

## A City in the Forest:

### Gaia in the Postmodern Contact Zones of Auroville's Wider Intentional Community in Tamil Nadu, India

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*"bio-power" or the "political technology of life" or "the disciplines of the body"*

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Vol. 1, 144-145)

## 1. Introduction

Auroville, in Tamil, Nadu, India, is one of the oldest territorially-based intentional communities, with a third-world location and a lifespan of almost fifty years. Intentional communities are often described as those created by groups of people who come together to actualize a shared vision outside of the cultural mainstream. In a Gaian context, they feature as laboratories for the "other possible worlds" advocated by the global peace and justice movement. These utopian spaces are designed to experiment with the lifestyles that will make it possible for the biota to continue to host our species. Auroville's spiritual vision anticipates the scientific findings that ensued when astronomer James Lovelock and bioscientist Lynn Margulis developed their Gaia theory. It is based on a mystical conflation of "The Mother", aka Mirra Alfassa, the co-spiritual leader of the mid-century Indian guru Sri Aurobindo Ghose, and *Mahashakti*, the universal mother of Hinduism, with *Shakti* being a representation of the sacred as embodied in the feminine.<sup>1</sup>

This willful conflation and the regenerative, creative impulses that ensued have generated a wider intentional community which includes Auroville proper and

its neighboring Tamil villages, for a total of some 20,000 people over a several square miles bioregion. With its Dravidian basis, Tamil culture has survived the multiple colonial legacies of the north Indian, British, and Western dominations. Its pantheon of deities and avatars and their adeptness in the arts of loving are well known to those interested in Indian and south-east Asian spiritual traditions. This adeptness, I claim, translates into the advanced knowledge in the arts of healing one finds in today's wider Auroville, including its surrounding Tamil villages. As a utopian space, Auroville is a laboratory for Western residents and visitors to learn from the biotope lifestyle of Tamil villagers. For the local population, it is an opportunity to become familiar with the eco-friendly technologies and collaborative disciplines these spiritual seekers bring here – in what might be described as a postmodern “contact zone” where transculturation and border gnosis occur.

The hippie Westerners who came to populate Auroville in the 1960s and 1970s participated in a radical process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization by which they left behind the excessive materialism and mass consumerism of that era and came to live in close proximity with rural Tamil Nadu, a bioregion depleted by excessive grazing and wood fire use, whose mostly illiterate villagers were nonetheless capable of subsisting with such a minimal resource usage, with such a reduced per-capita impact on the environment, as had not been seen in Europe since before the Industrial Revolution. The vision that inspired the community is one of “peace and human unity”, which obviously includes local Tamil villagers, whose well-honed biotopic skills are a boon to any collaborative ideal. Hence, a measure of Auroville's success in actualizing its vision is the extent to which the reterritorialization process of those who moved into the area has been conducive of mutual empowerment for two such diverse groups and for the bioregion that sustains them.

As a participant observer during the 2004 dry season, I was impressed with the success of the forestation effort and its attendant effect of improving the area's microclimate; with the widespread use of solar panels and other renewable sources of energy and its attendant effect of gradually reducing the use of network

electricity; with the ongoing gnosis of dexterities and body disciplines apt in freeing Westerners of technological servitude, in the areas of construction, transportation, nutrition, health, and education; with the building of prototypes apt to design the technologies of an eco-friendly future; with the widespread gender-bending practices in education and cultural activities; and with the respect for diversity and its attendant hospitality to non-conventional sexualities and indigenous modes of healing, despite opposite tendencies in mainstream India. The extent to which this mutual educational experiment works for the Tamil population can also be appreciated from the Auroville website's recent statistics, which indicate an incidence of poverty 50 percent below the rest of Tamil Nadu, accompanied by higher rates of literacy, education, labor skills, female employment, and small business initiative (2005b).<sup>2</sup> Also important is the widely documented high rate of recovery from natural disaster, observable in the coastal communities affected by the 2004 Tsunami wave. In this article, my observations will be presented in the context Mary Louise Pratt and Walter Mignolo's theories of "contact zones" and "border gnosis", and of Deleuze and Guattari's theories of postmodern fluxes and plateaus. On these bases, I propose to envisage the wider Auroville as a Deleuzian plateau where postmodern fluxes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization have converged to produce a utopian space where the knowledge-in-the-making necessary to invent Gaia's future is generated.

In the article, I will also summarize the history of Auroville's spiritual leadership; I will briefly explain the personal significance of my research trip to Auroville; I will theorize the space of enunciation from which I speak; I will establish the geographical, demographical, organizational, and administrative characteristics of the community; and I will proceed to describe its ecological prototypes and experimental energy production systems, its worker-friendly production units, its architectural landmarks and their spiritual significance, as well as its unique, two gender, Earth based spiritual partnership.

## 2. The Spiritual Leadership

The conflation of Mirra Alfassa, a world-traveled French occultist, with *Mahashakti*, or the Hindu universal mother, started with Aurobindo, who, due to his interest in a yoga of doing that would transform India into a progressive country and would assuage its colonial passivity, in 1926 joined Mirra in a dual-avatar spiritual partnership and began to theorize the sacred feminine as a mode of spiritual healing (Joshi 67-108). As a pamphlet of his explained in 1928,

The Mahashakti, the universal Mother (...) enters into the worlds that she has made; her presence fills and supports them [while] (...) [t]hat which we call Nature or Prakriti is only her most outward executive aspect; she marshals and arranges the harmony of her forces and processes, impels the operations of Nature and moves among them secret or manifest in all that can be seen or experienced or put into motion of life (Ghose 1999: 31).

This description, I claim, is uncannily similar to the concept of a super-organism with a life of its own that Lovelock and Margulis present, in its macroscopic and microscopic aspects respectively, in their books and theories developed from the 1960s onwards. It finds a philosophical correlative in the Spinozian *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* of the Western tradition, and, as a parallel development to the scientific Gaia hypothesis, it emphasizes intuition over empiricism.

Aurobindos' vision emphasized the *Shakti* with its all-encompassing personalities and attributes, including wisdom, strength, harmony, and perfection (Ghose 1999: 38). His interest in the sacred feminine became even more evident with his progressive empowerment of Mirra. Her commitment to being the embodiment of his vision and his partner in avatar-ship overcame the resistance of some of his male disciples, whose mentality was still controlled by misogynistic Vedantic thinking (Satprem 2003: 284-309; Van Vrekhem 1997: 51-65, 180-208). Aurobindo's theory about today's humans, and modern Westerners in particular, reprises Nietzsche in that he believes we are not the endpoint of evolution, but rather that we represent an intermediate phase leading to a more advanced stage of development in the near future (Ghose 1993: 229-238). He believed that the evolutionary crisis humans are now in demands an inner transformation that will then transform the environment too.

Aurobindo envisaged this transformation as one that would occur when the Supramental power, a symbiotic consciousness much stronger than any individual reason, would descend in a given, spiritually-based community. In his view, the practice of Integral Yoga is the biopolitics through which this transformation can be achieved for it integrates the introspective aspects of the Vedantic tradition with the Tantric focus on being-in-the-world as a force of transformation. In his mind and Mirra's, Auroville was the imagined community, the "city of dawn", where this consciousness and biopolitical practices would begin. The city was actually founded 18 years after his death, in 1968. In Mirra's view, the Tamil villagers who lived in the northern area of Pondicherry were to be "the first Aurovillians". Their biopolitics of subsistence, practices of the body, and skill at using local materials modeled a lifestyle designed *as if* Lovelock and Margulis's hypothesis were true. Mirra was evidently aware that these skills would make the ideal of peace applicable in the globe's environmentally uncertain future.

The new consciousness Mirra and Aurobindo's dual spiritual leadership envisioned can be seen as a form of Gaian awareness, while Auroville's wider intentional community, based on a sacred feminine principle, was the utopian space where the "new [human] race" would begin to develop the wisdom and skills to invent a new future.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, today's Auroville is a city in the forest with ubiquitous solar panels and signs to new-age and Hindu-sounding destinations, including "Aspiration", "Nilatangam", "New Creation", "Samasti", "Gratitude", and "Shri-ma". It is a quiet, well-organized oasis in the hustle and bustle of urban India. Its vision of "peace and human unity" has been actualized by its diverse population which includes several dozen nationalities and ethnic groups. Its "soul", or spiritual center, is a large womb-shaped building called the Matrimandir, or temple of the mother, home to an inspiring meditation room (Various 2001; Various 2000).

### **3. The Regional Biopolitics**

Tamil Nadu is one of the least affluent states in India, and one with a long standing cultural and literary tradition expressed in its own ancient language and script. It

occupies the eastern and central portion of the tip of the subcontinent. Chennai, or Madras, to the north of the state, is its political capital. In the state's central region, Bangalore is the fastest growing and most productive city, with its area dubbed India's "Silicon Valley" due to its burgeoning computer industry. 160 kilometers south of Chennai, Pondicherry, is a quiet hub in the former French colonial district, with its focus on spiritual practices and healing (Various 2003: 977-996).

The area technically designated as Auroville is within a 2.5 radius circle about six kilometers north of Pondicherry. It extends over an area of some 20 square kilometers, two kilometers away from the seashore. The once depleted dry tropical forest is now luxuriant. The area is home to some 1,700 Aurovillians, the official resident members of the intentional community. About two thirds of them are Westerners, most of whom from west and east Europe, with smaller contingents from South America, Russia, and Australia. A high percentage comes from multinational families, and a significant group is from Italy. One third of all Aurovillians are from various Indian states, including Tamil Nadu, and some are from other Asian countries (Various 2001: 22-23). The immediately neighboring Tamil villages include Kottakarai, Kuliapalayam, Sanjevi Nagar, Edayanchvadi, and Alankuppam. Numerous other villages in the area also participate in the Aurovillian economy, for a total of about 17,000 people, some 5,000 of whom are directly employed in Auroville's production and service units (Various 2001; Various 2000).

The Integral Yoga's focus on doing has encouraged the imaginativeness and creativity now deployed in a variety of products, services, and activities made possible by various forms of collaboration between residents and villagers. These, and the extremely convenient prices when one pays in hard currency, attract ecologically and spiritually aware Western tourists and long-term visitors. I also observed a number of north Indian visitors, as well as many local tourists intent in visiting the Matrimandir. Finally, the safety of the area attracts middle-aged Western women who travel solo or with other women, and might feel intimidated by other Asian destinations.

The Tamil villages affected by the intentional community are not only the places where the day workers employed at Auroville live. They have developed cultural centers and production units of their own which often compete with Auroville-based ones. The long-time community members who befriended me while in Auroville remember the boundless commingling that characterized the Tamil/Western relationship in the early years. On their part, this included a religious effort to learn Tamil and to raise their children together with village children. Ironically, the very expansion of Auroville as a visitor's destination and center of production in the region has enhanced the holistic organization aspect of the community at the expense of the intentional aspect.<sup>4</sup>

This has deemphasized the villagers' lifestyle as a model for the community, and their construction, in a Gaian perspective, as the "slaves" masters need to serve and learn from due to their superior knowledge. My sense is that over the years this reverse master/slave relationship has turned into a more conventional one, with Westerners as employers and villagers as employees, and all attendant inequalities and resentments. The raise of Hindu fundamentalism and the Tamil-Muslim civil wars in nearby Sri-Lanka have not made things easier. The high tension point was perhaps reached in February 2004, when Sydo, aka Sytze van Loo, a Dutch Aurovillian, was killed by a Tamil gang member for being ready to testify against some at-large Tamil criminals who had already killed some villagers. The recent Auroville socioeconomic study of the nearby Tamil population confirms my hypothesis. It encourages Auroville residents to treat Tamil workers as collaborators rather than employees, thus rekindling Alfassa's vision of them as "the first Aurovillians". The comparatively mild natural-disaster situation caused by the Tsunami wave must have catalyzed the two groups to function together on a new collaborative basis.

#### **4. A Testimonial Interlude**

It is about 8.00 pm on a weekday in the dry season in Pondicherry, and three middle-aged European-looking women are walking in the French Quarter. They

have been fasting for a week, while on a *panchakarma* program at a local Ayurvedic clinic. Their minds and bodies feel delightfully light and clear as they reach the nearest internet café. I am the tallest of the three and I drag my right foot which is broken due to a local accident. Thanks to a fiberglass cast made at the Pondicherry Institute of Medicine, the fracture is healing. We feel completely safe in this relatively privileged neighborhood bordering the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where his partnership with Mirra Alfassa first developed after he took shelter in the French district due to British persecution as a political leader of the Indian independence period.

The streets are crowded with local people. The Tamilians, a population that lived in the Indian peninsula long before the arrival of the Sanskrit speaking populations from the north, have their own language, Tamil, which, unlike other regional languages in India, is older than Sanskrit, and has its own script and literary classics. Pushed to the south of the peninsula by the lighter skinned invaders who now inhabit northern India, the Tamilians made their home in the southern region and parts of Sri Lanka.

At dusk, on a weekday, the streets are mostly peopled with men riding their bicycles to wherever their destinations may be. The Tamilians have ebony colored skins with sculpted, Indo-European features. Their black hair is thick and lightly wavy. Their vegetarian diet gives them thin bodies with round elbows and knees. Most men have relinquished their traditional attire – a loin cloth down to the shins and turban – to wear roughly sown cotton pants and shirts. During the day and on weekends, the women go out in droves, their voluptuous bodies wrapped in seamless saris. They remind me of my favorite Greek mythological figures. Their long, straight black hair is made into braids as thick as a wrist, which gracefully rest over the nape of their necks, adorned with colorful flowers. I imagine how they must groom each other in their home intimacy and, as they carry out the most humble chores in their goddess attire, I admire the elegance of their movements.

I have been blessed with the delicate care of one of them. On my second day in India, I fell on my foot as I was trying to start a moped, and a metacarpal



fracture ensued. I had just started my field trip. With my swollen foot, I was desperate that the immobility caused by the fracture would sabotage my research plan. The coordinator of Quiet, the community-based healing center where I was staying, proposed a solution. Having assessed my ineptness as a non-walking guest, he called Arndal, a trained health worker from a nearby Tamil village, to my help. He reassured me that having a personal assistant was common in India, for both locals and foreigners. Arndal arrived at 8:30 am in a green-print cotton sari and a thick, flower-adorned braid, a lipstick-red third eye painted between her eyebrows. And I was blessed with her elegant, sapient, and highly effective care, which included bathing my entire body in less than a bucketful of water while I stayed seated in my armchair; soaping and rinsing it in all its parts in the most thorough way, the touch of her hands a sweet caress on my skin; sweeping my room with a sage broom, her movement as delicate as a dancer's; and synchronizing her subtle perception system to mine so that she could gently anticipate any need I might have without the slightest intrusiveness. I learned that in her hands water is a liquid body her dexterity can multiply and control, not a flow that bursts out of a tap and quickly flushes away. With the amount I use to brush my teeth she can wash an entire person.

This experience was a prime example of border gnosis for me, and, I hope, for Arndal too. It was the process I learned to understand from Mignolo's theory, of creating knowledge from experience, especially subaltern experience, a process that engenders the kind of sustainable knowledge which is both scientific and humanistic, and also transcends either as it attains mystical, sacred, erotic, and magic certitudes in its mapping out and predicting other possible worlds and sustainable futures (Mignolo 2000: 3-48). Running water, I realized, occurs to us modern Westerners like an endless stream, a resource we can waste at our ease, even as we know about its widespread scarcity. The practice of sharing resources and learning the art of using them well is what, in the other possible worlds advocated by the global peace and justice movement, will overcome scarcity and create abundance.

In *Water Wars*, Vandana Shiva, a strong ecofeminist voice from India, argues that the privatization and control of water system will cause the wars of the future, unless a common-based approach prevails. To Arndal, who does not have running water at home, water occurs as a body of fluidity that laps and swashes according to one's wishes, and of whose movements the artist of care is in control. Her healing arts were so pleasurable to me that the pleasure alone made me want to heal. It answered the question that attracted me to India. Unlike Christian deities, and more like pagan ones, avatars of Hindu religion, including Vishnu, Shiva, and Krisna, are often represented in the nude and the mythology attached to them includes erotic activities. However, as in Foucault pre-modern Europe, so in today's India, the romantic passion that modernity associates with a healthy sexuality is rather uncommon.

Indeed, as Indian cultural theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty explains, in Bengali literary modernity, "the body is what threatens the domain of interiority" (Chakrabarty 2000: 136). The concept of romantic love became established as *pabitra prem* (pure love) which is achieved through a "set of techniques of interiority" (*idem*, 138) and is thus divorced from external nature often associated with appearance or *rup* (*idem*, 137). Nonetheless, as I observed in my trip, the symbology implied in the decorative patterns that most handicrafts repeat *ad infinitum* speaks of scripted modes in which visual and tactile pleasure comes to fruition for those educated in it. The grace with which women adorn and deport themselves in their traditional hairstyle and costumes occurred to me as a form of erotic expression that impacts a visitor's sensibility regardless of gender. It spoke to me of long-standing traditions of *ars erotica* that have evolved based on the intensity with which pleasure is distilled out of them.

This contrast between what a Western mind might read as sexual repression and *ars erotica*'s ubiquitousness is central to the quest of my trip: what happened to the erotic flamboyance of ancient Hindu mythology and religion and why does it not translate into the lovestyles of those who practice it? What factors intervened to generate this crease? The simple answer is Buddhism and the British

domination. But that *is* too simple, even without the border gnosis I experienced. I love water and have a mystical passion for it, as I've lived near the ocean for the past 15 years. I consider bodies of water live creatures. As Arndal washed me, I imagined Tamil women grooming each other and giving each other the pleasure she was offering me. Her healing occurred to me as a practice of love designed to teach me what water really is. As Foucault predicted, the "truth" of my border-gnosis experience was "drawn from pleasure itself (...) evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul" (Foucault 1990: 57). I became aware of how cultural any concept of water really is, and realized that the purpose of my accident was for me to learn about what water is to female Tamil villagers and disseminate this notion. Auroville provided the perfect transcultural space for the passage of tropes, and my surrender to the local modes of healing enabled the border gnosis to take place.

In the French Quarter rickshaws offer rides for a few Rupees. Most drivers have motors, while some still pedal away with their own hamstrings. My fasting companions get a motorized one for us. Giuliana, from Rome, has spent most of her life working in Italian consulates around the world; and Janice, from Connecticut, spent ten years in Singapore with her first husband. Even as hybrids in a multicultural world, the three of us are highly aware of our neocolonial ignorance and privilege. The border gnosis I experience in this trip eats at the credibility of the identity-based feminism I have been implied in for the past 20 years. I am now aware that the very preoccupation that gave rise to it was an anxiety of material acquisitiveness that inspired me to pursue my own career goals – despite my doubts about the integrity of any career or profession in a consumerist, acquisitive, materialistic social order.

The lessons of this trip are deep for me. They go much beyond my proposed study of an intentional community and cause me to question the epistemological basis of my most important decisions. With my body/mind light from a week's colon purification procedures, my perceptions are crystal clear. I see how little people here need to live with joy and dignity. Tamil villagers make their

dwellings from nearby resources like red clay, bamboo shoots, and palm trees. They grow most of their food. They squat in a resting position since their flexible heels are their most comfortable chairs built in via body discipline. They sit cross-legged on the floor and eat their food out of palm leaves. Their adept fingers are their silverware, and straw mats meet all their bedding needs. They are limber and free, and not, like us, addicted to cars and other high-energy consuming implements.

I look in retrospect at my end-of-graduate-school decision to design a career for myself rather than follow my creative impulses. And I realize how that either/or that controlled my life was only fear. What if, like these Tamil villagers who live on less than one dollar a day, I knew that what's around one is all one needs? What if the disciplines of my body had empowered me to do without the material implements I believe I need? All of a sudden, the decision about which, as a feminist, I have been proud of all these years looks like a young person's cowardice. Would today's wisdom advise against allowing that passing cloud to take hold of me? The practice of surrender appears to me as the most valuable asset in the ecofeminist life based on love I now plan to design for myself.

This epiphany happened as part of a process in which many Western visitors took part while in the wider Auroville; learning from "Orientals" how to surrender, trust the universe, and feel limber and free. With my digestive system well-rested and clean from the fasting, the oxygen I breathed went straight to my mind. Suddenly, the bicycles that crowded the Pondicherry streets appeared to me as the force of freedom, the swarm intelligence that animates a flight of butterflies, and symbolizes lightness as opposed to my heaviness and that of other car-dependent people.

## **5. Bits of Italian-Style Neocolonial Theory**

As a nomadic polyglot from Italy who has made her home in the north- and central-American higher education industry, I feel in some ways inadequate to write about India. I wonder how my background and culture can make me a suitable person to

study Auroville. I feel that the inspiration this community has provided for me, as well the life changing experience I had during my trip, make me a unique candidate. But I also realize that including the space of enunciation from which I speak might involve the risk of slightly tweaking neocolonial theory. As I do so, I will therefore write neocolonial speak with an Italian accent.

An Italian perspective on neocolonial theory involves an awareness that certain peoples consciously chose not to engage in modern national unity and the neocolonial endeavors that ensued. This includes Italians of the early modern period, who, unlike the French and British, did not follow the teachings that their own theorist, Machiavelli, expounded in *The Prince*. This awareness implies the possibility that a history of being at the center of the decomposition process of a large system of global domination – such as the Roman Empire had been in antiquity – might be an effective vaccine against any such ambitions. The factual consideration to begin with, then, is that the concepts of Orient/East and Occident/West were invented when nobody suspected that the Earth was a globe. In the Tolemaic system, the sun raised from what is today called the Middle East, and set where Hercules supposedly placed his columns, at Gibraltar. Since it turns out that we live on a globe, a definitional problem ensued. If we spoke languages original from the Pacific, we would probably think of Japan as the Occident/West and California as the Orient/East, namely the places where, if you're in Hawaii, the sun sets and rises, respectively. But the reality is that languages original from the Mediterranean have spread around the globe, thus mixing up geography and history.

In Italian, a Western language whose neocolonial legacy is thin, *ovest* and *est* are used as cardinal points, *occidente* and *oriente* as cultural descriptors. For example, Western civilization translates as *la civiltà occidentale*, and in connection with the word “west” people think of *il far west*, with its cow boys and *pistoleros* – quite the opposite of any civility. One could argue that the scarce neocolonial legacy in this language makes for some semantic clarity between geography and history. As a cultural construct in the English language, “Orientalism” comes from a

long-gone Mediterranean centrality, which is still semantically assumed in most Western languages. As Said rightfully claims, “the Orient is not a fact of nature” (Said 1979). It is indeed a cultural construct that confuses geography and history and causes resentment in those it threatens with exclusion. As an Italian, I am supposed to represent this west Orientalism resents, yet I often feel “Orientalized” in Said’s terms when some mainstream American scholar expects to understand antiquity or the Renaissance better than any Italian can. The healthy thing to do, then, is perhaps not staying caught in the desire to be included in the west, but rather assuming one’s exclusion as the fount of an *eros* that generates self-knowledge and definition. Coloniality is a never ending process with its winners and losers. But how can both cultures that exchange tropes win? My mind goes to Mignolo’s theory about colonies that become empires before their cycle of dependency from their former colonial power is complete (Mignolo 2000: 3-48).

A sheer discourse of Orientalism puts me in a position with respect to Auroville and India similar to that of those American scholars who I feel don’t understand Italy. I must ask who and what purposes this discourse serves. I cannot speak for the Tamil villagers I met at Auroville, nor for the Western Aurovillians who functioned as my informants and are as Indian as I am American. But I can and must claim a right to speak as a participant observer in the Auroville community, and the cultural-political reality that surrounds it, with my gender, nationalities, sexual orientations, age, and not quite able body. The propositions that Aijaz Ahmed, a scholar from India, presents in “Orientalism and After” come to my rescue. He claims that Said’s Orientalism served “those who came [to the US] as graduate students [in the 1980s] and then joined the faculties, especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences [and] tended to come from upper classes in their home countries . . . [and] needed documents of their assertion, proof that they had always been oppressed” (Ahmed 1994: 167). There is nothing wrong *per se* with making these claims for the purpose of getting an entry into an exclusionary system. However, believing in these claims conveniently hides significant historical and political circumstances of modern coloniality, namely the fact that, while the

majority of people in Asia and Africa suffered from colonialism, “there were also those who benefited from it” (*ibidem*), just like the infamous war, disaster, and terror profiteers of today.

In the context of alternative globalization theories, this ignorance is pernicious. One cannot lie to oneself about the past and claim to be in the process of inventing a new future. Mary Louise Pratt’s theory of “contact zones”, developed in the context of early modern and modern colonial studies, suggests that certain areas or regions where colonials and locals met were favorable to the exchange of cultural tropes between the two groups. I submit that such areas can also be seen as utopian spaces, where transculturation produces new hybrids. This of course does not mean that everything is pleasant in them, but rather that the encounter between significantly different cultures is fraught with risks, and that, even as often the most valuable, serene, and peaceful group succumbs, transcultural processes help cultural tropes survive so that some of the knowledge therein can be passed on.

Mignolo’s theory of “border gnosis” elaborates on this. He suggests that the Greek concepts of *episteme* and *doxa* give rise to the modern sciences and humanities disciplines, with their respective interpretive modes of epistemology and hermeneutics (Mignolo 2000: 9). In his view, this binary system tends to transmit existing knowledge rather than create new knowledge, which happens precisely in the interstices between existing disciplinary configurations. Gnoseology, also known as gnosis or the logic thereof, is a mode of knowledge production widely practiced at different times since the Middle Ages and in various regions, and is an answer to normative binary configurations. As he studies the transculturation processes of modern coloniality, Mignolo focuses on border gnosis as the kind of gnosis that happens in contact zones and unsettled regions where cultures impact one another. Today, one such region is the area of North-American known to people of Mexican descent as Aztlán, which Latina feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa also describe as Borderlands (*idem*, 24-25, 260). Border gnosis, Mignolo claims, is based on a method which is also an object. It provides access to

knowledge-in-the-making, knowledge, that is, which is empirical yet filtered through knowledge-acquisition processes that are a product of the transcultural impact itself. Border gnosis therefore is a manner of acquiring knowledge which presumes nothing except the desire of all groups involved in the transculturation process to genuinely participate in it. The concept of gnosis comes from the passion with which the divine is studied by certain religious groups. Even in its secular manifestations, gnosis does produce knowledge that is in some way sacred, precisely because it presumes a shared faith among those who participate in its production (*idem*, 3-48). One such community, I submit, is the wider Auroville.

The space of enunciation opened by Mignolo's theory seems to me more radical than the one indicated by Bhabha's theory of hybridization. Mignolo presents authenticity not as identity – hybrid as it might be – but rather as that which resides in the process of transculturalization itself, a process that becomes knowable via gnosis, and does not assume any original purity. In the wake of his theory, I submit that colonization is an unending process and contact zones always exist. This, in my view, is the constant of history, which is exemplified by the trope according to which the Roman Empire, at the apogee of its power, still understood itself as a cultural colony of the Greeks. In a similar way, the prevalence of specialists in British literature in any Department of English in a United States university institution – while Americanists are still few and far between – testifies to a cultural dependence the one-superpower system is not ready to sever yet. More than two centuries since the American Revolution, in other words, the complex of the colonized has not been shed yet. Thus, as Mignolo indicates, colonies become empires even as their independence is still in process (Mignolo 2000: 280-281 and *passim*).

Even as it has been destabilized by Aijaz Ahmed's more recent claims, Said's theory of Orientalism unproductively barred my space of enunciation. Mignolo and Pratt's perspectives enable my claim that intentional communities can be utopian spaces where border gnosis occurs, for they are based on intent rather than accident or destiny, and therefore on the love that intended members bring to



the vision they share. The force of this love is what I call *eros*, an inner drive to self-knowledge that eschews the permanent state of desire induced by consumer capitalism and its schizophrenic symptoms. There, I submit, the laboratory for the “other possible worlds” auspicated by the global peace and justice movement begins. The “deterritorializations and reterritorializations” which are inherent in the formation of an intentional community denote sapient ways to navigate the postmodern “fluxes” theorized by Deleuze and Guattari. In the wider Auroville area one can see how these fluxes converge into tantric “plateaus” that allow people to live *as if* Gaia was an organism with a life of its own. When this model applies to the globe as a whole, today’s abject multitudes theorized by Hardt and Negri will become the empowered multitudes they auspicate, who can operate like a global intentional community and therefore bring the interrupted project of modern democracy to fruition.

## **6. Environment, Architecture, and Administrative System**

With its legacy of backwardness and its more recent environmental depletion, in the late 1960s, north-eastern Tamil Nadu, south of Chennai, was a most suitable location to find Auroville. Its red-clay soil speaks of a special connection with the earth’s chemical and gravitational forces. Despite its glorious ancient history, Tamil Nadu is still one of the Indian states with the lowest literacy rates. Its one-time florid dry tropical forest has been depleted by overgrazing and excessive wood fire use. The state is not as attractive to Western tourists as Kerala, its counterpart on the Western southern tip of India, with its navigable backwaters, theater festivals, healing practices, progressive politics, and Catholic traditions. As is often the case with intentional communities, the region’s position out of the mainstream made the Auroville project more feasible.

The city was officially founded in 1968, in a ceremony that reflected the internationalist political landscape of those years, with its impulse towards world peace and its ecumenical inclusiveness. Indira Gandhi, who was known in the west for her appreciation of progressive views and who kept Hindu fundamentalism at

bay even as she enhanced the pride of independent India, was a personal friend of Alfassa and an advocate of Auroville. On February 28, about 5000 people met near the site of today's Matrimandir. They were representatives of 124 countries and all the Indian states. Each placed a handful of soil from his or her original land into a marble urn. Accordingly, the township's vision was going to be creating a utopian space where "men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities" and whose purpose is "to realize human unity" (Alfassa 1977a: 2). Predictably, in the high years of the social and cultural revolution that goes under the name of the 1968 Movement, the community attracted European baby boomers ready to reject Western acquisitiveness and the extreme consumer materialism that accompanied it during the economic growth of the 1960s. Some of them were already in the Indian subcontinent as long-term visitors in search of alternative spiritual visions.

The city's spiritual center, or Matrimandir, is designed to symbolize the city's earth-based spirituality and its devotion to Alfassa. Based on her connections and reputation as Ashram leader, in the early years Alfassa called in Robert Angier, a well-known French architect, to design the meditation center. The main building has a flat oval dome shape which looks like a womb, its exterior covered in gold-glazed disks that reflect the sunlight in various directions. Inside, a majestic meditation room whose white decoration is completed by the one sunlight beam that pierces in from the top of the building and falls on a large crystal placed at the center of the room. The womb-shaped building is surrounded by twelve small, petal-shaped buildings that host smaller meditation rooms. The complex is completed by a wide red-clay amphitheater that demonstrates the effective elegance of local building materials and serves as performative and ceremonial space for the community. The concept of a womb-shaped temple dedicated to a maternal deity is what initially attracted me to Auroville.

Alfassa's plan envisaged a city that would develop as a galaxy around the Matrimandir. Its sectors, including a cultural, international, industrial, and residential zone, were to be distributed within a 2.5 kilometer radius surface of

what then was a totally depleted dry tropical forest area (Various 2000: 4). The isolated surviving trees I've observed in pictures of those early years are only evidence of the impending desertification process which Auroville's forestation efforts have now definitely reversed (Various 2002, 12). As Hilda, the community's midwife explained to me during my stay, the technique that started the forestation process involved the excavation of linear ditches sided by mounds, which allowed the depleted soil to retain rain water, and therefore enable plant growth. A similar soil-management technique was also in use with the pre-Colombian Tainos on the Caribbean islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico.

One large surviving banyan tree, with its sacred character to Indians, marked the area where the Matrimandir was eventually built. Initially, the Aurobindo ashram, based in Pondicherry, took charge of the administration of the beginning township. During my visit, I learned that at one point its milder interpretation of Auroville's worldly oriented Integral Yoga came to a clash with the town's leadership. As a result, Auroville earned its administrative independence through a lawsuit, and is now organized as a Foundation. The area developed as a city-in-the-forest mostly invisible to superficial tourists. Its unpaved red-clay roads are frequented by cyclists, moped drivers, and occasional taxi vehicles, and the imaginative names of its neighborhoods are designed to inspire more thoughtful visitors.

The community eventually developed a rather selective entry process for its membership, which, as I learned, includes an intermediate stage as a "newcomer" and a gradual verification of the newcomer's ability to live up to the community's charted vision over a period of about two years. This process seemed to me inherently exclusive for it does not invite the Tamil villagers in, even as they collaborate with Auroville's services and production units. However, I also realized that the effort to recruit more perspective members from these communities was being debated when I visited. It was explained to me that the automatic inclusion of these workers would significantly dilute the cohesiveness of the community.

Auroville's proper form of government is a self-declared "divine anarchy" which involves operating by consensus rather than voting, with a commitment to participating in the assembly meetings. During my visit, in January-February of 2004, the dire winds of Hindu fundamentalism reached the heart of the community, and provided an opportunity to observe this form of government in action. On February 1, 2004, at 4 am, Sydo, a resident of the solar-powered green belt that surrounds the central buildings, was murdered in his home presumably to intimidate Aurovillians from helping in the state's judicial system. The following Tuesday the assembly came together in an open space at the international building Barhat Nivas, with community members joined by many visitors like me. The community's wound was first processed spiritually, with expressions of grief and anger followed by spontaneous healing rituals. Then practical matters were discussed, including what to do with the body and with the request to have it shipped to Europe from the victim's family, and the necessary protective actions that would ensue. The dramatic occasion enhanced participation, which made observing "divine anarchy" in action more moving. Gnostic forms of love were clearly in play as the decision-making process unfolded. Naturally, more decisional procedures ensued later on, even as transparency in administrative processes is part of Auroville's *ethos*, as I've observed from the detailed administrative documents available on its website too.

A main feature of divine anarchy is that all real estate property belongs to the community, with new Aurovillians expected to bring in all or part of the capital needed to build new homes. If an Aurovillian leaves, his or her descendants can use the property indefinitely. However, if all descendants leave, five years later the property will go back to the common fund. Most Aurovillians are foreign nationals whose ability to forestall deportation for political or whatever reason is quite limited. The thought of investing in a property one does not own located in a country one is not a citizen of is a far cry from conventional acquisitive thinking, even as it does happen frequently in Auroville. Predictably, though, the community has also been experiencing a shortage in newcomer housing. As I learned during my visit,

Auroville's successful forestation efforts and good land stewardship have revalued the whole bioregion, which includes several areas within the imagined perimeter that still belong to local villagers. For the Auroville Foundation, it has been increasingly difficult to purchase this land, for the owners in the nearby villages, well aware of possible developments in a more capitalistic mode, and not often willing to price it reasonably. Many Tamil villages have production units of their own non-affiliated with Auroville, as well as a number of Integral-Yoga inspired cultural initiatives. While a number of Aurovillians are Tamil Indians, the production units I visited were presided by either north Indians or Europeans.

### **7. Production, Services, and Healing**

The economy of Auroville is based on an honor system which allows the use of a local currency, and on the interdependence of its production and service units. Establishments that produce artifacts, goods, and services sold to visitors and tourists are considered production units. Service units, including food, education, and healing, are those that deliver services to other Aurovillians. The Foundation collects 30 percent of all income from each production unit and applies it towards a maintenance fee for Aurovillians employed in the service units. During the dry, or high season, the community focuses on its long-term visitors and tourists, so that more hard currency can be stored for the rest of the year. The focus is on residents during the low season. A local card system encourages visitors to experience the moneyless economy and trust it is based in.

The meaningful work and creativity encouraged by the practice of Integral Yoga has resulted in a large number of Auroville-based production units, devoted to a variety of activities including making and dyeing textiles, making jewelry, making lamp shades and other rice-paper products, making red-clay bricks and other construction materials, and more. The production units I visited during my stay were all hosted in healthy and ecologically sound buildings. The production processes I observed therein appeared to be environmentally friendly and respectful of worker's health and well being. Auroville's artifacts are characterized by the

originality with which they recombine elements of local craft traditions to create something new. A wide variety of them is on sale at the Visitors Center and at the Auroville Boutique in Pondicherry's French District. The most complex unit I visited is Saradanjali, which I will describe in detail. The unit uses rice paper produced at the Pondicherry Ashram and locally-grown flowers to produce decorative artifacts, including its famous screens, lamp shades, picture frames, trays, stationery, and a variety of other similar implements. Its limestone-paved building has wide openings that keep the working environment cool, and it employs 15 Tamil women. In the garden outside the building I could observe the flowers that, flattened and dried under weights, are applied to the rice paper as decorations. The models include variations on designed patterns. Some are framed in light local wood. The unit is one of the most successful in the community, with its products attracting numerous visitors. It is coordinated by ... a north Indian woman.

Another area in which Integral Yoga manifests is holistic healing. As a former holistic-health practitioner, I am quite tuned to the various forms that this approach to health takes. I found the services Auroville offered of exceptional quality and variety. My accident also provided an opportunity to probe the local medical facilities, the traditional village healers, as well as the level of cooperation among these three main healing modes and systems. I can truly say that, at least for my conditions, I cannot think of a better place to heal than Auroville. Quiet, the healing center near the coast where I was staying offers watsu, or water massage; homeopathy, syndrome-based and unicist; polarity therapy; a variety of massage styles, including Thai, Californian, osteopathy, and Kahuna; and a number of other modalities, most of which I experienced with glee. The center attracts some of the world's most experienced healers, and functions as an educational facility, with numerous classes in various healing specialties. It is also an ideal space to experiment with vegetarian food, as its buffet is known as one of the best in the region.

Auroville's emergency room is one of the most efficient I've ever seen, where half an hour and a dollar after my arrival the doctor on shift and I looked

together at the x-ray of my foot and agreed that there was a fracture. He also accepted my decision not to get a cast immediately, and indicated the bone setter of a nearby village where my driver took me to have the trauma treated with traditional Tamil systems. I allowed natural healing for about two weeks, when the need to use my foot induced me to go to the hospital and have the cast made. The whole process cost so little that I didn't even keep the receipts for insurance reimbursement.

Other healing practices I became familiar with include the Somalin treatment for back asymmetries and injuries, and the panchakarma or purification of the digestive system. I experienced both to much benefit, as the first brought my spine back into symmetry, saving me much pain when I work in a standing or seated position, and the second taught me the skill of keeping my mind and body light and clear. The style of care usually matched what I experienced with Arndal. A woman from France I met had a fracture similar to mine. Panicked at the idea of being stranded in a "third-world" country, she asked the consulate to repatriate her. I realized how my familiarity with the healing arts empowered me to benefit from arts of loving and healing offered by this intentional community.

Once the tourist season is over, the Quiet healers turn from production to service people, as they provide free healing practices for other Aurovillians. In accordance with their visions, community members also use other forms of holistic health practices, including home births and ecological child rearing which minimized diaper use. Hilda, Auroville's midwife, described to me how she prepares a birth by being in constant contact with the woman and her family, and by helping her anticipate possible difficulties. Another concern of hers is that, if resorting to the hospital becomes necessary, the woman gets there before an actual state of emergency ensues. In response to my preoccupation with the escalating waste related to children, such as excessive diaper use, and what being wrapped from the waist down until the age of three does to a child's body, Hilda also indicated to me that Tamil women are not embarrassed by their children's excrements. This I had observed in a Pondicherry temple, while seated on the floor

with other audience members. As an infant peed near his mother, she simply wiped up the liquid with the end of her sari. Hilda explained that Tamil women often manage to gently toilet train them in the first months of their existence. Similarly, Aurovillian parents take advantage of the warm weather to allow toddlers to roam free of diapers and therefore quickly become self-sufficient.

## **8. Socialization and Relationships**

Another area of observation made possible by border gnosis is that of socialization processes and relationships in Auroville proper. From my observation, it appeared that heterosexual couples are the main social unit. These often also form the basis for family-style production units. They are often formed by partners who came to Auroville together, and it is not clear that, if a partnership breaks up, forming another one is easy. Due to the entry process and the adaptation to Auroville's vision, it is also not easy for single members to bring in a partner from outside. Short-term and/or repeat relationships between visitors and between visitors and Aurovillians are certainly possible, even as they are not openly encouraged. Visitors tend to come back from year to year and this allows for a certain continuity and stability in social and emotional relating.

While male homosexuality is still legally banned in India, I was able to observe how Auroville offers gay and transsexual men a reprieve. Some of my most insightful conversation happened with a gay man who lives with a younger partner. I also met another male gay Aurovillian, whom I will call Mark, and a male-to-female transsexual from a nearby area whom I will call Savitri. Mark, who has experimented with amorous relationships with Tamil men, emphasized his commitment to helping young men from the villages create social spaces conducive to mutual appreciation and growth. Savitri appreciates deeper forms of acceptance in Auroville, well beyond the conventions of flashy parade exhibitionism. He explained to me that, as an MTF transie partner of an Indian man, he can only play bottom in their sexual activities, and his partner will go on to marry without ever telling his wife about him. He also indicated that local sex-



change operations mainly consist in creating a shallow opening in the genital area. Heavy hormone dosages are used to complete the process.

With the limited exposure made possible by my visit, I cannot say for sure what one's sexual and social life is like in Auroville. By and large, it seemed to me that the yoga of doing put the focus on work rather than leisure. During my stay I observed that resident Aurovillians still know each other by first name, and are so known also to visitors. This keeps alive a village-style coziness that appeared to me inconsiderate of the fact that the wider community now encompasses some 20,000 people. The preoccupation with this coziness might be a cause for some social unease, as the community goes through the growing pains of realizing its actual magnitude and potential therein.

### **9. Eco-Friendly Technologies and Prototypes**

Auroville appears immediately as a utopian space for those interested in learning about eco-friendly technologies and prototypes of the low-environmental impact machines of the Gaian future. As one gets around the city in the forest, its ubiquitous solar panels speak of a widespread use of solar power. During my stay I learned that the whole green-belt area around the central part of the city is exclusively powered by solar energy, with much pride for the Aurovillians who live in it, and offer ongoing forestation efforts and effective land stewardship. Like most residents of India, Aurovillians are sparing in their electricity usage, with small indoor lamps and little street lighting. Realizing that living on solar energy is possible for such a large community was very empowering to me, as it appears that the systems developed in Auroville could be applied towards resolving the energy crises that affect various regions, including California, Italy, and the New York area.

In the area of construction, Auroville also models learning from indigenous cultures and adding new elements to their systems. The basic brick in use ... is made from local red clay just like the sun-baked mud bricks Tamil villagers use for the perimeter walls of their thatch cabins ... is fired and has the added element of a

5 percent concrete. This makes it more resistant and apt for multistory buildings, like the Visitor Center and the Solar Kitchen, both of which are elegant specimen of Auroville's imaginative architectural styles. The Solar Kitchen is a radiant, inviting cafeteria which serves residents, guests, and nearby communities.

Besides its architecture, the Solar Kitchen is worthy of note for its Solar Bowl, the functioning prototype for a solar power machine able to produce enough steam to power a 2000-meals a day kitchen. This prototype was built based on a plan designed by Gilles Guigan, a French Aurovillian well versed in eco-friendly technology. The availability of Tamil labor, considerably cheaper than its Western equivalent, made the experiment of its construction more feasible. Ironically, the economic disparity between Westerners and Tamilians supplemented to the lack of commitment to funding ecological research so common in the greedy Western governments of our era. The Bowl's inauguration, in 2001, called the attention of India's minister for Non-conventional Energy Sources (Various 2005b). The system can certainly model similar bowls in the future which can significantly reduce the use of cooking gas and electricity.

Another interesting feature in the wider community is the ubiquity of well functioning and equipped Internet cafes, often managed by women and men from the Tamil villages. Their proximity to the thatch cabins and the unpaved roads populated by goats, chickens, cyclists, and women carrying fire wood, and sided with Dravidian-style sculptures of ancient deities, made the coevalness of it all come alive for me.

## **10. Activities in the Tamil Villages**

I was able to observe the structural organization, lifestyle, and activities of the Tamil villages thanks to a one-day tour offered by Balu, a Tamil Aurovillian I met through Mark, and to my driver Prakash, who shared many moments of tribulation with me due to my injury, and, based on the intimacy that ensued, felt inclined to invite me to dinner in his home with another Italian woman.

The Mohanam Center, in the Sangeevi Nagar Tamil village north of the Auroville- proper area, is designed to preserve Tamil cultural traditions and to offer life-enhancing, extra-curricular activities to village children and young adults, including ceramics, painting, summer camps, dance, and martial arts. The show I attended features young women in a concerted dance based on Thai-Chi movements. I was impressed with the gender hybridity of the feature, which mixed masculine, martial arts tropes with the more feminine dance movements and pointed to gender-bending as one of the positive experiences the center provides for its young participants. The center stores many artifacts made in village, including wallets, purses, musical instruments, ceramic mugs, and others. A nearby production unit we visited was run by two young Tamil women and made lamp shades. We were able to observe their water dyeing techniques. The village-based artisan production units do not pay dues to the Auroville Foundation, and therefore can apply lower prices. We were also invited to attend a religious festivity related to the Pongal, the January harvest festival, where I could observe a number of Dravidian-style wooden sculptural groups representing mythological events. The bright colors of the paint over their wood-frames matched the evocative brightness of the ghee candles that filled the floor decorations.

Near the village, a wide area has been fitted as a botanical garden complete with several bamboo cabins and a kitchen to host gatherings for youth in a convivial yet educational atmosphere. We were served a traditional, rice based meal while cross legged in a circle on the floor of the main cabin in front of fresh green palm leaves. We learned the etiquette of eating with the tips of one's fingers, without allowing the food to go past the first phalange, and using the left hand.

This prepared me for the dinner at my driver's home in the Kulyapalayam village, whose cabin is typical of the area. Over a brick wall a bit about three feet tall sits an eve-shaped bamboo structure that sustains a thick roof made of palm leaves. The entrance is a simple interruption of the wall, which allows people in as they bend their head. Inside, Prakash showed us the wooden-fire kitchen, to the right of the central room or entrance, and the bedroom, to the left, with its straw

mats and storage area. The cabin is home to Prakash, his wife and child, and his parent, all of whom sleep in the bedroom. The backyard has a well, a loo, and a banana tree, with a couple of cows for milk and other useful animals. The meal consisted in several grains and complex-fiber cereals cooked in various styles, all very tasty, healthy, and coming from the nearby fields tended by village families. The atmosphere was jovial and convivial, even as we sensed that this kind of dinner party is rather unusual, and even as the women's shyness pointed to their scarce familiarity with Westerners with respect to Prakash and other male drivers. I did not see any female drivers in Auroville, and, since this is a high-paying job which requires the upscale investment car ownership – still quite unusual in south India – I attribute this exclusion to the male cultural privilege that still prevails in the subcontinent.

Another significant gender disparity I noticed was in the level of competence in English language between men and women. Prakash was a rather competent, even though self-taught speaker, more competent than many other drivers I used. Arndal had a comparable competence, and was an extremely keen listener, even as her range of expression was more limited. My experience in the area of speech leads me to the next topic of language use in the context of border gnosis within the wider intentional community.

## **11. Language Gnosis**

Mignolo's theory of "bilanguaging love: thinking between languages" (2000: 250-277), provides the perfect context for my descriptive analysis of language gnosis at Auroville. According to Alfassa's chart, four s are officially in use in the community, with equal status: English, French, Sanskrit, and Tamil. The reality is that not a single speech act in the region is devoid of the in-betweenness described by Mignolo's theory, as language use shifts continuously among speakers and as other linguistic codes interface with the main language in use in any dialog, speech, or performance. It is in the space between linguistic codes that, argues Mignolo, border gnosis and the love it produces occurs. Since native speakers of

English are notoriously poor learners of other languages, and since English has been the unifying colonial language of India, one can safely say that it functions as a lingua franca among the multinational population of Auroville's residents and guests. French follows by one length, due to its own colonial legacy and attachment of its native speakers.

In this area of linguistic interchange one listens to a fairly cultured but quite stiff international English, spoke with a variety of thick accents and interspersed with an interlinguistic idiom referring to the local reality. For example, an Aurovillian will mention *darshan*, the Hindi word for devotion, a *lingham*, the Hindi word for a phallic symbol, or a *dahli*, a type of Indian bread, in the middle of a conversation in English. The border gnosis happens in the improvised lesson about Indian traditions available to an attentive listener. Aurovillians whose native languages are not English will break into another European language as soon as the group is small enough to include members who have one of these languages in common, including German, Italian, French, Spanish, Dutch, and others. This makes for still another level of interaction, where the cultural tropes learned in previous conversations can be rehashed and reviewed.

The situation of Tamil native speakers is not altogether different. Sanskrit, the unifying ancient language of north India, is an anti-identity language for them, a bit like English for Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans. They study and know it less than they do English. And they attribute cultural authenticity to Tamil, which is even older than Sanskrit and reflects their heritage, culture, and region. I cannot comment on the quality of this language, since I learned only a few words during my visit, but, given its well-respected classical literature, one can assume that it is a language with a wide range of expressiveness and embedded wisdom. Its beautiful script is ubiquitous in the region, which indicates a good level of literacy. To my knowledge, it is not widely taught or learned in the intentional community, which might be a cause for the rift often observed between Auroville residents and Tamil villagers. It is accompanied by the body-language tropes typical of India, including the well-known rhythmic tilting of one's head, which gets Western

newbies like me quite confused, since it looks either like a “yes” *and* a “no”, or like neither, and actually, as I learned, only means “I am here, I am paying attention to you”. I found it fascinating, an added feature of the gentle arts of loving and healing that characterize the villagers’ behavior in the region. Interestingly, I observed a number of old-time Aurovillian tilt their heads too, especially those who are in daily contact with Tamil workers. And on a few occasions, I surprised myself while imitating this contagious feature. I experienced logical oppositions as unnecessary and began to think in both/and terms too. What a lesson for a mind trained in Western logic and its in-built Manicheanism!

## **12. Conclusion**

The wider Auroville, with its multinational residents and surrounding Tamil villagers, is a utopian space of transculturation where various forms of border gnosis occur. The knowledge-in-the-making generated therein is the social, production, and environmental technology of the future, when Gaian awareness will reach critical mass and the human community will turn the present scarcity and environmental uncertainties into ecological harmony and abundance. My research trip was a lie-changing experience for me, which I understand as border gnosis thanks to Mignolo’s theory. The practice of Integral Yoga, together with the dual, two-gender spiritual leadership of the community, and the earth-centered spirituality that ensued have empowered Aurovillians and their collaborators among the Tamil villagers to actualize their vision regardless of economic disparities and political divisions. The effects of the vision are evident throughout the bioregion affected by the community, including widespread forestation, renewable energy production, healthy use of local materials, prototypes of eco-friendly machines, imaginative artisan productions, ongoing education, high-quality health services and holistic healing, gender-bending practices, hospitality to sexually diverse people, social commingling among residents, visitors, and villagers, and thinking between languages in the communication styles used therein.

The wider community is suffering the growing pains of any group intent in keeping faith in its vision as reality evolves in unexpected ways. In my view, Auroville can expand in a number of directions, some of which include hosting educational programs for world students in fields related to ecological regeneration and eco-friendly energy production; continuing and expanding the synergy of holistic and conventional healing; and further developing as a site of transculturation and border gnosis with their inherent coevalness. The community suffered a blow when a Tamil gang assassinated one of its resident members, and when the Tsunami wave affected the nearby coastal area and Tamil villages. However, in agreement with its spiritual leadership, it learned to be more attentive to the social transformations around itself, and rekindled its original vision of the surrounding villagers as collaborators and as “the first Aurovillians”.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *Shakti* prevails in the tantric counter-tradition, which emphasizes the body, sensuality, sexuality, as opposed to the more ascetic representations prevalent in the Vedantic traditions, according to which the world is an illusion, and females a prime example of this illusion a true sanyasi or spiritual disciple must eschew. According to some Aurovillians, the Tamil population believes that it comes from Lemuria, the mythical continent of the Southern hemisphere, which, as opposed to Atlantis, was more conducive to symbiosis and intuitiveness. About Hindu’s conventional concept of the world as illusion see also Ghose 1993.

<sup>2</sup> The document uses the BLP measure, namely the Below Poverty Line standards designed by the Indian government.

<sup>3</sup> It is even said that, to empower Mirra further, Aurobindo decided to “leave his body” prematurely, as he died of a relatively mild illness he chose not to fight off in 1950, so as not to be in Mirra’s way as she would actualize it (Wilfried 1990: 66-69).

<sup>4</sup> My informant is Ambre at Nilatangam, who also became my friend and guide.

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