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Touch in Contemporary Tantra:

Transgression, Healing, and Ecstasy in Women's
Constructions of Selfhood

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signed:

Samantha Bishop

Abstract

This thesis argues that women in contemporary Tantra engage with tactile practices in an ongoing effort to create an autonomous, empowered, and healthy sense of self. Focusing specifically on the sense of touch and how it is used in contemporary Tantra, I explore how and why touch techniques are used by participants – namely in inducing transformation, healing, and ecstatic experiences. By conducting interviews and fieldwork with Tantra teachers across Great Britain over the course of two years, this PhD shows how certain discourses around transgression, gender roles, and sexuality have become prominent within this context, and how touch is used to negotiate these themes. To date, Tantra in the West has rarely been studied ethnographically and as such, this thesis provides a much-needed contribution to knowledge on contemporary Tantric practices. Similarly, the sense of touch has received little academic attention; this thesis aims to expand understandings of how individuals engage with tactility within a social context that prioritises the visual.

In the first part of the thesis – Chapters 2 and 3 – I focus primarily on the emergence of Tantra in the West and how perceptions of this have been consistently associated with orientalism and the holistic milieu. In Chapter 3, I also explore how certain notions of Tantra, so widespread in the West, are experienced on the ground both by the researcher (myself) and the informants. In this chapter I develop the idea of embodied ethnography more fully. I demonstrate the importance of touch as a research method, which has yet to be fully elaborated in the wider field of anthropology and Tantra studies. Using this approach, and particularly focusing on the tactile, this thesis explores the experiences of women engaging with these practices, while simultaneously developing new ethnographic approaches to include the body and senses of the researcher as instruments of knowledge.

These two chapters set the scene in terms of the conceptual and methodological work, while in the next few chapters I explore the thematic resonance of Tantra and how its practices are fleshed out in everyday encounters of women in their social contexts. In Chapter 4, I focus on touch techniques used in Tantra groups and workshops to show how women use these practices as somatic modes of attention (Csordas, 1993). This enables women to reinterpret bodily experiences and social norms, thus legitimising certain feelings or behaviours and contributing to their projects of selfhood. In Chapter 5, I move on to focus on understandings of trauma and healing in contemporary Tantra. I explore the ideal of 'wellbeing', how trauma is understood, and how healing is a gradual and continual process, facilitated by the concept of sexual energy, that allows individuals to reconstruct a sense of self. Finally, in Chapter 6, I look at ecstasy in contemporary Tantra - how it is experienced, spoken about, and understood - as an experience that works to affirm these women's new sense of selfhood and alters their everyday experiences.

Lay Summary

This thesis aims to show how women involved in contemporary Tantra in Britain aim to construct a new or altered sense of self. By interviewing Tantra teachers, observing workshops and sessions, using my own body as a tool of knowledge in fieldwork, and referring to primary literature, I show how important the sense of touch is in this process, and I explore why individuals might focus on touch in this context. By focusing on certain common tactile experiences in contemporary Tantra – such as hugs and massages – I show how touch is used to create a healthy, authentic, and autonomous sense of self through the apparent transgression or reinforcement of boundaries, both physical and social. Tantra, understood as an ancient, exotic practice by practitioners, lends authority to this use of touch, negotiation of boundaries, and experiences induced through these practices. Throughout this thesis, I will show how gender affects such experiences – of touch, of Tantra, and of selfhood. As such, this research is important in exploring: contemporary interpretations and expressions of Tantra in Britain; how and why women specifically are engaged with forms of spirituality such as contemporary Tantra; the sense of touch and how it can contribute to a sense of self; and how touch can be used by a researcher to gain knowledge of certain phenomena.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: ‘THINK less, FEEL more!’

This thesis argues that women in contemporary Tantra engage with touch practices in the process of constructing a new or altered sense of self. Focusing on contemporary Tantra in Great Britain, which is situated comfortably within the holistic milieu (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005), this research explores how the sense of touch is used by individuals to create a sense of self which they perceive as autonomous, empowered, and healthy. Using the approach of embodied ethnography – interviews with Tantra teachers, ‘observant participation’ (Wacquant, 2004), and my own bodily experiences – over the course of two years, this research gives a detailed, sensory insight into how and why certain practices have become significant in the context of contemporary Tantra. Through this approach, participants’ experiences of transformation, healing, and ecstasy come to the fore and are explored in relation to prominent, related themes: transgression, the negotiation of gender norms, and sexuality.

The ethnographic sections of this thesis (and particularly Chapter 4) aim to show how the senses, specifically touch, have become a significant aspect of contemporary Tantra. Maintaining a focus on the tactile in this context offers insight into how practices are used to negotiate perceived boundaries between mind and body, self and other; as well as the social norms and discourses which influence how these boundaries are experienced. This opens up an exploration of how the sense of touch is understood in what is ostensibly a vision-focused society; as well as important discussions on how tactile engagement with others affects how an individual perceives their own sense of self. These ethnographic chapters also explore more specific behaviours – Tantric massage, and sexual activity – to show how touch-based practices are used to induce transformation, healing, and ecstatic experiences, all of

which affect individuals' everyday lives thereafter. The chapters also highlight ideas in contemporary Tantra such as the concept of 'sexual energy', which is used to positively interpret pleasurable sensations induced by touch practices. These concepts are used to legitimate the perceived transgression of norms around gender and sexuality for women engaging in these practices as part of their project of selfhood.

Throughout these chapters, a web of interrelated themes - transgression, gender norms, and sexuality - emerges. I highlight how the historical development of Tantra, and particularly the Orientalist sources which influenced this, caused these three themes to come to the fore. I also show how this Orientalism continues into the present day, and in this respect, this research identifies an 'ideology of transgression' (directly inspired by Kimberley Lau's 'ideology of the alternative' (2000)), which is based on Orientalist interpretations of Tantra, and is important in legitimising particular practices or ideas. This proposed 'ideology of transgression' also hints that some ideas presented as transgressive in the contemporary British context, might actually work to reinforce the status quo. Exploring the sense of touch is one way to bring these themes into focus, highlighting how discourses around embodied practices influence women engaging with contemporary Tantra.

With regards to methodology, the emphasis placed on touch in contemporary Tantra provides an opportunity for this thesis to explore new avenues in the field of embodied ethnography. As explored in Chapter 3, tactility can be used by the researcher to engender a sense of familiarity or 'insidership' with their participants, and to provide access to different kinds of embodied knowledge; yet can also highlight differences between individuals in the field, and necessitates putting the researcher's inconsistent (and sometimes vulnerable) body at the forefront of the research. This thesis also makes significant contributions in other areas: to date, little ethnographic work has

been conducted on contemporary Tantric practices, particularly in Britain. Similarly, the study of touch is still a developing field in the social sciences, and particularly in Religious Studies. This thesis works to improve knowledge in both fields, while providing further insight in related areas of study, such as women's involvement with holistic spirituality, and constructions of selfhood in the contemporary British context.

To provide a good grounding to this thesis, this introduction will provide an overview of contemporary Tantra. First, I provide some proposed definitions of Tantra; rather than being normative, strict definitions, these are presented in order to give the reader a sense of the field, before situating Tantra within the wider holistic milieu, and focusing on common themes encountered during the course of this research. This will identify the particular interpretations and expressions of Tantra that this research engages with; and highlights the social, political, and historical influences that have produced the phenomena that this thesis focuses on. This introduction will then provide information about the participants of this study, and the research methods used – particularly focusing on the approach of embodied ethnography - before providing a breakdown of material that each chapter contains.

What is Tantra?

To gain a good overview of what 'Tantra' refers to in the contemporary British context, it helps to look at definitions that have been proposed in the last 30 years. Although there is already a wealth of literature on historical South Asian Tantra, I will not do a comprehensive survey of this (more extensive overviews in this area can be found in Padoux, 2017; White, 2000; or Keul, 2012). Instead, I will draw out only those features of Tantra present in previous studies that have influenced and been picked up in

contemporary Tantra. Second, I briefly describe how Tantra first became known in the UK through colonial accounts, missionary work, and travel writings of the 19th century onwards; and show how some of these Orientalist, exoticised, and sensationalist perceptions of Tantra continue, to some extent, today. Third, I will cover the rise in popularity of Tantra from the 1970s onwards, spurred on by the countercultural interest in Indian religions, and the work of the controversial guru Osho (also known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh), who continues to influence contemporary Tantra in Britain (more detail on this can be found in Chapter 2). Finally, I will describe Tantra in the current popular imagination and common perceptions of what Tantra involves.

Definitions

As with so many attempts to describe phenomena under one label, the term 'Tantra' can be interpreted as referring to a wide spectrum of practices, traditions, philosophies, beliefs, and rituals. In Vedic literature, the term 'Tantra' was originally used to mean 'loom', or the 'warp' of a loom, with the implication of a system or framework (Flood, 2006:9, also see Urban, 2003:26-28 for a more in-depth discussion of etymology). Writing in 1986, French Indologist Andre Padoux suggested that the system of 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' (Padoux, 1986: 273).¹ Another

¹ This definition, however, is based on a body of Kashmiri exegesis of Tantric texts – leading David Gordon White to suggest that this is a more accurate definition of 'Tantrism' (White, 2003:16)

prominent contemporary scholar of Tantra in South Asia, David Gordon White, puts forward a different, somewhat frequently-quoted definition:

Tantra is the Asian body of beliefs 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 that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways (White, 2000:9; also used in Kripal, 2007b:19)

Jeffrey J Kripal, another well-known figure in the field, supports this definition as, according to Kripal, White's definition can also apply to expressions of Tantra in the 1960s and 1970s counterculture in Europe and the UK (2012:437). Inspired by Kripal, Ann Gleig also emphasises the 'this-worldly' tendencies of Tantra, suggesting that 'Tantric' refers to 'a broad spiritual perspective that insists on the essential unity of the transcendent and the immanent and seeks not to renounce the world but to recover it within the perspective of liberation' (Gleig, 2013:229-229). Elsewhere, Timalcina identifies a number of key characteristics of Tantra by characterising it as 'the religious practices emerging in the Indian sub-continent that predominantly worship goddesses identified as 'power' (*sakti*). It is secretive in nature, shares practices within the close circles identified as 'families' (*kula*), is transgressive of the societal ethos and norms, and introduces diverse images in visualisation practices' (Timalcina, 2011:274, emphasis in original).

A number of scholars agree that Tantra cannot be defined by one unifying element. Hugh Urban, inspired by Douglas Brooks, suggests that Tantra should be understood polythetically, by identifying a number of shared characteristics (Urban, 2003:271-272); although he stops short of suggesting a comprehensive list of what these might be. However, other scholars have worked to identify which characteristics could be included in a polythetic definition of Tantra. White notes the importance of *mandalas*,

mantras and *mudras*² in Tantra, yet also discusses how they can be found elsewhere in South Asian traditions; as such, from a historical, textual perspective, White argues that an interest in sex could be seen as a distinguishing feature of Tantra (2003:13). Gavin Flood also puts forward similar suggestions, referring to studies that list numerous features of Tantra (but which aren't necessarily exclusively Tantric), such as the location of a bipolar energy in the body (Goudriaan, Gupta and van Hoens, 1979:7-9, in Flood, 2006:200). Taking a similar approach to Flood, Christopher Wallis has compiled and combined lists describing the features of Buddhist, Shaiva, and Vaishnava Tantra (by Tribe, Hodge, Goudriaan, Brooks, and Lopez), and finds twenty-seven common characteristics - but suggests that the most prominent six aspects in classical Tantra are yogic meditation, mantras, mandalas, gurus, initiation, and ritual worship of the divine. Again, however, Wallis notes that these elements are present in other, non-Tantric traditions (Wallis, 2012:33-34).

Rather than attempting to pin down a single definition of Tantra, Hugh Urban – who has written extensively on the history of Tantra's transmission to the West³ – suggests that 'Tantra' is a 'highly variable and shifting category, whose meaning may differ depending on the particular historical moment, cultural milieu, and political context' (Urban, 2003:7). As such, Urban emphasises that 'because both the traditions and the scholars are historically, culturally, and politically situated, the imagining of Tantra will be different in every historical moment and in every new cross-cultural encounter' (Urban, 2003:272).

² *Mandalas*: symbolic patterns representing the cosmos, used for visualising or manifesting deities; *mantras*: combinations of words or syllables with performative and transformative power; *mudras*: hand gestures, usually accompanied by mantras, which express the deity through physical movement (all in Johnson, 2009).

³ Although use of the term 'the West' is problematic and can reinforce perceived differences between 'East' and 'West', I use it here to broadly refer to Europe, North America, and Australasia.

Tantra's Transmission to the West

A more rounded exploration of Tantra's movement from South Asia to the West has been provided in the Literature Review in Chapter 2. However, it is useful to provide a brief summary of this movement of Tantra at this point, to give some context and rationale for certain features of contemporary Tantra described later in this Introduction.

One of the defining features of Tantra's transmission to the West is the Orientalist discourses which shaped, and continue to shape, interpretations of it. Originally encountered in India by colonialist writers and Christian missionaries, Tantra was presented to its new Western audience as something 'extreme': either the most degenerate form of Indian religion, or a radically new solution to the troubles facing the West (Urban, 2003, 2011). Either way, Tantra was exoticised, romanticised, and seen as the 'other', upon which individuals in the West (and elsewhere) were able to project a range of characteristics. During the 1960s and 1970s, particularly positive Orientalist interpretations of Tantra became popular within the 'New Age' movement, wherein it was interpreted as a potential alternative to the ills of Western modernity. These interpretations were reinforced by gurus from India and Tibet such as Osho (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who were renowned for their practices, teachings, and personal lives, which were often sensationalised due to their alleged involvement in sexual activity and other transgressive behaviours (Urban, 2000:285-289). This theme of transgression (and providing an 'alternative'), based on Orientalist representations of Tantra, has continued into the contemporary context, wherein Tantra has acquired an association with particular themes in popular culture (as explored below).

Here, some attention must also be given to the term 'neo-Tantra', often applied by both scholars and practitioners to contemporary, Westernised interpretations of Tantra popular in the US and Europe. Although the prefix 'neo' could be seen as a simple signifier indicative of a 'new' interpretation of Tantra, Chapter 3 discusses in more detail how use of the term 'neo-Tantra' is a somewhat contentious issue. Using 'neo-' hints at a range of claims to authority and appeals to tradition, and this term was rarely used by my research participants to refer to their own practices. In addition, it could be argued that the use of the prefix 'neo-' is misleading in that it assumes the existence of a singular, clear-cut tradition of 'Tantra', from which 'neo-Tantra' differs – as Richard King argues with reference to the term 'neo-Hinduism' (1999:107). As such, in this thesis I have chosen to continue using the term 'Tantra', even though this research is focused on phenomena which many scholars and practitioners would label 'neo-Tantra'. I have also made use of the phrase 'contemporary Tantra', with the aim of describing my area of research in a more neutral way, without the connotations that a more well-known term such as 'neo-Tantra' can bring.

As briefly mentioned above, it is also important to note how the term 'Tantra' can describe a plethora of practices found in various parts of South and South-East Asia, which can be included under the umbrella of a number of different traditions. There are great geographical and cultural variations within Tantra in Asia: forms of Buddhist Tantra have historically been influential in Tibet, while Trika Shaivism has been popular in parts of Kashmir. As yet, it might seem that definitions and descriptions of Tantra in this thesis have glossed over the variation and nuance evident in forms of Tantra existent in South Asia. However, as noted by Timalisina, Tantra practitioners in the West have few issues in blending elements from various strands of Tantra. As such, although some practitioners are aware of (and attempt to differentiate between) different Tantric traditions, Tantra in the West has been broadly homogenised

(Timalsina, 2011:278). I found this to be generally true for my research participants, too – my presentation of Tantra here does not mean to ignore the variations between movements, but to reflect my participants’ understandings of these.

Popular Culture and Tantra

No one seems to have done more for the notoriety of Tantra in recent popular culture than English musician Sting (b. Gordon Sumner in 1951). An offhand interview comment (in which he credited Tantra for his lengthy love-making sessions with Trudie Styler) created such media attention around Tantra, and specifically, what Tantra could do for your sex life, that Sting’s name is often the main point of reference for people when asked about Tantra. This was not lost on many of my research participants; I will take this chance to introduce the voices of some Tantra teachers involved with my research, who would often mention Sting as soon as our conversation touched on the idea of popular perceptions of Tantra. Take, for instance, my interview with Adaira, a full-time Tantra teacher based in London:

Most people, if you mention the word Tantra, if they have even heard of it, the first thing they usually - the *only* thing most people know about - is Sting. They go, “Oh, that thing that Sting does, right?” It’s like, oh my god, how long ago did he say that?!⁴

For a researcher so involved in the field, popular public perceptions of Tantra are hard to gauge. An online search for ‘Tantra’ is likely to bring up a plethora of articles – often from magazines based in Europe and North America, aimed at young- to middle-aged women. One article from Marie Claire magazine titled ‘4 Amazing Tantric Sex Tips’ includes the subheading, ‘How to Learn Kama Sutra’ (Hudepohl, 2017) – displaying

⁴ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

the frequent confusion between Tantra and the Kama Sutra in popular culture (as they are both popularly understood to address sexual activity, they are often put under the same umbrella). A number of other mainstream magazines have also attempted to incorporate occasional articles on Tantra into their 'Love & Sex' sections. Due to the proliferation of media directly linking the two, it is possible to see how Tantra is now almost entirely identified with sexual experiences in popular culture – although more recently, some journalists have attempted to provide more balanced accounts of contemporary Tantra in Britain, based on personal engagement with Tantra workshops and teachers (see Bennet, 2019).

This popular association with sex (to the exclusion of almost anything else) was noted by a vast majority of the Tantra practitioners I interviewed. One Tantra teacher, Dahlia, who teaches in both England and France, good-humouredly summed up reactions she has previously received from acquaintances upon telling them she was involved with Tantra:

I think that there's this feeling... it's about free sex, it's about swapping partners, you know, it's kind of like the next level of the sixties free love movement... So I think people go, "Tantra, ahhh, you're into Tantra, right. Nice. What's your number?" [laughs]⁵

Meanwhile, Chandran – a Tantra teacher based in the Westcountry who originally encountered Tantra through practicing Transcendental Meditation - spoke about troubles encountered when organising venues for Tantra events:

...they really need reassuring, that it's not going to be orgies, and this and that, and people running around naked in their grounds, et cetera. So I reassure them, no it's not going to be orgies and people running around naked on your grounds... [laughs]⁶

⁵ Interview conducted in Edinburgh, 2nd March 2017.

⁶ Interview conducted via Skype, 7th April 2017.

Teacher Adaira also spoke about people who are a little better acquainted with contemporary Tantra:

Some people, I guess who are a bit more aware, but still not experienced in Tantra itself, they have this idea that it's this kind of fluffy, scented candles and feathers and silks, people writhing around with one another, or there's something 'woo-woo' about it that's really ungrounded. I mean for me, nothing could be further from the truth...⁷

In all cases, Tantra practitioners seemed highly aware of a certain perception and reputation that Tantra has acquired in popular British culture – and they were often keen to convey to me how these interpretations are inaccurate.

Contemporary Tantra as Holistic Spirituality

As mentioned above, contemporary Tantra in Britain can be comfortably situated alongside other forms of holistic spirituality; as such, it is worth explaining here what is meant by this term, used frequently in this thesis. By 'holistic spirituality', I refer to the messy field variously referred to and including 'alternative spirituality', 'New Age', or 'Mind/Body/Spirit'. Sointu and Woodhead define 'holistic spiritualities' as 'those forms of practice involving the body, which have become increasingly visible since the 1980s, and that have as their goal the attainment of wholeness and well-being of 'body, mind, and spirit' (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:259). My primary reason for preferring this label is that the term 'holistic' hints at an emphasis on the body and well-being, which I also recognise in the context of contemporary Tantra. The term 'spirituality', as opposed to 'religion', is also well-suited to the study of Tantra in Britain – many teachers and practitioners classify themselves as 'spiritual but not religious',

⁷ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

as is common across the holistic milieu. One good summary of the binaries implied by the spirituality/religion distinction (as used rhetorically by practitioners) is given by Fedele and Knibbe, who state that 'spirituality' is used to refer to a number of qualities including flexibility, having an absence of authority, gender equality, a non-hierarchical structure, being oriented toward inner development, unmediated access to divinity, and accepting of the body and sexuality. These characteristics are used in contrast to religion, which is seen as their opposite: hierarchical, rigid, authoritarian, and unaccepting of the body and sex (Fedele and Knibbe, 2013:6).

To give the reader an impression of what 'contemporary Tantra' refers to in this thesis, I will begin by describing characteristics that are common to many other practices and movements within the holistic milieu, in order to create some understanding of its place in the contemporary British context. I will then present qualities that appear to be more idiosyncratic to contemporary Tantra - although these certainly aren't exclusive to Tantra, due to the wide variation of practices and ideas within the holistic milieu. This presentation of characteristics is designed to become progressively more specific to contemporary Tantra, and should provide a general frame of reference for the reader to both situate this research, and give some understanding of what kind of 'Tantra' this thesis investigates. The ideas and characteristics presented below were identified through interviews with self-identifying Tantra practitioners in Britain, in combination with my own experiences of Tantra sessions, workshops, groups, and primary literature. It is important to note that the characteristics discussed below are generalisations – not all Tantra practitioners would recognise every characteristic in their own beliefs or practices, and indeed many teachers pride themselves on their original interpretations of ideas. However, from my own research, all of the ideas or qualities given below have been common to multiple teachers, workshops, or groups,

and can thus work towards creating a kind of polythetic definition of contemporary Tantra in Britain – echoing those discussed above.

Self-Sacralisation

One of the defining features of holistic spirituality is a focus on the self, and contemporary Tantra is no exception to this. The emphasis on the self in these movements has been highlighted by numerous scholars of holistic spirituality, who note the process of the ‘sacralisation’ or ‘divinisation’ of the self (Heelas, 1996; Partridge 2004:72; Hanegraaff, 1996:204). In this context the self is the ultimate authority, and experiencing the self is equated with experiencing ‘God’, the ‘Goddess’, or one’s ‘inner spirituality’ (Heelas, 1996:19-21). This is sometimes expressed in terms of a ‘High self’ or ‘authentic self’, which is perceived as beyond the socialised self, ego, or limited personality (Heelas, 1996:19; Hanegraaff, 1996:211). As such, ‘truth’ or ‘revelation’ is found within the individual (Partridge 2004:73). Further, this focus on the self also leads to individuals feeling responsible for their problems, with the assumption that only they can solve them (Heelas, 1996:188).⁸

Examples of an emphasis on the self abound in primary literature from the field of Tantra. One workshop advert on Tantra suggests that participants can find ‘Womb Wisdom, Deepest Connection with the Self...Self-Love and Self-Acceptance’ (UK

⁸ Some scholars, such as Veronique Altglas, have questioned the claim that the self is the ultimate authority (Altglas, 2014). Although Altglas agrees that realisation or experience of the self is an important goal in this context, she notes that this is also a socially constructed ideal, dependent on the presence of other social authorities in the field and as such, a ‘sacralised’ self can be understood as a social construction (Altglas, 2014:486).

Tantra News, January 2017); another advert hints at a gendered self, offering 'a year long intensive training into the reclaiming of our whole essential self as woman' (UK Tantra News, July 2017). Some highlight certain practices: 'using meditation as a way of increasing your intuition and connection to yourself' (UK Tantra News, September 2017), while yet others warn potential participants to '[b]e prepared to dig deep and meet yourself on all levels' (UK Tantra News, September 2017). As such, we can see that in Tantra (in accordance with the wider holistic milieu), there is a construction of a self (or 'Self') which participants variously aim to construct, connect with, or reclaim.

I suggest that this focus on the self is a key motivator for women in Britain engaging with Tantra. Throughout my fieldwork, the importance placed on discovering or developing an altered sense of self was threaded through each activity and interaction. As such, each of the following characteristics of contemporary Tantra can be seen as contributing to these ongoing projects of selfhood, to varying extents.

Body-Focused, Holistic, and Experiential

Another common feature in holistic spirituality (which the name hints at; as discussed above) is a focus on the body. The body is understood 'as the access point to unique selfhood,' and participants in this context aim to 'bring a valued self into being by way of bodywork' (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:265). In contemporary Tantra, this focus on the body is made explicit. One common narrative for teachers and practitioners in this field refers to a Cartesian split between mind and body, interpreted as a negative occurrence caused by Western societal influences, and which disrupts a connection with the self. Individuals are understood to be suffering from a disconnection from their bodies caused by modern, technology-focused, capitalist, patriarchal, culturally

Christian, Western society. Feeling a connection with the body is idealised as a 'natural' state, which individuals strive to achieve (or 'return' to). In response, the goal of Tantra is to re-connect with the physical body, thus working toward a holistic union within the individual, between mind and body – amounting to a discovery of the self. This was succinctly described by one of my interviewees, Lorraine, a Tantra teacher and Qigong practitioner from Scotland:

We overcome the separation, particularly of the West which came in, of the body and mind split, so it's really understanding that the body and mind and heart are absolute inseparably interconnected within the body.⁹

Overcoming this separation is achieved by foregrounding the role of the physical body in certain practices. As one Tantra workshop advert exhorts, '[t]his is a delicious invitation to get more pleasure out of your life, to get out of your head and into your body; THINK less, FEEL more!' (UK Tantra News, January 2017). Often, the language used is that of getting *back* into our bodies – implying that being 'in our bodies' is our natural

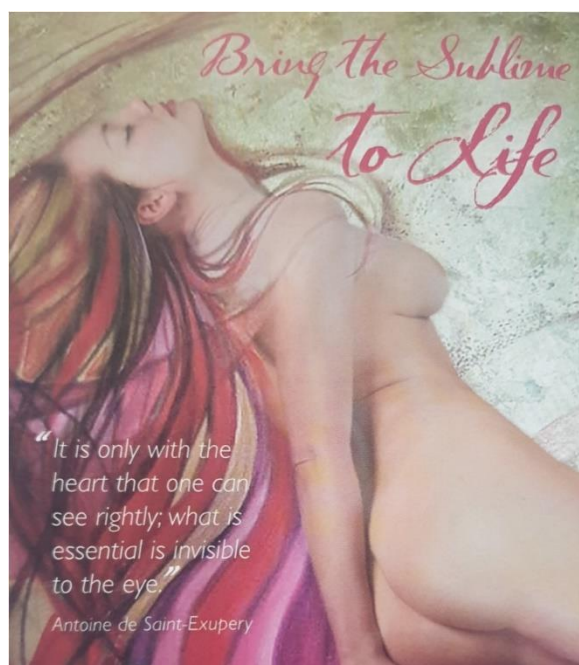


Figure 1 - Tantra Festival 2016 Flyer – 'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye'

state. The example of childhood innocence is used to convey this – an idealised state, before individuals are influenced by the (negative) pressures of Western society and 'move more into their heads', thus neglecting their bodies. This binary also has explicitly gendered aspects, wherein the mind/head is coded as masculine, while the

⁹ Interview conducted in London, 30th March 2017.

body is feminine – which will be discussed in further detail below. Additionally, paying attention to the body can lead to various understandings of anatomy, with participants referring to physical (and energetic) systems commonly known in the holistic milieu such as chakras, nadis, or the ‘subtle’ or ‘energy’ body.

This focus on the body is also intricately linked to experience, both in Tantra and in the wider holistic milieu. Heelas suggests that personal experience is understood as the only thing that can ‘[provide] direct and uncontaminated access to the spiritual realm’ (Heelas, 1996:21), while Partridge states that in this context, ‘the immediacy of personal experience is seen as epistemologically crucial’ (Partridge 2004:76). The physical body is key to giving individuals access to these experiences. As countless practitioners explained to me over the course of my fieldwork, talking about Tantra can only convey limited information: you really have to experience it, too. Tantra teacher Harriet, based near Glastonbury, stated:

It’s so experiential...something that you live rather than believe or know about. Which is another little bugbear I have, you know, with all these texts that talk about what Tantra is, it’s like...don’t write about it, don’t talk about it, *do* it!¹⁰

This was echoed by Lorraine, who stated that:

One thing about Tantra is it’s experiential. It doesn’t matter what you read, you can’t *know* it without actually doing it.¹¹

From this focus on the body and physical experience, a focus on the senses is a natural extension. It is through our senses that we understand and perceive not only

¹⁰ Interview conducted in Glastonbury, 10th June 2017.

¹¹ Interview conducted in London, 30th March 2017.

the outside world, but also our own bodies and selves. The senses (and the body) are understood as the medium through which information travels and experiences are created. Indeed, many practices in contemporary Tantra are explicitly aimed at stimulating the senses – this is explored in much more detail in Chapter 4.

Well-Being & Healing

Another theme common within the holistic milieu – and closely connected with the emphasis placed on the body – is that of well-being and healing (explored in more detail in Chapter 5). Like many other practices and groups in the holistic milieu, Tantra practitioners take a keen interest in maintaining the well-being of the individual, sometimes through specific healing practices, but also in more ‘everyday’ acts of care. Although Sointu and Woodhead note that a spiritual search will often start with some form of physical ailment (2008:265)¹², Partridge points out that ‘wellbeing is consistently suggestive of more than physical health, recognizing the integration of mind, body, and spirit’ (Partridge 2005:17). As such, Tantra practitioners’ perceptions of their own health and well-being can be key in formulating a positive sense of self. Adverts for Tantra workshops and sessions abound with references to healing – physical, psychological, spiritual, sexual, and everything in between – which is also discussed in some detail in Chapter 5.

¹² Although clearly, other factors such as age, gender, or class will also affect whether a person with a physical ailment will seek ‘spiritual’ healing.

Feminine and Masculine Principles

Taking influence from Jungian psychology (interpretations of which became particularly popular in the counterculture of the 60s and 70s), and harking back to other definitions of Tantra given above, another common theme in contemporary Tantra is that of essentialised masculine and feminine principles, often referred to as the Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine.¹³ Typical of many forms of holistic spirituality, masculine characteristics are thought to include, but are not limited to: direction, clarity, pointedness, stability, ambition, rationality, business acumen, strength, consciousness, and decisiveness; while feminine qualities include but are not limited to: sensitivity, sensuality, softness, nurture, maternalism, spontaneity, and receptivity. In Tantra, the opposition (or 'polarity') of Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine means that when they do come into contact, energy and attraction is created (the analogy of positive and negative ends of a magnet is often used). As London-based Tantra and yoga teacher Adrienne described to me:

That polarity between the feminine and the masculine, both inside our own beings and between beings, is what creates the 'zzz' [*electricity* noise], the magic in relationships and love and life and music and art and cooking and everything.¹⁴

Each person is thought to contain both essential principles; however, in each individual, either the feminine or masculine aspect is seen as being expressed more than the other. In this respect, femininity is often equated with being a woman; and masculinity with being a man. If a woman desires to have more ambition or

¹³ Jung's gender ideology and theory of archetypes has been taken up by a number of movements in the holistic milieu and further afield. Vivianne Crowley's (1996) article explores these in relation to Wicca, highlighting how Jung's various archetypes can help one to encounter the self; and also notes his ideas of the female's *animus* and the male's *anima*, i.e. the male part of a woman or female part of a man, which represent the essential qualities of the opposite gender (Crowley, 1996:7). In my experience, these are also reflected in contemporary Tantra.

¹⁴ Interview conducted in London, 21st October 2016.

decisiveness (for example), they might work on drawing out their 'masculine' aspects; and if a man wishes to be more sensual or empathetic (for example), they can work on developing their 'feminine' aspects. One's dominant aspect (sometimes referred to as a 'sexual essence') can also determine the type of intimate partners that a person is best suited to. Excellent examples of this can be found throughout David Deida's *Intimate Communion: Awakening Your Sexual Essence*, a book recommended to me by several Tantra practitioners. Tendencies toward gender essentialism have also been noted in studies of holistic spirituality more generally (e.g. Heelas, 1996:34), and particularly in certain forms of Paganism.¹⁵

Feminine-Focused

Despite characterising the world and other individuals in terms of essentialised feminine and masculine principles, Tantra practitioners present femininity as superior to masculinity – to the extent that, for them, Tantra can be characterised as an essentially feminine practice. As one teacher, Diane, states:

Tantra is a marriage – an equal marriage – between the masculine and the feminine. Having said that, I actually feel, unlike most practices, the doorway into Tantra is through the feminine, if that makes any sense. So it's like the female stands on the threshold of Tantra. She, as carrier of feminine energy, is already in the Tantric space. The masculine energy, the male energy, sort of has to be invited in, in a certain way. But once he's invited in, it's an equal partnership.¹⁶

This was reinforced by Chandran, who suggested that:

¹⁵ Although Oboler (2010) notes that these essentialist interpretations are increasingly being called into question; and there has been some debate over whether forms of Paganism would be classified as 'New Age' (York, 1996).

¹⁶ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

In my group workshops... generally it looks a bit like the women are more ready, they're a bit ahead, more interested, more open, and I think partly that's because in a way Tantra is, in some respects, is a feminine approach, or it's...certainly regarding sexuality, it's a more feminine approach. But that's just simply because we're emerging out of a period of patriarchy, so there's a necessary rebalancing...¹⁷

One important idea in contemporary Tantra is the concept of Shakti (the Great Goddess, equated with feminine power and energy), and how this is used to extend the limits of 'ideal' femininity, and to revalue certain feminine characteristics. Shakti can be variously interpreted as the Divine Feminine principle, the Goddess, a feminine energy, and sometimes a more degendered idea of 'divine power' (Pechilis, 2011:109). Often related to powerful, angry Hindu goddesses such as Kali and Bhairavi, Shakti is understood to incorporate 'typically' feminine attributes, such as those listed above – however, Shakti can also be wild, vengeful, passionate, and hard to contain. For practitioners of Tantra, this amounts to an expansion of how 'ideal' femininity can be expressed, legitimising a wider scope of behaviours and emotions for many women. Using Shakti, femininity is interpreted as less passive, and more dynamic, exciting, or passionate and as such, participants in Tantra are encouraged to re-value certain aspects of femininity and the characteristics ascribed to it. As one teacher, Harriet, stated:

It feels to me like Tantra is an opportunity to...to wonder what it would be like if we weren't brought up with any of the bullshit around feminine is "less than"...¹⁸

As will be explored in some depth in this thesis, this narrative can lead to individuals extolling the virtues of Tantra in terms of female empowerment, and liberation from repressive gender norms. However, these interpretations of femininity (and masculinity) continue to be gender essentialist, leading to questions over how

¹⁷ Interview conducted via Skype, 7th April 2017.

¹⁸ Interview conducted in Glastonbury, 10th June 2017.

empowering or liberating they can be, and whether they continue to limit individuals according to certain gendered characteristics. As we can see in Diane's quote, masculine energy is equated with males, reinforcing the fact that women and men are often expected to behave according to feminine or masculine ideals (even if certain aspects of these have been altered in this context).

It is also worth noting here how many participants in this research – despite consistently noting oppressive norms surrounding women in British society regarding sexual behaviour or bodily appearance – expressed indifference, or even active dislike, toward contemporary feminism. I suggest that this is in accordance with Tantra practitioners' general preference for gender essentialism – often understood to be characteristic of second-wave feminism, popularised in the 60s and 70s – which contemporary feminism tends to be critical of.

Relational

Tantra practitioners also maintain a focus on relationships. Often, this is expressed in terms of relationships with one's intimate partner(s); however, the same ideas can be applied to family relationships, friendships, and various other aspects of life. Rather than this distinguishing Tantra from other forms of holistic spirituality (which, as discussed above, can appear 'self-centred'), a focus on the relational is somewhat typical in this context. Individuals are understood to belong to a wider 'whole' made up of a web of personal relationships, leading those involved in such practices 'to be committed to a vision of authentic selfhood-in-relation' (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:267).

Again, primary literature from the field of Tantra in Britain can provide some examples. One workshop advert states that attendees can 'learn the keys to conscious relationships; experience authentic connection; learn to communicate with integrity; and deepen relationships' (UK Tantra News, July 2017); while another unites the previous themes of selfhood, experience, well-being, and a focus on relationships (not only in a romantic sense): '[we] will support you to find inner resources to transform your life...this work teaches tools to access and develop your emotional intelligence, facilitating a shift in self-awareness, empathy & motivation. This inner shift has a direct effect on your state of wellbeing, outer confidence and interpersonal relationships' (UK Tantra News, September 2017).

Anti-Institutional & De-traditionalised

Also typical of many groups in the holistic milieu, Tantra practitioners claim to be anti-institutional – particularly with reference to organised religion and specifically, Christianity. Tantra teacher Adaira explained to me:

When I was in my teens, I actively broke away from Catholicism because in particular, the teachings around sexuality, marriage, gay people, all of these things, for me this was not a message of love and I just knew that I couldn't align myself with something that spoke in this way about people. So I actively rejected that in my teenage years, and yeah, then in my late teens I discovered Buddhism, actually. But I was very determined not to become a Buddhist, I didn't want to have dropped one ideology and picked up another, and even though Buddhists would say, "oh it's a philosophy and its not a religion and its more of a philosophy", and all this kind of thing, I could very clearly see the places where people normalise around a particular topic, and I really didn't want to do that again.¹⁹

¹⁹ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

From Adaira's account, we can see that she reacted particularly strongly against her Catholic upbringing – but also aimed to avoid aligning herself with another 'ideology'. This tendency has also been noted in the work of scholars such as George Chryssides, who notes that "much of the New Age movement tends to reject Christianity, at least in its traditional institutionalized forms" (Chryssides, 2007:20). Heelas relates this directly to the emphasis on personal experience as the ultimate authority, stating that holistic spirituality tends to be 'radically *de-traditionalized* (rejecting voices of authority associated with established orders) or in other ways anti-authoritarian (rejecting voices of those exercising authority on their own, even rejecting 'beliefs')' (Heelas, 1996:22).

(Anti-)Authoritarian

As noted above, the anti-authoritarian representation of alternative spiritualities by practitioners has been explored; although Heelas does note that there are variations in how authority is accepted in holistic spirituality (Heelas, 1996:34). In this respect, Tantra practitioners and teachers tend to fall into two camps.

On one side, are the avowedly anti-authoritarian teachers – in many ways typical of the holistic milieu. Combining this with their anti-institutional, de-traditionalised stance, these practitioners claim to combine their beliefs and practices fairly freely and eclectically, taking only their own experiences as proof of their efficacy. Some might train with other groups or teachers, but will claim their resulting teachings, beliefs, or practices as their own. In this respect, personal experience is seen as more legitimate than external authority, as mentioned above (Heelas, 1996:21).

On the other hand, some Tantra teachers are very concerned with authority and hierarchies – specifically, guru lineages. This echoes classical forms of Tantra, wherein an individual needed to be initiated by a guru, and would train exclusively with them for a lengthy period. Some contemporary practitioners are aware of this history and situate themselves within it, albeit in a less committed way, as a way to signal their legitimacy or authenticity as a Tantra practitioner. Of particular relevance here is perhaps the most famous Tantric guru, Osho (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh – explored in more depth in Chapter 2). Some well-known Tantra teachers in Britain and other parts of Europe and North America – such as Margo Anand, Sarita, or Alan Lowen - were Osho *sannyasins*.²⁰ These *sannyasins* were disciples of Osho, staying at his ashram in Pune, India, before spreading their interpretations of his teachings in the West. A number of teachers in the contemporary Tantra scene have been trained by these *sannyasins*, and as such, are able to proudly place themselves in Osho's lineage. One teacher I interviewed placed herself within Osho's lineage and referred to herself as a *sannyas* after feeling intimately connected to the guru while on a trip to India, despite these travels occurring several years after his death. Other Tantra teachers will also train with a number of different, reputable teachers (both in Britain and elsewhere such as the US and Europe), and, linking themselves to these names and reputations, present their own practices as authoritative. Some affiliate with a particular school, or will advertise the fact that they have trained with a well-known teacher; however, few are loyal to only one teacher, and many will advertise the collection of schools and teachers that have contributed to their Tantric training. As such, attitudes toward authority (and specifically gurus) in contemporary Tantra are particularly varied.

²⁰ *Sannyasins*: devotees or renunciators; followers of Osho commonly referred to themselves using this term.

Transgression & Boundary Work

Another theme common in contemporary Tantra is that of 'boundary work' – setting, voicing, pushing, or reinforcing boundaries. It is tempting to relate this to historical or textual themes in traditional and South Asian Tantra – namely, transgression and taboo. On closer inspection, however, a more accurate characterisation might be that contemporary Tantra practitioners emphasise the theme of transgression – while the extent to which certain behaviours or ideas are transgressive in this context is debatable. As discussed throughout this thesis, I refer to this as an 'ideology of transgression', directly influenced by Kimberley Lau's 'ideology of the alternative' (2000). Over the course of my fieldwork, boundaries were often referred to in terms of being identified and transgressed, or upheld and honoured. Take the following examples from several different workshop adverts:

Your sense of honouring your own boundaries, limitations and comfort-levels are of utmost importance. Actually to say NO can be your biggest learning experience! (UK Tantra News, December 2017)

[This] is an invitation to take life into your own hands and take responsibility for your boundaries, pleasure and wellbeing. (UK Tantra News, December 2017)

We'll practice staying really present, learn how to express our wants and needs authentically and to establish healthy boundaries for ourselves' (UK Tantra News, July 2017)

These are typical examples of how boundaries are referred to in Tantra – and the topic is raised frequently within this context (this is explored further in Chapter 4).

Sex

As might be expected – and in accordance with presentations of Tantra in popular culture - sex is also a prominent theme in contemporary Tantra. As practitioners see the body and subjective experience as potential ways to find the ‘authentic’ or ‘High’ self, it follows that sexual experiences (as a natural part of life) can also aid in this pursuit. As Italian, Bristol-based Tantra teacher Isabella, stated:

...to me, what [Tantra] looks like, is a bunch of people worldwide, that wants to find some approval and some natural approach of sexuality, so being connected to their own body, being connected to another human being’s body, and...it’s very much based on that, I mean it adds a spiritual element to sexuality, definitely, and to pleasure.²¹

As such, Tantra can be seen as a way to validate and sacralise sexual behaviour, and to ‘connect with’ the body more generally (discussed above). In addition, Tantra teachers participating in my research appeared to understand sexuality as a broad category that could encompass many forms of sensuality and emotions not always seen as explicitly sexual – more akin to what Kripal refers to as ‘the erotic’ (2007b:169). However, the prominence of sexuality in Tantra doesn’t necessarily mean that it lives up to popular stereotypes of being all about ‘free’ sex. Isabella later clarified,

Tantra doesn’t mean being super free, “Oh! I’m Tantric, I’m going to have sex with everybody”, it’s not about that at all. It’s about having a natural approach about sexuality, a *normal* approach about sexuality, so not repressing it when it feels present, but not overdoing it, like an addiction, right? So there is a fine line there.

²¹ Interview conducted in Bristol, 9th March 2017.

Thus, it becomes clear that certain norms or expectations can still pertain to the area of sexuality. Another teacher, Dahlia, expressed how she prefers to practice Tantra within monogamous relationships:

I'm really kind of like an advocate I suppose, of the sacred union, the one-on-one, committed, monogamous, but *highly* adventurous, *highly* explorative, holy union with another one.²²

From these teachers, it becomes clear that ideas around sexual relationships in contemporary Tantra don't always live up to its reputation for unusual or somehow transgressive sexual behaviour – instead, the apparent transgression lies in how sexually open, honest, and exploratory individuals are, within certain parameters. Practitioners see this openness and positivity around sex as transgressive in the context of contemporary Britain. Having said that, many Tantra practitioners are also involved in [sexual] practices that do not fit the mould of a monogamous, heterosexual couple, and also see this as a key element of their spirituality. Practitioners' approaches to sex is one of the areas in which opinions differ the most, with some teachers upholding 'traditional' ideals (e.g. monogamy), and others being more exploratory (e.g. participating in group sex), all seen as part of their Tantric practice (this is also addressed in Chapter 3).

It is also worth noting here that contemporary Tantra is overwhelmingly heteronormative. As hinted at above, the notion of polarity and interplay between the Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine leads to assumptions that the ideal intimate partnership is between a woman and a man.²³ Despite practitioners of contemporary

²² Interview conducted in Edinburgh, 2nd March 2017.

²³ Urban notes that almost all major Tantric traditions of India are fundamentally heterosexual traditions, based on the union of female and male principles (Urban, 2012:481), although I would steer away from suggesting that this is a primary cause of heteronormativity in contemporary Tantra.

Tantra being overwhelmingly accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, there is a basic presumption – both in primary literature, and in groups or workshops – that couples will be heterosexual. However, there are signs that many teachers are working to counter this heteronormativity. Some individuals attempt to overcome this by seeing the Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine as purely psychological; however, when these ideas are taken out of the abstract and used to describe or rationalise certain practices such as sexual intercourse, they are hard for an LGBTQ+ audience to relate to. A number of gay and queer Tantra groups are advertised in a monthly newsletter, and teachers have become more aware of the language they use – for example Diane, who organises Tantra groups for women, and now states that they are aimed at ‘anyone who *identifies* as a woman’. Another teacher asked individuals in a workshop session to introduce themselves with their name and preferred pronouns - but then forgot that one individual preferred ‘they/them’ and instead referred to them as ‘she/her’. Incremental changes such as these highlight ongoing efforts to make Tantra more inclusive - although the extent to which this has thus far been effective is limited. Indeed, some teachers organising group sessions continue to strive to make sure that there are equal numbers of men and women in attendance, presuming that male-female pairs working together is optimal.

Despite the fact that many practitioners are working to counter this heteronormativity, many ‘classic’ pieces of primary literature in the field (such as Margo Anand’s 1990 *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy*) are primarily aimed at heterosexual couples, and tend to pay only the briefest lip service to how individuals in same-sex couples could participate in Tantra. One early exception to this is the work of Jeffrey Hopkins, a Tibetan Buddhist who was one of the first writers to present Tantric teachings and practices for a gay audience, in works such as *Sex, Orgasm, and the Mind of Clear Light: The Sixty-Four Arts of Gay Male Love* (1998). More recently, Barbara Carellas,

writer of *Urban Tantra: Sacred Sex for the Twenty-First Century* (2007) and founder of the Urban Tantra® professional training programme and international community, has worked to popularise inclusive interpretations of Tantra.

The above presentation of characteristics popular in contemporary Tantra in Britain primarily aims to give the reader some idea of the phenomena that this thesis addresses. However, I also wish to emphasise here how these themes, identified as important in Tantra, can all (to varying extents) be interpreted as contributing to individual projects of selfhood for those involved. From a focus on the body, gender, relationships, and sexual activity; to how individuals aim to transgress boundaries, or accept and reject forms of authority, the practices and discourses related to these themes can each aid a person in constructing a new or altered sense of self.

Orientalism

Clearly, the historical and social processes that led to Tantra being interpreted in certain ways in the West continue to have an effect on contemporary Tantra. As such, some typically Orientalist themes persist. As June McDaniel suggests, 'in these forms of New Age Tantra, we see a Western projection on the Mystic East, which is believed to be more sensual and world-affirming than Western culture' (McDaniel, 2004:277). Some Tantra practitioners and literature continue to expound a romanticised and exoticised view of India and the Tantric practices

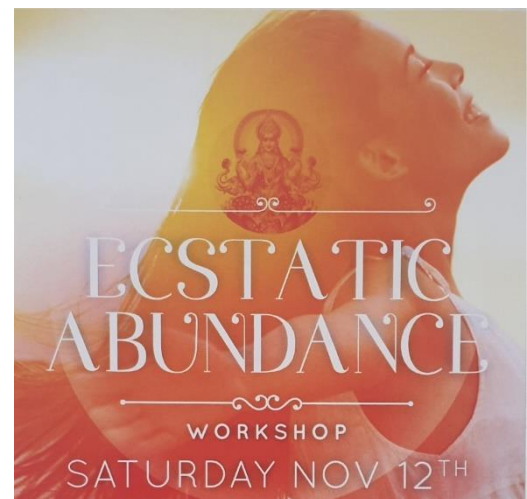


Figure 2 - 'Ecstatic Abundance' Workshop Flyer

originating there – one such example of this is Daniel Odier's (semi-)autobiographical *The Tantric Quest*, a tale of his initiation into Tantra with a sensual, beautiful, mysterious, and exotic Indian *dakini*.²⁴ In this, it is possible to see how the 'mystic East' is constructed as being directly linked to the body, senses, and femininity. Brown and Leledaki have also noted Orientalist themes in the holistic milieu (and particularly in 'Eastern movement forms'), suggesting that 'Orientalist perceptions not only persist, but loom large in the Western psyche', consistently being expressed through concerns about these Eastern movement forms' origins, teacher lineages, authenticity, and purity (2010:129). Similarly, Christopher Partridge suggests that some forms of holistic spirituality are presented 'in a way which suggests that ancient and Eastern origins are some verification of their value' (Partridge 2005:5) – this is something that I recognised in many parts of contemporary Tantra, and is discussed further in Chapter 2.

Related Movements

After describing some common features of contemporary Tantra, I will also undertake a brief exploration of movements in the holistic milieu which have a particularly close relationship with Tantra. As individuals within the holistic milieu tend to experiment with other groups and ideas fairly freely, most Tantra practitioners have experience with a number of other practices in this context. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, a number of related groups within the holistic milieu stood out to me as providing Tantra practitioners with common frames of reference – and often, being involved with these other practices had eventually introduced them to Tantra. Taking

²⁴ *Dakini* – in Tibetan Buddhism, a female deity or priestess.

note of these groups allows us to situate Tantra within its contemporary context, and to recognise other influences that might affect understandings of it. This also helps us to identify the subtle differences between Tantra and other practices within the holistic milieu; and allows us to acknowledge the flux of individuals, ideas, and practices between contemporary Tantra in Britain and other groups, as none of these are entirely discrete from each other.

Being involved with yoga – and particularly Kundalini Yoga (a dynamic practice with a focus on creating energy and a use of mantras) - is a common prelude to being involved in Tantra, and the relationship between Tantra and yoga is understood in various ways. Some teachers will refer to Tantra as an aspect of yoga; others will see yoga as an aspect of Tantra; and others differentiate clearly between the two. Teacher Isabella recounted her reasons for eventually leaving one particular 'yoga path' in favour of Tantra:

...the yoga path felt too...constrained. So the yoga is very strict, is very disciplined, so it's very much masculine. Yeah? You should do these exercises, you should dress all in white, you shouldn't have sex, you should be celibate, you cannot drink a beer, you cannot have too much chocolate, very strict. And that didn't speak to me anymore, so that's why I was then interested again into Tantra.²⁵

From this, we can also see how looking at related movements, and particularly the reasons why practitioners leave them in favour of Tantra, can also reveal a lot about how Tantra appeals to these individuals.²⁶

²⁵ Interview conducted in Bristol, 9th March 2017.

²⁶ Although practitioners aren't always so committed to only one system (e.g. Tantra or yoga) and don't necessarily have to leave one in favour of the other – for example Diane, who is a Tantra teacher and also an experienced Shaman, and who sees the two as complementary to each other.

Taoism is another movement commonly related to Tantra within the holistic milieu. The writings of Mantak Chia, such as *Awaken Healing Energy Through the Tao* (1983) and *The Multi-Orgasmic Man* (1996) are well known to Tantra practitioners, and at least one of my interviewees had received some form of training within this movement. From Taoism, the ideas of *yin* and *yang* appear particularly appealing for Tantra practitioners, and are sometimes equated with ideas of the Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine. Taoism in this context can also include Jade Egg practices, wherein a small stone egg is inserted into the vagina and pelvic floor exercises are performed in an effort to promote sexual health.

A less distinct movement – or perhaps more of an ‘umbrella’ movement - is that of sacred sexuality. It can be useful to classify Tantra as just one type of sacred sexuality, alongside other practices such as Quodoushka, a form of sacred sexuality in the holistic milieu inspired by Native American practices (which, like Tantra, has undergone interpretations and translations rendering it very distinct from that which it was inspired by). In my experience, Quodoushka is less popular in Britain than Tantra – and this is perhaps where we can see historical, particularly colonial, legacies in the holistic milieu. Harriet, a Tantra teacher, spoke with me about how she understands sacred sexuality:

I’m aware that there’s different forms of sacred sexuality around the world, so there’s Native American sacred sexuality, Quodoushka, and there’s a Pagan sexuality, and there’s a...a strong African tradition around sacred sexuality, so I see Tantra as just one tiny part of this big pie that is sacred sexuality around the world, and so it’s got a particular flavour, this Tantra thing, but it’s not the whole story.²⁷

In other cases, ‘Tantra’ can even function as the umbrella term, as some contemporary Tantra teachers understand Taoist teachings and Quodoushka as

²⁷ Interview conducted in Glastonbury, 10th June 2017.

'Tantric' in essence, even if the practitioners themselves would not describe themselves as such (Lousada and Angel, 2011:392).

Many Tantra teachers also have extensive experience in 5Rhythms Dance™²⁸ - which, for my participants, was the most common practice that had preceded their involvement with Tantra. Other specific trainings include the school of Sexological Bodywork™²⁹, which has developed a training programme with a respected reputation - an accreditation from this school can be seen as a signifier of a well-trained, ethical, responsible, and experienced Tantra teacher.

Practices which are also worth noting for providing a background for Tantra teachers (perhaps without being such a large influence as the aforementioned practices) are Bioenergetics, Shamanism, Qigong, and Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology. The practices listed above have been successful enough within the holistic milieu for them to become commonly known within these communities – and a scholar researching contemporary Tantra in Britain is certainly expected to have encountered the above movements and to have some rudimentary knowledge of, or experience in, them.

Slightly outside of the sphere of what is commonly included in holistic spirituality, are practices of BDSM,³⁰ which also have significant crossovers with Tantra. A number of my interviewees either noted the existence of this link, or spoke of their own personal

²⁸ Described as 'a dynamic movement practice – a practice of being in your body – that ignites creativity, connection, and community', and is focused on individuals expressing themselves in terms of the five rhythms – flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical, and stillness – which each have a web of associations (5 Rhythms, 2019)

²⁹ Described as a 'somatic, erotic education that assists individuals, couples and groups to deepen their experience of embodiment' (Association of Certified Sexological Bodyworkers, 2014)

³⁰ 'BDSM' is a broad acronym encompassing practices of Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, and SadoMasochism.

experiences with it. Various names have been given to this crossover – the most notable being ‘conscious kink’ - and courses in this are taught by several well-known Tantra schools in Britain. One teacher, Adaira, spoke with me about her own involvement with the BDSM community – as well as the ways in which it might be seen by other Tantra practitioners:

I cross over into other tribes which are sex positive as well, and of course Tantra’s not all about sex but I’m interested in sexuality so I’m in that community. And it also crosses over into the kink community, BDSM practices, which for me can also be really powerful places to explore ourselves, and our deeper, darker impulses. And for me, this is very Tantric, but some *tantrikas* would not go there at all, that would be seen to be an unacceptable domain to explore into.³¹

Adaira connects an exploration of BDSM with exploring the ‘self’ and uncovering unacknowledged impulses in the quest for self-knowledge. A different type of connection between Tantra and BDSM has also been made by Hugh Urban, who notes that both can be used to induce states of ecstasy (Urban, 2012:485).

Notably, none of my participants linked their practice of Tantra with previous experiences of Paganism or Wicca. Prior to my fieldwork, I expected to find some crossover in this area. At least one study has made direct comparisons between contemporary Wicca and South Asian Tantra, noting that ‘[b]oth modern Wicca and ancient Indian Tantra were based on initiatory cult groups; both placed a strong emphasis on ecstatic and trance states; both had small group rituals where participants undertook behaviour that was unconventional and disapproved of in the wider society’ (Samuel, 1998:125). Bringing the discussion to the modern day, Wicca shares a number of the aforementioned qualities of Tantra – including foundational beliefs such as the relationship of the Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine, and the

³¹ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

importance of sex and the body. However, during my fieldwork I encountered no evidence of Tantra practitioners having ties (past or present) to Wicca or Paganism more broadly.

Research Methods

The core of this research was based on ethnography conducted within British Tantra communities: qualitative interviews and participation in Tantra workshops, groups, and sessions. Although completed within a time frame of two years, the bulk of fieldwork was conducted between October 2016 and October 2017. This was supplemented by an analysis of primary literature – texts selected by recommendations from Tantra teachers and practitioners - and material collected online from social media, monthly community newsletters, blogs, and other websites known to be used within the British Tantra community. Before discussing my research methods (and how they developed over the course of my fieldwork) in more detail below, I will first provide some basic information about the fieldwork conducted for this research.

Deciding on the Object of Study – Who, What and Where

First, the area of study: this research concerns Tantra in Great Britain (which I also refer to as 'Britain', for brevity) – specifically, England and Scotland. Wales and Northern Ireland (as parts of the UK) weren't purposefully avoided in this research, and practitioners are certainly working within these areas. However, of those practitioners who responded to my research requests, none were based in Wales or

Northern Ireland and as such, I did not attend sessions or interview individuals based there.

Practically, the first stage of this research was deciding on the phenomena to be studied. As with almost any loosely organised practice or movement, it can be problematic to speak of a single British Tantra community. Indeed, many teachers would identify different strands of Tantra in Britain, dependent on where and by whom people were trained, which practices or aspects of Tantra are emphasised within the groups, or even according to personal relationships and friendships. As described above, it is hard to strictly delineate 'Tantra' as a bounded group – which is characteristic of its place in the holistic milieu. For this reason, finding research participants was done primarily through individuals self-identifying as Tantra teachers or practitioners, who were primarily based in Britain. The majority of Tantra teachers advertise through personal websites or networking sites (e.g. tantralink.com), and their self-description was taken as the basic criteria for initial contact. A monthly Tantra newsletter for the UK and Ireland is sent to email subscribers – this includes regular adverts for upcoming workshops, as well as a list of Tantra practitioners in the UK and Ireland which proved a valuable resource in my efforts to contact and build relationships with people in the community. The bar for inclusion on this list is set fairly low (as with my own methods, self-identifying as a Tantra practitioner is enough), and the list is separated into two sections – one for 'Tantra Groups/Centres etc.' and another for 'Tantra massage services' (this distinction is explored in more detail in Chapter 3). As I made progress with this research, the contact details of a number of Tantra practitioners included on this list proved to be outdated - which is perhaps indicative of how fluid and fast-changing the wider holistic milieu can be. Even so, it was a valuable resource for identifying individuals within the community.

Whether found online, via the newsletter, through word of mouth, or elsewhere, my initial contact with teachers was usually made by email. This email introduced my interests as a researcher, and explained the main aims at the outset of this process: exploring common themes and trends within the UK Tantra community. Depending on the teacher and whether they held regular workshops or groups, my email would ask if they would be open to the possibility of an interview, my attendance at their sessions, or ideally both. Once my fieldwork began to develop and I was in contact with a number of teachers, I was able to contact other individuals based on personal recommendation, snowballing my network of personal contacts.

For this research, I interviewed sixteen Tantra teachers - fourteen female and two male (the focus of the research was on women, but I didn't turn down the chance of interviewing two willing and enthusiastic male teachers). Of the fourteen female interviewees, all were aged between thirty and sixty, thirteen were white, and all were well-educated (to the equivalent of A-level or above) – as such, my sample was fairly typical of participants in holistic spirituality. All of these teachers worked within the holistic milieu as their primary employment³², and all had experience in both leading group workshops and conducting one-on-one sessions. I attended 24 workshops and group sessions – lasting anything between two hours and two days - and attended two annual Tantra festivals, each lasting the course of a weekend (see figure 3 for an example programme). To supplement this fieldwork, I also turned to core pieces of primary literature (all of which were recommended by teachers) and referred to practitioner blogs and websites.

³² Although some referred to themselves as full-time Tantra practitioners, many also taught practices such as yoga, Qigong, or meditation.

As this research involved fieldwork, I applied for and obtained ethical clearance from the School of Divinity's Ethics in Research Committee at the University of Edinburgh. In keeping with ethical standards, each participant in my research has been fully anonymised, and informed consent was obtained before interviews or participation in workshops. Individuals participated voluntarily, were contacted post-interview with the opportunity to read transcriptions, and were made aware of their right to withdraw consent at any point.

tantrafestival
Sunday Programme

	KAILASH <i>Shivas mystic mountain</i>	LILA <i>Shaktis paradise</i>	TANTRA LOKA
11:00 - 12:30	Tara Yoga Centre Yoga for Couples	Beverly Drumm Meeting the Beloved - You, Me & the Ecstasy of One-ness	Jayne Blackman & Tim Broughton Transforming Sex into Love
13:00 - 14:15	The Path of the Conscious Man Multi-orgasmic Men	Venus Multi-orgasmic Women	Mal Weeraratne - Tantric Journey Emotional Detox through Tantric - Tao Bodywork
15:00 - 16:30	John Hawken - The Path of Transformation Igniting the Fifteen Chakras to the Sublime	Leora Lightwoman Touching the Divine	Bogdan Radasanu Harmonising the Chakras for Couples
17:00 - 18:30	Ecstatic Joy Temple The Art of Tantric Massage	Marcelo and Patricia - Vital Development Love to be Lived	Vesa Kiviven Emotional Alchemy through Living Art
19:00 - 20:00	Closing Ceremony	—	—

Figure 3 - Tantra Festival 2016 Sunday Programme

Choice of Group, Workshop, or other Events

After developing contact with teachers who were willing to participate – through interviews, welcoming me into one of their sessions, or both – the next important step was identifying which sessions I should, and could, participate in.

Although attendance at regular group meetings would have been ideally suited to ethnographic work, two groups that I contacted and began attending regularly soon disbanded. Indeed, group classes conducted by teachers on a weekly or monthly basis are frequently dissolved, and are sometimes re-established in a different guise months or years later. This was a valuable lesson about Tantra groups (and indeed, the wider holistic milieu in Britain) and how fluid it is; and was also an important exercise in thinking about how to conduct research in such a geographically diverse and fluid field where long-term ethnography or case study research with a small number of groups seemed mostly unfeasible. However, this also alerted me to the important role that semi-regular, intensive workshops and training courses play in this context. Many Tantra teachers only conduct semi-regular workshops and trainings on top of their one-on-one sessions (e.g. some teachers hold only 2–4 workshops per year), which do not easily appeal to in-depth ethnography or case study for a PhD thesis. As such, working with a single teacher, or only one group, was not the approach best suited to this research.

In a small number of cases, access to groups was limited to personal factors outside of my control – for example, sessions aimed only at men, couples, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, or post-menopausal women. In addition, a significant amount of work in the Tantra scene is conducted in one-on-one sessions, wherein teachers take on roles resembling that of a therapist. Some groups I attended regularly; other times

I attended one-off workshops and interviewed the teachers. A small number of teachers were interviewed only, primarily because they had no upcoming workshops planned, or because they only conducted one-on-one work and geographical or financial constraints did not allow for this.

In such a fluid field of study, I decided that the best way to gain useful data was to take a flexible, mixed approach. I attended two regular monthly groups several times each, until they disbanded; I attended two annual Tantra festivals; and attended numerous workshops. Each time, I aimed to become familiar with the teacher or practitioner leading the session (through phone calls or Skype), and would ideally experience their workshops or sessions, before later interviewing them. Although my original research plan was much more structured – involving in-depth ethnography with two regular groups – it quickly became clear that this rigid plan did not suit the fluid nature of the field. I needed my methods to mirror that which they aimed to study, and adaptations had to be made to incorporate and allow for a certain degree of flexibility. Of course, this does have its drawbacks – for example, such an approach would be able to reveal relatively little about group dynamics, or the factors causing these groups to form and dissolve. However, for the purposes of this research – which aimed to delve into common beliefs and practices in a field which has thus far received little attention from ethnographers – I saw this flexible approach, informed by the field, as most appropriate.

Interview Procedure

Ideally, interviews for this research were conducted after my participation in at least one of the teacher's sessions. This was in order to give me a good understanding of the teacher's methods, and to allow further questioning of specific techniques, activities, and statements. The interviews took a semi-structured, casual form, during which I occasionally referred to a list of questions that I would steer the conversation towards in no set order, generally allowing the conversation to meander according to the participant. Interviews lasted anywhere between 40 minutes and 2.5 hours.

Participating in Workshops

In arranging attendance at workshops, the teachers or practitioners in question played a key part, and they would take the opportunity to notify other attendees of my participation as a researcher (each workshop usually has an email list through which all participants are contacted with practical information). At the start of each workshop, I was given the chance to introduce myself and my research, to explain my approach of being fully involved with all activities, as well as reassure other attendees that their personal experiences, statements, or views would not be included as part of this study without their consent. Once, a teacher stated that they would be happy for me to attend only in a personal capacity (i.e. as a participant only), but that they would not like me to attend if I took on any sort of observer or researcher approach. In this instance, I chose not to attend the session.

Full participation in Tantra workshops raised a number of important issues regarding ethnographic methods, the role of the researcher, and how ethnography can best be

conducted in such an intimate, body-focused environment as a Tantra workshop. These are themes that will be more fully explored in Chapter 3, which provides some exploration of how the researcher can participate productively and safely in Tantra session, without overstepping their own boundaries – which became an important aspect of this research. However, I shall explore here the ethnographic approach that I was informed by – namely, embodied ethnography - which can be kept in mind in forthcoming chapters of this thesis.

Embodied Ethnography

The last two decades have seen a steady increase of academic work on the body, not least in the field of anthropology – and for this research, recent studies on ‘embodied ethnography’ were instructive in showing how I could make sense of the touch-focused activities with which I was engaged. Of course, the researcher – and the researcher’s body – has always been a tool of ethnography. However, through the approach of embodied ethnography, emphasis is placed on how the researcher can use their bodies to gain knowledge about their participants and the wider research context.

Several scholars have been key in highlighting the importance of the body of both the researcher and participants in fieldwork. Writing in 1997, Paul Stoller noted a turn toward the body in anthropological work – however, he complained that ‘even the most insightful writers consider the body as a text that can be read and analysed. This analytical tack strips the body of its smells, tastes, textures and pains – its sensuousness...recent writing on the body tends to be articulated in a curiously

disembodied language' (Stoller, 1997:xiv).³³ To remedy this, Stoller suggested the benefits of sensuous ethnography, in its ability to '[create] a set of instabilities for the ethnographer. To accept sensuousness in scholarship is to eject the conceit of control in which mind and body, self and other are considered separate' (Stoller, 1997:xvii). Similarly, writing in 1999, ethnographer and qualitative researcher Amanda Coffey suggested that 'we must acknowledge the critical extent to which 'our body and the bodies of others are central to the practical accomplishments of fieldwork' (Coffey, 1999:59). Work has since been undertaken to rectify these issues, and embodied ethnography has developed with the aim of clearly placing the body of the researcher amongst the bodies of other individuals in the research context.

Part of this embodied ethnography involves a consideration of how the body of the researcher helps to construct and produce the research context. Giardina and Newman seek to understand 'that the researcher's embodied self – once set in motion and moving within cultural spaces – *produces* the very cultural physicalities he or she experiences' (Giardina and Newman, 2011:530); while Turner notes that 'the anthropologist cannot be present in a social field without participating and becoming a significant author of events, practices and political configurations, thereby affecting what happens and the significance it has for the constructions that emerge for participants' (Turner, 2000:53).

Further to this, work began to explore how the body of the researcher can be used as a research tool; and how a focus on 'embodiment' can produce knowledge about the research context. Often influenced by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body,

³³ This complaint was also repeated by Crang, who suggests that even though the bodily presence of the researcher as a 'co-present interlocuter' is generally acknowledged, after setting the context, 'the researcher [often] forms a ghostly absence' (Crang, 2003:499)

approaches such as Michael Jackson's 'radical empiricism' (1989) foreground the body in ethnographic research; as does Meredith McGuire, who notes the importance for sociologists of religion – particularly those engaging in ethnography - to understand their bodies as sources of insight or connection (2008:43). Scholars such as Longhurst et al (2008) have also addressed the topic of using the body as a research tool, particularly highlighting the idea that involuntary or undesirable bodily processes or responses should not be left out of the researcher's account. Inspired by Clifford Geertz's 'thick description', Samudra puts forward the idea of 'thick participation' – wherein cultural knowledge is 'recorded first in the anthropologist's body and only later externalized as visual or textual data for purposes of analysis'; 'it does not focus on interpreting social discourse. Rather, it centres on sharing social experience' (Samudra, 2008:667). I found each of these studies instructive in thinking about how my own bodily experiences could be used and analysed in the process of fieldwork.

Also valuable here is how a focus on the body can highlight particular social, historical and political discourses in the research context. Giardina & Newman note how the body – of both the researcher and researched – is 'a locus of politics and practice' (2011:37), suggesting that we must acknowledge the web of 'historical and contextual constraints held together by social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics' within which bodies act (Giardina and Newman, 2011:530). Samudra raises a similar point about embodied practices – that physical memory, performed repetitively, enacts sociocultural meanings for individuals, including the participating anthropologist' (Samudra, 2008:667). Nabhan-Warren, inspired by Bourdieu, raises a similar point: our bodies are not in and of themselves separated from other bodies. Whether we like it or not, we are connected to a larger social body and to other individual bodies' (Nabhan-Warren, 2011:392). This echoes the work of Thomas Csordas (1994), who recognises the importance of experiences of the physical body, while simultaneously

highlighting the political, historical, or social discourses which also have an effect on how the body is used and understood. Also relevant here is the work of Nick Crossley, inspired by Marcel Mauss' 'body techniques', who suggests that embodied involvement is the best way for a researcher to grasp 'the meaning generated by body techniques and the knowledge and understanding they embody' (Crossley, 2007).

This thesis aims to develop these approaches even further by focusing on the senses (as hinted at by Stoller, above) – and particularly, the sense of touch. As Meredith McGuire states:

We need to notice and pay more attention to a vast range of religious experiences and expressions that do not fit our field's tidy cognitive emphasis on beliefs. We need, also, to hone our own abilities to perceive such experiences and expressions when they are occurring. Literally sensing religion can be a valuable part of our ways of knowing. (McGuire, 2016:154)

As such, a focus on the sense of touch – and how tactility can be used by the researcher – seems a natural extension of embodied ethnography. This approach is developed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Relaying Information after Participating

The final stage in the ethnographic process was negotiating how to relay information about a workshop or sessions after participating in them. At this stage, one of the problems noted relates to the approach of embodied ethnography; while the other is more unique to contemporary Tantra.

Although, as discussed above, embodied ethnography is a way to gain certain kinds of knowledge in a particular research context, one of the biggest obstacles the ethnographer faces is of relaying their embodied experiences to their intended audience. Nick Crossley raises this critique, stating that '[e]mbodied knowledge is not discursive knowledge and cannot be put into discourse without distorting it' (Crossley, 2007). Thus, the question arises of how a researcher can best convey this newly acquired embodied knowledge to readers who might be entirely unfamiliar with the research context – who might not have seen or heard of the practices taking place, let alone felt or experienced them. To convey this complex interplay between embodied knowledge and theory, I have attempted to weave myself into the thick description provided in this thesis – my emotions, thoughts, and physical reactions (voluntary or involuntary) to the activities taking place. By weaving myself into this thesis, and recounting my experiences with particular emphasis on my bodily interactions with others in the research context, I aim to highlight the knowledge I was able to glean from these experiences. As would be expected in a thesis focusing on touch, I have aimed to provide detailed sensory descriptions of practices I participated in, to help the reader immerse themselves in the material, and to stimulate their imagination, or remind them of times when they might have had similar experiences.

As mentioned above, there is another element to consider when relaying information about contemporary Tantra practitioners or groups: their occasional appeals to secrecy and esotericism. This is particularly evident in testimonials of one well-known and influential school which the majority of my interviewees had some knowledge of (if they hadn't actually been through one of their training programmes). This school resolutely maintains an air of secrecy about their training weekends, only permitting certain attendees to write testimonials about how they feel after doing the workshop, without revealing any details (I was unable to engage with them, despite numerous

approaches). These appeals to secrecy were rare; however, when they did occur, they were framed in terms of Tantra's classically esoteric origins, emphasising secrecy as a key element of the practice.

The workshops and sessions I attended were not as concerned with secrecy as the school mentioned above. However, as Tantra workshops can be overwhelmingly intimate or personal, participants could understandably be sensitive to a researcher observing, participating, and writing about their experiences. In this respect, many teachers gave guidance on how I could navigate this. The most common agreement in group settings is a willingness for the researcher to recount themes and activities occurring in the group, but to avoid describing the specific experiences or speech of others unless given direct consent by individuals. This did not only apply to the researcher. It was a general rule applicable to all participants: the experiences of others should not be discussed outside of the workshop space unless individuals explicitly agreed to this being shared more widely. As such, I would spend time before and after the workshops speaking to individuals to seek their consent for their experiences or words being used in this research.

Chapter Breakdown

Following Chapter 1's broad introduction to contemporary Tantra in Britain and the main themes that this thesis addresses, Chapter 2 provides a literature review of relevant material, to ground this study in the contemporary academic field. There are a number of different fields in which this thesis has roots, and I work to sketch these out, to give the reader some explanation on how this research developed and the gaps in knowledge which it can begin to fill. This chapter begins by covering academic

research on Tantra, focusing on the mid-19th century onwards, and by doing so, provides more historical background to situate this thesis and give the reader further grounding in the field. This section also draws out themes that have so far been prominent in studies of Tantra: transgression, sex, and gender norms; and how Orientalist representations have affected the prominence of these themes. This literature review will also aim to highlight some of the most relevant studies in the area of alternative or holistic spirituality (under which I classify contemporary Tantra in Britain). This exploration of holistic spirituality focuses specifically on studies of selfhood, the body, gender, and sex in this context, discussing work which has been informative to this thesis.

Chapter 3 will explore my research methods in more detail, alongside other considerations undertaken during the process of fieldwork. This will focus on several key issues, many of which are idiosyncratic to contemporary Tantra, but which can also raise broader discussions around 1) classifying phenomena in the holistic milieu, and 2) using touch as a research method. Regarding classifications, I explore Tantra's crossover with sex work, and where boundaries can be drawn between the two (if at all); before discussing common distinctions made in both the academic world and 'on the ground' between 'Tantra' and 'neo-Tantra'. The chapter then moves on to discuss more practical issues: the benefits and disadvantages of using touch as a research method; consent; and how the researcher can maintain their own personal boundaries in this process.

Chapter 4 begins the ethnographic work proper, by first showing contemporary Tantra's very direct and explicit focus on the body and the senses, before focusing on the sense of touch specifically. Using interview data and fieldwork experiences, I will first illustrate how touch is used in Tantra – giving some examples of practices and

common conventions undertaken – before exploring why these touch practices are used. The theme of boundaries here comes to the fore, as the sense of touch is used to transgress perceived boundaries (between mind and body; self and other), construct boundaries (in reinforcing personal space), and highlighting social norms. Finally, I discuss Thomas Csordas' 'somatic modes of attention' to theorise these touch practices and show how they might be used in constructing a new or altered sense of self for these Tantra practitioners.

Chapter 5 takes a more specific look at how touch can be used in Tantra – in this case, in the process of healing. I explore how trauma is understood in Tantra: causes of trauma, how it manifests, and the body's role in this process. The chapter then moves on to discuss healing, and how touch can be used as a medium for healing. The concept of 'sexual energy' and its transformative potential is explored in more detail, to show how pleasurable sensations induced by touch can be interpreted through a Tantric framework. Thomas Csordas' four-stage model of ritual healing is used with particular reference to Tantric massage, to highlight the process of healing individuals from trauma and, by extension, constructing an autonomous, healthy, and empowered sense of self.

Chapter 6 continues these discussions of pleasure and sexual energy in processes of transformation, specifically looking at experiences of ecstasy in contemporary Tantra. Drawing out various experiences of orgasm, and the range of sensations they involve, confirms previously suggested motivations for individuals involved in contemporary Tantra. Touch is again key here in inducing and influencing these experiences, as well as providing confirmation of their efficacy through bodily sensations. In this chapter, I discuss how states of ecstasy – despite often being spoken about in abstract and vague terms – can be seen as instances of intense self-

perception and self-awareness. As such, experiences of ecstasy constitute an affirmation of an individual's new or altered sense of self, and continue to affect their everyday lives thereafter.

Finally, Chapter 7 will summarise the cumulative argument developed in this research, show the original contributions that have been made, explore how this research can advance ethnographic research methods, and suggest potential avenues for future research.

Language Note

In contemporary Tantra, practitioners and authors make occasional use of words deriving from Sanskrit and Tibetan. Some of these words are now in common use in English – for example, karma, mantra, or chakra. Other, less well-known, terms are also used in this context – such as *sannyasin*, *yoni*, *lingam*, *vajra*, or *dakini*. When using or quoting these terms, I have italicised them, used spellings without diacritics, and offer a very short explanation of each at their first mention - mostly to make this thesis accessible to all readers, with or without such linguistic knowledge.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Background

This literature review aims to organise and synthesise the relevant literature from a range of fields, at the crossroad of which this thesis stands. To present the relevant material in the most useful way, this review is split into two sections, each identifying broad trends in the literature, as well as potential areas for expansion and development. The first section addresses that which seems most obviously relevant to this thesis: an overview of scholarship on Tantra in the West, identifying important figures and themes in this field and sketching out its historical trajectory over the past two centuries. The second section then addresses the field of holistic spirituality – contextualising Tantra in the contemporary British context, and particularly highlighting literature exploring holistic spirituality with reference to selfhood, gender, the body, and sex. By looking at these two fields of research – both of which have been vital in shaping this project – I hope to highlight three prominent themes relating to this thesis' interest in projects of selfhood: the negotiation of gender roles, transgression, and sexuality. My selection of these three themes is based primarily on my findings in the field; however, they are also reflected in the extant literature. Throughout these discussions, and particularly in my exploration of Tantra's movement to the West, the influence of Orientalism remains relevant, and I aim to show how Orientalist representations of Tantra led to gender roles, sexuality, and transgression becoming important themes in contemporary Tantra. I suggest that all of these themes (with a basis in Orientalist interpretations) combine to play a role in the formation of a sense of self for women in contemporary Tantra in Britain.

Common Themes in Studies of Tantra

The introduction to this thesis has already provided various definitions of Tantra; as well as a short history of its development (particularly in Europe and North America), and a description of some common features, as represented by practitioners. This section aims to extend the basic overview of Tantra given in the Introduction, to highlight themes that have become prominent in literature on this topic and give the reader a good background from which to approach the rest of this thesis.

Literature on Tantra, like any subject, can be split into several camps. One broad field includes historical and textual studies, undertaken by Indologists and linguists (such as Wilke, 2012; White, 2003; Hatley, 2012; Biernacki 2011); another encompasses contemporary studies of Tantra in Asia, often focused on areas such as West Bengal, Tibet, or Assam (McDaniel, 2012; Urban, 2011b). Yet another field covers my own area of interest: studies of how Tantra is understood in contemporary Western contexts, usually focusing on Europe and North America. Although this literature review will focus mainly on the latter field, I will note here that three themes seem to emerge in studies of Tantra across the board, and which remain relevant to my own thesis: the negotiation of gender roles, transgression, and sexuality.

Tantra's somewhat unique position in its revaluation of the feminine has been of consistent interest to scholars, and previous studies have often focused on exploring Tantric understandings of gender roles, sexuality, and the role that goddesses in Tantric literature and imagery play in interpretations of these. There are a number of potential reasons for why a focus on gender roles has come to the fore; I will suggest, however, that as contemporary interpretations of Tantra present certain ahistorical claims about gender roles and sexuality (particularly regarding Tantra's enduring

ability to empower or liberate women), there is an interest – and a need - for thorough historical and textual work to ascertain the truth in these claims.³⁴

Specifically focusing on gender roles and sex in Tantra, Miranda Shaw's *Passionate Enlightenment* (1994) is a study of women in Tibetan Buddhism, circa 8th to 12th centuries, from a feminist perspective. By looking at biographies, Tantric texts, and literature describing practices, Shaw argues that women in these movements played an influential role in the development of Tantric Buddhism and were respected, served, and ritually worshipped (1994:4). Despite Shaw's suggestions, a number of scholars have continued to argue that historically, Tantra would have been neither liberatory nor empowering for the women involved. Puttick notes the main debate in this field: of whether women in Tantra serve only as sex objects for male priests (Puttick, 1998:114), and Hugh Urban states that with regards to Tantric rituals in the South Asian context, 'it seems more accurate to say that women in these rites are not so much 'empowered' and 'liberated' as they are used as tools for the optimization of the power of the male practitioner' (Urban, 2006:92). Jeffrey J Kripal agrees, explicitly warning that evidence of sexual rituals in this context did not constitute 'some kind of sexual Shangri-La' (Kripal, 2007b:171), and that 'such sexologies are androcentric models that grant little agency to the women who appear in their texts and rituals' (Kripal, 2007b:171). Further, Kripal states that studies in this field have developed sufficiently to 'warn us sternly away from any naïve or wishful notion that the Tantric traditions of Asia and modern Western notions of gender equity, reciprocity, and agency can somehow be easily reconciled. They cannot' (Kripal, 2007b:171-172). This is also acknowledged by Biernacki, who notes two main positions in studies of

³⁴ Jeffrey J Kripal has noted the suggestion that Indology's turn to studying sexuality and gender in Tantra arose from Western colonial discourses (discussed in more detail below) – but counters that Indologists were actually inspired by common themes in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s (Kripal, 2012:440-441).

women in South Asian Tantra: first, that women were indeed necessary to Tantric rites, but only as 'vehicles for male attainment'; and second, that although there are powerful female goddesses (such as Kali or Bhairavi), this doesn't necessarily lead to the empowerment of human women (Biernacki, 2011:123-124). Biernacki looks at the 'Kali Practice', presented in texts from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, associated with the Kamakhya Temple in Assam. She argues that this Tantric 'Kali Practice' acknowledges women's capacities for spiritual attainment, provides clear references to female gurus, and has the potential to change women's position in society (Biernacki, 2011:123-125). However, as Biernacki herself points out, her suggestions regarding the influence of the 'Kali Practice' are based on her own reading of these texts – they are primarily contemporary reconstructions by the author, and there is no way of knowing how this practice was interpreted or used at the time (Biernacki, 2011:124).

Another theme consistently raised in studies of Tantra across the board is its potential for transgression and breaking taboos. An article by Thomas B Ellis argues that the practices and rituals of 'hard-core' Tantra are 'disgusting, *universally*' (Ellis, 2011:880, emphasis in original). Focusing on the more transgressive, antinomian rituals of South Asian Tantra as maladaptive practices, Ellis argues that Tantric practices of consuming pathogenic substances (e.g. bodily fluids or excrement) and 'maximally suboptimal sexual intercourse with an out-of-caste partner' are potentially the most offensive behaviours for humans to engage with, in an evolutionary sense (2011:884). Ellis states that, 'engaging the disgusting is the unrecognized-yet-logical conclusion of not only a general South Asian religious impulse, but a universal religious impulse as well. If this is in fact the case, then all religious paths quite possibly lead to Tantra' (Ellis, 2011:888). This happens, he suggests, because 'transcending the human condition...seems to constitute the motor of every religious system' (Ellis, 2011:906).

Ellis' work makes some sweeping generalisations about the universality of certain human behaviours; however, it is useful here in highlighting ongoing scholarly interest in transgressive aspects of Tantra. Urban has also noted Tantra's potential for transgression and breaking taboos – however, he notes that transgressions in South Asian Tantra generally only take place in highly controlled, secret, ritualized contexts (Urban, 2006:105) - and thus, they actually function to reinforce social norms in 'everyday' life. As we shall see, these differ considerably from understandings of transgression in Tantra in contemporary Britain, where (as I suggest in Chapter 1 and elsewhere), it is the 'ideology of transgression' that becomes important for practitioners.

Tantra & Eastern Movements Moving to the West

Orientalism and Esotericism in the 19th and 20th Century

In studies of the movement of Tantra from East to West during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there are two interrelated strands that come to the fore in this narrative: Orientalism, and esoteric movements. Although both of these have, directly or indirectly, affected contemporary understandings of Tantra in Britain, I will keep this summary of literature brief, as more detailed discussions can be found elsewhere – research on Orientalist themes present in the movement of various forms of Hinduism to the West is extensive³⁵, and some related esoteric groups have been particularly well covered in Hugh Urban's (2006) *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Secrecy and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*. Aspects of Orientalism and esotericism particularly

³⁵ See Beinorinous, 2003; Heehs, 2008; Breckenridge and Van Der Veer, 1993 for fuller discussions

overlap in their focus on sexuality and gender, and clear Orientalist tendencies have been noted in esoteric groups at the time.

Richard King's seminal text, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the "Mystic East"* (1999), inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), laid out the argument that the Western study of Asian cultures was historically based on a form of essentialism, characterising 'Indian' culture as having distinct qualities that differentiate it from the West. In this, King argues that, 'simplistically speaking, we can speak of two forms of Orientalist discourse, the first, generally antagonistic and confident in European superiority, the second, generally affirmative, enthusiastic and suggestive of Indian superiority in certain key areas' (King, 1999: 340). Lee notes the different motivations for groups of people developing these two forms – categorised as the colonialists, and the romantics – suggesting that 'the stakes for the romantics were different because for them, unlike for the colonialists, Asia did not represent a paradise for plunder, but a resource for critical reflection' (Lee, 2003:363). As such, although some interpreted Tantra as a degeneration of India's golden age (Timalsina 2011:278), many intellectuals at the time (who were the individuals bringing Tantra to the West) 'turned the Orientalist model on its head, praising Tantra as a much-needed affirmation of the human body and sexuality.' (Urban, 2003:167). However, as noted by Urban, King's exploration of Orientalism in the Western study of Asian cultures makes no reference to sexuality, mysticism, or Tantra – whereas Urban argues that Tantra was actually key to Orientalist imaginings of India (Urban, 2011a:403). Urban partly attributes this Western interest in Tantra to the Victorian era's fascination with sexuality (and 'abnormal' expressions of sexuality), and notes that it was during this time that Tantra started to become almost entirely equated with sex (Urban, 2012:462). Urban has also worked to analyse literature produced by British novelists in India at the time, concluding that the presentation of Tantra in this literature was

often an expression of their own fears, desires, and anxieties, 'objectified in the mirror of an exotic Other' (Urban 2003:117). Even in the present day, Urban has noted the continuing Orientalist understandings of Tantra as representing perhaps the most extreme, Eastern 'Other' (2003:167); while other scholars such as Timalisina emphasise that 'Tantra in the Western mindset...stands for exotic and orgasmic practices coming from India and Tibet that blend sex and meditation' (2011:278), showing how these themes persists. Clearly, these exoticised, romanticised, Orientalist interpretations continue in contemporary perceptions of Tantra, which is an important theme of this thesis and is touched upon at several points.

The further popularisation of Tantra in the West (following initial accounts from colonial sources) is perhaps best attributed to esoteric groups of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which took a keen interest in Indian religions as potential resources for their own spiritual enterprises, displaying this aforementioned 'positive Orientalism'. A number of scholars have written accounts of esoteric groups - and the significant individuals involved - from this time.³⁶ However, Urban notes that some of the most well-known esoteric groups at this time, such as the Theosophical Society, made efforts to distance themselves from 'the 'disreputable' tradition of magic and hedonism of Tantra' (Urban, 2003:208). Similarly, this tendency has been noted in Swami Vivekananda's presentations of Hinduism at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893 - Urban also suggests that Swami Vivekananda actually sought to conceal Tantric aspects of Hinduism, in the belief that his primarily Western audience wouldn't accept Hinduism as a great world religion if transgressive or

³⁶ Although use of the terms 'esoteric' and 'Western esotericism' can be somewhat complex, a sense of the esoteric milieu from the late 19th century onwards can be gained through various texts such as Kocku von Stuckrad's *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (2005); or Wouter Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (1996).

antinomian aspects were evident (Urban, 2003:155-163; see also Beckerlegge, 2004:310).

Instead, Urban points to a number of individuals who he sees as being more important to the development of Tantra in the West, including Sir Richard Burton - to whom he credits the frequent confusion of the Kama Sutra as Tantric – and Sir John Woodroffe, also known as his pen name, Arthur Avalon (Urban, 2012:462). Woodroffe's book *The Serpent Power*, on Tantric yoga (originally published in 1919), argued an affinity between Tantra and modern science, in their experiential and experimental methods (Clarke, 1997:166). Other important figures in the development of Tantra in esoteric movements in the early 20th century include Paschal Beverly Randolph who, despite not claiming to present Tantra, 'can probably be credited as the forefather of almost all later sex magical traditions from the Ordo Temple Orientis down to our popularized, mass-marketed, and digitalized version of sex magic in the West' (Urban, 2006:78). Also influential in this field were Heinrich Zimmer, Mircea Eliade, and Julius Evola - an Italian philosopher who saw Tantra as a powerful solution to the ills of the modern West, and was also influential in the development of fascism (Urban, 2006:140-142). Some of these individuals explicitly connected themselves with Tantra, while others participated in the development of sex magic more broadly; however, all played some part in the transmission and popularisation of Tantric teachings (or at least, their own interpretation of Tantric teachings) to Europe throughout the early twentieth century. Broadly speaking, these writers tended to see Tantra as an ideal solution to the spiritual crisis of the modern man³⁷ (Urban, 2003:167). Urban particularly emphasises the role of Pierre Bernard, also known as 'The Omnipotent Oom', who, he states, is

³⁷ The phrase 'modern man' here is used by Urban when describing Tantra's development in the early 20th century; I have kept this here, partly to highlight how the most prominent individuals involved in Western Tantra at this time were all male.

important in the history of Tantra for three reasons: 1) Bernard was a pioneer in the early transmission of Tantra to America, where it took root and flourished; 2) he was one of the first figures reinterpreting Tantra as something primarily concerned with sex and physical pleasure; and 3) like many later gurus, Bernard attracted intense scandal and slander from the surrounding society, 'foreshadowing Tantra's role in the American imagination as something wonderfully seductive, tantalizing and transgressive' (Urban, 2012:472). Again, the themes of sex and transgression are clearly at the forefront.

Urban's history of the development of Tantra is fairly extensive, and works to highlight the importance of individuals who have perhaps not been identified as particularly influential in the past. As such, this literature review relies heavily on his work. However, other scholars have also worked to document Tantra's development in the West. Jeffrey Kripal has worked to identify several key moments in this history, involving a number of significant individuals. Agreeing with Urban, Kripal notes Pierre Bernard as one of the most important early figures in American Tantra, and one of the first to connect popular ideas on yoga and sex; alongside Bernard, Kripal adds Sylvais Hamadi – an accomplished Tantric yogi from Calcutta, who was Pierre Bernard's teacher (Kripal, 2012:444-445). Also highlighting the role of Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), Kripal adds Woodroffe's friend and translator, Atul Behari Ghosh, to the list of influential individuals. Ghosh aided Woodroffe in studying Tantric texts and together, they had a significant influence on Western understandings of Tantra, as well as Jungian psychology (Kripal, 2012:445-446). Kripal also puts forward the importance of Agehananda Bharati, born Leopold Fischer in 1923, in Vienna. Bharati was initiated as a monk and moved to India for six years, before travelling to America and working as an anthropologist for thirty years and writing *The Tantric Tradition* in 1979 (Kripal, 2012:448-451).

Aside from particular individuals who influenced understandings of Tantra in the West, a number of esoteric groups operating during this time were also significant in the development of Tantra – mostly notably, the Ordo Templi Orientis and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Developed primarily by Theodor Reuss in the early 20th century, the Ordo Templi Orientis was one of the first groups to combine Western sex magic with Tantra and yoga (Urban, 2011a:404). According to Urban – and combining the prominent themes of sexuality and transgression throughout studies of Tantra - Reuss saw the sexual practices of Tantra as a way to for individuals to both achieve spiritual liberation and work toward a new social order (Urban, 2011a:405). Reuss and the ‘Western Tantrikas’ that followed him tended to interpret Tantra as a ‘radical force of resistance and challenge to the existing social order and political establishment’ (Urban, 2006:105).

Even more important in this narrative is one individual, who was a member of both the Ordo Templi Orientis and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (Sutcliffe, 1996:121,125), and whose influence continues to resonate in certain parts of contemporary Tantra: Aleister Crowley (b.1875- d.1947).³⁸ Urban suggests that ‘it is Crowley’s form of sexual magic that most Western readers now think of when they hear the word ‘Tantra’’ (2006:123); and Puttick has also noted how Crowley appears to have been influenced by Tantra (1997:119). In an exploration of Crowley’s role in this process, Urban puts forward three reasons for his importance in the history of Tantra: 1) Crowley rejected Victorian morality, reflecting the attitudes of his era; 2) he had studied Hinduism and Buddhism, so was seen as an authority on Indian religions in the West; and 3) he was hugely influential in the wider revival of magic and

³⁸ Bogdan and Starr’s (2012) *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* works to chart out the influence Crowley continues to have on contemporary Paganism, esotericism, ‘New Age’ movements, and popular culture; also see Granholm, 2012:506; and Marco Pasi (2011).

alternative religions (Urban, 2006:110-111). Despite this, Urban is keen to point out that Crowley's knowledge of Tantra was probably somewhat rudimentary: although he is known to have studied yoga in India for some time, it is likely that Crowley's knowledge of Tantra came from colonial sources, rather than his own experience (Urban, 2006:125). Similarly, other scholars have noted Crowley's engagement with yoga and Buddhism in India, but do not note Tantra as a significant influence on his philosophy or practices (Bogdan, 2015:295). Urban is also keen to point out that most authors have simply assumed the connections between Crowley and Tantra exist, whereas they might have simply been made by Crowley's early biographers (Urban, 2006:128); and that connections made between South Asian Tantra and Crowley's form of sex magic might have been more accidental than intentional (Urban, 2011a:402).

Importantly for this research – and continuing themes in historical studies of Tantra - Urban considers Crowley's philosophy and rituals through a gendered lens, and argues that Crowley's transgressive rituals were 'usually quite androcentric, arguably misogynistic, and exploitative of the female body', leading to the oppression and exploitation of involved others (Urban, 2006:135). This is an important point, and raises questions of how interpretations of Tantra might have developed since this time, in order to appeal to women as an empowering or liberatory practice in the contemporary context.

The 'Long Sixties'

The period termed the 'Long Sixties', spanning from 1958 to 1974 (Marwick, 1998) has also been a locus of study for scholars interested in Tantra and other 'Eastern' traditions travelling to the West. Regarding broader changes in this context, Kripal has suggested that in the first half of the 20th century, Americans preferred renouncer forms of 'Eastern', Asian traditions. However, Kripal suggests, this began to change around the 1960s, when Americans inspired by the counterculture and Beat poets began to prefer Tantric models, which were understood as being concerned with the more immanent and material (Kripal, 2007a; also in Gleig, 2013:222).

Literature on the movement of Tantra during the Long Sixties tends to focus on its countercultural, transgressive potential. Recalling already prominent themes, Urban notes that Tantra became associated with movements aiming toward 'political liberation and social revolution' (Urban, 2011a:438), and particularly emphasises how during this period, Tantra 'seemed to embody both the countercultural revolt against prevailing Judeo-Christian values and the new positive celebration of the human body, sexuality, and sensual ecstasy' (Urban, 2000:280). Tantra began to address issues of sexual liberation, particularly for women, involving liberation of mind, body and spirit from the influence of the Christian church, which was seen as repressing their 'natural' desires (Urban, 2012:465). Urban also argues that, for individuals in the 1960s who were involved with psychedelics and 'free love', Tantra was a way to legitimise these behaviours – interpreted as a kind of ancient, Eastern wisdom, Tantra could provide both spiritual and political meaning (Urban, 2003:224). As such, it is possible to see how a tendency toward positive Orientalist continued during this period.

As Urban notes the general cultural changes taking place during the 1960s and 70s, Kripal has focused on one movement's interpretations of Tantra during this time: the Esalen institute, founded in 1962 in Big Sur, California. Esalen wasn't focused explicitly on Tantra – indeed, Kripal instead describes the institute as 'mother of the human potential movement' (2011:496-497). However, Kripal has suggested that prominent individuals in this institute such as Joseph Campbell and Heinrich Zimmer were significant 'transmitter[s] of Tantra-related ideas into American culture, transmuted and translated through a general psychoanalytic lens' (Kripal, 2011:516) – although admittedly, the scope of the category 'Tantra-related ideas' is very vague. Kripal puts forward areas of California – and particularly Big Sur and San Francisco - as epicentres of 'Tantric re-imaginings' all the way through from the 1960s to the 1990s (Kripal, 2011:501).

With regards to Great Britain during this period, several key sociological works have been written on this process of translation, exploring how cultural changes in post-war Britain led to various interpretations and understandings of 'Eastern' traditions. Rather than focusing specifically on Tantra, these studies tend to explore the popularisation of 'Eastern' (usually Indian) traditions more broadly.

One such study is Colin Campbell's *The Easternisation of the West* (2007), arguing that since the 1960s, 'the West' has gradually and voluntarily changed its outlook (characterised by Campbell as 'materialistic dualism') to an Eastern one (characterised as 'metaphysical monism'), giving the New Age movement as a prime example of 'Easternization'. Although the detail given in support of his argument is valuable, there are also some problematic assumptions in the piece, not least that he presents 'West' and 'East' as ahistorical ideal types. Most relevant for this thesis is that Campbell largely overlooks the growing influence of feminist movements from the

1960s and 1970s which, in a book focusing on widespread societal changes at the time (and which covers an abundance of other related movements), is a major oversight.

An earlier text, Harvey Cox's *Turning East* (1977), also provides commentary on this process of Eastern movements being transmitted to the West. Focusing specifically on America, Cox uses the term 'East Turners' to refer to individuals who find themselves attracted to 'one or another of the great traditions of Oriental spiritual wisdom' (Cox, 1977:92). Cox conducted a study of several movements within this milieu, including working with Tibetan Buddhist Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (also discussed below), practicing Zen Buddhism, and taking peyote. Cox suggests that these movements, often understood as 'Eastern' traditions, are perhaps better understood as American constructions, and labels them 'the new Orientalism' (Cox, 1977:11). In addition, Cox complains (somewhat cynically) that this has caused the movements to become focused on consumer culture and psychological individualism, to the detriment of their 'spiritual' content; and he questions whether 'we in the West can ever hear the voice of the East, can ever learn about the Buddhist or Hindu paths without corrupting them in the process' (Cox, 1977:135). As such, Cox reveals some of his own, somewhat essentialist, views of these 'East-turning' practices of spirituality.

Osho and Other Gurus

The sociological literature exploring Tantra's development in the West during the 1960s and 1970s has shown how this happened in tandem with broader cultural changes in Europe and North America. However, another method of exploring the development and transmission of Tantra is by looking at the roles of particular 'Tantric gurus'. Although Kripal, Urban, and Sutcliffe (above) all note significant figures in the development of Tantra up until the 1960s, I wish to bring further attention to studies on these gurus, active in the 1970s, 80s and beyond. Aside from being influential in the small field of Tantra – evidence of which can still be seen in the present day - these figures were also well-known in wider Western culture, primarily thanks to reports of their sensational, scandalous behaviours, combined with the popular media's appetite for covering such stories.

One such individual is Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher born in 1939, who arrived in the US in 1970 (after spending 7 years in the UK and founding the Samye Ling monastery in Scotland), and established a community in Boulder, Colorado. Stories abound about Trungpa's erratic behaviour: being intoxicated during his own lectures, engaging in sexual activity with multiple students, and displaying a disregard for social conventions (Bell, 1998). Claiming roots in the Vajrayana ('lightening bolt') Tibetan Tantric tradition, Trungpa presented his method as the most direct, yet dangerous, path to enlightenment (Urban, 2000:284). Another guru, Swami Muktananda, who was based in Kashmiri Shaivism expressions of Tantra, also arrived in the US in 1970s and founded Siddha Yoga, a movement which continues to be popular today. In contrast to Trungpa, Swami Muktananda distinguished himself from such controversial practices, and focused instead on moral purity, teaching students how to turn sexual urges into spiritual power (Urban, 2003:246). Despite

such teachings, Swami Muktananda and other figures of authority in his organisation have been accused of an array of inappropriate sexual activities (Urban, 2003:246).

One individual in the Western history of Tantra – and the guru most relevant to my own research, considering his ongoing influence in the contemporary context – is Osho (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh). A contemporary of Trungpa and Muktananda, Osho's influence on Western Tantra has been noted by a number of scholars (Thompson and Heelas, 1986; McDaniel, 2004:268), and was also evident in my own research. Originally founding an ashram in Pune, India, Osho moved to the US in 1981, illegally moving millions of dollars out of India after becoming unpopular with authorities there (Storr, 1996:57). After buying a ranch just outside Antelope, Oregon, Osho founded a community and named it Rajneeshpuram, which became relatively successful: Puttick suggests that by the mid-1970s, 'the Osho movement had become the most fashionable and fastest growing NRM [New Religious Movement] in the West' (Puttick, 1997:19). Estimates place the number of permanent residents at Rajneeshpuram in 1985 at 2500, with 2000 long-term guests – of these, the population was overwhelmingly middle-class and college educated (Thompson and Heelas, 1986; Storr, 1996:58).

In studies focusing on Osho, some scholars have highlighted the sometimes contradictory tendencies in his teachings regarding gender roles and sex (Palmer, 1994:51); while other studies have focused on his authority as a guru (Goldman, 2005). Still others have constructed wider histories of Osho's movement, particularly exploring the sensational events that took place in



Figure 4 - Osho at Rajneeshpuram. Jack Smith, Associated Press.

Rajneeshpuram, Oregon: interfering with local elections, attempting to mass-poison the town of Antelope, as well as the growing prevalence of STIs within the community (Storr, 1996:58; although coming from the field of psychiatry, Storr seems overly concerned to present gurus as dangerous or delusional figures).

Osho's teachings are generally seen as marketed toward a 'Western, New Age audience' (Urban, 2000:286), 'a synthesis between Western humanist psychology and Eastern meditation' (Puttick, 1997:4). Perhaps the most accurate description of his teachings comes from Urban, who describes them as 'a kind of postmodern pastiche: a crazy hodgepodge of ideas drawn from a remarkable range of sources, from Plato and Aristotle to Shankara, Lao Tzu, and Jean Paul Sartre – though he had a special fondness for the more radical figures such as Nietzsche, Gurdjieff, and Aleister Crowley' (Urban, 2000:288); still others have noted how he drew on Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Wilhelm Reich (Shay and Bodgan, 2014:65).³⁹ Despite this variety of influences (and contrary to most South Asian Tantric traditions), Osho refused to claim a lineage, saying that he owed no one for his knowledge (Storr, 1996:51). Although Osho's teachings were often contradictory, a number of persistent themes do emerge, and it is helpful to recount some of these now, in the ongoing effort to trace how and why certain tendencies continue in contemporary Tantra, especially as these are articulated in my ethnography.

Scholars have noted that one of Osho's most common assertions was that Tantra is highly individualistic. Osho presented Tantra as the opposite of organised, institutional, and hierarchical religions, and as such, it was seen as highly rebellious on an individual level (Urban, 2012:477). He put forward the idea of a 'religionless

³⁹ Puttick 1997:5-6 also discussed Osho's interpretation of Jung; and Wallis, 1986, also discussed Osho's commonalities with the Human Potential Movement

religion' – a way of life avoiding commitments to an institution, church, or creed - and encouraged his followers to 'live in the moment' and, above all, love oneself (Storr, 1996:51-52). In this respect, June McDaniel, who places Osho within the Shakta Tantra tradition, states that Osho's 'focus on individuality, the lack of conformity, and the avoidance of institution is quite traditional for Shakta Tantra, and not rebellious at all' (McDaniel, 2004:268).⁴⁰ As shown in the introduction, this individualistic and anti-institutional stance is also somewhat typical of contemporary forms of holistic spirituality.

Secondly, Osho put forward that Tantra positively revalues the body and bodily experiences - it 'does not deny or repress life or the body – rather, it is the ultimate affirmation of sensuality, passion, physicality, and pleasure' (Urban, 2000:289). It appears that the domain of sexuality is one of the few areas in which Osho's teachings 'are not only consistent and coherent, but they are also reflective of the period in which they were formulated' (Shay and Bogdan, 2014:57). Osho taught that sex was a way to enlightenment; and that religions which repress sexuality eventually cause frustration and neurosis (Storr, 1996:52). For many Western spiritual seekers and potential *sannyasins*, this made him unique among Indian gurus (Palmer, 1994:45). Despite these apparently liberal and progressive teachings on the freedom of sexuality, it is important to note that Osho limited his teachings to a heterosexual audience, and was openly homophobic (Storr, 1996:52).

Continuing the theme of gender roles in studies of Tantra, a number of scholars have looked in some detail at the role of women both in Osho's teachings, and in Rajneeshpuram. In some ways, Osho was a progressive thinker with regards to the

⁴⁰ It is worth noting, however, that Osho was a charismatic and authoritarian leader, who created an institution which survived after his death – which is perhaps another example of his contradictory teachings and practices.

roles of women: he criticised how women had been reduced to sex objects, and positions of authority in his ashrams were dominated by women (Palmer, 1994:56; Shay and Bogdan, 2014:71). However, he remained opposed to the women's liberation movement on the grounds that it made women act more 'male' (Puttick, 1997:82), and he instead used traditional, gender essentialist justifications for his different treatment of women, believing that men and women were psychologically different, with women being more receptive, trusting, peaceful, and connected to the earth, body, emotion, and nature (Shay and Bogdan, 2014:71-73; Puttick, 1997:80). Others have noted how Osho 'perceived feminine attributes as superior to masculine and believed women were more spiritual and made better disciples than men' (Puttick, 1997:6; Palmer, 1994:50), thus justifying their positions of authority in Osho's organisation. He also discouraged motherhood, validating many women's choices not to have children despite wider societal pressures to do so (Palmer, 1994:66). Palmer suggests that in Osho's movement, the gender roles adopted by women were 'meaningful for secular women seeking to understand their own ongoing process of self-reconstruction in late twentieth-century America' (Palmer, 1994:xii), which remains relevant to this thesis. However, as Puttick notes, 'it still has to be asked whether this glorification of femininity was empowering and liberating to women, or whether it reinforced oppressive stereotypes' (Puttick, 1997:100).

Interestingly, on Osho's return to India (after being expelled from the US on tax charges), he began to downplay the more radical sexual aspects of his teachings – Urban notes how his autobiography contains only brief reference[s] to Tantra or sexual practices – and instead 'turn[s] his neo-Tantrism into a kind of universal global religion of love' (Urban, 2003:242). This is perhaps reflected in the recent Netflix documentary series 'Wild, Wild Country' (2018), which recounts in some detail the development of Rajneeshpuram, but avoids references to 'Tantra' altogether. That

said, Osho's continuing influence on contemporary Tantra was clearly evident during my fieldwork; and has also been noted by Kath Albury, who suggests that 'many contemporary Western teachers seem to have learned techniques as or from *sannyasins*, or followers of Osho (the former Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh), himself a great mix 'n' matcher of religious philosophies' (Albury, 2001:208).

Further, it is the work of gurus such as Osho, Chogyam Trungpa or Muktananda that helps to complicate the sometimes simplistic narrative of Orientalist tendencies influencing the development of Tantra. Indeed, Urban is particularly keen to note that 'the development of Tantra is not just a predictable Saidian narrative of Orientalism' (Urban, 2003:265). This also harks back to Kripal's discussion of Sylvais Hamadi and Atul Behari Ghosh (Pierre Bernard and Sir John Woodroffe's collaborators, respectively), which emphasises the input that these individuals had in interpreting Tantra for a Western audience. Prominent and influential figures such as these gurus highlight the 'cross-cultural ping-pong' occurring, wherein Western interpretations of Tantra were re-appropriated by Indian and Tibetan gurus and authors, were then propagated, and continued to spread globally (Urban, 2012:458). In studying cross-cultural translations of Tantra, Urban argues that 'we must examine both the ability of indigenous cultures to resist or contest and their tendency to mimic, cooperate, or collude with Western representations of the exotic Orient' (Urban, 2003:12). Timalsina agrees, highlighting how romanticist interpretations of Tantra were presented both by Westerners such as Pierre Bernard ('the Omnipotent Oom'), as well as Indian gurus such as Osho. Focusing on Tantra's 'exotic', 'orgasmic' developments, he states, '[t]his cultural orgasm cannot be merely limited to Said's Orientalism alone, as it is giving birth to a much-awaited liberation from nuanced cultural repression' (Timalsina, 2011:278). Brown and Leledaki make a similar point, aiming to add nuance to the suggestion that Tantra (and other Eastern practices) are seen in certain ways entirely

due to Orientalism, by using the example of yoga and its link to Indian modernity (Brown and Leledaki, 2010:131; see also Van de Veer, 2009).

Contemporary Tantra in the West

Moving on from historical studies of Tantra, we arrive at a consideration of studies conducted so far on contemporary Tantra in Europe and North America. Information here is somewhat sparse, and rarely relies on ethnographic observations – this is a significant contribution that this thesis is able to make. Some studies situate Tantra under the broader heading of ‘sacred sexuality’ (e.g. Fedele and Knibbe, 2016, Lousada and Angel, 2011); however, this can gloss over certain nuances, and leads to fewer idiosyncrasies being explored. As noted elsewhere in this thesis (see Chapter 3), some scholars of classical Tantra give little attention to (or even express derision towards) contemporary interpretations and expressions in the West, and this is a strong theme in the extant literature (e.g. Feuerstein, 1998:271; White 2003:258; Kripal 2012:440 also notes this tendency). Addressing these tendencies, Urban argues that these new forms of Tantra cannot ‘be dismissed as the mere products of ‘for-profit purveyors of Tantric sex’ - instead, he sees ‘these contemporary neo-*tāntrikas* ...as important representations of the ongoing transformations of Tantra in culture and in history’ (Urban, 2006:5). These critiques also abound in the wider field: referring to West Coast Vipassana (which traces its origins to Theravada Buddhism), Stephen Prothero states that ‘they have transformed a religion deeply suspicious of the self into a vehicle of self-absorption’ (Prothero in Gleig, 2013:222). This leads Gleig to question whether these new, Western movements should be dismissed as ‘dharma-lite’ dilutions of traditional Buddhist practice and goals, or whether we should

'appreciate innovations as developing a more pragmatic 'mature spirituality' that makes Buddhist soteriological aims more accessible to contemporary American practitioners' (Gleig, 2013:222). In these discussions, it is possible to see the negative judgements conferred upon forms of Tantra which are seen as diverging from classical, historical forms which are presented as more authoritative or legitimate.

Left-Hand Path vs 'New Age'

In literature looking at Tantra in the West - mainly Europe and North America – two prominent branches can be identified in the scholarly literature. The first of these is what might be referred to as the 'Western Left-Hand Path'; and the second, 'New Age' Tantra.

The 'Western Left-Hand Path' generally refers to more esoteric practices and movements of contemporary Tantra, often influenced by the sex magic of Aleister Crowley and his system of Thelema (Sutcliffe, 1996:110). Overlapping with movements such as Satanism or Chaos Magic, the Left-Hand Path is by no means exclusively Tantric – although the name is clearly derived from the Tantric *vama-marga*, based on engaging with the five banned substances: flesh, fish, parched grain, wine, and sexual intercourse (Sutcliffe, 1996:110). Sutcliffe suggests that individuals might have labelled the Western Left-Hand Path as such in order to avoid classifying themselves under the other options available when the movement was first developing: 'white' or 'black' magicians (Sutcliffe, 1996:110).

Granholm has noted how Western Left-Hand path movements tend to position themselves in opposition to other 'New Age' interpretations of Tantra, presenting themselves as more traditional and authentic (Granholm, 2012:515). According to Granholm, 'New Age' interpretations of Tantra are more focused on sexual activity,

while the Left-Hand path is more concerned with 'the attainment of power and the antinomian possibilities that Tantra provides' (Granholm, 2012:495; although this may be coloured by how individuals in the Left-Hand Path wish to present themselves). Similarly, Faxneld and Peterson differentiate the Left-Hand Path by its emphasis on dark, dangerous, sinister, or antinomian themes (2014:173). Linking back to themes of Orientalism, Granholm puts forward that Left-Hand path movements 'are an example of a positive orientalism through which certain disliked characteristics of Western cultural and religious traditions can be critically scrutinized and discarded in seemingly legitimate ways' (Granholm, 2012:495) - although I would argue that 'New Age' Tantra does the same, albeit perhaps in less radical ways. Granholm argues that Left-Hand path groups emphasise individualism and self-deification (Granholm, 2012:502) and, reflecting themes already noted in studies of Tantra, also notes the Left-Hand path's utilisation of the feminine and sexual activity in these antinomian pursuits: 'Tantra provides a religious tradition which has models for this aggressive and dangerous sexualized feminine divine, at the same time as it provides the added allure of being an exotic other' (Granholm, 2012:512).

Granholm has also noted the importance of Kenneth Grant in the development of the Western Left-Hand Path – presenting Aleister Crowley as an authority on Tantra, Grant was instrumental in 'linking the Western Left-Hand Path directly with Indian Left-Hand Tantra' (Granholm, 2012:513-514). Grant presented Tantra as 'a dark, ancient, and potentially very dangerous form of esoteric religiosity which has manifested in various forms in many pre-Christian cultures...Thus, Tantra becomes something of *the* perennial religion, prior to and elevated from all other traditions' (Granholm, 2012:513-514). Returning to the theme of gender, Granholm suggests that the Western Left-Hand Path generally presented the feminine in ways that are typical of Western religions – while at the same time working to revalue and elevate these

typically 'feminine' attributes (Granholm, 2012:511). Another significant point noted about the Left-Hand Path by Sutcliffe (which is also recognisable in interpretations of 'New Age' Tantra and other forms of alternative spirituality) is how, although an antinomian element is present in the Western Left-Hand Path, transgressing taboos 'has more to do with the overcoming of one's own inhibitions and limitations...than with any ill-conceived anarchism' (Sutcliffe, 1996:111). As such, despite claims that the Left-Hand Path and 'New Age' Tantra differ, many of the prominent themes are similar. In the UK, only a small number of groups that would be considered part of the Western Left-Hand path have been studied: amongst other communities, Sutcliffe notes the Oxford Golden Dawn Occult Society, founded in 1981, which espouses a freestyle, mostly solitary style of work and radically individualistic and anti-hierarchical values, incorporating witchcraft, Tantra, Kabbalah, shamanism, runes and Thelemic magick into their practice (Sutcliffe, 1996:126-130).

'New Age' Tantra

Distinct from these Western Left-Hand Path interpretations, 'New Age' forms of Tantra are those which this thesis addresses most directly. Although, as mentioned above, some Indologists are highly critical of new interpretations of Tantra in Europe and North America, other (more sympathetic) scholars have worked to add more nuance and detail to the body of knowledge on contemporary Tantra. Indeed, Urban notes that scholars of Tantra are often deeply involved with their object of study (Urban, 2003:249), and might even go to the other extreme: rather than denouncing Tantra, they '[bend] over backward to prove that Tantra is not in fact simply about sexual indulgence, but is rather a highly philosophical, intellectual, and even elitist enterprise'

(Urban, 2003:271). Even so, studies of Tantra don't generally make use of ethnography and as such, the overall level of knowledge can sometimes seem only superficially descriptive and (for example, in the case of McDaniel, 2004:266) resemble a list of 'curiosities', a showcase of the diverse interpretations that have arisen. In addition, these tend to be focused in North America, and few (if any) studies have addressed Tantra in Britain specifically.

One point to note, also raised by Timalisina, is the fact that in the process of Tantra's movement from South Asia to 'the West', it has become simplified in certain respects: 'the market that consumes Tantra is little concerned with the problems inherent to blending Hindu and Buddhist Tantras, left-hand and right-hand Tantras, various disciplines (*acara*) maintained by Tantrics, or different philosophies adopted' (Timalisina, 2011:278). This is a tendency that I also noticed during my own fieldwork (and is briefly noted in the introduction), wherein a minority of teachers would differentiate between 'Hindu' and 'Buddhist' Tantra; however, Timalisina stresses that this homogenisation can also be found in India and is 'not uniquely Western' (Timalisina, 2011:278-9). A similar process is also noted with regards to yoga by Veronique Altglas, who notes that 'particular modes of dissemination and appropriation unavoidably result in the de-contextualization of exotic religious resources' (Altglas, 2014:61). Although not specific to Tantra, Altglas' work on *bricolage* and 'exotic religious resources' give a nuanced account of how Orientalist themes continue to appear and influence certain parts of the holistic milieu – this is discussed in more detail later.

A number of writers have been keen to emphasise Tantra's suitability and applicability to the contemporary Western (often American) context, and this is a prominent theme in Urban's work on the subject. Urban consistently argues that, as 'a life-affirming

technique of self-improvement', contemporary Tantra 'fits quite nicely with American capitalism and consumer culture' (Urban, 2011a:440; Urban, 2003:258). Perhaps the main thrust of Urban's extensive work on contemporary constructions of Tantra is that they can actually be seen as a reflection of the West: a mouldable, 'dialectical' category that is constructed according to Western consumer capitalist values. As such, he argues, 'our American fascination with Tantra has less to do with any actual Indian practice than it has to do with our own uniquely American fantasies, obsessions and repressed desires' (Urban, 2012:492; Urban, 2000:295). Using the work of Featherstone and Turner, Urban shows how, in stark contrast to the situation less than a century ago, the contemporary Western context can be characterised by 'a late-capitalist attitude based on mass consumption, physical pleasure, and hedonistic enjoyment...the body is proclaimed as the ultimate source of gratification, enjoyment, and fulfilment' (Urban, 2003:256); as such, 'Tantra could be said to represent the quintessential religion for late twentieth-century consumer capitalist society' (Urban, 2000:271), which intersects well with current Western attitudes toward sexuality and its liberation (Urban, 2000:303). This has also been highlighted by other scholars such as Persson, who notes how in Satyananda Yoga, Tantra is presented as a system particularly well suited to the contemporary material world - 'Western practitioners are assured that living a worldly life is not inimical to spiritual evolution, but in fact necessary' (Persson, 2010:801).

Comparisons Between East and West

Some scholars have taken a comparative angle, noting both differences and points of continuity between Tantra in South Asia and the West, usually North America. While I have chosen not to do this in this thesis, it is helpful to note the main themes that have arisen from these comparisons.

Timalsina compares forms of Tantra in ancient India to Tantra in the West on the point of esotericism: 'what constituted 'Tantric' in ancient India was its secretive nature....Tantra in the West functions not in its ability to remain 'secret', but in its ability to reveal' (Timalsina, 2011:286). Hugh Urban makes a similar point – that in Tantra's transmission to America, '[w]hat we see...is a clear shift in the imagining of Tantra as it has been imported to this country – a shift from Tantra conceived as dangerous power and secrecy to Tantra conceived as healthy pleasure and liberated openness' (Urban, 2012:458, 2003:205) – although it should be noted that Urban is keen to emphasise that it is *imaginings* of Tantra that have changed, and not 'Tantra' itself. Other scholars such as Gleig (going back to her study of West Coast Vipassana, which she claims has taken a 'Tantric turn') note that compared to Asian forms of Tantra, the most obvious difference in 'Western' Tantra is an absence of ritual, devotion, and esotericism (Gleig, 2013:233-234).

Although an abundance of differences has been noted, Urban has also worked to draw out some similarities between these various constructions of Tantra – which links back to the consistent themes woven through the literature. He notes that one characteristic that these constructions tend to share is the extremity of Tantra: Tantra is understood as the form of Indian spirituality most 'Other' to the modern West (Urban, 2003:3). Urban argues that all of these imaginings of Tantra are centred on

the theme of transgression, by engaging in activities seen as unacceptable in mainstream social standards (Urban, 2006:84). However, he argues that the main difference between the two is the ends to which these activities are directed. He states that many Indian Tantric authors were 'typically invested in preserving rather than subverting the class system and Brahmin privilege'; whereas Western proponents of Tantra used transgressive practices as 'a means to subvert, undermine, and challenge the dominant order of the nineteenth-century Christian world in which they were born by wilfully violating its moral and sexual values' (Urban, 2006:84-85) – parts of this were clearly reflected in my own fieldwork.

Sex & Sexuality

As might be expected (and has already been referred to above), a number of scholars have also explored the sexual side of contemporary Tantra. Puttick places Tantra under the category of 'sacred sex', 'a syncretistic selection from Tantra, Taoism, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, and clinical sexology'; still often based on Jungian psychology (Puttick, 1998:117). In a more detailed study, Fedele and Knibbe have looked at how Tantra can be used to overcome some European women's guilt and shame related to sex (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:205). The theme of transgression and resulting liberation with regards to sexuality is also noted by Timalisina, who states, 'that Tantra brings sex into religious discourse challenges cultural mores, as it comes into conflict with the founding structure of civilisation built on patriarchy' (Timalisina, 2011:281). McDaniel has also suggested that norms around sexuality are disrupted in contemporary forms of Tantra, showing how 'sexuality, formerly understood as promiscuity and hedonism, [is] now reinterpreted as tantric practice, the body's way to God. Sexual ecstasy becomes religious ecstasy, for God dwells in the body' (McDaniel, 2018:159). McDaniel is also one of the few scholars to note how

sexual activity might be used in the context of contemporary Tantra to heal sexual trauma and make a person healthier or stronger (2018:160).

As has already been noted above with regards to Osho (and also raised in Chapter 1), interpretations of Tantra tend to be overwhelmingly heteronormative (Storr, 1996:52), and this theme has generally continued in contemporary expressions. However, some scholars have aimed to highlight the potential benefits of Tantra to gay and queer communities. In 1998, Jeffrey Hopkins – an authority on Tibetan Buddhism and former translator for the Dalai Lama – published *Sex, Orgasm, and the Mind of Clear Light: The Sixty-Four Arts of Gay Male Love*, a gay interpretation of a Tibetan sex manual (Urban, 2012:483). Urban has also noted how lesbians can see Tantra as liberating, in its celebration of the female body and avoidance of patriarchal control (Urban, 2012:483-484).

In the field of sexuality, other literature has explored the crossovers between Tantra and BDSM. For example, Hugh Urban suggests that comparisons between Tantra and BDSM can be made, as they both use sex to achieve prolonged ecstatic experiences (Urban, 2012:485). Another piece by Kath Albury explores queer and feminist Tantra through the framework of Foucauldian ‘technologies of the self’, suggesting that it ‘explicitly works against scientific, medical and moral conceptions of normative sex, gender and culture. These forms of sacred sex are at once intensely personal and highly political attempts to develop ethical frameworks for sexual and personal interactions...which fall outside classic ‘moral’ boundaries of sexual practices and sexual identity’ (Albury, 2001:205). As such, it is possible to see how a number of scholars have been interested in contemporary Tantra’s transformative potential, particularly with regards to sexuality.

Shaktism & Goddesses

Some scholars have approached contemporary Tantra by seeing it as a new expression of *Shaktism* (in simple terms, goddess worship). June McDaniel, noting how many forms of holistic spirituality make use of terms or concepts from Indian traditions (such as karma, reincarnation, chakras, yoga, and mantras), has placed Tantra within the wider category of Hindu Shakta traditions (McDaniel, 2004:265). She notes that, while Shakta Tantra in India might have had some focus on devotion to goddesses, 'in the United States and Western Europe [Shakta Tantra] largely ignores these, and tends to have only one dimension: that of sexuality' (McDaniel, 2004:266). Further, she notes that 'rather than giving up attachment to the world for the sake of the goddess, here we have people immersing themselves in the world to find her. She has become immanent rather than transcendent, associated with self-satisfying earthly lust (kama) rather than self-sacrificing spiritual love (prema)' (McDaniel, 2018).

McDaniel characterises Shakta Tantra as one of three aspects of Hindu Shakti traditions in the West (the other two being kundalini yoga and the worship of Hindu goddesses), stating that Shakta Tantra 'has become a religion of hedonism, with an immanent goddess recognised as dwelling within the woman, and sexuality understood to be a spiritual path' (McDaniel, 2004:265-266), with an emphasis on this world, and increased sensuality (McDaniel, 2004:270). She notes how the worship of Hindu goddesses never really caught on in the holistic milieu, with practitioners preferring to take inspiration from Grecian, Roman, or Celtic goddesses (McDaniel, 2004:284); however, a number of scholars – McDaniel included - have noted how, of all the Hindu or South Asian goddesses, it is Kali that has become most popular for practitioners in the West (Smith, 2003:129).

Psychology & Therapy

Some literature has also approached contemporary Tantra from psychological and therapeutic perspectives, mining for potential benefits that practices interpreted as 'Tantric' might be able to bring. Clarke has noted how Tantra has been used in psychological healing – 'a school which has little interest in metaphysical speculation, but which offers a way of personal transformation embracing the physical as well as the spiritual dimensions...Tantra's emphasis on the integration of body and spirit has proved appealing for a culture whose indigenous religions have not always been seen to give adequate place to the physical and emotional dimensions of human existence' (Clarke, 1997:99). Works used in the holistic milieu such as Swami Rama, Rudolph Ballentine, and Swami Ajaya's *Yoga and Psychotherapy: The Evolution of Consciousness* (1999) use yoga and Tantric philosophy in therapeutic systems aiming for holistic wellbeing; as do more recent works such as Mike Lousada and Elena Angel's article, 'Tantric Orgasm: beyond Masters and Johnson' (2011) – written by working Tantra practitioners and published in the academic journal, *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*.

Online Expressions

Inspired by the work of Rachel Fell McDermott on the goddess Kali and online forms of worship (McDermott, 2003), Urban has also briefly explored the potential for Tantra to be expressed and practiced online. Urban presents online expressions as a potentially significant future avenue for Tantra, particularly in how individuals might physically participate through technology. He states, '[i]ronically, it is precisely through the Internet, by participating in online ecstasy via modem, mouse, and video screen,

that we are said to achieve the ultimate physical experience, to achieve the full realization of our bodily and sexual nature...Perhaps we are witnessing here the birth of a new vision of the human body itself, reconfigured for the digital era' (Urban, 2003:253). Although noting online expressions such as this can lead to fresh insights on how individuals engage in forms of spirituality, I don't agree with Urban's characterisation here. As this thesis shows, physical and 'in-person' tactile connection continues to be highly important in this context, and my research participants expressed little interest in online participation in Tantra, other than using the Internet to organise and advertise events. As a small aside, more recent work by Andre Padoux - a prolific scholar in the field of Tantra studies - suggests that the Tantra websites proliferating online are 'worthless, misleading, and teeming with errors' (Padoux, 2017:170). This statement from Padoux echoes criticisms of 'neo-Tantra' mentioned earlier (and discussed in more detail in Chapter 3); and also displays the common tendency of studies covering Westernised expressions of Tantra to rely mainly on superficial internet searches, rather than ethnographic work.

Tantra Overview

By presenting literature tracing Tantra's movement to the West from the 19th century onwards, I aim to provide the reader with some historical background for the phenomena that this thesis explores. In doing so, it is possible to see how certain discourses and interpretations – with roots stretching back to colonial times – have developed and persist in contemporary Tantra. Particularly significant here are the aforementioned Orientalist threads weaving through interpretations of Tantra in the West (or even being a foundation for them), which romanticise and exoticise it as an extreme 'other', capable of countering the ills of modern Western society. As I have

attempted to highlight, these Orientalist threads paved the way for the themes of transgression, 'alternative' gender roles, and sexuality to come to the fore. These three themes emerged throughout my fieldwork as being of particular interest to practitioners and as such, this thesis' ethnographic sections reflect themes that are already prominent in the extant literature on Tantra (and vice versa). I suggest that the prominence of these themes in contemporary Tantra is intricately tied up with Orientalist discourses that emphasised points at which Tantra was perceived to differ from the West.

I mention above that studies of contemporary Western Tantra rarely rely on ethnography. This echoes Hugh Urban (whose work has clearly been foundational for this thesis), who states that although there are some people studying 'lived' Tantra, they are almost all based in South Asia (Urban, 2003:274-275), and although some progress has been made, there is much work left to do. As there are so few studies of contemporary Tantra within which to situate this thesis, I have also found it useful to refer to literature from other fields, particularly that of holistic spirituality. As such, the next section of this literature review aims to highlight work directly relevant to this thesis, particularly centring around holistic spirituality with relation to selfhood, sex, gender, and the body.

Holistic Spirituality

This section aims to synthesise material written on the broader field of 'holistic spirituality'⁴¹, focusing on several key themes that are threaded throughout this thesis: selfhood, gender, the body, and sex. I will work to highlight studies addressing these themes that have contributed to the formation of this research, and areas which this thesis can also build upon. Clearly, some of the themes discussed in this section echo those identified in studies of Tantra – particularly gender and sex. A growing number of studies have explored the role of the body in holistic spirituality, and insights from this literature were helpful in developing an understanding of how the body, senses, and touch – so key to this thesis - can be understood or used in this context. In combination with studies of contemporary Tantra, discussed above, the section below aims to illustrate common discourses in holistic spirituality, in order to give a well-rounded view of the context within which contemporary Tantra is developing.

Spirituality and Selfhood

Perhaps the most logical body of literature to begin with from the broad field of holistic spirituality, is that addressing the negotiation of selfhood. The theme of selfhood is threaded throughout literature on the holistic milieu, and is relevant to much of the material discussed elsewhere in this literature review and wider thesis. On the topic of selfhood, the work of Charles Taylor greatly influenced a number of scholars in this field. His theory of the 'subjective turn' highlights the growing significance of inner

⁴¹ In Chapter 1, I have discussed the terminology used here: I use the term 'holistic spirituality' to refer to this messy field of study (preferring this over 'New Age' or 'alternative spirituality'), in an effort to emphasise how these practices aim for the wholeness and well-being of body, mind, and spirit (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:259).

originality and authenticity (directly related to religious change) in contemporary constructions of selfhood in the Western context (Taylor 1994:31; Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:260-263).

The work of Paul Heelas (1996), one of the earlier writers to explore holistic spirituality (in his terms, the 'New Age Movement') in some depth, is also vital to these discussions. Heelas uses the phrase 'self-spirituality' to highlight one of the most fundamental assumptions in this field: that 'authority lies with the Self' (Heelas, 1996:21), rather than the church or any other outside influences. Heelas notes how the individual is seen by practitioners as essentially spiritual, and knowledge of 'truth' or the 'Self' can only come through personal experience (Heelas, 1996:19-21). Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead also refer to the 'subjectivization thesis' (based on Taylor's work), which they characterise as 'a major shift...away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties, and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic)' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005:2). The importance of selfhood in this context has also been noted by Christopher Partridge, who suggests that two of the most significant unifying themes of 'New Age' are eclecticism, and the sacralization of the self (Partridge, 2004:72). Echoing Heelas, Partridge also notes that 'for New Age epistemology the self becomes supremely significant' for two reasons: first, that the self is able to discover 'truth' independently, without the involvement of external authorities; and second, that this truth is already contained within the self (Partridge 2004:73). Linda Woodhead has been particularly prominent in this field and, in later work with Eeva Sointu (discussed in more depth below), suggests that complementary health practices have 'a shared goal of reproducing understandings of selfhood as active, responsible, self-aware, and empowered to make changes in life' (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:263).

Other writers have also noted the importance of the self in contemporary expressions of spirituality: Veronique Altglas, in her work on *bricolage*, notes how religious resources are 'constructed and disseminated in the terms of those who appropriate them – that is, as universal and flexible techniques for realisation of the self' (Altglas, 2014:13). Altglas uses the work of Rose (1989) and Castel (1981), to illustrate 'the psychologisation of social life' and particularly the rise of 'therapy culture' – she argues that 'its representations of selfhood and social relations are at the heart of social actors' involvement' in forms of holistic spirituality such as yoga and Kabbalah (Altglas, 2014:202). Importantly, however, Altglas does also note that 'self-realisation, while desired and voluntarily pursued by social actors, is a socially constructed incentive which posits the self as the locus of discipline and has social significance' (Altglas, 2014:486).

Gender

Another important theme running through studies of holistic spiritualities – and intricately tied up with projects of selfhood - is that of gender. In Heelas and Woodhead's 'Kendal Project' – a study of the holistic milieu in the town of Kendal – they suggest that 80% of individuals involved with 'New Age' or holistic spiritualities

are women (Heelas and Woodhead, 2003⁴²), and this has since become a popular focus of study in this field.⁴³

A number of scholars have pointed out how previous theories concerning spirituality and selfhood fail to take gender into account. Sointu and Woodhead, discussing Taylor's theory of the self, state that it should be extended to consider gender, and suggest that 'he fails to register the importance of: (a) the body and emotion; (b) self-worth and well-being; and (c) intimate relationships in contemporary forms of 'expressive' spirituality' (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:265). Crowley has also noted that, despite Heelas' work on 'Self Religiosity' being highly valuable, 'he does not move on to point out that such a concept could be liberatory for women, who have struggled to have a self all along' (Crowley, 2011:3). Following Heelas' argument that the self is replacing the church as primary authority, Walter and Davie suggest that as women have 'been particularly subject to the male authority of churches, it is not surprising that women are to the fore in developing post-modern discourses of 'spirituality' nor that some experience these new discourses as liberating' (Walter and Davie, 1998:656).

One influential study in this field conducted by Stef Houtman and Dick Aupers, (2008; also see Houtman and Aupers, 2007), discusses the process of the detraditionalisation of gender roles, and how this affects contemporary forms of spirituality – particularly the fact that although detraditionalisation has been noted in

⁴² A number of other studies have also noted how individuals involved in complementary and alternative medicine, and holistic spirituality, are predominantly white, middle- and upper-class, often with higher education (Doel and Segrott, 2003; Bishop and Lewith, 2010; Upchurch and Chyu, 2005); my own pool of research participants also reflects these characteristics.

⁴³ for example, see Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe's (2013) edited volume *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches*; and Kristin Aune, Sonya Sharma, and Giselle Vincett's (2008) *Women and religion in the west : Challenging Secularization*.

similar levels for men and women, women continue to engage more with forms of religion or spirituality (Houtman and Aupers, 2008:109). Inspired by Arlie Hochschild's notion of the 'second shift' that women face after a day's work (Hochschild, 1989), they note how acceptance of traditional gender roles has decreased, but the related gendered expectations have not been eliminated altogether (Houtman and Aupers, 2008:110), thus emphasising the persistent disconnect between the contemporary negotiation of gender roles, and the gendered expectations still placed on women. To explain these differences between men and women, Houtman and Aupers suggest that 'even though the loss of the protective cloak of "pre-given" meaning and identity creates tensions and anxieties for men and women alike, women are substantially more likely to become caught up in new webs of contradiction and ambiguity' (Houtman and Aupers, 2008:110). Further, they suggest that this leads to women being more concerned by questions of meaning and identity, meaning that they are more likely to embark on a spiritual quest and sacralise their selves (Houtman and Aupers, 2008:110), as detraditionalisation 'produces stronger tensions and anxieties in post-traditional women...than post-traditional men' (Houtman and Aupers, 2008:113).

Woodhead aims to extend this article by Houtman and Aupers, to look at 'modes of selfhood engendered in contemporary women's working and intimate lives, and considering how they may relate to projects of the self authorized by religious and spiritual practices and communities in the West' (Woodhead, 2008:148). To do so, Woodhead also uses the work of Arlie Hochschild (1990) to present the idea of a 'stalled gender revolution' – wherein women have entered the world of paid employment alongside men, but find themselves 'caught between two forms of labour, two sets of obligation, and two forms of identity' (Woodhead, 2008:190; although Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012:67 argue that this 'double-deprivation' of women

does not explain the discrepancy in numbers). According to Woodhead, alternative spiritualities 'deal directly with the difficulties of the contemporary feminine condition...they make use of a range of body and emotion-focused techniques to assist women in the difficult and novel task of constructing autonomous forms of selfhood' (Woodhead, 2008:191). Woodhead also draws a correlation between the decline of Christianity and its association with 'femininities of service, self-sacrifice and domesticity', which were seen as more and more outdated, post-1960s (Woodhead, 2008:153).

Yet another piece by Woodhead, written with Eeva Sointu, uses the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:54-84) on the dilemma facing women in the contemporary Western context: that of 'living life for oneself' and 'living life for others' (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:261). They argue that forms of holistic spirituality can 'capture and enable women's desire to move away from traditional roles ascribed to feminine subjects' (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:261), and that by offering women a range of representations of femininity, they are important in women's construction of selfhood (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:260). As such, these holistic spiritualities can both legitimate and subvert traditional practices and discourses of femininity. By validating traditionally 'feminine' work of relational and emotional care, women can create a selfhood based on relations with others; yet these same spiritualities also put forth the subversive idea that a woman must also care for themselves before others, and can legitimate women's desires for physical and emotional fulfilment that they might otherwise have felt guilt for expressing. As such, according to Sointu and Woodhead, these spiritualities allow them to negotiate the dilemma of 'living for oneself' or 'living for others', and allow women to ask for and receive care (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:268-271). Elsewhere, Woodhead has argued that for many women, the simple fact of 'taking this time for oneself, paying for it, and entering an all-woman or woman-

dominated space is also directly empowering for many women (and nearly impossible for most working class women)' (Woodhead, 2008:157). Fedele and Knibbe explicitly support Sointu and Woodhead's argument that contemporary spirituality enables women to combine and negotiate different gendered ideals (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:203); however, they argue that holistic spirituality, 'often described as liberating and empowering, may create new gendered hierarchies' (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:195). Their study shows how for some women, traditionally Catholic ideals of unselfish, maternal love are incorporated into new ideals of personhood within holistic spiritualities (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:196). Similarly, McGee (2005: 180) suggested that spiritualities advocating self-care without political direction, can actually work to 'keep women in their place' in what continues to be a male-oriented context (also noted in Marler, 2008:49). In the field of CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine), Brenton and Elliot also note that middle class Americans often interpret CAM in ways that reproduce hegemonic gendered identities: women using CAM to create a new sense of self often reflect dominant constructions of femininity (Brenton and Elliot, 2013).

McGuire has also noted forms of holistic spirituality that work to 'ritually transform or sacralize aspects of women's everyday lives that are disvalued or denigrated in the dominant religious practices' (McGuire, 2007:191), and has suggested that embodied practices in feminist spirituality can be a form of resistance (McGuire, 2007:191; also in Northrup 1997; Winter, Lummis, and Stokes 1994). McGuire particularly draws on her own fieldwork, wherein women 'described spiritual practices that valorized mundane domestic materiality, such as the processes of growing, cooking, and eating food' (McGuire, 2008:105). Further, McGuire specifically identifies the suffering and healing that alternative spiritualities often address, highlighting how these are gendered experiences (McGuire, 2008:158).

Echoing aforementioned critiques of Tantra, a number of scholars have derided this contemporary search for the self, such as Charles Taylor and Harvey Cox, who both label this search 'narcissistic'; the latter also refers to it as 'futile', and 'frivolous' (Cox, 1977:79). Sointu and Woodhead take particular issue with Charles Taylor's description of these spiritualities, as he fails to take in to account the perspectives or motivations of women. They state, 'there is a good deal of truth in the general charge that holistic spiritualities and health practices are both self-centred and concerned with self-fulfilment of a distinctly sensuous kind. However...the emphasis on subjective and embodied well-being is also bound up with concerns about the value of subjects and experiences that continue to be marginalized in many religious and medical contexts' (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:272), thus aiming to remove the potentially negative connotations of 'self-centredness'. Other articles have also aimed to complicate assumptions that alternative spiritualities are narcissistic (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:203). Expanding on this topic, Crowley has noted three key themes from critics of 'New Age': first, that New Age causes a rise in narcissism and individualism; second, that New Age is a marketing ploy and as such, is 'inauthentic'; and third, that New Age increases susceptibility to irrationality and hysteria. Crowley convincingly argues that these accusations are gendered, and as such, they work to obscure the fact that New Age can 'foster agency and empowerment for women even as it rests on suspect racial logics' (Crowley, 2011:20-21-25). Similarly, in her studies of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), Eeva Sointu has noted that CAM is often conceptualised and even experienced as a feminised, 'soft' alternative to the 'hard' science of biomedicine (Sointu, 2011).

Aside from gender playing a role in constructions of selfhood, some scholars have looked at popular constructions of gender in holistic spiritualities. Woodhead, who has written extensively on this subject, has created a method of classifying religions

according to their attitudes toward gender, using the variables of: mainstream to marginal, and confirmatory to challenging. Two of the categories identified by Woodhead are most relevant to this study. First, the category of 'questing': marginal and confirmatory modes of religion, which work within the existing gender order, but work to improve the position of women within this (she gives the example of some holistic forms of New Age, and certain types of witchcraft). The second of these categories is the 'counter-cultural' – marginal and challenging modes of religion, which oppose and aim to change the existing gender order (examples given include the goddess feminist movement) (Woodhead, 2007:573-5).

Body

The body has become an important focus for scholars studying holistic spirituality (as mentioned above, this is highlighted in the use of the term 'holistic'). Clearly, bodies are closely tied into gender, gender roles, and constructions of selfhood. Again, the work of Linda Woodhead has been useful in this regard, as she emphasises what she sees as the huge significance of the body in the construction of selfhood. She states,

[S]uccessful projects of selfhood depend, importantly, upon access to fulfilling, socially valued, and well-paid work...upon having money (and/or credit) for oneself, as well as being able to make time for oneself and space for oneself. Most fundamentally, they depend upon bodily health and integrity and a sense of ownership of one's own body. Indeed, the domination or alienation of one's body, including one's sexuality, constitutes perhaps the most serious of all obstacles to the creation of a sense of unique, bounded and valuable selfhood under one's own control (Woodhead, 2008:149).

Sointu and Woodhead's article also argues that alternative spirituality begins with physical embodiment – often, treatments are sought out to aid the physical body. They

argue that ‘the principle upon which these activities are based is that it is the body that provides privileged access to the inner life of the emotions and the spirit’ (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:265). Further, Sointu and Woodhead note how individuals emphasise the importance of body-work in constructing a valued sense of self: ‘[t]he body offers a means of working on a wide range of emotional issues emerging from the authentic and inherently benign inner core of the person’ (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:265). They directly link subversive expressions of femininity with bodily pleasure; and further, note how holistic spiritualities are able to ‘recognize and affirm the body, its health, appearance, and sensations, as proper subjects of attention, care, and cultivation’ (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:269). In this article, Sointu and Woodhead tie in classic feminist work, such as Iris Marion Young’s *Throwing Like a Girl* to show how in contemporary Western society, women are objects ‘*to be looked at and acted upon*’ (Young, 1990:150), leading women to traditionally be socialised to care for their appearances for the benefit of others. In contrast, they suggest, ‘holistic spiritualities and health practices are more likely to be concerned with *the cultivation of bodily well-being for the benefit of the woman herself*, and through this personal well-being, for the benefit of her relations with those around her’ (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008:269, emphasis in original).

Meredith McGuire has also written extensively on the body and embodiment in the field of holistic spirituality, particularly relating this to gender and selfhood. She notes that ‘[b]oth feminist and other forms of women’s spiritual practice are more likely to take bodily expression than are institutionally approved religious practices’ (McGuire, 2007:191), and looks at overtly physical, embodied practices such as gardening or dancing to show how ‘embodied practices have creative potential to transmute painful or destructive memories and emotions into sources of emotional support, joy, and vitality... [they] can communicate joy, gratitude, and worshipfulness. Collective

embodied practices... can produce an experiential sense of community and connectedness. Without the full involvement of the material body, religion is confined to the realm of cognitions (i.e., beliefs, opinions, theological ideas)'. (McGuire, 2007:197). Similarly, Fedele and Knibbe note how forms of holistic spirituality can offer women new ways to conceptualise their bodies and bodily processes (Fedele and Knibbe, 2013:196; see also Fedele 2013; Salomonsen 2002; Pike 2001) – but again, they emphasise that gender stereotypes can be reinforced in these 'new' conceptualisations of body, gender, and selfhood (Fedele and Knibbe, 2013:197).

Sex

As an almost logical extension of discussions of the body and gender in constructions of selfhood, it is also helpful to explore studies addressing how holistic spiritualities can affect experiences of sex. Of the aforementioned elements of holistic spirituality, sex is the aspect that as yet, hasn't received as much attention, particularly with regards to ethnographic work.

Here, the work of Fedele and Knibbe is again relevant – their study of Mary Magdalene shrines in France (and how women reinterpret these) focuses on how women 'attempt to overcome the Christian stigmatization of body and sexuality embracing a corpus of theories about sacred sexuality and sacred prostitution' – and this 'sacred sexuality' is often referred to as 'Tantra' or a 'Tantric tradition' (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:206). According to Fedele and Knibbe, this practice of sacred sexuality 'allowed the pilgrims to see sexuality as a possible way for spiritual elevation and to reinforce their conceptualization of the body as the manifestation of divine forces' (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:206). Here, we can see how a sacralisation of the self also

involves a sacralisation of the body and its behaviours, such as sex. Fedele and Knibbe add more: '[L]ike women during the sexual revolution, these pilgrims reclaimed the right to have sex outside marriage or stable relationships. Unlike their counterparts in the sixties, they did not say that these encounters might take place just for fun or pleasure, but rather described them as potentially sacred experiences' (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:208); as such, sex is still seen as either sinful or sacred, thus reinforcing a common dichotomy in Christian traditions and creating a new dualism (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:209). Departing from Sointu and Woodhead's theory on holistic spirituality, gender, and bodies, they show that in this context, 'women are confronted with norms and expectations that sometimes seem to be unexpected metamorphoses of the norms and expectations they are encouraged to leave behind' (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:2010).

Related literature from other fields has also been helpful to this thesis. Material from the field of therapy has explored Shamanic practices and how these can inform treatment models for healing and empowering women's sexuality (Savage, 2013). In studies of Christianity, Sonya Sharma has looked at young women in Protestant Church communities in Canada, particularly noting the 'powerful message Protestant church culture gives about sex and sexuality; the shame and guilt embodied in young women's experiences of sex because of concepts like sin; and young women's negotiations of sexual experiences, given that they live in cultures that simultaneously normalize and encourage sexual exploration and permissiveness' (Sharma, 2008:71-72). Sharma highlights how for these women, experiences of shame and guilt were gendered 'in that they relate to not living up to conventional femininity, particularly a Christian femininity' (Sharma, 2008:75) – for some of my respondents, this was a key reason for their involvement in contemporary Tantra, as shown in Chapters 4 and 5.

Holistic Spirituality, Orientalism, and Cultural Appropriation

In a thesis focused on Tantra – understood as originating in ‘the East’ – and holistic spirituality, it is also important to take note of studies that raise the ideas of romanticism, exoticism, Orientalism, and cultural appropriation within the holistic milieu. As highlighted by Urban, the use of ‘Tantric’ ideas could be understood in two main ways: first, positively, as individuals aim to show interest and awareness of other cultures; or on the other hand, negatively, as a form of neo-colonialism (Urban, 2000:304).

Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted how positive Orientalist discourses in the mid- to late- 20th century led to perceptions of Tantra as an ancient source of wisdom, with the potential to provide ‘alternative’ ways of understanding gender roles, sex, and the body than those in the modern, patriarchal, capitalist West. Echoing these Orientalist themes woven through understandings of Tantra, Veronique Altglas’ exploration of Vedanta and Kabbalah notes how these movements were also typically represented in the West as ‘mystical and mysterious but also as universal and timeless sources of wisdom. Furthermore, these representations are inextricably linked to their polar opposite: the individualistic, materialistic, secular, and decadent West’ (Altglas, 2014a:24). Altglas argues that this nostalgic and romantic critique of Western modernity ‘remains an implicit element of the twentieth century’s fascination for Asian religions’ (Altglas, 2014a:30). In addition, the aforementioned homogenisation of Tantra echoes Altglas’ suggestion that the ‘idealization, universalization, and de-contextualization’ of religious resources is necessary, in order for them to become available or appealing in Euroamerican societies (Altglas, 2014a:58).

This is also highlighted by Partridge, who notes that this critique of Western modernity often focuses on institutional religion in 'the West', understood as 'a tired, authoritarian, patriarchal, sermonizing Christianity [as opposed] to forms of faith which are perceived to be more vital, experience-centred, and Eastern' (Partridge, 2004:87). Also key to the fascination with the East in holistic spirituality is 'the turn towards the experiencing self and away from external authorities – a shift from doctrines to techniques' (Partridge, 2004:88). Although Colin Campbell has argued that this amounts to an 'Easternization of the West', Partridge counters that 'what we are witnessing in the West is not a general process of Easternization, but rather the emergence of neo-Romanticism' (Partridge, 2004:89), and that 'much late-modern alternative spirituality is Easternized Western religious thought' (Partridge, 2004:96).

Several writers have criticised forms of holistic spirituality for their appropriation of ancient or indigenous rituals and artefacts in ahistorical, decontextualized ways (e.g. Donaldson, 2001), and Carrette and King (2005) have written extensively on Orientalism and appropriation, particularly with relation to capitalism. Crowley (2011) is particularly strong on this, taking an intersectional look at holistic spirituality by dissecting the gendered, racial formation of this milieu. Crowley argues that 'white women participate in New Age culture in part to negotiate the long, complex, and some would say failed political alliances with women of colour. Just when women of colour challenged feminism and women's and gender studies for their racist foundations in the 1980s and 1990s, many white women turned toward New Age spiritual practices that "allowed" them to live out fantasy unions with women of colour that were disrupted in the public, feminist-political sphere (Crowley, 2011:8).

Summary

This literature review has attempted to sketch out two main fields of literature relevant to this research: studies of Tantra's movement to the West; and studies of holistic spirituality – particularly how they relate to selfhood. Throughout, I have highlighted certain themes that are threaded throughout these fields of literature (and this thesis): gender, transgression, and sex. I have also aimed to show how Orientalist discourses woven through interpretations of Tantra have allowed these themes to become significant.

From this review, it is clear that this thesis can work to fill gaps in knowledge in several areas. The first, and perhaps most obvious, of these is the study of contemporary Tantra in the Western context. Little academic work has focused on this, and there is a notable lack of ethnographic work in this context – which this thesis can begin to remedy. As I have shown (in Chapter 1), popular perceptions of Tantra abound in the British context; yet are rarely accurate or well-informed. The second theoretical contribution this thesis can make is in the field of holistic spirituality. Although work continues to develop in the field of holistic spirituality, selfhood, and gender, fewer studies have also explored the body and sexuality in this context – this work aims to build on the work already conducted in these areas. As succeeding chapters show, this thesis can also work to extend other areas of study – for example, ethnographic work on touch, and research methods surrounding this.

Chapter 3: Research Methods and Fieldwork

Considerations

It's 5pm on a Sunday afternoon, and I'm sitting on the plush, carpeted floor of a room in a London town hall building. Its heavy curtains and wood-panelled walls look more suited to stuffy council meetings than the colourful annual Tantra festival which has taken over the building for the weekend. Around forty other men and women sit on the floor around me, dressed in an array of bright t-shirts, baggy cotton trousers, and with shoes set to the side of the room. We're in the final session of the last day of the festival, and there's only fifteen minutes left before the workshops of the festival will conclude until next year. The workshop I've chosen to attend is being co-led by two practitioners (one male, one female), who have just finished leading us through various styles of dance and partner work, and they are introducing the final activity of the session. Standing in the centre of the crowd, they choose a female volunteer to help demonstrate the next activity, and she steps curiously forward to help. The two instructors sit on the floor opposite each other, each with their legs splayed out on the floor in a 'V' shape, their ankles interlocking with the other person's. The female volunteer is asked to step into the small space between both instructors' legs, and to sit with her legs in the same position. She chooses to sit facing the female instructor, with her back to the male instructor, and arranges her legs to fit. The proximity of their bodies means that the volunteer is now sat in between the legs of the male instructor, and her legs are interlocking with those of the female instructor. As they settle into this position, I become aware of the soothing music that has been playing throughout: soft, slow piano music. All three close their eyes, breathe deeply, and the two instructors wrap their arms around the volunteer, sandwiching her in a gentle hug. They rock slowly backwards and forwards in harmony, causing the volunteer to first

lean forward into the body of the female instructor, then slowly lean back onto the body (and groin) of the male instructor. The crowd watches in silence, apparently enthralled. My stomach sinks, realising that I'm expected to copy this demonstration once they're finished. After a minute the three break position, and the leaders instruct everyone in the room to find two others with whom to practice. This, I decide, is my limit. As people in the crowd slowly stand and mill around to find groups, I slip quietly out of a door at the side of the room and into the cool, marble-floored corridor of the town hall.

After fifteen minutes, people begin to emerge from the room, signalling that it's safe to collect my shoes. Sitting down to tie my laces, a thirty-something North Londoner who I'd spoken to before the session strikes up conversation with me. 'That was amazing', he says, 'really deep. How was it for you?'. I briefly consider covering up my decision to step out, but decide against it. 'Actually, I left before the last activity. It was too far out of my comfort zone', I say, standing back up. He looks mildly surprised, but smiles reassuringly and responds, 'that's a bit of a shame...But well done for knowing where your boundaries are. You can only do things that you're ready for, I guess'.

* * * * *

Conducting research on contemporary Tantra involved a number of processes that needed to be carefully considered, revisited, and altered according to the fieldwork context. The vignette above illustrates a somewhat typical session conducted during a Tantra festival, showing the very personal engagement that this fieldwork required. The basics of my research methods can be found in Chapter 1 - but moving forward, this chapter aims to draw out some of the main issues encountered during the

research process, generally following the order in which certain obstacles or issues were encountered.

The main considerations of this chapter fall broadly under two categories, each of which is reflexive in its own way:

1. **Classificatory:** this involves precisely *who* or *what* I intended to study; who or what fell within these boundaries that I understood to contain 'Tantra'; and who or what could be excluded from this research.
2. **Practical:** this was often guided by my own personal experiences and choices. In a thesis focusing on the tactile, a reconsideration of the researcher's role in fieldwork was important. Influenced by the approach of embodied ethnography (covered in Chapter 1), I began to look closely at how the body - my body - of the researcher could act as a research tool; and how it could help (or hinder) me in gaining knowledge about the research context and participants.

The first section pertains more to epistemological reflexivity, while the second is more concerned with personal and methodological reflexivity. Issues of classification were most often encountered before fieldwork began, while practical issues usually arose during fieldwork activities, 'in the moment'. Throughout my fieldwork, however, certain events and individuals would cause me to reflect on the boundaries I had drawn, constantly blurring and altering them. Through exploring some key steps of my fieldwork process, it is possible to see how contemporary Tantra is ripe ground for reflecting on methodological issues, and for developing new directions in conducting anthropological research.

Classificatory Issues

Several discussions have been taken up in this chapter, partially due to my own interests in specific complexities, nuances, and power dynamics within the field; but also due to how prominent they appeared to be, and how frequently I encountered debates and discussions about them; which in turn, highlighted particular understandings and representations of what Tantra 'is'. In this section, I have chosen to focus on two topics of discussion: sex work, and 'neo-Tantra'. Throughout the research process, these two themes were frequently raised in conversation, and they became illustrative of how messy the boundaries defining contemporary Tantra are. Further, practitioner's discussions of these themes revealed claims to authenticity, as well as attitudes which sometimes seemed contradictory to claims they themselves made.

Tantra and Sex Work

Everybody thinks it's about sex for a long time without coming...everybody seems to feel that it's a kind of posh prostitute word...and that Tantric massage means a pretty lady giving you a massage, ending up with a happy ending...is a Tantric massage, which it isn't, it's nothing to do with a Tantric massage... - Diane⁴⁴

The first important consideration arose during the earliest stages of my research, in attempting to distinguish groups within the holistic milieu from each other – the flow of ideas, participants and practices in the milieu can make it hard to delineate phenomena such as Tantra (as discussed in Chapter 1). However, it wasn't these crossovers which I found most interesting. Instead, it was crossovers with another

⁴⁴ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

phenomenon that I also had to work out: sex work. Before undertaking practical fieldwork, I was required to consider the relationship between Tantra and sex work – including the potential to encounter ethical, or even legal, issues.

Many Tantra teachers seem to see the crossover between Tantra and sex work as a sliding scale, with sex work at one end, and Tantra practitioners at the other. The monthly Tantra UK newsletter is also representative of this split, in its online directory of Tantra practitioners. The list is split into two sections: 'Tantra Groups/Centres etc.' and 'Tantra massage services'. In this newsletter – and in other areas of online advertising - 'Tantra massage' or 'Tantric massage' is often a code for sex workers providing sexual services.⁴⁵ This plays on (and perpetuates) popular perceptions of Tantra as focused on sex (discussed in Chapter 1), and can add an 'exotic' selling point to sexual services. This code also appears to be acknowledged by the individual compiling the monthly newsletter, in their provision of links at the bottom of the 'Tantra massage services' list to the SAAFE (Support and Advice for UK Escorts) website. Notably, the 'Tantra Massage Services' sites on the newsletter vastly outnumber the 'Tantra Groups/Centres etc' sites, although many of both are defunct. As one teacher, Adaira, stated (good-naturedly, and laughing): 'Tantric massage gets used in quite a wide variety of ways, some of which have absolutely *nothing* to do with Tantra'.

For individuals selling sexual services, using the term 'Tantra' in this way can be useful in side-stepping legal issues (the sale and purchase of sexual services between consenting adults is legal in Great Britain, however a number of related activities are

⁴⁵ 'Prostitute' here refers to 'a person...who, on at least one occasion and whether or not compelled to do so, offers or provides sexual services to another person in return for payment or a promise of payment to A or a third person' (Sexual Offences Act, 2003)

still prohibited⁴⁶). Indeed, such legal issues have affected Tantra practitioners elsewhere: in Oregon, Tracey Elise – claiming to run a Tantric Goddess Temple – was found guilty of 22 counts of prostitution, illegal control of an enterprise, and other related counts, and was sentenced to over four years in prison (Stern, 2016). In-depth research on this case – particularly media coverage around it, and the conservative social and religious context in which it arose – could be very revealing.

Although some examples seem clear-cut, distinctions between sex work and Tantra are far from straightforward. As described in Chapters 5 and 6, Tantric practices can include a vast range of techniques, some of them distinctly sexual in nature. To provide an example: healing Tantric massages can be aimed directly at addressing sexual dysfunctions in both men and women, such as problems reaching orgasm. Part of the massage would thus be aimed at teaching individuals how to orgasm. This clearly complicates the question of whether it is possible to distinguish between some forms of Tantric massage and sex work.



Figure 5 – Flyer for couples' Tantric Massage course, Ecstatic Joy Temple

Here, boundaries are also blurred regarding which acts or practices are considered under the umbrella of sex work: what makes an act sexual in nature? Does a sensual or relaxing back massage (for example) cross this line? How about a *lingam* or *vajra* (penis) massage, if the objective of this is to provide healing? Is it any practice or

⁴⁶ Related activities such as brothel owning and soliciting are legislated against, mostly to protect children and vulnerable people from coercion and exploitation; in Northern Ireland, paying for sex is illegal (House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, 2016)

technique that involves the genitals? Or any practice that provides some sort of sexual pleasure to the receiver? Does the intention of the person providing the practice need to be taken into account? The boundaries around what makes a particular technique or behaviour sexual are hazy; yet at the same time, are often taken for granted – people are assumed to just ‘know’ when an act is sexual in nature.⁴⁷ On this subject, Sarah Oerton has noted the similarities between sex work and therapeutic massage treatments (although the study does not refer to Tantric massages, particularly those of a sexual nature): both are ‘episodic, exclusive, secluded, relatively unsupervised, conducted between two people in intimate surroundings of private houses, clinics, saunas; often on clients’ supine, semi-clad or totally undressed bodies (Oerton, 2004:550).

Exploring how Tantra practitioners made sense of these crossovers was revealing. Some practitioners intentionally blur these boundaries between Tantra and sex work – proudly so, referring to themselves as ‘sacred prostitutes’. Others, however, would take issue with this, hinting at a stigma attached to sex work with which they did not want to be associated. Despite generally being sex positive, these teachers seemed to struggle to overcome stigmas attached to prostitution. For these teachers, Tantra – understood as a ‘spiritual’ practice – lent legitimacy and respectability to the provision of sexual services; and it was the ‘spiritual’ nature of Tantra that made practices that might otherwise be understood as sex work, more acceptable to them. Similarly, it appeared as though an association with ‘mundane’ sex work might somehow devalue their ‘spiritual’ sexual practice of Tantra. In creating some distance between their own ‘spiritual’ practices and other types of sex work, these teachers

⁴⁷ Legal definitions are little help here: “penetration, touching or any other activity is sexual if a reasonable person would consider that (a) whatever its circumstances or any person’s purpose in relation to it, it is because of its nature sexual, or (b) because of its nature it may be sexual and because of its circumstances or the purpose of any person in relation to it (or both) it is sexual” <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/section/78>

revealed their own negative perceptions of sex work, thus showing how certain types of sexual behaviours are only permitted in certain circumstances. In these discussions, it appeared as though sex work continues to be stigmatised – but by interpreting similar work through the lens of Tantra, it becomes more ‘spiritual’, and thus more acceptable and legitimate. In addition, occasionally teachers would shun the idea of providing any sort of sexual service (e.g. massage) altogether, conveying the idea that engaging with others sexually somehow detracted from the ‘spiritual’ aspects of Tantra.⁴⁸

Over the course of my fieldwork, I questioned teachers about this distinction, and rarely received a definitive answer. Some differentiated Tantra and sex work by the intentions of the individuals *receiving* the services – for example, it was desirable for potential clients to be seeking some sort of personal growth or healing. Many Tantra practitioners vet their clients with an interview (or more casual conversations) before one-on-one sessions, to check that the practitioner’s and client’s understanding of the services provided are aligned. Others placed the onus on the intentions of the individual *providing* the services. A small number of Tantra practitioners were willing to entertain clients who arrived with the intention of attaining a brief, ‘no-strings’ sexual experience, but tried to show the client through their work that sex and sexual pleasure can affect broader changes in other areas of life. Through their work, they attempt to change the client’s attitudes towards sex and sexual pleasure, and in these situations, expectations held by the practitioners and clients were clearly different. One teacher, Adaira, succinctly summed up the confusion:

⁴⁸ The aforementioned study by Oerton (2004) also discussed tactics deployed by therapeutic massage practitioners aiming to ‘professionalise’ their practice, in an effort to clearly distinguish themselves from sex work; she notes how this problem usually only arises for women practitioners (Oerton, 2004:544)

There's a lot of misunderstanding, especially around Tantric massage, because the term gets used to mean all kinds of offerings, then it...actually I really feel for a lot of the guys whenever they get in touch, and they have this mess thing, because it's not their fault. If you go to somebody who's offering a Tantric massage and they give you a one-hour rub and tug, then you're going to think that that's what it is. You know? And so for me, I really love to educate and to open the doors into the deeper experience of oneself, in that space. But it's inevitably really strongly tied up with sexuality, that for me feels fine because sexuality is the environment that I'm particularly interested in, and eros, but it's- there's a lot of missing of the real depth and potential that's there.⁴⁹

Another female practitioner, Sarah - who primarily provides one-on-one sessions to men - spoke with me about how she tries to change her clients' attitudes toward sex, with the aim of encouraging them to change their behaviour (sexual and otherwise) toward others. Notably, her sessions were often quite 'sexual' in nature, and she was more accepting of sex work overlapping with Tantra. She described her practice as 'doing women's work, through men', to convey her hopes that the men she works with will go on to have healthier (sexual) relationships with future partners.⁵⁰

The very blurry boundaries between Tantra and sex work meant that I needed to reflect closely on my research choices – most notably, how my own biases could affect which teachers or practitioners I chose to contact. Although I hold the view that the safe exchange of sexual services for payment between consenting adults should be legal – and less stigmatised - such a subject could undeniably raise some unexamined, unconscious bias in me. I thought about whether I should contact *all* individuals who include the word 'Tantra' in descriptions of their sessions; and whether the choices I made regarding who to contact were influenced by what I already understood to be 'Tantra' or 'Tantric'. Would this lead me to exclude certain individuals or groups according to my own unconscious criteria? Did I, without due examination,

⁴⁹ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017. Again, this echoes Oerton's study of therapeutic massage, in which women practitioners note that 'boundaries between therapeutic massage and sex are inadequately recognised by many men clients' (2004:551)

⁵⁰ Interview conducted in London, 5th April 2017.

eliminate certain practitioners from my potential research pool because they didn't appear 'Tantric' enough? How about 'spiritual' enough? How did I decide where the line was, where I decided an individual wouldn't be fully relevant to my research aims? Should I contact individuals offering *only* Tantric massage, or should they also teach groups and workshops? Should I trust the judgement of the individual compiling the monthly Tantra newsletter and their own organisation of Tantra practitioners?

A number of processes helped me to sift through these issues. The first step in this was researching a practitioner's self-produced literature before contact – most often, their websites and adverts. The list provided by the aforementioned newsletter was helpful in this respect and supplemented my own independent search for practitioners. If the material on their websites was quite clearly pointed toward a straightforward provision of sexual services (e.g. being or closely resembling an escort site) then the practitioner was eliminated from my investigation. Figure 6 below provides two snippets from websites that I placed within this category, both of which included the words 'Tantra' or 'Tantric' in their URLs; I chose not to contact individuals advertising on these websites. The main reason for this was that the literature available provided no further elaboration on what Tantra might be; the individuals

didn't present themselves as Tantra practitioners or seem to have any interest or connections to the holistic milieu more widely; and 'Tantra' was used only as a code to advertise sexual services, which isn't the main focus of this thesis.



Figure 6 - excerpts from two Tantric massage websites

Obviously, this approach is somewhat subjective, and there are a number of valuable viewpoints which have potentially been left out as a result of this elimination process. In contrast to figure 6, figure 7 gives two examples of websites aimed at promoting 'spiritual' forms of Tantra, and which also had the words 'Tantra' or 'Tantric' in their URLs. This juxtaposition illustrates how individuals creating or designing such websites play on various perceptions of Tantra, and propagate these representations depending on who their potential audience is.

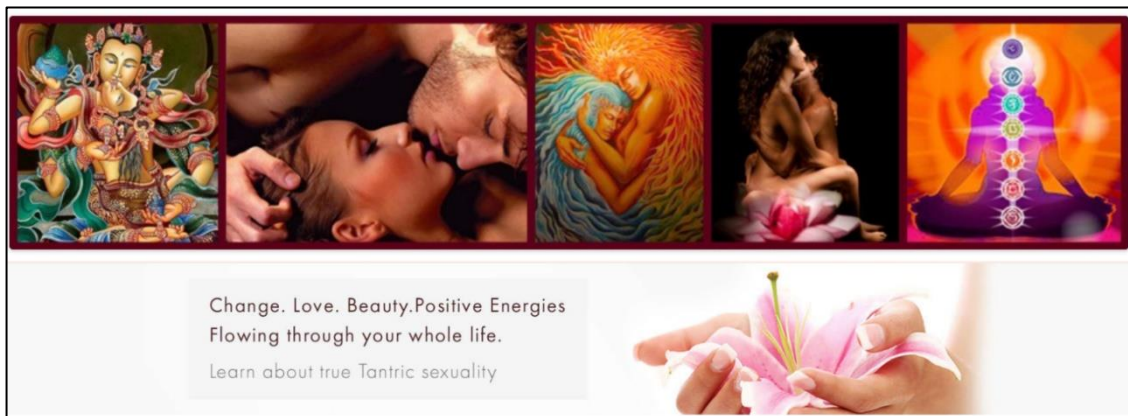


Figure 7 - excerpts from two Tantra websites

Another process involved – arguably the most important - was self-selection by practitioners. My introductory message to practitioners (when I cold-contacted them) explained the themes that I aimed to explore over the course of this research. Many individuals chose not to respond to this message, and it is understandable why an individual describing their sexual services as 'Tantric' might ignore my requests. As such, the description of my research would most likely appeal to practitioners who were more invested in the idea or practice of what they understood to be Tantra, and who had a vested interest in improving a researcher's knowledge of the subject. Again, this has its own issues - I am highly aware that the structure and content of this introductory message could have eliminated a wide range of individuals (both 'Tantric' and 'non-Tantric') and might have – unintentionally - only attracted a small segment of Tantra practitioners with certain interests and agendas. As such, those

practitioners who *did* respond to me might have been motivated by a desire to spread their own, 'correct' interpretation of Tantra by engaging with a postgraduate researcher. Once I became involved with a small number of Tantra teachers, snowballing also came into effect, which allowed me to contact (or be contacted by) individuals on the recommendations of other practitioners – this helped to side-step the decision of whether I should contact the individuals or not.

Tantra and Neo-Tantra

Another important classificatory issue that arose prior to conducting my fieldwork (and which has remained highly relevant throughout) was the frequently-discussed distinction between 'Tantra' and 'neo-Tantra'. I first became aware of these categories in academic literature referring to contemporary interpretations of Tantra (brief discussion of this is given in the Introduction), and quickly became interested in how 'neo-Tantra' as a term belies a range of disagreements over the legitimacy and authenticity of recent incarnations of Tantra in the West – both in academic literature, and 'on the ground'.⁵¹

Although the term 'neo-Tantra' would ostensibly refer to 'new' Tantra – so perhaps more recent, Westernised forms – in the contemporary British context, the main difference between 'Tantra' and 'neo-Tantra' is often constructed with reference to practitioners' attitudes towards sex and pleasure. As such, sex and pleasure seem to have become the crux around which distinctions form, and in this respect,

⁵¹ This isn't to say that academic literature and my fieldwork participants 'on the ground' are entirely distinct from each other – indeed, many of my interviewees took an active interest in current scholarly research on the subject, used this to inform their own views on certain debates, and would ask me for recommendations on the topic.

practitioners and academics alike have found some use in distinguishing between 'Tantra' and 'neo-Tantra'.

Some academic accounts refer to contemporary, Westernised forms of Tantra as 'neo-Tantra' in pejorative terms, criticising what they see as the misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and appropriation of Tantric rituals, imagery, or philosophy to focus exclusively on sexual activity. Research and literature focusing on South Asian forms of Tantra tend to view 'Western' Tantra as a denigration of traditional Tantra⁵² – David Gordon White is particularly strong on this, stating that 'from the ruins of its past, modern-day entrepreneurs have cobbled together the pathetic hybrid of New Age "Tantric sex" (White, 2003:258), while Georg Feuerstein states that 'Neo-Tantrism... [covers] purely genital impulses or neurotic emotional needs in an aura of spirituality' (Feuerstein, 1998:271). I find both descriptions particularly objectionable in their heavy-handed dismissal of contemporary Tantra; and Feuerstein's reference to 'genital impulses' and 'neurotic emotional needs' hints at a conservatism which suggests that neither of these characteristics are important, worthy of study, or indeed can't be addressed by some form of contemporary 'religion' or 'spirituality'. These descriptions also utterly ignore the motivations of individuals involved, and show a failure to understand that addressing 'genital impulses' or 'neurotic emotional needs' is 1) important for many individuals in terms of well-being or formulating a sense of self; and 2) a function, to some extent, of countless other practices or traditions which do not receive such negative attention. Such criticisms of contemporary Tantra also resurrect persistent Orientalist and exoticised representations of Tantra as purely sexual and bordering on deviant; although in this case, the same themes are applied to contemporary Western interpretations of Tantra. The backlash of some classical

⁵² Jeffrey Kripal has also noted the disapproval of the 'counterculture' translation of Tantra displayed by many Indologists (2012:440).

scholars and Indologists to these newer interpretations reveals an agenda to put forth and protect 'authentic' South Asian Tantra. However, given the proliferation of (mis)information about Tantra – both contemporary and classical - in the media and popular culture, it is understandable that scholars of Tantra in South Asia wish to present factual accounts of their object of study.

The contrast between 'Tantra' and 'neo-Tantra' is also an emic distinction, described to me by various teachers. Echoing themes from the scholarly research, the main difference between 'Tantra' and 'neo-Tantra', according to many of my respondents, is the extent to which sex is emphasised. However, the focus here is generally a little different. As will be shown throughout this thesis (and as mentioned above), contemporary Tantra is generally very sex-positive: the argument for an acceptance of, and focus on, sex generally follows the thread that expressing desire and having pleasurable sex is liberating, particularly for women; it is an appropriate interpretation of Tantric philosophy for the contemporary context; and that as a key part of human and embodied experience, there is no reason why sex can't also be part of a spiritual practice. Further, the argument goes, to exclude sex from forms of spirituality is to participate in the moral judgements so typical of our repressive society and institutional forms of religion that practitioners of Tantra aim to critique (as covered in Chapter 1).

However, some practitioners – who generally claim to have positive attitudes toward sex - do still label certain practices as 'neo-Tantric'. Having *too much* focus on sex can be described as 'neo-Tantric' – sometimes described in terms of allowing one's ego and desires to take control. Other practitioners might also express a general conservatism (bordering on distaste) towards casual sex, describing seeking casual sexual pleasure (both between two people, and in the form of group sex) as a

hedonistic, self-indulgent exercise - qualities that are apparently seen as negative. As

Tantra teacher Dahlia stated:

Sometimes I look at Tantra now, you know, in our countries in the West, and it seems a little bit fixated on sex only... you're not going around having these gorgeous experiences with other beings just for your own pleasure. You're doing it to awaken something and then absolutely give back to the community. And to me that's Tantra. It's very wholesome, it's very good, it's very...it's well meaning, it's not like, 'ooh how many orgasms can I have? And do I have this endless erection?' [*laughs*]... And I call that neo-Tantra.⁵³

These practitioners might still place a high value on sexual experiences; but emphasise that these are ideally carried out between a loving, emotionally intimate, trusting, monogamous couple. Later in our interview, Dahlia offered further explanation: "Back at the beginning I was very much interested in the sexual union only...step one, neo-Tantra". She describes sex-focused 'neo-Tantra' as just the first step in her journey, which then expanded into a practice including other aspects of her everyday experience. As such, Dahlia saw this stage – which she described as 'neo-Tantra' - as less advanced than her later Tantric practices, which had moved on from being solely focused on sex.

Similarly, Adaira spoke about how sexual activity shouldn't be undertaken just 'for fun', but should be considered a more serious undertaking:

There's such a pressure, I think, on people to be very sexual these days, and almost treat it like it's just a thing, it's just for fun, it's just for pleasure, or a kind of release. And actually, if we knew how sacred and how beautiful and how *deep* the experiences are within our bodies, we wouldn't be so mindless about what we did with them.⁵⁴

⁵³ Interview conducted in Edinburgh, 2nd March 2017.

⁵⁴ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

Another teacher, Isabella, presented a somewhat more optimistic view, expressing a certain amount of appreciation for what she sees as a 'neo-Tantric' approach to sexuality:

It seems that Tantra is an old religion, is an old spiritual path, and all that exists now is neo-Tantra, so new Tantra... what it looks like is a bunch of people worldwide, that want to find some approval and some natural approach of [*sic*] sexuality, so being connected to their own body, being connected to another human being's body, and...it's very much based on that. I mean it adds a spiritual element to sexuality, definitely, and to pleasure.⁵⁵

Yet another account of the differences between 'Tantra' and 'neo-Tantra' is given by Diane:

In these traditional practices, as opposed to a lot of teaching that's going on in Tantra these days – the sexual practices were very advanced practices, not things people did after a few weeks of playing around in a Tantra workshop. This seems to be a big switch in the Western form from its traditional sense because the West has sort of hijacked the sexual area, to add more spice and pleasure to our sex lives – not completely, but it has. Western teachers use it a lot more for things like relationship and intimacy, which is great, but not many people practice it in a spiritual way, whether it's everyday spirituality, or in terms of developing spiritual activity, that's my impression.⁵⁶

Diane seems to wrestle with her [dis]approval of an emphasis on sexuality – stating that to use Tantra to improve relationships and intimacy is a positive development. However, her use of the term 'hijacked' is revealing, and she directly contrasts the contemporary use of Tantra in sexual relationships with 'spirituality', constructing (or perhaps, reinforcing) a binary of sex and spirituality.

Despite my interviewees presenting some very strong opinions on what 'Tantra' and 'neo-Tantra' are, this distinction is certainly not clear-cut. Indeed, even for teachers who would express positive sentiments toward 'neo-Tantra', very few (in my

⁵⁵ Interview conducted in Bristol, 9th March 2017.

⁵⁶ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

interviews, at least) would describe themselves as 'neo-Tantric'. Instead, it was more often a baggage-laden term applied to others, and teachers preferred to describe their own practice as 'Tantric', most likely as an appeal to tradition, authenticity, and legitimacy. As such (and as discussed briefly in the Introduction), I have chosen to follow their lead and continue using the term 'Tantra' or 'Tantric', excluding the somewhat troublesome 'neo'-prefix and the connotations it brings. This also helps to prevent me from creating arbitrary divisions or sub-sections in an already messy field.

Tantra practitioners' inclusion and (partial) acceptance of sexual behaviour also sometimes strayed into other areas, such as individuals involved with BDSM practices (some discussion of this can be found in the Introduction). Some crossover between Tantra and BDSM is evident – and is often referred to as 'conscious kink' - however, not all Tantra practitioners are comfortable with Tantra being linked to this. One teacher, Adaira, told me:

I'm interested in sexuality so I'm in that community, and it also crosses over into the kink community, BDSM practices, which for me these can also be really powerful places to explore ourselves, and our deeper, darker impulses. And for me, this is very Tantric, but some *tantrikas* would not go there at all, that would be seen to be an unacceptable domain to explore into.⁵⁷

For Adaira, BDSM practices were a way to explore herself, by being involved in a range of practices often seen as transgressive (which could be more directly linked to transgression and taboo in South Asian Tantra). However, she also notes that for some *tantrikas*, forays into transgressive practices such as BDSM would be unacceptable – hinting that some contemporary interpretations of Tantra in the UK have been sanitised. Again, we see some areas of sexuality being accepted by Tantra practitioners, while others are not – perhaps hinting that despite attempts to be

⁵⁷ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

generally sex-positive, practitioners still feel that certain areas of sexuality are more acceptable than others, while others should still be excluded. Sexuality continues to be an area of life that is policed and restricted, albeit in different ways. For some, transgressive sexual practices are not compatible with Tantra as a form of spirituality (thus upholding traditional, British, Christian values which have particular restraints around sex and the body); whereas for others, it is precisely this transgression that makes it a spiritual practice (and Tantra is a way to legitimate these transgressive activities).

Thus far, the issues faced when preparing to conduct fieldwork have broadly related to classification: deciding on the object of study and justifying why an individual or group may or may not be considered under the scope of this research. Interestingly, the most prominent discussions around classification in this context seem to centre around sex and sexuality, individual attitudes towards it, and how sex also relates to 'spirituality'. It seems that by looking at how Tantra practitioners discuss sex - and particularly whether more transgressive sexual practices such as sex work and BDSM are considered 'Tantric' - we can reveal underlying tensions, as well as particular attitudes and assumptions about what sex and spirituality (and the relation between the two) should be. It is also important to emphasise here how, although these issues were considered before embarking on my fieldwork, I was constantly revising and updating my thoughts on them - being challenged and pushed by individuals and events, leading me to reconsider my own position.

Practical and Methodological Considerations

The second category of issues that became prominent as my research developed, were of a more practical nature: how, in a thesis focusing on touch, I could best be involved as a researcher. The introduction to this thesis has already sketched out the approach of 'embodied ethnography', exploring how the body can be used as a research tool, to experience that which research participants are also experiencing, in an effort to gain different kinds of knowledge. I made use of this approach, moulding it to this research context to focus specifically on the sense of touch – and as shown below, developed different ways of thinking about how I could use touch to gain further knowledge and experience. However, the approach of embodied ethnography does have its downfalls (also explored in the Introduction and Chapter 6). As expressed in the opening vignette to this chapter, embodied ethnography – in this case focusing on touch – requires the researcher to put herself in a plethora of demanding, intimate, and potentially dangerous situations. As such, my experiences of engaging with this approach deserve further attention.

Touch as a Research Method

Once I became aware of how important the sense of touch could be to this research – a realisation which gradually arose during the fieldwork process – I tried to think of the various ways tactility could be used. Based on methods of embodied ethnography, and particularly inspired by Loic Wacquant's (2004) *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, an ethnographic account of a Chicago boxing gym which weaves together the social, political, and historical situation with the writer's own bodily

experiences, I started to consider how I could use the sense of touch as a research method. This was also inspired by other writers, such as Crang writing on 'touchy-feely' methods (2003), and his call for researchers to 'push further into the felt, touched, and embodied constitution of knowledge' (Crang, 2003:501). Inspired by this, I began to think about using the sense of touch as a research tool in two important ways. I refer to these as tactical, and experiential, uses of touch.

Tactical Touch

Going into the field, there are a number of ways in which a researcher can aim to glean information from participants. The approach most suited to me was to follow the style of researchers working to make themselves seem less 'conspicuous': not only in their styling (i.e. choice of clothes or hairstyle), but in their bodily comportment.⁵⁸ During my fieldwork, I would make sure to wear comfortable, loose clothing - often leggings, and tops with patterns or flower motifs (this was also practical, as activities involving dance or yoga were common). I would wear my hair down; don my favourite gold bangles or a long necklace with a pendant; I would refrain from wearing much make-up – anything to encourage the perception that I was relaxed and 'natural' in the context of a Tantra workshop. With regards to bodily comportment, even a seemingly simple act such as sitting on the floor cross-legged or knowing a basic yoga *asana* could signal to other individuals that I wasn't totally new to this context. Throughout Tantra workshops and sessions, I was keenly aware of how my bodily

⁵⁸ Interestingly, in Kim Knott's exploration of how gender affects fieldwork practices, she notes that many female researchers saw their gender as conducive to blending in and going unnoticed in fieldwork situations. These female researchers also saw their gender as allowing them better access to disadvantaged social groups, a way to glean more personal information, and believed that their gender led to them being perceived as 'less confrontational' (Knott. 1995:203).

appearance and behaviour could both encourage acceptance into a group, as well as hinder me, or reveal any misgivings I might have had. As a result, I worked hard to make my body appear and behave in ways that I thought might be received positively by others.

Similarly, touch can be used tactically, and can benefit the researcher in two main ways relating to perceptions of 'insidership'. First, just as touch breaks down boundaries between different participants, it also overcomes boundaries between the researcher and the researched. Used in this way, touch can convey non-verbal signals that the researcher is somewhat familiar with the bodily techniques used in the field. Second, touch conveys that the researcher is willing to be fully involved with fellow participants, willing to experience the same pleasures and discomforts as them, and as such will be less of a distant observer. Of course, a researcher using touch in a way that comes across as forced or unnatural can highlight the differences between researcher and participant (which in itself, could also yield new experiences and data). Indeed, many research contexts will not necessitate any form of touching between the researcher and other individuals and in this way, the *lack* of touch can reveal norms and conventions around tactility in different research contexts (the idea of cultural norms with regards to touch is explored further in Chapter 4). As contemporary Tantra frequently encourages tactility, these workshops were an ideal context in which to think about how a researcher might negotiate this.

Take, as an example, the Melting Hug (described in full in Chapter 4) – a long, intimate, full-body embrace performed between two participants. I realised fairly quickly that these hugs were frequently used as an exercise during workshops, and that it would be a good idea to perform these hugs properly. This didn't only require me to know the mechanics of how the hugs work – which arms to put where, or how

to position my pelvis against the other person – but also required me to totally relax into the arms and body of a stranger, something that I initially found difficult, and which was inadvertently and unconsciously revealed through subtle changes in my body language. I began to understand that learning to relax into a Melting Hug was essential to my research process. During some partner work near the start of my fieldwork, one more experienced participant explicitly instructed me to ‘relax’ and ‘stop being so British’, revealing not only a common stereotype of British people being uptight and prudish, but also showing how much of an ‘outsider’ I appeared to her due to my awkward use of touch. Becoming comfortable with Melting Hugs involved learning not only the bodily techniques, but also changing my own attitudes and reactions to such close physical contact – learning to find relaxation and comfort in these hugs, which would then be revealed through subtle bodily changes. The process of learning how to perform a proper Melting Hug revealed to me not just the emic value of these hugs; but also how my research participants could read, understand, and judge me, through their own use of touch.⁵⁹

I also quickly learned that versions of this hug were used outside of the workshop structure. For example, when a group or session had ended, individuals would often spend a while afterwards catching up and debriefing. Before finally leaving, they would give others from the session a Melting Hug. These were usually offered to people that they already knew and were close friends with (the length of the hug often correlated with the level of familiarity), but would also include individuals with whom they had partnered with over the course of the workshop, or had felt some sort of connection with. Being able to perform these hugs – to touch other participants in expected and

⁵⁹ Kumate and Falcous, discussing Judo practice, noticed research participants ‘reading’ their bodies, physical capabilities, social location, and cultural backgrounds (Kumate and Falcous, 2017:208)

accepted ways - was a way for me to show people that I was indeed familiar with the social context and its conventions. Importantly, this was also a way for me to judge whether people had begun to trust me as both a participant and a researcher, through sensing how they touched (or avoided touching) me.

The benefits of tactical touch mentioned above suited my own method of 'blending in' – participating and learning alongside other attendees. However, researchers with different approaches could also learn by using touch tactically. Take, as an example, the researcher posing as a 'clumsy newbie'. By using touch in ways that showed they *weren't* familiar with the research context, they could encourage experienced practitioners to show them how to perform certain actions or behaviours correctly; a research participant's use of touch in teaching the researcher these practices could be very revealing. This echoes Nick Crossley's (2007) suggestion that one way to access 'embodied knowledge' is by looking at the diffusion of bodily techniques – that is, how they are taught, particularly to novices.

Experiential Touch

Touch can also be used in fieldwork experientially: by engaging in touch practices, I was able to feel and experience similar sensations as my participants, thus giving me further insight into how and why these touch practices are engaged with. This idea is 'touched' upon above, in the comfort and relaxation that I was eventually able to find in performing a Melting Hug. Practitioners of contemporary Tantra place a high value on *experiencing* things, rather than simply talking about them - in interviews specifically, teachers would often struggle to describe certain practices or sensations, and would instead advise me that 'it can't be described; it has to be *experienced*'. It

made sense for me to do as they said, by using my own body to access similar experiences or sensations.

Here, the work of Loic Wacquant became particularly helpful for me. In his ethnographic study of a Chicago boxing gym, Wacquant developed a sociology 'not only of the body, in the sense of object, but also *from* the body, that is, deploying the body as tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge' (Wacquant, 2004:viii). He refers to his position as an 'observant participant', rather than engaging in 'participant observation' (2004:6). Several ethnographers (and phenomenologists) have picked up this thread, applying Wacquant's approach to their own studies of judo (Kumate and Falcous, 2017), and Catholic shrines (Nabhan-Warren, 2011). They note the advantages of partaking in shared physical experiences (Kumate and Falcous, 2017:201), particularly noting how *failing* to involve the body in an immediate sense 'shortchanges the research, maintains a division between the mind and body, and privileges "objective" data over that which is "subjective"' (Nabhan-Warren, 2011:398). Being involved in touch practices in this way was an overwhelmingly fruitful method for me as a researcher. This is eloquently expressed by Kristy Nabhan-Warren, reflecting on her research on Catholic shrines in South Phoenix, Arizona:

[R]eligious, ethnic, and cultural borders were crossed as well as maintained through bodily movement and interaction at this shrine. I struggled to become one with them through my body, but in the beginning of my fieldwork, my own self-conscious comportment revealed my liminal status as a curious anomaly...my experiences at the shrine prompted me to begin thinking about the ways in which the ethnographer's body can be a barrier, but also a bridge, to cultural exchange and to entering and knowing her interlocutors' lifeworlds, worlds of "everyday goals, social existence, and practice activity"...in order to bridge the world of outsider and insider, I had to use my body to experience the lifeworld I was studying. (Nabhan-Warren, 2011:380)

The question arises here of whether embodied practices and touch practices (such as a Melting Hug) can be faked: can the researcher perform these actions

successfully, despite not having similar intentions or experiencing similar reactions and sensations? The answer to this is twofold. With regards to instances of tactical touch – I would argue that this is possible. Although, as I have recounted above, some fellow participants could tell when my mind and body (if I should indeed separate the two) weren't fully involved in a Melting Hug, I had numerous experiences where I performed such hugs physically, but my mind was not focused on the task at hand. Even in these instances, when I pulled away from the Melting Hug, I could tell that my partner had been somehow *affected* by my involvement – in other words, it had worked for them on some level, despite me being distracted. At times such as these, I felt as though I had faked the hug, and would occasionally even question whether I had deceived the person, even though no words were exchanged.⁶⁰ The second part of this answer is that even if hugs could be faked on a tactical level, it is generally undesirable for this to happen – particularly in the approach of embodied ethnography. Without achieving (or at least, trying to achieve) similar experiences to others in the research context, the amount that the researcher can learn from doing so is limited. To gain knowledge about certain embodied (and touch-focused) practices, the researcher needs to be as involved as possible, and open to the possibility of new experiences occurring, so should 'fake' as few things as possible.

As with any ethnographic method, there were pitfalls and complications which required negotiation along the way. I have discussed some of the difficulties of embodied ethnography – mostly regarding how the researcher can convey this embodied knowledge – in the Introduction. Instead, I focus here on issues that are specific to research centred around the sense of touch. Although giving and receiving

⁶⁰ This brings to mind recent work on 'fakes' in ethnography; particularly from Carlo Severi, who speaks of 'faking' in ethnography as: 1) a way to blur the researcher's identity; and 2) a method for researchers to demonstrate to their interlocutors that they are similar to them (2018: 58-59). Severi refers specifically to using the repetition of rumours to these ends; I argue that touch techniques can function in a similar way.

touch in Tantra sessions allowed me an intimate window into the rationale and sensations involved in certain practices, it also required me to put my own body at the forefront of this research. As such, conducting this research became a physically intimate and demanding endeavour.

Touch and the Researcher: Consent, Trust, and Withdrawal

As highlighted throughout this thesis, Tantra workshops and group sessions are overwhelmingly physical affairs. A participant will usually end up interacting with partners, often strangers, on a personal and intimate level. Touch is a key element of such workshops, and it is rare to attend a session which doesn't eventually involve touching another person in some capacity. This can involve anything from holding hands in meditation, using fingertips to feel the skin on someone's arm, receiving a hug, hitting someone with a pillow, giving a massage, being tickled, or playing with someone's hair. From my perspective, as a researcher, participation is key in such settings. As discussed above, using the body as a research tool can be highly beneficial; however, having such active involvement in a group can also raise certain issues. This raises the idea of 'ethical touch' in research – noting that in such situations, the researcher can be vulnerable and as such, the wellbeing and safety of the researcher (as well as their participants) should be considered.

In many ways, the festival workshop described in the opening of this chapter was typical of other Tantra sessions I've attended – starting with energetic group activities such as dance, then moving slowly into partner work (usually with strangers), making closer and more intimate connections with various partners as the session goes on. However, it was also atypical in many ways. First, due to its setting in the Tantra

festival, there were many more people in attendance than would normally be at other groups or workshops. Second, and most importantly, little was done to: 1) create a safe space for participants, and 2) give participants a way to withdraw consent, if activities were causing discomfort (these two concepts are defined and discussed in more detail in Chapter 4). As such, it felt as though I, as a researcher in this specific situation, had few safeguards which would allow me to remove myself from the situation.

The example presented above occurred near the start of my fieldwork period. Reflecting later, toward the end of my fieldwork period, I would most likely have participated in the activity mentioned with few reservations (showing how my own use of touch in the field developed as my work continued). The process of participating in a range of Tantra workshops has desensitised me somewhat to their highly physical nature – although I often remain guarded when working one-on-one with other people. The potential reservations I had toward such practices were affected by a number of factors; however, I found that the primary aspect likely to affect my decision to participate was the partner/people I was expected to work with. If I was able, within the parameter of the workshop instructions, to choose a partner, this choice was often based on little more than first impressions of who I might trust. I would often choose other women, and as a young female, I was never short of someone to work with – it seemed that I was also viewed as an unthreatening or otherwise appealing choice of partner. I generally put this down to my gender and age (echoing Knott's female researchers, above, being perceived as less confrontational). In several cases, I wondered whether I had been chosen by someone because they were sexually attracted to me. I recognised a similar guardedness in other participants occasionally, too – often women around the same age as me – and would become partners with them, as we seemed to be comfortable with each other.

I also came to reflect on how my reservations in participating in certain activities were based on my own fairly strong preferences for maintaining personal space – I am certainly not a tactile person, and generally avoid physical contact with other people, particularly strangers. Considering this preference, it seems somehow unsuited that I came to study tactility; on the other hand, perhaps this was also why I was highly aware of the use of touch – through an initial feeling of my own boundaries being pushed and transgressed. These feelings became particularly prominent during the second Tantra festival I attended – due to certain occurrences in my personal life, I felt particularly guarded and didn't want to be touched by anyone, let alone people I wasn't familiar with. At this time, I became acutely aware of how touch-focused ethnography blurs the boundaries between the personal and the professional – and also how the researcher's body, as a tool, can be inconsistent and unreliable. Even so, these inconsistencies can also yield valuable data and bring previously unnoticed phenomena to the researcher's attention.

Consent and Withdrawal

When participants agree to take part in a workshop or Tantra session, they are generally given a small amount of information about what the session will involve; and once the session begins, consent is generally assumed to have been given by participants, until it is withdrawn. The vast majority of teachers are conscious of their own responsibility in making sure that participants feel safe during their workshops, and many will take time at the start of a session to lay down ground rules, guiding participants on how they might be able to withdraw their consent to participate – which is particularly important when working with touch-based activities. Some teachers, at

the start of a session, will explain a signal that participants can give when they no longer want to participate – this can be an action as simple as raising a hand, or sitting at the side of the room. Teachers are often keen to emphasise that no judgement will be conferred upon a person if they choose not to participate in a certain practice – however, the fact remains that participants don't always have a wealth of information prior to the sessions (for example, adverts for workshops rarely describe particular activities that will take place, and instead speak more abstractly about benefits that participants can expect). As such, participants' consent isn't fully informed and additionally, affirmative consent (an 'enthusiastic yes') isn't sought before each new activity commences.

Teachers do tend to state at the start of a session that any person withdrawing their consent (i.e. not participating in any activity) will not be judged; neither will any questions be asked about why they stop participating, unless the teacher deems that the person needs extra, discreetly-given support. The standard convention of teachers providing a withdrawal clause (discussed further in Chapter 4) provided me, as both participant and researcher, with some form of safety net: if I didn't want to participate in an activity then I could, in theory, refuse. In the workshop described above, no opt-out clause was given, and the overwhelming expectation was that every person in that room would be willing to participate in all elements of the workshop. This led me to leaving the room altogether, perceiving this as my only option to maintain boundaries of personal space and intimacy that I did not want to compromise. Indeed, if a consent-withdrawal clause had been given, it's much more likely that I might have stayed in the room to begin the activity, in the knowledge that I could stop it at any time. Fortunately, the large number of participants present meant that my leaving went largely unnoticed - if I were to do such a thing in a smaller group, it would represent quite a disruption. Even so, the high value placed on maintaining

one's own boundaries is demonstrated in the above vignette - my acquaintance's reaction to my admission that I left the room was positive, reinforcing my decision to withdraw. Rather than seeing me as inflexible and closed to new experiences, as I feared, my interlocutor in fact affirmed and validated my decision to leave, viewing it instead as a positive quality that I could recognise my own limits – whilst also hinting that these boundaries might later expand as my Tantra 'journey' continues. Despite this, the extent to which judgement is reserved from individuals who withdraw consent (i.e. choose not to participate) is debatable – as one awkward encounter I witnessed illustrates.

* * * * *

We are in the large, wooden-floored community hall of a small town, and it is the start of the final day of a two-day workshop. In one corner stands a small altar with an emerald velvet tablecloth, a candle, and sticks of incense; the opposite corner contains a stack of battered exercise equipment, left by other groups using the space. The blinds have been pulled down, and the radiators are on full blast, working overtime to rid the hall of the overnight chill. Half-drunk cups of herbal tea are dotted around the edges of the room, from people who arrived early. The group has just finished warming up with a Dynamic Meditation⁶¹ set to loud, rhythmic drumming music, and I can still feel my fingers tingling, my calves burning from bouncing up and down, and my blood pumping. We are invited to sit on our yoga mats, arranged in a large circle facing the teacher, and I settle in cross-legged, waiting to hear what the teacher has planned for the day. She gives us a beaming smile, making eye contact with each person and welcoming us; then asks if anyone wants to contribute feedback

⁶¹ an energetic style of meditation popularised by Osho, involved standing and shaking the entire body for several minutes

from the previous day, or raise any questions about the coming session. Straight away, a woman raises her hand, and the teacher indicates that she can speak. “Well”, says the woman, “I didn’t like the way you looked at me then, when I was sitting out of that meditation. I felt like you were disappointed in me for not doing it”. Until now, I haven’t even realised she didn’t participate in the meditation – I’d been in a world of my own, with my eyes shut. There’s something accusatory in her tone - she wants to make a point, and my ears prick up. The room seems to feel just a tiny bit tenser. “No...I just thought you could have given it a go. It’s good to practice these things”, the teacher says. The woman comes straight back: “I did it yesterday and didn’t feel anything. I didn’t want to do it”. She’s definitely trying to make a point here. The teacher tries to explain - “Ok.... but you need to be open to different experiences-” “But you told us we can always choose what we want to do”. The teacher can’t argue with this and sits back, slowly, with a short (and what seems almost perfunctory) statement: “...and I honour your choices”.

* * * * *

In the scenario above, everyone in the room knew, in theory, that each activity was a choice. However, it was only when one woman chose not to participate – and was then willing and confident enough to address the teacher’s reaction to this – that the issue of consent was clearly highlighted, and I was shown how individuals might not feel entirely free to withdraw. This relates to another fairly common discourse in contemporary Tantra: that the individual is responsible for their own boundaries.

Despite teachers being aware of their role in creating a safe space, responsibility is also placed on the individual in providing or withdrawing consent. In one workshop I attended, this was negotiated in two levels during a session of touch-based partner

work. First, before any physical contact took place, pairs were organised by the teacher and asked to decide who would be 'giving touch' and who would be 'receiving touch'. The person receiving touch then advised their partner which parts of their body were 'off-limits' to touch – for example, intimate areas around the breasts or genitals, but also sensitive injuries which could be aggravated. The person giving touch was trusted to abide by the restrictions given by their partner. Second, the person giving touch had to ask their partner, 'Can I trust you with your boundaries?' This articulation was understood as a safeguard, in the case that the person receiving touch might discover previously unidentified points of discomfort or trauma during the course of the activity. Responsibility was thus placed on the person receiving touch to maintain their physical and psychological boundaries, and to take action if these were transgressed by giving a signal. Although teachers might aim to create safe spaces and maintain structures that encourage individuals to reinforce their boundaries, it is possible that these structures fail, or perhaps weren't even in place to begin with. As above, the extent to which participants felt truly free to enforce their boundaries is highly debatable; and the notion of individuals being responsible for preventing their own discomfort or trauma doesn't allow room for the social pressures a person might feel to take part, or the potential actions of others.

The above discussions allowed me a window into how freely individuals felt they could withdraw their consent; they also made me reflect on how my own interests affected my ability to withdraw. As a researcher, I often felt like I *should* participate in activities, for the sake of the research; if it weren't for the fact that I was pushing myself for the benefit of the research, I might have also chosen not to participate in many more group exercises. At this point, we reach a discussion about the lengths that the researcher can, or should, go to in order to assimilate with a group and to collect data, particularly when this process involves intimate physical activity with others. When

working in areas such as contemporary Tantra, which is often physical and sometimes sexual, careful thought and planning must occur beforehand. To paraphrase one of my interviewees, it's easy for participants to be swept into uncomfortable situations if there is uncertainty about when to say 'no'. This applies equally to the researcher-participant (or Wacquant's 'observant participant'), if boundaries have not been considered and decided upon in advance.

Based on the experiences recounted at the start of this section, I believe that removing oneself from the normal proceedings of a session or workshop should always remain an option for the researcher. Although it could flag up the researcher's identity as an 'outsider' to the group, personal boundaries must be identified and respected, particularly in work that necessitates intimate involvement. The research then takes a back seat to the researcher's wellbeing and safety. If a teacher makes this option to withdraw explicit at the start, it shouldn't drastically affect the group dynamic or activities (although there is certainly still a likelihood that I, as a known researcher, would be deemed less of a participant if I chose to sit out). I have participated in many sessions where a person chooses to opt-out of an activity without explanation, and the vast majority of the time, they were not questioned on this. However, even if the options are not given, the researcher must feel capable of avoiding an activity in the interests of self-preservation. In this context, a great opportunity for self-reflexivity arises from the act of removing oneself from the situation. In addition, by actively seeking reactions from others to your behaviour, leaving a session can become an opportunity to see how others rationalise and react to your choices – often, it is reactions to unusual behaviour that can be more revealing than behaviour considered 'normal' in the research context.

For example, my interlocuter's reaction (in the first vignette of this chapter), and the attitude of the teacher in the second vignette alerted me to a fairly common theme in contemporary Tantra. Individuals are expected to become more and more open to touch (and other) exercises, the more Tantra sessions they take part in – as a sort of progressive desensitisation, or an exploration of how far boundaries can be pushed. The individual's development in this respect is seen as working toward the ideal of a confident, uninhibited sense of selfhood, meaning the individual is open to touching others, being touched by them, and expressing how they want to be touched, with no reservations. Indeed, despite being a known researcher, I was also perceived as being on this same journey toward finding a new or altered sense of self.

'The Raincoat': Inappropriate Activity in Tantra

Despite many teachers' best efforts around encouraging consent and providing options for withdrawing, certain issues are particularly relevant in the domains of sex and pleasure in contemporary Tantra (as discussed above). Dahlia spoke to me about how, when she first became involved with Tantra in her twenties, she struggled to find a group or community to be involved with:

When you're working with a lot of *kundalini* energy, it's very sexual, it's very sexual on purpose, because you're looking to use the sexual energy to create a strong force, to open up all the chakras... So I start looking for Tantra, because I've got to do something with this [energy]. So I went to a few Tantric circles in London and - it wasn't very nice. I could feel that there was a heavy expectation in the group. It felt a little bit like raincoat territory – do you know what I mean by 'raincoat'?it was like people were there just for a quick feel, and to see whether they could cop off with someone for the night. So I was like, 'OK, maybe not this group'. So I tried many times, maybe even five different Tantric circles in London and every time I went it was the same thing – dodgy. A bit like ew, there's something sticky in the air and no one seems to notice but me. And I just didn't like it, and so I left it at that and I thought, maybe it's just Britain, maybe it's just England, let's see

what the Americans are up to. Same thing. And so then that left me with the realisation, what I'm looking for... I'm not finding.⁶²

As such, although the vast majority of teachers strive for their sessions to be safe spaces for individuals to explore various experiences, they can't always guarantee that others in the group will act appropriately – or perhaps don't have the knowledge and training to facilitate such a space, even though they would like to. As a result, Dahlia now offers primarily women-only workshops, in an effort to prevent others having the same negative experiences as herself – clearly, this is based on heteronormative assumptions (discussed further in the Introduction). Even the monthly Tantra UK newsletter has a regular section reminding readers of 'Tantra risks', which includes links to not only sexual health advice, but also articles on sexual abuse.

I suggest here that the straightforward provision of a consent withdrawal signal is not enough to ensure that individuals in workshops can remain safe and provide fully informed consent. Indeed, few teachers would be able to describe exactly what a workshop will involve – even if they could make individuals aware of the planned activities, they can't account for the behaviour of others in the group, making fully informed consent for a workshop overwhelmingly hard to achieve. From my own personal, embodied experiences in Tantra workshops, there were several times at which I felt uncomfortable, some occasions when I just didn't have a good feeling about someone, and a couple of occurrences during which I felt that the person with whom I was partnered was enjoying an activity *too* much for my liking. Such feelings of discomfort could arise from miniscule actions - a person letting their hand linger on my shoulder for slightly too long, or their breathing being slightly too heavy or too close to me. Even so, I would continue to engage with the activities, and did not ask

⁶² Interview conducted in Edinburgh, 2nd March 2017.

them to change their behaviour. In my case, a range of factors led to my continuing involvement: an awareness of my need to blend in as a researcher; feeling obliged to continue, for the sake of the research; a personal dislike of drawing attention to myself; a personal aversion to even mild conflict and confronting others over their actions; the fact that many workshop activities last only two or three minutes, so would be over soon; and a feeling that, as the transgression from the other person was only small, or only slightly pushing my boundaries, then I might as well grin, bear it, and wait for the activity to finish. In planning to conduct embodied ethnography involving touch, this would *not* have been in the plan; however, when caught in the moment, anyone – including the researcher - can struggle to think clearly and act decisively. From my own experience, I can relate to how others – perhaps individuals who are newer to the Tantra scene, or who lack confidence and experience – might feel discomfort in a similar situation. It is at times such as these where consent withdrawal plans fail: individuals rarely feel totally free to withdraw consent once they are in the midst of an activity and as such, further work could be done to ensure that individuals can provide (or withdraw) their consent at any stage of a workshop or session.

Tantra's 'Me Too' and Ethics of Touch

Broadening this theme of inappropriate activity to contemporary Tantra internationally, there has been a number of recent scandals involving Tantra schools, particularly surrounding individuals in positions of power (e.g. gurus) abusing the trust of their followers to coerce them into sexual activity under the guise of promoting 'spiritual growth'. There is some historical precedent for this: after the arrival of Tantric gurus in the 1970s, allegations of misconduct shortly followed. Chogyam Trungpa's

successor, Osel Tendzin, had unprotected sex with followers without disclosing his HIV-positive status (Bell, 1998:64); and in 2018 Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche – Chogyam Trungpa’s son and leader of the Shambhala movement founded by his father – was accused of abusing and exploiting his most devoted female followers (Newman, 2018). As recently as September 2018, The Guardian broke a story about the Agama Yoga school in Thailand – a popular centre teaching courses on yoga and Tantra which many British practitioners have attended. In Agama Yoga, there were numerous accounts of resident gurus and practitioners there abusing their power and committing acts of sexual assault against a large number of victims (Ellis-Peterson, 2018). Since I began receiving the Tantra UK newsletter in January 2017, it has consistently included a monthly ‘scandals’ section recounting recent news stories, as well as an advice section, encouraging participants to thoroughly research their teachers before attending a session, and to remain aware of the potential dangers involved. A wave of fresh allegations have been levelled at other popular teachers and schools, as a result of the revelations about Agama Yoga. These developments – which seem to amount to Tantra’s version of the ‘Me Too’ movement - began to develop as my fieldwork period had concluded and, although I have noted these changes, I have not studied them in enough detail to present a full analysis here. At the time of writing, survivors from various Tantra movements and schools continue to come forward.

Academic work on touch – and particularly the ethics of touch – in the context of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) has begun to develop, and this has the potential to be helpful to some Tantra practitioners. Of particular note here is work by Schiff et al, who note how complementary therapists need clear definitions and firm boundaries, as there is potential for personal and professional touch to blur together in this context (Schiff et al, 2010:195). They also note the potential for abuse

to happen: practitioners of complementary touch therapies often work privately and aren't supervised; such therapies also tend to be given in environments that encourage intimacy (for example, with candles or incense), leading to disinhibition; and additionally, touch invokes certain memories and can fulfil human desires for emotional warmth and closeness (Schiff et al, 2010:194-195). Schiff et al also note how 'the entire skin can be considered an erotic organ, and touching it can arouse sexual stimulation regardless of the therapist's initial intention' (Schiff et al, 2010:195). As such, their paper suggests a number of goals, guiding principles, and ethical rules for touch in CAM. Examples of the suggested ethical rules include: providing detailed clarifications of what the therapy will involve; only exposing the parts of the body that are being directly worked on at a particular time; therapists wearing professional, non-provocative clothing; and developing systems for allegations of sexual impropriety to be properly explored (Schiff et al, 2010:196). Importantly, one of the guiding principles of these ethics is that 'no treatment in CAM [Complementary and Alternative Medicine] is allowed to include contact or stimulus of a sexual nature of any kind whatsoever. Practitioners must refrain from acting sexually in any way with patients' (Schiff et al, 2010:196). As such, it currently seems unlikely that these ethical rules will gain currency with many practitioners of Tantra in Britain – mostly because of the sexual nature of some practices; but also because Tantra in Britain currently has no unifying, 'official' ruling body or framework that would be capable of investigating complaints of impropriety.

Conclusion

This chapter addresses a number of pertinent issues that arose before, during, and after conducting my fieldwork on contemporary Tantra in Britain, which I split into two broad categories: classificatory considerations; and practical or methodological considerations.

By first showing issues in classifying certain phenomena as 'Tantric', I have attempted to illustrate the people and activities that this study focuses on, while justifying why other groups or individuals might have been excluded from this research. By noting the similarities and differences between Tantra and sex work, key discussions raised by practitioners are brought to the fore. These discussions often centre around how Tantra is able to lend legitimacy and respectability to some activities (e.g. the sale of sexual services) that would otherwise be seen as unacceptable or taboo. Similarly, this chapter's exploration of the term 'neo-Tantra' also reveals claims to authenticity and tradition that are centred around the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. Despite claims of sex-positivity, it is possible to see how sexual activity in contemporary Tantra is still policed, and certain 'traditional' norms around sex persist: activities such as sex work, BDSM, group sex, or casual sex are not always accepted as a part of Tantra. By exploring phenomena that Tantra practitioners might define themselves *against*, it is possible to see which practices are more likely to be considered legitimate and authoritative in this context, and the discourses which affect this. Focusing on classificatory issues also allowed me to reflect on my own biases and preconceptions of what Tantra 'is', how my research process might have been affected by these ideas, and how I could attempt to mitigate these effects. Throughout, I attempt to show how boundaries between

various categories (Tantra and sex work; sexuality and spirituality; 'Tantra' and 'neo-Tantra') can be either blurred or reinforced.

The second half of this chapter focuses more on practical and methodological issues, particularly working to extend the methodology of embodied ethnography with a specific focus on touch. By highlighting two ways in which a researcher can use touch as a research tool - tactically and experientially - I argue that the researcher can gain new kinds of knowledge about their research context and participants. By using touch tactically, the researcher can engage with participants in ways which encourage familiarity or pedagogy, thus giving insight on certain embodied practices. In an experiential use of touch, the researcher can aim to achieve similar experiences or sensations as participants, allowing them to uncover different kinds of knowledge. In each situation, the researcher is required to put their own body – which can be vulnerable, inconsistent, and unreliable - at the forefront of the research. As such, safeguards must be considered to ensure the safety of both researchers and participants in such situations. This chapter also begins to explore the theme of consent (and the withdrawal of consent) in such intimate, touch-based environments, and how extra work could be done to develop an 'ethics of touch' in these contexts to ensure that researchers and participants can participate safely and productively.

Following this, Chapter 4 begins to focus on experiences and uses of touch in the context of contemporary Tantra, using the accounts of practitioners. The chapter shows how the sense of touch is given an elevated status in contemporary Tantra; as well as exploring how and why women engage in tactile practices in this context. Issues of consent and safety are explored further, and I work to thread the aforementioned methodological issues and reflections throughout. The following two chapters then look at specific instances of touch and associated experiences of

healing and ecstasy. Taken altogether, each of the next three ethnographic chapters contributes to this thesis' argument that touch techniques in Tantra are explicitly used in the pursuit of an autonomous, healthy, and empowered sense of self.

Chapter 4: Tantra and Touch

In preceding chapters, a focus on the body has been highlighted as a key theme in contemporary Tantra, consistent with its place in the holistic milieu of Europe and North America. Rather than focusing more generally on 'the body' in contemporary Tantra, this research aims to focus on one theme in detail: the senses, and specifically, the sense of touch. Through this focus, I hope to use the notion of 'embodiment' to explore both how touch can be experienced by practitioners, and how wider discourses and social norms around touch can affect these experiences.

This chapter will continue to introduce data collected over the course of my fieldwork, with a particular focus on the tactile. After showing the importance of the senses – and particularly touch - in contemporary Tantra, this chapter will illustrate some of the basics: where and how touch occurs, and the contexts in which close proximity with others is considered both appropriate and beneficial. I will then discuss the motivations for engaging in touch practices, to show how, in contemporary Tantra, touch is used as a somatic mode of attention (Csordas, 1993) to address three main themes: 1) perceived splits between the mind and body; 2) individual boundaries and how these can be reinforced or expanded; and 3) social norms surrounding the body and 'appropriate' bodily behaviour in contemporary British society. Finally, this discussion will be linked back to a central theme – the formation of a sense of self – using the work of Thomas Csordas, to show how the very physical act of touch relates to this. Framing touch as a 'somatic mode of attention' (Csordas, 1993) illustrates how in contemporary British Tantra, touch techniques⁶³ are vital in individuals exploring

⁶³ I refer to common touch practices in Tantra as 'techniques' or 'touch techniques' following the work of Marcel Mauss on 'body techniques', which he defines as 'ways in which from society to society men [sic] know how to use their bodies' (1979: 97), which vary depending on context (Mauss, 1979: 101)

and altering their own sense of self. The theme of transgression becomes important here, as Tantra becomes a way to legitimate and facilitate practices that these women understand to be transgressive, and allows alternative somatic modes of attention to be negotiated. The notion of transgression allows women to break out of their routine modes of behaviour and explore different experiences or sensations, knowing that these behaviours have been given some validation through their associations with Tantra.

In addition, studies of the tactile in academia – and particularly ethnographies of touch – are still developing. As such, this chapter can work towards showing how touch can be studied, analysed, and written about in productive ways.

The Senses in Tantra

I'm wearing a blindfold and being led by the hand to sit on a plush armchair in Diane's living room – she's a Tantra teacher leading a small group with whom I've attended a few sessions now. It's a wet December evening, but the house is warm and cosy inside. I settle into the armchair, tasting the lingering flavour of the non-alcoholic mulled wine that we were welcomed into the house with; I listen to the gentle sitar music playing as she goes to fetch the five other blindfolded attendees to lead them in, one-by-one. Once we're all settled, Diane explains to us that we're going to take part in the 'Awakening of the Senses' ritual: she's going to present us with a number of things to stimulate our senses while we remain blindfolded. If we become uncomfortable with any of the things happening, she says, we should raise a hand and she'll stop immediately.

The music is shut off, and I strain to hear the other activity going on in the room – working out where the other people are by the rustle of their clothing, or what Diane might be doing by her soft footsteps. I become aware of how loudly I'm breathing. All I can see is black, and I'm unsure whether my eyes are closed or not. We sit for a few moments in near silence. Then I hear the noise of what sounds like a Tibetan singing bowl – the wooden mallet is being run around the edge of the metal bowl. I can hear the sound gradually moving around the room, until it is brought close to my right ear and moves slowly behind my head to the other ear – it feels as though it's reverberating around my skull. It moves away again. The same happens with other sounds – fingertips tapping on a small drum; a tiny set of cymbals knocking together; a rainmaker tube. There's another moment of silence as Diane gently puts the last object down. Next, we move on to smells. Again, Diane's footsteps quietly move around the room, and I listen hard to anticipate when it is my turn again. Finally, I notice the distinctive aroma of burnt orange. Diane quietly encourages me to breathe deeply as I smell, making my nostrils twitch. The smell slowly disappears as she moves on to the next person. The same happens again with cloves; pine needles; cinnamon; and nutmeg. I'm pleased that I'm able to identify each one, and notice the memories of Christmas the combination of smells elicits in me. Next is taste: each food item is first held close to my nose, to give me a smell; then it is touched gently to my lips, and Diane quietly says I can choose whether or not to accept it into my mouth. I taste fresh strawberries; rich dark chocolate; a slice of orange; a date; and something soft that I can't identify but eat anyway. Next is touch. I feel the gentle stroke of a feather on my arms, neck, face and head; then a head scratcher; something furry – perhaps a rabbit skin; and a soft scarf. As I receive the touch sensations, the sounds and smells nearby seem heightened, and the taste of dark chocolate is still strong on my tongue.

We transition into another section of the ceremony, still sitting in our comfortable chairs. In a soothing voice, Diane encourages us to touch our own arms and faces – exploring, focusing on the different sensations. What changes when I touch my neck with a light fingertip, or give myself a firm scalp massage? We spend several minutes meditating on the sensations. Still blindfolded, Diane takes my hand and guides me to standing. She moves my chair, explaining that when I sit again, I'll be opposite one of the other participants. She doesn't tell me who. Once each person is positioned opposite a partner, she tells us that we should take it in turns to touch the other person on their arms, hands, head and face. She encourages us to do this curiously, with no particular intention in mind; but, we should be aware that the person receiving touch is a manifestation of Shakti. The person receiving touch is asked to sit back and enjoy being explored and worshipped as a manifestation of the goddess. After doing this with our partners for three minutes each, Diane guides us back to our original places.

Finally, she tells us to remove our blindfolds. My eyes adjust to take in the scene in front of me: the lights are dimmed, and we are sat in a circle. On the floor in front of us is laid a beautiful spread on a large, furry blanket. Flickering tea lights are scattered around with pinecones and red and green ornaments; all of the sensory stimulants used in the ritual are laid around. We all immediately kneel at the edge of the blanket, and slowly start to come out of our reverie and talk – we identify the objects we'd felt and the instruments we'd heard, and discuss which ones had confused us. We continue to eat morsels of the food laid out. I discover with bemusement that the food I couldn't identify was a banana – a fruit I was sure I disliked. After some minutes of discussion, Diane encourages us to sit comfortably on the floor and leads us in a short, silent meditation, which signals the end of the ritual. Even though it's done, we stay for a while longer to chat, and the atmosphere slowly becomes more light-hearted and informal. Diane talks about the idea behind the ritual – that the five senses are

only a few of the *tattvas*⁶⁴ that can lead to expanded consciousness, and this ritual is just one method to do so. She explains how the blindfolds are intended to heighten our other senses; they take away one layer of our pre-judgement, to avoid our preconceived ideas of how something will hear, taste, smell, or feel. Taking away our sight, she says, helps to ground us into ourselves and our bodies, as we aren't constantly looking to the outside. We all agree how effectively this works. By then, we've been together for about three hours. We slowly say our goodbyes to Diane with a hug, and gradually leave.

* * * * *

Practitioners of contemporary Tantra consistently put forward the importance of the five senses in their Tantric practice. The description above is of a ritual known as the 'Awakening of the Senses Ritual' – a ceremony described in Margo Anand's seminal work of 1990, *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy*, reproduced in more recent Tantric literature, and used in workshops or groups such as the one I attended that December evening. This ceremony explicitly highlighted the importance of the senses in contemporary Tantra, and was able to give me an early insight into why the senses attract such an emphasis, as well as showing me how valuable my own body and senses would be to this research. When I participated in the ritual above, I was unaware that it was fairly well-known in these circles, and it was only my later exploration of primary literature that alerted me to this. In Anand's book, before writing an instructive description of the ritual, she gives some reasoning as to why such a practice is important:

⁶⁴ In Sanskrit, 'that-ness'; commonly translated as principles or elements of reality.

Ordinarily we take our five senses for granted...everything that comes to us through our senses seems muted and weak. But that's also why awakening the senses through this ceremony can be so magical. The experience of really tasting, smelling, seeing, feeling, and hearing comes as a wonderful surprise. As William Blake said, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear as it is, infinite". (Anand, 1990:97)

Although he doesn't describe this specific ritual, the sentiment is echoed by Christopher Wallis, author of *Tantra Illuminated*, a well-researched and lengthy academic-practitioner text:

When we do pay attention to [the sensual world], it is "through a glass, darkly," filtering it through that mentally constructed world. This is why the Tantra stresses sensual meditations...The whole world becomes more vivid and real, more radiantly lovely, more full of life-energy, not the relatively dull and lifeless world perceived by one living primarily in the mind. (Wallis, 2012:129)

Wallis echoes Anand's sentiments that a focus on the senses changes the way individuals perceive both the world and themselves: preconceptions, expectations, and other social and mental constructs affect individual experiences in different ways; as a result, the world becomes more vibrant, more alive, clearer, when attention is paid to sensual experiences. The senses were frequently invoked as a key element of Tantra by interviewees, too. As Isabella, a London-based teacher, states:

...for me, Tantra is a path...that allows you to be present in your senses and align the senses to a bigger journey, towards enlightenment, or a higher level of consciousness. So not to dismiss our senses...but embracing them.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Interview conducted in Bristol, 9th March 2017.

Here, Isabella reveals her belief that the senses are a medium, a bridge, or a tool, for accessing other experiences. Another teacher, Harriet, also describes the sensuousness of Tantra:

...it feels to me like most religion and spiritual traditions kind of concentrate on the heart and up, where they're like, 'let me get out of my body and reach up to the divine, connect with the divine like it's out there, not me'. But I love that Tantra is like, 'let me move into my body and my senses and...you know, if god wants to experience this 3D body, sensory life, then let god taste this meal as I'm eating it, let god receive this music as it penetrates me...let god be here while I'm feeling the openness in my body as I'm being made love to', or whatever, you know. So...yeah, a really rooted, grounded, embodied sexuality and that being...as divine as going to church, is what I love about Tantra.⁶⁶

Here, Harriet raises a theme that reoccurs throughout this thesis – that Tantra is defined by participants in contrast to established religions such as Christianity (and other dominant 'Western' social structures and institutions – first discussed in the Introduction), which are perceived as denying the body, the senses, and the pleasures that can be derived from them.

Touch in Tantra

Clearly, the five senses (sight, touch, taste, sound, and smell) are given significance as a way of creating certain desired experiences. However, throughout the course of my fieldwork, it was the sense of touch that held my attention. As will be shown through this research, it is the sense of touch that is given most significance in contemporary Tantra; yet detailed studies of touch in similar contexts are yet to be

⁶⁶ Interview conducted in Glastonbury, 10th June 2017.

fully elaborated. As such, this thesis aims to draw out some significant yet understudied practices in this field.

The theme of the first Tantra workshop I ever attended – when I was still exploring this field as an area of research – was ‘Touch’. One Thursday evening, I arrived at the local yoga studio of a small town, with five other female attendees and two teachers jointly facilitating the session. I spent the next two hours focusing intently on the sense of touch: handling small objects in different ways; chiming in with group discussions about times when I’d been touched in nice, and not-so-nice, ways; focusing on sensations in my own body during guided meditations; and working with a partner, taking turns to touch each other’s arms (and other body parts, if they were willing). Each participant was encouraged to develop a range of touch techniques: nurturing, sensual, healing, erotic. The facilitators of the group were more than happy to demonstrate on us, and each other, if we were unsure how to proceed.

The importance of touch is evident in primary literature, too. One popular book recommended to me, an individual’s (semi)autobiographical account of his journey through the Himalayan foothills and his Tantric training with a *dakini*, explains:

In Tantra, the first thing is having experience of touch, of profound contact with things, with the universe, without mental commotion. Everything begins there: touching the universe deeply...When you touch deeply, you no longer need to let go. (Odier, 1997:59)

From more obvious examples - such as sexual practices and intimate Tantric massages – to more introductory interactions such as those described above, throughout the course of my fieldwork it became increasingly obvious that the sense of touch is given particular significance in contemporary Tantra. Diane, leading the ritual described above, went as far as to explicitly identify Tantra with the sense of touch:

I would say that I'm more familiar with the more Hindu type Tantra, and in the Hindu tradition for certain, it's considered to be one of three aspects of spiritual practice, of which another is mantra and the other is yantra. Very interestingly, I think, mantra is sound, yantra is visual, and Tantra, if you like, is touch and kinaesthetic movement...I suspect that that's possibly why Tantra developed because people have different ways of accessing expanded consciousness, because really Tantra is about expanding consciousness.⁶⁷

Almost every Tantra workshop I have attended has involved physical partner work of some sort, and a participant will usually end up interacting with others, often strangers, on a personal and intimate level. Touch is a key element of such workshops, and it is rare to attend a session which doesn't involve touching another person in some capacity. Such activities can typically include: beginning and ending with a joined-hand meditation; a focus on partner or group work; hugging; touching parts of one's own body; and taking turns to touch and be touched by others to varying degrees of intimacy. Take, as an example, two descriptions of the 'Melting Hug' – a long, intimate embrace which requires participants to use their bodies to engage closely with another individual (also mentioned in Chapter 3 – Research Methods). During my research, this practice was used frequently in Tantra workshops. The first description given here is taken from Margo Anand's *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy*; the second was written by a teacher in the current UK Tantra scene:

Stand across the room from your partner. Begin with a standing Heart Salutation. Then slowly walk toward each other, maintaining eye contact and remaining as relaxed as possible. Let your breathing be deep and full, yet effortless. When you come near each other, open your arms in a welcoming gesture, with the palms of your hands open to each other. Touching, nest against each other's chests, and slowly wrap your arms gently around each other. Let your hands feel they are really holding flesh, bones, and muscles, without exerting pressure. The aim is not to squeeze each other – love is not measured in pounds per square inch – but to embrace the whole body fully. Allow your pelvis to relax and move forward, touching the pelvis of your partner. Allow your thighs and your bellies to meet. Try keeping your knees slightly bent to enhance your sense of balance and groundedness. Let your bodies relax so that you can melt into each other, giving yourselves over to a trusting embrace, secure in the kind of letting-go that you felt as a child

⁶⁷ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

when your mother held you. After a minute or two, notice your partner's breathing pattern. Let your own breathing harmonize with your partner's so that you softly inhale and exhale together. If this harmonized breathing comes easily, do it now for a few minutes; otherwise, you can wait until you have a little experience and it comes naturally. You need not make any effort. This exercise is about welcoming, receiving, enjoying, and dissolving into each other. That is why I call it the Melting Hug. (Anand, 1989:80-82)

A melting hug is a beautiful way to connect simply and deeply with another person. It is about sharing, and more importantly receiving, meaningful human contact. A melting hug offers us the opportunity to let down our brittle defences and enjoy our own softness and tenderness, as well as the softness and tenderness of another...the defining feature of a melting hug is two people truly arriving together in a simple embrace, without agenda, through being fully present in each moment. It's called a 'melting hug' because as you remain together, breathing and relaxing, receiving each other through this contact, the boundaries between the two of you can start to melt away, and some merging of 'me' with 'you' can happen...the melting hug is about intimacy rather than eroticism. (Lightwoman, 2004:29)

These 'Melting Hugs' were used both by teachers as structured activities in workshops (wherein they would instruct individuals to pair up and spend a designated amount of time engaged in this hug), as well as by friends, when greeting each other or saying goodbye. As my fieldwork developed (and as discussed in Chapter 3), I quickly worked out that being able to perform these lengthy, intimate hugs would lend me a sense of legitimacy and trustworthiness – a physical way of building rapport and a sense of familiarity with those with whom I was engaging. Connecting with another individual in a Melting Hug was a way to signal that I was an 'insider' in some limited sense – not only because I knew how they were expected to be done, but because it also showed my willingness to fully engage, rather than remaining a distanced observer (this is discussed more fully in Chapter 3).

From this brief, descriptive overview, it is possible to see the significance given to physical touch within contemporary Tantra – sometimes even to the extent that Tantra is fully identified with it. The various quotes given above also touch on themes that

will be explored in some depth later in this thesis – ideas around construction of selfhood, healing, and social norms in the contemporary British context.

Touch In The Contemporary British Context

Before delving into further ethnographic observations on how touch is used in contemporary Tantra, it is helpful to note the wider context within which these practices are happening. By noting social and historical understandings of touch practices, this study remains focused on the *embodied* nature of these techniques: not only their physical, bodily nature, but also the political, social and historical contexts which have influenced their developments, their use, and their resulting effects on individuals. As such, this section aims to provide a foundation upon which to build a sound understanding of how and why touch techniques might be used.

A number of scholars have noted how, in the contemporary Western context, touch is often the sense given the least attention, with the focus being on sight and visual culture. Chidester, paraphrasing Foucault (1979) and Jay (1988) emphasises the dominance of the visual, stating that ‘the modern world is supposedly a domain of visibility, constituted by the hegemony of the gaze, governed by panoptic surveillance, and ruled by the ‘scopic regimes of modernity’ (Chidester, 2005:62). Constance Classen, tracing a cultural history of touch in the Western context over the past few hundred years, has similarly noted how the dominant sensory model is the visual: ‘we live in a society of the image, a markedly visual culture... The inability to touch the subject matter of the images that surround us, even though these have a tremendous impact on our lives, produces a sense of alienation, the feeling of being out of touch with one’s society, one’s environment and one’s cosmos – an isolated fragment in an

indifferent universe' (Classen, 2005:1-2). This sense of alienation, of feeling 'out of touch' with the world, was also expressed by my some of my interviewees, such as Lorraine:

...what I'd say is they [Tantra sessions] are definitely about touch, because tactileness is, of all the senses, touch is the most immediate, and we're all touch-deprived, I think, in the West.⁶⁸

As such, contemporary Western culture is characterised as being removed from the sense of touch, and techniques involved in Tantra are seen as a way to partially remedy this perceived lack.

In addition, touch isn't only a personal experience: it influences, and is influenced by, the social sphere. Writing in 1980, Terrence Turner suggested that 'the surface of the body seems everywhere to be treated, not only as the boundary of the individual as a biological and psychological entity but as the frontier of the social self as well' (Turner, 1980:112). Echoing this, Classen notes how 'touch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience, and contestation of social values and hierarchies' (Classen, 2005:1-2). As such, the sense of touch can express and expose social values and norms; as well as be a way to contest or transgress these norms.

As stated above, the focus on imagery in the contemporary Western context has meant that the sense of touch has received little attention; and in the historical Western philosophical tradition, the sense of touch has been perceived as the lowest, most animal, inferior, and feminine sense (Synnott 1991:63). David Chidester has explored the gendering of touch, specifically in relation to religion – he states that, 'we have to suspect that a particular kind of gendered tactility persists in rendering the

⁶⁸ Interview conducted in London, 30th March 2017.

haptic dynamics of the unseen forces of modernity in peculiar ways so that the 'male' political economy, with its masterful invisible hands and handshakes, is implicitly distinguished from the 'female' passivity [and] vulnerability' (Chidester, 2000:76-77).

Further, instances when touch does occur in this context – particularly between strangers – are unusual, potentially dangerous or sexual (or both), and a break with normal modes of behaviour. Classen has explored how, particularly in the UK from the Victorian period onward, the sense of touch was increasingly sexualised (2005:71). This Victorian obsession with classifying, categorising, and pathologizing sexual acts has been described in Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), and explored by Hugh Urban, who connects this fascination with sexual acts and aberrations to strong Orientalist interests in Tantra (Urban, 2006:93). Classen argues that these developments transformed the sense of touch into something potentially dangerous, an experience laden with latent sexual possibility (Classen, 2005:71; Gay 1984:439-40). This is also a tendency noted by contemporary Tantra teachers – one recounted to me how her gradual involvement with Tantra was partially motivated by a realisation that she struggled to experience touch from other individuals as anything other than sexual. This was a tendency that she had noted as being problematic, as a product of her upbringing and social context. She was attempting to reframe her experiences of touch through her practice of Tantra.

As such, it is evident that in Western, or specifically British, culture, touch is a sense that has been generally given little value – instead, the visual is the dominant sensory model, creating a sense of alienation and disconnection, as previously discussed. British people are popularly characterised as averse to any physical or intimate contact, and when physical contact does occur, it is laden with potential implications.

Tantra teacher Lorraine also noted how 'Britishness' affects how individuals understand their bodies:

So you know, obviously Tantra is...meeting people at their edges to encourage them to expand, so...so you do have to negotiate the culture of the place that you're in. So Britishness is always going to be in there, in terms of how people relate to their emotions, how they relate to their body, how they relate to what they think... and also how they engage with men.⁶⁹

This is the wider context within which contemporary Tantric practices have developed and continue to be used in Britain. Further to this discussion of dominant sensory models in Britain, cultural anthropologist Birgit Meyer has noted how religious movements and organisations can have 'distinct sensory regimes' (Meyer, 2006:22-23; also in Witte, 2011:150). In this thesis, the practices that I have thus far termed 'touch techniques' could be interpreted as part of the 'sensory regime' of contemporary Tantra. It is important to draw out these discourses around touch (which can constitute a form of 'sensory regime'), in order to maintain the focus on embodiment in this study of Tantra – both how the bodies of practitioners are experiencing phenomena, but also the discourses and social structures affecting and produced by these experiences.

⁶⁹ Interview conducted in London, 30th March 2017.

Conventions Around Touch in Contemporary Tantra

Although, as noted above, touch is valued and encouraged in contemporary Tantra, it is by no means a 'free for all' when it comes to practicing touch techniques. A range of conventions, rules and guidelines are put in place – often by teachers, but apparently commonly accepted throughout the field – to regulate the use of touch. These guidelines address *who* can touch; *how* they can touch; and *where* they can touch (both appropriate spaces, and where on the body), and are adhered to in order to make sure that the touch given and received in a Tantra session is seen as acceptable or appropriate (issues surrounding this are discussed in Chapter 3). While the main aim of this section is to illustrate how the sense of touch is regulated in Tantra sessions, these examples also aim to add to the broader picture given so far of common practices in contemporary Tantra.

Creation of 'Safe' Spaces/Feelings of Safety

Perhaps the most obvious way in which touch practices are regulated, is by the spaces in which they normally take place. Most Tantra sessions I attended throughout the course of my fieldwork were held in rented spaces such as local yoga studios, community centres, or church halls, or occasionally in the home of a teacher. Typically, the spaces had been prepared for the session ahead: a large circle on the floor was made with yoga mats, blankets, and plush pillows; blinds and curtains were drawn for privacy from the outside world; lighting was dimmed; soft, relaxing music was played; candles or incense were lit; objects were placed around the room such as fragrant bunches of flowers, or statues of Indian and Tibetan deities. Participants

normally remove their shoes at the door and switch off their phones for the duration of a session. At one workshop, once the session began, attention was drawn to one of the organisers locking the door – both as a practical gesture, but also to symbolise the creation of a ‘safe’ space.

This concept of ‘safe space’ was vital to many workshops I attended (although one exception is recounted in the opening vignette to Chapter 3), and I use the term ‘safe space’ here as Tantra practitioners also used this. However, their usage does not follow the same established conventions as ‘safe spaces’ created in feminist and queer circles, and I am not claiming that these Tantra groups would be considered a ‘safe space’ in such a sense.⁷⁰ Instead, I use ‘safe’ to refer to the feeling that no harm (physical, psychological, or otherwise) will come to you; and ‘safe space’ as a place, often intentionally created and temporary, where a person is able to feel this sense of safety. Of course, feelings of safety are subjective – one individual might feel very safe in the same situation that another feels endangered, as touched on in Chapter 3.

Usually, one of the first activities undertaken as a group is for every person sitting in the circle to join hands with the people either side of them (in the first co-ordinated use of touch), close their eyes, and spend a short time meditating, to ‘ground’ themselves. This can be done with or without music and guidance from the teacher. Participants are also encouraged to introduce themselves in turn, telling others their names and ‘intentions’ for the session – i.e. what they aim to achieve. These routines

⁷⁰ Kenney notes that this political notion of ‘safe space’ started in the women’s movement in the US, and was used to provide places where minority groups or oppressed individuals had “a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance” (Kenney, 2001:24).

allowed the participants to briefly bond as a group, and for group members to gauge other individuals with whom they could potentially be interacting. This was also a good time to remind group members of my researcher status, when presenting myself to the group. At the end of a session, participants typically perform another joined-hand meditation in a circle, which can be followed by each person sharing an important thing they have experienced or learnt that day. This typically signals the end of the session and the breaking of the space.

Consent

One key idea used in contemporary Tantra is the theme of consent. The notion of consent was raised in a vast majority of workshops I attended, and was deemed necessary due to the very tactile nature of activities (although, as discussed in Chapter 3, the effectiveness of these conventions to address consent/lack thereof is highly questionable). Past advertisements for workshops have titles including 'The Power of 'No'', and 'Consensuality and Tantra' ('Consensuality' being a merger of 'consensual' and 'sensuality'), and these aimed to reinforce the importance of consent in any form of physical interaction.⁷¹ In the introductory parts of a session, the vast majority of teachers will attempt to assure participants that all exercises presented are optional, and this is reflected in workshop adverts:

This will be a safely held space with authentic consent and all boundaries honoured. You will be in choice at all times as to your participation level. You may practice with a partner or friend if you booked together. Single attendees will be invited to rotate and practice with other attendees in partnered pairs or groups of three (this allows you to have a variety of

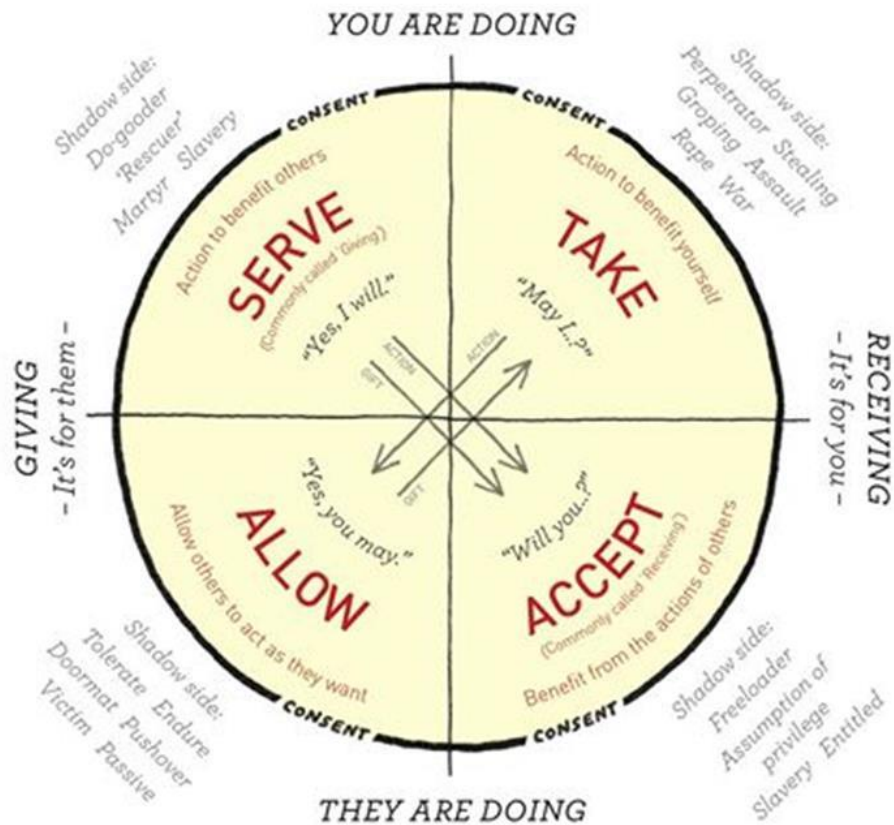
⁷¹ This idea of 'consent' also appears to draw on popular themes in contemporary feminism, however links between the two weren't drawn by my interviewees.

different experiences)...No Nudity in this workshop, clothed setting with optional touch exercises. (UK Tantra News, December 2017)

Additionally, certain exercises performed during workshops aimed to explore consent, framed in terms of people expressing what they did or didn't want to happen – sometimes phrased as an 'authentic yes' or 'authentic no': one common exercise during workshops involved the teacher(s) instructing all participants to slowly walk around the room in no particular direction; if you meet someone's eye, you can verbally offer them a hug. If they agree, you can perform a Melting Hug that can last anything from a few second to a few minutes. However, the teacher(s) encourage participants to refuse offers of hugs at random, by firmly saying 'no'. In rationalising this practice to me, teachers described the benefits as twofold: first, participants can practice refusing touch and saying 'no' to people, thus reinforcing their own boundaries and getting accustomed to withdrawing or refusing consent; and second, participants get used to hearing 'no' from others without feeling rejected or personally offended, thus learning to accept and respect others' assertion of their boundaries and refusal of consent. These exercises were generally performed near the beginning of a workshop, in an effort to show participants how they could continue to enforce their boundaries throughout the session. In addition, visual frameworks were sometimes used to illustrate to participants the importance of consent. Figure 8 is a popularly used diagram, originally formulated by Betty Martin (a Sexological Bodyworker and intimacy coach) and used by many Tantra teachers – I was given several identical copies during my time in the field. This diagram highlights how different actions (specifically, types of touch), can be seen as positive, as long as consent has been given beforehand; while also showing the 'shadow side' (i.e. the negative aspect) of such actions, if prior consent has not been obtained. During

workshops, activities were designed to encourage individuals to practice each of the four types of actions: serving, taking, allowing, and accepting.

THE WHEEL OF CONSENT



In any instance of touch, there are two factors: who is doing and who it's for. Those two factors combine in four ways (quadrants). Each quadrant presents its own challenges, lessons and joys.

The circle represents consent (your agreement). Inside the circle there is a gift given and a gift received. Outside the circle (without consent) the same action becomes stealing, abusing, etc.

© Dr. Betty Martin / www.bettymartin.org

You are welcome to share, including this diagram, with attribution (leave this paragraph in).

Figure 8 - Betty Martin's 'Wheel of Consent'

Touch Develops Gradually

Another important convention around touch is how it will almost always develop gradually throughout the course of a session. As illustrated in the 'Awakening the Senses' ritual above, touch exercises – and particularly the practices involving intimately touching another person – are saved until the latter parts of an event. A workshop will generally begin with exercises that involve little or no touch, such as eye-gazing and holding hands with a partner. Slowly, practices will be introduced – such as the hugging exercise described above – that allow participants to get accustomed to giving, receiving, and refusing touch from others in the group, and trust or feelings of safety can be built. The amount of physical contact then gradually increases and, in theory at least, individuals can decide how involved they would like to be through this gradual testing and expanding of boundaries.

Touch as Feminine

It is important to note the gendered ways in which touch is discussed in this context. In contemporary Tantra, the sense of touch (and sensuality more generally) is broadly coded as feminine, as one conversation with Tantra teacher Chandran highlighted:

So the feminine is seen as that which changes...So that's nature, that's everything we perceive... it's that which compels us to connect, seeking connection, really being concerned about the flow of communication. Touching things. Enjoying the sensuality of life. Revelling in tastes and sights and fabrics and clothing, food, being with your friends, children, love and compassion.⁷²

⁷² Interview conducted via Skype, 7th April 2017.

The feminine is frequently associated with the body, sensuality, softness, nature, physical connection, and touch. This correlates with historical understandings of touch in Western society (discussed above). Importantly, this also links with Orientalist tendencies of associating the 'exotic other' – in this case, Tantra – with the feminine body and sensuality.⁷³ As such, we can see how webs of meaning have been constructed, wherein the feminine is closely linked to the body, touch, and practices seen as originating in the 'exotic East' i.e. Tantra.

As an aside, this characterisation of both touch and Tantra as feminine brings to mind criticisms of 'New Age' or holistic practices, sometimes pejoratively referred to as being too 'touchy-feely'. Despite often being seen as a flippant comment, I would suggest that describing a practice as 'touchy-feely' refers to a web of meanings in which practices are coded as feminine and, as a result, inferior or less rational. This relates to the criticisms of 'New Age' described by Crowley (2011:20-21-25), discussed in Chapter 2.

What Does Touch Do?

After discussing the practicalities of how, when, and where Tantric touch practices are generally accepted, it is important to look at accounts of practitioners themselves. The following section aims to explore why individuals might be motivated to engage in touch practices, and what they can achieve through them. By looking at how touch

⁷³ Echoing Chandran's quote above, feminist writer Luce Irigaray, in *Between East and West* (2002), went as far as to argue that women naturally prefer the sense of touch, looking to yogic philosophy in the process of valorising the tactile (also mentioned in Chidester, 2000:77) – however her approach lacks nuance and is decidedly gender essentialist in ascribing specific qualities to the feminine

techniques are experienced by practitioners, this section aims to capture not only the wider discourses surrounding them, but also the somatic, bodily experiences induced. The section following this will then attempt to analyse these in more detail, to find a broader framework to make sense of these accounts. Note that this is an initial exploration of these themes, some of which are explored further and reframed in subsequent chapters.

Body and Mind Divisions

When Tantra practitioners during my fieldwork spoke about the sense of touch and its very physical nature, this was frequently related to the perceived split between mind and body. As mentioned in the Introduction, a common narrative for practitioners of contemporary Tantra is that of a Cartesian duality – a split between mind and body - becoming the dominant paradigm in the West during the Enlightenment, which individuals in contemporary society continue to be subject to. According to this narrative, the separation of mind and body has been detrimental to humans, as they have become too ‘up in their heads’; ‘out of touch’ with their physical nature; and now fail to value their bodies. Contemporary society is perceived as creating a fragmented sense of self, resulting in Constance Classen’s aforementioned feeling of alienation in contemporary Western society.

Tantric touch exercises are explicitly aimed at highlighting this split between mind and body. Either by touching your own body, or by someone else touching it *for* you, bringing awareness to specific parts of the body is thought to help to overcome this separation, uniting the body and mind. In these practices, it is the act of thinking about and bringing awareness to areas of the body experiencing touch, that leads to a

sensation of holism and connection between all parts of the person. As such, touch is understood to give an individual a more cohesive, holistic sense of self which integrates both the body and mind. Later in our conversation, Lorraine expanded on how touch practices in contemporary Tantra can help to address this:

... in that way, we overcome the separation, particularly of the West which came in, of the body and mind split. So it's really understanding that the body and mind and heart are absolute inseparably interconnected within the body, and then that that is also outside the body, so that in the end you are living life in a way that's a kind of experience with much more totality. And so to me, that's what spirituality really means.⁷⁴

As might be expected, this separation is frequently discussed in gendered terms, wherein the rational, scientific mind is coded as masculine and is separate from the intuitive, sensuous body, which is coded as feminine. According to this narrative, Western society has focused exclusively on the mind, to the detriment of the body, which must now be valorised and reconnected with. As discussed in the Introduction, particular blame for this separation is placed on Christianity, particularly the Catholic church and their guilt-inducing attitudes to sex and the female body⁷⁵; blame is also placed in a specifically British context, wherein British culture is seen as prudish, anti-sex, anti-body, and the legacy of the repressive Victorian era is apparently keenly felt. The combination of these Christian traditions and British (or Victorian) sensibilities are seen as having a disproportionate effect on the experiences of women, as masculine characteristics have historically been valued more highly.

⁷⁴ Interview conducted in London, 30th March 2017.

⁷⁵ The argument has been made elsewhere that it was actually Protestantism that denied the body more strongly, while Catholicism engaged with it (Mellor and Shilling, 1997:16); however, a significant number of my female interviewees related the rejection of their bodily experiences to their Catholic upbringing.

My female interviewees described a sense of disconnection between their minds and bodies, expressed as a criticism of contemporary society, as another quote from Lorraine suggests:

So that's why I think women are divorced from themselves in Britain because they don't seem to value the miracle that is their very physical nature... I think that when I'm working with people in Tantra, that is what I would be wanting to imbue with everybody.⁷⁶

The narrative of reversing an enforced separation between mind and body is a common thread in holistic spiritualities (as the term 'holistic' might imply). Importantly, Lorraine speaks about this separation as women being 'divorced from *themselves*', showing how important this idea is in these women's constructions of selfhood. More widely, this sense of separation has been noted particularly in women – scholars such as Holland et al studied young women (aged 16-21) in the UK, noting the sense of detachment these women felt from their material bodies. They documented a process of objectification that led women to see their bodies as fragmented, alienated, or something to control (Holland et al, 1994:25).

Bodily Boundaries - Reinforcement

It is common practice in workshops, as they are so often very physical affairs, to raise the topic of boundaries (as discussed in the 'Consent' section above, and in Chapter 3). This is partly done to protect participants from violence, harm or trauma – or triggering memories of these. I suggest here that Tantra participants are encouraged to identify and reinforce their physical boundaries as a process of formulating an

⁷⁶ Interview conducted in London, 30th March 2017.

autonomous or empowered sense of self. Take the following adverts for Tantra sessions:

The workshop starts by working with boundaries (ours and yours) to promote confidence and allow you to authentically connect with what feels right for you and what touch you want or don't want from others. You will also have the opportunity to experience touch which you might not otherwise be able to have in a safe, platonic, obligation free environment, and to connect with the art of receiving. There will be further opportunities to ask for other touch that you want. (UK Tantra News, September 2017)

We'll use touch to invite each person into a deeper connection with their body and sensual aliveness. We'll practice staying really present, learn how to express our wants and needs authentically and to establish healthy boundaries for ourselves. (UK Tantra News, March 2017)

These touch practices – such as the 'Melting Hug' exercise described above - encourage individuals to maintain agency about their bodies, control over their personal space, and who can or cannot touch them. As Thayer states:

[T]ouch represents a confirmation of our boundaries and separateness while permitting a union or connection with others that transcends physical limits. For this reason, of all of the communication channels, touch is the most carefully guarded and monitored, the most infrequently used, yet the most powerful and immediate. (Thayer, 1982:298)

As such, working directly with touch can lead to changes in how participants experience their bodies as discrete, bounded entities over which they can exercise control.

Touch practices concerning control over bodily boundaries are also interpreted in relation to gender. Building on studies such as those by Holland et al, Sonya Sharma (in a study of young women in Canada) has noted how conservative Protestant women's sense of detachment from their bodies leads them to seeing their bodies as passive, producing modest expressions of femininity that are based on a lack of agency and control over bodily boundaries (Sharma, 2008) In a study of women in

the UK age 21-35, Busso and Reavey note psychological processes of fragmentation that 'can lead to a struggle for women to experience themselves as the rightful occupier of their bodies, or as embodied persons with access to modes of being which offer the embodiment of agency' (2011:47). With regards to the reinforcement of bodily boundaries, it is fairly easy to see how these practices can be interpreted as feminist projects, providing participants with opportunities to develop confidence in enforcing physical limits. This maintenance and reinforcement of bodily boundaries is also vital in individuals formulating an autonomous, authentic sense of self. Linda Woodhead has noted how the construction of a sense of self can depend on 'a sense of ownership of one's own body. Indeed, the domination or alienation of one's body, including one's sexuality, constitutes perhaps the most serious of all obstacles to the creation of a sense of unique, bounded and valuable selfhood under one's own control' (Woodhead, 2008:149).

Bodily Boundaries - Expansion

Also raised in the above quote from Thayer is the notion that touch can be used to complicate boundaries between the physical body and that outside of it – exploring the physical limits of the individual. Returning to one of the descriptions of a Melting Hug given above, this becomes clear:

It's called a 'melting hug' because as you remain together, breathing and relaxing, receiving each other through this contact, the boundaries between the two of you can start to melt away, and some merging of 'me' with 'you' can happen. (Lightwoman, 2004:29)

As such, the sense of touch can also be used in the opposite way to that above, of constructing and reinforcing boundaries. Instead, it can be used, in certain contexts,

to dissolve perceived boundaries between individuals, creating experiences of merging into another. Rather than contradicting my feminist reading of touch reinforcing bodily boundaries (as discussed above), I suggest that as instances of boundary expansion are voluntary and done by choice, the two are compatible – this is also explored further in Chapter 6.

Highlighting Social Norms: Shame, Fears, and Inhibitions

As discussed above, touch is a social sense: ‘a fundamental medium for the expression, experience, and contestation of social values and hierarchies’ (Classen, 2005:1-2) and, as stated above, is the most carefully guarded and monitored of the five senses (Thayer, 1982:298). As such, creating a space where individuals are able to touch and be touched by others, could be seen as an explicit act of recognition of social norms of contemporary British society, where touch (particularly with a stranger) is unusual and laden with transgressive potential. The following workshop advert clearly shows practitioners attempting to create different modes of touching, away from the potentially dangerous or sexual implications this can often have:

In this workshop we will work with platonic touch in a safe and nurturing obligation free environment which supports you to connect with yourself and others from a heart opened space. Being able to connect with touch without sexualising it allows us to go back to a state of innocence and bliss of just being in our bodies. In addition this allows us to learn about what is there for us in our relationship dynamics. (UK Tantra News, September 2017)

Further to this, the areas of sex, intimacy and pleasure are perhaps subject to most taboos in contemporary society. Other touch exercises in Tantra encourage individuals to take pleasure in the experience of being touched, without feeling any guilt, shame, or sense of obligation toward the person touching them. Addressing this

can be particularly important for women, who must negotiate prescriptive and often contradictory discourses concerning appropriate sexual behaviour and experiences of pleasure. Experiencing touch in the context of a Tantra session can provide them with an alternative framework to interpret these experiences.

In all of the above uses of touch, boundaries – and particularly transgression of boundaries – is a key theme. This clearly correlates with historical themes of Tantra being transgressive (discussed in Chapter 2), which continue to permeate contemporary representations of Tantra in Britain. Here, I pose the notion of an ‘ideology of transgression’ – directly influenced by Kimberley Lau’s ‘ideology of the alternative’ (Lau, 2000). I suggest that an ‘ideology of transgression’ is key to contemporary Tantra, in providing legitimacy and authority to practices (mentioned above) that aim to negotiate boundaries. It is important for women in this context to see Tantra (and the touch techniques involved) as potentially transgressive, as this contributes to their building of a new sense of self – as discussed with reference to Thomas Csordas’ work, below.

Discussion

After exploring conventions around touch in contemporary Tantra, how it might be used to induce particular experiences or sensations, and the social context within which this is occurring, it is helpful to explore wider frameworks within which to situate this discussion. This thesis is primarily concerned with how, or whether, these experiences of touch allow participants to construct a sense of self which is perceived as authentic, autonomous, and healthy. As such, theories concerning selfhood and how individuals might cultivate this become relevant. Here, I will discuss a fruitful

framework for interpreting touch techniques in contemporary Tantra: Thomas Csordas' 'somatic modes of attention'. Using this, I suggest that touch techniques in contemporary Tantra are a key way for individuals to construct a new or transformed sense of self, specifically using the sense of touch.

Tantric Touch as Somatic Modes of Attention

Thomas Csordas' work posits bodily experience as the 'existential ground of culture and self' (1994), suggesting that 'embodied experience is the starting point for analysing human participation in a cultural world' (Csordas, 1993:135). Through this focus on embodied experience, Csordas aims to reveal more about 'the cultural patterning of bodily experience, and also about the intersubjective constitution of meaning through that experience' (Csordas, 1993:140-141). The aspect of Csordas' work most relevant here is his notion of 'somatic modes of attention'. These are defined as 'the processes in which we attend to and objectify our bodies... culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others' (Csordas, 1993:139). Csordas elaborates that somatic modes of attention are modes of 'culturally *elaborated* attention *to* and *with* the body in the immediacy of an *intersubjective* milieu' (Csordas, 1993:139, emphasis in original).

From this, it is clear that touch techniques in contemporary Tantra would come under the category of 'somatic modes of attention' – context-specific practices of bringing attention to the body, and of the body attending to its environment (or its intersubjective milieu) differently. Touch is used to bring close attention to bodily sensations, psychological constructs, and the social structures within which these

arise – and as such, can tell us about how practitioners understand their own positions in the world. Indeed, Csordas suggests that '[a]ttention to a bodily sensation can thus become a mode of attending to the intersubjective milieu that gives rise to that sensation' (Csordas, 1993:138). Csordas' exploration of somatic modes of attention as those which highlight and explore the 'phenomenological horizon' – the point between the act of constitution, and the object that is constituted - is echoed in Tantric literature regarding distinctions between self and other, subject and object:

Tantra sees the senses as gateways to Spirit. It is through being totally absorbed in sensory experience that the discursive mind can drop away and we 'become' the sound, smell, taste, touch or sight. In this moment we transcend the ordinary boundaries of self and other and so move from separate, dualistic perception into oneness and wholeness (Lightwoman, 2004:40)

This [Tantric] way of touching the world is marvellous, but also contains something terrifying for a Westerner: the harrowing sense, at the beginning, of being dissolved into the objects of perception. We have reinforced the ego in such a way that's it's painful to begin to feel how quickly it evaporates when we really touch the world... There's no border between the physical and the absolute. They interpenetrate each other completely (Odiar, 1997:69-72)

Recognising certain somatic modes of attention (i.e. touch techniques) opens up possibilities for them to be reworked or reinterpreted, thus changing individuals' perceptions of such experiences, and the discourses or structures that condition these experiences. Csordas himself recognises the potential that touch has to highlight these discourses, stating that 'touch breaks a culturally constructed interpersonal barrier based on a notion of the individual as a discrete, independent entity, on the concept of privacy, and on the injunction "don't touch" in most social settings (Montagu 1978; Shweder and Bourne, 1982)' (Csordas, 2002:31).

Following Csordas, it is possible to see how the narrative of Tantra as transgressive – crossing various types of boundaries – is involved in developing or altering somatic

modes of attention. As suggested above, this can be interpreted as amounting to an 'ideology of transgression' for practitioners. The narrative of Tantra as transgressive or antinomian (representing the most extreme 'Other') is used by practitioners in the contemporary British context, often inspired by historical and textual accounts of Tantra. Clearly, contemporary Tantra as part of the holistic milieu in Britain does not aim to replicate these historical esoteric practices (although there may be some more esoteric, 'Left Hand Path' groups that do explore these), and transgression is instead most often re-interpreted in terms of critiquing societal norms concerning a range of topics including, but not limited to, the body, sex, and gender roles. In this context, I suggest that touch in Tantra can be a key way for individuals to explore or create different somatic modes of attention aimed at the transgression and maintenance of boundaries: boundaries between the self and other; between mind and body; and boundaries governing social norms and interactions. These transgressions are a way for participants to critique dominant discourses in contemporary Western society, and are used as a process aimed at developing an integrated, bounded sense of self. The fact that Tantra is constructed by practitioners as a spiritual practice with a long history lends legitimacy to these perceived transgressions; and the established 'ideal' of transgression in Tantra means that individuals feel capable of exploring these. Tantra thus includes a range of touch techniques, imbued with an air of spiritual or traditional authority, that open up the potential to create new or altered somatic modes of attention, which change how individuals understand their world.

Constructing and maintaining somatic modes of attention that highlight physical and psychological boundaries – and social norms around these - is a way for participants in contemporary Tantra to develop a sense of control and agency, thus achieving a sense of self that is bounded, autonomous, and incorporates all parts of the individual. As discussed above, this in itself could be interpreted as a transgressive activity,

particularly for women, and could aid in their positive construction of a new sense of self. As previously stated, both Classen and Chidester note the hegemony of the visual in Western (for Chidester, specifically American) context. However, both also suggest that despite the hegemony of the visual, some groups and individuals may resist dominant sensory models and develop their own system of sensory values. Chidester, inspired by Michel de Certeau, suggests that touch – particularly touch in ‘religious’ settings - can act as a ‘tactic’, aiming to ‘defy, subvert, or otherwise interfere with an established domain of visibility’ (Chidester, 2005:62). As such, working with the sense of touch in a vision-dominated society can be interpreted as a transgressive act, an expression of dissatisfaction with image-focused Western culture, aimed at subverting dominant sensory models. Touch practices are thus aimed at reducing or counteracting Classen’s aforementioned sense of alienation from one’s society, environment, and cosmos; and Tantra workshops can provide safe spaces for individuals to explore and experience touch in an environment removed from these social conventions, to question why they exist, and why they are adhered to.

Further discussion of transgression is also necessary here and at this point, it is helpful to look back to the work of Hugh Urban. When Tantra originally exploded in popularity in the 1960s, it was seen as embodying ‘both the countercultural revolt against prevailing Judeo-Christian values and the new positive celebration of the human body, sexuality, and sensual ecstasy’ (Urban, 2000:280; 2003:227). As such, Tantra could be understood as a transgressive movement at that time. However, in the contemporary Western context, Urban suggests that Tantra is not a transgressive practice – if anything, it is ‘the ideal religion for late-capitalist society as a specifically *consumer religion* - a form of spirituality that does not deny but actually embraces our material impulses for wealth, financial success, and power’ (Urban, 2003:258; 2000:271). According to Urban, contemporary Tantra is also in accordance

with contemporary Western attitudes toward the body, sensuality, pleasure, sexuality and its liberation (2000:303) and, further to this, he raises the question of whether Tantra could in fact be characterised as 'the deepest fantasy of Western consumer capitalism, the most extreme affirmation of materialism, hedonism, and egotism, now projected on to the exotic mirror of the Eastern other' (Urban, 2000:295).

Criticisms of contemporary Tantra's claims to transgression arise with closer analysis of my own fieldwork, too. One of these criticisms can be related to the essentialised gender roles still clearly evident in contemporary Tantra. In Tantra, women particularly can find the re-valuation of feminine qualities refreshing, liberatory, or empowering, and work to incorporate this into their sense of self; however, coding touch practices (as well as the body; and Tantra as a practice) as feminine upholds essentialised, binary gender roles, wherein women continue to be equated with nature, the body, and sensuality. As such, the new or transformed sense of self that is constructed is implicitly gendered and as such, its potential for providing women with liberation is limited. This tendency has been previously noted in studies of 'sacred sexuality', wherein 'women are confronted with norms and expectations that sometimes seem to be unexpected metamorphoses of the norms and expectations they are encouraged to leave behind' (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016:210).

As such, while touch practices might be effective for the perceived wellbeing of an individual, they rarely challenge wider discourses of power. This is why I choose to refer to an 'ideology of transgression' (explored in more detail in Chapter 7). Rather than making judgement calls on whether women have or have not been liberated or empowered by Tantric practices, we can instead note how important the ideology of transgression is in their development of a new or altered sense of self.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to explore how the body, senses, and touch are particularly important in practices of contemporary Tantra. By first exploring the social implications of touch in the contemporary 'Western' context, I aimed to expose wider discourses which necessarily affect Tantra practitioners' use of touch exercises. By describing common conventions surrounding touch – including the creation of safe spaces, consent, and the gradual development of touch techniques - I have shown how tactility is still regulated in different contexts, but can be intentionally transformed into a tool for practitioners to bring attention to certain sensations and discourses.

This chapter then considers accounts from practitioners and primary literature regarding what touch can do, remaining focused on the experiences of individuals and the main themes that arise from their accounts. From these, it is possible to see how touch is used in contemporary Tantra to: negotiate perceived divisions between body and mind; expand and reinforce bodily boundaries; and highlight social norms surrounding the body and tactility. Throughout, I work to show how each of these uses of touch is gendered, and how these techniques' perceived abilities to address experiences and social norms particular to certain women is a key motivator for their involvement in contemporary Tantra.

Using Csordas' methodology of embodiment, and particularly the notion of somatic modes of attention, it is possible to engage the physical nature of touch practices with the relevant discourses in a more cohesive way. Using Csordas' somatic modes of attention allows consideration of both the body and society in how touch practices are understood, used, and developed in contemporary Tantra – and as a result, can provide insight on how this can be used to construct a sense of self for these women.

Further, this chapter delves deeper into the idea that an 'ideology of transgression' in Tantra is a way to construct, legitimate and authorise new somatic modes of attention, thus also contributing to projects of selfhood. Despite this ideology of transgression, it is possible to see how some gendered social norms that women aim to transgress or overcome are in fact reinforced, or simply re-emerge in different ways. This exploration of touch as a tool to formulate a new or different sense of self is explored further in the next chapter, which addresses themes in which transformation is forefront: trauma and healing.

Chapter 5: Trauma, Healing, and Touch in Tantra

This chapter aims to address how the themes of trauma and healing are negotiated in contemporary Tantra, particularly using the medium of touch. I argue here that, in the pursuit of well-being, touch is a key factor in helping individuals to heal through (re)interpreting emotions, events, and social norms, often using the notion of sexual energy. In contemporary interpretations of Tantra, these processes of healing and transformation are key to constructing a healthy and autonomous sense of self.

The previous chapter ('Touch in Tantra') presented several functions of touch in contemporary Tantra: highlighting splits between body and mind; controlling bodily boundaries; expanding bodily boundaries; and negotiating social norms. This chapter on trauma and healing will extend the discussion of these themes, to show how trauma can be understood as a perceived lack of control over boundaries between mind and body; bodily boundaries; and social boundaries. Accordingly, healing is a process aiming to empower individuals to create and reinforce boundaries around these, change perceptions of them, and effect some form of transformation. Individual feelings of agency and control around such boundaries are vital in creating a holistic, healthy, and autonomous sense of self – which is absolutely key in the holistic milieu's focus on well-being. Using Thomas Csordas' four stage model of healing – and drawing on his notion of 'somatic modes of attention' - this chapter will offer some analysis of how touch can be used as a healing tool in contemporary Tantra.

What is Trauma?

In writing this thesis, there was some question of whether 'trauma' was the correct term to encompass the range of experiences presented to me as being worthy of healing practices. 'Trauma' as a term is in common use in both contemporary Tantra groups and the wider holistic milieu, and there seems to be a common emic understanding of what it refers to. As such, my definition here differs from – but still overlaps with - clinical understandings from fields such as psychiatry.⁷⁷ Instead, I have attempted to use a definition which corresponds more closely with how my fieldwork participants might use the term: trauma is understood as an event (or memory of an event) that detracts from or negatively affects the sense of subjective well-being, wholeness, authenticity, and autonomy of an individual.

Admittedly, this definition is incredibly broad. However, drawing on my interviews, observations, participation, and exploration of primary literature, it seems the most appropriate to cover the huge range of emotions, reactions, memories, sensations, and experiences that might be referred to as 'trauma' in the context of contemporary Tantra. As Diane stated, when discussing what she might treat in her healing sessions: 'It's not just trauma, it's also milder things, but they're all forms of trauma, in a way...'.

The fact that 'trauma' is defined so broadly in this context echoes Heelas' suggestion that a key idea in the holistic milieu is that 'your lives do not work' (Heelas, 1996:18)

⁷⁷ Trauma is now defined in the DSM-V (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence in one or more of four ways: (a) directly experiencing the event; (b) witnessing, in person, the event occurring to others; (c) learning that such an event happened to a close family member or friend; and (d) experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of such events, such as with first responders; although arguments have been made by Brewin et al. (2009) that what constitutes a traumatic event should be defined by the individual (Jones and Cureton, 2014)

– anything less than a state of total well-being suggests that some form of trauma must be overcome. Another teacher, Harriet, spoke of just how common trauma is in the context of contemporary Tantra. She describes the healing of trauma as a process of creating a holistic sense of selfhood:

I would say that generally speaking with women, you're taking care of trauma in some way. And so [*healing is*] bringing women back to a sense of wholeness, centredness, completeness, and a...a willingness to feel what they feel...⁷⁸

Importantly, this reflects the holistic milieu's (and wider Western society's) focus on individual, holistic well-being, based on developing an autonomous, healthy, and empowered sense of self (discussed in the Introduction). Just as important here is the emphasis that Harriet puts on women's experiences of trauma. This topic is threaded throughout this chapter, and links closely with the theme of embodiment: bodies being gendered affects both how they experience the world and are perceived by others. This also links with discussions in the previous chapter about gendered experiences of touch - phenomena such as trauma and healing are embodied *and* tied up with social discourses; and as such, experiences of these will necessarily be affected by gender.

Causes of Trauma

The factors that are understood to cause trauma in this context are manifold. As such, this chapter is limited to exploring some of the causes that I encountered most frequently within my fieldwork in contemporary Tantra, and this list is by no means

⁷⁸ Interview conducted in Glastonbury, 10th June 2017.

exhaustive. The causes of trauma discussed here have been grouped under three main categories, which correspond closely with the functions of touch explored in the previous chapter. To avoid repetition, I will briefly recount these, specifically drawing out how certain aspects of touch can be understood as instances of trauma. These three causes of trauma will then later be referred to when exploring the process of healing, and how these might be remedied or negotiated in the context of contemporary Tantra, particularly using the sense of touch.

Body/Mind Boundaries

One of the most common ways in which trauma was discussed by individuals in Tantra involved a sense of disconnection between their minds and bodies – a feeling of internal splits, divisions, disunity, or disidentification from the physical body, disrupting and preventing feelings of holism or a stable sense of self. These ‘splits’ can be caused by a range of factors: living in a patriarchal society, capitalism, or the focus on technology in contemporary society were commonly suggested as causes of internal divisions, and this a common thread through a lot of alternative spiritualities. One teacher, Chandran, gave me his views on how the modern world causes individuals to become ‘disconnected’ from themselves:

...We’re disconnected from nature. And that’s part of what modernity does, people are lost... it’s like we’re creating now through technology, something that might be called the technosphere. So that’s a virtual realm, an artificial realm that has in one sense tremendous connectivity, and yet although on one level we have this incredible connectivity, it’s an age where people are so isolated, so disconnected from themselves.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Interview conducted via Skype, 7th April 2017.

Further, this sense of disconnection from the body meant that the body was seen as passive, being acted upon by external forces. A result of this was a feeling that the individuals weren't fully in control of their bodies, or lacked agency over them. It was this sense of disconnection within the individual that was understood by many of my interviewees to constitute an experience of trauma, as this sense of forced fragmentation from 'themselves' negatively affects well-being and the construction of a holistic, autonomous sense of self. Chandran spoke further on the perceived boundaries or disconnection between mind and body:

When I got to my teens, I was interested in spirituality already, in my own way, but I was trying to approach life and the world from the neck up, just my head, and I was totally emotionally shut down, I was really not comfortable in my body, quite disconnected.⁸⁰

Chandran was one of the very few male Tantra teachers that I interviewed, and he had clearly felt some form of separation between his mind and body. However, this sense of disconnection or disunity with the body was, according to my respondents, felt most keenly by women. Adaira gave an example:

...for me, it's like, I have one body and this is my vessel, so I may as well love it and be at home in it, and appreciate it, and enjoy it, which is something I see many women struggling with, actually...And so, for example, the breasts! ...It's quite extraordinary, our relationship as a society, to breasts, and where they're acceptable and where they're not acceptable, and how they're viewed by men, how they're viewed by women...⁸¹

Adaira notes that in her experience, many women struggle to be 'at home' in their bodies, and attributes this to societal causes, as she suggests above. As is typical of so many movements in the holistic milieu (and as discussed in previous chapters), women are associated with the body and nature, all of which are coded as feminine. As such, splits imposed between individuals and their natural, bodily state were

⁸⁰ Interview conducted via Skype, 7th April 2017.

⁸¹ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

understood to be more keenly felt by women, as they are 'naturally' more associated with the body.

Shame and Social Norms

Another commonly cited cause of trauma was feelings of shame. For Tantra participants, feelings of shame are often related to the area of the sexual – which is perhaps unsurprising, as this is one of the key areas of social life subject to a plethora of restrictions and taboos.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Tantra practitioners often highlight how traditional or institutional forms of religion (usually Christianity) and the Victorian obsession with sexuality continue to impose tight restrictions on expressions of sexuality, intimacy, and even the act of touching another person. This 'catch-22' means that individuals can either: 1) continue to repress their sexual desires – therefore not living 'authentically' or expressing their 'true self', and compartmentalising certain aspects of themselves; or 2) express and act upon their sexual desires, and feel shame or suffer judgement as a result. This also meant that relationships with particularly conservative relatives and friends could be seen as sources of trauma, if the individual was made to feel ashamed of their thoughts or behaviours, particularly in the domain of sex and sexuality. As with feelings of disconnection, my respondents saw women as suffering disproportionately from this kind of trauma – more stringent societal norms (influenced by organised religion, particularly Catholicism, according to many of my interlocutors) surrounding women's sexual behaviour were particularly to blame for deep-seated feelings of shame.

Isabella spoke about her own experiences of growing up in a Catholic country and how she negotiated this:

I grew up in Italy...where there is a lot of hang ups about sexuality and there is a lot of a sense of guilt around sexuality, a lot of shame, a lot of repression, because of the presence of the church, the Pope, and Catholicism. So I don't come from a Catholic family, but I come from a very Catholic country, where there is a lot of conditioning. And having had my mum as a model, as a...main person I spent time with, I was very much in touch with my body and with my senses, with my sensuality, with my sexuality, and I was very comfortable with it, it felt just...natural and normal. However, where I was living it felt that I was condemned a lot for being so much in my body.⁸²

As noted by some Tantra practitioners, this conservatism around female sexuality – and shame resulting from expressions of it - has also led to individuals in Britain having a generally very poor level of knowledge about female sexual pleasure. This lack of knowledge leads some women to believe they have a 'problem', i.e. some form of trauma. One teacher, Adaira, spoke with me about her experiences of helping women who struggled with this:

There's some absolutely crazy statistics around...it's something like 50% of women haven't experienced an orgasm. And then they've been treated as...I can't remember the term, anorgasmic or whatever it is, as if there's a problem, but actually the only problem is that there's such a low skill level around the female body [*laughs*], and such a lack of awareness about what women really need in order to awaken, fully enter their sensuality and sexuality. And of course, all the stuff that's out there in the world about how a woman should look, how she should dress, her appearance, her weight, her size, all of this, this is totally...that's like the first level of shutdown of female sexuality. Because if a woman doesn't feel comfortable in herself, in her body, how is she going to open in her pleasure?⁸³

As Adaira highlights here, there aren't only gendered expectations regarding sexual conduct and behaviour: there are also societal pressures regarding how women should look, dress, weigh, and present themselves. As such, shame can also arise from individuals feeling that their bodily appearances don't live up to these ideals. This

⁸² Interview conducted in Bristol, 9th March 2017.

⁸³ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

also links back to women feeling disconnected with their bodies, as they are conditioned to think that their bodies need to be controlled or shaped to fit certain narrowly-defined moulds – creating a sense of separation between the individual and their physical body. Many Tantra practitioners referred to their lack of body confidence, or their experiences of weight gain, aging, and even pregnancy as potential causes of shame – and thus trauma - as their bodies don't or didn't fit into the moulds seen as 'ideal' in the contemporary British context.

Compromising of Bodily Boundaries

The unwillful or unexpected transgression of an individual's bodily boundaries – in cases such as physical or sexual assault – is also clearly considered a traumatic experience. It is these experiences which correspond most closely with clinical definitions of trauma and which, for obvious reasons, can become difficult to negotiate – both for Tantra practitioners and the researcher – in this context. Feelings of powerlessness or lack of control over one's bodily boundaries (combined with the grave physical and psychological damage done) necessarily affect how individuals perceive themselves as a whole, and as such, negatively affect their sense of self.

As with the previous two examples, gender affects an individual's experience of trauma, as women are far more likely to have experienced some form of sexual assault (20% of women over 16 in England and Wales, compared to 4% of men (MoJ, Home Office, ONS, 2013)). In addition to this, Tantra teachers occasionally discussed with me how they saw Tantra as particularly appealing to individuals who have suffered sexual trauma. Diane stated:

Tantra's attitude, as I've been taught it, to trauma is quite different from the psychological attitude to trauma. There's no doubt that quite a lot of people who have had sexual trauma are drawn to Tantra. But it's not a therapy.⁸⁴

This raises a number of ethical issues. When these themes were raised during my fieldwork, I needed to think about the implications that this might have: was I now encountering vulnerable individuals, and should I even involve myself with any practices involved in a workshop, if there was a potential for me to be working with vulnerable people? As previously discussed, part of my approach in this research was to interview Tantra teachers and as such, I could steer away from interviewing individuals who I knew were closely involved with Tantra while in an acute stage of trauma. However, it is quite possible that in workshops I attended, some individuals present had been victims of abuse or assault, and I could have engaged in some of the aforementioned touch exercises with individuals while being unaware of their background and motivations for attendance. In some conversations with Tantra teachers, I had been surprised at how quickly they began to share experiences of assault or abuse with me. To be clear, these accounts came from a minority of my research participants. However, in these cases, the events in question seemed to have become a key part of the individuals' life narratives – particularly in their accounts of how they became involved in Tantra. In their accounts, these negative experiences would always be a part of their life story; however, the individual apparently felt equipped to deal with these memories and move on from them in a healthy way. These people would then credit Tantra with helping in this process. As such, although the topics of physical and sexual abuse were raised in some conversations, I did not find myself in a position where I felt I was working with or interviewing someone 'at risk'. When the topic arose in conversation, it was often in response to very general questions (such as, 'How did you become involved with

⁸⁴ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

Tantra?’ or ‘Were there many religious or spiritual influences during your upbringing?’), and the information was offered voluntarily by my interlocutors - I avoided encouraging them into further discussions of these experiences.

Physical Manifestations of Trauma

Continuing the approach of embodiment, it is important to explore how trauma might be experienced, with a focus on bringing out physical, bodily sensations associated with this. The causes of trauma listed above certainly involve bodies and their activities – but we have not yet considered the very visceral, embodied reactions that trauma can elicit in individuals.

The bodily sensations that trauma can cause – and the forms that trauma also takes – are manifold. Perhaps one of the more common conceptualisations of trauma is as a blockage or barrier within the body – something that prevents ‘healthy’ energies from circulating freely, which is an individual’s natural state (this concept of ‘energy’ will be discussed further below). In this interpretation, trauma is something held in the body and is discussed in terms of ‘release’ – trauma is something to be removed or let go, to allow the healthy circulation of energy. Take the following advert for a ‘de-armouring’ workshop (a common practice in Tantric circles, originally developed by figures such as Wilhelm Reich):

De-armouring is a subtle, yet profound process that helps us release pain and trauma and blockages stored within the physical, emotional and energetic bodies. These can be stored deep within our bodies and, over the years, we build up layers of ‘armour’ to keep the pain hidden and prevent us from having to deal with the source. This process sets up such a disconnection from ourselves and our Truth that it prevents us from living

and fulfilling our full potential. This can be a process of liberation and empowerment. (UK Tantra News, February 2017)

Further to this, trauma can be conceived as a tangible, material phenomenon. Not only is trauma conceptualised as a very physical phenomenon, with blockages described in somatic terms such as pain or heaviness; but trauma was also understood to be a material entity that could be held within the body. One teacher, Diane, discussed with me at length how memories are stored in a layer of cell tissue between the skin and muscles; she understood this to be the physical location of traumatic memories. Another very physical account of trauma comes from the blog of a well-known Tantra training school in the UK (note that the subject of this blog was 'genital healing', leading to a very specific focus – either way, it illustrates the tangibility of trauma):

...when something happens to us, whether large or small, it has an impact and causes us to withdraw from our place of open innocence. We close, we become numb...the tissues and muscles in the body, over time, literally become hardened and can create disease, springing from the inability of the energy to flow in a healthy way. This can happen from many things e.g. medical intervention, inappropriate touch, saying 'yes' instead of 'no', abortion, childbirth, insensitive or rough partners, overuse of vibrators, rape etc. (Spence, 2017)

In this interpretation, trauma causes the body to become 'hardened', and even leads to serious illness. This focus on the somatic effects and manifestations of trauma might seem at odds with 'mainstream' understandings of trauma, which put forward that it is a primarily psychological phenomenon. However, the very physical and bodily nature of trauma – its *embodied nature* - has already been noted. Scholars such as Meredith McGuire have also begun to note the role of the body and senses in trauma, particularly in relation to the field of Religious Studies. McGuire's recent work on sensory experiences and lived religion draws on, and is in accordance with, many

Tantra practitioner's views on the nature of trauma (note that she addresses memory rather than trauma, but the ideas resonate):

In Western ways of thinking, we tend to identify the memory as an operation solely of the brain. But biological and anthropological evidence suggests that memory resides in the whole body, such as in nerve connections and in the cells of the immune system. That means that memory can be closely connected with our senses and bodily states, including experiences of which we are not even conscious. (McGuire, 2016:155)

Echoing this, Diane stated:

So this is what I think happens with trauma, I think it becomes like a locked in, if you like, *samskara* is the Sanskrit word I think they would use for it, it's a locked in...programme of sensations and emotions that is released just like a memory will be released when something happens that reminds you of something.⁸⁵

As we can see from the causes of trauma given above, although trauma is experienced as an individual, bodily experience, trauma does not stem from only the individual. Instead, these experiences are intersubjective - in each case, very physical or bodily experiences of trauma are affected by other individuals, the social and historical context within which these experiences arise, and the meanings or importance that these are given. Understanding trauma through the lens of embodiment allows the physical, somatic experiences to be understood alongside, and in an interdependent relationship with, powerful discourses surrounding health, trauma, wellbeing, the body, and selfhood. This helps to complicate the commonly-drawn binary between mind and body, psychological and physical forms of trauma and healing.

⁸⁵ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

Gendered Trauma

In the discussions above (on causes of trauma), I have aimed to highlight women's experiences of trauma, and how these can be affected by their gender. However, there is also a broader discourse, which I found to be fairly common in Tantra – that generally, men become involved in Tantra for reasons surrounding pleasure; whereas women become involved primarily because they are seeking some form of healing for previous trauma. To quote Adaira again:

So for men, often the intention is around pleasure, so initially this might sound like I'm dichotomising healing and pleasure but it's actually not the case. Men tend to come for pleasure, and that's partly because there is a narrative of the masculine that's about sex...Whereas women tend to come with the intention of healing, partly because many women think that they're broken in some way, around their sexuality. For example, they might not have ever had an orgasm before, or they don't think they have very big orgasms, or that other people are having orgasmic experiences that they're not, or that they're not very turned on to sexuality in some way, and they think that that's their fault, or that they're broken somehow, or their body doesn't work the way that they want it to. And again, it's much more likely for a woman to invest in herself, in the experience of healing, than in the experience of pleasure.⁸⁶

From this perspective, I would suggest that being in a (mild) state of trauma is seen as the default for women in this context. To exist as a woman in Britain – with its Christian- and Victorian- influenced social norms around the female body and sexuality – is to have suffered some form of trauma, which must then be dealt with and overcome, in order for women to achieve an authentic and autonomous sense of self.⁸⁷ Although this might sound like a construction of victimhood, it often leads to narratives of self-empowerment and freedom for these women who feel capable of

⁸⁶ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

⁸⁷ This echoes Susan Sered and Linda Barnes, who suggest that 'gender-based oppression represents a form of structural violence that tends to elicit particular attention in contexts of religious healing' (in McGuire, 2008:128)

addressing these problematic dominant discourses through engaging with contemporary Tantra.

There are, of course, men who have suffered some form of trauma who are also involved in Tantra – and I don't doubt that in this context, there are forms of trauma understood to be more prevalent in men – however, this topic has remained unexplored in this research.

Healing in Tantra

After looking into the notion of trauma in the (very specific) context of contemporary Tantra, it is important to look into how Tantra is understood to address this. The motivation for many people becoming involved in Tantra – particularly women, as noted above – is the healing experiences that it can provide. As such, it is imperative to delve into these healing processes more deeply.

Out of the causes of trauma presented above, all concern the body – but only one is based primarily on the sense of touch, in the compromising of bodily boundaries (although as discussed in Chapter 4, touch exercises can draw attention to all of these causes of trauma). As we shall see, however, touch is often understood to be able to remedy all forms of trauma, whether inflicted primarily physically or not. I could even argue that most instances of touch in this thesis can be interpreted as healing in some way, if they are aimed at improving well-being, and if all women are seen as being in varying states of trauma. Before moving on to consider how these forms of trauma can be healed, there is one concept in contemporary Tantra that it is important to elucidate in more detail: sexual energy.

Sexual Energy as Healer

To understand healing in contemporary Tantra more fully, it is key to explore the concept of sexual energy - also referred to as *kundalini* (which in other parts of the holistic milieu, is often understood more broadly as simply 'energy', and sometimes 'feminine energy'). 'Energy' is not an unusual concept, particularly in the holistic milieu, where a large range of practices focus on manipulating energetic forces (such as Reiki or Bioenergetics), with the aim of improving an individual's holistic well-being (as discussed in Chapter 1). However, here I wish to explore the idiosyncratic ways in which energy, and particularly sexual energy, is understood by contemporary Tantra practitioners.

On one level, sexual energy can be seen as the force underlying existence itself. In this interpretation, sexual energy is a product of the (sexual) union of *Shiva* and *Shakti* on the 'cosmic' plane: the Divine Feminine and the Divine Masculine unite, (pro)creating the universe in the process. As such, all of existence is a product of sexual energy. On this basis, individuals are animated by the 'life force' of sexual energy: each person contains both feminine and masculine principles, and a 'healthy' flow of sexual energy results from a balance of these. In this interpretation, the individual is the microcosm reflecting the macrocosm. The levels of 'masculine' and 'feminine' producing a healthy balance vary from person to person, often corresponding to gender – for example, someone identifying as female might find their ideal balance to be more weighted toward the feminine, which means they would work on nurturing particular 'feminine' traits. Not finding a personal, healthy balance can affect general well-being, personality traits, and temperament. This aim of achieving a steady flow of sexual energy also intersects with ideas of trauma as a 'blockage', preventing sexual energy from circulating healthily.

As such, the aim of Tantra practitioners is to achieve a healthy, constant flow of sexual energy in and around their bodies during everyday life and, at times, to stimulate this to heightened levels in order to perform practices such as healing, or to achieve states of ecstasy (explored in the next chapter). Take, for example, this workshop advert found in the monthly newsletter:

The workshop will explore the nature of sexual energy, how to build, contain and direct it and how to focus it for healing, protection and transformation.
(UK Tantra News, April 2017)

Sexual energy can be raised through a range of practices. Breathing exercises, guided meditations, Dynamic Meditation (a particular practice of standing and vigorously shaking the body, popularised by Osho, also known as a 'Shaking Meditation'), and particular *asanas* (yoga postures) can be used to stimulate and raise this energy. However, my interest here lies particularly in how the sense of touch is used to this end. Massage is a very common method; as is partner work involving one person touching another's body using certain touch techniques; individual exercises such as meditating on how it feels when individuals touch themselves in certain ways; and other practices necessarily involving touch, such as masturbation or sexual intercourse. As such, using touch to raise sexual energy can be done alone, with a partner, or in groups. Although other senses can be used in the production and heightening of sexual energy, touch is a particularly effective and direct method due to its immediacy and intimacy. By touching ourselves, or being touched by others, we become acutely aware of our bodily boundaries and processes, and (involuntary) visceral bodily sensations are stirred, such as pleasure or discomfort - more so with touch than any other sense.

With the help of notions such as chakras, nadis, and a 'subtle' or 'energy' body corresponding to the physical body, participants are able to visualise sexual energy

circulating around the body. More than this though, they can *feel* it too. Experiencing physical sensations - such as tingling fingers, sensations of arousal, or feelings of weightlessness (for example) are seen as a bodily manifestation of this sexual energy, and confirmation of its existence and efficacy. In this way, practitioners receive pleasurable physical, bodily sensations induced by touch techniques that are interpreted as confirmation of the presence of sexual energy.

When combined with ideas in Tantra regarding how sexual energy can be a healing force flowing around the body, this provides a framework for individuals to interpret pleasurable bodily sensations as healing experiences. This is illustrated well by Diane, who described the feeling of sexual energy being raised during Dynamic Meditation:

So really the point of doing the meditations is to get you very fully into your body and out of your mind because immediately that happens you expand your consciousness into your body, for a start, that's all you need to do and then you've already changed something...so... you might feel sort of energy, warmth, tingling, coming up through your legs, or into your body or whatever like that, you might feel a bit sexually turned on, you might feel... when I'm doing that shaking my body will start shaking, so I'll start doing spontaneous shaking and releases and things like that which is kind of very relaxing in a certain way, and freeing.⁸⁸

Here, we can see that sexual energy is frequently experienced as sensations of pleasure - particularly sexual pleasure - and as such, pleasure is understood as a therapeutic sensation. Raising sexual energy – and feeling pleasure as a result - can be a profoundly healing experience for Tantra practitioners. In a conversation with Adaira, she explained why she eventually left her practice of Shiatsu, in favour of Tantra:

You weren't allowed to admit that you felt this kind of energy move pleasurable, it was kind of all very about the healing. And so I suddenly

⁸⁸ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

realised that we do have this huge schism between healing and pleasure, which for me Tantra dissolves. That pleasure *is* in itself healing. That the fullness of experiencing is a fullness of oneself. And not cutting off any parts of us in order to be acceptable.⁸⁹

Also worth revisiting here is Adaira's quote above about gendered trauma, in which she states that 'initially this might sound like I'm dichotomising healing and pleasure but it's actually not the case' – clearly, she sees healing and pleasure as part of the same process. As such, it seems that pleasure is the sensation which participants can readily encourage, recognise and experience; and conceptualising this as sexual energy, which possesses the potential to heal, is a progression of this.

Therapeutic Tantric Massage

To explore how the healing process might work in Tantra, I find it most useful to look more closely at one fairly common and easily identifiable practice in contemporary Tantra: that of Tantric Massage. Adaira explained the importance of massage in this context:

For me, for one of my teachers...he says that in its highest form, Tantric massage *is* an initiation into Tantra itself, and this is kind of how I see it. I'm standing and opening that doorway for people to explore themselves, through Tantra...for me, this is fundamentally it, it's an awakening into fullness of ourselves, through touch.⁹⁰

Tantric massage is an illustrative example of healing practices combining a range of practiced touch techniques, sexual energy, and pleasure, and is a prominent

⁸⁹ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

⁹⁰ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

component of contemporary Tantra in Britain. One advert from the newsletter reinforces this view (again, with particular focus on gendered experiences):

Tantra Massage can be a profoundly healing, transformative and pleasurable experience for a woman. Through Tantric touch she is honoured in her body, awakened in her senses, and fully given the time and space to expand into her arousal without pressure or expectation. Through this she comes to know the beauty and power of her being. (UK Tantra News, January 2017)

Massage can occur in a number of contexts: intimate couples will offer each other Tantric massages; teachers frequently offer one-on-one therapeutic massage sessions to clients; many teachers also offer massage workshops in which participants learn how to do a Tantric massage over the course of several days (which I was able to attend). One-on-one massage sessions and workshops are advertised widely in circles that would be considered part of the holistic milieu⁹¹, and are offered by the majority of teachers, both male and female. Workshops generally take place in rented community spaces, while individual sessions might occur in a dedicated studio, or within the home of the practitioner.

Some practitioners described to me how they will interview potential clients at the time of their initial contact, to find out what they want to gain from these workshops or sessions. These interviews are often done in order to check that the individual isn't seeking sexual services (also discussed in Chapter 3); and are also often used to find out whether the client should be seeking professional help from a counsellor, therapist, or other mental health specialist, rather than engaging the help of a Tantra practitioner (although these judgements are based solely on the Tantra practitioner's personal opinion). As part of these interviews, practitioners ask individuals what they

⁹¹ As well as further afield, wherein 'Tantric massage' is used as code for services provided by sex workers – this is a (mostly) separate phenomena, is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

feel they need help with. Often, these are the problems mentioned above: feelings of disconnection with their body; coming to terms with experiences of abuse; or feelings of shame about their body and/or sexual activity. Some individuals also present more overtly 'physical' problems, such as women being unable to orgasm, or chronic menstrual pain. However, even these symptoms are generally thought to stem from causes such as those mentioned above, and are seen as manifestations of trauma which are simply being expressed or released in unhealthy ways. As such, physical and psychological symptoms are not separated, and are instead recognised and treated holistically. Diane drew explicit connections between touch and massage techniques and their psychological effects:

[W]e do do some kind of physical healing practices as well of the *yonis* and the *vajra* or the *lingam* to release trapped trauma there too, that's an active thing that we do, practices to help that release process - because if you can make it more physical then it kind of goes to deeper, more subconscious levels.⁹²

The below advert for a Tantra massage workshop also relates back to the idea of encouraging a healthy flow of (sexual) energy:

All therapeutic massages work on the principle that trauma takes the form of armouring (contracted energy) in the body and that this robs us of our aliveness, creativity and joy. The genitals are no exception to this and this workshop provides a wonderful opportunity to be touched and massaged with loving hands, the intention being to bring balance and energy flow through the entire body...This is truly a gift. (UK Tantra News, June 2017)

Massages are often full-body, but a practitioner can focus on places of tension, or areas of the body that are thought to hold certain traumas – either intuitively, or upon guidance from the client. A woman having issues with menstruation might receive a massage focusing on the lower abdomen, over the uterus area; a self-conscious post-mastectomy woman might receive touch centred around the breast area; while a

⁹² Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

survivor of sexual assault might receive a healing *yoni* or *lingam* massage.⁹³ As one teacher, Dahlia, suggested:

If trauma entered the body physically, it needs to be healed from the body, physically...so you need the same component, however it went in, you need the same component...not to take it away, to lay it to rest. So I absolutely believe that people who have had sexual trespassing, sexual trauma, will need, when they're ready, a beautiful being who is willing to connect with the body physically, touch that part of the body, that absolute part of the body, that was trespassed, and do their work...You're touching the body so that those cells can feel the touch and go "What do you want? What do you want?"... you know? You're touching, you're bringing presence to that area.⁹⁴

Ideally, if the receiver is receiving a full-body massage and feels comfortable enough, they will be naked – clothes obstruct direct tactile contact and are thought to interfere with the process - and massage-givers can also be naked, but might also wear clothing, a sarong, or a light cover-up. Fragrant essential oils are frequently used in the massage, which come with their own web of associated qualities – such as revitalisation, relaxation, or healing.

Different touch techniques can be used by the person giving the massage. For example, one massage workshop I attended used the ideas of 'Earth touch' – which is firm, leads with the palm of the hand, and is good for grounding people and bringing energy levels down – and 'Air touch', which is performed extremely gently, with just the tips of the fingers, to awaken and heighten energy levels. In addition to these two techniques, the direction of touch also makes a difference – directing touch downwards, away from the heart, was soothing and supportive; while directing touch upwards, or toward the heart, was enlivening.

⁹³ There are clearly some very serious ethical implications in conducting touch therapies on the *yoni* (vagina or vulva) or *lingam* (penis; also sometimes referred to as *vajra*) – this is 'touched' on in Chapter 3.

⁹⁴ Interview conducted in Edinburgh, 2nd March 2017.

Tantra practitioners spoke frequently about how massages should be given and received 'without agenda or expectation' (to quote the leader of one of my massage workshops). For the massage receiver, this generally means that the point of the massage is to raise sexual energy in an effort to promote healing – but *not* to aim for an orgasm, as this is understood to release the healing sexual energy. Instead, the energy should be encouraged to circulate around the body, and the person giving the massage should sense when levels of sexual energy in the receiver need to be heightened or lowered. Once a massage finishes, the receiver might be advised to spend some time with their hands placed over their heart and stomach; or their heart and genitals; to encourage the healthy flow of energy within their body.

Sometimes, massage and touch can raise traumas that individuals don't even realise they are still processing. Adaira, for example, spoke to me about going for a Tantric massage (even experienced practitioners will often visit other practitioners for 'top-up' sessions), and how it raised unresolved feelings about a relationship break-up:

...of course the *yonis*, is just such a...an incredible, fascinating, deep, deep, part of us. Which again, holds so much of our experience and can guide us into what we need, an exploration. So for example...I decided to have a Tantra massage myself...with this very beautiful male practitioner who I felt a trust and an energetic connection to, and I had a massage with him, he did *yonis* massage, and it took me into such a space of grief, actually. This was grief for my last relationship. I used to teach with my partner, and we did massage together and stuff like that, and even though it's a few months since the end of our relationship and I thought I was dealing with it really well and all of that, but it showed me where I'm still holding so much sadness in myself. And longing, for connection, and everything else, and it was just...it was phenomenal.⁹⁵

Here, Adaira reinforces the idea that parts of our body (in this case, the *yonis*) can 'hold so much of our experience'. She also raises an important theme in Tantric healing practices (and other touch exercises; as also noted in Chapter 4): that of safety, and

⁹⁵ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

related feelings of having trust in certain individuals in such situations. This was an important idea raised in another massage workshop I attended: before any techniques were demonstrated or tested, we were advised as a group that the first condition for energy to arise is safety – ‘it will not arise unless you feel safe’. In another interview, Adaira and I returned to the topic, on which she elaborated:

For a woman to receive touch from a man that is totally unconditional, is hugely healing. Because the context of the touch is really without agenda, beyond attraction, without any need to reciprocate or to do anything about it afterwards, and in the security of that space it allows a woman to open into a fuller awareness of herself. And she can only do that when there is trust in place. And when she can feel that that touch is being given purely to honour her, and in service to her... And through that service there is a huge potential of healing. And it's healing that happens both at a personal level, for those unique individuals, and I think, at a collective level. Because there is a huge wound between men and women, around what has been taken from women. And when there is this purity of experience, I think it heals the collective as well.⁹⁶

In summary, it is possible to note some features of therapeutic Tantric massages – some obvious, and some not so obvious – but all of which are helpful to this exploration of healing. First, is the importance of (sexual) energy in massages, and how this can be raised and controlled using touch techniques to encourage a healthy and healing flow of energy. Second, is how the concept of sexual energy provides a framework to reinterpret certain sensations (such as pleasure) as positive experiences. Third, is the idea that anyone, even if lacking specific or well-defined trauma, can benefit from Tantric massage, as sometimes issues of which an individual is ostensibly unaware can spontaneously come to the fore. And fourth, is the importance of feelings of safety for any healing to take place.

⁹⁶ Interview conducted in Manchester, 16th September 2017.

Tantric Massage as Ritual Healing

To analyse further how a practice such as Tantric massage might function, it is instructive to look to Thomas Csordas' (2002) account of the healing process. Through an in-depth study of ritual healing in a Catholic Charismatic context, Csordas identifies the objective of ritual healing as 'not elimination of a thing (an illness, a problem, a symptom, a disorder) but transformation of a person, a self that is a bodily being' (Csordas, 2002:3-4). This approach to healing resonates with the very broad definition of 'trauma' found in my own fieldwork in contemporary Tantra – that it might be more oriented toward 'transformation', rather than a well-defined 'cure'. This also reflects themes raised in Chapter 3, wherein participants see involvement in Tantra as an ongoing journey for each participant to negotiate.

Csordas notes that in ritual healing, there are three stages that can be studied: 1) procedure – as in, who does what to whom; 2) process – individual experiences of these encounters; and 3) outcome – whether any form of transformation is effected (Csordas, 2002:12). Of these three, Csordas states, procedure (1) and outcome (3) have been the subject of much attention, whereas the process (2) – individual experiences of encounters - has been somewhat overlooked. Csordas aims to fill this gap, exploring the process of ritual healing by focusing on 'a phenomenology of the transformative process as lived by participants' (Csordas, 2002:12). This is an approach that this chapter aims to replicate, by exploring individual accounts of how Tantric massage can be a method to heal trauma. Csordas' framework of healing follows notions of touch techniques as somatic modes of attention (explored in the previous chapter), and is particularly apt for analysing my fieldwork material. This is largely due to Csordas' idea of healing as a self-process – in this way, his work relates

directly to Tantra's (and my own) focus on the body and touch contributing to women's constructions of selfhood.

In the context of healing, Csordas aims to show the importance of highlighting endogenous processes – that is, processes which occur on the physical and intrapsychic level, originating from the body, such as vision, memory, insight, dissociation, or acute psychotic episodes; as opposed to 'exogenous' processes – those coming from without, such as persuasion or suggestion (Csordas, 2002:18-19). When discussing 'endogenous' processes, Csordas refers to a range of holistic bodily experiences, including those which might be assumed to be primarily 'psychological' or 'physical' – he resists making strict distinctions between the two, aiming to collapse distinctions between body and mind (Csordas, 2002:4). Csordas looks at these endogenous processes alongside a consideration of 'how the processes are activated in therapy, and why different endogenous processes are prevalent in different settings' (Csordas, 2002:24).⁹⁷ Csordas turns to Foucault's discussion of discourse, arguing that the locus of therapeutic efficacy is in the discourses and rhetoric through which endogenous processes are activated and expressed (Csordas, 2002:5,24-25). As such, Csordas hopes to combine accounts of endogenous processes with those factors which operate on 'the level of social persuasion and interpersonal influence and the cultural level of meaning, symbols, and styles of argument', to show how healing is, in his own words, 'an experience of totality' (Csordas, 2002:25). Here, as suggested above, bodily experiences of pleasure (interpreted as the increased presence of sexual energy), are particularly relevant.

⁹⁷ Csordas gives examples of 'exogenous' process, such as persuasion or suggestion; and 'endogenous processes', such as visions, memory, insight, motor dissociation (such as when someone is 'resting in the spirit'), and acute psychotic episodes (Csordas, 2002:18-19;48)

Linking back to somatic modes of attention, as well as how healing might be seen as a process focused on the self and transformation (rather than finding a 'cure'), Csordas notes that:

[H]ealing is contingent upon a meaningful and convincing discourse that brings about a transformation of the phenomenological conditions under which the patient exists and experiences suffering or distress. It can be shown that this rhetoric redirects the supplicant's attention to new aspects of his actions and experiences, or persuades him to attend to accustomed features of action and experience from new perspectives (Csordas, 2002:25).

As such, it is helpful to analyse participant accounts of the Tantric massage experience with reference to the discourses surrounding this, to show how these work together to alter or transform the ways in which individuals understand and experience trauma.

The Primary Community of Reference

Before exploring experiences of Tantric massage as a healing process, we must consider what Csordas identifies as a key background factor for whether healing will be efficacious for an individual: the 'primary community of reference'. This is the community that an individual is situated within, which 'defines the type of problems that require treatment and establishes the criteria under which it will accept one of its members as having been cured' (Csordas, 2002:25). In this case, the primary community of reference is the contemporary Tantra community in Britain, which is in turn situated within the 'holistic milieu', wider British (usually white, middle-class) culture, and is also connected with the wider global Tantra community (primarily in

Europe and North America). Although this community might not be geographically close or meet very regularly, the ideas and themes prevalent therein shape the worldview of individuals involved, and ideas are transferred through participation in workshops, festivals, training courses, and online communities.

As the primary community of reference defines the problems that require treatment (and establishes the criteria for being considered 'healed'), the above discussions of causes of trauma are key. As we have seen, certain instances of trauma in this context become prominent, and thus emerge as phenomena worthy of healing in contemporary Tantra. These discussions above reveal that, in this primary community of reference, the problems that require treatment tend to be those revolving around the body. These factors range from feelings of guilt and disconnection to sexual assault; and despite this range, all are understood to detract from a person's well-being and healthy, stable, autonomous and authentic sense of self, to varying degrees. The problems tend to revolve around the themes of sex and intimacy; and these issues are also gender-specific - women are seen as suffering more directly from certain forms of trauma. Here, the persistent themes evident throughout each chapter so far – of transgression, negotiating gender norms, and sexuality – also come to the fore. I suggest that the prominence of these themes is important in the character and appeal of this primary community of reference and as such, these themes provide a framework for ways in which trauma and healing are understood and addressed.

Once the background – the primary community of reference – has been laid out, it is possible to move on to further exploration of the healing process itself. Csordas suggests that the therapeutic process involves four stages: 1) the disposition of participants; 2) the experience of the 'sacred'; 3) the negotiation of possibilities or

elaboration of alternatives; and 4) the actualisation of change (Csordas, 2002:46). I will use this framework to explore the example of Tantric massage, to demonstrate how this process may (or may not) be effective; how an individual in this context might be considered 'healed'; and how helpful this model can be in analysing contemporary healing practices in the holistic milieu. It is worth noting here that Csordas' framework describes the 'ideal' pattern of healing, where the healing is seen to have a positive effect. If these stages falter or fail for any reason, healing will generally not take place – or worse, forms of trauma could be reinforced and amplified.

Disposition

The (pre)disposition of participants in healing practices is key in deciding whether healing will be efficacious. The individual moving within the primary community of reference 'must be persuaded that healing is possible, that the group's claims in this respect are coherent and legitimate' (Csordas, 2002:27). In exploring individual dispositions, Csordas proposes looking at 'not only psychological states, such as expectancy...but at the disposition of persons within the healing process vis a vis social networks and symbolic resources' (Csordas, 2002:47). As such, a person becoming disposed to the efficacy of certain healing techniques can be comparable to a conversion (Csordas, 2002:29) – rather than being sudden, it can take years for an individual to gradually inhabit this viewpoint. This change in disposition gives potential for healing and transformation to occur – it lays 'the groundwork for activation of the endogenous processes through which the main work of healing is achieved' (Csordas, 2002:30). As mentioned above, the themes of gender norms, sexuality, and transgression are fairly prominent in contemporary Tantra (as the primary community

of reference), which can become part of the appeal for individuals already interested in exploring these areas.

So, how can individuals become disposed to the healing potential of Tantric massages? And how can Tantra practitioners persuade individuals that their healing practices are coherent, legitimate, and above all, possible? One such method of persuasion can be based on previous accounts and testimonials - a number of factors can combine to persuade an individual that healing has occurred in this context before, and is thus possible. Sometimes, groups and workshops are recommended to participants by friends, whose prior experiences vouch for the practices' transformative potential. Even the healthy, happy, relaxed presentation of a teacher; their use of clinical, (pseudo-)scientific language; or their qualifications in fields such as relationship counselling or sex therapy (which many teachers possess) can bring confidence that their practices can really work.

Tantra's relation to counselling, relationship therapy, and sex therapy also lends some legitimacy here, and creates further opportunities for individuals to become disposed to the healing work undertaken therein. Tantra is often set up alongside, and complementary to, more conventional forms of counselling. In most cases, practitioners don't aim to inhabit the same spaces as these treatments, which also provide healing in a similar form. Instead, a common tactic in Tantra is to accept the authority of 'conventional' therapy, but to criticise it for neglecting the body. Counselling is presented as a 'talking therapy' and as such, lacks the holism that Tantra can offer; Tantra claims authority by being related to it, but providing extra benefits by treating the person (and their bodies) as a whole. As such, individuals are persuaded that Tantra can provide the well-known benefits of 'conventional' therapy, along with a reevaluation of the physical body.

Moreover, contemporary Tantra is (generally) exoteric in its offering of therapeutic practices such as massage (as opposed to Csordas' more esoteric Catholic Charismatic groups, wherein individuals usually had to have participated in that community for some time before healing would be conducted). Csordas notes that with exoteric groups, individuals who become involved with them might already be looking for healing – and as such, are already predisposed to their efficacy (Csordas, 2002:27). This becomes even more relevant for women, who – as many of my interviewees noted – tend to turn to Tantra explicitly seeking particular forms of healing.

Broader discourses can also have an influence in the disposition of participants. Here, I suggest that Orientalist understandings of Tantra as an ancient and exotic Eastern tradition (the development of which have been discussed in Chapter 2) also encourage potential supplicants to be disposed to the efficacy of Tantra. These discourses allow Tantra to be presented as an authentic system of Eastern wisdom, removed from the Western world, thus legitimising the practices and ideas involved. This Orientalism provides an 'alternative' for individuals to aim towards, which Lau (2000) suggests is a vital component of the holistic milieu.

Although individuals might be generally predisposed to these forms of healing, more specific claims must also be seen as credible: for example, the idea that sexual energy and pleasure can provide healing experiences. Many people involved in Tantra have previously been involved in other groups or practices in the holistic milieu in which, as noted above, 'energy' is a common theme. As such, many individuals who become involved with contemporary Tantra have already 'made the leap' to experiencing specific effects or functions of 'energy', and it is simply a reconceptualising of this as sexual or pleasurable that needs to be done. For individuals completely new to Tantra

and the wider holistic milieu, it might be much harder to create this change in disposition – which would reflect Csordas' description of this as a slow form of 'conversion', during which the individual is gradually persuaded of the legitimacy of the group's claims. In addition, individuals might be convinced of the powerful potential in sexual energy and pleasure precisely because of their relatively taboo or transgressive nature. Participants are able to recognise the discursive power that these topics hold in contemporary British society (precisely because the topics are generally avoided) and can thus see the potential that they hold. Again, understandings of Tantra as an 'exotic other', opposite to British societal values, can open up avenues for these apparently transgressive behaviours to take place.

On the micro level, the disposition of participants could also change from moment to moment, thus affecting the efficacy of healing practices. The (often) one-on-one relationship between healer and client means that the person receiving the healing must feel safe, as part of the persuasive process that disposes the individual to benefitting from ritual healing. The primary community of reference does prime a person for this, and gradual involvement can help to make a person feel safe in instances such as Tantra workshops and groups. However, the very intimate relationship between 'healer' and 'client' – and how safe the person seeking healing feels - can make the difference between a healing practice being seen as efficacious, or not. The importance of the personal relationship between these individuals cannot be underestimated, and an individual's perception of the healer can be based on a wide range of factors. As mentioned above, a practitioner's previous trainings, credentials, reputation, or even demeanour and comportment can create a good background for potential clients. However, some clients might also have strong opinions on how they expect a practitioner to act, or what they expect them to do,

which, if a practitioner fails to do this, can also prevent the healing process from having a positive effect.

We can see this in the statement made by a teacher (mentioned above) at the start of a massage workshop: that sexual energy 'will not arise unless you feel safe'. Another teacher, Dahlia, also had strong opinions on this topic, and on how an individual seeking healing might search for the right practitioner to treat them (which is worth quoting at length):

I absolutely believe that people who have had sexual trespassing, sexual trauma, will need, when they're ready, a beautiful being who is willing to connect with the body physically, touch that part of the body, that absolute part of the body, that was trespassed, and do their work. Now... in order to find that person, I always say to the ladies, and the men, make sure the one that you choose has a- you have a heart connection with them. Because the touching of the body is just one part...You're touching, you're bringing presence to that area. That's not going to do the healing. What's going to do the healing is this *almighty* tsunami of love. Love is what heals...

...The mistake I see people make, is they choose their practitioner because they *fancy* their practitioner [*laughs*] and then it gets even more complicated because the sexual part of you is getting touched, which is going to awaken sexual energy, and because you *fancy* your practitioners, you're already projecting and expecting and so when that level of love comes and it's not the romantic version, that person gets all upset again... and the healing hasn't happened, in fact it's gone a bit deeper. 'Cause now you're getting entangled...

...[*laughs*] obviously I have a lot of opinions, it doesn't mean I'm talking the truth. I'm just trying to save people from what I see. So I say to the ladies who've got entangled with a male practitioner...next time, choose a woman. And then that part isn't going to get awakened. Choose a beautiful woman who you love and trust, and you can feel her heart's presence and she's a professional, and she's going to do this well, and if anything there's a little bit of *mother* energy there. That's how you heal physical sexual abuse. At this level, it's too delicate to go with a male practitioner. I don't think any of us humans are able to administer that kind of qualitative care that must take place for the sexual abuse energy to leave...So what's the best way? Stick with your own gender whilst we do our sexual healing and then men and women will be able to facilitate true and decent healing. But at the moment, in my opinion it's still a bit dodgy.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Interview conducted in Edinburgh, 2nd March 2017.

Aside from the overwhelming heteronormativity at play in this account, as well as the very serious ethical problems involved with treating sexual trauma, we can see that for Dahlia, gender plays a significant role in whether someone will be considered 'safe' to another. Men are less likely to be trusted by women to conduct this healing process on women in a 'proper' way. As such, being disposed to healing clearly also involves a feeling of safety for the supplicant that can arise from, or be destroyed by, a myriad of sources.

Experience of the 'Sacred' as Sexual Energy

Once trust is in place and the individual is somewhat disposed to the healing process, comes the next stage: experience of the 'sacred'. At some point in the healing process, 'the supplicant must be persuaded that the therapy is efficacious – that [s]he is experiencing the healing effects of spiritual power' (Csordas, 2002:27). Rather than following Csordas here by referring to the 'sacred', I will instead keep these instances of healing specific to Tantra, and refer to experiences of 'sexual energy', which is understood as the healing force. These perceived manifestations of sexual energy become apparent in the aforementioned endogenous processes (e.g. a person feeling pleasure) and, shaped by discourse, these are activated, experienced and interpreted (Csordas, 2002:24).

Csordas puts forward that the ways in which individuals will experience effects or manifestations of the 'sacred' (in this case, sexual energy) will differ between healing systems and their repertoire of components that are considered legitimate manifestations of power (Csordas, 2002:47-48). For Csordas, 'the concrete experience of the sacred is not an experience of the supernatural but a transformed

way of attending to the human world' (Csordas, 2002:49). Following this, during healing touch practices in Tantra (in this case, Tantric massage), when an individual experiences sexual energy, they interpret these endogenous experiences using a concept that makes sense in this context - sexual energy's healing power. This is particularly relevant for healing techniques which make use of the sense of touch, such as massage - following Mauss, Csordas states that the most immediate way to persuade people of the 'sacred' (or in this case, sexual energy; in Csordas' study, he refers to the holy spirit through the Pentecostal laying on of hands) is to involve their bodies (Csordas, 2002:30). Similarly, Meredith McGuire has noted how 'bodily experiences produce a confirmation that what one is experiencing is real, not just imaginary' (McGuire, 2008:102). This is echoed by some online literature produced by Tantra practitioners: 'For the big shifts...doing facilitated work IN the body, OF the body, is an essential component' (McCluskey, 2018).

Here, the notion of sexual energy (and the endogenous processes accompanying it, such as sensations of pleasure) as healing is pivotal. As mentioned above, certain touch practices aimed at raising sexual energy elicit somatic reactions from the participants – for example, physical feelings of sexual arousal, or tingling limbs. Other endogenous processes can also be produced, such as 'streaming', an occurrence wherein an individual (often lying on the floor) shakes throughout their entire body, as if energy were streaming straight through them, from head to toe. Other processes arise in the form of involuntary vocal noises such as groans and moans; shudders; or less visible physical reactions, such as feelings of arousal, the body relaxing and loosening up; or even unexpected emotional reactions, like Adaira's aforementioned grief. Such sensations, according to Csordas, 'are a sign, not that power is being transferred between individuals, but an affirmation that power is indeed being manifested, and an assurance to both healer and supplicant that the ritual is being

correctly performed' (Csordas, 2002:32). As such, experiencing these sensations is interpreted as confirmation that the sexual energy is being raised, and thus, that transformation is possible.

Of course, these endogenous processes need to be interpreted in a way that shows that the sensations experienced through the massage or touch will indeed provide healing. The discourses and rhetoric around these practices must show that such endogenous processes are positive developments – which is where the idea of a 'healthy' flow of sexual energy becomes important. As the individual experiences sensations such as pleasure, these experiences are affirmed by interpreting them as sexual energy beginning to circulate more freely, removing blockages and traumas.

It is also of use here to draw links with Csordas' somatic modes of attention, explored in the previous chapter. Tantric massage, heavily involving touch, can be seen as a clear example of a somatic mode of attention, and by looking at this, it is possible to see how these modes of attention can change through the activation of certain discourses, affirmed by experiencing endogenous processes such as sexual energy and pleasure. Looking at the notion of somatic modes of attention with reference to ritual healing (transformation) allows us to see how somatic modes of attention can be altered.

Elaboration of Alternatives/Negotiation of Possibilities

The third stage of healing put forward by Csordas is the elaboration of alternatives and negotiation of possibilities. The task of healing is 'to create alternatives by changing the 'assumptive world' (Frank, 1973) of the afflicted' (Csordas, 2002:49):

providing a new world, and different discourses within which the individual can become situated, thus changing their experiences and interpretations of trauma. This 'transformation of the phenomenological conditions under which the patient exists' (Csordas, 2002:25) redirects the participants' attention, creates new meanings for them, and begins to move them into a new world (Csordas, 2002:25). It is this rhetoric - a change in discourse, which is able to alter individual's experiences and their interpretations of them – which healing and transformation in these contexts is contingent upon.

Here, it is useful to look to the work of Hinton, Howes and Kirmayer (2008), who use Csordas' model of healing, with a specific focus on how the senses play a role – and particularly the sense of touch. Hinton, Howes and Kirmayer describe traumatic memories as 'somatic flashbacks' (2008:152), and emphasise how sensations can be a 'key site of memory-making', and 'powerful anchors for episodic memories' (Hinton et al, 2008:154). They posit the idea of a 'sensation interpretant': 'that which allows a sensation to be interpreted at a given moment, that is, the mental imagery, schemas, memories, and ideas evoked by a sensation' (Hinton et al, 2008:152). These sensation interpretants are able to change the 'sensation scripts' activated when an individual has certain experiences – the 'sensation schema activated (chosen) upon having a sensation will commonly identify specific social constructs or scenarios and lead to certain actions. Such scripts may have multiple other effects, such as serving to construct and position the self in terms of specific forms of (bodily) experience and identity' (Hollan, 2004; in Hinton et al, 2008:152).

According to Hinton et al, '[e]very culture (and each individual) has available various sensation scripts or stories that are activated by specific social contexts and that embed sensations in a larger web of meanings and expectations. The scripts

associated with a sensation will vary greatly owing to individual life experiences' (Hinton et al. 2008:153) – as such, Tantra provides an alternative script for individuals to interpret experiences. In addition, discourses of transgression in contemporary Tantra legitimate the construction and exploration of these new sensation interpretants. Using the work of Hinton et al, we can see how Tantric massage (and the web of concepts surrounding it, such as sexual energy) can act as a 'sensation interpretant', a means of opening up alternatives and new possibilities, thus allowing experiences of touch to 'acquire new metaphoric expressions, memory associations, attributions of cause, emotional resonances, and experiential consequences' (Hinton and Hinton, 2002; Kirmayer, 2002, 2007).

Here, it is helpful to return to the causes of trauma explored earlier in this chapter: the imposition of mind/body boundaries, shame and social norms, and the compromising of bodily boundaries. By looking at the alternative discourses suggested during an event such as a Tantric massage, we can see how possibilities are negotiated in this context.

With regards to the imposition of mind/body boundaries (and the feelings of passivity accompanying this) understood as a form of trauma, Tantric massage appeals to the individual holistically. By touching the entire body of the person and thus making a person acutely aware of their own bodily sensations and processes, an appeal is made to holistic union, rather than division. Individuals are encouraged to bring 'awareness' or 'consciousness' to different parts of the body, thus tying together the body and mind. Csordas notes a similar process in the Pentecostal laying on of hands, stating that 'it is the appeal to totality embodied in physical union rather than the magical transfer of power wherein lies much of the persuasiveness of the gesture' (Csordas, 2002:31).

Similarly, with regards to shame, or feelings of restriction under social norms, we can also see how Tantric massage can create sensation interpretants, leading to new possibilities and the potential for transformation - particularly in how the massage process provides a new, gender-specific discourse of how women can look and act. This is clear in ideas of Shakti – sometimes known as the Divine Feminine – which is a feminine power, and is often equated with kundalini (sexual energy). In this discourse, Shakti is the essence of femininity. She incorporates ‘typically’ feminine characteristics such as sensuousness, maternalism, and receptiveness; but is also powerful, overtly sexual, occasionally fierce, not passive (often, goddesses such as Kali and Bhairavi are referenced to illustrate femininity’s powerful aspects).⁹⁹ Invoking the idea of Shakti allows women to take on an expanded version of what ‘ideal’ femininity represents, thus giving them an alternative discourse to assimilate. Through this alternative discourse, they can feel freer in their choices, assured of their behaviours, and proud of their (sexual) desires. This relates back to an earlier quote from Adaira, who spoke about the ignorance around female sexuality leading women to believe that there was something wrong with them if they weren’t able to achieve orgasm; when these women were taught how to experience this differently, they were seen as being ‘cured’ to some extent.

As Shakti is equated with (or at least closely related to) kundalini, stirrings of pleasure or arousal, interpreted as sexual energy moving, are then equated with a stirring of Shakti, powerful female energy, which the individual can then embody. This also opens up new avenues for ideas about how women should look, and women are given permission to feel proud of their bodies and their capabilities (for example, women

⁹⁹ It is worth noting here that in contemporary Tantra, Kali and Bhairavi are generally seen as empowering and liberatory figures; even though historically, their images were often the product of a male gaze, wherein some forms and behaviours of these goddesses were seen as acceptable, while others were suppressed.

whose stomachs show signs of previous pregnancies – a cause of low body confidence – are given opportunities to feel proud of the strength required to give birth). Similarly, Csordas has noted how touch techniques allow Catholics to be relieved of guilt, through reinterpreting certain experiences (Csordas, 2002:24). With regards to instances of bodily boundaries being threatened and transgressed (in cases of sexual or physical abuse), sensation interpretants can give participants potentially different ways to interpret the incidents; by way of allowing an individual to feel like a survivor, rather than victim.

Actualisation of Change

The final stage of Csordas' healing process is the actualisation of change – the transformation itself, and the ways in which an individual experiences differently, post-healing ritual. Transformation is actualised 'when the supplicant is persuaded to change basic cognitive, affective, and behavioural patterns...[and] this movement amounts to a reconstruction of self' (Csordas, 2002:34). Confirming whether transformation has been actualised is tricky, relying on self-reports from the individual, or observations of their bodily behaviours and reactions to stimuli. Csordas emphasises that this transformation can be incremental and inconclusive – and goes as far as to question whether the end point of a 'cure' is ever realised – instead, he suggests that 'perhaps there is no therapeutic outcome, only therapeutic process' (Csordas, 2002:46,51).

In the context of contemporary Tantra, evidence of transformation – or healing – can be seen in practitioners' accounts of improved relationships with intimate partners; a reported increased sense of openness with others; or fewer reported feelings of

shame or guilt about their bodies and sexual activity. However, this transformation will most often be expressed in terms of a person feeling a change in their sense of self – to feeling more empowered, liberated, complete, authentic, and autonomous. Csordas' suggestion that a 'cure' might never be reached also intersects nicely with a common narrative in Tantra (and the wider holistic milieu) of such endeavours being a constant journey of self-improvement. Indeed, bringing healing into everyday life, Csordas suggests that the therapeutic process can transcend the healing event and continue as an 'everyday self process'. He states, 'the recognition of healing is a modulation of orientation in the world, so that one monitors one's symptoms and responds to them by modifying one's activities. (Csordas, 1994:70).

Taken as a whole, Csordas' analysis of the therapeutic process 'treats healing as a discourse that activates and gives meaningful form to endogenous physiological and psychological healing processes in the patient. The net effect is to redirect the patient's attention to various aspects of his or her life in such a way as to create new meaning for that life and a transformed sense of being a whole and well person' (Csordas, 2002:53). Some Tantra practitioners seem to be keenly aware of this process, expressing it in the following terms:

Remember that transformation happens through really seeing, knowing, feeling and recognising the extent of our past pain and past conditioning, and then choosing something new, something pleasurable, in the here and now (Lightwoman, 2004:210).

Actually, if the intention is to offer the body a different way of being, it can be an incredibly subtle process, a slow, gentle unwinding over time, a letting go of tightness, tension and holding (McCluskey, 2018).

This was echoed by Adaira, who shared her thoughts about women who come to her for Tantric massage sessions and workshops:

[I]n my experience, all of the women who have come to me thinking that there is something wrong with them, have discovered that when they are touched in a really loving way, without any agenda and with real awareness of female arousal and the body, they've got it *all* going on [*laughs*]. They just never had the right space before, to experience it. And that is huge, actually.¹⁰⁰

Adaira seems to echo Csordas' theory that [ritual] healing is dependent on a change in perspective on the behalf of the sufferer. In her account, women who come to her seeking healing are given opportunities and space to encounter potential alternatives and negotiate possibilities (as above). When they are able to do this, they discover through the use of touch techniques, that 'they've got it *all* going on' - that is, they 'discover' that there is no longer a problem- or even that there wasn't a problem to begin with. As such, this change in perspective constitutes an experience of healing not in the sense that the individual is 'cured', but in the sense of transformation: that they have been able to make positive changes in their perceptions of experiences and themselves. This mirrors Csordas' suggestion that healing is a process of 'redirecting the supplicant's attention...in order to achieve the construction of a self that is healthy, whole, and holy' (Csordas, 2002:34). As touch techniques work on several levels - the intimate and personal, as well as public and social - Tantric massage is able to address a wide range of factors that can be seen as causing trauma.

¹⁰⁰ Interview conducted in Manchester, 11th July 2017.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have illustrated the significance of touch techniques to the process of healing, in the context of contemporary Tantra. By first looking at what is understood to constitute an experience of trauma, and the forms that this takes, we begin to construct a picture of how individuals in contemporary Tantra interpret trauma, and how they identify an issue in need of healing. Identifying understandings of trauma also shows how these experiences are gendered. By focusing more specifically on one practice in Tantra – Tantric massage – I show how the healing process works to counteract trauma, by changing how the individual interprets their experiences, thus effecting some form of positive improvement.

Using Thomas Csordas' model of ritual healing, it is possible to analyse the touch-based practice of Tantric massage in more detail. Identifying common discourses in the primary community of reference (i.e. contemporary Tantra movements) highlights how the prominent themes of sex, transgression, and gender influence individual experiences of trauma and healing. This also shows how the primary community of reference emphasises the ideal of total well-being and an empowered, autonomous, healthy sense of self, thus defining when healing is understood to have taken place. In this community, sexual energy is presented as a potent force, paving the way for later experiences to be interpreted using this concept. An individual must then be persuaded that these ideas are legitimate – which can be done partly through understanding Tantric practices through Orientalist representations, as an ancient, exotic tradition - in order to dispose them to the healing process.

The experience of sexual energy (roughly equating to Csordas' 'experience of the sacred') is then crucial to the healing process. Through touch techniques, bodily

sensations (endogenous processes) such as pleasure are induced and must be interpreted in certain ways. Notions put forward by the primary community of reference make such interpretations possible, and in this case, pleasure is understood as a positive experience of sexual energy, thus convincing the individual that the techniques are efficacious. Once a participant is persuaded that sexual energy is present, they can begin to elaborate alternative ways of interpreting traumatic experiences and memories. At this point, an individual's 'sensation scripts' can be changed, utilising discourses prominent in the primary community of reference, to positively alter their associations to certain stimuli. Finally, this process of healing is actualised when the individual changes these behavioural, cognitive, and affective patterns – which amounts to 'a reconstruction of self' (Csordas, 2002:34).

Through this analysis of Tantric massage (and other touch techniques) as ritual healing, it is possible to see how tactility is used to address experiences understood as traumatic: perceived divisions between mind and body; social norms dictating appropriate behaviour; and transgressions of physical boundaries (i.e. assault), all of which result in a feeling of loss of control over one's boundaries to some extent. As touch induces experiences of sexual energy, individuals are provided with frameworks to positively reinterpret these experiences, thus allowing them to achieve a sense of empowerment and autonomy. This is an ongoing process of transformation, rather than a search for a definitive 'cure'; and in turn, contributes to the wider project of selfhood that is so key to contemporary Tantra.

Chapter 6: Ecstasy and Selfhood

Introduction

Previous chapters of this thesis have explored how touch can be an affirmation of the physical body; a way of exploring and exerting control over boundaries; and a way to heal psychological and physical ailments, all directed toward the continual goal of constructing a holistic, authentic, and autonomous sense of self. These ideas have primarily been explored using Thomas Csordas' theories of embodiment, healing, and somatic modes of attention. The previous chapter also 'touched' on how sexual energy can be a profoundly powerful force for healing and transformation – a process of reconstruction of the self (Csordas, 2002). Moving forward, it is important to address more explicitly that which contemporary Tantra is perhaps most (in)famous for: sexual activity, and ecstatic states achieved through this.

Using fieldwork data and primary literature, this chapter will show how touch – inducing pleasurable sensations, interpreted as sexual energy - can be used to achieve ecstatic states. Here, the following quote from Constance Classen's *The Book of Touch* becomes pertinent:

I do think...that scholars of culture have been too quick to dismiss or debunk pleasure, a sensation which offers both the most self-affirming and self-transcending of experiences, which is culturally elaborated in endless variations, and which we seek relentlessly throughout our lives (Classen, 2005:69)

Following Classen, if we interpret the previous chapter on healing as addressing 'self-affirming' experiences of pleasure, then one might assume that a chapter on intense experiences of pleasure – ecstasy – would address the 'self-transcending' experiences. However, this chapter will show that describing ecstatic experiences in

contemporary Tantra as 'self-transcending' is somewhat misleading. Instead, I argue that experiences of ecstasy in this context in fact work to *affirm* the new, transformed, or reconstructed sense of self that individuals create (the process of which is discussed throughout Chapters 4 and 5), thus directly contributing to Tantra practitioners' ongoing projects of selfhood.

To explore how ecstasy plays a role in Tantra practitioners' construction of a sense of self, this chapter turns back to the work of Paul Heelas regarding the 'sacralisation of the self' in holistic spirituality. As ecstatic states can be experienced by practitioners as instances of intense self-awareness or self-perception, I argue that these experiences work to sacralise the self. The emphasis on personal experience noted by Heelas is crucial here, as individuals interpret such states as direct experience of the 'self'. In addition, as this experience is understood to come from within the individual (rather than being mediated through external sources), the person can understand that, in Heelas' words, 'I am my own authority' (1996:21). Although these experiences of ecstasy are temporary, their effects (particularly on participants' sense of self) are reinforced in everyday life, thus providing lasting affirmation of this altered sense of self.

To illustrate this process, this chapter explores how ecstasy in contemporary Tantra can be interpreted as the culmination of a dedicated and committed training of the senses (particularly touch), which creates processes such as transformation, healing, and the raising of sexual energy described in previous chapters. As such, experiences of ecstasy are not times at which the self is transcended (in the sense of being 'left behind'), but are instead times at which the self, as an embodied whole, is acutely perceived and experienced. Through looking at common themes weaving through practitioners' accounts of ecstasy – namely connection, expansion, transformation,

and danger – I will show how women in contemporary Tantra present experiences of ecstasy as instances of significant and lasting self-affirmation.

In a chapter making constant reference to ‘sexual ecstasy’, it is important to consider what ‘ecstasy’ refers to in this context. Here, I use ‘ecstasy’ to refer to ‘the experience of an emotional state that is self-referential: ecstasy is experienced as such. Ecstasy as an emotional experience thus is based on awareness, not on amnesia...In this regard, ecstasy as an emotion differs from possession, hypnosis, or trance, of which the person often has no memory’ (Malinar and Basu, 2007:244). This definition of ecstasy, centred around awareness during ecstatic experiences (and thus conducive to both this chapter’s argument, and this thesis’ focus on the senses), will be expanded later; first, I would like to foreground descriptions of ecstasy encountered during my fieldwork.

Ecstasy and Orgasm

From my fieldwork it became clear that experiences of pleasure and ecstasy are an important component of many committed Tantra practitioners’ regular practice. From conversations with teachers, observations in the field, and an exploration of primary literature, the role of ecstasy (and specifically sexual ecstasy) is clearly in need of elaboration, particularly in a thesis centred around the sense of touch. This need for elaboration is furthered by popular perceptions of contemporary Tantra as centred solely on sexual activity (and discussed in Chapters 1 and 3); to ignore this aspect of Tantra would, I feel, be a significant oversight. My aim here is not to propagate these popular perceptions of Tantra, but to add nuance and detail through the voices and

experiences of practitioners. Describing the importance of ecstasy in contemporary Tantra, one prominent teacher writes:

In a sense, all Tantra is ultimately about ecstasy; it is about following our hearts and the truth of our own bodies, and moving beyond the rigid limitations imposed by our minds...sexual ecstasy happens when the pleasure, joy and intimacy of sex expand to the degree that we experience a perceptual shift; we open to a greater experience of ourselves (Lightwoman, 2004:230-231; emphasis added)

From this, we can gain three key points: first, the central role that ecstasy is granted in contemporary Tantra; second, how the body and senses continue to be emphasised in these practices; and third, how experiences of ecstasy can affect individuals' perceptions of their sense of self.

For the purpose of this research, one particularly useful way to explore ecstasy in contemporary Tantra is by focusing on how orgasms are induced, experienced and interpreted. I make the important caveat here that orgasm is by no means necessary in experiences of sexuality, eroticism, ecstasy, or pleasure – however, it is a commonly-experienced and discussed phenomena within this context which can provide some focus to this study. The importance of orgasms in the practice of contemporary Tantra – much like almost any other feature – varies between practitioners. However, it is possible to note the 'special' status that they are often given within this milieu. As Osho, perhaps the most well-known proponent of Tantra, stated:

As far as spiritual growth is concerned, orgasm is a necessity...Orgasm is nature's indication that you contain within yourself a tremendous amount of blissfulness. It simply gives you a taste – then you can go on the search (Osho 2002:38-39)

Not all Tantra practitioners accept Osho as a source of authority. However, he did have a significant influence – both directly and indirectly – on the field. Although other

Tantra practitioners might not go as far as describing orgasm as necessary to spiritual growth, sexual techniques involving forms of orgasm are often presented as the pinnacle of developing practice. In addition, an inability to experience orgasm is commonly interpreted as an indicator of underlying trauma in need of healing (as discussed in Chapter 5). This suggests that an individual capable of experiencing orgasms has achieved a sense of self that is empowered, healthy, and autonomous.

Two Types of Orgasm

To discuss the potential of orgasms in more detail, it is first important to distinguish how, and which, orgasms might lead to ecstatic experiences. Many Tantra practitioners make a distinction between (to borrow terminology from one of my respondents) ‘explosive’ and ‘implosive’ orgasms. In simple terms, ‘explosive’ orgasms are those which many people experience during ‘normal’ sexual activity, wherein sexual energy is understood to be released from the body during climax. On the other hand, ‘implosive’ orgasms (also referred to as ‘internal’, ‘full-body’, or ‘subtle’, amongst other things) require practice and training – but can also lead to the most intense blissful, ecstatic, or transcendent experiences, during which sexual energy is thought to circulate within the body during a prolonged period of time. It is at this point that orgasms move from the realm of pleasure, to the realm of ecstasy.

As Tantra teacher Diane explained to me:

I remember when I first came to Tantra I had this thing that my orgasms were not very big and I wanted to do something that made my orgasms bigger... but actually I think there are different kinds of orgasm, and lots of people will talk about this. I mean you can have an orgasm that's very physical, in the physical body, or you can have it on a more subtle level, in the subtle body. The same with intimacy. This can be at different levels, and the non-standard, expanded levels, however you want to describe them,

they tend to be...more subtle but they are more...ecstatic...But you need an idea of what ecstatic means, they are more...amazing is probably the right word, more like "wow!"¹⁰¹

Another teacher, Adrienne, attempted to describe these 'internal' orgasms to me:

In Tantra, those are the orgasms that we aim to have, we aim to have these internal orgasms that are naturally subliming, and will move – basically what I mean by sublimation is movement of energy from the lower chakras...and this is what leads to...full body orgasms, out of body experiences, blissful states, feeling like you've reached union with god - basically leads to stages of *samadhi*, enlightenment.¹⁰²

The views of these teachers are also echoed in primary literature in the field. To turn again to Margo Anand's seminal text, *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy* (the title of which is more pertinent now than ever):

In the Ecstatic Response you learn how to generate high levels of sexual arousal that are followed, just before the point of orgasmic release, by complete stillness of mind...This prepares you for a full-body orgasm...Instead of a localised genital release, you experience a prolonged sense of subtle, continuous, wavelike pulsations that spread through the body, resulting in the impression that you are melting into your partner. In this state the orgasmic sensations are no longer exclusively dependent on genital interaction but are often perceived as an altered state of consciousness. (Anand, 1990:29-30)

We can see in the above accounts of practitioners that one type of orgasm is constructed as somewhat 'mundane' and another set apart as 'special'. These 'implosive', 'full-body', 'internal', 'subtle' orgasms can be seen (and are often described by Tantra practitioners) as experiences of ecstasy. This might not seem particularly revolutionary – indeed, many previous studies have noted the potential of sexual activity, particularly orgasm, to create experiences of ecstasy (for example, Olivelle, 1997; McDaniel, 2018). However, academic literature seems to show some reluctance to seriously delve into why and how sexual activities such as these occur

¹⁰¹ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

¹⁰² Interview conducted in London, 21st October 2016.

within contemporary Tantra. Although the sexual nature of practices have been widely noted in previous academic literature, details are scarce, and practitioner accounts of these experiences have been particularly lacking.

'Techniques of Ecstasy'

Before recounting the pleasurable or ecstatic experiences themselves, it is important to note the techniques and practices used to induce these heightened, impulsive orgasmic states that are interpreted as experiences of ecstasy. Note that my examples here refer overwhelmingly to orgasms experienced with one other partner, as these were the experiences practitioners recounted to me most frequently – but many people may also choose to practice alone or in groups to reach these ecstatic states, and as such, interpretations of practices can be moulded accordingly.

Some practices recounted in previous chapters can provide clues: for example, intimate partner activities such as a Melting Hug will frequently be used as a 'warm-up' activity; or techniques such as the Five Senses Ritual can be used to stimulate each partner's senses before moving on to other, more intimate, activities. These activities are understood to begin the process of rousing sexual energy (*kundalini*), and the pleasure derived from these sensory experiences is seen as positive confirmation that sexual energy is 'on the move'. Indeed, in some rarer cases, these 'warm-up' practices can be enough to trigger an ecstatic experience in participants. The senses – and particularly the sense of touch – again come to the fore, and are key in altering the state of the individual (body and mind in combination), orienting them toward an experience of ecstasy.

Tantra teacher Isabella described how her and her partner might begin the process:

...by Tantric sex, I mean...I don't mean that we have to light incense or put a specific music or whatever, but it is to put consciousness and total presence in our interaction. So with a lot of eye contact, making it ritualistic in the way of undressing, being very deliberate and very present, as if we're unwrapping the best gift of our lives, while we undress the other. So to be really present in every moment and every interaction, and mostly not being goal-oriented. So not going - in our sensual interaction – not going straight to the genitals, or if we are there at the genitals, not go for a climax, for an orgasm, but to savour, to enjoy every sensation...¹⁰³

From Isabella's description, the importance of being aware of the senses emerges. She also notes another common, related theme discussed by practitioners – the idea of being 'present' and 'conscious' during these interactions: taking time, moving at a relaxed pace, focusing intently on your immediate surroundings and experiences, and taking pleasure in each bodily sensation that arises. This echoes the definition of ecstasy raised in the introduction to this chapter: that it is 'based on awareness, not on amnesia' (Malinar and Basu, 2007:244). Harriet conveys a similar point:

To begin with I was like, 'It's got to be in *yab yum* with candles and incense and hardly any friction, that's the way you make Tantric love'...And now I'm kind of...I've experienced such a breadth of perspective that I'm clear for me that there is no right or wrong way - so do it in *yab yum* with candles if you want, do it in stilettos and suspenders and a peekaboo bra if you want, it really doesn't matter, just so long as you're really, really present with yourself while you're doing whatever you're doing...the only thing I can do that's detrimental to myself is to *not be* with myself whilst I'm engaged in *anything*, sex or anything else.¹⁰⁴

Interestingly, Harriet conveys the idea that practices are almost inconsequential, as long as the individuals involved are 'present' - however, it is also clear that certain bodily techniques are used to induce this mindset.

¹⁰³ Interview conducted in Bristol, 9th March 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Interview conducted in Glastonbury, 10th June 2017.

Another practice prevalent in contemporary Tantric literature is hinted at in Harriet's reference to *yab yum* above. *Yab yum* (also sometimes referred to as *maithuna*¹⁰⁵) refers to symbolically powerful representations of the sexual union between male and female deities, common in Tibetan Buddhism and popularised in contemporary Tantra. In these representations, the deities face each other, and the female's legs are wrapped around the male, usually in a seated position. In contemporary Tantric literature – and again, Margo Anand appears to be the first popular source for this specific practice – the *yab yum* position is used in a ritual known as 'Riding the Wave of Bliss'. Riding the Wave of Bliss is a ritual wherein a couple (usually male and female, as Tantra tends to be overwhelmingly heteronormative, as discussed in Chapter 1) engages in sexual intercourse in the seated *yab yum* position. Anand describes in a detailed step-by-step process how the ritual requires extensive training and preparation (physical and psychological), but when done correctly, can result in an ecstatic experience for the couple involved, with sexual energy moving in a continuous flow between their two bodies (Anand, 1990:406-417).

Characteristics of Ecstatic Experiences

To show how experiences of ecstasy can affect Tantra practitioners' constructions of selfhood – and following this thesis' focus on embodiment and the experiences of practitioners – it is important to look at how such occurrences are described by practitioners. This section highlights several themes that became prominent when discussing ecstasy during my fieldwork. Needless to say, this list is certainly not

¹⁰⁵ Traditionally, *maithuna* (Sanskrit) refers to the act of sexual union more generally, and is less indicative of sexual position than *yab-yum* (Tibetan); even so, in contemporary Tantra the terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

exhaustive, and I am confident that other Tantra practitioners would describe sexual ecstasy in various other ways. By looking at the key themes that arose during these conversations, I aim to eventually show how experiences of ecstasy can play a role in an individual's sense of self. However, as I will discuss, these links between ecstasy and selfhood weren't always self-evident; and in addition, exploring this theme also led me to reflect more carefully on my method of choice – that of embodied ethnography.

The sections below explore particular features of ecstatic experiences that were commonly discussed with me in interviews with Tantra practitioners. Where appropriate, this has been supplemented with primary literature, to emphasise the commonalities between experiences of ecstasy in this context. Of course, there is also a possibility that common themes and descriptions of ecstasy given in the primary literature have an effect on how individuals understand and experience ecstasy and orgasms, thus setting a 'script' for how these experiences develop.

Connection with a Partner

One of the most common themes that arose in descriptions of ecstatic experiences was that of intimate connection with a partner. On one level, orgasm is experienced as connection with others in this world – for example, connection with a partner or loved one during sexual intercourse. As explored briefly in the earlier chapter on 'touch', touch exercises (particularly those involved in sexual activities) are a direct way to facilitate physical connection between two people. Further to this, rather than simply feeling connected to – in the sense of in contact with – the other, the boundaries between the two are felt to break down completely, leading to a total

merging of individuals. It is this total dissolution of boundaries between one individual and another that can make the experience 'ecstatic', as such sensations are normally unachievable in 'everyday' life. Diane attempted to describe this combination of ecstasy and connection with an intimate partner:

We do some breathing exercises where you feel the breath and it actually physically feels really almost like you're sexually penetrated, but very gently and smoothly without any friction or whatever. It gives me ...a real sense of how the energy of the sexual experience is in its pure form without any physicality or friction or anything like that, and that's quite an ecstatic experience in itself, because it's just an extraordinary feeling, and it's an extraordinary sense of connection with your partner...¹⁰⁶

Similarly, Margo Anand describes the first time that she experienced what she later understood to be 'Tantric love-making':

Suddenly we both seemed to be floating in an unbounded space filled with warmth and light. The boundaries between our bodies dissolved and, along with them, the distinctions between man and woman. We were one. The experience became timeless, and we seemed to remain like this forever...There was nothing to do, nothing to achieve. We were in ecstasy. (Anand, 1990:2-3)

Anand describes how the boundaries between her own and her partners' bodies dissolved, with sensations of pleasure allowing such intense connection that the two individual bodies felt indistinguishable. In this practice, the (sexual) energy is believed to flow in a circular stream not just within individual bodies, but between the two connected bodies, uniting them into the same entity, as in the 'Riding the Wave of Bliss' ritual.

¹⁰⁶ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

This sense of connection has also been noted by June McDaniel, who states that experiences of orgasm during Tantric practices may occasionally evoke an altered sense of identity, in those events in which people feel themselves merging into each other or “becoming one flesh,” and in those cases where people temporarily lose any sense of personal identity’ (McDaniel, 2018). McDaniel particularly notes the temporary loss of a sense of identity during these experiences – something that shall be discussed in more detail later.

Connection with an ‘Other’

In addition to the aforementioned sense of connection with a partner, sexual ecstasy was frequently experienced as a sense of connection with some form of ‘Other’ or ‘absolute’ underlying existence, variously described as the universe, god, nature, or the cosmos. As one newsletter advert states:

Moving into the trans-personal, as we discover that whether we are experiencing a moment of presence in nature, the exquisiteness of taste or the embrace of a lover, all are aspects of the divine. Here the Tantric realizes the capacity to transcend making love with self or another and instead begins to make love to all of life only to discover that in so doing they are making love to God, the God within and without. Here we become the Divine Lover. (UK Tantra News, September 2017)

Tantra teachers also recounted similar sensations during ecstatic, sexual experiences. Again, Diane attempted to articulate her personal experiences of ecstasy:

There is an exercise that we do where we take the energy up to the chakras and we do it quite sexually, with a man behind the woman, and I’ve had some really extraordinary experiences there, of just feeling that my whole, if you like, life energy, sexual energy has just taken me out to the cosmos and I’m kind of communing with god.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

Adrienne echoed these themes during a conversation about why practitioners aim to achieve these ecstatic states:

...that's the purpose of sexual union, is to dissolve the ego, and to *reveal* yourself, to surrender and through that to rise up in union with god. So, we're creating this union here on the physical plane but ultimately it's a spiritual union between *Shiva* and *Shakti*.¹⁰⁸

Later in our conversation, Adrienne returned to the topic:

...the entire almost first year of practicing Tantric sex with my husband and then also with myself and self-pleasure, it was...wow. I mean, I'd cry every single time... it's realising, it's realising that there *is* this greater power, there is something that has got your back, there is a greater- that you *are* loved, that you will always be loved, you know? And that you're a fool, or I at least was, a fool for so long to believe anything less than that.

As evidenced by Diane and Adrienne, experiences of 'communing' or 'uniting' with god aren't necessarily distinct from connection with a partner – indeed, intimacy and a trusting relationship with another can encourage these sensations, and can even be *necessary* to inducing these experiences. Being able to trust another individual to such an extent, and feeling safe enough with them to entirely let go of boundaries, can be an intensely liberating experience for both individuals, echoing the necessity of trust in the healing and transformation process discussed in previous chapters. There are individuals who give accounts of achieving these levels of ecstasy alone; but the emphasis is generally on having a partner (or partners) with whom to practice.

In both cases, connection is perhaps not the best term to encapsulate the phenomena: connection here also involves a loss of bodily boundaries; a merging with something outside of the individual physical body (described in the above quotes

¹⁰⁸ Interview conducted in London, 21st October 2016.

as 'god' and 'the cosmos'); as well as intense or unusual sensations of pleasure.

Again, Margo Anand highlights this quite succinctly:

If you can find this point of deep relaxation, the physical body, gender, and personality begin to disappear. Instead of two individuals, you become a flow and rhythm of energy, mirroring the impersonal flow of energy in the universe itself. (Anand, 1990:421)

These accounts echo work by Horn et al (2005), in which they explore the relationship between sexuality and spirituality, noting that 'individuals experienced connections with God and with their partner [which] resulted in a breakdown of 'dualism of all forms' that reconciled body and spirit, male and female, human and nature' (Horn et al, 2005:83, in Beckmann, 2009:194). These themes lead into, and overlap significantly with, the next commonly described experience: that of expansion.

Expansion

Another common theme that arose when discussing pleasure – and which is also 'touched' on in Chapter 4 - was the idea of expansion. Expansion was often described in terms of a sensation that the boundaries of one's body or self were surpassed (hence, these descriptions are closely linked to the above experiences of connection). This could be described in terms of 'expanding consciousness', or an 'opening of consciousness'. In an interview, I asked teacher Isabella how she might experience this:

I never took a psychedelic myself so I have no idea what it does to you, but I feel that when I receive a Tantric massage, or if we start to make love in a Tantric way...I feel like I'm having what I think a psychedelic experience would give you. So there is a total opening, opening of consciousness, and I love it. It's just amazing.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Interview conducted in Bristol, 9th March 2017.

As such, themes of expansion and connection often go hand in hand, conveying the idea that boundaries between the individual and the rest of the world become blurry, or even non-existent. As one popular book recounting an individual's foray into Tantra states:

I had succeeded in perceiving how natural and near ecstasy is to us...Our resistance to ecstasy is no thicker than a paper wall...The day when one takes this miniscule step, the body abandons itself completely, and one passes over to the other side of this vibration to enter into an infinite landscape, that of empty consciousness. (Otier, 1997:127-8)

Another well-known teacher and founder of Urban Tantra™, Barbara Carellas, writes of her own experiences of ecstasy:

The orgasmic energy starts in the very centre of your being, then flows out to the limits of your body and beyond. You may feel boundaryless...as if you are in a sort of alternative universe...Your orgasm is happening everywhere and nowhere, and it may go on and on. Afterward you may feel energized, or you may feel peaceful and blessed-out...This kind of orgasm is not limited to sex, and it's certainly not limited to the genitals. (Carellas, 2007:82)

These experiences of connection and expansion have also been identified elsewhere. In Jenny Wade's phenomenological study of 'transcendent' sexual experiences, she uses Stanislav Grof's taxonomy of transpersonal states (1975, 1988) to categorise descriptions of non-ordinary sexual experiences¹¹⁰ (Wade, 2000). In her questionnaire responses, she identifies a range of experiences, some of which correlate closely with findings from my own fieldwork: most notably, transcendence of spatial boundaries (including merging into another person); experiences of energy fields (e.g. kundalini in the body); and identifying with the ultimate principle that represents all beings (Wade, 2000).

¹¹⁰ Interestingly, Wade notes that '[t]he momentary loss of self, time, and space during orgasm is so familiar that many people seem to identify this sensation as "ordinary"' (Wade, 2000:105)

Describing Ecstasy: Ineffability and Embodied Ethnography

It is worth taking an aside here, to note the abstract and often ambiguous language used by practitioners when attempting to recount these ecstatic experiences. As seen in the accounts of connection and expansion above – the most common themes arising from this part of my fieldwork - practitioners often grappled with describing the embodied sensations involved in ecstasy.

Take, for example, Diane's description of ecstasy, which she sums up simply as 'amazing' and 'wow!'. Isabella also tried to convey to me how she experienced ecstasy:

...Many times when I received a Tantric massage from practitioners, for me...it's been one of the most enlightening experiences of my life. And that brings you out of your body, it brings you out of your mind, and it's only sensations, and for me that feels divine.¹¹¹

Again, the ineffability of ecstatic experiences is highlighted as Isabella describes being outside of her body and mind, and being left with 'only sensations'. Some interviewees would use other concepts from Tantra (and further afield) to interpret these experiences: for example Naomi, who spoke about how her physical body is limited, but her energy body is not – for her, ecstatic Tantric experiences are about 'identifying with my energy rather than my form'.¹¹² Others, like Isabella, would attempt to describe these experiences by noting their similarities to points of reference such as psychedelics, alcohol, or other drugs.

As discussed above, the body – and particularly the senses - are key to giving an individual access to experiences of ecstasy. Stimulation and cultivation of the senses

¹¹¹ Interview conducted in Bristol, 9th March 2017.

¹¹² Interview conducted in Devon, 6th February 2017.

leads to feelings of pleasure, interpreted as stirrings of sexual energy, which can then be directed toward achieving ecstatic states. However, when individuals aim to retrospectively describe these ecstatic states, the embodied self occupies an ambiguous role. Echoing Diane and Isabella above, accounts in the primary literature also seem to struggle to indicate how this might actually feel, and they are similarly abstract when talking about the body - for example in the above quote from Odier, in which he states that 'the body abandons itself completely' (1997:127-8). The same themes emerge in Margo Anand's descriptions, too. After describing 'Riding the Wave of Bliss', she states:

...a point is reached when the ecstasy for which you have been seeking and searching suddenly overwhelms you, floods through your body, consumes you...In that moment you allow yourself to move beyond the control of the mind and let yourself be possessed by something bigger than you, carrying you into a timeless experience of ecstatic loving. Then you have truly experienced High Sex. Then there are no longer two people involved, but one. In fact, there is not even one. There is only the experience of ecstasy. (Anand, 1990:423)

I found this ambiguity and abstractness in my fieldwork data interesting for two main reasons: first, as noted in the Introduction, the women I interviewed were fairly typical of participants in the holistic milieu, in that they were generally well-educated and articulate individuals. Language is crucial in conveying subjective experiences to others, and in my experience (and as shown in previous chapters), Tantra practitioners had generally been skilled at eloquently conveying certain opinions or experiences to me. As such, the fact that they often struggled to find the vocabulary or metaphors to effectively express these experiences, stood out to me. Indeed, after attempting to describe ecstatic states, many practitioners would refer back to the common phrase (also noted in Chapter 1) that, 'it can't be described; it has to be *experienced*'. The second reason that this ambiguity caught my attention was my own assumption that contemporary Tantra's focus on touch and the senses would lead to

practitioners describing experiences in very physical, visceral, or tangible ways. As an emphasis is placed on heightening and training the senses to certain ends, it might be presumed that individuals involved in Tantra would develop ways of describing and conveying these experiences to others. However, this was not the case. Indeed, the common refrain that some states can't be described but must be experienced hints at the idea that practitioners don't feel that it is necessary to put this into words, as long as they are able to personally achieve these ecstatic states.

In one sense, the way in which practitioners struggled to articulate their experiences reflected how useful the approach of embodied ethnography can be. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, embodied ethnography calls for the researcher to aim toward similar embodied experiences as their participants, 'deploying the body as tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge' (Wacquant, 2004:viii). As such, embodied ethnography could seem a well-suited method in explorations such as this chapter, particularly when analysing experiences that participants have trouble describing and vocalising.

However, it was at this point that another limitation in the approach of embodied ethnography also came to the fore. Chapter 1 raises the critique that it is overwhelmingly difficult for ethnographers to convey the knowledge gained through embodied experiences to their intended audience. When considering experiences of ecstasy, another hurdle was encountered: that I had never had an experience that I would consider to be 'ecstatic'; and neither did I achieve anything close to this during the course of my fieldwork. This opens up a discussion on how useful the approach of embodied ethnography can be in situations wherein the researcher – whose body can be inconsistent and unreliable – is unable to emulate or approximate the experiences of their participants, despite their best efforts. In response to this obstacle

(as shown above), I have relied heavily on personal accounts of respondents, with the addition of supporting primary literature which gives first-hand accounts of these experiences. However, this limitation of embodied ethnography becomes even trickier when exploring a subject that participants themselves express in abstract or ambiguous terms.

In addition, the topics of orgasm and sexual ecstasy are intensely personal, particularly in the context of contemporary Britain. Although I found that Tantra practitioners, being generally very sex-positive, were often more than happy to openly talk about intimate sexual experiences, the fact remains that some might be less willing to share these details of their lives. Further, and as noted in Chapter 3, there are certain points during the process of embodied ethnography (and indeed, all approaches to ethnography) wherein the boundaries between the personal and professional become particularly blurred. The researcher's body, background, and previous experiences are all brought into the field with them, particularly in the approach of embodied ethnography. Clearly, this is one of such instance of the professional and the personal overlapping. The question then arises of whether, if I (as the researcher) had indeed attained a state of ecstasy – specifically sexual ecstasy, somehow comparable to those of my respondents - would I want to include this in my ethnography? If sensual, bodily descriptions are required to convey data gleaned during embodied ethnography, this would require the researcher to share some of the most intimate information about their own experiences of sex and orgasm. The willingness of a researcher to share and describe such experiences will obviously vary from person to person; however, I would have been unwilling to stretch the approach of embodied ethnography this far, had I had such experiences.

After Ecstasy

Despite encountering some difficulties while attempting to both obtain and describe ecstatic states, there are other ways in which ecstasy can be approached in this thesis. As mentioned above, the approach of embodied ethnography was limited here; and the resulting emphasis on accounts from practitioners can only partially remedy this, as my interview data recounting ecstatic states were still somewhat abstract. As such, I began to broaden my scope, to look at how these experiences were spoken about outside of the narrow boundaries of the temporary ecstatic state. Other than experiences 'in the moment', many practitioners also described how experiences of ecstasy (specifically, sexual ecstasy and orgasm) can affect other aspects of their life, once the experience itself has ended. As such, we can look at the wider effects that ecstasy can have, particularly with regards to contributing to a new or altered sense of self.

Transformation

A significant theme running through Tantra practitioners' accounts of ecstasy was that of lasting transformation: an experience of ecstasy could be enough to transform how they experienced everyday life thereafter, allowing individuals to derive pleasure from 'everyday' activities. Dahlia gave a description of the massages she offers to others, and which she has also received:

The best way I can describe it is slow, voluptuous, deep feeling, sensual, slightly erotic, massage. With full, wakeful presence... you're simply there to very decently and very elegantly, fully awaken the pleasure with sincere love

and care...Incredible. And do you know what, you only have to receive it once. It was an instant, an instant awakening.¹¹³

The theme of transformation was frequently related to the idea of finding pleasure in mundane, everyday activities. Once individuals had experienced and understood ecstasy, they were able to experience (less intense versions of) it in all aspects of life.

As Anand states:

The pleasure that you experience in lovemaking need not be an isolated or unusual event...High Sex offers you a whole new way of life. You can feel sensual while brushing your teeth, eating your breakfast, or walking down the street. You can feel vibrantly alive while driving a car. The Tantra vision, remember, includes everything, not just your sexuality. (Anand, 1990 :424)

Linking the transformation of everyday life with the aforementioned theme of expansion, Diane stated that:

...really Tantra is about expanding consciousness. And what do I mean by that? It means seeing the world from a different standpoint than you do in the everyday, normal, get up, go to work, make your porridge blah blah blah way...The kind of way one might do meditation, is an obvious way that people can get it; taking drugs is an obvious one, another way that people can get it; sometimes spontaneously; or if you're in love, there's lots of things that happen in life that takes us to a new point of seeing reality, which...expanded is the word Tantra uses.... if you haven't experienced it, it probably doesn't mean anything but if you have the experience is self-evident... For me, it's like the parameters of perception are widened, so more is appreciated, and the kind of wisdom in that and the understanding that comes from that...it has some really fantastic benefits. It is actually an ecstatic place, and I think this is what's captured people's imagination and public consciousness.¹¹⁴

Again, Diane highlights the difficulties in describing ecstasy, particularly to someone who has never had such an experience. However, she also shows how everyday life can be positively affected by these experiences: although being in states of ecstasy (e.g. during an 'implosive' orgasm) is temporary, these events can be powerful or

¹¹³ Interview conducted in Edinburgh, 2nd March 2017.

¹¹⁴ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

transformative enough to alter an individual's perception of other experiences thereafter. Later in our conversation, Diane talked about what these subsequent transformations might feel like:

[You] come away feeling very relaxed, very open, very loving, very... as though the world is a little bit more delicious, is a bit brighter, it's a little bit friendlier, those sorts of things. And these are the first sorts of things – kind of the things you'd have when you know, you have a couple of glasses of wine you'd feel. But you're not taking any wine, it's your consciousness, you don't get any of the side effects or anything like that.

From these accounts, it is possible to see how intense, temporary experiences of ecstasy are powerful enough to effect lasting change on those who experience them. As such, ecstatic states can cause fundamental shifts in the way that individuals perceive and experience all other aspects of life. In this sense, I suggest that direct connections can be made with the process of healing (discussed in the previous chapter), characterised by Csordas as a process of 'transformation of a person, a self that is a bodily being' (Csordas, 2002:3-4). The above descriptions of the after-effects of ecstasy could clearly also fit into this mould. Further, returning to the work of Hinton, Howes and Kirmayer (2008), I suggest that ecstatic states can be understood as 'sensation interpretants'. Understood in this way, ecstatic states alter an individual's 'sensation scripts' that affect how they react to everyday stimuli, thus fundamentally transforming how they experience the world.

For Tantra practitioners such as Diane, this transformation can lead to the world being experienced as 'a little bit more delicious, is a bit brighter, it's a little bit friendlier'. In another interpretation, Harriet described how ecstatic experiences achieved through Tantric practices transformed her way of understanding the world:

So it's made everything sex...now sex is everything [*laughs*]. This is sex, this conversation, it's like your masculine is trying to penetrate into my experience and open me up like a flower, what is there in there? What

nectar can you glean? And you know, it's the same the other way... there's also me in masculine, like, let me penetrate into your mind, all this experience and knowledge and excitement that I have about Tantra, let me siege you with it, let me create a pregnancy of everything that I'm excited about in you. You know, it's going on all the time.¹¹⁵

As such, it is possible to see how ecstatic experiences could transform other, apparently minor, aspects of everyday life, due to their ability to alter how individuals perceive and experience the world. Clearly, this would also affect how individuals understand their own sense of self.

Ecstasy and Danger

Despite all of the positive outcomes associated with experiences of sexual energy, 'implosive' orgasms, and ecstasy, there is also significant attention paid to their potential dangers. Touch techniques can lead to powerful experiences of ecstasy, expansion, transformation, and connection – but these same techniques can also pose risks. If a person aims to 'raise *kundalini*' (i.e. experience this sexual energy, aiming to achieve ecstatic states) in the wrong context, there can be serious repercussions. The individual in question must be prepared and ready – or at least be in the presence of a trusted and experienced teacher – or sexual energy can, in theory, have damaging effects. As Adrienne described:

Not to put anybody off, but that's Tantra. It's a...a very powerful method of reaching enlightenment in one lifetime...it's a speedway and the faster you go, the more likelihood there is for you to crash. And you're going to crash because everybody's going to crash, because that's life, right? And when

¹¹⁵ Interview conducted in Glastonbury, 10th June 2017.

you crash it's going to be harder, more sore, and the thing that makes you a Tantric is whether you pick yourself up and carry on. That's it.¹¹⁶

Diane gave an account of a woman in one of her workshops reaching an ecstatic state, emphasising the fine line between positive ecstatic experiences becoming dangerous:

Sometimes, because the stuff is powerful, *kundalini* can be raised...which can feel very sexual and very fantastic and very ecstatic ...one of my clients in my closed group, she had a *kundalini* awakening and had an absolutely fantastic time because I like to think I was there to support her and I knew what was going on and it was life changing for her. But if people don't have that support they can feel they're going mad and it can be really unpleasant.¹¹⁷

This was a theme raised in a number of conversations throughout my fieldwork; and is also reminiscent of historical or classical accounts of Tantra. This is the idea that transgressive (in this context, sexual) practices are so effective and can bring transformative results, precisely because of the danger and risk involved.

The monthly Tantra UK newsletter also includes a section providing warnings about the risk of psychosis when working with sexual energy, and a number of articles recommended therein detail the potentially dangerous outcomes of Tantra with regards to practitioners' physical and mental health. Here, the apparently fine line between psychosis and ecstasy (sometimes identified as 'mystical psychosis') is explored¹¹⁸, with descriptions pointing to the idea that raising *kundalini* or having a *kundalini* awakening in the 'right' context can be an ecstatic, liberating, life-changing,

¹¹⁶ Interview conducted in London, 21st October 2016.

¹¹⁷ Interview conducted in Somerset, 15th December 2016.

¹¹⁸ for example in Dr Nicola Crowley's 'Psychosis or Spiritual Emergency: the Transformative Potential of Psychosis in Recovery' (https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/members/sigs/spirituality-spsig/spirituality-special-interest-group-publications-nicki-crowley-psychotic-episode-or-spiritual-emergency.pdf?sfvrsn=d64fcd69_2); or in Charles Carreon's report on 'Tantra-Induced Delusional Syndrome', rejected from the DSM-V; other personal accounts also draw links between kundalini awakenings and psychosis or mental illness (<http://lissarankin.com/coming-out-of-the-spiritual-closet>)

and transformative experience; while in the 'wrong' context, this same energy can be expressed negatively as psychosis or delusions.

This emphasis on the potential dangers involved in engaging with sexual energy and ecstasy links directly back to the 'ideology of transgression' (first mentioned in Chapter 4 and directly influenced by Kimberley Lau's 'ideology of the alternative' (2000)). In previous chapters, I show how the 'ideology of transgression' is based on perceptions and presentations of Tantra as an ancient, Eastern, spiritual practice which utilised and encouraged antinomian behaviour; these perceptions then lend authority to certain practices in contemporary Tantra which practitioners understand to be transgressive, and which helps them to build a new or altered sense of self. Here, we can see that an ideology of transgression is also expressed when talking about sexual energy and ecstasy being potentially dangerous, and the threat of danger here lends these activities some discursive power – this is discussed in more detail below.

Ecstasy, Touch, and Selfhood

The above material, collating accounts of ecstasy within contemporary Tantra, builds on my thesis that women engaging with touch techniques in this context do so in order to construct a new or altered sense of self. An initial analysis of these ecstatic states might at first lead to assumptions that the self is transcended (as Classen suggests), as descriptions of expansion and connection tend to be somewhat abstract. Accounts of connection and expansion seem to show how a sense of self is being

deconstructed, expanded, left behind, or merged into others, using the medium of touch. However, I argue here that the opposite is happening.

It can help to first highlight the methods through which ecstasy can be achieved. Here, as in other parts of this thesis, the role of touch emerges as being particularly important. This is due to the embodied experiences – physical, psychological, and everything in between – that it elicits, and the attention that it brings to certain parts of the body. As with the previous chapter exploring the role of sexual energy in healing, pleasurable sensations act as reinforcement and reassurance that the practices being undertaken are both positive and powerful; and the established teachings and beliefs common in contemporary Tantra provide a framework to interpret these embodied sensations in particular ways. Experiences of ecstasy are thus seen as moments at which certain practices successfully cultivate sexual energy to a critical level.

Here, it is also helpful to return to the definition of ecstasy given at the start of this chapter, from Malinar and Basu: ‘Ecstasy as an emotional experience thus is based on *awareness*, not on amnesia’ (Malinar and Basu, 2007:244, emphasis added).

Malinar and Basu write that the ecstatic quality of experiences consist in:

...the overflowing of those emotions that are valued as pleasant and positive - feelings of bliss, love, desire, and lightness. These signs of what psychological research has called “overalertness”... this experience is thus regarded as a way one not only meets the object of its quest but undertakes a highly pleasant journey into oneself that in most cases leaves one asking for more. (Malinar and Basu, 2007:247)

This emphasis on awareness and ‘overalertness’ during experiences of ecstasy is key - and also directly correlates with accounts given by Harriet and Isabella about being ‘present’ and ‘conscious’ during all interactions, particularly in those aiming to achieve states of ecstasy. The sense of touch here becomes central in creating awareness of

embodied sensations (as well as inducing sensations such as pleasure, interpreted as sexual energy) which can then lead to ecstatic states. In addition, Malinar and Basu suggest that ecstasy can be interpreted as individuals undertaking 'a highly pleasant journey into oneself' – again, emphasis here is on the experience of the embodied self, rather than anything external to it.

This direct focus on the body and senses as a medium through which ecstasy (or similar states) can be achieved has also been noted by other scholars. Andrea Beckmann's study of BDSM (or consensual SM), explores the attainment of forms of ecstasy (Beckmann uses the phrases 'transcendence' and 'mystical experiences') through these practices. In contrast to my knowledge of contemporary Tantra, wherein the senses are stimulated and cultivated in order to give access to ecstatic states, Beckmann suggests that sensory deprivation – the withdrawal of the senses – is a prerequisite in creating these experiences (Beckmann, 2009:185). Despite this difference in approach to how the senses could be manipulated, I broadly agree with a number of key points made by Beckmann. First, Beckmann suggests that the 'bodily practices' of consensual SM can 'be interpreted as one form of mysticism in which the "lived body", and in particular its sensuous capacities, are used as a medium' (Beckmann, 2009:185). Second, Beckmann argues from a Foucauldian perspective that states achieved during practices of consensual SM can be likened to 'limit-experiences' – experiences that temporarily lose the self and allow it to be reoriented, opening up new possibilities because the self is ruptured (Beckman, 2009:224). Although I do not use Foucault in my analysis of ecstasy, the idea that a sense of self can be altered or reoriented is clearly relevant to this thesis.

I suggest that these ecstatic experiences, achieved through touch techniques in contemporary Tantra, work toward the broader project of the construction of an

autonomous, healthy, and authentic sense of self in a number of ways. Here, I return once more to awareness-centred definitions of ecstasy given by Malinar and Basu who suggest that, 'ecstasy can be regarded... as an intense mode of *self-perception* and awareness by the ecstatic subject' (Malinar and Basu, 2007:246; emphasis added). Interpreted in this way, I argue that states of ecstasy provide individuals with experiences of intense self-perception or self-awareness.

This relates directly back to the work of Paul Heelas discussed in previous chapters, whose seminal text *The New Age Movement* (1996) highlights how knowledge or direct experience of the self (or 'Self') is highly valued in the holistic milieu. I suggest here that experiences of ecstasy are important times at which the individual perceives themselves as experiencing their 'true' or 'authentic' self.

Further, the individual learns that the potential for having and creating these ecstatic experiences lies within themselves; through the cultivation of techniques focusing on their own body and senses. Through successful practice and cultivation, the individual understands that experiences of ecstasy are not dependent on an outside authority (e.g. an organisation, doctrine, or ritual specialist); neither are they dependent on consuming mind-altering substances, which might also lead to similar states. Ecstatic experiences – described in such ambiguous terms – are understood as the result of the cultivation of sexual energy, induced by an individual's own bodily techniques and explorations. As such, the potential for ecstasy lies entirely within the individual: the ways in which practitioners utilise their senses means that they are able to access these states either alone, or while practicing with others. This supports one of the most 'fundamental of all assumptions' of holistic spirituality, in Heelas' words: 'that the authority lies with the Self' (Heelas, 1996:21).

I also wish to push this argument further, to suggest that experiences of ecstasy are not simply another way in which individuals aim to construct a sense of self (as in instances of healing). Instead, ecstatic states are predicated on an individual already having a healthy and autonomous sense of self: an individual must *know*, in some way, that they contain the potential for having these experiences. In addition, achieving these ecstatic states then affirms or reinforces this empowered sense of selfhood. In some primary literature from contemporary Tantra, awareness and acceptance of oneself (achieved through touch techniques and other sensory practices) is a prerequisite for attaining these ecstatic states:

[F]ocus more on reaching a place in yourself where you experience you, as you are...self-awareness breeds self-acceptance, which can blossom into self-love. These qualities are the foundation of all Tantric practice, both in terms of your capacity to truly love your beloved for who they really are, and in terms of opening to ecstasy and transcendent states of ecstasy (Lightwoman, 2004:239)

As such, I argue that experiences of ecstasy function slightly differently to other experiences of touch and healing (explored in Chapters 4 and 5), which work to (re)construct a new sense of self. Instead, I suggest that ecstatic states work to *affirm* this newly-constructed sense of self, created through touch and healing techniques. As ecstatic states are understood to require a grounding - a strong, stable sense of self - in order for these experiences to occur, an individual successfully attaining such an experience can interpret this as an affirmation, reinforcement, or confirmation of their new sense of self.

The necessity of an already strong sense of self directly relates to the above accounts of the potential dangers in raising kundalini or attempting to achieve ecstatic experiences. The discourse around danger and ecstasy reinforces the idea that an individual must already have a healthy, autonomous, and empowered sense of self,

in order for ecstatic experiences to occur in the first place (much like Lightwoman states above). If an individual attempts to raise sexual energy without having undertaken sufficient preparation (i.e. work on a sense of self), then there is potential for negative effects to occur, usually on a psychological level, such as psychosis. As such, the attainment of ecstasy works to positively confirm to the practitioner that they have successfully created a sense of self that is able to support, withstand, and revel in these experiences.

In addition to this, I argue that ecstatic experiences work in the affirmation or confirmation of a new sense of self due to their after-effects. As such, it is worth looking at these ecstatic experiences in relation to 'everyday' life (this is particularly relevant to the section on 'transformation' above). For practitioners, the aim is not only to experience ecstasy occasionally, but to also increase the levels of pleasure and sensuality derived from, and experienced during, everyday life, as after-effects of this ecstasy. As discussed above, if ecstatic states are interpreted as capable of changing 'sensation scripts', fundamentally altering how stimuli are perceived, then it follows that experiences of everyday life will also be positively altered. As such, experiences of ecstasy, despite seeming short-lived, filter through into all aspects of individuals' lives; and this shift amounts to what Csordas refers to as a 'transformation of a self'. Seeing everyday life differently acts as a constant reminder that an individual has previously been able to achieve ecstatic states, as well changing the standpoint from which the individual views the world, thus affirming their newly-reconstructed sense of self.

As with so many instances of touch and constructions of selfhood in contemporary Tantra, there can be some discussion of how these experiences of ecstasy might be gendered. As shown in previous chapters, individuals work to construct a new, altered

sense of self outside of typical social norms and gender roles; however, these new constructions of self are often gendered in different ways. In my interviews with Tantra practitioners, this subject arose less frequently during conversations about ecstasy: gendered social norms and roles were given somewhat less consideration than in instances described in previous chapters. However, there were some instances in which this subject was raised. One teacher, Adrienne, related ecstatic experiences and orgasm specifically to the experience of femininity:

Having the deeper orgasms actually supports femininity, they bring out more of this feminine quality and this feminine empowerment... It's so liberating. And through that liberation, through that connection, that deep, central, feminine, powerful connection, you can really *be*, you can really *do* in the world from that place.¹¹⁹

From Adrienne, we can see how this sense of self, affirmed through experiences of ecstasy, can still be essentially gendered. Adrienne experiences her self as essentially feminine and as such, embodied experiences such as orgasm and ecstasy are also perceived as feminine. In addition, I argue that the aforementioned changes in everyday experiences can also allow women to positively affirm parts of their selves that were previously perceived as sources of guilt, judgement, or shame: the female body, sexuality, sensuality, and female pleasure.

¹¹⁹ Interview conducted in London, 21st October 2016.

Conclusion: Situating Ecstasy in Contemporary Tantra

In this chapter, I have explored the role of ecstasy in Tantra – particularly how this can eventually contribute to an affirmation or reinforcement of a sense of self for the women involved with these practices. Beginning with the aim of adding nuance and detail to popular perceptions of Tantra as purely sexual, I show how touch techniques are able to induce sensations of pleasure (interpreted as sexual energy) which, at their peak, are experienced as ecstatic states.

By first delving into women's descriptions of these experiences, this chapter shows how both my research participants and the primary literature describe ecstasy in abstract, ambiguous terms, despite the potential for it to be an experience of intense awareness and self-perception. This leads to another consideration of embodied ethnography as a research method – particularly questions pertaining to where the limits of embodied ethnography lie, when the researcher is unable to experience similar bodily states to those of their participants; and even if they could attain such states, the researcher might be reluctant to describe such intimate experiences. Following this, the chapter changes course slightly, to instead look at the after-effects of ecstasy – namely, transformation, and the potential dangers involved if an effort to experience ecstasy 'goes wrong'. By combining these accounts from my own fieldwork and the primary literature, this chapter then shows how experiences of ecstasy are predicated on an already stable and healthy sense of self; and these experiences then work to affirm or reinforce this self as empowered, autonomous, and authoritative. In exploring these experiences of ecstasy (using discussions of orgasm to focus the material) as affirmations of a sense of self and the culmination of practices in contemporary Tantra, I build on and expand the work of previous chapters, which illustrate how individuals aim to initially create this sense of self. By doing so, I hope

to show how ecstatic states aren't only temporary, but can affect change on an individuals' sense of self, thus affecting everyday life thereafter.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis argues that women in contemporary Tantra use touch techniques in their pursuit of an autonomous, empowered, and healthy sense of self. By analysing various practices - with a particular focus on the use of touch and the discourses around this - previous chapters of this thesis identify processes of transformation, healing, and ecstasy in contemporary Tantra. These processes are key in addressing three themes which I suggest are key to an individual's construction of a sense of self in this context: gender, sex, and transgression. In this conclusion, I will first take a brief look at the contribution that each chapter makes to my overall argument. I will then take a broader view, tying in underlying Orientalist discourses and a suggested 'ideology of transgression' to show how a broad web of interrelated themes and practices – touch, gender, sex, transgression, and Orientalism – all play into constructions of selfhood for the individuals engaged. Following this, I will discuss the wider applicability of this study; the potential for further research; and some limitations of this thesis, including some discussion of my method of choice, embodied ethnography.

Focusing on the sense of touch allows this thesis to add nuance and detail to contemporary understandings of Tantra, which is important for two main reasons: first, because little ethnographic work on Tantra in the West has been done thus far; and second, because certain perceptions of Tantra proliferate in popular culture - and these seldom match the experiences of Tantra practitioners that I encountered during my fieldwork. Looking at tactility in contemporary Tantra brings certain practices to the fore: Melting Hugs, the Five Senses ritual, massages, sexual activity, and other kinds of 'bodywork' involving touch are all understood as ways in which an individual can work on creating a new or altered sense of self. In one sense, touch can be

interpreted as an intimate, immediate, personal bodily experience; while at the same time, touch is intersubjective, social, and the sense that physically connects an individual with the world around them. As such, tactility can affect an individual's sense of self in a plethora of ways. Exploring how these touch practices are used becomes particularly insightful when we consider the wider context within which these practices are happening: in the contemporary British context, vision and imagery constitute the dominant 'sensory model' (Classen, 2005:1-2); while touch is generally viewed as an inferior, potentially dangerous, feminine sense (Synnott 1991:63). On this topic, this research shows how women in contemporary Tantra are very aware of the 'hegemony of the gaze' (Chidester, 2005:62), and explicitly work to disrupt this by engaging in very tactile practices.

In Chapter 4, 'Tantra and Touch', I explore the sense of touch in contemporary Tantra. Specifically, the chapter looks at how touch techniques in Tantra can be seen as somatic modes of attention: 'processes in which we attend to and objectify our bodies... culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others' (Csordas, 1993:139); and how the sense of touch can be understood as contributing to a sense of self, in an ostensibly vision-focused cultural context. I show how touch techniques - as somatic modes of attention - are used to address three important issues for women in this context: 1) perceived splits between the mind and body; 2) individual boundaries and how these can be reinforced or expanded; and 3) social norms surrounding the body and 'appropriate' bodily behaviour for women in contemporary British society. By engaging somatic modes of attention, individuals can draw attention to these issues, explore boundaries (through transgression or reinforcement), and reinterpret embodied experiences, in an effort to construct an empowered, autonomous, and healthy sense of self. This chapter also raises the idea that Tantra is particularly

appealing to women in contemporary Britain due to the aforementioned themes that became particularly prominent during Tantra's transition to the West: the negotiation of gender norms, sex, and transgression. Focusing on these three issues that touch can address allows some discussion of how a newly-constructed sense of self can continue to be gendered – particularly when touch and Tantra (key practices in creating this sense of self) are interpreted as essentially feminine. Additionally, this chapter shows how these ideas are linked to ongoing Orientalism in interpretations of Tantra; the presence of which contributes to the prominence of these themes and provides certain discourses and behaviours with an air of legitimacy, authority, and authenticity.

Chapter 5, 'Trauma, Healing, and Touch in Tantra' moves on to explore more specific instances of touch in contemporary Tantra, with a focus on two common and interrelated themes in this context: trauma and healing. By first looking at how trauma is conceptualised by Tantra practitioners, it becomes clear that trauma is interpreted as almost anything that detracts from an individual's sense of autonomous, healthy, and empowered selfhood; and that trauma is experienced differently according to gender. Looking at the example of Tantric massages, this chapter explores what healing entails in this context. Using Thomas Csordas' model of ritual healing, we can trace the various stages of this process, eventually seeing how the process of healing (in contemporary Tantra) can aid individuals in perceiving themselves and their surrounding worlds differently and more positively (rather than providing some sort of definitive 'cure'). Touch is particularly important here in its ability to raise sexual energy, understood as a healing force contained within the person. Through receiving massages (and other touch techniques) aimed at raising sexual energy, individuals experience pleasure; pleasure is then interpreted as confirmation of the presence of sexual energy, confirming that the practices are positive and effective. This provides

participants with frameworks and resources to interpret potentially traumatic experiences in different ways; and by addressing trauma in this way, individuals are able to work toward constructing a sense of self that is autonomous, empowered, and healthy. Also raised in this chapter is the idea that individuals can be disposed to understanding Tantra (and Tantric touch techniques) as potentially healing due to Orientalist presentations of Tantra as an ancient Eastern practice which is capable of healing ills caused by contemporary Western, patriarchal, capitalist, vision-centred society; seen in this way, Tantra offers an 'alternative' to these negative aspects of Western society. As such, it is possible to see how the themes of gender, sex, and transgression – all influenced to some extent by Orientalism – continue to weave through contemporary Tantric practices.

Finally, Chapter 6, 'Ecstasy and Selfhood' argues that experiences of ecstasy (specifically, orgasm) work to affirm the newly empowered, autonomous, and healthy sense of self that practitioners continually work to construct. I again emphasise the importance of touch techniques in producing sensations of sexual energy, which peaks into experiences of ecstasy. Noting how practitioners struggle to describe these experiences in anything other than vague and abstract terms, I suggest that this is not, in fact, suggestive that ecstasy is an experience of self-transcendence or loss of self. Instead, this chapter shows how ecstasy can be interpreted as a mode of intense self-perception and self-awareness, and can thus reinforce or affirm an individual's sense of self. The chapter shows that practitioners must have a somewhat stable sense of self already in place in order to access experiences of ecstasy; and this, combined with the idea that touch techniques inducing ecstasy can be performed individually (i.e. without a teacher or other form of authority involved) gives subjective experience and self-authority central roles, contributing to the process of sacralising the self (Heelas, 1996). Further, these ecstatic experiences can lead to individuals

experiencing 'everyday' life thereafter differently, encouraging further positive experiences (such as deriving pleasure from 'mundane' activities) and thus enabling the individual to reinforce this new sense of self on a daily basis, aiding them in the ideal of 'well-being' in the context of the contemporary holistic milieu.

The main argument of this thesis is as follows: as Tantra is constructed in both historical and contemporary discourse through an Orientalist lens as an exotic and transgressive Eastern practice, individuals are able to transpose ideals of an empowered, autonomous, healthy, and specifically feminine selfhood onto Tantra. This echoes Veronique Altglas' analysis of *bricolage*, which emphasises that 'otherness is the crux of the matter' in the use of exotic religious resources (Altglas, 2014a:162-163). Altglas argues that perceived 'otherness' of a tradition allows for ignorance of how it is lived and practiced (Altglas, 2014a:329). This then means that the 'otherness' of the resource can be domesticated and moulded to the outcomes that the *bricoleur* desires. In the case of contemporary Western society, this equates to 'exotic' spiritualities being constructed as 'techniques for the realization of the self' (Altglas, 2014a:330).

Historically prominent themes in interpretations of Tantra – specifically sex, transgression, and 'alternative' gender roles – are particularly appealing to, and then propagated by, women in the holistic milieu, who see Tantra as uniquely suited to their pursuit of a new or altered sense of self. Engaging in touch practices that are perceived as transgressive in contemporary British society – particularly for women – allows these women to develop new ways of conceptualising their body, their selves, and the social context in which they are primarily based, using Tantra (interpreted as an authoritative and transgressive spiritual tradition) to legitimate these practices. Conceptualising trauma broadly, and developing touch techniques to address this,

allows these women to identify, reconceptualise, and attain a feeling of control over any aspects of life detracting from the ideal of empowered, autonomous, and healthy selfhood. In addition, experiences of (sexual) ecstasy work to affirm the process of sacralising parts of their selves that were previously perceived as shameful, unacceptable, or were restricted in some way: the female body, sexuality, sensuality, and female pleasure. Despite Tantra being understood as legitimising apparently transgressive behaviour, with the result of enabling women to overcome gender norms, it is also possible to see how the characterisation of touch, trauma, sensuality, and sexuality as essentially feminine can lead to the individual's new sense of self being gendered - thus casting doubt on how transgressive, liberatory, or empowering these practices might be.

It is also vital to place this research within wider narratives surrounding holistic spirituality – particularly ideas of the 'alternative', and aforementioned Orientalist tropes. Especially pertinent here is the work of Kimberley Lau, who argues that with regards to 'New Age' practices of health and well-being:

[T]he actual methods of transformation often drew - as they do today - on an ideology of the alternative or a belief that the ideal social state exists in opposition to the extant one...such an ideology turns eastward for its inspiration and relies on sentimentalism and nostalgia for a lost past in order to participate in contemporary cultural dialogues about modernity and antimodernity (Lau, 2000:7).

As such, Lau suggests that a critique of modernity is key to an individual's pursuit of transformation toward health and well-being. Based on the ideal of total wellbeing and authentic selfhood within the holistic milieu, I take this to mean that this pursuit of transformation – achieved through a critique of modernity - is vital in an individual's development of a new or altered sense of self. This is also evident in accounts from Tantra teachers such as Lorraine, who describe the splits between mind and body in

the West; and Chandran, who spoke of how the 'technosphere' causes individuals to become isolated and 'disconnected from themselves'.

Lau suggests that the aforementioned 'ideology of the alternative' is key to these critiques of modernity, defining these as 'a powerful form of popular orientalism that critiques modernity through the romanticization of nature, thus making for very attractive options in the global marketplace of New Age capitalism' (Lau, 2000:10). Extending Lau's concept of the 'ideology of the alternative', my argument here is twofold: first, that an 'ideology of transgression' in contemporary Tantra (first mentioned in Chapter 1) functions in a similar way to Lau's ideology of the alternative, and indeed, could be an excellent example of this; and second, that the sense of touch - much like the concept of nature in the ideology of the alternative - is interpreted through a romantic, Orientalist lens, used to critique Western modernity, and thus aids in an individual's process of transformation and is a key part in the formation of selfhood in this context.

To address the first point, equating the ideology of the alternative with the ideology of transgression: I suggest that this is justified, as both ideologies are based on idealising an 'other' or an 'alternative' (in Tantra's case, reached through the process of the perceived transgression of norms), and pursuing this through particular embodied practices in the context of the holistic milieu. Framing certain practices through the lens of transgression also allows a 'traditionalization'¹²⁰ of contemporary Tantric practices, thus legitimising this pursuit of the 'alternative' using historical accounts of transgressive practices used in South Asian Tantra. Both the ideology of the

¹²⁰ Lau defines 'traditionalization' as 'the processes by which third parties make cultural practices *seem* traditional, as though they were ancient customs that have been practiced continuously throughout the centuries and into the present in the various countries and cultural groups of their origins' (Lau, 2000:12)

alternative and the ideology of transgression allow individuals within the holistic milieu to create a critique of contemporary Western society (or modernity more generally), eventually contributing toward their sense of wellbeing and selfhood.

Second, is my assertion that touch in Tantra is romanticised, and is thus used to critique modernity in the process of constructing a sense of self. Lau notes that, '[i]mplicit in the turn to the East for spiritual guidance and social alternatives is a celebration of nature and the natural. Eastern cultures and thought have long been imagined and constructed as simplistically close to nature' (Lau, 2000:8-9); this connection with nature is 'by virtue of their distance from Western centers of power and from Western cultural norms' (Lau, 2000:7). Similar processes have also been noted with regards to the body and its romantic, idealised associations with the East and nature; and as such, I suggest that touch practices are an extension of this. In previous chapters, I have shown how individuals understand the West as being disconnected from the sense of touch, implying that Tantra, as an 'other' originating in the East, can be connected with tactility.¹²¹ As such, by engaging in touch techniques in the context of contemporary Tantra, individuals participate in the process of critiquing modernity through a romantic, Orientalist lens. Again this echoes Lau, who argues that 'even subversive counter-movements and cultural critiques - which are usually critiques of modernity - are deeply influenced by an orientalist logic' (Lau, 2000:8). As such, in contemporary Tantra, critiques of modernity – which according to Lau play a key role in the process of transformation aimed at health and well-being (and by extension, an autonomous, healthy and empowered sense of self –

¹²¹ Clearly, these discourses don't consider whether 'Eastern' cultures really are more connected with the sense of touch or not.

are based on the ideology of transgression *and* the sense of touch, both of which are influenced by Orientalist, romantic interpretations of Tantra.

Original Contributions to Knowledge

With regards to this thesis' original contributions to knowledge: by virtue of involving ethnography, this research introduces a wealth of new data to current scholarship. I have, however, identified three key areas in which this thesis makes a substantial contribution.

The most obvious field that this thesis contributes to is in studies of Tantra (or as some might prefer, 'neo-Tantra'). Little ethnographic work has been conducted on contemporary Tantra thus far, particularly in Britain; as such, this thesis can provide some insight into the practices and ideas commonly circulating in this field. Popular representations and perceptions of Tantra tend to be somewhat superficial, and often avoid delving further into the reasons why certain practices have become meaningful or useful for practitioners; as such, the rationale that these individuals are simply pleasure-seekers or narcissists is rarely explored further. Those studies that do take a more sympathetic view of Tantra (for example, the detailed histories provided by Hugh Urban which recount how Tantra has developed into its contemporary forms) generally don't use ethnography. By exploring certain practices in detail, this thesis adds nuance to popular representations of Tantra, and as such, can begin to fill gaps in knowledge on how and why women are engaging with Tantra in this context. As such, this thesis can be useful to both academics and a wider audience. I also suggest here that by using ethnography, this thesis is able to emphasise the experiences of women in Tantra. Studies discussing prominent individuals in the historical

development of Tantra in the West are overwhelmingly male dominated (see Urban, 2012; Kripal 2012); this study can highlight the work that many women are doing to develop their own interpretations of Tantra.

Another area in which this thesis can make fresh contributions is in studies of touch; specifically, how touch can relate to selfhood. Often inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) which emphasises the role of the body, philosophers such as Mazis (1979) have explored the role of touch in perception, human relationships, and intersubjective experiences. This thesis has steered away from these philosophical approaches, focusing instead on the lived experiences of Tantra practitioners. As such, this work emphasises the accounts of the practitioners themselves, in exploring how touch practices – particularly those focused on addressing gender roles, transgression, and sex - can intentionally be used in projects of selfhood. This also emphasises a need for people to be understood as *embodied* individuals – combining their physical, bodily experiences with wider social, political, and historical discourses that they are situated within.

The third contribution this thesis makes is toward developing the approach of embodied ethnography, with a particular focus on touch. Contemporary Tantra – and its elaboration of certain touch techniques – proved ripe ground for using the approach of embodied ethnography, focusing on the use of one sense. The attention this thesis gives to tactility allows a new perspective and fresh insights to be given on certain practices in this context. The fact that these touch techniques have the potential to be very personal or intimate also allowed this thesis to push the boundaries of embodied ethnography, to find where the limits of this might lie. My hope is that other ethnographers might begin to consider more closely how they use touch (both tactically, and experientially) during the course of their research.

Limitations

As with all research – and particularly with some forms of ethnography – this thesis does have its limitations, some of which have been noted as this thesis progresses. However, it is helpful here to reflect on how certain approaches or ideas have been used throughout this work.

One of my main interests here is in my choice of research method: the limitations of this, and how it can be improved. This thesis has worked to look closely at the approach of embodied ethnography, and accounts or vignettes have been written with the aim of bringing the reader into the world of contemporary Tantra in Britain. This thesis also works to highlight some specificities of how embodied ethnography can be used, by focusing on how the sense of touch can be used both tactically (to attempt to manipulate participants' views of the researcher), and experientially (to gain knowledge about how and why certain practices are done).

The first limit of embodied ethnography to note is that it is highly subjective. As such, the knowledge gained by the researcher from this approach is specifically applicable to certain people, in particular situations. I make some suggestions (and potential generalisations) about, for example, contemporary Tantra; women in the holistic milieu; how touch can be used in the context of contemporary Britain, or even how the same research pool would react to another researcher. These suggestions can be useful, as research will ideally answer some broader questions – however, there is a fine balance to be struck. Although the subjective nature of embodied ethnography can be seen by some as a limitation, the approach does not strive for objectivity, and instead revalues and emphasises the knowledge that can be gained from subjective, embodied experiences. In this line, I have included some of my own

personal opinions and reactions, in an effort to emphasise to readers how my own involvement affected the field and thus the data gained.

As noted in the Introduction, another limit of embodied ethnography is the issue of conveying the knowledge gleaned through this method. The researcher must first try to systematise the knowledge that they are gaining through their embodied experiences – a difficult task in itself – before presenting it in a way that both makes sense to others, and is reflected in quotes, stories, and vignettes. My aim, in this thesis, has been to guide the reader through the experiences and thought processes that led to certain analyses or conclusions being drawn. Of course, there will be times at which this is more difficult. Sometimes, I was able to understand certain phenomena differently due to a participants' use of a single word or phrase; a particular tone of voice; or a miniscule shift in body language. Often, it was a culmination of these tiny events that led me to taking a different perspective. The challenge for me, then, was identifying a moment at which these changes were clearly shown, and which could be relayed to readers, as a window into the world of my interlocuters.

Both of these potential limitations become evident during Chapter 6, in my discussion of ecstasy, selfhood and orgasm. Here, the problems encountered were threefold: first, that I had never had such an ecstatic experience, and as such, could not use my body to gain certain kinds of information; second, that my participants who were familiar with these experiences struggled to find the vocabulary to describe them; and third, that even if I had had such ecstatic experiences, I would be reluctant to include such intimate, personal information in a thesis such as this. As a result, this Chapter 6 leans on accounts from practitioners (rather than accounts of my own experience), and primary literature from the field.

Some more practical limitations are also evident – my pool of participants was relatively small, and time constraints prevented me spending even more time delving into in the field. Further, the fluidity of the field – which led to me travelling widely across the UK to participate in various ways – meant that I was unable to immerse myself deeply with a single group of Tantra practitioners. Doing so would have made for a very different and perhaps more detailed ethnography; yet at the same time, this fluidity reflected the holistic milieu more widely, and alerted me to the importance of less regular workshops and sessions in this context. Further, as I have attempted to highlight throughout, the field of contemporary Tantra is so varied and fluid that any attempt to represent all of the views and experiences therein would ultimately be doomed to fail. Throughout this work, I have attempted to avoid making generalising claims, ensuring that my fieldwork accounts remain faithful to the specific contexts and individuals with whom which I worked.

Wider Applicability

This thesis stands at the crossroads of a number of fields – discussions of selfhood, embodied ethnography, the body, holistic spirituality, touch, gender, and sex are all woven throughout, and as such, the findings within can be applicable to several different fields. Here, I will highlight only the most directly relevant discussions which this research can contribute to.

One area in which this thesis could be used is in studies of holistic spirituality - and specifically, women's experiences of these. This is a field already blossoming in academia, and work exploring women's motivations for engaging in the holistic milieu has recently proliferated. As discussed in the Introduction, Tantra stands in the holistic

milieu alongside a number of other related movements, and practitioners often experiment with these, to find a set of practices or ideas that suits their needs. This thesis could be used to support claims made elsewhere in studies of holistic spirituality regarding the reasons why women are involved, and what they can gain from engaging with such practices. Further, this thesis can help to highlight the social norms that women engaging in holistic spiritualities in Britain perceive as restrictive or repressive, particularly with regards to gender roles and sexual behaviour. This then helps to show how certain ideas are used to legitimate women exploring 'alternative' gender roles and sexual behaviours, while at the same time engaging with the continued popularity of gender essentialism in the holistic milieu.

This work could also be particularly useful when applied to other tactile practices popular in the holistic milieu. As noted in Chapter 4, expressions of holistic spirituality are often pejoratively described as 'touchy-feely'. I find this gendering of holistic spirituality and tactility as female – and the resulting value judgements that might be made from this – particularly interesting. As such, this thesis' analysis of the role of touch in Tantra (and how it is often coded as feminine) could be used to support and expand studies such as Karlyn Crowley's, who suggests that 'by not accounting for how these New Age practices and beliefs are gendered, we miss the ideologies at work in the denigration of New Age culture' (2011:24).

Outside of studies focusing on the holistic milieu, this research could also be used to encourage open conversations about the potential benefits of exploring of sex and pleasure, particularly for women; and could be useful to explorations of how certain frameworks are constructed in order to validate these explorations, and to legitimate women's experiences. Further, with regards to sexuality in contemporary Britain, this study can be used to show how certain norms and restrictions around what constitutes

'acceptable' sexual behaviour persist, even in movements that present themselves as very liberal and sex-positive.

With regards to anthropological theory and ethnography, the explorations of embodied ethnography in this thesis could be broadly applicable to many other research projects. I hope that some of the observations and reflections on my own use of this method (and its limitations), are useful to other potential ethnographers in honing their own approaches, and in considering the various ways in which a researcher's body can be used.

Finally, on a much broader scale, this study can be used in further explorations of touch. Tactility – and how it is perceived and used - is still a developing field; and discussions of touch are necessarily tied in with understanding the dominant sensory models of a particular place or society. David Chidester has already 'touched' on this a little, suggesting that touch can be interpreted as a transgressive act in a context that focuses on the visual, such as contemporary Britain (Chidester, 2005:62).

Further Research Potential

As hinted in the previous section, this research could open up several different avenues for further research. In some fields similar work has already begun to be undertaken; and in all fields, there is still much more to learn.

One area in which work is already underway is in studies of gender, and how this is negotiated in the holistic milieu. As noted in Chapter 2, a number of scholars have looked at how gender roles were altered and positively re-evaluated in movements such as Osho's Rajneeshpuram. These teachings, first emerging in the 1970s and

1980s, were generally in line with popular discourses in second-wave feminism: that men and women had essential characteristics, and those characteristics possessed by women needed to be revalued and elevated. Although feminist thought has generally moved on from this argument, many forms of holistic spirituality continue to use these gender essentialist ideas. Some movements, however, are showing signs of change, and studies have been undertaken looking at how gender essentialism is negotiated in the contemporary context – for example, Oboler (2010) who has explored how gender essentialism is negotiated in Paganism (specifically Wicca). She notes how these movements appear to be moving away from gender essentialism, interpreting ideas relating to the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ as purely metaphorical, rather than inherent characteristics. In my own fieldwork, I noticed that Tantra teachers were becoming aware of how their groups or practices might be exclusionary to individuals who don’t fit into the gender binary, and they worked to remedy this with varying degrees of success. As such, there is scope for further research on if and how these changes will continue and become popular in contemporary Tantra.

On the theme of gender, this thesis has focused almost solely on the experiences of women. This is somewhat typical of the field of holistic spirituality, as scholars have noted the proliferation of women within this movement and worked to explore why; and also suited me, as a female researcher. However, throughout my research I was aware that a separate branch of thought has emerged with regards to men’s involvement with Tantra. I was able to identify certain themes for men in Tantra – such as the rejection of toxic masculinity, and a desire for men to be able to express themselves differently – that would be ripe for future research. This relates to a suggestion from Tantra teacher Adaira, who stated that women tend to come to Tantra for healing, while men come for pleasure. As well as showing how experiences of Tantra, from the very start, can be different for men and women, this also shows that

individuals perceive contemporary British society as affecting men and women very differently. A study mirroring this thesis, focusing on men in Tantra, would be very revealing, particularly with regards to how these men might understand and use touch. As tactility is coded as feminine (which, following gender essentialist lines, makes it the domain of women), studying how men engage with this would add an interesting perspective.

Elsewhere in this thesis, I have noted the heteronormativity evident in contemporary Tantra. As above, although some teachers work to negotiate ideas or concepts in order to make them more inclusive, this is still a work in progress – gender essentialism and heteronormativity are still common in both Tantra and the wider holistic milieu. It becomes evident from this that Tantra can certainly be empowering when it comes to gender roles and sexuality; but only for individuals who fit a certain mould. As such, there is potential here for research to be conducted with LGBTQ+ individuals, to explore how they engage with both Tantra and the holistic milieu more widely, and to show the innovations that can be implemented in order for Tantra to be welcoming and inclusive to individuals, regardless of sexual orientation.

Further research could also be done in the areas of sex and sexuality: analysing uses of sexual activity in Tantra can add nuance to current understandings of sexuality and pleasure in Britain (and further afield). Practices in contemporary Tantra allow us a window into how pleasure and sex aren't simply expressions of wanton desire (as they might be represented in popular culture), but can also be positively affirming experiences, amounting to a 'self-process' (Csordas, 2002). There is scope for research to be conducted on how sex could be used in this way; and the frameworks or discourses (such as Tantra) that are used to grant authority and legitimacy to these activities.

I also hope that this research can begin to raise questions around consent and safety, particularly in contexts such as the contemporary holistic milieu. As a space which often involves intimate physical involvement and, due to an emphasis on healing, can sometimes attract vulnerable individuals, teachers and practitioners working in this space still have much work to do in developing codes of behaviour or ethical guidelines. As contemporary Tantra – and the holistic milieu more widely – has no singular governing body, the question remains as to whether such standardised guidelines will ever develop. With no framework for conducting training or holding individuals accountable for unethical behaviour (whatever this is defined to be), responsibility is placed squarely on individual practitioners to uphold ethical standards and safeguards, for the sake of their clients. Although my limited experience can attest to many teachers having the best intentions and acting as ethically as they know how, I can also identify that many of these teachers are not necessarily acquainted with the most up-to-date and relevant literature concerning consent.¹²² In addition, recent work to develop codes of ethics in ‘alternative’ touch therapies (e.g. Schiff et al., 2010, discussed in Chapter 3) aren’t entirely suited to Tantra – mainly because sexual therapies are seen as a key element. As such, more work must be done on how these touch practices can be conducted productively, safely, and ethically, while protecting and safeguarding all involved.

Finally, this research opens up avenues for further research in the domain of touch. As previously discussed, few studies focus on how the sense of touch is used by individuals, particularly in studies of religion. Those studies that do begin to address tactility often focus on how individuals interact with a specific object; and tend to centre

¹²² Or at worst, in the case of some Tantra teachers, might intentionally flout safeguards in order to abuse, harass, or take advantage of others (discussed in Chapter 3).

specifically on the hands as the touching organs, rather than the whole body.¹²³ This thesis takes a broader approach, fusing together individual, intimate experiences of touch, with accounts of how tactility is perceived in the social world, to show how experiences of touch involve all of these elements. There is great potential for work to be extended in this area. Continuing ideas from this thesis, further exploration of how touch is used in a vision-focused society – whether in the context of holistic spirituality or elsewhere – could be an insightful new approach to take. Such work could discuss whether various groups in contemporary Britain continue to characterise touch as the most animal, inferior, and feminine sense (Synnott 1991:63), and the effects that this might have on individuals directly involved.

Final Thoughts

When I began researching contemporary Tantra, I had no idea that the sense of touch would become a key theme – and even part of the methodology - of this thesis. Sitting on the floor in one of the first Tantra sessions I ever attended, Diane guided us, with closed eyes, in using the fingertips of our non-dominant hand to lightly stroke our other forearm. She gently encouraged us to switch our attention between the sensations in the active fingertips, and the sensations in the arm being gently touched. As I practiced directing my focus between the two, it struck me that this was such a simple practice; and yet the way that my experience of the touch changed, based on where I directed my attention, was entirely new to me. It was this exercise – out of all the hugging, stroking, gazing, massaging, dancing, spooning, and hand-holding with strangers that my fieldwork entailed – that led me to understanding the sense of touch

¹²³ For example, Morgan (2014) on the use of touch in 19th century spiritualism.

in a different way. This was a brief moment of insight and from then on, I began to pay close attention to how touch techniques were being intentionally used to disrupt my established ways of experiencing tactility. The ways in which this fieldwork would become intensely personal were surprising – yet looking back, should have been entirely expected.

One of my aims in writing this thesis was to present the experiences and opinions of women involved with Tantra in Britain in a way that was non-judgemental, without the sensationalism or controversy that Tantra can so often be associated with (Sting still has much to answer for on this front!). In doing so, I hoped to elevate these women's voices, encouraging discussions of how and why these practices can be taken seriously, both in academia and further afield. Of course, this thesis can't represent the views of every Tantra practitioner, and this is a mere snapshot of a field constantly in flux. I am certain that some teachers will eventually move away from Tantra, finding and innovating other practices more suited to each stage of their lives. However, for those women I attempt to represent, I hope this thesis has been able to sufficiently express the ways in which Tantra is woven into their everyday experience.

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