

SEEING INDIA:
A Hyperreal Yoga Fantasy

by

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ABSTRACT

How does the yoga studio present India for viewing? As a yoga scholar-practitioner, I examine visual, linguistic, and embodied representations of India at a local yoga studio to address this question. The fieldwork for this ethnographic thesis spans yoga classes, yoga teacher training, and a two-week pilgrimage to India with members of this yoga studio. I pay special attention to bhakti yoga, a devotional form of yoga taught by the yoga studio as a way to offer a more spiritual and therefore more authentic yoga. Placing my experiences within a critical understanding of postcolonial yoga history, I show that yoga has been constructed to meet various ideologies and political projects, challenging the production of yoga as India's pristine and unchanging cultural icon. I find that India is exhibited as an ultra-spiritual, pre-colonial, anti-modern location both at the yoga studio and when traveling as a yoga tourist. Using Jean Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal, along with postcolonial theories, I argue that the yoga studio creates a particular India for consumption that is not based in reality but is instead the product of oriental fantasies.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This thesis has been edited from its original version, as some of my informants have expressed concerns about my public naming of the yoga studio and community which I studied. In acknowledgement of this feedback, I have adopted pseudonyms for the yoga studio and its location and slightly adjusted other identifying information.

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PROLOGUE

“Feel your pelvis supported by the earth. Hips heavy, thighs heavy, knees heavy. And at the same time, allow each inhalation to create more space between each vertebra, lengthening the crown of your head to the sky.”

This is it, the moment of transition from yoga student to yoga teacher, the culmination of the nine months of effort that was my teacher training program. Five of my classmates are seated cross-legged in front of me, with their eyes closed. I hope they are relaxed and breathing, though it’s likely they’re thinking about their own upcoming practicums, as I’m the first person in the group to face the teaching challenge. The owner of the yoga studio and head of the teacher training program, and another senior teacher are sitting in the corners to my left and right, taking notes as they evaluate my teaching. I try to block them out of my awareness.

“Inhale space, expansiveness – sky energy. Exhale grounded, secure – earth energy. Bringing these two essential energies together in your core. Know that they are not in conflict with each other, but can coalesce into a union, right here, right now.”

My voice is calm and steady. I try to remember to breathe as well. My outward appearance is completely incongruent with my inner experience, but I reluctantly step into the role of a yoga teacher for the next ten minutes. It feels like a false identity. Though I’ve come to enjoy teaching yoga much more than I thought I would, today I’m only half-heartedly embracing this task. At this moment in time, I’m no longer sure that I agree with much of what had been taught to me as yoga, and I feel uncomfortable graduating as a yoga teacher.

When our yoga teacher training began, each person in the class was assigned a pose, intended to be a more physically challenging one that could serve as the apex pose of a yoga class. We were to intimately acquaint ourselves with the pose, learning about it on anatomical, energetic, and metaphorical levels. Our final task was to teach this pose, putting it into a ten-minute flow sequence that included a theme, sun salutation, and preparatory and counter poses. My pose was *garuḍāsana*, translated from Sanskrit as eagle pose, though there is not a direct translation for the mythical bird *garuḍa*, vehicle of Vishnu. I learned this at the beginning of the training, along with much more information about what this pose could symbolize when I looked it up in *Myths of the Asanas* (Kaivalya and Kooij 2010), one of the lead instructor's recommended sources for studying poses.

Midway through teacher training, I was attending a session on Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga (a highly disciplined style of yoga with specialized sequencing of demanding postures linked to the breath) where, before practicing the Ashtanga Primary Series, I was told that this exact sequence of poses was five thousand years old.¹ I had a comic image in my head of some wizened sage up in the Himalayas unrolling his sticky yoga mat outside of his cave to flow through the vigorous series of poses that comprises an Ashtanga Vinyasa practice. This seemed absurd, of course, but yoga was consistently taught to me as an ancient, Indian

¹ This is a common claim among Ashtanga Vinyasa teachers. It refers to Krishnamacharya's purportedly finding the 5,000-year-old *Yoga Kurunta* in a Calcutta library. Krishnamacharya then taught this text verbatim to his student, Pattabhi Jois, the founder of Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga, who insisted that the *Yoga Kurunta* fully outlines the Ashtanga Vinyasa sequences taught today. As the text has reportedly since been eaten by ants, it is impossible to verify these assertions. I am skeptical of such allegations and find it much more likely that the existence of such a text was a much more recent invention that is backed by the authority of tradition. See Singleton (2010: 184-186) for a convincing explanation of this argument. However, the search for this text continues and a group of scholars believes that it may have now been located (Mallinson 2014).



Image 1. I pose in garuḍāsana at a river lodge in the foothills of the Himalayas while traveling in India as a yoga tourist.

practice, originally done by men who had renounced worldly life and retreated to the mountains in solitude, eventually finding great spiritual knowledge. Additionally, I got the impression that whatever yoga we practiced today was at best an attempt to reclaim this former glory, and at worst an American corruption of a pure, Indian tradition. Unconvinced by such a framing, I skeptically started researching yoga's history, with the hope of making sense of what I was hearing at the studio.

Through a casual internet search, I stumbled across an article by Alanna Kaivalya (2012), one of the authors of *Myths of the Asanas*, largely renouncing her earlier work. In this article, she claimed that the true “myth of the asanas” is that they are thousands of years old. Giving the poses Sanskrit names and relating them to Hindu mythology, as done with

my pose, *garuḍāsana*, is part of a contemporary process of creating the illusion of antiquity and continuous tradition in modern yoga.

When I was read this article, I knew then and there that I could not, in good conscience, teach eagle pose as *garuḍāsana*, retelling the mythology of gods I barely knew, and reinforcing yoga as an ancient, authentic, Hindu practice. I don't remember what *Myths of the Asanas* claimed a yogi was supposed to embody in *garuḍāsana*, but for me it became a **position of conflict**. Wrapping my arms and legs tightly in front of my body now represented the epistemological bind I was in. There are many ways to approach teaching any yoga pose, so I was not overly pressured to teach around mythology, but I still felt uncomfortable. As a yoga teacher, as well as an anthropology student, I feel that I have a responsibility to be aware of the cultural images I produce for my students' consumption, and I do not want to falsely represent India just to make my teaching more appealing.

A couple of my teacher training classmates did decide to draw on mythology for their teaching inspiration, telling stiffly rehearsed stories and mispronouncing names. One young woman, assigned to teach *matsyāsana* (fish pose) spoke of Shiva, how he had been meditating in the mountains for centuries, during which time he discovered yoga. When Shiva came home, he told his consort, Parvati, what he had learned. Even though Parvati had already started to practice yoga in his absence, she patiently listened to Shiva's story, as did a fish swimming in a nearby pond. In this way, that fish became the first disciple of yoga, and Shiva the first guru. As my fellow teacher-in-training instructed us to lay on our backs and arch our chests towards the sky while resting on the crown of our heads, she told us that yoga has been passed down in this manner, teacher-to-student, for thousands of years. Therefore,

this is why we were here on this particular day, completing teacher training, stepping into our place in the continuation of this tradition.

But was that why I was here, investing considerable amounts of time and money in becoming a yoga teacher? Was it because I wanted to pass on the wisdom supposedly generated by Shiva millennia ago? A certain degree of disenchantment with yoga practice had set in. I was intensely studying my non-academic passion, the activity I did to unwind and disengage from a long day of studying. According to the *Yogasūtra*, yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind,² but my mind was turning back and forth more than ever as I tried to reconcile critical thinking with my yoga practice. From my conversations with others who have gone through the experience, I know it's not uncommon for teachers-in-training to find themselves intensely analyzing how a class is taught or what the theme is. However, I had an additional set of questions racing through my head: Was the teacher using philosophy or scripture as a backing to give the practice legitimacy? How did she relate what we were doing on our yoga mats to India? Were India and its inhabitants treated as unalteringly spiritual? In short, how and why was India being represented this way, in Westville, North Carolina?

I eventually reached a point where I was so caught up in thoughts that I would mentally narrate the yoga class as if I was writing field notes. Soon, I stopped going to yoga daily, and spent more time studying it. Even though I could now justify time spent in yoga classes as research, something about my experience had shifted to where yoga was not nearly as enjoyable. At the most extreme, yoga seemed delusional. Though the positive benefits of

² Sutra 1.2: *Yogās citta vṛtti nirodhaḥ*, translated as “the restraint of the modifications of the mind-stuff is Yoga” (Satchidananda 2012), among other similar translations.

the practice are very real, the way in which yoga was presented seemed to rest on falsehood. It became, and still is, a challenge to reconcile my awareness of yoga's complex history and tangled relationship with India with a passion for yoga.

One of the things I was told in yoga teacher training was that, when teaching a class, a teacher usually offers what they need that day. Your theme for the class is often inspired by your life experiences, and it is perfectly acceptable to wake up the morning of teaching a yoga class and reflect on what lessons you need to learn. When I taught my practicum and talked about joining opposites, I was speaking about "earth and sky energies" (as abstract and debatable a concept this might be), but really, there were other dualities I was struggling to unite: that of the anthropologist and the yogi, that of intellectual thought and embodied experience, that of the participant-observer, and that of the harried college student at the end of a semester and the peaceful yoga teacher.

INTRODUCTION: Position of Conflict

There is a “long-standing, mutual prejudice” between those who study yoga as an academic pursuit and those who do yoga (Singleton and Byrne 2008: 3). When discussing yoga history, I had one informant tell me that I should not listen to scholars and trust my inner wisdom, as if I have some innate knowledge of history that can be tapped through meditation. From my academic lens, yoga seems uncritical and unquestioning, willing to propagate historical, religious, and philosophical knowledge – whether accurate or not – without delving into the harder truths about where, when, and why the practice emerged. Following the well-worn Orientalist path (Said 1979) that constructs a dichotomy between East and West, as well as giving the latter control over the former, I find yoga frequently guilty of essentializing, as well as romanticizing India. But, when I take the stance of a yoga practitioner, this feels like an outsider’s view that is disconnected from actually doing yoga and is too quick to overlook the benefits of the practice. In conducting this research, I find myself part of a group of yoga scholar-practitioners,³ awash in the polarizing currents between thinking and doing.

My yoga practice started during my second semester of college, when I ventured into the free group fitness classes on campus. My body moved reluctantly into the unfamiliar shapes amid the background noise of assorted exercise machines. Though I felt extremely self-conscious, I came back for class the next week, and the week after that. Soon, I was

³ Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne use the term “scholar-practitioner” to describe the approach they take in their edited volume (2008). A non-comprehensive list of such scholar-practitioners includes Jean Byrne (2014), Carol Horton (2012), Elizabeth de Michelis (2004), Mark Singleton (2008, 2010), Sarah Strauss (2015), and Benjamin Smith (2007).

taking two yoga classes a week, and I added two more classes called boga – a hybrid workout of barre and yoga. Those four nights a week were reserved for my ritual of walking across campus to one of the student gyms, newly purchased yoga mat slung over my shoulder. The teachers, college students themselves, were shocked that I hardly ever missed a class. I had never taken a fitness class or attended a gym before, but it was the both the physical and mental benefits of yoga that drew me in. Eventually, as my body grew limber enough for me to once again touch my toes, I found more ease in my mind as well. Yoga didn't solve my problems, but I felt better equipped to handle the unending stresses of college life. When I returned to campus the following semester, I ventured into the advanced yoga classes and began an on-campus teacher training program, consisting of only six weekly sessions.

Still curious for more, that December I took advantage of the coupon for a free yoga class placed in my student mailbox and ventured off-campus. I walked to Namaste Yoga, a nearby studio in Westville, North Carolina. It was a Monday evening, which happened to be the one class that the studio owner teaches weekly. I do not remember too much about that initial venture, aside from that my movements were clumsy and that I was confused about whether or not I should join the other students in chanting “om” at the beginning and end of class. The poses flowed quickly and fluidly one into another in a way that I hadn't quite experienced before. I do remember the studio owner introducing a Buddhist mantra to mentally recite with our inhalations and exhalations: “The body is the temple; the breath is the prayer.” Despite struggling to keep pace with the other students, I was hooked. The teaching was on a different level than that which I had experienced on campus. The instructions were more detailed, and the poses were creatively strung together. Perhaps most importantly, this class introduced yoga as a way of life, where my practice on the mat would

lead to self-improvement throughout the rest of my activities. Soon, I started buying unlimited passes to the studio and attending class daily, sometimes even twice a day. I've now been attending classes at Namaste Yoga for a little less than two years, in which time I've taken hundreds of classes.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, as I attended classes regularly, I was beginning the process of enculturation. I did not think of myself as an anthropologist at first. I was trying to get away from the exhaustion and mental energy of the academic realm, and conceiving of this endeavor as a research project wouldn't happen for another nine months. Though I was nervous and shy in the beginning, soon my experience was that of finding a group of people with whom I could connect. After a few weeks, teachers and students alike started to recognize me as a regular part of classes and even began to joke that I must live at the studio. Slowly I began to form friendships with people I saw in class week after week. Habits such as chanting "om" no longer seemed odd. I was willing to attend Diwali (the Hindu festival of lights celebrated as the Indian new year) and other ritual events, despite never personally identifying as Hindu. I learned about the chakra system and energetic anatomy, and soon took for granted the existence of these subtle aspects. All of these bits of yoga knowledge that were never mentioned in the fitness classes on campus gradually became unstrange. I like to think the anthropologist in me was always a little wary, especially when I found myself appropriating the spiritual richness ascribed to India as part of my yoga routine. However, I suppressed any moral qualms by telling myself that this was how yoga was supposed to be and that I was connecting with the authenticity of yoga.

As time went on, I made two large commitments to improving my yoga practice. The first was Namaste Yoga's teacher training program. The teacher training I previously

completed on campus was not nearly as comprehensive as the training most studio teachers have. Namaste Yoga's program is recognized as a two-hundred-hour training program by Yoga Alliance, a national organization that attempts to set minimum educational standards for professionals in the largely unregulated yoga industry. This annual nine-month-long program is open to everyone, not just people who are interested in becoming teachers. The studio owner promotes this training as a chance to learn about the entirety of yoga, "to turn it into an entire lifestyle," not just a practice on the mat. This training emphasizes the ethical teachings of yoga and other practices beyond the physical poses. Because Yoga Alliance sets relatively loose guidelines, not all teacher training programs are alike, yet I was still able to get a glimpse of how knowledge of yoga is produced for new teachers. This is especially valuable when thinking about the history and philosophy that we were taught and, even more tellingly in retrospect, what we weren't taught.

The second commitment was the one that germinated into this thesis. That was the decision to go on a trip to India with twenty people from the yoga studio. According to the studio owner, who led this trip, it was really about experiencing the culture of bhakti yoga, a path of yoga that emphasizes devotion and "living a heart-centered life." As I was delving deeper and deeper into yoga, I was becoming increasingly curious about the history of this pastime that was quickly taking over my life. I was not all that curious about India really, but about what made India so important in the context and propagation of yoga. I did not deny the historical connection, but there seemed to be something more. So much of yoga discourse relied on promoting a certain image of India. I wondered: What is to be gained by constructing India in a particular way? Why do yoga institutions claim the authority to represent India, and why are American yoga teachers perceived as authorities on Indian

philosophy? What are the implications of this in terms of transnationalism and postcolonialism? And how does this affect the yoga practitioners who never experience India directly but have a familiarity with India mediated through yoga? I decided that the best way to explore some of these questions was to go to India as a yoga tourist, as well as examine the community at the yoga studio more closely. As Namaste Yoga presents itself as an authority on yoga, it also presents itself as an authority on India, promoting a particular version of India that is perhaps too readily embraced as an authentic incarnation.

In this thesis, I examine representations of India at Namaste Yoga, the largest yoga studio in Westville. I primarily focus on visual representations that permit yoga practitioners to see India, whether at the studio in Westville or as a yoga tourist in India. I also pay close attention to the representation of India through language in the context of yoga classes, because such activities do not just teach yoga postures, but also create a knowledge of India. Such representations fit into larger patterns of Orientalist discourse. I place yoga within the complex political landscape created by colonialism and postcolonialism.

Drawing inspiration from Edward Said (1979) and Timothy Mitchell (1988), I examine yoga from a postcolonial perspective, to show that yoga is both caught up in and contributes to continuing power imbalances that follow the discourse of Orientalism – “a special way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European experience” (Said 1979: 1). Orientalism functions to maintain Western dominance over the East, as well as to construct the dichotomy of West and East in the first place. Like Mitchell, I especially focus on representation: a system in which “everything [is] collected and arranged to stand for something, to represent progress and history, human industry and empire; everything set up, and the whole set-up always evoking some larger truth” (1988: 6).

Through taking yoga classes, studying to be a teacher myself, working at the studio, conducting formal interviews, and conversing with members of the yoga community, I encountered many representations of India that followed a certain pattern, and it is these representations that are central to this thesis. As Namaste Yoga deploys particular representations of India, it positions itself as a legitimate producer of knowledge about India, and therefore maintains the superior position in this power dynamic between East and West, even when the “West” is a noncosmopolitan, small town in the Appalachian Mountains.

Because Namaste Yoga presents itself as “India,” I have also found Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra (1994) to be especially appropriate for discussing this recreation of India for middle-class American consumers. It is not just that Namaste Yoga mimics India, but that in designing the yoga studio, the studio owner selected elements that are perceived as essentially Indian to create the studio *as India*. I do not see the studio as reproducing India, so much as functioning as a simulacrum of India that creates a certain India in the minds of those who visit the studio and of those who travel to the geopolitical entity of India. In this way, the simulacrum structures the territory that it is supposed to represent, creating the “precession of simulacra” (Baudrillard 1994: 1).

I have outlined my background as a yoga practitioner and some of my involvement at Namaste Yoga, my primary research site. My core informants are my fellow travelers from the trip to India. In addition to spending two weeks with them in India, I have added to my understanding of their views of yoga and India through post-trip interviews and simply hanging out at yoga classes and trip reunions. Additional ethnographic data about Namaste Yoga are drawn from my experience in classes, teacher training, working at the front desk of the studio, and occasionally teaching a class myself, throughout all of which I have interacted

with a range of yoga teachers and students. One of the methodological benefits of being closely involved as a participant in yoga activities at Namaste Yoga is that I spend a great deal of time in the space. This led to portions of this thesis being written among the population I am studying, creating a collaborative workspace that allowed me to ask for feedback when necessary and seek clarification of my informants' opinions. Even though I am quite liberal in reflexively including my own experiences, I make every attempt not to impose my perspective or that of other scholars on those around me.

In this ethnographic project, I follow sociocultural anthropologist Joseph Alter, who writes, "On some level, as anthropology, this study must be a study of those people who practice Yoga, and it is precisely the ambiguous relationship among Yoga as a thing, the cultural construction of Yoga, and the claims made about Yoga as a thing that create a profound analytical problem" (2004: 12). Yoga occupies an extremely complex position, with competing ideas about just what exactly yoga is. It is not only *garuḍāsana*, but the whole enterprise of yoga that I feel to be in a position of conflict. There is inherent tension even in writing about yoga, simply in terms of deciding what it is and what parts of it to highlight. I focus on the observable details of what people see, say, and do, while leaving room for the internal, embodied experiences that make up so much of the yoga practice I know. My task in this thesis is to explore the selective production of knowledge about India through Namaste Yoga's representations. Particularly, I am concerned with how these representations form yoga as an Indian product and shape the yoga studio as holder of a certain knowledge of India. As I do this, I see representations that enforce patterns of power of West over East, or to be more specific, create an India that is consumable by the middle-class American yogi.

As a yoga practitioner, I very much struggle with finding myself in this position of conflict, which entails examining and criticizing yoga, while at the same time trying to remain a committed yoga student and teacher. I, and the yogis I've spoken to, have many reasons for practicing yoga. The general pattern I hear from my informants is that they started their yoga practice for physical reasons and kept with the practice because of "deeper" aspects on the mental and spiritual levels. I do not want to suggest that we stop practicing yoga, or that there is something inherently wrong with engaging in yoga or wanting to learn about India. I do ask that we reconsider how we think of yoga and how we depict it. As a yoga teacher, I want to share yoga with people, but I want to do so in a way that does not rest on a compromised, fictitious, privileged view of India. The tension I feel as a scholar-practitioner approaching this project is that of the participant-observer caught in the classic quagmire of fieldwork. As I participate, especially in travel to India as a yoga tourist, I become uncomfortably complicit with the very systems I am trying to question. But, if I withdraw to the comfort of books and coldly recording notes, I lose the vibrancy of direct experience that I value as a yogi and also as an ethnographer. It is indeed a position of conflict, much like my well-practiced *garuḍāsana*. I try to draw together these opposing energies as best I can, though similar to balancing in *garuḍāsana*, it is frequently a wobbly and precarious stance to take.

Namaste Yoga

Writing about yoga is complicated by the abstractness of yoga. Yoga is simultaneously philosophy, science, religion, medicine, consciousness, and exercise, though not equal in all of these, to all practitioners. Faced with this vast topical terrain, I have frequently pondered over the question, "What *is* yoga?" I am of the opinion that there is no

such thing as a singular yoga. Rather, there are multiple yogas, which are performed for various reasons, generally for self-improvement on a physical, mental, and/or spiritual level. Despite what I've been taught, I disavow the existence of an original authentic yoga and embrace the complexity of my subject as fragmented throughout time and space. Other scholars have attempted to name the type of yoga I see at Namaste Yoga as "modern postural yoga" (de Michelis 2004) or "transnational Anglophone yoga" (Singleton 2010). Throughout this thesis, I simply use the unmodified "yoga" in all its semantic breadth, as this is what my informants say they are doing. My definition of yoga is broad, in that it refers to the collection of practices that my informants call yoga. I do not consider there to be any true yoga, as throughout history yoga has consistently been polyvalent. Nor do I want to create simplistic distinctions between "good" and "bad" yogas.

To slightly simplify the question as to what yoga is, for this immediate project, I am focusing on one local yoga studio.⁴ However, this is not because what I examine is not relevant in other yoga contexts. Rather, it gives me a solid community of both friends and informants that ethnographically informs my work. When I explore yoga ethnographically, I write about a physical asana practice offered in class format, taught by a certified teacher. Many of the teachers at the studio were trained through Namaste Yoga's teacher training program. This studio is not associated with any single lineage or style of yoga, but has classes drawing on Iyengar, Anusara, and Ashtanga Vinyasa practices. Classes largely consist of asana (the yoga postures themselves), and also incorporate practices of meditation, pranayama (breathing techniques to control life force energy), and mantra. Currently, the

⁴ Other ethnographic studies of particular yoga communities are Altglas (2014), Lea (2009), Koch (2013), Nichter (2013), Persson (2007), and Strauss (2005).

studio offers about thirty classes a week, plus additional workshops. Popular classes will routinely draw in upwards of twenty people, though some classes only have a couple of students. Between working at the front desk and attending classes myself, I see that yoga attracts adults of all ages. The majority of people I see are women, and nearly everyone is white. The same demographics apply to the teachers. Typically, students seek out a teacher or style that resonates with them and come to the same class or set of classes weekly.

While there are students who may come to a class or two and decide it's not the practice for them or visitors who come to the studio only when they are in the area, there is enough of a core group of regular students at Namaste Yoga to create the impression of a stable yoga community, with which people self-identify. The studio owner refers to this as a "tribe," which she perceives as a group of like-minded individuals. More than once I've heard her say that people who come to the studio "feel as though they've found their tribe."

"Tribe" is a loaded and problematic word that has a complex history, both in anthropology and in common speech. It implies a racialized primitivism that is often applied pejoratively or used to deny status and sovereignty as justification for control or colonization. In such a context, referring to a group of people as a "tribe" instead of a "nation" denies political recognition and autonomy. At the same time, "tribe" can also connote a romanticized connection to nature and anti-modern lifestyles. Again, this denies agency, through freezing people in the past and refusing to acknowledge change. When the studio owner uses the word tribe, she romanticizes primitivism and a more natural way of life that recognizes supposedly "ancient" knowledge.

Despite issues of terminology, I see the studio as an important space for forming and maintaining social relationships, creating a supportive community.⁵ A couple people have commented to me that they believe the studio owner is very good at building community. I've both observed and experienced friendships that grew out of a shared yoga practice. It's not uncommon to see the same people in class week after week, and most people who come to the studio seem willing to strike up a conversation with fellow students before or after class. Often, students will hang around the studio, chatting with one another or eating a meal. Conversations go beyond discussions of yoga to other aspects of students' lives as well. Such friendships are likely important parts of students' social relationships – in fact, several people chose to go on the trip to India because their friends were going.

Forming connections with other people, oneself, and with some greater metaphysical force seems to be at the heart of Namaste Yoga's mission. This studio consistently makes classes about more than just bodily health or form. "It's not about how you look in the pose, it's about how you are in the pose," the studio owner frequently says. Classes begin with a short talk by the instructor, introducing some theme for the class, with students usually being encouraged to set an intention around how they can apply this theme to their own yoga practice and lives. The yoga practiced on the mat is intended to transfer to how practitioners approach the other aspects of their lives beyond the immediate yoga practice. Sometimes the theme has a purely physical focus, such as low back health, but more often the instructor brings some offering of self-improvement or how to live in relationship. The theme is then

⁵ It is also important to note that yoga studios can also be very exclusionary based on race, class, gender, and sexuality (Haddix 2016, Page 2016). When I describe the studio as welcoming I do so from the position of a white, middle-class female, with a relatively slender and flexible body. Certain demographics are notably absent from Namaste Yoga's classes and may find the environment unwelcoming.

tied to the poses offered in that particular class. Some teachers will incorporate energetic forces, such as the chakras or prana vayus, into how they structure their class. When I talked to my informants, they expressed gratitude for having beautiful space to practice and for a studio supportive of such teachings. One teacher told me that she would stop teaching if a studio owner told her that she couldn't include the "spiritual aspects" of the practice.

I see Namaste Yoga as a site of resistance against the growing trend of yoga as a pop culture exercise, able to capitalize on clients' search for a yoga presented as much more than the latest workout. As Alter notes, writing about this trajectory of yoga's development, "as yoga becomes increasingly about physical fitness, the existence of 'spirit' in the triad of mind, body, and spirit leads to a certain anxiety of the metaphysical aspects of yoga" (2008: 36). The attention paid to mind, body, and spirit varies among different forms of yoga across nations, but the existence of the spirit and spirituality in yoga have become particularly contested. Most of my informants expressed the opinion that, at many places that offer yoga, these spiritual or metaphysical aspects have been relegated to the sidelines, to create a postural yoga that serves as little more than exercise. Namaste Yoga works to do something different though, perceived by its clients as keeping true to what they see as the essence of yoga. This is generally done through creating a studio environment that hopes to function as a mediation of a certain imaginary of India. This imaginary is anchored in a local understanding of bhakti⁶ yoga.

⁶ Bhakti, also known as devotionalism, "is the form of Hinduism in which devotion to the deity is accorded the greatest value" (Fuller 1992: 156). Bhakti can also involve devotion to a guru instead of or in addition to a deity. Devotees worship gurus as living gods (McKean 1996: 1). The bhakti movement in India refers to India's medieval history during which time poet-saints wrote and sung devotional pieces. It's a populist movement involving members of different faiths and is less exclusionary based on caste and gender than other Indian movements. This is a narrative produced during the 19th century, around Indian

I asked the studio owner to explain what bhakti yoga meant to her. She told me:

It's the path of devotion. And it's a practice, like any other part of yoga. It comes from the Hindu tradition, but bhakti yoga itself wouldn't necessarily be considered a religion. ... It brings yoga into its fullest sense. I don't think you can really separate it out from yoga, although in the West we try to do that. We separate the physical out from the spiritual part. But for me it's all yoga, so it's just one more layer and one more aspect of yoga that adds depth to the practice.

Bhakti, then, is seen as a way of connecting to a larger yoga practice, one that draws on spirituality, instead of (or in addition to) physicality. It is understood as Eastern and opposed to a Western way of thinking and doing.

Despite the studio owner's insistence that bhakti is not Hinduism, it is very closely tied to it. She is indeed correct that bhakti is not Hinduism – other Indian religions have traditions of bhakti. However, the dominant discourse of bhakti in India is produced within an Indian Nationalist framework, an extremely conservative political movement currently in power that seeks to establish India as a Hindu nation. And furthermore, dominant explanations of bhakti at Namaste Yoga focus on Hinduism. Some ways in which bhakti is practiced at Namaste Yoga are chanting, musical kirtan events, and weekend workshops discussing the qualities of different deities – all activities which articulate closely with Hinduism, *or what yoga students imagine to be Hinduism*. The studio tries to create a bhakti movement that is open to all faiths, urging people to connect with something larger than their individual selves. Yet, when the studio owner's Indian friends, our guides on the India trip, visited Westville, she offered a bhakti weekend that included mantra singing (with an exposition on the Hindu mythology behind the mantra), a puja that included chanting 108

independence and provides a unifying Nationalist history, rather than one that is divisive. For more detail about the bhakti movement and its history and creation see Hawley (2015).

names of Ganesh, and an Indian cooking class. When it is performed at Namaste Yoga, bhakti is almost always associated with Hinduism and a certain spiritual India.

The most recent attempt to bring bhakti into the studio is “bhakti asana” classes. Taught by a rotating series of teachers in a Sunday morning time slot reminiscent of a church service, bhakti asana is a slower paced class with a focus on meditation and connecting with the heart. In these classes the teacher typically spends more time explaining some reading, deity, or mantra to support a spiritual practice. More time is spent on chanting and meditation, and less time is spent on alignment or proper muscle engagement in asana.

When the studio director advertises the bhakti asana class to students, she points out that there are many places in Westville where one can take a yoga class: the university, spas, fitness centers. Yet, she asserts, those places do not incorporate bhakti yoga into their classes. She adds that every class she teaches is bhakti asana. Here bhakti is less about its literal meaning and historical context, and serves as an indication of a practice less focused on physical exercise and more about connecting with something deeper. Bhakti is how Namaste Yoga attempts to differentiate itself from nearby locations that offer yoga. I viewed this as a marketing strategy, until then one of my informants pointed out that this emphasis on bhakti could also discourage people from coming to these classes. And indeed, there are people who just want to do yoga for a workout, relaxation, or other health benefits. These are people who likely do not come to Namaste Yoga and whose views are not well represented through my portrayal of this specific yoga studio. So when I observe that most people who come into the studio seem open to these classes and opportunities, I admit that my sample is inherently biased in that people have already self-selected. Also, not everyone who comes to bhakti-related events is aware of what bhakti is. Even some of my informants

from the India trip, the banner bhakti event, were not especially familiar with the term. Bhakti was just seen as something Indian, or more tellingly, the summation of everything imagined as Indian.

Bhakti is not only another manifestation of American interest in Eastern spirituality. It is a distinct sort of spirituality ascribed to India. Yoga students are told that bhakti is not so much a practice in India as it is simply an engrained way of life that permeates every daily activity.⁷ Given the long postcolonial history of ascribing such exotic and extreme spirituality to the East (Said 1979, Inden 1990, King 1998), I am wary of such constructions. Instead of accepting such claims, I adopt a more critical stance, in which I examine the power/knowledge (Foucault 1980) relationships in which Namaste Yoga is complicit, and which it furthers, which serve to engender specific attitudes about India and its inhabitants.

Consumable Aesthetic

Since my first visit to the studio, it has moved to a new location in town. Previously located in a small building in the studio owner's backyard, it now occupies the much larger space of over the upper level of an old building downtown. The former space, which housed the studio for ten years, is now used only for teacher trainings and small events. The new studio space is a hub of activity to support a yogic lifestyle. The space is divided between the studio room itself, which is large enough to hold around fifty students; a reception and retail area for clothing, gifts, and yoga accessories; and a café that serves local, plant-based fare. Compared to the old studio, this space is elaborate. It also attracts a larger crowd than

⁷ Bhakti is certainly present in India, indeed it is a highly visible aspect of Hinduism, but it is mistaken to view it as an all-encompassing religious practice. See Kim 2014, Srinivas 2014, and Warriar 2014 for three ethnographic examples of bhakti yoga practiced in India and transnationally. These examples highlight devotion to a guru within a structured organization.



Image 2. The reception area in the yoga studio, where students often chat before and after classes. In the background is the retail area, selling a variety of yoga and India-themed items.

the old space, and feels much more open to the public due to its more conspicuous location, especially around lunch time, when people head to the café. Not only can one take classes to learn the practices of yoga, but one can also purchase the appropriate clothes, jewelry, books, home décor items, and consume foods to signify that one is indeed a yogi. In this space, yoga/India is marketed as a consumable aesthetic and lifestyle.

When pursued in the context of studio classes, yoga is not an inexpensive pastime or lifestyle. A monthly pass to take up to one yoga class a day costs \$108, though only a few students come daily. It costs between \$10 and \$15 to “drop in” to a yoga class, with additional packages and specials available for college students or purchasing multiple classes at a time. Namaste Yoga offers a donation-based class five afternoons a week in an attempt to make yoga more accessible to those who might struggle to afford it. As a teacher, I am

presented with various opportunities to teach free community classes, though I suspect that I am targeted because I am a newer teacher in need of experience.

Knowledge about yoga is very much commodified.⁸ Yoga Alliance estimates that more than a hundred-thousand people a year are spending an average of \$3,000 each on two-hundred-hour teacher trainings, such as the one I completed (Eichenseher 2016). Additional continuing education workshops needed to maintain recognition by Yoga Alliance's teaching registry are an additional expense. And even with the appropriate education, teaching yoga is rarely a full-time career that provides a livable income. Therefore, there's a certain financial standing needed to become a part of this studio community, like many other studios around the world. When one pursues opportunities such as a trip to India, which cost me \$2800 plus international airfare, more resources are required. The cost of acquiring yoga clothing and accessories makes yoga even more expensive, especially if one wants to project a certain image.

There is no overt pressure to look or dress a particular way around the studio, but there is a certain fashion aesthetic. Often teachers wear shirts featuring the "om" symbol or a drawing of a deity. Text on such shirts is designed to mimic Sanskrit characters. Likewise, I see many practitioners wearing *mālā* beads (a necklace of beads counted as a form of meditation, similar to a rosary). A similar practice involves wearing specific clothing brands designed for yoga practitioners, usually featuring a Sanskrit brand name. Such items go beyond their functional use to symbolize involvement with a higher level of yoga practice and show an awareness of "yoga philosophy" and "Indian spirituality." Many yoga

⁸ For more about the branding and marketing of yoga knowledge, as well as claims to intellectual property ownership of this knowledge, see Fish (2006) and Jain (2015).

practitioners I see at Namaste Yoga present themselves in particular ways that align with using India as a consumable aesthetic.

There are many local yoga practitioners who will never go to India. For these people, Namaste Yoga is perhaps the closest they will get to India without even having to leave their town. The construction of Namaste Yoga as an “Indian” space is important, because it reflects a particular marketable business image and, also, evokes a certain aesthetic and sensorial atmosphere through which visitors to the space interpret their experiences. Often, I have been working at the reception desk when someone wanders into the studio for the first time. It’s usually easy to tell when someone is new to the studio because of the awestruck expression on their face as they find themselves in this unexpectedly different space.

The focus in a yoga class is typically supposed to be internal, on the physical or emotional experience. As I was taught, a yoga practitioner should not get caught up in the distraction of the external environment. However, I think about how different this studio space is from the fitness-oriented gym where I first started taking classes. Such a distinction becomes even more relevant when we consider that one of the experiences reported by yoga practitioners is a heightened sensory awareness (Nevrin 2008: 125). Even though *pratyāhāra* (withdrawal of the senses) is one of the practices of yoga, it is clear that sensory experience of the studio has an impact on practitioners, especially when it comes to creating an environment that is set apart from everyday life and promotes relaxation.

Namaste Yoga structures a certain environment, one that is a rich sensory experience. Flickering candles and fragrant incense, often placed at the base of the Buddha and Ganesh sculptures in the front corners of the studio. Textured walls and ceiling tiles painted in deeply vibrant shades of gold, teal, and vermillion. Music played in classes, often mantras

sung in Sanskrit. To open awareness to all the details in this space is almost risking becoming overwhelmed by the attention to design. Some of the extraordinariness of this space is lost on me, because I see it nearly every day, but many visitors describe it as “walking into India” – visitors who have quite likely never set foot in India. The studio owner tells people that she tried to design the space after an Indian temple, and though I never saw anyone doing yoga in a temple in India, this statement makes a connection between yoga, India, and spirituality – associations that the studio reinforces in presenting itself as India.

Yet, this is an India that is designed to be beautiful and pleasurable to its clients, with none of the discomfort that may accompany an American yoga practitioner’s trip to India. This space is welcoming and luxurious, much more so than any Indian temple I encountered. It is an India designed to appeal to the tastes of the middle-class American yoga consumer. Sitting in this space, I am not faced with the less desirable parts of India that I experienced during my travels. Disfigured beggars are not pleading for me to give them money. No garbage lines the walkways. No holy cows or stray dogs roam around the studio space, which is conveniently climate controlled, making it much more conducive to a relaxing yoga practice. The sound of traffic outside is muffled; there is not the incessant blaring of horns that I recall from the larger Indian cities. For all the effort gone to structure the studio as India, this India is quiet, peaceful, and scented with diffused essential oils – a far cry from my own experiences traveling in India.



Image 3. Portraiture along one of the entryways to Namaste Yoga.

The photographs on the reception and retail area walls offer windows into India (though at least a few of these pictures were taken in Nepal) – both making visible what is thought of as Indian, and separating the viewer from any discomfort that might arise from actually experiencing India. Most of these pictures are portraits, usually of individuals, but a few are of small groups. Here are glimpses of Indian street life. A woman cooks outside; another elegantly dressed women walks down a street carrying a broom in one hand while bearing the weight of a large bowl on her head. The pictures of men are more striking. A man bows his head with beads clasped in his hands. Another man stares straight at the viewer, hands in a prayer position, as if graciously welcoming the yogi to this Indian practice. A turbaned man, face colored gray with ash, has direct stare, distant and exotic to a Western gaze. These photographic presences silently endorse Namaste Yoga’s presentation of Indian spirituality.

When I talk to students who experience other yoga studios more frequently than I do, they tell me that this is by far one of the nicest studios they’ve seen. “Nice,” here, does not mean the largest studio or the studio with the most demanding classes. Rather, it’s the environment and attitudes cultivated that most people find distinctive and appealing.

Specifically, it is the commitment to yoga beyond the physical practice that my informants cite as being extraordinary. “Spiritual” is the word I tend to hear clients use to describe this studio’s space and the teachings it promotes.

These people also discuss Namaste Yoga’s commitment to honoring and preserving an “Indian tradition,” an idea that warrants much exploration and deconstruction, especially because this commitment effectively erases the complexities inherent throughout India, in addition to assuming that yoga is an intrinsically Indian tradition, or is even a tradition at all. Yoga, in its contemporary form, like many “traditions,” is an invention. These invented traditions are “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations” (Hobsbawm 1983: 2). This involves “a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition” (Hobsbawm 1983: 4). Yoga today has little to do with yoga millennia ago, yet it has undergone a process of invention or reinvention to make it appear as though it does. It is this process of building yoga and constructing relationships to India that I explore here.

ENCOUNTERING INDIA

This is not an ethnography of India. This is a critical and sympathetic analysis of yoga practice centered in Westville, North Carolina, but extending across sites to include parts of India. I have not sought to tell the story of a people of a place, as is perhaps the classical model of anthropology, but to write about this local group of yoga practitioners as they create, participate in, travel for, celebrate, and remember India – or at least the fragment of India that yoga has come to represent for them. Through a multi-sited approach, especially when participating in yoga tourism/pilgrimage, I am able to explore this idea of India by “following connections, associations, and putative relationships” (Marcus 1995: 97) in a world of transnational flows of information. In Marcus’ schema, I “follow the people” to engage with a group of yoga tourists to track the production of yoga in Westville as it relates to experiences in India. I also “follow the metaphor” to understand yoga as part of a larger system of transnational exchanges, especially in regard to the discourse of teaching yoga and the use of symbols and discourse to create certain experiences, especially those that are embodied, and relate them to India.

I am under no pretense that I have any authority to write about India as it exists outside of the simulacrum of American yoga production. The India portion of this ethnography was a fragment of two weeks, albeit an intense one. As a tourist, the little bits of India that I was able to see were structured, censored, and set out for me. Almost my every move was pre-arranged. And because I traveled as a yoga tourist, I suspect that I was shown things to bolster my pre-conceptions, not challenge them. Because of this, I can speak to the whirlwind of experiences of traveling as a yoga tourist, but I lack a long-term engagement with how yoga is presented in India.



Image 4. Stepping into "India."

It is a different “India” that I attempt to describe. This is the version of India that exists in the top level of an old hardware store on the main street of downtown Westville. Here is the main location of Namaste Yoga. A visitor to the space can walk through doors from an Indian temple, but instead of the Indian temple, they step into an American yoga studio. When I call this India, I do not mean that it is *like India*, but that it is thought of as being a replication of India and exists as a metonym for being Indian. The stories told of Hindu deities, the emphasis on extreme spirituality, the construction of the East as the counter and cure for our unbalanced Western lifestyle – all of this is India, presented as an authentic representation. During my time spent in the studio, I cultivated several friendships that would occasionally lead to conversation about my work as an ethnographer. I didn’t go into detail unless further prompted, but when asked, I would say that I was curious about how

Namaste Yoga presented this mythic or spiritual construction of India. Even when I explained what I meant by this, I would get confused looks from my acquaintances, who would then say something along the lines of, “Well, isn’t India like this?” The high degree of diversity in India is collapsed into a static, timeless image. The very act of questioning it was received as radical, maybe even absurd.

I have two main avenues that I wish to explore in this section. The first is the manner in which Namaste Yoga’s representations create a particular knowledge of India as a spiritual location that fits into a larger framework of Orientalist and other postcolonial discourses. These representations are mobilized both at the yoga studio in Westville and while we were actually in India. The lingering effects of colonial power relationships and dynamics have an important part in how Americans view India and the “East” in general, especially when it comes to an extreme emphasis on spirituality and religion. The yoga studio has created itself as an authority, not just on asana-based movement, but on Indian culture, philosophy, and history. Through teaching and taking yoga classes, a knowledge is shared that produces “India.” A side street on this avenue is the related question of authenticity. Spirituality and authenticity are both attributes ascribed to certain yogas. There is also a positive correlative in that spiritual yoga is presumed to be authentic. The second avenue is the simulacra/simulation (Baudrillard 1994) that operates at Namaste Yoga. I argue that the studio has not just come to signify India, it has actually become India in the eyes of many students. Thus, while I do discuss how India is “imagined,” I also realize, in the influence of Baudrillard (1994), that I am unable to talk about the distinction between the real and the imaginary, as it appears that the imaginary has become taken for real.

Spirituality

There is probably no tradition that has been construed as more timeless, more intrinsically authentic, more inherently Indian than Yoga. It has become a kind of pristine cultural icon linking together, in a seemingly unbroken line, the past glory of the Indus civilization with the present and future possibility of modern, postcolonial India. (Alter 2004: 14).

Yoga, in all its attributed glory, is perceived as essentially Indian. And, further, it serves as a connection to other aspects taken as Indian. Yoga, including but not limited to asana, inspires a belief that one is taking part in a rich, ancient, authentic, tradition. If one takes this search of an Indian practice far enough, one can connect not only with physical and mental benefits but with spirituality, bhakti yoga, and Hinduism. These are not three separate terms, but rather ones that overlap, which I use to describe the aspects of yoga that might be understood as religious or at least as seeking some metaphysical connection. And though the studio owner and many others insist that yoga is not a religion, “in many ways, Yoga has become the functional equivalent of a distinct religion” (Alter 2004: 13). I’ve heard the bhakti asana classes, held on Sunday mornings, casually referred to as “church.”

Spirituality is a vague word that can easily be adapted, its meanings multiple. I use spirituality here in the same sense that my informants do, to mean a connection to some manner of greater, ordering force. It is a vague term, one that is up for interpretation by each practitioner, and can thus accommodate practitioners from various religious and non-religious backgrounds. Namaste Yoga’s bhakti practice is a form of spirituality in its connection to yoga beyond the physical. It’s also a form of spirituality that directly references Indian practices and uses a Sanskrit name.

Hinduism is rarely mentioned directly by yoga teachers, but its deities are. Hinduism exists as a subtext, and often when a yoga teacher refers to an Indian practice or holiday, they

mean a *Hindu* Indian practice or holiday. The yoga teachers I know claim that yoga is not Hindu, and I agree. Yet some Hindus want to reclaim yoga as a Hindu practice.⁹ This tangle of claims gets even more complicated when this supposedly not-Hindu practice offers workshops on Hindu goddesses, sells merchandise featuring Ganesh, and mandates that its teachers in training study the *Bhagavad Gītā* and attend Diwali.¹⁰ There's an admiration of Hinduism, particularly in studying aspects of the multiple deities, but there is also a degree of dislike. One informant told me that she would call upon the Hindu goddesses, but said, "I certainly don't think of myself as Hindu, and I certainly don't buy into caste and some of the things that reflect Hindu." Similarly, another informant said, "I find the mythology fascinating. ... And some of the stories that [our guide] told us really made me want to learn more. And just in yoga classes at [Namaste Yoga]. But no, I'm not a Hindu." I see a simultaneous embrace of Hindu practices, when they are incorporated into yoga teachings, but also a disavowal of Hinduism as a religious identity.

When we were in India, we relied on the familiar asana-based methodology to interpret our experiences. I know it is common for Western tourists to seek ever-increasingly authentic and unmediated encounters, but most of how I experienced India was indirectly through the studio owner's yoga classes. This provided a framework for understanding that was accessible, but something seems odd about an American woman, who does not identify

⁹ For an example, see the Hindu American Foundation's "Take Back Yoga" campaign: <http://www.hafsite.org/media/pr/takeyogaback>.

¹⁰ I could make similar, though not as strong claims, about how Namaste Yoga affiliates itself with Buddhism. Interestingly, several of the informants I interviewed expressed some involvement in Buddhist practices (primarily meditation) prior to beginning yoga. While India is home to diverse religions including Hinduism and Buddhism, I see it as incorporating elements of both religions to express a flexible interest in Eastern spirituality. See Nicholson (2013) for some of the complexities around religious claims of yoga.

as Hindu, teaching us about India through yoga classes, especially when we were in India and had opportunities for more direct experiences. The studio owner's teachings conflate the country of India with Hinduism, one of many religious practices among Indian people. She also assumes that Hinduism is practiced homogeneously and overlooks the regional and caste variations (see Mines 2010).

As the studio owner shares Indian mythology and philosophy through her classes, she creates a "somatic mode of attention" (Csordas 1993) that constructs India within an embodied experience of movement and stillness. These yoga classes were a highlight for many travelers. Many members of the group did not usually take the studio owner's classes in Westville, so they were unaccustomed to her teaching style.¹¹ Several of these people were used to the radically different Iyengar-based yoga classes offered at the studio, which is strongly focused on alignment, and less concerned with the faster-paced flows of the vinyasa style of yoga that the studio owner teaches. Her classes in India would begin with an exposition of myth, often long enough that people began to stretch and re-cross their legs, trying to maintain a comfortable seated position. During the three classes taught in India, the studio owner offered information about Ganesh, Durga, Shiva, Ganga, and Hanuman, as well as the concepts of karma and dharma. When we finally began to move, she guided us through flows of poses so that we could embody particular qualities associated with the deities. She also used specific language that links movement of the physical body with emotions or the metaphysical. For example, backbends are "heart-opening," forward folds

¹¹ Including myself, there are four of us from the trip that routinely attend the studio owner's class. Since the trip, there are another couple of travelers who have started coming, though a little more sporadically.



Image 5. The altar set up by the studio owner at the front of our yoga veranda at our host's house in Haridwar, India. Items include a flower mālā, image of Durga, statues of Ganesh and Buddha, Shiva's trident, a small vessel of Ganga water, and clay lamps.

involve “surrendering to something greater than yourself,” or poses that require core strength connect us to our inner purpose and desire.

The studio owner told me that she teaches from mythology because “it absolutely makes the spiritual aspects of yoga more accessible, so long as [the student] has an open mind and an open heart.” One of her favorite poses to teach in connection to mythology is *hanumānāsana* (a full split). She taught this pose in our last class together in India, and teaches it occasionally in her classes in Westville as well. The studio owner uses this pose to talk about Hanuman's devotion to Rama. In her interpretation of this myth, Hanuman makes a leap from the tip of India to Sri Lanka to rescue Rama's princess from a demon who kidnapped her. As we yoga students stretch our legs in opposite directions, trying to sink our hips as close to the ground as possible, the studio owner encourages us to focus on something

larger than our individual selves, which I take to mean something other than the intense sensation this pose ignites in hips and hamstrings.

To my body, experiencing the various degrees of sickness, exhaustion, and soreness that accompanied traveling in India, the studio owner's classes felt physically demanding. I gathered my fellow travelers felt the same way. In each class, there were a couple of people who took resting poses or sat out completely instead of engaging in the more vigorous movement, seeming too ill or tired to fully participate. In comparing these classes with studio owner's classes in Westville, I observed that she spent more time explaining the "origins" of the poses, especially when it came to relating them to deities and sages. She would also incorporate and explain pranayama, mudra, and mantra, finishing class with a seated meditation before *śavasana* (corpse pose). Afterwards, travelers would gather to compare notes and discuss what they had learned about "Indian" philosophy and religion in that yoga class.

Asana is a direct way to embody bhakti, presented as the spiritual essence of India. This embodiment lends a personal feel to the practice, one that was perhaps lacking in other bhakti-related encounters in India, especially temple visits. We went to several Hindu temples throughout the journey, generally making an assortment of missteps in the process. One of our first stops was the temple at Banaras Hindu College in Varanasi. Before going in the multi-level building that housed a pantheon of deities, our guide stopped and bought us flower *mālās* (garlands) as offerings. Within the next few seconds, several of us had made the mistake of sniffing the *mālās*, trying to detect a floral aroma, at which point we learned that we had polluted our offerings and they were no longer suitable to present to Shiva. At other times, we committed the sin of holding *prasād* (a food offering) in our left hands,



Image 6. A fellow traveler greets Shiva when we come across this small temple while hiking. considered unclean for such purposes. Typically, when approaching a temple, we'd form a line and interact with the priest one at a time. Even if the first person in line had received some instruction, as we went through the line our attempts at proper ritual behavior by mimicking the person ahead got more and more distorted.

I always felt embarrassed walking away from these encounters. I was not alone. More than one person commented that they were unsure how to act on these occasions, emphasizing that “this was not my religion.” This wasn't so much an excuse for their poor cultural behavior, as it was a genuine confusion about how to approach such religious activities. While there was a curiosity about bhakti as a metaphysical practice, it did not lead to engagement in the same way that asana classes did. The same people who would eagerly listen to stories about Shiva in a yoga class found that they couldn't connect so well when this deity was presented outside of yoga.

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We traveled to India because of its supposed spirituality. As I drove to the airport to catch our flight to India, one of the two informants riding with me started talking about how we had all come together as part of this trip because we were so spiritual, and how “we all have an interest in Eastern religion.” The other informant in the car agreed. These are assumptions, of course, but they say something about how this informant, and likely others, viewed this trip: as a chance to connect with the spirituality ascribed to India. Yet, what my informants do not realize is that “the location of a ‘spiritual’ essence as central to the Hindu religion is bound up with the complexities of colonial and gender politics in nineteenth-century India” (King 1999: 123). Thus when we see India as inherently spiritual, we are connecting to a dialogue formed through colonialism that lingers on through postcolonial imbalances into the twenty-first century. This dialogue can be invoked to various ideological ends, by both Indians and non-Indians, but it is nevertheless still entangled in colonial power. Spirituality is presented as the Eastern, feminized counter to Western, masculine rationality. It is an attribute inscribed in the body of the Other.

India, my informants tell me, is extremely spiritual. In one of my post-trip interviews, a co-traveler spoke of an essence, an energy, that imbues India:

I like the reverence that you could feel in India. ... I don't know, there's just this energy around it. ... It was in the air. It was in the feeling of everyday life. The way they live was in accordance with reverence for life and for appreciation. And there was a sense that there was something bigger beyond the individual.

The theme of spirituality being so widespread that it is part of everyday life was common across my interview and observations. Before the trip the studio owner told me “Everybody [in India] is practicing yoga. But they’re practicing bhakti yoga. In India, it’s really something that they live. They live bhakti yoga. It’s a way of being in the world.” Ideas of

Indian spirituality were placed in opposition to mainstream American religion, where religious/spiritual activities are carried out at a set time and place, and then abandoned for the rest of life. My informants cite the ringing of temple bells at dawn and shrines by the roadside to conclude that Indian spirituality is so great that it cannot be contained to a set time slot. My informants also presumed that all Indian people are willing to share this overflowing spirituality with us.

These same informants, as well as other clients at the yoga studio, use the same word, “spiritual,” to describe the environment and practices at Namaste Yoga, a location which actively contributes to the idea of India as a spiritual country. Rather than following the assumption that India is indeed hyper-spiritual, I follow Rabinow’s suggestion that “we need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal; make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the social world” (1986: 241). Despite the fact that India’s spirituality seems to be taken-for-granted by many of my informants, I call into question this assumption, especially when it is applied to the entirety of India. I examine the discursive structures that represent India as this hyper-spiritual locale. We don’t see India as spiritual because it necessarily is, but rather there are certain historical precedents that inform our construction (see Clarke 1997). Attitudes towards Eastern spirituality vary considerably, ranging from fear to fascination.

When my informants talk about Indian spirituality, they emphasize how pervasive it is in everyday life in India. In their impression, spirituality permeates Indian existence. Spirituality also co-exists with material poverty. The studio owner presented a polarizing

rubric in teacher training that's proved helpful for understanding a general narrative of Indian spirituality: "India is spiritually rich, but materially poor." As a yoga tourist, this makes sense. Something that seems strange is due to excessive spirituality, and any discomforts we experience are a result of material poverty. As an anthropologist who is aware that India is a large and diverse country, this is an extremely unsatisfactory explanation. However, after returning, many of my informants describe India along the lines of these beliefs, emphasizing the poverty and unpleasant surroundings – when not talking about Indian spirituality and beauty. They and other yogis I know make very little effort made to engage with the political complexities of India, which is depicted as sealed off from modern development and global influences.

Though there is material poverty in India, as there is in America, there are also very wealthy Indians, with India becoming a global economic power. Indian poverty is not a given, rather there are structural factors driving it.¹² Unfortunately, while it seems that yogis are willing to study Indian mythology and philosophy, there is little interest in delving any deeper into India's politics and history. Such topics would inevitably complicate the production of India's spirituality in Westville. Nor, aside from Indian food, do my informants seem to take much interest in the many other elements of India that exist separately from yoga. I find discussions of India's colonial past and postcolonial present to be notably lacking. My informants generally know of the existence of caste, though it is conflated with *varna*, a Vedic term that refers to the four ranked categories of human beings,

¹² Nearly 450 million Indians live below the World Bank's poverty line. The industrial capitalism growing in India is not improving the living conditions of many Indian citizens and is instead exacerbating inequality. Reasons for this vary across India, but some explanations include unreliable contract work, lack of jobs in the formal economy, class and caste divisions, and exploitation by employers. (Corbridge and Shah 2013)

which is not the same as *jati* (caste) (Mines 2009). A couple informants also mentioned that they knew that Indian women were treated unfairly, and one informant even told me that she thought perhaps we [Americans] could promote better treatment of women and give something to the Indians, demonstrating a missionary-like attitude.

One informant, while talking about the level of pollution that we encountered told me:

There's a lot of people that have to suffer a lot. And they have a tremendous philosophical spiritual attitude about it all. The culture itself is totally immersed in the spiritual aspect. The people themselves, just the way they smile, the presence they seem to have, and the way they just look at you so deeply that it just feels like there's a connection, because their lives don't seem to be based on the same things our lives are based on, and so they seem to be more present.

From this statement, it appears that spirituality creates tolerance for such suffering, even correlates with it in some way. That there were human beings living in deplorable conditions is secondary to the fact that these are human beings that are extremely spiritual. Or, as was mentioned as we drove past a group of women carrying stones to build a retaining wall along the side of a narrow mountain road, they do such hard work but are still so impeccably dressed.

Yet, at Namaste Yoga, spirituality can go along with material affluence, requiring a certain financial status to deeply be involved. The yoga studio creates a world in which its clients can have it all: spiritual knowledge as part of a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. This modern presentation of yoga shows the desire for the pre-modern lifestyle ascribed to Indians, but there is never a desire to completely leave the mediated environment of the yoga studio.

As long as the people of India are spiritual and colorfully dressed, material poverty becomes an aside, even a note of praise or honor for these people. For yoga tourists, it seems

to be enough to note that Indian people are poor, but as long as poverty is romanticized it seems to be permissible. Paul Chaat Smith argues that romanticism functions as a form of racism: “Simply put, romanticism is a highly developed, deeply ideological system of racism toward [Native Americans] that encompasses language, culture, and history” (2009: 17). Romanticism erases the ability to see Indians as complex multi-dimensional human beings, hampering any sincere understanding of India. As long as the narrative at Namaste Yoga is reaching back into the depths of history to a romanticized Indian past, there will never be a full appreciation for India or a willingness to accept the inevitable evolutions of its culture.

Authenticity

When people spoke to me about their desires to go to India, there was a conception that we’d experience a deeper, purer level of yoga. On the trip, we had several experiences with yoga besides the classes taught by the studio owner for us. A yoga teacher, Vishnu, from the World Peace Yoga School in Rishikesh came to give us a class at our hotel. Vishnu was a young, charismatic, smiling man, who preached a message of unity and connection. He also brought a tambourine with him, and we finished class by chanting “Om Namah Shivaya” as he rattled the instrument. Yoga is powerful, he said, but it is even more powerful when practiced here, on the banks of the Ganga. In Rishikesh, yoga was everywhere. Advertisements for the World Peace Yoga School were painted on the roadside walls, asking “are you breathing correctly?” Fliers were posted around town for various meditation groups, yoga teacher trainings, and healing courses. Here, we could purchase a yoga mat, though the pale-skinned model on the label was demonstrating yoga poses while wearing tennis shoes, footwear that I have never seen in any yoga class. Was this the “source” of yoga, as the studio owner had told me when I asked about how she had selected our travel

itinerary? This yoga seemed focused on breathing, training the mind, healing the body, and achieving an ultimate state of consciousness.

As I walked through the streets of Rishikesh after Vishnu's class on a shopping expedition with my roommate, who was a longtime yogi, she spoke about how Vishnu had taught a very traditional and advanced class that followed the Indian approach that "less is more." She told me that she had taken classes similar to this one when she just started practicing yoga, but that unfortunately most yoga teachers did not teach according to tradition anymore. Perhaps she thought I was being too critical of Vishnu, as she told me that maybe I was too young to appreciate such an advanced practice. Had I only seen Rishikesh, I just might believe that there was some essential yoga to be found here. More importantly, I'd believe that yoga was featured prominently in India, as it seemed like every other shop offered some yoga class or product.

Yet, I had already had the experience of a couple other Indian cities and towns. A week and a half earlier, I was in Varanasi. Yoga was not as visible in that city. I stared out of the window of our bus as we drove into Varanasi, straining for some sign of this practice that was supposed to be intrinsic and traditional to India. It wasn't until the next day, walking through the densely crowded city, that I found a sign advertising yoga. The same sign mentioned pranic healing. This is an indication of a yoga focused on the subtle body, I thought to myself. This seemed relatively in line with my preconceptions for yoga in India – concerned less with yoga as a form of exercise and more with metaphysics. But, a little down the road, I saw a studio offering fitness classes. There, I could take yoga for weight loss, advertised along with Zumba classes. And it wasn't until the following day when I finally saw someone outside of our group doing actually yoga: a gray-haired man on the



Image 7. The first yoga sighting of the trip.

upper steps of the ghats (large stone steps leading down to the river), performing what seemed to be a sun salutation¹³ facing the Ganga. He had no mat or cushioning from the concrete surface as he moved through asana beside a bright red shrine with a monkey sitting on the roof. We paused for a moment to take pictures, and then continued walking.

We had a yoga class on the roof of our hotel in Varanasi, arranged especially for us. It was taught by a woman, seemingly in her teens, who wore a dark colored tracksuit, which must have been quite hot given the midday sun. She guided us through poses clumsily, likely

¹³ I interpreted this series of postures as yoga, because they looked familiar to me as such. However, *sūryanamaskār* (the sun salutation) has a complicated history. It has been practiced by Brahmin priests as a form of worship (Goldberg 2016: 189). This sequence is not mentioned in any of the early (medieval) yoga texts, and entered yoga more directly through a wrestling warm-up exercise. Given that this encounter happened around sunrise facing the Ganga, I can only speculate as to whether or not it was indeed a yoga practice or some other activity.

due to the fact that she spoke very little English. I felt embarrassed as people in our group chatted and laughed as she tried to teach. She used the Sanskrit names for poses, which probably confused our group further. After the class, the studio owner asked me what I thought of the teaching, given that I was a teacher-in-training. I spoke to what I saw as the most glaring flaw: “I wouldn’t take students into *padmāsana* (lotus pose) without opening up their hips first, certainly not as the third pose in a class.” Though the studio owner agreed with me that this was not accessible to many people, she said that what we had practiced was a very traditional sequence.

I encountered yoga once more on the ghats our last morning in Varanasi. I went out for a walk with two companions in the early morning, before sunrise. Leaving our hotel, we walked in the opposite direction from the ghats and were pleasantly surprised to find a small park, deserted except for one woman, who left right after our arrival. We walked around the perimeter a couple times, and one of my companions bent over to pick up a large red flower, nearly falling over. An Indian man saw. “Balance, just balance,” he said. He started walking along with us, conversing with each of us in turn. He spoke with me last. Curious to see what someone in an unarranged encounter thinks of yoga. I slowly told him we were there to study yoga. He asked me what kind of yoga. “Asana,” I said, and then self-consciously feeling the need to express that my practice is deeper than that, I added “and some pranayama and meditation.” I’m not quite sure why, but he patted me on the head, as if I were a precocious child. This man – Santosh, according to the business card for massage therapy he gave me – wanted to take us somewhere. We debated amongst ourselves. We had to board a van to the airport soon, and some of us still needed to pack. When we did decide to follow him on the quick walk, we were glad. We were unsure of his final

destination, but he took us to a yoga class, down by the river. People, probably upwards of a hundred, were seated around a stage. Those seated in front of the stage were in plastic lawn chairs, but we sat with a group of women off to the side, on carpeting covering the stone steps. When we arrived, these people – Indians, not foreign tourists - were doing pranayama. Because the instructions for the class were being given in Hindi, we followed the women in front of us as we moved through the breathing exercises. A couple exercises in, I heard “*Kapalbhati*” announced through the loudspeakers, I was excited because I recognized that name. Known in English as Breath of Fire or Skull-shining Breath, it consists of quick, forceful abdominal contractions to push air out, followed by a short, nearly automatic inhalation as breath rushes back in. “This feels purifying” one of my companions told me. Purifying isn’t quite the word I would use to describe how the sharp abdominal contractions felt given my digestive distress. We remained at this class as long as possible, but as the class shifted into rolling and flexing various joints, we couldn’t linger any longer, given our pending travel. I left excited that I had had a serendipitous, unexpected, local encounter with yoga.

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Is any of this yoga more “authentic” than what I know from Westville? In taking classes at Namaste Yoga, I had been taught that the many types of yoga in America were just splinters of a comprehensive Indian tradition. One thing I learned while in India was that, just as there is no singular American yoga, there is no one Indian yoga. I didn’t find the quality of the instruction to be superior in India or the classes any more enjoyable. Within our group, it seemed like the best received classes were the studio owner’s, in terms of the perceived appreciation of and engagement with the teachings. There was certainly less of a

language barrier, and the studio owner seemed more willing to adjust poses to accommodate the various physical abilities in our group. Generally, the classes I took in India from Indian instructors seemed to place more focus on breath and meditation. And, while the yoga poses were done in a slower manner, the classes all began with an aerobic warmup that was quite unfamiliar.

My informants will try to juxtapose Indian yoga and American yoga, though, with Indian yoga being much more complex. One of my informants told me that “in the West most people hear the term yoga and only think of the physical aspects. In India it clearly is more about the meditative, devotional aspects and the physical practice is in fact a small part of the meaning of yoga in India.” To say that Indian yoga is spiritual or metaphysical overlooks the fact that yoga is also practiced by many Indian women for weight loss or to alleviate the boredom of married life (Nichter 2013: 216). Additionally, in Rishikesh, the same city where I met Vishnu with his World Peace Yoga School, many residents, especially women, are involved in yoga for primarily physical benefits (Strauss 2005: 77). Whether in India or Westville, North Carolina, it is not hard to see that yoga takes varied forms.

Still, my informants seem to believe that there is such a thing as an authentic yoga, and furthermore, that such a yoga is to be found in India. One of my informants, who had been to India previously, said that this trip appealed to him because all of the cities the studio owner had chosen to visit were on his “wish list of places to see in India on future trips. Being able to do them all at once was very appealing. All of these places are extremely important to the origins and propagation of yoga.” The idea that the roots of yoga history and practice can be found in India is not entirely an American construction; the Indian government does a fair bit to promote yoga tourism and to brand yoga as an Indian cultural

product, specifically when it comes to marketing wellness and adventure forms of tourism. India does have a legitimate historical claim to yoga, but it is more complicated than most people realize or promote. Nevertheless, the drive for authenticity remains a powerful factor for American yogis traveling to India, as well as for promoting Indian nationalist interests.

Kopela (2010) points out the irony in this search for an authentic past, given that British colonists were concerned with moving Indians away from their past, which was perceived as backwards. Yoga tourism is the reverse of the colonial civilizing mission. In an article about Westerners seeking Indian classical music in Varanasi, Kopela writes that “Westerners thus seem to long for the ‘great’ pre-colonial past and want to ‘freeze’ classical music in its ‘authentic’ form, whereas many Indian musicians willingly develop their tradition in new directions” (2010: 1311). Likewise, in yoga, there is a desire to obtain whatever yoga is most authentic, which is also placed in a pre-colonial past. When my informants talk about yoga history, they talk about ancient practices, scriptures, and deities. They do not mention, nor do I think they know about, yoga as it was created during the colonial and postcolonial periods, entangled with shifting state power. After all, if yoga as we know it arose out of that political climate, it would fail to fulfill the timeless purity and authenticity we look for in India.

Urry (1990) argues that authenticity alone is not valid to explain the drive for all types of tourism. Yet in some cases, including this one, authenticity is very important. The whole motivation for India as a destination is its presumed connection with authentic yoga. Aside from the yoga aspect, several informants expressed a curiosity about learning about Indian culture, which implies that we would encounter an authentic Indian culture. One informant talked about how much he enjoyed encounters with “real” Indians, by which he

meant those people we interacted with outside of priests and yoga teachers. The concept of authenticity is problematic and debatable (Theodossopoulos 2013), and much has been written on this concept as it applies to tourism. I am not going to argue what, if anything is authentic, rather, I find it a more fruitful inquiry to question what authenticity does for people as a realm of desire, imagery and social practice. Because meanings of authenticity are shifting depending on the context and presentation, authenticity is something that is produced, not inherently present. Throughout various industries, authenticity is a potent marketing strategy (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2013), and it appears that yoga is no different.

I would be remiss to imply that this search for precolonial yogic authority only exists as something applied to India by outsiders. An ancient, authentic yoga is very much a creation of modernity, particularly the modernity that was experienced in the Indian context of colonialism. Indian innovators of modern yoga refused to acknowledge that they were drawing on European exercise and body building systems. “[Instead they] insisted on pointing solely to the ancient and pure Indian lineage of their yoga systems” (Goldberg 2016: 95). This often involved referencing an ancient text or invoking the somewhat fantastical figure of the guru on the Himalayas. Authenticity creates a nationalist product that refutes the negative discourses of colonialism.

A similar (re)inventing took place with Ayurveda, a collection of indigenous Indian medical practices that is frequently marketed alongside yoga. I studied rudimentary Ayurvedic concepts as part of my yoga teacher training, and in Rishikesh there were plenty of storefronts advertising Ayurvedic healing practices. Jean Langford (2002) argues that Ayurveda’s importance lies in its ability to strategically address postcolonial imbalances, part of which involves promoting Ayurveda as an Indian cultural product and deploying

narratives of antiquity and authenticity, while at the same time being able to ease the ills of modernity.

The Indian nationalist agenda and the postcolonial drives for authenticity intersect. Both strive to represent an original yoga originating in India's postcolonial past and often use orientalist discourse as part of this promotion. In doing this, it is frequently overlooked that the concept of authenticity is a construction, albeit a marketable and appealing one. "There are no such simple originals, but only the process of deciding to pretend that there are, and of forgetting this decision" (Mitchell 1988: 59). The decision to create an authentic yoga is largely forgotten, except in recent scholarly histories of yoga. The precolonial, Indian, yogic "authenticity" creates a sense of desirability, even when "authenticity" is a postcolonial transnational production.

This is especially clear at Namaste Yoga where, while the quality of instruction is wonderful, a major draw for clients is the constructed environment that creates "India," accompanied by the belief that what we are doing is closer to authentic yoga than if we were attending yoga classes at a gym. Students claim to connect with this authenticity, much of which is created out of elements appropriated from Indian traditions. For my informants who previously took yoga classes at a different location, they refer to when they started practicing at Namaste Yoga as when they really started to deepen their yoga practice and pursue yoga seriously. This is true for me as well, having first experienced yoga in a group fitness class. Namaste Yoga presents its version of yoga as being much more true, much more authentic, much more desirable.

When we search for a spiritual essence of India, we look for something that is essential and authentic. Spiritual yoga is thought to be authentic, and fitness-based,

commercialized yoga the derivative. Yoga, a vast transnational practice, is much more complex than that. Yet, many of my informants act as if there is some authentic, spiritual yoga, which is available in India, or perhaps even at Namaste Yoga, which markets this authenticity.

Simulacra

Under all these layers of anticipated and ascribed belief about what India is and about what authentic yoga is, can we make such distinctions as to what is truly real? Issues about truth seem important to practitioners, but such a believed truth is based on a faulty historicity. Namaste Yoga produces itself as offering a yoga that is perhaps more real – that is more “authentic – than what would be offered at a fitness center. This is a yoga that is for the serious or dedicated practitioner, who really wants to understand yoga at a deeper level.

The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they *are* representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the “truth,” which is itself a representation. (Said 1978: 272)¹⁴

With yoga history, behavior is often promoted on the grounds of authenticity or tradition.

These are subjective constructions themselves, not historical facts. However, this lack of “truth” does not diminish the power of such constructions.

¹⁴ But, see Clifford (1988, chapter 11) as to the inconsistency in Said’s argument as to the existence of a real Orient. Clifford writes of Said: “Frequently he suggests that a text or tradition distorts, dominates, or ignores some real or authentic feature of the Orient. Elsewhere, however, he denies the existence of any “real Orient,” and in this he is more rigorously faithful to Foucault and the other radical critics of representation whom he cites.” (1988: 260). In my work here, I do not attempt to make distinctions between the real and the unreal, but between the real and the hyperreal.

I argue that Namaste Yoga has come to represent India to such an extreme degree that it has actually replaced India for its patrons. Yoga, this neat little package of Eastern culture containing tradition, spirituality, and focus on the experienced body, stands to represent the desire for different experience that is easily consumed in class format. This is done in such a way that the studio space becomes taken for the real India. Walking into the yoga studio is not just like stepping into India, it actually *is* entering into India for many people. In this contrived, “figured world” (Holland et al. 2001) “simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard 1994: 3).

The simulacrum of yoga at Namaste Yoga is based on faulty mythology. “It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1994: 1). It forms a map that is then able to create the territory it is supposed to represent. Drawing on icons, images, and ideas about what India, and therefore yoga, is supposed to be, Namaste Yoga does not just create knowledge of yoga, but a presumed knowledge of India. Even when we traveled to India, the same techniques were used to create an India closely tied to yoga, which is no less a construction than is the studio back home. This involved an emphasis on spirituality and Hindu deities, as well as experiencing these through practicing yoga asana.

Because the studio creates the trip, we see an India selectively created to be the India of our imaginations. Because of this, I find it difficult to make any statements about what India is actually like, as I was caught up in hyperreal representations. Experiencing the hyperreal through travel is a similar experience to what Mitchell refers to as a labyrinth, where it becomes increasingly different to tell where the representations of the exhibition end and the supposedly real world begins (1988: 10). As we travel to India, we are promised a

more real, more authentic experience, yet the metric for judging this is based on the yoga studio in Westville. As a simulacrum, the map precedes the very territory that it supposedly represents, making it impossible to locate any reality, even when we are in the country of India.

Signs of the real create the real. Here, I take bhakti yoga as my example. It taps into the pre-supposed wellspring of spirituality that functions as an expression of the mystical, Orientalized understanding of the East. It takes the Hindu deities and our curiosity about them to create an India that is highly religious. Yoga, while a relatively recent invention as a physical practice, does indeed have philosophical roots stretching back into time. This not only lends an aura of antiquity, but connects with what is a desirable and fantastic ancient wisdom. One of the reasons it is difficult to pin down exactly what yoga is, is because yoga creates itself as a world outside the dichotomy of truth and falsehood, where it generates its own realness.

Baudrillard specifically mentions yoga as a reclamation of a more primitive past: “One reinvents penury, asceticism, vanished savage naturalness: natural food, health food, yoga” (1994: 13). Here, yoga is both a critique of modern life and, when repackaged as a luxury, very much a part of it. Yoga is simultaneously counter culture and pop culture. When the studio owner refers to her clients as a “tribe,” she gestures to this trend to recreate the vanished natural past as something desirably anti-modern. A certain primitivism is associated with the Indian “way of life,” revealing a theory of culture that is static and spatially fixed. The studio owner’s emphasis on great spirituality and great material poverty, frames Indian life as both lacking and somehow revered. But by reinventing India as a hyperreal space, we, in Westville, can have both spiritual knowledge, and have material

wealth. Perhaps we are even able to obtain spiritual knowledge because we have the financial means.

To be clear, my argument is not entirely about cultural appropriation. I do not view yoga as exclusively Indian cultural property, as it was formed through various global encounters and exchanges. Yet, the simulacra of yoga functions through selective appropriation. Claiming certain elements of what is perceived to be Indian culture and religion and incorporating them into a yoga aesthetic is indeed a strategic creation of the hyperreal India.

The shallowness of this hyperreal India was clearly expressed when, after learning about how I was viewing Namaste Yoga as a hyperreal space, a friend from the yoga studio told me that he had started to wonder what it would be like if we replaced the elements of India at the yoga studio with aspects from another country, such as Greece. “I have no more connection to Apollo than I do to Hanuman,” he said. “I don’t think it would really matter, as long as it’s a little exotic.” Though India has been presented in certain ways that make it especially suitable for production through the hyperreal, and I absolutely do not advocate for the selective appropriation of any culture on the basis of it being “exotic,” I think my friend made an important point in this conversation, that the connection to India as a geopolitical entity matters much less than having a space that is exotic and distinct from other everyday spaces.

Yoga’s relationship to India is historical, but it is excessively underscored in this hyperreal space. This is used to create a marketable yoga, one that is “exotic” and “authentic.” The constructed nature of this hyperreality goes unrealized by the community of practitioners, who are eager to consume Namaste Yoga’s production of bhakti yoga,

believing that this version of yoga is what yoga is supposed to be. Both spirituality and authenticity serve as gauges for judging this realness, yet such a realness “is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control” (Baudrillard 1994: 2). The realness is located in Westville, and in taking certain elements and exaggerating their presence, Namaste Yoga design an India to fit the fantasies of American yoga practitioners. And, in doing this, a hyperreal India is created, a certain India that is more real than the reality.

HISTORY

It is necessary to provide some historical overview of yoga.¹⁵ I do not attempt to do so in a comprehensive manner from time immemorial,¹⁶ but instead to discuss the emergence of some aspects of contemporary yoga that affect how I critically interpret my ethnographic experience at Namaste Yoga. I include a section on yoga history in this thesis because it complicates the production of yoga as India's pristine and unchanging cultural icon. For the purposes of this exploration, I am less interested in yoga as an orthodox school of philosophy, but in yoga as it is practiced, performed, and created, especially throughout colonial and postcolonial history. This is not to say that yoga philosophy is not an interesting area of study, merely that it does not necessarily exert much force on an ethnographic study of yoga practice. To those who are wary about this detour from philosophy, the typical area of focus in yoga history discussions, I point out that "yoga," in its Sanskrit uses, has a wide array of meanings in contexts unrelated to each other. Also, it will quickly become clear that both yoga philosophy and yoga practice are both heterogeneous entities.

'Yoga' has a wider range of meanings than nearly any other word in the entire Sanskrit lexicon. The act of yoking an animal, as well as the yoke itself, is called yoga. In astronomy, a conjunction of planets or stars, as well as a constellation, is called yoga. The word yoga has also been employed to denote a device, a recipe, a method, a strategy, a charm, an incantation, fraud, a trick, an endeavor, a combination, union, an arrangement, zeal, care, diligence, industriousness, discipline, use, application, contract, a sum total, and the Work of alchemists. But this is by no means an exhaustive list. (White 2012: 2)

¹⁵ For recent reviews of the field of yoga history, see Farmer (2012) and Schrank (2014). Yoga history, especially when it comes to recent trends in practice and explanations for gender, race, and socioeconomic backgrounds of practitioners, requires further attention from historians.

¹⁶ Attempts have been made to do just this. See Feuerstein (2008) for an example. However, I find such texts overly concerned with connecting present-day yoga to prehistory and philosophy, without adequately considering the many historical forces, especially non-Indian ones, that have shaped yoga into many different forms.

So clearly, just because two or more things are called yoga, it does not mean that they are associated in anything other than name. Because the word “yoga” crops up in some historical context, it does not reliably indicate the slightest bit of relevance to any sort of postural yoga. Some discernment is therefore necessary in structuring a yoga history that is relevant to today’s yoga practice, which is what I have tried to do here.

In addition to somewhat separating yoga philosophy and practice, I also find it useful to recognize that yoga is not a predefined or static entity but is absolutely a product of certain situations and ideologies. It is also frequently tied to power and the production of a certain mode of knowledge. There is a long history of scholarly engagement with yoga (see Whicher 1998 for an overview of this literature). However, “a close reading of Yoga’s literary history of commentary and redaction shows how it has been subject to the inevitable process of interpretation, a process that is distinct from the obvious features of intellectual refinement and clarification, if not exclusively so” (Alter 2004: 5). I strongly agree with Alter when he cautions that treatises on yoga should not be taken containing an absolute yogic truth but instead need to be situated as a product of human imagination.

In discussing yoga history, I do not want to chart the course of yoga as being a linear decline from some point of authentic origin. This is a frequently espoused point of view, which many of my informants have shared with me and I have heard throughout my yoga teacher training. Much of how I approach yoga in this history section is not how my informants think of yoga. I see Namaste Yoga determined to cling to as many signifiers and linear of authentic India as possible, whether that’s statues of Ganesh, chanting “om,” burning incense, or insisting that yoga should incorporate meditation and breathing techniques to make it more than just asana.

There is also the silent denial of any recent modifications of yoga, aside from the fact that it has become so diluted as to appeal to the American masses. The studio owner explained the predicament of American contemporary yoga:

Right now yoga is in an unusual place, it's found itself. Yoga has become pop culture. And I have mixed feelings about that. Because some people will say, 'oh there's no pure lineage anymore, and anything can be yoga.' And maybe that's the case. But I also feel that because it's so popular that it's been able to reach so many so many people that would normally not have access to it and touched the lives of so many people. At one point it was a very small subculture. And now it's popular culture ... But ninety percent of [yoga in America] is going to be the focus on the physical practice, but in India that is not the case.

The studio owner appreciates that many people in America are experiencing yoga, but has concerns that they are not experiencing yoga in its most complete form. She also presents India as the location for the most authentic yoga, ignoring that yoga in India is hardly an inert practice. This point of view has informed how she structures her studio offerings around bhakti yoga.

Bhakti yoga, is one more signifier, perhaps even the ultimate signifier of wanting to embrace a more spiritual practice and escape from a fitness-based practice. Bhakti's inclusion of practices associated with India and Hinduism reference yoga's supposedly ancient, Indian origins. Teachings and practicing bhakti yoga can be seen as a point of resistance against much of what American yoga has developed (or devolved) into, but a historical reading of yoga yields much greater complexity than that found in this simple narrative. Yoga, like its stereotypical practitioners, is flexible. It has been modified to fit a variety of purposes and agendas.

This history that I outline here is not well-known among practitioners. Despite my experience as a yogi and yoga teacher, I was surprised by how much I had not learned about yoga's history through my yoga practice. Liberman refers to the idea of an original yoga as a

“just-so story,” one that is shared as classes are taught (2008: 100). In the yoga classes I attend, and even throughout my teacher training, a certain history, though not an accurate one, is taught.

In the latter stages of this project, after I had completed the bulk of this writing, I attended a lecture on yoga history given by an out-of-town scholar to the most recent class of yoga teacher trainees. As this scholar opened his talk and described what he had to say as controversial, I hoped that his views would touch on some of the complexities that I’d been researching and writing about. I think it is especially important for yoga teachers to understand yoga’s modern history, because most yoga students will only know the yoga history mentioned by teachers. To my dismay, this scholar merely placed the origins of yoga in a different school of ancient history. Emphasizing that there was “one yoga” (not the multiple yogas I and others theorize), he claimed yoga, including postural yoga, to be seven thousand years old. His justification for this was that people who were able sit in lotus pose to meditate for long periods must also be doing some additional asana. At the same time, he attacked “intellectuals” for questioning this and desiring proof.

I am not in a position to critique the ancient history this scholar presented, but I do feel strongly that he painted a selective history of yoga, with absolutely no attention at all to the considerable innovations of yoga within the past hundred and fifty years. Even though what he said may have been partially true, this is likely the only “yoga history” to which this class of teacher trainees will be exposed during the course of their training. Such a biased view of yoga history makes it too easy for yoga teachers to believe that what they are teaching today is directly related to ancient practices, further perpetuating the hyperreal.

“Today, the history that is ‘given back’ to us (precisely because it was taken from us) has no more of a relation to a ‘historical real’ than neofiguration in painting does to the classical figuration of the real” (Baudrillard 1994: 45). Baudrillard continues, defining neofiguration as “an *invocation* of a resemblance, but at the same time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation: *hyperreal*” (1994: 45). These hyperreal representations of yoga emphasize certain desirable, pleasurable, even marketable aspects of the practice as history, but evade a much deeper and complex history that questions claims of tradition and continuity in the yoga that is practiced today.

Constructing Classical Yoga

Because I am interested with yoga as a practice, I start my historical retracing with Patanjali’s *Yogasūtra*. This collection of short statements, sometimes referred to as aphorisms, is a philosophical text, but one that is widely read by today’s yoga teachers. This text, or rather its assorted translations and commentaries, is at the forefront of many teacher training programs and discussions of yoga philosophy. Its importance to practitioners is so great that it was the first text I read in Namaste Yoga’s teacher training program and warranted a day-long workshop by a scholar from out of town, who taught us how to incorporate the sutras into our teaching. The very fact that I quoted Sutra 1.2 (“yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind”) earlier in this thesis shows how engrained it is in my mind.

Looking at the multiplicity of yoga practices today, it is easy to assume that these are fragments of a previously cohesive tradition. What is often referred to as classical yoga, the

aṣṭāṅga (eight-limbed)¹⁷ practice attributed to Patanjali¹⁸ who codified it through his *Yogasūtra*, was not a distinct authority with a monolithic following, until fairly recently. In examining Śaiva scripture and practice, Vasudeva (2004) argues that the *Yogasūtra* was rarely significant and existed as one of many competing systems of yoga. I consider the *Yogasūtra* to be an important starting point of yoga history because it marks the beginning of Orientalist scholarship and production of yoga, as well as the creation of a singular yoga for cultural circulation.

When European colonial scholars and translators began to engage with Sanskrit texts, they did so with the intention of introducing Western models of thought and furthering colonial dominance by creating relationships with *pandits* (scholars of Hindu scriptures, often also priests) (Dodson 2002). One such commentator of the *Yogasūtra* is James Ballantyne, who found that while there were many *pandits* in Varanasi willing to learn English and assist in translation, there was no one who claimed to be teaching the system of yoga (Ballantyne 1852: ii). Another early translation is that of Rajendralala Mitra, who took special care to align his introduction with Western philosophy and separate it from the perceived irrational fanaticism of *haṭha* yogis. Like Ballantyne, Mitra also was challenged, as he “could find no Paṇḍit in Bengal who had made the Yoga the special subject of his study” (Mitra 1883: xc). This suggests that yoga, at least that espoused by Patanjali, was not widely known or practiced at this point in history. This is incongruent with the current

¹⁷ To limit confusion, I use *aṣṭāṅga* to refer to the eight-limbed practice outlined in the *Yogasūtra*, whereas I use *Ashtanga Vinyasa* to refer to the well-known style of yoga asana taught by Pattabhi Jois (frequently just called *Ashtanga*) that he chose to name after the eight-limbed model of yoga.

¹⁸ Patanjali is somewhat of a mythical figure in yoga. His identity, or the identity of author(s) of the *Yogasūtra* is unknown.

positioning of the *Yogasūtra* as a foundational text for understanding yoga. When the *Yogasūtra* was translated, it was for particular political and ideological aims, not because of its previously authoritative status.¹⁹

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) is widely credited for having brought yoga to the attention of the American public when he gave his dynamic speech on Hinduism and yoga at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. This speech afforded him celebrity status and made him a figurehead of American yoga production. As he becomes the spokesperson for yoga, he establishes the *Yogasūtra* or yoga aphorisms to be the “highest authority on Raja-Yoga²⁰ and form its textbook” (Vivekananda 1973: 5). Singleton points out that the accuracy of Vivekananda’s statements is extremely questionable, as it does not seem that the *Yogasūtra* offered either a school of philosophy or a practice tradition. Rather, Vivekananda’s endorsement was due to him being a product of the Indian colonial education system that had elevated Patanjali’s text (Singleton 2008: 83). Vivekananda operated in a modern context, working to integrate Indian thought into the West while promoting what was seen as an inherently Indian project (Halbfass 1988). He presented “‘his’ yoga to the West as India’s exemplary cultural artefact” (Singleton 2008: 85).

¹⁹ This process is not isolated to yoga. A similar Orientalist project was undertaken in the translation of religious texts to create “Hinduism.” Christian biases about religious texts lead towards a preference for locating Indian religiosity in particular Sanskrit texts and included a tendency to translate based on what they perceived as a normative religious paradigm (King 1999: 101). These texts were then ascribed a status as exemplary guides for understanding Hindu/Indian culture.

²⁰ *Rāja* yoga (literally “royal yoga”) includes Patanjali’s eight-limbs of yoga. While there are conflicting classificatory schemas that attempt to order the vastness of yoga practices, *rāja* is frequently referred to as one of the four paths of yoga, along with the three paths mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gītā*: *jyana*, *karma*, and *bhakti*. Of these four paths, *rāja* includes the postural yogas practiced today. These are the components to the fourfold path taught by Vivekananda.

While the *Yogasūtra* was translated as a project by Orientalist scholars, Vivekananda was working to promote Indian nationalism and Hinduism to audiences both abroad and back home. Born in Calcutta to elite parents, Vivekananda became a devotee to Sri Ramakrishna and promoter of a form of Advaita Vedānta (a non-dualist philosophy). As part of this process, he placed extreme emphasis on Indian spirituality as being a gift to the West – in exchange for financial support for India. Vivekananda promoted a romanticized view of India that played into existing Orientalist beliefs. “Thus the very discourse that succeeded in alienating, subordinating, and controlling India was used by Vivekānanda as a religious clarion call for the Indian people to unite under the banner of a universalistic and all-embracing Hinduism” (King 1999: 93).

Vivekananda is careful to present yoga rationally – as a science, not as some unnatural phenomenon. He grounds raja yoga as the method for teaching people how to have direct religious experiences (1973: 9). This is mostly a mental or meditative pursuit, scientific in that it involves repeatable, direct experience. Indeed, he argues that “anything that is secret and mysterious in this system of yoga should be at once rejected” (1973: 17). In this yoga, the mind is the focus, not the body. Vivekananda discusses the eight limbs of yoga per Patanjali, but he glosses over the first three (ethical teachings and asana), spends a little more time on prana and energetics, but really focuses on the final four limbs, in which one develops a meditative practice that eventually culminates in an enlightened consciousness, called *samādhi*. Vivekananda is an important figure in yoga history, not simply because he shared it with Americans or brought yoga to “the West,” but because he demonstrates an early presentation of yoga as a system of practice, and also because he explicates a yoga deeply entangled in India’s colonial politics.

Asana

The *Yogasūtra* and Vivekananda's exposition are both commonly included as yoga history, though they are presented as existing separately from any transnational politics or colonial pressures. These explain the background behind some of the formulation and transmission of yoga, but what about the asana practice that is nearly synonymous with yoga? Patanjali's text makes only brief mention of asana, and then the term refers to a meditation seat, not stretching or strength-building postures. Vivekananda mentions asana as well, again mostly as a meditation posture. Beyond such a seat, he dismisses asana as "something we have nothing to do with here, because its practices are very difficult and cannot be learned in a day, and, after all, do not lead to much spiritual growth" (1973: 23). He also points out that most of these postures can be found in the teaching of François Delsarte (a French teacher who developed a system of expressive movement) and others, making associations between asana and forms of movement taught in Europe.

The first recorded²¹ descriptions of a physical, asana-based yoga, do not occur until medieval times, in such texts as the *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* (eleventh century), *Gorakṣaśataka* (eleventh or twelfth century), and *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* (fourteenth century), when some of the asana practiced today are first documented (Lieberman 2008: 101). These medieval *haṭha* yogis²² from north India practiced an "amalgam of tantra with aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Śaivism, alchemy, and magic" (Lieberman 2008: 101). These practitioners focused on energetic techniques, including asana and pranayama to move

²¹ The limitation here being that many who want to deepen the history of asana will claim that it was transmitted orally. There is likely some truth to this claim, but it is frequently taken to extremes.

²² See White (2009) for a detailed account of this chapter of yoga history.

kuṇḍalinī śakti (an energy that usually lies dormant at the base of the spinal column) up along the spine and through the chakras and nadis. More notably, *haṭha* yogis were associated with perverted sexual practices and extreme asceticisms, and their asana with nothing more than sideshow-esque contortionism (Singleton 2010). These are the *haṭha* yogis that Vivekananda pushed out of his narrative, to sanitize yoga from such debased irrationality. And while “hatha” is used to describe some yoga classes taught today, there is much less mysticism and much more asana.

Even among the *haṭha* yogis, asana was not extremely prominent, and Vivekananda strove to make it even less so in his rendition of yogic tradition. Now, it is taken for granted that asana will be included in a yoga class. Even though Namaste Yoga takes the stance that yoga is an entire lifestyle to be practiced on and off the yoga mat and consists of much more than the physical postures, asana is still the instructional modality of choice. This most familiar form of yoga today only has very loose ties with an Indian tradition. Mark Singleton (2010) and Elliot Goldberg (2016) are two of the scholar-practitioners who have most extensively detailed the rise in asana practice in both India and America.

Asana started to once again become fashionable within the context of the worldwide physical culture movement. In the 19th century, many European countries became interested in developing the body as a means of cultivating physical and moral aptitude among their citizens, particularly men. By the end of this century, there was a pan-European trend towards exercise regimens, particularly gymnastics and body building. Physical culture promoted certain ideological principles, with the aim of creating the perfect citizen. The body thus becomes a locus for state control and a site for the cultivation of a certain subjectivity (Foucault 1995). When merged with faith, English physical culture became

known as muscular Christianity, where a sound body developed both a sound mind and a sound spirit (Singleton 2010: 83). Originally promoted in India through the public school system, and organizations such as the Salvation Army and the YMCA, physical practices enforced the body as part of the British empire.

The power of colonialism has produced highly visceral effects and somatic politics (Langford 2002, Roy 2010). The ideal of the perfect Englishmen as both physically and spiritually strong was reversed and projected on the body of the colonial other (Collingham 2001). Through the British education system, the same principles reached India, taught as gymnastics by remnants of the British colonial ex-military drillmasters. This was a way to enforce the superiority of Britain's physical culture by expanding it to an imperial level (Budd 1997: 81).

Ling gymnastics, a Swedish system developed in 1814 is particularly important here. Ling's system of movement was primarily therapeutic, in which certain postures have curative properties. This created a framework for the medicalization of asana. "Gymnastics in the Lingian and post-Lingian-paradigm provided a convenient and intelligible explanation of the function and form of asana, which to some extent circumvented the need to engage with the complexities of *hatha* yoga theory" (Singleton 2010: 87). The lack of equipment in Ling's gymnastics also made it practical for transmission to India. Other European systems of calisthenics, such as J. P. Müller's (1866-1938) simple and dynamic exercises, also inspired explanations of asana practice (Goldberg 2016: 31). Indian pioneers of asana never acknowledged the contributions of these European systems, which they often plagiarized (Goldberg 2016). So great was the association between asana and gymnastics that some

Indians tried to reverse the causation, with Indian yoga being the source of European gymnastics (Singleton 2010: 156).

Though it wasn't until the 1920s and '30s that an asana-based yoga was really established, asana fit into a larger and established framework of gymnastics and other physical culture. For example, *sūryanamaskār*, the near ubiquitous sun salutation in today's yoga classes, existed as a bodybuilding technique and wrestling warm-up before it as incorporated as a "traditional" yoga exercise (Goldberg 2016). Many harmonial gymnastic exercises practiced by American and British women closely resemble yoga as well. Harmonial gymnastics included callisthenic movement, breathing exercises, and relaxation within harmonial religion (Stebbins 1892), which sounds highly similar to yoga practice.

When B. K. S. Iyengar writes in *Light on Yoga*, perhaps the most famous yoga practice manual, that "āsanas are not merely gymnastic exercises; they are postures" (1979: 40), he goes on to detail a system of physical movement that greatly resembles gymnastics, though without the need for equipment, in an attempt to distinguish yoga from other exercises. He further describes asana as a way to develop a healthy, strong, and flexible physique (not unlike gymnastics), but he says that "their real importance lies in the way they train and discipline the mind" (1979: 40). This demonstrates a need to differentiate yoga from a variety of movement systems through arguing for its benefit beyond the physical level.

The physical culture that greatly inspired yoga practice cannot be viewed as a direct translation from England to India without accounting for the complexities of colonialism. Colonial attitudes played a large part in promoting yoga as a distinctly Indian exercise. By engaging in physical culture exercises, Indians were able to refute the colonial messages of

Indian effeminacy (Sen 2004). As Indian (Hindu) Nationalism became an increasingly pressing project throughout the early 20th century, men were encouraged to seek physical training to become strong fighters. Vivekananda himself supported physical development as being extremely important for “spiritual development of the modern Hindu” (Singleton 2010: 100). Though Vivekananda rejected the asana practice of *haṭha* yoga, he does not seem to equate asana with the project of developing physical culture. Some new yogis did associate themselves with the disruptive traditions of *haṭha* yoga, as a violent act of protest against colonial rule.

Two early yoga teachers, Sri Yogendra and Swami Kuvalayananda both were involved in physical culture in their youth, studied yoga under the guru Paramahansa Madhavadasaji, and went on to formulate their own teachings of yoga in ways that responded to India’s modernity. Both of these early-20th century yogis brought yoga out of the guru-disciple relationship and made classes open and available to the public. In its classroom presentation, yoga shed its associations with religion and became a form of health care and preventative medicine. This sort of yoga did not involve renouncing worldly life, but was appropriate for a householder who remained immersed in worldly experiences. These teachers found that their middle-class Indian clientele were less interested in a system to achieve *samādhi* than they were exercises to improve their physical health.

Yogendra is credited for teaching the first public yoga class (free of cost) at his newly formed Yoga Institute in Versova, Bombay in 1918. In doing so he “relocated the center of hatha yoga instruction from the realm of the sacred, the ashram, where renunciates withdrew from ordinary society to seek spiritual liberation, to the realm of the secular, the yoga center or institute, where students exercised together to improve their health” (Goldberg 2016: 18-

19). Yogendra's students did need some convincing to take up yoga, as they still associated it with the ascetic tradition of self-punishment (Goldberg 2016: 20). Among Yogendra's students, yoga also became a leisurely pursuit. He created a yoga routine that was both short and easy, allowing it to be taken up by the general public without too much hardship. Yoga, when presented as a counter to the anxiety induced by modernity, became about relaxation. The asanas were no longer preparatory for meditation, but a practice in and of themselves. Though the first classes were free, Yogendra implemented payment and donation systems, becoming the first to commodify yoga, allowing it to be bought and sold by middle-class Indians (Goldberg 2016: 25).

Yogendra's yoga was also seen as a type of Nature Cure,²³ part of a system of health practices that were opposed to the techniques of biomedicine. His rival, Kuvalayananda, made this connection more explicit, and sought to back it up through science. He also started a yoga institute/ashram just outside of Bombay in 1924. Formulating scientific proof was one more way of making yoga more accepted by Indians themselves, who were still wary of this practice (Goldberg 2016: 92). By emphasizing the health benefits, yoga was not only presented as an indigenous form of exercise but of health care as well.

The figure that is linked to much of asana's current popularity is T. Krishnamacharya (1888-1989), who taught such noted students as K. Pattabhi Jois, B. K. S. Iyengar, Indra Devi, and T. K. V. Desikachar. Krishnamacharya taught yoga exclusively in India; it is his students who are responsible for sharing much of his yoga throughout the world.

Krishnamacharya was born into a Brahmin family and studied Sanskrit, the Vedas, philosophy, and yoga (Goldberg 2016: 209). Krishnamacharya also claims authority from

²³ For an extensive discussion of Nature Cure and yoga in modern India, see Alter (2010).

studying under a saint in a cave in Tibet, but most, if not all, of this mysticism-laced story is likely fabricated (Goldberg 2016: 210).

It was from the 1930s to the early 1950s, when Krishnamacharya was teaching at the Mysore palace that he formed the systematized asana practice that informs the major yoga lineages. Krishnamacharya was working under the direction of the Maharaja of Mysore to popularize yoga as an Indian form of physical culture. He originally taught to the young royal boys at the palace and a few select others. Yoga classes were optional and not especially favored, seen as weak and feminine (Singleton 2010: 191). The asanas showcased at the palace were those of extreme flexibility, linked with transitions similar to the vinyasa (a common series of postures in some styles of yoga, often done to “reset” or “rebalance” the body after a sequence). Goldberg claims that many of the extreme yoga postures were invented by Krishnamacharya: “[he] wasn’t just the keeper of the flame for the old, weird *asana* tradition; as part of his teaching to the boys at the Jagan Mohan Palace in the early 1930s, he made the *asana* repertoire weirder” by including extremely contorted postures that couldn’t be accounted for in early sources (2016: 223).

Singleton (2010) argues that the asana taught by Krishnamacharya can only be understood within the drive for an Indian form of physical culture. Asana had a lot riding on it. It was supposed to refute the idea of imported gymnastics, counter the stereotype of the inherent weakness of Indians, and serve as a spectacle for entertainment and promotion (Singleton 2010: 192). Krishnamacharya taught yoga primarily as a physical pursuit. His student Iyengar notes of Krishnamacharya, “if [he] also had an eye to my deeper spiritual or personal development, he did not say so at the time” (2005: xix). Goldberg takes the critique

of Krishnamacharya even further, to say that he was creating difficult poses only to impress an audience, not to improve his students' health or test their dedication (2016: 233).

The importance here is that Krishnamacharya was not working in a vacuum, but rather was responding to certain cultural pressures. None of this is to say that yoga is not a powerful practice, but it does suggest that claims to yoga's antiquity are vastly overstated. It also suggests that there is nothing inherently sacred about asana, that they are the product of human imagination and ingenuity. Yoga is created in response to particular contexts. Asana in India was developed toward certain goals and ideologies, and it certainly was not always an essential part of a system of yoga.

American Flourishings

We can see familiar components of yoga beginning to emerge, albeit in a perhaps unfamiliar historical framing. But, none of what I have discussed so far accounts for the phenomenal growth of yoga in America in recent decades. Yoga is now trendy. *Yoga Journal* and Yoga Alliance's most recent poll provides some statistics to back up this claim: they estimate that there are 36.7 million American yoga practitioners (up from 20.4 million in 2012), with even more saying they're likely to take a class this year; 74% of practitioners started practicing only within the past five years; Americans spend over \$16 billion on yoga classes, clothes, and accessories (Yoga in America Study 2016). This same study reports that yoga is generally viewed as being beneficial to physical and mental health. Something, or many things, about what yoga offers is appealing to people.

Yoga was not always so well perceived in the American eye. In 19th century New England, some Transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Thoreau were fascinated by reading Orientalist texts and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Thoreau, in particular, practiced his version of

yoga, which involved meditation and asceticism at Walden Pond. Vivekananda's visit increased this curiosity in yoga, and he found ready donors in young New England women, ready to support his efforts in teaching meditative yoga. Vivekananda's work also articulated with the framework of metaphysical religious movements such as Christian Science, New Thought, and Theosophy. Vivekananda initiated two disciples in New York, who founded the Vedanta Society. One of these disciples began to teach hatha yoga asana as the first step to spiritual realization, instead of merely devotional teaching (Syman 2010: 69-70). The Vedanta society grew to several outposts, not all agreeing on what should be taught.

Another proto-yogic group took a different portion of yoga teachings, the tantras (tantric texts). Pierre Bernard, with his teacher Sylvais Hamati behind the scenes, founded the Tantric Order in San Francisco. The Tantric Order was a secretive and expensive private club that operated by advancing its members through a seven-level structure. Students had to pass a written examination and pay a fee to advance within the order. Given tantra's associations with magic and ceremonial sex, Bernard faced several scandals over the Order's teachings, which included Vedic texts, kundalini energy, and rituals involving sexual intercourse for members at the highest level. Bernard avoided the term hatha yoga, calling his classes "physical culture" or "physical instruction" (Syman 2010: 94). He was successful, and managed to create tantric lodges in several cities before relocating to New York. Bernard's neighbors frequently filed complaints, causing him to move all around New York and New Jersey, eventually giving up the more licentiously perceived teachings.

It was Bernard's wife, Blanche De Vries, who did more to encourage a positive image of yoga. She learned postural yoga quickly, and Bernard entrusted her with opening an institute of Yoga Gymnosophy in New York in 1919. The institute was sumptuously

decorated, as “one more proof to show visitors that Yoga succeeded materially as well as spiritually” (Cheerie Jackson, quoted in Syman 2010: 100). De Vries oversaw a dozen American hatha yoga teachers, some of whom were from prominent families. Both men and women were taking classes at the institute, which taught postures, breathing exercises, and meditation.

With an interest in yoga often informed by armchair Orientalists who never traveled themselves, gradually more and more Americans traveled to India to seek direct experiences of yoga, and more and more gurus set up shop in America. Southern California became a particular hub. Yoga, while still marginal, attracted increasing curiosity. As ever, there were many competing presentations of yoga. Theos Bernard (Pierre’s half nephew) traveled through India and Tibet, and on his return taught a variety of severe exercises, mostly pranayama and headstands held for long periods. On the other hand, Swami Prabhavananda, who founded the Hollywood Vedanta Temple (though with others doing the behind the scenes work), was a religious speaker who condoned asana for its associations with the gross body (Syman 2010). Paramahansa Yogananda, another middle-class Bengali swami who made his way to Los Angeles, developed his own system, which included asana and physical feats to prove the power of the mind over the body. Though these men were engaging public speakers, they also published books that helped yoga spread.²⁴ It also seems nearly inevitable that there was at least some degree of scandal following such gurus, very often related to sexual relationships or a large amount of worldly possessions.

²⁴ One of my informants very firmly cites Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1955) as his initial exposure to yoga, leading to a strong interest in meditation, even before he started practicing asana. When we were in Varanasi, this informant sought to visit the places mentioned in Yogananda’s book.

Yoga was far from mainstream, but it was an object of discussion and interest, though not always reflected in a positive light. Indra Devi (born Eugenie Peterson in 1899), the first woman and westerner to study with Krishnamacharya, taught gentle and relaxing yoga classes to Hollywood stars – specifically calling her teachings Hatha Yoga, despite warnings about hatha’s negative associations (Syman 2010: 180). Born in Latvia, and raised in Russia and Germany, Devi eventually married a Czech diplomat stationed in Bombay, where she took an interest in yoga. Devi’s Hollywood clientele did much to push yoga into the public awareness. With the desire for health, beauty, and youth, Devi’s yoga, at least in her initial introduction, focused on the physical. Vedanta might have marketed itself as focusing on a body-mind connection, but it neglected the physical body, focusing instead on philosophy. Devi found a ready market in Los Angeles. She taught regular yoga classes, consisting of postures and deep breathing (not referred to as pranayama) that met the needs of Hollywood stars, especially women, who were under pressure to appear beautiful. As in India, physical culture exercises, such as calisthenics, provided a background for creating and understanding asana, with many “asanas” already being performed under different names. Devi held that it was the deep rhythmic breathing that separated yoga from other exercises (Syman 2010: 187). By the 1950s, yoga was accepted as a healthful pastime, promising beauty and youth. Devi’s hatha yoga was nothing more than the best way to get and stay healthy, with no more complexity than that, and certainly no espoused relationship to Hinduism or anything that might be culturally or religiously offensive (Syman 2010: 190).

Just a decade later, yoga got caught up in the consciousness-seeking culture of the sixties. In this historical retracing, we are beginning to enter into events that had a direct influence on many of my informants. Though some swamis, including Prabhavananda

(Syman 2010: 208), frowned on the shortcut of psychedelics, their use created a surge of interest in spirituality, particularly Zen. Yoga's subtle body, including the infamous kundalini awakening, was compared to and understood through LSD trips. LSD had an immediacy that yoga greatly lacked, but the two became different means to the same end. Or, they became mixed together in part of the same youthful transgressive counterculture. Indian gurus frowned upon this, even banning drug use among their students. The pattern shifted to where one graduated from drugs to move into the practices of yoga (Syman 2010: 226). Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation, framed his method as one that worked without drugs. Eventually, many gurus met their downfalls, again, usually involving sexual relationships and accusations of culthood.

Meanwhile, hatha yoga teachers distanced themselves from these gurus, and continued to teach classes. In trying to separate themselves, they presented yoga as a workout discipline, where it grew for a while, but by the 1980s, it got swallowed by other, newly popular workouts, such as aerobics. In terms of being culturally relevant, yoga couldn't deliver the strength and power that many women sought after (Syman 2010: 266). It took a more vigorous yoga to compete in this market, such as the heated Bikram yoga or the quick-moving Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga. Both of these yogas are strenuous, and both adhere to a set sequence of postures. They also encourage daily practice from their adherents.

Syman describes yoga as a Rorschach test, where "students and teachers see in it the contents of their own minds, their fantasies and desires" (2010: 202). It is precisely because yoga is so open to interpretation that it appeals to both swamis and scientists, middle-aged housewives and young hippies. Yoga had yet to grow to the same prominence it has today, but it made rapid progress, often flipping back and forth in its approach, generating new

styles and hybrids, some of which are intensely physical, some of which are gentle. Even at Namaste Yoga, the classes are varied in their content and approach. In addition to the boga class I took at the university fitness center, I've experienced hybrids such as AcroYoga,[®] and Laughter Yoga. And, lest the order I've presented yoga history suggest that yoga has solely been transferred from India to the English-speaking West, yoga practice in cosmopolitan India has been revitalized by cultural flows in the opposite direction (Askegaard and Eckhardt 2013, Nichter 2013). Other areas of the world have been introduced to yoga as well, where it undoubtedly takes a variety of forms arising out of location. I refrain from making a general statement about the zeitgeist of yoga today, other than one that emphasizes its immense variability as well as its seeming omnipresence, especially in mainstream America.

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“Much of yoga is subverted,” one of my informants told me. But is it really? Yoga as we know it has changed – multiple times. But, it is not a shallow echo of what it once was, rather it has been constructed, built up to serve various functions. I am much less interested in debating orthopraxy than I am about the existence of a drive for authenticity in what has historically been a conglomeration. Examining yoga history seems to yield more information about European attitudes than it does about India itself. Colonialism and other forms of global exchange and the trafficking of images and ideals have arguably had more of an influence on contemporary yoga than indigenously Indian traditions have. American yoga is not a case of cultural appropriation, as is occasionally charged. Rather, it is a transnational reinventing, one which draws on influences from throughout the world to appeal to large numbers of practitioners. Yoga in America is diverse; so is yoga in India.

I have tried to offer a counter-narrative to the presumed authenticity and originality of yoga as an Indian practice. Because so much of the yoga narrative I am familiar with as a practitioner relies on ahistorical claims, I feel compelled to offer some context to refute such notions, as well as check my own preconceptions arising from my experience as a yoga student. Such narratives arising from the yoga studio are not unimportant – they play an important role in producing yoga – though they are frequently not wholly accurate. Furthermore, I want to make the case that yoga is, and has been, an inherently political project. It can be easy to think of a yoga practice as a neutral activity, but, in examining history, yoga has been created in relation to various political agendas. As I move forward to discussing yoga tourism, I argue that this activity is also not neutral, but is caught up in lingering creations of cultural consumption and power.

LOOKING

Throughout the history of yoga, visibility has been key for transmitting attitudes and ideas. Whether it is the spectacle of the sideshow contortionist yogi or yogi magician in 19th century England (Dane 1933), photographic reproduction as way to disseminate poses in a clear, accessible manner (Singleton 2010: chapter 8), performativity in Indian yoga camps (Alter 2008), or the glossy covers of *Yoga Journal* magazine that almost unfailingly feature a slender, white, stylishly dressed woman the very act of looking is powerful. Considering the relationship between colonialism and yoga, the colonial gaze and its technologies “turned people into observed objects, and authorized the official discourses of European viewers, whose representations determined and fixed the status and stature of colonized subjects” (Paidipaty 2008: 262). Further, the gaze plays a role in Indian worship, as *darśan*, auspicious sight given by deities, saints, and sadhus, and taken by the devotee (Eck 1998b). This opens the act of seeing to having a broader array of cultural meanings than we are perhaps familiar with.²⁵

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“I feel invasive,” one of my informants whispered to me in a hushed tone, as though this was a thought she did not expect to have and could not voice to the whole group. As we took a boat down the Ganga, the liveliness of Varanasi was on full display. Above the far bank of the river, the sun was rising. It was only the second sunrise we had been in India, and it marked the beginning of the auspicious day of Shivaratri. According to our guide, there was a special planetary alignment that made this Shivaratri extra auspicious. It was

²⁵ For the importance of considering Indian modes of thinking in examining the tourist gaze in the context of Ganga Aarti see (Zara 2015).



Image 8. Varanasi as seen from the Ganga.

impossible for us to know if the holiday added to the growing bustle on the near bank or if this was a daily routine for the residents of the city. Our boat was narrow, and most of our group was sitting on benches along the sides. From my seat on the stern, I saw both the ghats of Varanasi and everyone's reactions as we floated on the murky water, letting the current carry us along. The more photographically-inclined snapped pictures from both sides of the boat, capturing both life on the ghats and the much more serene and silent sunrise. A few people sat still, soaking in the sights.

I agreed with this informant: we were invasive. I had been thinking that since our arrival, though I hadn't said anything, not wanting to impose my own ideas on the group. We were not even subtly invasive, sneaking into the Varanasi pre-dawn morning. Instead we stood out glaringly. Twenty-one fair-skinned American tourists, sticking our cameras into places they probably weren't welcome and nearly getting hit by motorcycles and auto

rickshaws as we tried to walk through the busy city. On this first full day in Varanasi many of us were wearing newly purchased clothes that we bought two nights prior, right after we arrived in Delhi, as if a change in our wardrobe would make a big difference in how local we seemed. We don't speak a bit of Hindi, and some of us don't even know that the language here is called Hindi, not Hindu. Several members of our group had been to India before, though none to Varanasi. Bathing, clothes-washing, and unknown other morning activities were carried out in front of our gaze. It seemed as though the bulk of the city's population remained on shore as many brightly colored boats were moored. We floated past two crematory ghats with flames licking up from wooden pyres by the river's muddy edge. Here, it was suggested, though not ordered, that we refrain from taking photographs of this encounter with death. Smoke and smog mingled together, a haze over the river. Occasionally a worship call carried to the river from the shore. I distinctly heard a cry of "Hanuman" pierce the air.

Here in Varanasi, I felt the "tourist gaze" most acutely. This is a phrase first used by John Urry (1990), who theorizes the tourist gaze as being in contrast with non-tourist experiences. However, my use of the phrase "gaze" is more related to Mulvey (1999), who argues that the gaze is situated to reproduce and cater to a particular power dynamic. Tourist practices also involve a "multitude of gazes" as it is put forth by Lutz and Collins (1991). I also follow Foucault (1976, 1995) in using "gaze" to encompass a form of knowledge/power both of the body and enacted through the body.

Varanasi was the perfect place to enact and experience the tourist gaze. At our following two stops, Haridwar and the remote mountain village of Shivanandi, we were more isolated to our own group. In Rishikesh, the final leg of the trip, there were so many tourists

and travelers, which for me had the effect of making the city seem less “Indian.” While out walking, one informant jokingly complained that there were too many tourists here. Others in our group took the range of nationalities as a sign of welcoming hospitality and spiritual awakening that is open to all. As a result, many informants cite Rishikesh as their favorite stop. Yet, for me, even long after our return, there is something about Varanasi that stands out as the most poignant part of the trip. Encounters with difference were closer, more intense, more sensory. This city was everything I was nervous about India being: crowded, noisy, polluted. And yet, to my surprise, getting caught up in the bustle was not entirely unpleasant, but it instead fascinated me and encouraged me to dig deeper. As much as I was anxious about this stop, I was intrigued. It is said that Varanasi is one of India’s most sacred and timeless cities, popular for pilgrimage.²⁶ To die in this city liberates a devout Hindu from *samsara*, the cycle of reincarnation. Maybe by the time we made it to Rishikesh we were slightly accustomed to India, but in Varanasi our surroundings seemed freshly strange. The streets were narrower, more crowded, louder. The clamor was not confined to the streets but penetrated through the walls of our hotel. We were wrapped up in India.

The evening after Shivaratri, we walked down to the ghats and got on a boat once more. This time we were going to Ganga Aarti, the nightly puja overlooking the Ganga. Part religious ceremony, part staged spectacle, it was difficult to untangle exactly what the event is.²⁷ From our boat on the river, we were removed from the action. Many tourists and locals chose to sit on the crowded ghat, and additionally the river was seemingly overflowing with

²⁶ For more about Varanasi, also known as Banaras or Kāśī, and its prominence as a devotional city, read Eck (1998a) and Parry (1994). See also Huberman (2012) for an ethnographic account of children who work in Varanasi’s resulting riverside tourist industry.

²⁷ Zara (2015) discusses the con-fusion of meaning and gazes at Ganga Aarti.

boats as well, so tightly packed that one could step from boat to boat. There were commercial photographers and salesmen hawking small trinkets. A few people took photos of us, in a surprising reversal of roles. Apparently, this many white people in one boat was a spectacle in itself. The ceremony started on the bank, though we were too far away to really notice what was going on, aside from the circular waving of flaming lamps that stood out against the rapidly darkening sky. The sounds easily traveled down to the water. Chanting and the ringing of bells assaulted my eardrums. The fellow traveler seated next to me, is rhythmically moving with the sound. He told me he loves sound and rhythm and perhaps we could each find our own rhythms here as part of the music.

It was after our return, when most of our group had reunited by the water once more, gathering to have our own puja and aarti at a nearby lake, attempting to reenact our Indian experiences, that this same informant elaborated on this thought. He and several others were sitting on a dock, and I'm bobbing in a kayak, my elbow resting on the dock to keep from floating away. "I can see why Varanasi attracts people and pilgrims trying to find themselves," he said. "There are so many layers of activity going on that it forms a kind of white noise, and you're forced to turn inward." Here, Varanasi is just a backdrop, a setting for self-inquiry, offering little more than constructive static to focus oneself.

Different Views

To a large extent, when I call the activity of traveling to India tourism, I am imposing my own frame. The trip was advertised as a "spiritual pilgrimage." The studio owner told me, "India's the source. We're going to the source. That's why I call it a pilgrimage." I am skeptical of the appropriateness of referring to us as pilgrims on the grounds that, while we went to place of pilgrimage and participated in some activities that can be considered

religious, we very much lacked the connection to Hinduism to really grasp the meaning or importance of these places. For many people, there was curiosity about India and yoga, but not the devotion of a pilgrim. Some travelers may have thought of themselves as pilgrims, especially the one woman who did identify as Hindu. But, I acknowledge that spiritual pilgrimage and tourism are related acts. “A tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist” (Turner and Turner 1978: 20). There are similarities between pilgrimage and tourism. Both are a break in the regular structure of life and function as liminal states. Both also create a sense of *communitas*, which was quite evident among our group.

Tourist is not necessarily the perfect label either. When John Urry (1990) uses the term “tourist gaze,” he emphasizes an element of leisure and holiday. I don’t believe that any of my informants chose to go to India because they wanted a relaxing holiday. From the beginning, we knew that in many ways it would be a difficult trip, one that would be challenging and uncomfortable at times. And indeed, each person had their own highs and lows. And though most people spoke positively about the trip, especially after we had returned, one informant revealed to me that she did not enjoy the trip much at all. Ultimately, our gaze was shaped by a number of interacting factors. As a group, I am comfortable that characterizing us as tourists is accurate. Individually, we had varying motivations for making the trip, as well as differences in age, ability, and background in yoga. One person, who went on the studio’s previous trip to India four years ago, told me that she was expecting the trip to be more meditative, with more of an introspective focus.

The yoga tourist gaze is one that takes an interest in spiritual India, but is mostly interested in finding some level of psychological insight. The studio owner frequently stressed that processing this trip would take time, and new aspects would be revealed to us



Image 9. Photographing the streets of Varanasi from a van.

long after our return. As yoga tourists, we consistently find ourselves in a “flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (Said 1979: 7). There’s an India suitable for study, for inhabiting for brief periods of time, for referencing as yoga’s historical locale. Yoga tourism, and Namaste Yoga’s presentation of yoga in general, structures India as a backdrop for our own experiences. “I went to India because I thought it would help me take [my spiritual and yoga practice] to the next level,” one informant told me. We might have had the internal gaze of the pilgrim, but we lacked the religious background.

Yoga tourism can also be seen as an extension of the colonial gaze, with an emphasis on “fixity” – a paradoxical mode of representation that constantly repeats the supposedly unchanging stereotypical aspects (Bhabha 1983). It is mistaken to believe that the

postcolonial context marks the end of colonialism. Rather, I use the term to show a continued impact of colonial entanglement, even after the formal decolonization process (Loomba 1998: 12). When seeing the gaze as a result of power and privilege (Gaines 1983), it becomes important to examine how and for whom these representations are being made. The stereotypes of the tourist gaze are reproduced and spread through photography.

Photography

One needs to situate tourism representations politically, examine what they include and exclude, and expose whose interests they serve. A critical analysis of tourism representations must recognize the political linkages between tourism discourses and technologies of power to uncover the ideologies and practices that structure touristic relations. One needs to examine how the ways tourists are enmeshed within webs of significance and taken-for-granted assumptions created by the world of tourism representations constitute the meanings they have and constitute them as political subjects. (Mellinger 1994: 776)

The camera is the tool, or weapon, of choice for tourists. “The tourist gaze has been inseparably tied up with the development and popularisation of cameras and photographs” (Urry and Larson 2011: 155). It is perhaps taken for granted that as tourists, we were armed with cameras, or in the case of many in our group, smart phones. Though yoga trains us to be mindful and present in the moment, many of us reached for our camera or phone at the slightest impulse. The camera is posited to be a weapon, and it is also a shield. “Many tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture” (Sontag 1977: 10). The process of photography becomes a soothing ritual in the face of anxieties about difference. It places a barrier between us and them.

To photograph is a manner of taking control of what one is seeing. Not only do photographs give a sense of having been in a particular moment, they also claim and impose a particular power/knowledge over the subject. Tourism, and tourist photography in

particular, recreates power dynamics. “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power” (Sontag 1977: 4). To take a picture is to structure reality in a particular way, one that conforms with certain conceptions of how reality is supposed to be – for example, a reality of yoga that is enforced by Namaste Yoga. The photograph is easily taken for reality, but it is marked by conscious and unconscious editing decisions.

I am not outside this dynamic. I traveled with a camera and certainly took plenty of pictures. I did try to step into the role of an observer at times, and I watched, embarrassed, as many of my fellow travelers eagerly snapped away. I took very few pictures of Indians, focusing instead on documenting the encounters of Americans with India and Indians. There was the first night we were in India, where we shared a hotel with a family preparing for a wedding. As the family, dressed up for the event, left the hotel while we were waiting in the lobby, a few members of our group rushed to take pictures, never mind that we might be detaining them. The next morning, as we were waiting to depart the hotel, a group of children wandered down the street, and again, several people jumped at this photo opportunity. The first incident was to capture India’s beauty and the second to capture its poverty, both traits to which we were programmed to react and record.

It was as if, in Mitchell’s phrasing, we were in the “world-as-exhibition” (1988). Experiencing India was similar to being in the yoga studio, with its convenient mode of consuming the Other. Being in India put the country on display as if it were an exhibition, just as it is exhibited in particular ways back in Westville. As invasive observers, it was as if we were touring an exhibition. And it is true that India was presented in certain ways and



Image 10. Photographing children on the street in Delhi.

that we had certain experiences that were planned for us. But, we tended to treat every encounter as if it was an exhibition just for us, from waylaying Indian families to gawking at Buddhist monks circumambulating a stupa. And, because we were visiting an exhibition, it was perfectly natural to take pictures, as though everyone around us was simply an actor carrying out a prescribed role, while we were somehow outside the reality we aimed to record.

This argument about photography can be expanded to yoga tourism and yoga representations as well. Namaste Yoga consistently edits India. Much like a tourist's photo that captures experience in a certain light and is then displayed as evidence of an experience, Namaste Yoga focuses on particular aspects of India and highlights them for display. India's spirituality is centered in the frame, and any aspects that might contradict a timeless, authentic India are cropped out. When Namaste Yoga promotes bhakti yoga as its focus, it is

making a certain statement as to what yoga is, while consciously excluding parts of the picture. And this does not just happen with yoga, but also with the complexity of India. Yoga is seen as Indian, and it is often the only thing my informants think they know about India. This leaves out so much of India, and even makes it seem as though yoga is a ubiquitous practice in India. As a simulacrum, Namaste Yoga creates a certain “India,” which is produced in Westville and then proceeds to map and create our experiences when we travel to the country of India. As yoga tourists, we were primed to see India in particular ways, which we could then duplicate in our photographs and conversations after we returned.

Subjectivity

As yoga students and travelers to India we experienced the unusual position that Mitchell refers to as “modern subjectivity, which is not a ‘natural’ relation of the person to the world but a careful and curious construction” (1988: 59). In modern subjectivity, “the subject was set up outside the facades, like the visitor to an exhibition, and was surrounded and contained by them” (Mitchell 1988: 59-60), having a position simultaneously outside and inside. Mitchell goes on to explain the effects this position has on organizing a view of truth:

The world is set up before an observing subject as though it were the picture of something. Its order occurs as the relationship between observer and picture, appearing and experienced in terms of the relationship between the picture and the plan or meaning it represents. It follows that the appearance of order is at the same time an order of appearance, a hierarchy. The world appears to the observer as a relationship between picture and reality, the one present but secondary, a mere representation, the other only represented, but prior, more original, more real. This order of appearance is what might be called the hierarchy of truth. (1988: 60)

As both Mitchell and Baudrillard tell us, the problem with such a view point is that there are no simple originals, no hierarchy of imitator and imitation. Yet, this is precisely what we look for in India – the timeless original, the authentic tradition. “Believing in an ‘outside world’, beyond the exhibition, beyond all process of representation, as a realm inert

and disenchanted – the great signified, the referent, the empty, changeless Orient- the modern individual is under a new and more subtle enchantment” (Mitchell 1988: 62). As much as Namaste Yoga is itself viewed as India, the search for the truer, more direct India remains.

And herein lies the contradiction. When someone from the yoga studio views the “real India,” they are viewing through expectations based on the hyperreal. These expectations are unmeetable because the simulacrum of Namaste Yoga is ultimately a constructed view, just as constructed as the dichotomy between East and West. I have shown that Namaste Yoga offers a view of India that is incomplete and largely fiction. Additionally, even while in India we took a narrow, one-dimensional view of the country and its inhabitants. Not only are such views inherently incomplete, they frequently align with colonial and primitivist attitudes, and most harmfully strip Indians of their human complexity.

And we cannot pretend that the Namaste Yoga or any yoga institution exists as a discrete entity and that its constructions do not spread beyond its boundaries. The impact of the yoga studio is not limited to the time clients spend in yoga classes. If we indeed carry the teachings of yoga off the mat and into the world, as encouraged, how does that affect our thoughts of India and its people? When the simulacrum of India becomes mistaken for reality, there is no longer any recognition of its constructed nature.

Gerald Vizenor explains how this functions, using his concept of the “postindian,” in reference to Native Americans:

The *indian* is the invention, and *indian* cultures are simulations, that is, the ethnographic construction of a model that replaces the real in most academic references. ... The *indian* was simulated to be an absence, to be without a place. The reference of the simulation is a weak metaphor of colonialism. ... The postindian is after the simulation, and the sense of a native presence is both resistance and

survival. So the presence of postindians teases the reader to see the absence, the simulation of the other, as a problem. (Vizenor and Lee 1999: 85)

The postindian is the existence that is not accounted for in the narrow models of the *indian*. It's pushing back against control and reclaiming agency. The simulation of the Other is indeed a significant problem.

None of the representations I have discussed throughout this thesis are intended to be problematic by those who use them, though as Vizenor argues, they have considerable repercussions for those who are represented. Even though Namaste Yoga's representations are deployed with the seeming intention of honoring and respecting India, they fall far short of this goal. And there is certainly no recognition that us American yogis are placed in a position of power when we are the ones traveling to India as spiritual seekers. But there is also no recognition that we are working inside our own constructs, and that our models might fail to completely account for reality. These models claim an authoritative absolute truth, which by their very nature are destined to be incomplete.

I have discussed elements of the simulation of "India," as well as some of the ways in which they fall short. They present restrictive, binding models of what it means to be Indian. They show a static, monolithic view of Indian culture that denies hybridity and change. They hamper a more complex understanding of India that would be helpful in this increasingly globalized world. And I recognize the contradiction within this project, as a postcolonial project, of trying to dismantle stereotypes and generalizations while imposing my own framework (Chatterjee 2016). So, while being sensitive to the many layers of narrative at the yoga studio, there are clearly some significant issues with this set of representations worthy of consideration.

I am not attempting to single out Namaste Yoga as the only yoga studio that deploys harmful representations. This issue is spread throughout the larger institutions of yoga. Though I use a single yoga studio to ethnographically inform my arguments, none of what I have discussed is outside the view of India taken by other studios, yoga teacher celebrities, and publications such as *Yoga Journal* and *Yoga International*. There are plenty of media developed for both yoga teachers and yoga students that emphasize the same elements of India as Namaste Yoga.

Many sources within yoga represent India and yoga in ways that reinforce stereotypes, creating a certain power/knowledge through representations. The yoga studio allows us to “see” India, but only in limited ways that structure power through putting India and its inhabitants on display. Because of the constructed nature of this viewing, seeing India through a yoga class and seeing India through yoga tourism are both ultimately incomplete views. These are simulations by the yoga studio, not an inherent truth of India.

CONCLUSION: Shantaya?

Approaching yoga from a position of conflict seems contradictory. After all, yoga is presented as a peaceful activity. The word peace comes up over and over again. The old Namaste Yoga was located on Shantaya Lane – the town required the studio owner to name her driveway once she opened a business in her backyard – a street name which means peace. The studio owner referred to us teacher training graduates as a “tribe of peaceful warriors” (my façade of the peaceful yoga teacher must have been successful). In yoga classes, we are encouraged to find peace within ourselves so we can share it with the world. I think back to Rishikesh, where we encountered the World Peace Yoga School. The studio owner quotes one of her teachers, Swami Satchidananda, the founder of Integral Yoga, as saying that yoga can be summed up in having an easeful body, a peaceful mind, and a useful life. Peace, and other positive attributes such as love and joy are used to describe a yoga practice and its results. Such a purportedly peaceful practice seems ill-suited to be approached from my position of conflict.

When I describe my position as one of conflict, it seems incongruent with the yoga promoted in the studio around me. But on a larger scale, yoga holds a position that is very much conflicted. The great scope of yoga allows it to be used in many different ways and to various ends. Yoga being taught in public schools in the Encinitas school district in California was taken to the courtroom by parents enraged about their children learning Hinduism (the school system then renamed poses and removed any religious connotations from its curriculum, and the court ruled that yoga could continue to be taught as physical education without infringing on religious freedom or being inherently religious). In India,

religious minorities object to Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushing yoga as part of a Nationalist agenda, including his successful efforts to get recognition from the United Nations for an annual International Day of Yoga. In countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, and Egypt, Islamic authorities have issued fatwas forbidding devout Muslims from practicing yoga. Outside of religious debates, there is the question of yoga competitions, and even yoga obtaining status as an Olympic sport, which seems absolutely antithetical to the yoga I know. But both myself and competitive yogis claim to be doing yoga, whatever that is. And then there are issues surrounding body image and acceptance in yoga, perceived by many to be exclusive and tailored to a slender, hypermobile, white body. Even the biomechanical safety of some extreme yoga poses has been called into question, undermining the health and wellness aspect of the practice.

Though we may be chanting “shanthi” at the studio level and extolling the benefits of a yoga practice, on a global scale yoga is full of conflicts. Arguments about what yoga is and is not abound, as do arguments about who yoga practitioners are. The above list is just a sampling of controversies in recent years. Yoga’s history has been just as conflicted, especially in the mire of colonial politics. These are issues that are easy to lose sight of, if they are ever glimpsed at all, when one walks into Namaste Yoga, a space designed to be welcoming, and indeed peaceful, as well as Indian. Though a position of conflict might seem out of place with the yoga taught at Namaste Yoga, my stance corresponds with larger issues in contemporary yoga practice.

Above all, this is a thesis about representation, the ways in which yoga is visualized, talked about, and embodied, and how these representations are put together to structure power/knowledge. I question how and why yoga is a representation of India. For me, a yoga

teacher, this is a personal issue, even a question of professional ethics. As an anthropologist, the pattern of a Western culture finding fascination in some aspect of an Eastern culture is nothing new. But the yoga practiced worldwide is just as much a product of Euro-Americans as it is Indians. In an increasingly globalized world that makes both direct and indirect encounters with India easier for many to attain, we need to make sense of this construction of the Other that is in large part our own fantasy. Of utmost importance is being able to recognize that these representations are indeed constructions, reflecting Western desires and ambitions rather than any sort of essential Indian truth. Through postcolonial theory, I show that yoga fits into a larger pattern of Orientalist representations and selective appropriations. I also use the theory of simulacra to show that Namaste Yoga's representations of India are hyperreal, in fact creating their own reality in how they structure a local "India" for residents in Westville.

I problematize yoga to encourage a rethinking of a practice that seems so peaceful and pure, so distant from conflicts. I can walk into the luxurious environment of Namaste Yoga and be greeted with smiles from the people who showed up for class that day, many of whom I have come to consider friends. They do not realize the conflicts of yoga. They come to the studio to meet with their friends, find ease in their minds and bodies, and maybe find spiritual wellness too. The way in which yoga is presented at Namaste Yoga works for them.

Yet, it is necessary to reconsider yoga. I respect that yoga is a powerful practice that is helping many people. I also respect that there are problems with this practice precisely because it is powerful – that is to say caught up in various global inequities of power. As yogis who have been to India, we have acquired certain power/knowledge, which can then be disseminated through the established institution of the yoga studio. For the studio owner and

the other teachers in the group, that means they can speak about India with more authority to their yoga classes and the wider community. For those of us in who traveled to India and were in teacher training, we came back and shared our impressions of India to those in our class who did not go. I found that when the group returned from India we were incessantly asked to speak about India to both students and teachers, who, of course, already knew that India is amazing and spiritual. Stories of India were recounted over lunch in the café in the very same hyperreal environment that inspired these attitudes.

This is a circular production of knowledge. Namaste Yoga, as I have argued, functions as a hyperreal space that replaces India, with yoga functioning as a metonym for India and eastern spirituality more broadly. Through classes and the strategically decorated environment, certain attitudes are fostered that create “India.” It is these same attitudes that provided a framework that those of us who traveled to the country of India use to interpret our experiences. Our experience, as we told it, offered nothing new, and when we returned, we simply solidified the pre-existing narratives. Because the shared experiences in India were so important and formed tight bonds of community, the group, dubbed the Bhakti Buddies, frequently reunites. We lament about how hard it is to share our experiences with those outside of the studio. Friends and family may take interest, but it is the people within the yoga studio that are the most ready consumers of our stories.

In writing this thesis, I am trying to break this self-affirming cycle, performing a rupture in this narrative.

EPILOGUE

“As you try to balance here in eagle pose, it’s okay if you wobble. If you fall out of the pose, take a breath and find your way back. Balance is a lot like perfection, it sounds good in theory, but it doesn’t actually exist, and you’ll likely just make just make yourself miserable trying to attain it. Let this balancing practice help you find more steadiness as you move through the changes of life.”

The next time I teach *garuḍāsana* is about two months after I graduated from teacher training. This time I’m standing in a local garden, offering a free community class themed around the idea of balance. I smile slightly as my students sway back and forth, trying to hold the pose, and I remind them that they are welcome to place both feet on the ground if they would like. Outside of the confines of the studio, I dispense with much of “tradition.” There are no statues of Ganesh staring at this class or any Sanskrit chanting being played over the sound system. I do retain the customary “namaste” (translated as “the divine light in me sees the divine light in you”) at the end of class. I genuinely find this recognition of shared existence to be a beautiful statement, especially at the end of a yoga class when students and teacher alike must leave the yoga mat and face the complexities of the world that tend to fade away during yoga class.

When I teach in the environment of the yoga studio, it is harder to break the teaching habits I dislike. Once, when I was struggling to find words, I hastily justified the complicated twist I was teaching by saying it was named after an Indian sage. I caught myself nearly instantly, but I didn’t try to correct my statements to the class. I felt guilty about it, but I had a suspicion that most of the clients who come to the studio expected particular things, and learning about the invented tradition of naming yoga poses was not part

of the environment I was supposed to cultivate in this setting, especially as an employee of the studio.

I've tried to find a teaching style that adequately reflects my concerns about yoga while still making the necessary concessions to be palatable to yoga consumers. I describe my teaching as a slow flow that focuses on developing mindfulness and heartfulness, two intertwined modes of awareness. Mindfulness to be aware of what you are doing, and heartfulness to hold your experiences with a sense of compassion. Sometimes, I have a student approach me after a class and thank me for teaching. Often, they tell that me something about what I taught was meaningful to them and made a difference in their day. It's those moments that make being a yoga teacher worthwhile.

I continue to teach yoga, when I'm asked. Yet, more and more frequently, I've wanted to roll up my yoga mat and never go to a studio again. I haven't quite given up on yoga, but I am increasingly frustrated by it. I've reached a point in this project where I can see the same ideas and representations being played out over and over. As a researcher, this consistency is a good thing, but as someone caught up within the community of the yoga studio, I desperately hope for change.

It seems a shame that yoga, a practice with so much to offer in terms of not only self-improvement but larger social activism and transformation (Stone 2009), can be so problematic in terms of its presentation of India. Yoga is used to foster community engagement and activism (Remski 2012), heal eating disorders and substance abuse (Roff 2012 and Mehta 2016), inform legal practice for social justice (González and Eckstrom 2016), and address community violence (Catlett and Bunn 2016), among other very positive functions. As I've been writing this thesis, I've had one of the recent issues of *Yoga Journal*

(September 2016) sitting among the piles of books surrounding my work area. The cover announces the “Good Karma Awards” and highlights the story of yoga teacher training offered in a prison.

And here is the crux of the position of conflict: contemporary American yogis are using their practice to do great things, though arguably in settings far less privileged than Namaste Yoga. I’ve stared at that *Yoga Journal* cover and wondered if perhaps I’m misguided in my sincere criticism of yoga. I’ve had a hard time remembering the transformative power of yoga while I’ve been engaged in this critical project. I miss the naivety of my early encounters with yoga, where that hour or hour-and-a-half spent in yoga class was genuinely the best part of my day. I honestly believe that practicing yoga made my life better. Now my newfound awareness of the harsher complexities of yoga tends to provoke irritation rather than peacefulness, and I question whether or not I’ll remain involved with yoga after the end of this project.

Would departing from the yoga studio accomplish anything, other than perhaps gratifying my self-righteousness? If I abstain from teaching yoga, someone else would be ready to take my place. Namaste Yoga has trained so many teachers in the past ten years as to create a competitive job market. It seems better to have someone who is as aware of the cultural complexities of yoga’s production as possible leading a class than to have someone teaching who is willing to unquestioningly propagate inaccuracies about India and its relation to yoga. And I know there are a lot of those teachers out there, many of whom I’ve come to know well through this project. So, I keep teaching, for now. It’s not the perfect solution, but it’s the best I can manage. Yoga has taught me many things, one of which is that one does not immediately give up when encountering difficulty. I don’t encounter a difficult

pose and leave the studio. Instead, I stay with that difficulty, not expecting to grasp it right away, but hoping that with practice I will find more ease in the difficult positions. Along the way, I might get frustrated with myself or feel inadequate, but the best thing to do is to take a breath, maybe take a break, but keep on trying.

I find myself searching for answers in yoga teachings, but ultimately, I feel so thoroughly disillusioned by the enterprise of modern yoga that I must look elsewhere, knowing that there are no easy answers. My search is undoubtedly complicated by my position as a yoga teacher and student, and I worry that this position makes me too sympathetic and complicit with the institution of the yoga studio. Questioning the very ground on which you stand is truly a difficult practice. I hope that my intellectual tension and conflict can not only be useful in thinking about global flows of yoga, and how yoga is constructed and reconstructed, but in addition will open up space to reconsider yoga praxis and pedagogy.

I do not have the solution for some pristine yoga that is excised from its history of conflict. That form of yoga does not exist, nor should it. Yoga, like so many other practices, can never be completely outside violence and conflict, as much as we might like to think that it can be. What I do have is a willingness to question yoga and the hope that eventually this will spark conversations and eventual change within and without the yoga studio. I maintain that yoga has a lot to offer, but yoga's benefits, especially for white middle-class Americans, are no excuse to continue the shallow representations of the hyperreal India. It matters that yoga practitioners are taught to see India in certain ways, especially when these ways evoke colonial stereotypes and romanticized racism.

Throughout its history, yoga has shown that it can evolve to match a range of philosophies, attitudes, and beliefs. I believe it is time to consider a new iteration of yoga, one that is honest about its past and aware of the complexities entangled in its teachings. I want yoga teachers to stop claiming that what we do on our yoga mats is somehow related to ancient Indian practices. I want Indians to be seen as people outside of shallow stereotypes that are easier for consumption. I want a recognition that cultures and practices are not bounded by time and space but spread and evolve. Ultimately, I want a yoga that sees India as more than just the object of a fantasy.

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