HOLLY HILLGARDNER

Longing and Letting Go

Christian and Hindu Practices of Passionate Non-Attachment

Longing and Letting Go

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For Greg

Strange is the path
When you offer your love.
MIRABAI[i]

Love makes me wander outside myself.
HADEWIJCH[ii]

i. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 191," Mirabai, in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. A. J. Alston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), 114.

ii. "Poems in Stanzas 6: Conquest of Love—at a Price," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Mother Columba Hart, OSB (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 143, line 49.

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Longing and Letting Go

I

The Paradox of Longing and Letting Go

I will let Love be,
From my side, what she wishes.

HADEWIJCH[1]

You have set the boat of love in motion
And abandoned it on the ocean of longing.

MIRABAI[2]

MY FIRST COLLEGE teaching assignment included the confoundingly expansive "World Religions" course. How, in one semester, was I to teach all the world's major religious traditions? Taking the advice of a more seasoned colleague, I considered dividing the religions we would study into "warm" and "cool" paths. As a schema to make sense of religious diversity, the "warm" paths fan the flames of desire and devotion, while "cool" paths cultivate renunciation, or a letting go of worldly attachments. Passionately warm paths thus contrast neatly with ascetically cool paths.

As I rushed to construct the syllabus and order textbooks, some drawbacks to this dichotomy began to emerge. In addition to potentially encouraging an unhelpful East-West dualism, the warm/cool division also occluded the complexity contained within each of the world's

1. "Poems in Stanzas 39: Love's Blows," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Mother Columba Hart, OSB (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 241, lines 46–47.

2. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 64," in Mirabai, *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. A. J. Alston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), 60.

religions. Judaism or Buddhism, for example, does not exist in just one strict pattern; the religions manifest differently through place and time. These intrareligious complexities were nowhere as clear as when my class embarked on our study of Hinduism, which Wendy Doniger has called—as though in answer to the above contrast of temperatures—a religion of both "fire and ice."[3]

Fire and Ice in Hindu Traditions

The multiple paths contained in the construct of "Hinduism" include ways to hold together fiery attachment and icy renunciation. Imagery and stories surrounding Śiva, for example, have traditionally accommodated both erotic and ascetic forces, energies of longing and letting go.[4] Śiva remains at once the ascetic meditator extraordinaire *and* the great lover to Pārvatī, with whom, in one particularly memorable session, he continuously made love for a thousand years! Elucidating Śiva's curious combination of desire and renunciation, Doniger concludes that "even in his asceticism, Śiva is *in* the world. The two joys are the same joy, however much they appear—even to the god, at times—to be separate. They are two aspects of one life force."[5] The forces of desire and ascetic discipline do not relate as antithetical energies for Śiva; instead, Doniger argues for a common opposite for both energies: "quiescence."[6] Those actively engaged in life, those who are not quiescent, may traverse these twin joys, the joy of the love of the world *and* the joy of asceticism.

The four classical aims of a Hindu life (*puruṣārthas*) likewise reflect a simultaneous embrace of both desire and non-attachment. As traditionally listed, these aims are *dharma* (truth, duty), *artha* (wealth), *kāma* (desire), and *mokṣa* (liberation). Within this structure, desire finds an obvious and important place, and non-attachment is often understood as an integral part of the path to *mokṣa*. In addition, the four classical Hindu stages of life (*āśramas*)—those of student, householder, retiree,

3. Wendy Doniger, *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 82.

4. Ibid., esp. section 2, "Asceticism and Eroticism in Early Indian Mythology."

5. Ibid., 254.

6. Ibid., 312.

and renunciate—demonstrate the importance of both passion and non-attachment in the cultivation of a full life. As the householder stage necessitates kāma between partners, the last two stages call for non-attachment, when the devotee begins slowly, and then more fully, to let go of the trappings of worldly life in preparation for death.

In Indic mythology and as codified by the above religious schemas, then, desire exists as something necessary and good. Still, many prominent Indian philosophies find desire variously problematic. Buddhism, Hinduism's younger-sister religion, may offer the most marked case. According to the four noble truths, desire causes suffering. Similarly, ancient Indian yoga treatises, such as Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, prescribe a rigorous, eight-limbed asceticism and warn that following desires leads—in an endless, destructive cycle—to increased karmic debts. "Non-attachment [*vairāgya*] is self-mastery," the *Yoga Sūtras* teach, "it is freedom from desire for what is seen and heard."[7] Much yoga, as classically understood, leads to the minimizing of desire through the mastering of increasingly subtle methods of meditation, breathing, ethics, and posture.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, too, teaches a cautionary attitude toward desire, but one in which *attachment* to desire, not desire itself, needs uprooting. Holding a space for desire, the *Gita* develops the idea of *niṣkāmakarma*, or action without attachment. Multiple times throughout the *Gita*, Krishna counsels Arjuna not to let go of desire itself, but of desire for the *results* of actions: "Therefore, without attachment, always do whatever action has to be done; for it is through acting without attachment that a man attains the highest."[8]

Attempting to reconcile the tensions between desire and non-attachment, the *Gita* teaches how to attain liberation while living in a world awash with desire. Returning to the above metaphor of temperature, this is a path of "warm" and "cool" energies together: compassionate actions in the world and impassioned desire for the divine in tandem with letting go of attachments to the results of actions.

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7. Patañjali, *Yoga Sūtra* 1:15, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, in *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (Hollywood: Vedanta Society of Southern California, 1981), 27.

8. W. J. Johnson, trans. *Bhagavad Gita* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.

Longing and Letting Go in Today's World

This book has been inspired and leavened by countless conversations with friends and colleagues, particularly those also on the hatha yoga and mainline Protestant Christian paths I walk. Many of us yearn to hold the energies of desire and non-attachment together more coherently. A number of my friends who practice yoga and I, for example, admit to harboring some cognitive dissonance concerning desire and non-attachment. The path of hatha yoga has often been traditionally understood as an ascetic wisdom that uses the body to transcend the body. At the same time, this yoga—definitely as taught in the West but also as often taught in India—offers methods for living a fuller embodied life in the world. Many yoga students that I know testify that the practices of yoga have led them to healthier, happier, and more ethical lives in their communities.

As they lead fruitful embodied lives in the world, serious yoga practitioners may find themselves in some conflict with yoga's prescribed goals, which are often framed in ascetic terms. While these tensions might be seen as modern values clashing with older values, or as yet another example of the West's colonizing impulse, controversy about yoga's goals is not new. Today's scholars of yoga, for example, engage in ancient debates concerning the meaning of the ultimate yogic state of *kaivalya*, which translates as "separation" or "detachment." The *yogi* or *yoginī* in this state becomes free from all bondages, including rebirth. What would such a liberation look like? Could the "stilling of the changing states of the mind,"[9] the *Yoga Sūtra*'s definition of yoga, result in an integrative living liberation, one in which the mind does not separate from the world? Alternatively, does the "mind-boggling, mad, paradoxical dualism" of the *Sūtras* preclude such an embodied liberation?[10]

The contexts of twenty-first-century yoga in the West give these longstanding tensions new intensities. Today's yoga practitioners, who tend to

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9. See Edwin Bryant's translation of *Yoga Sūtra* 1:1, for this definition of yoga, in *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), 10.

10. For more on the former option, see Christopher Key Chapple, "Living Liberation in Sāṃkya and Yoga," in *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, ed. Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 115–134. For the latter option, see Lloyd W. Pfluger, "Dueling with Dualism: Revising the Paradox of Puruṣa and Prakṛti," in *Yoga: The Indian Tradition*, eds. Ian Whitcher and David Carpenter (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 70–82, esp. 74.

be white, affluent, female practitioners with careers, families, and other worldly attachments,[11] have embraced variations of practice that were once reserved for high-caste, male sexual renunciates, or *brahmacharyas*. These shifting demographics further inform the age-old questions. Can a yogi, then, be both passionately involved in the world and also dedicated to yogic practice? Does a yogic life necessarily involve a "preliminary detachment from matter, emancipation with respect to the world?"[12] How might we best describe yoga's ultimate goal: as separation from the world or as a deeper involvement, even a kind of unity, with the world?

In the Christian social justice activist circles in which I also orbit, we seek answers to questions about the relationship between desire and non-attachment, albeit in different permutations. Activists, often alternatively exhilarated and dispirited, may wonder, "Is it possible to work passionately for change and not become exhausted by the demands of the work?" Dedicated visionaries may become disillusioned as they struggle with the inevitable disappointments, delays, and complexities that come with trying to change the world. If practices of non-attachment are recommended as a remedy, questions arise. For a Christian social justice activist, what is the place, if any, of such practices as meditation or yoga, which are conventionally thought to turn the devotee inward and away from the world? Does the fire of the desire for justice and social change become dampened as a result of practices that emphasize an inner world? Are such practices only respites from demanding work, or might they offer something vital and integral for activists fervently at work in the world?

Indeed, it is not only people on yogic or activist paths who wrestle with the tensions between desire and non-attachment. Anyone who has deeply loved another knows the profound vulnerability that passion creates in this tenuous world. Mary Oliver's poem "In Blackwater Woods" gives voice to the inherent riskiness and necessity of longing and letting go. In the last two stanzas, she names the "three things" one must do in the world.

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

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11. And yes, I am a white, female, married, middle-class college professor.

12. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 15.

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.[13]

13. Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods," in *American Primitive* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1983), 82–83.

Oliver's poem inspires its own related questions. How can we find the courage to love in this world of loss? In a world of "fires and the black river of loss," how can we find the strength to nurture these relationships on which our own precarious lives depend? How could one ever let go of such integral and intense passions? And if one could in fact let go, should one do so? These concrete existential questions—ones I once asked fervently as I nursed a twenty-five-year-old husband with terminal cancer and continue to ask today, over fifteen years later—paved the way for the unfolding of this book's comparative theological journey into passionate non-attachment. In this sense, this book's themes are unabashedly autobiographical.

Guides for the Journey: Hadewijch and Mirabai

I now introduce into the matrix of these questions two medieval women, Mirabai of North India and Hadewijch of lowland Europe, each of whom practiced a path of passionate non-attachment that led her deeper into the mysteries of divine and human love. Mirabai is widely believed to have been a sixteenth-century Rajasthani princess who wrote passionate songs of her desire for Krishna. "The fire of longing/ Is burning in my heart," she sings.[14] Hadewijch, a thirteenth-century woman from what would become Belgium, straddled the worlds of laity and the consecrated religious as a Beguine, part of an unprecedented community of devoted women who did not take vows. She wrote poems, letters, and visions that tell of her longing to become Love (*Minne*) itself, "to be God with God."[15]

It may seem odd and somewhat arbitrary to pluck two women from such different times, places, and religious traditions to be our guides for this study, but intriguing and deepening resonances between the two love mystics inspired their pairing. Their books each spent years together on my bedside table. First, I read them for enjoyment, and later, as I recognized their deep wisdoms, I read them in a kind of prayerful *lectio divina*. Mirabai and Hadewijch first drew me to them with their depictions of full-bodied, sensuously imaged longing for love, but I gradually came to realize that—in addition to the heat of each woman's desire—each also

14. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 155," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 97.

15. "Letter 6: To Live Christ," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 61.

concurrently practiced an unconventional variant of asceticism. As hagiography presents her, Mirabai was a female itinerant, a rare example, who left her home and family to live simply and sing songs of divine love. Hadewijch was a leader in the early Beguine movement, which created a new way of uncloistered service that opened women's options for a meaningful life beyond marriage or the nunnery.

In addition to their uniquely gendered asceticisms, I also found Hadewijch and Mirabai speaking to me and to each other, across the eras and oceans, about their "engaged" mysticisms, a term meant to contrast with any mysticism characterized by flights of disembodied transcendence or dualistic interiority. Each woman's respective longing for the divine not only takes her on an inward journey but also opens her up into an entangling involvement with the beauty and suffering of the world. Mysticism in both Hindu and Christian traditions runs the risk of pushing away from the world and its pressing needs as it journeys toward an exclusive union with the divine. The resulting insular and individualistic spiritualities stand in ironic contrast with mysticism's implied promises, that is, connecting the mystic to *everything*. Hadewijch's writings, however, display not only what could be called a "vertical connectivity" to God, but also a "horizontal connectivity" to her community of Beguines and the wider world. Mirabai's songs, too, evince a palpable horizontal connectivity to the circles of other devotees singing their songs of shared longing for Krishna.

The paths of mystical longing taken by Mirabai and Hadewijch lead them to religious disciplines that do not involve wholesale and final turns away from the world; instead, their longings connect them to the world. Reading them together invites our own interreligious meditations on justice-centered practices of passionate non-attachment. The comparative theological readings offered in this book thus extend into preliminary explorations of why passionate non-attachment matters. Across the miles and the centuries, these medieval women have resources to offer us today.

Along with these women, we, too, want to know: How can we practice longing and letting go in our relationships with one another? How can we practice longing and letting go in our relationships with God? Which practices help us avoid burnout, that frequent byproduct of a life lived passionately? Can practices of longing and letting go, for example, help us with today's pressing ethical challenges, such as the ever-present temptation toward "climate despair"? Drawing from the wisdoms of Mirabai and Hadewijch, this book poses these questions and ventures tentative answers through the developing methods of comparative theology.

The Methods and Promises of Comparative Theology

To better read Mirabai and Hadewijch together, this book utilizes the evolving methodologies of the "new" or "contemporary" comparative theology. Reid B. Lochlin and Hugh Nicholson differentiate this genre, which they trace to the late 1980s, from the early nineteenth-century subgenre of comparative theology that "epitomizes the universalist ideology that has since become so problematic."[16] In contrast, the new comparative theology denotes work that "generally uses comparison to unsettle and complexify prevailing theological assumptions."[17] This unsettling stands in contrast to the earlier grasping for universal religious answers. Understanding religious identity as "relational" rather than "substantialist," that is, as constructed and emerging rather than fixed or static, this comparative theology finds fertile ground to engage in work that both recognizes other forms of religious identity and welcomes reconstructions of one's own.[18]

As it worked to complexify and unsettle universal theological assumptions, early iterations of the new comparative theology tended to resist making constructive or normative claims. Instead, they asserted the need for a "patient deferral of issues of truth."[19] As the new comparative theology developed, a feminist critique emerged among comparative theologians, such as Michelle Voss Roberts and Tracey Sayuki Tiemeier, who called for risking normative statements in light of pressing justice concerns.[20]

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16. See Reid B. Lochlin and Hugh Nicholson, "The Return of Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2010): 481.

17. Hugh Nicholson, "Comparative Theology after Liberalism," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 22 (2007): 244.

18. Ibid., 241–242, 245. Nicholson utilizes Kathryn Tanner's terms "relational" and "substantialist" in his argument. See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), chap. 3, for her argument that cultural interactions constitute an integral part of theology's task.

19. Prolific and ground-breaking comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney emphasizes the "patient deferral of issues of truth" in his early work. See Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 187.

20. See Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, "Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation," in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 129–149; and Michelle Voss Roberts, "Gendering Comparative Theology," in Clooney, *the New Comparative Theology*, 109–112. Both essays, as noted, appeared in a volume edited by Clooney, who has also taken up a number of the volume's concerns. For example, he engaged specifically with gender theory in *Divine Mother,*

This book continues the feminist project of holding together what I see as the twin aims of comparative theology: patient, careful, deferred theological construction *and* theology's responsibilities toward the marginalized.

Not unrelated to those justice concerns, I also draw attention to postcolonial calls for epistemologies that do not subsume comparative theological thinking into Westernized, Christianized categories.[21] In order to represent well the "polycentrism" of Hinduism, Richard King has argued that scholars must work constructively with indigenous Indian ways of knowing, particularly those that existed before the advent of the Western academic discourse of religion.[22] Heeding this charge, I choose to read Hadewijch and Mirabai together through the schema of *viraha bhakti*, a mystical eroticism from Mirabai's *Vaiṣṇava* Hindu tradition that emphasizes communal, emotionally complex experiences of intense longing. In this way, I advance the ancient Indian art of longing as an epistemology, one that has significance for thinking about how we might practice passionate non-attachment today.

Even as we prioritize the lens of viraha bhakti, we recognize that comparative theology does not flow unidirectionally. The most fertile theological thinking crosses back and forth across the traditions being compared. Therefore, we will be "cross-pollinating" Mirabai and Hadewijch, to use John J. Thatamanil's apt metaphor for the work of a multidirectional, transformative comparative theology.[23] Cross-pollination has the potential to create something different from the compared elements: something neither entirely new nor wholly divorced from its roots, but something organically hybrid that answers theological questions in fresh ways.

Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

21. See Sharada Sugirtharajah, *Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2003), for a postcolonial critique of the ways that Hinduism has been historically defined, interpreted, and created by Western academics in part to bolster Christianity and its colonialist interests.

22. Richard King, "Who Invented Hinduism? Rethinking Religion in India," in *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*, ed. Esther Bloch, Marianne Kippers, and Rajaram Hegde (New York: Routledge, 2010), 110.

23. John J. Thatamanil "cross-pollinates" Śaṅkara with Paul Tillich in John J. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 206.

Attempting to avoid the hegemony of typical Western epistemologies, we first read Mirabai's songs and Hadewijch's writings through the lens of viraha bhakti, and then, cross-pollinating, read back and across the traditions, as the currents take us into theological anthropology, apophaticism, and feminist ethics, for example. My recursive approach enlivens the study of both Hadewijch and Mirabai, as it encourages a shifting focus on different aspects of each woman's longing, allowing new questions, ideas, and concerns to emerge as the traditions are juxtaposed.

I focus my comparison on a select number of Hadewijch's and Mirabai's writings and songs of yearning, which I call "focus texts." While it would be impossible to attend to both women's full corpora within the confines of one book, yet another limitation presents itself. Some compositions that have been traditionally attributed to Hadewijch, along with some songs that have been traditionally attributed to Mirabai, have come into authorial dispute. A Hadewijch I, II, and even III have been proposed.[24] In Mirabai's case, songs attributed to her have multiplied over the centuries, well past the best dates we have for her life.[25]

In my use of focus texts then, I do not claim that these limited text selections from Mirabai and Hadewijch work as synecdoches for their larger bodies of work and all their concomitant and overlapping traditions. The focus texts, then, spotlight just one central theme—let us call it *love-longing*—which, in varying ways, pervades the texts attributed to both women. This pivotal theme inspires my application of the lens of viraha bhakti to our comparative theological endeavor.

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24. It is predominantly the texts in the latter third of Hadewijch's *Mengeldicten* that lead some scholars to surmise more than one Hadewijch, based on the texts' tone, "mystic content," imagery, and vocabulary. See Saskia Murk Jansen, *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch's Mengeldichten* (Goppingen: Kummerle Verlag, 1991), 14–15, for a summary of these arguments. Using a statistical method, Murk Jansen concludes that *Mengeldichten* 17–24 share a common spiritual perspective and vocabulary with Hadewijch's other works and should be attributed to her; however, she finds it "unlikely" that *Mengeldicten* 25–29 are from Hadewijch's hand (163–166).

25. See John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), chap. 4, for an introduction to the difficulties of locating the historical Mirabai.

Too Narrow and Too Wide: Controversies in Bhakti Studies and Comparative Theology

Delving further into the book's methodology, we now consider the trajectory of bhakti scholarship in very general terms. I highlight a few challenges that the field of comparative theology has shared with bhakti studies to show how each field, like genres across the spectrum of the humanities, have wrestled with the methodological problems of categorical essentialisms and incommensurate particularities.

As early Indologists studying bhakti rushed to categorize the different streams of what it cobbled together as "Hinduism," scholars employed the term "bhakti" too narrowly *and* too widely. For example, in early bhakti studies, bhakti was often read narrowly as "devotion," an emotional and spontaneous phenomenon, drastically different from other Hindu religious paths that emphasized the intellect, philosophical contemplation, or rituals. In their quest to circumscribe the field, early bhakti scholars thus missed many of the ways that various Hindu religious traditions overlap. Bhakti, it turns out, can be intellectual, intentional, and hospitable to both ritual and contemplation. Not simply an unbridled emotion that negates or ignores the intellect, bhakti is best defined as "participation" and "committed engagement," as per Karen Pechilis's apt description. This committed engagement presupposes an active, multifaceted involvement with God and others, rather than the passive divine adoration signified when bhakti is defined solely as "devotion."[26]

Early studies of bhakti also missed important differences among kinds of bhakti because they did not focus on the particularities of disparate bhakti voices, Pechilis notes. Instead of wrestling with bhakti's complexities, these studies, she argues, strove to discover an all-enveloping definition of bhakti that could somehow span all the voices and regions that bhakti encompassed.[27] In this way, the label "bhakti" was used too widely and missed the specific particularities that compose its full spectrum. In later studies, scholars engaged more deliberately with bhakti in its many historical, regionally specific contexts.

As a discipline, comparative theology has also undergone changes that resonate with the oscillations in bhakti studies that made the field

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26. Karen Pechilis, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20–24.

27. Ibid., 5–6.

both too narrow and too wide. From its roots in such various academic disciplines as the first incarnation of comparative theology,[28] comparative religion, and "theology of religions,"[29] today's comparative theology aims to locate its methodology between a too-wide search for universalist interreligious generalities and a too-narrow focus on difference that stymies constructive comparative theological work. Clooney's aforementioned, still-important warning to practice the "patient deferral of issues of truth," for example, can make cross-fertilizing divergent traditions seem too risky, while particularist notions of religious incommensurability can paint such comparison as nonsensical.[30] Because this book aims to explore what both Mirabai and Hadewijch contribute to ways of knowing that simultaneously embrace erotic devotion and non-attachment, it requires that bridges of comparison be built between unique aspects of different traditions.[31] Here, in accordance with others who practice comparative theology, I submit that difference and commensurability do not contradict but instead strengthen each other. In such a methodological third space, viraha bhakti, translated as the ache of "love-longing,"[32] may be compared fruitfully to Hadewijch's very different, yet corresponding notion of love-longing, Minne.

Comparative theology makes a strong case that religious boundaries are porous and ever-changing, that comparative thinking is implicit in all academic disciplines, and that theology has always borrowed from other cultures to conceptualize its ideas.[33] When risking

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28. See Lochlin and Nicholson, "Return of Comparative Theology," 481.

29. Theology of religions is a subfield that attempts to use theology to assess the phenomena of religious diversity.

30. The "particularist" schema of thinking about relationships among religions is well described in chapter 4 of Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 146–196.

31. See Francis X. Clooney, "Passionate Comparison: The Intensification of Affect in Interreligious Reading of Hindu and Christian Texts," *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 4 (2005): 367–390, for an exploration of religious affect's possibilities, even for "outsiders" of religious traditions. He describes affect's power to foster interreligious learning that "creates living interconnections even while reason is busy pondering whether such affective exchange across religious boundaries is possible at all" (389).

32. John A. Ramsaran, *English and Hindi Religious Poetry: An Analogical Study* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 96.

33. See Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), for an introduction to and brief history of comparative theology.

the articulation of similarities and differences among religious paths, comparative theology must still remain provisional, as well as accountable to the religious traditions with which it engages.[34] Vital, then, to the comparative theology of this book is the diversity and particularity of the traditions surrounding Mirabai, a *specific* sixteenth-century North Indian Vaiṣṇavite woman devotedly singing with other bhaktas, and Hadewijch, a *particular* thirteenth-century Beguine living in a new kind of women-centered Christian community. As we explore the tensions between desire and non-attachment, we look to the complex ways that both hot and cool energies play out in the voices of each of these women.

Eros and Non-attachment: A Feminist Critique

In addition to being a work of comparative theology, this book also draws deeply from the ongoing work of fellow feminist theologians on the theme of eros. In feminist Christian theology, a strand of thought developed in the last decades of the twentieth century that reclaimed eros as a divine force of mutuality, beauty, and goodness.[35] Responding to the theological marginalization of eros, these feminist theological conceptions retrieved a relational eros, which celebrated desire, embodiment and sexuality as divine, creative energies.

Without dismissing eros's great gifts to theology, some feminist scholars have argued that some early conceptions of feminist theological eros functioned as a type of categorical essentialism, in which eros stood alone, unsullied by the ambiguities of life. In this understanding, eros stood as a pure, prelinguistic, incorruptibly good force. Such an unambiguous conception overburdened eros by expecting it to "include all true goods and conflict with none."[36] This model in which a naturally pure eros remains

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34. See Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider, introduction to *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*, ed. Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1. Keller and Schneider argue that a "responsible pluralism of interdependence and uncertainty now seems to facilitate deeper attention to ancient religious traditions."

35. See Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1989) as a prime example; as well as Mary Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroads, 1991); and Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroads, 2000).

36. Kathleen M. Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 47.

free from the complex fabric of the world presents a number of problems, including the exclusion of other, less positive experiences. For example, Alyda Faber, critiquing Carter Heyward's groundbreaking work with eros, asserts that Heyward makes negative experiences of relationality, suffering, and pain "less real than an essentialist *eros*."[37]

Discussing the occlusions caused by this version of feminist eros, L. J. Tessier frames the critique this way: "Is feminist eros *too nice*? Does it fail to acknowledge the dangers along this path, claiming justice, love, mutuality and harmony for the erotic and attributing all fear, grief, and pain to patriarchal causes? Perhaps it forgets the hurt in love and the fear in sex, the potential for damage when passions collide."[38]

Tessier's "too nice" critique thus disputes any portrayal of eros as one-dimensional. Love-longing, as we explore with Mirabai and Hadewijch is complex; it includes grief, fear, and pain. By hiding what Kathleen Sands has called the "tragic," early ideas of feminist eros may indeed have turned out to be "too nice." Yes, eros is powerful, Sands agrees, but if, as *Song of Songs* asserts, "love is as strong as death," "that is bad news as well as good news."[39] Eros's mixed, ambiguous nature cannot be sidestepped, so the lens of viraha bhakti that we employ to begin this comparative endeavor accommodates eros's complexity. Because viraha bhakti's primary dynamic involves the movements back and forth in the middle spaces between the poles of divine presence and absence, Mirabai's love-longing involves not just goodness, mutuality, and beauty, but also intense grief, confusion, and frustration. All of these complex aspects mixed together result not in an unsullied bliss but in what Diedre Green aptly calls bhakti's "bittersweetness of love-in-separation."[40]

Any credible notion of feminist eros, then, must uphold eros's embeddedness in the complex matrix of the world, as well as acknowledge its tendencies toward a grasping, totalizing concupiscence. Through her crucial insight that eros contains energies of non-attachment that can

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37. Alyda Faber, "Eros and Violence," *Feminist Theology* 12, no. 3 (2004): 323.

38. L. J. Tessier, *Dancing after the Whirlwind: Feminist Reflections on Sex, Denial, and Spiritual Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 74 (italics mine).

39. Sands, *Escape from Paradise*, 155.

40. Diedre Green, "Living between the World: Bhakti Poetry and the Carmelite Mystics," in *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, ed. Karel Werner. Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1994), 134.

attenuate such cupidity, Wendy Farley offers a key inspiration for this book. Coining the term "passionate detachment" to describe this dynamic, Farley advances a philosophical eros, much informed by the eros of Plato, that becomes detached through its focus on the pleasure taken *in* the other, not the pleasure taken *from* the other. As Platonic eros ascends a ladder of purification, Farley's eros is a pleasure "purified of satiation, possession, concupiscence, and anxiety."[41] One experiences this decentering "passionate detachment" when one accepts that everything does not revolve around oneself. In passionate detachment, one can remain open to the beauty and suffering of *others* because one is not selfishly consumed. While Farley's understanding of the erotic contains more nuance than that of the earlier feminist theologians we have discussed earlier, her assertion that *true* eros does not try to possess the other may still be read as essentializing the erotic. In this book, through the resources of viraha bhakti's mixed, ambiguous notion of eros, I continue Farley's inquiry into practices of longing that keep the very real dangers of concupiscence at bay.

Building on Farley's insights about "passionate detachment," we take a comparative look at Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of what I call "passionate non-attachment." Here, I shift to the word "non-attachment" in an attempt to avoid the disengaged, disconnected connotations of "detachment," even as we know "detachment" has its rightful place in religious studies. Contemplating Mirabai's and Hadewijch's different practices of desirous longing, we investigate how their practices, in unique ways, contain the seeds of non-attachment, that is, the letting go of the cravings, aversions, fears, and false identities that keep the relational self bound in an illusory, isolating self-possession. I propose that erotic longing, tempered by the surprising renunciatory energies that eros may engender, attenuates some of the problems of an essentialist eros. Viraha bhakti, a specific kind of erotic love-longing, accommodates and even necessitates grief, for example. In this way, I answer the important critique that eros denies pain, loss, and conflict. Longing and letting go entwine in an interdependent process in which each needs the other to flourish.

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41. Wendy Farley, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 83. Farley credits her concept of "passionate detachment" as an outgrowth of her comparative work with Christianity and Buddhism.

The Chapters Ahead

In the next seven chapters, we explore Mirabai's and Hadewijch's intersections of desire and non-attachment, both separately and together. Chapter 2 introduces Mirabai, as well as the primary comparative category of viraha bhakti, whose central dynamic involves oscillating intensities of presence and absence between the human and the divine. In chapter 2, we closely examine a number of Mirabai's songs through the lens of viraha bhakti. We focus not just on her celebrated devotion despite an ongoing sense of abandonment but also on her sustained cultivation of the distance between her and Krishna. Their separation serves not as a preliminary step on the path to ultimate fulfillment, but as an integral part of the beginning, middle, and even end of the path itself. In viraha bhakti, the devotee's yearning is viewed as a form of joy, and a deepening of devotion that the *virahiṇī*, or female devotee, experiences bodily in her devotion to God. Such a reading emphasizes that no matter how much she longs for Krishna, the middle spaces of love-longing remain her primary state, and grief cannot be sidestepped. In the focus songs of chapter 3, I emphasize Mirabai's depictions of herself as a married *yoginī*, an erotic ascetic who holds together the energies of passion and non-attachment. Near the end of the chapter, I explore the potential of viraha bhakti as a liberating force for women and other marginalized groups. Practices of passionate non-attachment, I suggest, may function as dislocating forces that can push against an oppressive status quo.

Our focus shifts to the passionate non-attachment of Hadewijch in chapter 4. First, we attend to Hadewijch's themes of love-longing within her own context as a writer who creatively combines the genres of Christian bridal mysticism and secular courtly love literature. Through her mixing of genres, she creates an uncommon vocabulary and set of tropes that are on full display in her innovative concept of "Lady Minne," her term for divine Love. After contextualizing Hadewijch as a thirteenth-century Beguine writer from lowland medieval Europe, in chapter 5 we delve into focus texts that display her unique concept of "noble unfaith." Naming a specific kind of passionate non-attachment, "noble unfaith" becomes our focus, along with related apophatic trajectories in Hadewijch's work. Next comes our first comparative reading, that of Hadewijch's love-longing read through the lens of Mirabai's viraha bhakti. This reading allows a fruitful consideration of Hadewijch's own longing through the lens of viraha bhakti themes, such as transformative

desire, charged absence, non-attachment, and the cultivation of embodied longing.

Chapter 6 is the most elaborated comparative chapter in the book. Examining the integral relationships between desire and non-attachment, we explore the complexities of both women's longings and renunciations. From two very different traditions, Hadewijch and Mirabai show the intertwining of non-attachment and desire. Neither desire nor non-attachment becomes subordinated; instead, each is exposed as integrally necessary to the other's continuous flourishing. In the spirit of what Arvind Sharma calls "reciprocal illumination," when Mirabai's songs of viraha bhakti are read through the lens of Hadewijch's apophatically-tinged longing for Love, and vice versa, aspects of each's longing come to light. Sharma writes of this method, "Reciprocal illumination, as a method, respects the integrity of each tradition. It allows it to speak for itself, and the other tradition to hear for itself. It allows each tradition to be studied on its own terms, yet at the same time it renders such a respectful study of one tradition meaningful for another, in terms of the other tradition."[42] In reciprocal illumination, aspects of Mirabai's and Hadewijch's love-longing, such as communal longing, middle spaces of longing, and practices of longing become clearer, revealing resonances where there seemed to be none, or differences where there appeared to be consonances.

In chapter 7, we investigate a specific correspondence that the previous comparative chapters have brought to light. Because Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of longing each heighten their vulnerability, their longings can be said to "dispossess" their senses of self, to use the language of Judith Butler. "Dispossession" thus names and elaborates upon a non-attachment that springs from practices of desire. This philosophically complementary schema helps us consider how desire, manifested in the oscillating grief of separation and the erotic bliss of near union, becomes a dispossessing force that creates the very conditions for states of non-attachment. Thinking with Butler's idea of a dispossessive relationality that exposes our "unknowingness" about the social constitution of the self, we explore how Hadewijch's and Mirabai's desires and griefs evidence the ways in which we are, in Butler's evocative words, "undone by each other."[43] The desire and grief inherent in Hadewijch's and Mirabai's

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42. Arvind Sharma, *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination* (Albany: State University of New York, 2006), 19.

43. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 29.

longing thus inspire an ethically tinged "apophatic anthropology," a concept that involves dispossessed and dispossessing relational selves in integral relationship.[44]

Finally, in chapter 8, the conversation wades into theological ethics, as we imagine how practices of passionate non-attachment might engender a reorientation to the erotic and the ascetic. Harvesting the fruits of our comparative work, I propose an interreligious lived ethic of passionate non-attachment and explore how we might relate to others in this spirit. Do practices of passionate non-attachment, informed and inspired by those of Hadewijch and Mirabai, help us in this crucial environmental moment? Do they have implications for the way we relate to each other as gendered beings? How can such practices be applied to the ways we relate to the religious other? Might passionate non-attachment even be applied to the methods of this book, that is, to comparative theology? Method and content converge here, as passionate non-attachment performs its deconstructive and reconstructive movements on the practice of comparative theology itself.

Our comparative theological practice involves reciprocal readings of Hadewijch's love-longing through the lens of Mirabai's love-longing, and Mirabai's love-longing through the lens of Hadewijch's love-longing. Our cross-fertilizing readings allow a doubling of desire, which sets the stage for varieties of non-attachment to emerge, as desire performs its dispossessing work. Inviting Mirabai and Hadewijch to be our guides for the journey, together we long to unfold the mysteries of passionate non-attachment in these specific Hindu and Christian permutations. As we commence our comparative contemplation of love-longing together, we both anticipate the gifts of this practice and let go of our expectations for how we might be changed—the very spirit of passionate non-attachment.

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44. "Apophatic anthropology" is a term I borrow from Kathryn Tanner, "In the Image of the Invisible," in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel, 117–135 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). Others who have recently worked with this term include Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian* Mysticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6; Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroads, 2001), 48; and Charles Stang, "'Being Neither Oneself nor Someone Else': The Apophatic Anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite," in Keller and Boesel, *Apophatic Bodies*, 59–76.

2

Mirabai's Love-Longing and Passionate Non-attachment

Where are You going,
Having lit the flames of love?

MIRABAI[1]

Let Him go, let Him go, my companion!

MIRABAI[2]

LEGEND HAS IT that the passionate poet-princess Mirabai left a cloistered palace and moved into the streets to join her fellow devotional singers in an itinerant life. Dispossessed of her home and family, she traveled out into the world singing and dancing for Krishna, whose name denotes both "one who attracts" and "to drag, to give pain."[3] Consonant with this double etymology, Mirabai's songs portray her as a lover who revels in desire for the seductive divine but also grapples with the pain this longing brings.

Mirabai's Practices of Longing

In this chapter, we delve into Mirabai's excruciating, exquisite practices of longing—what David Dean Shulman calls "delicious distress."[4]

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1. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 49," in Mirabai, *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. A. J. Alston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), 54.

2. Caturvedī's *Pada* 57," in Mirabai, *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. A. J. Alston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), 57.

3. In Monier-Williams's Sanskrit dictionary, *kr.s.* denotes ploughing and by extension "to draw into one's power, become master of, overpower" and "to draw or tear out, to pull to and fro, cause pain, torture, torment." M. Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilil Banarsidass, 2005), s. v. "kr.s," 306.

4. David Dean Shulman, "Modes of Meaning and Experience: Viraha and Viḷaiyāṭal," *Parabola* 11, no. 3 (1986): 15.

This longing fuels both her erotic relationship with Krishna and a nonattachment to self, the divine, and the narrower world she once knew. To gain insight into the texture of this longing, we first read Mirabai in her context of bhakti, best translated as "participation," as noted in chapter 1. This multifaceted participation refers to the interrelated involvement of the author of the songs, her listeners, and the longed-for divinity in a shared love life. More specifically, we employ the subcategory of viraha bhakti, which I define as "participation in love-longing," as the primary interpretive lens for Mirabai's songs.

Only a portion of Mirabai's songs are categorized as songs of viraha bhakti in Paraśurām Caturvedī's important Hindi-language Mirabai anthology, but viraha bhakti makes itself felt throughout the corpus of Mirabai's work. While the genre originated in South India, Mirabai's northern desert home in Rajasthan likely contributed a unique intensity to her viraha bhakti. Stretching for hundreds of miles, Rajasthan's often harsh landscape made traveling difficult and created almost inevitable separations between loved ones. These hardships likely contribute to the "culture of separation" that infuses her writings.[5]

In Mirabai's viraha bhakti tradition, tension exists between the desire for an experience of ultimate unity and the desire to experience fully the diverse emotions and experiences viraha bhakti delivers. Together, the divergent poles of this phenomenon—blissful togetherness and painful separation, along with the middle spaces between them—combine to create viraha bhakti's complexity. In viraha bhakti, participants experience the difficulties of separation as they yearn toward the fulfilling bliss of union with the divine.

Before we explore a number of Mirabai's songs in their context of viraha bhakti, we first examine some of the uncertainties surrounding her songs and life. These ambiguities inform what Mirabai scholar Nancy Martin calls "multiple Miras."[6] Utilizing this schema, I advance a Mirabai who exists in numerous, even seemingly contradictory, forms. As a preliminary example, when Mirabai sings to Krishna that she will take up his "yogic garb" and "search through the world as a yogi does with you—yogi and yogini, side by side,"[7] the concept of "multiple Miras"

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5. Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 569.

6. Nancy Martin, "Dyed in the Color of Her Lord: Multiple Representations of the Mirabai Tradition" (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1996), 15. Martin's book on Mirabai is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

7. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 117," in John Stratton Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 139.

helps accommodate the paradox that Mirabai describes: a yogic ascetic embroiled in a passionate, committed partnership with the divine.

As multiple, sometimes contradictory, hagiographical stories about her life also attest, Mirabai's identity cannot be contained in a single, consistent story. Through her explication of "multiple Miras," Martin supplies a helpful schema for conceiving of the variety of stories about and songs attributed to Mirabai. Proposing thinking about these multiple representations as "a narrative language spoken in a multitude of genres," she places these genres into three categories: (1) stories from the hagiography inspired by various bhakti contexts, (2) sources that emerged from Mirabai's Rajput clan as the academy searched for a historical Mirabai and the Rajputs attempted to solidify an identity in the colonial and postcolonial periods, and (3) songs of past and present low-caste singers of northern India.[8] Located within these various genres, the multiple and still-multiplying songs and stories of Mirabai are woven together to form a tapestry that, though sometimes clashing in its colors and textures, abides the expression of a multitude of Mirabais.

Multiple Mirabais

The lack of either a historically verified written record of Mirabai's life or an authoritative corpus of her songs has sometimes proved a challenge for academic study; nonetheless, the multitude of voices eager to tell her story may be reframed fruitfully. In my view, the ambiguities surrounding her work and life are better seen, not as elusive facts to be nailed down authoritatively, but as opportunities to explore what it means theologically for Mirabai's life and songs to be created, re-created, and sustained by a collective of voices.

Mirabai's songs reach across the centuries and the continents as they form this collective. In India, her memory has been kept alive not just through her songs, but also through movies, recordings, and even a comic book.[9] Today, many Westerners with global spiritual predilections gravitate

8. Martin, "Dyed in the Color of Her Lord," 24.

9. See Hawley, *Songs of the Saints in India*, 139. The author cites ten movies about Mirabai made in India as well as numerous popular recordings of her songs. See also Hawley's chapter "The Saints Subdued," in John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139–164, in which Hawley offers reflections on the Mirabai comic book published by Amar Chitra Katha.

to her as well. As I wrote the first draft of this chapter in Woodstock, New York, a groovy place if there ever was one, I ambled by a bookstore named Mirabai Books on my way to find coffee.[10] Unfortunately for my research, this bookstore stocked only two books that referenced Mirabai, both of which I owned. When I asked the clerk about the bookstore's name, she described Mirabai as a mystically inclined, wandering, rule-breaking, independent woman. Calling a bookstore with only two books on Mirabai (but dozens of vegetarian cookbooks and yoga primers) Mirabai Books may well function as a metonym for a desired customer base of spiritually seeking, multicultural feminists. The Mirabai of this bookstore ranks as yet another Mirabai, one that falls outside of Martin's three categories. Mirabai is indeed multiple.

Mirabai's multiplicity got its start in north India, her birthplace. Lindsay Harlan's ethnographic work notes that Mirabai is understood in modern northern India as a "daughter, a wife, a widow, a *bhakta*, an adultress, a dancer, an ascetic, and, in some sense, a *satī*."[11] Harlan discovered that for the people who live where Mirabai lived, she is all of these things, some of which contradict each other. Because so little can be known for certain about her life and songs, we might say that an open space—perhaps even an apophatic space—dwells at the heart of the Mirabai tradition. Her historical unknowability allows her to be many things to many people as they color in the open spaces of Mirabai's ambiguities according to their own ideas, values, and identities. Her songs contain a wide spectrum of themes, a rich treasure trove of compelling topics to which one might be variously drawn: presence and absence, the sublime and the unbearable, independence and communion, and *saguṇa* (with attributes) and *nirguṇa* (without attributes) depictions of divinity.

In addition to her song's diverse themes, Mirabai's identity as an author also contains multitudes. As Harlan elaborates, Mirabai crosses the *pardā*, or separative curtain that governed gendered social relations in her world, from female space to male space, and also from private space to public space.[12] Her hagiographic identity thus shifts as her selves are said and then

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10. I drafted this chapter in Woodstock in part because of my previous discovery of the bookstore, a scheduled *kirtan* session at the town's yoga studio by "Mira," and cheap lodging made possible by damage done to my partner's car by a local innkeeper (long story).

11. Lindsay Harlan and Paul B. Courtright, "Introduction: On Hindu Marriage and Its Margins," in *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion and Culture*, ed. Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16.

12. Lindsay Harlan, "Abandoning Shame: Mīrā and the Margins of Marriage," in Harlan and Courtright, *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage*, 207.

apophatically unsaid. In some songs, she is a widow, and in others she is not a widow. She is a wife and also not a wife. She is an ascetic and an adulterous lover of God. She practices non-attachment, and she passionately yearns.

As an illustration of these shifting hagiographies, consider how modern Rajput women, the clan to which Mirabai is said to have belonged, interpret the story of Mirabai in Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl*. A seventeenth-century text, the *Bhaktamāl*, which translates as "Garland of Devotees," enumerates in short verses the lives of numerous Indian saints and is the earliest source to give an account of Mirabai's life. As it praises Mirabai, the *Bhaktamāl* sets up a contrast between the expectations of a sixteenth-century woman such as Mirabai and her antinomian actions. I quote it at length to underscore the subversive power of Mirabai's fearless, shameless devotion to Krishna.

Mira unraveled the fetters of family;
she sundered the chains of shame to sing
of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.
Like a latter-day gopi, she showed the meaning
of devotion in our devastated age.
She had no fear. Her impervious tongue
intoned the triumphs of her artful Lord.
Villains thought it vile. They set out to kill her,
But not even a hair on her head was harmed,
For the poison she took turned elixir in her throat.
She cringed before none: she beat love's drum.
Mira unraveled the fetters of family;
she sundered the chains of shame to sing
of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.[13]

As the story goes,[14] Mirabai considered Krishna her husband and "unraveled the fetters of family," who insisted on her living a traditional

13. Nābhādās, *Śri Bhaktamāl, with the Bhaktirasabodhinī Commentary of Priyādas* (Lucknow: Tejkumār Press, 1969), 712–713, quoted in Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 123.

14. These verses in the *Bhaktamāl* were famously expanded upon in Priyādas's influential commentary in the next century. See Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1994), 21–23, for a discussion of Priyādas's hagiography of Mirabai.

marital life of devotion to the prince she had married. Shame, however, did not result from traditionally shameful choices, claims the *Bhaktamāl*. Mirabai fearlessly sang, boldly "beat love's drum," and proudly devoted herself to the Lord she beheld as lover; thus, she "sundered the chains of shame." Her unorthodox choices instead bring freedom: "I have donned anklets and ornaments / And danced before Him without shame," she reports.[15] In another song, she reveals, "I have thrown away worldly shame / As one throws away dirty water."[16]

In an effort to understand how modern Rajput women understand Mirabai's complexities, Harlan conducted interviews in which she invited women to discuss their thoughts on Mirabai.[17] Many of them pointed out that Mirabai is admirable even if she cannot be a *pativrat*, a devoted and chaste wife, to her human husband. Even in her unfaithful state toward her human husband, they continue, she remains a pativrat to Krishna. By connecting the pativrat status to Krishna, the interviewed women uphold their culture's ideal of marriage, but on a transcendent rather than an earthly level. At the same time, they also—in a boldly creative move—link socially sanctioned marriage to the countercultural shedding of family life. In such an arrangement, Mirabai functions as God's wife rather than a man's wife. Acting as a wife to God, she may then leave her family without shame.[18] Providing an evocative glimpse into how one group of women make sense of "multiple Miras," Harlan shows that for these Rajput women "Mīrā is a saint because and in spite of that fact that she transgresses the locus of the *pardā* and the code that articulates a woman's place."[19] In their understanding of Mirabai's choices, these women reframe her contradictions and complexities as unique opportunities for her to achieve a faithful and fruitful life.

Mirabai's hagiography, rife with biographical complexity, allows her to be many things to many people. Discussing the way different groups have created multiple Mirabais for different purposes, Martin explains, "Mira's story has clearly become a second-order language to speak about things other than the life of a saint from the past."[20] This inexpungible ambiguity

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15. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 19," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 40.

16. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 38," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 49.

17. Harlan, n. 11, 204.

18. Ibid., 211.

19. Ibid., 213.

20. Martin, "Dyed in the Color of Her Lord," 176.

may be seen as gift, since isolating any one story and calling it the sole truth domesticates the expansive power of longing at the heart of Mirabai's songs of viraha bhakti. At the same time, these powerful songs are not just the voice of one sixteenth-century woman either. The communal and performative nature of her songs expand her reach far beyond her historical time and place.

Mirabai's Living Songs: Creating Meaning through Performance and Community

Mirabai has made inroads into public consciousness in the West through her inclusion in anthologies of both women's and mystical poetry. In India, her legacy has been kept alive in part through devotional songs, which are still sung all over the country, especially in northern Indian communities. Arguing that bhakti songs should not be separated from their performance, K. Ayyaapa Paniker describes how the songs are re-created each time they are performed. This recreation occurs not only through the various ways the lyrics are sung, but also by the ways the notes are played, the instruments are chosen, and the perfomers' bodies move. In this way, the songs are deconstructed and reconstructed in different ways by the participants each time they are performed; thus, they never achieve their final meanings.[21] The songs are not confined to the past or to the page; they live on in their continuing social, affective, and artistic power.

In her work examining the appropriation of Mirabai's legacy by different groups in India and beyond, Parita Mukta has documented and theorized the centuries-old tradition among the subordinated classes of Saurasthra and Rajasthan, two northwestern regions of India, of performing Mirabai's songs. Thus, Mukta claims that Mirabai's work is best conceived of as living songs, rather than poems on a page. Further, she argues, classifying Mirabai's work as poetry may in fact contribute to individualistic, domesticated readings of her songs that privatize their themes of social justice and truncate their potential power to transform communities. Elaborating on what she deems a destructive colonial phenomenon, Mukta writes, "The wresting of bhaktas into a history of 'poets' has caused a dissonance in the way that these figures have been received in

21. K. Ayyapa Paniker, ed., introduction to *Indian Medieval Literature*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997), xxix.

the contemporary period (through textbooks on Hindi literature, etc.) out of their context of a devotional gathering."[22] In the circle of bhaktas, as multiple voices of the humiliated and downtrodden ring out, Mirabai may not be easily read as one individual yearning for a different life; instead, in a choir of voices, she "becomes the voice of the oppressed people just as the bhaktas become Mira through their singing."[23] As ever-evolving and always-deferred performative communal meanings are produced, and as marginalized bhaktas merge with the poet-princess lover of Krishna, Mirabai again shows herself to be multiple indeed.

Another merging can be said to occur between the singer and the song's subject. When the singers participate in a song, or *bhajan*, they do more than take on the subjectivity of the author of the song. There is also a uniting of the singer and the subject of the song, which Mukta describes as "an entering into the other's nature and it entails living the presence of the subject of the *bhajan*."[24] Because the only primary characters in most of Mirabai's songs are Krishna and she, singers are thus assured a position of shared subjectivity with Mirabai, as well as a concomitant intimacy with Krishna.

In songs of viraha bhakti, longing leads to intimacy with the divine through a softening of the boundaries between the divine and the human. Norman Cutler's work on the rhetoric of bhakti theorizes divine-human merging, or what he calls "communion."[25] In his reading, devotion begets divinity in the devotee, as the devotee and the divine commune. The songs themselves, full of desire for God, become the instruments of this communion. In Cutler's words, the "aesthetic/rhetorical process is, in the final analysis, a process of divination, and the hymns fuel that process."[26] In these multiple mergings, the transformative power of Mirabai's bhakti comes into focus: authorship widens, gods become human, humans become gods, and each bhakta finds herself constitually connected to the other bhaktas.

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22. Parita Mukta, n. 14, 29.

23. Ibid., 87.

24. Ibid., 89.

25. See Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 51–58, for his work on the rhetoric of the Tamil bhakti poets, which also holds relevance for the later northern bhaktas, such as Mirabai.

26. Ibid., 51.

We build on these readings to stress the importance of reading Mirabai's songs collectively and as performance. Individualized, privatized readings of Mirabai decontextualize the relational powers of Mirabai's bhakti and obscure the performative, relational genre of her songs and its power, particularly in the lives of oppressed, low-caste women. Even today, Mirabai's songs remain "a collective oeuvre," Kumkum Sangari explains, one in which "songs are inscribed in an *extended* rather than discrete moment of production. They represent intentionalities, beliefs, and desires, which stretch beyond the individual and may be designated as a definable mode of social perception inhabited by Mirabai and nameless others."[27] Thus, I argue that the term "multiple Miras" may not only describe the wide variety of Mirabais that exist in story and song, but also the critical importance of the communal for the spiritual life, as both named and nameless persons continue to inhabit together this "mode of social perception" in the beauty, pain, and power of love-in-separation. Mirabai's songs stretch into the communal and beyond the individual in another, related way, too—through her embrace of kāma, or desire. Through the power of her longing, she connects to both divinity and other devotees. In the next section, we examine how kāma suffuses and colors her viraha bhakti.

Mirabai's Kāma and Love-Longing

I am utterly charmed by Mohan's beauty,
His beautiful body, His lotus-petal eyes,
His sidelong glances, His gentle smiles.[28]

Mirabai's songs speak of her love-longing in starkly erotic terms. The above verses serve as just one example of the vivid kāma saturating her songs. Other songs, such as one that details the narrator and Krishna as "drenched with the liquid pleasure of making love," depict their connection through images of mutual sexual desire.[29] Despite these examples,

27. Kumkum Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 28 (July 7–14, 1990): 1466.

28. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 11," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 37.

29. Mirabai, "rāg devagaṅdhār," in Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 112. This song, considered by Hawley and others to be one of the earliest of the songs attributed to Mirabai, does not appear in Caturvedī's collection. See Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 202, for more about Mirabai's manuscripts and the difficulties of locating the historical Mirabai.

A. J. Alston, who translated Caturvedī's Mirabai anthology from Hindi to English, claims that "there is no erotic element in her poetry whatever,"[30] even as he translates lines such as, "If You are now making love to another / Why did you make love to me first?"[31]

"Mira's poems are distinctly devotional without any element of eroticism," philosopher R. Raj Singh similarly asserts.[32] Arguing that it is pain, not erotic love, that motivates Mirabai, he contends that her *marital* love for Krishna differs from the *erotic* love depicted by famed *Kṛiṣṇaite* bhakti writers Jayadeva, Vidyāpati, and Caṇḍidāsa. These writers, he continues, lionize not the previously mentioned wifely love (*pativrat*), but the illicit love (*parakiyā*) epitomized by the *gopīs*, the famous cowherding devotees of Krishna.[33] For Singh, no eroticism exists in Mirabai's songs for the simple fact that Krishna is sometimes portrayed as Mirabai's husband. She therefore fits into a devotional paradigm rather than an erotic one, he argues.[34]

To be sure, more overtly sexual bhakti texts than Mirabai's songs exist; however, it proves difficult to maintain that when Mirabai presents herself to Krishna as "life after life, a virginal harvest for you to reap,"[35] she does so without eroticism, whether she speaks as a wife or not. Of course, as Singh argues, she also fits well into a devotional paradigm, but the validity of that schema does not preclude the undeniably erotic elements in her songs. For example, in one of the four focus songs that we will soon examine, Mirabai complains to a female friend, "Take a yogin / for lover, get nothing but grief." She speaks of Krishna's "intimate whispers—all worthless" and then details his heartbreaking ways as "he plucks your flower / then pulls on his robe and is gone."[36] Even Alston's slightly more subdued translation has this to say of Krisha's entanglements with Mirabai: "He speaks sweet words / When you are with him, / But then he forgets you and goes."[37]

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30. A. J. Alston, introduction to Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 19.

31. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 80," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 67.

32. R. Raj Singh, *Bhakti and Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 151.

33. Ibid., 152.

34. Ibid.

35. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 51," in Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai*, 126.

36. Mirabai, "jogiyāri prītaṛī," in *For Love of the Dark One*, trans. Andrew Schelling (Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, 1998), 45.

37. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 54," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 56.

Such erotic themes have roots in the wider umbrella of Krishna bhakti, which, as Friedhelm Hardy explains, evolved as an "aesthetic-erotic-ecstatic mysticism of separation."[38] Mirabai's songs of viraha bhakti concretize Hardy's complex description. For example, she writes of her hopes for love that keep getting dashed:

> *He seems to speak sweetly,*
> *But never gives His love.*
> *I thought the affair would succeed,*
> *But He left me halfway and went off.*[39]

Her longing for Krishna is bold, obvious, and—whether she and Krishna are portrayed as married or not—erotic.

Of course, it remains likely that these denials of eroticism in Mirabai's songs have more than a little something do with her gender. When male bhakti writers use erotic devotional imagery to express their love-longing for the divine, scholars and translators do not disavow the eroticism in their verses. Traditionally, male bhaktas sometimes employ a female point of view as a literary convention to amplify the difference and distance between the male Krishna and the archetypically feminine bhakta.[40] Taking on the voice of a woman, male writers create female narrators who yearn for Krishna as the male writers imagine a human woman yearns for her male beloved. For example, Sūrdās, a fifteenth-century bhakta, creates the voice of a cowherd maiden, or gopī, singing of last night's tryst with Krishna: "Last night, in fact, that cowherd came to my house: / He laughed his laugh and grasped me by the arm."[41] Sūrdās must create this female voice because the male equivalent of the female-gendered virahiṇī does not exist, linguistically or conceptually, in viraha bhakti.

The practices of longing become gendered as female in this schema as well, since Mirabai is one of the few bhakti writers who actually *is* a woman. Because of Mirabai's gender, her biography and songs inevitably became linked; that is, the narrative voice of a song attributed to Mirabai

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38. Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti*, 573.

39. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 57," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 57.

40. Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 119–120.

41. Sūrdās, "Pada 3886," in *Sūrsāgar*, ed. Jagannāthdās Ratnākar and Nandadulāre Vājpeyī et al. (Varanasi, India: Kāśī Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā, 1948), quoted in Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 109.

was often conflated with that of the historical Mirabai herself, rather than being understood as the voice of a constructed narrator. Predictably, concerns arise for some about the eroticism to which she gives voice as a woman. When Singh, for example, chooses to view Mirabai exclusively as Krishna's wife, which she both is and is not according to various songs and hagiographies, he attempts to undercut the female eroticism he finds problematic. Tying Mirabai to the wifely role in the pativrat (wife) / parakiyā (gopī) paradigm, in which the wife's main characteristic is loyalty and the gopī's distinguishing feature is desire, installs a barrier between Mirabai and any eroticism.

Modern claims that her songs are merely devotional and not erotic may also have roots in interpretations of the important twelfth-century *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*, whose aphorisms define, detail, and discuss the bhakti path. As such, the *Sūtra* reveals the tensions within bhakti between desire and renunciation. Even as some verses advocate loving God as the gopīs of Braj loved Krishna; that is, with immense longing, the seventh sutra avers, "Because [bhakti] is of the nature of renunciation there is no element of desire in that Love Divine."[42] How then, one may reasonably ask, does a bhakta love with the full-bodied devotion of the gopīs and also in the spirit of renunciation, both of which are recommended by these sutras?

In Indian religious traditions, desire (kāma) functions as an ambiguous energy.[43] A force that sometimes leads to karmic debt and bondage, kāma also can contribute to liberation. For example, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣads*, one of the oldest of the Upaniṣads, kāma is portrayed both as a worldly, distracting love and as the love of the divine soul, argues Madeleine Biardeau.[44] In the much later *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a similar paradox exists: the gopīs, "discarded all desires for [Krishna's] sake," yet they also achieved liberation though their kāma, Graham Schweig contends.[45]

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42. Swami Chinmayananda, trans. *Love Divine: Narada Bhakti Sutra* (Bombay: Chinmaya Publication Trust, 1970), 14.

43. Kāma has a number of meanings, such as desire, love, and affection, as well as sensual or sexual enjoyment or pleasure. See V. S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, and Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s. v. "kāma."

44. Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 87.

45. Graham Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love: India's Classic Sacred Love Story; The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 170. Quoted is Schweig's translation of *Rāsa Līlā* 1.30, part of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

The Bhagavad Gita also uses kāma multivalently. While kāma can describe a state in which the soul is in bondage to the phenomenal world, Krishna, an avatar of the god Vishnu, also asserts directly, "I am desire [kāma] undivorced from righteousness [dharma]."[46] In this straightforward declaration, kāma becomes associated with the very nature of the divine.[47] As multiple important precedents that do not equate kāma with either cupidity or exclusively worldly love exist in these examples, kāma may thus be understood as a term with essential relevance to divine love.

Specifically, kāma describes the drawing together of divinity and humanity in viraha bhakti. Depicting this entanglement, Mirabai writes, "Like a lily blossoming under the full moon's light, / I open to him in this rain: every pore of my body is cooled."[48] Her desire leads to a mixing of divine and human, an interfluidity imaged as bodies commingling. This multi-sensory image of her hot body transformed by cool rain also emphasizes the pivotal role of the body in viraha bhakti. Discussing the importance of bodily language for the genre, Hardy argues that viraha bhaktī's bodily images "fundamentally denotate an awareness which stubbornly defends the validity of the body, the senses, and the emotions in the religious context against the normative claim that solely the mind can play a positive role."[49] While bhakti generally values the body for its role in communions with the divine and other bhaktas,[50] viraha bhakti emphasizes the bodily longing inherent to humanity. Rather than merely serving as an

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46. Mohandas Gandhi, *Bhagavad Gita according to Gandhi*, ed. John Strohmeier (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 105.

47. See the further discussion of kāma and the Bhagavad Gita in Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*, 171.

48. "The Long Drought Is Over," in Mirabai, *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, trans. Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 50.

49. Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti*, 443.

50. Karen Pechilis highlights the positive role of the body in bhakti, specifically that the "necessity and accessibility of bodily participation in remembering the divine distinguishes it from religious perspectives that demanded that participants have a pure body—one perceived as inherently pure by caste and/or ritually transformed into a pure, divine-like body—such as orthodox philosophical schools, Tantra, and even schools that built upon bhakti, such as Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism." Karen Pechilis, "Theology beyond the Social in the Poems of a Female Bhakti Poet-Saint" (paper presented at American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, "Panel: Hindu Theologies of Love," Chicago, Nov. 16–19, 2012). See also Pechilis, "To Body or Not to Body: Repulsion, Wonder and the Tamil Saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār," in *Refiguring the Body: Embodiment in South Asian Religions*, B. Holdrege and K. Pechilis, eds. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, forthcoming 2016).

intermediate step on the path to ultimate spiritual fulfillment, the yearning of viraha bhakti expresses the necessary oscillations of the human-divine relationship, which flourish in the flesh and blood of embodiment.

Mirabai's Twin Practices of Longing and Letting Go

In the life and work of Mirabai, desire exists alongside renunciation because Mirabai, as we have seen, is multiple. Sometimes she longs: "I am mad with desire for Thy sight," she sings. In a line from the same song, she lets go : "I will don ashes and deer skin."[51] Themes of renunciation are thus mixed with kāma, creating vignettes of passionate non-attachment. For example, consider Mirabai's dual practice of fasting and lovemaking:

> *The colors of the dark One have penetrated Mira's body;*
> *all the other colors washed out.*
>
> *Making love with the Dark One and eating little, those are*
> *my pearls and my carnelians.*
>
> *Meditation beads and the forehead streak, those are my*
> *scarves and my rings.*[52]

Here, Mirabai juxtaposes symbols of marriage with symbols of renunciation. In these startling juxtapositions of bridal jewelry and *japa mala* beads, for example, she expresses the paradoxical coexistence of this double theme in her life.

In chapter 3, delving further into such explicit spaces of passionate non-attachment, we engage in close readings of a number of Mirabai's songs. First, we will look at specific songs in which Mirabai appears in some combination of desire and renunciation. Then we take a wider look at some of the common conventions of viraha bhakti, so that we may better understand this genre and what contributions Mirabai's unique innovations make to our study of passionate non-attachment. Finally,

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51. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 94," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 73.

52. Mirabai, "Why Mira Can't Go Back to Her Own House," in Mirabai, *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, 21.

inspired by Mirabai's bold life outside the boundaries the world set for her, we explore the subversive powers of liberation that viraha bhakti harbors. Reading Mirabai's songs of passionate non-attachment through the lens of viraha bhakti, we see how love-longing takes her and, by proxy, us, deeper into the world, even giving us tools with which to transform it.

3

Looking Closer

MIRABAI'S VOICES OF LONGING AND LETTING GO

Her whole life passes in longing.
MIRABAI[1]

WE HAVE ALREADY heard the voices of "multiple Miras" as she sings of letting go and of longing, often at the same time. In this chapter, we delve even more deeply into her songs of passionate non-attachment. As a means of investigating Mirabai's erotic asceticism, as well as of inquiring into viraha bhakti's powerful poetic conventions and potential liberative power, we now read together a number of her songs.

Mirabai as "Erotic Ascetic"

Mirabai pivots between her willingness to marry or to renounce, as symbolized by one song's respective options to "color [her] sari red" or to"wear the godly yellow garb."[2] In another song, Mirabai—in grief born of passion—writes of her choices to take off her jewelry, cut her hair, and wear holy clothing. These three actions taken together connote three possible situations: widowhood, preparation for *sati* (widow burning), and a chosen asceticism. Reading both of these enigmatic songs through the lens of

1. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 66," in Mirabai, *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. A. J. Alston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), 61.

2. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 153," in John Stratton Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 138.

viraha bhakti, which is wide enough to accommodate these paradoxes, we further explore these collisions of Mirabai's erotic and ascetic energies.[3]

As these songs disclose, Mirabai expresses her desire for renunciation in tandem with her desire for an erotic partnership with Krishna. These conflicting drives toward becoming a wandering ascetic *and* a passionate partner, suggests John Stratton Hawley, compel her to devise a "new institution to answer her urges," that of the yogic marriage.[4] Through this new institution, Mirabai "concocts an unorthodox mixture of home and homelessness that has precedent in only a few extreme tantric groups and in the mythology of Pārvatī and Śiva."[5] In these songs, Mirabai writes of simultaneously living in states of asceticism and devoted desire for Krishna.

In this first song, viraha bhakti leads her to invent a new way of living—the role of a yoginī-wife. Mirabai sings:

> *Go to where my loved one lives,*
> *go where he lives and tell him*
> *if he says so, I'll color my sari red;*
> *if he says so, I'll wear the godly yellow garb;*
> *if he says so, I'll drape the part in my hair with pearls;*
> *if he says so, I'll let my hair grow wild.*
> *Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter;*
> *listen to the praises of that king.*[6]

Yearning for communion with Krishna, Mirabai writes concurrently of marriage, imaged by the red sari and the pearls, and renunciation, connoted by the yellow robe and the wild hair. This list of ways to love Krishna does not seem to preclude her doing more than one of these options simultaneously. In fact, through the imagery of this song, one can now envision her with both untamed hair *and* a red sari. Through these startling, juxtaposed details, she shows that the "love of Krishna is a force strong enough

3. Wendy Doniger, as I noted in chapter 1, titled a book *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic*.

4. Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 133.

5. John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123.

6. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 153," in Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 138.

to fuse even logical opposites such as these."[7] In these verses Mirabai envisions herself as both an ascetic yoginī *and* a wife. Even as the roles of yoginī and wife directly contradict one another, viraha bhaktī's expansiveness recognizes a paradoxical coherence between Mirabaī's desirous and ascetic selves.

Mirabaī's yogic marriage thus sheds light on her practices of passionate non-attachment. In our viraha bhakti reading of this text, marriage can represent Krishna's and Mirabaī's highest flow of communion, while yogic asceticism can represent their lowest ebb. Since ebbs and flows are both necessary for the fullness of viraha bhakti, rather than representing separate and exclusive choices, the wife and the yoginī may also represent different locations that Mirabai passes through repeatedly on the fluctuating path of viraha bhakti. These ebbs and flows describe one of the defining traits of viraha bhakti devotionalism, the existence of separation and communion on a related continuum, not as isolated opposites. The oscillations of viraha bhakti, mirroring the seemingly contradictory roles of yoginī and wife, represent Mirabaī's journey through different intensities of presence-in-absence.

In another song expressive of the fluctuations of viraha bhakti, she details her passionate reactions to Krishna's abandonment of her:

My dark one has gone to an alien land.
He's left me behind,
he's never returned,
he's never sent me a single word,
So I've stripped off my ornaments,
jewels and adornments,
cut the hair from my head,
And put on holy garments,
all on his account,
seeking him in all four directions.
Mira: unless she meets the Dark One, her Lord,
she doesn't even want to live.[8]

7. Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 138.

8. Mirabai, "Caturvedīī's *Pada* 68," in Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 121.

This song might be read as Mirabai's ritualistic preparation for *sati*, or widow burning. When she cuts her hair, takes off her jewelry, and puts on sacred clothing, however, she also conjures images of another option, a life of ascetic renunciation. In the classical *āśrama* system of the four stages of Hindu life, traditionally only men leave their marriages behind in the last phase as they prepares for death by becoming wandering renunciates.[9] This choice did not exist for the large majority of women, as a woman's societally sanctioned roles kept her tied to the family home. As a third option beyond *sati* or wandering, Mirabai's actions might also be read as symbols for the state of widowhood.[10] In such a reading, she transitions from wife to widow because Krishna has left and never sent a "single word." She thus protests his physical desertion of her by acting as a widow would. As she desires and renounces, here she creates another new role—that of a pseudo-widow. Krishna has not died, but Mirabai acts as if he has.

These most uncommon options—those of yoginī-wife or pseudo-widow—do not easily fit the parakiyā (gopī) pattern through which viraha bhakti is most often viewed. I have already discussed how Mirabai confuses some interpreters by breaking convention when she portrays herself as Krishna's wife, not his lover. In the traditional parakiyā relationship in which the out-of-bounds love relationship is celebrated, devotees engage in illicit affairs with Krishna and leave everything behind in their total devotion to him. Instead of always working within this frame though, Mirabai often chooses other roles—those involving marriage, widowhood, and renunciation, or even a combination, thereof—to express the complexities of viraha bhakti.

No matter which role she takes though, each of these "multiple Miras" speaks to an exceptional intimacy between herself and the divine. Viewing herself as a partner to Krishna, she exclaims that she wants to "search through the world as a yogi does with you—yogi and yogini side by side," as she expresses in a previously discussed song.[11] Even as she suffers the pangs of separation from Krishna, this anguish manifests as a sign of the extant relationship between herself and God. Because of their strong connection, pain represents an appropriate and necessary response to their separation.

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9. Again, the traditional four stages include those of the student, householder, retiree, and renunciate.

10. Kumkum Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti: *Economic and Political Weekly*" (July 7–14 1990): 1548.

11. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 117," in Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 139.

Illuminating the bhaktas' understanding of painful longing, Shulman writes, "Such suffering is, in their eyes, quite literally divine—a reflection of the god's need and longing for the lowly creatures who are, for their part, obsessed with their own yearnings for him. These sorrows are apprehended as signs of the living relation between the two parties, hence of the rapturous connection which only separation makes possible."[12] This kind of suffering might be described by Shulman's aforementioned term "delicious distress."[13] Mirabai, it must be acknowledged though, does not always find these moments delectable. She cries out in one song, for example: "My body is in pain, my breath burning. / Come and extinguish the fire of separation."[14]

Regarding the intensity of Mirabai's distress, Andrew Schelling, writes of her journey, "Not a path to salvation, it seems the farther you travel it, the more hopeless your station, the more pointed the anguish, the deeper the desolation."[15] While I maintain that Mirabai's longing is not endlessly debilitating, she often attests to the desolation caused by the grief of separation. Unless she again meets the "Dark One," she concludes in the last lines of a previously discussed song, "she doesn't even want to live."

Both Martin's concept of "multiple Miras" and what I am calling the "middle spaces" of Mirabai's longing accommodate the wide range of Mirabai's responses to Krishna. Through its movement back and forth between the poles of separation and communion, viraha bhakti reveals that there is no place completely outside divine presence and no place where full possession of the divine exists. Oscillating back and forth, Mirabai resides primarily in the middle spaces between those poles, where divine presence-in-absence abides in different intensities. In the way of life that is viraha bhakti, Mirabai reverses the logic of what counts as spiritual victory: the virahiṇī can find different levels of communion all along the spectrum but does not find ultimate, total communion. These middle spaces become Mirabai's place of abiding, and attaining any sort of final end becomes

12. Shulman, "Modes of Meaning and Experience: Viraha and Viḷaiyāṭal," *Parabola* 11, no. 3 (1986): 11.

13. Ibid., 15.

14. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 96," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mirabai*, 74.

15. Andrew Schelling, "'Where's My Beloved?' Mīrābāī's Prem Bhakti Mārg," in *Vaiṣṇnavi: Women and the Worship of Krishna*, ed. Steven J. Rosen (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), 56.

subordinated to living in the middle spaces of longing. In longing, the virahiṇī acts as a gopī "not in order to lure his god, to overcome and dominate him"; rather, the longing is its own reward.[16] Viraha bhakti celebrates the desire to live and long in the middle spaces of love-in-separation.

Mirabai's Creative Command of Viraha Bhakti Conventions

Next, we explore Mirabai's adherence to and subversion of the conventions of viraha bhakti. Focusing on *pada* 54, one song of viraha bhakti, allows us to closely examine how Mirabai employs and transcends the genre. In this focus song, Mirabai first bemoans the heartbreaking effects of her decision to take a yogi for a lover. Because of her separation from Krishna, whom she images as her yogi-lover, Mirabai is beside herself with grief. She further laments:

> *To love a Jogī brings pain.*
> *He speaks sweet words*
> *When you are with him,*
> *But then He forgets you and goes.*
> *Sister, he snaps the ties of love*
> *As you might pluck a sprig of jasmine.*
> *Says Mīrā: My Lord,*
> *Without Thy sight my heart grieves sorely.*[17]

Longing undoes the narrator, as her grief makes plain from the first line through the last. As is often the case in the viraha bhakti tradition, the song portrays the virahiṇī as patiently and passively waiting for the divine to come back to her. Mirabai's waiting may appear to be another example of such passivity, but consider the first line above. She begins, "To love a Jogī brings pain" and then details Krishna's harshness when leaving her bed. Beginning the song with the words, "to love," she emphasizes her own agency, even as the lines are tinged with a measure of regretful sorrow for her choice.

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16. Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 580.

17. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 54," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 56.

Further tempering any misconceptions of unmitigated passivity, Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita point to the ubiquity of first-person statements of activity in Mirabai's songs, such as "I will," "I will not," "I am," and "I have."[18] In our reading thus far, we have seen a number of examples of these assertions, such as when Mirabai declares, "I've stripped off my ornaments" and "I have sacrificed my life." When Mirabai takes Krishna for a lover, she exercises her own agency, and despite the pain of the separation she experiences, she remains free to choose how to devote herself to him. Not answering any unilateral command from Krishna, but always freely searching for him, *she* decides the actions she will take in pursuit of Krishna.

As she pursues him, Mirabai struggles and becomes discouraged, but even amid these challenges, she chooses to devote herself to loving and finding Krishna. In her single-minded devotion, she comes up against opposition: Intimations of her family's harsh admonishments and even attempts on her life abound in the hagiography as well as the songs.[19] These griefs, as well as her profound disappointment at Krishna's lack of attention, also dwell at the heart of her songs. Despite the precarious situations that her devotion creates, she still elects love-longing as a way of life.

In this sense, viraha bhakti remains the *goal* of her practices of longing, not simply the *means* to an ultimate end of them. Mirabai belongs within a Vaiṣṇava tradition that does not deny the reality of the world; as such, it apotheosizes love of the divine *in the world* as one of its ultimate goals. In viraha bhakti there exists a "deeply ingrained acceptance of man's [*sic*] empirical being—his emotions, senses, and desires—through the belief in the world as Krishna's place of 'work' and manifestation and as man's place of achieving his perfection through sharing in the work of Krishna."[20] Through the practices of viraha bhakti, Mirabai joins with Krishna for transformative work in the world.

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18. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, "Poison to Nectar: The Life and Work of Mirabai," *Women Bhakta Poets*, special issue, *Manushi*, 50–52 (January–June 1989): 88. They also note that in Caturvedī's collection of 202 Mirabai songs, she starts twenty-nine songs with "I" or a variant ("my" or "me"). The next largest category consists of eleven songs starting with the names for Krishna, "Sanwaro" or "Shyam."

19. In the hagiography according to Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl* and in the work of Priyādas, the *rana*, a princely title of royalty, tried to kill Mirabai by sending her a cup of poison. The *rana* is sometimes interpreted as her husband and sometimes as her father-in-law.

20. Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti*, 10.

As such, Mirabai's embracing of presence-in-absence and love-in-separation prove to be integral elements of her practices of viraha bhakti, which promote a "deep engagement in the life of the world, even, it could be argued, a basic acceptance of life, for all its horrors."[21] Prominent among those horrors for Mirabai is the realization that separation from Krishna is her primary state. She cannot quite grasp Krishna; he is ultimately unreachable. Regarding the pain of this presence-in-absence, Shulman comments, "The very presence of the deity, his revelation before our eyes, evokes in us the unbearable sense of his absence—of our finitude, our inability to hold the god there, our frustration at the awareness of his total transcendence."[22] Here, the pain comes in part from trying to grasp the infinite. Mirabai's longing—no matter how deep—cannot contain the transcendental; the other is finally beyond her reach.

Mirabai's vivid scenes of abandonment also function as a language of grief over her lack of further ecstasy. Even after times of intense communion, viraha bhakti necessarily oscillates back into spaces of separation. For example, in the focus song Mirabai relates the painful throes of separation that occur after times of intense communion. Describing the oscillations of intimacy and absence, she writes, "But then He forgets you and goes." She grieves these losses loudly and boldly.

Another bhakti convention involves metaphors of captivity. How does Mirabai's putative freedom to choose her practices of viraha bhakti exist alongside such metaphors of bondage? At first glance, these startling comparisons may seem to undermine any notions of mutuality in the human/divine relationship Mirabai describes. Rather than pointing unambiguously toward subordination though, these tropes may be construed as pointing unexpectedly toward an ethic of mutuality. For example, she writes about herself, "She has sold herself in slavery to Him / Without accepting a fee" which, in its description of her own actions, keeps her subjectivity in play.[23] In addition, Mirabai's images of buying and selling are mutual—she also buys Krishna!—and are used to describe the precious quality of their relationship.[24]

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21. Shulman, n. 12: 12.

22. Ibid., 10.

23. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 58," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 58.

24. Ibid.

For instance, Mirabai discusses the sale of Krishna with her concerned friend:

> *You say it was expensive,*
> *But I say it was cheap,*
> *And I measured it out on the scales.*
> *I would offer my body,*
> *I would offer my life,*
> *For a prize beyond all price.*[25]

These mercantile images allude to the mutuality of need between lover and beloved, between human and divine, while not fully muting the iconoclastic shock of buying and selling love.

While Mirabai's love-longing may at first glance read as simple passivity, an understanding of the dynamics and conventions of viraha bhakti underscores the paradoxical power inherent in her practices of love-longing. Elaborating upon this power, Sangari writes, "Even though the *virahiṇī* may gain affective power on a rhetorical level from her supposed impotency to change the situation, in fact Mirabai *does* have agency and power to bring union with the divine as an effect of her longing."[26] What Mirabai does not seem to have agency in—what seems to happen *to* her as a result of her choices—is the immense vulnerability created by the desire and grief of viraha bhakti. As she chooses to take Krishna for a lover, she becomes vulnerable to his absenting her and and to the subsequent deepening of her desire.

As her passion deepens in the agony of separation, such vulnerability has drastic consequences. At times, she grieves furiously, yet she is still able to write of herself doing so; that is, she is not unraveled past her ability to aestheticize. For example, utilizing the viraha bhakti trope of madness to describe the undoing of her sense of self, she deems herself "mad for the Maddening One / raw for my dear dark love" in one song.[27] Another translation reads:

> *People think I am mad over Madan,*
> *That love of Shyām has driven me silly.*[28]

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25. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 22," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 41–42.

26. Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti," 1547.

27. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 37," in Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 134.

28. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 37," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 49.

In accordance with her unique descriptions of madness though, this altered state is not always altogether unwelcome. For instance, Mirabai describes an long-lasting state of blissful drunkenness:

I have drunk from the cup of nectar
And it has set me in a spin.
They cannot sober me, however they try.[29]

In another song, from the Gujurātī oral tradition, Mirabai lauds the "great qualities" madness produces in her:

[I]t is alright that I have turned insane, lady,
I found great qualities in insanity.[30]

These unnamed "great qualities" suggest again that the madness does not disintegrate all that she is and all that she knows. Instead, she recognizes in the insanity some connective profundity, a kind of "holy madness" that makes her more lucid in her condemnation of injustice, public opinion, and power. For example, through her "mad" actions of drinking poison and singing about it, she boldly exposes the injustice of the king's nefarious plan to kill her:

The King prepared a cup of poison
Which they gave to the princess to drink.[31]

Viraha bhaktī's trope of "holy madness" thus helps Mirabai find her voice against oppressive and shaming powers. She can even glory in the way that others, who may think her insane, view her. Not concerned for her reputation,

She wanders about recklessly,
Drunk in adoration,
Offering herself to Giridhara in total sacrifice.[32]

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29. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 40," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī* , 50.

30. Mirabai, "ghelā ame bhale," in *Mīrā-nā Śreṣṭha Pad*, ed. Shivalal Jesalpura (Ahmedabad: Navbharat Sahitya Mandir), 47, quoted and translated in Neelima Shukla-Blatt, "Performance as Translation: Mira in Gujurat," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 2007): 284.

31. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 40," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 50.

32. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 41," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 51.

Rather than feel shame in her reckless drunkenness, she revels in it, finding bold power in her bliss. In the final section of this chapter, we focus further on aspects of viraha bhakti that manifest as forces against unjust powers in the world.

Mirabai's Viraha Bhakti as a Liberating Force

In one famous song, Mirabai writes of the "wild woman" who tastes plum after plum to find one worthy offering:

The wild woman of the woods
Found out the sweet plums by tasting them
And brought them to the Lord.
She was neither civilized nor educated
Not possessed of physical beauty.
She was of low caste and filthy apparel,

The rest of the song speaks to her loving relationship with a God who accepts all who love as she does:

But the Lord accepted her soiled plum,
Knowing the sincerity of her love.
She recognized no distinctions of high and low,
But sought only the pure milk of love,
Not for her the learning of the Veda,
She was transported to heaven on a chariot
At a single stroke,
Now she sports in Vaikunth,
Bound to Hari by ties of love.
Says servant Mīrā:
Whoso loves like this is saved.
The Lord is the Savior of the Fallen
And I was a cowherd-maiden at Gokul
In a former birth.[33]

33. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 186," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 112.

Here, we see a different type of song from those we have previously examined. Instead of a first-person perspective, this song primarily uses the third-person narrative voice to tell the story of a woman who, while poor and likely low-caste, pleases God by offering a plum that she had tasted to ensure its perfect sweetness. The groups situated lowest in Mirabai's society were often seen as impure, insomuch that other groups would not want members of those groups touching or tasting their food. In this song though, the wild woman tastes and offers the food to the divine, and this "soiled plum" is well received by Krishna, "[k]nowing the sincerity of her love."

Mirabai speaks in her own voice at the end of the song, but the song is primarily given over to the voice of one who differs from Mirabai's famed breeding and beauty. "Whoso loves like this is saved," Mirabai declares about this "wild woman," and Mirabai herself longs to love as this woman does. Through both the content of the story it tells and the technique of Mirabai's shifting narrative voice, this song powerfully advocates for the leveling of caste and class. It yearns toward a society in which Krishna is a "protector of the poor," in the words of another of Mirabai's songs.[34] In the world Mirabai depicts, the poor wild woman with no religious training, longing gopīs, and princesses such as Mirabai may all find themselves "transported to heaven on a chariot," in the song's soaring words.

In the spirit of this image of women joining together across social classes, bhakti has long been understood as a democratizing religious energy.[35] At the same time, despite the equitable vision put forward in this song, bhakti's liberatory potential may sometimes get thwarted;

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34. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 3," quoted in in S. M. Pandey and Norman Zide, "Mīrābāī and Her Contributions to the Bhakti Movement," *History of Religions* 5, no. 1 (Summer 1965): 66. The authors supply their own translations of the *pada*s used in the article.

35. Discussing the historical and current social implications of bhakti, Pechilis remarks: "It is clear . . . that for both modernist and postmodernist social leaders, bhakti is a remembered counter-argument that can be updated and mobilized in order to create a community that is informed by and responds to social concerns that circulate in their own time. Medieval bhakti groups had proclaimed their social inclusiveness by their equation of love with the essence of humanity, as well as their sacralization of the compositions of a diversity of poets, including 'untouchables' and women. Modern and postmodern social leaders were and are concerned with drawing on bhaktī's image of inclusiveness to concretely address issues of social status within a nationalist community that was increasingly collectively defined by a rhetoric of egalitarianism." "Modern Social Interpretations of Bhakti Traditions." Paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Chicago, November 16–19, 2012. 3. See also Pechilis, "Bhakti Traditions," in *The Continuum Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frasier (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 107–121.

instead, bhakti may function only as a "compensatory safety valve or an interstitial or liminal interlude in an otherwise normatively ordered social existence."[36] Is bhakti, then, a conservative or revolutionary force? Does Mirabai's bhakti open up possibilities for a life less constrained by the social dictates of a patriarchal, oppressive society; or, is Mirabai's Krishna-directed bhakti symptomatic of just another kind of patriarchal power?

Rightly perceiving the flexibility of Mirabai's notion of bhakti, Sangari notes its possibilities for liberation *or* subordination:

> The metaphysical core of Mira's bhakti is labile and abstract enough to provide a medium for unarticulated human possibility (*moksha*), for speculation on the nature of being and the pressure of mortality, as well as a medium for the formation of an "inner life" or "sensibility." And yet *being* labile and abstract it is simultaneously open to reinterpretation, to caste, class, or patriarchal interests and to political use.[37]

Going further, Sangari argues that Mirabai's songs may be said to give subalternity a certain symbolic power. *Because* they are women, Mirabai and other female singers can achieve salvation through the schema of bhakti more easily than ever. The catch, she continues, is that they must surrender to the patriarchy to do so.[38] In other words, while bhakti may be perceived as a socially transformative force, it does not consistently or radically alter the social order in which it exists. In some ways, then, Mirabai's bhakti can be said to create a system that only compensates for the freedoms that Mirabai cannot have. As its "compensatory character" balances out its "radicalizing potential," Mirabai's bhakti is "internally poised to lose the ground it sets out to gain."[39]

Conceivably though, Mirabai's bhakti does harbor more substantial transformative potential. For John Stratton Hawley, bhakti may invert a community's traditional values, and these inversions can then create new visions for ethics. In the inversion he describes, dharma, or duty, is thus transformed, and "ordinary virtue is reshaped by being set in a new

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36. Mary E. Hancock, "The Dilemmas of Domesticity: Possession and Devotional Experience among Urban Smārta Women," in *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion and Culture*, ed. Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 63.

37. Sangari, n. 10, 1469.

38. Ibid., 1471.

39. Ibid., 1551.

context."[40] As one example, the *Bhaktamāl* presents Mirabai as having "No inhibitions. Totally fearless."[41] She did not cringe, even as the "villains" tried to kill her, the text continues. Her lack of fear and inhibitions is read by Hawley as an inversion of the dharmic prescriptions that women of Mirabai's station were usually obligated to live out. Discussing the tension between dharma and bhakti, Hawley points out that varying emphases on dharma and bhakti result in different interpretations of Mirabai, depending on how much weight is given to the bhakti or dharma poles of this continuum. If more weight is placed on dharma, for example, we may end up with a conservative Mirabai who exemplifies the ideal of the pativrat, or perfect wife, as at least one recent Indian comic book has portrayed her.[42] Conversely, if more emphasis is given to bhakti, its transformative energies may flow within communities "by reuniting socially disparate elements in a common cause: the praise of God."[43] In Hawley's vision, opportunities for solidarity amongst disparate social groups can occur through the practice of bhakti. We see an example of such solidarity in her writing when Mirabai places herself in literary and spiritual proximity to the "wild woman," and we see another example when Mirabai leaves her palace to join the motley group of itinerant bhaktas.

Hawley thus gives more credence to the liberative possibilities of bhakti than does Sangari. Warning against bhakti's potential for misuse, including co-option by oppressive interests, Sangari notes that there exists no pure, unsullied space in the midst of the embedded patriarchal and religious schemas of Mirabai's life and work.[44] If we view Mirabai's bhakti as a liberating force, then we do well to look for the dislocations within the sullied space. Despite Sangari's acknowledgment that what she calls the "spiritual economy" of Mirabai's bhakti is often aligned with the dominant political and domestic economies, she also suggests that there is something excessive in Mirabai's spiritual economy that cannot be contained.[45]

Mirabai's ardent expressions of longing may thus function as dislocating spaces. In its excessiveness then, Mirabai's bhakti cannot be possessed

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40. Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 62–67.

41. Nābhādās, *Śri Bhaktamāl, with the Bhaktirasabodhinī Commentary of Priyādas* (Lucknow: Tejkumār Press, 1969), 712–713, quoted in Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 123.

42. Hawley, n. 5, 66.

43. Ibid., 63.

44. Sangari, n. 10, 1472–1473.

45. Ibid., 1471–1472.

completely by any group. When Mirabai mourns her inability to possess the fullness of God, the excess toward which she points likewise evades the grasp of any individual or group who might want to hoard its power. Her songs, eluding possession, may thus work as a "powerful force which selectively uses the metaphysic of high Hinduism (*maya, karma*, and rebirth) in an attempt to create an inappropriate excess or transcendent value grounded within the dailiness of a material life within the reach of all."[46] In other words, Mirabai's "liberalizing and dissenting forms of bhakti" attempt to break through and redefine the content, methods, authors, and audiences of traditional understandings.[47]

As such, Mirabai's ardent practices of longing relativize any claim to a singular understanding of who Mirabai was and what bhakti might accomplish. Her storied choice to give up the benefits of a royal life allows her an unnaming of the privilege and family ties that once defined and bound her. In such a move, her particular characteristics and priorities charge bhakti with even more liberatory potential. A Mirabai who yearns with and for others, outside the walls of respectability, is a Mirabai who may create disturbances in the workings of an unjust world.

While historical and present injustices work against an unambiguously optimistic reading of bhakti's potential to break the chains that bind women and other subalterns, the force of Mirabai's longing, that is, the excess of her viraha bhakti, functions as a tool that may loosen the chains. Discussing the possibility of liberatory spaces even within patriarchal systems, Sangari suggests that when Mirabai writes in "language which makes the patriarchal substratum of customary subjection simultaneously the matrix of agency and transcendence," she "may achieve quite remarkable shifts of emphasis, dislocations and create new, contradictory spaces, even as it remains amenable to maintaining *status quo*."[48] These new, contradictory spaces, engendered by Mirabai's mystical excess and nurtured by viraha bhakti's communal longing, pry open space for the creation of solidarities toward a more just world. In this way, we engender hope to avoid what Sangari calls the "embourgeoisement of Mirabai."[49] Such a

46. Ibid., 1464.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., 1472.

49. Kumkum Sangari, "*Viraha*: A Trajectory in the Nehruvian Era," in *Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia: Loss, Love, and Liberation*, ed. Kavita Panjabi (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 258.

co-opting of Mirabai enervates her, diminishing her power by homogenizing the many strands of her songs and stories into a monomyth of a virtuous and loyal wife. Such an embourgeoisement undercuts the dislocating power of Mirabai's curious combination of longing and letting go.

Mirabai's Strange Path of Passionate Non-Attachment

Strange is the path of love and devotion!
MIRABAI[50]

Mirabai's path of viraha bhakti is indeed odd in embracing both desire and non-attachment. Through the lens of her feminist commitments, translator Jane Hirshfield has attempted to make sense of the passion and the renunciation that Mirabai combines so potently. She writes of what she sees as Mirabai's two central teachings and the connection between them: "One is the consummate freedom passion calls up in us, and the other is the surrender of self that passion's fulfillment requires . . . And through reading her poems, we begin to discover that these two teachings are not separate."[51] As we have discussed in this chapter, Mirabai's viraha bhakti can display non-attachment even in the embodied embraces of erotic longing. Conversely, her viraha bhakti often drips with desire even in its ascetic moments.

We have examined songs, for example, in which Mirabai lives as a passionate yoginī, driven by desirous devotion *and* renunciation. Attempting to understand this confluence of desire and non-attachment, Neelima Shukla-Blatt asserts that Mirabai is "not simply a person who has attained detachment through discipline"; she is also a "lover who, being fully absorbed in love, becomes indifferent to the world."[52] Looking at the passionate non-attachment of Mirabai's songs through the lens of viraha bhakti, we have not observed indifference in Mirabai; instead, we have seen her love-longing take her and, by proxy, us *deeper* into the world.

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50. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 46," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 53.

51. Jane Hirshfield, "Mirabai's Teachings," in Mirabai, *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, ed. Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), xiv.

52. Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, "Performance as Translation: Mira in Gujurat," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, no. 3 (2007): 285.

Mirabai does not become indifferently detached from the world as she writes and sings songs of communal longing. Rather, she boldly leaves her scripted courtly life in order to dive deeply and passionately into the wider, unknown world—"seeking him in all four directions."[53] Viraha bhakti infuses Mirabai's world—and that of her divine lover, fellow singers, and readers—with passionate non-attachment. These twin practices of longing and letting go release her from any narrow individualisticism and impel her onto the wider roads that she walks with others. As Mirabai sings of this path of love and grief:

> *Listen, my friend, this road is the heart opening,*
> *Kissing his feet, resistance broken, tears all night.*[54]

53. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 68," in Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 121.

54. "The Heat of Midnight Tears," in Mirabai, *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, 64.

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Hadewijch's Love-Longing and Passionate Non-attachment

. . . nevertheless this noble unfaith can neither feel nor trust
Love, so much does unfaith enlarge desire.
HADEWIJCH[1]

OUR COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION of passionate non-attachment's possibilities and perils now oscillates, perhaps dizzyingly, from sixteenth-century India to thirteenth-century Europe. By way of introduction, I note that Hadewijch, like Mirabai, presents as a historical mystery in many ways. No facts can be conclusively known about the specifics of her birth, family, or death; nonetheless, some scholars have tried to create a general outline of her life by examining clues in her writing. These clues suggest that after years as a leader of her Christian Beguine community, her authority as a teacher was questioned, and she may have been dispossessed from the circle.[2] Judging from the themes and style of her writings, it is likely she had access to more education than most women of her time.[3] Not much else, alas, can be definitively known about her life.

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1. "Letter 8: Two Fears about Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Mother Columba Hart, OSB (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 65.

2. Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986), 177.

3. Mother Columba Hart, OSB, introduction to Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 5–7. Hart notes that Hadewijch's familiarity with the vocabulary of chivalry and courtly love suggests that she was of a higher class. She most likely attended school, as indicated by her metaphors of curriculum and schoolmen in her "school of love" poems. As shown by allusions in her work, she was also conversant with Latin, rules of rhetoric, numerology, Ptolemaic astronomy, and music theory. She introduces a number of French words into her writing and knew many of the Church Fathers and most of the canonical twelfth-century writers. She also had a great deal of knowledge of vernacular love poetry and was familiar with the Latin verse of Alain de Lille and Peter Abelard.

Hadewijch's Noble Unfaith

Hadewijch's writings, which include letters, visions, poems in stanzas, and poems in couplets—all written in middle Dutch—display her loving a Love, *Minne* in middle Dutch, who incites both desirous longing *and* a letting go of everything short of her longing. In what she calls "noble unfaith" (*edele ontrouwe*), she even lets go of her faith. In a theologically unprecedented move, Hadewijch longs for Love so intensely that she lets go of her faith in order to continue enlarging her desire for Minne. In a stunning example of passionate non-attachment, Hadewijch's fervent eros and grief turn her away from her familiar modes of faith, reason, humility, and trust because they cannot deliver her into what she calls Love's fruition (*ghebruken*).

Hadewijch's practices of longing and letting go take her into unfathomable spiritual depths. In one poem, she writes of these mysterious, desirous spaces of unknowing (*onwetenne*):

> *If I desire something,*
> *it is not known to me, because*
> *I find myself at all times imprisoned in fathomless unknowing.*[4]

In another image of what might be called an apophatic darkness, Hadewijch can only utter, "Then the soul sees, and it sees nothing."[5] Attempting to describe what she paradoxically calls "divine clarity," Hadewijch reports both sight and its lack. In these eight words—"Then the soul sees, and it sees nothing"—she succinctly expresses this apophatic mystery.

Hadewijch's practices of longing encompass the wide range of her relationship with Minne, including this state of divine dark clarity between the poles of blissful communion and grief-inducing separation. These ebbs and flows in the middle spaces between communion and separation bring to mind Mirabai's oscillating viraha bhakti, with its fluctuating continuum of divine presence-in-absence; accordingly,

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4. Hadewijch, "*Mengeldict* 25 (Poems in Couplets)," in Saskia Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch's Mengeldichten* (Goppingen, Germany: Kummerle Verlag, 1991), 87, lines 1–3. Scholars have proposed that this text was written by a writer they call Hadewijch II.

5. "Letter 28: Trinitarian Contemplation Caught in Words," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 111.

we will read Hadewijch with the lens of Mirabai's practice of viraha bhakti. Not occluding Hadewijch's rich particularity by anachronistically attempting to contain her within this framework, we will instead read her writings *alongside* Mirabai's songs of viraha bhakti, which shed light on Hadewijch's unique configurations of desire and non-attachment, including her "noble unfaith."

Before delving into this comparative reading, we first locate Hadewijch within her medieval Christian Beguine context. Through a creative blending of two literary genres common to her time, Hadewijch and other Beguine contemporaries, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete, generated a new genre of theological writing. In the context of this hybrid genre, we examine Hadewijch's enigmatic concept of "noble unfaith," which functions as a particular form of passionate non-attachment. Highlighting the desirous Love (Minne) Hadewijch yearns *for* and *with*, this chapter investigates her twin, integral practices of longing and letting go.

La Mystique Courtoise*: Hadewijch's Hybrid Genre of Courtly Love and Bridal Mysticism*

In the old days, before this time, with regard to all my acts,
I constantly wished to know, and kept thinking of it, and
repeated ceaselessly: "What is Love? And who is Love?"

HADEWIJCH[6]

Hadewijch reports that she had long been occupied with the nature of Love (Minne). According to these lines from her second vision, Hadewijch spent years contemplating, "What is Love?" and "Who is Love?" Later, still searching to understand just who and what Love is, Hadewijch potently combined two literary genres of thirteenth-century Western Europe, vernacular courtly love poetry and Christian bridal mysticism, to produce a third genre, that of *la mystique courtoise*, or "courtly mysticism."[7]

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6. "Vision 2: Experience of Pentecost," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 271.

7. See Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 139, for an introduction to this term. Newman argues for the use of *mystique courtoise* over the more common *Minnemystik* to describe Hadewijch's writings for two primary reasons: (1) the influence of courtly love literature on Hadewijch's writings and (2) "the ambiguous social location of this [Beguine] movement, which, like the beguines themselves, straddled the border between religious and secular life" (139).

Possessing a mastery of both courtly love poetry and bridal mysticism that was deep enough to allow her to improvise within and between these genres, Hadewijch's creative improvisations in the language of mystique courtoise result in provocative understandings of God, herself, and others, as well as of the bonds connecting them all. Focusing on these two formative genres and the new genre they birthed, we now examine in more detail the advantages of mystique courtoise for Hadewijch's dual expression of erotic and renunciatory energies.

Scholarly consensus holds that Hadewijch was much influenced by the interpretive schema of bridal mysticism, or *Brautmystik*, which harnessed the eros in *Song of Songs* as an allegory for the relationship between God and the soul.[8] In this tradition, which drew theological sustenance from bringing together elements of the Old Testament's *Song of Songs* with elements of the New Testament's *Apocalypse* an image of the female bride represents the human soul, who attains spiritual perfection through her union with the divine male bridegroom.

To Brautmystik's resources, Hadewijch contributed a transformative element, the predominantly secular genre of courtly love verse, or *fine amour*.[9] Fine amour highlights the courtly lover, or the *knight errant*, who sings troubadour songs of unfulfilled desire and performs difficult deeds to win the love of a distant noblewoman. Combining elements of fine amour and Brautmystik, Hadewijch concocted a potent mix: mystique courtoise. Describing the intersecting threads of this new genre, Barbara Newman explains, "Sacred and secular met in mystique courtoise when the aura of Caritas enveloped the originally profane figures of Amour and Minne, giving rise to the awesome Goddess of the beguines."[10] Here, "Caritas," a Christian concept of Charity/Love, rendezvouses with "Amour" and "Minne," the respective French and Dutch concepts of romantic, courtly

8. In the ancient tradition of interpreting the *Song of Songs*, often traced back to Origen, Hadewijch was particularly influenced by the works of Bernard of Clairvoix and William of St. Thierry. See Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 169–170.

9. See Newman, n. 7, 164, for a discussion of how *fine amour* and *Brautmystik* shaped each other: courtly love literature had been influenced by the Cistercian allegorical literature on the *Song of Songs*, as can be seen in *La Queste del saint Graal* and in Gottfried's *Tristan*, for example. Along with some of her fellow Beguines influenced by fine amour, Hadewijch provided a reciprocal influence on Brautmystik.

10. Ibid., 78. See also Newman's book *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) for her argument that Minne represents one of multiple notions of feminine divine power that sprung from the medieval theological imagination.

love. This dynamic begets mystique courtoise's rendition of Minne, a female-gendered term of fantastically flexible valence, whose nuances we discuss later in this chapter.

Hadewijch's concoction of bridal mysticism mixed with courtly love poetry creates some startingly innovative theological ideas. Consider Newman's list of the creative results of this coupling: "the glamour of love at a distance, the pursuit of amorous fusion through abjection, refinement in love as a badge of class distinction, exaltation of Love as a goddess or cosmic principle, representation of the Beloved as a mirror of the self, and gender inversion or exchange between lovers as a proof of perfect union."[11] Each of these themes might be fruitfully examined, but as an example of the results of Hadewijch's inventive genre play, we focus here on the first element.

Concerning the "glamour of love at a distance," mystique courtoise heightens and complexifies traditional Brautmystik themes of mystical absence through the addition of a haughtily distant beloved from the fine amour tradition. Brautmystik is characterized by divine distance and absence, seen most vividly in the dominant image of the bride awaiting the arrival of her groom, but this arrival is nonetheless inevitable. In the mystique courtoise genre, Hadewijch shifts the connotations of divine distance and absence toward uncertainty regarding the final outcome of her waiting. Hadewijch thus does not claim to know exactly what will happen at the end of her longing or whether her longing will ever stop at all.

Inasmuch as the genre of fine amour thrived on the idea of perpetually unfulfilled longing, it differed from existing medieval models of marriage. In traditional European medieval society, apart from the literary invention of fine amour, a man would possess a woman through a marriage contract, and she would become his property. The ideals of fine amour led in a new direction: the beloved must be wooed and courted by the questing knight. The goal, however, was not marriage. The quest itself became the goal, and longing fueled the adventure. The beloved was thus ultimately unpossessable, and the necessary distance between her and the knight only increased the knight's desire. The best kind of love, according to this schema, needed distance to stay alive.

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11. Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 164.

Coupled with the erotic longing of Brautmystik, which lauds a not-yet-consummated union, the element of necessary distance in fine amour further complexifies Hadewijch's model. The analogue of the noblewoman's unattainability in the courtly love song becomes God's unattainability, which Hadewijch mines for theological import. For example, in Hadewijch's tenth vision, the soul enters into the New Jerusalem as a bride waiting for the arrival of her bridegroom. When the bridegroom arrives, he shouts, "Behold, this is my bride, who has passed through all your honors with perfect love, and whose love is so strong that, through it, all attain growth!" He assures Hadewijch that "we shall remain one," but as the vision ends, she finds herself "piteously lamenting [her] exile."[12] Despite this mourning in the vision's conclusion, much of the imagery of this vision lends itself well to a traditional Brautmystik reading of an assured eventual happy ending of union for the soul and God. For instance, Hadewijch is said to have "passed through" the steps of the journey, and she now meets her bridegroom as the reward. The reward is not limited to her alone: "all attain growth" through her strong love, an important theme I return to later.

With the addition of fine amour motifs, however, this vision now includes a beloved who, in the language of courtly love, may be fickle or play hard to get in her noble hauteur. The beloved's expected, but still painful behavior toward the lover creates a complicated relationship. Because the distant or absent beloved of fine amour is known for her demanding, even tyrannical ways, the lover of Minne must let go of her assumptions of complete union. At the end of the vision, when Hadewijch experiences "exile," she finds herself cast out from the marriage that Brautmystik promises. The grief Hadewijch then expresses reflects her reaction to the unattainability of the union for which she longs. As she grieves, her desire for Minne grows even stronger.

Here, we have discussed just one example of how Hadewijch's new genre of mystique courtoise significantly alters some distinguishing aspects of Brautmystik and fine amour. In the next section, we continue to explore how mystique courtoise transforms traditional theological elements to unorthodox effect. Specifically, we now consider the commodious concepts of gender that emerge in mystique courtoise.

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12. "Vision 10: The Bride in the City," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 288.

Hadewijch's Gendered Desire and Mystique Courtoise

. . . But they who serve Love with truth
Shall in love walk with Love
All round that kingdom where Love is Lady. . .
HADEWIJCH[13]

At the intersection of courtly love and bridal mysticism—that is, in mystique courtoise—Hadewijch unsettles conventional gender conceptions, and these unsayings of gender further influence the ways Minne and the lover of Minne interact.[14] In fine amour and Brautmystik, the two primary genres Hadewijch combines in mystique courtoise, two persons engage in specifically defined love relationships: the knight and the lady, and the bride and the groom, respectively. In Hadewijch's mystique courtoise however, the love relationship may play out in multiple ways. Options double for which "lover" role Hadewijch plays; that is, she may choose to identify with the questing male knight of fine amour or with the female bride of Brautmystik. When choosing the role of the knight, she experiments with taking on a role usually imaged as male. In the voice of a knight, for example, she writes of her dual experiences of joy and despair:

. . . Then I ride my proud steed
And consort with my Beloved in supreme joy,
As if all beings of the North, the South, the East,
And the West were captive in my power.
And suddenly I am unhorsed, on foot. . .[15]

13. "Poems in Stanzas 34: Becoming Love with Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 225, lines 36–38.

14. For more on theologically unsaying gender, see Catherine Keller, "The Apophasis of Gender: A Fourfold Unsaying of Feminist Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 4 (2008): 905–933, a narrative of feminist theology's deployment of the apophasis of gender, an "apophatic silence [that] opens a visionary space in which unexpected solidarities can form" (911).

15. "Poems in Stanzas 10: Knight Errant," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 153, lines 40–44.

In these lines, her tumultuous experience of riding joyfully and then being quickly "unhorsed" illustrates the oscillations of the knight's journey, while the gender reversal allows her to express images of freedom, power, and travel that were not commonly associated with women.

Hadewijch is one of the only medieval female Christian writers to experiment with images of gender reversal. A number of male writers of her time, however, identified with the female-gendered bride/soul in the traditional Brautmystik schema.[16] Expanding the ancient allegorical reading of *Song of Songs* initiated by Origen, male theologians, such as Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry, depicted themselves as devoted female lovers of God. These male-to-female reversals are often explained as ways to intensify themes of otherness or to express unique intimacy, since the divine-human relationship they attempt to describe was unlike anything these men had ever experienced.[17] Writers employing this method maintained a heteronormative model of sexual relations on the surface; yet, these gender reversals, these queer acts, display a "linguistic transvestitism" that may be said to "denaturalize and destabilize normative conceptions of human sexuality in potentially radical ways."[18] As Amy Hollywood's words attest, such gender bending may augur more fluid and capacious ways of thinking about sexuality and gender.

As we have already begun to see, Hadewijch performs multiple destabilizations of normative gender and sexual paradigms. When Hadewijch takes on the role of male knight errant yearning for the female beloved, for example, she queers her own subjectivity. This subversive choice allows her to undertake the yearning that is usually denied her because of her gender. When she does choose to voice a female subjectivity within the framework of mystique courtoise, she highlights the female body as a site of longing. Her focus on the female desiring body is also a subversive choice. In fine amour, women have no desire themselves; they only wait

16. Caroline Walker Bynum reminds us that writers of the medieval era used gender "more fluidly and less literally than we do now, focusing in the continuum rather than on the dichotomy." See Catherine Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1991), 108.

17. Saskia Murk Jansen, "The Use of Gender and Gender-Related Imagery in Hadewijch," in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 54.

18. Amy Hollywood, "Sexual Desire, Divine Desire; or, Queering the Beguines," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 123.

patiently while the desiring knight comes to find them. Elaborating on the radicality of Hadewijch's depiction of desire, Karma Lochrie asserts, "Since cultural models of courtly love were based on the impossibility of female desire, the assumption and expression of mystical desire in courtly love already exposes the heterosexual laws it usurps."[19] When Hadewijch then, as a woman, writes of *her* desire for Minne, she may be understood as contesting the "idealizing strategies of male abjection and the spiritualized mythos of courtly love."[20] Here, the very existence of her female yearning, not to mention its intensity, decenters gendered aspects of the schemas of bridal mysticism and courtly love. Hadewijch creatively combines those genres in ways that liberate gender categories from some of their limiting aspects.

In a ravishing image of bodily embrace in her seventh vision, Hadewijch underscores desirous female embodiment as essential to her practices of longing. In an extraordinary depiction of embracing the adult Jesus, Hadewijch describes their full-bodied encounter. After recounting how Jesus gives her the Eucharist, she continues, "[H]e came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported."[21] By making the desiring female body the site of mystical union, Hadewijch highlights the crucial role of female desire in the mutual erotic love for which she yearns. Taking her into his arms, Jesus responds to her desire with his own. The vision continues with Hadewijch asserting that they "each wholly receive the other in full satisfaction of the sight, the hearing, and the passing away of the one in the other."[22] Here, Jesus reaches for her in order to find mutual satisfaction.

Elaborating on the way Hadewijch subverts the Platonic self-sufficiency of divinity, John Giles Milhaven notes that Hadewijch does not "speak Greek" in this vision.[23] In the Greek-influenced theological tradition, God

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19. Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 185–186.

20. Ibid.

21. "Vision 7: Oneness in the Eucharist," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 281.

22. Ibid., 281–282.

23. John Giles Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters: Other Ways of Loving and Knowing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 37.

traditionally has "no discontent, no unsatisfied desire," but Hadewijch's bodily imagery of mutual embrace contradicts this understanding.[24] Often denied desire, both figures in this vision—God and the female desiring body—express their passion for the other.

Many of Hadewijch's most compelling images of desire depict this erotic mutuality. As I have mentioned, in the fine amour tradition, yearning exists unidirectionally: the knight desires, but the waiting lady does not. Mutual yearning between the bride and groom does exist in the Brautmystik tradition, however, which draws primary inspiration from *Song of Songs*. Borrowing themes from this tradition, Hadewijch composes staggering scenes of mutual erotic love. With arresting imagery of bodily intimacy, Hadewijch writes:

> Where the abyss of his wisdom is, he will teach you what he is, and with what wondrous sweetness the loved one and the Beloved dwell one in the other, and how they penetrate each other in such a way that neither of the two distinguishes himself from the other. But they abide in one another in fruition, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul while one sweet *divine Nature* flows through them both (2 Pet. 1:4), and they are both one thing through each other, but at the same time remain two different selves—yes, and remain so forever.[25]

Here, the "loved one" and the "Beloved" interdwell within each other's bodies, which bears witness to the mutuality of desire flowing back and forth between them. "Mouth and mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul," the lovers unite in rapturous communion; at the same time, they remain themselves.

As we have begun to explore, Hadewijch's artful hybridization of bridal mysticism and courtly love provides choices for how she portrays the participants in mutual love. In the paradigms of Brautmystik and fine amour, the beloveds of the bride and knight are the divine Bridegroom and the lady, respectively. Of course, in Brautmystik the groom images God, but in fine amour, the lady is a mortal female, albeit an idealized one. While Hadewijch sometimes utilizes a traditional Brautmystik schema of a female human

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24. Ibid., 37.

25. "Letter 9: He in Me and I in Him," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 66.

lover and a male divine Beloved, she upsets traditional gender and sexual roles in other writings. We have already seen her perform a "linguistic transvestitism" when she writes in the knight errant's male voice. In vision 9, which might be seen as the culmination of her visions, Hadewijch's creative combining of genres results in something utterly unexpected for a thirteenth-century Christian writer: a depiction of a mutually erotic divine-human relationship between female-gendered lovers.[26] Using an all-female cast that includes Minne, Hadewijch, and Queen Reason, vision 9 concludes with Minne's ravishing of Hadewijch. "But Love came and embraced me;" she writes, not as a knight but in her own voice, "and I came out of the spirit and remained lying until late in the day inebriated with unspeakable wonders."[27] Their clinch leaves her tipsy with joyful mystery.

With its "characteristic dynamism," mystique courtoise uses its broadened resources to "express the loving, volatile self's whole panoply of response to its ineffable Other."[28] Within the context of mystique courtoise, we have begun to explore Hadewijch's deployment of flexibly gendered imagery for both lover and beloved, innovations that may seem theologically profound even today. Next, we continue to explore the multivalence of the term "Minne" as a resource for Hadewijch's theological innovations.

"*What Is Minne? Who Is Minne?*"

"De Minne es al!"
HADEWIJCH[29]

As discussed previously, the questions "What is Minne?" and "Who is Minne?" fueled Hadewijch's writings throughout her life. Venturing an answer to these ambitious questions, she asserts in one letter, "De Minne es al!" Minne, for Hadewijch, *is all*, but how does she understand this "all"?

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26. See Mary A. Suydem, "The Touch of Satisfaction: Visions and the Religious Experience according to Hadewijch of Antwerp," *Journal for the Feminist Study of Religion* 12, no. 2 (1996): 5–27. Suydem discusses how Hadewijch uses a language of unsaying gender paradigms to "produce a different dialogue with divinity"(20).

27. "Vision 9: Queen Reason," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 286.

28. Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 138–139.

29. "Letter 25," in *Hadewijch: Brieven*, ed. Jozef Van Mierlo, SJ (Antwerp: Standaard Boekhandel, 1947), 216.

We have seen that Minne, often translated as "Love" or "Lady Love," serves as Hadewijch's name for God. Even as Hadewijch refers to God as Minne, at the same time she expands her use of the word beyond being a referent for God. In this section, I examine a number of attempts to understand Hadewijch's creative, multivalent uses of Minne as a term used not only for God but also for other aspects of her faith and practice.

As we have seen, Hadewijch constructs her depictions of Minne from the secular courtly love tradition as well as from Brautmystik's religious depictions of love. In the context of the resulting genre of mystique courtoise, the combination of these strands results in diverse possibilities for understanding who and what Minne is. Scholarly interpretations of Hadewijch's concept of Minne thus vary widely, and their diversity showcases the manifold ideas abiding in this one evocative word. Noting some of the ways Minne resists univocality, Newman writes, "[Minne] appears in various contexts as a double for the mystic herself, her 'transcendent I'; as a double for Christ, the Beloved; and as ultimate being, the Absolute, in which Lover and Beloved are one."[30] Next, I offer a further sampling of scholarly interpretations of Minne.

As we have begun to see, Hadewijch's Minne contains a stunning and sometimes baffling collection of meanings. Tanis Guest argues that Minne is Hadewijch's term for a "living entity," not an "abstract quality."[31] Gordon Rudy asserts that Minne is a tripartite term meaning "equally God, the person, and the bond between the two."[32] Describing the layers of meaning fine amour adds to Minne, Jessica Boon notes, "Only *Minne*, referring to God once as lady, the soul as knight, and to the loving relationships within God and between lover and God, can capture in one many-layered phrase the multiplicity of the experience of simple union with a God beyond descriptors."[33] Highlighting the crucial relational aspects

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30. Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 153. The "transcendent I" (116–117) references the work of Wilhelm Breuer," Philologische Zugänge zur Mystik Hadewijchs: Zu Form und Funkion religiöser Sprache bei Hadewijch," *Grunfragen christlicher Mystik*, ed. Margot Schmidt and Dieter Bauer, 103–121 (Germany: G. Holzboog, 1987), 116–117.

31. Tanis Guest, *Some Aspects of Hadewijch's Poetic Form in the "Strofische Gedichten"* (The Hague: Matinus Nijhoff, 1975), 137.

32. Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 68.

33. Jessica A. Boon, "Trinitarian Love Mysticism: Ruusbroec, Hadewijch, and the Gendered Experience of the Divine," *Church History* 72, no. 3 (2003): 493.

of Minne, Reinder Meijer claims that Minne is precisely "the relation between God and man" [*sic*].[34]

Minne's extraordinary linguistic flexibility allows space for these multiple meanings to exist within one word. Grammatically, Minne "can occupy nearly any function in a sentence and is often repeated [by Hadewijch] in one and the same sentence, through different grammatical functions," notes Veerle Fraeters.[35] For example, Hadewijch demonstrates its grammatical lability in this prayer, which uses minne or a variant ten times in four lines:

Ay minne ware ic mine
Ende met minnen minne v minne
Ay minne om minne gheuet dat minne
Die minne al minne volkinne.

In English, the poem reads, "O love, were I love, and with love, love you, love, O love, for love, give that love which love may know wholly as love."[36] The repetitive arrangement serves a number of functions: it literally demonstrates Hadewijch's belief that "De Minne es al," and at the same time it emphasizes love's multiple aspects. By placing variants of Minne next to one another, the repetition also brings the all the loves and lovers together, bridging distances amongst them. In an apophatically-tinged interpretation of these lines, Saskia Murk Jansen proposes that Hadewijch's repetition of Minne helps to "undo distinctions between the poet's love for God and the love that is God dissolved in union."[37] The loves thus melt into each other and in their integration, destabilize any sense of enduring distinction between human and divine loves.

Hadewijch's Gifts of Integration

By integrating two unique sets of metaphors to express who and what Minne is, Hadewijch created a new theological genre abounding in yet other

34. Reinder Meijer, *Literature of the Low Countries: A Short History of Dutch Literature in the Netherlands and Belgium* (Cheltenham, UK: Stanley Thornes Publishers, 1978), 17.

35. Veerle Fraeters, "Hadewijch," in *Women Writing in Dutch*, ed. Kristiaan Aercke (New York: Garland, 1994), 19.

36. "*Mengeldict* 15," in Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought*, 71, lines 49–52.

37. Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought*, 71.

inspired integrations. The bodily imagery Hadewijch so often employs, for example, further displays her talent for integration. Emphasizing this imagery's concrete, not merely symbolic uses, Grace Jantzen argues, "Erotic mysticism for Hadewijch is passionate, embodied mysticism; the erotic is not merely metaphorical but rather is a focus for integration."[38] In other words, Hadewijch's erotic imagery becomes integrated into her vocation in ways not seen in either the speculative or affective traditions of male medieval mystic spirituality. While these traditions often attempted to strip away any reference to the body in a quest for spiritual purity, Hadewijch's goal "to be God with God . . . involves an identification with the humanity and divinity of Christ, sharing concretely in his self-sacrificing care for those who needed him, in the way that the beguine communities were putting into practice throughout Northern Europe."[39] The divine eros Hadewijch describes sends her out into the world to actively care for others. In this way, her soul and body find integration together.

Hadewijch's talent for integrating presumed opposites has been well noted. Mary A. Suydem, for instance, identifies the integration of the roles of Love and Reason, both of which are personified (and female) forces in Hadewijch's writings.[40] Paul Mommaers notes Hadewijch's integration of transcendence and immanence: "God is such that he allows himself to be possessed in an incredibly intimate manner. But you can seldom find a mystical author—who at the same time—throws such light on God's transcendence as Hadewijch does."[41] Notwithstanding Hadewijch's gift for integration, Tanis Guest pinpoints two areas that she claims Hadewijch has difficulty integrating, the affects of her victorious highs of union with Minne and her forlorn lows of separation from Minne. Claiming that only resignation exists between the joyous communions and depressive separations, Guest explains:

> We seldom if ever find her taking a dispassionate standpoint; she has two basic moods in her writing, and therefore probably in her

38. Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 145.

39. Ibid., 140.

40. Suydem, "The Touch of Satisfaction: Visions and the Religious Experience according to Hadewijch of Antwerp," 18.

41. Paul Mommaers, preface to Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, xv.

> life. The first, which we see most frequently in the *Strophische Gedichten* [poems in stanzas] is that of total depression and despair, the other of exultation and confidence; between the two falls the resignation in which she schooled herself, and which often makes a somewhat artificial impression.[42]

Here, Guest reductively reads Hadewijch as suffering from a barely concealed mood disorder. Certainly, Hadewijch's work contains a wide spectrum of moods, including those of exultation and despair. The imagery of her embracing Christ as well as of abiding with him "mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul and soul" are two dramatic instances of her exulting mood, but we have not yet much discussed her despairing mood.

Low moods can be found throughout her body of work, but her poems in stanzas, as Guest points out, especially can be read as extended meditations on her sense of separation from God's presence. In stanzaic poem 17, for example, Hadewijch laments:

> *. . . The number of my griefs must be unuttered,*
> *My cruel burdens must remain unweighed:*
> *Nothing can be compared to them. . .*[43]

In another stanzaic poem, she mourns the dispossession of herself, the result of the way Love treats her:

> *. . . The hidden ways by which Love sends me*
> *Are such as completely rob me of myself. . .*[44]

These examples, just two of many, display the dramatic depression she suffers.

Between these high and low moods posed as opposites, Guest asserts that Hadewijch only displays a "studied and artificial resignation," which suggests a lack of authenticity on Hadewijch's part. Toward a more integral

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42. Guest, *Some Aspects of Hadewijch's Poetic Form*, 132.

43. "Poems in Stanzas 17: Under the Blow," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 172, lines 19–21.

44. "Poems in Stanzas 25: Reason, Pleasure, and Desire," Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 197, lines 27–28.

conception of the mystical life than one in which Hadewijch fakes her satisfaction as she pings back and forth between opposite ways of being, we now examine the relationship between Hadewijch's spiritual highs and lows for a more integral way of understanding these fluctuations.

Fruition and Non-fruition Together: Ghebruken *and* Ghebreken

To begin this study of Hadewijch's moods, we focus on Hadewijch's terms for states of communion and separation: *ghebruken* and *ghebreken*, respectively. Some interpreters read Hadewijch as a mystic of erotic abundance, brimming with ghebruken, while others view her as a suffering saint, full of ghebreken.[45] The dramatic fluctuations of ghebruken and ghebreken in Hadewijch's writings may leave readers unsure of the hermeneutical keys to understanding her oscillations. How should Hadewijch's complexity best be understood?

The word ghebruken, used by Hadewijch to denote times of communion, is often translated as "fruition," while the word ghebreken is translated as "non-fruition" or "lack of fruition."[46] Others translate ghebruken as "enjoyment" or "satisfaction,"[47] and ghebreken as "falling short."[48] This last definition, that of "falling short," provides a compelling way to think about the tensile relationship between ghebreken and ghebruken. Rather than cast the terms as mere opposites, ghebreken as "falling short" signals that one's reach exceeded one's grasp. Ghebreken occurs when Hadewijch does not quite reach the union for which she longs.

Further complexifying the concept of ghebreken, Hadewijch's "falling short," Mommaers proposes, is a "positive term which refers to the moment when the human person is freed from selfness, a freedom which is a necessary condition for having fruition of what *is*."[49] In other words,

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45. For example, among the scholars I have referenced, Saskia Murk Jansen tends to read her as the latter, while Paul Mommaers reads her as the former.

46. Mother Columba Hart, whose translations of Hadewijch I most often use in this book, uses these translations.

47. Respectively, Suydem, "Touch of Satisfaction," 14; Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters*, 29.

48. Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, with Elisabeth M. Dutton (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2005), 114.

49. Ibid., 69.

by falling short (ghebreken), Hadewijch has an opportunity to get closer to fruition (ghebruken). Said another way, Hadewijch, in falling short, exposes the self's usual efforts to reach Minne as useless. When she falls short, she lets go of any attachment to self sufficiency, and she may then achieve fruition.

Hadewijch's simultaneous experience of ghebruken and ghebreken in a number of her writings further complicates any idea of two separate primary moods. Sometimes Hadewijch may be found singularly expressing the bliss of ghebruken *or* the despair of ghebreken, but at other times, she writes of experiencing ghebruken and ghebreken *at the same time*. Recall, for example, her imagery of riding her horse victoriously and then quickly becoming "unhorsed." In another poem, Hadewijch uses the metaphor of taste when she describes how Love brings her close and simultaneously holds her away. Detailing this double, complex taste of Minne, she ponders the mystery of this bittersweet flavor:

> *. . . Consolation and ill treatment both at once,*
> *This is the essence of the taste of Love*
> *Wise Solomon, were he still living,*
> *Could not interpret such an enigma.*
> *We are not fully enlightened on the subject in any sermon.*
> *The song surpasses every melody!. . .*[50]

In placing the paradox of the bittersweet "taste of Love" beyond what even the wisest of humans can understand, Hadewijch underscores the mysterious intertwining of ghebruken and ghebreken. Elaborating on this integration, Mommaers suggests that Hadewijch expresses "a compound phenomenon which consists in the interplay of two different but complementary aspects, namely *ghebruken* 'to have fruition,' and *ghebreken*, 'to be in want of fruition.'"[51] In the continual and dual experience of these states, Hadewijch suggests the integral intertwining of separation and union. They do not exist solely as opposite and unconnected states; instead, the interconnected states of blissful enjoyment

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50. "Poems in Stanzas 31: Melody and Song," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 217, lines 25–30.

51. Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, 98.

and forlorn abandonment combine toward the expression of a full-bodied communion with Minne.

Hadewijch experiences these dual states of ghebruken and ghebreken through her identification with the person of Jesus Christ. When Hadewijch writes of her goal "to be God with God,"[52] Jantzen argues that "in Hadewijch's understanding, [this] means to live in imitation of the humanity and divinity of Jesus."[53] As Hadewijch imitates Jesus in the vicissitudes of his human incarnation, her body serves as the means to union with God and service to others. It should be noted here that in the thirteenth century, Christians, including large numbers of women, began to imitate Jesus's life explicitly, with the body serving as a conduit to divinity in this pursuit.[54] Murk Jansen, meditating upon Hadewijch's deeply mournful letter 29, argues that fruition between the soul and the divine is most possible at the moment of abandonment, epitomized by Jesus's agonized cry on the cross, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?"[55] In times of intense bodily yearning, Hadewijch embodies a paradox: the point at which she experiences the most intense separation is the point where she is ushered into deeper fruition with God. Hadewijch's highest form of union with God occurs at the "moment of feeling most abandoned by him," Murk Jansen maintains.[56] Ghebreken, in this way, opens up into ghebruken.

The relationship between ghebreken and ghebruken thus turns out to be more integrated in Hadewijch's work than it might first appear.[57] Ghebreken and ghebruken function then, not as opposites, but in a tensile, interdependent relationship with one another. This tension between

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52. "Letter 6: To Live Christ," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 62.

53. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, 140.

54. See Caroline Walker Bynum for a classic argument on this subject, especially the chapter "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages," in Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 181–238.

55. Saskia Murk Jansen, "Hadewijch," in *Medieval Holy Women: In the Christian Tradition c. 1100–c. 1500*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols 2010), 674.

56. Ibid.

57. One might surmise that the Hadewijch, who loved to play with words, may have had a pun in mind when she chose these two similar words, *ghebreken* and *ghebruken*, to express the poles of longing's continuum.

ghebreken and ghebruken may be seen as Hadewijch's "craving for *minne*," Ria Vanderauwera suggests.[58] Rather than Guest's idea of resignation existing in the middle spaces between the despair and exultation, I suggest instead that craving for love, or what I call "love-longing," exists in the middle spaces, helping to integrate ghebreken and ghebruken.

Rather than settle things, though, this leads to more questions: How do ghebruken and ghebreken relate with each other through love-longing? What role does love-longing play in this dynamic? Is fruition (ghebruken) the goal and non-fruition (ghebreken) merely the means to the goal? If not, what function does non-fruition play? How should the suffering in non-fruition, so vividly described by Hadewijch, be viewed? These and other questions lead us deeper into our investigation of the complexities of Hadewijch's passionate non-attachment.

To further explore these questions, in chapter 5, we examine Hadewijch's unique concept of "noble unfaith." The complex workings of "noble unfaith" dramatically display the integral intertwining of ghebruken and ghebreken; that is, when Hadewijch's longing for Minne falls short of attaining Minne, this non-fruition takes her yet deeper into the fruition of Minne. In other words, when the virtue of faith cannot propel her any deeper into the fruition of Love, her "noble unfaith," a state characterized by intense non-fruition, takes over. Undoing Hadewijch's usual spiritual practices, this unfaith names a particular form of passionate non-attachment, one that resonates with Mirabai's practices of viraha bhakti.

58. Ria Vanderauwera, "Hadewijch," in *An Encyclopedia of Continental Women Writers, Volume A–K,* ed. Katherina M. Wilson (London: Taylor and Francis, 1991), 520. Vanderauwera distinguishes three basic moments in Hadewijch's experience with Minne: "the awareness of a distance between *minne* and Hadewijch—*een ghebreken,* a 'lack'; the complete surrendering to *minne—een ghebrucken,* 'using and enjoying'; and finally balance restored. The tension between *ghebreken and ghebruken,* the mystic's craving for *minne,* runs through most of Hadewijch's work."

5

Looking Closer

HADEWIJCH'S VOICES OF LONGING AND LETTING GO

HADEWIJCH'S CONCEPT OF "noble unfaith" proves to be exceedingly rare, if not unique, in Christian theology. In some continuity with Mirabai's viraha bhakti though, "noble unfaith" creatively combines loving passionately with letting go. While Hadewijch never precisely defines what she means by "noble unfaith," she refers to it multiple times in her body of work. This chapter explores Hadewijch's paradoxical concept of "noble unfaith" in light of her integral dynamic of ghebruken and ghebreken, as seen in three focus texts: excerpts from couplet poem 10, vision 13, and letter 8. After closely reading these texts, we then pair them with songs of Mirabai and further delve into the continuities and differences that emerge.

Noble, Demanding *Unfaith*

In the following poem, which discusses the nature of Minne (Love) and how to best reach Her, Hadewijch extols the methodological superiority of desire over suffering for reaching Love:

> *. . . Love does not allow it [desire] to have any rest:*
> *Even if all the suffering were massed together*
> *That ever was, or is, or shall be,*
> *It could not conquer so much*
> *As desire of veritable Love can.*

As the poem continues, Hadewijch discusses the quality of restlessness that Love gives to desire:

> *Desire snatched at suffering above all measure*
> *And at work that Love will grant it;*
> *So it is allotted perturbation and turbulent unrest.*
> *Love does not allow it to be at rest;*

Next, she introduces "noble unfaith" as a form of such restless desire:

> *It undergoes pressure from noble unfaith,*
> *Which is stronger and higher than fidelity:*
> *Fidelity, which one can record by reason,*
> *And express with the mind*
> *Often lets desire be satisfied—*
> *What unfaith can never put up with;*

With imagery of "conquering," Hadewijch describes what noble unfaith does to inspire Love's "reach":

> *Fidelity must often be absent*
> *So that unfaith can conquer;*
> *Noble unfaith cannot rest*
> *So long as it does not conquer to the hilt;*
> *It wishes to conquer all that Love is:*
> *For that reason it cannot remain out of her reach. . .*[1]

In this excerpt, part of a couplet poem that discusses Minne's demands on the lover, Hadewijch names unfaith as a conquering, restless force of desire. When Minne demands a response to Her love that includes "perturbation and turbulent unrest," the knight of love works harder for Her sake—unleashing unfaith—in order to "conquer all that Love is."

Hadewijch then contrasts faith or fidelity (*trouwe*) with unfaith (*ontrouwe*). She maintains that whereas fidelity problematically allows yearning to cease and desire to be satisfied, unfaith will not abide "letting

1. "Couplet Poem 10: No Feeling but Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Mother Columba Hart, OSB (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 337, lines 93–98.

desire be satisfied." Since unfaith cannot abide the satisfaction and subsequent ceasing of desire, unfaith demands that faith must "be absent." Here, Hadewijch gets to the heart of her problem with faith: faith stands in the way of her remaining within Love's reach because faith already has the satisfaction it seeks. Faith, in a striking and surprising turn, must absent itself so that unfaith can do its knightly work of conquering Love. In other words, by letting desire be prematurely satisfied before communing with Love, faith stands in the way of the lover's continual reaching for love. In contrast, the longing of unfaith expands the lover's reach, allowing her to come closer to Love. Hadewijch's faith is satisfied with less intimacy with Minne, but through the gift of unfaith, Minne gives an "unquiet life" of longing to those who hunger for her in unfaith.[2]

Such is the power of Hadewijch's "unfaith," but what of "*noble* unfaith," the intriguing descriptor that Hadewijch employs? What is it that makes this unfaith "noble"? Previously, we considered Newman's description of Hadewijch's mystique courtoise, which included "refinement in love as a badge of class solidarity."[3] At times, Hadewijch expresses a sense of spiritual singularity. For example, she writes in one vision, "And I understood that, since my childhood, God had drawn me to himself alone, far from the other beings whom he welcomes to himself in other manners."[4] When she adds the descriptor "noble" to unfaith, Hadewijch provides another example of her self-perceived uniqueness. In her perspective, "noble unfaith" is given to the spiritual elite to aid in their battles with Minne.

Hadewijch's imagery of fighting back against Love also characterizes her "noble unfaith." By utilizing the tropes of fine amour, Hadewijch employs the imagery of combat to describe the conduct appropriate for the noble lovers of Love. Near the end of couplet poem 10, "noble faith" aims to conquer Love "to the hilt . . . to conquer all that Love is." In another poem, she describes Love as using cunning, invisible arrows when ". . . Love's arrow first inwardly shot [her] . . ."[5] With such a skillful, stealthy opponent as Minne, Hadewijch must fight back with equal

2. Ibid., 337, line 66.

3. Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 164.

4. "Vision 11: The Abyss of Omnipotence," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 290, lines 83–85.

5. "Poems in Stanzas 16: Complaint and Surrender to Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 169, line 37.

prowess, as befits a "noble" fighter. When describing the necessity of fighting with Love in yet another poem, Hadewijch warns her fellow fighters to watch out because Love will "fence under the shield," if that be Her "pleasure."[6] All is fair in this war with Love. Hadewijch rallies her fellow Beguines to the cause and frames their challenge as a dare: "[W]e must continually dare to fight her in new assaults with all our strength, all our knowledge, all our wealth, all our love—all these alike. This is how to behave with the Beloved."[7] The devotee is vanquished by Love and yet remains, paradoxically, unvanquished as long as she fights back. She marshalls all her noble resources for this battle and encourages others to give their all—strength, knowledge, wealth, and love—to the fight.

Minne and lovers of Minne relate to each other as worthy contenders. They engage the other in a whole-bodied, wholehearted fight, with longing as the primary weapon. Hadewich displays much bravery here, even a foolhardiness, it could be argued. How does she find the fortitude to do battle with God? In the next example of noble unfaith, Hadewijch describes how unfaith gives her the "depth" to make her brave enough to fight Minne with longing.

Noble, Deepening *Unfaith*

Hadewijch finds herself transported to a "new heaven" in her layered, complicated thirteenth vision, titled "The Six-Winged Countenance" by translator Mother Columba Hart. In the section of the vision that discusses "noble unfaith," Hadewijch first considers what she calls the gifts/signs of love: "The seven gifts are seven signs of love, but the eighth is the Divine Touch, giving fruition, which does away with everything that pertains to reason, so that the loved one becomes one with the Beloved."[8] In possession of the seven gifts but not yet the eighth, the lovers in the vision begin to experience noble unfaith. Hadewijch describes the daring depths to which unfaith leads them:

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6. "Poems in Stanzas 39: Love's Blows," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 241, line 53.

7. "Letter 7: Assault on Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 64.

8. "Vision 13: The Six-Winged Countenance," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 300.

> But because they had the seven gifts and made progress toward a knowledge of the eighth, and Love demanded this of them, they called continually for fruition and did not believe in the love of their Beloved; it rather appeared to them that they alone were loving and that Love did not help them. Unfaith made them so deep that they wholly engulfed Love and dared to fight her with sweet and bitter. That which Love gives turns bitter and is consumed and devoured. That which Love holds back is enriched by great strength to follow Love's demand that they always be great like her, so that all God's artifice may not separate them from Love.[9]

In the spirit of unfaith, the lovers feel they have no choice but to fight Love in what Hadewijch says is a complexedly "sweet and bitter" battle. In this vision, Hadewijch then sees Mary, the mother of Jesus, who has received all the gifts, including Divine Touch. Mary then tells her about the three conquering "voices of love"—reason, humility, and unfaith—and offers her this wisdom concerning these voices, including unfaith, "the most delightful voice of Love,":"For the denial of Love with humility is the highest voice of Love. The work of the highest fidelity of reason is the clearest and most euphonious voice of love. But the noise of the highest unfaith is the most delightful voice of Love; in this she can no longer keep herself at a distance and depart."[10]

As this "most delightful" unfaith compels her closer, Hadewijch also images Love as being unable to stay away from the lover who voices such unfaith. The voice of unfaith, then, will not allow God to keep a distance or withdraw from the lover; instead, unfaith increases God's longing and compels God closer. Gregory of Nyssa and other Greek Church Fathers write of *epektasis*, the way that God leads, step by step, by withdrawing Godself, so that souls move forward hungrily in a search for God. Later, mystics, such as Meister Eckhart and Hadewijch, reverse this concept; humans are now depicted as having the power to compel God closer.

As a heterodox virtue, noble unfaith subverts traditional ideas of goodness. The Brautmystik tradition valorized certain virtues for their efficacy in bringing about the union of the soul and God. For example, the virtue of patience, as seen previously in the image of the bride awaiting the arrival

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 301.

of the bridegroom, belongs to these traditional virtues. Hadewijch inverts and destabilizes the virtue of faith by placing unfaith alongside traditional virtues. Then, in a stunning move, she elevates unfaith over faith.

The end of this vision offers a glimpse of the depths into which unfaith leads her. Describing her state of fruition (ghebruken), Hadewijch "sank into the fathomless depth and came out of the spirit in that hour, of which one can never speak at all."[11] This imagery of sinking is deepened in the third example of noble unfaith, as we continue to fathom the abyssal power of this heterodox virtue.

Noble, Abyssal *Unfaith*

Letter 8 focuses on the two fears that grow as love develops between the lover and Minne. The first one is that the lover is unworthy of such love and cannot satisfy Her. Hadewijch then reveals the second fear, a fear that love is one-sided:

> The second fear is, we fear that Love does not love us enough, because she binds us so painfully that we think Love continually oppresses us and helps us little, and that all the love is on our side. This unfaith is higher than any fidelity that is not abysmal, I mean, than a fidelity that allows itself to rest peacefully without the full possession of Love, or than a fidelity that takes pleasure in what it has in the hand. This noble unfaith greatly enlarges consciousness.[12]

Unfaith, as contrasted with fidelity/faith, finds no contentment in the status quo; instead, unfaith must keep longing. Unfaith continues to encourage love; it "spurs on, or indeed is, love's desire for Love."[13]

Continuing to discuss the work of noble unfaith, Hadewijch writes in letter eight:

> Even though anyone loves so violently that he fears he will lose his mind, and his heart feels oppression, and his veins continually stretch and rupture, and his soul melts—even if anyone loves

11. Ibid., 302.

12. "Letter 8: Two Fears about Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 65.

13. Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters*, 61.

> Love so violently, nevertheless this noble unfaith can neither feel nor trust Love, so much does unfaith enlarge desire. And unfaith never allows fidelity to rest in any fidelity but, in the fear of not being loved enough, continually distrusts desire. So high is unfaith that it continually fears either it does not love enough, or that it is not enough loved.[14]

This letter echoes the themes of unsatisfied, increasing yearning we saw in couplet poem 10 and vision 13. Noting that unfaith does not "rest peacefully," Hadewijch stresses that unfaith takes no pleasure in the status quo, in "what it has in the hand." Unfaith doubts Love because it cannot understand why Love could stay away. If desire is strong enough, unfaith reasons, then Love cannot rest. Fidelity, on the other hand, believes in the inevitability of the desired spiritual outcome and so can rest. Such a respite cannot be an option for Hadewijch. Because she believes Love is still capable of loving her more, her longing increases.[15] Unfaith, then, might be described as a kind of desire, the force of which cannot be stopped as it compels Love to match Hadewijch's own desirously longing love.[16]

Instead of resting in the complacency of some perceived possession of Love, Hadewijch chooses to "love violently," which has some alarming physical and spiritual effects. Hadewijch's desire for Love (*orewoet*) is no domesticated desire; it manifests as an unruly, wild force, translated by Mommaers as "the desire that drives one mad."[17] In fear for her mind and body, Hadewijch details the symptoms of orewoet in vision 7: "My heart and my veins and all my limbs twitched and trembled and quivered with eager desire (orewoet) and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me . . . so that dying I must go mad and going mad I must die."[18] Reeling from desire, Hadewijch describes a force that flows through her whole body and threatens to overwhelm her faculties. Her disquieting imagery depicts physical and psychological symptoms: twitching appendages and a pounding heart, for example.

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14. "Letter 8: Two Fears about Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 65.

15. Milhaven, n. 13, 62–65.

16. Ibid., 71.

17. Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, with Elisabeth M. Dutton Leuven (Belgium: Peeters, 2005), 2.

18. "Vision 7: Oneness in the Eucharist," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 280.

One cannot help but wonder if this describes a discipline of desire or an extreme anxiety disorder. Is Hadewijch then endorsing suffering as a means of attaining Love? What then do we make of another part of letter 8, which asserts that "all pain for the sake of Love must be pleasing to him"?[19]

Attempting to answer this question, Valerie Fraeters frames Hadewijch's teachings on love and pain accordingly: "[T]he only correct attitude to life for the mystic lover is this passionate involvement combined with the readiness to accept blows and the courage to always go on."[20] What Fraeters understands as courageous acceptance, however, often contains problematic language of coercion. As Hadewijch writes in another poem:

> *. . . Love has subjugated me:*
> *To me this is no surprise.*
> *For she is strong and I am weak.*
> *She makes me*
> *Unfree of myself,*
> *Continually against my will.*
> *She does with me what she wishes;*
> *Nothing of myself remains to me;*
> *Formerly I was rich,*
> *Now I am poor: everything is lost in love. . .*[21]

While the lines "nothing of myself remains to me" and "everything is lost in love" might be read as apophatic discourse, which we will further explore in chapters six and seven, lines such as "Love has subjugated me" and "Continually against my will" shift into violent language of compulsion.

Some scholars have insisted that this language is merely hyperbolic rhetoric. For example, Diana Neal asserts that Hadewijch uses "language *in extremis* to express a love experienced *in extremis*."[22] Certainly, it may

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19. "Letter 8: Two Fear about Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 65.

20. Valerie Fraeters, "Hadewijch," in *Women Writing in Dutch*, ed. Kristiaan Aercke (New York: Garland, 1994), 20.

21. "Poems in Stanzas 24: Subjugation to Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 194, lines 41–50. See also Saskia Murk Jansen, *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch's Mengeldichten* (Goppingen, Germany: Kummerle Verlag, 1991), 140. Murk Jansen translates the first line as: "I am overthrown by love."

22. Diana Neal, "Wounding and Healing: Reciprocity in Divine and Human Narratives: The Cases of Christina Mirabilis, Hadewijch, and Mechthild," *New Blackfriars* 83, no. 972 (2002): 90.

also be noted that Minne, the feminine referent for the one making her "unfree" of herself, may somewhat alter the power dynamics, if not fully alleviating their worrisomeness. Perhaps there is also a mutuality inherent in Hadewijch's discourse of wounding. For example, in a wounding born of Love, one who is submissive to Love ends up receiving "love's unheard-of power."[23] In a surprising inversion of the virtue of strength, therefore, the lover wounds and subdues Love when she or he submits to Love: ". . . He shall yet subdue Love / And be her lord and master. . ."[24]

Hadewijch, as we have seen, urges fighting back against Minne, and Minne, curiously, equips her for this epic struggle. As she fights with Love, she deems "Hell" the final name of Love in a poem about the seven names of Minne:

> *. . . Hell is the seventh name*
> *Of this Love wherein I suffer. . .*[25]

Proposing unfaith as a gift that can stand up even to Hell, Murk Jansen writes, "If Hell is the highest name of Love, this is mirrored by the highest gift of love, unfaith—the sense of doubt and distrust engendered by Love's behavior."[26] As Hadewijch receives and cultivates the gift of noble unfaith, she and Minne move toward one another.

In noble unfaith, Hadewijch must be willing to go ever deeper into the abyss. In letter 8, Hadewijch asserts that "unfaith is higher than any fidelity that is not abysmal." In this juxtaposition of high and low, Hadewijch elevates both unfaith and any faith willing to sink into the abyss. In the abyss, God and the soul commune deeply; the soul, she says in another letter, is a "bottomless abyss in which God contents himself and his own contentedness ever finds fruition (ghebruken) to the full in this soul, for its part ever does in him."[27] Describing the mutual need of the soul for God and

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23. "Poems in Stanzas 6: Conquest of Love—at a Price," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 142, line 44.

24. Ibid., lines 47–48.

25. "Poems in Couplets: Love's Seven Names" in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 356, lines 149–150.

26. Murk Jansen, "Hadewijch," in Murk Jansen, *Medieval Holy Women: In the Christian Tradition c. 1100–c. 1500*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010), 675.

27. "Letter 18," in Milhaven, n. 13, 31.

God for the soul, Hadewijch shows both God and the soul to be bottomless abysses who meet together—in the abyss. This triune abyss illustrates the intersection of Hadewijch's three related uses of abyssal imagery: to display the common abyssal nature of the soul and the divine, to express the place where the soul meets God, and to highlight the mutuality of the relationship between God and the soul.[28]

Hadewijch's description of mutual communion alludes to the fullness of the longing that the soul *and* God experience for each other. Coming together in the abyss, they find a longed-for contentment in each other. She continues to explore with abyssal imagery the satisfying mutuality of the relationship between the soul and God: "Soul is a way for the passage of God from his depth into his liberty; and God is a way for the passage of the soul into its liberty, that is, into his inmost depths, which cannot be touched except for the soul's abyss."[29] In this exceptional image of a mutual two-way journey into freedom, Hadewijch evokes the intimate interdependence that both God and the soul display as they journey toward liberty in an indispensable partnership with one other.

In another of her visions, using imagery of lostness, falling, and engulfment, Hadewijch describes the partnership of God and soul in the abyss. She recounts, "I fell out of the spirit—from myself and all I had seen in him—wholly lost, fell upon the breast, the fruition, of his nature, which is Love. There I remained, engulfed and lost, without any comprehension of other knowledge, or sight, or spiritual understanding, except to be one with him and to have fruition of this union."[30] In this abyss of Love, Hadewijch reports, she remains "engulfed and lost" in darkness. In couplet poem 25, she evocatively describes a similar experience: communion with Minne as "fathomless unknowing," and an "abyss of unknowing."[31]

The abyss that Hadewijch describes, despite the contentedness to which she alludes, points also to a Love that cannot be fully known, possessed, or pinned down. Although this evokes the grief and frustration of non-fruition (ghebreken), Hadewijch's abyss can, at the same time, be seen as a place of fruition (ghebruken). To this point, Grace Jantzen calls

28. Ibid.

29. "Letter 18: Greatness of the Soul," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 86.

30. "Vision 6: To Condemn and Bless with Christ," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 279.

31. Hadewijch, "*Mengeldict* 25," in Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought*, 87, lines 1–3.

Hadewijch's abyss "a place of ravishment, [of] erotic encounter with the divine Beloved."[32] This description speaks to erotic joy and pleasure, of course; but, according to Jantzen, Hadewijch's fruition primarily suggests a kind of procreation, or creativity. "This is more about making babies than about sexual ecstasy," she suggests.[33] She elaborates on Hadewijch's fecundity:

> Thus in Hadewijch's powerful rendition, the abyss of divine Love is not simply a warm and consoling security blanket into which the lovers can sink, blissfully wrapped up in one another. Rather, the divine Love passes into its liberty in the (embodied) soul, active in the "fruition" of which Hadewijch has much to say, a "fruition" that is a unity of the soul with the humanity (not the divinity) of Christ and thus actively engaged in compassion, teaching, healing, and care—a portrait of the Beguines. Moreover, it is such activity, not swooning away in ecstasy, that characterizes the passage of the soul into its liberty in the depths of the divine abyss.[34]

Hadewijch's "life-giving" abyss, Jantzen argues, fuels fertile, concrete works of compassion in Hadewijch and her Beguine sisters.[35] Recognizing the importance of Jantzen's reading that prioritizes active compassion over privatized feeling, I also point out that the dichotomizing of women's fruitfulness into "making babies" (even metaphorical "fruits" of service, as Jantzen seems to be saying) as distinct from "sexual ecstasy" undercuts the multivalence of Hadewijch's gendered and erotic imagery. For Hadewijch, ghubruken is blissful just as much as it is generative—physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually—for the benefit of the whole world.

As befits our comparative study, we now oscillate back into Mirabai's songs. What further insights about Hadewijch's practices of longing can we glean by reading her alongside Mirabai? While Hadewijch made use of mystique courtoise's apt imagery to depict the waves of her longing

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32. Grace M. Jantzen, "Eros and the Abyss: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity," *Literature and Theology* 17, no. 3 (2003): 245.

33. Ibid., 249.

34. Ibid., 248.

35. Ibid., 261.

for Minne, viraha bhakti provides a different grammar for articulating the fluctuations of divine presence and absence that Hadewijch describes. Viraha bhakti—through its language of mourning and grief, its themes of transformative devotion in the midst of charged absence, and its cultivation of longing—provides a fertile perspective from which to consider Hadewijch's practices of passionate non-attachment. As we read Hadewijch through the lens of Mirabai's viraha bhakti, love-longing doubles, reaching climactic heights.

Reading Hadewijch with Viraha Bhakti

As we discussed previously, viraha bhakti can be described as a mystical eroticism of separation, whose primary dynamic involves oscillations in the middle spaces between full divine presence and complete absence. Far from being a parochial spiritual technique, viraha bhakti encompasses an entire way of life, a disciplined integration of unfocused energies into a concentrated yearning. We have already seen that viraha bhakti envisions love-longing as both the method and the goal of spiritual practice. To put it another way, viraha bhakti is not the means to the goal of perfect union with the divine; rather, viraha bhakti is the goal itself. Complete unity with the divine does not necessarily wait at the end of this journey; thus, an emphasis on tidy conclusions misses the middle spaces of longing that the viraha bhakti path highlights.

When Hadewijch's writings on noble unfaith are read alongside Mirabai's expressions of viraha bhakti, the primacy of Hadewijch's mode of longing comes even more strongly to the forefront. Hadewijch's longing, we see more clearly, is the force through which she and Minne effect their mutual conquering. As she expresses this power of longing:

> *. . . If anyone dares to fight love with longing,*
> *Wholly without heart and without mind*
> *And Love counters this longing with her longing*
> *That is the force by which we conquer Love. . .*[36]

36. "Poems in Stanzas 38: Nothingness in Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 239, lines 53–56.

Hadewijch's focused longing unleashes the longing of God, which catalyzes the coming together of the self and God. At the moment when her desire for fruition with God comes up against her limits as a human being who cannot grasp the totality of God, she must stop all activity, save longing. Fruition for Hadewijch results from letting go of the idea that she can match the divine love but trying with all her passionate energy to "conquer" it anyway.[37]

In Mirabai's songs, we noted longing's overreaching, excessive quality, an understanding we also see in Hadewijch's practices of longing. Mommaers comments on the overreaching quality of Hadewijch's longing when he writes that "only a faculty that continually goes outside its own reach, so that by way of conquest it will immediately seize yet more, is suited to come into contact with the Reality that surpasses all measure and comprehension."[38] Put another way, the Reality beyond everything finds a fitting partner in a lover with an overreaching longing that, as letter 8 elucidates, stretches everything—mind, veins, and consciousness—in her efforts to reach Minne.

Reading Hadewijch with Mirabai's viraha bhakti may thus shed light on Hadewijch's suffering in times of *ghebreken*, or non-fruition. Earlier, I asked whether Hadewijch's longing was best characterized as a practice of desire or diagnosed as an anxiety disorder. Read in view of viraha bhakti, Hadewijch's longing, even with its burdensome physical and mental consequences, may be best viewed as an acceptance and even a celebration of bodily life rather than a glorification of suffering. Not courting pain, she may instead be said to embrace the grief and pain inherent in longing as a given of her earthly, embodied life. Rather than try to escape her embodied longings, Hadewijch may be said to linger there, as she experiences the transformative work of both *ghebrucken* and *ghebreken* together, a dual state Murk Jansen deems "sweet abandonment."[39]

Viraha bhakti helps to further articulate the enigma of both women's experiences of grief and joy together. Despite the emphasis viraha bhakti places on grief, it still remains a life-affirming stance. Even in grief, it

37. Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, 114.

38. Mommaers, preface to Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, xvi.

39. Murk Jansen, "Hadewijch," in Murk Jansen, *Medieval Holy Women*, 673.

celebrates the bittersweet presence-in-absence that emerges when one discovers that the object of desire cannot be possessed. Nonetheless, when Mirabai practices viraha bhakti, she leaves herself vulnerable to the pain of unfulfilled longing. "Abandonment scorches my heart," she writes, "only those who have felt the knife can measure the wound's deepness."[40] Hadewijch, too, writes of wounds, ones with which Love "blesses" her:

> *. . . In those whom Love thus blesses with her wounds,*
> *And to whom she shows the vastness knowable in her,*
> *Longing keeps the wounds open and undressed,*
> *Because Love stormily inflames them. . .*[41]

Is there a way to think responsibly about what might be read as a celebration of pain, suffering that exacerbates her already vulnerable place in the world? Perhaps for Hadewijch and her Beguine sisters, the "wound of love represents the failure of the project for *fulfilled* mystical union, not a divine rationale for self-inflicted torture."[42] As Neal attempts to find an alternative way to think about the wounding capabilities of love, viraha bhakti provides another way into thinking about these "open and undressed" wounds that do not fully heal. Hadewijch might be said to cultivate longing, as the virahiṇīs do, by learning to lean into, if not fully accept, the inevitable griefs of separation.

If in viraha bhakti longing exists as the highest expression of the bond between the human and the divine, then this connection of longing exists as something to celebrate, as "these sorrows are apprehended as signs of the living relation between the two parties, hence of the rapturous connection which only separation makes possible."[43] Less blissful aspects of life, including the pain of longing, may then be embraced, valued, and integrated in a full life with God. In her own way, Hadewijch comes to realize that experiential states of unity with the divine—wonderful as they may be—are not the sole goal of her spiritual

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40. Mirabai, "Mira Is Mad with Love," in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, trans. Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 38.

41. "Poems in Stanzas 14: School of Love" in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch*: The Complete Works, 164-5, lines 67-9.

42. Neal, "Wounding and Healing," 90.

43. David Dean Shulman, "Modes of Meaning and Experience: Viraha and Viḷaiyāṭal," *Parabola* 11, no. 3 (1986): 11.

life. Indeed, privileging the sensory bliss of fruition with God incurs Hadewijch's admonition:

> *. . . And there is too much childishness in love*
> *when one wants many particular things*
> *and prefers to be in delight. . .*[44]

Viewed through the lens of viraha bhakti, which accepts the emotional turmoil of separation as a sign of love, states of blissful fruition are not to be valued above non-fruition and the middle spaces of longing. Instead, for Hadewijch, the states of longing that fall short of full fruition become opportunities to engage fully in the work of the world. In these states, she reasons, one is freer to practice works of service. In times of painful longing, she counsels, service to others may indeed serve as an antidote. Regarding the importance of not shunning works of service, she offers, "But when this fruition grows less or passes away, . . . works should indeed be performed, as justly owed."[45] The performance of these "owed" works, Hadewijch emphasizes, is a duty that does not lessen, even as one grows in fruition.

Even as Hadewijch requires involvement in the works of the community, she cautions against going too *widely* into the world. Describing a manic and undisciplined sort of activist religious life, she writes to a beguine who, in Hadewijch's opinion, is too widely involved in the world: "You busy yourself unduly with many things, and so many of them are not suited to you. You waste too much time with your energy, throwing yourself headlong into things that cross your path . . . when you want to do something you always plunge into it as if you could pay heed to nothing else."[46] Urging moderation here, she adds in the same passage that it "pleases [her] that you comfort and help all your friends, yes, the more the better."[47] As we saw earlier when Hadewijch achieved spiritual growth for "all" through her "perfect love" in vision 10,[48] she is not stingy in her love; rather, she attempts to focus her love.

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44. "Poems in Couplets 10: Not Feeling but Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch*: The Complete Works, 335, lines 9–11.

45. "Letter 17: Living in the Rhythm of the Trinity," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 84.

46. "Letter 5: False Brethren," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 56.

47. Ibid.

48. In vision 10, Hadewijch states, "Behold, this is my bride, who has passed through all your honors with perfect love, and whose love is so strong that, through it, all attain growth!" See Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 288.

Mirabai, too, cultivates a focused longing, training herself to abide in it. In the longing of the bhakti poets, there exists a "degree of duality—there is a tension between the desire for the ultimate unitive experience and the desire to continue to experience the bitter-sweetness of love-in-separation."[49] Does a similar tension exist on Hadewijch's continuum of ghebreken and ghebruken? Reading Hadewijch alongside viraha bhakti brings into clearer view the importance of the middle spaces of longing, which can otherwise get obscured by the poles of fruition and non-fruition. Instead of prioritizing the completion of mystical union, Mirabai's middle spaces of longing emphasize the spaces betwixt and between the poles of absence and presence. This focus helps avoid any tendencies to conceptualize "stages" of the spiritual life on a straight continuum that begins in separation and ends in union. One remains free to dwell in the middle, without straining towards a predetermined finish line.

As Hadewijch practices longing in the middle spaces of presence-in-absence, she writes that the "incompletion of this blissful fruition is yet the sweetest fruition."[50] In this stunning realization, which Mommaers calls her "phenomenological pearl,"[51] she explicitly lauds the "sweetest" *incompletion* of the fruition between herself and Minne. She continues in the same letter, "Oh, this *never-completed* work must stir every noble soul like a storm, causing it to cast aside all superfluity and all that is either unlike or less than that which can content Love."[52]

Hadewijch's "phenomenological pearl," when read alongside viraha bhakti, takes on even deeper resonances around the theme of the "never-completed" work of longing. Just as viraha bhakti employs a logic that neither equates incompletion with failure nor connotes a kind of destructive masochism, Hadewijch's understanding of the incomplete, yet satisfying relationship of longing between the lover and the Beloved likewise echoes and honors life's vicissitudes. Her love-longing, like the love-longing of Mirabai's viraha bhakti, does not set a mystical peace and satisfaction

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49. Diedre Green, "Living between the World: Bhakti Poetry and the Carmelite Mystics," in *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, ed. Karel Werner (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1994), 134.

50. "Letter 16: Loving God with His Own Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 80.

51. Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, 4.

52. "Letter 16: Loving God with His Own Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 80 (italics mine).

above the restlessness and grief of an embodied love. Through the grief and desire that longing entails, Hadewijch gains entry into the depths of a Love that does not privilege any completed state of blissful consciousness or totalizing union; instead, this Love celebrates a passionate, embodied longing in which indeed "the incompletion of this blissful fruition is yet the sweetest fruition."[53] In the light of viraha bhakti, Hadewijch may be read as embracing her embodiedness with its bittersweet longings and incumbent limits, including a vulnerability born of the uncertainties of longing.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, Hadewijch's longing for Love is mutual: the Love she calls Minne yearns for Hadewijch, as Hadewijch yearns for Her. Consider these lines from couplet poem 17, a prayer-poem that points to the longing at the very heart of Minne:

> *. . . May Love herself make you experience*
> *How with love one loves in Love,*
> *May her nature make you understand in fiery longing*
> *How one sees with longing in longing. . .*[54]

In the first two lines, Hadewijch writes of Minne and the radical nondualism that occurs in Love, in which "with love one loves in Love." In the following two lines, echoing the syntax of the previous couplet, she refers to longing in parallel terms with Love, which lends an explicit cast of divinity to longing itself. Mirabai's and Hadewijch's longing with and for love manifests love, and "the love that appears is nothing less than God."[55]

Longing, we have seen, resides at the heart of Hadewijch's concept of Minne. We have already discussed Minne as a multivalent term, one that can name the divine, the self, and the loving bond between the two, among other meanings. As we read Hadewijch through the lens of viraha bhakti, we see more clearly how longing describes the mutual bond between

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53. Ibid.

54. "Couplet Poem 1: The Nature of Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 311, lines 17–20.

55. Lance E. Nelson, "The Ontology of Bhakti: Devotion as Paramapurusārtha in Gaudīya Vaisnavism and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 no. 4 (2004): 390. Nelson's thesis is that these Hindu sects reconceptualized bhakti "in such a way that it attained ontological parity with *mokṣa* [liberation]" (388). I extend this reading to Mirabai's practices of longing and suggest that Hadewijch's longing, too, becomes soteriologically primary.

Hadewijch and the divine. "Longing" now comes into view as a viable translation for Minne.

In the prayer-poem we have been discussing, Hadewijch blesses her community, as she longs for others to learn "how one sees with longing in longing." Hadewijch here refers to longing as the way one should *see*; that is, she proposes an erotically charged epistemology for viewing the world. Moving into chapter 6, we respond across the ages to Hadewijch's blessing. Through the lens of love-longing, we try to see with "longing in longing"—while Mirabai and Hadewijch continue to meet across the centuries, miles, religions, and cultures. As the winds of comparative theology cross-fertilize these women's respective energies of desire and non-attachment, we will further contemplate the practices of longing that shape the contours of their respective visions, neither of which lose sight of the suffering *and* the beauty of the world.

6

Longing and Letting Go Together

COMPARATIVE PRACTICES OF PASSIONATE NON-ATTACHMENT

FOCUSING PARTICULAR ATTENTION on what I am calling the "middle spaces of longing," we have explored the oscillations of separation and communion in the writings of Mirabai and Hadewijch. In their lives of devotion to the "Dark One" and to "Minne," to use two of their respective epithets for the divine, Mirabai and Hadewijch negotiate these fluctuations with passionate non-attachment. Within both Hinduism and Christianity, non-attachment and desire have often been understood as opposing forces, but Hadewijch and Mirabai illuminate—each from her respective tradition—the integral, tensile relationship between desire and non-attachment. In this chapter, we keep asking, as Hadewijch and Mirabai are read together, "What can be learned about the interdependencies of non-attachment and desire in each tradition?"

Each woman, in her own way, demonstrates that passionate love-longing contains the power to launch certain kinds of non-attachments. This uncommon understanding of the relationship between desire and non-attachment provides a framework wide enough for Mirabai's and Hadewijch's cultural and religious particularities. Thinking passionate non-attachment with Mirabai in chapters 2 and 3, we focused on viraha bhakti as a way to explore the middle spaces of longing where Mirabai dwells—spaces *between* complete union and utter separation. Viraha bhakti encompasses modes of both desire and renunciation, as can be seen, for example, in depictions of "yogic marriage." Mirabai's viraha bhakti includes non-attachment even as she embraces erotic, embodied love; at the same time, it encompasses the erotic even as she shaves her

head and puts on the orange robe of the ascetic. Through her practices of longing, she cultivates a desirous grief that takes her deeper into communion with the divine, despite and even *because* of Krishna's absence. Put another way, Mirabai's viraha bhakti recognizes presence-in-absence as a mark of a sustaining desirous mutual relationship with the divine.

Then, shifting to a focus on Hadewijch in chapters 4 and 5, we viewed her "noble unfaith" as naming a specific kind of passionate non-attachment. Noble unfaith, in other words, desires so vigorously that it undoes the traditional virtue of faith. Unleashing a potent non-attachment to her previous understandings of virtue, God, and herself, the desire and grief of noble unfaith plunge Hadewijch deeper into an abyssal relationship with Minne. Reading Hadewijch in light of Mirabai's viraha bhakti, we first explored the resonances between viraha bhakti's fluctuations and Hadewijch's oscillations of ghebreken and ghebruken. Then we mined these resonances to uncover clues for understanding Hadewijch's states of ghebreken and ghebruken as interrelated modes that express different aspects of love-longing. Just as varying states between absence and presence in Mirabai's songs are connected by the integrative theme of viraha bhakti, the states of ghebreken and ghebruken—as connected by Hadewijch's longing—are similarly revealed as necessary, overlapping states in Hadewijch's full-bodied communion with Minne. The erotic fulfillment of ghebruken and the grief of ghebreken can thus be seen as interstitially connected by longing. Minne Herself, both the end and the means of Hadewijch's spiritual quest, can be interpreted anew as love-longing.

In the comparative theological spirit in which we first read Hadewijch's ghebruken, ghebreken, and "noble unfaith" through the lens of Mirabai's viraha bhakti, we now make a converse move. To learn more about Mirabai's passionate non-attachment, we read her songs of viraha bhakti through the lens of Hadewijch's love-longing. In this way, we multiply the ways that these two different women from two different contexts may be brought into relation. Thus, we continue reading Hadewijch and Mirabai alongside one another, allowing cross-fertilization to occur around three overlapping aspects: their communal longings, the middle spaces of mutual longing, and their practices of cultivating attachment. We also begin to explore how their respective love-longings, including hints of the apophatic in their writings, may be understood as pivotal to each woman's sense of theological anthropology—of what it means to be human in the world. We now move into a reading of Mirabai's viraha bhakti in light of Hadewijch's love-longing, particularly her concept of "noble unfaith."

Reading Mirabai with Hadewijch's Abyssal Noble Unfaith

As we begin to employ Hadewijch's lens of noble unfaith, it bears noting that Mirabai *herself* was nobility, a princess who, as she waited for Krishna, may be said to have suffered challenges to her faith. When this noblewoman laments her separation from Krishna, might she also be understood as practicing a kind of noble unfaith? After all, she bravely copes with his departure while she stays behind, and she cannot know or trust that he is coming back. She laments his absence in these lines:

> *I do not know how to meet my Lord.*
> *He came into the courtyard and went,*
> *And I only know that I missed Him.*
> *I spent days in search,*
> *Scanning the road night and day.*[1]

As she waits for him without knowing if he will return, might Mirabai be understood as having developed an "unfaith" in her Lord? Consider how she describes herself in one song's closing lines: "Mira is but a bewildered abandoned girl."[2] In light of these examples, we may ask, "What relationship does Hadewijch's noble unfaith have with the noble Mirabai's love-longing?"

Considering the modes and goals of her noble unfaith, Hadewijch writes, as we have previously seen:

> *. . . Fidelity must often be absent*
> *So that unfaith can conquer;*
> *Noble unfaith cannot rest*
> *So long as it does not conquer to the hilt;*
> *It wishes to conquer all that Love is:*
> *For that reason it cannot remain out of her reach. . .*[3]

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1. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 43: Suffering in Absence," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 52.

2. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 28," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 45.

3. "Couplet Poem 10: Not Feeling but Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Mother Columba Hart, OSB (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 337, 93–98.

We have considered Hadewijch's martial imagery as a trope; here I note her use of the word "conquer" four times in this letter—three times in its last six lines just quoted. Hadewijch's imagery of fighting to conquer connotes a direct activity—an attack—on her part; that is, "noble unfaith" exists as a weapon in this battle with Minne. The previously discussed letter 8 notes the restlessness of noble faith and its distrust of Minne: "[T]his noble unfaith can neither feel nor trust love so much does unfaith enlarge desire."[4] In the midst of this lack of trust, the longing unleashed by her "noble unfaith" keeps Hadewijch soldiering on with confidence toward her conquest of Minne. Her unfaith provides her the weapon she needs—longing—to fight Love and conquer "all that Love is." As discussed in chapter 5, Hadewijch's conquering can be viewed as a process of mutual conquering. Succinctly expounding the reciprocity, Hadewijch writes, "...Love conquers [the human lover] so that [this lover] may conquer her ..."[5] Minne thus provides this gift of unfaith as a resource for longing; that is, a catalyst to keep desire flowing bidirectionally.

In contrast to Hadewijch's general confidence in her ability to conquer love with longing, Mirabai's songs often highlight the *uncertainty* of a conclusively victorious ending to her and Krishna's love story. In one of our focus songs, for example, Mirabai rues that "he's never returned, / he's never sent me a single word,"[6] The repetition of the word "never" reveals Mirabai's sober point of view. Rather than adopt a victorious conquering tone as Hadewijch often does, Mirabai acknowledges that she and Krishna may remain separated for some time longer. In her *Kṛṣṇaite* bhakti tradition, precedent exists for such a continued separation: After Krishna's period of communing with the gopīs in the forest, there comes a time when he leaves for his birthplace of Mathura, never returning to dance again with the gopīs.[7] In keeping with the themes of this famous story, Mirabai does not mitigate

4. "Letter 8: Two Fears about Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 65.

5. "Poems in Stanzas 40: Love's Remoteness," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 244, line 33.

6. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 68," in John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 121.

7. Tracey Coleman, "Viraha-Bhakti and Strīdharma: Re-Reading the Story of Kṛṣṇa and the Gopīs in the Harivaṃśa and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130, no. 3 (2010): 387. Coleman discusses how Krishna's final departure in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* reflects Krishna's ultimate unattainability for devotees.

her lament with an assurance of his sure return, and longing remains the modus operandi for her and all virahiṇīs.

In contrast, Hadewijch presents the way of noble unfaith as a choice only *some* lovers of Minne will undertake. Vision 13, for example, names alternative ways of loving Minne. As we saw, one may choose the way of reason or of humility instead, but the way of unfaith comes recommended to Hadewijch by none other than Mary, the Mother of Jesus, whom Hadewijch names in this vision as the highest of the twenty-nine "full-grown" creatures in heaven. Mary tells her, "But the noise of the highest unfaith is the most delightful voice of Love; in this she can no longer keep herself at a distance and depart."[8] Like a siren's call, the desire born of unfaith becomes the voice that Minne cannot resist; nonetheless, this desire has consequences for the one brave enough to engage it.

Here we revisit letter 8's listing of the dire consequences of choosing to fight Love with noble unfaith: "Even though anyone loves so violently that he fears he will lose his mind, and his heart feels oppression, and his veins continually stretch and rupture, and his soul melts—even if anyone loves Love so violently, nevertheless this noble unfaith can neither feel nor trust Love, so much does unfaith enlarge desire."[9] Even as she lists the calamitous results of this perilous practice of love, Hadewijch's words display a sense of the hypothetical. She assserts that the losing, oppressing, stretching, rupturing, and melting *may* happen, but it is not immediately happening to anyone, nor must it ever happen. Signaling this contingency, Hadewijch specifies, "*even though* anyone loves so violently" and "*even if* anyone loves Love so violently" [italics mine]. Taking this path of loving Love, rather than the measured paths of reason or humility, remains a choice for Hadewijch.

A similar option to choose longing does not characterize Mirabai's songs, however. Her literary style often includes vividly sensory details expressed in the present tense, which brings the reader or singer directly into the living, longing heart of viraha bhakti. Her love affair with Krishna happens now, not in a hypothetical future or for a select few who may choose that path. To revisit a previously discussed song, this time in a

8. "Vision 13: The Six-Winged Countenance," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 301, lines 233–235.

9. "Letter 8: Two Fears about Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 65.

different translation, Mirabai reports to her friend about her tryst with Krishna:

> *Sister, he plucks your flower*
> *like a sprig of jasmine,*
> *then pulls on his robe and is gone.*[10]

Plucking flowers and pulling on robes, Krishna comes and then goes in the here and now. In this way, the initial shock and sting of their separation coming so soon after their union occurs continually for the reader/singer of her song. The ubiquity of the present tense in Mirabai's songs suggests that one who loves Krishna will surely end up entangled in the longing and grief of viraha bhakti. Even though one may choose specific practices of longing, viraha bhakti maintains the inevitability of separation. Knowing that separation cannot be sidestepped, Mirabai matter of factly faces the ambiguities of her relationship with Krishna.

Hadewijch handles her separation differently: fear drives her relationship of "noble unfaith" with Love. In other words, as her fear grows, her desire for Love increases more and more. For instance, letter eight, as we have seen, describes two fears that the lover of Love will undergo. The first fear is that a lover does not love Love enough, "that he is unworthy and that he cannot content such love." She calls this fear the "very noblest," as it increases restless longing.[11] Concerning the existential fears that emerge in this situation, Hadewijch writes, "For when they fear they are not worthy of such great love, their humanity is shaken by a storm and forbids them all rest."[12] The second fear she describes inverts the first fear: here, she fears that Love does not love the lover enough. Here, these twin fears create a distrust not only of Love, but also of the self. The lover cannot trust that Love is loving her enough, so desire for Minne heightens as a result. Similarly, she cannot trust that she herself is loving Minne enough, so she increases her desire. For Hadewijch then, fear both creates and sustains her "noble unfaith."

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10. Mirabai, "jogiyāri prītaṛī," in Mirabai, *For Love of the Dark One: Songs of Mirabai*, trans. Andrew Schelling (Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, 1998), 45.

11. "Letter 8: Two Fears about Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 64.

12. Ibid.

Mirabai, in contrast, is known for her fearlessness. "She had no fear," the *Bhaktamāl* declares directly.[13] Even as she experiences Krishna's abandonment, fear rarely mainfests in her songs. For instance, in a previously discussed song, she writes:

> *My dark one has gone to an alien land.*
> *He's left me behind.*
> *he's never returned,*
> *he's never sent me a single word.*[14]

Even as she mourns Krishna's absence in this song, Mirabai does not express fear. She does not examine the cause of their separation because she does not fear that Krishna does not love her. Here, she makes three declarative statements: "he's left me behind / he's never returned, / he's never sent me a single word." These successive statements might inspire fear in some, but Mirabai possesses the resources of viraha bhakti. As we have discussed, viraha bhakti paradoxically finds the presence of the divine in times of absence. Despite his inexplicable absence, an intimacy nonetheless marks the love between Mirabai and Krishna. In fact, it is *because* of his absence that her longing, the mark of their bond, may flourish. In other words, the very grief that Mirabai experiences is read within the viraha bhakti schema as evidence of their mutual desirous devotion. She, unlike Hadewijch, does not fear that she does not love him enough. As a sign of her love, her longing speaks for itself.

Fear of not being loved enough or not loving enough thus does not describe Mirabai's devotional world. Not fearful that she does not love Krishna enough or that Krishna does not love her enough, Mirabai only bemoans his choices to stay away. She does not fear love's lack; her longing is proof enough that she is connected to him and he to her. Neither does she fight back out of fear or charge into battle to conquer, as Hadewijch does.

But if fear does not figure prominently into Mirabai's response to her separation from Krishna, grief certainly does. The tradition of viraha

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13. Nābhādās, *Śri Bhaktamāl, with the Bhaktirasabodhinī Commentary of Priyādas* (Lucknow, India: Tejkumār Press, 1969), 712–713, quoted in John Stratton Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 123.

14. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 68," in John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 62.

bhakti explicitly embraces the emotions of grief, and grief, in all its complexity, sometimes encompasses the odd fear as well. We have seen how Mirabai models herself on the gopīs who devoted themselves to Krishna completely. For example, in the song about the wild woman of the woods, Mirabai recalls her former birth as a gopī, a "cowherd-maiden at Gokul."[15] Leaving their work undone and abandoning their families (including their husbands), the gopīs gleefully ran into the forests of Braj to frolic with their lovers whenever they arrived. As Mirabai waits for Krishna to come back, she acts as a waiting gopī—mourning his absence yet expecting imminent joy. She stays ready to participate once again in love play with Krishna, even as she knows his return may not be immediate or even assured. Because grief results from the recognition of separation between the lover and Beloved, the grief she experiences makes plain the intimacy between her and Krishna.

Mirabai thus trusts in the oscillations of viraha bhakti, despite its vagaries and uncertainties, even when it undoes her. A stubborn persistence characterizes her longing while she waits for Krishna. She concludes one song with these dogged lines:

Me—
my love's in a distant land
and wet, I stubbornly stand at the door.
For Hari is indelibly green,
Mira's Lord,
And he has invited a standing,
stubborn love.[16]

Even when her love is away, Mirabai, drenched with devotion, stands dreaming of him. In her mode of persistent longing, she waits expectantly at the door, energized by her "stubborn love," a love that always stands ready, never resting in its yearning. She continues to love him, despite the grief such a love brings.

Mirabai's viraha bhakti thus differs from Hadewijch's noble unfaith in its mode of longing. When we read her together with Hadewijch, we see that Mirabai's focus tends toward waiting, while Hadewijch's focus tends

15. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 186," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 112.

16. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 82," in Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 135.

toward winning. While Hadewijch's mode of longing reads as an active *passion*, Mirabai's mode reads as an active *passivity*. As we continue to read Hadewijch and Mirabai together, three other lines of comparison come into focus: communal longing, the middle spaces of mutual longing, and the practices of cultivating attachment.

Communal Longing in Mirabai and Hadewijch

As discussed in chapter 2, a collective of voices, not a single author, created the corpus of songs attributed to Mirabai. Many of the songs connected to her could not have been from her pen, since songs bearing her name multiplied years, even centuries, after she is said to have lived. Hadewijch, in like manner, may also have served as the inspiration for pseudonymous authors—in her case, ones anchoring their writings in the Christian mystical Beguine tradition. As mentioned in chapter 1, the existence of a Hadewijch II and even a Hadewijch III has been posited because of seemingly incongruous themes and literary conventions in the body of work traditionally attributed to her. Multiple voices of longing thus constitute both Hadewijch's and Mirabai's literary corpora.

As part of an oral culture that is still flourishing today, Mirabai's songs cannot be understood in isolation; they must be construed as performances in communal settings, not only as words on the page. Hadewijch's work has been traditionally parsed and studied as written texts rather than as part of a performative/oral tradition; however, her letters and visions were most likely read aloud to her community, as part of a common program of education. They may have also been set to music, as musicologist Louis Grijp has found models for five of Hadewijch's stanzaic poems among medieval troubadour songs and hymns.[17] This suggests that the stanzaic poems, too, were performed aloud as songs for the communal benefit of the Beguines. Further, Hadewijch's prose texts may have been heard by the Beguines collectively in a ritual consisting of hearing the texts and responding in song, according to Anikó Daróczi's hypothesis.[18] Similarly to how Mirabai's songs were created and sustained by a

17. Veerle Fraeters, foreword to Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, x. Fraeters discusses the work of Louis P. Grijp, "De zingende Hadewijch," in *Een zoet akkoord: Middeleeuwse lyriek in de Lage Landen* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1992), 72–93.

18. Ibid. Fraeters points to the work of Anikó Daróczi, *Hadewijch: Ende hieromme swighic sachte* (Amsterdam-Antwerp: Atlas, 2002).

collective of bhakta voices composing and singing together, Hadewijch's work, too, likely relied on performance, bringing longing to fuller fruition in her community. Both women's longing voices thus become extended by others, who participate in this yearning, even writing new texts in their own longing voices.

Both the songs of Mirabai and the writings of Hadewijch, it is also important to note, were written in vernacular languages, instead of the traditional languages of the religious orthodoxies of their times. Writing in Middle Dutch rather than Latin, which she likely knew, Hadewijch chose the language of many of her less educated Beguine sisters and of others living in the surrounding communities. Correspondingly, the *bhakti* movement is known for its embrace of the vernacular languages of local singers, rather than the exclusive use of Sanskrit, the language of orthodox texts and rituals. Mirabai, writing in a local dialect of Hindi, fits this pattern, one that opened up the devotional life to countless women, who wrote songs in her name in their own languages. In these ways, Hadewijch and Mirabai participated in two countercultural religious movements that valued ordinary, outsider voices, including the voices of women.

Hadewijch's and Mirabai's Middle Spaces of Longing

In different ways, Mirabai and Hadewijch also highlight what I have been calling the middle spaces of longing. It is in these middle spaces—where the erotic desire for union with God mixes with grief over the thwarting of that full union—that much of their work resides. In the texts we have examined, Hadewijch and Mirabai voice the difficulties of their separations from the divine presence: both are restless, yearning, and wanting more. Not only do they ache for more of the divine presence, they each indicate that their yearning may in fact—in certain distinct ways—deliver this presence. Voicing this view, Hadewijch explains, "... Noble unfaith cannot rest / as long as it does not conquer to the hilt."[19]

Hadewijch here declares her confidence in the desire, fear, and grief of noble unfaith to effect a conquering, one that she often describes as mutual. Mirabai, too, acts as if she may influence Krishna through her

19. "Couplet Poem 10: Not Feeling but Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 337, lines, 95–96.

practices of grieving. For example, she recalls to Krishna their intimate relationship when he seems to have forgotten. Expressing their affective bond, Mirabai, as we have seen, calls Krishna pet names, such as "my loved one" and "my dark one" in her songs. In the midst of separation, she displays her sense of a continuing intimate relationship with him. "My love for Him," she asserts, "is ancient and long-standing."[20]

Dwelling in the middle spaces between full absence or presence, viraha bhakti recommends the cultivation of longing for the divine; in fact, this *is* the path of liberation for Mirabai. A common bhakti saying is that the devotee does not want to *be* sugar, she wants to *taste* sugar. In other words, Mirabai does not long to be completely subsumed in the divine presence. She instead desires to relate to God as herself—not in a self-extinguishing union, but in a coupling that necessitates separation and a concomitant longing.

For Mirabai, life consists of this "tasting" as it exists in the presence-in-absence of viraha bhakti. Using synesthetic imagery of taste and sight, she issues the following invitation to her friend:

> *Come, my companion, look at his face,*
> *Drink in the beauty with thine eyes . . .*
> *On a glimpse of His visage I live.*[21]

Even the rare songs that speak of a happy ending of ultimate togetherness (and most of her songs do not) allude to a qualified nondualism that does not swallow her up and extinguish difference. Mirabai's spiritual journey does not end in her complete union with Krishna, even as she envisions their reunion:

> *This coming and going will end,*
> *says Mīrā,*
> *with me clasping your*
> *feet forever.*[22]

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20. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 20," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 41.

21. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 16," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 39.

22. Mirabai, "karaṇāṃ suṇi syām merī," in Mirabai, *For Love of the Dark One*, 61.

This image of Mirabaī's hands on Krishna's feet emphasizes the bodily, concrete aspects of her yearning. Bhakti here displays its special genius for concretizing metaphysical principles. In her reading of bhaktī's gendered Hindu metaphysics, Sangari reveals yearning to be connected to the female-gendered *maya* which sets up that yearning to occur:

> [S]ince maya is the principle which separates the devotee from god, all life may be presented as yearning, and yearning as the human condition. In this way, viraha spreads femaleness across the boundary of gender; there is also a visible movement from the actual lives of some women, to a metaphor for devotion, to a metaphysic of the human soul. Love is experienced as suffering.[23]

Yearning is revealed to be the "human condition." In this insight, she extrapolates yearning as the human condition instead of invoking the gendered way that the body/soul distinction is often framed in Hindu metaphysics.[24] The yearning usually seen as inherently female becomes fully and necessarily human; that is, the "female" state of yearning is reconfigured as the human condition. Maya, too, is reconfigured: not solely as the "illusion" of Vedānta thought, but also as the necessary state of loving while embodied. One of the functions of bhakti has been to "existentialize metaphysical insights, to translate into the lived world experience an abstract relationship."[25] This embodiment of the metaphysical value of longing, one of the great gifts of viraha bhakti, proves an invaluable boon to our comparative study.

Mirabaī's vivid details of color, movement, and music thus express a metaphysic of love-longing in sensory, bodily ways. She sings:

> *I am dyed deep in the love of Shyām,*
> *My King, dyed deep in the love of Shyām.*
> *I danced before the holy men,*
> *Beating the drum.*[26]

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23. Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti," *Economic and Political Weekly* (July 7, 1990): 1547.

24. This refers to the classical *Sāṁkya* idea of the separation of the eternal principle of male consciousness (*puruṣa*) from the eternal principle of unconscious, female nature (*prakṛiti*), which is often understood as the separation of soul and body.

25. Raj R. Singh, *Bhakti and Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006), 11.

26. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 37," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 49.

Even as part of Mirabai's fleshed-out experience of longing includes the joys of drumming and dancing in the colorful community of the saints, suffering is also part of this experience. As previously discussed, both Hadewijch and Mirabai detail the physically and emotionally painful effects of yearning. Hadewijch shares in great detail the symptoms of the devotee's lack of fruition: as we have seen, she or he "will lose his mind, and his heart feels oppression, and his veins continually stretch and rupture, and his soul melts,"[27] all signs of increasing desire. In one song we have read together, Mirabai matter-of-factly says, "Without Thy sight my heart grieves sorely."[28] Even as Mirabai experiences her very self coming undone in deep grief, she nonetheless finds a satisfaction that paradoxically exists in the heart of viraha bhakti. To use the common Indian image of nectar, viraha bhakti is the sweet nectar that transforms the pain of the separation into joy. "The King sent me a cup of poison," Mirabai sings, "[a]nd I accepted it as nectar."[29]

Explicating viraha's paradoxical powers in another way, Sangari proposes that the unfinished present of viraha bhakti unfolds into what she calls an "incomplete time-in-the-making." She contrasts this incomplete, more open time with what she calls karmic time, which contains the past in the present.[30] In her practices of longing, Mirabai lingers in "incomplete time-in-the-making," a new kind of middle space. Here, the future stays open, and possibilities for her ongoing relationship with the divine can evolve with elements of novelty and freedom.

Complete or final union with the divine does not, then, mark the goal for either Hadewijch and Mirabai; instead, each emphasizes the middle spaces of longing as the focus for their lives, loves, and writing. Through this emphasis, each woman destabilizes traditional understandings of peak religious experiences. Both Mirabai and Hadewijch point to the fecundity of the middle places of longing—spaces between consummated desire and no desire. Describing the middle places where she waits, Mirabai attests, "You have set the boat of love in motion / And

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27. "Letter 8: Two Fears about Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 65.

28. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 54," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 56.

29. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 39," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 50.

30. Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti," 1551.

abandoned it on the ocean of longing."[31] It is on this ocean, on the middle spaces of the waves between continents of dry, sure land, where her journey takes place.

Hadewijch's primary state, as we have seen, is also one of restless, incomplete longing. ". . . Love does not allow [desire] to have any rest . . ."[32] Hadewijch laments, but her life of longing leads her to wisdom; that is, her insight that "incompletion of this blissful fruition is yet the sweetest fruition."[33] I contend that, for both women, it is the value placed on these in-between spaces, where both desire and grief flourish at the same time, that shape how each relates to the divine and to the world.

Hadewijch's and Mirabai's Cultivated Practices of Attachment

As we have seen, neither Hadewijch nor Mirabai hold desire lightly: both women desire the divine with their whole selves. Hadewijch loves Love so intensely that she fears the perceived limits of both herself and of Love. Noble unfaith gives her a tool—increased desire—to let go beyond those limits. We have seen that in vision 13, Hadewijch describes how unfaith transports souls into the deep abyss. Here, they engage in battle with Minne: "Unfaith made them so deep that they wholly engulfed Love and dared to fight her with sweet and bitter."[34] Increased desire thus precedes a letting go into noble unfaith.

Hadwijch's spiritual practice cultivates desire as a weapon with which to conquer Love. She praises "noble knights," who "in burning desire, labor with great combat and fierce assault for noble Love."[35] Suffering fear over Love's lack of fruition, she finds herself in noble unfaith as she lets go of what she thought she knew of the spiritual life. The non-attachment that unfaith delivers thus serves as a mercy, as she copes with states of ecstatic, frenzied desire. By preserving the integrity of her longing, herself,

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31. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 64," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 60.

32. "Couplet Poem 10: Not Feeling but Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 337, line 78.

33. "Letter 16: Loving God with His Own Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 80.

34. "Vision 13: The Six-Winged Countenance," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 300.

35. "Letter 18: Greatness of the Soul," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 85.

and God, her practice of non-attachment then prevents a capitulation to a maddening desire, which, unabated, results in dramatic physical and emotional effects.

If Hadewijch cultivates desire as her primary practice of longing, Mirabai primarily cultivates grief. Mirabai's songs often find her in medias res of her love affair with Krishna; it is a tale that has played out between them throughout multiple lifetimes. She says of their eternal love, "My love is ancient / And runs from former births."[36] There is no clear beginning or end to this cyclical love story of longing, and her songs find her deeply in the midst of longing, cultivating the grief that has resulted. As she attests matter-of-factly in one song: "On beholding his beauty, I long for him much."[37]

Mirabai's and Hadewijch's primary spiritual practices, I argue, consist of cultivating attachment, rather than non-attachment. Neither wants to lessen or let go of these attachments; instead, each nurtures their growth. In her maddening desire, Hadewijch often yearns to the point of almost breaking, but she nurtures desire regardless, because, for her, ". . . Love is always possessed in violent longing . . ."[38] Celebrating her attachment to the divine, Mirabai sings, "But attachment to the Dancer with the Peacock Plume / Has now sunk deep."[39] In another song, she reiterates, "I have become attached to your face, beloved Mohan, I have become attached to your face."[40] She does not long to be rid of her attachment, no matter how difficult the accompanying grief; in fact, she takes measures to make her attachment stronger. In yet another song, she details her plan and its destined result: "I planted the creeper of love / And watered it with my tears." She ends this song with a declarative, third-person affirmation of her strong attachment and its resulting peace: "Mira's love has set in deeply, / She accepts whatever comes."[41]

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36. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 51," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 55.

37. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 20," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 41.

38. "Poems in Stanzas 20: Love's Sublimity," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 181, line 35.

39. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 9," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 36.

40. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita. "Poison to Nectar: The Life and Work of Mirabai," *Women Bhakta Poets*, special issue, *Manushi* 50–52 (January–June 1989): 70.

41. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 18," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 40.

Through the strength of their attachment, though, both women paradoxically find non-attachment. In other words, even as each cultivates longing, non-attachment springs up in the midst of her yearnings. In different yet resonant ways, desire cracks Mirabai's and Hadewijch's selves wide open. As their increasing desire and the concomitant griefs born of separation threaten to overwhelm them, non-attachment may then be born. This occurs through a letting go of their respective comprehensions of the self, the divine, and, in Hadewijch's case, faith itself.[42]

As it emerges, non-attachment does not stamp out desire however. Instead, non-attachment encourages desire to flourish further by sustaining a necessary interval between the lover and the beloved. Through the preservation of space between the lover and the beloved, non-attachment keeps difference and desire alive. Desire, then, requires non-attachment in order to avoid a grasping, consuming concupiscence. The spaces between the poles of desire and non-attachment—the middle spaces—ultimately nourish Hadewijch's and Mirabai's bonds of longing.

Non-attachment and desire thus expose themselves as intimately connected, with neither ultimately trumping the other. Non-attachment is not the highest goal, and yet neither is desire. Thus neither Mirabai nor Hadewijch leap over desire to go straight to non-attachment, as if non-attachment is the ultimate goal. At the same time, neither eschews non-attachment to dwell endlessly in the fires of union with the divine. Both non-attachment and desire are necessary ends *and* means for the respective embodied communions that Hadewijch and Mirabai describe. Intertwined with each other, desire and non-attachment interact with one another in a recursive process.

Non-attachment for Mirabai and Hadewijch, then, is not explicitly cultivated, but instead functions as an outgrowth of their excessive desire and grief. This understanding of non-attachment differs from most traditional notions of renunciation, yet finds a precedent in bhakti. For example, in his work with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, an important Vaiṣṇava bhakti text, Graham Schweig details the differences between spontaneous, love-based renunciation and traditional Indic notions of renunciation:

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42. Mommaers points out how the etymology of the word "comprehension" itself points to the human's grasping reflex. As Hadewijch lets go of her comprehension of the ways she believed the spiritual life functions, she, too, lets go of grasping for the totality of the self and the other. See Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, 108.

> [T]he text promotes renunciation that is naturally occurring and selflessly generated, spontaneously arising out of love. The cowherd maidens are considered to have achieved the perfection of all asceticism and to have attained the highest transcendence simply through their love and passionate devotion to God. This method of attainment is clearly distinct from rigorous asceticism and ceaseless searching for world-denying transcendence for which much of religious India is known.[43]

Here, the focused longing of the gopīs results in a "spontaneously arising" non-attachment that does not result in an individualistic renunciation; instead, it is cultivated and culminates in loving relationships. In this classic text, we see an evocative example of desire leading to renunciation, differently conceived.

Further distilling this idea, the yearning expressed in different ways by Mirabai and Hadewijch provides a passageway to non-attachment, which leads cyclically back to more desire, more non-attachment, and so on, as each fuels the other. Their different practices, or askeses, of attachment widen their conceptions of the divine, the self, and longing itself.[44] Looking closer at their respective askeses, we next consider how each woman hints at the apophatic in her practices, and the tantalizing implications therein.

Adumbrations of the Apophatic

Highlighting the inherent assailability of one who walks the apophatic path of unsaying and unknowing, Michael Sells asserts, "It demands a willingness to let go, at a particular moment, of the grasping for guarantees and for knowledge as a possession. It demands a moment of vulnerability."[45] Moments of letting go and vulnerability have been key to our explorations of Mirabaï's and Hadewijch's passionate non-attachment; as

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43. Graham Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love: India's Classic Sacred Love Story; The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3.

44. Gavin Flood's concept of the ascetic body helps elucidate how these practices of attachment can be seen as askesis. He writes, "The ascetic submits her life to a form that transforms it, to a training that changes a person's orientation from the fulfillment of desire to a narrative greater than the self." See Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

45. Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Language of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 217.

such, their practices of longing and letting go resonate with the language of apophatic discourse. Might we say, to use the language of apophaticism, that each *unsays* or *unknows* aspects of the divine?

Mirabai's saguṇa bhakti tradition traditionally focuses on *naming* the divine rather than an apophatic unnaming. To be sure, neither is Hadewijch usually viewed as part of an explicit tradition of negative theology, as the apophatic lineage assumes more philosophical training than medieval women could obtain. Nonetheless, as I noted in chapter 4, traces of the apophatic can be discerned in Hadewijch's mysticism of the abyss. Attempting to describe Minne's dark mystery as she communes with Love in the abyss, she writes, "Then the soul sees, and it sees nothing."[46] In a stanzaic poem, she intriguingly calls this dark place the "abyss of unknowing."[47] In another poem that provides a tantalizing hint of the apophatic, she writes of Minne:

In the divinity
of personality
is no shape at all.[48]

In these examples, signaling perhaps some awareness of the apophatic tradition, Hadewijch unsays her concept of Minne beyond description and knowing.

Reading Mirabai alongside Hadewijch's abyssal mysticism, might we find hints of the apophatic in Mirabai's songs as well? In chapter 2, we discussed the dynamics that result in Mirabai's multiple, shifting identities. Because Mirabai is important to numerous groups and the historical details of her life remain incomplete, these fragments tend to blossom cataphatically into multiple forms and interpretations—multiple Mirabais. Because she is many things to many people, her identity might be said to function apophatically as an unknowable, unsayable space, one sustained by a multitude of stories about her life and songs attributed to her. In this space, stories and songs of Mirabai are said and then unsaid by yet other stories and songs, as her identity is made and unmade. Using the language of "unmaking" and "undoing," if not unsaying or unknowing, Revathi Krisnaswamy argues that Mirabai and Krishna have an "unruly

46. "Letter 28: Trinitarian Contemplation Caught in Words," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 111.

47. Hadewijch, "*Mengeldict* 25," in Saskia Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch's Mengeldichten* (Goppingen, Germany: Kummerle Verlag, 1991), 87, lines 1–3.

48. Hadewijch, "*Mengeldict* 20," in Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought*, 36, lines 1–3.

relationship that is an unmaking, an undoing of man-made relationships."[49] For example, in the following song, Mirabai makes the choice to unmake her human marriage because of her loyalty to Krishna:

> *O Sister, without Hari I cannot live.*
> *My mother-in-law fights with me,*
> *My sister-in-law scolds me,*
> *The King is permanently in a rage.*
> *They have bolted my door*
> *And mounted a guard outside it.*
> *Why should I abandon my ancient love*
> *Inherited from earlier births?*
> *Mīrā's Lord is the courtly Giridhara*
> *And she will be satisfied with nothing else.*[50]

Harassed and mocked by her husband's family, she is locked inside her room, but her love burns strongly still. The bond she has with Krishna—one that has endured life after life—unsays her bond with her family, including her husband. Displaying where her fidelity lies, she asks regarding Krishna, "Why should I abandon my ancient love?"

Despite these unsayings of familial bonds, Mirabai is rightly classified as a predominantly saguṇa bhakti writer, although one of her songs found its way into early Sikh (nirguṇa) texts.[51] Mirabai's songs are notable for the way she specifically images and names God. God is Krishna—Mountain Lifter, King of Braj, Beloved, and Dark One. These epithets each name an aspect of God, respectively God's strength, position, and loveliness, but what about that last epithet, "Dark One"? What might she mean when she invokes his darkness? She uses such imagery of darkness elsewhere, as well. In one song, in which she first describes how the music from Krishna's lute "snatches away her mind," she continues:

> *My senses cut loose from their moorings—*
> *Dark waters, dark garments, dark Lord.*[52]

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49. Revathi Krisnaswamy, "Subversive Spirituality: Woman as Poet-Saint in Medieval India," *Women's Studies International Forum* 16, no. 2 (1993): 142.

50. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 42," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 51.

51. A poem attributed to Mirabai is found in the *Kartārpur Bīr* of 1604, a predecessor of the Sikh text *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. It was later removed because of its heterodox content. See Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 99–100.

52. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 166," in Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 136.

Here, we notice, that Mirabai employs images that evoke the very abyss where Hadewijch meets Minne, "which is so deep and so unfathomable that in wondrousness and unknowableness he is deeper and darker than the abyss," to use Hadewijch's description.[53] Mirabai, lost in a longing for Krishna brought about by his music, finds herself longing for a dark Lord, in dark waters, clad in dark garments. In Vaiṣṇavite imagery, Krishna's darkness usually refers to his beautiful dusky skin, but here, combined with the other images of darkness and her depiction of senses that are "cut loose from their moorings," perhaps the darkness refers to more than the color of Krishna's skin, although the darkness of his skin is not also without important racial and ethnic significance in postcolonial India and its diaspora. In these images though, the darkness designates, too, the opaque mystery of Krishna himself.[54] In Mirabai's description, as Krishna is mysterious opacity, so is Mirabai's very self, as her mind, senses and body find themselves "loose from their moorings." Hints of an apophatic theology thus lead to intimations of an apophatic anthropology.

Passionate Non-Attachment and Theological Anthropology

Hadewijch, as we have seen, describes the abyss of Love as an "abyss of unknowing." When she finds herself in the abyss, she finds herself in a state of unknowing: in its own abyssal state, "the soul sees and it sees nothing."[55] Discussing the relationship among the abyss, God, and the soul in the writings of Hadewijch, Jantzen writes, "Shocking though this might at first sound, it stands within the long tradition of the doctrine of the soul as *imago Dei*. Here, that doctrine is transposed into

53. "Letter 27: Ultimate Motives for Humility," in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 107.

54. Other references to the divine as darkness can be found in the Creation Hymn of the Rig Veda, where it is said that "darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning." See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, trans., *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 25. Also, in the Tamil praise-poem *Gopalavimshati*, Krishna is described as "this luminous darkness / shining black as kohl / under women's eyes." See Steven P. Hopkins, "Sanskrit from Tamil Nadu: At Play in the Forests of the Lord: The *Gopalavimshati* of Vedantadeshika," in *Krishna: A Sourcebook*, ed. Edwin F. Bryant (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 298.

55. "Letter 29: Trinitarian Contemplation Caught in Words," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 111.

language of the abyss: if God can be described as an abyss of Love desiring incarnation, then parallel comments can be made of the human soul."[56]

While Jantzen describes both God and the soul as "abysses of Love desiring incarnation," Kathryn Tanner articulates another way to describe the abyssal relationship between humans and God. Drawing on Gregory of Nyssa's assertion that if humans are the image of God then they are an incomprehensible image of the incomprehensible, Tanner claims that an apophatic anthropology results from an apophatic theology.[57] Her concept extends even further, as she considers what it might mean for humans to share an apophatic "nature." Tanner's notion of the self's "plasticity" expresses uncertainty and flexibility about what kind of self one is "naturally."[58] The knowledge is simply not available to us; thus, she explains, "[H]umans might have a nature that imitates God only by not having a clearly delimited nature."[59]

In other words, humans stand out by virtue of their failure to be clearly limited by a particular nature as other creatures are. As humans then, we have the opportunity to select what we will become based on the object of attachment we choose. Attachment, suggests Tanner, has the potential to perfect human nature. As she discusses the potential benefits of attachment, she leaves the specifics of the objects of attachment intriguingly open, besides saying that for Christian practice, attachment would mean devotion to Christ. In this way, she leaves room for different understandings of Christian devotion, as well as room for attachments derived from other practices.

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56. Grace N. Jantzen, "Eros and the Abyss: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity," *Literature and Theology* 17, no. 3 (2003): 248.

57. Kathryn Tanner, "In the Image of the Invisible," in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 118. Tanner works with Gregory of Nyssa's assertion: "If, while the archetype transcends comprehension, the nature of the image were comprehended, the contrary character of the attributes . . . would prove the defect of the image. . . . [S]ince the nature of our mind . . . evades our knowledge, it has an accurate resemblance to the superior nature, figuring by its unknowableness the incomprehensible Nature." *On the Making of Man*, XI: 4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 396–397.

58. Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40–57.

59. Tanner, n. 53, 121.

In an apophatic anthropology, the self resists a hardened sense of identity that denies the creative powers of relationality for creating and sustaining the self. The power of relationality is so compromised when, in Tanner's words, "an already established nature or identity could determine all by itself what one might become in sovereign independence of entanglements with others."[60] Here, an icy isolationism, one that denies the fires of warmer connective energies that create and undo the self, emerges as a fiction.

As we move into the penultimate chapter, we look to Hadewijch's and Mirabai's longing as resources for an articulation of an anthropology of constitutive relationality. In other words, their voices will help express the ways we are not "us" without others. Longing stands at the heart of a relational, apophatic theological anthropology, one in which energies of desire and grief—of passionate non-attachment—help widen the "I" past itself into fruitful, mysteriously entangled relationships with the world. Instead of a privatized self hunkered down against the impingements of the other, we see in Hadewijch and Mirabai selves that become undone and enlarged as they relate to divine and human others.

60. Ibid., 118.

7

Becoming Undone

MIRABAI, HADEWIJCH, AND DISPOSSESSION

[Infinity] has undone me
wider than wide

HADEWIJCH[1]

If you want to offer love
Be prepared to cut off your head
And sit on it.

MIRABAI[2]

One is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel.

JUDITH BUTLER[3]

1. "*Mengeldict* 21," in Saskia Murk Jansen, *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch's Mengeldichten* (Goppingen, Germany: Kummerle Verlag, 1991), 108, lines 21–22.

2. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 191," in Mirabai, *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. A. J. Alston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), 114.

3. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 24.

WE HAVE SEEN how Mirabai's and Hadewijch's longings suffuse their respective worlds. Mirabai gives voice to longing in colorfully erotic imagery when she writes:

> *I've stripped off shame and family custom*
> *To go to the bed of the Dark One.*
> *Body and mind, Mira wears only the color of God.*[4]

Just as Mirabai wears God's colors exclusively, Hadewijch's inventive wordplay with Minne similarly points to her whole world becoming longing: as Mirabai gives everything "body and mind," Hadewijch aims to "... give herself wholly in love / and live wholly as Love with Love..."[5]

We have seen how Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of longing usher them into realms of non-attachment. To put it another way, as their practices of longing take them deeper into their interior lives, at the same time, these embodied practices loosen their attachments to certainties about life itself. In chapter 6, I argued that as each woman cultivates "practices of attachment" in her respective askesis of longing, energies of non-attachment result. Caught up in the desire and grief of longing, each finds herself letting go of—unknowing—her cherished understandings of her relationships with God and the world. In this way, each may be said to be dispossessed by her longing.

Judith Butler and Dispossession

The above terminology of "dispossession" and "unknowing" references the recent writings of philosopher Judith Butler. Dispossession, for Butler, refers to an ecstatic movement that exposes the intrinsic relationality of the self with others. Literally meaning "to be outside oneself," *ek-static*, as Butler traces the term, means both to be moved outside of the self in passion and also to be "beside oneself" in grief or rage.[6] Desire and grief, she continues, often reveal the illusion of a self sheltered in an invulnerable autonomy.[7]

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4. "To Dance for the Dark One Is All the Clothing Mira Needs," in Mirabai, *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, trans. Robert Bly and Jane Hirschfield (Boston: Beacon, 2004), 60.

5. "Poems in Stanzas 6: Conquest of Love—at a Price," in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, OSB (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 141, lines 9–10.

6. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

7. In *Precarious Life*, Butler writes mostly about the force of grief, but she notes that grief's ability to undo the self in the face of the other "can be so only because it was already the case with desire" (23).

In dispossession brought on by desire and grief, the reality of one's integral, constitutive relationality with the world comes into sharper focus. Butler offers an ethically inflected relational ontology that highlights how intense desire and grief disrupt the boundaries of the self. This disjuncture allows us to recognize, if only partially, how the self, or the "I," is not itself without its entanglements with others. Through desire and grief, one sees more clearly what was always true: the self does not exist apart from its relations with the world.

Describing the power of both desire and grief, Butler encourages an admission of vulnerability: "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something."[8] In her discussion of the concept of "undoing," she points to more than a relational construction of identity; that is, she proposes a conception of the self that goes beyond a self formed in relation with others. To wit, our relations not only constitute our selves but also serve to dispossess our selves. This dispossession uncovers the reality of the self's myriad, constitutive relationships with others in the world, even if these relationships are still shrouded in mystery. In relational dispossession, the self, rather than being foundational and given, demonstrates its necessary state of fracture and unknowingness.

Butler describes this dispossession as an undoing of the self in the face of the other: "[O]ne is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel."[9] In this undone state, the self can no longer fully "give an account" of itself.[10] In other words, dispossession "posits the 'I' in the mode of unknowingness."[11] Here, "unknowingness," Butler's term for the inability to know fully how one is related to others in the matrix of sociality, alludes to the mystery of the ways we are given over, even from birth, into a vulnerable sociality. Much wider in scope than mere psychological insights about

8. Butler, n. 3, 23.

9. Ibid., 24.

10. In Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), Butler makes the argument that giving an account of oneself goes hand in hand with accounting for the social conditions through which one is constituted, which can only be done incompletely. The difficulty of narrating either the self or the other manifests even more clearly when one becomes undone by the other. She concludes the book with a summons, an invitation to becoming "undone": "To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession" (136).

11. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 30.

the individual self, the "'I' in the mode of unknowingness" also speaks powerfully to questions of politics and social justice, such as national sovereignty, human rights, and nonviolence.[12]

For the theologically attuned, Butler's language of unknowing and undoing ripples with compelling apophatic resonances. The fifth-century writer Pseudo-Dionysius, often considered the father of apophatic theology, described the pinnacle of the mystical climb as a paradoxical dive into the "truly mysterious darkness of unknowing," in order to know by "knowing nothing."[13] On the ascent to God, the climber methodically negates, or undoes, the names for God through the application of an apophatic theology. Previously, I noted Tanner's linking of apophatic theology to apophatic anthropology; briefly, as God has an incomprehensible nature, so too, do humans. Developing further the connection between unsaying God and unsaying the self, Charles M. Stang argues that the negative process of unsaying God simultaneously undoes the contemplative self "from the names and categories that prevent it from being divine."[14] These two examples provide complementary articulations of the link between unsayings and undoings of the self and of God.

For our comparative study of passionate non-attachment, Butler's "dispossession" does the crucial work of naming a specific kind of non-attachment that is accessed through longing. Dispossession points to a non-attachment that is not purposely cultivated as a goal, but that occurs as a result of intense and deeply human attachments. This understanding of non-attachment corresponds with my readings of Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of longing, each of which may be said to dispossess the devotee into states of unknowingness, loosening her attachments to the divine, the self, and the other.

Such resonances inspire the following reading of Mirabai and Hadewijch through the lens of Butler, who provides crucial assistance for thinking about the ethical implications of passionate non-attachment. Fleshing out these links and possibilities, Butler proposes, "My own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection

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12. See, for example, Butler's applications in Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, chap. 2, "Violence, Mourning, Politics"; and Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), chap. 10, "The Question of Social Transformation."

13. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Paul Rorem (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 1.3, 1000A, 137.

14. Charles M. Stang, "Dionysius, Paul, and the Significance of the Pseudonym," in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Malden, MA: 2009), 16.

with others. I am not fully known to myself because part of what I am is the enigmatic trace of others."[15] In other words, not being able to fully account for one's interrelationality with the world does not disqualify one from the pursuit of an ethical life. Instead, the unknowingness and uncertainty about *how* one is mysteriously entangled with others becomes the starting place for ethics.

In this chapter, focusing on spaces of dispossession and unknowingness, we first read Butler together with Hadewijch to consider the ethical power of "undoing" and "unsaying"; then we apply the same method and rationale to Mirabai's songs of longing and letting go. Butler's work on dispossessive relationality and states of unknowingness, read alongside Hadewijch and Mirabai, contributes to the construction of an apophatic anthropology and an accompanying ethic based in passionate non-attachment.

Hadewijch Read with Butler: Toward a Wider Self

. . . Love makes me wander outside myself . . .
HADEWIJCH[16]

Butler's concepts of "unknowing" and "undoing" provide an apt lens through which to consider anew Hadewijch's intertwining states of *ghebruken* (fruition) and *ghebreken* (non-fruition). These two poles—connected by the middle spaces of longing—have both been established as necessary for Hadewijch's full-bodied spiritual life. If Hadewijch's times of fruition refer to moments of blissful communion with Minne, dispossession might describe times of grievous non-fruition. Many of Hadewijch's poems in stanzas, for example, display her extreme frustration at Minne's unresponsiveness. Here, she laments Love's lack of consolation:

. . . I complain and accuse her
With new indignation:
She refuses the happiness that had consoled me . . .[17]

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15. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 46.

16. "Poems in Stanzas 6: Conquest of Love—at a Price," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 143, line 49.

17. "Poems in Stanzas 16: Complaint and Surrender to Love," in *Hadewijch: The Complete* Works, 170, lines 56–60.

When what had worked in the past no longer results in uniting her and Minne, Hadewijch finds herself dispossessed of her once-certain knowledge of how to find unity with Minne. This resulting state of unknowingness leads her to accept both fruition *and* non-fruition. In other words, unknowingness precludes any sole attachment to states of fruition. As she begins to let go of her attachment to fruition, she grieves her ineffectiveness at bringing about her desired communion. This grief catalyzes a dispossession.

To put it a different way, as she engages with grief and desire, Hadewijch's sense of an efficacious, autonomous, conquering self cannot be sustained. Such a self-concept "falls short," to use Mommaers's translation of *ghebreken*, and "refers to the moment when the human person is freed from selfness, a freedom which is a necessary condition for having fruition of what *is*."[18] This moment of being freed, I suggest, might be framed as a dispossession from "selfness." Describing the self's inability to know and possess Love fully, Hadewijch writes, "For interiorly Love draws them so strongly to her, and they feel Love so vast and so incomprehensible; and they find themselves too small for this, and too inadequate to satisfy that Essence which is Love."[19] As she responds to this state of affairs in noble unfaith, Hadewijch's longing increases; and this growing longing, fueled by desire and grief, incites a dispossession that plunges her into the "abyss of unknowing."[20] In this abyss, she cannot see either herself or the divine clearly; they exist entangled together in a dark unknowingness. Placing this abyss "beyond the understanding of human reason," she explains:

> *One must have been led far, and made wide*
> *By the understanding of human reason*
> *Combined with love beyond the*
> *understanding of human reason by means of*
> *love, before one can know or receive light.*[21]

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18. Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, 69.

19. "Letter 13: Love Unappeasable," in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 75.

20. Hadewijch, "*Mengeldict* 25," in Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought*, 87 lines 1–3.

21. Hadewijch, "*Mengeldict* 18," in Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought*, 80, lines 403–408.

She describes being widened by reason and love, which, it is implied, lead her into the darkness that occurs "before one can know or receive light."

In addition to the concept of "unknowing," Hadewijch also shares the language of "undoing" with Butler. In a stunning couplet poem, seen in this chapter's epigraph, Hadewijch writes of the divine:

> *[Infinity] has undone me*
> *wider than wide*
> *Everything else is too narrow for me.*[22]

Her language of undoing speaks to a dispossession that leaves her in a less narrow state. With an undone, wider self, she now finds herself stretched and enlarged. Regarding dispossession's effects on the self, Catherine Keller meditates on the above lines, "In Hadewijch the knowing subject, the touching 'I,' encodes an intimate relationality."[23] Here, the coming together of the Infinite and the "I" in this intimate relationality transforms the "I": "undoes it, dispossesses it, widens it, but neither diminishes it nor annihilates it."[24] Selfhood, in short, is not destroyed but opened up, complexified and undone.

As such, Butler's idea of dispossession assists in a reading of Hadewijch that preserves the integrity of the self in communion with the longed for other. In Butlerian dispossession, the porous self does not completely merge with the other. At the same time, Butler reminds us that humans are not "merely bounded beings" either.[25] In her own expression of the simultaneously bounded and unbounded self, Hadewijch evinces a sense of self even in the midst of the deepest states of communion. For example, letter 9 depicts the way she remains paradoxically self-possessed, even as she is being dispossessed by desire. In her words, she and Minne are

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22. Hadewijch, "*Mengeldict* 21," in Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought*, 108, lines 19–22.

23. Catherine Keller, "Undoing and Unknowing: Judith Butler in Process," in *Butler on Whitehead: On the Occasion*, ed. Roland Faber, Michael Halewood, and Deena M. Lin, (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), 44. Keller's reflection is a small piece of her larger argument about the intersections of Butler and Alfred North Whitehead.

24. Ibid., 44.

25. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 27–28.

"both one thing through each other, but at the same time remain two different selves—yes, and remain so forever."[26]

At the same time, in such a merging-in-differentiation, Hadewijch's usual "self awareness which goes together with this mutual giving and taking disappears," Mommaers asserts.[27] While the disappearance of self-awareness might be read as the annihilation of the self, it might alternatively signal a dispossessive unknowing of the self. Hadewijch's communion with Minne involves the blurring of the boundaries of her discrete self, as demarcations among the self, Minne, and others show themselves to be more porous than she previously knew.

Read with a focus on Butler's concept of dispossession, Hadewijch's longing and grief may be said to create a more capacious self, one able to connect deeply to others without losing itself. Hadewijch describes this expanding sense of self as a fluid community in which God and "his friends, in mutual interpenetration, enjoy such blissful fruition, and are flowing into his goodness and flowing out again in all good."[28] Rather than staying bounded in the confines of the self-possessed "I," a widened Hadewijch finds herself connected in divine fruition with other longing selves. Describing this state of communal longing as "a sufficiency of selves sufficing for themselves *and* each other," Milhaven articulates the radical broadening of Hadewijch's sense of self.[29] Hadewijch's dispossession is best understood as an expression of her connections to other selves, each of whom constitutes the others, as imaged in this flowing fruition.

Notwithstanding these glowing descriptions of the widened "I," it bears noting that dispossession is a force that operates largely independently of the desires of the one being dispossessed. One does not dispossess oneself; one is dispossessed by a power outside oneself, a disquieting experience at best. Butler describes dispossession having its way: "One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage to for a while, but despite one's best efforts," one is undone by the force of grief.[30] Note,

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26. "Letter 9: He in Me and Me in Him," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 66.

27. Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, 106.

28. "Letter 12: The Jacob Letter," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 71.

29. Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters*, 45.

30. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

too, that the process may not regularly result in a fruitive, blissful, orgy of mutual interpenetration among friends, a la Hadewijch's description! While Butler argues that we "are missing something" if we do not submit to dispossession, she also calls dispossession an "anguish."[31] We see this anguish often enough in Hadewijch's work, and Butler's deployment of an incisive poststructuralist philosophical grammar offers another articulation of dispossession's grief.

Because Hadewijch also recognizes the concomitant anguish, she does not necessarily desire to be dispossessed. Even as she acknowledges the gifts of a dispossessing "noble unfaith," she remains honest about her desire to *possess* Love. Her letters expound, for example, on cultivating the humility necessary for an efficacious conquest of Minne: "So must anyone always do if he wishes to draw God into himself and *possess* him fruitively in love."[32] It seems Hadewijch, like most of us, would rather possess, not be dispossessed; nonetheless, her longing leads her to dispossession's door.

Hadewijch and her fellow Beguines also perform another kind of dispossession, an unsaying of the very concept of possessing the beloved. As discussed in chapter 3, the courtly love tradition contrasted with the prevailing idea of marriage: that of the husband taking possession of the wife by means of a marriage contract or by force. Instead, the courtly lover "dreamt of experiencing a personal relationship in which the woman might even dominate the man, for the lover did not just relinquish his right to command her, he faithfully resigned to the service of woman."[33] Instead of emphasizing possession of the beloved, the courtly love tradition insisted that desirous love from afar represented the ideal. Maintaining a distance between the lover and beloved, this tradition apotheosized a beloved who could not be finally and totally possessed. By adopting the tropes of courtly love, Hadewijch's mystique courtoise holds open space between the lover and beloved.

Through longing, Hadewijch, who portrays herself frequently as a conquering and victorious self, becomes, "periodically undone and open to being unbounded," to borrow Butler's words.[34] In Hadewijch's words,

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31. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 136.

32. "Letter 12: The Jacob Letter," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 70 (italics mine).

33. Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, 13.

34. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28.

"...Longing keeps the wounds open and undressed / Because Love stormily inflames them...,"[35] and the divine infinity undoes her "wider than wide."[36] Hadewijch's cultivated longing allows the flourishing of dispossessing energies of desire and grief, which widen her connectivity with the divine and others. As we cycle back to Mirabai, we explore the intracacies of her undone self read through the lens of Butler's dispossessive relationality.

Mirabai Read with Butler: Keeping Grief Close

Who can understand the grief
Of a woman parted from her beloved?
MIRABAI[37]

Mirabai's viraha bhakti tradition invites its adherents to stay extremely close to grief. Grief is on full display in these introductory words of a previously discussed focus song:

My dark one has gone to an alien land
He's left me behind,
he's never returned,
he's never sent me a single word.[38]

For Mirabai, the grief of her separation from Krishna cannot be sidestepped. Grief remains essential to her practices of longing, and, as discussed in chapters 2 and 3, she cultivates and embraces grief, staying close to its transformative edges.

Butler, too, encourages cultivating intimacy with the griefs that visit us. She suggests that there may be something to be gained by staying close to the feeling of loss—a sense of vulnerability that leads to a "collective

35. "Poems in Stanzas 14: School of Love," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 165, lines 69–70.

36. Hadewijch, "*Mengeldict* 21," in Murk Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought*, 108, line 20.

37. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 73," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 63.

38. Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 68," in John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 121.

responsibility for the physical lives of one another."[39] Butler lays bare the disorientation of grief and its power to unveil this co-constitution with one another. The bereaved may ask questions with unknowable answers in the face of loss: " 'Who have I become?' or indeed, 'What is left of me?' or 'What is it in the Other that I have lost?' "[40] Mystery thus coexists with knowledge, in what we might call a knowing unknowingness.

Finding oneself in such a knowing unknowingness, where one viscerally apprehends one's connections but cannot supply all the details, marks a way into ethical wisdom. Butler elaborates on grief's power to reveal both the socially constituted self and a related way of thinking ethically: "Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation, but I think it exposes the constitutive sociality of the self, a basis for thinking a political community of a complex order."[41] Rather than only isolate us in our own pain, grief, if we let it do its work, may turn out to connect us to others.

Embracing grief, even with an eye to its gifts, is certainly fraught with dangers, especially for those who may already suffer multiple vulnerabilities in society, something we must always keep in mind, never romanticizing vulnerability. Grief is a powerful transformational force, and in undergoing this transformation, one accepts that "one will be changed, possibly forever."[42] Mirabai's viraha bhakti tradition, too, encourages a transforming submission to grief, in this case viraha bhakti's grief of separation from God. Viraha bhakti teaches that grief is the price of embodiment. Because grief is an essential part of what it means to be human, Mirabai's spiritual practice involves accepting this process of transformation.

Stopping short of calling grief the human condition, Butler nevertheless speaks to its ubiquity: "Loss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all."[43] In the community of wandering bhaktas that Mirabai joins, all of whom have lost ties to their previous lives, including their families of origin, a "tenuous 'we' " is constructed. Even though Mirabai's family condemns her, she finds

39. Butler, n. 3, 30.

40. Ibid.

41. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 19.

42. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

43. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

another family in the bhaktas. In this collective of dispossessed bhaktas who are brimming with desire and grief, longing takes on power that it forfeits in isolation. An isolated devotion attenuates yearning's power for remaking relationships, communities, and even religious identity, applications we will return to chapter 8.

Even as these resonances flourish between Butler and Mirabai, it must be acknowledged that the concept of an autonomous self against which dispossession pushes does not translate easily into most traditional Indian ideas of the self. Even as she proposes an alternative concept, Butler writes from a Western philosophical perspective that assumes a self that can be unified and possessed through a single coherent narrative from birth to death. In Mirabai's world, however, this version of the self was never assumed to exist in this way. Mirabai does not come into a dispossessive relationship with anyone—neither Krishna nor her fellow bhaktas—who possesses the illusion of a tightly bound, autonomous self in the Western sense.

Here, Diana Eck's description of the refracted, interdependent Indian self may shed some light: "A person thinks of himself or herself not as a singular entity but rather as part of a larger interdependent whole, in which parts mirror one another in an infinite, intricate pattern."[44] This interdependent self contrasts with a self who constantly must patrol its own individual boundaries. This latter self, a self that prioritizes self-possession, must narrow its wide, unknowable, interconnected self to something manageable, something ownable, something no one can take away—a singular personal possession: the very modern notion of the self.[45] The holistic, interdependent "Indian self" should not be understood as a culturally specific idealization without complexities or as neat foil for a "Western self." To be sure, Hadewijch's medieval, Western self shares

44. Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 39.

45. Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 42. Linking modern Western ways of thinking about owning property and possessing one's self, Taylor argues that the Western monotheistic worldview demands that everything—language, God, uni-verse, the self—be univocal. He writes, "From a monotheistic perspective, to be is to be one." To be one is to be proper and to be decent. To be proper and decent is never to err, and maintaining this strict perfection allows one to think that one has possession of the self." Taylor names this possession of personality as the "original personal property" and concludes that from this perspective, "owning is oneing and oneing is owning" (41–42).

some similarities with the Indian self described here: both assume a premodern, pre-Cartesian model of the self that does not presuppose an individualistic autonomy as its basis.[46]

Continuing to read Mirabai through the lens of Butler, we may perhaps view the desire and grief that are so present in Mirabai's work, not as energies that dispel a commonly held belief about the self, but as sites that dramatically highlight her relationality with others, both divine and human. Butler, however, is not just talking about relationality, as important as a relational ontology is to the ethic she begins to develop. Explaining dispossession's importance, she suggests, "Despite my affinity for the term relationality, we may need other language to approach the issue that concerns us, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted but also dispossessed by [others]."[47]

This language of dispossession emphasizes the unknowing incumbent in what becomes clearer in grief and desire: that our connections—that is, the primariness of our sociality—make the self inscrutable. Through emphasizing the unknowingness that is a consequence of dispossession, a cross-cultural application of Butler becomes possible, one that goes beyond the insight of primary interconnectedness and interdependency.

For Mirabai, both grief and desire—so inextricably tied together—expose her unknowingness. Consequently, we emphasize not just that Mirabai displays an interdependent relationality with the divine and the world—again, this is not an insight that has been lost much in Indian thought—but that desire and grief uncover an ethically important unknowingness about *how* she is connected to others.

In the previous chapter, when reading Mirabai alongside Hadewijch, we explored the apophatic possibilities not usually accounted for in Mirabai's saguṇa bhakti tradition. As another example of the unknowingness exposed by her longing, consider her prayer to Krishna:

> *O Mohan, I know your ways of love,*
> *Know them well.*
> *Mine is the path of Love and Devotion,*

46. For more on medieval Western ideas of the self and women writers, see Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 21–28.

47. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

I know no other.
Why, having first plied me with nectar,
Do you serve me with poison now?[48]

As one interpretation, consider how she juxtaposes what she thought she knew against her present reality. She believed that she knew his "ways of love," but now she is confronted with something different. In this way, she might be said to "unknow" her previous understandings. Now, uncertainty predominates, but still she continues on this vulnerable path, "the path of Love and Devotion."

Naming some of Mirabai's multiple vulnerabilities, Sangari notes that in some of the stories and songs, Mirabai is a widow, and in other stories and songs, she is a wandering mendicant. Each role carries its own hazards, of course. Widows were vulnerable to societal disapproval and financial destitution, among other dangers, while itinerant women were subject to threats to their physical safety and to alienation from their families. Mirabai's role as a bhakta carries also carries a certain vulnerability. In its orality that demands a willing audience, she is exposed to her audience through a sharing of her deepest griefs and desires.[49] As discussed in chapter 2, everyone who participates in the bhakti song, including the singers, authors, and subject of the songs—even Krishna himself—shares together in vulnerability.[50] In Mirabai's songs, vulnerability, like grief, cannot be escaped.

Reading Butler alongside Mirabai also provides further illumination of the multiple Mirabais discussed in chapter 2. Mirabai, as we saw, cannot be reduced to just one Mirabai: she contains various voices and narratives. Butler helps us see that narrating one's own life, made up of so many known and unknown threads and connections, is fraught with difficulties; any attempt is necessarily incomplete. Due to its socially constituted nature, one's life cannot be linearly and conclusively narrated, and only the "I" in moments of unknowingness can encompass all its diverse trajectories. Read with Butler, the desire of Mirabai's intimate encounters with Krishna and the grief of not fully uniting with him can be said to dispossess her, which results in an unknowingness that abides many Mirabais.

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48. "Caturvedī's *Pada* 56," in Mirabai, *Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, 57.

49. Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti," 1468.

50. Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life*, 89.

Hagiography, on the other hand, often tries to nail down the essence of a saint authoritatively. It tends to interpret behaviors "as simple and pure expressions of spiritual being, and interprets 'character' as deriving from such a substantial self rather than from the exigencies of changing, accrued experience."[51] As we have seen, some have tried to solidify Mirabai's legacy as a traditional wife, for example, while others crown her as the epitome of independent womanhood. Revealing something about the goals that certain communities value, hagiography tends to suppress complexity.

In contrast to the limitations of hagiography, the diversity of images in Mirabai's songs may be encompassed more capaciously through a Butlerian lens. In light of the self's inability to narrate itself fully, Mirabai is not limited to any essential or singular nature that could be contained in a knowable, static, substantial self. Mirabai is further loosed to be her complicated, contradictory, ecstatic, vulnerable, grieving, married-yoginī selves.

Mysticism, Passionate Non-Attachment, and Ethics

The god who is acquired as a private possession may indeed serve the quest for experience, but nothing more.

DOROTHEE SÖLLE[52]

The mystical depths of Mirabai and Hadewijch speak to the deep, interconnected, relational mysteries among the self, the divine, and others. Informed and inspired by this triune relationality, we now lean into an ethical turn and ask what the mystics Mirabai and Hadewijch can offer toward the goal of a more just world. Claiming that mysticism cannot offer tools for the construction of ethics, Jeffrey Kripal argues, "It is certainly possible that we may find apophatic and deconstructive powers helpful in our initial task of calling into question our own dominant fictions, but in the end we must turn elsewhere, well outside the mystical, for the tools we need to construct another, more adequate fiction."[53] Only deconstruction,

51. Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti," 1465.

52. Dorothee Sölle, "To Be Amazed, to Let Go, to Resist: Outline for a Mystical Journey Today," *Mysticism and Social Transformation,* ed. Janet K. Ruffing, RSM (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 46.

53. Jeffrey Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 318.

he argues, can be accomplished through the resources of mysticism. Constructive religious work needs other resources.

While I disagree that Hadewijch's and Mirabai's embodied mysticisms—grounded as they are in the middle spaces of longing in this world—offer no resources for constructive theology and ethics, I maintain that Butler's articulation of a shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves—an unknowingness—offers crucial and further clues to the ethical valence of Hadewich's, Mirabai's, and even our own unknowingness.[54] Butler urges us to ask important questions about what kind of ethics might emerge from staying close to grief and vulnerability. She reflects, "What might it mean. . . to feel the surety of one's epistemological and ontological anchor go, but be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be?"[55] As she points to the integral relationship between dispossession and unknowingness, she provides hints to the ethical resources located in an apophatic anthropology.[56] In her latest book, she also reminds us of the indispensability of a relational ethics: "For me, the question of ethics is always a question of an ethical relation, that is, the question of what binds me to another and in what way this obligation suggests that the 'I' is invariably implicated in the 'we'. . . I do not augment myself with my virtuousness when I act responsibly, but I give myself over to the broader sociality that I am."[57] Here, Butler suggests that ethics enacts who we truly are: we act virtuously because we know—through unknowing—that we are not separated from each other.

Read though Butler, an apophatic theological anthropology inspired by Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of passionate non-attachment allows

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54. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 84.

55. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 35.

56. As mysticism has been critiqued by Kripal for its lack of ethical resources, Judith Butler has also been criticized by those who find her work lacking in strategies for constructive ethics. Claudia Schippert summarizes (and argues against) this line of thinking: "Often Butler is disqualified from any relevance for feminist political or ethical discussions because the strategies of subversion and resignification that are central to her argument seem incompatible with constructive ethics based on the specificity of bodily materiality and the experience of domination." See Claudia Schippert, "Turning on/to Ethics," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press), 58.

57. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 107–108.

multiple and multiplying discourses to reflect the *imago Dei* without hegemonic discourses defining what it means to be human. By looking for places where the other has been dissembled by hubristic and occlusive knowing, perhaps we can—in knowing unknowingness—undo the old inclusivist ethic of the *imago Dei*, in which new groups could be included but only on the reigning groups' terms.[58] In the final chapter, with Mirabai and Hadewijch continuing as our guides, we further articulate how passionate non-attachment moves us toward an ethic that bolsters our longing for justice, while helping us let go of what isolates us.

58. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Contesting the Subject: A Feminist Account of the *Imago Dei*," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 100.

8

Toward an Interreligious Ethic of Passionate Non-attachment

Blessed also are they that hunger and thirst without being filled.

JOSEPH SITTLER[1]

We believe in the dimension of "not-knowing"... that makes us humble and at the same time more combative in order to gain respect for differences and the possibility of building an interdependent society.

IVONE GEBARA[2]

ON MY FINAL day of my last trip to India, on the banks of the Ganges River in Rishikesh, I bought an offering from a riverside stall. Its simple beauty stunned me: a boat of green leaves, and nestled within it, yellow flowers, a candle, and a stick of incense. This offering to the river Ganges, I was told by a pilgrim cradling a similar offering in her hands, represented the elements of earth, fire, wind, water, and sky—the whole world.

My trip to India was slipping away fast, and I thought about how these five elements evoked aspects of my journey so far: the flowers represented the ever-blossoming beauty of this ancient land I had come so far to visit; the lit candle echoed the nightly fire ceremonies on the sacred river; and the smoke from the incense conjured the winds seeping through my window at night, so cold that I slept in three pairs of socks. Soon I would place the whole

1. Joseph Sittler, "The View from Mt. Nebo," in *The Care of the Earth* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004), 48.

2. Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 132.

offering in the Ganges, often imaged as a watery goddess who cleanses and purifies. As I looked up, I saw the sky, open to where the horizon met the rising Himalayan foothills, and its vastness evoked the immense worlds of Indian religion and culture I longed to know. I held all five elements in my hands.

As the sun began to set, I watched some devotees splash the divine water on their heads or take a sip to drink. With a growing sense of grief about my impending return home, I found myself yearning—for more temples, ashrams, sacred rivers, teachers, study, new friends, and most of all, time—all of these longings encapsulated in this palm-sized offering.

And yet, the next step was to let go of this elemental sculpture. Joining with others who were launching these glowing, floating offerings, I waded beyond the river's edge. As I let my offering go, I watched this symbol of my longings move downstream alongside the desires of others, all of our yearnings represented by the dozens of offerings floating down the ancient river. I gazed through tears at the swirling configurations of desires flowing together, becoming part of the sacred river Herself.

In the scene before me, passionate non-attachment came to vivid life. I saw the sculptures we launched into the river as symbols for the myriad ways we are tethered to each other and supported by the planet. As I let my offering go, I watched it bob and float, riding the currents. In the flowing, holy river, there was room for all of our longings, swirling together in the fluid womb of Mother Ganges. Here we were—longing and letting go—together.

In this enchanted moment of passionate non-attachment, a sobering thought arose: where were all those offerings going to end up, not in a lofty spiritual sense, but in terms of the nuts and bolts of ecological waste management? While they were essentially decomposable, millions of such offerings, each introducing foreign elements into the river, surely created ecological problems into which I was now directly implicated.[3] How troubling that these sacred moments of passionate non-attachment were also contributing to the degradation of the Ganges, the most sacred of Hindu rivers, one that embodies divinity herself.[4] Thinking about my complicity,

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3. Not to mention the airplane fuel, bottled water, and other environmental stressors my pilgrimage involved.

4. For an exploration of the environmental crisis in India's rivers as well as resources from Indian religious traditions for addressing these problems, see David L. Haberman, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

I wondered, "Were the desires of the divine, represented by the flowing of this sacred river, as well as the desires of non-human and human creatures living in it or near it, occluded by the desires of us at the river's edge? Was this true even as we were motivated by devotion to God, even a God imaged as female and as river?"

There at the Ganges, my own practices of longing allowed me to embody an ethic of passionate non-attachment, if only briefly, incompletely, and problematically. While practices of longing may dispossess the self, prompting a "knowing unknowingness" that sustains vulnerability and relationality, this ideal never actualizes perfectly or completely. Practices of longing, I perceived more clearly at the river, carry real dangers of nourishing individual and exclusively human desires, at the expense of the good of communities and of the earth itself. At the same time, the scene at the river also illustrated the promises of longing and letting go. As we have explored, longing contains the seeds of the self's dispossession, which can lead to intimations of the vast matrix of relationality, the way we are all part of each other and part of the divine. As we come to know this, we are changed and may act in the world differently and accordingly.

This chapter thus follows the lure of an apophatic anthropology, one inspired by the intersections of Butler, Mirabai, and Hadewijch, further into the realm of ethics. In their own times and in ours, Mirabai's and Hadewijch's practices of longing do not stay in the "vertical" realms between one woman and her God without also seeping into "horizontal," this-worldly spaces. Each woman's practices of longing offer clues for ways of living—what we can call a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment—that encourages desire for the flourishing of the world, without that passion consuming the world, the other, or the self.

Together we imagine how longing—in its erotic, renunciatory, relational, apophatic, dispossessive aspects—informs such a lived ethic, which holds space for the desires of others in an interrelated, fragile world. Recognizing passionate non-attachment as an interreligious value worth pursuing, we venture applications of this ethic in the service of a more just world. Moving beyond our study of the literary aesthetics and theological themes of Mirabai's and Hadewijch's words, we look to how their passionate longing and letting go might guide us in our lived realities.

Insights and Questions from Feminist Comparative Theology

Feminist comparative theologians, such as Michelle Voss Roberts and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, have argued that comparative theology must focus on lived realities; in other words, comparative theology must be both gendered and liberative.[5] In the case of Hindu-Christian comparative theology, the fraught history of colonialism in early comparative religion and comparative theology—what Raimon Panikkar calls the field's "loaded karma"[6]—makes this critique even more pressing. Despite and because of its colonialist history, comparative theology must not be afraid to press further into the realm of praxis and to risk constructive proposals that can help unravel insidious complicities still extant in the postcolonial world. Comparative theology's still important ethos of "patient deferral of issues of truth"[7] must be held in tension with theology's pursuit of justice for the marginalized.

Toward this dual vision of deferral and justice, Voss Roberts, in an important essay entitled "Gendering Comparative Theology," insists that comparative theology be utilized to explore issues of power and its marginalizing effects. Specifically, comparative theology needs to risk normative statements and may be uniquely positioned to:

> further consider what forms oppression takes in different settings, whether terms such as "oppression" and "patriarchy" apply across contexts, and who is permitted to name oppression. We can inquire how marginal subjects accommodate, survive, and resist hegemonies; and we can bear witness to the theological implications of their practices. From these vantage points we might further consider how the intersection of various identity markers (race, class, gender, sexuality) affects our ability to compare.[8]

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5. See their respective essays: Michelle Voss Roberts, "Gendering Comparative Theology," in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 129–149; and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, "Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation," in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 109–112.

6. Raimon Panikkar, "Foreword: The Ongoing Dialogue," in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. Harold Coward (New York: Orbits Books, 1989), ix.

7. Clooney, *Theology after Vedānta*, 187.

8. Voss Roberts, "Gendering Comparative Theology," in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 126.

Voss Roberts identifies ways that the multiple, cross-cultural, and interreligious perspectives cultivated in comparative theology interrogate and deconstruct oppressive power structures. From its multiply situated positionality, comparative theology is well placed to gain insights into oppressive power structures—boldly naming them while questioning its own potentially hegemonic epistemological categories. Guided by these insights, we may ask, as different permutations of passionate non-attachment have emerged in Hadewijch's and Mirabai's traditions, "What would a liberative vision of passionate non-attachment look like?"

As Tiemeier and Voss Roberts each point out, we cannot assume what is liberative for different communities. Tiemeier calls for an interreligious comparative investigation into the construction of "liberation." In other words, she argues, "liberation" cannot rest as an uncontested term in any theology, explicitly comparative or otherwise.[9] In a related way, Voss Roberts worries about the imperialistic importing of Western values in comparative theology. Because of this very real threat, comparative theologians in a postcolonial world must argue for the values that they represent rather than assume their universal appeal.[10] Comparative theology, I concur, is an ongoing conversation with diverse others that asks questions, listens, proposes tentative answers, and asks questions again. This book, a conversation among Mirabai, Hadewijch, and us, their readers, continues to unfold, as we help each other—through the resources of our diverse lived experiences and interdisciplinary knowledge—avoid the pitfalls of comparative theology.

Starting with Desire and Coming to Unknow

As we have explored the worlds of Hadewijch and Mirabai, we have seen how both women dynamically related to the world in passionate non-attachment. As a fluid approach to knowing, living, and imagining, a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment could never be contained in a dry set of ethical precepts. We need ways of knowing that take desire seriously and begin in the embodied lives of people.

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9. Tiemeier, "Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation," in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 129–130.

10. Michelle Voss Roberts, "Worldly Advaita? Limits and Possibilities for an Ecofriendly Nondualism," *Religious Studies Review* 34, no. 3 (2008): 142.

In their epistemologies that privilege Hindu and Christian concepts of desire, respectively, Friedhelm Hardy and Grace Jantzen propose two different ways of thinking about longing that deserve a closer look. Working with viraha bhakti as a starting point, Hardy interprets its pleasures and griefs as a resource for an ethics not based on propositions, but on communal emotional experiences. Delineating these ideas, he distinguishes between this emotional mode and what he calls a "typical Christian attitude," which would scorn the embodied griefs and pleasures of viraha bhakti through its focus on general ethical precepts for individuals.[11] Embracing instead the emotions encompassed in longing, Hardy emphasizes the shared aspects of grief and pleasure as bhaktas relate to each other in and through these emotions. In such communities born of and sustained by longing, bhaktas "produce" and "intensify" emotions together in dance, poetry, song, and music.[12] These emotions then inform the way they live together in the world—sharing, creating together, and hearing each other.

Neither does Jantzen suggest grounding ethics in precepts. Instead, in her work with eros, the abyss (*Abgrund*), and medieval Christian mystics, Jantzen proposes a lived ethic guided by the "erotic imagination":

> What I am after here is not some new set of grounds for ethical propositions (or indeed religious beliefs). What I am after is the way in which our erotic imagination configures our response to the *Abgrund*, acting not just as some kind of mental decoration but as a configuration of our behaviour and ethics.[13]

Here, sourcing medieval women such as Hadewijch, Jantzen utilizes the erotic imagination toward an epistemology that allows eros to pattern the way one lives in the world. From a sense of the power and possibility of eros, she suggests, one may respond to the "abyss," her term for a postmodern lacuna, without surrendering desire, creativity, or meaning-making.

Both Jantzen and Hardy thus affirm a crucial aspect of feminist ethics: the starting place remains the embodied, complex lives of persons

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11. Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 575.

12. Ibid.

13. Grace M. Jantzen, "Eros and the Abyss: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity," *Literature and Theology* 17, no. 3 (2003): 260.

in community. As Jantzen resources the Christian medieval mystical tradition and Hardy draws from the Hindu bhakti mystical tradition, they attempt to imagine, in different ways, epistemologies that take desire seriously. These ways of knowing powerfully describe how longing informs both Hadewijch's and Mirabai's every action. From Hadewijch's advising her fellow Beguines in the ways of Love to Mirabai's running off with the bhaktas, longing is *what* each woman knows and *how* each woman knows.

Yet we have also been exploring how Hadewijch's and Mirabai's longings lead not just to knowing but also to unknowing. Practices of dispossessive longing might be said to guide an apophatic epistemology of longing, one that recognizes unknowing as an important kind of knowledge. In an apophatic epistemology, Hardy's communal emotional experiences or Jantzen's erotic imagination may be said to come undone; that is, as longing opens out into non-attachment, these ways of knowing are prevented from slipping into an ethics of propositional foundationalism. Starting instead with the longing to which both Hadewijch and Mirabai point provides more reliable ethical footing.

A Love of Human (and Other) Beings

As we consider desirous, apophatic epistemologies inspired by Mirabai's and Hadewijch's passionate non-attachment, I am again cognizant of Kripal's argument that mystical texts need interdisciplinary resources to provide the means of ethical construction alongside mysticism's deconstructive energies. The "mystical," he argues, needs "reason, political theory, moral debate, and *a love of human beings*, not as ciphers for grand metaphysical realities . . . but as human beings in all their *mundane and messy glory*."[14] If we explore the dynamic through which Mirabai and Hadewijch find blissful union with the divine, while bracketing a "love of human beings," we will pervert the "mystical," he warns. Our focus on Mirabai's and Hadewijch's embodied practices of longing makes it harder to make this mistake; each cultivated a "love of human beings" along with a love for God. Here, not shying away from "messy and mundane glory," we also emphasize the importance of cultivating a love for other creatures, apart from the human, as well as a love for the imperiled world we

14. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*, 318 (italics mine).

all inhabit together. At this crucial moment when the flourishing of our planet's diversity, even its very survival, depends on our solidarity with the non-human, may we heed Mirabai's and Hadewijch's wise insistence that we are all connected in a vast matrix of interdependence.

Kripal argues that if the focus of study remains primarily on the achievement of moments of "grand metaphysical realities" where the divine and human come together, then the imperfect messiness and challenges of life together on earth become obscured. Put another way, the achievement of an exclusive coming-together of the individual soul with the divine—one vertical relationship—then takes precedence over and separates itself from the multiple and interconnected horizontal relationships that a devotee has in the quotidian, complex world.

Vertical relationships of exclusivity and interiority do not, I argue, predominate in the mysticisms of Hadewijch and Mirabai. In our readings, we have primarily focused our gaze not on what might be considered grand spiritual "successes"—that is, moments of consummate communion between God and the devotee—but on presence-in-absence, longing as dispossessive eros and grief, and the resulting vulnerabilities of interdependence. If one is focused only on moments of union, one misses the moments of in-betweenness where much of life takes place—the middle spaces of longing. Thus, we continue to ask what difference living in these spaces makes. By dwelling in the middle spaces, I suggest that Mirabai and Hadewijch reverse the logic of what can be considered perfection, completion, or success.[15]

In other words, linear progress toward a predefined goal does not describe Mirabai's or Hadewijch's journey; instead, attending to the various spaces between union and separation is their focus. Indeed, "mundane and messy" glory may be unexpectedly found in the ultimate unreachability of the other, even as grief and desire expose a necessary vulnerability of interconnection. In the recognition that neither the self nor the longed-for beloved can be said to contain the permanence, immutability, or substantiveness that is often craved, conditions are created in which both desire and non-attachment can flourish.

Hindu-Christian interreligious theology has strong precedent for the kind of decentering work to which Mirabai and Hadewijch call us. For example,

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15. For a groundbreaking argument that questions theological narratives of success, wholeness, perfection, and salvation, see Karen Bray, "Unredeemed: a political theology of affect, time, and worth" (PhD diss., Drew University, 2016).

Susan Abraham, toward a goal of a decentered postcolonial theology, suggests dialogical discourse in a "mode of ascesis of the ego." Naming this ascesis as a "spiritual practice," she attests to its value for producing knowledge that distances itself from the modes of mastery that are held in academic esteem.[16] Thatamanil, in a similar move, asks those working in religion and theology to reflect upon and detach from their conventional identities as academics, a technique inspired by the Advaitan discipline of giving up attachments to one's conventional identity.[17] While not explicitly intended as methodologies for comparative theology, both proposals espouse practices of non-attachment that are conducive to a more capacious scholarly identity, one attuned to the ethical resources of practices of passionate non-attachment.

An Ethic of Risk

The ethic that is emerging starts with desire that opens out into non-attachment through a cyclical dynamic of longing and letting go. This dynamic veritably pulses with the risk of failure; perhaps it even demands it. Facing squarely into the possibility of falling short, Sharon Welch calls for an "ethic of risk," which takes seriously the chance that our activism will not be successful, not today and not even in our lifetimes. We may not get that for which we long, and we may have to let go of timelines; but letting go does not mean letting go of love, of anger, and of resistance. She counsels:

> We need to learn that failure to develop the strength to remain angry, to continually love and therefore to resist, is to die. . . It is the death of the imagination, the death of caring, the death of the ability to love. For if we cease resisting, we lose the ability to imagine a world that is any different than that of the present; we lose the ability to imagine strategies of resistance and ways of sustaining each other in the long struggle for justice. We lose the ability to care, to love life in all its forms. We cannot numb our pain at the degradation of life without numbing our joy at its abundance.[18]

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16. Susan Abraham, "Postcolonial Approaches to Hindu-Christian Studies," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 21 (2008): 12.

17. John J. Thatamanil, "Managing Multiple Religious and Scholarly Identities: An Argument for a Theological Study of Hinduism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 4 (2000): 800.

18. Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsberg Fortress, 2000), 20.

Heeding her warning, we imagine practices of longing in which we let go of our expectations that things change according to our expectations. Neither a passive submission to evil nor a jaded complicity with oppressive powers, such an ethic of risk encourages our longings for justice and love, even when justice and love are slow to manifest in this world.

Continuing to Harvest the Comparative Fruit

To more fully explore how longing and letting go manifested in the paths of Mirabai and Hadewijch, we have crossed disciplinary boundaries, employing the resources of gender studies, mysticism studies, medieval history, and poststructuralist philosophy. We have predominantly interacted, however, with the theological resources of Mirabai and Hadewijch. This is not to say, of course, that the powerful forces we have seen in both women's writings—desire, grief, dispossession, longing, and vulnerability—present identically in Mirabai's sixteenth-century Northern India and Hadewijch's thirteenth-century lowland Europe. This book has thus examined the differences between two religious manifestations of the idea of passionate non-attachment.

At the same time, we have also found pivotal lines of convergence. Both Mirabai's and Hadewijch's longing allow desire to flourish with something like a built-in release valve, which dispossesses desire from a grasping greed that longs to consume the integrity of the other. Their paths of conscious and sustained lingering in the middle spaces of longing—their religious practices of desire—allow Mirabai and Hadewijch possibilities for mutual, nonpossessive relationships with the other, divine and otherwise. As longing grows, the reality, if not the details, of the complex and opaque relationships that make up the "self" can come into focus. Some of these ties may be sustaining, some may be destructive, and many are a complex mixture of both. In intimations of these connections revealed through dispossessive longing, interconnectedness becomes unveiled as a primary human condition. We dwell in the middle spaces, neither trapped in isolation nor subsumed by the other.

Decentering the Self toward Solidarity with Others

Through the intersections of Butler and our medieval mystics, we have been considering how our connections to others mysteriously constitute

what we often think of as the "self"; further, we see that these ties that constitute the "self" are not fully knowable. Using spatial metaphors, Butler has emphasized the importance of decentering the self: in grief or passion, one finds oneself "beside oneself."[19] Sometimes these trajectories make themselves boldly known: when we lose someone to death, grief may dramatically unveil some of the intricate interweavings that make up one's "self." In grief, one may feel lost and disoriented, on the one hand, but strangely held together by relationships of care and concern with others, on the other. As Hadewijch, Mirabai, and Butler show us in different ways, intimations of these connections, occurring in grief and desire, decenter conceptions of an autonomous self.

Passionate non-attachment may then read as letting go of attachments to one's own individualistic desires, so that desire may flow between the self and others. Selfhood is not destroyed in this process: the self drawn out of itself by longing is still tethered to itself but is liberated from attachments to the perceived stabilities of a former self. When we let go of our desire to control others and the world, we make space for others, who have their own powers to influence the world. In contrast, if we focus solely on our own desires, we cannot enjoy, or even clearly see, the diversity and beauty of the world. One instead makes of the other a tool for individual satisfaction or personal consumption,

Allowing the flourishing of the world can be understood as an unleashing of the powers of desire; and a decentering of the self, or a non-attachment to the self, paves the way for further expressions of desire. These practices of longing may result in a fuller recognition of the integral value and beauty of others. We thus help each other access the power and agency that we each have, and that we have—even more powerfully—in solidarity with each other.

Longing, we have seen, is not neediness, nor is it perpetual frustration or eternal dissatisfaction. Nourishing interconnectedness, our disciplined practices of longing embrace the complexities of life with its inevitable loves and griefs. While longing represents a deep hunger for wholeness and completion in a frighteningly uncertain world, desire nonetheless must pull back from its tendency to destroy the integrity of that for which it longs. In other words, energies of non-attachment are necessary to prevent desire from degrading into a greedy, destructive concupiscence.

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19. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

Hadewijch and Mirabai are not perfect on their paths. Each admits to wanting to grasp the totality of the other. Yet Hadewijch and Mirabai display what two specific, complex askeses of longing look like: each longs for the whole of the other before she realizes, not without some grief, both the futility and undesirability of such a goal. Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of longing do not ultimately abide such unilateral graspings toward possession. In longing's most intense moments, a letting go—a dispossession—protects desire from its shadow side—an egotistical myopia, where relationship becomes tragically truncated. By the power of dispossession, the all-too human urge to grasp can become transformed by grief and passion into something life-giving and connective.

As longing dispossesses the self and creates non-attachment, rigid boundaries around identity may loosen. Where there is less attachment to a separative self, a more commodious sense of relationality with others emerges, as well as more fluidity in the way aspects of personal identity get named and imaged. In the final sections, we will further consider how this integral relationship between desire and non-attachment might play out in the wider world outside of Hadewijch's Beguine community and Mirabai's bhakti circles.

Gender and Passionate Non-Attachment

Mysticism often allows for fluidity around the mystic's gender identities; we have seen such fluidity in both Hadewijch's and Mirabai's writings. Highlighting Hadewijch's work with gender, specifically the female-gendered Minne, Suydem describes how Hadewijch "plays with gendered frameworks, [and] savors erotic double meanings, gender confusion, and ambiguity" as she "continually blurs subject-object boundaries."[20] In her work on "queering the Beguines," Hollywood writes about the "linguistic transvestitism" that occurs in medieval Christian female and male writers.[21] We saw Hadewijch perform this transvestitism when she described herself as a male troubadour, for example.

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20. Mary A. Suydem, "Ever in Unrest: Translating Hadewijch of Antwerp's *Mengeldichten*," *Women's Studies* 28 (1999): 178.

21. Amy M. Hollywood, "Sexual Desire, Divine Desire; or, Queering the Beguines," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 123.

As we read Mirabai's songs, we also discussed bhakti's propensity for gender bending. In particular, we explored how men in the bhakti tradition may take on a female persona to sing of their love for God. In the hagiography and in her songs, Mirabai often acts in ways that are associated with men's roles in medieval Rajput society: making choices about whom to love, traveling on her own, taking a guru while insisting on her right to be taught, and choosing to focus on the divine directly rather than through established familial channels.

These destabilizations and inversions function to open up possibilities for resistance against traditional gender norms, ones oppressively undisclosive of gender and sexual diversity. Emphasizing these queered sites of resistance, Karma Lochre asserts, "By destabilizing gender and sexual categories that deeply structure mystical experience and religious devotion, queer mystical rapture offers a cultural site of resistance, opposition, or transgression for medieval women mystics."[22] These openings can provide new visions that can nourish our dreams of justice and our related work toward a better world.

Kripal similarly argues that mystical texts should be read as "semiotic openings to a more polymorphous erotic existence that would be impossible within the more orthodox parameters of the social register in questions."[23] Opening up liminal spaces where ideas can more freely exist might not represent concrete change toward gender and sexual justice; nonetheless, as Butler so powerfully argues, "One might wonder what use 'opening up possibilities' finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is 'impossible,' illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question."[24] Passionate non-attachment, too, may evoke doubt about its efficacy for social change; nevertheless, Hadewijch and Mirabai speak across the miles and centuries to tell us that these sites of queer resistance *can* exist and that they *do* make a difference.

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22. Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochris, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 194.

23. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*, 17.

24. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), viii.

Religious Identity and Passionate Non-Attachment

As Hadewijch and Mirabai engaged in their respective askeses of longing, their practices not only dispossessed rigid gender identities, but also performed a loosening of traditional religious identities. As illustrated by Mirabai's choice to live as an itinerant bhakta and by Hadewijch's choice to live as a Beguine, each embraced religious identities that were at odds with the dominant religious cultures of their times.

Many persons involved in the growing fields of interreligious dialogue and comparative theology, have also experienced expansions of religious identity. One's primary religious identity may become so decentered, that hyphenated, pluralistic understandings of religious identity better describe where one finds oneself. As such, the hyphen, such as the one in "Hindu-Christian," does more than just attach words: it also represents the tensile relationship between the terms "Hindu" and "Christian." The hyphen functions, Clooney suggests, to describe persons who participate in or belong to two or more religious traditions, and he envisions it marking persons for whom different religious pathways are deeply meaningful without asking them to choose either one exclusively.[25] For example, for one with a Hindu-Christian identity, the hyphen extends in both directions between "Hindu" and "Christian," which represents the mutual exchange of multidirectional currents and also prevents the collapsing of the traditions into each other. The hyphen, this tiny little punctuation mark, expresses a tremendous idea: desire brings the traditions together, as non-attachment sustains the interstitial space between them. Might practices of passionate non-attachment, then, with their possibilities for mutuality, vulnerability, and dispossessive relationality, lead to more spacious religious identities? Could they nurture and protect difference between and among traditions, even as they are brought together in relation?

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25. Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 160–161. See also Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), in which Clooney also has an essay, for an introduction to the concept of multiple religious belonging.

Practicing Comparative Theology and Passionate Non-Attachment

In this very book, we have endeavored both to practice the theory and to theorize the practice of a comparative theology of passionate non-attachment. My practices of reading, contemplating, comparing, and sharing Mirabai's and Hadewijch's texts of love-longing have helped me to enter into deep love-longing. At the same time, readers of this book have also had the opportunity to enter into love-longing. Through cultivated longing for the intersecting wisdoms of Mirabai and Hadewijch, we might find ourselves not holding so tightly to what might be "our tradition" and what might be the "other's tradition." In a demonstration of what is possible, we may have found ourselves living in the Hindu-Christian "hyphen," if only imperfectly and for a short time. In this kind of middle space, we can find empathy and solidarity with the religious other, as we find her in ourselves.

For the practice of comparative theology, dwelling in the middle spaces—in the hyphen—leaves us vulnerable to a compounding of longing. We have experienced Mirabai's love-longing, Hadewijch's love-longing, and maybe even our own. Clooney, one of the founders of comparative theology, writes that good comparativism shifts "from reading at a distance, with a professional control that correctly and necessarily prizes detachment, toward a submission to these texts, immersion finally in a double reading that makes us vulnerable to the realities of God and self as imagined by the authors."[26] He contrasts a methodology of distant control against a recommended doubling of desire, a technique consonant with our ethos of passionate non-attachment and vulnerability.

As we read Hadewijch and Mirabai together, these yearning women come into relationship with each other and also with us. Longing multiplies and deepens. By entering into the desire of the texts through the practices of a devoted reader, we perform textually a version of what Mirabai and Hadewijch performed devotionally: loving passionately, which arouses non-attachment, which may then circle back around again and again. Desiring Mirabai and Hadewijch to speak their truths, but never being able to capture their essences, we, as readers, are dispossessed into a space in which we are better capable of holding the texts lightly, without

26. Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis De Sales and Śri Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 22.

attempting to possess them for ourselves, an exclusive faith, or a certain scholarly tradition.

Longing and Letting Go (and Longing Again)

Some paths within both Hinduism and Christianity teach that desire should be solely satisfied in God, held lightly or even completely eradicated. Mirabai and Hadewijch, however, dive deeply into desire. Some religious traditions teach ways to cultivate non-attachment in an attempt to ameliorate the very real dangers desiring subjects are to both themselves and others; neither Hadewijch nor Mirabai conform to this path. If we pay attention to Mirabai's and Hadewijch's ways of knowing and seeing the world, we find that they point to passionate non-attachment: paths of attachment fueled by longing, yet sheltered from possession or consumption-based systems of desire by these very energies of longing, as they open up into letting go. An ethic of passionate non-attachment contains resources to protect the life-giving multiplicity of the world and the flowering of desire.

Non-attachment does not lead to a disconnection of each woman from her world; instead, the relational dispossessions that engender non-attachment underscore connectivity. When we examine Mirabai's songs through the dual lenses of her own viraha bhakti and of Hadewijch's noble unfaith, we see her love-longing for Krishna taking her *deeper* into the world. She does not become indifferent to the world but instead leaves her scripted, courtly life to face into the wider, unknown world. "[I]t's time to take my songs into the street," she sings.[27] Viraha bhakti is thus best understood not as an insular narrowing of Mirabai's world to a single point but as a comprehensive infusing of her broadening world with desire.

As we read Hadewijch through the double lenses of viraha bhakti and of noble unfaith, the widening of her world, born of longing, also comes into clearer focus. Minne does not send her deeply into a separative interiority, but dispossessing her of herself, She sends Hadewijch beyond herself. "Love makes me wander outside myself," Hadewijch confides.[28] Longing

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27. Mirabai, "barasāṃ rī badariyā savān rī," in Mirabai, *For Love of the Dark One: Songs of Mirabai*, trans. Andrew Schelling (Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, 1998), 26.

28. "Poems in Stanzas 6: Conquest of Love—at a Price," in Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 143, line 49.

in this key provides resources for a whole-hearted journey with others into places yet unknown.

Instead of denying our need for each other and our constitutive relationality with one another, what if we instead cultivate longing for the other? What if we are brave enough to let longing do its work? What if, instead of trying to preserve autonomy at all costs and denying our vulnerabilities, we practice longing? Not an easy practice, longing leaves us subject to the the risks of desire, namely, the concomitant grief and vulnerability that practices of longing beget. Temptation exists everywhere to eschew such practices. Because of a hunger for independence, a prideful denial of need, or a fear of the abyss, to name a few temptations, we may miss the opportunity to dwell desirously with one another.

Of course, there are other very real risks to practices of longing and letting go. The rhetoric of dispossession can prove especially dangerous to those who are most vulnerable in our society. In her latest book, Butler and her co-author, Athena Athanasiou, remind us that it is crucial to "understand the difference between precarity as an existential category that is presumed to be equally shared, and precarity as a condition of induced inequality and destitution."[29] Precarity's value can be co-opted to legitimize and create apathy about unjust societal structures, so even as we recognize the profundity of practices of longing and letting go, we condemn the induced vulnerability of the poor and oppressed.[30] Together we fight to dismantle the unjust power structures that create and sustain these enforced vulnerabilities.

From the standpoints of two different religious traditions, we have been unfolding the perils and promises of a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment, which uniquely shelters both deconstructive *and* constructive energies. As the cycles of desire and non-attachment unfold, a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment does the work of deconstruction and reconstruction in a recursive, interrelated unsaying and saying. Mirabai and Hadewijch invite us to long and to let go and to long again. These cyclic practices of longing and letting go embrace the complexity of life with its inevitable loves, griefs, and other entanglements.

This book has attempted to narrate historical yet still resonant instances of lives lived in passionate non-attachment. If it is true that we are, in

29. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 20.

30. Ibid., 5.

fact, constituted by each other, then through our readings of Hadewijch and Mirabai, we become related to their communities of longing, and are maybe even dispossessed by and with them. We find ourselves longing together in a chorus of related voices, brought together across the centuries and continents.

Our longing becomes communal power for remaking the world. Our fervent desire, loosed from its egotistical impulses, can topple hegemonic powers and foster solidarities for justice; and our letting go, coupled with our desire for a more just world, allows us wider, more interconnected perspectives. To return to the image of the Ganges, as we stand together at the edge of the river, may we see the promises and attenuate the dangers. May we long and let go.

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