

# Transsexuality, Transition, and Yantras: Metaphysics and Myth in Mystic Diagrams

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## Yantras are a familiar and significant genre of Indian art and of particular importance to visual aesthetics and metaphysics.

In my definitions of metaphysics and aesthetics the focus is on Tantric visual culture and their associations with divinity, myth, and spiritual phenomenology. Traditional interpretations of the Yantra emphasize binary embodiment, most closely associated with the cisgender male and female being.<sup>1</sup> The Yantra allows for a transsexual dwelling both phenomenologically and visually. The inherent logic of the yantra's structure—as found throughout Tantric scholarship and art—is based on embodiment. Nevertheless, Yantras are created and interpreted within a (cis)gendered male and female symbolism binary. A call for the reading of the transsexual body allows for transsexual people to see a reflection of themselves in Hindu mythology. In the following thesis, through an analysis of two historic Yantras—Śrī Yantra and Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala—and one contemporary Yantra—my work titled *Khilata Hua Yantra* (Blooming Yantra)—I argue for an expanded reading of the Yantra that emphasizes the heretofore excluded transsexual body. To advance this argument, I will concentrate on the following features of the Yantra: the orientation of objects; multiplicities; and the structural logic of the form.

The transsexual body is inherently involved in this historical and contemporary Yantra's reading. Through Tantric philosophy studies and trans(gender) theory, the body justifies itself. There is a trans mythos that dwells in the structure and logic of the Yantra—the transsexual body existing through orientations, transition, and self-reference in a visual rendition. In my argument, I bridge the gap between the Yantra and the transsexual body through metaphysics and myth.

Before beginning our analysis of the Yantra structure presented in this reading, it is integral to review the definitions of the Yantra structure and what they represent. Madhu Khanna, an Indian scholar who focuses on the phenomenology of the Yantra in Tantric culture, explores and defines this complex structure in her seminal text *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (1979). First, she begins to define the structural concept of the Yantra as “any kind of mechanical contrivance

<sup>1</sup> Wendy Doniger, “God's Body, or, the Lingam Made Flesh: Conflicts over the Representation of the Sexual Body of the Hindu God Shiva,” *Social Research* 78, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 485–508. As Doniger's essay makes clear, the ritual worship of Śiva and Śakti is through Śiva's metaphorical *lingam* (phallus) and Śakti's *yoni* (vagina). There is an implication of cisness applied to the Hindu gods in such readings. This canon of cisgender worship associated with Śiva and Śakti is explained by Doniger. It is the basis for the argument of the theory of creation and birthing of the cosmos as it is related to Hindu and Tantric mythology and metaphysics.

which is harnessed to aid in an enterprise. A yantra in this sense, therefore, is any sort of machine or instrument used in architecture, astronomy, alchemy, chemistry, warfare or recreation.”<sup>2</sup> The justification of Yantra’s mechanical method uses Khanna’s terms “machine” or “instrument.” Its diagrammatic structure is similar to the visual representations and concept of a machine: many small parts make a whole to produce the desired effect or function.

Even more salient for my analysis is Khanna’s definition of the Mystic Yantras as “aids to and the chief instruments of meditative discipline. Basically, a yantra used in this context and for this purpose is an abstract geometrical design intended as a ‘tool’ for meditation and increased awareness.”<sup>3</sup>

Its inclusion in its mythology is associated with keeping the body in mind, as meditation happens within the body. The two-dimensional form has metaphysical qualities because it exists as a multiplicity within and outside the body.

### **The Subject Position of Transsexuality: Transition of Body/State**

Transsexuality, in my definition, applies to bodies that have been biologically affected through a medical transition. Eva Hayward, a trans scholar focusing on trans phenomenology, speaks of *transition* in her research and specifically in her paper “Spiderwomen” (2017): “By transitioning, I do not mean a monolithic movement between states, rather I mean simply an emergence of a material, physical, sensual, and social self through corporeal, spatial, and temporal processes that transfigure the lived body.”<sup>4</sup> Here we see the linking of transition to the transsexual body *outside* of the transgender umbrella. My research applies to this subject position. Transsexuality as trans phenomenology is prioritized in this definition. While Hayward makes the case that not all transsexuals transition, I believe that there is a possibility for redefining the term to include transition within transsexual women experimenting with hormones. There is an insistence on including and focusing on bodies that fall into the scope of hormonal change, which I think is integral to solidifying and fortifying this argument. In my definition of a transsexual woman, I would rephrase this argument to say that I *explicitly* speak about trans women who have experienced medically aided transitions. While Hayward

<sup>2</sup> Madhu Khanna, *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol for Cosmic Unity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Khanna, *Yantra*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Eva Hayward, “Spiderwomen,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 258.

defines this as her interest in her essay, I would go so far as to use that definition solely to describe transsexual women.<sup>5</sup>

This is primarily because of the metaphor, meaning, being, and embodied nature of transitioning hormonally, surgically, and physically.<sup>6</sup> The importance of transition is integral here, as it mirrors the mythic power of the transmutation of states when meditating upon the Yantra. While transposition offers a colonial presentation of gender *change*, transmutation allows us to find that change is a change of states rather than a transgression as a shift *toward* femininity. Can this now be shifted into a mythological place where we can find divinity in falling *into* ourselves? Can transness, now, be incorporated into mythological practice to find divinity? In a sense, it was there all along. This mythos asked us to fall into ourselves so that it could reveal itself. A mythos that could honor where we come *from* and allow us to *fall inward* without outside influence equally. To transition *toward gender* is inherently colonial, as there is still a binary system in place, and a transgression is performed: there is a movement from one gender to another. Inherently, the transgression is one in which a sense of embodiment is being *left behind* and erased rather than contextualized. Constructed mythos allows trans women to *fall into themselves* rather than transition towards an extremity on a “spectrum” with only two sides.

### Śrī Yantra: Considering the Embodied (Trans)gendered Dwelling

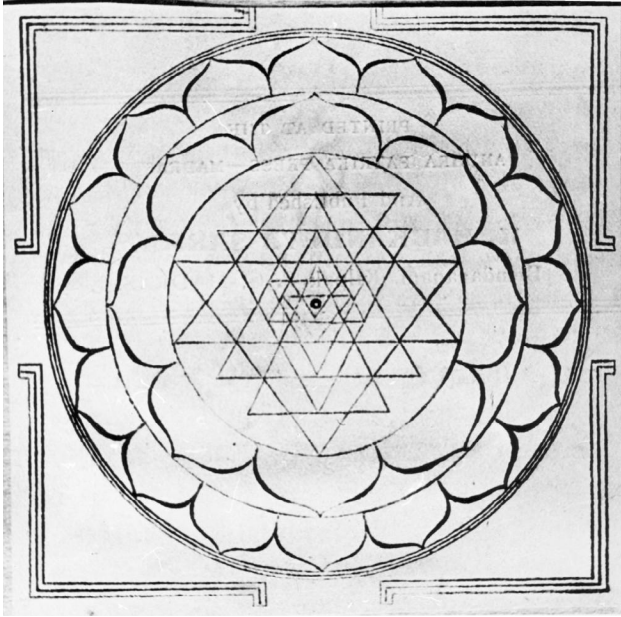
The Śrī Yantra [fig.1] represents the union between Śiva and Śakti; it is a visual geometric rendition of the birthing of the cosmos. The cisgender unity of Śiva and Śakti is the result of their union “birthing” the cosmos and rests on the reproductive implication that cis people implicitly have conquered nativity as it relies on metaphysics and concept. This is because of Śiva and Śakti’s proximity to and close relationships with reproductivity in a cishet<sup>7</sup> ideal. This supports the argument that the theory of creation and birthing of the cosmos as it is related to Hindu and Tantric mythology and metaphysics is related to the cisness of both Śiva and Śakti.

The Bindu is the dot in the center of the mystic yantra or the mystic diagram. It is seen as the point of divinity because of associations with the birthing of the cosmos as it relates to Śakti and Śiva. Orientations of the body here are in context to cisgender embodiment and their visual representation—triangles

5 Julia Serrano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2016), 30. See Serrano in her definition of transition as it links to transsexuality. She links transsexuality to the change of primary and secondary sexual characteristics that shift due to medically aided transition. In response to her sentiment, I argue that the term transition as related to transgender women should belong in the term transsexuality.

6 Serrano, *Whipping Girl*, 31. . . for Serrano’s definition of primary and secondary sex characteristics and their involvement and change in hormone replacement therapy and transsexuality.

7 By “cishet,” I mean cisgender and heteronormative ideals.



**Figure 1.** Drawing of Śrī Yantra., n.d. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.11677118>.

dictate cisgender and heterosexual orientations, that is, Śakti and Śiva.<sup>8</sup> Divinity and its link to the Bindu also brings up lingering ideas about disorientation, the metaphysical object, and its relationship to the body. This disorientation near the Bindu disorients the viewer in the intersections and overlaps of the triangle: the reading presents an opening for a queer and trans perspective. This is taking into account Sara Ahmed’s definitions of disorientation and the body, or as the body moving within states: “Disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one’s place and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling and a feeling that is affected by violence or shaped by violence directed toward the body.”<sup>9</sup>

In the reading of this diagram, we notice a lack of direction. These triangles are inverted and complicated because of their orientation, or lack thereof. One may lose their place in the diagram yet return the Bindu to locate the body and mind, restarting the reading process. This Bindu is a point of reorientation visually.<sup>10</sup> Śakti and Śiva’s union produces a visual disorientation: it produces itself

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1946), 147.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 160.

<sup>10</sup> Khanna, *Yantra*, 31.

as trans phenomenology in the image. Disorientation exists as the transsexual dwelling in this Yantra, and its proximity to the orientations associated with their cisgendered embodiment. The disorientations allow for a trans dwelling as disorientations manifest as the inability to easily recognize and count all configurations of triangles. *If disorientation lies near the beginning point of the cosmos, can we not say that the inherent being of the metaphysical nature of the yantra is transsexual?*

### Transsexual Phenomenology in the Indian Image: Metaphysics in Object, Shape, and “Likeness”

In “Representation in India’s Sacred Images: Objective vs. Metaphysical Reference” (2002), V. K. Chari journeys through understanding the meaning and metaphysics behind Hindu mythological imagery. Chari communicates the idea of the “metaphysical school” by naming and explaining the definitions Ananda Coomaraswamy established for comprehending Indian art. Coomaraswamy’s definitions of the “metaphysical school” are below, representing the link between Indian art and metaphysical tradition.<sup>11</sup> Point number two, as emphasized by Coomaraswamy via Chari, is that “the Indian image . . . is not the likeness of any earthly model but an ‘ideal representation’ or symbolization of a mental image, having for its referent a divine or metaphysical order of being.”<sup>12</sup>

I argue that this reading would be in the extension of Tantrism *intersecting* with trans studies and phenomenology as a means of the implication of transness onto a Yantra. As it is concerned with Indian art, representation in the context of the Yantra is the correspondence between shapes and imagery that acclimates itself to Tantric philosophy and Hindu mythology. This acclimation is to say that the metaphysical nature of the Yantra cannot be removed from its reading. Phenomenology is inherently present in the Indian mode of viewing artwork. Notice that the word “being” is relevant here—“being” as its link to existence, experience, and embodiment. In the Indian image, a transsexual body can be read and interpreted based on the phenomenology of transness existing in the image, whether with its associations with shape and image, or its link to “being” as associated with trans representation and identity. Trans phenomenology can be an extension of queer phenomenology in that they share similarities within the rejection of cis-hetero patriarchal structures of gender and sexual orientation. The use of trans studies in

<sup>11</sup> Chari paraphrases Coomaraswamy who explains the first point in the metaphysical school as being that: “Indian art cannot be dissociated from its metaphysical tradition. In order to understand the actual content and *raison d’être* of Indian iconography it is necessary to return to its philosophical sources—the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanisads, and the Buddhist canonical texts—to appropriate the Indian mentality and ‘the specifically Indian modes of comprehending. Indian art cannot be appreciated without a recognition of the ‘metaphysical principles’ to which it is related.” V. K. Chari, “Representation in India’s Sacred Images: Objective vs. Metaphysical Reference,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 65, no. 1 (2002): 52.

<sup>12</sup> Chari, “Representation in India’s Sacred Images,” 53.

this context will be an extension of Ahmed's text "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" (2006), in which she speaks of orientations and objects as they appear in phenomenology and image. Tantric studies and trans studies intersect across their shared overlap in phenomenology. Ahmed uses Edmund Husserl's definition of the "living body" to link queer studies with phenomenology:

[Queer and/or trans] phenomenology emphasizes the lived experience of inhabiting a body, or what Edmund Husserl calls "the living body." Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as phenomenology emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready to hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds.<sup>13</sup>

Here we can see a link between Coomaraswamy and Ahmed in that both argue for the importance of context, experience, and tradition. Similar to the inclusion of Hayward's own experience with transness and transition to provide clarity for those terms, Ahmed prioritizes the importance of lived experience when speaking of phenomenology, especially as it relates to queerness and transness.

### Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala: A History and Path of the Body within the Grid

The body is rooted in the Śrī Yantra and references it in its *meaning* and *making*; the Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala is a yantra structure gridded *around* the body.<sup>14</sup> The Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala (**fig. 2**) is a prime example of the maṇḍala structure translated into an architectural diagram used as a blueprint for Indian structures; the temple, home, or physical planning often follows this as a guideline but not a strict requirement.<sup>15</sup> The Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala itself dates back to the Vedic era<sup>16</sup> (ca. 1750–500 BCE), and moreover, one of its uses is to develop the theory of the Yantra as it intersects with architectural tradition. Maṇḍala and Yantra can be interchanged here, as traditions of structures radiating outward in hierarchical ideology; moreover, both rely on a central point from whence to move outward.<sup>17</sup> This particular iteration of the Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala follows the Vāstupuruṣa laid upon the maṇḍala itself. The Vāstupuruṣa is the body shape in the center of the Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala. Also known as the spirit of the site, it is the graft of a mythological being into the yantra structure.

<sup>13</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 544.

<sup>14</sup> Sonit Bafna, "On the Idea of the Mandala as a Governing Device in Indian Architectural Tradition," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59, no. 1 (2000): 28.

<sup>15</sup> Bafna, "On the Idea of the Mandala as a Governing Device in Indian Architectural Tradition," 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. The Vāstupuruṣa here is firmly placed onto the ground by the deities holding it.

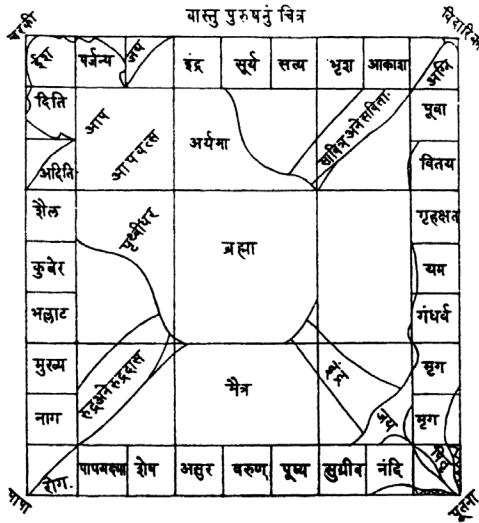


Figure 2. Vibhuti Chakrabarti, *Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala*, 1998. From *Indian Architectural Theory* (Richmond, Surrey, 1998).

Before beginning the analysis of the structure, let us break down the exact meaning of the *Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala*. We will be turning to Khanna's definition of the word:

*Vāstu* = bodily existence or site; *Puruṣa* = Supreme Principal or source of the cosmos; *Maṇḍala* = closed polygonal figure.<sup>18</sup>

The *Vāstupuruṣa* is oriented in a particular direction diagonally, with its head belonging to the northwest, the feet in the southeast, and the legs pointing northeast and southwest. The torso is in the center of the diagram, taking up space in boxes one, two, four, and five (read from left to right and top to bottom). It is crucial to note that the diagram has specific rules that dictate the structure's division and use in architectural planning.<sup>19</sup> While the rules dictate a methodology to build a guide upon a body, it is essential to keep in mind that the body always comes back to being the central concept of the image—both visually and even through the *making* of the structure conceptually. This body is one that the grid places itself around so as to make sense of the object.<sup>20</sup> Here we notice that the grid as we see it functions as a straightening device, as it works to make sense of the object

<sup>18</sup> Khanna, *Yantra*, 143.

<sup>19</sup> Bafna, "On the Idea of the Mandala as a Governing Device in Indian Architectural Tradition," 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.



placed into it or around it. We can use Ahmed's understanding of the "normative dimension" to refer to straight bodies. The grid here is something that I place as the normative in that it works to make sense of and create a means to approach the body.<sup>21</sup> It is the factor that makes the body "diagonal" in its orientation and compartmentalized straight lines. The goal of the Vāstu being gridded into space is to not *leave* or lack *longevity*. This, in turn, makes it the transgender subject. Longevity here is the rendition of the Vāstu being forced into place through the "normative dimension" or gridded structure. The body's orientation is the crucial element in the trans phenomenological reading. Ahmed speaks about "straightness." However, straightness extends into longevity, as what appears inline is only doing so because of its stability:

The straight body re-describes the normative dimension, which appears inline. . . . things seem straight (on the vertical axis) when they are in line, which means they align with other lines. Rather than presuming the vertical line is simply given, we would see the vertical line as an effect of this alignment process. Think of tracing paper. Its lines disappear when they are aligned with the paper lines that have been traced: you simply see one set of lines.<sup>22</sup>

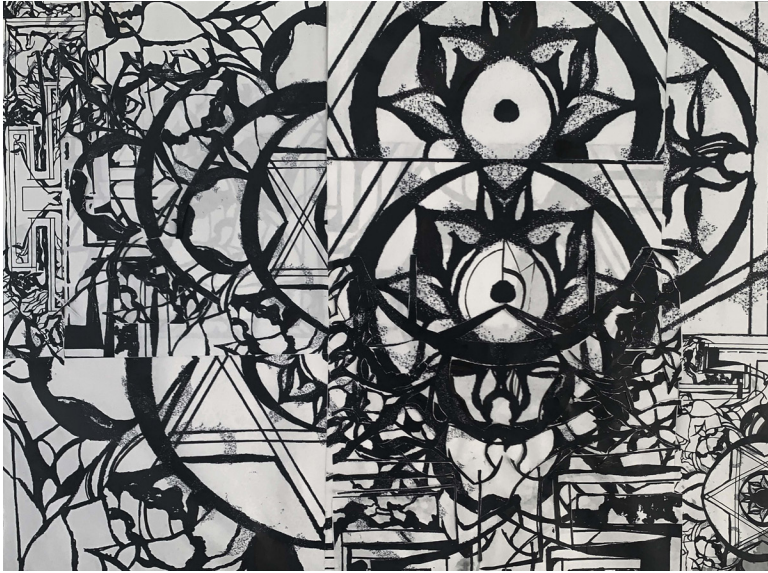
When the grid encapsulates the body of the Vāstu, the orientation of the body slants against the X and Y axes; the alignment process here refers to the vertical lines aligning the deities to the body of the Vāstu through the normative dimension. They are placed through this hegemonic gridded structure, emphasizing the concept of binary in gender, direction, and orientation. The Vāstu is not in line, regardless of the attempts to make it so. It exists on the slant, and the deities begrudgingly try to keep it in place. It would rather be that the Vāstu is forced into longevity than allowed to flee because of forcing it into the straight orientation via the normative dimension.

### ***Khilata Hua Yantra* and the Possibility for a Transsexual Dwelling**

My work *Khilata Hua Yantra* (Blooming Yantra) (2019, [fig. 3](#)) is a collage of layered black-and-white Xerox copies of my body intersecting with a preexisting yantra.

<sup>21</sup> Bafna, "On the Idea of the Mandala as a Governing Device in Indian Architectural Tradition," 28.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmed, "Orientations," 562.



**Figure 3.** Aliya Parashar, *Khilata Hua Yantra* (Blooming Yantra), 2019. Collage and Xerox prints, 25 x 21 inches.

The ink markings of the original drawings are placed onto the photocopied prints, which have been expanded, rotated, cut into, and collaged to create a landscape of layered curvilinear imagery. *Khilata Hua Yantra* implicitly references the problematic cishet orientations and gendering earlier mentioned. Hindu and Tantric ritualistic methods speak of the body as a root for self-divination. Like the images consistently appearing in traditional yantras, for instance lotus leaves, bindus, circles, and triangle shapes, my body embeds into the diagram of the Yantra. In this sense, I am likewise using the logic of the *Vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala* as the point of divergence for this particular work. Layers do not just appear at the forefront of this diagram; they create a different composition *behind* the current presentation.

The skewed Bindu from the central point in the image toward the right displaces the concrete structure of the Yantra and complicates it. This gesture turns

it from an image that radiates outward from the center into an image with two radiation points, specifically two Bindus. The theory of creation is located around the Bindu; additionally, the proximity of disorientation to the Bindu in the Śrī Yantra calls for a transsexual dwelling. With the multiplicity of the transsexual being and dwelling, longevity is not guaranteed, and reproduction is linked to the theory of creation within yantra studies. The trans body becomes the site of (re) production, directly opposing the cisgender hegemony. To self-divinize the transsexual subject in my work—that is, my own body—I aim to make the physical image consider my body when approaching the divine, both physically and metaphorically. The universal dwelling of transsexuality in the Yantra structure combined with images of my physical body pushes past the anthropomorphic vessel of my body into the spiritual content of the transsexual dwelling. I made the rendition of the Yantra using my abstracted and segmented body. The recontextualization of the figure onto a trans body introduces the divine into transness. Using the example earlier in the essay, we can see that the body also serves as a point of the generative divine related to the production of Yantras. The body is a ground onto which the Yantra projects itself; conversely, the body projects itself onto the Yantra. The connection of the body to the Yantra does not solely rely on forming those facets as two different entities.

I make this work at a moment of heightened awareness of trans bodies occupying spaces in our social ecologies. With that increased awareness, we see a coupling of violence and visibility.<sup>23</sup> We deem transsexual people as bodies living on the fringes of society; in doing so, they are inherently disrespected, cast aside, and not allowed entrance into discourse about respect, space, and time. As my creative work and my scholarly analyses of Yantra studies make clear, there exists an opportunity to show the divine inherently imbued onto transsexual bodies. The Yantra's ethos becomes a generating tool for the divine to imbue the transsexual woman's body with this divinity. The transsexual body is the body-yantra used to connect to the divine, as its existence carves out spaces in cis-reality. Her body is consistently reflecting and noticing its lack of stasis. Movement is the inherent state of divinity and transformation and evolution that exists as divine. Her body is the live rendition of her home, made by and of herself. Her existence as the

23 Lexi Adsit, Sydney Freeland, Robert Hamblin, and Geo Wyeth, moderated by Tavia Nyong'o, "Representation and Its Limits," in *Trap Door*, 191–200.

Bindu and the Yantra radiating outward from her. She becomes the point where space begins to be, as the spaces' responses to her are to change or reject. There is no liminal response to her existing as the radiating force, which is mythos. When trans women cannot see our divinity, there is a fervent loss of identity and meaning. When her mythos has been removed from her environment, is it not up to us to restore it?

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Lastly, a thanks to my cohort: Liz Ordway, Liz Hafey, Katherine Hamilton, and Kristen Wawruck.

