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NEOLIBERAL YOGA

Andrea R. Jain

Introduction

We have all heard the expression ‘you are what you eat’. Historically, the extent of yoga practitioners’ concerns about what, when or how a person eats is met only by concerns about with whom, when or how a person has sex, hence attention given in many yoga systems to purifying the body through rigorous control over diet and fasting alongside celibacy. Today, especially among those living in global cities, yoga is as much about what a person buys, another kind of consumption. The majority of yoga practitioners are full participants in the global consumer economy, marking their worth by purchasing expensive brands.

The yoga industry is an enormous one. According to a report by Allied Market Research, the global pilates and yoga studios market was valued at almost $89 million in 2017 and is projected to reach almost $216 million by 2025 (Bhandalkar, Das and Kadam 2019: 14). The yoga industry is also entangled with other large markets. For example, Baba Ramdev, the most famous yoga guru in India, is also the brand ambassador for and CEO of Patanjali Ayurved, a corporation with more than 200,000 outlets, and its sales of health, wellness and food products reached over $1.5 billion in the 2017 fiscal year (Scroll Staff 2017).

This chapter theorises yoga as a social, economic, political, cultural and religious project, locating its disciplines, discourses and institutions within a neoliberal capitalist network. I analyse different and conflicting narratives in order to shed light on the following key aspects of the global yoga industry: capitalist strategies of appropriation and commodification, and a pervasive neoliberal logic whereby control over one’s body and personal circumstances is valued and defined as an individual achievement.

When I speak of neoliberal yoga, I am referring to the yoga systems that rely on the selective deployment of key assumptions, such as the importance of self-governance and individual responsibility as well as the value of entrepreneurship. In turn, it privileges meritocracy insofar as many activities revolve around discerning and certifying the merit that leads to the envied lifestyle of personal growth, self-care, health, wellness and even liberation. There is a rich archive of this type of yoga, which combines an exhortation for individuals to take responsibility for their conditions with effective commodifying and purchasing strategies and usually marketing endeavours that rely on some kind of nostalgic attachment to the past, valorization of purity and cultural appropriation.

At the same time, the yoga industry has suffered the fate of other areas of culture under the dominance of neoliberal capitalism. Adherents must ‘do more with less’, cutting costs while meeting ever-greater demands. Yoga teachers, for example, who in much of the world happen to be mostly women, face shrinking wages, and this workforce is increasingly precarious, even
as yoga teachers are called on to teach more students than ever before, to do more unpaid seva or ‘service’, and to demonstrate that they are doing it better than ever.

Yoga has undergone rampant change and diversification since its global boom in contemporary consumer culture, yet, even though the extent of this was unprecedented before the late-twentieth century, yoga had always been polythetic in the many pathways of its historical development as a part of South Asian religious history (Jain 2014a: 1–19). Furthermore, although neoliberal capitalist culture’s emphasis on self-development through consumer choice – most notably when it comes to tools and regimens for body maintenance – mirrors the yoga industry’s devotion to fitness, health and wellness, for many practitioners, yoga’s religious qualities have not been eliminated. They have been transformed. So even though neoliberal capitalism birthed the yoga industry, this kind of yoga cannot be reduced to market forces or the dynamics of power, status and money. Rather, it remains deeply religious even in (and in some cases through) acts of appropriation and commodification (Jain 2014a). In fact, yoga consumers share many qualities with what we often imagine as traditional yogic subjects, including demarcating sacred spaces and time, creating communities, posing solutions to the problems of suffering, illness and death, and sharing myths and rituals (Jain 2014a).

Scholars love arguing over the meaning of words, and it is fair to say that neoliberalism is one of the most contested terms in our contemporary lexicon. I use the term to refer to a particular modern secular paradigm and mode of governance. Following Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is best understood ‘not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life … It formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves’ (Brown, 2015: 176). In other words, signs of the rising dominance of neoliberal capitalism are in the increasing monetisation of all public space and the commercialisation of everything.

Since the late 1980s, neoliberalism has increasingly functioned as the ‘hegemonic mode of discourse’ (Harvey 2005: 3), a discourse that deploys state power ‘to reshape society in accordance with market models’ (Kotsko 2018: 5). Neoliberalism exercises governance by putting the burden on the individual for their position in society, rendering certain modes of self-governing the ‘appropriate’ responses to their problems (Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991; Miller and Rose 2008; Shamir 2008; Hamann 2009). In other words, neoliberal discourses are accompanied by practices and technologies, such as programmes or tools for ‘self-care’, for individuals to work on themselves. They reframe and reconfigure the conditions of the individual so that their fate depends predominantly on their own choices, actions and abilities. The consequences of the actions, therefore, are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them (Lemke 2001: 201). Neoliberal governmentality can be seen at play in discourses of self-sufficiency, which reify the individual, construed as an automaton, ideally self-optimising, self-sustaining and entrepreneurial.

Finally, neoliberalism conflates ‘individualism and liberation’, along with ‘consumption and activism’ through its consumer-driven logic (Butler 2013: 46). A person is a good and ‘free’ citizen when she engages in appropriate consumption. In other words, the shift to neoliberal governance, according to Jess Butler, entails ‘the development of discourses that emphasize consumer citizenship, personal responsibility, and individual empowerment’ (Butler 2013: 41). A person is liberated insofar as they are free to make consumer choices, to participate in the market economy, hence individuals are expected to be self-reliant and self-disciplining through consumption.

The extension of neoliberal governance into yoga is visible in the discourses and practices of the industry’s most powerful corporations and proponents, including the current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, and his spiritual ally and the most famous living yoga guru
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in India, Baba Ramdev, as well as some of the most popular yoga corporations today, such as Spiritual Gangster (a US-based yogaware company) and Bikram Yoga (the original ‘hot yoga’). Neoliberal yoga’s discourses and activities are not just a result of the demands of capital, but actually reflect a key part of neoliberal ideology: that we must constantly work on ourselves and call out those who are not doing so properly. They build that ideology as much as market capitalism reproduces them. In other words, even though yoga gets caught in a web of commodification and market exchange, it cannot be reduced to market dynamics; instead it is also reflective of ‘good consumer choices’, in other words, of discourses and behaviours that construct and uphold a neoliberal ethic.

Selling yoga

How and when did yoga become a readily available consumer choice in global cities around the world? The postural practice most commonly associated with yoga today underwent popularisation when it began to coincide with certain global developments in the late-twentieth century (Jain 2014a: 42–72). First, increased freedom in physical mobility allowed consumers to travel to other parts of the world and adopt disparate wares and entrepreneurs and proselytising teachers to widely disseminate their teachings or products. Many restrictions on immigration from India to the United States and parts of Europe were lifted in the 1960s. Furthermore, instead of the historically dominant practice of relying on yoga’s transmission through the guru-disciple relationship, usually in the isolated context of an ashram, gurus began to actively seek adherents to their yoga systems by ‘selling’ yoga to large audiences (Jain 2014a: 42–72).

Second, disillusionment with established religious institutions was widespread as many urban dwelling consumers felt threatened by social environments they no longer controlled in light of globalisation and other modern social processes; hence the market for ‘alternative’ spiritual practices and teachers widened (Kakar 1983: 191–192; Swallow 1982: 123–158). Yoga gurus broke into that increasingly global market with what they prescribed as solutions to the problems of excess and chaos in modern life, drawing large swathes of disciples with their miracles and promises of empowerment and transformation (Jain 2014a: 42–94). Many of these gurus travelled the world, especially in response to the British-American counter-culture, which included audiences – including the high-profile rock band, The Beatles – drawn to spiritual practices and messages distinct from what were perceived as the oppressive, puritanical orthodoxies of the previous generation (Porterfield 2001: 164–165, 203).

Though some scholars suggest that we consider systems of modern yoga as examples of the transplantation of movements from India to Euro-American contexts (for example, see Williamson 2005: 149; Caldwell 2001: 25), many global gurus (for example, Sri Anandamayi Maa; Daya Mata (born Faye Wright); Guru Anjali; Gurumayi Chidvilasananda; Ma Yogashakti; Mata Amritanandamayi or ‘Amma’; Muktananda; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada; Satya Narayan Goenka; and Sathy Sai Baba) developed and maintained prominent Indian followings (Jain 2014a: 46–47; see also the essays in Pechilis 2004; Chapple 2005: 15–35; Raj 2005: 123–146; and Lucia 2014). Their successes testify, not to the ‘Americanization’ or ‘westernization’ of yoga, but to the increased visibility of yoga in the late-twentieth century in areas across the globe (Jain 2014a: 65). The entrepreneurial spirit that characterised the global consumer culture landscape influenced these gurus, meaning yoga was commercialised and framed as a practice consumers could select and combine with previously held beliefs or practices according to individual preferences and needs.

When long-term commitment to yoga required adherents to learn Sanskrit, to adopt an inferior position vis-à-vis a guru, or to abstain from a consumer approach to spiritual goods
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(Jain 2014a: 65), those systems were less successful in the emergent global yoga market than the ones that thoroughly coincided with the dominant trends of consumer culture. Nonetheless, through acts of cultural appropriation, yoga succeeded when it was perceived to transport the consumer to an authentic ancient landscape – such as ‘exotic’ or ‘ancient’ India – independent of actual time and place. Selling yoga, in turn, entailed appropriating and commodifying aspects of South Asian cultures, from Sanskrit terminology to images of Ganesha.

The entrepreneurial spirit was strongest among proponents of postural yoga (Jain 2014a: 65–70). Postural yoga’s popularisation is explained in part by the fact that it more often provided quick and direct access to the perceived benefits of yoga, rather than indirect access through the intermediary role of a (far-removed) teacher or text (De Michelis 2004: 250). Increasingly, postural yoga gurus’ marketing campaigns attempted to convince people to choose their particular renditions of yoga as one part of individual programmes of self-development. They worked within a market in which wares were most successful when they could be easily fit into individualised lifestyles (Jain 2014a: 65–70). The earliest of these included B. K. S. Iyengar, Selvarajan Yesudian, Sivananda, Boris Sacharow, Vishnudevananda, Indra Devi, Chidananda Sarasvati, Lilias Folan and Richard Hittleman. Many of these yoga advocates abandoned all or many of the rules, such as those dealing with alms, celibacy, scriptural study and retreat from society or social norms, which traditionally separated the yoga practitioner from society so that they could sell yoga as a form of fitness, self-care and wellness (Jain 2014a: 66–67).

With the rise to dominance of neoliberal capitalism in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, the yoga market came to feature endless yoga brands whose products were sold for immediate consumption (Jain 2012; Jain 2014a: 73–94). There was a seismic shift in how yoga advocates established and acknowledged authority, which was increasingly vested in certain brand names (Jain 2014a: 74). The market for ‘self-care’ regimens, which held individuals and their consumer choices accountable for their health, wellness, professional success and other life circumstances, witnessed robust growth. Self-care became a way to signal a consumer’s willingness to own up to their responsibility for their wellbeing, and yoga was widely sold as an effective path to get there.

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There are countless ways neoliberal yoga, that peculiar variant of yoga that incites its adherents to accept full responsibility for their own wellbeing, self-care and liberation by making good consumer choices, is made manifest. Neoliberal yoga is never short on authoritarian prescriptions and prohibitions. Here are just a few examples to consider.

In a Yoga Journal article titled ‘Kino MacGregor: India Is a Yoga Teacher’, the famous white American ashtanga yoga teacher Kino MacGregor appropriates and commodifies India as ‘a place where you are free to discover yourself on your own terms’. Here, India itself is the good consumer choice. She encourages yoga consumers to ‘go to India and lose all the accoutrements of the Western world to see what’s underneath and just be yourself’ (MacGregor 2015: para. 4). Such orientalist dialectics or win-win narratives free consumers to purchase yoga without attention to their embeddedness within social structures based on power inequities and histories of colonialism (O’Reilly 2006: 1003), and they are present in a variety of industries.3 For example, it is precisely this kind of narrative that informs bestselling neoliberal manifestos, such as Whole Foods Market CEO John Mackey’s Conscious Capitalism, in which the ideal person is construed as atomized, self-optimising and entrepreneurial. Mackey suggests that leadership in ‘conscious capitalism’ ‘integrates Western systems and efficiency with Eastern wisdom and effectiveness’ (Mackey and Sisodia 2014: 194). Consider also the Indian Ministry of Tourism’s Swadesh Darshan Scheme, launched under the Modi government, which includes
a ‘spiritual’ tourism circuit, arguing that India is ‘the land of spirituality’ and therefore is in need of ‘tourist facilities across the country’ to accommodate spiritual travellers (Ministry of Tourism Government of India 2018).

Some yoga consumers respond to the current climate crisis by greenwashing yoga, opting, for example, for the high-end apparel of Satva Living, which offers ‘mindfully designed organic fashion’. The company claims to improve the health and wellness of ‘conscious consumers’ as well as the lives of Indian organic farmers by partnering with Suminter India Organics and working under the model of ‘creative capitalism’, an approach that ensures that a portion of profits are invested back into the communities and agricultural programmes of the farmers. Satva Living products are sold across India as well as the United States and are available, for example, at Whole Foods Market, where spiritual consumers might also shop for ‘eco-friendly’ biodegradable paper plates. The multimillionaire entrepreneur Mackey uses the phrase conscious capitalism, arguing that capitalism’s ‘heroic spirit’ is the key to creating ‘a world in which all people live lives full of prosperity, love, and creativity – a world of compassion, freedom, and prosperity’ (Mackey and Sisodia 2014).

The discourses printed across yoga apparel provide more insight into the workings of neoliberal yoga. Yoga pants and t-shirts feature catchy expressions, for example: ‘Good Vibes. All Day. Every Day.’, ‘Good Karma’, ‘Namaste All Day’ and ‘Self Love Club’. Spiritual Gangster yogaware is just one articulation of neoliberal yoga, wedding their yoga products to an effort to cultivate universal happiness and freedom. ‘Our mission’, according to their website, ‘is to inspire positivity, generosity, kindness and connectedness with this goal in mind: may all beings everywhere be happy and free’. ‘We are connected. We are the same. We are one.’ (Spiritual Gangster 2019).

Baba Ramdev similarly espouses a message of ‘positive thinking’ and ‘self-care’, which he disseminates across India through speeches, interviews, advertisements and other media platforms. In alliance with Narendra Modi, Baba Ramdev serves a neoliberal regime of power (Andrews, Batts and Silk 2013; Jain and Schulson 2016; Khalikova 2017). There is a paradox in Ramdev’s work. On the one hand, Ramdev’s stance seems fundamentally nationalist and conservative. He profits from products marketed as traditional, natural foods and ancient medicinal practices, including yoga. In Ramdev, his corporation Patañjali Ayurved has a strong brand ambassador, one credited with bringing yoga as a health practice to the mainstream in India. He has supporters across the country who choose Patañjali Ayurved products because of the yogic authority they invest in its ambassador, as well as the nationalist associations of the brand. Ramdev consistently positions Patañjali Ayurved as a homegrown Indian company fighting global multinational competitors.

Like other entrepreneurs selling yoga and associated products globally, however, Ramdev is also building a massive corporation selling packaged, branded and commercialised products with sleek modern advertising, and he thrives in a modern neoliberal health-and-wellness sector that is growing globally, a sector that calls on consumers to take responsibility for their health, wellness, success and empowerment. Ramdev is helping to accelerate yoga’s entry into the twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalist global economy. Entrepreneurial gurus and yoga brands like these might be appealing in part because they successfully appropriate and commodify the ‘ancient’ ideas and symbols of India, but they also represent one expression of a global shift toward a form of self-care that is deeply exclusionary – creating outgroups who fail when they do not choose the right consumer products. Ramdev, for example, was instrumental in recriminalizing same-sex sex in India, which exacerbated the social and physical vulnerability of LGBTQ Indians. He claimed homosexuality was a ‘disease’ that could be ‘cured’ by buying yoga (NDTV 2013).
Another of the most famous neoliberal yoga entrepreneurs is Bikram Choudhury, creator of Bikram Yoga or what is often described as ‘the original hot yoga’, which he claims maintains and restores health even to those with grave injuries and illnesses. In the 1990s, Bikram began hosting teacher-training programmes in Los Angeles, which would eventually boast upwards of six hundred registrants. The cost for training steadily rose. A 2019 training course, for example, cost $16,600. If, as Kathryn Lofton suggests, ‘religion manifests in efforts to mass-produce relations of value’ (Lofton 2017: 2), then Bikram Yoga teacher-training programmes represent consumer religion. Teachers who have completed the training have opened more than five thousand yoga studios worldwide (for a more extensive discussion and analysis of Bikram, see Jain 2018 and Jain 2020).

It is not surprising, given the assumption that the best way to bring about happiness and freedom in society is to hold individuals accountable for buying the right self-care regimens, that neoliberal yoga embodies all sorts of contradictions, giving rise to social and political controversies. Bikram, for example, is a multimillionaire who has exploited the cultural cache and economic capital of yoga, all while creating Bikram Yoga, a practice some practitioners deem deeply healing, empowering and transformative. He is also, however, someone who has claimed but failed to secure copyrights on yoga postures, pursued litigation against rival yoga franchises and battled allegations of sexual harassment and even rape by students and employees. In Bikram, we see how neoliberal yoga can betray ritual, mythological and other religious qualities, but it is also an industry that operates by the same logic as multinational corporations.

Bikram is far from the only neoliberal yoga teacher or entrepreneur mired in sex scandals. Since the October 2017 New York Times publication of investigative work into the decades of sexual harassment allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Kantor and Twohey 2017), hundreds of women from the yoga industry stepped forward to say, ‘me too’. Most notably, in December 2017, Rachel Brathen collected more than three hundred #metoo stories and posted them on her Yoga Girl website (Yoga Girl 2019). The hundreds of #metoo exposés chronicled (mostly) women’s stories in which they accused (mostly) male yoga teachers and gurus, including the famous yoga guru responsible for popularizing Ashtanga Yoga, Pattabhi Jois, of exploitative and sexually violent conduct.

Other contradictions manifest around the International Day of Yoga. For example, consider the closure of the Burrard St. Bridge. In 2015 in Vancouver – home to yoga apparel giant lululemon – a scheduled Yoga Day event threatened to ‘divide the city and the local yoga community’ due to the $150,000 price tag, corporate sponsors (including lululemon) and the planned seven-hour ‘Om the Bridge’ closure. The added irony was that the event was largely sponsored by an affluent white Canadian demographic and threatened to eclipse National Aboriginal Day – all while its organisers claimed to celebrate an ancient system of knowledge indigenous to India, that is, yoga. The event was cancelled following a week of protest (see Bramadat 2019). Events for Yoga Day have even sparked controversy in India, where Indian Muslims protested Yoga Day programmes, arguing they serve right-wing Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ‘saffron agenda’; that is, his Hindu nationalism (Jain 2014b; see also Jain 2020).

‘Personal growth’, ‘self-care’, ‘healing’, and ‘transformation’ are just some of the generative tropes in the narrative of what I am calling neoliberal yoga. Huge swathes of consumers in urban spaces all over the world now spend money on yoga, hence the emergence of large multinational corporations, indeed an entire global industry, that produce these products. When yoga practitioners speak about personal growth, self-care or transformation, however, they uphold cultural, religious and economic systems that are less empowering, healing or liberating than implied. Although there is no doubt that yoga practitioners frequently undergo dramatic healing experiences through the practice of yoga, purchasing yoga commodities does not actually challenge or weaken the dominant, oppressive hierarchies or social systems that
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cause trauma, suffering and sickness to begin with. Much of the industry’s products, in fact, are rooted in concerns about preventing deviancy, not only in the form of low productivity but also forms of social deviancy, such as non-conformity to heteronormativity or other gender and sexual norms. The prescriptions for self-care or personal liberation, in other words, have little or nothing to do with societal transformation; rather they denote the requirements for making individuals into more productive, efficient and conforming workers and members of society. As the demands on people to conform to capitalist ideals have increased, so we have seen an increase in yoga teachers, systems and classes, which for the most part claim to enhance productivity and simultaneously conformity to a rigid neoliberal ethical (not to mention racial, gender, sexual and overall bodily) standard (Jain 2020).

Put differently, the yoga industry supports neoliberal capitalism, both in the pursuit of surplus value and ideological control; that is, by reinforcing its structures, norms and values and punishing deviations from them. More specifically, neoliberal yoga creates deviant outgroups – from yoga apparel companies like lululemon or Spiritual Gangster’s marketing strategies that present a narrow vision of the ideal (usually white) female body to Baba Ramdev’s prescription of yoga as the cure for homosexuality and Modi’s political strategies whereby yoga is weaponised against a Muslim minority – claiming that the members of such groups fail to choose the right lifestyle interventions to cultivate self-improvement and public allegiance to the nation (Jain 2020).

Furthermore, there is no doubt that large-scale interest in neoliberal yoga is built on romanticised images of the exotic Other and a distorted view of history. Consumers often ignore context, history and politics when they appropriate and commodify yoga. There are several relevant contexts to consider, including of course the history of white British colonial control of South Asia. The appropriation of South Asian cultural symbols and practices is situated within a history of colonialism and capitalist exploitation. Social inequalities, colonial histories, racism and nationalism all shape our ways of understanding who uses South Asian practices and why. Although many yoga entrepreneurs, corporations and consumers might resist critical reflection on these matters, preferring instead to speak of yoga as if it represents a static essence that can be seamlessly transmitted from one consumer-practitioner to another, transmission is far messier and usually does not take place between social equals (Jain 2020).

Consumers appropriate cultural products because there is something evocative about them (Einstein 2008: 4). Middle- or upper-class white yoga consumers living in the globalised twenty-first century, for example, often imagine themselves as materially rich but spiritually poor and, in turn, see South Asians as materially poor but offering great spiritual wealth or wisdom. In these representations, it becomes clear how capitalism, colonialism, racism, nationalism and orientalism engender and reify one another by discouraging reflection on historical and contemporary systematic forms of oppression.

In addition to the problems of cultural appropriation and orientalism, neoliberal yoga also upholds heteropatriarchy. In fact, gender is central (not peripheral) to its operations, especially insofar as heteropatriarchy shapes the ways authority is demarcated and exercised such that structural transformation is not expected as the solution to gender inequities; rather, resolving those challenges is a burden placed on the shoulders of the most oppressed; that is, women and other gender and sexual minorities. For example, industry leaders call on women, not to subvert heteropatriarchal social structures that obstruct their abilities to parent while fulfilling the demands of a career, but to use yoga as a means of achieving that envied (and maybe impossible) work-life balance: Yoga, in other words, is an individual’s tool for breaking the glass ceiling, not dismantling the ceiling so that all women have equal opportunity (Jain 2020).

Genealogies of power, privilege and oppression in neoliberal yoga can be narrated through attention, not only to individual incidents of racism or sexual harassment and assault, but
also by reading the texts of popular publications, such as Yoga Journal, or listening to widely disseminated yoga discourses, such as those of Baba Ramdev. In these, we learn that single women, queer people, fat people, sick people, people of colour, differently abled and atypical people and poor people are real problems. We learn that yoga practitioners, should they want to survive and thrive, must avoid, call out and regulate those problems. Industry leaders learn that its prescriptions about how to govern bodies has a productive energy that can be harnessed to convince consumers to buy more commodities and therefore support the industry, even when that support also cultivates discrimination, exclusion and abuse. Neoliberal yoga runs only by convincing consumers that they are imperfect and flawed by that same discrimination, exclusion and abuse, and that they can be healed if only they purchase the right products (Jain 2020).

Conclusion

I suggest we use neoliberal capitalism as a framework for understanding commercial yoga and the generally conservative ethos of the yoga industry. Most significantly, yoga serves as a way to individualise what are fundamentally social and political problems in society. This is obviously cohesive with neoliberal capitalism. It follows an ideology that you need to work on yourself, rather than look to social resources for solutions to your problems or demand structural changes. Through an ethic of self-care, the yoga industry trains consumers not only to believe that their bodily and social conditions are under their control, but to feel ashamed about those parts of their lives that do not comply with cultural ideals. The yoga industry fabricates this neoliberal-individual understanding of self-care and the ideal of the free entrepreneurial individual.

Teachers and entrepreneurs use yoga to advocate for the promise that free markets and for-profits will bring healing and empowerment to those who make the right consumer choices. Many scholars have already offered referenda on commodified spiritualities, such as yoga or mindfulness, suggesting they merely serve as palliatives or coping mechanisms (see note 2). These commodities, in their view, function like a fetish that helps consumers feel as if they have escaped reality. In other words, they offer consumers an escape into an experience (of the present moment, of a romanticised or orientalised Other, or an idealised ancient past), which allows them to imagine themselves as separate from the busyness of everyday life, and by extension disconnected from the social and economic relations of global capitalism.

The solutions to consumers’ problems that neoliberal yoga offers do not elide the structural and economic undergirding of the earth’s population’s greatest threats, for example, pervasive inequalities and environmental destruction. By ignoring that socio-economic and cultural structures shape our lives, they ensure greater conformity to the dominant ideology of neoliberalism and the reigning socio-economic system of capitalism, which are largely responsible for conditions of exploitation and a dehumanizing workplace, assaults against democracy and vast social inequalities. Critical contributions to the study of neoliberal yoga should examine the material and social operations of its commodities, pursued with a sensitivity to subtle – and sometimes not-so-subtle – power dynamics, complicating any straightforward progress narrative about democratization, increased choice or individual autonomy among yoga consumers. This form of yoga ultimately directs its address to the middle- and upper-middle classes, effectively erasing the problems faced by the vast majority of the population from its view. And, since teachers’ and entrepreneurs’ aim is often bottom-line profit, they are usually uninterested in social justice or mass mobilization, or at least those are not
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prioritised. Furthermore, as much as individual consumers are not in control of their physical living conditions or places on the socio-economic hierarchy, shopping for yoga and its accoutrements give consumers a sense of control over their lives. A wide range of commodities – mats, apparel, books, classes, workshops – are celebrated as good consumer choices, products that lead to better living outcomes. Adherents of this type of yoga use the notion of consumer choice to convince themselves they are in control of their wellbeing, self-care and happiness (Jain 2020).

All of these observations are accurate and notable, yet the commodities of neoliberal yoga also represent cultural, religious and economic systems far more complex than the ‘fetish’ assessment implies. Critical contributions to the study of neoliberal yoga should also examine how to interpret the dissenting discourses of yoga. Spiritual Gangster’s appropriation of ‘gangster’, for example, could be read as an effort toward dissent, since gang culture is historically a space of Black resistance. According to the Spiritual Gangster website, ‘We exercise love as the most powerful form of activism’ (Spiritual Gangster 2019). The company also donates an unspecified percentage of every sale to provide food for those living in poverty. What about these neoliberal yoga entrepreneurs and corporations profiting from spiritual commodities that claim to counter the problems of unbridled capitalism with charitable giving or various forms of ‘conscious capitalism’?

What should we make of the Indian state’s efforts to challenge the imperialism behind western commodifications of yoga, more specifically, the North American multi-billion-dollar yoga industry, by reclaiming yoga for India? Or Baba Ramdev’s company, Patañjali Ayurved, which claims to offer alternatives to the products of western corporations with their natural and ayurvedic products, packaged in the orange and green of the Indian flag and marketed as ‘Made in Bharat’?

What should we make of the feminist spiritual discourses – the calls for women’s empowerment through yoga all while placing the burden of success on individual women and their willingness to work hard under dire circumstances? What should we make of consumers who greenwash yoga in an attempt to counter environmental degradation in the face of capitalism?

When we attend to these contradictions of neoliberal yoga, rather than a mode through which consumers simply ignore or are numbed to the problems of neoliberal capitalism, we find that many yoga commodities, corporations and entrepreneurs do actually acknowledge those problems and, in fact, make efforts to correct them. They are not numbed, in other words, to current social and environmental crises. Yet, from provocative taglines printed across t-shirts or packaging to various forms of charitable giving, commodification serves as a strategy through which the dissent itself is colonised (Jain 2020).

Yoga commodities often enact an orientalist fantasy of enlightenment-ethics that is especially seductive in a world of ever-expanding obligations and needs. In and through its creative usage of capitalist-orientalist tropes, the text of these commodities provides a theoretical model and ideological justification for a neoliberal ethic. Capitalist-individualist understandings of ‘progress’ or ‘freedom’ largely stand in place of radical anti-hierarchical, egalitarian and anti-capitalist understandings of liberation (Jain 2020).

In the academic study of yoga and in popular yoga publications themselves, there is often a desire for a narrative of unity, as if there is an essence or core to yoga and to the culture from which participants in the global yoga industry appropriate. But the discomfort that comes with efforts to illuminate the differences, discrepancies and contradictions within and across neoliberal yoga is necessary. Ultimately, attending to these, acknowledging all of the moving parts of neoliberal yoga, will strengthen the collective project to understand not only yoga itself, but also the workings of neoliberalism in contemporary society.
Notes


2 Although my work on neoliberal yoga makes the case that the above points are true (Jain 2014a, 2020), this has not been the general consensus among scholars analysing the commercialisation and mass marketing of yoga or spirituality at large. Some studies bemoan the consumer branding, commodification and popularisation of yoga and other spiritual commodities, such as mindfulness, as the loss of an imagined purer, authentic religious practice. Such approaches fit yoga within a framework that pits corrupt commodifications of cultural products against so-called authentic ones. Most notably, Slavoj Žižek (2001) offers such a referendum on modern appropriations of Buddhism, and Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2005) bemoan the co-optation of spirituality by market forces, arguing that spirituality, including the yoga industry, is a ‘vacuous cultural trope’ that can be mixed with anything (2005: 46) and represents the ‘takeover’ of religion. Rather than make authenticity claims or otherwise assess the relationship between neoliberal yoga and historical yoga traditions, the current chapter focuses on yoga’s relationship to the dominant modes of governance at play under neoliberal capitalism. Of course, my argument that neoliberal capitalism moulds cultures of self-care does accord with the consensus academic position that the present moment’s arrangement of culture and ideology shapes the ways people are capable of thinking, even when they seek to think beyond or against the dominant order, it also analyzes those very cultures as religious ones.

3 Edward Said (1978) defines orientalism as ‘a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire … a product of certain political forces and activities’ (202–203). In the colonial period, orientalist scholarship served to legitimate colonial rule by bifurcating the world into the Orient and the Occident. The Orient and the Occident were defined in terms of perceived essences, and thus each was perceived as a homogenous, static system. Because orientalist thinkers have defined the Orient vis-à-vis the Occident, the system of representation that Said calls orientalism reveals more about occidental subjectivity than about any reality underlying representations of the Orient. Although these representations do not serve direct colonial rule, the regime of knowledge they support perpetuates divisive attitudes toward colonized cultures.

4 Several studies have addressed these tendencies of the larger ‘neoliberal feminist’ movement, including H. Eisenstein 2009; Z. Eisenstein 2013; Fraser 2013; Rottenberg 2014; Rottenberg 2018; Kantor 2013; Huffer 2013.

Bibliography


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