

## 2 Saving Yogis

### Spiritual Nationalism and the Proselytizing Missions of Global Yoga

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#### **Abstract**

The portable practice of yoga first migrated through unidirectional networks that transported knowledge from India to the West in the early twentieth century. Today, yoga flows through multidirectional and reverse networks, exposing new forms of hypermobility. This chapter analyzes one of these reverse networks by focusing particularly on how North American yogis export yoga globally through proselytization, marketing, and yoga *sevā* (“selfless service”) tourism. It reveals how these modern yogis construct the practice as a universal good, and the benefits of “doing yoga” are often parsed with religious language. The author argues that the current hypermobility of yoga is more productively analyzed through missiological models of proselytization and conversion as opposed to economic models of production and consumption.

**Keywords:** yoga, spirituality, secularism, proselytization, globalization, nationalism

#### **Introduction**

Many contemporary postural yoga practitioners believe that postural yoga is an ancient spiritual practice birthed on the Indian subcontinent approximately 5000 years ago. The Indian government has reinforced this common popular understanding by revitalizing and claiming yoga as a product of India through global extravaganzas, like the inaugural International Yoga Day (IYD) on 21 June 2015 (Associated Press 2015). In a speech at the United

Nations leading up to the 2015 IYD celebrations, Indian Prime Minister (PM), Narendra Modi characterized yoga as “an invaluable gift of ancient Indian tradition” (Suri 2015). Yoga has been similarly framed as India’s gift to the world since the rise of nationalism in the early twentieth century. It was championed as such by Swami Vivekananda on his US tours in 1893-1896 and many religious emissaries from India have reiterated this notion since. In the 1990s, Ashok Singhal, the leader of Hindu nationalist political party Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), explained, “Of all nations, India alone has spirituality”, in Hindi, but using the English term “spirituality” (McKean 1996, xv). Yoga has become the most visible form of Indic spirituality to mobilize globally. It has become India’s leading spiritual export. Despite its modern-day presentation as a secular physical exercise, yoga is intimately related to Indic religious forms, and as such it has become a leading vehicle for “spiritual nationalism” (van der Veer quoted in Csordas 2009, 263).<sup>1</sup>

While postural yoga often includes religious ritual elements and philosophical (and sometimes theological) underpinnings, the Indian government and other yogic organizations around the world have been careful to distance the practice of postural yoga from religion, and Hindu religion in particular. Their quite accurate fear emerges from the fact that if yoga were to become synonymous with any one religion, it would be rendered particularly local, and potentially exclusionary. Even PM Modi omitted the Surya Namaskar and the chanting of “Om” from the IYD celebrations in order to make it appear less Hindu, despite his close connections to Hindutva ideologies.<sup>2</sup> His decision models the way in which a secularized form of yoga has been allowed to become mandatory in some schools in the United States, because it is represented as a form of secular exercise. While some Hindu organizations have attempted to locate yoga as a product of Hinduism, others have recognized that any yogic allegiance to Hinduism may hinder the spread of modern yoga, barring it from universalization and implementation in these types of secular (and government-funded) spaces.<sup>3</sup>

1 On Hindu nationalism, see van der Veer 1994; Jaffrelot 1996; Nussbaum 2009; Hansen 1999; Appadurai 2006; and Kurien 2007.

2 Leading up to the celebrations, Modi’s political position became somewhat of a double bind. He was caught between the protests of Muslim organizations (particularly the All India Muslim Personal Law Board [AIMPLB]), which claimed that IYD was emblematic of the Hindu-saffronization of India, and the protests of sadhus (Hindu holy men), who vowed to launch a “countrywide agitation” if Hindu-derived postures, such as the Surya Namaskar, were not included in the formal program of IYD (Firstpost 2005).

3 See the 2013 lawsuit concerning mandatory yoga in public schools in Encinitas, California (*Sedlock v. Baird*), related to the 2015 controversies in the days leading up to IYD, wherein the Indian government omitted the chanting of “Om” and the Surya Namaskar in efforts to appease

Contemporary yogis around the world simultaneously gain credibility and claim authenticity by sourcing the Indic roots of yoga while advocating for its universal applicability (DeMichelis 2005; Strauss 2005; Singleton 2010; Jain 2015).

Modern postural yoga has become a “portable practice” (Csordas 2009, 4), meaning a mobile practice that is universal and able to globally travel through networks. This article focuses on the migration patterns of this portable practice, noting how the yogis of the twentieth century have developed different networks of dissemination according to their cultural priorities. While India exported yoga to the West in efforts to present an anticolonial nationalism, the West has begun to export yoga globally through proselytization, marketing, and yoga *sevā* (“selfless service”) tourism. As yoga has become a portable practice, it has been universalized as “rites that can be easily learned, require relatively little esoteric knowledge or paraphernalia, are not held as proprietary or necessarily linked to a specific cultural context, and can be performed without commitment to an elaborate ideological or institutional apparatus” (ibid.). Yoga operates within globally integrated networks, wherein teachers transfer knowledge transnationally through various epicenters around the globe. It operates both in patterns of exchange and development (shifting gradually over time and across continents) and holographically (with causes and effects forming connections and composites simultaneously and instantaneously), a fused interdependency in its very creation (Urry 2003, 51).

The portable practice of yoga first migrated through networks that began transporting knowledge from India to the West in the early twentieth century, but now have expanded into forms of hypermobility, enacted through multidirectional and reverse networks so that the West is now the primary global exporter of yoga. This chapter analyzes this transition from unidirectional migration to hypermobility. I follow the suggestion of Manuel Vasquez, who suggests that “we might also study how religious elites adapt doctrines and ritual practices to particular localities and how locals creatively appropriate the teachings, opening the way for ‘heresies’ and other forms of religious innovation” (2011, 302-3). Yoga has been widely adapted and variously appropriated in the West largely by elite populations. Sometimes its contemporary innovations in the United States look so different from their Indian antecedents that they appear to some as “heresies”. In the United States, there are many of these “heresies”: yoga has

aggravated Muslim groups. Also, for a discussion of the Hindu American Foundation’s “Take Back Yoga” campaign, see Andrea Jain 2014, 427-71 (also reprinted in Jain 2015, 130-57).

become overtly marketed as a secular practice, as highly sexualized, and as highly commodified. Here, I focus on the understudied fact that some facets of yoga in the United States have innovated by adopting missionary tactics to spread the practice. Indian emissaries laid the foundations for this proselytizing yoga and North American proponents of modern postural yoga are emulating traditional missionary networks and rhetorical frames to mobilize yoga globally.

This article draws from six years of netnographic research following the expressions of yoga online and significant ethnographic research in three types of yogic festival environments. My research organizes these three types of yogic festivals into three correlated forms of yogic spirituality: spirituality as personal religious experience (exemplified by the annual Bhakti and Shakti Fests held in Joshua Tree, California), spirituality as trans-traditional bricolage (exemplified by transformational festivals, including *Lightning in a Bottle* held in Bradley, California, and *Burning Man* held in Black Rock City, Nevada), and spirituality as the enchanted secular (exemplified by dozens of *Wanderlust* yoga festivals held in vacation destinations around the globe). Since 2011, I have lived for approximately 140 days at 28 transformational festivals; my average stay immersed in each festival was five days. Although transformational festivals include multiple forms of spiritual practices, yoga was the method through which I observed American spirituality displayed, embodied, and constructed. In festival environments, I took both lengthy and brief interviews with a wide variety of attendees. Interviewees ranged from first-time attendees to the yoga instructors, organizers, founders, and builders of the festivals. I also developed sustained relationships with many festival attendees from within the context of a singular festival or over the course of multiple festivals on the global festival circuit. During festivals, I divided my time between “deep hanging out” (Renato Rosaldo quoted in Clifford 1997, 56) with key informants developed from these sustained ethnographic relationships, taking interviews with festival attendees and famed yoga instructors, and participating and observing tantric and meditation workshops, yoga classes, devotional music, and the multiple spiritual cultures embodied at each festival. I returned to each festival multiple times over the past six years to mark changes; I also observed the festival cultures throughout the year through netnographic methods of online research and participation in local community events.

In North America, yoga teachers in the majority of yoga studios and online classes are instructed to keep the practice secular. Many studio owners instruct yoga teachers to minimize religious and philosophical

references, sermonizing, and mantra chanting. For this reason, festival yoga and yoga retreats have been an extremely important venue for this research because they reveal American yogic discourses as they occur when these restrictions are not in place. Festival cultures give yoga teachers the freedom to voice their philosophies and theologies, and to articulate their own visions for yoga practice and sometimes their utopian visions for the world. Festivals and retreats recur periodically, and sometimes annually, in the same popular destinations. Touristic, luxury yoga retreats are often held in the coastal regions of Hawaii, Bali, Costa Rica, Australia, and northern Europe. Service-oriented yoga mission trips are often held in Costa Rica, Haiti, Cuba, Belize, and Ecuador. These geographic patterns are forming new networks of hypermobility beyond the frames of migration between India and the US and UK. As new networks, they are “flexible, highly dynamic, nontotalizing and multidirectional structures of relationality,” but most importantly, they are constrained within the broader power dynamics of globalization (Vasquez 2011, 298).

The tenor of the discourses surrounding and within these yoga festivals and retreats shows that even though yoga focuses on physical postures (*āsanas*) in the US, it is expressed as a “body of religious practice” (Jain 2014, 99). This scholarly consensus is also reflected in the popular opinions of many Americans. According to a 2016 survey commissioned by *Yoga Journal* and Yoga Alliance, 63 percent of all North Americans agree that yoga is spiritual and 72 percent agree that practicing yoga postures is a form of meditation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, even while the most physical forms of modern yoga have been extracted from the context of the religions of India and proliferated in the United States, still they retain a semblance of their identity as India’s leading spiritual export.

However, when considering the mobility patterns of yoga globally, many scholars turn away from this religious core and instead rely on economic models of buying and selling, producers, and consumers. There is certainly money circulating in the thriving business of postural yoga. American yogis alone spend \$16 billion annually on yoga classes, clothing, equipment, and accessories (Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance 2016b); estimates that also include yoga gurus, retreats, and festivals claim the yoga industry ranges from \$27 billion to \$80 billion globally (Gregoire 2013; Nair 2015). In the United States (as in India), yoga is big business, but very few American yogis begin their yoga practice because they believe it will be a lucrative business

4 “2016 Yoga in America Study” is conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs on behalf of Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance.

venture. Instead, they “do yoga” because they believe it is good for you – it increases flexibility, it relieves stress, it is a form of meditation, it enhances physical performance, and it is spiritually fulfilling (Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance 2016a, 26).

With this in mind, it becomes evident that economic models can only take us so far. If we carefully consider the intentions of contemporary yogis, it is obvious that their utopian and spiritual claims cannot be contained within the analytic of monetary, and neoliberal market-driven pursuits. Instead, scholars should analyze the spread of modern yoga by looking at how it is echoing the traditional missionary modes for the dissemination and expansion of religion. Scholars should be thinking of the current hypermobilities that define the global transmission of yoga in terms of missiological activity, proselytization, and personal transformation, if not formal conversion.

In this chapter, I argue that the representational tactics of the spread of yoga are historically, and continue to be, proselytizing in rhetoric and form. Advocates for modern postural yoga construct the practice as a universal good, and the benefits of “doing yoga” are often parsed with religious language. This missiology occurs not only in rhetoric, but it is also centrally located within the aims for the global dissemination of yoga. Thus, integrating an analytic focused on missiological patterns and processes more accurately represents the fundamental aims of the practice. Furthermore, this analysis explains the dramatic demographic shifts among practitioners of postural yoga in the modern period, as second and third generations of modern yogis continue to proselytize the universal good of yoga within their own social and geographical contexts.

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian yogis who brought yoga to the United States were interested in spreading yoga, but also in finding new audiences to support their spiritual labors. They exemplified the “complicated entanglement that exists between religious motives and the socioeconomic aims that drive labor migration” (Brown and Yeoh, this volume). They also used migration as a generating force for innovation, responding to modernity by defining yoga as a scientific, universalistic practice that would improve health and concentration. In the United States, their students comprise the second and third generations of the twentieth- and 21st-century yogis. My research demonstrates that these contemporary yogis have emulated their teachers’ dedication to spreading yoga globally and have become some of the leading advocates for postural yoga. In its most overt forms, yoga missionary networks aim to export “the good news” of the benefits of modern postural yoga to places like Haiti, Belize, Costa

Rica, Mexico, Cuba, and Palestine. In its more subtle forms, proselytizing yoga uses slogans and sermons during yoga classes, and mimesis of yogic exemplars to incite personal transformation and spiritual reaffiliations among their followers. Many of the most famous yoga teachers travel intensively along international yoga circuits; they also spread their messages globally through social media and personal websites. The combinative factors of extreme itinerancy and the volume of communication through digital technology result in a new form of hypermobility. Hypermobility enables modern yogis to proselytize the practice of yoga to global audiences at an unprecedented scale and speed. Unconstrained by “traditional religious authorities” and “conventional rituals and devotional discipline”, these global yogis are free to create and disseminate yoga according to their own branded interpretations (Brown and Yeoh, this volume). The expansive multiplicity of branded yogas that have been codified by these modern global emissaries and their predecessors exemplifies the ways in which religion in the context of migration and hypermobility generates exponential forms of innovation.

### **Overt Yogic Missionaries**

The ambition to spread yoga globally has taken on a multiplicity of forms historically, but recently American yogis have hybridized this ambition with missionary models in innovative and problematic ways. Here, we can see new forms of yogic mobility unfolding within the legacies of missionary activity and colonialism and within the civilizational hierarchies positioned through globalization. At the most overt level, some American yogis have become so convinced of the transformative possibilities of postural yoga that they have endeavored to export it to other environments in efforts to alleviate suffering and social turmoil. When modern American yogis position themselves as yoga emissaries to the impoverished in these countries within the global South, they enact the power relations of traditional missionaries. As Vasquez (2011, 300) argues, “Networks of exchange shape individual and group identities through the distribution of honor, prestige, status, and authority”. These yogic missionary networks reinforce the affluent, giving, and powerful identities of the predominantly white, wealthy American yogi, and the impoverished, receiving, and disempowered identities of the brown, native, global South recipients.

Many yoga studios offer retreats that incorporate wellness for American yogis with service opportunities in locations such as Belize, Costa Rica,

Haiti, and Mexico. There are also yogic companies that explicitly focus on the combination of *sevā* and tourism, such as Mats on a Mission, Seva Yoga Trips, True Nature Yoga Wellness, Yoga 4 Trauma, and Go Give Yoga.<sup>5</sup> Each of these companies sponsors yoga retreats that include extensive self-care incorporated with service opportunities. In some cases, it is only that a portion of the profits of the trip will be donated to a charitable organization. But in most cases, the opportunity for *sevā* is a significant part of the experience. Each of these companies partners with orphanages, service organizations, empowerment programs for girls, or medical needs assistance programs. While some of the *sevā* work that these yoga tours commit to are largely secular, i.e. building homes, providing funds, and making repairs, some are focused explicitly on exporting yoga and its presumed benefits.

In an article entitled “Go Give Yoga Haiti Mission”, Don Wenig, the founder of Dancing Feet Yoga, explains that for Haitians, “We found that the children live an incredibly stressful life. They have to fight for everything... Yoga allows them to reduce their stress, to center themselves, to become calm. Having a yoga mat and a space of their own was a luxury their day to day life doesn’t provide”. Wenig explains the therapeutic effects of yoga practice, suggesting that yoga reduces stress and accentuates calm in the midst of stress and violence. Many yogis missionize postural yoga by emphasizing these therapeutic aspects. Their target populations follow similar networks as Christian missionaries, who have a long history of proselytizing in territories plagued by stress, violence, and turmoil, and they present these communities with a religious solution. In fact, while the American yogis may not have recognized this missionizing pattern, it appears the Haitians did. Wenig explains, “Yoga is not a part of the culture of Haiti, and we had to reassure a handful of adults that it was not a cult, a devil worship, or a religion” (Medlock, n.d.).

At Wanderlust in Squaw Valley, I shared a meal with Makayla, a yoga teacher from Santa Fe, New Mexico, who explained that, “We have *all* gotten interested in yoga as a mechanism to help us deal with trauma”.<sup>6</sup> She then expanded this sentiment to suggest that basic yoga techniques like breathing are completely vital to overcoming trauma and that populations in trauma need the skills that yoga can offer. She told me about her friend’s new yoga studio that had opened on the West Bank and she offered

5 See [www.matsonamission.com](http://www.matsonamission.com); [www.sevayogatrips.com](http://www.sevayogatrips.com); [www.truenatureyogawellness.com](http://www.truenatureyogawellness.com); <https://yoga4trauma.wordpress.com>; and [www.gogiveyoga.org](http://www.gogiveyoga.org). Last accessed 23 August 2016.

6 Interview with Makayla, Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, 19 July 2014.



the “huge response from Palestinian women” as evidence for the healing powers of yoga. Many American yogis are bringing yoga into “troubled” areas of the world in efforts to promote personal and social transformation. The most extreme of such missionizing activity can be seen (somewhat predictably) in the activities of the Christian-inspired Holy Yoga, which envisions itself as a “missional community dedicated to equipping and providing resources for our instructors to launch, grow and maintain their own personal ministries as collectively we take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth” (Holy Yoga, n.d.). As yoga has migrated globally, it has given rise to multiple hybridities, including subtle and overt forms of proselytizing yoga.

Off the Mat, a project that aims to combine yoga and activism, conducts global sevā challenges and is concerned about the perception of their endeavors as missiological. On a recent conference call focused on the “Dos and Don’ts of International Service”, the famed yoga teacher Seane Corn (2015) explained:

The assumption is that we go over there and we teach yoga to people, as that is our intention and that is why we are there. It has been very important to us to let it be known that the only time that we offer yoga is as a way to engage, to develop a relationship... it is not something that we bring into the culture. In the same way I wouldn’t go in there and make a suggestion that they should believe in one God over another or encourage them to change their spiritual practices based on my belief system.

Despite its marketing campaigns focused on salacious issues related to female oppression and problematic representations of “empowerment”, Off the Mat spokespeople are critically aware of the dangers of international proselytization and the power dynamics inherent in yogic humanitarian missions conducted by teams of majority white Americans in places like Ecuador, Uganda, South Africa, and India.<sup>7</sup> While one can easily critique the very impulse of white Americans embarking on international humanitarian missions targeted at such issues as human trafficking in India (2012), or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Early Childhood Marriage (ECM) in

7 “I can get frozen in my privilege and think ‘well, who am I?’ and then nothing changes or I can ignore my privileges and then nothing changes, or I can acknowledge that I have some privileges, I can acknowledge that within those privileges there is going to be some hurdles to cross and attempt to cross them as elegantly as mindfully as I possibly can, keeping in mind that the person that I am engaging with is a human being and is deserving of respect and that respect goes – that’s the hurdle that crosses all barriers” (Corn 2015).

Kenya (2015), still, the fact that this conversation occurred is a step in the right direction (Off the Mat Into the World [OTM], n.d.).

The competitive nature of the American yogic field insures that yogis will continue to advocate for yogic lifestyles, practices, and ideologies to position themselves in contradistinction to other yogis and to provide ready solutions to the problems facing societies across the globe. As American yogis activate the discourses and practices of postural yoga as ushering the potential for personal and societal transformation, they must be hyper-vigilant to insure that advocacy does not mirror the “white savior” paternalism of many missionizing discourses.

### **Marketing and/or Proselytization?**

By the 1960s, postural yoga had become a vibrant global force, largely due to the efforts of global yoga emissaries (Singleton 2010; Strauss 2005; De Michelis 2005; Jain 2015). As Jain (2015, 69) explains, “postural yoga became something that was increasingly prescribed and consumed as a product independent of ethnic, philosophical, or religious identities or commitments. Postural yoga was instead a product that could be chosen as a body-enhancing practice that was one part of individual regimens of self-development, and it was being packaged in this way for transnational audiences”. Jain argues that the dissemination of modern postural yoga can be best understood through the lens of late capitalist consumer culture. In her view, successful yoga “entrepreneurs” began to “brand yoga in the same ways other products and services are branded... As yoga generates somatic, semantic, and symbolic fields of meaning meant to appeal to consumer desires, brands seek to signify those meanings to millions of individuals interested in doing yoga” (ibid., 77). Jain’s argument directs us to one certain reality: as modern postural yoga has expanded into multiple geographies across the globe, there are increasingly heterogeneous forms of yoga being offered and practiced, and new yoga gurus emerge each day who claim to present more effective techniques, unique styles, and personal charisma than their contemporaries.

However, the spiritual has not completely receded, nor has yoga’s Indic religious influences. When there are no restrictions on yoga instructors to keep their practice secular – as is often the case in studios and schools – the religious abounds, untethered. In yoga retreats, festivals, and sevā tourism, yoga practice is contextualized within spiritual and religious ontologies. In fact, many practitioners argue that one can only “do yoga” in the most

superficial way without stepping into religious territories. It is largely assumed that as yoga practitioners learn more about the history, context, and philosophy of yoga, whether through personal study or the intensive environments of retreats, festivals, and *sevā* tourism, many will engage its spiritual core. Therefore, cold economism is a limited analytic through which to analyze the layered mobilities of global yoga. Instead, the language of proselytization and missionary activity more closely represents the intent of many leaders within the yoga community as they aim to disseminate yoga globally.

Proselytism refers to the act of attempting to convert people to another religion or opinion. It is derived from the Greek prefix “*pros*” (“toward”) and the verb “*érchomai*” (“to come”), thus the act of proselytizing invites people to come toward the proselytizer’s perspective, and away from their previously held convictions. As such, at its root, proselytism engages the language of marketing, which is commonly defined as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (American Marketing Association [AMA], n.d.). But with modern yogis’ adoption of yoga, for many, the practice extends far beyond brand loyalty. In my interviews, numerous yogis have discussed their own personal transformations as a result of their yoga practice in direct and revelatory ways. When faced with such inspiring personal transformations, many of the more socially conscious yogis aim to “give back” to society by sharing their practice and newly found knowledge. These yogis can be found giving advice to the “unawakened” of society, mentoring budding yogis, and engaged in humanitarian campaigns that often aim to bring not only relief and services, but also a yogic consciousness (and sometimes a yogic practice) to underserved communities. Many yoga practitioners are first introduced into the world of “alternative spiritualities” through yoga. Yoga practice becomes a point of entry that introduces new ideas, practices, rituals, and religious cosmologies. These yogis migrate into religious territories guided by Indic religious texts, accounts of Indic yogis who practiced before them, knowledge sharing through communal and festival gatherings, and the teachings of yoga gurus past and present.

### **Conversion and/or Self-Transformation?**

These yogic adepts and aspirants are not only interested in branding themselves with various yogic products or profiting from yoga (there are many

other more lucrative ways to make a profit in the US). Rather, many serious yogis are actively engaged in a process of spiritual self-transformation that resembles conversion. Certainly, the external markers of personal transformation may include product replacement and different purchasing choices, but the consumptive *habitus* of the transformation is not the transformation itself. Just as the religious convictions of the Amish are more than their consumption of bonnets and suspenders, so too the spiritual convictions of American yogis are more than their consumption of leggings, yoga mats, and green juice smoothies. Consumptive practices signify distinctive worldviews and changes in consumptive practices are the after-effects of yogic self-transformation. To consider consumptive patterns as the primary rubric for defining American yogis inverts the reality, by placing the effect as the cause. The cause or the motivation that drives everyday citizens to decide to radically change their lives is frankly, much more interesting.

As American yogis become increasingly invested in yogic practice (above and beyond the physical postures), they begin to make life changes, community changes, and changes in their consumptive patterns. This gradual process is related to the process of religious conversion. As Dianne Austin-Broos (2003, 2) explains, “the language of converts expresses *new forms of relatedness* [emphasis mine]. The public aspect of this belonging is perhaps a new identity, a newly inscribed communal self-defined *through the gaze of others...* Conversion is a type of passage that negotiates a place in the world. Conversion as passage is also a quest, a quest to be at home in a world experienced as turbulent or constraining or, in some way, as wanting in value”. Yogic “conversions” are not emblematic of the typical sociology of religion conception of an individual’s adoption of an exclusive affiliation with a new religious institution, but rather they are a process of self-transformation wherein the individual adopts a gradual process of change to newly found spiritual attitudes and ritualized behaviors that buttress their newly formed yogic selves. Although they are usually noninstitutional, as yogic aspirants become increasingly engaged in a process of sacralization as the *sangha*, or the community of yogis, they begin to construct new identities by adopting new knowledge bases, patterns of dress and diet, value systems, worldviews, patterns of speech and behavior – in essence, creating a new spiritual *habitus*.<sup>8</sup>

8 Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 53) defines *habitus* as “[t]he conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles

One older, white female yogi explains the effects of her yogic meditation succinctly, by saying “I appreciated [that]... it was recalibrating my thought processes. It was recalibrating my internal disposition to allow a Sanskrit phrase, an ancient Sanskrit phrase to go from being a small program to an application to becoming my operating system and how that allows me to be regenerative and to feel”.<sup>9</sup> Her digital metaphor of transformation from her yogic *mantra* being “a small program” to “becoming my operating system” reveals the gradual processes by which yogic activity begins with small changes and then becomes the foundation for an entirely new *modus operandi*. In community, modern yogis reflect these “new forms of relatedness” to the world and to each other, and the community bolsters this continual process of self-definition through its internal gaze – the self is defined “through the gaze of others”. As it deepens beyond the physical postures, yogic practice often becomes imbued with deeply ritualized practice, personal spiritual aims, accounts of miraculous events, vibrant communal engagement, and the active construction of new ontological, soteriological, and cosmological understandings.

Today’s yogic adepts advocate for the practice of postural yoga as a first step to activate this process of personal transformation. Like the majority of religions, the justification for their solution derives from an initial crisis (Riesebrodt 2010); their urgency stems from a deeply held critique of multiple contexts of contemporary society. From environmental crisis, abuses of women, poverty (often with a view toward the global South), to the rampant corporate takeover of seemingly all areas of individual freedoms and global markets, the yoga community uses postural yoga as an initial solution to global problems. Personal growth through yoga practice becomes a means to initiate change from the inside out – one person at a time. Instead of focusing on institutionalized systems of political, social, and environmental injustice, global yogis aim to change the world through the reconfiguration of individual selves. As a result, there is often an incessant drive within yoga communities to spread yoga, to engage the ever-increasing numbers of people in the practice of yoga, in an urgent effort to transform the world.

which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor”.

9 Interview with Bonnie Harter, Bhakti Fest, 7 September 2013.

Proselytization can be defined as the effort to spread a message of social transformation through individual reaffiliations that are constituted by adoptions of a new religious habitus. Proselytic activity targets “for the most part individual religious (re)affiliation, but with the hopes of collective transformation, proselytization resorts to very public strategies to achieve its goals” (Hackett 2008, 14). Advocates of modern postural yoga aim to recalibrate bodies and minds to yogic ideals. They suggest that the practice of yoga is inherently transformative and many leaders in the field view the physical practice as a mere gateway into a deeper investigation that is imbued with religious significance and texture. For example, Seane Corn has recently released a video entitled *Body Prayer: The Body and Beyond*, with the explicit aim to reveal that “yoga is much more than a physical practice – it’s an opportunity to use the movement and breath to express deep devotion” (Corn 2017). Yoga mentors develop and employ informational networks for students, through which they transfer yogic knowledge, such as scripture, secondary spiritual literatures, and additional supplementary techniques (often meditational or ritual). Many of the yogic adepts who are revered in various yoga communities are revered not only for their physical perfection, but also for their spiritual knowledge and perspective. In fact, the majority of the most famous global yoga teachers cultivates distinct philosophies and systems of meditation and ritual action. Many function as gurus without the title, and advocate a religious worldview in all but name.

Thus, instead of viewing these yogic adepts as entrepreneurs marketing and branding products, we must recognize that this is not solely a secular activity. As Hackett (2004) indicates, “Many proselytizers take advantage of deregulation and liberalization, just as they may adopt the styles of new entrepreneurs in quest of profit and markets”. Similarly, yogic adepts take advantage of the markets and adopt entrepreneurial methodologies, but their aims are not solely profit. Their yogic marketing is imbued with a cosmological vision, a ritualized practice, and an aim to transform the very nature of the individual, which they believe will transform society. The analytics of marketing, in its dry economism at best or cynicism at worst, misses the most important emic aspect of yogic adepts’ intentions.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Scholarship, such as the recent work of Carrette & King’s *Selling Spirituality*, instigates an important discussion about corporate encroachment and neoliberal sensibilities in the contemporary practice of postural yoga. However, it does not engage the emic perspectives of the many serious global yoga practitioners, who do not intend to “recode” yoga into “the individualist values of [the] western society,” but rather aim to transform themselves into that which is “genuinely counter-cultural, transformative and challenging to western cultural norms”. Carrette & King assume that the process of adopting a yoga practice is a unilateral

The proselytizing impulse stems from the transformative experiences that many yogic adepts believe that modern postural yoga has brought to their lives. Many have experienced what might be comparable to a conversion experience, an ideological and practical process that transforms the individual from one subjectivity to another. Even the most secular yogis have adopted the practice as a means of mental and physical cleansing, to combat the stressors of everyday modernity. As Clara, a soft-spoken yogi at Wanderlust, Mont Tremblant in 2014 explained, “it [yoga] has calmed me down... it’s the mental part of it. It’s just that, breathing, cleansing. Just it’s like taking an eraser to a full chalkboard and you just, you’re leaving the class and you’re feeling energized”.<sup>11</sup> This account of recalibrating the stresses of life, reveals one of the most basic and simple influences of yogic practice.

For others, the transformation can take on more extreme and intentional forms of recalibration. Some yoga programs explicitly aim to initiate “rehabilitation”, “personal transformation”, and “behavioral change”, as in the Prison Yoga Project.<sup>12</sup> At Bhakti Fest in 2012, Liam explained “it was a gradual process and it kind of creeps up on you in the way that it is working on your consciousness... The way this works, the whole transformation... *prāṇayāma* [breath control] and those kinds of things that are [more] purifying at the physical level so it feels more direct and immediate. But doing something like that [*karma yoga*, the yoga of action] where, it is forcing you to pay more and more attention to each action you take and each thought you have towards that action – just really expands your consciousness more and more through every aspect of your life”.<sup>13</sup> For this yogi, his postural practice led him to the practices of *prāṇayāma*, *karma yoga*, and residence in an ashram community. In some cases, the physical aspects of yoga have become a gateway to philosophical practices. Whether clearing the mind as if “taking an eraser to a full chalkboard”, or aiming for “rehabilitation” of prison populations, or “expand[ing] your consciousness” in an ashram setting – each refers to the gradual processes of transformation, whereby the practice of yoga slowly and deliberately refashions the self.

movement of yoga coming to the West and being transformed according to Western values, instead of investigating the many ways in which the process also flows in the opposite direction. I am particularly interested in the ways in which yoga is transforming those residing in the West through yoga, that is to say, how many Westerners are moving toward the traditional Indic context of yoga.

11 Interview with Marie-Claire, Wanderlust, Mont Tremblant, Quebec, 23 August 2014.

12 See <https://prisonyoga.org>. Last accessed 4 March 2017.

13 Interview with Liam, Bhakti Fest, Joshua Tree, CA, 7 September 2012.

### Subtle Yogic Missionaries: Slogans and Sermons

In the first section, I discussed overt yogic missionary activity and demonstrated how *sevā* missions or “off-the-mat humanitarian” yogis proselytize in familiar, and familiarly problematic ways. Here, I turn to three additional modes of proselytizing outreach that take on more subtle forms: products and slogans, yoga-class sermons, and mimesis of yogic exemplars to incite personal transformation. The first category, products and slogans, is perhaps the most ubiquitous form of proselytization in which the average American yogi engages. Commonplace life directives routinely punctuate a variety of yoga products and promotional materials; they can be found on T-shirts, water bottles, yoga mats, towels, stickers, websites, and the like. Directives can take the form of the short phrases: “Be Love”, “Give Love”, “Trust the Universe”, “Grateful”, “Namaste”, “Salute the Sun”, “We are All One”, “Breathe Practice Repeat”, “Warrior”, “Aim True”, and so on. These slogans proliferate within the yoga community and are repeated often enough that they become signifiers of a distinct ideology – and even an identity. Sometimes they signify the lifestyle philosophy of a particular yoga teacher (i.e. “Aim True” signifies the brand of the yoga celebrity Kathryn Budig) or a distinctive hybrid innovation, as in the case of “Spiritual Gangster” apparel. These proclamations signify (to both self and other) membership within the *sangha*<sup>14</sup> (community of yogis) and a personal commitment to the yoga community. They garner distinction through the expression of a particular faith commitment, a worldview, and a perspective. Some are modeled explicitly from the proselytization slogans of their Christian counterparts, for example, the play on the kitsch slogan “Jesus is my homeboy” to create a yogic T-shirt that declares “Shiva is my *Om*-boy.”

Just as proselytizing religious communities believe themselves to be privy to knowledge that others *should* adopt, yogis too believe that they have attained knowledge of a practice that is inherently good for all persons. Many practitioners believe that yoga has helped them to achieve personal goals that others *should* aspire to as well, i.e. openness, freedom, strength, truth, health, radiance, happiness, and power. In fact, some advertisements for teacher trainings and more extensive yogic learning capitalize on this very sensibility. For example, an Exhale Yoga Teacher Training flier reads, “If yoga has changed your life and you want to pass that passion on to others, then

<sup>14</sup> Formally, *sangha* is a Buddhist term used to signify the community of Buddhists or alternately the community of Buddhist monks and nuns. I use it here to refer to the community of yogis, following the language of MC Yogi, one of my informants who quoted using the term with the same signification in the penultimate section, “Yogic ‘Beacons of Light’ to the World”.



**Figure 2.1** “Shiva is my Om Boy”: tank top from vendor at Bhakti Fest. Joshua Tree, California, 2013



Photo by Amanda Lucia

this is the program for you”. There is a direct relationship between a personal transformation and the desire to share that experience with others. In the religious context, this is the typical sequencing of a conversion narrative,

wherein an individual undergoes a personal conversion experience and then goes on to convert others armed with the evidence of his or her own personal transformation. The narrative of a personal transformative experience is the most powerful tool in the creation of converts.

Like many other religious worldviews, many American yogis also posit a problem to which yoga provides a ready solution. For example, Shiva Rae (2014) suggests that we need to “heal the schism” and explains that “[w]hen we ignore the flow, we feel the arrhythmia – the experience of being out of sync with life which can be on five levels: self-rhythms... interpersonal rhythms... communal rhythms... global rhythms... [and] cosmic rhythms”.<sup>15</sup> Other teachers explain the problem as a lack of bodily awareness, connection between individuals, intimacy with nature, knowledge of self, or even the lack of an experience of divinity. Saul David Raye (2014) explained in his yoga intensive at Bhakti Fest that “[h]ere on the planet earth, we’re screwing it up because we’re not living in harmony with the laws of creation, the laws of the mother, the laws of all the indigenous cultures”. These yogis believe that the world is in crisis, and yoga is a solution.

Freed from the secular confines of studio practice, in festival yoga classes, many teachers include a significant amount of commentary, philosophy, and sermonizing. As Shiva Rae likes to exclaim at Bhakti Fest, this is where the inner-*bhakta* (devotee) can “come out of the closet!” Mark Whitwell’s classes at Lightning in a Bottle, Bhakti Fest, and Shakti Fest, consisted of lengthy sermons (45 minutes) on tantra-yogic philosophy while students sat or laid in *śavāsana* (“corpse pose”). At the close of her yoga class at Wanderlust yoga festival in Oahu in 2014, Seane Corn offered this prayer, “And we close the practice by giving thanks to God. (...) May we live everyday in harmony and choose to be more mindful and sustainable to her resources. We ask for the strength to continue on our own path, to let go of all that we think we know – to be released from our fear and our rage and our doubt and our shame and our grief, and to open instead to possibilities of love. May we forgive, always, ourselves and others. And commit to that inner purification so that we can show up as who we are – love”. Corn’s prayer suggests a distinctive theology that includes the aims of gratitude to God, harmony and sustainability with nature, and strength and independence on a spiritual path. In her view, the spiritual path referred to involves “let[ting] go of all that we think we know”, which is a standard prerequisite at the outset of conversion narratives of personal transformation. Corn suggests that it is only then, once the mental space has cleared, that the practitioner

15 “Pulse Collective” flier, Bhakti Fest, Joshua Tree, CA, 2014.

can be open to the possibilities of love and forgiveness, which is “inner purification” of the self.

### Mimetic Missionaries: Yogic “Beacons of Light” to the World

In addition to slogans and sermonizing, contemporary American yogis present themselves, i.e. their behavior, lifestyle, spiritual acumen, and success, as evidence for the efficacy of the practice. Yogis become examples to be mimetically emulated by their followers and to be witnessed by the general public in efforts to convince them to embody yogic ideals and practices as well. Their bodies, lifestyle, and spiritual messages converge into the presentation of an ideal that is hypermobilized on social media, the Internet, and through their itinerant travel to global festivals, retreats, workshops, and guest teaching appointments. Their yoga practice becomes evidence of positive self-transformation and operates within an ideological system wherein self-transformation is believed to be the catalyst for social change. In their expansionist manner of thinking, the more people who view them as ideal exemplars, the more people who may begin to practice yoga. Consequently, the more people who practice yoga, the more they will impact positive social change.

In his yoga class at Wanderlust in Squaw Valley in 2014, MC Yogi encouraged this mimetic model by conjoining commonly cited biblical passages (Matthew 5:14-16)<sup>16</sup> and Buddhist frames of suffering and *sangha*.<sup>17</sup> He said, “As the *sangha* grows on the earth the light starts to swell, and the people suffering find their way to the other side because the beacon of light is strong enough that it shines like a lighthouse. So thank you guys for being that and coming here and shining on the mountaintop”. In this framing, yoga practitioners are a “beacon of light” who can alleviate suffering in the world.

The ideal of transforming oneself into a “beacon of light” for the entire world to witness has long roots in discourses of Protestantism and American exceptionalism. The Puritans first used this language and imagined themselves as religious exemplars for the world. Famously, on the *Arbella*, the ship

<sup>16</sup> “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven”. (Matthew 5:14-16, NIV)

<sup>17</sup> “Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dhamma/Dharma” (Pali: *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta*; Sanskrit: *Dharmacakrapravartanasūtra*). See also Rahula, 1974.

that brought Massachusetts Bay colonists from England to America in 1630, John Winthrop used the imagery in his vision of creating a new settlement in America that would be a “city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us”. The passengers of the *Arbella* imagined themselves as models of Christian charity, beacons of light shining for the world. The Puritan ideal of living by example derives from the Calvinist notion of Predestination – the concept that there are those who are saved and those who are not, and those who are saved act only in accordance with God. This theological perspective had social consequences and Puritans suffered considerable pressure to demonstrate that they were saved to their fellow citizens. Presenting oneself as an exemplary model citizen, one who acts in accordance with God, became of paramount importance for the Puritans. Modern American yogis adopt this Protestant ethos as they obsess over their yogic self-presentations on various media platforms. This preoccupation with self-presentation reveals their desire to present themselves and their yogic bodies as evidence of perfected morality and exemplary yogis to their communities.

Just as the Puritans sculpted themselves as exemplars of Protestant Christian piety shining their inner light from a “city upon a hill”, MC Yogi reiterates their quintessentially American and Christian ideals, thanking American yogis for “shining their light from the mountaintop” for all the world to see and emulate. Even more intriguing, he blends these seminal Christian ideas that would justify proselytization and expansion with an invocation of Buddhist cosmology and the centralization of yoga. MC Yogi’s religious hybridity is commonplace in the field of yogic spirituality. In an interview he explained, “I see the Buddha as almost like Christ, Jesus was like a reformer, like Martin Luther. These radical, sort of rebellious, self-realized beings came along and they realized the truth in their own life and they saw the institution [of religion] and how it had sort of hardened and corrupted, like the caste system, you know like the money lenders in the temple. And they just came and, everyone breaks off and starts their own things, but none of it is really broken”.<sup>18</sup> MC Yogi hybridizes Buddhist and Christian ideals with the presumed efficacy of yoga practice to encourage his students to embody the “light” and to live as examples for others. The underlying presumption is that this “beacon of light” will attract others to the practice of yoga and thus catalyze social transformation that will alleviate global suffering.

Many American yogis also imagine themselves to be leading by example, a “beacon of light” to the world. Melinda, a young bohemian yogi at Bhakti Fest explained to me, “I had to clear a lot of blocks in myself to see myself

<sup>18</sup> Interview with MC Yogi, Festival of Colors, Spanish Fork, Utah, 29 March 2015.

as a spiritual leader, trusting myself as a spiritual leader”.<sup>19</sup> At the same festival, Liam explained, “We are coming into an age where people are more and more just waking up in general and... not just in terms of yogic circles, but there are other forms of practices and paths that are really leaning into very similar energetic spiritual kind of directions, that result in the empowerment of the individual and the recognition that each of us can do what we want and that we create our lives... The sad thing is that we’ve been conditioned to believe that we can’t do [these] things”.<sup>20</sup> Through introspection and practice, yoga practitioners believe that the yogic path enables them to cleanse and refashion the self and thereby enact personal transformation. Gradually, the personal transformation becomes externally visible, so that one can serve as a “beacon of light” for others.

Many American yogic adepts also present themselves as spiritual leaders on social media platforms, through which they become models for others through their lifestyle and self-presentations. Their beauty, peace, centeredness, tranquility, bliss, and flow all become indications of the ways in which their yogic selves have become the “beacon of light” and can radiate a brilliance to which novices can aspire. The yogi is imagined to be progressing ever higher on the ladder of evolutionary processes, engaging in purificatory rituals of self-perfection.<sup>21</sup> These Instagram yogis are building on the mimetic impulse that defines the guru-disciple relationship, meaning that disciples are called to refashion themselves by modeling the guru. Such an understanding derives from Indic sources, but dovetails neatly with neoliberal conceptions of the self-disciplined subject who is “active, autonomous, prudent, responsible and calculating” (Godrej 2016, 9; Altglas 2014, 271-81). In this mimetic relationship, yogic adepts show the way for novices through their bodily comportment, self-disciplined behavior, and accounts of their personal spiritual experiences. Instagram yogis hybridize the premodern demand for the mimetic relationship between the guru and disciple with the current pressures to conform to neoliberal forms of subjectivity, and in so doing, they innovate in ways that are hypermobilized to global audiences through modern technologies.

The pressures of this mimetic role were revealed directly on 14 June 2015, when Kino MacGregor, an active presence in the yoga community (who at the

19 Interview with Cara, Bhakti Fest, 7 September 2012.

20 Interview with Liam, Bhakti Fest, 7 September 2012.

21 In Indic texts as early as the *Mahābhārata*, the philosophical schools of Samkhya and Yoga imagined the world and persons in terms of a “ladder” levels of being that descended from some common source entity, with the purest and most holy at the top, and the thickest and most stagnant at the bottom (Fitzgerald 2012, 49).

time had 782,000 followers on Instagram and 264,000 on Facebook), posted on Instagram that she had severely injured her hamstring or hip, to the extent that she could not straighten or put weight on her leg (Remski 2015a).<sup>22</sup> Still, in the following days, as if nothing had happened, she continued to proliferate her Instagram profile with her stock of (some previously recorded) short videos of her bikini-clad, muscular body performing sequences of highly difficult poses in beautiful beach and ocean surroundings. This spurious action may be about the maintenance of the brand (as some of her online critics responded), but it was also about maintaining the illusion of bodily transcendence, insuring that the role model of the supple and invincible yogic adept remained an unscathed and intact model for aspiring yogis.

In the yogic field, the importance of self-presentation combines with the practical drive for self-promotion through marketing and publicity in efforts to grow a clientele. In this way, self-presentation becomes vitally important, as yogic bodies become evidence of personal transformation. Yogic accomplishment is indexed through the perfected body and conscious spirit. The supposition that ideal bodies correlate to perfected spirituality and consciousness has been a vulnerability and a point of heavy critique for the yoga community. Even when the “yoga industrial complex” has attempted to counteract this presumed correlation by adopting messages of body positivity, it struggles to create meaningful change.<sup>23</sup>

Some famous yogis use their struggle to attain their current ideal bodies as a means to proselytize to those who suffer within imperfect bodies. They represent themselves as “beacons of light” by issuing redemption narratives explaining how they triumphed over struggle, disease, and pain as a result of yoga practice. Govindas, a famed yoga teacher who teaches at Bhakti and Shakti Fests and Lightning in a Bottle, began practicing yoga as a means to overcome multiple digestive diseases.<sup>24</sup> Other celebrity yoga instructors have written full memoirs that highlight their victories

22 Importantly, McGregor’s injury occurred while assisting a student, not while engaged in her own asana practice.

23 See Miller 2016.

24 Govindas is also one of the founders of Bhakti Yoga Shala in Santa Monica, California. He “[Govindas] (Ira Jeffrey Rosen) first came to yoga while living in Los Angeles in 1994 because of health concerns – specifically ulcerative colitis/crohn’s/inflammatory bowel disease. After years of many different practices with the intention of healing (hatha yoga, ayurveda, buddhist meditation etc.), Ira Rosen found his yogic ‘home’ in the path of Bhakti Yoga, the aspect of yoga frequently described as the ‘yoga of the heart’ or ‘the yoga of love and devotion.’ Not by avoiding or denying our life and health challenges, but only by accepting and courageously moving through and forward, the flower of our full appreciation and devotion to Life blooms. It is in this tradition of ‘Bhakti/Devotion’ where Ira was given his spiritual name – Govind Das or simply ‘Govindas’

over adversity as a result of postural yoga, such as Ana Forrest's intense account of contending with child abuse, eating disorders, and detachment disorders in *Fierce Medicine*, or Bhava Ram's gripping account of how yoga rescued him from a broken back and addiction to pain medications in *Warrior Pose* (Forrest 2011; Willis 2013). Each of these contemporary yogis echoes the Indian yoga emissary, regarded by many as the founder of modern yoga, B.K.S. Iyengar, who claimed that postural yoga cured his tuberculosis.<sup>25</sup>

The pressure to represent the self as an ideal yogi and thus attract followers also stems from the economic need and professional desire to grow one's own yoga community of followers, hence personalizing and representing a particular yogic philosophy, method, or practice (i.e. branding). These proselytizing patterns of increasing dissemination and recruitment derive in part from the intense competition of the yoga market. In order to compete, leading yoga practitioners advocate for their own particular yoga teachings, as Rod Stryker's website explains, "Our mission is to serve these teachings by continuing to be a leading resource for the dissemination of their wisdom, power and capacity to positively affect all aspects of modern life".<sup>26</sup> Many of the most famous yogis spread their messages widely through the Internet, in studio guest appearances, and in the circuit of retreats and festivals. Many travel within the circuit route from California (often Venice/Santa Monica or the Bay Area), to Vancouver, Hawaii, the Mediterranean (often Greece and Italy), Costa Rica, and then to Bali, New Zealand, Australia, or perhaps Thailand. For those who are interested in drawing a presumed authenticity from yoga's imagined ancient roots, retreats and tours of India are particularly central. As a result, the most famous yoga teachers have become like the itinerant ministers of nineteenth-century America, traveling amazing distances in efforts to preach the gospel as widely as possible.

Many of the most famous yoga teachers in the United States are proselytizing modern postural yoga as a portable practice through geographic networks enabled by globalization and modern technology. From sevā missions to prison yoga, from "beacons of light" to personal transformation, from guru-disciple mimesis to redemption narratives, multiple facets of contemporary yoga draw on religious idioms and rhetorical frames.

which means 'servant of the Divine'... This path of service is at the root of his spiritual life – to serve the Love and Spirit that lives in the hearts of all". (Bhakti Yoga Shala, n.d.)

<sup>25</sup> "The Ultimate Freedom Yoga", 1976, film.

<sup>26</sup> See [www.parayoga.com/about](http://www.parayoga.com/about). Accessed 9 April 2015.

Yoga instructors have developed expansive global networks, centralized only by the motion of their hypermobility and the itinerant ambitions of their proselytization. Their hypermobility enables them to attract global audiences and opens new avenues for hybridity and religious innovation as they connect their knowledge to new geographies and cultural contexts. However, their proselytizing and innovative hybridizations are merely an exaggeration and extension of the proselytizing impulses of the first generation of yogic emissaries. The historical trajectory of the dissemination of yoga has transitioned from the first generations of unidirectional migration (India to the West) to contemporary global hypermobility, but both forms of migratory journeys have generated this proselytizing model.

### **Yogic Migrations: India's Gift to the World**

Yoga first came to the attention of Europeans when Alexander the Great documented the bodily contortions and ascetic extremities of Indian yogis whom he encountered in India in 327 BCE. 1500 years later, the Mughals also encountered Indian yogis during their conquests of India. Yogic texts were translated into Arabic and circulated in the West, and selected Mughal leaders were intrigued with the promise of yogic powers, while Sufis found significant confluences of thought with yogic philosophical ideas.<sup>27</sup> The initial attraction to yoga stemmed immediately from the simple curiosity of the radically ascetic lifestyles and unusual bodily practices of Indian yogis. Indian yogis were (and are) striking in appearance and their rejection of commonplace human values (comfort, sustenance, progeny) and thus they create notable communities, marked by multiple levels of social distinction. There is also the allure of the dangerous combination of secrecy and power within their practices – a promise that has titillated great rulers and laity alike.

Indic yoga draws from Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, but the modern expansion of yoga into global forums coincides with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century developments of global Hinduism (Jaffrelot 1996; Pennington 2005; van der Veer 1994). This historical confluence means that many people view yoga through a Hindu lens. At the same time, this confluence incites Hindus to claim yoga as a derivative of Hinduism on

<sup>27</sup> See White 2009, 198-254; and Ernst 2013, 59-68.



the global stage. There is much at stake in tracing the origin myth of a multibillion dollar industry.

At the turn of the twentieth century, many Hindu leaders became globally popular by presenting a form of Hinduism that they claimed was universal, *sanatana dharma* (“the universal truth”), and which they often articulated in the language of science and spirituality (Aravamudan, 2010; Lucia 2011; Altglas 2014). Leading Hindu reformers, from Rammohan Roy, Vivekananda to Chinmayananda, championed accommodationist approaches that presented a form of de-ritualized, monistic, scientific Hinduism on the world’s stages. Importantly, as Joanne Punzo Waghorne has shown, Vivekananda attempted to universalize Hinduism by presenting it globally as an accessible form of *spirituality*. He attempted to free this Indic spirituality from the legacies of caste and exclusivism. In the process he created a form of “de-ethnicized Hinduism”, that is to say, a form of spirituality that could travel beyond the cultural confines of India (Waghorne 2009). With regard to yoga, though he was against postural practices, Vivekananda promoted his contemplative version of *raja yoga* as a unifying, nonsectarian, applied spirituality that could be wielded for popular consumption in India, but also for the entire world (van der Veer 2001, 73-4).

Several decades later, recognizable forms of modern postural yoga were being created in the Indian centers of Rishikesh and Mysore, drawing on Indian nationalist demands for a strong and muscular populace capable of leading the independence movement. These modern forms of postural yoga combined Indic forms of wrestling and bodybuilding and European forms of gymnastics and esoteric dance (Singleton 2010). Seminal figures like Shivananda and Tirumalai Krishnamacharya blended these traditions and practices together with indigenous yogic philosophy, meditation, breathing exercises, and physical movement. Their amalgamated product resulted in several of the most commonly taught forms of modern postural yoga today. Krishnamacharya, in particular, sculpted the bodies and minds of many highly renowned yoga teachers (and disseminators): his son T.K.V. Desikachar, his brother-in-law B.K.S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois, A.G. Mohan, and the famed Russian-European dancer, Indra Devi. Except for Indra Devi, all of these foundational teachers were Hindu and they went on to disseminate yoga globally.

These yogic adepts disseminated postural yoga as a cathartic and healing physical practice to students across the globe. Capitalizing on the mythos of the yogas of ancient India, they drew continuous lineages between esoteric ancient practices and their modern teachings. They built on Krishnamacharya’s

innovative sequence of postures and crafted a modern postural yoga that was ideally suited to the strains of modernity and the confines of industrial life. His students promoted yoga globally as a health science and believed in yoga's universality. Those who learned from him adopted these foundations while adding their own personalizations into their practice. Although postural yoga was a conglomerated practice in its modern foundations, yogic adepts, who were teaching and learning in India, presented themselves as reviving the eternal and ancient wisdom of mystical India.

Both Iyengar and Jois became globally famous as the fathers of modern postural yoga. They developed new systems of postural practice that expanded rapidly across the globe in the twentieth century, in large part because they were not explicitly linked to religion, as were the soteriological yogas of other more religiously inclined gurus, for example Paramhansa Yogananda. Still, they drew connections between India's ancient religious history and the innovative forms of postural yoga practice they had created. This bolstered their credibility as purveyors of an ancient tradition and augmented their authority to disseminate their yogic ideas and practices outside of India.<sup>28</sup> It is only quite recently that these yogic leaders have been recognized as modern innovators, instead of purveyors of a 5000-year-old tradition (Singleton 2010).<sup>29</sup> Their innovations included modern forms of sequencing postures, the rapid movement from one posture to another (*vinyāsa*), and even particular postures. But more importantly, these leaders democratized yoga. They transformed it from an elite Indic system of knowledge available only to trained religious adepts within Indic religious systems to an agnostic, physical practice that anyone could do. As they and their students migrated outside of India and carried yoga onto the global stage, their reconceptualization of yoga as universal and democratic became one of their most salient and vital innovations.

Both Peter van der Veer and Mark Singleton have argued that the drive to spread yogic philosophy and practice globally emerged in tandem with, if not as an expression of anticolonial nationalism in India (van der Veer

28 For more on orientalist constructions of India, see Inden 2006, 13–60.

29 This continues to be a topic of considerable debate. While most scholars have been convinced by the evidence that Singleton has offered (White 2014; Jain 2014), others maintain that there is evidence that even postural forms of yoga are 5000 years old (see the interventions of the Hindu American Foundation and Christopher Wallis in the popular yoga scene). With regard to the scholarly response, James Mallinson (2011) has suggested that there is much work yet to be done to unearth the history of postural yoga, but there is textual evidence for physical yogic practices since the early medieval period. See also Sir James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, eds. 2017. *Roots of Yoga*. New York: Penguin.

2009; Singleton 2010). Religious leaders in India began to see spirituality as a means to assert Indian self-worth in defense against colonial critiques. India began to disseminate spiritual ambassadors globally, who spoke in terms of spirituality and situated themselves as wayfaring guides for the West mired in industry and materialism (Lucia 2011). Swami Vivekananda (2003) repeatedly claimed that while the East [India] would learn industry from the West, the West must learn spirituality from the East [India]. He claimed yoga as “the Indian science of supra-consciousness” and presented it as scientific, a rational form of spirituality lacking in “religious specificity” that stands in stark opposition to religion and devotional rituals (van der Veer 2009, 267).

After the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, Vivekananda attracted a following in the United States who practiced his meditative and breathing techniques and envisioned yoga as a scientific and spiritual practice that did not demand conversion. His treatise on *Raja Yoga* in 1896 became wildly popular among North Americans, particularly elite women. By the 1920s, with the rise of the bohemians, yoga exploded with popularity in the United States. In this yogic craze, Paramhansa Yogananda (who would later pen his famed treatise *Autobiography of a Yogi*) began teaching yogic exercises, including postures, to his followers.<sup>30</sup> The 1920s also brought yogi-magicians to American stages and sideshows, tantric yogis on national tours and in the presses, and African-Americans who donned the garb and presence of Indian yogis with dreams of fame and fortune.<sup>31</sup> By now, the Indian yogi was *en vogue* among the eclectics and the bohemians, and particularly among members of high society in the US (and in Europe and the UK). As the yogi’s popularity grew, so did his stagecraft. Yogis often presented the contortions of postural yoga and the breathing exercises of *prānāyāma* blended with a heavy dose of the exotification of India.

At the same time, halfway around the world in India, Krishnamacharya and his students were developing new physical techniques to develop a strong and muscular Indian populace. They incorporated wrestling, bodybuilding, gymnastics, and even esoteric dance into their practice – all aimed to help modern yogis build a strong physique. This was quite a different goal than that of yoga as it is explained in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, as the union of the soul with God, or in Vedanta as the unification of *ātman* (“the essence of self”) and *brahman* (“the essence of the universe”), or conversely as in the *Yoga Sūtras*, as the unjoining of consciousness from matter, *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*. Nor were

<sup>30</sup> See Pokazanyeva 2015.

<sup>31</sup> See Deslippe 2014; and Rocklin 2016.

these modern yogis *avatar-gurus* (“divine gurus”) in the modern sense. They were the gurus of an older sort – those who had a specific field of knowledge to teach and did so through direct apprenticeship. But even though they were not religious gurus and their yoga was particular in its physical orientation, they did not reject the religious core at the center of yogic tradition.

To ground his yogic practice in Indic traditions, Iyengar centralized Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* as the quintessential text of yoga. He also asserted that the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, is “the most important authority on Yoga philosophy” (Iyengar 1976, 19). Even though he claimed that these Indic and Hindu scriptures are the roots of the tradition, he also sought to universalize it – to allow yoga to transcend any one location or religion. He explained, “Yoga is not a religion by itself. It is the science of religions, the study of which will enable a *sādhaka* [practitioner] to better appreciate his own faith” (ibid., 39). Jois, on the other hand, suggested that the *surya namaskār* sequence of his *vināyāsa* system could be traced directly to the oldest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas (Singleton 2010, 221-2, quoted in Jain 2014, 114). In a public interview, Jois affirmed, “The reason we do yoga is to become one with God and to realize Him in our hearts. You can lecture, you can talk about God, but when you practice correctly, you come to experience God inside. Some people start yoga and don’t even know of Him, don’t even want to know of Him. But for anyone who practices yoga correctly, the love of God will develop. And, after some time, a greater love for God will be theirs, whether they want it or not” (Brown 2013, 19). The Hare Krishnas, the most aggressively proselytizing Hindu group in the world, would later echo this sentiment: Fire is fire. It burns whether you believe in it or not (Hughes, Lee, Lucia, & Mukherjee 2015, 58).

Both Iyengar and Jois sought the global distribution of yoga and they argued that postural yoga practice is innately beneficial for all persons. In his seminal book, *The Light on Yoga*, (often referred to as “The Bible of Modern Yoga”), B.K.S. Iyengar quoted the fifteenth-century text, the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*, explaining,

The young, the old, the extremely aged, even the sick and the infirm obtain perfection in Yoga by constant practice. Success will follow him who practises, not him who practises not. Success in Yoga is not obtained by the mere theoretical reading of sacred texts. Success is not obtained by wearing the dress of a yogi or a *sanyāsi* (a recluse), nor by talking about it. Constant practice alone is the secret of success.<sup>32</sup>

32 Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, chapter 1, verses 64-6, quoted in Iyengar 1976, 30.

Today, the foremost description of Iyengar Yoga on its US website reads, “Yoga is for everyone” (IYNAUS, n.d.). Jois is often quoted to have said, “Anyone can practice [yoga]. Young man can practice. Old man can practice. Very old man can practice. Man who is sick, he can practice. Man who doesn’t have strength can practice. Except lazy people; lazy people can’t practice Ashtanga yoga”.<sup>33</sup> In both of these fundamental strains of yogic thought that proliferated globally in the twentieth century, yoga was presented as a religiously unspecific universal practice that demands only commitment for success.<sup>34</sup>

The leading ambassadors for yoga believed that anyone of any faith could practice yoga, but they still privileged Hindu texts, like the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Ṛg Veda* as the sources of yoga. This is the quintessential move of proselytizing Hinduism, which propagates inclusivism in the form of *hierarchical relativism*. As Peter van der Veer (1994, 68) explains, “The many gods and paths are manifestations of the One who is formless – but some of these manifestations are higher than others. Moreover, they perform different functions, and in a hierarchical order. The general idea seems to be that other paths do not have to be denied as heretical but that they are inferior and thus cater to inferior beings”. As such, anyone of any faith can do yoga, but it is Īśvara in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*, Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, or the Hindu gods of the *Ṛg Veda*, who occupy the heart of the tradition.

## Conclusion

The global proliferation of postural yoga is the legacy of these twentieth-century yogic emissaries. Today, the majority of students around the globe is introduced to yoga through physical postures and a largely secular context. As Burçak Ertimur and Gokcen Coskuner-Balli have argued, the global yoga market is divided between spiritual, medical, and fitness models – and the spiritual model is becoming decreasingly important in the United States. Their recent quantitative research study concludes that, “over the three

33 Matthew Remski (2015b) suggests that Jois may be paraphrasing Pancham Sinh’s 1914 translation of the *Haṭhpradīpikā*, 1.64, “Whether young, or too old, sick or lean, one who discards laziness, gets success if he practises yoga”. James Mallinson suggests that the paraphrase is taken from the *Dattātreyayogaśāstra*, v.40, wherein a-tandritaḥ can be translated as “not tired”, which could possibly be stretched to mean one who is not tired, or “one who discards laziness”.

34 Even today, yoga-for-everyone advocacy articles, such as Cody Groth’s “Why Everyone Can and Should Do Yoga”, written for *Yoga Digest*, proliferate the Internet.

decade time frame of the study [1980-2009], the yoga market was decreasingly associated with the logic of spirituality and increasingly associated with the medical and fitness logics” (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli 2014, 53). Their data revealed that spirituality had been pushed to the margins of mainstream American yoga. They also suggested that it was Indians and Indian gurus in particular who retained the spiritual core of yoga and proselytized its benefits globally. With the decline of the Indic guru-disciple relationship, the spiritual content of yoga also declined. Furthermore, Americans sought to make yoga socially, culturally, and politically acceptable thus increased its commercial logics. In order to successfully integrate yoga into the global context, they focused heavily on the fitness, medical, and commercial logics and minimized the spiritual foundations (Feuerstein 2003).

In most yoga studios, Hinduism and spirituality are routinely recoded into secularized or New Age language in order to increase the studio’s marketability. Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli (2014, 51) quote a yoga studio director saying, “We don’t do any chanting because people are not comfortable with it... We never use the word ‘God.’ We talk about energy, we talk about peace, we talk about mindfulness. We use those New-Agey kinds of words”. These studios gamble on the assumption that yoga can be practiced for solely physical aims productively, so long as one confines the practice to the surface of the tradition. But when one dips below the surface into Indic cultural heritage, proscribed yogic texts, or the greater context of yoga, one quickly becomes immersed within yoga’s religious roots: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

While many global practitioners of postural yoga view the practice as mere exercise, others aim to deepen their yoga practice and expand it beyond the physical postures. As they educate themselves more deeply about yoga, whether through readings, study with a teacher, retreats, or festivals, modern yogis are likely to find themselves embedded in multiple religious ideas and practices that contextualize postural yoga. In their readings of primary and secondary religious sources, their meditations, and their personal rituals, some find the active ingredients for a vibrant catalyst for self-transformation. Through an exploration into the spiritual modalities and religious systems that exist on the immediate peripheries of postural yoga, practitioners begin to design a new spiritual habitus. Despite the fact that self-transformation is neither exclusive nor institutional, the gradual intensity of the recalibration of spiritual affinity, if not “religious (re)affiliation”, resembles narratives of conversion. Invigorated with redemption and salvation narratives describing how yoga “changed” or even “saved” lives, many of these practitioners aim to share the practice with others. They become rooted in the belief system that yoga can change the world, one individual transformation at a time.

As the leaders of yoga culture circulate the globe, spreading their newfound knowledge with eager novices, their itinerancy easily conjures the methods, if not the modes, of missionaries as they endeavor to spread the gospel to more and more souls. Like their forbearers, modern global yogic adepts sermonize, missionize, and proselytize in efforts to transform society into their multifarious visions of yogic utopia and self-perfection.

Early twentieth-century yogis were most concerned to establish migratory networks of proselytization from India to the West. But today, yoga has expanded into networks of global hypermobility that extend far beyond the dialectic between India and the West. American yogis have taken control over the dissemination of modern postural yoga and in many ways, they have eclipsed the representation of Indian yogis. In addition to dominating the yoga field, some American yogis aim to expand yoga into the global theaters that they believe need yoga the most – the geographies plagued by stress, violence, and poverty. In its most overt forms, American yogis are following similar patterns of relief missionary work that have been established in carefully articulated networks by their Christian forbearers. In its more subtle forms, they enact the rhetorical strategies and the positionality of missionaries in their efforts to spread yoga as a universal good. In analyzing the global flows of yogic hypermobility, we must recognize that mobility is not only celebratory. Networks of mobility can recreate historical patterns of violence and oppression. American yogis may very well recreate patterns of dominance and subordination through their missionizing practices and rhetorical strategies, especially when applying them to vulnerable populations.

The tactics used for the dissemination of yoga globally have traditionally been proselytizing and focused on inciting yogic “conversions” – even when yogic emissaries present yoga practice as secular. Just as religion is being transmitted through “globally integrated networks”,<sup>35</sup> “cellular systems”,<sup>36</sup> and “hyphal knots”,<sup>37</sup> similarly modern postural yoga follows this religious model, even if it is being marketed as a secular practice. Yoga emissaries have expanded the practice into secular and religious fields and they often blend traditional yogic spirituality with their own worldviews, such as

35 “GINs consist of complex, enduring and predictable networked connections between peoples, objects and technologies stretching across multiple and distant spaces and times”. (Urry 2003, 56-7)

36 Cellular systems consist of rhizomically networked cells, as opposed to linear, “vertebrate systems”. (Appadurai 2006, 21)

37 “‘Hyphal knots’ are those key intersections amid the complex networks of mycelia that spread subterraneously throughout the ecosystem and play critical roles in the circulation of resources and information between organic and inorganic matter”. (Urban 2015, 6-7)

environmentalism, feminism, psychology, or aspects of non-yogic religions, such as indigenous religions, tantrism, or Daoism. This hybridization of yoga with multiple worldviews reflects the ways in which its mobility is forcing it into contact and dialogue with existing secular and religious systems. As yoga emissaries position yoga as a universal good within multiple geographical contexts, they hybridize to adapt to the sociohistorical, cultural, and religious conditions of each location and thus become generators of yogic innovations.

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