**The Politics of Yoga:**

**The Neoliberal Yogi and the Question of Yogic “Authenticity”**

Conference Draft—Please do not circulate or cite without permission

Farah Godrej

University of California-Riverside

Paper prepared for Western Political Science Association (WPSA), Annual Conference

April 1-4, 2015

Can the theory and practice of the yogic tradition serve as a challenge to dominant social, cultural and political norms in the Western world?  Those who claim that it can tend to engage in a popular, public discourse characterized by a great deal of anxiety about preserving the  “authenticity” or “purity” of postural yoga.  In this essay, I demonstrate that there has never been a “pure” or “authentic” form of yoga as such, and that anxieties about preserving yoga's “authenticity” may be implicated with a reified, appropriately non-Western and counterculturally “other” notion of yoga, and thus with the same essentialisms on which much of modern yoga’s trajectory in the West has been built. The modern practice of postural yoga is built on countless innovations and reconstructions, with the participation of both Indians and non-Indians.  Contemporary forms of yogic practice—particularly those that converge with modern, Western, capitalist and/or neoliberal tropes—are not necessarily a distortion of the so-called “original” principles and norms of the yogic tradition.  Rather, they may be fully compatible with key norms and principles of the so-called “tradition,” in all its diversity and plurality. Thus, a profound ambivalence underlies the politics of contemporary yogic practice: forms of postural yoga practice prevalent in the West may militate against but simultaneously also participate in and therefore legitimate forms of selfhood that are encouraged by and produced within the biopolitical regimes of neoliberalism.

The essay begins with a brief historical overview of the yogic tradition, including its arrival and development within the West. In the second section, I explore how contemporary forms of yogic practice align with and encourage the forms of selfhood crucial to biopolitical self-governance in neoliberal regimes. In the third section, I address objections to this way of characterizing the contemporary practice of postural yoga, demonstrating that its multivalence may allow it to occasionally stand in opposition to and in critique of neoliberal forms of selfhood. Finally, I note that understandings of yoga’s counterhegemonic status often rely on an exaggerated notion of its alterity, which belie the invented and retrospectively reconstructed nature of yoga. I conclude by gesturing toward the uncomfortable political implications that may accompany a recognition of the flaws inherent in arguments about yoga’s “authenticity.”

1) What exactly is yoga, and how did it get here?

The term *yoga* is not as clearly-defined as most of its contemporary practicioners might imagine. Scholars points out that the word has meant many different things in many different contexts. Joseph Alter tells us that perhaps no word has been more misunderstood than *yoga*, used in the earliest texts of the Indic traditions to mean “yoke” or “union.” According to David Gordon White, “yoga” has a wider range of meanings than any other word in the Sanskrit lexicon,”[[1]](#endnote--1) ranging from “yoking” an animal to its harness, to practices that would “yoke” or “unify” individual consciousness with the divine. The word has variously been employed in ancient Indic texts 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, contact, a sum total, and the work of alchemists. But this is by no means an exhaustive list.”[[2]](#endnote-0) Over time, the term has come to be identified with techniques of disciplined self-mastery and transcendence, aiming toward an extra-ordinary state of consciousness, often (although not always) defined as ultimate union with the divine.[[3]](#endnote-1)

Recent scholarship by South Asianists has emphasized that the variety of texts, ideas and practices subsumed under the umbrella term *yoga* have always been heterogenous, doctrinally diverse and highly syncretic, even (and perhaps especially) within their premodern Indian iterations. Scholars note that while a “relatively systematic yoga nomenclature became established among Hindus, Buddhists and Jains” in the subcontinent between about 300 BCE and the fifth century, [[4]](#endnote-2) and while yoga may have been “culturally South Asian,” it was practiced in a variety of ways across these various religious traditions of the subcontinent.[[5]](#endnote-3) Most importantly, its textual and philosophical foundations were highly diverse, articulated in different ways throughout different time periods, and through a variety of distinct approaches to both theory and practice.[[6]](#endnote-4) Across a variety of Indic texts and traditions, yoga was developed, defined, taught and systematized in a variety of ways, replete with cross-cultural borrowing and exchange across the fluid boundaries between various systems: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, and other non-Brahmanical traditions of renunciation.[[7]](#endnote-5)

Scholars agree that it was not until the relatively late, medieval development of tantric systems in both Hinduism and Buddhism (around the tenth or eleventh centuries CE) that postural practice emerged as a focus of yoga.[[8]](#endnote-6) Tantra refers broadly to South Asian philosophical systems centred around the use of embodiment as a pathway to transcendence and divine bliss. It involves the embrace rather than the denial of bodily pleasure, which had up to then characterized the more predominant ascetic systems of renunciatory yoga in South Asia. *Hatha* *yoga* or the physical practice of postures (*asanas*), today thought to be the most central practice in contemporary forms of yoga, was in fact a much later and far more innovative, heterodox development, rather than a “pure” or “originary” form of yoga. As Kenneth Libermann notes, yoga as it is practiced today is a medieval—rather than ancient—“hotchpotch of Buddhism, Saivism, with even Islamic influence and non-Hindu tribal asceticism.”[[9]](#endnote-7) The meaning of yoga has therefore never been particularly stable or monolithic. The yoga that is known and practiced in the modern world is “derived from a tradition that was itself a *derivative and syncretic form* of spiritual practice.”[[10]](#endnote-8) In contrast to the notion of a “pristine and unchanging, millennia-old lineage of…theory and practice”[[11]](#endnote-9) which often characterizes contemporary study and dissemination of yoga in the West, most scholars now agree that yoga, like every other social product, be seen as syncretic from the outset,[[12]](#endnote-10) containing “a multiplicity of definitions and interpretations.”[[13]](#endnote-11)

The arrival of yoga in the West in the modern period, starting in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, was the result of a complicated transnational journey. Scholars of yoga now largely agree that this journey was the combined product of inventive and retrospective reconstruction of a so-called “classical” yogic tradition of India by modern Indian pioneers, along with key dialogical exchanges between these Indians and crucial Western interlocutors. Beginning in the nineteenth century, yoga was “deconstructed and reconstructed both within and beyond South Asia, leading to the emergence of a new transnational tradition.”[[14]](#endnote-12) Contemporary yoga is constituted by “heterogenous systems that developed as a consequence of encounters between Indian yoga reformers engaged with modern thought, [and] Europeans and Americans interested in topics ranging from metaphysics to fitness,”[[15]](#endnote-13) during an increasingly modern and globalized nineteenth century.

Various intellectual modernizers, both Indian and Western, were interested establishing yoga’s legitimacy in the West as a philosophical, contemplative and ethical tradition of ancient provenance.[[16]](#endnote-14) Swami Vivekanada is one of the key figures credited with this feat.[[17]](#endnote-15) Following his famous address to the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893, Vivekananda gave a series of lectures in the US, offering a modern, rationalist, ascetic and contemplative interpretation of yogic spirituality.[[18]](#endnote-16) Using a selective reading of Patanjali’s *Yogasutras* which reified the text as central to the study and practice of yoga, Vivekanada constructed an essentialized, monolithic and ostensibly “authentic” version of yoga’s “classical” history that today constitutes its most predominant narrative: “From the time it was discovered, more than four thousand years ago, Yoga was perfectly delineated, formulated and preached in India.”[[19]](#endnote-17)

Vivekananda expressed disdain for yoga’s bodily practices, downplaying their importance, but other Indian reformers began representing yoga as a physical fitness regime comprised primarily of bodily postures and exercises. Among others, Sivananda Saraswati and Tirumalai Krishnamacharya constructed new postural systems with putative roots in earlier Indian textual traditions. Like Vivekananda, however, these reformers also undertook a selective and creative reliance on so-called “ancient” texts of the Indian tradition—particularly Patanjali’s *Yogasutras*, but also the *Bhagavad-Gita*—reifying certain texts and practices over others, linking postural practice to the meditative and contemplative strains in the “classical” texts, and eliding the fact that the provenance of the postures they invented was hardly “ancient” or “classical.” In fact, many of the poses taught by these teachers (and now routinely practiced in contemporary yoga classes), despite their Sanskrit names, do not occur in the medieval tantric texts in which *hatha-yoga* is elaborated at length, much less in the earlier, so-called “classical texts,” where there is no mention at all of any physical postures.[[20]](#endnote-18)

To a large extent, “popular postural yoga came into being in the first half of the twentieth century as a hybridized product of colonial’s India’s dialogical encounter with the worldwide physical culture movement,”[[21]](#endnote-19) as well as India’s nationalist aspirations to building a strong, fit, and disciplined population capable of rejecting colonial rule and ruling itself.[[22]](#endnote-20) Modern Indian yogis internalized the importance of physical fitness during the late colonial (and later early postcolonial periods), constructing indigenous exercise forms that were both distinct from as well as borrowed from imported fitness techniques, resulting in a “pan-Indian hub of physical culture revivalism.”[[23]](#endnote-21) Most yoga scholars now agree that the methods of postural yoga that became popular in India the early to mid-twentieth century (and later in the West) “would not have been considered yoga prior to this period of Indian history.”[[24]](#endnote-22) Meanwhile, the connections between these postural methods and their putatively ancient textual roots is even more tenuous. “Monolithic deference” to both the notion of classical yoga as well as to the authoritative status of certain texts such as the *Yogasutras* are themselves modern phenomena, constructed by a combination of modern Orientalist scholarship and the retrospective presentation of an unbroken “classical” tradition by modern Indian reformers.[[25]](#endnote-23)

These reformers attracted and trained many students, some of whom went on to become key players in the global dissemination of yoga styles. B.K.S. Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois, both students of Krishnamacharya, each innovated their own schools of postural practice (Iyengar Yoga and Ashtanga Yoga respectively), which have gone on to become well-recognized in the West today. The yogas taught and disseminated by these figures, much like those of their reformist teachers, even while being linked to a putatively ancient or classical tradition, were simultaneously represented as comporting with the modern requirements of rationalist, modern science and biomedicine.[[26]](#endnote-24) This universalized, scienticized and medicalized postural yoga became increasingly popular in the West in the mid- to late- twentieth century, driven by a combination of a Euro-American counterculture drawn to alternative spiritualities, increased global travel allowing EuroAmericans to travel to India, the lifting of immigration restrictions which led to the rise of transnational teacher or *guru* figures in the West, and the eventual intersection of yoga with the emergent global consumer culture.[[27]](#endnote-25)

In the late twentieth century, yoga’s popularity exploded as EuroAmerican practicioners and teachers of postural yoga (including, in some cases, immigrants of Indian origin such as Bikram Chowdhury) began to invent their own systems of yoga, commodifying, branding and marketing these innovations to global audiences in accordance with the entrepreneurial spirit of global consumer capitalism.[[28]](#endnote-26) The mind-boggling array of yoga practices now available at many urban centers in the West includes aerial or flying yoga (performed on silk scarves suspended from the ceiling); acro-yoga (performed in the acrobatic or circus-like style); Stand-Up Paddleboard (SUP) yoga, performed on a paddleboard on open water; “rock-n-roll yoga” (set to certain kinds of music); “yogalates” (a hybrid of yoga and pilates); along with Anusara yoga (innovated by American *yogi* John Friend), “hot yoga,” or Bikram yoga (performed in a heated environment) “kundalini yoga” (ostensibly based on a version of *tantra*), as well as Iyengar, Ashtanga and Vinyasa yoga, among many other forms.

2) Yoga and Biopolitical Self-Governance

From this brief historical overview, I now shift to addressing the place, cultural status and treatment of yoga in contemporary Western societies. In modern Western contexts, the term yoga is now most closely identifed with the physical practices (or *asanas*) of postural yoga. I now explore how the contemporary practices of postural yoga may stand in relation to forms of power exerted in contemporary liberal and neoliberal societies of the industrialized West. Here, I rely on Foucauldian conceptions of biopolitical self-governance and neoliberal governmentality to offer a reading of the role of postural yoga practice within liberal and neoliberal regimes.[[29]](#endnote-27) While some analysts see certain forms of postural yoga practice as standing in resistance to the forms of power and domination Foucault identifies in such regimes, I argue that this is only partially true. In many instances, I show, the practice of postural yoga in the West is a full participant within the exercise of neoliberal biopolitical power. Moreover, the development of postural yoga into a form of biopolitical self-governance does not always represent a divergence from the so-called “authentically Indian” or putatively “ancient” roots of the yogic tradition. Rather, it can be quite compatible with a variety of imperatives found within the yogic tradition from its earliest iterations. In some instances, postural yoga’s participation in a neoliberal biopolitics may require a neglect, denial and perhaps even violation of some of the yogic tradition’s most common norms and practices. But yoga’s transformation in the West—and particularly its participation in neoliberal biopolitics— has also been “effected in a way that is coextensive with some of the most important underlying assumptions or principles that ground the way in which yoga operates and what it yields.”[[30]](#endnote-28) In making these claims about postural yoga’s participation in contemporary Western socio-political formations, I rely on an understanding of yogic practice as it is constructed, reconstructed and lived today in particular contexts, rather than on any monolithic notion of the yogic “tradition.” The plural, fragmentary and hybrid nature of both premodern and contemporary yoga necessarily entails a methodological position that relies not on any textual sources or forms of yogic practice construed as “authoritative” or “originary,” but rather on specific, particular forms of lived yogic experience.[[31]](#endnote-29) It is this latter set of lived experiences in EuroAmerican urban centers—as evidenced in attendance at yoga studios, as well as popular discourse in the world of blogs and yoga magazines—to which I now refer.

1. Foucault’s Biopolitics and Neoliberal Governmentality

Michel Foucault’s concepts of biopolitics and governmentality offer us a compelling way to understand how the individual’s relationship to her or his own body is enlisted in the workings of power, as practices of bodily cultivation and self-fashioning intersect with forms of power in liberal and neoliberal regimes. Foucault’s conception of biopower or biopolitics deals with the penetration of self-disciplinary regimes into the most intimate domains of modern life, including and especially the body.[[32]](#endnote-30) In his 1978 and 1979 lectures at the College de France, Foucault links biopolitics to the emergence of liberal forms of government, calling liberalism a “specific art of governing human beings,” which provides the “general framework of biopolitics.”[[33]](#endnote-31) In these same lectures, Foucault also investigates processes of subjectivation in liberal societies, and introduces the concept of “governmentality” characteristic of modern liberal (and later neoliberal) regimes. Governmentality, defined as the “conduct of conduct,” refers to “the set of institutions and practices, from administration to education, through which people’s conduct is guided,”[[34]](#endnote-32) as “authorities seek to guide and shape the conduct and decisions of individuals and collectives in order to achieve specific objectives” through a “complex of practical mechanisms, procedures, instruments and calculations.”[[35]](#endnote-33)

The advent of neoliberalism in the latter half of the twentieth century brings about an emphasis on a new kind of subject: active, autonomous, prudent, responsible and calculating. While in ordinary parlance, neoliberalism is equated with a radically free market involving maximized competition and free trade,[[36]](#endnote-34) Wendy Brown notes that neoliberalism is also a political rationality: a “specific form of normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship,” which “governs the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth criteria of these domains.”[[37]](#endnote-35) Neoliberalism, she further claims, “casts the political and social spheres as appropriately dominated by market concerns and as themselves organized by market rationality.”[[38]](#endnote-36) Thus, neoliberal political rationality “produces governance criteria …of productivity and profitability, with the consequence that governance talk increasingly becomes market-speak.”[[39]](#endnote-37) Meanwhile, it promulgates a “political culture that figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life,” as well as a “host of policies that figure and produce citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for “self-care”—their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions.”[[40]](#endnote-38) In making the individual fully responsible for her/himself, neoliberalism “carries responsibility for the self to new heights.”[[41]](#endnote-39) Neoliberalism therefore entails “a social analysis which, when deployed as a form of governmentality… involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action.”[[42]](#endnote-40) Neoliberal governmentality entails a mode of control “achieved through formation rather than repression or punishment,”[[43]](#endnote-41) which “orchestrat[es] the subject's conduct toward him or herself,”[[44]](#endnote-42) “lead[ing] and control[ling] subjects without being responsible for them.”[[45]](#endnote-43) It convenes a “free” subject who is controlled through their his or her own freedom: an individual “entrepreneur” in every aspect of life, rationally deliberating about alternative courses of action, making choices, and bearing responsibility for the consequences of these choices, wholly responsible for his or her own well-being.[[46]](#endnote-44) Such subjects are given the resources, opportunities and the motivations to govern themselves, to acquire and employ certain mentalities which allow them to construct themselves as amenable subjects of neoliberal rule.

Thus, in neoliberal regimes, which promote classically liberal ideals of self-reliance and self-governance, social order is achieved “not through hierarchical and top-down authoritative rules but through bottom-up technologies of individual responsibility and voluntary participation.”[[47]](#endnote-45) Scholars influenced by Foucault have noted that this neoliberal “responsibilization” of individuals—that is, enhancing personal responsibility by shifting caring responsibilities from public welfare to self-help—is particularly apparent in the field of health, for liberal humanism is at least in part anchored in the belief that “individual health is a product of our own choices.”[[48]](#endnote-46) The shift in rationalities and technologies of government in late liberal and neoliberal biopolitical regimes involves a devolution of the many responsibilities for human health management, with “an increasing emphasis on the responsibility of individuals to manage their own affairs, to secure their own security with a prudential eye on the future.”[[49]](#endnote-47)

1. Yoga’s Participation in a Neoliberal Biopolitics

Many forms of contemporary postural yoga in the EuroAmerican world not only participate in this neoliberal biopolitics, they illustrate the perfect Foucauldian convergence of biopolitics with neoliberal governmentality. The practice of yoga is now part and parcel of what Foucault has called “technologies of the self:” practices which “permit individuals to effect…a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”[[50]](#endnote-48) In contemporary neoliberal societies, Nikolas Rose tells us, these technologies of the self are put in service of the imperatives of choice and self-maximization: “the body and its capacities have become central to technologies of selfhood.”[[51]](#endnote-49) While bodily self-enhancement has of course been a human goal since time immemorial, self-enhancement in contemporary neoliberal biopolitical regimes is characterized by the “[maximization of] the vital forces and potentialities of the living body,” which is “understood as an imperative.”[[52]](#endnote-50) It is this imperative—and indeed responsibility—to maximize and optimize human vital capacity that is reflected in many contemporary forms of postural yoga practice.

Generally speaking, postural yoga is a teleological project of progressive individual self-fashioning, self-improvement and optimization. Despite the diversity entailed in different understandings of the purpose of yogic teleology,[[53]](#endnote-51) at the heart of the yogic project is the inevitable impetus toward steady, incremental, betterment of one’s capabilities, whether understood in the lofty terms of soteriological aims toward transcendence or in terms of more mundane aims such as bodily beauty or perfection of postures. In most contemporary forms of yogic practice, one attends classes with regularity, working incrementally to master postures, to make the body more pliable and easefully able to move into and out of certain poses. The body is honed, trained and cultivated through repeated practice. Nor is this commitment to teleological self-fashioning and self-cultivation exclusively an artefact of “modern” or “Western” versions of yoga. The emphasis on repeated practice of self-cultivation appears in premodern Indic texts now regarded as “canonical,” as well as in modern Indian forms of practice.[[54]](#endnote-52) Benjamin Richard Smith, for instance, notes that the practice of K. Pattabhi Jois’ Ashtanga yoga valorizes “the body’s ability to … progressively achieve greater hights in the performance of yoga poses,”[[55]](#endnote-53) while B.K.S. Iyengar’s *Light on Yoga* is replete with references to repeated practice in pursuit of progressive achievement.[[56]](#endnote-54)

As a “technology of the self,” the practice of postural yoga also participates fully in discourses of individual choice and responsibility so crucial to the neoliberal program. Contemporary postural yoga not only offers the modern consumer a dizzying variety of choice in terms of the myriad possibilities for yoga practice, it also allows the consumer to construct her own identity in keeping with the logic of the market and consumer culture.[[57]](#endnote-55) The self-cultivation and self-fashioning of contemporary postural yogic practice is “invariably couched in the rhetoric of individual choice and taste…standing alongside decisions about lifestyle and sexuality as expressions of individual identity.”[[58]](#endnote-56) Many yoga classes in Western urban centers are rife with the language of individual choice, as teachers repeatedly deploy responsibilizing language that congratulates the yoga practicioner for their healthy choices. “Thank yourself for coming to your mat,” and “you showed up to practice today” are encouraging refrains routinely heard at such studios, implying that the subject has made the correct choice to practice and thus avail of the many benefits of yogic practice. Like Althusser’s subject, the responsible subjects of yogic practice are “hailed” when they choose to engage in the self-improvement and self-cultivation entailed in their yogic practice, while recognizing their own identity as responsible subjects.[[59]](#endnote-57) Teachers also repeatedly and gently exhort the students with slogans such as “this is your time” and “this is your practice.” Also highly common is the idea of individualizing yogic practice to each person’s requirements, as practicioners are given choices to modify their practice in conjunction with the requirements of their own bodily constraints and capabilities. Often, teachers will demonstrate a difficult, physically demanding posture or sequence, while reassuring students that they are welcome to modify these postures to make them less demanding, or to skip certain sequences altogether by taking “child’s pose” or *balasana*, an easy restorative foetal position accessible to almost all. Yoga fully adopts the neoliberal ethos of “risk management” that responsibilizes the individual for her choices: signing a waiver releasing the teacher or the studio from legal liability due to any injury incurred during the course of the practice is now mandatory at almost any yoga studio in the US. The rational, prudent, and autonomous subject of yoga not only chooses her specific form of practice from the dizzying variety available to her, she chooses daily to “come to her mat,” to “show up,” and then to modify the postures in accordance with the choices given to her, to be responsible for recognizing her own bodily capacities and limitations in the course of her practice.

This convergence of yogic practice with the neoliberal logic of consumer choice exemplifies postural yoga’s occasional detachment from—and transformation of—the dominant norms of the Indic traditions from which it emerges. In most premodern Indic contexts, yogic knowledge and practice was typically transmitted within the context of an authoritarian guru-disciple relationship, often characterized by complete submission of disciple to guru.[[60]](#endnote-58) Yogic knowledge, once the purview of those who chose to enter a lifelong relationship of spiritual submission to a teacher, now functions largely according to the principles of individual choice and autonomy, as each individual practicioner chooses his or her own path eclectically and without much immersion within the context of a particular lineage.[[61]](#endnote-59) Of course, it is true that the “lineages” of particular modern Indian gurus are reified by some Western yoga practicioners (usually teachers) who seek to travel to India to study “at the source” and thus “authenticate” their teaching and practice.[[62]](#endnote-60) Yet, discipleship under modern Indian gurus takes on the normative features of modern Western life, reflecting the “technological, ideological, bureacratic and spiritual concerns of the day.”[[63]](#endnote-61) The individual choice of the student continues to take precedence as the organizing principle for most yoga practice, even when filtered through the lens of guru-disciple tradition.[[64]](#endnote-62)

But even while contemporary postural yoga’s participation in neoliberal biopolitics occurs at the expense of distorting certain predominant or traditional yogic norms, it simultaneously also converges with others. Of all yogic principles and practices, those most closely aligned with the responsible, self-governing subjects of neoliberalism are self-discipline and self-mastery. Indeed, the very translation of the word “yoga,” despite the variety involved therein, usually denotes a system for self-disciplined efforts toward a particular goal. In almost every text now retrospectively construed as authoritative, self-discipline, self-mastery and self-control are considered the primary routes toward the yogic goals. While the earliest of premodern yogic texts concerns itself with mainly mental, ethical or spiritual forms of discipline geared toward self-transcendence, the later medieval tantric texts rely equally on the language of self-discipline for physical self-cultivation.[[65]](#endnote-63) The self-discipine and self-mastery so foundational to the very definition of yoga appear to have been translated into and made compatible with contemporary forms of self-governance and self-regulation required in late modern neoliberal times. Like contemporary diet, weight loss and exercise regimens which “[assign] to each individual the responsibility for monitoring and measuring their body’s activities …as a matter of habit,” yoga’s fundamental commitment to self-discipline and self-mastery aligns creatively with a neoliberal biopolitics that “affords individuals both the tools and the motivation for increasing levels of self-governance.”[[66]](#endnote-64)

In a study interviewing yoga practicioners, yoga scholars Sarah Strauss and Laura Mandelbaum found that “nearly two-thirds of the respondents [interviewed] answered that … one of the things they valued most was discipline and work ethic that yoga instilled in them.”[[67]](#endnote-65) In a response representative of half the sample, a student who had been practicing yoga for over 6 years explained that yoga had helped to “transform” her: “I stopped smoking, I lost about fifteen kilos, I stopped doing drugs, I stopped drinking…*I have developed self discipline*…I am more calm, more *disciplined*, more focused, eat better, feel healthier, more energized.”[[68]](#endnote-66) Like diet and exercise, postural practice becomes one more way in which contemporary neoliberal subjects can become “governors of their own selves.”[[69]](#endnote-67) Regular attendance at postural yoga classes signify the self-control and self-mastery of the disciplined neoliberal subject. The financial incentives offered at most yoga studios for continuous attendance hail the committed practicioner who brings herself to the practice with regularity and self-discipline.[[70]](#endnote-68) Many yogic practicioners are encouraged by the system of the class-series or multi-class-pass to monitor how many times in a given week or month they have “been to yoga.” To commit seriously to postural yoga practice is to work steadily and cumulatively, perhaps over many years, on the details of precision and alignment that allow one’s body eventually to enter increasingly more easefully and correctly into and out of postures, or allow one’s breath to flow more easily, or allow one’s mind to come to rest more naturally. Every *asana* (pose) “is a challenge that sometimes has to be practiced intensively until you finally master it.”[[71]](#endnote-69) Even (or perhaps especially) when understood in the most mundane and worldly terms and shorn of the more ascetic implications of spiritual transcendence, these aims all require disciplined, regular practice, habituation and forms of mental and corporeal self-mastery. In this sense, “the conceptualizations of selfhood that are produced within yoga converge with neoliberal constructions of selfhood, and these discourses are therefore mutually reinforcing and constantly reproduced.”[[72]](#endnote-70)

Yogic norms of self-mastery and self-discipline may also assist the subject in dealing with the conflicting demands placed on her by the neoliberal regime. Many Foucauldians have noted that the body becomes a crucial site of contradictory impulses toward both consumption and self-restraint in neoliberal regimes of biopolitical self-governance. For instance, Julie Guthman aptly notes: “neoliberal governmentality produces contradictory impulses such that the neoliberal subject is emotionally compelled to participate in society as both out-of- control consumer and self-controlled subject.”[[73]](#endnote-71) Neoliberalism and its attendant forms of consumer culture simultaneously require the subject to engage in obligatory forms of ingestion and consumption, while also moderating her own consumption and atoning for it through forms of health-inducing bodily self-cultivation. Those who either resist the temptation of “unhealthy” foods or are able to moderate the physical effects of such consumption are imbued with normative superiority: “the perfect subject-citizen is able to achieve both eating and thinness …Those who can achieve thinness amidst this plenty are imbued with the rationality and self-discipline that those who are fat must logically lack.”[[74]](#endnote-72) For many practicioners, postural yoga serves as the perfect instrument to fulfill these conflicting demands of neoliberalism and consumer culture, in more ways than one: either the repeated physical practice ostensibly militates against overeating or eating unhealthily; or the yogic norms of self-discipline and self-mastery allow the subject to avoid temptation altogether.[[75]](#endnote-73) Meanwhile, yoga scholar Verena Schnäbele notes that the popularity of postural yoga in the EuroAmerican middle classes may also be explained by the demands of the post-Fordist economy, in which the density of work is increased while the working day is gradually delimited by blurring the boundaries between the “workday” and the rest of one’s life. In such contexts postural yoga can become a palliative form of self-care that allows subjects to continue coping with the stresses of the post-Fordist workplace,[[76]](#endnote-74) while keeping the body “useful” and “flexible,” in a reflection of the post-Fordist demands for employees who are productive enough to work all hours. Yoga allows post-Fordist employees to “maintain [their] physical health in order to be able to meet the demands of work,” fulfilling a neoliberal appeal that allows them to be healthy and therefore productively employed.[[77]](#endnote-75) Thus, postural yoga empowers citizens to self-discipline, (either corporeally, mentally, or both), and eventually to enhance their capacities and skills in ways that subtly (if unintentionally) shape them into “the kind of self-monitoring and self-reliant subjects that are indeed prepared for success in global capitalism.”[[78]](#endnote-76)

Contemporary forms of postural yoga thus illustrate the productive, empowering aspect of self-governance at the heart of governmentality. Thomas Lemke reminds us that on Foucault’s view, exercises of power do not necessarily result in the removal of liberty or options available to individuals; quite on the contrary, they may “‘empower’ or ‘activate’ subjects and enlarge the field of individual freedom and choice,”[[79]](#endnote-77) as processes of self-formation couple with the guiding, shaping power of governmentality. Participation in contemporary forms of postural yoga empowers its subjects: practicioners of yoga choose the teacher/studio/form of practice/school that may best aid their self-enhancement, while taking responsibility for their own progress, as well as for any adverse effects of the practice, thus partaking in an ethic of “active biological citizenship.”[[80]](#endnote-78) Practicioners are empowered by exploring and pushing their own physical limits, which often translates to accessing new realms of possibility in the rest of their lives, often reporting how good it *feels* to be able to achieve new things in body and mind, to conquer difficulty, to encounter challenge, to understand and perhaps conquer one’s physical limits.[[81]](#endnote-79)

In this way, the practices and techniques of self-governance valorized by modern postural yoga produce forms of agency both required and rewarded by neoliberal regimes. Many contemporary forms of yogic practice provide individuals both “the ability and motivation to ensure the productive and predictable development of their own body toward the end of smooth economic development.”[[82]](#endnote-80) The practice of postural yoga may fulfill what Lavin calls the “cultural demand for entrepreneurial, disciplined, and self-regulating subjects” evident in late modern neoliberal times. Forms of modern postural yoga may creatively align with the biopolitical imperatives of neoliberal governmentality in Western contexts, as the language of yogic self-discipline converges with the neoliberal imperatives of self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-mastery which lend themselves to regimes of governmentality intended to create citizens amenable to the objectives of neoliberalism. Many contemporary yoga practicioners may become perfect subjects of neoliberalism: autonomous, self-disciplined, driven by the logic of choice, well-informed, responsible for their own health, geared toward progressive self-cultivation, made amenable to the competing demands of neoliberal economy through techniques that militate against the demands of such an economy, and empowered to be productive members of such an economy.

At this point, some may object that there is surely nothing wrong with a healthy, disciplined and productive populace in which people feel increasingly physically challenged and thus empowered by their own pursuit of health and self-enhancement. If contemporary forms of postural yoga practice produce citizens who discipline themselves and take responsibility for their own health and productivity, should that not be seen as a worthy outcome? But Wendy Brown eloquently reminds us that neoliberalism as rationality “has inadvertently prepared the ground for profoundly anti-democratic political ideas and practices to take root” in both the individual subject, and the culture at large.[[83]](#endnote-81) It produces “an abject, unemancipatory, and anti-egalitarian orientation,”[[84]](#endnote-82) undermining “an already weak investment in an *active citizenry* and an already thin concept of a *public good*.”[[85]](#endnote-83) Neoliberal conceptions of selfhood produce a “pacified and neutered citizenry”[[86]](#endnote-84) in which citizenship is reduced to successful self-care, consumption and entrepreneurship, while being divested of any orientation toward the common, thereby ensuring that “the project of navigating the social becomes entirely one of discerning, affording and procuring a personal solution to every problem.”[[87]](#endnote-85) Meanwhile, “the practice of democracy…is effectively reduced to an individual consumer good, little different in kind or importance from other consumer goods,[[88]](#endnote-86) and the “conversion of socially, economically, and politically produced problems into consumer items” entails “depoliticization on an unprecedented level.”[[89]](#endnote-87) Neoliberal logic demands an “equal right to inequality”[[90]](#endnote-88) such that unemployment, obesity, or ill-health—and by extension poverty—must be attributed to the subject’s lack of responsibility, entrepreneurship or self-mastery, rather to unjust social or political structures. Democratic subjects, meanwhile, wholly in thrall to their own interests,[[91]](#endnote-89) become “available to political tyranny or authoritarianism precisely *because* they are absorbed in a province of choice and need-satisfaction that they mistake for freedom.”[[92]](#endnote-90) The danger is that contemporary yogis may become perfect neoliberal subjects precisely because the practice of yoga may unwittingly reinscribe a consumerist, politically passive, undemocratic and anti-egalitarian conception of selfhood. Responsibilizing yogic subjects for the health-inducing choices in the course of their own progressive self-cultivation and “consumption” of yogic opportunities, while connecting such success in self-cultivation to self-mastery and self-governance, may imply that poor, fat, unhealthy or unemployed others have only themselves to blame. The logic that the achievement of enhanced bodily health is the result of one’s “free choices” and “hard work,” may produce passive, apolitical attitudes that neglect to cast critical light on undemocratic and inegalitarian social structures, focusing instead on one’s own individual self-cultivation, and the freedom to engage in the rational self-disciplined consumption of yoga. “Legitimate stratification and subordination…[take] shape as a political norm,”[[93]](#endnote-91) as inequities in health, body size, employment or income are all depoliticized by being relegated to the realm of “personal” choice, indicating a failure of responsibility, entrepreneurial self-care, and self-discipline. Such a yogic subject may become amenable to arrogations of power, absorbed in pursuing her free choice of health (or transcendence)-inducing practice, disinterested in questioning the broader socioeconomic structures, norms and forms of domination that produce differential outcomes.

3) Yoga’s Cultural Alterity: An “Alternative” Characterization?

Recall, however, that contemporary postural yoga practice adheres to a variety of forms, and fulfills a variety of goals and purposes. As such, it may therefore align with a variety of political structures and formations, including alternative political commitments that stand in opposition to neoliberal rationality. Surely, many might ask, do the precepts and normative underpinnings of the yogic tradition not contain principles that allow practicioners to critique and resist contemporary neoliberal forms of governance and domination, rather than capitulate to them?

For instance, the yogic tradition’s emphasis on asceticism and detachment from worldly desire should perhaps place it in opposition to the norms of consumer culture. As such, one would expect the dissemination of yogic norms to inculcate a critique of material desires and forms of consumer fetishism seen in neoliberalism. Verena Schnabele notes that the yogic body may “[become] a sanctuary and a place of resistance against the pervasive demands of consumer society.”[[94]](#endnote-92) Meanwhile, Laura Duhan Kaplan suggests that “hatha yoga struggles against…universal quantitative standards for bodily development”[[95]](#endnote-93) due to its emphasis on “interior development” in contrast to “bodily excellence,” emphasizing both body uniqueness and body acceptance. She suggests that in contrast to other forms of physical self-cultivation, “*hatha yoga* at least teaches resistance to some of the prevailing conceptions of self that powerful entities in our society—the fitness industry, the cosmetics industry, the finance charge industry, the corporate workplace, and men in relation to women—support, solely in order to increase their dominion.”[[96]](#endnote-94)

Similarly, one might also imagine that the yogic practices of remaining a witness rather than a participant in one’s thoughts and desires, while viewing one’s bodily experiences from a detached perspective, might inculcate in practicioners an awareness and self-reflexivity that stands in resistance to neoliberal or consumerist norms. Some argue that the very ways in which the body is experienced as part of postural practice may refigure one’s way of relating to one’s own body, producing relationships that are characterized by acceptance and self-awareness, rather than by self-critique and endless aspiration toward externally-imposed aesthetic standards: “The more the body is ‘explored’ and thereby mapped, the more detailed the inner body awareness becomes.”[[97]](#endnote-95) As a result of this increased awareness, “adapting to social norms of beauty recedes to the background gradually while the communicative exchange between consciousness and the body is experienced as being more important. This establishes an opposition to discourses of aesthetics,” encouraging a “counter-discourse [in which] the body…is increasingly defined through its ‘inner’ functionality.”[[98]](#endnote-96) Meanwhile, “the attentional skills and nonordinary uses of the body that one acquires through yoga practice can be said to counteract detached and inflexible modes of experiencing,” empowering its practicioners both existentially and socially by producing the trust and solidarity required for the establishment of communities and collective action.[[99]](#endnote-97)

Meanwhile, some Western teachers critique contemporary reinterpretations of the yogic tradition as replete with individually-modifiable “choices” for the consumer, often noting that the ethos of the pre-modern yogic tradition (at least as currently imagined in the West) was in fact rigorous, physically demanding, exacting, and forceful, requiring great physical stamina, capacity for exertion, and complete submission to the teacher’s instructions. This is demonstrated by the fact that the Sanskrit term *hatha-yoga* in fact translates to “violent” or “forceful exertion.” Stories are routinely told of legendarily authoritarian Indian teachers like Iyengar and Jois who were famous for their punitive and forceful teaching styles, sometimes employing forms of corporal discipline, such as aggressive physical adjustments designed to force students into particular postures, and even slapping and shouting at students.[[100]](#endnote-98) By invoking a more pre-modern form of practice putatively less wedded to the ethos of individual choice and instead requiring submission to the rigorous and exacting standards of their “Indian teachers,” some Western teachers also appear to be resisting the prevailing Western neoliberal reinterpretation of yoga as a form of physical exercise that allows each individual to “pick and choose” their own pace and path, while insisting on yoga’s “traditional” emphasis on self-effacement rather than the fetishized logic individual choice and self-enhancement.

Of course modern postural yoga, as Klas Nevrin notes, “can be seen as offering discourses and practices…in which alternative ideologies and practices of the body can be explored, simultaneously offering opportunities for social empowerment and the formation of alternative social interactions.”[[101]](#endnote-99) By no means do I wish to deny the possibility that yoga practice may encourage subverting the predominant norms of liberal and neoliberal individualist, consumer-oriented socio-political formations. But it must be noted that claims about yoga’s countercultural position are all-too-often predicated on a vague sense that it is yoga’s utter cultural and philosophical alterity that constitutes its greatest resource in serving as a potential source of challenge and resistance to dominant political formations of our time. The intuition that yogic practice can serve as a challenge to dominant norms and forms of governance is implicitly married to a popular, public discourse characterized by an anxiety about preserving the “authenticity” or “purity” of postural yoga in all its otherness. I argue now that such anxieties are often implicated with a reified, appropriately non-Western and counterculturally “other” notion of yoga, and thus with precisely the same essentialisms on which much of modern yoga’s trajectory in the West has been built.

The fault most commonly found with contemporary yoga, by both scholars and “informed” practicioners, is that it is “*inauthentic* with regard to the Indian traditions it claims to transmit.”[[102]](#endnote-100) Such discourse largely centers around laments that its cultural alterity and therefore authenticity is being lost, as yoga becomes more secularized, commodified, and palatable for Western consumption, and thus less connected to its Indian roots. Many practicioners assume that postural yoga prior to its export to the West had long been a spiritual practice oriented toward transcendence; that its physical practice is linked to the ascetic and/or contemplative goals elaborated in particular texts such as Patanjali’s *Yogasutras* or the *Bhagavad-Gita*; that the cultural and textual authority of certain “lineages” of yoga which are assumed to be sacrosanct; that renowned teachers such as Pattabhi Jois or Iyengar can trace the authority of their lineages to an unbroken chain of theoretical and practical continuity with assumed ancient teachers and/or forms of practice. For many such commentators and practicioners, yoga’s trajectory in the West is a narrative of steady cultural denuding and domestication in service of liberal, secular Western imperatives of commodification and materialism, leading to a loss of cultural purity, and perhaps implicitly, of countercultural, counter-hegemonic and subversive potential.[[103]](#endnote-101)

It is tempting to assume, therefore, that perhaps it is this cultural appropriation of yoga—consisting in its secularization, liberalization and commodification— that leads to it being put in service of neoliberal forms of governance, particularly as it is de-ascetized and decontextualized from soteriological aims.[[104]](#endnote-102) Surely, one might contend, if yoga were taught and practiced in some “authentic” or “original” way—re-attached to its transcendent purposes, interpreted as a quest for spiritual self-mastery involving guru-disciple transmission—it could resist rather than align with contemporary Western (and therefore neoliberal) imperatives, thus restoring it to a fully countercultural position? This seems like an attractive line of argument to pursue. But attributing yoga’s counterhegemonic potential to its alterity is predicated on multiple fallacies: either that there is indeed some “authentic” or “pure” form of yogic practice, or that the yogic tradition is so irreducibly “other” that only in being domesticated, appropriated, commodified or otherwise corrupted by the West could it possibly become so amenable to modern Western (and therefore neoliberal) norms. Such arguments ignore the possibility that contemporary yogas may be adapting to mainstream secular, neoliberal, individualist tropes in the West, precisely because the history of the yogic “tradition” itself (both premodern and modern) contains elements fully compatible with such tropes. That is, claims about yoga’s countercultural potential may be predicated on exaggerated understandings of its “alterity,” eliding the extent to which the yogic tradition contains strains compatible with the worldly, secularized, neoliberal objectives of the contemporary West.

Take for instance the claim that postural yoga has become increasingly “secularized,” that is, increasingly abstracted away from the soteriological aims of transcendence that have long characterized its practice in South Asia. Critics of yoga’s appropriation often lament that modern postural yoga is said to be less and less attached to its spiritual origins, and increasingly domesticated, made more compatible with secular, liberal society.[[105]](#endnote-103) For these critics, yoga’s spiritual and/or philosophical alterity may allow it to be enlisted in challenging or subverting hegemonic structures and institutions—including dominant Western religions— that some chafe against. But many EuroAmerican practicioners are also able to embrace the practice precisely because its spiritual alterity is carefully neutralized and thus more universally palatable in the West.[[106]](#endnote-104) In fact, yoga may be offering Western practicioners the choice between soteriological and non-sectarian experiences in a way that appears fully compatible with its own ambivalent position within the Indic tradition as a metaphysical philosophy of transcendence both attached to certain religious tropes yet beyond religion.[[107]](#endnote-105) Moreover, the explicit detachment of yogic practice from transcendent aims is neither uniquely modern nor Western, for the yogic tradition has long been both “outward-directed”—that is, put in service of material rather than other-worldly goals—even while it has been seen as “inward-directed.” The purposes and goals of yogic practice have always ranged from the sacred to the mundane, the transcendent to the worldly. In premodern forms, its goals have included, among other things, new states of cognition and perception, techniques for breath control, philosophical inquiry, the development of ominscience and/or magical, supernatural powers, and aspirations to immortality. There are numerous examples of yoga being pressed into service of wordly, secular or mundane goals such as “bodily perfection, beauty, and other ‘physical’ goods.”[[108]](#endnote-106) Across the span of yoga’s premodern history—beginning with its earliest developments, then in its more “classical” from, and finally in medieval, tantric literatures[[109]](#endnote-107)--pleasure and worldly aims have been important components of yoga, along with the ascetic, world-denying, ascetic or soteriological ones, reflecting the coexistence of the sacred and the mundane throughout the history of religions.”[[110]](#endnote-108) Tantra’s world-affirming embrace of both embodiment and physical pleasure further complicates the notion that yoga has ever been exclusively either focused on transcendence or on worldly, material objectives. The deployment of yoga during the political and moral development of the Indian nation, both in the anticolonial and postcolonial periods,[[111]](#endnote-109) only underscores its compatibility with instrumental and worldly goals. Yoga’s status in the popular imagination as the West’s countercultural “other,” and as such, its most popular source of “alternative”—non-Western or non-Abrahamic—spirituality is often predicated on ignorance of the variety of goals within its history, transcendent and secular, worldly and other-worldly, spiritual and material.

Critiques of the secularization of yoga often overlap with the lament that postural yoga in its EuroAmerican iteration is overly commodified, and that this commodification is yet another symptom of the disrespectful appropriation and distortion by its EuroAmerican practicioners.[[112]](#endnote-110) There is of course no doubt that postural yoga has in some sense become a commodified technology of the body and a fetishized object of material gain in the time of late capitalism.[[113]](#endnote-111) Magazines such as *Yoga Journal* attest to the dizzying variety clothing and other yoga “merchandise” that place it squarely in the realm of material profit, along with photo shoots featuring pouty models and designer yoga-wear, all of which reinscribe cultural standards of heteronormative physical beauty. But this too cannot be seen as a solely modern or Western phenomenon. While the specific ways in which transnational postural yoga is commodified may be unique, the postural practice of yoga, from the most ancient times, may always have had instrumental objectives, involving manipulation of physical being for this-worldly goals.[[114]](#endnote-112) The notion of a “pure” or “authentic” pre-commercial yoga with solely spiritual goals, contrasted with lamentably commodified contemporary forms, relies on the same essentialism and fallacies that ignore the extent to which yoga’s own history evidences *both* instrumental manipulation for purposes of material gain, along with purely spiritual goals of world-denying transcendence, no less than it does today.

Finally, it is often imagined that the practice of postural yoga must converge with an ethical agenda of service to society and an imperative to collective social action in a way that is naturally critical of existing social arrangements, and that such imperatives toward social critique are inherent in the so-called “originary” texts and principles of the tradition.[[115]](#endnote-113) Many yoga teachers, studios and organizations combine (and conflate) their understanding of postural practice with a concomitant obligation to collective and/or critical social action. Yoga’s fundamental ethos, for instance, is thought to be particularly compatible with commitments to environmental sustainability and ecological change.[[116]](#endnote-114) Many organizations base their *raison d’etre* on the assumption that the practice of yoga is fundamentally socially-engaged and ethically-informed, characterized by a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all beings in the cosmos.[[117]](#endnote-115) The first of Patanjali’s eight “limbs” of yoga articulated in his *Yogasutras* is *ahimsa* or nonviolence: this leads many practicioners to assume an automatic connection between yogic commitments and commitments to nonviolent social change.[[118]](#endnote-116) But newer yoga scholarship has emphasized that if anything, the premodern practice of yoga was asocial, anti-human and perhaps even anti-ethical. Many premodern yoga systems “required the adept to be removed from structures that render social ethics possible:” the practicioner was “removed from relational webs of conventional society, intentional action, and the natural enviroment.”[[119]](#endnote-117) The ascetic dimensions of yoga, Andrea Jain asserts, “conflict with the attribution of intrinsic value” to the human body and, by extension, human life; as such, they are generally hostile to the conventional and natural worlds. It may be that the premodern practice of yoga was in fact deeply individualist, in the most radical sense of the word: removing the individual from webs of social relation, obligation and concern.[[120]](#endnote-118) Yoga’s contemporary participation in forms of social critique oriented toward collective action and social justice is to some extent the result of a reified projection by its urban, EuroAmerican practicioners, in whose imagination yoga has “always” been collectively-oriented toward social action and critique, rather than deeply individualist, asocial, and as such even apolitical, in ways that would perhaps happily converge with the depoliticized neoliberal subject described earlier.

Conclusion: Implications for the politics of postural yoga

The preceding arguments suggest that if only yogic practice could remain attached to its ascetic, spiritual imperatives (including those of guru-disciple transmission which de-emphasize individual choice); less instrumentalized or put in service of material goals such as commodification; and somehow more socially critical, we could kill two birds with one stone, that is, restore yoga’s “authenticity,” while allowing it to be more counterhegemonic. My intent here has not been to critique all arguments that point to the subversive potential inherent within the practice of yoga. Nor has it been to suggest that predominant forms of yoga have not been soteriological, ascetic and world-denying in nature, or that all critiques of the cross-cultural transformation and (mis)appropriation of these traditional forms of yoga are misguided. Rather, it is to point to multiple levels of profound ambivalence that underlie the politics of contemporary yogic practice. First, forms of postural yoga practice prevalent in the West today may militate against but simultaneously also participate in and therefore legitimate forms of selfhood that are encouraged by and produced within the biopolitical regimes of neoliberalism. Second, the convergence of postural yoga with modern Western neoliberalism occasionally distorts certain principles and norms of the yogic tradition, but simultaneously also expresses ideas fully compatible with other norms within the tradition. Assertions about yoga’s counterhegemonic role are often intertwined with anxieties about its cultural domestication or appropriation. These anxieties, I have attempted to show, neglect the crucial insight that the modern practice of postural yoga is built on countless accretions and retrospective reconstructions, with the participation of both Indians and non-Indians. Many Western practicioners “consider yoga in the modern period as primarily *divergence from*” some authentic, premodern, singular cultural idea,[[121]](#endnote-119) while ignoring the fact that yoga has repeatedly been “made and remade in social practice”[[122]](#endnote-120) both in the West and in India. It is precisely the diversity and multivalence of yogic practice that allows its various forms to be put in service of a variety of socio-cultural norms and political commitments today. More thoughtful and informed critiques of yoga’s commodification and/or appropriation would require a nuanced recognition of these facts.

“If we are to appreciate the genius of transcultural innovation rooted in modern India,” Josephy Alter boldly asserts, then “yoga must be recognized as a historical construct that has no meaning apart from the continency of human experience, and everyone who practices it must be taken seriously—including B.K.S. Iyengar and those who teach themselves by reading *Yoga for Dummies*.”[[123]](#endnote-121) Alter’s claim leaves us with the age-old dilemma that confronts most anthropologists, cultural studies scholars and now comparative political theorists struggling to “understand” and “interpret” cultural traditions: either “anything goes,” or there must be standards for defining what counts as “inside” or “outside” the boundaries that define a “tradition.”[[124]](#endnote-122) Much discourse around the contemporary practice of postural yoga today, preoccupied with the question of whether yoga can be taught or practiced in the West while remaining relatively faithful to the norms and principles of the cultural context from which it emerged, uncritically adheres to the latter view. But what people have been “getting” out of yoga, whether in premodern India, modern India, or in the contemporary West, has *always* been subject to a variety of modes of meaning-making by the very subjects who have undertaken its practice. If we accept that this variety of meaning-making is the only way to understand yoga in all its diversity and variety, then we must be left with an inevitable sense of discomfort when confronted with any questions about yoga’s trajectory in the West that are predicated on its “purity,” “originary meaning” or “authentic” versus “inauthentic” forms of yogic practice.

Finally, I wish to point to two additional political implications of this conclusion, which may arouse similar feelings of discomfort. First, the project of legitimating some forms of yogic practice over others, while attempting to assert Indian “cultural ownership” of yoga, lands in murky waters. If ancient Hindu yogis, Buddhists, Jains, Muslims, Sufis, medieval Nath yogis and Kanphata tantrics, not to mention Krishnamacharya, Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and a host of countless others, each invented and reconstructed yoga, why should “Westernized” forms of yoga involving stand-up paddleboards, silk scarves, Yogalates and so forth not be deemed equally legitimate? And, by extension, should not the innovations of Western yogis such as John Friend, Rodney Yee and Shiva Rea stand alongside and enjoy as much credibility as those of Krishnamacharya, Iyengar, or Pattabhi Jois? Much of the discourse around the cultural appropriation of contemporary yoga also demonstrates an anxiety about Indian civilization’s claim to its “cultural ownership.” Notorious legal battles have been fought over exactly who owns the techniques and methods of yoga,[[125]](#endnote-123) the Indian government has begun to “register” yoga postures in the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library in order to “substantiate their Indianness and thus prevent sly entrepreneurs from patenting cultural know-how as their own,”[[126]](#endnote-124) and South-Asian-American yoga practicioners in the US have begun organize around the issue of “restoring yoga to its South Asian roots,” as a form of “South Asian cultural history and theological property.”[[127]](#endnote-125) Such moves are fully in keeping with the compelling criticisms of theorists like Vandana Shiva who point to the “biopiracy” of institutions and corporations of the West, which appropriate and profiteer from traditional forms of indigenous, non-Western knowledge.[[128]](#endnote-126) But it sits at odds with the recognition that the very notion of an “authentically Indian” yogic tradition is to some extent a retrospective reconstruction and reification.

Finally, the syncretic and hybrid nature of the yogic “tradition” appears to leave us with little intellectually-firm ground from which to produce ethical and/or political critiques of the cooptation of yogic practice for neoliberal aims and purposes. Any political critique of this cooptation may need to be grounded in something other than an argument about the nature of the yogic tradition “itself,” for two reasons. First, the so-called “tradition” is itself invented and reconstructed: if instrumentalist pleasure-seeking and aesthetic self-enhancement have long stood alongside ascetic self-denial and transcendence as goals of yogic practice, can contemporary forms of yoga which promote convergence with neoliberal biopolitical self-governance be dismissed as any less worthy than those that militate against consumerist norms and mainstream standards of bodily beauty? Second, many of its “traditional” elements have been fully compatible with, and have all-too-often creatively converged with, the individualist, secularized, neoliberal and capitalist objectives of the contemporary West. The political task of critiquing this convergence may be both appropriate and necessary, but it may also need to rely on arguments and principles external to—rather than derived from within—the yogic tradition, instead of relying solely on exaggerated and fetishized notions of yoga’s cultural alterity.

1. David Gordon White (ed.), *Yoga in Practice* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 2 [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. White, *Yoga in Practice*, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. See Geoffrey Samuel, *Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press). p. 2, defining yoga as “disciplined and systematic techniques for the training and control of the human mind-body complex, which are also understood as techniques for the reshaping of human consciousness toward some kind of higher goal.” See also Georg Feuerstein, *TheYoga Tradition*: *Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice* (Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, 1998), and Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. White, *Yoga in Practice*, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Countercultural to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Yogic techniques and practices make various appearances in early Vedic literature (the Rig Veda, Samhita, circa 15th century BCE), early Brahmanical and Buddhist texts, various Upanishads such as the *Katha*-, *Shvetasvatara*- and *Maitrayaniya- Upanishads* (the Katha Upanishad is said to provide the first extant systematic acccount of yoga), the epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (which includes famously, the *Bhagavad Gita*, now considered a key text of yoga), Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* along with other core texts of the Samkhya school of philosophy, the texts of Mahayana Buddhism (such as ), the Yogavasistha (“Vasistha’s Teachings on Yoga,”) and Jain texts such as Haribhadra’s *Yoga DrishtiSamuccaya*, among many others. See Jain, *Selling Yoga*; and White, *Yoga in Practice*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. Jain, *Selling Yoga*, p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
8. See Jain, *Selling Yoga*; White,*Yoga in Practice*; Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra*. See also Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004); and Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
9. Kenneth Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of *Hatha Yoga*” in Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (eds.), *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), [hereafter *YMW*], p.104. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
10. Liberman, p.104 (emphasis in original). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
11. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, “Introduction,” in *YMW*, p. 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
12. Liberman, p. 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
13. Singleton and Byrne, “Introduction, in *YMW*, p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
14. Jain, *Selling Yoga*, p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
15. Jain, *Selling Yoga*, p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
16. These included Indian spiritual figures such as Swami Vivekananda, Yogananda Paramahansa, Sivananda Saraswati, and Swami Satchidananda; Indian reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission; Western theosophists who were highly instrumental in reifying and valorizing India’s spiritual and textual traditions; as well as American Transcendentalists such as Thoreau and Emerson who read the *Bhagavad-Gita*, among many others. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
17. De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*; Jain, *Selling Yoga;* Singleton, *Yoga Body*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
18. De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*; Jain, *Selling Yoga;* Singleton, *Yoga Body* [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
19. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram), 1992 [1896], p. 20, cited in Jain, p. 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
20. See Liberman, p. 100; Joseph Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 22-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
21. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, p. 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
22. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, chs. 4 and 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
23. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, pp. 176-177. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
24. See Jain, *Selling Yoga*, p. 37; Singleton, *Yoga Body*, p. 177 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
25. Mark Singleton reminds us that “[it] is by no means self-evident, as many modern practitioners assume, that the *YogaSutra* has always been the ultimate authority on the practice of yoga, nor indeed that Classical Yoga has ever really constituted a distinct practice lineage in its own right.” Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Constructive Orientalism,” in *YMW*, p 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
26. See Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*; Singleton, *Yoga Body*; Jain, *Selling Yoga*; *YMW*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
27. Jain, *Selling Yoga*, p. 43-44. See also De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, pp. 191-194. It is important to note that the forms of yoga that have been disseminated in the West within the last fifty or sixty years have not been solely postural. As many scholars have noted, the more philosophical and contemplative forms of yoga have also proliferated in the West, including those that are wedded, to greater or lesser extents, to a variety of spiritual or docrinal claims about transcendence. While some scholars now distinguish between soteriological and physical forms of yoga, Elisabeth De Michelis has attempted a typology of modern yoga which includes, along with postural yoga, what she calls modern denominational yoga (with focus on the doctrinal teachings of a particular *guru* or spiritual leader); modern psychosomatic yoga (dedicated to mind-body-spirit training without doctrinal influence); and modern meditational yoga (with stress on purely mental practices also without religious doctrine). See De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, p. 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
28. Jain, *Selling Yoga*, ch.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
29. Liberal and neoliberal…why I use these terms interchangeably [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
30. Stuart Ray Sarbacker, “The Numinous and Cessative in modern Yoga,” in *YMW*, p. 178 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
31. See, for instance, Farah Godrej, “Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other” *Polity* 41(2) 2009; and *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
32. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), pp. 139, 143. See also Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
33. *Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*, Palgrave, 2008, p. 22, [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
34. Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Power* (New York: The New Press, 2000, pp. 295-296. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
35. Thomas Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), pp. 4-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
36. Wendy Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” *Theory & Event* 7:1 (2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
37. Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization,” *Political Theory* 34 (6) 2006, p. 693 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
38. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 694 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
39. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 694 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
40. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 694 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
41. Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
42. Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
43. Wendy Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
44. Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
45. Thomas Lemke, “ ‘The Birth of Bio-politics:’ Michel Foucault's Lecture at the College de France on Neo-liberal Governmentality,” *Economy and Society* 30:2 (May 2001), p. 201 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
46. Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
47. Chad Lavin, *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. xiv [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
48. Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, p. 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
49. Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
50. Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” iin Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
51. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself*, p. 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
52. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself*, p. 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
53. In contemporary times, its purposes include everything from the pursuit of commercially-defined aesthetic bodily standards (such as toned, fit bodies), to overall healthiness understood in more holistic terms and abstracted away from such mainstream aesthetic norms, to stress reduction, strength and flexibility, athletic prowess, pacification of the nervous system, anti-aging benefits, as well as the more “classically Indian” goals of asceticism or soteriological transcendence (though these last are less often seen in Western iterations of yoga). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
54. See, for instance, Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali*: *A New Translation and Commentary* (Folkestone, UK: Dawson, 1979). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
55. Benjamin Richard Smith, “ ‘With Heat Even Iron Will Bend,’ ” in *YMW*, p.156. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
56. See B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga: Yoga Dipika* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
57. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself*, p. 20. See also Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga* p. 69: yoga has become “a product that could be chosen as a body-enhancing practice that was one part of individual regimes of self-development and it was being packaged in this way for transnational audiences;” and pp. 77-78: “consumers construct the self-identity they desire by consuming what they think signifies that self-identity…dominant ways of conceptualizing the body in contemporary consumer culture are important for understanding why postural yoga underwent popularization.” [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
58. Chad Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, p. xix. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
59. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
60. Ellen Goldberg and Mark Singleton, “Introduction,” in Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (eds.), *Gurus of Modern Yoga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
61. Nor can this largely liberal and individualist reinterpretation of postural yoga practice be attributed solely to its Western character. A more individualist and less orthodox reinterpretation of postural yoga practice had already occurred in twentieth-century India, during the context of the anticolonial movement, when hatha yoga was reconstructed (yet again) based on Indian encounters with modern Western aspects of physical fitness culture, and put in service of the nationalist movement. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
62. Mimi Nichter, “The Social Life of Yoga: Exploring Transcultural Flows in India,” in Beatrix Hauser (ed.), *Yoga Traveling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective* (Germany: Springer, 2013) [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
63. Goldberg and Singleton, “Introduction,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, p. 4. The guru-disciple relationship, once characterized by secrecy, exclusivity, full authority of the guru, and obedience of the student, has now been democratized, rationalized, scientized and empiricized. The modern Indian guru accepts any student who wishes to study with them without formal induction or initiation, transmission is rarely exclusive and private, the modern guru often functions as lifestyle-coach-cum-personal trainer whose teaching is “authorized by essentially nonmystical, rational-scientific knowledge,”while the individual student’s choice to follow the guru is founded largely on spiritual empiricism or the self-authorizing epistemic validity of one’s own experience. See also, pp. 4, 7, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
64. See, for instance, Julie J. C. Peters, “Guruji, Get Your Hand Off my Vagina: The Modern Yoga Teacher-Student Relationship,” *Elephant Journal*, January 6, 2012, http://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/01/guruji-get-your-hand-off-my-vagina-the-modern-yoga-teacher-student-relationship/ [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
65. Tantra, as we have seen, is world-embracing rather than world-denying (unlike the brahmanical ascesis of earlier forms of yoga), and in tantric thought, self-discipline is applied to the body even in its world-embracing activities. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
66. Lavin, Eating Anxiety, pp. 19-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
67. Sarah Strauss and Laura Mandelbaum, “Consuming Yoga, Conserving the Environment: Transcultural Discourses on Sustainable Living,” in *Yoga Traveling*, p. 185 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
68. Strauss and Mandelbaum, p. 185. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
69. Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 89, 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
70. A “drop-in” class, signifying one-time attendance, is typically far more expensive than a “pass” or a “series,” which requires the practicioner to regularly attend classes. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
71. Verena Schnäbele, “The Useful Body: The Yogic Answer to Appearance Management in the Post-Fordist Workplace,” in *Yoga Traveling*, p. 146. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
72. Strauss and Mandelbaum, p. 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
73. Julie Guthman and Melanie DuPuis, “Embodying Neoliberalism: Economy, Culture and the Politics of Fat,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Volume 24, 2006, p. 444 [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
74. Guthman and DuPuis, p. 444. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
75. As Andrea Jain notes, postural yoga “serves as one more way to self-actualize and repent for the modern sins of eating too much sugar, smoking cigarettes, or sitting around watching television.” *Selling Yoga*, p. 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
76. Schnäbele, p. 143 [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
77. Schnäbele, p. p.144 [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
78. Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
79. Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, p. 20 [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
80. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself*, p. 25 [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
81. See Schnäbele, p. 146: “It’s really nice when you have practiced for months and months and all of a sudden, you can do something that you weren’t able to do before,” practicioners often say. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
82. Chad Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, p. 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
83. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 702. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
84. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 703 [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
85. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 695. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
86. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 709 [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
87. Brown, “American Nightmare,” pp. 695, 704. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
88. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 703 [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
89. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 704. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
90. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 695 [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
91. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 699 [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
92. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 703 [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
93. Brown, “American Nightmare,” p. 708. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
94. Schnäbele, p. 148 [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
95. Duhan Kaplan, “Physical Education for Domination and Emancipation: A Foucauldian Analysis of Aerobics and Hatha Yoga,” in Laura Duhan Kaplan and Laurence F. Bove (eds.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Power and Domination* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), p. 75 [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
96. Duhan Kaplan, p. 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
97. Schnäbele, p. 146. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
98. Schnäbele, pp. 147-148. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
99. Klas Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” in *YMW*, pp. 130, 133 [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
100. Smith, “With Heat Even Iron Will Bend,” in *YMW*. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
101. Nevrin, p. 134 [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
102. Singleton and Byrne, “Introduction,” in *YMW*, p. 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
103. This includes even scholars who have themselves recognized the derivative, syncretic, and partly invented nature of the yogic tradition, but are not entirely comfortable with the most radical and perhaps “relativistic” implications of these recognitions. For instance, Kenneth Liberman, despite his claim that there has never been a “pure” or “original” yoga, simultaneously insists that the largely secularized yoga taught in the West, shorn of its spiritual moorings is a “scandal;” that “postmodern criticisms of authenticity…should not be permitted to lead us into a radical relativism that paralyzes moral resolve,” and that there must be criteria for the “measure of what is authentic in yoga.” See Liberman, pp. 109-113. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
104. Andrea Jain notes that the success of contemporary postural yoga in the West relies partially on its de-asceticization and secularization: it is by minimizing the ascetic, world-denying or transcendence-oriented aspects of the yogic tradition, while emphasizing its more secular and worldly aspects in keeping with modern consumer culture, that postural yoga has gained such widespread acceptance in the West. Jain, Selling Yoga, ch. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
105. See Mikel Burley , “A Petrification of One’s Own Humanity? Nonattachment and Ethics in Yoga,” *Journal of Religion* 94 (2) 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
106. Joseph Alter rightly notes that the past century has witnessed both the “dramatic secularization of yoga” on the one hand, but also its “articulation as a kind of universalist, nonsectarian ‘spirituality’ on the other.” Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, p. 13. Some yoga studios dispense entirely with allusions to the textual foundations of the yogic tradition, while others include readings from the *Yogasutras* or the *Bhagavad-Gita*, emphasizing the links between postural practice and a philosophical, textual “tradition” and ascetic practice such as meditation. Some classes are purely physical nature, emphasizing anatomical precision and biomedical explanations of the benefits of yoga, while eschewing the chanting of mantras or the reference to the Hindu pantheon. In others, the chanting of “Om” or other Sanskrit mantras occurs under the benevolent gaze of the statue of Shiva Nataraja or Ganesha or some other Hindu deity, representing the modern yogi’s turn away from traditional Western institutionalized religion and toward alternative, non-Western religiosities. See Jain, *Selling Yoga*, chs. 5 and 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
107. While some scholars insist that yoga is clearly a soteriological or religious body of thought and practice, others note that the very question of yoga’s status as a “religion” is contentious. Yoga, Joseph Alter claims, is philosophy of transcendence that may simultaneously be both soteriological as well as entirely beyond religion, in that there is not faith in a divine Creator in the Abrahamic sense. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, p. 13. He also notes that it is a “metaphysical philosophy of transcendence” linked to certain texts that are soteriological nature, but technically not a religious system, since it entails no faith in a divine Creator in the Abrahamic sense of the term. It is, he claims, “in a very important sense…beyond religion in terms of soteriological conceptualization.”for while yoga has become something to “believe it,” it also encourages a form of transcendence beyond ordinary belief systems (including ordinary conceptions of divinity). Thus, there is there is “nothing external to it, such as God or Natural Law. Alter, *Yoga in Modern Ind*ia, p.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
108. Sarbacker, p. 173. Andrea Jain also notes that turning “outward” toward external objects—material, this-worldly goals such as pleasure, youth and beauty—was a common and “perhaps the *most* common aim of early yoga systems.”Jain, *Selling Yoga*, p. 11. See also David Gordon White, “ ‘Open’ and ‘Closed’ Models of the Human Body in Indian Medical and Yogic Traditions,” *Asian Medicine: Tradition and Modernity* 2(1), 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
109. Sarbacker, p. 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
110. Jain, *Selling Yoga*, p. 103 [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
111. See Sarah Strauss, “ ‘Adapt, Adjust, Accommodate’: The Production of Yoga in a Transnational World,” in *YMW*, p. 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
112. Gwi-Seok (Peggy) Hong, “Yoga Tradition and Lulu-ji: Can Commercialized Yoga be Respectful to the Indian Traditional Practice?” *The Periphery*, February 2015, http://www.theperipherymag.com/essay-yoga-tradition-and-lulu-ji [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
113. See Beatrix Hauser, “Introduction,” in *Yoga Traveling*, p. 6: “the commodification and business opportunities associated with yoga have caused a series of proprietary claims on yoga-related goods and services: in the US alone, 2315 yoga trademarks, 150 yoga-related copyrights, and 134 patents for yoga accessories have been registered by 2005.” See also Strauss and Mandelbaum in Yoga Traveling, pp. 178-181. Among many others, Andrea Jain has documented the extent to which contemporary practicioners of modern postural yoga has “intersected with emergent global consumer culture,” appropriating popular ideas and practices of late-twentieth century consumer cultre. See Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
114. See Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, pp. 9, 11; Beatrix Hauser, “Introduction: Transcultural Yoga(s). Analyzing a Traveling Subject,” in *Traveling Yoga*, p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
115. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 116, 119-121. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
116. Strauss and Mandelbaum [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
117. Rob Schware, “Yoga Activism at Work,” Huffington Post, June 12, 2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rob-schware/yoga-activism-at-work_b_5243075.html>; Susanna Barkataki, “How to Decolonize Your Yoga Practice,” <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/decolonize-yoga-practice/>; http://www.offthematintotheworld.org/mission/ [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
118. Michael Stone, “Our True Nature is Our Imagination: Yoga and Non-Violence at The Edge of the World,” and Matthew Remski, “Modern Yoga Will Not Form A Real Culture Until Every Studio Can Also Double as a Soup Kitchen and other observations from the threshold between yoga and activism” both in Carol Horton and Roseanne Harvey (eds.), *21st Century Yoga: Culture, Politics and Practice* (Kleio Books, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
119. Jain, *Selling Yoga*, p. 120. See also Andrea R. Jain and Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Quietism and Karma: Non-Action and Non-Ethics in Jain Asceticism,” *Common Knowledge, Symposium: Apology for Quietism* Part 2, 15(2) Spring 2009, 197-207; Jeffrey Kripal, “Debating the Mystical as the Ethical: An Indological Map,” in G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism* (New York: Seven Bridges Press/Chatham House), 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
120. Joseph Alter notes that premodern yoga was conceived as a “profoundly antisocial form of self-discipline… structured in opposition to human nature.”Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
121. Singleton and Byrne, “Introduction,” in *YMW*, p. 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
122. Hauser, “Introduction,” in *Yoga Traveling*, p. 24 [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
123. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
124. See Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method Practice, Discipline*, ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-122)
125. Singleton and Byrne, “Introduction,” in *YMW*, p. 2. See A. Fish, “The Commodification and Exchange of Knowledge in the Case of Transnational Commercial Yoga,” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 13, 2006; S. Srivastava, “What Happens When Spirit Meets Wallet? It’s Patently Obvious,” *Asia Times Online*, July 2, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\_Asia/GG02Df02.html [↑](#endnote-ref-123)
126. Hauser, “Introduction,” in *Yoga Traveling*, p. 6, [↑](#endnote-ref-124)
127. Rob Schware, “Restoring Yoga to its South Asian Roots,” Huffington Post, October 21, 2013, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rob-schware/restoring-yoga-to-its-sou_b_4005329.html>; <https://saapya.wordpress.com>; “We are not Exotic, We are Exhausted: A Film on Yoga, Race, Being Desi and Diasporic,” accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEBjeD3S7JM> [↑](#endnote-ref-125)
128. [↑](#endnote-ref-126)