“The Dangerous Guru: The Haptic Logics of Proxemic Desire and Contemporary Sex Scandals”

Dr. Amanda Lucia

Historically, American critics of Indic gurus have popularized the orientalist trope of the oversexualized and predatory Indian male guru who preys on white women both financially and sexually. This article argues that this routinely iterated racialized and gendered means of addressing sexuality in the guru-disciple relationship is not only faulty, but it has hindered scholars from addressing the root of the power dynamics inherent in the guru-disciple relationship that make such events possible, if not inevitable.

In efforts to complicate this racialized stereotype, this article considers four different case studies of sexual scandals that have emerged from guru led communities: Oom the Omnipotent, Swami Kriyananda, Mata Amritanandamayi, and John Friend. Each of these case studies highlights accusations of sexual misconduct wherein the alleged perpetrators were *not* Indian males and the alleged victims were *not* (only) white women. These case studies draw the reader back into the earliest accounts of tantric sex cults in the American media and continue through to the present day sex scandals that have plagued the postural yoga community. In some of these cases the guru has been convicted, in others the guru has confessed and apologized, and in others the guru vehemently denies any suggestion of impropriety. From the little known to the headline splashing, from rumor and alleged misdeeds to the convicted, this article does not seek to make normative claims concerning the validity of these accusations. Instead, the author suggests that whether the accusations of sexual misconduct were validated or not, the intimacies of the guru-disciple relationship create an environment wherein devotees in the majority of guru movements recount such events and are often believed to be telling the truth.

Sexuality is an inherent feature of human activity and this article does not seek to overlay a moral argument based in Puritanical prudency to sexual behavior. However, three factors emerge that make these particular sexual encounters feel like violations to both participants and observers. The first condition is that in most cases that involve gurus, the guru has publicly proclaimed celibacy. As such, the guru’s alleged sexual encounters smack of hypocrisy and easily rile the aggressions of devotees (and ex-devotees). The second condition is that in many cases, those who emerge from these alleged sexual encounters recount feelings of abuse and shame. The third is the fact that the very notion of sexual consent becomes a complex question when devotees are engaged in the unbalanced relational power dynamic of the guru-disciple relationship.

Power imbalance resides at the very core of the guru-disciple relationship; the guru is believed to be powerful, if not divine, and the devotee must surrender to his will. This article aims to show the depth of that power imbalance through ethnographic evidence of devotee accounts, in efforts to demonstrate its effect on the psyches and choices of devotees. The author shows how devotees long to be physically close to the guru and believe in the guru’s special ability to transfer magical or spiritual powers (*śakti*) beyond the physical body. Through an analysis of the haptic logics of what Tulasi Srinivas has called “proxemic desire,” this article reveals how devotees clamor to be close to the guru, engage in physical encounters with the guru, to ingest substances that have encountered the guru’s body – to quite literally ingest the guru. These haptic logics of proxemic desire create an environment wherein devotees relish in proximity to the guru (which can be abused) and gurus can easily justify sexual misconduct as a ‘blessing,’ ‘healing,’ ‘transformation,’ or ‘initiation’ deemed essential to the devotees’ spiritual progress.

Within this power dynamic wherein drinking the water in which the guru’s feet have been washed appears as a blessing and wherein the guru’s every action is justified as divine, we must reconsider the notion of sexual consent. This article aims to delve deeply into such complex territories and problematize the historical ways in which the racialized and orientalist conception of the reasons for sexual abuse in guru movements has blinded us to a deeper analytic that may illuminate this facet of the guru-disciple relationship. This topic has long captivated the tabloids and critics, but scholars have largely ignored it. Following the advice of Kathryn Lofton as she addressed the sexual scandals of the Catholic Church, the author suggests that we should view the ubiquity of sex scandal among guru movements as a vibrant, yet troublesome aspect of lived religion in the guru field, and one that scholars cannot and should not continue to ignore.