

PASSIONATE NON-ATTACHMENT: PRACTICES OF LONGING IN
MIRABAI AND HADEWIJCH; A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DESIROUS MYSTICISM

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Division of Religion
Drew University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

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Ph.D. Dissertation by

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This dissertation explores and compares the energies of desire and non-attachment in the writings of Hadewijch, a thirteenth-century Christian Beguine, and Mirabai, a sixteenth-century Hindu *bhakta*. Through an examination of the relational power of their respective mystical poetics of longing, this dissertation invites interreligious meditation on the middle spaces of longing as a resource for an ethic of social justice. Passionate non-attachment thus surfaces as an interreligious value and practice in the service of a less oppressive world. Mirabai and Hadewijch are both read through the primary comparative framework of *viraha-bhakti*, a mystical eroticism from Mirabai's *Vaiṣṇava* Hindu tradition that fosters communal experiences of longing. Mirabai's songs of *viraha-bhakti* are conversely read through the lens of Hadewijch's concept of "noble unfaith," which will be construed as a particular version of passionate non-attachment. Reading back and forth across the traditions, the comparative currents move into the thematics of apophatic theological anthropology, comparative feminist ethics, and understandings of religiously plural identities. Judith Butler provides a philosophically resonant schema through which to consider how the mystics' desire, manifest in the grief of separation and the erotic bliss of near union, operates as a force of "dispossession" that creates the very conditions for non-attachment. Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of longing, read in terms of Butler's concept of dispossession, offer clues for a lived ethic that encourages desire for the

flourishing of the world, without that passion consuming the world, the other, or the self. Longing—in its vulnerable, relational, apophatic, dispossessive aspects—informs a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment, which holds space for the desires of others in an interrelated, fragile world. When configured as performative relationality and applied to the discipline of comparative theology, practices of longing decenter the self and allow for the emergence of dynamic, even plural, religious identities.

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For Greg

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Chapter One

Introduction to Passionate Non-Attachment

Blessed also are they that hunger and thirst without being filled.
—Joseph Sittler¹

“Passionate non-attachment,” as the characterization of a religious path, reads as paradox, if not an outright contradiction. When teaching a “world religions” class recently, I came across one textbook suggesting the division of religious traditions into “warm” and “cool” paths. The “warm” paths fanned the flames of desire and devotion, while those described as “cool” cultivated renunciation, or a letting go of worldly attachments. Passionately warm paths were thus juxtaposed with cool paths of asceticism and non-attachment. While this schema may hold some promise for an introductory understanding of diverse religious traditions, it may also encourage an unhelpful East-West dualism and occlude the intrareligious complexity contained within each of the “great world religions.” These intricacies were nowhere as clear as when as my class embarked on the study of the Hinduism, which Wendy Doniger has called—as though in answer to the above dualism of temperatures—a religion of both “fire and ice.”²

The numerous paths contained in the umbrella term “Hinduism” include multiple ways to rethink the intersections of desire and non-attachment. Imagery and stories surrounding Śiva, for example, have traditionally held together ascetic and erotic forces.³ He

¹ Joseph Sittler, *The Care of the Earth* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press,

² Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 82.

³ *Ibid.* See especially Section II “Asceticism and Eroticism in Early Indian Mythology.”

remains at once the ascetic meditator extraordinaire as well as the great lover to Parvati, with whom, in one particularly memorable session, he is said to have continuously made love for a thousand years. Elucidating the curious combination of his desire and renunciation, Doniger writes, “[E]ven 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.”⁴ As such, the forces of desire and ascetic discipline do not relate as oppositional energies; instead, she argues for a common opposite: “quiescence.”⁵ Those vigorously engaged in life, it is implied, cycle through and actively embrace both energies.

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 these aims, desire finds an obvious and important place, and non-attachment is traditionally recognized as an important part of the path to *mokṣa*. In addition, the four classic Hindu stages of life (*ashramas*)—those of student, householder, retiree, and renunciate—also demonstrate the importance of both passion and non-attachment in the pursuit of a full life. As the householder stage necessitates *kāma*, the last two stages call for non-attachment, when the adherent begins slowly, and then more fully, to let go of the trappings of worldly life.

In mythology and as codified in these schemas of orthodoxy, desire exists as a necessary good. Yet a number of prominent Indian philosophies find desire variously problematic. Buddhism 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*

⁴ Ibid., 254.

⁵ Ibid., 312.

Sūtras, prescribe a rigorous, eight-limbed asceticism and warn that following desires leads, in an endless, destructive cycle, to increased karmic debts. “Non-attachment (*vairagya*) is self-mastery;” the *Sūtras* teach, “it is freedom from desire for what is seen and heard.”⁶ Yoga, as classically understood, leads to the minimizing of attachments to desire through mastering the practice of increasingly subtle methods.

Rather than recommending specific ascetic practices, the *Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes a multi-faceted loving devotion toward the divine, but similarly teaches a cautionary attitude toward desire, one in which *attachment* to desire, not desire itself, needs uprooting. Holding a space for desire, the *Gita* develops the idea of *nishkamakarma*, or action without attachment, which involves letting go not of desire itself, but to desire for the results of actions.

Attempting to reconcile the tensions between desire and non-attachment, the *Gita* teaches how to attain liberation while living in the world of desire. If we stay with the above metaphors of temperature, this is a path of “warm” and “cool” energies together: loving actions in the world and impassioned desire for the divine in tandem with letting go of attachments to the fruits of desire.

The above sketch of the *Gita* represents one religious path that integrates warm and cool energies. This dissertation has been inspired and leavened by countless conversations with old and new friends, particularly those on *hatha* yoga and/or Christian activist paths, who also yearn to hold the energies of desire and non-attachment together more coherently. For example, *hatha* yoga has been traditionally understood as an ascetic wisdom that uses the body to transcend the body. But the modern yoga I learned in India and in the West also

⁶ Patañjali, *Yoga Sūtra* 1:15, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, in *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Society of Southern California, 1981), 27.

teaches methods for a soteriology of embodied life in community. Along with other serious yoga practitioners, I have wrestled with these sometimes conflicting ideas about the body and yoga's ultimate goal. While these tensions might be framed as modern values coming into conflict with ancient values, or as yet another example of the colonizing impulse of the West toward the East, differing ideas about the goals of yoga are not necessarily new. Scholars of yoga engage in debates concerning the meaning of the ultimate yogic state of *kaivalya* (separation, isolation). Does the "stilling of the changing states of the mind,"⁷ result in an integrative living liberation in which the world does not dissolve; or a does the "mind-boggling, mad, paradoxical dualism" of the *Yoga Sūtras* preclude such an embodied liberation?⁸ The contexts of twenty-first century yoga in the West, however, give these tensions new intensities. Today's western yogis, who tend to be female practitioners with jobs, families, and other worldly attachments, have embraced forms of practice that were once reserved for male sexual renunciates, or *brahmacharyas*. In the most practical way, such changes raise again the question: "Can a yogi, then, be both passionately involved in the world and also dedicated to yogic disciplines, which imply a "preliminary detachment from matter, emancipation with respect to the world"?⁹

⁷ 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.

⁸ For the former option, see Christopher Key Chapple, "Living Liberation in Sāṃkhya and Yoga," in *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, eds. Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 115-134. For the latter, see Lloyd W. Pfluger, "Dueling with Dualism: Revising the Paradox of Puruṣa and Prakṛti," in *Yoga: The Indian Tradition*, eds. Ian Whicher and David Carpenter (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 70-82, especially 74.

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 15.

In the Christian and interreligious religious activist circles in which I also orbit, questions about the relationship between desire and non-attachment are fervently asked as well, albeit in different permutations. Those desiring peace and justice in the world may wonder, “Is it possible to work passionately for change and not become exhausted by the demands of the work?” I have seen visionary activists become disillusioned as they struggle with the inevitable disappointments, delays, and complexities that come with such work. Some recommend practices of non-attachment as a remedy, but questions remain: For a religious activist, what is the place, if any, of such practices as meditation, contemplation, or yoga, which are usually thought to turn the devotee inward and away from the world? Does the fire of the desire for justice and social change dampen as a result of such practices?

Indeed, it is not only people on traditional spiritual paths who wrestle with the tensions between desire and non-attachment. Anyone who has deeply loved another knows the deepened vulnerability that passion creates in this tenuous world. The poet Mary Oliver gives voice to the inherent riskiness in what she calls the “three things” one must do in the world:

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.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mary Oliver, “In Blackwater Woods,” in *American Primitive* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1983), 82-3.

How, she asks, can one find courage to love in this world of loss? How can one find the strength to nurture these tenuous relationships on which one's own vulnerable, precarious life depends? How does one ever let such such integral and intense passions go? These questions and perspectives pave the way for this dissertation's comparative theological journey into passionate non-attachment.

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. Both practiced mystical paths of passionate non-attachment that led them deeper into the mysteries of love. Mirabai is widely thought to be have been a sixteenth century Rajasthani princess who wrote passionate songs of her desire for Krishna. Hadewijch, a thirteenth century Beguine from what would become Belgium, wrote poems, letters, and prose that tell of her longing to become Love (*Minne*) itself, to be "God with God."¹¹

It may seem odd and somewhat arbitrary to pluck out these two women from different times, places, and religious traditions to guide this project. Intriguing resonances between the two love mystics first inspired this pairing. When I first encountered Mirabai and Hadewijch, I became fascinated with their respective writings of full-bodied, sensuously imaged longing for divine love. Reading them separately and together, I realized that, in addition to the heat of each woman's desire, each also concurrently practiced an unconventionally ascetic path. Mira was a rare female itinerant, who left her home and family to live simply and sing songs of divine love, and Hadewijch was a leader in the early Beguine movement, one of the

¹¹ Hadewijch, "Letter 6: To Live Christ," *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Columba Hart, O. S. D. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), line 229, 61.

women who created a third way of uncloistered devoted service between the traditional women's options of marriage and the nunnery.

In addition to their uniquely gendered asceticism, another preliminary resonance between Hadewijch and Mirabai concerns their engaged mysticism, a term that contrasts 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 in the beauty and sufferings 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, intimate union with the divine. The resulting insular and ultimately individualistic spirituality stands in 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 *Minne*, but also a "horizontal connectivity" to her community of Beguines and the wider world. Mirabai's songs, too, evince a connectivity to the circle of other devotees singing their songs of shared longing for Krishna.

The paths of mystical longing taken by Mirabai and Hadewijch thus point to mysticisms that do not involve a wholesale and final turn away from the world; instead, their longings connect them back to the world in unique ways. Reading these women's writings together, I suggest, invites interreligious meditation on longing's connection to justice-centered practices of passionate non-attachment. The comparative theological reading offered in this dissertation thus explores the broadening relational power of their respective poetics of longing.

Comparative Methodology

To better read Mirabai and Hadewijch together, this dissertation utilizes the evolving methodologies of what Hugh Nicholson calls the “new” or “contemporary” comparative theology. Nicholson’s nomenclature differentiates this genre, which he traces to the late 1980’s, from the early nineteenth century subgenre of comparative theology that “epitomizes the universalist ideology that has since become so problematic.”¹² In contrast, the “new comparative theology” denotes work that “generally uses comparison to unsettle and complexify prevailing theological assumptions.”¹³ Understanding religious identity as “relational” rather than “substantialist,” 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.¹⁴

Even as it worked to complexify and unsettle universal theological assumptions, early iterations of the new comparative theology, such as works by James Fredericks and Francis X. Clooney, tended to defer making constructive or normative claims, claiming the need for a

¹² See Reid B. Lochlin and Hugh Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2010): 481.

¹³ Hugh Nicholson, “Comparative Theology after Liberalism,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 22 (2007): 244.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 241-2, 245. Nicholson utilizes Kathryn Tanner’s terms of “relational” and “substantialist” for his argument. See *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), ch. 3. for Tanner’s argument that interactions with other cultures constitute an integral part of theology’s task.

“patient deferral of issues of truth.”¹⁵ As the new comparative theology developed, a feminist critique emerged by comparative theologians, such as Michelle Voss Roberts and Tracey Sayuki Tiemeier, that called for risking normative statements in light of pressing justice concerns.¹⁶ This dissertation continues this ongoing work of holding together the twin aims of comparative theology: patient, careful, “deferred” theological construction and theology’s responsibility toward the marginalized.

Not unrelated to the above justice concerns, I also attend to postcolonial calls for epistemologies that do not subsume all thinking into Westernized, Christianized categories.¹⁷ Comparative Asianist Richard King has argued persuasively that to represent well the “polycentrism” of Hinduism, scholars need to work constructively with indigenous Indian ways of knowing, particularly those that existed before the advent of the Western academic discourse of religion.¹⁸ Attempting to heed King’s charge, I chose to begin reading

¹⁵ Comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney emphasizes the “patient deferral of issues of truth” in his early work. See *Theology after Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 187.

¹⁶ See Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier’s “Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation” and Michelle Voss Robert’s “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 109-12. These essays, as is noted above, were edited by Clooney, who has taken up a number of the volume’s concerns. For example, he engaged specifically with gender theory in *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ See Sharada Sugirtharajah, *Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2003), for a postcolonial exploration of the ways that “Hinduism” has been defined, interpreted, and created by Western academics in part to bolster Christianity and its colonialist interests.

¹⁸ Richard King, “Who Invented Hinduism?: Rethinking Religion in India,” in *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism*, eds. Esther Bloch, Marianne Kippers and Rajaram Hegde (New York: Routledge, 2010), 110.

Hadewijch and Mirabai together through the schema of *viraha-bhakti*, a mystical eroticism from Mirabai's *Vaiṣṇava* Hindu tradition that emphasizes communal experiences of longing. Comparative theological work does not best flow unidirectionally though; it crosses back and forth across the traditions compared. Therefore, I will be "cross-pollinating" Mirabai and Hadewijch, to use John J. Thatamanil's metaphor for the work of a multidirectional, transformative comparative theology.¹⁹ Cross-pollination has the potential to create something different from the compared elements—neither something entirely new nor wholly divorced from its roots, but something organically hybrid that answers theological questions in fresh ways. Desiring to deviate from the hegemony of typical Western epistemologies, I will first read Mirabai's songs and then Hadewijch's writings through the lens of *viraha-bhakti*, and then read back and across the traditions, cross-pollinating, as the currents move into the spaces of theological anthropology, feminist ethics, and understandings of religiously plural identity. Such an approach enriches the study of both Hadewijch and Mirabai, for it encourages a shifting focus on different aspects of each's longing, thus allowing new questions, ideas, and concerns to emerge as the traditions are juxtaposed.

I have decided to focus my comparison on a few of Hadewijch's and Mirabai's most yearning writings and songs, which I call "focus texts." While it would be impossible to attend to their full corpora within the confines of this dissertation, both Hadewijch and Mirabai also have bodies of work whose authorship is disputed. Some scholars, for example,

¹⁹ John J. Thatamanil coins the term and "cross-pollinates" Śaṅkara with Paul Tillich in *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 206.

propose a Hadewijch I, II, and even III.²⁰ In Mirabai’s case, her songs have multiplied over the centuries, even past the best dates we have for her life.²¹ In my use of focus texts, I am not claiming that these limited text selections from Mirabai and Hadewijch work as synecdoches for their larger bodies of work and all of their concomitant traditions. As I seek to show in upcoming chapters two and three, it remains impossible to know either Hadewijch’s or Mirabai’s biographies or bodies of work with any certainty and the themes of their work are many, varied, and complex. The focus texts, then, work to spotlight one theme—that of love-longing—which pervades the texts attributed to both women in varying ways and fosters the application of the lens of *viraha-bhakti* to this comparative theological endeavor.

***Bhakti* and Comparative Theology**

Going further into methodology, in this section I briefly point out the trajectory of *bhakti* scholarship in very general terms in order to give a fuller introduction to *bhakti*, specifically *viraha-bhakti*. Then, I highlight a few methodological challenges that the field of comparative theology has shared with *bhakti* studies to show how each field, like genres

²⁰ It is predominantly the latter third of Hadewijch’s *Mengeldichten* that leads some scholars to surmise more than one Hadewijch on the basis of these texts’ tone, “mystic content,” imagery, and vocabulary. See Saskia Murk-Jansen, *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch’s Mengeldichten* (Göppingen: 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. She finds it “unlikely” that *Mengeldichten* 25-29 are from Hadewijch’s hand (163-66).

²¹ See John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch. 4, for an introduction to the difficulties of locating the historical Mirabai.

across the spectrum of the humanities, have wrestled with the complexities of categorical essentialisms and particularities.

As early Indologists studying *bhakti* rushed to categorize the different streams of what it cobbled together as “Hinduism,” scholars employed the term “*bhakti*” both too narrowly and too widely. For example, in early *bhakti* studies, *bhakti* was often read narrowly as “devotion,” an emotional, spontaneous phenomenon, drastically different from paths that emphasized the intellect, philosophical contemplation, or rituals. In their quest to define the field, *bhakti* scholars missed many of the ways that Indian 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 “participation” and “committed engagement,” as Karen Pechilis aptly describes it. This committed engagement presupposes an active, multifaceted involvement with God, rather than the passive adoration signified by defining *bhakti* simply as “devotion.”²²

Pechilis also notes that early studies of *bhakti* missed the colorful differences between different kinds of *bhakti* because they did not focus on the *particularities* of disparate voices. Instead, she contends, these studies futilely strove to discover an all-encompassing definition of *bhakti* that could somehow span all of the voices and regions that *bhakti* encompassed.²³ In this way, the label “*bhakti*” was used too widely and missed the specific particularities that compose its full spectrum. In later studies, studies engaged more consciously with *bhakti* in its many historical, regionally specific contexts.

²² Karen Pechilis, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20-24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

As a discipline, comparative theology has undergone changes that—not accidentally—resonate with the oscillations in *bhakti* studies that shifted the field both too narrow and too wide. From its roots in such various sub-genres as the earlier “comparative theology,” early comparative religion, and “theology of religions,” comparative theology has struggled to locate its methodology between a too-wide search for universalist interreligious generalities and a narrow or reactive focus on difference that stymies constructive comparative theological work. The aforementioned and 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 incommensurability can paint such comparison as nonsensical.²⁴ This dissertation aims to explore what Mirabai and Hadewijch contribute to ways of knowing that simultaneously embrace erotic devotion and non-attachment; thus, it necessitates that bridges of comparison be built between unique aspects of different traditions.²⁵ Here, difference and commensurability do not contradict but strengthen each other; thus, this dissertation’s methodology advances its concrete project of comparing aspects of Hadewijch’s and Mirabai’s writings. In such a methodological third space, *viraha-bhakti*, translated as the “pain of separation,” or as “love-longing,”²⁶ may be

²⁴ The “particularist” schema is introduced in chapter four of Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 146-96.

²⁵ 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): 367-90, for an exploration of the impact of religious affect, even for “outsiders” of religious traditions. On page 389, he discusses interreligious learning that “creates living interconnections even while reason is busy pondering whether such affective exchange across religious boundaries is possible at all.”

²⁶ John A. Ramsaran, *English and Hindi Religious Poetry: An Analogical Study* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1973), 96.

compared fruitfully to Hadewijch's very different, yet resonant notion of love-longing. Supporting careful comparison, comparative theology has made a strong case that religious boundaries are ever-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.²⁷ Comparative theology, as it articulates these ever-shifting boundary spaces between religious paths, will best remain ever provisional and accountable to other religious traditions as it risks comparison.²⁸

Vital, then, to the comparative theology of this dissertation 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 I explore the tensions between desire and non-attachment, I look to the complex ways that both hot and cool energies play out in each of these traditions.

Feminist Eros and Non-Attachment

As noted above, I situate this project within a feminist framework, and as such, I endeavor to develop the ongoing work of feminist theologians on the theme of eros,

²⁷ See Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), for an introduction and brief history of comparative theology.

²⁸ See Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider, Introduction to *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*, eds. Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1, for their argument that a “responsible pluralism of interdependence and uncertainty now seems to facilitate deeper attention to ancient religious traditions as well as more robust engagement with serious critiques of religion.”

emphasizing its relational, embodied aspects. In feminist Christian theology, a strand of thought developed that claimed eros as a divine force of mutuality, beauty and goodness.²⁹ Retrieving such a relational eros from the dustbin of theology that had marginalized and occluded eros, feminist theological conceptions of eros did important work in their celebration of desire, embodiment and sexuality as divine energies.

Its great gifts notwithstanding, early experiments in feminist theological eros, some feminist scholars argued, had begun to function 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; hence, such a conception overburdened eros, expecting it to “include all true goods and conflict with none.”³⁰ This model in which a naturally pure eros remains free from the ambiguous fabric of the world presents a number of problems. For example, of Carter Heyward’s influential work with eros, Alyda Faber wrote that it makes negative experiences of relationality, suffering, and pain “less real than an essentialist eros.”³¹

Discussing this and other occlusions of a “too nice” feminist eros, L.J. Tessier asked:

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.³²

²⁹ See Carter Heyward’s *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989) as a prime example, as well as Mary Hunt’s *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroads, 1991) and Rita Nakashima Brock’s *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroads, 2000).

³⁰ Kathleen M. Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 47.

³¹ Alyda Faber, “Eros and Violence,” *Feminist Theology* 12, no. 3 (2004): 323.

As it occludes 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, but “if love is as strong as death,” Sands argues, “that is bad news as well as good news.”³³ Eros’ strength underscores its mixed, ambiguous nature, and the lens of *viraha-bhakti* that I employ to begin this comparative endeavor accentuates this understanding of eros. As *viraha-bhakti*’s primary dynamic involves the movement between divine presence and absence, Mirabai’s erotic love-longing involves not just goodness, mutuality, and beauty, but also puts intense grief, confusion, and separation into the mix, acknowledging the “bitter-sweetness of love-in separation.”³⁴

Any credible notion of feminist eros, then, must uphold eros’ embeddedness in the matrix of the world, as well as acknowledge eros’ tendency toward a grasping, totalizing concupiscence. Through her crucial insight that eros contains energies of non-attachment that can attenuate drives toward totalization, Wendy Farley serves as another inspiration for this dissertation. Coining the term “passionate detachment” to describe this dynamic, Farley’s eros, much informed by Platonic eros, 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

³² L. J. Tessier. *Dancing after the Whirlwind: Feminist Reflections on Sex, Denial, and Spiritual Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 74.

³³ Sands, 155.

³⁴ 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, U. K.: Curzon Press, 1994), 134.

anxiety.”³⁵ One experiences this decentering “passionate detachment” when one understands that everything does not revolve around oneself; thus, one can remain open to the beauty and suffering of others. While her understanding of eros is more nuanced than that of the early feminist theologians discussed above, she does, however, sometimes essentialize eros in her assertion that if eros is *true* eros, it does not try to possess the other.

This dissertation will build on Farley’s account of “passionate detachment” by looking comparatively at Hadewijch’s and Mirabai’s practices of what I call “passionate non-attachment.” I have chosen the term “non-attachment” over “detachment,” to avoid the disengaged, disconnected connotations of “detachment,” as well as to better locate the idea within the language of Asian religious traditions. As I contemplate Mirabai’s and Hadewijch’s different practices of desirous longing, I draw out 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 self bound in an illusory self-possession that walls it off from others. I propose that erotic longing, tempered by the dispossessive energies eros engenders, attenuates some of the problems of an essentialist eros. For example, the eros of longing accommodates and even necessitates grief. In this way, it does not “deny tragic loss and conflicts of incommensurable and fragile goods.”³⁶ As this dissertation progresses, I look to current possibilities for the cultivation of practices of longing that help keep dangers of concupiscence and totalization at bay.

³⁵ Wendy Farley, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 83.

³⁶ Faber, 327.

The Chapters

In the next five chapters, I explore Mirabai's and Hadewijch's intersections of desire and non-attachment both separately and together. Chapter two introduces Mirabai, as well as the primary comparative category of *viraha-bhakti*, whose central dynamic involves oscillating moments of presence and absence between the human and the divine. In the first comparative reading section, I examine some key Mirabai songs through the lens of *viraha-bhakti*. I draw attention not just to her celebrated devotion despite her ongoing sense of abandonment, but also to 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 thus viewed as a form of joy, a "delicious distress,"³⁷ and a deepening of devotion that the *virahiṇī*, or female devotee, experiences bodily in her devotion to her "Lord." 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, I emphasize Mirabai's depictions of herself as a married *yogi*, 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, particularly looking to practices of passionate non-attachment as dislocating, contradictory spaces that push against the status quo.

The focus then shifts to the passionate non-attachment of Hadewijch in chapter three. First, I attend to Hadewijch's themes of love-longing within her own context as a writer who

³⁷ David Dean Shulman, "Modes of Meaning and Experience: *viraha* and *viḷaiyāṭal*," *Parabola* 11, no. 3 (August 1986): 15.

combines the genres of Christian bridal mysticism and secular courtly love. In this way, she creates an uncommon vocabulary and set of tropes that are in 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, I delve into focus texts that display her unique concept of “noble unfaith,” her term that, I suggest, names a specific kind of passionate non-attachment, and I explore related mystically apophatic trajectories in her work as well. Next comes my first comparative reading, that of Hadewijch’s love-longing read through the lens of Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti*. Such a reading allows a fruitful exploration of Hadewijch’s own longing for *Minne* through the consideration of *viraha-bhakti* themes, such as transformative desire, charged absence, non-attachment, justice, and the cultivation of embodied longing.

The fourth chapter is the most explicitly comparative chapter in the dissertation. I persist in considering aspects of the integral relationship between desire and non-attachment, as seen through the lenses of both women’s longing. From two very different traditions, Hadewijch and Mirabai show the intertwinings of non-attachment and desire; yet, in the yearning seen in these women’s writings neither desire nor non-attachment is diminished or subordinated. Each is exposed as integrally necessary to the other’s continuous flourishing. Next, Mirabai’s songs of *viraha-bhakti* are read through the lens of Hadewijch’s apophatically-tinged longing for Love. In the spirit of what Arvind Sharma calls “reciprocal illumination,” aspects of longing, such as communal longing, middle spaces of mutual longing, and practices of longing are compared. 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.³⁸

Through mutual illumination, comparisons of Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of longings sometimes reveal resonances where there seemed to be none, or differences where there appeared to be consonances.

As we move into chapter five, I begin by noting an important resonance found thus far. As Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of longing heighten their senses of vulnerability in unique ways, their longings can be said, to use the language of Judith Butler, to "dispossess" their senses of self. Linger here, I wonder, as I read both Mirabai and Hadewijch through the lens of the recent writings of Butler, what might result by "staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself"?³⁹ Butler provides a philosophically resonant schema to 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 an unknowingness about the constitution of the self, I explore how Hadewijch's and Mirabai's desires and griefs evidence the ways in which we are, in Butler's words, "undone by each other."⁴⁰ The desirous and grieving components of Hadewijch's and Mirabai's longing thus provide openings into an exploration of an ethically-tinged "apophatic

³⁸ Arvind Sharma, *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2006), 19.

³⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

anthropology” of dispossessed and dispossessing relational selves, who remain vulnerable, each to the other.⁴¹

Finally, in the sixth and last chapter, the conversation quite naturally advances into a comparative theological ethics, as I imagine how practices of passionate non-attachment might engender a reorientation to relational eros. Reaping the fruit of the comparative work, I argue for a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment and explore how we might relate to others in a spirit of passionate non-attachment. For example, do practices of passionate non-attachment, informed and inspired by those of Hadewijch and Mirabai, 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 be applied to the methods of this dissertation, that is, to comparative theology? Method and content converge here, as passionate non-attachment performs its deconstructive and reconstructive movements on the practices of comparative theology itself.

Toward the application of such a possible unity of opposites, a *coincidencia oppositorum*, we read Hadewijch’s love-longing through the lens of Mirabai and Mirabai’s love-longing through the lens of Hadewijch. These cross-fertilizing readings allow a doubling of desire, setting the stage for non-attachments to emerge as we desire to unfold the

⁴¹ “Apophatic anthropology” is a term I borrow from Kathryn Tanner’s “In the Image of the Invisible,” in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation and Relationality*, eds. Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel, 117-135 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). Others who have recently used 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 *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, eds. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, 59-75 (New York: Fordham Press, 2009).

mysteries of passionate non-attachment in these specific Hindu and Christian permutations. Inviting Mirabai and Hadewijch as guides for the journey, we will now contemplate their respective practices of passionate non-attachment.

Chapter 2

Mirabai's *Viraha-Bhakti* and Passionate Non-Attachment

Listen, my friend, this road is the heart opening,
Kissing his feet, resistance broken, tears all night.
—Mirabai⁴²

Legend has it that the passionate poet-princess Mirabai moved from a cloistered palace into the streets, where she joined a community of fellow devotional singers in an itinerant life. Dispossessed from her home and family, she traveled out into the world singing and dancing for Krishna, whose name can be translated as both “one who attracts” and “to drag, to give pain.”⁴³ Consonant with this etymology, Mirabai’s songs portray her as a lover who grapples with desire for the seductive divine, as well as with the pain that accompanies this longing. In this chapter, I delve into Mirabai’s excruciating, exquisite expressions of longing—what David Dean Shulman calls “delicious distress”⁴⁴—that fuel both her erotic love relationship with Krishna and a non-attachment to self, the divine, and the narrower world she once knew. To gain insight into the texture of this longing, I will first read Mirabai through the lens of the *viraha-bhakti* of her own Hindu *Kṛiṣṇaite* context. *Bhakti*, as noted in the introductory chapter, is best translated as “participation,” which speaks to the

⁴² Mirabai, “The Heat of Midnight Tears,” in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, trans. Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 64. I use a number of translations of Mirabai in this dissertation, but in the final publication of this manuscript, I will include my own translations of important verses.

⁴³ In Monier-Williams’ Sanskrit dictionary, *kr.s.* has the meaning of 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*, Reprint (Delhi: Motilil Banarsidass, 2005), 306.

⁴⁴ Shulman, “Modes of Meaning and Experience: *viraha* and *viḷaiyāṭal*,” 15.

participation of the author of the songs, of her or his listeners, and of the longed-for divinity in a shared life. More specifically, the category of *viraha-bhakti*, participation in “love-in-separation”⁴⁵ or love-longing, will be employed as an interpretive lens for Mirabai’s songs.

Paraśurām Caturvedī’s important collection of Mirabai’s songs in Hindi categorizes a portion of Mirabai’s work as songs of *viraha*, but *viraha* makes itself felt throughout the corpus of Mirabai’s work.⁴⁶ While the category first came from South India, Mirabai’s northern desert home in Rajasthan may have contributed an even more intense register to her adoption of *viraha*. Stretching for hundreds of miles, the often harsh landscape made traveling extremely difficult and created almost inevitable separation between loved ones. The desert thus contributes to a “culture of separation” that infuses her writings.⁴⁷ In Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti* tradition, tension exists between the desire for an experience of ultimate unity and the desire to experience the fruits of *viraha-bhakti*, the “bitter-sweetness of love-in-separation.”⁴⁸ Participants experience a communal sense of both the difficulties of separation and the fulfilling bliss of presence-in-absence that longing reveals.

Before exploring a number of Mirabai’s songs in their context of *viraha-bhakti*, I will first examine some of the ambiguities surrounding her songs and life. These ambiguities occasion the positing of what Mirabai scholar Nancy Martin calls “multiple Mirabai’s.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Green, 134.

⁴⁶ See *Mirabai ki Padavali* (Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1973).

⁴⁷ Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 569.

⁴⁸ Green, 134.

⁴⁹ Nancy Martin-Kershaw, “Dyed in the Color of Her Lord: Multiple Representations of the Mirabai Tradition,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 1996), 15.

Utilizing this schema of “multiple Mirabai’s,” 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,”⁵⁰ the concept of “multiple Mirabai’s” helps accommodate the paradox that Mirabai describes, a yogic ascetic embroiled in a passionate 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 Mirabai’s,” Martin supplies a helpful schema for conceiving of the variety of stories about and songs attributed to Mirabai. She proposes thinking about “multiple Mirabai’s” 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 colonial and post-colonial periods, and (3) songs of past and present low-caste singers of northern India.⁵¹ Located within these various genres, the multiple and still-multiplying songs and stories of Mirabai weave together to form a tapestry that, while sometimes clashing in its colors and textures, abides the expression of a multitude of Mirabai’s.

⁵⁰ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 117,” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 139.

⁵¹ Martin-Kershaw, 24.

The Apophatic Spaces of Mirabai's Multiple, Shifting Identities

The lack of either an authoritative written record of Mirabai's life or a historically verified corpus of her songs has sometimes proved a challenge for academic study; nonetheless, the multitude of voices clamoring 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 someday, but as opportunities to explore what it means theologically for Mirabai's life and songs to be created, recreated, and sustained by a collective of voices.

Mirabai's songs reach across the centuries and the continents to form this collective. In India, her memory has been kept alive not just through songs by and stories about her, but also through movies, recordings, and a comic book.⁵² Today, many Westerners with globally-minded spiritual predilections gravitate 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 called "Mirabai Books" on my way to get coffee.⁵³ Unfortunately for my research, this bookstore stocked only two books on Mirabai, both of which I already owned. Querying the proprietor about Mirabai, I was told a story that painted her as a mystically-inclined, wandering, rule-breaking, independent woman. Calling a bookstore with only two books on

⁵² John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer cite ten movies made about Mirabai in India, as well as numerous popular recordings of her songs in *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 139. In the chapter "The Saints Subdued" in *Three Bhakti Voices*, 139-164, Hawley offers reflections on the Mirabai comic book published by *Amar Chitra Katha*.

⁵³ I drafted this chapter in Woodstock in part because of my previous discovery of the bookstore, a concurrent *kirtan* session at the town's yoga studio by a "Mira," and cheap lodging made possible by damage done to my partner's car by a local innkeeper (long story)!

Mirabai (but dozens of vegetarian cookbooks and yoga primers) “Mirabai Books” may well function as a metonym for their desired spiritually-seeking, globally-minded, aging-hippy, feminist customers. This Mirabai ranks as yet another Mirabai, one falling outside of Martin-Kershaw’s three diverse categories.

In India, as Martin-Kershaw describes, Mirabai is multiple indeed. For example, Lindsay Harlan’s ethnographic work notes that Mirabai is understood in modern northern India as “daughter, a wife, a widow, a *bhakta*, an adultress, a dancer, an ascetic, and, in some sense, a *satī*.”⁵⁴ How is it possible that she is all of these things, some of which contradict each other? Because so little can be known for certain about her life and her songs, we might say that an apophatic space exists at the heart of the Mirabai tradition. Such a space 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 intriguing topics and identities 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) concepts of divinity, for example. As Harlan further elaborates, Mirabai crosses the *pardā*, or separative curtain governing gendered social relations in Mirabai’s world, from female space to male space, and from private space to public space.⁵⁵ Her hagiographic identity shifts as

⁵⁴ Lindsay Harlan and Paul B. Courtright, “Introduction: On Hindu Marriage and Its Margins,” in *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religions and Culture*, eds. Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16.

⁵⁵ Lindsay Harlan, “Abandoning Shame: Mīrā and the Margins of Marriage,” in *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religions and Culture*, eds. Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 207. Here,

her selves are said and unsaid: She is a widow but not a widow and a wife but not a wife. She is an ascetic and an adulterous lover of God. She practices non-attachment and she passionately yearns.

To illustrate these shifting hagiographies, let us look at how the story of Mirabai in Nābhādās' *Bhaktamāl*, the earliest source to give an account of Mirabai's life, has been interpreted by modern Rajput women, the clan to which Mirabai is said to have belonged. The *Bhaktamāl*, which translates as "Garland of Devotees," is a seventeenth century text that enumerates in short verses the lives of numerous Indian saints. In its praise of Mirabai, the *Bhaktamāl* sets up a contrast between the expectations of a woman such as Mirabai in the sixteenth century and her actions. I quote it at length to underscore the power of Mirabai's fearless, shameless devotion to Krishna:

Mira unraveled the fetters of family;
 she sundered the chain 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

Harlan also discusses the recent loosening of *pardā* restrictions that separate male and female domains for modern Rajput women.

of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.⁵⁶

As the story goes,⁵⁷ Mirabai considered Krishna her husband and “unraveled the fetters of family,” who insisted on her living a traditional marital life of devotion to the prince she married.⁵⁸ The *Bhaktamāl* insists that shame did not result from traditionally shameful choices, however. She sang fearlessly, boldly “beat love’s drum,” and proudly devoted herself to the Lord she imaged as lover. In these ways, she “sundered the chains of shame.”

In an effort to understand how modern Rajput women understand Mirabai’s complexities, Harlan conducted interviews in which she invited women to discuss their opinions about Mirabai.⁵⁹ Many of the women pointed out that Mirabai is admirable even if she cannot be a *pativrāt*, a devoted and chaste wife, to her human husband. Even in this unfaithful state toward her human husband, they continue, she remains a *pativrāt* to Krishna. By connecting the *pativrāt* status to Krishna, the women uphold their culture’s ideal of marriage on a transcendent level. In this way, they link socially sanctioned marriage to the countercultural shedding of family life. In this schema then, Mirabai is God’s wife, rather than a man’s wife. Therefore, acting as a wife to God, she can leave her family without shame.⁶⁰ This example provides a glimpse into how one group of women make sense of

⁵⁶ Nābhādās, *Śrī Bhaktamāl*, with the *Bhaktirasabodhinī Commentary of Priyādas* (Lucknow: Tejkumār Press, 1969), 712-13, quoted in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 123.

⁵⁷ These verses in the *Bhaktamāl* were famously expanded upon in Priyādas’ influential commentary in the next century. See Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 21-3, for a discussion of his hagiography of Mirabai.

⁵⁹ Harlan, 204.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

“multiple Mirabai’s.” Harlan shows that for these 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.”⁶¹

The “truth” about Mirabai’s life remains impossible to isolate. Discussing the way different groups have created different Mirabai’s, Martin explains, “Mira’s story has clearly become a second-order language to speak about things other the life of a saint from the past.”⁶² The inexpugible ambiguity may be seen as gift, since isolating any one story and calling it the truth domesticates the excess of longing at the heart of Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti*. In the next section, I will examine Mirabai’s multiple selves and songs in light of their *bhakti* context as performed, communal songs.

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

Mira says Dark One,
I’ve waited,
it’s time to take my songs
into the street.
—Mirabai⁶³

While Mirabai has made inroads into public consciousness in the West through published collections of her poetry and her inclusion in anthropologies of women’s and mystical poetry, in India she has flourished in part through devotional songs, which are still sung all over the country, especially in northern Indian communities. Describing how *bhakti*

⁶¹ Ibid., 213.

⁶² Martin-Kershaw, 176.

⁶³ Mirabai, “*barasām rī badariyā savān rī*,” in *For Love of the Dark One: Songs of Mirabai*, trans. Andrew Schelling (Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, 1998), 26.

songs come alive in performance, K. Ayyapa Paniker argues that the songs are re-created each time they are performed, not only by the lyrics, but also by the rhythm, music, and body language of the performers. In this way, the songs continually get deconstructed and reconstructed each time they are performed by different participants in different ways, and the songs never achieve their final meanings.⁶⁴

In her work examining the appropriation of Mirabai's legacy and work by different groups in India and beyond, Parita Mukta has documented and theorized the centuries-old tradition of performing Mirabai songs by the subordinated classes of Saurashtra and Rajasthan, two northwestern regions of India. Toward the flourishing of ever-evolving and always-deferred performative communal meanings, 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 justice and truncate their potential power to transform subaltern communities. Elaborating upon 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 the contemporary period (through textbooks on Hindi literature, etc.) out of their context of a devotional gathering."⁶⁵ In the circle of *bhaktas*, as the 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

⁶⁴ K. Ayyapa Paniker, Introduction to *Indian Medieval Literature, Volume 1* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997), xxix.

⁶⁵ Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 29.

through their singing.”⁶⁶ As marginalized *bhaktas* merge with the poet-princess lover of Krishna, Mirabai becomes 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 coming-together of the singer and the subject of the song, “an entering into the other’s nature and it entails living the presence of the subject of the *bhajan*.”⁶⁷ Because the only primary characters in most of Mirabai’s songs are she and Krishna, singers are thus assured a position of subjectivity with Mirabai, as well as intimacy with Krishna.

Norman Cutler’s work on the rhetoric of *bhakti* fleshes out a similar concept of merging, or what he calls “communion.”⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹ In songs of *viraha-bhakti*, longing leads to a loosening of the boundaries between the divine and the human. In these multiple mergings among God, singers, and writers, the transformative power of Mirabai’s *bhakti* comes into focus: authorship widens, gods become

⁶⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁸ See Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 51-58, for his work on the rhetoric of the Tamil *bhakti* poets. His conclusions about the rhetoric of *bhakti* are also relevant to the later northern *bhaktas*, such as Mirabai.

⁶⁹ Cutler, 51.

human, humans become gods, and each *bhakta* finds herself constitually interrelated with the other *bhaktas*.

I build on these readings to stress further that individualized readings of Mirabai decontextualize the relational powers of Mirabai's *bhakti* and foreclose upon the performative, relational genre of her songs and its power in the lives of oppressed, particularly low-caste women. Mirabai's songs are "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."⁷⁰ Thinking with Sangari, I suggest that the term "multiple Mirabai's" may not just describe the wide variety of Mirabai's that exist in story and song, but also the critical importance of the communal, as *bhaktas* continue to inhabit together this "mode of social perception" in the beauty and pain of love-in-separation. Mirabai's songs stretch beyond the individual in another related way as well—through her embrace of *kāma*, or desire, which connects her to divinity and other devotees. In the next section, I look at how *kāma* suffuses and colors her *viraha-bhakti*.

Mirabai's *Kāma* and *Bhakti*

Come to my bedroom,
I've scattered fresh buds on the couch,
Perfumed my body.

—Mirabai⁷¹

⁷⁰ Kumkum Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti," *Economic and Political Weekly* (7-14 July): 1466.

⁷¹ Mirabai, "mhāre dere ājyo," in *For Love of the Dark One*, trans. Schelling, 4.

Mirabai's songs speak of her love-longing in erotic terms. The above verses serve as a vivid example of the *kāma* saturating her songs. Many 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 bodily desire.⁷² Nevertheless, A. J. Alston, who translated Caturvedī's esteemed Mirabai anthology from Hindi to English in 1980, claims that "there is no erotic element in her poetry whatever,"⁷³ even as he translates lines, such as:

If You are now making love to another
Why did you make love to me first?⁷⁴

Philosopher R. Raj Singh concurs with Alston, "Mira's poems are distinctly devotional without any element of eroticism."⁷⁵ Arguing that it is pain, not erotic love, that seizes Mirabai, he asserts that her *marital* love for Krishna differs from the erotic love depicted by the famed *Kṛiṣṇaite bhakti* writers Jayadeva, Vidyāpati, and Caṇḍidāsa. These writers lionize not the previously mentioned wifely love (*pativrāt*) but the illicit love (*parakiyā*) epitomized by the *gopīs*, the famous cowherding devotees of Krishna.⁷⁶ For

⁷² Mirabai, "rāg devagāndhār," in *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours*, trans. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 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 and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 202, for more about Mirabai's manuscripts and the difficulties of locating the historical Mirabai.

⁷³ A.J. Alston, Introduction to *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, ed. and trans. A. J. Alston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), 19.

⁷⁴ Mirabai, "Caturvedī's Pada 80," in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. A. J. Alston (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), 67.

⁷⁵ R. Raj Singh, *Bhakti and Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 151.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

Singh, no eroticism exists in Mirabai's songs because Krishna is portrayed as Mirabai's husband. She fits into a devotional paradigm rather than an erotic one, he argues.⁷⁷

To be sure, more overtly sexual *bhakti* texts than Mirabai's songs exist; however, it remains difficult to maintain that when Mirabai presents herself to Krishna as "life after life, a virginal harvest for you to reap,"⁷⁸ 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 paradigm does not preclude the undeniably erotic elements in her songs. For example, in one of the four focus songs that I 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 love 'em and leave 'em style as "he plucks your flower . . . then pulls on his robe and is gone."⁷⁹

Such an erotic devotion has roots in the wider umbrella of Krishna *bhakti*, which, as Friedhelm Hardy explains, evolved as an "aesthetic-erotic-ecstatic mysticism of separation."⁸⁰ Mirabai's songs of *viraha-bhakti* fit well Hardy's description. For instance, she writes:

I go to the house of my one true Lover, the lifter of Mountains
 When I see his beauty I only crave him more.
 At dusk I go to him, at dawn I return
 Whatever his pleasure, day and night I am his.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Mirabai, "Caturvedī's Pada 51," in *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours*, trans. Hawley, 126.

⁷⁹ Mirabai, "jogiyāri prītarī," in *For Love of the Dark One*, trans. Schelling, 45.

⁸⁰ Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti*, 573.

The desire that she and Krishna experience for one another is bold, obvious, and—whether she and Krishna are portrayed as married or not—aesthetic, ecstatic, *and* erotic in its mutual desire.

Of course, it remains likely that these denials of eroticism in Mirabai’s songs have more than a little something to do with her gender. For example, male *bhakti* writers also use erotic devotional imagery to express their love-longing for the divine, but critics and translators do not disavow the eroticism in their verses. Male *bhaktas* sometimes use a female point of view as a literary convention to amplify the difference and distance between the male Krishna and the archetypically feminine *bhakta*.⁸² Taking on the voice of a woman, male writers create female narrators who yearn for Krishna as the writers imagine a human woman yearns for her male beloved. For example, Sūrdās, another *saguṇa bhakta*, creates the voice of a *gopī*:

Last night, in fact, that cowherd came to my house:

He laughed his laugh and grasped me by the arm.⁸³

Significantly, Mirabai is one of the few *bhakti* writers who actually *is* a woman.

Indeed, a male equivalent for one who longs in *viraha-bhakti*, the female-gendered *virahiṇī*, does not exist in Sanskrit.

Because of Mirabai’s gender, her biography and songs inevitably become linked; that is, the narrative voice of a song attributed to Mirabai often conflates to that of Mirabai

⁸¹ Mirabai, “Mira the Slave,” in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, trans. Bly and Hirshfield, 47.

⁸² Hawley and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 119-20.

⁸³ Sūrdās, “Pada 3886,” *Sūrsāgar*, eds. Ratnākar, Jagannāthdās, Nandadulāre Vājpeyī, et al., 2 vols. (Varanasi, India: Kāśī Nāgarīpracārīṇī Sabhā, 1948), quoted and translated in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 109.

herself, rather than being understood as the voice of a constructed narrator. Concerns then 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 eroticism and Mirabai.

The claim that her *bhakti* is 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* pathway. Accordingly, the *Sūtras* display the tensions within *bhakti* between *kāma* and renunciation. Even as some *sūtras* advocate loving God as the *gopīs* of Braj loved Krishna; that is, with immense *kāma* and longing, the seventh sutra avers, "Because [bhakti] is of the nature of renunciation there is no element of desire in that Love Divine."⁸⁴ How then 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 the *sūtra*?

In Indian religious tradition generally, *kāma* is an ambiguous energy.⁸⁵ It is a force that leads to karmic debt and bondage, and also an energy that leads to liberation. In *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣads*, *kāma* is portrayed both as a worldly, distracting love and as the

⁸⁴ Swami Chinmayananda. *Love Divine: Narada Bhakti Sutra* (Bombay: Chinmaya Publication Trust, 1970), 14.

⁸⁵ *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's *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* and Monier-Williams' *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*.

love of the divine soul, argues Madeline Biardeau.⁸⁶ In the much later *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a similar paradox exists: the *gopīs*, “discarded all desires for his sake,” but yet they also achieved liberation though their *kāma* for Krishna, Graham Schweig contends.⁸⁷

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, *kāma* is also used polyvalently. For example, *kāma* is used to describe a state where the soul is in bondage to the phenomenal world. But then Krishna says in the seventh chapter directly, “I am *kāma*.”⁸⁸ In this straightforward admission, *kāma* becomes associated with the very nature of the divine.⁸⁹ Thus, multiple important precedents that do not equate *kāma* solely with egoistic love exist in these important texts. *Kāma* may therefore be understood as a term with essential relevance to divine love, and, I suggest, to the practices of *viraha-bhakti* that entangle divinity and humanity together. Illustrating such a bond, when 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,”⁹⁰ *kāma* leads to a mixing of divine and human, an interfluidity of the two.

The above imagery also emphasizes the role of the body in *viraha-bhakti*. Discussing the importance of bodily language in *viraha-bhakti*, Hardy writes that “[bodily images]

⁸⁶ Madeline Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 87.

⁸⁷ Graham Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love: India's Classic Sacred Love Story; The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), 170. Quoted is his translation of *Rāsa Līlā* 1.30, part of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

⁸⁸ *Bhagavad Gita* 7.12

⁸⁹ See Schweig's further discussion of *kāma* and the *Bhagavad Gita* in *Dance of Divine Love*, 171.

⁹⁰ Mirabai, “The Long Drought Is Over,” in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, trans. Bly and Hirshfield, 50.

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.”⁹¹ While *bhakti* generally values the body for its role in communions with the divine and other *bhaktas*, *viraha-bhakti* validates the bodily manifestations of longing inherent in human life.⁹² Rather than serving as an intermediate step on the path to ultimate spiritual fulfillment, the yearning of *viraha-bhakti* constitutes mystical union itself as it exists in the flesh and blood of embodiment.

In light of Mirabai’s vivid imagery of erotic abandon, what then can be made of the above verse from the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*, “Because [*bhakti*] is of the nature of renunciation there is no element of desire in that Love Divine”? Mirabai is multiple: sometime she opens everything to Krishna in ecstasy, but in other verses, Mirabai sings of renunciation:

I have sacrificed my life
Unto the beautiful Shyām.⁹³

Moreover, in some of her songs, themes of renunciation are mixed with *kāma*, creating vignettes of passionate non-attachment. For example, in the following excerpt, Mirabai speaks of a dual practice of fasting and lovemaking:

⁹¹ Hardy, 443.

⁹² Karen Pechilis comments on the positive role of the body in *bhakti*, specifically *bhakti*’s theory of 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.” “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,” Nov. 16-19, Chicago 2012), 1.

⁹³ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s Pada 94,” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 72.

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.⁹⁴

Delving into such explicit spaces of passionate non-attachment, in the next section I take a closer look at two other songs in which Mirabai appears in some combination of desire and renunciation. In the first song, Mira pivots between her willingness to marry or renounce, as symbolized by the options to “color [her] sari red” and “wear the godly yellow garb.”⁹⁵ In the second song, Mira writes in grief born of passion of her choices to take off her jewelry, cut her hair, and wear holy clothing. This list of acts connotes three potentially overlapping situations: widowhood, preparation for *sati* (widow-burning), and asceticism. Reading these two songs through the lens of *viraha-bhakti*, which can accommodate these paradoxes, I will further explore these collisions of Mira’s erotic and ascetic energies.

Mirabai as Erotic Ascetic in *Padas* 17 and 153

As the songs alluded to above disclose, Mirabai expresses her desire for renunciation in tandem with her desire for an erotic partnership with Krishna. John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer suggest that these conflicting drives, those of being a wandering ascetic *and* a passionate partner, compel her to devise a “new institution to answer her urges,” that of

⁹⁴ Mirabai, “Why Mira Can’t Go Back to Her Own House,” in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, trans. Bly and Hirshfield, 21.

⁹⁵ Mirabai, Caturvedī’s *Pada* 153,” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 138.

the *yogic marriage*.⁹⁶ 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 Pārvaṭī and Śiva.”⁹⁷ In these songs, Mirabai writes of living in states of asceticism and devoted desire for Krishna simultaneously.

In this first song, the vulnerability that accompanies *viraha-bhakti* leads her to invent new ways of living as a “yogi-wife.”

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.⁹⁸

Yearning for communion with Krishna, Mirabai writes concurrently of marriage, imaged by the red sari and pearls, and renunciation, connoted by the saffron robe and wild hair.

Mirabai’s anaphoric list of ways to love Krishna does not seem to preclude her doing more than one of these options simultaneously. As per the imagery of this poem, one can envision her with untamed hair bejeweled and a bride’s markings. As in the previously quoted song, when she wears a *yogi*’s meditation beads and a married woman’s forehead markings, she

⁹⁶ Hawley and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 133.

⁹⁷ Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 123.

⁹⁸ “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 153,” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 138.

embodies the idea that “the love of Krishna is a force strong enough to fuse even logical opposites such as these.”⁹⁹

Mirabai envisions herself as both an ascetic yogi *and* a wife. Even though the idea of a “yogi-wife” is “disallowed by basic categories of thought,”¹⁰⁰ *viraha-bhakti* recognizes a paradoxical coherence between these seemingly incompatible desirous and ascetic selves. What does Mirabai’s paradox of yogic marriage illuminate about her practices of passionate non-attachment? I suggest that marriage may represent Krishna’s and Mirabai’s highest flow of communion, while yogic asceticism may represent their lowest ebb of communion, both of which are necessary to the fullness of the oscillations of *viraha-bhakti*. Rather than representing separate and exclusive choices, the wife and the yogi may represent locations that she passes through repeatedly on the oscillating path of *viraha-bhakti*. These ebbs and flows describe one of the integral traits of *viraha-bhakti* devotionality, the continuum of separation and communion. The oscillations of *viraha-bhakti*, mirroring the seemingly contradictory roles of *yogi* and wife, represent Mirabai’s journey through different intensities of presence-in-absence.

In another song expressive of *viraha-bhakti*, she details her passionately dramatic 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,

⁹⁹ Hawley and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 127.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 132-33.

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. ¹⁰¹

While this song may be read as Mirabai's preparation for *sati*, when she cuts her hair, takes off her jewelry, and puts on sacred clothing, she also conjures images of renunciation. These acts then represent illicitly ascetic activities for a woman, for in the classical *āśrama* system of the four stages of life, a man leaves his marriage behind in the last two stages as he prepares for death by becoming a wandering *yogi*.¹⁰² Such a choice did not exist for the large majority of women, as women's societally sanctioned roles kept them tied to the family home. At the same time, Mirabai's actions might be seen as symbols for the sanctioned, if despised, state of widowhood.¹⁰³ In this reading, she transitions from a married woman to a mourning 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, she creates another new role—that of a pseudo-widow.

Significantly, these new options—that of *yogi*-wife or pseudo-widow—do not fit the *parakiyā* (*gopī*) pattern through which *viraha-bhakti* is most often viewed. I have already discussed how Mirabai confuses some interpreters by breaking this convention when she

¹⁰¹ Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 68," in *Three Bhakti Voices*, trans. Hawley, 121.

¹⁰² Again, the traditional four stages include those of the student, householder, retiree, and renunciate.

¹⁰³ Sangari, 1548.

portrays herself as Krishna’s wife. In the traditional *parakiyā* relationship in which the out-of-bounds is celebrated, devotees engage in an illicit affair with Krishna, leaving everything behind in their total devotion to him. Instead of always working within this frame, Mirabai chooses other roles, too, to express *viraha-bhakti*—those involving marriage, widowhood, and yogic asceticism.

No matter what role she takes, all her roles speak to an intimacy between herself and the divine. She views herself as a partner to Krishna; she wants to “search through the world as a yogi does with you—yogi and yogini side by side.”¹⁰⁴ Even as she suffers the pangs of separation, these pangs represent signs of the extant relationship between herself and God. Their connection is so strong that pain is the only appropriate response to their having been separated. Shulman writes of the *bhaktas*’ understanding of painful longing:

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.¹⁰⁵

While this kind of suffering can be described by the aforementioned term “delicious distress,” it must be acknowledged that she does not always find these moments “delicious.”¹⁰⁶ For example, she cries out:

My body is in pain, my breath burning.
Come and extinguish the fire of separation.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 117,” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 139.

¹⁰⁵ Shulman, “Modes of Meaning and Experience: *viraha* and *viḷaiyāṭal*,” 11.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 96,” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 74.

Discussing Mirabai's distress, one of Mirabai's translators, Andrew Schelling, writes of her path, "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."¹⁰⁸ While I maintain that Mirabai's longing is not endlessly debilitating, she often attests that the grief of separation feels unbearable. Unless she again meets the "dark One," she concludes in the last lines of the above focus song, "she doesn't even want to live."

I have suggested that both Martin's concept of "multiple Mirabai's" as well as the unique vicissitudes of Mirabai's longing create space to house Mirabai's energies of *kamā* and non-attachment simultaneously. Despite its language of the poles of separation and communion, *viraha-bhakti* holds that there is no place completely outside of divine presence and no place where full possession of the divine exists. Oscillating back and forth, she resides in the middle space between those poles, where the 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 *virahinī* can find different levels of communion all along the spectrum but can never find ultimate, total communion. Attaining any sort of final end is not the focus; instead, the middle spaces of longing are valued. In longing, the *bhakta* "turns into a gopi" not in order to lure his god, to overcome and dominate him";¹⁰⁹ rather, the longing is its own reward. Thus, *viraha-bhakti* celebrates the desire to live and long in the middle spaces of love-in-separation.

¹⁰⁸ Andrew Schelling, "'Where's My Beloved?': Mīrābāī's Prem Bhakti Mārg," in *Vaiṣṇavi: Women and the Worship of Krishna*, ed. Steven J. Rosen (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), 56.

¹⁰⁹ Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti*, 580.

Conventions of *Viraha-Bhakti* in Pada 54

In this section, I explore some of the common conventions of *viraha-bhakti* in order to better understanding Mirabai’s oscillations of love-longing in passionate non-attachment. In the next focus song, Mirabai bemoans the effects of her decision to “take a yogin for lover.” Because of her separation from Krishna, whom she images as her yogi-lover, Mirabai is beside herself with grief. She laments:

Take a yogin
 for lover, get nothing but grief.
 He beguiles you with intimate whispers—all worthless.
 Sister, he plucks your flower
 like a sprig of jasmine,
 then pulls on his robe and is gone.
 Mira says, Dark One,
 I saw you once,
 but tonight I’m an utter wreck.¹¹⁰

Longing undoes the narrator, here, self-described as an “utter wreck.” As is often the case in the *viraha-bhakti* tradition, the *bhakta* is portrayed as passively waiting for the divine to come back to her. As a *virahiṇī*, Mirabai’s waiting may appear to be passive but consider the first two lines the above song. She begins, “Take a yogin / for lover, get nothing but grief” before detailing Krishna’s harshness when leaving her bed. Beginning the song with the active verb “take,” she emphasizes her own choice in the matter, even as the lines are tinged with a measure of regretful sorrow for her choice.

¹¹⁰ Mirabai, “jogiyāri pīṭarī,” in *For Love of the Dark One*, trans. Schelling, 45.

Further tempering misconceptions of unmitigated passivity, Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita point to the ubiquity of first person statements in Mirabai's songs, such as "I will," "I will not," "I am," and "I have."¹¹¹ In our reading thus far, we have seen examples of these assertions, such as "I've stripped off my ornaments," and "I have sacrificed my life." When Mirabai takes the *yogin* 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 within the schema of *viraha-bhakti*. Not answering any unilateral command, but always freely searching for him, she decides the actions she will take in pursuit of Krishna. Despite much discouragement—stories of her family's admonishments and assassination attempts by the *rana*,¹¹² as well as Krishna's lack of attention itself—she chooses how to devote herself through practices of *viraha-bhakti*.

She chooses love-longing, despite the consequences, as *viraha-bhakti* remains the *goal* of her practices, not simply the *means* to an ultimate end of them. Mirabai is situated within a *Vaiṣṇava* tradition that does not deny the reality of the world and values embodied love of the divine in the world as one of its ultimate goals. In *viraha-bhakti*, too, there is a "deeply ingrained acceptance of man's 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

¹¹¹ Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, in "Poison to Nectar: The Life and Work of Mirabai," in *Manushi* 50-51-52 (January-June 1989): 88. They also note that in Caturvedī's collection of 202 Mira 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."

¹¹² In the hagiography according to Nabhadās' *Bhaktamāl* and the work of Priyadas, the *rana*, a princely title of royalty, tried to kill Mira by sending her a cup of poison. The *rana* is sometimes interpreted as her husband and sometimes as her father-in-law.

place of achieving his perfection through sharing in the work of Krishna.”¹¹³ Mirabai’s embracing of presence-in-absence and love-in-separation are integral elements of her *viraha-bhakti*, which promotes a “deep engagement in the life of the world, even, it could be argued, a basic acceptance of life, for all its horrors.”¹¹⁴

Primary among those horrors for Mirabai includes the realization that separation from Krishna is her primary state. She cannot quite reach across and grasp Krishna; he is ultimately unreachable. Shulman comments about this pain of presence-in-absence, “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.”¹¹⁵ The pain comes from trying to grasp the infinite. Mirabai cannot contain the transcendental; the Other is finally beyond her reach.

Mirabai’s scenes of vivid abandonment often function as a language of grief over the lack of further mystical ecstasy. Even after times of intense communion, *viraha-bhakti* will oscillate back into spaces of separation. In the above focus song Mirabai relates the painful throes of separation after times of intense communion. She writes, “He beguiles you with intimate whispers—all worthless.” The hyphen in the line points to Mirabai’s near breathless grief that even the most intimate acts of lovemaking cannot live up to their intimations of fully-realized unity, or her previous experiences of bliss.

Another convention often seen in *bhakti* literature involves metaphors of slavery. How does Mirabai’s putative freedom to choose her practices of *viraha-bhakti* coincide with

¹¹³ Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti*, 10.

¹¹⁴ Shulman, “Modes of Meaning and Experience: *viraha* and *vilāiyāṭal*,” 12.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

metaphors of bondage that seem to undermine understandings of mutuality in the human/divine relationship? Rather than point unambiguously toward subordination however, these metaphors may be construed as pointing unexpectedly toward an ethic of mutuality. For example, instead of writing “Giradhar has bought me,” Mirabai writes, “I am sold into Giradhar’s hands,” which in its preservation of the nominative first person pronoun, keeps her subjectivity in play.¹¹⁶ In addition, Mirabai’s images of buying and selling are mutual and are used to depict the quality of her relationship with Krishna as something immensely valuable.¹¹⁷ When Mirabai buys Krishna, she discusses the sale with her concerned friend:

You say I gave too much; I say too little.
 Actually, I put him on a scale before I bought him.
 What I paid was my social body, my town body, my family body,
 and all my inherited jewels.¹¹⁸

These 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.

Thus, while Mira’s love-longing may often look like simple passivity, an understanding of the dynamics and conventions of *viraha-bhakti* underscores the power inherent in Mirabai’s love-longing. Discussing this paradoxical power, Sangari writes, “Even though the *virahinī* 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

¹¹⁶ Kishwar and Vanita, 88.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Mirabai, “It’s True I Went to the Market,” in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, trans. Bly and Hirshfield, 6.

effect of her longing.”¹¹⁹ What Mirabai does not seem to have agency in—what seems to happen *to* her—is the vulnerability created by the *kamā* and grief of *viraha-bhakti*. As she chooses to take Krishna for a lover, she becomes vulnerable to his absenting her and to the deepening of her *kāma*.

As her passion deepens in the agony of separation, such vulnerability has drastic consequences. At times, she is, as seen in the above song, “an utter wreck,” yet she is still able to write herself as such; that is, she is not unraveled past her ability to aestheticize. She sometimes utilizes the *viraha-bhakti* trope of madness to describe the undoing of her sense of self, deeming herself “mad for the Maddening One.”¹²⁰ Take for instance her plea to Krishna in another song:

a vision of you has driven me mad.
Separation eats at my limbs.¹²¹

This madness is not altogether unwelcome. Here, Mirabai expresses it as an eternal state of “blissful” drunkenness:

I drank the cup of immortal bliss, and became drunk.
My inebriation never goes away, however many millions of ways I try.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Sangari, 1547.

¹²⁰ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 37,” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 134.

¹²¹ Mirabai, “karaṇām suṇi syām merī,” *For Love of the Dark One*, trans. Schelling, 61.

¹²² Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 40,” in “Poems from Mirabai,” unpublished mimeo, trans. S.M. Pandey and Norman H. Zide (University of Chicago, 1964), quoted in Kishwar and Vanita, 81.

In another poem, however, she lauds the qualities madness produces in her:

it is alright that I have turned insane, lady,
I found great qualities in insanity.¹²³

These unnamed “great qualities” suggest again that that the madness does not disintegrate all that she knows; that is, she recognizes in the insanity some connective profundity, a “holy madness” that makes her more lucid in her condemnation of injustice, public opinion, and power. For example, in the following Gujarati song, through her “mad” actions of drinking poison, she boldly exposes the injustice of the king’s nefarious plan to kill her:

The king sent me a cup of poison, even that I have drunk with pleasure!
The news is now public, everyone knows that Mīrā is deeply attached by love to God
it does not matter now; what was fated has happened!¹²⁴

Thus, *viraha-bhakti*’s trope of “holy madness” helps Mirabai find her voice against oppressive and shaming powers. She glories in the way that others, who may think her insane, view her. She writes:

This infamy, O my Prince,
is delicious!”¹²⁵

¹²³ 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 Gujarat,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 2007): 284.

¹²⁴ Mirabai, “Hinduism Part III,” in *Sources of Indian Tradition Volume III*, trans. V. Raghavan and R.N. Dandekar, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 359.

¹²⁵ Mirabai, “rāñāji mhāne yā badnāmī,” in *For Love of The Dark One*, trans. Schelling, 55.

In the last section in this chapter, I focus further on *bhakti*, specifically *viraha-bhakti*, as a force against oppressive powers in the world.

Mirabai's *Viraha-Bhakti* as A Liberating Force in *Pada* 186

Mirabai writes of the poor Bhil woman and her gift to God in one famous song:

The Bhil woman tasted then, plum after plum,
 and finally found one she could offer him.
 What king of genteel breeding was this?
 And hers was no ravishing beauty.
 Her family was poor, her caste quite low,
 her clothes a matter of rags,

The rest of the poem speaks to her loving relationship with God:

Yet Ram took that fruit—that touched, spoiled fruit—
 for he knew that it stood for her love.
 This was a woman who loved the taste of love,
 and Ram knows no high, no low.
 What sort of Veda could she ever have learned?
 But quick as a flash she mounted a chariot
 And sped to heaven to swing on a swing,
 tied by love to God.
 You are the Lord who cares for the fallen;
 rescue whoever loves as she did:
 Let Mira, your servant, safely cross over,
 a cowerding Gokul girl.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 186,” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 137.

Here, we look at a different type of song from the others we have previously studied. Instead of a first-person narrated song, this one tells a third-person story of a Bhil woman who, while poor and low-caste, pleases God by offering a plum that she had tasted to ensure its perfect sweetness.¹²⁷ The groups situated lowest in Mirabai's society were often seen as impure, inasmuch that other groups would not want members of these groups touching or tasting their food. In this case, the Bhil woman tastes and offers the food to the divine, and this fruit, "touched, spoiled," is well received by Krishna because of her love for him. At the end of this song, Mirabai identifies herself as a passionate *gopī*, a "cowherding Gokul girl," but the song is primarily given over to the story of one who differs from Mirabai's famed breeding and beauty. As the Bhil woman "loved the taste of love," Mirabai, too, yearns to love like this, to "safely cross over" to be with God.

This song powerfully advocates for the leveling of caste and class toward a society in which Krishna is, in the words of another Mirabai song, a "protector of the poor."¹²⁸ In the world imaged here, the poor Bhil woman, yearning *gopīs*, and princesses such as Mirabai may all find themselves "sped to heaven to swing on a swing." *Bhakti* has long been understood as a democratizing religious energy,¹²⁹ yet, despite the just vision seen in this

¹²⁷ Bhils were often employed by the Rajputs, Mirabai's clan.

¹²⁸ Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 3," in "Mīrābāī and her Contributions to the Bhakti Movement," trans. S. M. Pandey, *History of Religions* 5, no. 1 (Summer 1965): 66.

¹²⁹ Discussing 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 bhakti's image of inclusiveness to

song, *bhakti*'s liberatory potential is sometimes perceived as only a "compensatory safety valve or an interstitial or liminal interlude in an otherwise normatively ordered social existence."¹³⁰

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 society, or is Mirabai's Krishna-directed *bhakti* representative of just another kind of patriarchal power? Sangari rightly perceives the *flexibility* of Mirabai's notion of *bhakti*. As such, it can be used toward 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.¹³¹

Going further, Sangari argues that Mirabai's songs may be said to give subalternity a certain symbolic power, and women subalterns can achieve salvation through the schema of Mirabai's *bhakti* more easily than they ever have been able to do *because* they are women. The catch is that they must surrender to the patriarchy to do so.¹³² In other words, while *bhakti* may be perceived as a socially transformative force, it does not consistently or

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," (response paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Chicago, Nov. 16-19, 2012), 3.

¹³⁰ 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, Religions and Culture*, eds. Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 63.

¹³¹ Sangari, 1469.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 1471.

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. Its "compensatory character" balances out its "radicalizing potential"; thus, Mirabai's *bhakti* is "internally poised to lose the ground it sets out to gain."¹³³

In contrast, John Stratton Hawley reads Mirabai's *bhakti* as having more substantial transformative potential for justice within religious communities. For him, *bhakti* can invert the traditional values of a social context, and these inversions create new visions for what counts ethically. *Dharma* or duty is thus transformed, and "ordinary virtue is reshaped by being set in a new context."¹³⁴ For example, Mirabai is presented in the previously discussed *Bhaktamāl* as having "No inhibitions. Totally fearless."¹³⁵ She did not cringe, even as the "villains" tried to kill her, the text goes on. This fearlessness and lack of 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* (duty) and *bhakti*, Hawley points out that different 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 the *dharma* pole, for example, one may end up with a conservative Mirabai who exemplifies the ideal of the *pativrat*, or perfect wife, as some recent Indian comic books have portrayed her.¹³⁶ Conversely, more weight on the

¹³³ Ibid., 1551.

¹³⁴ Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 62-67.

¹³⁵ Nābhādās, *Śri Bhaktamāl, with the Bhaktirasabodhinī Commentary of Priyādas* (Lucknow: Tejkumār Press, 1969), 712-13, quoted in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 123.

¹³⁶ Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 66.

bhakti pole may allow *bhakti*'s liberative energies to flow within communities "by reuniting socially disparate elements in a common cause: the praise of God."¹³⁷ In Hawley's vision, more opportunities for communion among often separated groups can occur, as seen when Mirabai places herself next to the Bhil woman and when she joins the motley group of itinerant *bhaktas*.

Hawley's understanding of the liberative possibilities of *bhakti* is thus less ambivalent than Sangari's understanding. Warning against *bhakti*'s potential for misuse by oppressive interests, despite its liberatory potential, Sangari suggests that Mirabai's life cannot find an unsullied space in the midst of its embedded patriarchal and religious schemas.¹³⁸ The struggle for reading Mirabai's *bhakti* as liberating, I suggest, includes looking for the dislocations within the sullied space. In this dissertation, I suggest that places of passionate non-attachment may function as such dislocating spaces.

The mystical excess of Mirabai's longing may create these dislocations. Despite Sangari's acknowledgment that what she calls the "spiritual economy" of Mirabai's *bhakti* is often aligned with the Rajput political and domestic economies, she admits that there is something excessive in this spiritual economy that cannot be contained.¹³⁹ Therefore, as Mirabai herself cannot possess the fullness of God, the mystical excess toward which she points is unable to be fully grasped by any individual or group who wants to contain its power. In its excessiveness, Mirabai's *bhakti* cannot be possessed completely by any group.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 63.

¹³⁸ Sangari, 1472-3.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 1471-2.

Her songs 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.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, Mirabai’s “liberalizing and dissenting forms of *bhakti*” attempts to break through and redefine the content, methods, author and audience of brahmanical Hinduism.¹⁴¹

In addition, Mirabai’s focused longing for Krishna relativizes the claims that others have on her. Correspondingly, her choice to give up the benefits of a royal life allows her an unnamings of the privilege and family ties that once defined her. Thus, the *bhakta*’s characteristics and priorities may charge *bhakti* with liberatory potential. A Mirabai who yearns with and for others, outside the walls of her individual self, is a Mirabai who may create dislocations in the sullied space of an unjust world.

While historical and present injustices work against an unambiguously optimistic stance for the potential of Mirabai’s *bhakti* for breaking the chains that bind women and other subalterns, the force of her longing, that is, the excess of her *viraha-bhakti*, may keep these systems more open. Discussing the possibility of liberatory spaces even within patriarchal systems, Sangari suggests that Mirabai writes in a “language which makes the patriarchal substratum of customary subjection and simultaneously dislocates and creates new, contradictory spaces, even as it remains amenable to maintaining *status quo*.”¹⁴² These dislocations, engendered by Mirabai’s mystical excess in and nurtured by *viraha-bhakti*’s communal longing, pry open space for the creation of solidarities for a more just world.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 1464.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 1472.

Mirabai and Passionate Non-Attachment

Strange is the path
 When you offer your love.
 —Mirabai¹⁴³

Mirabai's path of *viraha-bhakti* is indeed strange in its embracing of both *kamā* and non-attachment. Through the lens of her strong feminist commitments, Mirabai translator Jane Hirshfield has attempted to make sense of the passion and the non-attachment 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."¹⁴⁴ As we have discussed in this chapter, Mirabai's *viraha-bhakti* displays non-attachment even in the embodied embraces of mutual erotic longing. Conversely, her *viraha-bhakti* manifests desire even in its ascetic moments.

We have discussed songs in which Mirabai lives as a passionate yogi, driven by desirous devotion *and* renunciation. Shukla-Blatt speaks to this combination of desire and non-attachment when she asserts that for Mirabai a yogi is "not simply a person who has attained detachment through discipline," she is also a "lover who, being fully absorbed in

¹⁴³ Mirabai, "Caturvedī's Pada 191," in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 114.

¹⁴⁴ Jane Hirshfield, "Mirabai's Teachings," in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, eds. Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), xiv.

love, becomes indifferent to the world.”¹⁴⁵ Looking at Mirabai’s songs through the lens of *viraha-bhakti*, I argue that her love-longing takes her *deeper* into the world. Singing songs of communal longing, she does not become indifferently detached from the world but instead leaves her scripted courtly life in order to face bravely into the wider, unknown world. *Viraha-bhakti* infuses Mirabai’s world—and that of her divine lover, fellow singers, and readers—with passionate non-attachment.

¹⁴⁵ Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, “Performance as Translation: Mira in Gujarat” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 2007): 285.

Chapter 3

Hadewijch's Love-Longing and Passionate Non-Attachment

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

—Hadewijch¹⁴⁶

Our comparative exploration of the tensions inherent in passionate non-attachment now oscillates, perhaps dizzyingly, from sixteenth century India to thirteenth century Europe. By way of introduction, like Mirabai, Hadewijch is, in many ways, a historical mystery. No facts can be nailed down about the specifics of her birth, family, or death. Some scholars have tried to create an outline of her life from her writings, which suggest that after years as a leader of her Christian Beguine community, her authority as a teacher was questioned and that she may have even been dispossessed from the circle.¹⁴⁷ From the content of her writings, we can also surmise that she was most likely well-educated.¹⁴⁸

Her writings, which include letters, visions, poems in stanzas, and poems in couplets, show Hadewijch loving a Love (*Minne*) who incites both desirous longing and a letting go of

¹⁴⁶ Hadewijch, "Letter 8: Two Fears about Love," in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Columba Hart, O. S. D. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) lines 41-2, 65.

¹⁴⁷ Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986), 177.

¹⁴⁸ Columba Hart, O.S.W., Introduction to *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 5-7. Hart notes that Hadewijch's familiarity with the vocabulary of chivalry and courtly love suggest that she was of a higher class. She most likely attended school, as seen in her metaphors of the curriculum and schoolmen in her "school of love" poems. She was also familiar with the Latin language, rules of rhetoric, numerology, Ptolemaic astronomy, and the theory of music. 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 knowledge of a great deal of vernacular love poetry and was familiar with the Latin verse of Alain de Lilel and Peter Abelard.

everything, save her longing. In what she startlingly calls “noble unfaith” (*edele ontrouwe*), Hadewijch longs for Love so passionately that she lets go even of her faith in order to continue enlarging her desire for *Minne*. In this stunning example of passionate non-attachment, Hadewijch turns away in fervent eros and grief from her familiar relational modes of faith, reason, humility, and trust when they cannot deliver her into Love’s fruition (*ghebruken*). As “noble unfaith” enlarges her desire for *Minne*, she and *Minne* tumble into an apophatic darkness. Attempting to describe this unfathomable abyss, Hadewijch can only utter, “Then the soul sees, and it sees nothing.”¹⁴⁹ She writes of these dark, 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.¹⁵⁰

Her abyssal, erotic mysticism incites longing. From longing, unfaith is birthed, and from unfaith springs an apophatic unknowing of herself, *Minne*, and the bond between them.

Hadewijch’s mysticism encompasses the wide range of her tumultuous relationship with *Minne*—from states of blissful communion to states of grief-inducing separation. Within our experiment in comparative reading, these ebbs and flows of communion and separation bring to mind Mirabai’s oscillating *viraha-bhakti*, with its fluctuating continuum of divine presence-in-absence. Accordingly, later in this chapter I will read Hadewijch through the lens of Mirabai’s practice of *viraha-bhakti*. Although I will not limit Hadewijch’s rich particularity

¹⁴⁹ Hadewijch, “Letter 28: Trinitarian Contemplation Caught in Words,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 129-30, 111.

¹⁵⁰ Hadewijch, “*Mengeldict 25* (Poems in Couplets),” in *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch’s Mengeldichten*, trans. Saskia Murk-Jansen (Göppingen: Kummerle Verlag, 1991), lines 1-3, 87. Murk-Jansen proposes that this text was written by Hadewijch II.

by attempting to contain her inside this framework, reading Hadewijch's writings alongside Mirabai's songs of *viraha-bhakti* sheds light on Hadewijch's unique configurations of desire and non-attachment, such as her peculiar "noble unfaith."

Before delving into this comparative reading, I first locate Hadewijch within her medieval Christian Beguine context. Through a creative blending of two literary genres common to her time, Hadewijch and other mystical Beguine contemporaries, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete, generated and developed a new genre of theological writing. In the context of this genre b(l)ending, I will then examine Hadewijch's paradoxical concept of "noble unfaith," which epitomizes her practices of passionate non-attachment. Highlighting the desirous Love Hadewijch yearns for *and* with, this chapter investigates her integral practices of passionate 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?"

—Hadewijch¹⁵¹

Hadewijch reports that even as a child she was obsessed with the nature of Love (*Minne*). According to her second vision, Hadewijch spent her early years contemplating, "What is Love?" and "Who is Love?" In her adult years, still searching to understand just who and what Love is, Hadewijch potently combined two literary genres of thirteenth-century Western Europe, courtly love vernacular poetry and Christian bridal mysticism, to produce a

¹⁵¹ Hadewijch, "Vision 2: Experience of Pentecost," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 19-20, 271.

third genre, that of *mystique courtoise*.¹⁵² Possessing a mastery of both courtly love poetry and bridal mysticism deep enough to improvise within and between these genres,¹⁵³ her creative permutations in the language of *mystique courtoise* result in provocative understandings of *Minne*, self, others, and the bonds connecting them all. As I introduce these two formative genres and the genre birthed from them, I specifically examine the implications of the new genre for Hadewijch's dual expression of erotic and renunciative 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.¹⁵⁴ In this literary tradition, which drew theological sustenance from the *Wesenmystik* of Augustine, the mysticism of the Greek Fathers, and the Pseudo-Dionysian apophatic tradition, an image of the female bride represents the human soul, who attains perfection through her union with the divine male Bridegroom.

As she worked with the resources of *Brautmystik*, Hadewijch contributed a transformative element, the predominantly secular genre of courtly love verse, or *fine amour*.¹⁵⁵ *Fine amours* highlights the courtly lover, the *knight-errant*, who sings *troubadour*

¹⁵² 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 term *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 2) "the ambiguous social location of this [Beguine] movement, which, like the beguines themselves, straddled the border between religious and secular life" (139).

¹⁵³ See *ibid.*, 148, for more on Hadewijch's employment of a wide range of "troubadour moods" in her work.

¹⁵⁴ In this regard, she was especially influenced by works of Bernard of Clairvoix and William of St. Thierry. See page 169-70 in *ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ See *Ibid.*, 164, for a discussion of how *fine amours* and *Brautmystik* mutually

songs of unfulfilled desire and performs difficult deeds to win the love of a distant, noble beloved. Combining elements of *fine amour* and *Brautmystik*, Hadewijch came to write in a new genre, which Barbara Newman names *mystique courtoise*, or “courtly mysticism.” Describing the intersecting threads of this new genre, 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.”¹⁵⁶ Here, *Caritas*, the Christian concept of Charity/Love, rendezvouses with *Amour* and *Minne*, the respective French and Dutch concepts of romantic, courtly love. This coupling begets *mystique courtoise*’s rendition of *Minne*, a female-gendered term of fantastically flexible valence, whose nuances I will discuss later in this chapter. Newman lists some of the key elements of *mystique courtoise*:

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.¹⁵⁷

Hadewijch’s creative combining of genres allows her images of lover and beloved to take on complex, rich resonances. For example, in *mystique courtoise*, traditional *Brautmystik* themes of mystical absence become heightened and complexified with the addition of a haughtily distant beloved from the *fine amour* tradition. *Brautmystik*, too, is characterized by divine distance and absence, as seen most vividly in the image of the bride waiting for the

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 *fins amours*, Hadewijch provided a reciprocal influence on *Brautmystik*.

¹⁵⁶ 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* was one of multiple creations of feminine power from the medieval theological imagination.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 164.

arrival of her groom—an arrival that is nonetheless inevitable. The mixing of elements of bridal mysticism with elements of courtly love poetry shifts the connotations of divine distance and absence toward uncertainty concerning the final outcome of this waiting.

Inasmuch as the genre of *fine amour* thrived on the idea of perpetually unfulfilled desire, it differed from existing medieval models of marriage. In traditional European medieval society before the 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, but the goal was not marriage. The ladylove was thus ultimately unattainable, and the distance between the knight and the ladylove only increased the knight's desire. The best kind of love, in this schema, needed distance to stay alive. Coupled with the erotic longing of *Brautmystik*, which played on a not yet consummated coupling, the element of necessary distance in *fine amour* added complex connotations to *mystique courtoise*'s depiction of the relationship between *Minne* and Hadewijch. As the unattainability of the ladylove became a literary convention in the courtly love song, the analogue of the unattainability of God accordingly developed ontological resonances in Hadewijch's writings.

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!" Hadewijch is assured by him that "we shall remain one," but as her vision ends, she finds herself "piteously lamenting [her] exile."¹⁵⁸ Much of the imagery of this vision lends itself well to a *Brautmystik* reading of an assured

¹⁵⁸ Hadewijch, "Vision 10: The Bride in the City," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 55-7 and 73, 288.

happy ending of union for the soul and God. For instance, Hadewijch is said to have “passed through” the steps of the journey and now meets her bridegroom as the reward. Note that the reward is not limited to her alone; she attains spiritual growth for “all” through her strong love, a theme I will pick up again later in this chapter. With the addition of *fine amour* motifs, however, a reading of her vision now includes a beloved who, in the language of courtly love, may be fickle or play hard to get in her noble *hauteur*. Such a depiction of the beloved has implications for the lover’s expectations. In other words, 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 an assumption of complete union. To return to the end of the vision, when Hadewijch experiences “exile,” she finds herself cast out from the unitive marriage that *Brautmystik* promises. The grief Hadewijch expresses at the end of this vision reflects her reaction, common in her writing, to the unattainability of the union for which she longs. As she grieves and lets go of the faith that she will fully attain her Lady Love, her desire for *Minne* is heightened even further.

Above, I discussed just one example of how Hadewijch’s new genre alters some distinguishing aspects of *Brautmystik*, particularly concerning concepts of *Minne* and the self. In the next section, I will continue to explore how the genre of *mystique courtoise* functions to transform theological categories, particularly the commodious concepts of gender that emerge in *mystique courtoise*.

Hadewijch's Gendered Desire and *Mystique Courtoise*

But they abide in one another in fruition, mouth and mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul . . .

—Hadewijch¹⁵⁹

At the intersection of courtly love and bridal mysticism, that is, in *mystique courtoise*, Hadewijch unsays conventional conceptions of gender. These unsayings of gender further unsettle ideas of how *Minne* interacts with the lover of *Minne*.¹⁶⁰ To begin, *fine amour* and *Brautmystik*, the two literary genres Hadewijch combines in *mystique courtoise*, involve two sets of players in unique relationships of yearning. Hadewijch's *mystique courtoise* provides options for which "lover" role to play; that is, Hadewijch may choose to identify with the questing male knight of *fine amour* or with *Brautmystik*'s female bride. When taking on the role of the actively questing knight, she experiments with taking on a role usually imaged as male. In the voice of a knight, she writes of her 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.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Hadewijch, "Letter 9: He in Me and I in Him," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 8-9, 66.

¹⁶⁰ See Catherine Keller's "The Apophasis of Gender: A Fourfold Unsayings of Feminist Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 4 (Dec. 2008): 905-933, for a masterful 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).

¹⁶¹ Hadewijch, "Poems in Stanzas 10: Knight Errant," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 40-44, 153.

Hadewijch remains one of the only Christian woman medieval mystics to experiment with images of gender reversal, but a number of the male mystics of her time identified with the female soul/bride in the traditional *Brautmystik* schema.¹⁶² These male-to-female reversals are often explained in terms of intensifying themes of intimacy and otherness, as the divine relationship was unlike anything these men had ever experienced.¹⁶³ Even as these male theologians' rhetorical choices preserve a heteronormative model of sexual relations, a queering "linguistic transvestitism" takes place in the act of gender reversals.¹⁶⁴

When Hadewijch takes on the role of male *knight-errant* yearning for the female *Minne*, she, too, works within a heterosexual framework, but as she takes on a male subjective role, she also queers her subjectivity, especially as depicted through her focus on the military arts. At the same time, when she alternatively chooses to voice a female subjectivity within *mystique courtoise*, she subversively highlights the female body as a site of longing. Karma Lochrie elaborates, "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

¹⁶² 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 *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1991), 108.

¹⁶³ 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 (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1996), 54.

¹⁶⁴ Amy Hollywood, "Sexual Desire, Divine Desire; Or, Queering the Beguines," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, eds. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 123.

the heterosexual laws it usurps.”¹⁶⁵ Hadewijch thus may be understood as queering and contesting the “idealizing strategies of male abjection and the spiritualized mythos of courtly love.”¹⁶⁶ When Hadewijch writes of her female-bodied desire for *Minne*, she queers, we might say, her very yearning.

In a ravishing image of bodily embrace in one of her visions, for example, Hadewijch reinforces the idea of desirous female embodiment as essential to yearning. In an extraordinary image of Hadewijch embracing the adult Jesus, she describes their full-bodied encounter. In the vision, after recounting how Jesus gives her the Eucharist, she continues:

he 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. Also then, for a short while, I had the strength to bear this.¹⁶⁷

By making the desiring female body the site of mystical union, Hadewijch speaks to the crucial role of female desire in the mutual erotic love for which she yearns. In mutuality, taking her into his arms, Jesus comes to her in desire, too. Here, one who traditionally has no unfulfilled longings reaches for her. Elaborating on the way Hadewijch unsays the Platonic self-sufficiency of divinity, John Giles Milhaven asserts that Hadewijch does not “speak

¹⁶⁵ Karma Lochrie, “Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies,” in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, eds. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 185-6.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Hadewijch, “Vision 7: Oneness in the Eucharist,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 70-74, 281.

Greek” in this vision.¹⁶⁸ Traditionally, God has “no discontent, no unsatisfied desire,” but Hadewijch’s bodily image contradicts such an understanding.¹⁶⁹

Many of Hadewijch’s most compelling images of desire depict such an eros of mutuality. In *fine amour*, yearning is unidirectional, as the waiting ladylove does not act out of desire; however, mutual yearning between the bride and groom flourishes in *Brautmystik*. Drawing from hints in the *Brautmystik* tradition, Hadewijch composes staggering scenes of mutual erotic love. For example, employing 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.¹⁷⁰

Here, the “loved one” and the Beloved interdwell within each other’s bodies, which testifies to the mutuality of desire moving fluidly back and forth between them. “Mouth and mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul,” the lover and the beloved come together in rapturous communion.

In the paradigms of *Brautmystik* and *fine amour*, the beloved of the bride and knight are the divine Bridegroom and the ladylove, respectively. Of course, in *Brautmystik* the groom images God, but in *fine amour*, the ladylove is a mortal female, albeit an idealized one. As we have begun to explore, Hadewijch’s artful hybridization of bridal mysticism and courtly love

¹⁶⁸ John Giles Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters: Other Ways of Loving and Knowing* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 37.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷⁰ Hadewijch, “Letter 9: He in Me and I in Him,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 4-12, 66.

allow her to make choices about how she portrays the participants in mutual love. While she sometimes utilizes a traditional *Brautmystik* schema of a female human lover and a male divine Beloved, in other writings, she unsays this schema. We have already seen how she performs a “linguistic transvesticism” in which she writes in the *knight-errant*’s male voice. In vision nine, which Mary A. Suydem has called the culmination of the visions, Hadewijch uses a radically new schema—that of a mutually erotic divine-human relationship between female-gendered lovers.¹⁷¹ Using an all-female paradigm of *Minne*, Hadewijch, and Queen Reason, a figure who appears as a prelude to Hadewijch’s vision of *Minne*, vision nine concludes with *Minne* embracing Hadewijch, who becomes “inebriated with unspeakable wonders.”¹⁷²

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.”¹⁷³ Within the context of *mystique courtoise*, I explored Hadewijch’s deployment of flexibly-gendered, imagery for both lover and beloved. Next, I will explore how multiple interpretations of *Minne* further broaden possibilities for understanding Hadewijch’s theological contributions.

¹⁷¹ 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 this language of unsaying gender paradigms to “produce a different dialogue with divinity” (20).

¹⁷² Hadewijch, “Vision 9: Queen Reason,” in *Hadewijch*, trans, Hart, lines 69-70, 286.

¹⁷³ Newman, 138-139.

“What is Minne? Who is Minne?”

“*De Minne es al!*”
—Hadewijch¹⁷⁴

The questions “What is *Minne*?” and “Who is *Minne*?” fueled Hadewijch’s writings from the beginning. Venturing an answer to these questions, she asserts succinctly in one letter, “*De Minne es al!*” Heretofore in this chapter, I have used *Minne*, often translated “Love” or “Lady Love,” straightforwardly as Hadewijch’s favored name for God. In this section, I look at a number of scholarly attempts to comprehend Hadewijch’s multivalent use of *Minne* as a term not only used for God, but also for a number of other aspects of her faith and practice.

In the context of *mystique courtoise*, Hadewijch’s *Minne* is constructed from the courtly love tradition as well as from *Brautmystik*’s depictions of love—both Caritas and Eros. The combination of these strands opens up diverse possibilities for understanding who and what *Minne* is. Scholarly interpretations of Hadewijch’s *Minne* thus vary widely, with manifold ideas abiding within this one evocative word. For example, Newman notes some of the ways *Minne* resists any univocality: “She 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.”¹⁷⁵ In what follows, I offer a sampling of some of these interpretations of *Minne*.

¹⁷⁴ Hadewijch, “Letter 25: Sara, Emma, and Margaret,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 37, 106.

Tanis Guest has argued that *Minne* is Hadewijch's term for a "living entity" and not an "abstract quality."¹⁷⁶ Gordon Rudy asserts that *Minne* is a multivalent term meaning "equally God, the person, and the bond between the two."¹⁷⁷ Further 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."¹⁷⁸ Reinder Meijer also highlights the relational thrust of *Minne* when he writes that *Minne* is "the relation between God and man."¹⁷⁹

Minne's linguistic flexibility allows for such a wide variety of ideas about *Minne*'s meanings. Grammatically, notes Veerle Fraeters, *Minne* "can occupy nearly any function in a sentence and is often repeated in one and the same sentence, through different grammatical functions."¹⁸⁰ For example, this grammatical flexibility can be seen in Hadewijch's prayer:

¹⁷⁵ Newman, 153. The "transcendent I" (116-117) references the work of Wilhelm Breuer, "Philologische Zugänge zur Mystik Hadewijchs: Zu Form und Funktion religiöser Sprache bei Hadewijch," *Grünfragen christlicher Mystik*, eds. Margot Schmidt and Dieter Bauer, 103-121 (Germany: G. Holzboog, 1987), 116-17.

¹⁷⁶ Tanis Guest, *Some Aspects of Hadewijch's Poetic Form in the 'Strofische Gedichten.'* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 137.

¹⁷⁷ Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages.* (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 68.

¹⁷⁸ Jessica A. Boon, "Trinitarian Love Mysticism: Ruusbroec, Hadewijch, and the Gendered Experience of the Divine," *Church History* 72, no. 3 (2003): 493.

¹⁷⁹ 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.

¹⁸⁰ Veerle Fraeters, "Hadewijch," in *Women Writing in Dutch*, ed. Kristiaan Aercke (New York: Garland, 1994), 19.

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.¹⁸¹

Employing the device of repetition helps rhetorically to “undo distinctions between the poet’s love for God and the love that is God is dissolved in union,” Saskia Murk-Jansen proposes.¹⁸² The loves (*minnes*) thus melt into each other, destabilizing any sense of enduring distinction between human and divine love. *Minne* can thus be read in a variety of ways; however, in light of its work undoing boundaries between the self and the divine, a relational definition that underscores their unity-in-difference is especially compelling.

Hadewijch’s Integrative Mysticism

By allowing Hadewijch to integrate two unique sets of metaphors to express who and what *Minne* is, *mystique courtoise* changed the face of mysticism. Scholars who have studied Hadewijch, such as Barbara Newman, Grace Jantzen, Mary A. Suydem, and Paul Mommaers, point to her predilection for genre creation and other ingenious integrations that engender new theological possibilities. In this section, I briefly look at other examples of her unique integrations, as well as pinpoint a place where integration proves a challenge, the space between her exultant highs of communion with *Minne* and her despairing lows of separation from *Minne*.

¹⁸¹ Hadewijch, “*Mengeldict 15*,” in *The Measure of Mystic Thought*, trans. Murk-Jansen, lines 49-52, 71. In Dutch, the poem reads, “*Ay minne ware ic minne/ Ende met minnen minne v minne / Ay minne om minne gheuet dat minne / Die minne al minne volkinne.*”

¹⁸² Saskia Murk-Jansen, *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch’s Mengeldichten* (Göppingen: Kummerle Verlag, 1991), 71.

Discussing eros and its pivotal, integrative role in Hadewijch's writings, Jantzen offers the following: "Erotic mysticism for Hadewijch is passionate, embodied mysticism; the erotic is not merely metaphorical, but rather is a focus of integration."¹⁸³ In other words, the bodily, sensory imagery Hadewijch employs becomes integrated into her yearning for the divine in ways not seen in either the speculative or affective traditions of male medieval mystic spirituality. While these traditions had a tendency to try to strip away the bodily erotic in a quest for spiritual purity, "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."¹⁸⁴

Others have identified examples of Hadewijch's talent for integration of presumed opposites. For instance, Suydem discusses the integration of the role of Love and Reason, both of which are personified (and female) forces in Hadewijch's writings.¹⁸⁵ In addition, Mommaers writes of 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."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 145.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁸⁵ Suydam, "The Touch of Satisfaction," 18.

¹⁸⁶ Paul Mommaers, Preface to *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. Columba Hart, O. S. D., (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), xv.

Notwithstanding Hadewijch's gift for integration, Tanis Guest pinpoints two areas that she claims Hadewijch has difficulty integrating, that 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 writes:

We seldom if ever find her taking a dispassionate standpoint; she has two basic moods in her writing, and therefore probably in her life. The first, which we see most frequently in the [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.¹⁸⁷

Here, Guest reads Hadewijch in a way that reductively might suggest a psychological disorder. Certainly, Hadewijch's work contains a wide spectrum of moods, including those of exultation and despair. Already I have discussed several examples of Hadewijch's mood of exultation. The imagery of her embracing Christ, as well as her abiding with him "mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul and soul" exemplify two dramatic instances of this mood, but her "depressed" mood has not yet been much discussed. This attitude can be found throughout her body of work, but her poems in stanzas can especially be read as an extended meditation on the unspeakable grief of being cast off from God's presence. In stanzaic poem seventeen, for example, Hadewijch laments:

The number of my griefs must be unuttered
My cruel burdens must remain unweighed.¹⁸⁸

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

¹⁸⁷ Guest, *Some Aspects of Hadewijch's Poetic Form in the 'Strofische Gedichten.'* 132.

¹⁸⁸ Hadewijch, "Poems in Stanzas 17: Under the Blow," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 19-20, 172.

The *hidden ways* by which Love sends me
Are such as completely rob me of myself.¹⁸⁹

Between these two modes posed as opposites, Guest asserts that Hadewijch only displays a “studied and artificial resignation.” Toward a more integral, less schizoid conception of the mystical life than one in which Hadewijch pings back and forth between opposite ways of being, I now further examine Hadewijch’s descriptions of her spiritual highs and lows. To begin this investigation, I focus on Hadewijch’s central terms for states of communion and separation, *ghebruken* and *ghebreken*, respectively.

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

The dramatic fluctuations of *ghebruken* and *ghebreken* in Hadewijch’s writings can leave readers unsure of the hermeneutical keys to understanding her work. Consequently, some interpreters have read Hadewijch as a suffering saint, full of *ghebreken*, while others view her as a mystic of erotic abundance, brimming with *ghebruken*.¹⁹⁰ How should she best be understood?

The term *ghebruken*, used by Hadewijch to denote times of communion, is often translated as “fruition,” while the term *ghebreken* often translates as “non-fruition” or “lack of fruition.”¹⁹¹ Others translate *ghebruken* as “enjoyment” or “satisfaction,”¹⁹² and *ghebreken*

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., Poems in Stanzas 25: Reason, Pleasure, and Desire,” lines 27-28, 197.

¹⁹⁰ For example, Saskia Murk-Jansen tends to read her as the former, while Paul Mommaers reads her as the latter.

¹⁹¹ Hart employs these translations.

¹⁹² Respectively, Suydem, “The Touch of Satisfaction,” 14, and Milhaven, 29.

as “falling short.”¹⁹³ The translation of *ghebreken* as “falling short” provides a compelling way of thinking about the relationship between *ghebreken* and *ghebruken*. Hadewijch’s “falling short,” Mommaers explains, 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*.”¹⁹⁴ Thus, by falling short (*ghebreken*), Hadewijch has an opportunity to experience fruition (*ghebruken*) more fully. Said another way, Hadewijch, in falling short, exposes the self’s usual efforts to reach *Minne* as useless, and in that letting go, she mysteriously finds fruition. Hadewijch discusses, in a stanzaic poem, how longing “weighs [her] down” in her quest to know Love. Here, she comments on the necessity of “renouncing self”:

Therefore in my fiery longing I will never be appeased.
It weighs me down that I cannot obtain
Knowledge of Love without renouncing self.
Even if desire crushes my heart,
Even if strength slips away from me through Love’s coercion,
I shall yet know what draws me . . .¹⁹⁵

Hadewijch’s simultaneous experience of *ghebrucken* and *ghebreken* in a number of her writings further complicates the idea of two separate primary moods. As seen in the above examples, Hadewijch may be found singularly expressing the bliss of *ghebruken* or the despair of *ghebreken*, but other times, she experiences *ghebruken* and *ghebreken* at the same

¹⁹³ Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer—Begaine—Love Mystic*, with Elisabeth M. Dutton (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2005), 114.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹⁵ Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 22: To Live Out What I Am,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 42-47, 187-88.

time. Recall, for example, her imagery of riding her horse victoriously and then quickly becoming “unhorsed.” As another example, consider the following lines, describing the dual states she felt “constantly.”

With his unity in love I have felt constantly, since then, the experience of being lost in the fruition of Love (*vorlorenheit van ghebrukene*) or the suffering of being deprived of this fruition (*passien van ghebrekene dies ghebrukens*), and the ways of veritable love in all things, and its mode of operation in God and in all men.¹⁹⁶

In another poem, using the metaphor of taste, Hadewijch describes the way Love brings her close while also holding her away. Detailing this double “taste” of *Minne*, she elaborates on the mystery of this bittersweet taste:

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!¹⁹⁷

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.’”¹⁹⁸ In the continual and dual experience of these states, Hadewijch suggests the

¹⁹⁶ Hadewijch, “Hadewijch Evicted,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 75-8, 115.

¹⁹⁷ Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 31: Melody and Song,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 25-30, 217.

¹⁹⁸ Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer—Begaine—Love Mystic*, 98.

integral intertwining of separation and union. The interconnected states of sensual, blissful enjoyment and grieving abandonment combine toward the expression of a full-bodied communion with *Minne*.

Hadewijch experiences the dual states of *ghebruken* and *ghebreken* bodily through her identification with the person of Jesus Christ. As discussed above, Jantzen has argued that “to be God with God,”¹⁹⁹ in Hadewijch’s understanding, means to live in imitation of Jesus.²⁰⁰ As Hadewijch imitates him in the vicissitudes of his human incarnation, her body serves as the means to union with God (*Minne*) and service to others (*minnes*). It should be noted here that in the thirteenth century, Christians, especially women, turned to imitating Christ’s life, and the body served as a conduit to divinity in this pursuit.²⁰¹ 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. Murk-Jansen, in her work on Hadewijch’s letter twenty nine, which discusses deep suffering, argues that fruition between the soul and the divine is most possible at the moment of abandonment epitomized by Jesus’ agonized cry, “Father, why hast thou forsaken me?”²⁰² *Ghebreken*, in this way, opens up into *ghebruken*. Thus, Murk-Jansen maintains that

¹⁹⁹ Hadewijch, “Letter 6: To Live Christ,” *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 229-30, 62.

²⁰⁰ Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, 140.

²⁰¹ See Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Fragmentation and Redemption* for some early work on this subject, especially the essay “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages.” (New York: Zone, 1991), 181-238.

²⁰² Saskia Murk-Jansen, “Hadewijch,” in *Medieval Holy Women: In the Christian Tradition c. 1100-c. 1500*, eds. Alastair J. Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols 2010), 674.

Hadewijch's highest form of union with God occurs at the "moment of feeling most abandoned by him."²⁰³

The relationship between *ghebreken* and *ghebruken* thus appears more integrated in Hadewijch's work than it might first appear.²⁰⁴ *Ghebreken* and *ghebruken* function then, not as opposites, but in a tensile, complementary relationship with one another. Ria Vanderauwera suggests that this tension may be seen as Hadewijch's "craving for *minne*."²⁰⁵ Rather than resignation existing in the middle space between the despair and exultation, as Guest maintains, I suggest that "craving for love," or what I am calling longing, functions as the interstitial space that integrates *ghebreken* and *ghebruken*.

How do *ghebruken* and *ghebreken* relate with each other through longing? What is the vital role of longing? Is fruition the goal and non-fruition merely the means to the goal? If not, what function does non-fruition play? How should the suffering seen vividly in non-fruition be viewed? How does passionate non-attachment come into play? To further explore these questions, in the next section I examine Hadewijch's unique concept of "noble unfaith." "Noble unfaith" dramatically displays the integral intertwining of *ghebruken* and *ghebreken*; that is, when Hadewijch lets go of her expectations of *Minne*'s behavior, her

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ 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*, as "opposites."

²⁰⁵ Ria Vanderauwera, "Hadewijch," in *An Encyclopedia of Continental Women Writers, Volume A-K*, ed. Katherine M. Wilson (London: Taylor and Francis, 1991), 520. Here she 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." 520.

letting go takes her deeper into Love. The virtue of faith cannot propel her any deeper into the fruition of Love. Instead, her “noble unfaith,” a state characterized by intense non-fruition, can be said to do this work. “Noble unfaith” thus unsays Hadewijch’s usual spiritual practices, and it names, I want to suggest, a particular form of passionate non-attachment.

While Hadewijch never precisely defines what she means by “noble unfaith,” she explicitly refers to it three times in her body of work. In light of her integral dynamic of *ghebruken* and *ghebreken*, I next explore Hadewijch’s paradoxical concept of “noble unfaith” as seen in three specific focus texts: excerpts from couplet poem ten, vision thirteen, and letter eight.

Noble, Demanding Unfaith in Couplet Poem Ten

In this poem, which discusses the nature of *Minne* and how to best reach Her, Hadewijch first elaborates upon the superiority of desire for conquering 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, she discusses the quality of restlessness that *Minne* 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, “noble unfaith” is introduced 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 the work that “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.²⁰⁶

Hadewijch’s concept of “noble unfaith” is exceedingly rare, if not utterly unique in theology. In this excerpt, part of a couplet poem that discusses *Minne*’s demands on the lover, Hadewijch discusses desire as a force that Love encourages to increase—mainly by not allowing it any rest. *Minne*, the Ladylove, demands a response to Her love that includes “perturbation and turbulent unrest,” which propels the knight of love to work harder for Her sake in order to “conquer all that Love is.”

Next, Hadewijch contrasts faith or fidelity (*trouwe*) with unfaith (*ontrouwe*).²⁰⁷

Hadewijch declares that while fidelity problematically allows yearning to cease and desire to

²⁰⁶ Hadewijch, “Couplet Poem 10: No Feeling But Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 93-98, 337.

²⁰⁷ While the common translation of *ontrouwe* is “unfaith,” an alternative translation is “infidelity.” While I focus on “unfaith,” the translation “infidelity” leads to intriguing connotations regarding the actions of the lover of *Minne*.

be satisfied, unfaith, on the other hand, will not abide “letting desire be satisfied.” Since unfaith cannot abide the satisfaction and ceasing of desire, unfaith demands that faith must “be absent.” Faith thus gets in the way of Hadewijch’s remaining within Love’s reach because faith already has the satisfaction it seeks. Faith 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’s reach. 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.²⁰⁸

Such is the power of Hadewijch’s “unfaith,” but what of “*noble* unfaith”? What is it that makes this unfaith “noble”? Previously I listed Newman’s characteristics of *mystique courtoise*, which included “refinement in love as a badge of class distinction.”²⁰⁹ Hadewijch at times expresses such a sense of elitist 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.”²¹⁰ As she adds the descriptor “noble” to unfaith, she displays another example of this attitude. For her, “noble

²⁰⁸ Hadewijch, “Couplet Poem 10: Not Feeling But Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 66, 337.

²⁰⁹ Newman, 164.

²¹⁰ Hadewijch, “Vision 11: The Abyss of Omnipotence,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 83-5, 290.

unfaith” represents a choice for the spiritual elite who have the spiritual gifts and talents to persevere in noble battles with *Minne*.

Hadewijch’s martial, knightly imagery of fighting back against Love is another characteristic of her “noble unfaith.” In utilizing the tropes of *fine amour*, Hadewijch often employs imagery of combat to describe the conduct appropriate for the noble lovers of Love. Near the end of couplet poem ten, “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 me.”²¹¹ With such a skillful, stealthy opponent as *Minne*, Hadewijch must fight back with equal 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.”²¹² All is fair in this war with/of Love! The devotee is vanquished by Love and yet remains, paradoxically, unvanquished, as long as she fights back. She gives explicit advice to her fellow Beguines, framing her challenge as a dare to fight *Minne* with all of their noble resources: “[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.”²¹³

²¹¹ Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 16: Complaint and Surrender to Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 37, 169.

²¹² Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 39: Love’s Blows,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 53, 241.

²¹³ Hadewijch, “Letter 7: Assault on Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 9-11, 64.

In this “loving contest,”²¹⁴ each contender is a worthy foe, one to be respected. Neither is to be coerced or dominated, but instead engaged in a whole-bodied, whole-hearted fight with longing as its weapon. In the upcoming example of Hadewijch’s “noble unfaith,” she describes how unfaith gives her the “depth” to make her brave enough to fight love with longing.

Noble, Deepening Unfaith in Vision Thirteen

In this layered, complicated vision, titled by translator Columba Hart “The Six-Winged Countenance,” Hadewijch finds herself transported to a “new heaven.” Here, I examine the section of the vision that discusses “noble unfaith.” She first considers 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.²¹⁵

In possession of the seven gifts but not yet the eighth, the lovers begin to experience “noble unfaith”:

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.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 2nd ed., trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 13.

²¹⁵ Hadewijch, “Vision 8: The Six-Winged Countenance,” in *Hadewijch*, lines 179-82, 300.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 179-194.

Hadewijch sees Mary, the mother of Jesus, as one of those who has received all of the gifts. Mary then proceeds to tell her about the three conquering “voices of love”—reason, humility, and unfaith—and offers her this wisdom concerning unfaith:

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.²¹⁷

As unfaith is said to be the most “delightful” of *Minne*’s voices, Hadewijch images Love as not being able to stay away from the lover who voices unfaith. The voice of unfaith, then, will not allow God’s keeping a distance or withdrawing from the lover; instead, unfaith increases God’s longing and compels God closer.²¹⁸

As a heterodox virtue, noble unfaith hence subverts the traditional role of virtue for the devotee. In the *Brautmystik* tradition, certain virtues were valorized for their efficacy in bringing together the union of the soul and God. The virtue of patience, as seen previously in the image of the bride waiting on the arrival of the Bridegroom, for example, belongs to these traditional virtues. Through *mystique courtoise*, Hadewijch inverts and destabilizes the virtue of faith by finding unfaith within the traditional virtue and then paradoxically elevating unfaith over faith. *Minne* provides this gift of unfaith as a catalyst that keeps desire flowing bi-directionally, even as this flow turns both “sweet and bitter” along the way. Referencing the longing that the lover experiences, Hadewijch writes that *Minne* responds in kind:

²¹⁷ Ibid., lines 235-9, 301.

²¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa and other Greek fathers speak 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, spoke first about the power humans have to compel God to come forward.

That longing swallows up all Love's gifts,
And she must continually press this mode of action.²¹⁹

This conquering—accomplished by longing—is mutual; “Love conquers him so that he may conquer her.”²²⁰ Unfaith continues to enlarge love; it “spurs on, or indeed is, love’s desire for Love.”²²¹

The end of vision eight offers a glimpse of the “fathomless” abyss toward which unfaith leads her. Describing how *Minne* overcame her, Hadewijch “sank into the fathomless depth and came out of the spirit in that hour, of which one can never speak at all.”²²² In the next example of “noble unfaith,” I will continue to explore the abyssal power of “noble unfaith.”

Noble, Abyssal Unfaith in Letter Eight

Letter eight focuses on the two fears that grow as love develops between the lover and *Minne*. The first one is that the lover herself is “unworthy, that he cannot content such love.” Hadewijch then reveals the second fear and its connection to “noble unfaith”:

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

²¹⁹ Hadewijch, “Poems in Couplets 1: The Nature of Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 61-2, 213.

²²⁰ Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 40: Love’s Remoteness,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 33, 244.

²²¹ Milhaven, 61.

²²² Hadewijch, “Vision 13: The Six-Winged Countenance,” in *Hadewijch*, lines 255-7, 302.

than a fidelity that takes pleasure in what it has in the hand. This noble unfaith greatly enlarges consciousness.²²³

Continuing to discuss the work of noble unfaith, she writes:

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. And unfaith never allows fidelity to rest in any fidelity but 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.²²⁴

Letter eight echoes the themes of unsatisfied, increasing yearning in couplet poem ten and vision thirteen. 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. Fidelity, on the other hand, believes in the inevitability of the desired spiritual outcome and so can rest, but rest cannot be an option for Hadewijch. Because she believes Love is capable of loving her more than Love had been loving her, her longing increases.²²⁵ Unfaith, then, might be described as a bodily “willed desire,” the force of which cannot be stopped as it compels Love to match Hadewijch’s own desirously longing love.²²⁶

Instead of resting in the complacency of a perceived possession of Love, Hadewijch chooses to “love violently,” which results in some alarming physical and spiritual effects. Hadewijch’s desire for Love (*orewoet*) here is no domesticated desire; it is an unruly, wild

²²³ Hadewijch “Letter 8: Two Fears About Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 27-33, 65.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 34-42.

²²⁵ Milhaven, 62-65.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

force, translated by Mommaers “the desire that drives one mad.”²²⁷ In fear for her mind and body, Hadewijch details the symptoms of *orewoet* in vision seven:

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 is seemed to me . . . so that dying I must go mad and going mad I must die.²²⁸

Reeling from *orewoet*, Hadewijch describes a desire that flows through her whole body and threatens to overwhelm her faculties. With disquieting imagery, she writes about the melting of the lover’s soul along with other distortions of the physical body: a lost mind; an oppressed heart; and stretching, rupturing veins. One cannot help but wonder if this describes a discipline of desire or an extreme anxiety disorder. Is Hadewijch endorsing suffering as a means of attaining Love? What does one make, for example, of letter eight, which asserts, “[A]ll pain for the sake of Love must be pleasing to him”²²⁹

Attempting to answer such a question, Fraeters frames Hadewijch’s perspective on love and pain thusly: “[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.”²³⁰ What Fraeters frames as acceptance, however, Hadewijch often discusses in the language of submission. For example, she writes:

²²⁷ Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer—Begaine—Love Mystic*, 2.

²²⁸ Hadewijch, “Vision 7: Oneness in the Eucharist,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 3-10, 280.

²²⁹ Hadewijch, “Letter 8: Two Fear About Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 48-9, 65.

²³⁰ Fraeters, “Hadewijch,” 20.

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.²³¹

While language such as “nothing of myself remains to me” and “everything is lost in love” might be read as apophatic discourse, phrases such as “against my will” shift into images of coercion.

Some scholars have insisted that this kind of language is merely hyperbolic rhetoric. For example, Diana Neal writes that it is “language *in extremis* to express a love experienced *in extremis*.”²³² Certainly, it must also be noted, that the feminine pronouns for the one making her “unfree” of herself change the connotations of power somewhat, if not fully alleviating their worrisomeness. Others have insisted on the mutuality inherent in Hadewijch’s discourse of wounding, as understood in the context of *mystique courtoise*. For example, in a mutual wounding born of Love and marked by mutuality, one who is

²³¹ Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 24: Subjugation to Love,” *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 41-50, 194. Murk-Jansen in *The Measure of Mystic Thought* translates the first line, “I am overthrown by love” (140).

²³² Diana Neal, “Wounding and Healing: Reciprocity in Divine and Human Narratives: The Cases of Christina Mirabilis, Hadewijch, and Mechthild.” *New Blackfriars* 83, no. 972 (Feb 2002): 90.

submissive to Love ends up receiving “love’s unheard-of power.”²³³ In a mystical inversion of the virtue of strength, therefore, Hadewijch wounds and subdues Love when she submits to Love.

Hadewijch, as we have seen, urges fighting back as Love tries to conquer her, but *Minne* equips her for her struggle. As she fights with Love, she names “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.²³⁴

Proposing unfaith as a gift that can stand up 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.”²³⁵ 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 deeper into the abyss. In letter eight, Hadewijch asserts that “unfaith is higher than any fidelity that is not abysmal.” In this ironic juxtaposition of high and low, Hadewijch elevates both unfaith and any faith willing to sink into the abyss. She employs imagery of the divine abyss for three related purposes: 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.²³⁶ In the abyss, God and the soul commune deeply; the soul is a “bottomless abyss in

²³³ Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 6: Conquest of Love—At a Price,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 44, 142.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 149-150.

²³⁵ Murk-Jansen, “Hadewijch,” 675.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

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.”²³⁷ Describing the mutual need of the soul for God and God for the soul, Hadewijch shows both God and the soul to be bottomless abysses who meet together in the abyss.

In the above description of mutual communion, Hadewijch implies a restless lack of contentedness, or what could be called longing, that the soul *and* God experience for each other. Coming together in the abyss, they find a longed-for contentment in each other. In another letter, she continues to explore with abyssal imagery the 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.²³⁸

In this exceptional metaphor of a mutual, two-way passage 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 one of her visions, Hadewijch describes this meeting of God and soul in the abyss in the language of falling, lostness, and engulfment. 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.²³⁹

²³⁷ Hadewijch, “Letter 18,” in *Hadewijch and Her Sisters: Other Ways of Knowing and Loving*, trans. Milhaven, 31.

²³⁸ Hadewijch, “Letter 18: Greatness of the Soul,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 75-78, 86.

²³⁹ Hadewijch, “Vision 6: To Condemn and Bless with Christ,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 84-8, 279.

In the abyss of Love, Hadewijch suggests, there is an apophatic darkness in which she remains “engulfed and lost.” In couplet poem twenty-five, communion with *Minne* is evocatively described as “fathomless unknowing,” or an “abyss of unknowing” (*onweten*).²⁴⁰ The abyss that Hadewijch describes points to a Love that cannot be fully known, possessed, or pinned down. Evoking both the grief and frustration of non-fruit (*ghebreken*), Hadewijch’s abyss can, at the same time, be seen as a place of *ghebruken*, “a place of ravishment, erotic encounter with the divine Beloved.”²⁴¹ This description speaks to erotic joy and pleasure, of course, but, according to Jantzen, fruition primarily suggests procreation. As Jantzen makes the point, “This is more about making babies than about sexual ecstasy.” She elaborates on Hadewijch’s fecundity in a passage that deserves to be cited at length:

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.²⁴²

Hadewijch’s abyss, Jantzen argues, is a “life-giving” abyss that fuels the fertile, concrete works of compassion of Hadewijch and her Beguine sisters.²⁴³ Notwithstanding the

²⁴⁰ Hadewijch, “*Mengeldict 25*,” in *The Measure of Mystic Thought*, trans. Murk-Jansen, lines 1-3, 87.

²⁴¹ Grace M. Jantzen, “Eros and the Abyss: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity,” *Literature & Theology* 17, no. 3 (September 2003): 245.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 248.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 261.

importance of her essential argument, I emphasize also that these life-giving aspects exist together with the grief of her longing.

In these three explorations of Hadewijch’s “noble unfaith, we have seen that persistent longing leads to the “gift” of “noble unfaith.” The renunciative element of unfaith thus follows the cultivation of desire, which together results in a practice of passionate non-attachment. We have seen already the dangers of this desire (*oroweat*) as it threatens to overwhelm Hadewijch’s body and mind. As we saw in chapter two, Mirabai lives in similar circumstances much of the time, exclaiming in one song:

My body is in pain, my breath burning.
Come and extinguish the fire of separation.²⁴⁴

In the next section, I read Hadewijch through the lens of Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti*, asking, “What further insights about Hadewijch’s practices of longing can we glean by reading her alongside Mirabai?”

Reading Hadewijch with *Viraha-Bhakti*

While Hadewijch made use of *mystique courtoise*’s apt imagery to depict the continuum of her longing for *Minne*, *viraha-bhakti* provides a different grammar for articulating the oscillations 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 *praxis* of the cultivation of longing—provides a fruitful lens to consider Hadewijch’s practices of passionate non-attachment.

²⁴⁴ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 96,” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 74.

As discussed in detail in the previous chapter, *viraha-bhakti* can be described as a mystical eroticism of separation, and its primary dynamic involves the divinizing, oscillating movement between divine presence and absence. *Viraha-bhakti* is an entire way of life, a disciplined integration of unfocused energies into a focused yearning. We have already seen that *viraha-bhakti* envisions love-longing as both the method and the goal of spiritual practice. *Viraha-bhakti* is not the means to the goal of perfect union with the divine; rather, *viraha-bhakti* is in fact the goal itself. Complete unity with the divine is not necessarily waiting at the end of the journey; thus, a sole focus on endings or conclusions misses the middle spaces of longing that the *viraha-bhakti* path highlights.

Longing is the main mode of communion with the divine in Mirabai's songs, and when Hadewijch's writings on noble unfaith are read alongside Mirabai's *viraha-bhakti*, the primacy of Hadewijch's mode of longing comes to the forefront. Hadewijch's longing is the force through which she and *Minne* effect their mutual conquering. She writes of the 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.²⁴⁵

Hadewijch's longing unleashes the longing of God to catalyze the coming-together of the soul and God. At the moment when the desire for fruition with God comes up against Hadewijch's limits as a human being who cannot grasp the totality of God, the soul must stop all activity, save longing. Fruition for Hadewijch results from letting go of the idea that she

²⁴⁵ Hadewijch, "Poems in Stanzas 38: Nothingness in Love," *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 53-56, 238.

can match the divine love, but trying with all her passionate energy to “conquer” it anyway.²⁴⁶

As expressed in Mirabai’s songs, longing has an over-reaching, excessive quality, an understanding similarly seen in Hadewijch’s idea 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.”²⁴⁷ Put another way, the Reality beyond everything finds a fitting match in a lover with an overreaching longing that, as letter eight elucidates, stretches everything—mind, veins, and consciousness—in its 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-fruit. Earlier in this chapter, I asked whether Hadewijch’s longing was best characterized as a practice of desire or an anxiety disorder. Read in light of *viraha-bhakti*, I suggest that Hadewijch’s longing, even as it results in burdensome physical and mental consequences, may be best viewed as an acceptance of bodily life, rather than a glorification of suffering. Not courting pain, she may be said to accept the grief and pain inherent in longing as a given for her earthly, embodied life. Despite the value *viraha-bhakti* places on grief, it remains a life-affirming stance. A “delicious distress” stands at the heart of Mirabai’s *bhakti*;²⁴⁸ it is the sometimes painful, sometimes joyful presence-in-absence that emerges when she discovers the object of desire cannot be possessed. Rather than trying to escape her

²⁴⁶ Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer—Begaine—Love Mystic*, 114.

²⁴⁷ Mommaers, Preface to *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, xvi.

²⁴⁸ Shulman, “Modes of Meaning and Experience: *viraha* and *vilāiyātal*,” 15.

embodied longings, Hadewijch may be said to linger in these spaces, experiencing both *ghebrucken* and *ghebreken* together, a state Murk-Jansen deems “sweet abandonment.”²⁴⁹

When Mirabai practices *viraha-bhakti*, she leaves herself vulnerable to the desire and grief of her longing. “Abandonment scorches my heart,” she writes, “only those who have felt the knife can measure the wound’s deepness.”²⁵⁰ Hadewijch, too, writes of the wounds that Love creates in her:

Those to whom Love grants her wounds,
And shows how wide her knowledge is,
Desire keeps them open and unbound
And Love shines fiercely through.²⁵¹

When Neal writes of Hadewijch and her Beguine sisters that “the wound of love represents the failure of the project for *fulfilled* mystical union, not a divine rationale for self-inflicted torture,” she attempts to find a way to think responsibly about the wounding capabilities of love.²⁵² *Viraha-bhakti* provides another way into thinking about these “unbound” wounds that do not fully heal. Hadewijch, might be said to cultivate longing, as the *virahinīs* do, by learning to lean into, if not fully accept, the inevitable griefs of separation. In *viraha-bhakti*, longing exists as the highest expression of the bond between the human and the divine, and 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

²⁴⁹ Murk-Jansen, “Hadewijch,” 673.

²⁵⁰ Mirabai, “Mira is Mad with Love,” in *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems*, trans. Bly. and Hirshfield, 38.

²⁵¹ Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 14,” in “Some Aspects of Hadewijch’s Poetic Form in the ‘*Strofische Gedichten*,’” trans. Guest, 278.

²⁵² Neal, 90.

of the rapturous connection which only separation makes possible.”²⁵³ Less blissful aspects of life, including the emotional pain of longing, are to be embraced, valued and integrated in a full life with God. Hadewijch, in her own way, comes to realize that experiential states of unity with the divine—wonderful as they may be—are not the sole goal of her spiritual life. To crave 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.²⁵⁴

Viewed through the lens of *viraha-bhakti*, which accepts the emotional turmoil of separation as a sign of love, the experientially rich states of blissful fruition/*ghebruken* are not valued above the middle spaces of longing and non-fruition/*ghebreken*. Instead, for Hadewijch, the states of longing and grief that occur in the mystical life may be the more important and more lasting states. In these states, she remains freer to practice works of charity and the “justice of brotherly love,” for example.²⁵⁵ Writing about the importance of this work, Hadewijch asserts that “but when this enjoyment falters or sinks away, then one must perform all . . . works by justice and by right.”²⁵⁶ However, while she encourages a deep 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, Hadewijch writes of the beguine who is

²⁵³ Shulman, “Modes of Meaning and Experience: *viraha* and *viḷaiyāṭal*,” 11.

²⁵⁴ Hadewijch, “Poems in Couplets 10: Not Feeling But Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 9-11, 335.

²⁵⁵ Hadewijch, “Letter 12: The Jacob Letter,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 80-1, 71.

²⁵⁶ Hadewijch, “Letter 17” in *The Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Gordon Rudy, lines 87-90, 91.

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.²⁵⁷

She urges moderation in that same passage but adds that it “pleases [her] that you comfort and help all your friends, yes, the more the better.”²⁵⁸ As seen earlier in this chapter, Hadewijch is not stingy in her love but rather she is focused. For example, she achieves spiritual growth for “all” through her “perfect love” in vision ten.²⁵⁹

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.”²⁶⁰ Does a similar tension exist in Hadewijch’s continuum of *ghebreken* and *ghebruken*?

Reading Hadewijch alongside *viraha-bhakti* also brings into view her depiction of the middle spaces of longing, which can otherwise get obscured by the poles of fruition and non-fruition. For example, instead of prioritizing the completion of mystical union, or total presence, Mirabai’s middle spaces of longing values the spaces betwixt and between the poles of absence and presence. This strategy of viewing the mystical life avoids any tendency

²⁵⁷ Hadewijch, “Letter 5: False Brethren,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 38-43, 56.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, line 46-7.

²⁵⁹ In vision ten, 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!” *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 55-7, 288.

²⁶⁰ Green, 134.

to conceptualize “stages” of the mystical life on a straight continuum that begins in separation and ends in union.

As Hadewijch practices longing in the middle spaces of presence-in-absence, Hadewijch learns that “the incompleteness of this blissful fruition is yet the sweetest fruition.”²⁶¹ In this stunning realization, which Mommaers calls her “phenomenological pearl,”²⁶² she explicitly values the “sweetest” *incompletion* of the fruition between herself *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.”²⁶³

Her “phenomenological pearl,” when read alongside *viraha-bhakti*, takes on even deeper resonances around the theme of incompleteness and the never-completed work of longing. As such, *viraha-bhakti* employs a logic that does not equate incompleteness with either masochism or failure. Hadewijch’s understanding of the incomplete yet satisfying relationship of longing between the lover and the Beloved echoes and honors life’s vicissitudes; that is, it does not set a mystical peace and satisfaction 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 but celebrates a passionate, embodied longing in which

²⁶¹ Hadewijch, “Letter 16: Loving God with His Own Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 16-7, 80.

²⁶² Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer—Begaine—Love Mystic*, 4.

²⁶³ Hadewijch, “Letter 16: Loving God with His Own Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 20-3, 80.

indeed “the incompleteness of this blissful fruition is yet the sweetest fruition.”²⁶⁴ In the light of *viraha-bhakti*, Hadewijch may be read as embracing her embodiedness with its incumbent limits and bittersweet longings while also cultivating a vulnerability born from the uncertainties of longing.

For Mirabai, her longing manifests more longing, and “the love that appears is nothing less than God.”²⁶⁵ Longing, we have seen, is also at the heart of Hadewijch’s concept of *Minne*. I have already discussed *Minne* as a polyvalent term, one that can name the divine, the self, and the loving bond between the two, among other compelling translations. As we read Hadewijch through the lens of the *viraha-bhakti*, we see more clearly how longing describes the bond between the Hadewijch’s self and the divine, and “longing” comes into view as a viable translation for *Minne*. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the Love she calls *Minne* yearns for Hadewijch, as Hadewijch yearns for her. Consider these lines from couplet poem seventeen that points to 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.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Ibid., lines 16-7, 80.

²⁶⁵ Lance E. Nelson, “The Ontology of Bhakti: Devotion as Paramapurusa-rtha in Gaudīya Vaisnavism and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 no. 4 (2004): 390. His thesis is that these Hindu sects worked to reconceptualize *bhakti* “in such a way that it attained ontological parity with *mokṣa*,” and I extend this reading to Mirabai’s practice of *viraha-bhakti*. (388).

²⁶⁶ Hadewijch, “Couplet Poem 1: The Nature of Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart. lines 17-20, 311.

Here, 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.” Then, in the following two lines, echoing the syntax of the previous couplet, she refers to longing in parallel terms with Love, lending an explicit cast of divinity to longing itself. She also refers to longing as the way one should see; that is, she proposes an erotically-charged epistemology for viewing the world. It should also be noted Hadewijch extends the blessing in this prayer-poem to her community, as she longs for others, too, to see with “longing in longing.”

Moving into the next chapter, we will continue to explore the areas that open up when Mirabai and Hadewijch meet across the centuries, miles, religions, and cultures, as the winds of comparative theology cross-fertilize the mystics’ respective energies of desire and non-attachment. To this end, we will contemplate their juxtaposed practices of longing, which shape the contours of their mysticisms that never lose sight of the beauty and suffering of the world.

Chapter 4

Comparative Practices of Passionate Non-Attachment in Hadewijch and Mirabai

In the previous two chapters, paying particular attention to 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 *Minne*, to use their respective epithets for the divine, Mirabai and Hadewijch negotiate these separations and communions with different permutations of passionate non-attachment. Within both Hinduism and Christianity, non-attachment and desire have sometimes presented as opposing forces, but Hadewijch and Mirabai each illuminate, from their respective traditions, the integral, tensile relationship between desire and non-attachment. In this chapter, I keep asking, as Hadewijch and Mirabai are read together, “What can be learned about the interdependencies of non-attachment and desire in each tradition?”

Thus far, each woman, in her own way, has shown that a passionate love longing necessitates certain kinds of renunciations, or non-attachments. This understanding of the interdependencies of desire and non-attachment represents a framework with space for Mirabai’s and Hadewijch’s unique particularities, such as were explicated in the previous two chapters. Thinking passionate non-attachment with Mirabai in chapter two, I focused on *viraha-bhakti* as a way of exploring the middle spaces of longing where Mirabai mostly dwells—spaces between complete union and utter separation. *Viraha-bhakti* encompasses modes of desire, grief, and renunciation, as seen in depictions of her “yogic marriage.” Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti* thus leaves room for non-attachment in her embraces of erotic, embodied love, as well as space for the erotic in her yogic wanderings through the forest.

Through her practices of longing, she cultivates a grief that takes her deeper into communion with the divine, despite and even *because* of Krishna’s absence. As such, Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti* recognizes presence-in-absence as a mark of a sustaining, desirous mutual relationship with the divine.

Then, thinking passionate non-attachment with Hadewijch in chapter three, I pointed to “noble unfaith” as naming a specific kind of passionate non-attachment, which 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*. In that same chapter, reading Hadewijch in light of Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti*, I first explored the resonances between Hadewijch’s oscillations of lack of fruition (*ghebreken*) and fruition (*ghebruken*), and *viraha-bhakti*’s embracing of both grief and bliss. Then I mined these resonances to uncover clues for understanding Hadewijch’s states of *ghebreken* and *ghebruken* as interrelated modes of being expressing different aspects of love-longing. As states of 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 and letting go 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 this dissertation’s most explicitly comparative chapter, I continue to explore the double oscillations between Mirabai and Hadewijch, and between desire and non-attachment. First, in the comparative theological spirit in which I read Hadewijch’s *ghebruken*,

ghebreken, and “noble unfaith” through the lens of Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti*, I now turn to what can be learned about Mirabai’s passionate non-attachment by reading her songs of *viraha-bhakti* through the lens of Hadewijch’s love-longing. Then in the next sections, I will continue reading Hadewijch and Mirabai alongside one another, allowing cross-fertilizations to occur around three overlapping aspects of their longings: communal longing, middle spaces of mutual longing, and “practices of attachment.” In the last part of the chapter, I begin to explore how their respective love-longings, including apophatic hints in their writings, may be understood as pivotal to their own senses of theological anthropology, each marked in different ways by passionate non-attachment. At this juncture, I 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”

Hadewijch’s paradoxical concept of “noble unfaith” provides a fecund lens through which to consider Mirabai’s songs of *viraha-bhakti*. As an obvious beginning point for this lens of “noble unfaith,” Mirabai herself was nobility, a princess who, as she waited for the arrival of the divine, may be said to suffer challenges to her faith. Perhaps, when this noblewoman continually laments her separation from Krishna, she might also be understood as practicing a kind of “noble unfaith.” After all, she must cope with his going away while she stays behind, and she cannot know or trust that he is coming back. She laments his absence in the following 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.²⁶⁷

As she waits on him without knowing whether he will return, might she be understood as having developed an “unfaith” in her Lord? What relationship might Hadewijch’s “noble unfaith” have with the noble Mirabai’s love-longing?

Discussing the modes and goals of her “noble unfaith,” Hadewijch writes:

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.²⁶⁸

Having considered Hadewijch’s martial imagery in the previous chapter, here I note her use of the word “conquer” four times in this letter—three times in its last six lines excerpted above. Hadewijch’s imagery of fighting to conquer connotes direct activity, an attack on her part. “Noble unfaith” exists as a weapon in this battle with *Minne*. The previously discussed Letter eight 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.”²⁶⁹ 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

²⁶⁷ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 43: Suffering in Absence,” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 52.

²⁶⁸ Hadewijch, “Couplet Poem 10: Not Feeling But Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 93-98, 337.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, “Letter Eight: Two Fears about Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 37-8, 65.

needs—longing—to fight Love and conquer “all that Love is.” As discussed in the previous chapter, Hadewijch’s conquering is part of a process of mutual conquering. Succinctly explaining the reciprocity, Hadewijch writes, “Love conquers him so that he may conquer her.”²⁷⁰

Contrasted with 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, when Mirabai rues, “he’s never returned, / he’s never sent me a single word,” the repetition of the word “never” reveals Mirabai’s sober point of view. Rather than adopt a victorious tone of conquering as Hadewijch often does, Mirabai acknowledges that she and Krishna may remain separated for some time longer. In her *Kṛiṣṇaite bhakti* tradition, precedent exists for such a continued separation. In Krishna mythology, after his period of communing with the *gopīs* in the forest, there comes a time when he leaves for his birthplace Mathura, never returning to dance again with the *gopīs*.²⁷¹ Accordingly, Mirabai does not mitigate her lament with an assurance of his return, and longing remains the *modus operandi* for her and all *virahinīs*.

In contrast, Hadewijch presents the way of “noble unfaith” as a choice only some lovers of *Minne* will undertake. Standing out in greater relief against the democratization of longing seen in Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti*, an inherent elitism exists on Hadewijch’s “noble” path. Vision thirteen, for example, names alternative ways to love *Minne*: one may choose

²⁷⁰ Ibid., “Poems in Stanzas 40: Love’s Remoteness,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 33, 244.

²⁷¹ Tracey Coleman, “Viraha-Bhakti and Strīdharmā: Re-Reading the Story of Kṛiṣṇa and the Gopīs in the Harivaṃśa and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130, no. 3 (2010): 387. Here, Coleman discusses how Krishna’s final departure in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* creates Krishna’s ultimate unattainability for devotees.

the way of reason or humility, but the way of unfaith comes recommended to Hadewijch by none other than Mary, the Mother of Jesus. 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.”²⁷² Like a siren call, the desire born of unfaith becomes the “noise” that *Minne* cannot resist; however, this desire is not without its consequences for the one brave enough to engage it.

Letter eight displays the 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.²⁷³

Through the use of the subjunctive verb tense, Hadewijch’s writing displays a sense of the hypothetical. That is to say 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 writes, “*even though* anyone loves so violently” or “*even if* anyone loves Love so violently.” Taking the path of loving Love with excessive, violent love, rather than the measured paths of reason or humility, remains a choice for Hadewijch, as she expresses through the subjunctive tense.

The option to choose longing does not likewise characterize Mirabai’s songs. Her literary style often includes vividly sensory details combined with the present verb tense, bringing the reader/singer directly into the heart of *viraha-bhakti*. For her, her love affair

²⁷² Hadewijch, “Vision 13: The Six-Winged Countenance,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 233-5, 301.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, “Letter 8: Two Fears About Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 34-8, 65.

with Krishna happens now, not in the hypothetical future for a select few who may choose that path. For example, 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.²⁷⁴

Plucking flowers and pulling on robes, Krishna comes and goes in the here and now; thus, the initial shock and sting of their separation 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 end up entangled in the longing and grief of *viraha-bhakti*. Even though one may choose specific practices of longing, there is a matter-of-fact inevitability to the mode of *viraha-bhakti*. Knowing that separation cannot be sidestepped, Mirabai fearlessly faces into the ambiguities of her relationship with Krishna.

Hadewijch's "noble unfaith," in contrast, is driven by her fears. 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."²⁷⁵ This fear increases restless longing. Describing the reason for such restlessness, 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."²⁷⁶ The second fear is the inverse: the fear that Love does not love the lover enough. Here, these twin fears create a

²⁷⁴ Mirabai, "jogiyāri prītaṛī," in *For Love of the Dark One*, trans. Schelling, 45.

²⁷⁵ Hadewijch, "Letter 8: Two Fears About Love," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 3-4, 64.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 8-10, 64.

distrust not only of Love, but also of the self. The lover cannot trust that Love is loving her enough, and desire for *Minne* heightens as a result. Similarly, she cannot trust that she herself is loving *Minne* enough, and desire increases. For Hadewijch, fear both creates and sustains her “noble unfaith.”

In contrast, Mirabai is known for her fearlessness. “She had no fear,” the *Bhaktamāl* declares.²⁷⁷ Even when she experiences Krishna’s abandonment, fear does not manifest in her songs. For instance, 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 . . .²⁷⁸

Even as she mourns Krishna’s absence in this song, Mirabai does not express fear about the cause of their separation; that is, she does not fear that Krishna does not love her. Here, she makes threefold declarative statements: “he’s left me behind / he’s never returned, / he’s never sent me a single word.” These dramatic statements might inspire fear for some, but as we have discussed, *viraha-bhakti* 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 also does not fear that she does not love him enough; her longing speaks for itself in that regard.

²⁷⁷ Nābhādās, *Śrī Bhaktamāl, with the Bhaktirasabodhinī Commentary of Priyādas* (Lucknow: Tejkumār Press, 1969), 712-13, quoted and translated in Hawley, John Stratton and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 123.

²⁷⁸ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s Pada 68,” in *Three Bhakti Voices*, trans. Hawley, 121.

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

While fear does not figure into her response to her separation from Krishna, grief certainly does. The tradition of *viraha-bhakti* embraces the emotions of grief. Because grief results from the recognition of separation between the lover and Beloved, grief demonstrates the intimacy between the human and the divine. At times Mirabai models herself on the *gopīs* who devoted themselves completely to Krishna. For example, in the song about the Bhil woman, Mirabai calls herself “a cowherding Gokul girl.”²⁷⁹ Leaving their work undone and abandoning their families (including their husbands), the *gopīs* joyfully ran into the forests of Braj to frolic with their lover whenever he arrived. As Mirabai waits for Krishna to come back, she acts as a waiting *gopī*—mourning, yet expectant. She is ready to participate once again in love play with Krishna, even as she knows his return may not be imminent or even assured.

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

Me—
my love's in a distant land

²⁷⁹ Mirabai, “Caturvedī's Pada 186,” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 137.

Hadewijch III, due to what they read as incongruous themes and literary conventions in the body of work traditionally attributed to her. Their literary corporas were thus created by multiple voices of longing.

As part of an oral culture still flourishing today, Mirabai's songs, we have seen, cannot be understood outside of their performance in a communal setting. In contrast, Hadewijch's work has been traditionally parsed and studied as written texts, rather than as part of a performative/oral tradition, but such a reading has come under criticism. Her letters and visions were most likely read aloud to her community, and musicologist Louis Grijp has found models for five of Hadewijch's stanzaic poems among medieval troubadour songs and hymns.²⁸¹ This suggests that the stanzaic poems were sung, but even if they were not, they were most likely read aloud, along with her visions and letters, for the benefit of the Beguines. In addition, Anikó Daróczi, a scholar of medieval Dutch mysticism, has hypothesized that Hadewijch's prose texts were heard by the Beguines collectively in a ritual consisting of hearing the texts and of responsive song.²⁸² Similarly to how Mirabai's songs were created and sustained by a collective of *bhakta* voices composing and singing together, Hadewijch's work, too, may have relied on ritual performance, bringing longing to fuller fruition in her community. Both women's voices of longing thus become extended by others, who responded and wrote new texts in their own longing voices.

It is also important to note that the songs of Mirabai and the writings of Hadewijch

²⁸¹ Veerle Fraeters, forward to *Hadewijch: Writer—Beguine—Love Mystic*, by Paul Mommaers with Elizabeth Dutton (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2005), x. She discusses Louis P. Grijp, "De zingende Hadewijch," in *Een zoet akkoord. Middeleeuwse lyriek in de Lage Landen* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1992), 72-93.

²⁸² Ibid. Fraeters points to the work of Anikó Daróczi, *Hadewijch. Ende hieromme swighic sachte* (Amsterdam-Antwerp: Atlas, 2002).

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 mostly likely also knew, Hadewijch chose the language of many of her less educated Beguine sisters and those living in the surrounding communities. In like manner, the *bhakti* movement is known for its embracing of the vernacular languages of local poets and singers, rather than the Sanskrit language of traditional Hindu rituals and texts. Mirabai, writing in local languages (possibly Gujurati or Rajasthani) that were soon translated into Hindi, fits this pattern that opens up the devotional life to countless devotees, who then wrote songs in her name in their 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's and Hadewijch's writings 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 is mixed with the grief of the thwarting of that full union—where most of their writing is located. In the texts we have been examining, Hadewijch and Mirabai voice the difficulties of their separations from the divine presence: both are restless, yearning, wanting more. Not only do they ache for more of the divine presence, they each indicate that their yearning may deliver this presence. Expressing this view, Hadewijch explains:

Noble faith cannot rest
as long as it does not conquer to the hilt.²⁸³

²⁸³ Hadewijch, "Couplet Poem 10: Not Feeling But Love," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 95-6, 337.

She expresses her confidence in the desire, fear, and grief of noble unfaith to effect a conquering, one that she describes as mutual. In a less direct way, Mirabai, too, acts as if she may influence Krishna through her practices of grieving. Acting as the memory of Krishna, she recalls to him their intimate relationship when he seems to have forgotten. Expressing their affective bond, Mirabai calls Krishna “my loved one” and “my dark one,” for example, in her songs. In the midst of separation, she displays her sense of a continuing intimate relationship with him. “My love for Him,” she writes, “is ancient and long-standing.”²⁸⁴

In its varying oscillations of absence and presence, the cultivation of longing for the divine *is* the path of liberation for Mirabai; that is, *viraha-bhakti* serves as an integral part of *mokṣa*. A common saying in *bhakti* is that the devotee does not want to *be* sugar, she wants to *taste* sugar. In other words, she does not want to be completely subsumed in the divine presence. She thus desires to relate to God as herself, which necessitates separation and a concomitant longing for a closer union. For Mirabai, liberation consists of this “tasting” as it exists in the presence-in-absence of *viraha-bhakti*. Using this imagery, 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.²⁸⁵

Even a song that speaks of a “happy ending” of ultimate togetherness (and most songs do not) speaks of a qualified nondualism with difference intact. For example, in the following

²⁸⁴ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 20,” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 41.

²⁸⁵ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 16,” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 39.

verse, Mirabai is not fully united with Krishna, even in the vision of their reunion.

This coming and going will end,
says Mira,
with me clasping your
feet forever.²⁸⁶

Further exploring the soteriological aspects of yearning, Sangari locates yearning in women's bodies in her reading of *bhakti* and its deployment of gendered Hindu metaphysics. Discussing how *bhakti* grounds metaphysical principles, she reveals yearning to be a female force that manifests divine love:

. . . since 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.²⁸⁷

Sangari first asserts that embodied life necessitates separation, which results in yearning. Here, *maya* is presented not solely as the “illusion” of *Vedānta* thought, but as the necessary state of loving while embodied. It is, in her words, the “human condition.” Here, she extrapolates yearning as the human condition from two sources: the life of Mirabai and the gendered way that the body/soul distinction is often framed in Hindu metaphysics.²⁸⁸ The yearning usually seen as inherently female becomes fully and necessarily human; that is, the “female” state of yearning gets reconfigured as the human condition. One of the functions of

²⁸⁶ Mirabai, “karaṇām suṇi syām merī,” *For Love of the Dark One*, trans. Schelling, 61.

²⁸⁷ Sangari, 1547.

²⁸⁸ This refers to the classical *Sāṃkhya* 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 cleaving of spirit and matter, or soul and body.

bhakti has always been to “existentialize metaphysical insights, to translate into the lived world experience an abstract relationship.”²⁸⁹ Accordingly, I suggest that the embodiment of the metaphysical value of longing is one of the great gifts of *viraha-bhakti*. Mirabai’s vivid details of color, movement and music express a metaphysic of love-longing in sensory, bodily ways. She writes in one song:

Drumming out the rhythm on the drum, I danced,
dancing in the presence of the saints,
colored with the color of my Lord.²⁹⁰

Even as part of Mirabai’s fleshed-out experience of longing include, as per the above example, the joys of drumming and dancing in the colorful community of the saints, suffering is also part of this experience, Sangari reminds us. As we have seen, 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: she or he “will lose his mind, and his heart feels oppression, and his veins continually stretch and rupture, and his soul melts.”²⁹¹ These are all signs of her increasing desire. In one song, Mirabai matter-of-factly calls herself an “utter wreck,” due to her one-time liaison with Krishna.²⁹² Even as Mirabai experiences her very self coming undone, she nonetheless finds the presence, fullness, and satisfaction that paradoxically exists in the heart of *viraha-bhakti*.

²⁸⁹ Singh, 11.

²⁹⁰ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 37,” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 134.

²⁹¹ Hadewijch, “Letter Eight: Two Fears about Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, 134-6, 65.

²⁹² Mirabai, “jogiyāri prītaṛī,” in *For Love of the Dark One*, trans. Schelling, 45.

To use the common Indian image of nectar, *viraha-bhakti* is the sweet nectar that transforms the pain of the separation into joy.

Explicating the paradox in a different 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 karmic time, which contains the past in the present.²⁹³ As Mirabai waits and practices *viraha-bhakti*, the future stays open, and possibilities for her ongoing relationship with the divine can evolve with elements of novelty.

Complete union with the divine does not mark the only goal for Hadewijch and Mirabai; instead, each emphasizes the middle spaces of longing as the focus for their lives, loves, and writing. In these ways, each mystic also destabilizes traditional understandings of peak mystical experiences. Both Mirabai and Hadewijch, in different ways, point to the middle places of longing between infinite desire and no desire. Mirabai is “life after life, a virginal harvest for [Krishna] to reap.”²⁹⁴ Through her cosmology of no ultimate beginning and end, she emphasizes the eternal significance of the in-between spaces. Describing the middle places where she waits, she attests:

You have set the boat of love in motion
And abandoned it on the ocean of longing.²⁹⁵

Hadewijch’s primary state, as we have seen, is one of restless incompleteness. “Love

²⁹³ Sangari, 1551.

²⁹⁴ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s Pada 51,” in *Three Bhakti Voices*, trans. Hawley, 126.

²⁹⁵ Mirabai, Caturvedī’s Pada 64,” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 60.

does not allow [desire] to have any rest,”²⁹⁶ Hadewijch cautions, but affirms that “the incompleteness of this blissful fruition is yet the sweetest fruition.”²⁹⁷ I submit that, for both of them, the in-between spaces, where desire and grief can flourish, represent their foci.

Hadewijch’s and Mirabai’s Practices of Attachment

One thing that has become clear thus far is that neither Hadewijch nor Mirabai holds desire lightly; both women desire the divine with their whole selves. Hadewijch loves Love so intensely that she finds fear at the perceived limits of both herself and of Love. “Noble unfaith” gives her a tool—increased desire—to let go beyond those limits. For example, in vision eight, she describes how unfaith takes souls into the deep abyss where they may engage in battle with *Minne*: “Unfaith made them so deep that they wholly engulfed Love and dared to fight her with sweet and bitter.”²⁹⁸ Increased desire thus precedes a letting go into “noble unfaith.” In her spiritual practice, she first cultivates desire as a weapon to conquer Love. She writes of “noble knights,” who “in burning desire, labor with great combat and fierce assault for noble Love.”²⁹⁹ 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 represents can be seen as a mercy to her, as she copes

²⁹⁶ Hadewijch, “Couplet Poem 10: Not Feeling But Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 93, 337.

²⁹⁷ Hadewijch, “Letter 16: Loving God with His Own Love,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 16-7, 80.

²⁹⁸ Hadewijch, “Vision 13: The Six-Winged Countenance,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 86-88, 300.

²⁹⁹ Hadewijch, “Letter 18: Greatness of the Soul,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 24-6, 85.

with states of ecstatic, frenzied desire. Preserving the integrity of her longing, herself, and God, non-attachment prevents a capitulation to a maddening desire (*orewoet*).

If Hadewijch primarily cultivates desire as her primary practice of longing, Mirabai primarily cultivates the grief of separation. Mirabai's songs often find her *in medias res* of her love story with Krishna, a tale that has played out between them throughout multiple lifetimes. She says of their eternal love:

I have talked to you,
 dark lifter of Mountains, talked,
 About this old love,
 From birth after birth.³⁰⁰

Thus, there is no clear beginning or end to this cyclical love story of longing. Her songs find her deeply in the midst of longing, cultivating the grief that has resulted. She attests: “On beholding his beauty, I long for him much.”³⁰¹

Mirabai's and Hadewijch's primary spiritual practices, I submit, each consist of cultivating attachment, rather than non-attachment. Neither wants to lessen or let go of these attachments; instead, each nurtures their growth. Hadewijch yearns to the point of almost breaking from her maddening desire, but nurtures desire regardless, as “Love is always possessed in violent longing.”³⁰² Celebrating her own attachment to the divine, Mirabai

³⁰⁰ Mirabai, “Caturvedī's Pada 51,” in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 138.

³⁰¹ Mirabai, “Caturvedī's Pada 20,” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 41.

³⁰² Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 20: Love's Sublimity,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 35, 181.

sings, “Strong had my attachment grown to the peacock crowned dancer.”³⁰³ In another song, she reiterates, “I have become attached to your face, beloved Mohan, I have become attached to your face.”³⁰⁴ She does not long to be rid of her attachment, no matter how difficult the accompanying grief; in fact, she takes measures to make the attachment stronger. She details her plan and its destined result, “With tears I watered love’s creeper and it took root.” She ends this song with a third-person affirmation of their strong connection, “Mira’s attachment is strong—what was to happen has happened.”

Through the strength of their attachments, both mystics find their way into energies of non-attachment. That is to say, as each cultivates longing, non-attachment *happens* in the midst of their yearnings. In different yet resonant ways, desire and grief cracks their selves wide open, and they each grieve their inabilities to fully grasp and understand the divine. 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.³⁰⁵

As it emerges, energies of non-attachment do not stamp out desire however. Rather, non-attachment encourages desire to flourish further by sustaining an interval between the

³⁰³ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 9,” in “Poison to Nectar: The Life and Work of Mirabai,” *Manushi* 50-51-52, trans. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (January-June 1989), 89.

³⁰⁴ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 18,” in “Poison to Nectar: The Life and Work of Mirabai,” *Manushi* 50-51-52, trans. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (January-June 1989), 70.

³⁰⁵ Mommaers points out how the etymology of the word “comprehension” itself points to the human’s grasping reflex. As Hadewijch lets go of comprehension of the ways she believed the spiritual life functions, she lets go of grasping for the totality of the self and the other. See *Hadewijch: Writer—Beguine—Love Mystic*, 108.

lover and the beloved. Through the preservation of a space between the lover and the beloved, non-attachment keeps desire alive, as desire needs the difference and space of separation in order to avoid a grasping, consuming concupiscence. The oscillation between desire and non-attachment thus nourishes Hadewijch's and Mirabai's human-divine bonds of longing.

In this recycling of energies, non-attachment and desire are seen to be intimately connected, and neither is ultimately privileged. Non-attachment is not the highest goal, and neither is erotic communion. 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, as seen in Mirabai and Hadewijch, is not explicitly cultivated, but instead functions as an outgrowth of excessive desire and grief. This understanding of non-attachment is different from most traditional notions of renunciation, yet this concept finds a precedent in *bhakti*. In his work with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, an important *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* text, Schweig details the differences between its spontaneous, love-based renunciation and traditional Indic notions of renunciation:

. . . the 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.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ Schweig, 3.

Here, the focused longing of the *gopīs* results in a “spontaneously arising” non-attachment that does not focus on an individualistic renunciation, but is instead cultivated in loving relationships.

To summarize, 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 senses of the self, the divine and longing itself.³⁰⁷ Looking closer at these respective *askeses*, in the next section I consider apophatic elements of their practices.

Hadewijch, Mirabai, and the Apophatic

Michael Sells has written of the apophatic path of unsaying and unknowing, “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.”³⁰⁸ Such moments of vulnerability have been key to our exploration of passionate non-attachment in both Mirabai and Hadewijch. For example, practices of longing create vulnerability as Mirabai lets go of shame and societal expectations and Hadewijch lets go of faith in “noble unfaith.” Can Mirabai’s and/or Hadewijch’s passionate non-attachment be read as part of an apophatic discourse? Are there ways that they can be said to unsay or unknow the divine?

³⁰⁷ 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.” *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

³⁰⁸ Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Language of Unsayings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 217.

Mirabai's *saguna bhakti* (divinity with attributes) tradition focuses on *naming* the divine rather than an apophatic unnamings. To be sure, Hadewijch is not usually viewed as part of an explicit tradition of negative theology either, since speculative mysticism assumes more philosophical training than medieval women could obtain. Nonetheless, as I noted in chapter three, I posit traces of the apophatic in Hadewijch's mysticism of the abyss. For example, attempting to describe *Minne*'s dark mystery as she communes with Love in the abyss, she writes, "The soul sees and it sees nothing."³⁰⁹ In a stanzaic poem, she intriguingly calls this abyss, "the abyss of unknowing" (*ontweten*).³¹⁰ In these examples, signaling perhaps some awareness of the apophatic tradition, Hadewijch's concept of *Minne* goes beyond description and knowing. She writes of *Minne*:

In the divinity
of personality
is no shape at all . . .³¹¹

Reading Mirabai alongside Hadewijch's abyssal mysticism, might we find hints of the apophatic in Mirabai's songs as well? In chapter two, I discussed the apophatic spaces of Mirabai's multiple, shifting identities. Because Mirabai is important to multiple groups and the historical details of her life remain incomplete, these details tend to blossom into multiple forms and interpretations—multiple Mirabai's. As many things to many people, her identity can be said to function apophatically as an unknowable, unsayable space sustained by a

³⁰⁹ Hadewijch, "Letter 28: Trinitarian Contemplation Caught in Words," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 129-30, 111.

³¹⁰ Hadewijch, "Mengeldict 25," in *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch's Mengeldichten*, trans. Murk-Jansen, lines 1-3, 87.

³¹¹ Hadewijch, "Mengeldict 20," in *The Measure of Mystic Thought*, trans. Murk-Jansen, lines 1-3, 36.

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. Revathi Krisnaswamy uses the language of unmaking and undoing, if not unsaying, to discuss Mirabai's relationships with her family. With Krishna, Mirabai has an "unruly relationship that is an unmaking, an undoing of man-made relationships."³¹² In the following song, for example, she makes the choice to unsay her human marriage in her loyalty to Krishna:

Life without Hari is no life, my friend,
 And though my mother-in-law fights,
 my sister-in-law teases,
 the *rana* is angered,
 A guard is stationed on a stool outside,
 and a lock is mounted on the door,
 How can I abandon the love I have loved
 In life after life?
 Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter:
 Why would I want anyone else?³¹³

Harassed and mocked by her husband's family, she is locked inside her room, but her love still burns strongly, angering her earthly husband, the *rana*.³¹⁴ The bond she has with Krishna—one that has endured "life after life"—unsays her bond with her husband and the

³¹² Revathi Krisnaswamy, "Subversive Spirituality: Woman as Poet-Saint in Medieval India." *Womens's Studies International Forum* 16, no. 2 (1993): 142.

³¹³ Mirabai, "Caturvedī's *Pada* 42," in *Songs of the Saints of India*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 134.

³¹⁴ As footnoted previously, in some stories, the *rana* is identified as her husband; in others, he is her brother-in-law.

rest of her family. “Why would I want anyone else?” she says of Krishna, displaying where her fidelity lies.

Despite these unsayings of stories and familial bonds, Mirabai is rightly classified as a predominantly *saguna bhakti* writer, although she is also recognized as having written *nirguna* (divinity without attributes) songs.³¹⁵ While *saguna* and *nirguna bhakti* need each other to function theologically and are not mutually exclusive, Mirabai is known 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, loveliness . . . but what about that last name? What might she mean when she invokes his darkness?

In one song, she speaks of 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.³¹⁶

Here, I suggest, Mirabai employs images that evoke the 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.”³¹⁷ Lost in longing for Krishna brought about by his music, Mirabai 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,

³¹⁵ A poem attributed Mirabai was found in the *Kartārpur Bīr* of 1604, a predecessor of the Sikh text *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. See Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 99-100.

³¹⁶ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 166,” in *Songs of the Saints*, trans. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 136.

³¹⁷ Hadewijch, “Letter 27: Ultimate Motives for Humility,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 5-7, 107.

combined with these other images of darkness and her confused senses, “cut loose from their moorings,” perhaps the darkness refers to more than the color of Krishna’s skin. I suggest the darkness may also refer to the opaque mystery of Krishna himself. As Krishna is mysterious opacity, the image suggests that so is Mirabai’s very self, “clad in dark garments,” as she longs for him. 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” (*ontweten*). When she finds herself in the abyss, she finds herself in a state of unknowing: in its abyssal state, “the soul sees and it sees nothing.”³¹⁸ 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 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.³¹⁹

While Jantzen describes both God and the soul as “abysses of Love desiring incarnation,” Kathryn Tanner’s connection of apophatic theology to apophatic anthropology articulates another way to describe the abyssal relationship between humans and God. Working with 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

³¹⁸ Hadewijch, “Letter 29: Trinitarian Contemplation Caught in Words,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 127-30, 111.

³¹⁹ Grace M. Jantzen, “Eros and the Abyss: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity,” 248.

anthropology is the result of an apophatic theology.³²⁰ However, her concept goes further, as she works out what it might mean for humans to share an apophatic “nature.” In Tanner’s notion of the self’s “plasticity,” unknowingness exists about what kind of self one is “naturally.”³²¹ The knowledge is simply not available to us. She explains, “[H]umans might have a nature that imitates God only by not having a clearly delimited nature.”³²² In other words, humans stand out by their failure to be clearly limited by a particular nature as other creatures are. One thus has the opportunity to select what one will become based on the object of attachment one chooses. Attachment, argues Tanner, has the potential to perfect human nature. As Tanner discusses the potential benefits of attachment, she leaves the specifics of the objects of attachment intriguingly open, besides saying that for Christians 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.

In an apophatic anthropology, the self resists privatization into a hardened sense of identity that denies relationality. The power of relationality is compromised when, in Tanner’s words, “an already established nature or identity could determine all by itself what

³²⁰ Kathryn Tanner, “In the Image of the Invisible,” in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, eds. Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 118. Here, she 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, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 396-97.

³²¹ Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40-57.

³²² Tanner, “In the Image of the Invisible,” 121.

one might become in sovereign independence of entanglements with others.”³²³ Here, an icy isolationism, one that desires self-possession and denies the fires of warmer connective energies that make and unmake the self, emerges as a fiction.

Moving into the next chapter, I look to Hadewijch’s and Mirabai’s texts of longing as resources for an articulation of constitual, unknowable relationality, the way 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” into fruitful, mysteriously entangled relationships with the world.

³²³ Ibid., 118.

Hadewijch's wordplay with "*Minne*" points to her whole world becoming longing, as she desires to "give herself wholly in love / and live wholly as Love with Love."³²⁸ Thus far in this dissertation, I have highlighted that Hadewijch and Mirabai, in their own ways, find their practices of longing ushering them into realms of non-attachment. In other words, as each of their *askeses* of longing takes them deeper into their interior lives, at the same time, these embodied practices loosen their attachments to certainties about the mystical life. In the previous chapter, I argued that each woman cultivates "practices of attachment" in her respective *askesis* of longing, and that the renunciatory energies of non-attachment result from dedicated practices of longing. Caught up in the desire and grief of longing, each finds herself letting go of cherished understandings of her relationships with God and the world. In this way, each may be said to be *dispossessed* by her longing into a sense of vulnerable unknowingness about her configurations of interdependence.

This terminology of "dispossession" and "unknowingness" is the language of the recent writings of Judith Butler. Dispossession, for her, refers to an *ec-static* movement that exposes the intrinsic relationality of the self with others. Literally meaning "to be outside oneself," *ec-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.³²⁹ Desire and grief tend to reveal the

³²⁸ Hadewijch, "Conquest of Love—At a Price, Stanzaic Poem 6," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 9-10, 141.

³²⁹ Butler, *Prekarious Life*, 24.

illusion of a self sheltered in an invulnerable autonomy.³³⁰ In dispossession, the reality of one's integral, constitutive relationality with the world comes into focus.

Butler writes of the power of both desire and grief, "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something."³³¹ In this undoing, she points to more than a relational construction of identity; that is, she proposes a conception of the self that goes *beyond* relationality. For her, our relations not only constitute our selves but also dispossess them. Through 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: "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."³³² In this undone state, the self can no longer fully "give an account" of itself.³³³ In other words, dispossession "posits the 'I' in the mode of unknowingness."³³⁴ "Unknowingness" is Butler's term for the inability to know

³³⁰ 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).

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³³² *Ibid.*, 24.

³³³ In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham 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 is often seen when one becomes undone by the other. She ends the book with a call to be open 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).

³³⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

fully how one is related to others in the matrix of sociality, and this unknowingness about the way we are given over, even from birth, into a vulnerable sociality has imports much wider than psychological insights about the individual self. Unknowingness, as Butler's work attests, also speaks to questions of politics, such as national sovereignty, human rights, and non-violence.³³⁵

For the theologian, Butler's language of unknowing and undoing ripples with apophatic resonances. The fifth-century Pseudo-Dionysius, considered by some to be the father of apophatic theology, described the pinnacle of the mystical climb as a diving into the "truly mysterious darkness of unknowing," in order to know by "knowing nothing."³³⁶ 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. As Charles M. Stang has similarly pointed out, the negative process of unsaying God also simultaneously undoes the contemplative self "from the names and categories that prevent it from being divine."³³⁷

Discussing Butler's work on the apophatic edge of unknowing, Catherine Keller has articulated the help that Butler can offer theologians exploring the ethical implications of apophatic relationality. Keller writes that Butler "enables the articulation of the precise fold

³³⁵ See, for example, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," chapter two, *Precarious Life* and chapter ten, "The Question of Social Transformation," in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³³⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 1.3, 1000A, 137.

³³⁷ Charles M. Stang, "Dionysius, Paul and the Significance of the Pseudonym," in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, eds. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Malden, MA: 2009), 16.

between our interhuman entanglement and the knowing ignorance. For she recognizes, indeed finds the very possibility of ‘recognition,’ right there where our constituent relationality exposes us to our unknowing.”³³⁸ For this dissertation focused on passionate non-attachment, Butler’s “dispossession” also does the 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 attachments, manifested in desire and grief. This concept of non-attachment resonates with my reading of Hadewijch’s and Mirabai’s *askeses* of longing, each of which may be said to dispossess the devotee into states of unknowingness.

These resonances inspire this chapter’s reading of Mirabai and Hadewijch through the lens of Butler, who provides crucial assistance toward thinking about the ethical implications of passionate non-attachment and apophatic anthropology. Fleshing out the ethical possibilities of unknowingness, Butler proposes, “My own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. I am not fully known to myself because part of what I am is the enigmatic trace of others.”³³⁹ In other words, not being able to fully account for one’s interrelationality with the world does not disqualify one from the pursuit an ethical life; instead, the unknowingness—the space in which one is mysteriously entangled with others—becomes the basis for such an ethics.

In this chapter, focusing on spaces of dispossession and unknowingness, I first will read Butler together with Hadewijch to consider further the “undoing” and “unsaying” in

³³⁸ Catherine Keller, “Undoing and Unknowing: Judith Butler in Process,” in *Butler on Whitehead: On the Occasion*, eds. Roland Faber, Michael Halewood, and Deena M. Lin (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Book, 2012), 43.

³³⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 46.

Hadewijch's work. Then in the next section I will apply the same method and rationale to Mirabai's songs. In the last section, informed and inspired by Hadewijch's and Mirabai's practices of passionate non-attachment, I will explore how Butler's work on dispossessive relationality and unknowingness might contribute 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.
—Hadewijch³⁴⁰

Butler's concepts of unknowing and undoing provide an apt lens to consider anew Hadewijch's compound state of *ghebruken* (fruition) and *ghebreken* (lack of fruition). Each of these poles—connected by longing—has been established as necessary for Hadewijch's full-bodied spiritual life. If Hadewijch's times of fruition or *ghebruken* refer to moments of blissful communion with *Minne*, I suggest that times of grievous non-fruition might well be described as the dispossession of the possibility for the communion for which she longs. To illustrate, many of Hadewijch's poems in stanzas display extreme frustration at *Minne*'s unresponsiveness. For instance, she laments:

I complain and accuse her
With new indignation:
She refuses the happiness that had consoled me.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Hadewijch, "Poems in Stanzas 6: Conquest of Love—At a Price," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 49, 143.

³⁴¹ Hadewijch, "Poems in Stanzas 16: Complaint and Surrender to Love," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 58-60, 170.

When what had worked in the past no longer results in uniting Hadewijch and *Minne*, she finds herself dispossessed of her once-certain knowledge of how to find unity with *Minne*. This state of unknowingness leads her to embrace the importance of both *ghebreken* and *ghebruken*; that is, unknowingness precludes any sole attachment to states of fruitive *ghebruken*. Letting go of her attachment to *ghebruken*, she grieves her ineffectiveness at bringing about her desired communion.

Consequently, Hadewijch's sense of an efficacious, autonomous, conquering self "falls short," as Mommaers translates *ghebreken*. That is to say that *ghebreken* "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*."³⁴² This moment of being freed may be read 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."³⁴³ As she responds to this state of affairs in "noble unfaith," Hadewijch increases her longing, and this mounting longing, fueled by desire and grief, incites a dispossession that plunges her into the "abyss of unknowing".³⁴⁴ In this abyss, she cannot see either herself or the divine clearly; they exist entangled together in a dark unknowingness. Such an "abyss of love" is "beyond the understanding of human reason." She writes:

³⁴² Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer—Begaine—Love Mystic*, 69.

³⁴³ Hadewijch, "Letter 13: Love Unappeasable," in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 46-9, 75.

³⁴⁴ Hadewijch, "Mengeldict 25," in *The Measure of Mystic Thought*, trans. Murk-Jansen, lines 1-3, 87.

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.³⁴⁵

In addition to the language of “unknowing,” Hadewijch also shares the language of “undoing” with Butler. In a couplet poem, Hadewijch writes of the divine:

[Infinity] has undone me
 Wider than wide
 Everything else is too narrow for me.³⁴⁶

Her language of undoing speaks to a dispossession that leaves her with an undone, wider self. Regarding dispossession’s effects on the self, Keller meditates on the above verses, “In Hadewijch the knowing subject, the touching ‘I,’ encodes an intimate relationality.”³⁴⁷ 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.”³⁴⁸ Selfhood, in short, is not destroyed but reconstructed.

With her language of undoing the self, Butler’s idea of dispossession assists in a reading of Hadewijch that preserves the integrity of the self-in-communion with the longed

³⁴⁵ Hadewijch, “*Mengeldict 18*,” in *The Measure of Mystic Thought*, trans. Murk-Jansen, lines 403-8, 80.

³⁴⁶ Hadewijch, “*Mengeldict 21*,” in *The Measure of Mystic Thought*, trans. Murk-Jansen, lines 19-22, 108.

³⁴⁷ Keller, “Undoing and Unknowing: Judith Butler in Process,” 44. Her reflection is a small piece of a larger argument about the intersections of Butler and Alfred North Whitehead.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

for other. In Butlerian dispossession, the vulnerable, porous self is not completely merged with the other, or otherwise without any boundaries. At the same time, humans are not “merely bounded beings” either.³⁴⁹ 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 nine depicts the way she remains paradoxically “self-possessed” as she is being dispossessed by desire. In other words, she and *Minne* are “both one thing through each other, but at the same time remain two different selves—yes, and remain so forever.”³⁵⁰ At the same time, even in such a merging-in-differentiation, Mommaers asserts that Hadewijch’s usual “self awareness which goes together with this mutual giving and taking disappears.”³⁵¹ While the disappearance of self-awareness might be read as the annihilation of the self, alternatively it might signal a dispossessive unknowing of the self. Hadewijch’s communion with *Minne* involves her letting go of the boundaries of her 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 wider sense of self through dispossession. 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

³⁴⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 27-8.

³⁵⁰ Hadewijch, “Letter 9: He in Me and Me in Him,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 1-12, 66.

³⁵¹ Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer—Beguine—Love Mystic*, 106.

out again in all good.”³⁵² 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.³⁵³

Notwithstanding these glowing descriptions of the widened “I,” it bears noting that dispossession is a force that operates mostly independently of the desires of the one being dispossessed. 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.³⁵⁴ Note, too, that the process may not regularly result in a fruitive, blissful, orgy of mutual interpenetration among friends, *a la* Hadewijch’s above description! While Butler argues that we “are missing something” if we do not submit to dispossession, she also calls dispossession an “anguish.”³⁵⁵

For such reasons, Hadewijch 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 Minne*. In her teachings about cultivating the humility necessary for an efficacious conquest of *Minne*, Hadewijch counsels, “So must anyone always do if he wishes

³⁵² Hadewijch, “Letter 12: The Jacob Letter,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 57-9, 71.

³⁵³ Milhaven, 45.

³⁵⁴ Butler, *Prekarious Life*, 24.

³⁵⁵ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 136.

to draw God into himself and *possess* him fruitively in love” (emphasis added).³⁵⁶ Hadewijch wants to possess, not be dispossessed, yet her longing nonetheless leads her to dispossession’s door.

When reading Hadewijch through the lens of Butler, it is not only the self that can be said to become dispossessed. Hadewijch and her fellow Beguines also perform a dispossession of the concept of possessing the human beloved. As discussed in chapter three, the courtly love tradition protested against the prevalent view of marriage, that of the man 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.”³⁵⁷ 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 that 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, which prevents a greedy, grasping for possession of the other.

Through longing, Hadewijch, who portrays herself frequently as a conquering and victorious self, becomes, in Butler’s words, “periodically undone and open to being unbounded.”³⁵⁸ In Hadewijch’s words, “Desire keeps [her wounds] open and unbound,”³⁵⁹

³⁵⁶ Hadewijch, “Letter 12: The Jacob Letter,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 5-6, 70.

³⁵⁷ Mommaers, *Writer—Beguine—Love Mystic*, 13.

³⁵⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28.

and the divine infinity undoes her self “wider than wide.”³⁶⁰ Hadewijch’s cultivated longing allows the flourishing of dispossessing energies of desire and grief that widen her connectivity with the divine and others. In the next section, I will move into an exploration of Mirabai’s undone self, as read through the lens of Butler’s dispossessive relationality of desire and grief.

Mirabai Read with Butler: Keeping Grief Close

Who can understand the grief
Of a woman parted from her beloved?
—Mirabai³⁶¹

Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti* tradition invites its adherents to stay extremely close to grief. Her 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.³⁶²

In another song, Mirabai wanders in grief “pasted with ash, clad in a deerskin, / [her] body wasting / to cinder.” For Mirabai, the grief of her separation from Krishna cannot be

³⁵⁹ Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 14,” in “*Some Aspects of Hadewijch’s Poetic Form in the ‘Strofische Gedichten,’*” trans. Guest, 278.

³⁶⁰ Hadewijch, “*Mengeldict 21,*” in *The Measure of Mystic Thought*, trans. Murk-Jansen, lines 20, 108.

³⁶¹ Mirabai, Caturvedī’s *Pada 73,*” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī,* trans. Alston, 63.

³⁶² Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada 68,*” in *Three Bhakti Voices,* trans. Hawley, 121.

sidestepped. It is essential to her *askesis* of longing, and, as discussed in chapter four, she cultivates and embraces grief, thus staying close to its transformative edges.

Butler, too, counsels staying close to grief. She suggests that there may be something to be gained by staying close to the feeling of loss—a sense of human vulnerability and a concomitant “collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another.”³⁶³ 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?’”³⁶⁴

To find oneself in such a knowing unknowingness is a pathway into understanding the necessity of grief for the self. Butler elaborates on grief’s power to reveal 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.”³⁶⁵

The notion of necessary grief can be a sobering and frightening one, fraught with vulnerability, but an acceptance of grief is necessary for what Butler calls “submitting to a transformation.” In undergoing this transformation by mourning, one accepts that “one will be changed, possibly forever.”³⁶⁶ Mirabai’s *viraha-bhakti* tradition may be said to encourage a transforming submission to the grief of separation as well. Accepting the transformation, rather than choosing to fight it, constitutes Mirabai’s spiritual practice. *Viraha-bhakti* teaches

³⁶³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 19.

³⁶⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

that grief is the price of embodiment, or in more archaic language, part of the human condition.

While she stops short of calling grief the human condition,³⁶⁷ Butler asserts, “Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire.”³⁶⁸ Mirabai, through her *askesis* of longing, brimming with desire and grief, embodies this search for the conditions of desire. In the community of wandering *bhaktas* that she 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 would rather “poison her than nourish her,” she found another family in “the company of the saints.”³⁶⁹ In this collectivity of dispossessed *bhaktas*, longing can take on power that it forfeits in isolation, as an isolated devotion attenuates yearning’s power for remaking relationships, communities, and even religious identity, an application I will return to in the last chapter.

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 traditional Indian ideas of the self. Butler writes from a Western philosophical perspective that assumes, even as she proposes an alternative concept, a commonly held illusion of a self that can be unified and possessed through a single coherent narrative from birth to death. For Butler, the illusion comes undone because “it is precisely

³⁶⁷ However, in *Undoing Gender*, she mourns that there is “no vulnerability that serves as the basis for an apprehension of our commonality” (25).

³⁶⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

³⁶⁹ Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 53. He is referencing the account of her life in the *Bhaktamāl*.

by virtue of one's relations to others that one is opaque to oneself."³⁷⁰ In these places of unknowing, the illusion of a separate, independent, completely autonomous self comes undone. In Mirabai's world, however, this "I" was never quite assumed to exist in the first place. Mirabai does not come into a dispossessive relationship with anyone—neither Krishna nor her fellow *bhaktas*—possessed of an illusion of a tightly bounded, 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."³⁷¹ This interdependent self contrasts with an individual self whose boundaries must be patrolled to keep one *possessed* of one's own self. The self that longs for self-possession must narrow its wide, unknowable, interconnected sense of "self" to something manageable, something ownable, something no one can take away—a singular personal possession: a self.³⁷²

³⁷⁰ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 20.

³⁷¹ Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 39.

³⁷² Mark C. Taylor's *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: The 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 this strict perfection allows one to think that one gains 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" (41-2).

This point about the holistic Indian self, however, should not be understood as a culturally specific idealization that eliminates societal problems. In addition, it is important to realize that Hadewijch's medieval, Western self shares some similarities with the Indian self described here; that is, they both assume a premodern, pre-Cartesian model of the self that does not presuppose an individualistic autonomy as its basis.³⁷³

Reading Mirabai through the lens of Butler, the desire and grief so present in Mirabai's work and life may be better seen not as energies that dispel a commonly held belief about the self, but as sites that dramatically mark her relationality with others, divine and human. However, Butler is not just talking about relationality, as important as a relational ontology is to the ethic she begins to develop. For her, there is something indispensable about *dispossession*. She explains, "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.]"³⁷⁴ Dispossession therefore emphasizes the unknowing incumbent in what becomes clearer in grief and desire: that our connections, our "primary sociality," make the self inscrutable. Through emphasizing the unknowingness that is a consequence of dispossession, perhaps a cross-cultural application of Butler is possible, one that goes beyond the insight of primary interconnectedness and interdependency.

Hence, both grief and desire—so inextricably tied together for Mirabai—expose her unknowingness. Consequently, the point is not just that Mirabai displays an interdependent

³⁷³ For more on medieval Western ideas of the self and women writers, see Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986), 21-28.

³⁷⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

relationality with the divine and the world— again, this is not an insight that has been much lost in India—but that desire and grief uncover an unknowingness, about how just *how* she is connected to others. For instance, when reading Mirabai alongside Hadewijch in the previous chapter, I explored the apophatic possibilities not usually accounted for in Mirabai’s *saguna bhakti* tradition. As another example of the unknowingness exposed by her longing, consider her prayer to Krishna:

Mohan, I knew your love, I knew your love.
My way is the way of loving devotion,
I don’t know anything else.³⁷⁵

In this song, she speaks in the past tense of what she knew. She *knew* his love, but she does not seem to know it anymore. All she knows presently is her devotion and longing, which has blossomed into an unknowingness that carries with it a vulnerability. Any certainty is gone, save the path she will continue on, the path of *viraha-bhakti*’s “loving devotion.”

Naming some of Mirabai’s multiple vulnerabilities, Sangari notes that in some stories and songs, Mirabai is a widow and in some songs she is a wandering mendicant. These roles carry their own hazards. Widows were vulnerable to societal disapproval and financial destitution, among other dangers, while itinerant women were left open to physical safety concerns and alienation from their families. Even her status as a *bhakta* carries a certain vulnerability.³⁷⁶ In its orality that demands a willing audience, she is exposed to her audience through a sharing of her deepest griefs and desires. As discussed in chapter two, anyone who participates in the *bhakti* song, including the singers, authors, and subject of the songs—

³⁷⁵ Mirabai, “*Pada 56*,” in “*Mīrābāī and Her Contributions to the Bhakti Movement*,” trans. S.M. Pandey and Norman H. Zide, 68.

³⁷⁶ Sangari, 1468.

Krishna himself—enters into the other’s nature.³⁷⁷ In Mirabai’s songs, vulnerability, like grief, cannot be escaped.

Reading Butler alongside Mirabai also provides further illumination on the idea of “multiple Mirabai’s” discussed in chapter two. Mirabai cannot be reduced to just one Mirabai: she contains various voices and numerous narratives. Concerning the difficulties experienced by persons attempting to narrate their own life stories, Butler suggests that the account that one gives of oneself in discourse, that is, “the ‘I’ that yields to narration, cannot comprise the many dimensions of itself.”³⁷⁸ Because one’s life cannot be linearly and conclusively narrated due to its socially constituted nature, only the “I” in moments of unknowingness can encompass such wide diversities. Read with Butler, the desire of Mirabai’s intimate encounters with Krishna and the grief of not fully uniting with him dispossess her “I,” which results in an unknowingness that abides many Mirabai’s.

Hagiography often tries to nail down the essence of a saint authoritatively though. Thus, hagiography interprets 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.”³⁷⁹ As we have seen, some have tried to solidify Mirabai’s legacy as a traditional wife, for example, while others have viewed her as the epitome of independent womanhood. Revealing something about what individuals and communities value, hagiography tends to reduce saints to our own images. I suggest that the diversity of images in Mirabai’s songs can be encompassed more capaciously if thinks with

³⁷⁷ Mukta, 89.

³⁷⁸ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 135.

³⁷⁹ Sangari, 1465.

Butler's concept of unknowingness as revealed in dispossession. Regarding narratability and unknowingness, Butler points out the difficulty of knowing the other, in addition to the challenges of knowing the self. That is to say, if one cannot be relied upon to give a full account of oneself, how could anyone possibly be able to know the other fully? Not limited to any essentiality that can be contained in a knowable, static, substantial self, Mirabai is further loosed to be her complicated, contradictory, ecstatic, vulnerable, grieving, married-yogi selves.

Mysticism, Ethics, and Passionate Non-Attachment

The mystical depths of Mirabai and Hadewijch are no doubt intriguing, as they speak to the deep mysteries of the self, divine, and others in relationship. However, these liminal states are value-neutral in and of themselves. Jeffrey Kripal writes compellingly of how mysticism cannot offer tools for the construction of ethics:

It is certainly possible that we may find apophatic and deconstructive powers helpful in our initial talk 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.³⁸⁰

Accordingly, only deconstruction can be accomplished through the resources of mysticism, but the construction of a "more adequate fiction" needs other resources. Butler, whose concept of unknowingness does not spring from mystical sources, provides this dissertation such resources.³⁸¹ In her proposal of a shared, invariable, and partial blindness about

³⁸⁰ Jeffrey Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001), 318.

³⁸¹ Claudia Schippert makes the argument, "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

ourselves—an unknowingness—she encourages asking ourselves if there is “ethical valence to [our] unknowingness?”³⁸² She urges asking questions about what kind of ethics might emerge from staying close to grief and vulnerability. As she points to the relationship between dispossession and unknowingness, she provides further hints to the ethical resources located in an apophatic anthropology. 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?”³⁸³

Read through the lens of Butler, an apophatic theological anthropology inspired by Hadewijch’s and Mirabai’s practices of passionate non-attachment allows 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 languages of knowing, we can—in knowing unknowingness—undo the old inclusivist ethic of the *imago dei*, in which new groups could be included but only under the reigning groups’ terms.³⁸⁴ While a fleshing out of the substance of a theological anthropology may be one of the tasks of our religious communities, “sustaining the bond that the question opens is finally

based on the specificity of bodily materiality and the experience of domination.” “Turning on/to Ethics,” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, eds. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press), 58.

³⁸² Butler, *Giving an Account Of Oneself*, 84.

³⁸³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 35.

³⁸⁴ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Contesting the Subject: A Feminist Account of the *Imago Dei*,” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 100.

more valuable than knowing in advance what holds us in common, as if we already have all the resources we need to know what defines the human, what its future life might be.”³⁸⁵

Moving into the last chapter, with Mirabai and Hadewijch as guides, I continue to imagine how passionate non-attachment is integral to an apophatic anthropology of dispossessive relationality that opens us one to the other. In the last and final chapter, I hence explore the possibilities of “being *for* another *by virtue* of another” that passionate non-attachment engenders.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 35.

³⁸⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

Chapter 6

Toward a Lived Ethic of Passionate Non-Attachment

I will let Love be,
 From my side, what she wishes.
 —Hadewijch³⁸⁷

This love, Sister, is a love that endures
 —Mirabai³⁸⁸

On the banks of the Ganges in Rishikesh two year ago, I bought an offering from one of the many vendors along the river. The simple beauty of the offering stunned me: a boat of green leaves in which were nestled yellow flowers, a candle, and a stick of incense. This offering to the river Ganges, I was told by a new friend, represented the elements of earth, fire, wind, water, and sky.

My trip to India was slipping away fast, and I thought about how the elements evoked aspects of my journey so far: the flowers represented the earth I had been trodding with my backpack full of dissertation books, the lit candle evoked the nightly *agni* ceremonies, and the incense smoke conjured the chilly winds coming through my window at night. The whole offering was to be placed in the water of the Ganges, so vitally important to many of the people I had met on this trip. As I looked up, I saw the sky, open to where the horizon met the vast Himalayan foothills, and its vastness made me think about the immense worlds of Indian religion and culture I longed to understand.

³⁸⁷ Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 39: Love’s Blows,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, lines 46-47, 241.

³⁸⁸ Mirabai, “Caturvedī’s *Pada* 40,” in *The Devotional Poems of Mīrābāī*, trans. Alston, 50.

Others launching these glowing, floating sculptures waded into the river or stopped just at the edge, sometimes splashing the divine water on their heads or taking a sip to drink. I felt myself longing for more— more temples, more ashrams, more sacred rivers, more teachers, more studying, more time to experience it all—all of these longings encapsulated in this palm-sized offering. And yet the next step was to let go of this beautiful, elemental sculpture. As I stepped to the edge of the river and made my offering, I watched my desires moving together with the desires represented by the dozens of offerings now floating down this ancient river. I gazed at the swirling configurations of offerings flowing together.

In the image before me, I saw the possibility of whole-hearted engagement with the elements of this world, yet at the same time a letting go that made space for the desires of the other—all of this unfolding in the fluid womb of Mother Ganges. In this communal moment of passionate non-attachment, I paused, thinking about the environmental effect of all of those offerings. While they were essentially decomposable, millions of these offerings introducing foreign elements into the river creates troubling ecological problems. I found it sobering that these moments of passionate non-attachment contributed to the degradation of the Ganges, that most sacred of Hindu rivers, one that embodies divinity herself.³⁸⁹ Going further with this image, 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,

³⁸⁹ 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, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

becoming occluded by the desires of human beings, even human beings in devotion to God, even a God imaged as female and as river?

My own practice of longing at the Ganges allowed to me embody an ethic of passionate non-attachment, if only for a few moments, and problematically and incompletely. While practices of longing may dispossess the self, opening it into “knowing unknowingness” that sustains vulnerability and relationality, this ideal does not, of course, always actualize perfectly or completely. Practices of longing, I saw here in concrete ways, carry very real dangers for the nourishing of individual and exclusively human desires. At the same time, longing contains the seeds of the self’s dispossession that leads to intimations of unknowable relationality—something else I saw imaged clearly, as I stood on the river bank.

This chapter thus follows the lure of an apophatic anthropology further into the realm of ethics. Mirabai’s and Hadewijch’s practices of longing do not stay in the “vertical” realms between one woman and her God without leaking out into “horizontal” this-worldly spaces. Each woman’s *askesis* of longing offer clues for a way of living—what I will call a lived ethic—that encourages desire for the flourishing of the world, without that passion consuming the world, the other, or the self. In this chapter, I imagine how longing—in its vulnerable, relational, apophatic, dispossessive aspects—informs a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment, which holds space for the desires of others in an interrelated, fragile world. I will argue for passionate non-attachment as an interreligious value worth pursuing and venture an application of this ethic in the service of a less oppressive world. Finally, I will articulate what comparative theology might look like as a contemporary practice of passionate non-attachment.

Passionate Non-Attachment as a Lived Ethic

Because passionate non-attachment, as understood by thinking with the writings of Hadewijch and Mirabai, is a way of knowing, living, and imagining, a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment could never be contained in a set of ethical guidelines or precepts. Passionate non-attachment as a lived ethic requires an epistemology that encompasses both desire and renunciation. In their respective feminist epistemologies of desire, Friedhelm Hardy and Grace Jantzen propose two different lived ethics that deserve a closer look. Working with *viraha-bhakti* as a starting point, Hardy proposes the pleasures and griefs of *viraha-bhakti* as a resource for an ethics not based on propositions, but on communal emotional experiences. He distinguishes between this emotional mode and what he calls a “typical Christian attitude,” one which scorns the embodied griefs and pleasures of *viraha-bhakti* in its insistence on general ethical precepts for individuals, such as “love thy neighbor.”³⁹⁰ Embracing the emotions of longing as a way of knowing, Hardy, instead emphasizes the *shared* aspects of griefs and pleasure as *bhaktas* relate to each other in and through these emotions. In communities born of and sustained by longing, *bhaktas* “produce” and “intensify” emotions together in dance, poetry, song, and music.³⁹¹ These emotions, for Hardy, then inform the way they live together in the world.

Neither does Jantzen suggest grounding one’s actions in beliefs or propositions; instead, in her work with eros, the abyss, and medieval Christian mystics, Jantzen proposes a lived ethic guided by the “erotic imagination.” She writes:

³⁹⁰ Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti*, 575.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

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.³⁹²

Here, looking to medieval women, such as Hadewijch, she emphasizes the erotic imagination for 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 that one may respond to the *Abgrund* in postmodernity without surrendering desire, creativity, or meaning-making.

Both Jantzen and Hardy thus emphasize a crucial aspect of feminist ethics: the starting place remains the embodied, complex lives of persons in community. In addition, as Jantzen resources the Christian mystical tradition and Hardy draws from the Hindu *bhakti* mystical tradition, each attempts to imagine, in different ways, epistemologies that take desire seriously. These ways of knowing powerfully describe how longing informs both mystics' 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 knows and *how* each knows.

Yet, we have also been exploring how Hadewijch and Mirabai's longings lead not just to knowing, but also to an unknowing. Practices of dispossessive longing might be said to guide an apophatic epistemology, one that points to unknowing as an important kind of knowledge. In an apophatic epistemology, Hardy's communal emotional experiences or Jantzen's erotic imagination come undone, as longing opens out into non-attachment, which further prevents these ways of knowing from slipping into an ethical foundationalism.

As I imagine apophatic epistemologies, inspired by Mirabai and Hadewijch together in passionate non-attachment, I am cognizant again of Kripal's argument that mystical texts

³⁹² Jantzen, "Eros and the Abyss: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity," 260.

need interdisciplinary resources to provide the means of ethical construction alongside mysticism's deconstructive energies. Kripal elaborates on how mystic texts cannot by themselves "lead to the ethical":

The mystical cannot lead to the ethical without considerable help from outside and elsewhere, that is, from 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*" (emphasis added).³⁹³

I would be evading the ethical by simply exploring the dynamic through which Mirabai and Hadewijch find union with the divine, while bracketing a "love of human beings," and, I would add, a love of other creatures and the world that we all inhabit together. Bringing attention to what I have been calling "the middle spaces of longing," 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 becomes obscured. Put another way, the achievement of an exceptional, 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 "mundane and messy" world.

One theme of this dissertation has been the "mundane and messy glory" of the lives and loves of Hadewijch and Mirabai. I focused my gaze not primarily on what might be considered grand spiritual "successes," i.e. 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.

³⁹³ Kripal, 318.

When 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, it is imperative to continue asking what difference living in these spaces makes. By dwelling in the middle spaces, Mirabai and Hadewijch reverse the logic of what can be considered perfection or completion. In other words, linear progress toward a predefined goal is not what is valued; instead, attending to the spaces between union and separation becomes the focus. Indeed, “mundane and messy” glory may be unexpectedly found in the unreachability of the other, as grief and desire expose a necessary vulnerability of interconnection. When neither the self nor the longed for beloved can be said to contain the permanence, immutability, or substantiveness that is often wanted, conditions are created for both desire and non-attachment to flourish.

The ethic that is emerging is based in desire and grief that opens out into non-attachment in a cyclical dynamic of longing and letting go. In the next section, I will begin to examine what the discipline of comparative theology, particularly feminist comparative theology, offers to this developing lived ethic of passionate non-attachment.

Insights and Questions from Feminist Comparative Theology

As discussed in chapter one, feminist comparative theologians, such as Michelle Voss Roberts and Tracey Sayuki Tiemeier have made the case that comparative theology must be gendered and libertative.³⁹⁴ In the case of Hindu-Christian comparative theology, the fraught

³⁹⁴ See their respective essays, Robert’s “Gendering Comparative Theology” and Tiemeier’s “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 109-12.

history of colonialism in early comparative religion and comparative theology—what Raimon Panikkar calls the field’s “loaded karma”³⁹⁵—makes this critique even more pressing. Despite and because of its history of colonialism, 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. Thus, comparative theology’s still important ethos of the “patient deferral of issues of truth”³⁹⁶ must be held in tension with theology’s responsibility toward justice for the marginalized.

Toward this vision, 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.³⁹⁷

In this passage, Roberts points to the ways that the multiple, cross-cultural, and interreligious perspectives cultivated in comparative theology can help identify and deconstruct hegemonies. From its multiply-situated positionality, comparative theology is

³⁹⁵ Raimon Panikkar, “Forward: The Ongoing Dialogue” in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. Harold Coward (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), ix.

³⁹⁶ Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 187.

³⁹⁷ Roberts, “Gendering Comparative Theology,” 126.

well-located to gain insights into oppressive power structures—boldly naming them, while interrogating its own potentially hegemonic epistemological categories at the same time. For example, I ask, in this dissertation, as different permutations of passionate non-attachment have emerged in Hadewijch’s and Mirabai’s traditions, “What is a liberative vision of passionate non-attachment?”

Tiemeier and Roberts point out in different ways that what is liberative cannot be assumed. Tiemeier calls for an interreligious, comparative construction of “liberation.” In other words, she argues, “liberation” cannot rest as an uncontested term in comparative theology.³⁹⁸ Roberts worries about the imperialistic importing of Western values in comparative theology, too; thus, she proposes that comparative theologians must *argue* for the values that they represent rather than assuming their universal appeal.³⁹⁹ What then, can be argued about the value of a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment?

All along, I have been transdisciplinarily crossing boundaries by working with resources from two specific faith traditions, as exemplified in Mirabai’s and Hadewijch’s writings. In addition, I have employed such diverse disciplines as feminist studies, theories of mysticism, historical studies, and poststructuralist philosophy in order to explore how longing and its dispossessive effects manifest in the paths of Mirabai and Hadewijch. This is not to say, of course, that desire, grief, dispossession, longing, or vulnerability present identically in sixteenth-century Northern India, thirteenth-century lowland Europe, and

³⁹⁸ Tiemeier, “Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation,” 129-30.

³⁹⁹ Michelle Voss Roberts, “Worldly Advaita? Limits and Possibilities for an Ecofriendly Nondualism.” *Religious Studies Review* 34, no. 3 (2008): 142.

twenty-first century North America. This dissertation has thus examined specific and divergent cultural manifestations of the idea of passionate non-attachment.

At the same time, I have also found some pivotal lines of convergence. Both Mirabai's and Hadewijch's longing allows desire to flourish with something like a built-in release valve, which dispossesses desire from a grasping greed to consume the riches of the other. Thus, a conscious and sustained lingering in the middle spaces of longing—an *askesis* of longing—opens Mirabai and Hadewijch to possibilities for mutual, non-possessive relationships with the other, divine and otherwise.

I am fleshing out how the cultivation of longing may lead to two crucial ethical insights: 1) an acknowledgment of vulnerability and a concomitant awareness that all are so vulnerably situated. 2) a way to enjoy the world in its integrity, without “denaturing it,” to quote Denys Turner's assertion that “the undetached person denatures her world and cannot even properly enjoy it.”⁴⁰⁰

I have been arguing that as longing opens up into vulnerability, the reality, if not the details, of the complex and opaque interrelationships that make up the “self” comes 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 in dispossessive longing, vulnerability becomes unveiled as a primary condition, one in which we must learn to abide, as the alternative often includes a destructive shoring up of the boundaries between ourselves and the other. Thus, the primary condition of vulnerability describes the inescapable starting place *and* ending place of a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment.

⁴⁰⁰ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 83.

This does not mean that one finally arrives exactly where one began on the path of longing, but rather that one can never move into a place of invulnerability. Enmeshed and entangled in a web of rationality from birth to death, individualistic invulnerability can be neither the starting place nor the goal. While the longing we have been exploring may begin as the desire to move past vulnerability into a fabled state of invulnerability, longing ultimately teaches the impossibility of possessing an autonomous and invulnerable self.

Our connections to others thus mysteriously constitute what we often think of as the “self,” and these relationships that constitute the “self” are not fully knowable. Butler has emphasized the “value of being beside oneself, of being a porous boundary, given over to others, finding oneself in a trajectory of desire in which one is not the presumptive center.”⁴⁰¹ Sometimes these trajectories are more obvious than not: when losing someone to death, grief may unveil some of the intricate interweavings that make up this “self.” In grief, one may feel lost and disoriented on one hand, but strangely held together by relationships of care and concern with others. Intimations of these connections decenter conceptions of an autonomous self.

Pathways of passionate non-attachment might be conceived of as allowing grief and desire to do their decentering work without an insistence on re-centering. Passionate non-attachment then reads as letting go of attachments to oneself to let desire 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 liberated from attachments to a re-centered self.

One thus can encourage the world to flourish by allowing *others* the integrity of their power to exist and influence the world. Otherwise, attempting to control the world, one

⁴⁰¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 25.

cannot enjoy the diversity and beauty of the world because one 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. A decentering of the self, or a non-attachment to the self, paves the way for further expressions of desire. In non-attachment, without a focus or preoccupation with centering the self, space opens up for recognizing the value and beauty of others. Dispossessive de-centering thus allows desire to flourish.

Hadewijch and Mirabai display what two specific *askeses* of longing look like. Longing, we have seen, is not neediness, nor is it perpetual frustration or eternal dissatisfaction. Nourishing a continuing sense of vulnerability, disciplined practices of longing embrace the fullness of life with its inevitable loves, griefs, and other mutual entanglements. Longing represents a deep hunger for wholeness and completion within frighteningly uncertain lives, but despite the fears and uncertainties of life, desire must pull back from its tendency to “de-nature,” or 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 concupiscence.

Hadewijch and Mirabai point toward an honest desire that admits of wanting to grasp the totality of the Other. Each longs for the whole of the other before she realizes, not without some grief, both the futility and undesirability of such goals. Hadewijch’s and Mirabai’s practices of longing do not abide such unilateral grasping toward possession. In moments of their greatest intensity, I am suggesting, longing becomes dispossessed and opens up into non-attachment and potential mutuality. Dispossession protects desire from its shadow side, which can create an egotistical myopia, as it truncates relationship.

As longing dispossesses the self and creates non-attachment, rigid boundaries around identity become loosened. Where there is less attachment to a separative “I,” a more commodious sense of relationality emerges, as well as more fluidity in the way identity gets named and imaged. In the final sections, I will consider further how this integral relationship between desire and non-attachment might play out in the wider world, outside of Hadewijch’s Beguine communities and Mirabai’s *bhakti* circles.

A Lived Ethic of Passionate Non-attachment

Mysticism often allows for fluidity around the mystic’s gender identities, and I have already touched on such fluidity in Hadewijch’s and Mirabai’s writings. Suydem, for example, has highlighted the many varieties of Hadewijch’s gender fluidities, describing how she “plays with gendered frameworks, [and] savors erotic double meanings, gender confusion, and ambiguity” as she “continually blurs subject-object boundaries.”⁴⁰² In her work on “queering the Beguines,” Hollywood writes about the “linguistic tranvesticism” that occurs in medieval Christian female and male writers.⁴⁰³ Hadewijch performs this transvestitism when she describes herself as a male, for example. In Mirabai’s songs, we have discussed *bhakti*’s propensity for gender bending as well. In particular, we explored how men in the *bhakti* tradition may take on a female persona to sing of their love for God more longingly. In addition, in the hagiography and in her songs, Mirabai often acts in ways more associated with men’s roles in medieval Rajput society: making choices about whom

⁴⁰² Mary A. Suydem, “Ever in Unrest: Translating Hadewijch of Antwerp’s *Mengeldichten*.” *Women’s Studies* 28 (1999): 178.

⁴⁰³ Hollywood, “Sexual Desire, Divine Desire; Or, Queering the Beguines,” 123.

to love, choosing to focus on the divine directly rather than through established familial channels, traveling on her own, and taking a guru and insisting on her right to be taught.

These destabilizations and inversions may function to open up possibilities for resistance against gender norms that are oppressively undisclosive of gender and sexual diversity. Lochrie writes about such queered sites of resistance, “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.”⁴⁰⁴ 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.”⁴⁰⁵ Opening up liminal spaces might not represent concrete change toward gender justice, but as Butler so powerfully writes of the opening of possibilities, “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.”⁴⁰⁶

The above reflections on the liberative possibilities of gender fluidity, engendered by understandings of the mystical self, function without an explicit focus on the value of passionate non-attachment, however. Here, the deconstructive and apophatic powers of mysticism can be said to do their necessary, but only preliminary, deconstructive work. A lived ethic of passionate non-attachment, however, shelters both deconstructive and constructive energies. As deconstruction opens up possibilities, there can be an attendant

⁴⁰⁴ Lochrie, 194.

⁴⁰⁵ Kripal, 17.

⁴⁰⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), viii.

imagining of what those possibilities might look like. 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 saying and unsaying.

As Hadewijch and Mirabai engaged in their respective *askeses* of longing, their longings 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 lived into religious identities that were at odds with the dominant religious cultures of their times. Many persons working in the fields of interreligious dialogue and/or comparative theology have felt the practice of their disciplines opening up their religious identities, a process that may result in hyphenated, decentered, religiously plural identities. Elaborating on the idea of the hyphen in identities of multiple religious belonging or participation, Clooney envisions it marking persons for whom different religious pathways are deeply meaningful, without asking them to choose either one exclusively.⁴⁰⁷ For example, in a Hindu-Christian identity, the hyphen extends in both directions between "Hindu" and "Christian," representing an exchange of multidirectional currents that does not collapse the traditions into each other.

I am proposing that an ethic of passionate non-attachment animates comparative theological practices that decenter religious identity. In its connectivity that maintains difference, the hyphen can also express how a lived ethic of passionate non-attachment maintains the space between traditions, even as they are brought together in relation. Desire

⁴⁰⁷ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA; Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 160-1. Also, see Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, (Eugene, OR : Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), in which Clooney also has an essay, for an introduction to the concept of multiple religious belonging

brings the traditions together, as non-attachment sustains the interstitial space between them. A dispossession of the self, born of practices of longing for the truths, gifts, and graces of the religious other, leads toward an openness to being transformed by the religious other. Longing thus makes space for the uncertainties of non-fixed religious identities.

Toward a goal of a decentered postcolonial theology, Susan Abraham has suggested practicing dialogical discourse in a “mode of ascesis of the ego.” Calling this *ascesis* a “spiritual practice,” she attests to its value for producing knowledge that distances itself from the modes of mastery held in academic esteem.⁴⁰⁸ Thatamanil, in a similar move, asks academics working in religion to reflect upon and detach from their conventional identities as academics, a move inspired by the Advaitan discipline of giving up attachments to one’s conventional identity.⁴⁰⁹ While these two proposals are not explicitly intended as methodologies for comparative theology, they each emphasize practices of non-attachment toward a more capacious scholarly identity.

Informed by a lived ethic of passionate-nonattachment and inspired by the above proposals that emphasize the pole of non-attachment, I shift the emphasis to the cultivation of longing as a practice for the flourishing of comparative theology. Might practices of longing, with their implications for mutuality, vulnerability, and dispossessive relationality, lead to more commodious religious identities and the sustaining of spaces of difference between and among traditions, even as they are brought together in relation? Instead of denying our need

⁴⁰⁸ Susan Abraham, “Postcolonial Approaches to Hindu-Christian Studies,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 21 (2008): 12.

⁴⁰⁹ 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 (December 2000): 800.

for each other and our constitutional relationality with one another, what if we cultivated longing for the other? What if, instead of trying to preserve autonomy at all costs and denying our vulnerabilities, we were brave enough to let longing do its work?

In this very dissertation, I have engaged in the practice of comparative theology through the cultivation of practices of longing. Devoted reading, writing, contemplating, comparing, and sharing of Mirabai's and Hadewijch's texts of love-longing all represent aspects of this practice. In addition, this dissertation's readers, as co-readers with me of Hadewijch and Mirabai, have also had the opportunity to enter into longing. Through a cultivated longing for understandings of the pathways the two mystics depict, we may 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 therefore find ourselves living in the hyphen, if only for a moment.

In the practice of comparative theology, living in the middle spaces—in the hyphen—leaves us vulnerable to a doubling of longing. Clooney has written 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."⁴¹⁰ As we read Hadewijch and Mirabai together, these yearning women come into relationship with each other and us, and desire multiplies and deepens. By entering into the desire of the texts through the practices of a devoted reader, one can perform textually a version of what Mirabai and Hadewijch perform devotionally: loving passionately into a non-attachment that

⁴¹⁰ Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis De Sales and Śri Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 22.

circles back around into desire 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 where we are better capable of holding the texts lightly, without attempting to possess them for ourselves, an exclusive faith, or a certain scholarly tradition.

Some paths within both Hinduism and Christianity teach that desire should be held lightly, or even completely eradicated; however, Mirabai and Hadewijch do not desire to let go of desire. Some 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, 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 non-attachment.

Non-attachment is not a detachment or disconnection of each woman from her world; instead, the relational dispossessions that engender non-attachment underscore connectivity. Considering Mirabai's songs through the lens of *viraha-bhakti*, I 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 so that she may face into the wider, unknown world. She sings, "[I]t's time to take my songs into the street."⁴¹¹ *Viraha-bhakti* is thus not best understood as an insular narrowing of her world to a single point, but a comprehensive infusing of her broadening world with desire. As we read Hadewijch through the lens of *viraha-bhakti* and her own tradition's resources, the widening of her world, born of longing,

⁴¹¹ Mirabai, *barasām rī badariyā savān rī*," in *For Love of the Dark One*, trans. Schelling, 26.

also comes into focus. “Love makes me wander outside myself,” Hadewijch declares.⁴¹²

Minne does not send her deeply into a separative interiority, but dispossessing her of herself, sends her beyond herself. Longing in this key provides resources for a whole-hearted engagement that does not colonize the other. An ethic of passionate non-attachment protects the life-giving multiplicity of the world and the flowering of desire, as it “enfold[s] a postcolonial ethics along with precolonial hints of wonder.”⁴¹³

Practices of longing accept the risks of a full-bodied desire and the concomitant grief and vulnerability that a relational vision of desire begets. In many forms, temptation exists to eschew such practices. Perhaps from a quest for an unrealizable independence, a prideful denial of need, or a fear of the abyss, the opportunity to dwell desirously with one another in vulnerability may be missed. This dissertation has attempted to narrate historical, yet living instances of these opportunities. If we are constituted by each other, then through our readings of Hadewijch and Mirabai, we become related to their communities of longing, and maybe even dispossessed by and with them. Longing thus becomes communal power for remaking the world. Mirabai and Hadewijch in passionate-non-attachment invite us to long, to let go, and to love together—come what may.

⁴¹² Hadewijch, “Poems in Stanzas 6: Conquest of Love—At a Price,” in *Hadewijch*, trans. Hart, line 49, 143.

⁴¹³ Roland Faber and Catherine Keller, “A Taste for Multiplicity: The Skillful Means of Religious Pluralism,” in *Religions in the Making: Whitehead and the Wisdom Traditions in the World*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publisher, 2012), 193.

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