

Tantra Wars: The Frontlines of Gender in the Spiritual Scene

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The way gender is conceptualized directly influences our comprehension of the self, making it a central issue in contemporary cultural conflicts. This phenomenon extends to modern Tantra, where gender constructions shape the methodologies and spiritual paths within different schools. Contemporary Tantra schools, particularly those that emphasize sexuality as a core element of practice, reflect the ongoing ideological battles between conservative and liberal interpretations of gender and selfhood. These interpretations significantly diverge from pre-modern Tantra, aligning instead with the western construct of “Tantrism.”¹ This study examines three distinct Tantra schools that represent different positions in what we term the “Tantra Wars” (the ideological struggles over gender in modern spiritual movements): Binary Tantra, Difference Feminist Tantra and Queer Tantra. By analyzing these three paradigms, this chapter highlights how differing gender frameworks within Tantra not only shape individual spiritual practices but also contribute to broader socio-political discourses on gender, identity, and selfhood. The findings illustrate how contemporary Tantra schools navigate and reconstruct gendered spiritual narratives, reflecting and influencing wider cultural debates.

Key words: Tantra; Tantrism; Binary Tantra; Difference Feminist Tantra; Queer Tantra; culture wars; gender; contemporary yoga; contemporary tantra

1 Introduction

How we understand gender determines our comprehension of the self, and without a doubt, gender conceptions are a key battleground in today’s “culture wars” between conservative and liberal factions in society. The global spiritual scene is no exception, especially modern Tantra schools, which are at the forefront of contemporary spirituality regarding gender construction.

Currently, different schools self-identify as tantric, positioning sexuality in a broad sense at the core of their methodology. This perspective corresponds with “Tantrism” as a modern and western construct, different in many aspects from pre-modern Tantra (White 2003). Thus, their

contemporary interpretations of Tantra, sexuality, and gender shape the sense of self in both human and divine dimensions, with social and political implications.

This article presents three schools of Tantra and their methodological proposals regarding developing the divine Self from the personal self, determined by different conceptions of gender. These three schools are paradigmatic of three positions in these Tantra Wars, one more conservative (Binary Tantra) and two more liberal: Difference Feminist Tantra and Queer Tantra, aligned respectively to the second and third waves in feminism. The terms *Difference Feminist Tantra* and *Queer Tantra* can be situated within the broader genealogy of feminist thought, often described through its successive “waves.” During the second wave (1960s–1980s), theorists such as Luce Irigaray emphasized the recovery of female subjectivity and the valorization of sexual difference, proposing a specifically feminine mode of experience as a source to empowerment. This orientation finds resonance in what I refer to as Difference Feminist Tantra, which reinterprets tantric polarity through the affirmation of the sacred feminine. In contrast, the third wave of feminism, emerging in the 1990s under the influence of queer theory, for example with authors as Judith Butler, challenged essentialist views of gender and emphasized multiplicity and performativity. What I refer to as Queer Tantra echoes this shift by dissolving binary oppositions and conceiving gender as a fluid continuum of spiritual potential.

On the one hand, “Binary Tantra” maintains essentialist gender polarities. An example is the teachings of David Deida. In *Intimate Communion*, the sense of self develops within the couple's relationship, where the essences of “man” and “woman” are complementary and interdependent (Deida 1995).² Thus, the divine self is cultivated through embodying a “man” or “woman” as an ontological representation of the Divine Couple's interplay between the transcendent “Masculine” and the immanent “Feminine.” On the other hand, since the feminine turn in yoga and Tantra, methodologies have appeared that focus on the specificity of women (with a womb), what we can call a “Difference Feminist Tantra.” An example is Uma Dinsmore-Tuli's *Yoni Shakti* (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014).³ In her Womb Yoga, intuition, wisdom, and understanding of the divine Self are given by living these experiences as manifestations of the Goddess and as aspects of the Ten Mahāvidyās. In contrast, “Queer Tantra,” exemplified by the teachings of Barbara Carrellas, challenges this binary conception. Her *Urban Tantra* advocates for practices that honor diverse gender identities. Thus, it conceives the self beyond gender constructs, dissolved through “tantric sex” and ecstasy, as other human constructions are (Carrellas 2017).⁴ The methodology of *Urban Tantra* focuses on embodying the self through immanent and energetic experiences, rather than through a transcendent and metaphysical lens (as seen in “Binary Tantra”), or experiences related to the specific condition of having a uterus (as seen in “Difference Feminist Tantra”).

2 Tantra, Tantrism and Contemporary Tantrikas

Contemporary schools that define themselves as tantric differ from medieval tantric traditions. Although we do not want to designate them as being ‘inauthentic’ or a version of “neo-Tantra,” their understanding of Tantra is determined by what has been called “Tantrism.” However, unlike authors like David G. White, we do not consider that only a medieval Kaula Tantra is authentic Tantra (White 2003). We understand a tantric as someone who defines themselves as such (Flood 2006: 8).⁵ Whether the practitioner is rooted in traditional Tantra or follows a contemporary understanding of it is a different matter.

Tantrism is a modern and western construct that positions sexuality at the core of its methodology. As Padoux claims (Padoux 1986: 272),⁶ the category of “Tantrism” was created and developed in colonialism by Orientalism and encompasses different tantric phenomena in an abstract, singular, and unified entity. Hugh Urban shows the east-west dialectic that operated in this development between Orientalism and Indian elites. As the author explains:

It is a dialectical category [...] born out of the mirroring and mimesis that goes on between Western and Indian minds. Neither simply the result of an indigenous evolution nor a mere Orientalist fabrication, Tantra is a shifting amalgam of fantasies, fears, and wish fulfillments, at one native and Other, which strikes to the heart of our constructions of the exotic Orient and of the contemporary West (Urban 2012: 3).⁷

However, in our view, the fact that there is a modern understanding of Tantra does not imply that there is not a whole series of traditions that we can consider tantric. Although there is indeed no closed and monolithic tradition with an eternal essence, this does not imply that the categories of Tantra and Tantrism do not indicate a set of diverse peoples, practices, and texts. Our point is that Tantric traditions are diverse; we cannot reduce them to a homogeneous Tantrism.

When talking about contemporary tantric groups, heirs of Tantrism, their focus on sex and sexuality is fundamental. It is precisely the sex that has made Tantra famous in modernity. Thus, in the west, Tantra is usually related to “sacred sexuality” or “spiritual sex.” Although sexual energies play a role in ontotheology and tantric practices, these conceptions are not comparable to those in pre-modern tantric groups. As David White notes, it is worth distinguishing the *ritualization of sex* that occurs in neotantric environments from the *sexualization of ritual* that occurs in the medieval tantric phenomenon (White 2003: xii). The former gives a central place to sex as a key spiritual means, ritualizing sex through ceremonies and techniques of “yogic” origin, practicing it with more awareness, sensuality, and attention, as we will see, for example, in Urban Tantra. On the other hand, according to White, in medieval Tantra, rituals were sexualized, for example in Kaula cults, where the practitioners produced sexual fluids in cultic contexts to be used for ceremonial and liturgical purposes, but not as a means of attaining ecstasy. However, while it is true that the production of sexual fluids played a role in these Kaula

tantric groups, the function of sex should not be exaggerated. The production of sexual fluids did not imply an emphasis on pleasure. In the words of White: “At nearly no point in the original Kaula sources on sexualized ritual, however, is mention made of pleasure, let alone bliss or ecstasy” (White 2003: xii). Nevertheless, the path to that *ritualization of sex* developed by Tantrism was seeded with the Kashmiri aestheticization of that *sexualization of ritual*. Over the centuries, Tantrika hermeneutics transformed sexual fluids into metaphors and symbols, culminating in the Kashmir school and the figure of Abhinavagupta, who may be regarded as a paradigmatic figure for future Tantrism. According to White, this Kashmiri theoretician “sublimated the end and *raison d'être* of Kaula sexual practice—the production of powerful, transformative sexual fluids—into simple by-products of a higher goal: the cultivation of a divine state of consciousness homologous to the bliss experienced in sexual orgasm” (White 2003: xii). These developments will be emphasized by modern Tantrism which came to conceive of sex as an energy capable of leading to ecstasy.

3 Tantra Wars as a Frontline in Culture Wars

We live in a polarized political world. Society is the battlefield of what has been called *culture wars*. As an analytical category, *culture war* describes a contemporary cultural conflict between antagonistic positions that seek hegemony on the social and political board. The same values are at stake in this battle regarding what it means to be a person, and what society and culture should be like. It is a conflict regarding meaning and identity, with the fronts having antagonistic versions regarding issues as central to understanding the human being as sex and gender.

Undoubtedly, James Davison Hunter, in 1991, with his book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, popularized the term (Hunter 1991).⁸ The author considered that there was a crucial gap between conservative and progressive perspectives regarding morality and that it determined aspects of politics, ethnicity, and religion, extending even to questions of sex (gender, we would say today). After his book and Patrick Buchanan's speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention, the term began to be used in the media. Politics is no longer carried out only in the parliaments of different countries but on any front, from universities to the wellness industry.

The subject of gender has become a key battleground where conservative and liberal factions vie for ideological dominance. In Gramsci's terms, the culture battle seeks to gain *cultural hegemony*; it seeks to ensure that what is defended ends up being the dominant ideology. In his *Prison Notebooks (Quaderni del carcere)*,⁹ written between 1929-1935, Antonio Gramsci defines cultural hegemony as the intellectual, ideological, and moral leadership that one group exercises over others through consensus, rather than through direct economic or political coercion. Hegemony is achieved when the dominant group's values, ideas, norms, and ways of life are perceived as natural, universal, and rooted in common sense. This hegemony is produced and

maintained by controlling the symbolic means: education, media, religion, art, and science. A successful cultural hegemony ensures that even those outside the hegemonic group come to internalize its worldview, not through coercion but through cultural and symbolic consensus.

On one of the poles, some governments are applying legislative changes aligned with third-wave feminism; thus, gender self-determination laws are present in many countries of the planet, showing how feminist third-wave, once anti-hegemonic, has had a political hegemonic outcome, producing not only a legislative transformation but a change of mind in the population, making now hegemonic what was anti-hegemonic. These legislative changes are aligned with queer theory because they challenge the state's enforcement of particular gender norms (even those of second-wave feminism) and advocate for the state's tolerance of more fluid and inclusive understandings of gender, looking for substantial changes in the society. This shows how movements that they were anti-hegemonic, such as third-wave feminism, have gained cultural hegemony in the Gramscian sense now. Over the decades, third-wave feminism has at least in some contexts built a counter-hegemony by creating new cultural narratives, forging broad alliances, and penetrating institutions and spaces of power. It went from being marginal to gaining institutional support, reshaping public discourse: its issues ceased to be peripheral and moved to the center of the political debate, by carrying out changes in laws, education, and public policies, which are the classical tools for building cultural hegemony.

On the other pole though, we have conservative visions of gender, of what it means to be a man and a woman, with sexual and gender differences being explained based on these categories and in essentialist terms. As in the spiritual milieu, politics in the EU and US are shifting toward the conservative side today. For example, conservative parties are against what they call the "LGTBIQ+ lobby," or gender self-determination laws. Given the progressive political transformation in ordinary society and institutions, conservative factions seek to, in a sort of reaction, return to positions that predate the feminist and LGTBIQ+ movements, presenting themselves now as anti-hegemonic, "the new punk rock." In the middle, we have difference feminism, aligned with second-wave feminism, once revolutionary, today considered by some trans-inclusive feminists of the third-wave as outdated and trans-exclusive (TERF).

This culture battle is also being fought in the global spiritual scene, especially in modern Tantra schools, which are at the forefront of contemporary spirituality gender construction. Contemporary Tantric schools disseminate influential conceptions about gender. Behind the religious (and "spiritual") discourses, lies a field shaped by political forces, power dynamics, and struggles for legitimacy and hegemony. Through their diverging interpretations of gender, different Tantra schools (whether deliberately or implicitly) align themselves with broader political positions, giving arguments to the culture war in the "spiritual" milieu. At stake is the cultural authority to define what constitutes a man, a woman, or non-binary subjectivities. Each school seeks to normalize its gender paradigm, presenting it not merely as a spiritual insight but as a coherent, natural, and authentic truth.

Contemporary tantric authority, however, is not monolithic. It is a site of contestation, where competing groups seek for news forms of symbolic consensus by shaping discourses, practices,

and pedagogies. These efforts are mediated through workshops, trainings, social media, public discourse, publications, and institutional visibility. Each group attempts to establish its vision of Tantra and gender as the legitimate or “true” expression of the tradition. Despite their divergent worldviews, all schools operate within a common hegemonic logic: they seek to have their vision widely accepted through visibility, normative influence, legitimacy, and the production of consensus.

Thus, these different ways of understanding what we call “Tantra,” the Divine Couple, tantric ontology and metaphysics will determine how we understand, conceive, and perform gender.

4 The Binary Tantra of *Intimate Communion*

Tantra, Divine Couple and Polarization

One of the most influential contemporary teachers of Binary Tantra is David Deida. His understanding of gender and new masculinity evokes conservative ideas such as Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992),¹⁰ and the new masculinities of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, symbolically founded by Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990).¹¹ Like this book, David Deida's *Intimate Communion* (1995) appears as a counterpoint to New Age men (and women), as seen in his “second stage.”

For David Deida, the sexual polarity of Tantra serves as an ontological template to understand sexuality, sexual polarization, and, ultimately, couple relationships. Thus, with the goal of spiritual growth, in line with the New Age, but trying to transcend it, Deida develops a tantric methodology focused on the couple's relationship. Thus, the couple's relationship can be spiritual and lead to a genuinely intimate union, where surrender to love prevails, beyond romantic relationships (Deida 1995: 8), and reach the Self, Śiva and Śakti. In this sense, he breaks with part of modern Tantrism that focuses on sexual experience, the so-called “tantric sex.” Although this author also includes tantric sex in his methodology, it is in the complementarity and interaction between man and woman where the intimate communion is embodied. However, although it is not the center of the methodology, tantric sex is the perfect moment to practice the intimate communion and dance in masculine and feminine energies (Deida 1995: 255).

For Deida, everything in the universe is polarized, following the model of the God and Goddess of Tantric Hinduism. The ontological reality is polarized in the Masculine and Feminine forces (Deida 1995: 20), emanating from the metaphysical macrocosm of Śiva and Śakti. The God is Transcendent, found in Freedom, Attention, Concentration, Direction, Purpose, and Presence;

the Goddess is Immanent, found in Love, Energy, Cosmos, Nature, Giving and Nurturing. Thus, sexual polarity and polarization also occur in the ontic microcosm of the couple (Deida 1995: 15). Masculine and feminine energies are part of each person, but generally, one part is abundant, thus being the essence of a masculine or feminine person. Deida gives definitions of *masculine* and *feminine* in human beings. Roughly speaking, the primary masculine characteristics in a person are presence, “transcendental position,” and “directionality” (Deida 1995: 30, 31). The feminine ones are: “force of radiance and opening” (Deida 1995: 32). About life goals, according to Deida, “the Masculine searches for Freedom. The Feminine searches for love” (Deida 1995: 85).

Furthermore, Deida sees women as essentially wild, as Goddesses where “the Feminine nurtures, gives life and dances in sensual joy—although sometimes Feminine energy is also wild, fierce or chaotic” (Deida 1995: 90). In this sense, like the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, Deida's vision of the feminine is consistent with some of the ideas of the new femininities proposed by Clarissa Pinkola Estés' mythopoetic approach in her popular and influential book *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992)¹² and with the Goddess Movement, for example the idea of women as wild.

One of the instrumental goals of the intimate communion methodology is to embody the Self (Śiva for men and Śakti for woman) through the “art of cultivating and sharing sexual polarity” (Deida 1995: 16) in order to increase Freedom in the masculine person (the man) and Love in the feminine person (the woman). This polarization occurs when each member of the couple embodies his or her sexual essence and finds a complementary partner. Thus, these “sexual essences” reflect ontologically the microcosm of the two universal forces of the macrocosm. By embodying the sexual essence, one connects with the universal Forces of Śiva and Śakti. There is a metaphysics of the Divine Couple and existential ontology in man and woman, even in non-cis genders; all diversity would fit into this metaphysics and these fundamental essences. It is important to note that Deida believes the Masculine and Feminine have nothing to do with sex or gender; rather, these terms refer to the polarity present in the universe and in human beings (Deida 1995: 22). However, this binary metaphysical conception tends to re-establish the traditional, cisgender couple through tantric means, reinforcing stereotypical roles and performances.

Three Stages

Deida proposes an evolutionary taxonomy of three stages, the last being the intimate communion. The first stage is “Dependence Relationship,” which is the most conservative relationship. He gives the example of the 1950s, with marked roles: “Men are men and women are women” (Deida 1995: 59). Deida sees both positive and negative aspects of this type of conservative relationship. On the positive side, Deida considers that this model maintains sexual

essence. However, one negative aspect is that the members are co-dependent, and the man dominates the woman; the relationship consists of attachments, needs, and interests, and it does not help to grow spiritually.

The second stage is the “50/50 Relationship,” which he relates (in spiritual environments) to the New Age. In the previous stage, the members were co-dependent, the relationship being passionate in the most negative sense; in this one, the members are “co-independent,” but it is a “lukewarm” relationship. He stresses that this stage is necessary to leave the first one behind but insufficient for fulfillment. It consists of “*Safe boundaries and equal expectations for men and women*” (Deida 1995: 59; emphasis in original). This stage will seek an internal Masculine/Feminine balance. However, for the author, one side effect “*is the suppression or starvation of our naturally more Masculine or Feminine sexual essence*” (Deida 1995: 60; emphasis in original). Part of the problem in the second stage is that, achieving 50/50 sameness and independence, men and women neutralize their sexual essences, “following a culturally pre-defined role” (Deida 1995: 74), and, therefore, incapable of embodying what they *are* in intimacy.

This “lukewarm” New Age individual that Deida is talking about draws direct inspiration from haṭhayoga. Rooted in Tantra, haṭha yogis learn to harmonize the polarities of existence and the Divine Couple within themselves, balancing the “masculine” and “feminine” energies, as well as the lunar and solar aspects of their being (Mallinson 2011: 772).¹³ A modern school of yoga that is faithful to this conception of Tantric-rooted Hatha Yoga is the Bihar School of Yoga, which considers that haṭha seeks the harmonization of the individual's polarities (Riutort 2023: 205-07).¹⁴ This conception is the most common and widely accepted in contemporary yoga. Like many schools, it echoes the medieval etymology of haṭha found in verses 148–149 of the *Yogabīja*, which refer to the yogi's balancing of the polarized forces of existence. This concept has as its reference the icon of Ardhanārīśvara, which fuses the God and the Goddess. The purpose is to integrate the polarities. In this sense, the paradigm of the haṭha yogi is a person focused on his practice, without any emphasis on gender relations, since the paradigm of the yogi is the *brahmācārya*, who has no sex. What the yogi wants is precisely to annul sexual polarization, to balance the masculine and feminine. There is no need to complement oneself with another person, in a couple that imitates the Divine Couple. Although most contemporary schools of yoga that follow this paradigm of haṭhayoga admit that people have partners, they do not base yogic development on tantric sex or personal relationships, but on this balancing practice of haṭha. For Deida, in a certain way, this means developing a kind of inner androgyne.

The answer to the problems in the first two stages is the third stage: the “intimate communion.” Here people “relax into oneness and spontaneously give [one's] deepest gifts” (Deida 1995: 60). They are no longer co-dependent or co-independent but co-practitioners of this intimate communion. In the third stage, man and woman give their most profound gifts: Freedom and Love, respectively.

In the third relationship, the Self of man is Freedom and the Self in woman is Love. In a certain

way, Deida interprets the way of man as *jñana-marga* (the “Path of Knowledge”) and the way of woman as *bhakti-marga* (the “Path of Devotion”), reducing the masculine to the intellectual and the feminine to the role of service.

Thus, in man, the Self manifests Itself as the “active realization” in the present to relax into the true contemplation of the true Being, “which is inherently free, loving and happy” (Deida 1995: 248). Man embodies Śiva: “In His fullest realization, the Masculine is Consciousness, the nature of which is freedom” (Deida 1995: 249).

In the third stage, the woman goes beyond love for others to embody absolute Love: “She is no longer dependent on external love. She is no longer relying on her self-love. Rather, she is love incarnate” (Deida 1995: 95). Thus, we see the way of woman as an embodied way of devotion.

Therefore, we see these two paths, the masculine and feminine, corresponding to *jñāna-mārga* and *bhakti-mārga* in the South Asian traditions, reinterpreted based on Deida's theory and methodology. This association is a personal interpretation of Deida, and contrasts with the South Asian traditions. Thus, we can find the opposite concerning the man; for example, many lineages, such as in Vaiṣṇava mysticism (Olson 1981a),¹⁵ instruct men to develop their feminine side in order to unite with the Divine. However, in Deida's *Intimate Communion*, the self in the person of masculine essence is to be in true being, in Freedom. In the woman, the only possibility of feeling fulfilled in the self is to be “in the present relaxation of radiant love” (Deida 1995: 263). Thus, the intimate communion's methodology seeks to embody a type of attitude in the person, depending on the masculine/feminine proportion.

Conclusions

The complementary relationship between the masculine person and the feminine person grows the Self; their dance is the ontological dance of the Metaphysical Masculine/Feminine at different levels, according to the phase. One goes from the masculine/feminine in the body (first phase) to the mind (second phase) and to the heart-spirit (third phase), from the individual self to the Divine Self. The experience of the personal self and the Divine Self comes through embodying the masculine and feminine essences. This embodiment is an attitudinal process through an ethos of actions, emotions, thoughts and intuition in line with the experience of the personal self, which connects one with the Divine Self, Freedom and Love.

The intimate communion is the means to embody the Self of Free and True Consciousness in the male person and the Self of Devoted and Surrendered Love in the female person. Ultimately, the Divine Self in us is Freedom and Love, Transcendence and Immanence. According to Deida, we are “embodiments” of the Masculine and Feminine energies, Freedom and Love, and we participate in the Divine through the “gifts” of embodying a man and a woman.

The human being, therefore, by connecting with the self, embodies the Divine Self: the more

one connects with their ontic existential essence, the more one embodies the metaphysical Essence of Existence. The passage from the self to the Self involves a dissolution of egoic forms (Deida 1995: 85). In the Divine Self, man is Śiva; woman is Śakti. In this metaphysical binary framework, the Divine Self is actualized through the embodiment of Śiva in the male person and Śakti in the female person. The human couple thus mirrors the cosmic polarity, enacting a spiritual path shaped by gendered essences and traditional gender roles.

5 The Difference Feminist Tantra of *Yoni Shakti*

A Yoga of the Womb

For centuries, there has been a hegemony of men over women in Tantra and yoga. Modern yoga is no exception in its colonial beginnings in South Asia and its diaspora across the planet with transnational yoga. However, there has been a feminine turn in transnational tantric and yogic environments in recent decades. This turn began with yoginis like Swami Satyasangananda or Geeta Iyengar, disciples of transnational masters such as Swami Satyananda and Iyengar, but it was particularly catalyzed by major events like the Fall from Grace of prominent spiritual masters and the #metoo movement in yoga milieus (Wildcroft 2020),¹⁶ when a series of sexual scandals surrounding male gurus came to light following victims' accusations, shaking many yoga communities and challenging the patriarchal structures of transnational yoga lineages. These developments led to a loss of confidence in the spiritual master, especially male transnational gurus. Consequences involved the fall of the authority of the guru figure in many schools of the yoga community, with splits and exoduses that have implied new ways of understanding contemporary yoga. Many academies and schools no longer follow the lineages of modern transnational second-wave yoga (for example Pattabhi Jois' Ashtanga Yoga, or Swami Vishnudevananda's Sivananda Yoga), but have left these schools for new forms, often based on these transnational interpretations, but with personal changes. These new yoga schools do not follow the lineage anymore. In post-lineage yoga, without the constraints of the (male) lineages, creativity emerges. Although post-lineage yoga is not *per se* gendered, after the Death of the Guru (Riutort 2022),¹⁷ without male teachers that instruct on masculine views of yoga, many schools of women's yoga are growing and focusing on the specific differences of women (with a uterus).

Dinsmore-Tuli's Womb Yoga, explained in her book *Yoni Shakti*, which takes a step further from the Bihar School of Yoga, is one example. As Satyananda Yoga, Womb Yoga is intrinsically linked to Tantra. Yoga and Tantra have been related for centuries, making it difficult to establish where one ends and the other begins. We can consider Womb Yoga as a tantric yoga or a yogic Tantra; it claims to be inspired by Śakta Tantra, from the Śaiva Tantrika traditions (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014:

400). We can consider this proposal “post-Satyananda,” as a post-lineage yoga after Bihar. After the hearings of the *Australian Government Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* concerning an ashram of the Bihar School of Yoga (BSY) in Australia (Bartos 2021: 90-93),¹⁸ many practitioners of the Satyananda movement have put into question the teachings of the School (Riutort 2023: 236) and abandoned the School, the lineage and its symbols. Dinsmore-Tuli took a critical stance about these events (Dinsmore-Tuli 2017).¹⁹

Therefore, part of the reason for the emergence of post-lineage yoga (after transnational yoga) is precisely the Fall from Grace and #metoo, which resulted in the loss of legitimacy and trust in male authority figures. In this sense, Womb Yoga advocates creating a woman's yoga *for* women and *by* women to avoid not only anatomical reification and oblivion of the specific conditions of the uterus in the yoga class but also to avoid sexual abuse.

In its social context, Womb Yoga is related to the Goddess Movement and to a way of living feminism and embodying womanhood. Thus, we have a Feminist Tantra of Difference, which historically has its roots in the Goddess Movement and which would partly understand the Tantra of the Goddess, taking into account this current of feminism.

Womb Yoga focuses on the uterus and its conditions, such as menstruation, pregnancy, the postnatal period, lactation, perimenopause, and menopause. In this sense, it forms part of a contemporary trend that sees the female body as the key to wisdom. According to Olsson (2023a: 4)²⁰: “there is repeated talk of an understanding that comes through the body; a somatic knowledge, as well as a return to feminine wisdom (so-called ‘womb wisdom’)” [own translation]. Thus, *Yoni Shakti* is a yoga for women (with a uterus); it is no longer for men to teach what is specific to women. For decades of transnational yoga (and millennia of precolonial yoga), the uterus has been ignored and hidden, with all the violence that this entails for women. However, there is no consistent evidence that women engaged in *āsana* in pre-modern South Asian traditions (Westoby 2024),²¹ so Dinsmore-Tuli clearly challenges male hegemony in the yoga scene, rewriting history and engaging in what might be called “thea-logical” politics, in line with second-wave feminism (Salomonsen 2022).²²

Thus, it is a tantric yoga that fits well with Luce Irigaray's feminism (Irigaray 1985).²³ Irigaray considers that patriarchy defines femininity as the “other,” traditionally and metaphysically. For Irigaray, woman's liberation will come through a redefinition of the feminine from itself and not through an abolition of sexual difference, which would, in fact, only be a “masculinization” of women. Womb Yoga starts from this difference from the perspective of women, not from a masculine reading, always from an embodiment experience of being woman, as in Irigaray. It is no coincidence that Irigaray has practiced yoga (Irigaray 2022)²⁴; her difference feminism is inspired by Tantra understood as an experience of embodiment (Olsson 2023b).²⁵

Empowering Woman through the Intuition of the Natural Siddhis

Womb Yoga focuses on empowering yogic and tantric practices and shows other disempowering practices. Intuition is essential for this empowerment. Thus, Estés and her “wild woman” of *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992) influenced Womb Yoga (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014: 98). Womb Yoga promotes intuition and the emergence of one's inner teacher (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014: 126-27) through the existential experience of embodying a woman (with a uterus); the wisdom that comes from the conditions of menstruation, orgasm, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, postpartum, perimenopause, and menopause. She even considers these experiences as the (natural) *siddhis* of women (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014: 245).

In Dinsmore-Tuli's feminist reclaiming, “Yoni Shakti” is “cunt power”; a power not to control nature but to align with it. Male yogis have sought these *siddhis*, developing yoga as we know it in the process. Thus, the natural *siddhis* of women have inspired the pre-modern haṭhayoga project of men (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014: 268-69; 429). Womb Yoga does not exclude men or women without a uterus in this methodology, but neither does it include them in a strict sense since it is designed to develop intuition through this existential specificity (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014: 1156).

The Personal Self and the Divine Self in the Practice of the Ten Mahāvidyās

The self in Womb Yoga comes from a connection with the nature (not the culture) of the woman's body (with a uterus) and, through this, the yogini embodies the ontological emanation of the Goddess, going deeper into the Self. A woman's cycles are considered to be the wisdom of the Goddesses, and their characteristics fall within the category of *siddhis*. Thus, the archetypal paradigm to emulate is the Goddess, the Śakti, following the line of most Śakta traditions. The Śakti of every woman would be a divine embodiment of the Mother (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014: 307). In this way, she accepts the metaphysics of Tantra and the polarity of the Divine Couple that determines the ontological and ontic manifestation of the world and sexual human beings. She accepts the binary polarity of Śiva and Śakti, pure consciousness and energy (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014: 387), where the woman (with a uterus) represents the Goddess, although it is unclear where Śiva stands in Womb Yoga's methodology.

One of the goals in this understanding of Tantrism is to embody the Goddess ontologically speaking, to empower oneself with the *siddhis* powers, which would come from the Goddess. Thus, *Yoni Shakti* is in line with the Goddess Feminist Movement, sharing the four concepts that are central to the Goddess Movement according to Reid-Bowen: “deity,” “femaleness,” “nature” and “politics” (Reid-Bowen 2007).²⁶ Thus, the Goddess is perceived as Transcendent and Immanent Deity; “femaleness” has been historically disparaged; nature is viewed as holy and

identified with the Goddess Herself; and the Goddess spirituality is political.

Dinsmore-Tuli dedicates part of the book to practices inspired by the Ten Mahāvidyās; doing that she is using some chosen fragments of pre-modern iconography to inspire connections to the life stages of women in ways that are inconsistent with known South Asian Hindu traditions.²⁷ “The powers of the Mahāvidyās thus offer us direct parallels to the current state of awareness of the female siddhis,” she claims (Dinsmore-Tuli 2014: 459). Thus, *Yoni Shakti* proposes rituals of the Mahāvidyās for different moments of the woman's life.

Womb Yoga is aligned with the principles of Irigaray's difference feminism, as female identity is not understood simply in terms of lack concerning the male. She proposes that the female body has its logic and forms of expression that have been systematically repressed and distorted by patriarchal discourse. Irigaray introduces the idea that women have multiple subjectivities. *Yoni Shakti* introduces the Mahāvidyās precisely to address the multiple subjectivity and the various phases of women, celebrating the multiplicity of the female experience. Irigaray advocates the creation of a new language and symbols that can more adequately express the female experience. The term “Yoni” itself, or Womb Yoga, is a reclaiming of the power and sacredness of the female reproductive organ.

From Irigaray's perspective, Womb Yoga practices will not solidify oppressive gender roles or focus exclusively on women's reproductive capacity but rather open up empowering possibilities for new understandings of femininity and spirituality, transcending simple biological functions and recognizing the wisdom inherent in women's bodies. By ritualizing and sacralizing aspects of the female body, these practices challenge the objectification and instrumentalization of women's bodies in a patriarchal society, offering instead a vision of femininity as sacred and powerful, offering practices that honor and strengthen female well-being holistically. Thus, Womb Yoga also challenges patriarchal medical and social structures that have ignored or pathologized female experiences.

Conclusions

In Womb Yoga, Dinsmore-Tuli seeks intuition as a portal to embody higher and divine instances. The self in Womb Yoga comes from a connection with nature (not culture) of the woman's body (with a womb). At the same time, through this connection, the yogini incarnates the ontological emanation of the Goddess, embodying the Divine Self.

This methodology intended for women with wombs seeks to manifest the Goddess in the yogini and to embody her forms in and through the feminine cycles. Although it is unclear if it is a search for metaphysical essences, the methodology focuses on the ontic existences of having a womb, something concrete, somatic and carnal, grounded in the genitalia. Just as the project of

hathayoga was founded on semen and *bindu* (Mallinson 2011:770), Womb Yoga is founded on the uterus and the associated cycles.

In a kind of empowerment, the experiences of the feminine *siddhis* mark spiritual growth, always connected to the psychosomatic and material side of existence. The ontic is a threshold for the ontological (and maybe metaphysical)—existence as a portal to the essence. By living the *siddhis*, the yogini embodies the ontological manifestation of the Goddess, making Union and Non-duality possible.

6 The Queer Tantra of *Urban Tantra*

Tantra, Genre, and Ecstasy

One example of Queer Tantra is Barbara Carrellas' *Urban Tantra* (2017). Over the decades, Carrellas has developed tantric practices for all types of people, genders, sexualities, and bodies. Thus, one of the objectives of her “Urban Tantra” is to provide a Tantra for everyone, not just for heteronormative or binary people. Like *Intimate Communion* and *Yoni Shakti*, which are mostly for specific profiles (although they claim to be for all types of people), Carrellas' *Urban Tantra* proposal stands out primarily for being able to include the LGTBIQ+ collective. We can say that it is her significant contribution to the scene of spirituality and spiritual sex since, with “binary” forms of contemporary Tantra, people from the LGTBIQ+ collective could feel excluded. Thus, throughout the book's pages, Carrellas takes into account the current terminological diversity in order to accommodate anyone who wants to practice Tantra. For Carrellas, precisely, *Urban Tantra* follows the revolutionary dimension of Tantra (Carrellas 2017: 7). In a way, for her, a conservative Tantra in terms of gender and sexual preferences would be an oxymoron; today, Tantra is an exceptional place to revolutionize gender and the way we understand sexuality.

For Carrellas, Tantra is a practice of liberation; the human body and life are divine manifestations; the sexual experience is a taste of divine energy; sex, therefore, can be sacred; sexual energy can be a powerful method for liberation; and all life can be included and celebrated on the path to liberation (Carrellas 2017: 5). Thus, the clear objective of the book is to reach liberation through sexual ecstasy (Carrellas 2017: 12).

In this search, healing is a byproduct. She understands Tantric sex as therapeutic (Carrellas 2017: 74), following a trend in contemporary Tantric sex schools to develop lingam massages and yoni massages for the therapeutic release of tensions and traumas.

For Carrellas, ecstasy is beyond genres. Just as the other schools propose archetypal paradigms

(Śiva, the Goddess, the Dasa Mahāvidyās), Carrellas does not propose any archetypal model. To deconstruct gender, she also avoids any essentialist position. Carrellas takes the Divine Couple as a mere metaphor. She reckons that contemporary tantrikas have misunderstood Śiva and Śakti: “How did Shiva, the essence of consciousness, and Shakti, the essence of energy and power, become reduced to male and female, heterosexual lovers?”, she asks (Carrellas 2017: 6). In this reading, the gods themselves are just symbols; there is no metaphysical Śiva and Śakti that determine reality, *maithuna*, or liberation.

Urban Tantra does not acknowledge gender in an essentialist way, based on a metaphysical reality, but rather that individuals generate genders and sexual identities. *Urban Tantra* aligns with Judith Butler, who, in *Gender in Dispute*, defends that gender is not an underlying essential nature (from which the behavior would arise) but is performative, that is, a set of actions that are repeated, creating an illusion of a naturalized appearance (Butler 1990).²⁸ Repetition creates the so-called masculine and feminine characteristics. Gender is a performance, not a substance or a prior essence. Thus, for queer theory, from which Carrellas draws, if gender is performative, it is then an accident, something arbitrary, not necessary; anyone can and should change it to match their sexual identity.

However, although Carrellas is against so-called gender essentialism and heteronormativity (since it reduces sexualities to a binary), she ends up accepting a certain chemical “essentialism.” Thus, she speaks of “testosterone-based bodies” (yang, related to the masculine in Chinese cosmology) and “estrogen-based bodies” (yin, related to the feminine in Chinese cosmology) (Carrellas 2017: 78).

Tantric Sex as Methodology

In *Urban Tantra*, orgasm is the perfect gateway to reach ecstasy (Carrellas 2017: 74), hence the importance of tantric sex in its varied and updated forms. Throughout the book, she proposes establishing rituals for sexual encounters, massages, individual sessions, as well as yogic-sexual practices, in order to reach ecstasy, and healing.

The methodology of *Urban Tantra* is, therefore, so-called tantric sex. Thus, *Urban Tantra* carries out a *ritualization of sex* because it involves practicing sex in a ritual format. Much of the book contains instructions on how to develop tantric sex rituals and embody the divine Ecstasy; its ritualization of sex, among other things, uses Hatha Yoga techniques, breathing, focused awareness and imagination, objects, props, and stage setting.

In line with Judith Butler, Carrellas proposes a series of parodic performative practices to subvert the dominant discourse that oppresses the individual and to generate new meanings beyond

binary systems. On the one hand, *Urban Tantra*, following queer theory, does not give priority to penetration. Thus, for Carrellas, *maithuna* is not only a copulation of the male and the female but any connection through sexuality in a broad sense. For that reason, massage is so important in *Urban Tantra* because it can accommodate diverse gender identities. On the other hand, Carrellas gives in Chapter 20 new understandings and nomenclatures of the genitals. She develops all her creativity to propose alternative ways of understanding the genitals and giving a new interpretation to tantric polarity. Thus, she invents new names for genitals and reinterprets the nature and location of the penis and vulva in order to break the most classic and heteronormative sexual polarization.

Conclusions

Carrellas' Queer Tantra seeks the ecstatic experience beyond the dichotomies of gender, binarism, and the conceptualization of sex, gender and the sexual experience itself. Sex, in any of its forms, is the gateway, and Tantra is precisely breaking with any mold, including sex and gender. Accordingly, *Urban Tantra* corresponds to what we have defined as Tantrism, given that it situates sex at the core of its methodology. Although *Urban Tantra* starts from sexual differences, it tends to dilute them to go to the ecstatic experience. Ultimately, the Divine Self is the Joy of a cosmic orgasm, an ecstasy considered divine, and which opens to eternalizing forces. The methodology seeks to embody that Ecstasy, using any means, without complexes or obstacles.

Ultimately, there is no essential sex; gender is cultivated and constructed, but also embodied, with openness to an unlimited variety. Sexual diversity itself is a performed, created, and cultivated experience. What we are, is what we do and perform, what we experience and embody. *Urban Tantra* does not follow an archetypal Self; no metaphysical model guides it. It is the experience that guides. Gender and sexual identity are the boat that leads to Ecstasy, but not what must be imitated in a performance of divine mimesis. It does not try to reach the specificity of what it is to be a man or woman but precisely to go beyond those limitations through every specific somatic experience. *Urban Tantra* tends to fracture these categories in favor of inclusivity, embracing all gender identities. Not even the genitals (the womb, for example) are something essential to the masculine/feminine. *Urban Tantra* does not seek an essence, a metaphysical substance, through the ontological manifestation of the Gods, but an experience of Ecstasy without form (*nirguṇa*). Thus, *Urban Tantra* challenges traditional binary conceptions of gender, even the Divine Couple, which would be nothing more than a metaphor. Ecstasy itself is a performance, as is creativity and divine creation itself. *Urban Tantra* embodies the divine Ecstasy as an art with infinite possibilities.

7 The Self, the Divine Couple and the Self

These three contemporary tantric schools are proposals for specific profiles, based on a specific way of understanding gender identity. On the one hand, Deida prioritizes cisgender people, men and their wives. On the other hand, Dinsmore-Tuli dedicates her methodology to women with a uterus. In the case of Carrellas, her Queer Tantra is designed for all types of people, but especially for people with non-heteronormative identities, where the LGTBIQ+ community can feel included. Thus, in all these contemporary tantric schools the self is permeated by gender, it is a “sexual” self, and it determines the spiritual path that leads to the Divine Self. Therefore, the ways of understanding and embodying both this human self and the divine Self are different and are reflected in their methodologies.

All of them, consciously or unconsciously, are aligned with political positions regarding the culture battle of gender. While *Intimate Communion* could have been considered liberal at one time as it was the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, due to the new approaches in gender theory, we can consider it as a conservative Tantra regarding gender, due to its binarism and stereotypical models. It would be a re-foundation of the traditional couple through tantric means. Furthermore, the man would be made based on some preconceived ideas of what it means to be a man, stereotypes that are performed and performative in a kind of spiritual courtship. Woman is still seen as the nurturing and complementary person, heir to gender stereotypes. There is no reconstruction of women's subjectivity and agency, on the contrary, but rather a reconstruction of femininity as seen by men.

Yoni Shakti, on the other hand, is situated in the sphere of difference feminism, due to its emphasis on the subjectivity and agency of the woman with a uterus. It does not focus on the relationship with the cisgender man, on complementarity, based on a supposed paradigm of the Divine Couple, possibly influenced by centuries of patriarchy, but on the agency of women, a work not done even in contemporary times and which it considers must be done before proposing coordinated yogic work with the cisgender man.

Finally, *Urban Tantra* is situated in the sphere of queer theory, due to its emphasis on the constructive nature of gender and sexual identity. Carrellas does not seek the complementarity of the cisgender man and woman, much less the re-foundation of the couple, but paradoxically she continues to believe in a certain chemical binary polarization of testosterone-based and estrogen-based bodies. In any case, attention to diversity allows her to create a methodology where people of different genders and sexual identities feel included.

We can see a certain affinity between Deida and Womb Yoga, since in the end it is said that the woman is born and the man is made (or rather that the yogini is born and the yogi is made). This affinity between Deida and Dinsmore-Tuli would be parallel to the affinity of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement and the Goddess movement.²⁹ However, the nuances are important, as Deida does not take into account authentic subjectivity and agency in women

(unlike Dinsmore-Tuli). As Fedele and Knibbe comment, the gender roles constructed within some spiritual schools can indeed empower women, but they can also recreate gender stereotypes and gendered domination (Fedele and Knibbe 2013: 5).³⁰ For Carrellas, no person would be born with a gender, but rather it would be constructed and embodied (although there is the chemical basis of testosterone and estrogen).

Regarding the divine Self, represented in the tantric paradigm of the Divine Couple, these authors have also different metaphysical, ontological and methodological conceptions. As for the Divine Couple, in *Intimate Communion* the male person follows the paradigm of Śiva and the female person that of Śakti; however, this Śakti can only be only a manifestation of the Goddess, who only reflects complementary aspects (as lover and nurturer), and not the subjective multiplicity of the woman, and the Mahāvidyās. This implies a reduction of women's agency since only the paradigm that can complement the man is valid. In a certain way, Deida wants to avoid the loss of the male position in the couple, as well as the loss of sexual polarization, but also the same abandonment by the couple, or being devoured by the woman in her manifestation as Mother Goddess; hence, Deida's *Intimate Communion* puts on a corset to womanhood, encouraging the erotic and nurturing aspects towards the man, but not other empowering ones, or those embodying the Mother. In this, Deida converges with the fear of the archetypal Mother of Bly's *John Iron*.

As for Dinsmore-Tuli, she hardly focuses on the paradigm of the Divine Couple. Let us say that in her mythological paradigm, she takes other aspects of the Goddess, manifestations of the Mahāvidyās that allow her to connect, explore and delve deeper into the conditions of the woman with a uterus (the natural *siddhis*) in order to embody the Self of the Goddess. It is not clear where Śiva is, what the relationship of the woman (as Śakti) with the man (as Śiva) entails, as well as how the “masculine” aspects are integrated. In any case, sexuality is only one dimension and one part of the development of intuition, and by no means the most important thing, nor is the relationship (complementary or not) with cisgender man central. The condition of mother is among the key aspects of being a woman and therefore Womb Yoga. Therefore, women can go deep into their connection with the divine Self embodying the Mother.

The Divine Couple is for Carrellas just a metaphor. There is no metaphysical reality of the couple and therefore, it does not make sense to follow a mythological paradigm for a tantric methodology. The ecstatic experience of each person in tantric sex is the beacon to guide us in the knowledge of both the personal self and the divine Self. The way of conceiving ontology and the ontic is immanent, following Śakta traditions, with a certain oblivion of transcendental, and Śaiva, aspects. In any case, tantric sex is basic in this methodology, not the couple's relationship or the ontic-existential exploration of the biological condition of the genitals. *Urban Tantra* proposes precisely an avant-garde tantric way of understanding the genitals, which in a certain way does follow the paradigm of the Divine Couple, but as the divine androgyne, Ardhanārīśvara. In this sense, it would share paradoxically the paradigm of androgyny with some Śaiva (Olson 1981b)³¹ or Vaiṣṇava (Olson 1981a) mystics, and even the internal balance of modern Hatha Yoga (Ruitort 2023). The knowledge of the Self would be through the internal understanding and embodiment of the androgyne in a game of polarization shared with other

people also in that search.

Thus, the different schools propose different mythological paradigms to explore, experience and embody the divine Self. The choice of the deities (Śiva/Śakti, the Dasa Mahāvidyās and Ardhanārīśvara, respectively) are manifestations fully aligned with their basic philosophies as well as with their methodologies.

8 Conclusions

We have seen how the tantric schools examined here tend to establish hegemonic models of gender and spirituality through discourses and practices. However, the battle for hegemony is not new to religion. Spirituality has been an arena of struggle and domination for millennia. Masters and yogis have long sought to win philosophical battles in order to gain legitimacy, authority, and hegemony. Specifically, Tantra has historically been closely linked to power, due to its relationship with the intramundane. It is no coincidence that in the current era, it is also deeply connected with the struggle for hegemony. Yet, the spirituality of Tantra is not a struggle for power. Therefore, it becomes valuable to move beyond its tendency to impose models of gender through hegemonic consensus.

This implies moving beyond the will to power, to use the terms of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In this regard, the “Three Transformations” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* can be illuminating for yogic and tantric traditions (Riutort 2020: 96-9).³² The task is not only to transcend the camel (the “thou shalt”) but also the lion—the “I will” implicit in the culture wars. What is required is the third transformation: that of the child, innocent, spontaneous, and free of agenda—a tantric figure, a *sahajiyā siddha*, beyond the will to power, focused on simply being rather than on defining life or asserting truth.

In this sense, although the contemporary tantric schools examined tend to establish hegemonic models of gender and spirituality, they also offer perspectives that reach beyond the lion's will to power, beyond this sort of tantric hero (*vīra*) now engaged in culture wars. Each school proposes ways to transcend legitimizing discourses and prescriptive practices based on fixed models of reality.

David Deida, for example, proposes a symbolic language to explore the dynamics between different forms of presence and energy in human relationships. If interpreted without rigidity, his distinction between “masculine” and “feminine” can be understood as a means of spiritual growth, beyond biological gender. His work offers valuable practices for cultivating the spontaneous expression of one's gifts (without falling into gender stereotypes) that can help the practitioner connect with the divine.

In turn, Dinsmore-Tuli emphasizes bodily experience, inviting a deep spiritual relationship with the body. While her approach is grounded in a sensitivity associated with feminine difference and gifts, it avoids imposing a singular model. She can give inspiration to those seeking to integrate spirituality and the body in an honest and respectful way, not only women with a uterus, but also people of other sexual identities, who may embody their own specific differences within the spiritual framework of Tantra.

Barbara Carrellas, for her part, develops an open and flexible approach that allows Tantra to be adapted to different lifestyles and sexual orientations, promoting freedom of exploration and mutual respect as fundamental principles of the tantric practice. Her approach frees us from predetermined structures and fixed templates, inviting us to embrace the life and gifts that emanate uniquely from each of us.

When Tantra is pursued as an experiential path—without pretension of universality, spiritual superiority or fixed models of reality—it can become a fertile space for each person to explore their relationship with the sacred through their own gifts. Thus, rather than reinforcing exclusive or universalizing visions, contemporary Tantra can open a dialogue with the diversity of human experiences, without the need to impose a single truth about gender, spirituality or reality. The Word (*vac*) is emptiness and possibility—arising from and returning to Silence.

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