

'Namaste All Day': Containing Dissent in Commercial Spirituality

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NAMASTE ALL DAY. PEACE LOVE YOGA. GOOD KARMA. SELF LOVE CLUB. DOPE SOUL. ZEN AF (that is, "Zen As Fuck"), and my personal favorite: YOUR EGO IS NOT YOUR AMIGO.¹ These are just a few of the pithy expressions found on Spiritual Gangster yogaware. The website for Spiritual Gangster displays beautiful, slim, young, (usually) white bodies clad in remarkable combinations of cotton and spandex and forever in a state of leisure at varying locations, ranging from an urban basketball court to a bed of white linens in what appears to be a high-end resort, but always with an exotic backdrop.²

This is the person you should be. Lounging in your yoga pants, you would feel beautiful, positive, relaxed, and spiritual, but in a fleeting moment, you might also slip into a painfully reflexive state as you realize you are also a cog in the economic and social machinations of neoliberal capitalism, and you might marvel and then retract at the neoliberal project's magical abilities to create a void and then to fill it, for those who can afford to do so.³

The "spiritual but not religious" are known for their individualistic self-understanding and tendency to appropriate freely from different cultures and religious traditions to meet personal goals. They also are known for skillfully commodifying and selling spirituality. Spirituality features evocative objects, images, or ideas appropriated from other cultures, resulting in commodities ranging from Ganesha T-shirts to yoga pants with GOOD KARMA applied across the butt. Those who profess to being spiritual but not religious are also generally imagined as rejecting claims to absolute authority and unfair power

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structures or hierarchies (for example, patriarchy) and instead valorizing equality and environmental sustainability.

As in other areas of bourgeois urban globalized culture, spiritual consumers pick and choose from a variety of practices and worldviews to construct individualized “lifestyles.” Given that effective marketing depends on the perpetual production of new images—late capitalism is dominated by the reproduction of images or, using Jean Baudrillard’s term, *simulation*—representations of the exotic Other are particularly profitable in consumer culture.⁴ Furthermore, as Pierre Bourdieu notes, the increasing importance of symbolic goods has accelerated the demand for cultural specialists who draw from other cultures and traditions in order to produce desirable commodities.⁵ This may explain in part the rise to prominence of entrepreneurial spiritual teachers and gurus (including various spiritual CEOs). In any case, these entrepreneurs make products attractive to large target audiences of consumers who do not necessarily want to go to Hindu ashrams or Buddhist temples in order to embrace the evocative ideas, symbols, and practices associated with these cultures. Instead of relying on transmission through traditional teacher-disciple relationships, most spiritual consumers prefer easily accessible commodities for self-actualization.⁶

For the most part, scholars observing these developments offer critiques of spiritual appropriation and commodification in ways that fail to account for the complexities of the cultural phenomena they represent. Critics often assume that spiritual appropriators offer inauthentic representations of the traditions from which they borrow. This is based on the assumption that there is an original, static, tradition to be preserved (for example, some reified notion of Buddhism, Hinduism, or yoga), and consequently they produce nostalgic representations that are out of touch with historical reality, mirroring the essentialist arguments of consumers themselves. In other words, critics tend to reify Hindu, Buddhist, and other exotic Others in ways that simplify them and make them easier to contain, own, discuss, or sell.

The study *Selling Spirituality* (2005) by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, for example, criticize the yoga industry for separating yoga practice from its religio-philosophical, ascetic, and ethical dimensions, for what they perceive as its reliance on physical practice exclusively and at the loss of a “complete” lifestyle.⁷ They suggest *real* yoga (as if that is one thing) features a selfless ethical agenda in service to society and the environment (offering an anachronistic vision that projects modern commitments to social justice and environmental sustainability onto past yogic ethical systems).⁸ More recently, Peter Doran’s *A Political Economy of Attention, Mindfulness and Consumerism: Reclaiming the Mindful Commons* (Routledge, 2017) similarly argues that commercial mindfulness serves simply as support for individuals’ struggle to comply with pressures to enhance productivity in the capitalist workplace and has been stripped of its so-called ethical and contextual roots in Buddhism, presumably *real* Buddhism (whatever that is).

Such critiques are right to illuminate the ways power dynamics are at play in all acts of appropriation and commodification. Many such critics correctly observe that spiritual entrepreneurs and corporations ransack cultures and traditions that are not their own in order to produce commodities that help middle- or upper-class consumers feel better, as if they have overcome and defeated stress, illness, or aging—all while making a handsome profit. Spiritual appropriations and commodifications are frequently based on cultural stereotypes, and many white spiritual entrepreneurs, corporations, and consumers appropriate from other cultures and traditions for their own utilitarian or profit-driven purposes and reflect a colonial logic—extract from colonized people what materials and ideas are profitable without extending privilege or benefit to those who are the conduits.

Much of the scholarship on neoliberal spirituality reads it contra to those who self-describe as “spiritual but not religious” or who buy spiritual commodities—insiders often see their consumer practices as ways of controlling desire as a sine qua non to self-actualization. Critics typically note that those who commodify spirituality are not sincere seekers as much as they are capitalists and imperialists, duped

into thinking their spirituality is more than merely a device meant to dumb them to the painful reality of life under capitalism—in other words, the spiritual industrial complex is merely spiritual cover for the exploitative operations of the capitalist marketplace or Western colonialism.

One of the problems with these analyses is that, in equating the commercialization of spirituality with religious decline or loss of authenticity, they fail to account for what spiritual industries share with traditional religions. As Mike Featherstone suggests, “If we focus on the actual use of commodities it is clear that in certain settings they can become de-commodified and receive a symbolic charge (over and above that intended by the advertisers) which makes them sacred to their users.”⁹ I suggest then that it is not the scholar of spirituality’s place *to establish or verify* claims about origin or authenticity. It is the scholar’s place, in my view, to *acknowledge those claims* among her subjects, to analyze them as *religious* claims with soteriological aims (bracketing theological questions regarding whether or not they actually achieve those ends), and to *critique* her subjects as engaged in collective strategies to preserve social systems, thus, in the case of global spirituality, as cogs in the economic and social machinations of neoliberal capitalism. In other words, the more illuminating approach—as opposed to the reduction of global spirituality to market activities—is to study spiritual appropriation and commodification as a form of religious practice and simultaneously to evaluate them, and even critique them, as complicit in the expansion of neoliberalism and market capitalism in and through their discourses, institutions, and practices.

When we see global spirituality as a religious complex, we are able to nuance the analysis of how it upholds neoliberal capitalism. As in traditional religious institutions, the forms opposition usually takes shift the language of resistance, subversion, and critique away from actual political struggles and acts and onto the plane of disengaged gestures and symbols. In the case of global spirituality, dissent is domesticated through commodification. In the forms these commodities take, a liberal-individualist understanding of “progress” largely stands in place of socialist understandings of revolution.

For example, we might ask what we should make of the subversive discourses of spirituality that do call on adherents to think beyond the individual and even out into the environment. Spiritual Gangster's products, for example, range from yoga pants with GOOD VIBES applied across the butt to T-shirts that read PEACE LOVE YOGA, as if these three were inherently compatible and mutually reinforcing commitments. The appropriation of GANGSTER itself could be read as subversive, since gang culture is historically a space of Black resistance. According to the [Spiritual Gangster](#) website, "We exercise love as the most powerful form of activism."¹⁰ The company also donates an unspecified percentage of every sale to provide food for those living in poverty. What about these entrepreneurs and corporations profiting off spiritual commodities that claim to counter the problems of unbridled capitalism with charitable giving or various forms of "conscious capitalism"? What should we make of the feminist spiritual discourses—the calls for women's empowerment that are nearly ubiquitous in spiritual discourses, all while placing the burden of success on individual women and their willingness to work hard, think positively, conquer stress by doing yoga or taking a mindfulness class, and all while aspiring for equality?

I suggest we attend to these subversive elements of neoliberal spirituality, suggesting that, rather than a mode through which consumers ignore, escape, or are numbed to the problems of neoliberal capitalism, many spiritual commodities, corporations, and entrepreneurs do actually acknowledge those problems and, in fact, subvert them. But they subvert them through mere gestures. From provocative taglines printed across T-shirts or packaging to various forms of charitable giving, commodification serves as a strategy through which subversion itself is colonized. In other words, neoliberal spirituality represents a religious complex through which protest against the reigning socioeconomic and cultural order is simultaneously expressed and contained.

Drawing on Mark Fisher's work on *capitalist realism*, the dominant idea that there are no viable alternatives to capitalism, I suggest choosing spiritual commodities that represent revolutionary,

egalitarian, environmentally friendly, or authentically ancient values can best be understood as a form of *gestural* anticapitalism or *gestural subversion*.¹¹ Fisher describes how we find this kind of anticapitalist counter-discourse, which is widely disseminated in popular culture, in Hollywood movies or television—how often is the villain the “evil corporation”? According to Fisher, this is a by-product of capitalist realism. Buying subversive commodities performs our anticapitalism, allowing us to continue to consume without blame or guilt. In other words, in my view, spirituality, with its countercultural or subversive gestures, is domesticated to the dominant culture, to a neoliberal capitalist rationality.

To put it differently, global spirituality is not merely spiritual cover for the operations of neoliberal capitalism. It is not a mode through which dumbed-down consumers are numbed to the problems of capitalism. Rather, it is also a form of neoliberal capitalist religion through which protest is contained. And what comprises spiritual perfection, union, or liberation for one community might consequently marginalize, disenfranchise, or oppress another. Appropriations and commodifications are always in negotiation with power, sometimes in ambiguous and complicated ways.

We can better understand the apparent conflicts and contradictions of the practices and commitments of commercial spirituality by approaching it as both a body of religious practice and a neoliberal ethical complex. More specifically, I argue that the commodities of the industry often enact an orientalist fantasy of enlightenment-ethics that is especially seductive in a world of ever-expanding obligations and needs. In and through its creative usage of capitalist-orientalist tropes, the text of spiritual commodities provides a theoretical model and ideological justification for a neoliberal ethic. The powerful expressions applied across yogaware and the industry’s “do good” discourse trick the consumer into believing that the products are intrinsically characterized by “yogic” values. Yet, for all of the self-actualization it offers through PEACE LOVE YOGA, the industry also plays a capitalist game that thrives on nostalgia about lost cultural norms, as well as neoliberal narratives about the capitalist market, self-care, personal improvement, and the value of leisure and pleasure.

Donning yogaware is a key ritual of yoga practice in commercial contexts. The commodities of the athleisure industry also illustrate the appropriation-commodification-religion overlap. Corporations deliver authoritarian prescriptions and prohibitions through the often-orientalist expressions applied across T-shirts and yoga pants. Expressions frequently entail egalitarian messages, but these amount to a form of gestural subversion. They do not actually entail political action to subvert oppressive social structures but contain dissent in the threads of clothing products. In other words, dissent is contained by the expressions applied across yogaware and the industry's do-good discourse when the consumer believes buying the shirt performs their dissent, that the products themselves are intrinsically characterized by a social ethic of PEACE LOVE YOGA.

The commodities of the high-end yogaware company Spiritual Gangster capitalize off of consumers' aspirations for enlightenment-ethics by appropriating from provocative cultural imagery or symbols. The consumer is given a choice when it comes to yoga apparel. Spiritual Gangster, which has been described as "a hip yoga line with a twist of social good" because it donates some of its profits to various "organizations that are close to [its] heart," makes it possible for the consumer to "give back" and put out GOOD VIBES.¹² On the surface, choosing Spiritual Gangster products seems a potentially more spiritual and ethical prospect. Some of the organizations that benefit from Spiritual Gangster's charitable giving include Feeding America, Cambodian Children's Fund, Make a Wish Arizona, and Phoenix Children's Hospital.

However, the relationship between giver and recipient is reduced to an exchange between "animate and inanimate things—all equally subject to administration," the terms of which are the instrumental relations of the late capitalist market.¹³ The individual's discomfort at thoughts of people starving or seriously ill children is alleviated even as subversion and critique shift away from actual political struggles and acts to change the social structures that cause suffering into the plane of disengaged

gestures and symbols, in this case, a charitable gesture and a T-shirt with something like MAY WE ALL BE HAPPY AND FREE or BELIEVE IN MIRACLES applied across the front.

In marketing materials, silences, gaps, or omissions are sometimes more revealing than overt message content.¹⁴ In order to demystify the ideological function of a mass cultural text, buried processes of class, race, and gender conflict and struggle must be reclaimed. In Spiritual Gangster advertisements, privilege and hierarchy are clearly illuminated when one takes note of the near absences of black or brown bodies and especially fat bodies, differently abled bodies, queer bodies, and even class difference—models are not working but always in leisure, positioned at sites of exotic retreat.

Among Spiritual Gangster's many products are the YANTRA MANDALA T-shirt for \$50, the GURU T-shirt for \$48, and the NAMASTE ALL DAY T-shirt for \$56. The Spiritual Gangster's motto reads: "We are all one." Another reads, "Raise your vibration," a motto that echoes the tendency in metaphysical religion to envision the divine as vibratory or energetic and testifies to the infiltration of this notion in popular culture. Spiritual Gangster claims it is "designed to join ancient wisdoms with modern culture" and that it aspires to "create collections to encourage the high vibration practices of living in gratitude, giving back and choosing happiness" and to inspire "positivity, generosity, kindness and connectedness" with the goal that "all beings everywhere be happy and free." In Spiritual Gangster, orientalist imagery and a do-good discourse establish the brand's authenticity while obscuring the capitalist individualism that goes hand-in-hand with the kind of consumer spirituality it represents. In the SELF LOVE CLUB and EVERYTHING YOU CAN IMAGINE IS REAL T-shirts, the consumer hears echoes of neoliberal governmentality—your situation in life is your (consumer) choice, not the result of social structures. There is, therefore, no reason to challenge or subvert social structures.

Yogaware is concerned with desire and its management. A liberal-individualist understanding of "progress" stands in place of subversive, antihierarchical, anticapitalist understandings of revolution.

The practice of donning clothes with spiritual expressions (for example, YOUR EGO IS NOT YOUR AMIGO), which include a litany of authoritarian statements, prescriptions, and prohibitions, functions to affirm the very desires they publicly denounce. The appropriation of terms associated with revolutionary or nonconformist dispositions and subcultures (for example, GANGSTER) makes it possible for the consumer to express transgressive or subversive desires while simultaneously containing them. Whereas Spiritual Gangster consumers might see the text of the corporation's yogaware as medicine necessary to alleviate the malady of ego, selfishness, and desire, such materials just exacerbate the maladies of neoliberal capitalism.

Given the wide range of products and retailer descriptions, the consumer is free to choose, based on a variety of aesthetic, spiritual, and functional needs and preferences, but the spirituality industry also features certain patterns in the production and management of desire. Spiritual Gangster aptly captures those patterns. The brand offers a mix of charitable giving and ancient authenticity for the modern consumer. The popularity of Spiritual Gangster products may be attributed to the powerful contradictions they represent and contain through strategies of self-management. The polarity between private consumption and personal fulfillment (for example, in SELF LOVE CLUB T-shirts), on the one hand, and concern about inequality and the false promises of charitable giving, on the other hand, as well as appropriating practices that fulfill a desire for access to ancient authenticity (as indicated, for example, in GOOD KARMA T-shirts) are all material for multidimensional and even contradictory images within the text.

As a strategy manual, the text offers consumers products for aims set by the neoliberal capitalist marketplace, but coded in terms of enlightenment-ethics: means-to-ends relations motivated by self-interest, especially pleasure, leisure, and sex appeal. The goal of enlightenment-ethics, in fact, must be honed through consumer practices. You can pursue it and still feel good about yourself because you are also sending GOOD VIBES into the world. Desire to be a transgressive GANGSTER is subsumed within the

fantasy to familiar codes of alternative, antiauthoritarian, social-service enlightenment-ethics. Yet the repetitive, authoritarian tone of the text attests to the instability of the resolutions it offers.

Spiritual Gangster covertly defines selective consumerism as a form of civic participation and social activism, yet purchasing its products does not entail any effort to actually transform social structures. Their products, however, halt resistance to inequity because, having purchased T-shirts that express dissent against inequity or suffering, the consumer feels as if she has made the world a better place. Spiritual consumers can feel more spiritual and more ethical by purchasing Spiritual Gangster commodities without actually doing anything to prevent inequalities.

Whereas some critics of commercial spirituality suggest that it can be reduced to market practices, a more nuanced approach is necessary for understanding the spiritual but not religious movement's dynamism, internal diversity, religious creativity, and connections to consumer culture. Any linear narrative that imagines "authentic" religions inexorably giving way to market-driven rivals is misleading: it underestimates the religious ambitions of practitioners who gather under the banners of Spiritual Gangster or any other such spiritual entrepreneurs or corporations, as well as the ways these succeed in and through their religious institutions and practices.

Spiritualities appear everywhere—on the Spiritual Gangster website and at its retail outlets, at Whole Foods, Indian natural food outlets, and high-end yoga studios, but also in trade unions, immigrant rights movements, environmental justice organizations, grassroots civil rights projects, on college campuses, and elsewhere where there is work that undermines inequalities of all kinds. I have no doubt that many spaces that community members describe as "spiritual" facilitate sustained dissent against dominant neoliberal capitalist social structures. Those spaces, however, appear at the margins of spirituality. In other words, commercial spirituality represents just one strain of the spiritual but not religious, but it is the most powerful and visible, so it should be of ultimate concern to us in our theorizing endeavors.

Notes:

1. This article is based on material that will appear in Andrea R. Jain, *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Some of these ideas appeared in Andrea R. Jain, "The Revolution Will Not Be Fetishized: Taking Resistance beyond the Spiritual Industrial Complex," *Religion Dispatches*, February 7, 2017.
2. Spiritual Gangster, spiritualgangster.com. Throughout this article, the expressions applied on Spiritual Gangster clothing products will be indicated with all caps.
3. Neoliberalism is best understood "not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life"; Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (MIT Press, 2015), 176. Since the late 1980s, neoliberalism has increasingly functioned as the "hegemonic mode of discourse"; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (Semiotext[e], 1983).
5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (Routledge and Kegan, 1984), and Pierre Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991): 1–44.
6. I demonstrate this process as it pertains to the yoga industry: see Andrea R. Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
7. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (Routledge, 2005), 117–18. See also Kimberly J. Lau, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 104.
8. Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 116–20.

9. Mike Featherstone *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (Sage, 2007), 119.
10. Spiritual Gangster, spiritualgangster.com/pages/giving-back.
11. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero, 2009), 16–19.
12. Spiritual Gangster was described as “a hip yoga line with a twist of social good” on *Trendhunter*, www.trendhunter.com/trends/vanessa-lee. For the corporation’s own understanding of its charitable giving, see Spiritual Gangster, spiritualgangster.com/pages/giving.
13. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Beacon Press, 1955, 2015), 103.
14. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (Routledge, 1978, 2006); and Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2002).