

# Abhinavagupta's Erotic Mysticism: The Reconciliation of Spirit and Flesh<sup>1</sup>

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## Overview

Always Already Abhinavagupta/Fresh-and-Concealed  
and Belonging to the Primordial Past, Previously Revealed,  
I am the Heart, with Dazzling Brilliance of the Supreme,  
Spontaneously I Blast Forth, the Ultimate.

(Abhinavagupta, *Parātrīśikālaghuvṛtti*)<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on the erotic aspects of a particular mystical worldview, the “erotic mysticism” of Abhinavagupta, the Hindu Tantric sage of Kashmir (ca. 975–1025 CE). In particular, I concentrate on Abhinavagupta’s intertwining of consciousness and sexuality, as one example of his interpretative capacities. A master of multiple traditions, discourses, and methodologies<sup>3</sup>—ranging from the most analytical to the most poetic, and including Vyākaraṇa,<sup>4</sup> Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika,<sup>5</sup> Buddhist logic, hermeneutics, Śaiva and Śākta mythology, symbolism, and religious *imaginaire*,<sup>6</sup> Tantric and yogic ritual, theology, and aesthetics—Abhinavagupta applied his visionary capacities to numerous problematics, seamlessly blending diverse epistemic fields,<sup>7</sup> creatively synthesizing different aspects of Being,<sup>8</sup> and continually reconnecting polarities—One and Many, Purity and Power (see Sanderson 1985), Self and Other (see Dupuche 2001)—in his nondualistic vision of reality. Out of this vast array of problematics to which Abhinavagupta devoted himself, I will focus on consciousness and sexuality. I focus on these precisely because of the lack of attention that sexuality often gets in academic discussions of the seemingly abstract notion of consciousness. For Abhinavagupta, these two “polarities” are reconnected in his form of Tantra that I will refer to as “erotic mysticism.” This term was used—for the first time in Hindu Studies as far as I am aware—by Edward C. Dimock, Jr., in his classic work *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava-sahajiyā Cult of Bengal* (1989 [1966]). Dimock (1989: 3, 15, and *passim*) shows that the Vaiṣṇava-sahajiyās attempted to

reconcile sacred experience and the body, or the “spirit” and “flesh,” in both theory and poetic expression.<sup>9</sup> Later, Alexis Sanderson, in his masterpiece “Purity and Power Among the Brahmans of Kashmir” (1985), made the Kaula Tantric tradition famous and referred to this tradition that would flow into and influence Abhinavagupta’s own tradition as “erotic-mystical” (see Sanderson 1986c: 15, 1986d: 16). Sanderson describes how the later internalized Kaula practices, culminating in Abhinavagupta’s own tradition, evolved from the practices of the Kāpālikas, the “Skull-Men,” an earlier ascetic tradition that was centered in the cremation grounds:

The Kāpālika...sought the convergence of the Yoginīs and his fusion with them (*yoginīmelaka*, *-melāpa*) through a process of visionary invocation in which he would attract them out of the sky, gratify them with an offering of blood drawn from his own body, and ascend with them into the sky as the leader of their band. The Kaulas translated this visionary fantasy into the aesthetic terms of mystical experience. The Yoginīs became the deities of his senses (*karaneśvarīs*), revelling in his sensations. In intense pleasure this revelling completely clouds his internal awareness: he becomes their plaything or victim (*paśu*). However, when in the same pleasure the desiring ego is suspended, then the outer sources of sensation lose their gross otherness. They shine *within* cognition as its aesthetic form. The Yoginīs of the senses relish this offering of “nectar” and gratified thereby they converge and fuse with the *kaula*’s inner transcendental identity as the Kuleśvara [Lord of the Cosmic Body], the Bhairava in the radiant “sky” of enlightened consciousness (*cidvyomabhairava*) (1988: 680; emphasis in original).

Sanderson points toward the *yoginīs* becoming the sense-energies, and the master of the energies becoming the Heart-Center of consciousness. In other words, concrete flesh-and-blood *yoginīs* and the shamanic practitioner are internalized by the Kaulas, becoming experienced as inner manifestations of consciousness.<sup>10</sup> In this article I am inspired and influenced by both Dimock and Sanderson, and I will show how Abhinavagupta’s poetic language reflects his appropriation of Kaula erotic mysticism, as well as his own attempt to reconcile the “spirit” and the “flesh” or pure consciousness and embodied sexuality. This reconciliation took place in the areas of theory, poetic expression, and practice. For Abhinavagupta, the experience of Ultimate Consciousness was experienced both *in* and *as* orgasmic sexual union. The highest state of awareness was expressed in sexual ritual performance; this unique combination of pure awareness and sexuality in turn charged Abhinavagupta’s model of reality and his poetic evocations of Ultimate Consciousness.

How Abhinavagupta understood the highest and most authentic experience available to humanity is complex precisely because Abhinavagupta elucidates such an experience in at least two different ways. On one hand, he describes the central experience as recollecting one’s identity as Ultimate Consciousness or Ultimate Reality. In other words, he can and does talk about such an experience in quite abstract terms, in terms of pure consciousness. Now on the other hand, that very

Ultimate that is described in terms of consciousness, is also described further by Abhinavagupta to be nothing less than the god Śiva in sexual union with the goddess Śakti, so that the ultimate experience could be and was achieved in a ritual of sexual union.

My method will be to get at this central experience by paying careful attention to the language Abhinavagupta uses and taking seriously its various levels of meaning. In particular, Abhinavagupta uses two sets of language. On one hand, he uses a variety of *mṛś* terms: terms such as *vimarśa*, literally “touching back,” and *parāmarśa*, literally “laying hold of.” Both of these terms are used to refer to the central experience of recollection,<sup>11</sup> and I indicate this by translating both as “Recollective Awareness.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Abhinavagupta uses terms that have clear references to sexual intercourse and that, at the same time, are able to operate more abstractly (by referring, for example, to language and consciousness). Two important terms in this connection are *sphurattā*, “throbbing” or “pulsation,” and *samghaṭṭa*, “banging together.” I will be looking at how Abhinavagupta used both of these sets of terms in his Tantric works, especially his magnum opus, the *Tantrāloka* (The Illumination of the Tantra), suggesting that Abhinavagupta reveals his vision of reality to be both mystical and erotic. In general, I will be focusing on two very different parts of the *Tantrāloka*: on one hand, chapters 3 and 4, where Abhinavagupta's discourse centers on consciousness, as he describes practices and rituals in terms of the higher states of consciousness to which they lead, and, on the other hand, chapter 29, where the discourse becomes centered on the concrete ritual of sexual union. It is my contention that these two sets of discourse mutually inform one another: as rituals of sexual union are understood in terms of consciousness, so consciousness is understood in terms of sexuality.

### The Interplay of Consciousness and Sexuality

The complexity of Abhinavagupta's language, freely crossing the discourse of consciousness with that of sexuality, may be initially seen by placing together the third and twenty-ninth chapters of the *Tantrāloka*. In the third chapter, Abhinavagupta discusses, in a very abstract manner, what is called “the phonematic recollection,” an abstract contemplative process understood as the recollective experience of the fifty Sanskrit phonemes.<sup>13</sup> The fifty Sanskrit phonemes represent the totality of the universe, and the consciousness of the practitioner is said to recollect itself so that the practitioner embraces the whole matrix of sounds, and thus the totality of the universe, in one instant. On the other hand, in the twenty-ninth chapter,<sup>14</sup> Abhinavagupta refers to a concrete practice, known as the *kulayāga*, a ritual of sexual union. In calling it the *kulayāga*, Abhinavagupta makes it clear that he is appropriating the Kaula erotic mystical tradition, in which a sexual ritual, culminating in orgasm, was the central practice. Already the complexity of the *Tantrāloka* should be clear. Abhinavagupta is concerned with, on the one hand, the very concrete ritual of orgasmic sexual union and, on the other hand, an abstract

contemplative practice leading to a higher state of consciousness.

The dynamic interplay of these two fields of meaning may be initially demonstrated by focusing on the term “*saṃghaṭṭa*,” a term that Abhinavagupta associates with *vimarśa* and a term that he uses in sections of both *Tantrāloka* 3 and 29. The term may be translated as “banging together,” where “together” has the sense of “as one unit.” Although the phrase “banging together” is admittedly inelegant, it has the advantage nonetheless of retrieving the erotic meaning that, I believe, is motivating Abhinavagupta’s description of experience and that is otherwise lost. At the same time, I recognize that the term operates on several levels, and I am not attempting to reduce its meaning to the merely sexual level. In fact I will show that the term must be understood metaphysically and even grammatically. My point now however is that while meaning exists on both of these levels, the grammatical and metaphysical, the term always retains its sexual connotation. I am suggesting that all interpretation and translation should evoke this crossing of consciousness and sexuality, which vitalized Abhinavagupta’s vision of reality. What makes Abhinavagupta’s language provocative and interesting is that he is able to speak metaphysically, grammatically, and erotically all at once. Not only does his metaphysics retain an erotic connotation, the very existence of his metaphysics is dependent on the fact that it is erotic.

My translation of *saṃghaṭṭa* may be initially justified by looking at its etymology. The term is formed from the root *ghaṭṭ*, meaning “to rub or clash,” and the prefix *saṃ*, meaning “together.” The literal meaning then of *saṃghaṭṭa* is “rubbing or clashing together.” Additionally, the term has the connotation of making a sound through such “clashing,” and the translation “banging together” also captures that connotation. We are reminded of proto-Tantric rites of banging a gong<sup>15</sup> and shamanic rites of drum-banging (see Kalweit 2001), where acoustic banging is related to transformation and the creation of new realities. However, in this article, I am translating *saṃghaṭṭa* as “banging together” primarily to emphasize another meaning, the sexual connotation. Both Abhinavagupta and others used the term in such a way. For example, the twelfth-century Kashmiri historian, Kalhaṇa, who wrote the master chronicle of the rulers of his land, used the term to refer precisely to the mutual clashing together, or again, “banging together,” of lovers embracing (see Monier-Williams 1984).

### “Big Bang” Theory in Tantric Cosmology and Practice

With each usage of the term, Abhinavagupta purposely evoked, while simultaneously elucidating abstract Tantric cosmology or practice, the image of “the banging together” of Śiva and Śakti, that is, Śiva and Śakti in the process of sexual intercourse. To understand that, Abhinavagupta’s cosmology, explicated in exquisite detail by André Padoux, needs to be understood. At the top of Abhinavagupta’s cosmology is a Godhead with two intertwining aspects, pure light consciousness (*prakāśa*) and recollective awareness (*vimarśa*).<sup>16</sup> This latter dynamic aspect of the Godhead is equivalent to God’s urge to “be in touch” with himself, that is, to know

himself or to come out of himself precisely to turn back and see himself. Further, the manifestation itself may be understood from God's point of view. God displays himself so that he may gaze on and return to himself.

This notion has a precedent in Prajāpati, described in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4.1–6; see Olivelle 1996: 13–14) as gazing at himself and thinking to himself. Tired of being alone and wanting to transcend himself, or get out of himself, he becomes many, first becoming the male and female in embrace that he resembles and then procreating. The story crosses consciousness and sexuality;<sup>17</sup> the narrative is at once about creation through copulation and about consciousness wanting to know itself and turning back on itself.

Maheśvarānanda of Cidambaram (flourished about 1175–1225 CE), in his *Mahārthamañjarī* (Blossoming of Great Meaning), one of the most important Recollection-influenced Krama texts produced during the diffusion of Krama into South India (Sanderson 1986b: 14), describes the same process as Śiva, overflowing with joy, raising his face to take a peek at himself (*Mahārthamañjarī* page 40; Singh 1990: 10). In terms of Śiva alone,<sup>18</sup> that urge is simply the urge to come out of one's self and turn back to take a look at oneself. This urge is known as "Śakti," and in particular the "Śakti" or "Power" that is Recollective Awareness.

That Abhinavagupta equates the pure light with Śiva, and this urge to know with Śakti, has extremely significant consequences. Not only does Abhinavagupta discuss cosmology using abstract *prakāśa-vimarśa* language, he also uses discourse that relies on Śiva-Śakti language, giving rise to a cosmology with a radically different flavor. When using Śiva-Śakti terminology, the primordial beginning of the cosmos becomes the masculine polar aspect Śiva in perpetual sexual union with the feminine polar aspect Śakti. In other words, the emission, ejaculation even, of the universe begins with a "big bang" or "banging together."

The urge described in terms of consciousness is the urge to know the self; in erotic terms it is the urge to sexually unite with the other. Thus, knowing the self is intimately interrelated with knowing, or touching, the other. Sexual union becomes the most radical way of getting out of oneself and hence returning to oneself.<sup>19</sup> Important to us is that for Abhinavagupta, the intertwining of the two poles that I just described above in abstract terms may be expressed in more concrete terms. More precisely, Light-Consciousness and Recollective Awareness are Śiva and Śakti in a state of blissful intercourse, always intertwining.

Abhinavagupta in fact playfully brings together both the abstract and concrete terms when he uses a *mṛś* term to describe the precise relationship between Śiva and Śakti: "Śakti would not even think (*āmarśayet*) [of herself] as different from Śiva" (*Parātriṃśikāvivarāṇa* page 3).<sup>20</sup> To be Śakti or Recollective Awareness, is to be in dynamic intercourse with Śiva, infusing him with energy, life, and his potent capacity. There is no Śakti that is not in the state of blissful union with Śiva. There is no *vimarśa* that can "*mṛś*" itself into difference; to be *vimarśa* is to intertwine with Śiva, to turn back onto Śiva, to touch Śiva, to gather the totality together again back to the Light-Consciousness.

It is important to note here that the deep structure of reality for Abhinavagupta is polarity or complementarity. This does not contradict Abhinavagupta's nonduality as the two poles Śiva and Śakti merge in nondual union. The incessant intertwining of Śiva and Śakti, or more concretely, their sexual intercourse, becomes the great mytheme that guides Abhinavagupta's stance towards the world. This intertwining that takes place at the highest level of reality is woven into all levels of reality. The universe arises precisely from the sexual union of Śiva and Śakti. As Abhinavagupta states, Śiva and Śakti blissfully "bang together" and out of that "big bang" the whole universe surges forth. Abhinavagupta writes: "The doubled form of these two [Śiva and Śakti] is known as 'banging together.' That very [form] is called 'energy of bliss,' from which the totality is ejaculated" (*Tantrāloka* 3.68a–68b).<sup>21</sup>

In union with Śakti, Śiva literally "ejaculates" (*vi-srj*) the world.<sup>22</sup> The Sanskrit root *srj* used here is a cognate of the English term "surge." The world then is precisely a "surging forth" of Śiva himself. That Śiva puts himself into the world supports Abhinavagupta's nondual metaphysics where it is emphasized that although Consciousness is transcendent to the universe it is always immanent and hence always available. Śiva although transcendent still dwells in all beings; that is, all beings retain their connection to Śiva (see Padoux 1990: 80–81). In other words, Śiva simply transforms himself in creating the world. As he emits, he puts himself into the emission. In describing the emission of the universe, Abhinavagupta is clearly thinking of the parallels to the emission of semen. Subtle vibration transforms into pulsation or throbbing, leading to emission. What surges forth finally is the semen of Śiva, so that the universe contains the essence (*sāra*) of Śiva (see Padoux 1990: 80). In this way, again, creation begins with a "big bang."

Since the goal of all Tantric practice (*sādhanā*) is to return to the primordial beginning by effecting a reversal of the cosmology, Tantric practice becomes a "banging together," as it is nothing less than a reenactment of that essential primordial moment. Insofar as such a Tantric cosmology informs Tantric practice, it is correct to say that one experiences the primordial beginning, or reality itself, *in* orgasmic sexual union. Further, however, and this is a main point of this article, even in ritual as abstract as phonematic recollection, the goal is still to return to that primordial moment, that is, to experience reality *as* orgasmic sexual union. Putting it that way, I am indicating that Abhinavagupta is using the notion of "banging together," with all its erotic connotations, as a symbol to evoke the highest experience achieved in orgasmic sexual union, an experience of bliss, or wonder, in which the prediscursive impulse of recollective consciousness manifests. Thus, even ritual as abstract as phonematic recollection, which similarly allows the prediscursive consciousness to arise, becomes in Abhinavagupta's worldview an internalization of the very concrete ritual of sexual union, the *kulayāga*, or the sacrifice of the Cosmic Body.

### **The Term "Sphurattā": Abhinavagupta's Throbbing Heart**

In this section, I want to flesh out some of the above ideas further by focusing on

another important term in Abhinavagupta's discourse: *sphurattā*, meaning "throbbing" or "pulsation." Although the term "*sphurattā*" may be understood abstractly as a characteristic of recollective awareness (*vimarśa*), an exploration of this term again reveals the Kaula erotico-mystical substrate.

*Sphurattā* is derived from the root *sphur*, a cognate of which is "spur" (Lanman 1963: 281), as in "spur of the moment," meaning "a sudden [or creative] impulse."<sup>23</sup> In the fourth chapter of the *Tantrāloka*, Abhinavagupta relates the notion of recollective awareness to this creative pulsation and to a variety of other terms, including "vibration" (*spanda*), "surging up" (*ucchalana*), "wave" (*ūrmi*), "essence" (*sāra*), "heart" (*hrdaya*), and the source of vibration, "motionless motion" (*kiñcicalana*) (see also Torella 1994: 121n28), the center or stillpoint, out of which all activity arises:

In the Heart, the Recollective Awareness of the self, in which the entire universe is dissolved, manifesting in the first and last [moments] of the perceiving of things, has the name "universal"; and [such recollective awareness] is called "Vibration" in the scriptures, whose nature is a surging up within one's own self. This Vibration is precisely a motionless motion, as it is the wave of the ocean of intelligence; without such wave, there is no consciousness. The reality of the ocean is the state of wavelessness, then waves, and so on. This [Vibration] is the essence of the ensemble of everything. The insentient universe has consciousness for its essence, its foundation resting in that [Consciousness]. That Essence is the Great Heart (*Tantrāloka* 4.182b–86a).<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Abhinavagupta evokes the idea of a prediscursive creative pulsation out of which all manifestation arises.

Elsewhere, Abhinavagupta uses the term "*sphūrj*," literally to "rumble," in his introductory verses of his *Parātrīśikālaghuvṛtti* (Short Commentary on the Supreme Triadic Queen), while simultaneously throwing himself forth, into the world of the text:

Continually Completely Fresh (*abhinava*), Concealed (*gupta*),  
and Belonging to the Primordial Past, Already Revealed,  
That is the Heart, with Dazzling Brilliance of the Supreme,  
Spontaneously It Blasts Forth (*sphūrjati*), the Ultimate.<sup>25</sup>

The two terms that make up Abhinavagupta's name may be translated together as "fresh, concealed," as I have done in this translation. In that way, Abhinavagupta literally emits himself into the text. In doing so, he equates his Self with the Pulsating Heart, the Ultimate that continually emits the universe. Significantly, Abhinavagupta evokes the dynamic and erotic aspect of his own consciousness—not some pure static consciousness, but one that creatively "blasts forth." Are there echoes here too of that great creative being, Prajāpati?

Although it is not difficult to link “pulsation” with sexuality, I want to make the point that Abhinavagupta was continually playing with this connection, purposely evoking consciousness as erotic. Now bearing in mind that Abhinavagupta equates Recollective Awareness with Pulsation, it is worth dwelling on the meaning of yet another especially significant verse in which the term “Pulsation” occurs and in which Abhinavagupta again puts himself into the text. I believe the erotic aspects of this verse will be more obvious. This verse, among other things a hymn to Mother and Father, might be said to be Abhinavagupta’s most important in that he himself places it at the beginning of not only the *Tantrāloka* but also the *Tantrasāra* (Essence of Tantra) and *Parātriṃśikāvivarāṇa* (Long Commentary on the Supreme Triadic Queen). This verse puts Pulsation in a context that reveals much about what Abhinavagupta is thinking when he uses both this term and the term “Recollective Awareness.” Before attempting to decipher the many levels of meaning pouring out of Abhinavagupta’s evocative poetics, I first provide my translation of this ode to the Heart of consciousness:

Mother [the Generating], full of the ever fresh [and secret] (*abhinava*) Emission that rests in her pure portion; and Father [the Generator], having a body that is full, his desire [and dazzling beauty] hidden (*gupta*) in the five faces; my Heart, containing in itself the Emissional Power, the stuff pulsed out from the sexual intercourse of both [Mother and Father], the Supreme Cosmic Body of the nectar of immortality, may it vibrate! (*Parātriṃśikāvivarāṇa* page 2).<sup>26</sup>

I want to belabor a certain point and assume that my translation has not already borne out the obvious.<sup>27</sup> What Abhinavagupta seems to have in mind here is sexual intercourse, between Śiva and Śakti, between his own mother and father, and between the *siddha* and the *yoginī*. Abhinavagupta is purposely evoking the Kaula erotico-mystical tradition, in which the mouth of the *yoginī*, the vulva, was essential for effecting the transfer of sexual fluids (for details, again, see White 2003: Chapter 4).

For example, he refers to the “pure portion” of the female that holds the “emission.” In doing so, he seems to be referring, at least on one level, to the vulva. The fact that this is “pure” supports this idea further. The hymn as a whole refers to Abhinavagupta being a *yoginībhū*, someone that arises out a *yoni* that is precisely pure. Now given this reference to the pure *yoni*, it would be natural, even without the erotic emphasis of Abhinavagupta’s theology, to find a reference to the male sexual organ, too. Such indeed is the case, for immediately following the reference to the vulva is Abhinavagupta’s description of a form that is full, embodying or symbolic of desire and belonging only to the male; this seems to refer, again at least on one level, to the male sexual organ.

Now this is also said to be hidden in the *pañcamukha*; in addition to meaning “five faces” this may also mean the mouth that is spread out or wide open (see Singh 1989: 2n3). Thus, although it may refer to a lion (*siṃha*) and in turn to Abhinava-



gupta's father, Narasiṃhagupta,<sup>28</sup> another implicit reference is to the open vulva.

These connections find further support if we begin to go outside of the immediate text. For example, when we take *pañcamukha* as "five faces," then this term refers to the five faces of Śiva which are part of the *liṅga* when used as an object of worship. To make sense of this verse now, we need to ask: in what sense is the *liṅga* hidden in the five faces? Just as the *liṅga* as a whole represents Śiva in his transcendency, who is "invisibly present" in the five faces,<sup>29</sup> in that way it may be said that the Father, Śiva, is hidden in the five faces.

Abhinavagupta's reference to the female sexual organ finds further support in that the pure portion also refers to the sixteenth digit of the moon.<sup>30</sup> One of the senses of "pure" here is that this aspect of the moon is beyond change (see Gnoli 1985). Important for us is that this sixteenth digit becomes equated by Abhinavagupta with the sixteenth phoneme, none other than the *visarga*-phoneme and all that it symbolizes. Among other things, this phoneme, also called the "love-principle" (*kāmatattva*), becomes equated with emission itself and hence the place in which the emission takes place, which on the human level, is the *yoni*.<sup>31</sup>

Again, I want to emphasize that Abhinavagupta's language is multivocal, continually referring not only to concrete levels of sexuality but also to more abstract levels of consciousness. Thus, Raniero Gnoli,<sup>32</sup> long ago, pointed out that the ever fresh (*abhinava*) Emission (*sr̥ṣṭi*) may refer to not only Abhinavagupta but also to "the way, the pure world, beyond illusion." The Emissional Power (*visarga*) may refer to both "the true and proper emission" and "the creative force of consciousness, the I." The Cosmic Body, or Holographic Body (*kula*), refers "to the ensemble of the divine powers that constitute the totality, the secret essence of the sacred scriptures." In translating *kula* as "Holographic Body,"<sup>33</sup> I am inspired by Paul Muller-Ortega's discussion (1989: 110–11) of the *kulayāga*, where he describes the male *siddha* and female *yoginī* uniting as one microcosmic body of power, through which they return to the primordial macrocosmic body of power, Śiva and Śakti in union.<sup>34</sup> Even more meanings of *kula* are found in *Tantrāloka* 29, for example, where Abhinavagupta describes the Cosmic Body as not only "superiority," "freedom," "hermeneutical power,"<sup>35</sup> and "consciousness," but also "body of the Godhead," "potency," "vitality," "force," and "amassing."<sup>36</sup> Finally, the five faces of Śiva are also the sources of the Śaiva revelation according to a system accepted and reinterpreted by Abhinavagupta (see Gnoli 1985: 12n24). Thus, we are reminded that Abhinavagupta continually evokes several levels of meaning. And as Gnoli's work reminds us, scholarship on Abhinavagupta has never come up short in uncovering the more abstract levels. However, one of the purposes of this article is to show that the concrete levels that refer to sexuality have remained for the most part untouched.

Returning to Abhinavagupta's prayer then, on one level, "Father and Mother" refers to Śiva and Śakti. On another level, Abhinavagupta is making a reference to his own birth and to the Tantric union that took place to conceive him. Abhinavagupta himself is a *yoginībhū*, a spiritual offspring arisen from a pure womb; he was conceived in the Tantric ritual union of a *yoginī* and a *siddha*, his mother Vimalā and

his father Narasiṃhagupta, respectively, both in the state of meditative absorption at the time (see Silburn 1988: 174–75).<sup>37</sup> On one level then this is a reference to his own mother Vimalā, referred to by the phrase “*vimalakalā*,” a mother who is “*abhinava*,” “always new,” and to his own father, a father who is “*gupta*,” “concealed.” The result of an “*abhinava*”-Mother and a “*gupta*”-Father is Abhinavagupta himself.

In traversing this hermeneutical liminal terrain, I am aware that I have been taking risks. The process of translation and interpretation presents the scholar with both opportunity (of finding new meaning) and danger (of misinterpretation). I am encouraged here, however, by the scholarship of Francis Clooney, who has attempted to make sense of Śaiva mythological material, in which the *liṅga* is ever present. Interpreting the narrative of the infinite *liṅga* in the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* (1.2.26.19–24), Clooney simply and perceptively remarks:

In the minds of most ordinary Hindus, the lingam is not the phallus of Shiva nor even a phallic symbol; it is simply the universal symbol of Shiva’s transcendence and mystery. We must respect this common viewpoint, but after the reading the myth it is hard to avoid attributing some phallic significance to the lingam. A tall, thin column, it seems to signify both Shiva’s sexual power and also the unshaken self-control of this master who neither represses nor surrenders to desire. The lingam usually stands inside a yoni...so worshiping the lingam is to approach the male together with the female....

To worship the lingam is to praise Shiva as the highest Lord of the universe and to surrender to that mystery. By accepting the lingam as the sign of Shiva, the sages find a new foundation for their religious practice....They affirm the paradoxical nature of Shiva....[T]hey step beyond the secure and entirely predictable asceticism of their past (1998: 81).

Clooney’s answer to the question “Is the *liṅga* a phallus or a symbol of transcendence?” is that it is both. Clooney and, of course, such scholars of Hindu mythology before him, including Wendy Doniger and Stella Kramrisch, have long recognized the many levels of meaning presented by erotic symbols such as the *liṅga*. Their insights certainly apply to Abhinavagupta, who, in putting forth his theory of resonance (*dhvani*), himself recognized—perhaps more than any other Hindu scholar—the capacity of language to resonate on many levels.<sup>38</sup>

### **Abhinavagupta’s Erotic Hermeneutics of Consciousness**

The implication of the above discussion is that the terms Abhinavagupta uses to discuss Recollective Consciousness are terms with obvious sexual referents. More precisely, they refer to the sexual ritual central to the Kaula lineage, in which initiation and liberation occur via the transmission of sexual fluids. Thus, that Abhinavagupta uses metaphors arising out of this context reveals what Abhinava-

gupta really thinks about Consciousness-Pulsation. Again, this is not to deny that Abhinavagupta's discourse also refers to consciousness. However, it would be wrong to simply say that Abhinavagupta's terms refer to sexual intercourse on one level and to consciousness on another level. It is more accurate to say that the meanings feed off of each other. Abhinavagupta's model of consciousness, language, and reality is meant to be erotic and is continually enlivened by its erotic dimension. This is in fact quite natural, and I am reminded here of David Michael Levin, who argues that both creative vision and poetic language naturally contain an erotic dimension. Levin states that creative vision "makes connections, it gathers and unifies, it joins, it creates, it reproduces and multiplies; it is, in a word, erotic. Vision, being inherently metaphorical, responds primordially to things with a gaze very different from the literal gaze of the scientific eye" (1988: 226–27). Levin also states that poetic language always "bespeaks its groundedness in the dynamism, the inherent creativity, of experience" (1988: 231). In other words, the dynamism and creativity of authentic experience will naturally transfer to the language that properly represents it.

Ignoring the erotic dimension of Abhinavagupta's model of consciousness, the crossing of consciousness and sexuality in Abhinavagupta's discourse, leads to academic representations of Abhinavagupta's life and work becoming too abstract.<sup>39</sup> What I am saying is that Abhinavagupta's model of Consciousness, and in particular his understanding of Recollective Consciousness, has a Tantric grounding.

Having said that, the gist of what he is really saying, the sexual substance giving life to Abhinavagupta's language, needs to be retrieved. Language and Consciousness for Abhinavagupta are erotic and even "spermatic."<sup>40</sup> By that I mean that for Abhinavagupta, language and words are filled with seminal power, able to burst forth and generate meaning. Further, consciousness is or carries the stuff of life and is able to transmit the stuff of life from one to another. Like sperm fertilizing the womb, transmitting life, by way of two into the heart of one offspring, this Primordial Pulsation may be transmitted from one to another and in particular from Śiva-Bhairava to conscious beings. Pulsation takes the practitioner back to the "big bang" (*saṃghaṭṭa*) itself, the primordial moment of Śiva and Śakti, Mother and Father, in pulsating union. Reflecting on his own state of being, Abhinavagupta envisions his Heart-Consciousness as arising out of Pulsation and thus still bearing that power. In tune with his Heart, and emulating those great vibrant ones, the "human tuning-forks" known as *ṛṣis*, Abhinavagupta allows his Heart to vibrate so that he is transmitted to the past, or rather, so that the past becomes present once again in his own Consciousness.<sup>41</sup> The transmission of Consciousness takes place precisely in the same way that sexual fluids are transmitted, allowing one to flow back to the primordial source where it all begins, the big bang.

### **Multiple Levels of Meaning of the Term "Saṃghaṭṭa"**

I now want to return to the term "*saṃghaṭṭa*"; it is an especially good term to focus

on and to think with because of the multiple levels of meaning inherent in the term. In particular, Abhinavagupta uses the term to refer to the grammatical union of phonemes. This is a natural use of the term, as in general it does have the connotation of union. Abhinavagupta's grammatical references form part of his cosmological and soteriological discourse in the third chapter of the *Tāntraloka*, as scholars such as Raniero Gnoli, André Padoux, Paul Muller-Ortega, and Bettina Bäumer have made clear.<sup>42</sup> Most significantly, Abhinavagupta's phonematic cosmology corresponds with various rules of Sanskrit grammar, such as, for example, the basic rule that the combination of the sounds short *A* and short *A* always gives rise to the sound long *A* ( $A + A \rightarrow \bar{A}$ ). Important in understanding Abhinavagupta's conception of cosmology and practice is that these various rules become articulated by him in code form, as he uses various terms to represent the various Sanskrit sounds with which these terms begin. Thus, the term "*anuttara*" (or "*anuttarā*") (I say more about these two terms below), which means "Ultimate" and which begins with the sound *A*, comes to represent the sound or phoneme *A*; similarly the term "*ānanda*," which means "Bliss" and which begins with the sound  $\bar{A}$ , then comes to represent the phoneme  $\bar{A}$ . Thus, these various terms refer to specific phonemes, allowing Abhinavagupta to give a hidden discussion of grammar while discussing other metaphysical matters at the same time. In particular these same terms are meaningful in the context of Abhinavagupta's ontology; in other words each term also represents an aspect of Ultimate Reality, corresponding to some stage of Reality as it unfolds to give rise to the totality. Thus, when Abhinavagupta makes the statement that Ultimate Reality consists of two intertwining poles that then give rise to the power of bliss, he is making sense metaphysically, that is, discussing standard Śaiva cosmology. At the same time, he is also articulating a grammatical rule in code form. Finally, as I will make clear shortly, his whole discussion is given an erotic twist, as he is also precisely referring to sexual copulation.

More particularly, the two intertwining poles become known in Abhinavagupta's system as *anuttara* and *anuttarā*, both meaning literally "none higher," the former term being masculine and the latter term being feminine. Again, both represent the sound with which they begin, the sound *A*. Now these two intertwine to give rise to bliss, *ānanda*, again, representing the sound with which it begins, the sound  $\bar{A}$ . In other words,  $A + A \rightarrow \bar{A}$ . Thus, Abhinavagupta is speaking at once both metaphysically and grammatically. Near the beginning of his discussion of the phonematic emanation, Abhinavagupta states:

The Goddess who is Ultimate (*anuttarā*) [the phoneme *A*], abounding in the unfolding of the Cosmic Body (*kula*) of this God who is the Absolute Body (*akula*) [*A-kula*, that is, the Cosmic Body of the Phoneme *A* = *anuttara*], She is the Supreme, the Power of the Cosmic Body (*kaulikī śakti*), with which the Lord intertwines. The doubled form of these two [Śiva and Śakti] is known as "banging together." That very [form] is called "energy of bliss," (*ānanda*) [the Phoneme  $\bar{A}$ ] from which the totality is ejaculated (*Tantrāloka* 3.66b [excerpt]–68b).<sup>43</sup>

This is an example of Abhinavagupta clearly playing with terminology. Precisely in this way, he is able to give a discourse on both metaphysics and grammar while at the same referring back to the sexual union of Śiva and Śakti and the sexual ritual in which such union is realized.

His association of “banging together” and “bliss” is consistent with the Kaula notion that reality in the form of bliss (*ānanda*) becomes embodied during sexual intercourse (see Pandey 1963: 620). For Abhinavagupta there is no difference between experiencing the bliss or blessedness of Śiva-Śakti and bliss in the body. There is no such thing for Abhinavagupta as a merely cognitive experience of Śiva-Śakti;<sup>44</sup> the implication is that Consciousness is always embodied.

Thus, the term “*saṃghaṭṭa*” is used in various ways: in *Tantrāloka* 29, where Abhinavagupta discusses the *kulayāga* and where the term has clear sexual connotations; in *Tantrāloka* 3, where Abhinavagupta discusses the phonematic recollection and where the term has new meanings, both metaphysical and grammatical meanings; and in *Tantrāloka* 3 again, where the term has the same meanings as it did in *Tantrāloka* 29, that is, clear sexual meanings.

### Phonematic Recollection as the Banging Together of Śiva and Śakti

Instead of focusing on only one term, if we turn to the phonematic recollection as a whole, a natural and significant question arises: might Abhinavagupta purposely be infusing his discussion of the phonematic recollection as a whole with terminology that carries sexual or erotic meanings?

There are two ways of understanding Abhinavagupta's discussion of the phonematic recollection. On one hand, he is clearly engaged in an abstract discussion of consciousness. Thus, Bäumer's insightful interpretation of *sāmbhavopāya*, “the way of Śambhu”—equated by Abhinavagupta with phonematic recollection—provides us with a hermeneutics of consciousness in approaching Abhinavagupta's understanding of this abstract contemplative practice.<sup>45</sup> Bäumer highlights Abhinavagupta's description of the adept as allowing consciousness to spontaneously and naturally recollect itself, instantly “seizing” the complete matrix of sounds. Such recollection is salvific precisely because it is the interior reversal of Śiva's manifestation of the universe.<sup>46</sup> Here the emission of the universe by Śiva is understood as precisely the articulation of the fifty phonemes that embody the absolute self. Thus, in emitting the universe, Śiva at once puts himself into it. Śiva's utterance of the phonemes is referred to as Śiva's recollective awareness (*parāmarśa*); in other words, his act of recollection, of touching or knowing himself, gets him out of himself, that is, it leads from the absolute reality transcending the universe to the manifest universe. Understood at the human level, the act of recollection leads from the manifest universe to the absolute. In other words, the practitioner gathers together, unifies, or collects all the aspects of Śiva dispersed into the world and makes them whole again, uniting them in the absolute self.

As an aside, I want to note an interesting parallel: the recollection of Being has

been described from a Western point of view by Levin,<sup>47</sup> highlighting the primordial potential of creative language and vision, experienced in the body as an ecstatic experience of transacting in visionary energies:

By reconnecting us to the unifying unity of the primordial field, it helps us to see our bodily felt “centre of ecstasy” and makes of our vision, our visionary “transactions”, a hermeneutical disclosing—a *homologeïn*—of the primordial ecstasy of Being, seen, ontologically, as presencing in the opening-up of a (self-differentiating) field of sheer lucency (1988: 214).

Abhinavagupta similarly understood recollection in terms of creative vision and language. In particular, language in the form of *mantra* is understood as being continually emitted and resorbed by Consciousness, sometimes called “the Creative Sonic Matrix” (*mātrkā*), in the form of Energy (*śakti*).<sup>48</sup> The energies retain their link to Consciousness, a link referred to as “Vitality” (*vīrya*), and such connection may be used by the practitioner to journey back to the source. Again, recollection is an act of gathering together all the energies that have been emitted, seeing them as unified in one source. Abhinavagupta’s language, similar to Levin’s language, is consciousness-centered. However, and to foreshadow my argument below, I want to note that Abhinavagupta’s use of Tantric terminology (“Creative Sonic Matrix,” “Vitality,” and “Energy”) signals that the process of recollection is also understood by Abhinavagupta in terms of the Kaula erotic-mystical process of linking with the energies of the *yoginīs*.<sup>49</sup> I will return to this erotic dimension, after discussing another example of the abstract level of meaning in Abhinavagupta’s discourse.

Abhinavagupta also evokes the power of primordial language in *Tantrāloka* 11. Śiva is the master of words, the poet who puts his consciousness into his work, a consciousness that may be tapped into by the person-with-heart (*sahridaya*). Abhinavagupta describes the process of accessing deeper levels of reality and consciousness through language:

The more this uncreated overflowing reality is seen clearly, the more wonder unfolds. The various levels in which creative intuition is present follow from conventional language being immersed in what precedes it, and that in the primordial, transcendental phonemes. Those who repose in this creative intuition, overflowing with the primordial phonemes, become poetic and linguistic adepts. Resting in this consciousness-reality in its highest form, unlimited by conventional language, what would they not [be able to] know [and] what would they not [be able to] do? (*Tantrāloka* 11.76b–80a; my translation of Gnoli’s [1992: 282–83] Italian translation).<sup>50</sup>

The practitioner returning to the primordial level of language is able to experience wonder just as the Absolute itself, reflecting on its own freedom, experiences amazement. Significantly, such amazement is equated with the power of Śiva’s

creative impulse (*icchāśakti*).<sup>51</sup> We are reminded then that the Phonematic Recollection is precisely the way (*upāya*) of creative impulse (*Tantrāloka* 1.144), in which the practitioner returns to the prediscursive impulse, only to be amazed by his own creativity in attaining “Śiva-Vision” (*śivadṛṣṭi*). For Abhinavagupta then, one way of understanding the phonematic recollection is in terms of language and consciousness.

However, the phonematic recollection may be understood in still other terms, in particular as a return to the primordial moment of the “banging together” of Śiva and Śakti. As I have already indicated, the Kaula erotic-mystical context is reflected in Abhinavagupta's language. He refers to Śakti, who is embodied in the universe and is the emission itself, as *kula*: “The Absolute [the phoneme *A* = *anuttara*], the supreme abode, that precisely is called the ‘Absolute Body’ (*akula*) [the Cosmic Body of the Phoneme *A* = *anuttara*]; the emission of the Lord is called the ‘Power of the Cosmic Body’ ” (*Tantrāloka* 3.143).<sup>52</sup> Although *kula* has many significations,<sup>53</sup> one meaning, according to Sanderson, is “cosmic body,” which is equivalent to the totality of all energies in the universe, also called the “cosmic body of power” (*kaulikī śakti*).<sup>54</sup> Thus, Abhinavagupta is appropriating the language of Kaula erotic mysticism, which saw this body of power as being embodied in eight lineages, each represented by a Mother (*mātrkā*). Further, as Sanderson has shown, the Kaula practitioner could enter the totality of the eight clans, the cosmic body as a whole, by penetrating into just one part, through the ritual of sexual union with a *yoginī* that represented one of the Mothers and hence the whole universe of powers (see Sanderson 1988: 679). Abhinavagupta's notion of *kula* builds on the Kaula understanding of the same notion. As Muller-Ortega has shown, for Abhinavagupta, *kula* becomes any finite manifestation of God or Ultimate Reality, still containing a piece of the infinite, and being an embodiment of the Ultimate. Hence, each finite manifestation contains the very possibility of returning to the Ultimate. Each finite part is a microcosm, and one gains access to the macrocosm through any one part.<sup>55</sup> Thus, during the *kulayāga*, the male *siddha* and female *yoginī* become as one unit, a *kula*, or a body of power. It is through this very body that one gains access, returns to, and relives the primordial body of power, Śiva and Śakti in blissful intercourse (see Muller-Ortega 1989: 110–11).

It is clear that Abhinavagupta has this model in mind even in his exposition of the phonematic recollection. In particular, he is thinking with Kaula categories; in other words, he is thinking of the phonematic recollection as a return to the primordial moment of sexual union.

That the phonematic recollection is a reversal of the emission also implies that such recollection, insofar as it is a return to the source, must in some way reenact the primordial sexual union of Śiva and Śakti. This is further supported by the fact that in phonematic terms the beginning of the emission is the phoneme *A*, equated with the Ultimate (*anuttara*). In the context of the primordial sacrifice discussed in *Tantrāloka* 29, that is, the ritual of sexual union, Abhinavagupta describes *anuttara* as the religious experience in which the union of Śiva and Śakti is directly realized.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, the set of phonemes is also identified with Śakti in the form of the Creative Sonic Mother (*māṭṛkā*). Abhinavagupta envisions Śakti in the form of the Creative Sonic Mother in union with Śiva in the form of the Mass of Sounds; together they thus form the two intertwining aspects of reality at its highest level. These two contain all fifty phonemes, making up the ground of all words and meanings (Dyczkowski 1987: 198) and hence of all reality. Thus, in the fifteenth chapter of the *Tantrāloka* (130b–31a), Abhinavagupta says that the Creative Sonic Mother contains the universe in a potential state, similar to the pregnant woman about to give birth (Dyczkowski 1987: 198, 1992a: 21). And in the third chapter, Abhinavagupta writes: “And this [Creative Sonic Mother], by banging together with the Mass of Sounds, [becomes] the Phonematic Garland (*mālinī*), whose vulva is open (*bhinnayoni*) (*Tantrāloka* 3.199a).”<sup>57</sup> Here, in erotic terminology, Abhinavagupta envisions the Creative Sonic Mother in sexual union with the Mass of Sounds, giving rise to the birth of the universe.

I began my discussion of the phonematic recollection noting that the highest experience, when consciousness terminology is used, is the “touching” or “seizing” (*parāmarśa*) in one instant of the fifty phonemes or the complete matrix of sounds. The sexual substrate should now be obvious. Touching is more than the mere recognition by a consciousness without a body; and the matrix is more than the merely metaphysical ground of being. The ultimate experience for Abhinavagupta, achieved through the phonematic recollection which is understood abstractly as the *parāmarśa* of the fifty phonemes, is precisely the “seizing,” “stroking,” or “laying hold of” the Creative Sonic Mother (*māṭṛkā*). This in turn reflects the laying hold of the Goddess of the Kula, reenacting the erotic intertwining of the Lord and the Goddess of the Kula, by way of penetrating one of the eight Mothers and thus penetrating the center, the Lady Kula. In various ways then, in his discussion of the phonematic recollection in general, and in his more specific uses of both the terms “*saṃghaṭṭa*” and “*sphurattā*,” Abhinavagupta’s language erotically evokes and returns the practitioner to the primordial moment of sexual union of the Lord and Goddess of the Kula.

## Notes

1. This article is a revision of a paper that I presented at the American Academy of Religion 2001 Meeting, in Denver, Colorado, USA, on November 18, 2001. The paper itself was a revision of part of my Ph.D. dissertation (Skora 2001). I am deeply grateful to my advisor David Gordon White, who helped me see the pervasive Kaula erotico-mystical influence on not only Abhinavagupta’s language but also his whole vision of reality. I am also grateful for the insightful and helpful comments of my two anonymous reviewers.

2. *Parātrīśikālaghuvṛtti*, excerpt from introductory verses: *sadābhinavaguptaṃ yat parāṇaṃ ca prasiddhimat | hṛdayaṃ tatparollāsaiḥ svayaṃ sphūrjatyannuttaram ||* The Sanskrit is found in Padoux (1975: 49). Technically, the Sanskrit would require



that I translate this verse using the third person (see my translation below). Here, I provide a more poetic translation, which I believe is justified by Abhinavagupta's playful move of embedding himself in the text and poetically identifying himself with the Heart. Note that the first line connects to *Tantrāloka* 35. See especially verses 1a–3a and 9b–10a, where *prasiddhi* (“intuitive certainty”) is said to belong to a prior time. I am translating *prasiddhimat*, literally “possessed of intuitive certainty,” as “previously revealed” because of Abhinavagupta's linking of *prasiddhi* and *āgama* (“revealed tradition”) (see, for example, *Tantrāloka* 35.1a–3a, and also Jayaratha's commentary on *Tantrāloka* 35.9b–10a). For a complete translation of *Tantrāloka* 35 and a discussion of the relation between intuitive certainty and revealed tradition, see Skora (2001: Chapter 5).

3. I am again grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for emphasizing the “bigger picture” delineated in this and the following sentences. For a brief, general discussion of the extensive range of Abhinavagupta's corpus—usually divided into three categories of Tantra, Recollection Philosophy, and Poetics/Aesthetics—see Sanderson (1986a: 8–9).

4. For example, on the influence of Bhartṛhari's Vyākaraṇa on Abhinavagupta's (and his *paramaguru* Utpaladeva's) philosophical discourse on recollection (*pratyabhijñā*), see Lawrence (1999: 20–21); see also Isayeva (1995: 135–37).

5. For example, on Abhinavagupta's system following Nyāya standards of argumentation, see Lawrence (1999: 48–57); on the connection between Abhinavagupta's Recollection system and other Indian schools of philosophy, see page 36.

6. I am following Flood's (2004: 119) use of the term “*imaginaire*.”

7. Pandey (1963) was the first scholar to emphasize the multidimensional nature of Abhinavagupta, noting that Abhinavagupta was simultaneously a philosopher, *tāntrika*, and *rasika*. See, for example, his (pages 20–23) translation of the disciple Madhurāja's poem to Abhinavagupta. For another example of Abhinavagupta's blending of disciplines, see Gerow's (1994) study of how Abhinavagupta's philosophy of Recollection was ultimately grounded in aesthetics.

8. Abhinavagupta is best characterized as a “metaphorical thinker,” as he continually interconnects diverse levels of reality, ranging from the personal to the cosmological. For Abhinavagupta, these are not arbitrary interrelationships but unities revealed at the level of precognitive awareness. Here, I am deeply inspired by anthropologist Jackson (1989). For a description of Abhinavagupta's fusion of Self, Revelation, and Being, in his interpretation of maṇḍalic ritual, see Sanderson (1986c).

9. As will become clear, I am using the terms “spirit” and “flesh” to refer to pure consciousness and embodied sexuality, respectively, as understood by Abhinavagupta. Although I recognize the association of the terms “spirit” and “flesh” with Christian religious traditions, my purpose is not to conflate a Christian reconciliation with Abhinavagupta's. I am following the lead of Dimock, who deliberately employs these Christian terms, not to conflate the detailed problematic of a particular Christian tradition with that of a particular Hindu tradition, but in order to suggest

that the attempt to integrate sacred experience with bodily experience is a “human peculiarity” (1989: 3) that is not confined to any one culture. What these various traditions do have in common is the positing of a divine Otherness experienced by the body. See the discussions of “embodied otherness” by anthropologist of the body Csordas (2001: 238–41, 2002: 82–83). See also the related analysis of “spiritual touch” by phenomenological philosopher Chrétien (2004: 128–31).

10. See also White (2003) for a comprehensive analysis of the Kaula sexual ritual practices, involving the exchange of sexual fluids between male practitioners and female *yoginīs*.

11. Abhinavagupta identifies *vimarśa* with *pratyabhijñā* in his *Īśvara-pratyabhijñā-vimarśinī* (see Gerow 1994: 190–91n40). For the best and most succinct discussion of Śaiva recollection vocabulary in general, see Lawrence (1999: 86–87). There, Lawrence also connects *vimarśa* with *pratyabhijñā*.

12. Additionally, I continually describe *vimarśa* and related *mṛś* terms by crossing the more abstract notion of “recollection” with the more concrete notion of “touching.” Although both the etymology of *mṛś* and Abhinavagupta’s intertwining of *mṛś* terms and discourse on sexual practices (as I discuss later) support the link, I am not aware of Abhinavagupta using the term “*vimarśa*” or related terms to specifically refer to “only touching,” for example, external forms of touching such as sexual touching. We should not be surprised: just as *vimarśa* is not simply disembodied consciousness, in the same way, it is not simply touching divorced from deep awareness. My crossing of “recollection” with “touching” is an attempt to follow Abhinavagupta’s own understanding of consciousness as bodily based and as rooted in a type of touching. In other words, the primordial meaning of the term “*vimarśa*,” “to touch,” is always retained by Abhinavagupta as he unfolds what it means to be aware. Abhinavagupta understands awareness as bodily awareness, so that touching is not just external touching but also “inner touching,” and in particular the inner bodily felt sense of Being. For my development of these ideas, see Skora (2004). For a related discussion, on the notion of “knowing” in various Indo-European languages as reflecting the embodiment of human consciousness, see Jackson (1989: especially 143).

13. A complete English translation of *Tantrāloka* 3.65a–200a, where Abhinavagupta discusses the phonematic recollection, may be found in Skora (2001: Chapter 2).

14. A complete English translation of *Tantrāloka* 29.96a–186a, where Abhinavagupta discusses the *kulayāga*, may be found in Skora (2001: Chapter 4). More recently, Dupuche (2003) has published an insightful study and translation of all of chapter 29.

15. I thank David Gordon White who first made me aware of this connection.

16. For an excellent and succinct account of the overall pattern of Abhinavagupta’s cosmology, see Padoux (1990: 77–82), which I partly follow and summarize here and throughout this section. At the same time, while I follow the outline that Padoux has laid bare in his ground-breaking work, my interpretation will diverge in

its emphasis on the sexual dimension of Abhinavagupta's cosmology.

17. Connecting sexuality to consciousness and cosmology is not uncommon in the history of Indic religious traditions. Even further, as Flood (1993) notes, prior to Abhinavagupta, sexual union was already linked to soteriological discourse and practice in Vedic-Upaniṣadic traditions. Thus, in some ways, Abhinavagupta's tradition may be seen as creatively extending these earlier identifications (see Flood's discussion, with other examples, on pages 284–85, 381–82nn35–39). At the same time, as the work of Sanderson and White shows, the link between sexual practices and nondualistic cosmology and soteriology is a radical reinterpretation—both an internalization and aestheticization—of earlier Tantric sexual practices. In particular, whereas in earlier Hindu Tantric traditions, sexual union is simply a means for producing powerful, transformative sexual fluids (that is, there is no link between sexual practices and metaphysics and soteriology), with Abhinavagupta, orgasmic sexual union is no longer a means to an end and becomes homologized with the joyful and liberating expansion of consciousness (see Sanderson 1985: especially pages 202–5; White 2003: especially Chapters 4, 8). These two lines of interpretation need not contradict one another and remind us of the hermeneutical mastery of Abhinavagupta. Abhinavagupta radically breaks with earlier Tantric traditions precisely by recovering, from non-Tantric traditions, a natural identification between sexuality on one hand, and consciousness, cosmology, and soteriology on the other. Finally, Abhinavagupta creatively develops a third stream, the philosophico-theological Recollection (*pratyabhijñā*) tradition. Abhinavagupta's crossing of consciousness and sexuality is a creative development of his *paramaguru* Utpaladeva's understanding of *vimarśa*, in that the process of recollection becomes understood by Abhinavagupta in terms of the Kaula erotic-mystical process of linking with the energies of the *yoginīs*. This was first discussed by Mark S. G. Dyczkowski and later emphasized by Natalia Isayeva (see note 49 below). For a brilliant study of the Recollection tradition, focusing on Utpaladeva's and Abhinavagupta's philosophical works, and most valuable for elucidating how Recollection discourse bridges theological argument with Tantric praxis, see Lawrence (1999).

18. In the Trika Śaiva theology of Abhinavagupta and his followers, Śiva may be thought of as either alone or interdependent with Śakti. Maheśvarānanda's poetic image evokes Śiva as one, so that *vimarśa* is simply an attribute of Śiva. For more on the dual nature of Trika Śaiva discourse, see Gupta (1988: 36); Padoux (1990: 81).

19. See Foerst (2004: 82–83, 115–17), who makes this point in an insightful commentary in connection with the Hebrew Biblical term “*jada*” (both “knowing” and “sexual intercourse”). Foerst is inspired by a profound interpretation of the fourteenth-century rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra of a biblical passage (Genesis 3:21) in which God gives human beings the gift of skin and thus the gift of touching. Foerst builds on this interpretation and understands that skin and touching ultimately make human beings aware, allowing both a sense of Self and a sense of Other.

20. *na hi śaktiḥ śivād bhedaṃ āmarśayet* | The Sanskrit is taken from Gnoli (1985: 187–88). The verse is also referred to by Padoux (1990: 77).

21. tayoryadyāmalaṃ rūpaṃ sa saṃghaṭṭa iti smṛtaḥ | ānandaśaktiḥ saivoktā yato viśvaṃ viśrjyate ||

22. See, again, Padoux (1990: especially 80–81), which I summarize in part in this paragraph.

23. Lanman lists the English “spur,” meaning “goad with the heel,” as one of the cognates. This in turn is used idiomatically in the phrase “on the spur of the moment,” which is defined as “on a sudden impulse” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, s.v.).

24. hṛdaye svavimarśo’sau drāvītāśeṣaviśvakaḥ || bhāvagrahādīparyantabhāvī sāmānyasaṃjñakaḥ | spandaḥ sa kathyate śāstre svātmanyucchalanātmakaḥ || kiṃci-ccalanametāvadananyasphuraṇaṃ hi yat | ūrmireṣā vibodhābdherna saṃvidanayā vinā || nistaraṅgataṅgādivṛttireva hi sindhutā | sārametatsamastasya yaccitsāraṃ jaḍaṃ jagat || tadadhīnapraṭiṣṭhatvāttatsāraṃ hṛdayaṃ mahat |

25. See note 2 above for the Sanskrit.

26. vimalakalāśrayābhīnavasrṣṭimahā janānī bharitatanuś ca pañcamukhagupta-  
rucir janakaḥ | tadubhayayāmalasphuritabhāvavisargamayaṃ hṛdayaṃ anuttarāmṛta-  
kulaṃ mama saṃsphuratāt || I have taken the Sanskrit from Gnoli (1985: 187).

27. My purpose is to ensure that the enterprise of “deodorization” does not have the last word. By that term, I am referring to the interpretative strategy of cleaning up Tantra by eliminating its sexual aspects. As far as I am aware, Sanderson (see 1985: 203) first used the term to refer to Śaivasiddhānta theologians in their orthodox reformation of the heterodox culture of the cremation grounds. Urban (see, for example, 1999) later used the same term to refer to the Tantric scholarship of John Woodroffe and others.

28. This is Singh’s (1989: 2n3) insight.

29. See Kramrisch’s comments (1981: 182) on the five faces.

30. This is first noted by Gnoli (1985: 3n1).

31. See Padoux (1990: 277–86, especially 281–84), on the sexual connotations of the *visarga* phoneme; see White (1998), on the symbolism of the *visarga* according to both Abhinavagupta and the *Yoginīhṛdaya*.

32. What follows is a free translation and summary of an excerpt from Gnoli (1985: 3n1).

33. On the related notion “holographic self,” see Wagner (2001). Also, on Śiva as the “holographic God” and on the relevance of physicist David Bohm’s notion of “holomovement” to Śaiva cosmology, see Handelman and Shulman (1997: 193–98). On the relevance of “holomovement” to Abhinavagupta’s cosmology, see Muller-Ortega (1992).

34. I will say more on this below.

35. The term used by Abhinavagupta is *sāmarthya*. This is derived from *samartha* which means “a word that has force or meaning,” that is, “significant word”; thus *sāmarthya* is both “power” and “sameness of...meaning or signification” (Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v.).

36. *Tantrāloka* 29.4a–4b: kulaṃ ca parameśasya śaktiḥ sāmarthyamūrdhvatā |

svāntryamojo vīryaṃ ca piṇḍaḥ saṃvicchārīrakam ॥

37. Abhinavagupta provides some details of his life in *Tantrāloka* 37; part of this is summarized in Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan (1990: 30).

38. Abhinavagupta's theory of resonance is developed in his *Dhvanyālokalocana* (see Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan 1990). Gnoli (1968: xxvii–xxxiv) offers a concise and insightful summary, underlining the idea that for Abhinavagupta poetic and religious language can never be exhausted by or reduced to ordinary words. Also, Alper (1979: 384–85) notes that Abhinavagupta, as a “student of *nāṭya*,” was “alert to the poetic overtones of word and gesture” (1979: 384), and suggests that the concurrent study of philosophy on one hand and symbolism and mythology on the other would be especially illuminating for the study of Abhinavagupta. Finally, both Muller-Ortega and Isayeva offer useful comparisons between Abhinavagupta's *dhvani* and Paul Ricoeur's theory of metaphor. Muller-Ortega (1989: 12–13) highlights the “inexhaustible depth” of resonance, while Isayeva (1995: 165–70) suggests that *dhvani* is the power of language to continually go beyond itself, revealing new and surprising meanings.

39. For example, Gnoli (1999: 72), the only scholar to produce a complete translation of the *Tantrāloka* into any Western language, translates *Tantrāloka* 3.1.99a as follows: “Questa potenza, grazie a un'unione con l'insieme dei suoni, si converte poi nella Mālinī, nella quale le matrici sono mescolate [con i semi].” This can be readily translated into English as follows: “This energy, by being united with the ensemble of sounds, is converted then into Mālinī, in which the matrices are mixed [with the seeds].” Compare to the following translation found in White (2003: 244): “And this [Little Mother], by banging together with the Mass of Sounds, becomes the Garland of Phonemes, whose vulva is spread.” As White notes, the translation is a slight alteration of my own translation, which I give below, along with the Sanskrit. I use it here to demonstrate the extreme range of translation that is possible and to contrast it with Gnoli's abstract and consciousness-centered translation, which forsakes the erotic and sexual layers of meaning. Of course, I remain deeply grateful to Professor Gnoli for his brilliant and pioneering studies, to which my own work, including this article, is indebted.

40. This too is not as unusual as it sounds; the doctrine of “Spermatikos Logos” arises in various places, ancient and modern. On disciples of Thomas Pynchon characterizing his understanding of Language (and hence Consciousness) as “spermatik,” see Daw and Ruch (2000).

41. On the *ṛ̥sis* as bringing the past into the present, see Gonda (1975: 65). On the relevance of this idea to Abhinavagupta's conception of tradition, see Skora (2001: 33637). And for a brilliant weaving together of notions of time, memory, and tradition, as found in Vedic texts, and in Kālidāsa's dramaturgy and Abhinavagupta's corresponding aesthetic interpretation, see Malamoud (1996: 255–58).

42. My comments here and below on the phonematic cosmology have been inspired by and follow the work of each of these scholars: Bäumer (1997); Muller-Ortega (1992); Padoux (1990: 223–329). Gnoli's Italian translation is found in his

*Luce dei Tantra* (1999), pages 58–72. Again, for a complete English translation of Abhinavagupta’s discussion of the phonematic emanation, see Skora (2001: Chapter 2).

43. devīm...hyanuttarām || akulasyāsyā devasya kulaprathanaśālīnī | kaulikī sā parā śaktiraviyukto yayā prabhuḥ || tayoryadyāmalam rūpaṃ sa saṃghaṭṭa iti smṛtaḥ | ānandaśaktiḥ saivoktā yato viśvaṃ viśṛjyate ||

44. These ideas follow directly from Pandey’s interpretation of Madhurāja’s poem. For further discussion and a new translation of the poem, see Skora (2001: 10–14).

45. Here and in the rest of this paragraph, I am following and summarizing Bäumer (1997: 16).

46. For a general discussion of this key element in the Tantric practices of various traditions, see White (2000: 9–13).

47. I am not attempting to make any facile comparisons between Levin’s “recollection of Being” and Abhinavagupta’s “recollection of Śiva.” Levin is a contemporary continental philosopher who borrows a nontheistic notion of Being from Martin Heidegger, and, further, unlike Abhinavagupta, his theoretical discourse is not directly linked to a particular set of religious practices. Nonetheless, Levin’s method of continually connecting authentic consciousness to the recovery of bodily awareness is relevant to the present study. Levin’s work attempts to articulate “an emerging body of understanding” (see 1988: 12, 35), contributing to the development and realization of an authentic self in terms of bodily felt awareness. His embodied phenomenology of consciousness is relevant to my study insofar as Abhinavagupta understood pure consciousness as manifesting in and as bodily felt energies and capacities. Additionally, Levin sees his work as a response to contemporary nihilism and the loss of awareness, understood as loss of bodily felt sense. Similarly, as I have argued elsewhere (Skora 2004, 2005), Abhinavagupta’s response to a Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy that controlled the body and its senses is best understood as a recovery of bodily felt awareness.

48. Here and in the next sentence, I am following Dyczkowski’s exposition (1992a: especially 61) of *Śivasūtra* 1.23.

49. The first to flesh out the development of the notion of *vimarśa* from Utpaladeva to Abhinavagupta and to specifically link Abhinavagupta’s understanding of the term to Kaula erotic mysticism is Dyczkowski (1992b: especially 38–45). See also Isayeva (1995: especially 138). The rest of my discussion extends this idea further, by showing how phonematic emanation itself is linked to the Kaula tradition.

50. See also Kuanpoonpol’s discussion (1991: 257–58) of this with reference to *pratibhā*.

51. *Tantrasāra* 1, page 6: taccamatkāra icchāśaktiḥ (noted by Padoux 1990: 247).

52. anuttaram param dhāma tadevākulamucyate | visargastasya nāthasya kaulikī śaktirucyate || See also *Tantrāloka* 3.67, where the Supreme Goddess is referred to as the Power of the Cosmic Body. I have translated this verse above.

53. See my discussion above on the multivocality of Abhinavagupta’s language, with specific reference to his usage of *kula* in his hymn to the Heart in the *Parātrim-*

*śikāvivaraṇa* and in *Tantrāloka* 29.4. See also *Tantrāloka* 35.31a–34b and my (Skora 2001: 377–78) discussion of these verses.

54. Here and in the following sentences, I am following Sanderson (1988: 679); see also White (2003: 18–20).

55. Here, I am following Muller-Ortega (1989: 101–2).

56. See *Tantrāloka* 29.115b–17a and Jayaratha's commentary: first noted by Pandey (1963: 643).

57. *sā śabdarāśiṣaṃghaṭṭādbhinnayonistu mālinī* | See also White's comments on this verse (2003: 244).

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