Image of Yoga: Instagram, Identity, and Western Imagination

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Image of Yoga:
Instagram, Identity, and Western Imagination

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Introduction

On the third floor of a commercial rental building in Rhinebeck, NY, a heavy door opens onto a hardwood floor. A table and stool function as a front desk directly behind the door, where a woman sits collecting names and payments. To her right, a shelving unit displays various jewelry, books, and clothing for sale. Large red curtains separate this space and a large open room filled with the chatter of soft voices. Blankets and small cushions line the floor to form a semi circle around a thin white woman. Something chimes; a quiet falls over the room as people scatter, finding a place to sit. Another woman, shorter in stature and seemingly younger in spirit, welcomes everyone. She applauds the new class of teacher trainee’s who will begin their 200-hour journey to becoming yoga teachers with this lecture. The other woman, the one who will be giving the lecture, is introduced as Lady Ruth. She speaks in a very soft voice; one that people must lean in to hear. Another woman walks up to her and bows to kiss her feet, thanking her for coming to speak. A moment passes, and a small piano like instrument is brought to the front of the room upon which Ruth and the woman who introduced her begin to play notes and sing a Sanskrit mantra.

I am one of the 15 women who are beginning their yoga teacher-training course with this lecture. Sitting on a blanket, listening and attempting to sing along to this mantra I cannot help but think that I have made a very grave mistake. As the lecture continues on, Ruth tells her audience about each of the Yamas and the Niyamas, internal and external practices written about in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.¹ As I look around the room I am met with numerous white faces, aside from the one Asian woman seated beside me. Most of the crowd is older than me, and I

feel invariably alone in the crowd of people chanting and smiling along with Ruth. As I sat on the hardwood floor my back began to hurt and my heart raced the way it often does when nervousness takes over. I wanted to leave the room. This did not feel correct. This was not the yoga I had seen in magazines and websites. This was not the yoga I had read about in books. This yoga seemed inherently other; distinctly separate from the lexicon of my accepted notions of cultural mobility. What I perceived as I sat on that blanket on the floor was a yoga that was not my own and, quite frankly, did not seem to belong to anyone in the room.

These distinct conceptions of yoga, one that is ‘mine’ as a member of Western society and one that is an untouchable ‘other’, introduce the framework for this paper. Western imaginations of yoga, or Western societies conceived perceptions and definitions of yoga, have gone through multiple paradigmatic shifts in understanding and acceptance. What once existed as an entity of Eastern religious spirituality now functions as the basis for a multi-billion dollar industry. The yogic image, through a process of negotiation with Western ideologies, has culminated in a visuality both knowable and acceptable to Western imaginations. In employing the term yogic image, I refer not to the literal image of a body practicing yoga, but to Western societies perceived imaginations surrounding those images, and the implications of those images as a means of representing what the Western contemporary society conceptualizes as ‘yoga’.

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, ‘yoga’, a practice rooted in Hindu and Eastern ideologies, has crossed multiple cultural boundaries to find its own existence within Western societies and cultures. This paper functions as an exploration of yoga’s evolution, and its continued development, within the Western imagination specifically within the context of the late 20th century up to the present moment.
While the term ‘yoga’ represents a wide range of practices and ideology’s, the physical practice of hatha yoga and it’s evolution within Western thought will be the main focus of this paper. Hatha yoga in particular is the type of yoga, which utilizes the physical body as a means of accessing spiritual or ascendant paths. This anatomically rooted yoga was not accepted or understood within Western imaginations until the late 20th century. While more intellectual and philosophically driven forms of yoga were accepted and even highly regarded prior to the 20th century, hatha yoga was pushed to the outskirts of Western yogic image.

The major success of hatha yoga’s acceptance within the Western imagination came with the acceptance of and proliferation by media. In looking at the way Western thought has evolved in regard to the yogic image I draw upon Benedict Anderson’s theory that print media helped foster a national identity through the construction of shared imaginations in his seminal work *Imagined Communities*. Similarly to his argument I posit that yoga, through multiple forms of media, has become both digestible and accessible to Western audiences.

The final component and great accommodator of the yogic image in the West is the medium of biography. Eric Freedman posits that, “As individuals, we find refuge in biography, in the subjectivization and individualization of the world around us.” This lack of solitude so integral to biography has become increasingly conflated with yogic image over the 21st century in particular. The authority and accessibility biography offers has allowed Western audiences a means of entry into the practice of yoga and given way to both its acceptance and commodification.

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Both media and biography have accommodated the construction of a yogic image that is both accessible and comfortable for Western society. The yogic image’s evolution in the West, which has undergone a deep appropriative normalization in Western visualities, is where the arguments and questions of this paper are most clearly defined. Each chapter offers an exploration of Western imaginations surrounding yoga both throughout the 20th century and within the present moment. In exploring the mediums of biography and media I aim to explore the means by which yoga has been ingrained in Western culture and what Western imaginations of yoga are present today.

The first chapter of this work will briefly survey the history of Western imaginations of yoga specifically in regard to the bodily practice of hatha yoga. Beginning as early as the mid 17th century, Western fascination with asceticism, mendicancy, and ‘yogis’ contorting their bodies into various postures was documented by European visitors personal accounts of their travels. European colonialism promoted the image of the yogi as distinctly other, and hatha yoga practitioners were often forced into lifestyles of showmanship as Western imaginations held these yogic practices as strange forms of entertainment. It was not until the mid 20th century when hatha yoga began its acceptance in Western imagination with the birth of one Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya.

Krishnamacharya’s teachings greatly affected Western imaginations of yoga particularly in his affinity to hatha yoga as a physical exercise. His students B.K.S. Iyengar and Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, along with yoga guru Bikram Choudhury, continued to influence the Western yogic image with their athletically challenging systems. Indra Devi, another of Krishnamacharya’s students, was the first European woman to study and then teach yoga to Westerners in Hollywood.
Each of these gurus and teachers allowed Western imaginations of yoga to shift due to their aesthetic realities.

Finally, the first chapter will note the expansion and evolution of print media in specific regard to periodical literature, which allowed yoga to become both digestible and commodified to Western audiences. Through the observation of periodical literature over the late 20th century it is clear that yoga leaves the body of the Indian male and enters the white thin female body. These forms of print media provide textual evidence of yoga’s increasing attachment to beauty throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The second chapter will focus on contemporary practices of yoga within the Western world. In observing who is given authority and accessibility to yoga, I introduce the new media of Instagram that has become a space for constructing yogic identity. In examining how Instagram functions as a means of telling life stories, I look at two specific Instagram accounts of women who have framed a narrative of themselves within yogic practice and have in turn gained fame and celebrity, namely Rachel Brathen and Jessamyn Stanley. In examining these two specific examples of yoga’s existence on Instagram, I question if this certain genre of media is allowing for a shift in contemporary Western conceptions of yoga.

The third and final chapter will explore yoga’s commodified existence in the contemporary Western world. In analyzing the financial success of both Brathen and Stanley I posit that the expansive nature of the Western yogic image allows for its commodification and marketability. In surveying each of the women’s personal yogic autobiographies, an emerging genre of literature, I explore the ways in which biography and yoga become conflated. From this conflation comes a marketable identity and product, both of which efficiently support Brathen and Stanley as celebrity yoga figures.
Throughout this paper I attempt to examine the discrepancies between yoga’s history and it’s current perception in the West. I argue that yoga has been subconsciously appropriated in the Western imagination through the conflation of yoga with Western ideals of capitalism, beauty, and immediacy as a means of understanding and making known the foreign and unknowable ‘yoga’ of the East.

I have no intention of denying my own position in the telling of this story. I am a 21-year-old white woman from the United States who discovered yoga at a YMCA camp. I became a certified Vinyasa flow yoga teacher in upstate New York and was taught ancient Indian traditions by three white women. Needless to say, my own personal relationship with yoga is as flawed and imperfect as its existence in the West. However, this conflict has allowed me insight into Western imaginations of yoga that I, myself, have taken part in. In a panel on Yoga in the United States, my very own yoga teacher Sondra Loring said, “I think yoga has more questions than answers.”{4} I do not seek to give the reader an answer as to what yoga is or how all of Western society imagines it precisely, but rather aim to ask the question of how we got where we are, and perhaps where to go from here.

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{4} Sondra Loring, "Yoga in the United States" (lecture, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, April 18, 2017).
Chapter 1: Histories of Imagination: Lineage and Biography

Early Reflections of Western Yogic Image

Western imaginations of yoga, particularly hatha yoga, developed considerably with European travel to the East. In his investigation of modern postural yoga, which predominates the contemporary Western yogic image, Mark Singleton observes the histories of European thought in regard to yoga.\(^5\) During the period of “…modern European colonial expansion”\(^6\), European visitors would return from their voyages to the East, namely India, with stories and eventually photographs of what they had seen. Inherent difficulties in perceiving and correctly relaying these experiences arose upon their return and subsequent literature written on the discoveries of their travel. One such difficulty presents itself in the European perception and communication of the term ‘yogi’. Singleton writes,

> “European visitors commonly had difficulty distinguishing between the various categories of mendicant orders, and would commonly conflate the (Hindu) yogin and the (Mohammedan) fakir...For these visitors “yogi” tended to signify the social group of itinerant renouncers known for their disreputable (and sometimes violent) behavior, mendicancy, and outlandish austerities.”\(^7\)

Eventually the term “yogi” became an expansive definition for multiple ascetic and austere practices including laying on beds of nails and contorting their bodies into various postures unknown and foreign to the European traveller. Hatha yoga practitioners in particular were especially other-ed and became a spectacle in the eyes of European travelers. The anthropologist Kirin Nar-
yan speaks about the image of the Hindu Holy man, or *sadhus*, writing, “The holy man’s body become a site in which cultural difference was first derisively emphasized and then commodified for entertainment.”

Print media eventually gave rise to postcards and newspapers including photographs of men on beds of nails and hatha yogis in various postures, which offered Westerners a representation of yoga. These images became a tool for the objectification and humiliation of a culture. Nirayan writes,

“As Britain’s colonial relationship with India became consolidated after 1757, the Hindu holy man became increasingly saturated with negative meaning, his “self torturing” practices an illustration of India’s spiritual and moral backwardness.”

This image of the Indian mendicant, and in turn the ‘yogi’, functioned as pivotal tools for the colonizing government. Alongside the British government, Christian missionaries proliferated this backwards image of the ‘yogi’. The Western gaze upon holy men of the East during this period relied heavily upon this association of the yogic image with otherness.

Within the 18th and 19th centuries Western perceptions of yoga shifted slightly upon the translation of multiple Hindu texts. With their translation, Eastern philosophies gained academic recognition in the European world as noteworthy concepts. With Indian guru Swami Vivekananda’s visit to America in the late 19th century, yoga as an intellectual and philosophical pursuit gained validation and appreciation on the Western stage. The hatha yogi, however, continued to suffer a synonymy with backwardness and inherent otherness for years.

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9 Narayan, "Refractions of the Field," [Page 487].
Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, with the growth of print media and globalization, yoga’s perception in Western culture managed to shift away from its original negative associations. Throughout the following chapter I follow the lives and teachings of five gurus and teachers whose influence allowed for Western imaginations surrounding yoga to shift.

**Histories of Aesthetic Practice**

The contemporary Western conception of yoga compiles multiple styles and traditions, most of which were born throughout the late 20th century. These styles and traditions branch mainly from the lineage of yoga guru Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, whose system of yoga deeply intertwined itself with the principles of physical fitness and gymnastics. His students, namely Pattabhi Jois and Iyengar, would go on to produce some of the most popular systems of yoga, also deeply rooted in physicality. The aesthetic quality of the yoga practiced within the Krishnamacharya lineage emphasized the visual aspect of yoga and the concept of perfection or beauty, which Westerners were eventually drawn toward. Through his system, the human body became a symbol of not just what yoga was as a spiritual practice but provided real-life physical evidence of what yoga did to the human body and satisfied the Western understanding of seeing as believing.

The aesthetically based postural yoga Krishnamacharya developed and spread to his students is also evident in the yoga of one Bikram Choudhury who, although not a part of the Krishnamacharya lineage, also developed a system deeply rooted in physicality. Choudhury’s self-named system of yoga entitled *Bikram* has become one of the most popular styles of yoga in the West, regardless of the brand’s multiple scandals. Bikram’s showmanship-like postures emphasize the physicality of yoga rather than its spirituality and locate yoga within the body. This move towards athleticism and away from spirituality captivated Western audiences who appreci-
ated the system’s ability to produce bodies that could perform postures that are both visually engaging and mystifying.

Both the Bikram system and Krishnamacharya’s lineage shifted Western perceptions of yoga in its relationship to the body and general acceptance of hatha yoga within Western society. Additionally, one of Krishnamacharya’s students was able to disrupt the West’s perception of who was able to practice hatha yoga. Indra Devi, born Eugenie V. Peterson, was Krishnamacharya’s most prominent female European student who went on to teach yoga in Hollywood to celebrity film actors. Her impact on Western understandings of who yoga belongs to and the yogic image in the West as a whole is unparalleled.

These predecessors and figureheads of contemporary yoga each come with their own distinct life stories. In order to approach where these histories of yoga delineate from, one must understand the person from which the system of yoga is born. Biography’s close relationship with the contemporary Western yogic image comes from yoga’s unique relationship to the human individual. In the following sections I will give a brief overview of the figureheads I mentioned above whose life and teachings have aided in the evolution of the yogic image.

**Krishnamacharya**

The father of most contemporary Western yoga practice is a man named Krishnamacharya. When considering the life of Krishnamacharya it is important to note the mystery that surrounds his life. While a few authors have attempted to compile a biography of his life, such as *Krishnamacharya: His Life and Teachings*[^10] written by one of his students and *Health*,

[^10]: A.G. Mohan, Krishnamacharya: His Life and Teachings (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2010).
Healing, and Beyond: Yoga and the Living Tradition of T. Krishnamacharya\textsuperscript{11} written by his son, each vary in multiple ways and amount, somewhat, to compilations of stories they either personally experienced or heard.

Despite these confusions and various accounts what is agreed upon is that Krishnamacharya was born in the Indian state of Karnataka in a town named Muchukundapuram in the year 1888. Born into the Brahmin caste, the highest-ranking caste in India, Krishnamacharya had access to a good education as a child. After becoming extremely well versed in Sanskrit and ancient Sanskrit texts, it is understood that Krishnamacharya received multiple academic degrees. It is generally agreed upon that his main yoga education came from a man known as Ramamohana Brahmachari, with whom Krishnamacharya studied for about 7 years within which he learned the practices of yoga and meditation. Eventually, his teacher “…instructed him to go back to India, start a family, and teach yoga”\textsuperscript{12}. Krishnamacharya took this instruction to heart, marrying a woman by the name of Namagiriama in 1925 and teaching as the Sanskrit College in Mysore after being invited by the maharaja in the early 1930’s.

From that point onwards Krishnamacharya taught countless students, many of whom would become some of the most influential yoga figures of the modern world. Krishnamacharya's teaching style evolved and grew just as he did, eventually giving birth to \textit{Ashtanga Vinyasa} yoga. This system is rooted in \textit{Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras}, the word \textit{ashtanga} referring to the texts 8 limbed path of yoga: \textit{yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, samadhi}\textsuperscript{13}. Each of these limbs functions as their own practice, such as the limb of \textit{pranayama}, mean-

\textsuperscript{12} Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg, eds., \textit{Gurus of Modern Yoga} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), [Page 86].
\textsuperscript{13} Bryant, \textit{The Yoga}. 
ing breath control, which utilizes breath as a means of heightening one's consciousness. All of the practices focus on the aim of samadhi, which can essentially be translated as total absorption or enlightenment. While Krishnamacharya’s system of yoga was rooted in this text, the Ashtanga Vinyasa technique was one of the first forms of yoga to seriously teach asana or postures.

Krishnamacharya’s use of asana resulted in numerous postures that had previously not existed mainly as a “…response to the needs of the modern age”\(^\text{14}\). This principle of a system of yoga that was able to evolve is intimately connected with Krishnamacharya’s teachings. He held strong convictions in regard to the relationship between teacher and student and, “…devised his individual approach based on each student's constitution, needs, capacity, and es.”\(^\text{15}\) The yoga teacher, to Krishnamacharya, had to act not as both a protector and challenger as learning and safety were key to his teachings. In taking this individualized approach, Krishnamacharya was able to make yoga accessible for people from all walks of life.

In the contemporary Western yoga world, while yoga does appeal to specific audiences as a commodity, as a practice most yoga lineages preach inclusivity. Singleton and Fraser write, “Krishnamacharya did not insist that his foreign students adopt his sectarian allegiance and instead adapted practices to suit the culturally influenced needs of the individual.”\(^\text{16}\) In this way, he opened the doors of yoga to people of all walks of life. Yoga, through Krishnamacharya, became a practice for people not of Indian descent, namely Westerners. This fact alone acts as a summation of Krishnamacharya’s functionality in his implications in the contemporary Western imagination of yoga. In the following pages I will give an overview of some of the most acclaimed

\(^\text{14}\) Singleton and Goldberg, Gurus of Modern, [Page 97].
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., [Page 88].
\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., [Page 95].
students of Krishnamacharya and the effect they have had in the expansion and evolution of the Western yogic image.

**Pattabhi Jois and the Ashtanga Yoga Lineage**

Born into a Brahmin family in July of 1915, Pattabhi Jois remains a mammoth influence in contemporary Western views of yoga. He began studying with Krishnamacharya at the young age of 12 for about two years in 1927. Later, in 1932, Jois continued his study with Krishnamacharya at the Sanskrit College in Mysore until he became a professor there himself in 1950\(^1\). A married man with 3 children, Jois was known as a friendly and kind force of nature. His teaching career resulted in the creation of the Krishna Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KPJAYI) in Mysore, India where he taught until his death on May 18, 2009. The Institute was established first in 1948 where Jois taught yoga to locals but was opened to Western students in 1964. Since the institute’s expansion to Western students it has become an extremely popular site for Western Ashtanga Practitioners. Pattabhi Jois’ grandson Sharath Jois continues on as the Institute's head instructor, which took effect after Pattabhi Jois passed away.

Jois’ influence in the Western yogic imagination comes from the system of yoga that he created and formalized called the Ashtanga Yoga method. Although it is akin to many of Krishnamacharya’s *Ashtanga Vinyasa* teachings, Jois’ method utilizes yoga postures to create a methodical system. This method, often coined ‘Mysore Style’ yoga, consists of multiple series of poses, which are connected through *vinyasa*: a flow of motion that guides the body between various postures. There are 6 series or levels in the Ashtanga Yoga method. Each series consists of

\(^1\) Singleton and Goldberg, *Gurus of Modern*, [Page 110].
different poses that build upon the series that came before. Students move through and learn each series beginning with the Primary Series until the teacher deems the student ready to move on to the next series. It is to be practiced 6 times a week, with a rest on full moon days.

The entire practice and structure of Ashtanga yoga is extremely dynamic. Traditionally, Ashtanga practitioners begin in a classroom with a certified Ashtanga teacher. While students can partake in traditionally lead Primary Series classes, Mysore style yoga in a classroom is very unique when compared to most contemporary Western yoga classes, which feature students taking directions from the teacher and doing all of the same postures simultaneously. However in a Mysore Style Ashtanga class, all of the students practice their own individual series together in silence. This requires students to learn their own sequence, depending on which level they are on. It also allows the teacher to give individualized attention to students who need it.

Another aspect, which makes Jois’ system of yoga so unique, is Ashtanga Yoga’s use of parampara or authorization. Parampara is a Sanskrit word which “...denotes the succession and passing of knowledge from teacher to student in Hindu culture and religion”18. In order to be recognized as a certified Ashtanga teacher a student has to be given authorization by Pattabhi Jois, now Sharath Jois, himself. This transition of power and authority relies heavily upon the relationship between teacher and student. Therefore in order to even be considered for this authorization the student has to have a deep connection with Pattabhi, now Sharath Jois, so that they can determine whether or not a student is prepared to take on the responsibility of teaching. For many, this means months and even years of practicing at the Ashtanga Institute in Mysore even after which Sharath may not decide to give full authorization.

18 Singleton and Goldberg, Gurus of Modern, [Page 111].
This question of authorization, then, is also one of dedication. Someone from the United States aiming to become a certified Ashtanga teacher, they would need a lifestyle that allowed for months of study in India, including time off from work and the funds to be able to support oneself. While other forms of yoga require a simple teacher training, Ashtanga involves years of daily practice. This dedication is at the core of Jois’ philosophy. “Practice and all is coming”\textsuperscript{19} is one of the guru’s most famous quotes and is used today as inspiration for yoga practitioners across the globe. Jois’ belief and faith in the daily practice of Ashtanga Yoga lives on today in thousands of students and his principles of dedication have deeply influenced the world of contemporary yoga as a whole.

\textbf{B.K.S. Iyengar}

Arguably Krishnamacharya’s most renowned student, B.K.S. Iyengar was born into a Brahmin caste family in 1918. His childhood left him a very fragile body, suffering through multiple diseases including typhoid and malaria. In 1934 he moved to live with a sister in Mysore, India. This sister was the wife of Krishnamacharya. He studied under Krishnamacharya for only a year and a half\textsuperscript{20}, after which he was sent off to the Indian city of Pune to teach. Upon his arrival, the 18 year old was greeted by a community with little to no knowledge of yoga and an entirely foreign language. Despite these challenges, Pune became the epicenter of Iyengar’s unique brand of yoga aptly named after himself.

His system of yoga focuses heavily on the anatomy of the body and proper alignment within yoga postures, employing the use of props and assistance to help the pose conform to the

\textsuperscript{20} Singleton and Goldberg, \textit{Gurus of Modern}, [Page 126].
body, rather than forcing the body into a posture. This approach to yoga had not existed prior to Iyengar and proved tremendously successful in its move to the West. Iyengar’s bodily practice undoubtedly remains at the forefront of Western imaginations surrounding yoga.

Iyengar’s most seminal work within the context of evolving Eastern yogic image came in 1966, when his book entitled Light On Yoga\(^1\) was published. While the book offers a brief introductory section overviewing Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*\(^2\), Samkhya philosophy,\(^3\) and their importance in relation to yoga, the majority of its pages are filled with pictures of Iyengar in yoga postures. Each come with detailed descriptions of the pose, its name, how it is to be practiced, and what props can be used to assist the pose. With its publication, *Light on Yoga* became the world’s first yogic encyclopedia.

Pivotal to this literary work is the ancient authority claimed within its pages. Smith and White write,

> “Mr. Iyengar studied in a yoga culture in which Krishnamacharya spoke glowing-ly of history, not so very ancient—and imagined history, it turns out—of thousands of *asanas* or yogic postures. This culture surely had a lasting effect on him: his discourse of yoga and self-presentation as a yoga guru are thoroughly perme-ated by references to classical religious narrative.”\(^4\)

Indeed a majority of the poses that are featured in Iyengar’s book are accompanied by names that invoke a connection to Hindu mythology. Iyengar not only depicts these poses but explains certain stories attributed to the Hindu gods and figures after which the postures are

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\(^{2}\) Bryant, *The Yoga*.

\(^{3}\) Philosophical discourse often related to yoga practice concerning the concept of *purusa*, or the self.

\(^{4}\) Singleton and Goldberg, *Gurus of Modern*, [Page 125].
named. With this book, Iyengar forms a connection between Hinduism and yoga that prior to this book was not so much highlighted as accepted. By this I simply mean that the yoga was being practiced in a deeply Hindu culture, so that Hinduism was pervading yoga practice subconsciously. However by naming these poses, and by publishing such a book that people would read all across the globe, there began this inextricable link between yoga and Hindu mythology, Hindu spirituality.

Light on Yoga shifted Western imaginations surrounding the practice of yoga mainly in its accessibility. Iyengar’s work effectively made yoga accessible with its removal of the physical teacher and its replacement with the visual aid. With its publishing, Light On Yoga allowed Western practitioners to simply replicate, or attempt to replicate, the images within the books pages rather than attending a yoga class or finding a yoga teacher. The book was able to bolster the creation of a practice taught by the self, to the self, and for the self. The notions of instructional yogic literature and individual yogic practice have since been revisited and revitalized in the contemporary Western yogic imagination. I revisit these concepts both in Chapters 2 and 3, but note here their birth in Iyengar’s first literary work.

As Iyengar’s work and teachings spread west, his style of yoga grew increasingly popular. In the present moment students who wish to teach Iyengar yoga must receive certification from the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Institute in Pune, much like the authorization process of Ashtanga yoga. Andrea Jain references the Iyengar Yoga system stating, “In response to the robust trends in the global fitness market, Iyengar selected from Krishnamacharya’s teachings and elaborated upon those teachings in order to create Iyengar Yoga as a physical fitness brand”\(^{26}\).

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25 See Kurmasana in Iyengar, Light On Yoga, [Page 288].
Iyengar’s connection to the body and his anatomical use of yoga appealed to Westerners and have aided in the construction of the contemporary Western yogic image. Mr. Iyengar passed away in August of 2014, leaving behind a brand of yoga whose influences are felt throughout most contemporary yoga whether practitioners are aware or not. His writings and teachings located yogic practice within the physical body and allowed for a Western imagination of yoga that was both accessible and individual.

**Indra Devi**

The most important of Krishnamacharya’s students, particularly in relation to Western imaginations of yoga, was a woman known as Eugenia V. Peterson. While other students such as Iyengar and Jois allowed for more anatomical approaches to yoga, neither shifted Western perceptions as monumentally as Peterson, later known as Indra Devi. All of the biographical information provided here comes from Michelle Goldberg’s recent biography of Devi entitled *The Goddess Pose: The Audacious Life of Indra Devi*²⁷. The story of this book and the way in which it is told serve as interesting case studies of both Devi’s life and the biographer’s approach.

Eugenia Peterson was born in the year 1899 to Vasili Pavlovich Peterson and Sasha Zitovich, a Swedish banker and a Russian noblewoman respectively. Her parents quickly divorced and her mother promptly left Eugenia with her parents to become an actress. Eugenia was therefore raised by her grandparents, two Russian aristocrats, although her loyalty always remained with her mother. Eugenie would travel alongside her mother on multiple occasions, one

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of which lead her to Yogi Ramacharaka’s *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism*. The book sparked Peterson’s endless quest for India and Eastern spirituality.

A major contributor to Peterson’s fascination with Eastern spirituality and eventual discovery of yoga was the ideology of Theosophy. Goldberg writes, “To understand how Eugenia became Indra Devi, it’s necessary to understand the bridge Theosophy created between Eastern and Western spirituality.” Theosophy is a system of philosophy that attempts to bring together the essential knowledge of multiple religions. The Theosophical Society, a group established by one Madame Blavatsky in 1875, dedicated itself to this philosophy. The society explored ideologies such as spirituality, occultism, and a general fascination with all things from the East, including yoga. It was through the writings and members of the Theosophical Society that Eugenia found her path to spirituality, to India, and yoga itself. She was quite a dedicated member of the society for a majority of her early life.

Through the Society’s complex network, Peterson was able to travel to India both in 1927 and 1929, where Peterson discovered the Indian silent film industry. Goldberg writes, “Most European women acting in Indian films took Indian names. Mishra suggested Indira Devi—Indira after the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the most popular men in India, and Devi because it is the Sanskrit word for ‘goddess.’”

Out of the Hollywood of India came a new name for Eugenia Peterson, although she wouldn’t officially call herself Indra Devi for quite some time.

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28 As referenced in Goldberg, *The Goddess*, [Page 18].
30 Ibid., [Page 83].
Her relationship with Krishnamacharya and yoga did not begin until the late 1930’s upon her third visit to India. She was invited to Mysore for the son of the maharaja’s wedding; he was an acquaintance had Devi made in her previous travels to India. Upon her arrival she went promptly to Krishnamacharya’s yoga shala where she hoped to begin studying yoga with him. Initially Krishnamacharya turned Peterson away, and only after being prompted by the maharaja himself did he accept her as a student. Goldberg writes that Krishnamacharya, “…developed a grudging respect for her…”31 after observing Peterson’s dedication to the practice. Interestingly enough, Devi’s relationship with Krishnamacharya was one of his shortest in terms of his most influential students. She only studied with him for about 8 months before she moved to Shanghai to return to her husband, a Czechoslovakian diplomat working in Shanghai at the time. Upon the completion of their time together Krishnamacharya made a decision that would change Western imaginations of yoga entirely: he instructed Devi to teach.

When she arrived in Shanghai, Devi offered yoga classes that initially garnered little to no attention. Her success as a yoga teacher only developed after she approached a specific subset of individuals. Goldberg writes, “…someone suggested she put on a conference for people in the diplomatic world, inviting them to learn what yoga actually was. She did, and soon a number of curious American women showed up for class…”32 Devi’s success as a guru and teacher of yoga came solely with the fascination of American women, namely wives of American diplomats in Shanghai.

In 1947 Indra Devi set sail for the United States, eventually landing in California. She began to teach yoga in Hollywood where, similar to her experience in Shanghai, she garnered interest amongst many upper-class American women. She went on to teach Hollywood stars such

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31 Goldberg, The Goddess, [Page 122].
32 Ibid., [Page 133].
as Greta Garbo and Gloria Swanson, gaining a following from Hollywood celebrities and socialites. Her time in America shifted Western perceptions of who was allowed to practice yoga and who, in turn, taught it. Devi’s sheer existence emphasized yoga’s ability to be female.

Prior to Eugenia Peterson’s discovery of and dedication to yoga, it was rather unheard of for women to seriously practice let alone teach yoga. Yoga was reserved mainly for Indian Brahmin males, with the exception of certain guru’s female family members. Devi’s acceptance into the world of yoga functioned as a paradigmatic shift in its Western conceptualization. Where previously yoga was a practice reserved for Hindu holy men, suddenly it was accessible to white European women. The story of Devi’s life serves as an example of the West’s long-standing fascination with Eastern culture, the results of which lead to hatha yoga’s acceptance in the West. Likewise, it is impossible to examine Devi’s influence on the Western imagination of yoga without assessing her controversial role in its introduction to the West.

Indra Devi was often pictured in a traditional Indian sari after her move to the United States. While traveling in India, wearing a sari was a sign of respect she practiced in honoring a culture that was not her own. The question of appropriation arises when Devi, a white European woman, chose to take on an Indian name and continue wearing a sari when she traveled to Los Angeles, was not a part of the American cultural landscape. This decision allowed for the sari to be decontextualized and thus accepted in its appearance on a white woman. Indra Devi’s role in introducing yoga to the West epitomizes the unresolved conflict contemporary Western yoga communities still face on the question of appropriation.

Devi passed away at a remarkable 102 years old in 2002. She never developed her own system of yoga or opened a school of yoga still in existence today, and despite authoring multiple literary works, none remain as major reference texts for contemporary Western practitioners.
Her influence seems an afterthought in the contemporary world of yoga, despite its considerable affect of Western contemporary yogic practice. With Devi’s move to the states, Western perceptions of yoga began to encompass the female practitioner. Particularly the white, upper-class female practitioner so widely understood as normative in the contemporary Western imagination.

**Bikram Choudhury**

The final guru I bring into conversation does not come from the lineage of Krishnamacharya. On the contrary, the most controversial lineage of yoga begins and ends with a man named Bikram Choudhury. Surprisingly little has been written on the early life of Choudhury, perhaps because his later life has enveloped most of the focus. Choudhury was born in 1946 in Calcutta, India. According to Bikram Yoga’s website, Choudhury began practicing yoga at the age of four with his guru Bishnu Ghosh. Gosh’s approach to the practice of yoga was deeply physical. Joseph Altar writes,

“In 1930, Ghosh established Ghosh’s College of Yoga and Physical Culture in Calcutta and began to experiment with bodybuilding exercises combined with asana...Gosh achieved significant physical development and muscular definition, clearly establishing himself as a bodybuilder...”

In his relationship with Gosh yoga was undoubtedly framed as a deeply physical exercise for young Choudhury. This link between physical athleticism, aesthetics, and yoga, which began in his early childhood, has very clearly influenced Choudhury’s own yoga system.

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This system developed over years of study and practice, according to Choudhury. Named after himself, Bikram yoga consists of only 26 postures being performed in a room heated up to around 105 degrees. This heat is necessary, as Bikram notes, in order to match the heat of India. Of course his method has been met with some skepticism. Mark Stephen’s writes in his comprehensive book entitled *Teaching Yoga: Essential Foundations and Techniques*,

“Stretching in an environment heated to such an extreme as in Bikram yoga allows a person to stretch much further than would otherwise be possible for his or her body. The problem is that this extending stretching ability is often beyond what the body is ready for, often resulting in injuries.”

This concern for the physical safety of Bikram yoga practitioners is not uncommon in the contemporary yoga community, but is a comparatively small issue in relation to Bikram’s larger controversies.

Bikram and his lineage have faced multiple scandals within the contemporary yoga world, the first of which came in 2003. Due to competition from other hot yoga studios, Bikram attempted to copyright his brand of yoga and sue “unauthorized teachers.” This raised large questions in the contemporary yoga community about what yoga actually was and if someone could ‘own’ it. The lawsuit functioned as a pivotal moment in contemporary yogic history, and eventually found Bikram’s case unwarranted.

Bikram’s second and more detrimental scandal occurred in 2013 when a former student filed a lawsuit against Choudhury claiming that he had sexually assaulted her during one of his teacher trainings. In a New York Times article the woman is identified as,

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36 Singleton, Globalized Modern, in Yoga: The Art of Transformation, [Page 101].
...Sarah Baughn, 29, a onetime Bikram yoga devotee and international yoga competitor whose lawsuit against Mr. Choudhury in 2013 was like an earthquake among followers of his style of yoga”37. Baughn was just the first of many women who have come forward to make similar claims. One woman’s claims were contested by Choudhury’s lawyers claiming that the statute of limitations had passed, but the contestation went disregarded because the woman “... had endured so much damage to her life and psyche that most of the suit could move ahead.” 38

These scandals have not deterred Choudhury or his yoga empire. Bikram studios are still as popular as ever, and while he lost many devotees due to the scandal it has not seemed to affect the self-proclaimed guru who continues to lead teacher training courses and classes. Perhaps one reason for this continued success comes from Western capitalist ideals. Stephens writes, “Bikram Yoga responds well to the powerful impulse in Western culture to feel quick results from any effort”39. Bikram’s approach to yoga allows practitioners to both look and feel as if they are undergoing massive amounts of physical intensity within a short period of time mainly due to its temperature requirements. In this way, Bikram satisfies the Western affinity to instant gratification and immediacy in a way few other systems of yoga offer.

Healy’s New York Times article outlines Bikram as “the yoga guru who built an empire on sweat and swagger. He has a stable of luxury cars and a Beverly Hill mansion” 40. Pictures of Choudhury on the Bikram website show him in sunglasses, wearing a fancy three piece suit with a matching fedora hat. There are also pictures of him on opulent staircases, attempting

38 Healy, "Schism Emerges,”.
39 Stephens, Teaching Yoga, [Page 32].
40 Healy, "Schism Emerges,”.
to depict both glamour and wealth. His yogic system has influenced Western imaginations of yoga considerably. Despite multiple rape accusations and his failed attempt to brand Bikram, Choudhury continues to run a successful yoga empire focused upon spiritual enlightenment and physical perfection.

**Gender and Biography: Contradictions of Contemporary Yoga**

In examining these major figures who have contributed to the evolution of Western yogic imaginations, it is integral to consider whose stories are being memorialized and how they are being memorialized. In the case of Indra Devi, although a contemporary of such teachers as Pattabhi Jois and Iyengar, is never once referred to as a guru. Rather, she is given the title of *mataji*, or mother. The way yoga gurus are remembered, namely the biographies and stories written about them, are very telling in the way the world perceives their message and proliferates their teaching.

Much of Devi’s biography, as told by Goldberg, functions rather differently than the biographic tales of the other male gurus who came from the Krishnamacharya lineage. In stories written on the life of Pattabhi Jois and Iyengar there is much to say about the evolution of their teachings and their growth as a guru. Whereas for Devi there simply exists, at least in the instance of *The Goddess Pose*, the story of a young girl grappling with life’s struggles, namely emotional distress and relationships. Goldberg writes often in a questioning way on the true nature of Eugenia’s intentions. In reference to Eugenia’s mother leaving her Goldberg writes,
“She would have recoiled at the idea that her mother had wounded her in any serious way. Instead, she insisted that her mother showed her the importance of independence and of pursuing one’s passion”. 41

The type of curiosity Goldberg has in approaching Eugenia’s intentions and subconscious issues is, in my reading, unheard of in writing on other male gurus. Later on she writes, “She had no interest in the social life on the boat, but she attributed this to spiritual development, not depression.” 42 This type of language that evokes a curiosity, a wondering about the reality of Devi’s life as she saw it, would never be used when talking about Iyengar and Jois. While it must be considered that The Goddess Pose was published in 2015 and therefore is written through a far more contemporary lens than other such portraits, it is pivotal to consider how gender may affect the telling of a life story.

In the contemporary moment of Western yoga, the story and life of Devi are being forgotten. There remains no institute or system of yoga in her name, and none of her literary works received nearly as much fanfare or interest as Iyengar or Pattabhi Jois’. Quite plainly, Devi’s life story is beginning to fade into the bowels of history despite the major impact her existence had on the Western imagination of yoga. This fact brings to light the undeniable patriarchy instilled within yogic institutions even to this day, where the majority of yoga brands and systems of yoga are created and run by men. There is this undeniable contradiction between who practices yoga in the West, namely white women, and who benefits off of that notion, namely men who run businesses connected with yoga. These businesses run the gamut from Bikram Choudhury and

41 Goldberg, The Goddess, [Page 13].
42 Goldberg, The Goddess, [Page 128].
his system of yoga, to clothing and yoga mat retailers such as Manduka, Lululemon, and Prana, each of which were founded by men.43

Yoga in the contemporary West has managed to shift from a once male-dominated practice to almost entirely female. Despite Indra Devi’s influence in this contemporary understanding of yoga, her life and teachings are becoming relics while her contemporaries are consistently memorialized. While yoga is perceived in the contemporary West as an inherently feminine practice, these facts contest the widely accepted theory that these same women are profiting from the practice.

Print Media, Celebrity, and Capitalism: Evolving A Western Yogic Image

In surveying the lineage of Krishnamacharya and the development of contemporary yoga practice in the West, it becomes increasingly clear that yoga is consumable only by certain communities. Traditionally in India, yoga texts such as the Yoga Sutra’s and the practice of asana and pranayama were available only to a certain type of person: males of the Brahmin caste. While being of the Brahmin caste in India does not inherently denote wealth or power, Brahmin social privilege made education and opportunities for advancement in the study of yoga far more accessible. Yoga, therefore, existed as a very patriarchal and elite institution in its early life in India. While today’s Western forms of yoga promote themselves as accessible and all inclusive, the reality, I argue, is that yoga’s tendency toward exclusivity did not change when it came to the west but rather shifted in its permission of who was granted access. While in India the practice

was accessible to Brahmin men, in the contemporary West, yoga is widely available and stapled as a practice for and by white women.

This shift in accessibility coincided with a shift in Western yogic imaginations. As Western imaginations became increasingly white and feminine, the practice of yoga became increasingly digestible and acceptable throughout Western culture. Let us take a moment here to consider the Western yogic image as its own entity, and therefore acknowledge what success, if we can call it that, the yogic image has obtained in the West. In just over 20 years, the image of the yoga practitioner has become not just digestible but *encouraged* throughout Western society. Prior to this shift, Western perceptions of yoga were endlessly negative and supported the idea of the yoga practitioner as backward and wrong. The question I approach now is how, in fact, this shift was able to occur so rapidly.

In his seminal book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson posits that the development of nationalism and national consciousness had to do in large part with the development and accessibility to print media. As wider groups of communities and societies began to read the same literature, similar imaginations could be conceived and instilled within communities. The yogic image as a socially constructed ideal underwent a rapid process of deconstruction and reconstruction due in large part to the ways media affected its consumers. I conducted a brief survey of the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*, an index of periodicals published within the United States, between the years 1948 and 1995. In doing so I found that the evolution of Western imaginations regarding yoga could be invariably witnessed through the various publications that speak about yoga. For example, throughout the late 1940’s and 50’s, articles related to yoga were published primarily in publications such as *Life* or *Newsweek*, and promoted the aes-

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44 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
thetic of the Indian male yogi. It is in the 1960’s when publications such as Seventeen Magazine and Harper’s Bazaar, both periodicals with female target audiences, began including articles in reference to yoga. In the 1970’s, publications such as Ladies Home Journal, Mademoiselle, and Vogue began producing print on yoga, and by the 1990’s yoga’s textual representation in print media was present in People, Essence, Working Woman, Glamour and Good Housekeeping.

While there were yogic representations in certain male-targeted publications such as Sports Illustrated and Esquire, their mentions are brief and less frequent. It is quite simple to see how with the growth of yogic representation in print media targeted specifically toward female populous, Western conceptions of yoga shifted in such a rapid and abrupt way.

In congruence with print media, the role of the celebrity in the evolution of the yogic image is highly significant. When Indra Devi came to the states in the late 1940’s and opened her studio in Los Angeles, her popularity as a teacher came with the popularity of her students, many of whom were Hollywood film stars and socialites. As more celebrities began practicing yoga, its popularity grew. In the 1980’s celebrities such as Jane Fonda and Madonna began promoting yoga as a fitness regime and more importantly a beauty regime. Supermodel Christy Turlington and movie star Gwyneth Paltrow continued promoting yoga’s effects as a means of obtaining physical perfection. As yoga became increasingly practiced and promoted by female celebrities, the Western imagination of yoga tied itself not only to the female form, but to Western conceptions of beauty.

Celebrities, like print media, have the agency to shift an entire culture’s perception on a subject. Lisa Colletta writes, “Celebrities represent a unique identity and personality, which
seem special but also universally attainable."\(^{46}\) This connection that people experienced and continue to experience with celebrities is deeply intertwined with a conception of identity; particularly the identities people wish to construct and portray of themselves. Through celebrities, Colletta indicates, people find identities similar to those they are attempting to replicate or construct. Colletta goes on to write that “...audiences begin to look to celebrities for guidance on what to buy and wear, how to behave, and how to live”\(^{47}\). As Western print media began to depict yoga as a female practice, and as more female celebrities became associated with yoga, new markets emerged in Western capitalist society. Capitalism itself encapsulates the notion that what you buy represents who you are. In the case of yoga, print media, and celebrities, the association of yoga with female celebrities and female beauty standards allowed for yoga to become a commodity to be bought and sold as a mode of constructing identity.

As Western female celebrities began practicing yoga, and in turn as Western print media began to perpetuate yoga’s association with female beauty standards, yoga became a commodity. The acceptance of the yogic image as a physical practice came not just with yoga’s location in any body, but specifically within the female body. Yoga became a regiment in which women could negotiate and conform their bodies to a specific social standard, namely the standard being sold to them through celebrity bodies. Workout videos could be sold, as well as the clothing and equipment that was being used in those videos. Corporations such as Yoga Journal, Lululemon, and Manduka were created as an answer to Western capitalist needs.\(^{48}\) These yoga brands, in turn, perpetuated Western imaginations of yoga by advertising the thin, white, female

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\(^{47}\) Ibid.

body. Over the course of just twenty years, yoga, with the help of print media, celebrities, and capitalism, managed to leave the body of the Indian ascetic and enter the thin, white, Western woman.

**The Question of Appropriation**

In attempting to answer the question of how a foreign practice such as yoga has become commodified in the West Kimberly Lau writes, “Difference becomes a highly marketable commodity, and this form of globalization has made it chic… presenting a world in which difference is commodified, sanitized, and thus neutralized for easy consumption.”49 The difference yoga represents as an Eastern spiritual practice has consistently been fetishized by Westerners. Over the course of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, this difference has been sculpted in a way that it can appeal to Western audiences. In other words, the practice of yoga, in particular hatha yoga, has been culturally appropriated.

Over the course of the past twenty years, yoga has become a physical fitness regimen for thin white women, namely *wealthy* thin white wealthy women in Western culture. While yoga still exists in its Indian homeland, its representations and associations within Indian social constructs are by no means similar to those of the West. Oxford Reference defines cultural appropriation as,

“A term used to describe the taking over of creative or artistic forms, themes, or practices by one cultural group from another. It is in general used to describe

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Western appropriations of non-Western or non-white forms, and carries connotations of exploitation and dominance.”  

Some may argue that yogic practice was not taken over by the West in that Indian gurus and sages were the ones to bring the practice West. Others will argue that yoga is a universal practice.

Mr. Iyengar said in an interview conducted in 2012 that,

“No, it’s not from India. It was originated that’s all. But it concerns the human being. That’s why the very word Patanjali used… he has used the word “sarva bHAVa”... means universal culture. He never uses Hindu culture. He has used to words universal culture. That’s the beauty of his word...so it stands for the humanity”

Arguably the most famous Indian guru in Western culture negates the argument that yoga is being appropriated.

I make the distinction here between hatha yoga and its intellectual counterparts. While Westerners have long been interested in the philosophical and intellectual pursuits of yoga, hatha yoga did not exists as a common Western practice until the early 21st century. Prior to its acceptance in Western culture, hatha yoga practitioners, and therefore hatha yoga itself, existed as a backward and freakish practice in the Western imagination. This Western perception only shifted when yoga became conflated with Western conceptions of female beauty. With this consideration in mind, I move on to explore the Western imagination of yoga, both in its contemporary existence and continuous evolution.


Chapter 2: Authority, Identity, and Instagram: Making a Contemporary Yogic Image

Claiming Authority

Mark Stephen’s book entitled “Teaching Yoga: Essential Foundations and Techniques”, a comprehensive textbook for yoga teachers, introduces various lineages of yogic practice. Within its pages rests specific language pivotal to understanding the contemporary Western conception of yoga. In describing how to become a teacher for various types of yoga, Stephens writes the following:

“To teach Ashtanga Vinyasa with authorization, one is required to study for several years directly with Jois’s grandson Sharath Rangaswami in Mysore, India, and with one of his small cadre of authorized teachers.”\(^{52}\)

“To gain certification as a teacher required many more years of in-depth study through an authorized Iyengar institute or senior certified instructor.”\(^{53}\)

“You will gain certification to teach one of the most popular styles of Hatha yoga…”\(^{54}\)

Each of these quotes describes a way in which one gains the authority to teach. In this traditional sense, teaching yoga is a privilege rather than a right; a practice that one must dedicate their entire life to. The gurus and teachers mentioned in the previous chapters dedicated at least a full year entirely focused around studying yoga before they were able to teach. Furthermore, the ability to teach was most often the choice of the teacher, rather than the student. When a student’s guru saw that they had both the dedication and the ability to teach they were given authorization.

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\(^{52}\) Stephens, Teaching Yoga, [Page 31].
\(^{53}\) Ibid., [Page 36-37].
\(^{54}\) Ibid., [Page 32].
In the contemporary West individuals who wish to study and teach yoga have multiple options. One can still take a traditional route: travel to Mysore, India and study with Sharath for a number of years, or go to the Iyengar institute in Pune and do the same. However, in contemporary Western society not everyone wishing to practice or teach yoga feels the need or want to undergo such intensive study. Western society’s need for instant gratification has given way to a new form of yoga certification: the 200-hour training course. These courses range from yearlong trainings to two-week intensives. Essentially, these programs aim to give students all the tools they need to become yoga teachers upon graduation. This includes studying texts such as *Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras* and *The Bhagavad Gita,*\(^55\) studying human anatomy and proper alignment during yoga asanas as well as sequencing yoga classes; and finally studying meditation and mindfulness practices. Due to Western presumptions that the yoga teacher functions as both fitness coach and therapist, training courses must cover a wide range of skill sets.

The course is typically taught by RYT’s at RYS’s, i.e. Registered Yoga Teachers at Registered Yoga Schools. The title of ‘registered’ refers to these teachers and schools belonging to the Yoga Alliance\(^56\). As the Yoga Alliance explains,

“A Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT®) is a credential earned by yoga teachers whose training and teaching experience meet Yoga Alliance Registry Standards. A RYT must complete training with a Registered Yoga School (RYS®), be confirmed by RYS and keep current with Continuing Education and their annual fees.”\(^57\)


\(^{57}\) Yoga Alliance, "For Teachers," Yoga Alliance.
Annual fees only apply to those who decide to take their 200-hour certification and register with the Yoga Alliance.

These courses, while efficient and profitable, can be insufficient training for teachers who are now able to gain the title of “certified” with as little as two weeks of study. Even courses which span an entire year can fail to prepare a teacher in the same way years of intensive study would. However, in the contemporary Western world yoga has become a commodified entity and becoming a yoga teacher is a right instead of a privilege. Studios such as Yoga to the People, a non-for-profit yoga studio based in New York City, rely on funding from yoga teacher trainings in order to keep doors open. 58 Their near $3000 courses happen once every two months, turning out hundreds of new yoga teachers each year. Each is a conscious choice and a legitimate transaction. Consumers offer money in return for certification or authorization to teach. Where there used to be serious time spent with a teacher, determining in fact if one could teach let alone practice, there now rests a check.

So in this world where hundreds, if not thousands, of yoga teachers exist and continue to be created, which get their voices heard? Who does the authority to teach belong to? Who is the modern guru? As Western accessibility to technology and media expands, accessibility to yoga is changing as well. Smart phones and computers now act as mediators between yoga practitioners and teachers through online platforms which promote yoga education. Suddenly, with the creation of social media sites and growing access to the Internet, people do not have to go to a yoga studio in order to learn from a guru or teacher. As access to social networks expands, access to yoga does as well. In the following chapter I explore the social networking app called Instagram. I explore the multiple functionalities of Instagram as they fall pertinent to the contem-

porary Western imagination of yoga, particularly in relationship to the authority Instagram allows its users.

**Defining Instagram**

The term “social media” suffices to describe a developing form of media that allows its users to both consume its content and participate in its creation. Since the onset of the 21st century, social media has developed into a form of media the effects of which have not been seen since the creation of the printing press. In allowing its users to take part in the production of media, social media platforms have changed and continue to shift societies identities and help to further globalization. Within the Western society, various forms of social media act as a gratification for capitalist notions of immediacy. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram each function as a means of communicating what is happening in the present moment.⁵⁹ In this sense, social media allows for continuous evolution and construction of identities, ideas, and communities.

In examining the evolution of Western yogic image, Instagram more than any other social media site has proven a colossal force. In order to better understand Instagram let us first look at two other popular social media platforms. Twitter is a social media site that focus solely on text, allowing each user 140 characters with which to generate textual content. This platform allows users to post and communicate both on the mobile phone and computer, and its short textual based information allows for quick and simple access to information. The Facebook platform acts as more of a cumulative space for multiple types of media including user-created content.

such as images and text as well as outside media. Facebook also offers itself as a mobile phone application or a website.

Unlike its counterparts, Instagram’s platform focuses distinctly on the relationship between image and text. Users post their own images and captions and are in turn able to communicate and respond to other users based upon those images and captions. Also unlike other platforms, Instagram functions solely as a mobile phone application. While it’s website does allow users to view their profile and comment on other users posts, it does not allow a user to create content from the computer. By only allowing content to be created with the mobile smartphone device, Instagram situates itself in a device whose sole purpose is communication and immediacy.

Following the applications launch in 2010, the platform gained 1 million users just in its first two months. Seven years later, over 500 million people use the site and have active accounts, making Instagram one of the world’s most popular forms of social media. As an entity, Instagram functions as a platform for a multitude of social interactions, including a place for companies to market themselves, a place to keep in touch with family and friends, even a place to stay informed about current events. Considering these multiple functionalities, Instagram has come to exist as a space for the yogic image in unique ways that involve the creation of identity and celebrity.

**Constructing Identity: The Personal Instagram Account and Celebritization**

Instagram accounts span from individual persons using Instagram as a means of documentation and communication to corporations and business using the platform to advertise. In

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this paper, we will focus on the personal Instagram account in which an individual user posts images as a means of constructing identity. The Instagram account for the individual user acts as a platform where one can consciously display themselves in a specific way, whether it is to family and friends or the general public. In this way the personal Instagram account acts as a presentation of a user’s chosen representation primarily through the use of image.

This emphasis and centralization around the image is highly specific to Instagram. Particularly, the *photographic* image made possible through smartphones. Karen Strassler writes,

“As photography becomes more widespread as both a personal and a public form of representational practice, images become increasingly central to the ways individuals and collectivities imagine and recognize themselves. In training people to see in particular ways, and in working to entwine personal experiences with larger historical trajectories, photographic practices bind people to broader collectivities and social imaginaries.”

Images, specifically photographic images, have largely contributed to the way in which people imagine themselves, their societies, and the world itself. In contemporary Western society the creation and accessibility to the smartphone has made photography both simple and commonplace. Due to this growing accessibility, the photographic image is becoming integral to the way in which people conceptualize themselves and the world around them. Instagram’s intrinsic implication of image in the construction of identity mirrors Strassler’s conception of photography as a representational practice. In giving the user the agency to decide which images will represent them, users become active participants in the construction of their identity both realistically and psychologically.

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Since Instagram’s launch and eventual rise to popularity, the app has become a platform for celebrity creation. Various accounts have utilized their constructed identities as a means of garnering large follower bases and gaining the status of ‘Instagram celebrity’. While the term ‘fan’ may have been an appropriate term prior to social media, the term ‘follower’ now sufficiently takes its place. The number of followers any given account has determines the popularity of both the account and its user. Just as consumers of cinema would connect and identify with celebrity actors, followers on Instagram are now experiencing similar affinities to Instagram celebrities. However, unlike celebrity actors whose identities may be predetermined by a screenplay or handler, Instagram celebrities are able to construct their own identity and write their own story.

In this way, Instagram affords voices and identities that are unknown and unheard of in mainstream media the opportunity to gain public exposure. People are able to gain traction and large followings without having to be promoted in a magazine, newspaper or TV program. Due to its inherently public and accessible environment, Instagram allows the general public to choose whom to follow and, in turn, which accounts will become ‘famous’. Most publicly created celebrities began their accounts to share their personal life and interests, eventually giving rise to a specific trade or craft including make up artists, poets, and visual artists. Others simply gained fame and notoriety for depicting their life in general.

These accounts and the identities they construct amass followings of thousands of people and launch some into wealth and fame far beyond the screen of a smart phone. I return to Instagram’s implications in the commodification of yoga in the West in the third chapter, but cite in this chapter the ways in which Instagram allows for commodification through its connection to identity. Through the medium of images and captions, the personal Instagram account grants us-
ers a place in which to represent themselves. Instagram, as a globalized form of interaction and communication, has allowed for the celebritization of people who had neither the means nor the platform to have their voice heard, and as we will see, the commodification of identity.

**The Yogic Image on Instagram**

With the creation of Instagram came the creation of a specific genre of Instagram account surrounding the practice of postural yoga. This genre consisted, at first, of yoga practitioners who used their personal Instagram accounts to post pictures of themselves in yoga postures. These individuals ranged from professional yoga teachers to people just beginning to practice yoga located all over the world. The initial reason for posting these pictures, for many users, was simply to track their postural practice visually. In taking photos and videos of themselves practicing yoga, individuals could visually identify the shift that occurred in their body over time due to yogic postural practice. In this sense, Instagram and the images people shared provided visual evidence of yoga and its effects on the body. Visual documentation of yoga postures was not new to the world of yoga. What was new, however, was the documentation of an individual's yoga journey, that is, the transformation of the physical body from one state to another, whether that is from weak to strong, or inflexible to flexible. With this new form of documentation, seeing was literally believing.

In addition to personal and individual reflections upon image, Instagram offered yoga practitioners a space for feedback and interaction: a community. Individuals who were newer to the practice could comment on more physically advanced user’s photographs and ask for tips about how to practice certain postures within the comment section of an Instagram post. Due to its interactive nature, Instagram gave birth to a community that fostered yoga education through imagery. Certain personal accounts of yoga practitioners on postural journeys garnered massive
followings specifically because of their physical image and how their posture practice informed and taught other users hoping to achieve similar poses. Due to their mass followings many popular accounts were made, willing or unwilling, into yoga teachers.

This phenomenon of the personal yoga Instagram has allowed for the creation of multiple yoga celebrity accounts, each with at least 100,000 followers or more. This genre of the yoga Instagram, specifically accounts that have gained large followings, have similar formats. While each still focus in some way on tracking their physical posture practice, the celebrity yoga Instagram focuses much more intently on yoga as a lifestyle. In depicting the physical practice of yoga in conversation with personal reflections on their own life that they share in comments, the personal yoga Instagram has become a type of autobiography. In this way, the personal yoga Instagram has allowed the Western imagination of yoga to expand beyond the limitations of the body. These Instagram yoga celebrities share well-crafted stories of personhood along with each distinct image they post. Compiled together, these images construct unique identities that inform, accommodate, and reject contemporary Western imaginations surrounding yoga.

The Instagram accounts of yoga practitioners who have gained some amount of fame and notoriety each follow similar patterns in the creation of their own identities. The most notable aspect of the celebrity yoga Instagram account is the female-bodied individual. While many male-bodied yoga practitioners have Instagram accounts, some of which are very successful, none match the fame of their female-bodied counterparts. The second aspect of the successful yoga Instagram is the visual image of the yoga practitioner, that is the literal image of the user in a yoga posture. Without featuring asana, an Instagram account would not be linked in any way to yoga. This connection between asana and yoga that was so deeply instilled in the Western imaginations of what defines yoga plays itself out very clearly on Instagram.
The third and most definitive aspect of almost all celebrity yoga Instagram’s is their attachment to self-proclaimed honesty. This theme of honesty is depicted through users sharing details pertaining to their personal lives, political situations, and place in the yoga community. Users employ multiple forms of this honesty, including posting images of them and their significant other, their children, their naked body, and even images of them having contractions. Showing an ‘unfiltered life’ is a central theme in these famous Instagram accounts. While many images are utilized to depict honesty, most personal information plays out in the caption of an Instagram post.

Text, in conversation with the image, plays a major role in the creation of the successful personal yoga account particularly in relation to the user’s attachment to honesty. Many famous yoga accounts are using their captions to break what they view as the ‘traditional mold’ of many social media platforms. This ‘mold’ refers to the Instagram users, mainly women, whose accounts reflect socially acceptable beauty standards and construct an identity of perfection. Many yoga accounts critique these mainstream Instagram identities, claiming that they are both superficial and falsely representative of reality. In turn, yoga Instagram accounts claim that these identities have negative effects on those who feel the need to conform to the more unrealistic standards of perfection and beauty represented by mainstream content. Social media has not only given people a way to represent themselves but to perceive others; the yoga Instagram accounts’ critique is aimed at this functionality of Instagram that allows consumers to imagine that others lives are somehow better than theirs.

In attempting to break this ‘mold’ of social media, personal yoga accounts are taking to the caption section with fervor. In these caption sections, Instagram yoga account users share personal stories of mental health struggles, relationship issues, and dealing with death, as a
means of showing their audience that life is not always ‘perfect’. For many of these users, their Instagram accounts have become akin to a personal diary, exploring emotions and life’s struggles in a very outright way.

The peculiar and unique phenomenon that is the personal Instagram account of the yoga practitioner is in no way unique. Dozens of these accounts have amassed large followings, all with upwards of 10,000 followers, each with this quality of openness, about life and about themselves. In this way, the personal Instagram accounts of these yoga practitioners are able to tell stories of personhood far more complicated than what can be depicted in a single photo. In order to grasp this phenomenon of the yoga Instagram, I will survey two specific Instagram users, Rachel Brathen and Jessamyn Stanley. Each of these women have created Instagram accounts that construct unique identities in relation to yoga through both image and text. These identities, constructed within the genre of the yoga Instagram, have garnered massive followings and made both Brathen and Stanley celebrities in their own right.

@yoga_girl62

Picture this: White sands, sunshine, and water. The kind that of water that is clear up close but from afar is all different shades of blue. Then there are some flamingoes, bright pink, and maybe some rocks that line the coast. To complete the picture: a woman. A very blonde, very beautiful woman. A very blonde, beautiful woman standing upside down, on her hands, on a paddleboard, in the middle of that water. She is smiling effortlessly, balancing on her hands in the middle of the ocean. Her name is Rachel, and this image will be seen by upwards of two million people. Brathen’s success on Instagram is unparalleled. Arguably the most famous Insta-

gram yoga personality today, her Instagram has been and continues to be a platform from which she shares very intimate details about her life with a community of millions of strangers. Her Instagram tells the story of picturesque island life. She lives in Aruba with her husband, new baby daughter, a few dogs, and two goats. Brathen’s images and captions are exhaustive and expansive, ranging from pictures of yoga postures to food, animals, best friends, and travels back and forth to her homeland, Sweden. Brathen’s life, as pictured on Instagram, is objectively charmed: a constant vacation filled with laughter and sunshine.

We should begin at the beginning, over 6,016 photos ago with a picture of a grapefruit, papaya, and a green drink posted on February 6th, 2012. From the very onset of her account, Brathen’s photos display an island vacation. Her first yoga posture pictured on Instagram captures what becomes, without a doubt, her most iconic image: the handstand. Brathen’s Instagram will go on to feature hundreds of handstand photos after this one, most of them surrounded by the sand of an Aruban beach. In images where she performs intense yoga postures she is often smiling, giving the impression that these postures place little to no strain on her body. They are simple, easy, and fun. In addition to her endless stream of yoga postures on the beach, Brathen often posts photos of herself practicing SUP (standup paddle board) yoga. This is a form of yoga in which a paddleboard, a larger version of a surfboard, takes the place of a yoga mat, and water the place of a floor. SUP yoga, as it is now known, has become popularized over the last few years in large part due to Brathen. As her following grew, so did the rise in popularity of SUP yoga.

A sentiment of happiness and a true lack of anxiety emanate throughout Brathen’s images. A quality of joy can be seen in nearly every image she posts. Along with images of herself doing yoga, Brathen’s Instagram features many images that depict her day-to-day life on the
Island. There are multiple photos of her various animals including her dog Ringo, and her goat Penny. She often will share photos of her and her best friend Olivia either on the beach or in the ocean. Brathen’s personal relationships make up an extremely large part of her Instagram and extend her aesthetic biography beyond an image of yoga that is located within the body to one that is located within relationships.

The largest relationship Brathen depicts on her Instagram is that of her and her husband, Dennis. Brathen’s Instagram has featured photos of the couple since 2012, when the two were just dating, all the way through their marriage in 2014. The couple's most recent milestone is the birth of their first daughter. Photos of Brathen and her pregnancy have overwhelmed most of her feed over the course of the past year. After her due date passed with no sign of her baby being born, Brathen shared posts and Instagram stories nearly everyday, updating her followers on the status of the baby's birth.\(^{63}\) She would reference that her followers had expressed concern in regard to her overdue baby, and reassure them not to worry, that overdue babies were perfectly normal. Finally, two weeks past her due date on March 12th, Brathen began posting Instagram stories of her contractions that began in the early morning. Brathen’s baby girl, named Lea Luna, was born on March 13th.

**Brathen’s Caption**

Brathen is quoted in an interview with Outside Magazine saying she, “credits her inspirational captions for her success. “I focus a lot on what I write,” she says.”\(^{64}\) Although many

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\(^{63}\) Instagram stories allow users to post content that will disappear within 24 hours. They do not qualify as actual Instagram posts that are archived within the account’s page, but can be viewed by followers within 24 hours following its initial upload.

posts are accompanied by a quick one-liner about food or an inspirational quote, a majority of her photos come with large quantities of text. These collections of words explore a wealth of issues including, but not limited to, political conversations, information about one of her organizations, explorations of emotion, and personal traumas. She writes often on the very sudden death of her best friend a few years ago to a car crash in captions such as these:

“Three years ago on this day I was lying in a hospital bed, convulsing with pain. You were in a hospital in another country, fighting for your life...We went into the hospital at the same time. We both had stomach surgery. I woke up the next morning. You didn’t.”

These stories of personal loss and emotional struggle are rampant throughout Brøthen’s account. In July of 2015, a caption opens with the words “My name is Rachel and I am not ok.” Brøthen goes on to write about how her mother attempted suicide earlier that year for the second time in Brøthen’s life.

“She abandoned me and it’s not the first time and now our family is in a million pieces. I’m five years old again but this time… It’s not suicide letters neatly left in sealed envelopes, one for me, one for my brother…it’s a message through What’s App and she is telling me to take care of my sisters and my brother and she’s so sorry she didn’t make it. It’s still vodka and enough pills to ensure a certain death.”

Caption after caption, Brøthen makes a very concerted effort to be open and honest about very personal details of her life through social media. Sociologist Sherry Turkle has investigated human’s relationship to technology throughout its evolution over the past two decades. She writes

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65 Brøthen, "yoga_girl," Instagram,[March 10, 2017].
that, “...technology makes it easy to express emotions while they are being formed. It supports an emotional style in which feelings are not fully experienced until they are communicated”\(^67\). In the case of Brathen and her Instagram, this relationship can be seen very clearly. Her emotions, while maybe at first shared in the interest of being open and honest, have developed into full-blown diary entries. Each time a tragedy has struck in Brathen’s life, a new post has followed without fail, even when these incidents have to do with social media and her use of it. In one post she expresses her frustration with the virtual world that has given her such fame, writing:

“I have dedicated my influence to making this world a better place. I run a global non-profit, an animal rescue and a platform for healing. Everything I’ve ever promoted has gone to better the world because I feel so strongly that using this influence for anything else would be plain ridiculous…. I share our efforts to help the children affected by the Ecuador earthquake and get less than 25% of the likes I get if I share a bikini picture. What is wrong with this world??”\(^68\)

Not immune to the harshness that the world of social media can create, this post is one of many in which Brathen explores questions of her own identity on Instagram. She does not appear blind to the appeal of a bikini clad blonde woman on the beach, and perhaps would not shy away from the fact that many of her followers could indeed be following her for just that appeal. Despite that, Brathen continually focuses on being entirely honest and deeply personal in these captions. One of the most extreme cases of Brathen’s sharing on Instagram despite it being the cause of her concern happened this past January. She posts a photo of a beach sunset with the caption,

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\(^{67}\) Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), [Page 175].

\(^{68}\) Brathen, "yoga_girl," Instagram, [July 1, 2016].
“I'm hereby kindly asking everyone to respect my privacy and to please, please, please: STOP COMING TO MY PRIVATE HOME... I've been through some very weird stuff with this social media circus including getting people's hair sent to me in the mail, receiving love letters from clearly unstable people, threats coming in against Dennis, people grabbing me in the street and we've even had people fly to the island, spend days trying to locate us and then open our front door and walk all the way into our kitchen without even knocking.”

Despite what appears to be a very traumatizing experience, Brathen finishes this post by telling her fans to come by her yoga studio, that it is there for that purpose. Brathen wavers between these dissonant tones often in her Instagram captions, asking for privacy while publicly offering herself up for examination.

Brathen’s presence on Instagram is, like her following, unparalleled. While other yoga celebrities open up about their personal life, none do so to Brathen’s extent. Many of Brathen’s most personal and intimate life details are documented and spoken about on Instagram much like a personal diary. In sharing her own emotions, Brathen offers up an expression of solidarity to her followers. Her honesty about personal struggles with identity, emotions, and personal relationships in her captions act as a way to connect with her followers, perhaps in an attempt to let them know that they are not alone. In totality, Brathen’s Instagram shares the identity of a white yoga teacher: slender, beautiful, and surrounded by attractive people who live life as a vacation on the shores of a tropical island.

69 Brathen, "yoga_girl," Instagram, [January 4, 2017].
Brathen’s first Instagram Image
Brathen, "yoga_girl," Instagram, [February 6, 2012].

Brathen’s first yoga posture on Instagram
Brathen, "yoga_girl," Instagram, [February 12, 2012].

Brathen and her husband Dennis’s on their wedding day
Brathen, "yoga_girl," Instagram, [June 26, 2016].
Brathen and her pet goat Penny
Brathen, "yoga girl," Instagram,[February 19, 2016].

Brathen on a SUP board with her dog, Ringo, and goat, Penny
Brathen, "yoga girl," Instagram,[April 11, 2016].

Brathen in labor with husband
Brathen, "yoga girl," Instagram,[March 19, 2017].

Lea Luna, Rachel’s daughter
Brathen, "yoga girl," Instagram,[April 10, 2017].
Let’s travel north from the island of Aruba, up the coast of North America to the town of Durham, North Carolina. Here we find, instead of a beach, an apartment room. A blank white wall and simple wooden floor with a yoga mat rolled out. Light floods in through what must be a window, to the right of the mat. There is a woman here, too. A beautiful woman. This time the woman is black, and not quite as thin. She, too, is upside down. 27 year old Jessamyn Stanley, like her celebrity yoga counterparts, has become a world renown yoga teacher and writer over the past few years, mainly due to her Instagram following. Based in Durham, North Carolina, Stanley’s Instagram presence represents a wildly different story from other yoga celebrities. She trades in classical beach handstand photos for her mat, her apartment, and most importantly: her body. As a self-proclaimed fat-femme and black woman, Jessamyn represents a world of yoga quite counter to the Western yogic image of the thin, heterosexual, white, and female practitioner. Her Instagram has gained upwards of 200,000 followers since she began to document her yoga practice in 2013.

I take a moment here to offer a note of descriptors. As Stanley illuminates herself in multiple instances, “fat” is a descriptor, not a bad word. Just as the word ‘black” is a descriptor of race, not an inappropriate word to go unused or whispered. When these words are not used as a society, the society further perpetuates the idea that these words, these identities, are innately wrong. In this sense my use of the terms fat and black are very intentional and very needed in speaking on such topics. I view it as the Western academics responsibility, namely my own responsibility as a thin white author, to use such vernacular in an academic paper as a means of normalizing what was never ‘other’ to begin with.

While Stanley’s account follows the same format of other successful yoga Instagram’s, her image and message are falling counter to many of her celebrity equivalents. The simple fact is that Stanley’s Instagram does not look the same as other accounts. As a black woman, and a fat woman, Stanley’s physical visuality alone is countering the contemporary Western imagination of who practices yoga. The message Stanley aims to share through her Instagram page is that yoga belongs to anyone willing to practice it. In breaking racial, physical, and heteronormative stereotypes associated with yoga, Stanley's Instagram is acting as a loudspeaker for the voices of those in the yoga community who have not previously been heard. Her Instagram and her story are, I would argue, challenging and perhaps shifting Western conceptions of yoga.

Stanley’s Instagram begins in April of 2012 with a photo of a sign at the laundromat. Much like Brathen, yoga poses were nowhere to be found in her earliest stream of photos. This changed a little over a year later on July 19th, 2013, when Stanley posted a photo of herself in bow pose. From that point on, asana photos become regular and exhaustive for Stanley. While Instagram accounts such as Brathen’s depict her personal life through image, Stanley’s aesthetic biography is more private in that regard. People other than her are rarely ever pictured on her Instagram. Nearly every image, especially those shared towards the onset of Stanley’s account, features her in a yoga posture. Each of the poses are pictured in her own home, sometimes not even on a mat. She paints the picture of a home yoga practice. There is no beach, no sunset, and no image of island life. Instead of a vacation, Stanley’s account depicts home and hard work. Image after image she goes on posting various yoga postures, often posting the same posture for weeks at a time. With this exhaustive depiction of the same postures, her Instagram account illustrates a clear visual progression of her asana practice. The untrained eye can easily see how Stanley's
body goes from weak to strong, inflexible to flexible. Her Instagram displays a true dedication to *asana* and the development of *asana* that other similar Instagram accounts simply do not feature.

Along with this dedication, however, Stanley depicts a clear essence of joy. Constantly smiling, Stanley’s images depict that same effortless nature Brathen’s do, only this time with a wall behind her instead of a sunset. There are always bright colors in Stanley’s photos. From hot pink mats to bright yellow leggings and turquoise tops, the vibrant nature of her images continuously evokes a feeling of happiness. However the most important aspect of Stanley’s Instagram account, and the real reason for her celebrity status, is the quality of pleasure her images portray in relationship to her body. In most of her *asana* photos she is wearing a sports bra and underwear, and multiple selfies picture her in underwear and tight clothing. The story her Instagram tells with these images is simple: joy in and with the body. The genre of Instagram accounts regarding yoga feature multiple thin white women, like Brathen, in bikinis and leggings. Stanley is doing the *same exact thing*, but because of the body she has and the societal expectations placed upon that body, her joy is being received as a revolutionary reaction to those limitations. With her Instagram photos, Stanley visually depicts to the consumers of her image that it is the *stigma* surrounding fat bodies and black bodies that is wrong, rather than the bodies themselves.

**Stanley’s Caption**

Stanley’s Instagram captions function similarly to Brathen’s in that they tell much more than her images. However, Stanley takes a much more private approach when it comes to speaking openly about her personal life. On March 31st of 2016 she captioned a photo writing,

“In the week since I’ve returned home… much of my personal life has been turned upside down. Don’t worry, I’m not going into more detail than that, but
this week has really brought into technicolor just how much my loved ones mean to me.”

Throughout the majority of her Instagram captions, that is as personal as she will get.

She will reference her partner a few times, often in Instagram stories that will disappear after a short time. Even then, she will only refer to them as “bae”. In one post from February of 2016 she posts a caption of her doing a headstand on a beach and writes, “Because my heart is so full it could literally burst. Because my lover was napping in the shadow of my GoPro while I decided spontaneously have the world’s best hip opening beach #yoga practice.”

It is these small pieces of information with which a follower can construct some idea of what Stanley's personal life may look like although explicit details are never shared. Without the sharing of personal information, however, Stanley is still able to share her emotional struggles, especially in regard to her status as a fat yoga teacher in the contemporary yoga world. She writes on September 21st, 2016:

“I almost cried during my interview with @selfmagazine when they asked about my experiences with self hate- honestly, it’s bizarre to me that I’m perceived as such a confident person when I spent such a huge chunk of my life buried under truly toxic body shame.”

Body image and its ramifications on Instagram do not just give Stanley leeway in talking about her own experiences but also allow her to speak on social issues and her own issues with the social media community. On March 22, 2015 she wrote about her experience being extremely emotional after a yoga class. She writes,

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71 Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram,[March 16, 2016].
72 Ibid.,[February 12, 2016].
“I know this topic is probably a little dark for the ‘bright and happy’ world of Instagram yoga, but I’m glad. It’s completely ridiculous for yoga practitioners to hold themselves to ridiculous standards of happiness and beauty. No one’s life is really like that, and I think pretending otherwise is inauthentic. In my opinion, it belittles the true reasons we all continue to practice.”73

Stanley continuously critiques the world of social media yoga in terms of its body image standards and lack of focus upon true yogic practice. In another post she writes, “All of the trappings of social media create some serious ethical and moral questions for 21st century (yoga) teachers…”74 This critical view of contemporary yoga is constant and unwavering in Stanley's caption, as well as a critique of Western society itself. She writes in a post shared last December of 2016, “What is happening in Aleppo right now is a far cry from the daily experience of the average American. Btw, if you’re not familiar with the real life nightmare being lived by sooooo many Syrians right now...do a quick google search.”75 Stanley exhibits this awareness and critical analysis surrounding social issues and Western, specifically American, reactions to those issues in many of her Instagram captions.

Along with her comments on social issues, Stanley’s captions exhibit a use of colloquial terms very specific to the millennial generation. This language includes words such as ‘cis gendered’, ‘trigger warning’, and ‘femme’. As vernacular terms they are rather new and contemporary in general usage. Take for example this introduction to a caption where she writes, “TRIGGER WARNING: SELF MUTILATION, DEPRESSION.”76 She goes on to write about her experience with depression in relation to her body. This type of language is highly unique to the

74 Ibid., [June 7th, 2016].
75 Ibid., [December 14, 2016].
76 Ibid., [April 1, 2015].
yoga Instagram account and Stanley is the only user, in my research, who exhibits a usage of these terms on a regular basis.

The final ingredient of Stanley’s Instagram caption is the constant recurrence of yoga practice itself. She writes,

“A funny thing happens when you practice the same asana repeatedly- you see & feel tiny yet cataclysmic shifts in your being. That’s why I often post the same poses over and over again- repetition is powerful fucking medicine & it’s my therapy of choice.”

This referral to yoga practice is surprisingly unique compared to other celebrity Instagram accounts, namely Brathen’s, which feature little to no talk about yoga asana or yoga practice whatsoever.

Stanley’s Instagram account breaks the mold of social media in it’s own distinct way. With regard to physical image, Stanley’s body alone is setting a new precedent for what a yoga teacher and yoga practitioner ‘looks like’ in that it is not white or thin. Stanley's captions are also breaking the mold of how many Instagram yoga celebrities use their platforms: choosing to talk often about minority rights and social issues, all while using vernacular language very specific to “p.c.” culture. In terms of Western imaginations of yoga, Stanley is revolutionizing not only what a yoga practitioner looks like physically, but also how a yoga practitioner interacts with the society that surrounds them. Her Instagram account constructs an identity in which social justice, body positivity, and yoga exist as one.

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77 Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram, [July 26th, 2015].
Stanley’s first Image
Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram. [April 5, 2012]

Stanley’s first Yoga Posture
Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram. [July 19, 2013]

Stanley in Dancers Pose
Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram. August 12, 2014

Stanley for the Adiposity Project
Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram. [April 1, 2015].
Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram, [October 18, 2016].

Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram, [December 7, 2016].

Stanley at a book release
Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram, [April 5, 2017].
Authority and Instagram

In speaking on her experiences within the context of Instagram Stanley stated,

“I was not interested in teaching at all and I had been logging my practice on Instagram for quite some time...I had had so many people from all over the world (say) … ‘teach me teach me’ and...I would recommend other teachers ...because I did not understand why I needed to teach.”

Stanley’s words make evident the fact that the followers she garnered on Instagram had not simply found a yoga teacher to follow on Instagram but rather they created one. Prior to social media, the mass media had been tasked with the decision of whose stories were worth telling and sharing with the public. In a reflection on media Lisa Nakamura states, “Women and people of color have not been well served by the mass media, which has thrived on the circulation of racist and sexist ideologies as a means of marketing commodities.” What happens then, when millions of stories are being told simultaneously on a platform such as Instagram? Do those same rules of mass media pertaining to race and gender still apply? Whose stories are deemed most important?

On Instagram, which has upwards of 600 million users, each profile is constantly sharing its own story and constructing its own identity. Telling one’s own life story through image and caption is now accessible to anyone with a camera phone. It is therefore no longer a question of whose story gets to be told, but rather whose story gets to be heard; a decision that no longer

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rests in the hands of the mass media but in the public. On platforms such as Instagram, the popularity of a person’s profile is the product of invisible social decision-making. The concept of whose story gets heard is becoming a social decision instead of a hierarchical declaration. The elusive “followers” and invisible faces that swipe and tap their phone screens and scroll endlessly through Instagram pages have become the inventors of celebrities and the promotors of their identities. Instead of being told which figures major media corporations deem most important, the public is now able to decide for themselves.

As the creation of celebrities increasingly falls in the hands of the public in spaces such as Instagram, the voices that are chosen as celebrities become reflections of that public. The Pew Research Center shared in February of 2016 that “Smartphones are more common in Europe, U.S., less so in developing countries.” This research suggests that Instagram users and the public that it serves rests mainly in the hands of countries with developed economies and Western sensibilities. When faced with the question of whether Instagram is truly allowing unheard voices to be heard, the public that chooses those voices must be considered. In observing the two Instagram celebrities above, Brathen, the skinny white yoga teacher on the shores of Aruba, has garnered over 2 million followers while Stanley, a fat-femme black woman from North Carolina, has fewer than 300,000. Instagram and its public are therefore reflecting contemporary Western notions of beauty through the identities they choose to popularize. While minority voices such as Stanley’s are being given a platform on Instagram, discrepancies between her following and the following of celebrity counterparts must be considered.

In addition to its reflection of societal imaginations, the public of Instagram also exhibits what is required of Instagram celebrities in their claim to authority. In the case of both Brathen and Stanley, each began their Instagram accounts without yoga teaching certifications and, in Stanley’s case, without even the urge to teach yoga. In this case, both Brathen and Stanley’s initial claims to authority surround their physical image. Through visually proving their physical ability to do certain yoga postures, they gain the authority to teach and to be heard. The quality of seeing as believing so inherent to the Western imaginations of yoga is integral to the choice of which yoga personalities rise to fame on Instagram. In addition to this visual proof of authority, the role of biography and the life story is key in its functional accessibility. In speaking openly about trauma, emotions, body image, relationships, and social issues, these women are connecting to their followers in a way other celebrities cannot. Their honesty and transparency of being gives them both the authority to teach and the authority to be heard.

Instagram exists as a space where Western imaginations surrounding yoga are being constantly negotiated. Its expansive community is giving way to new forms of social decision-making that allows broader access to voices which go unheard in mainstream media. Despite its tendency toward Western imaginations due to its varied accessibility, Instagram allows for the contemporary existence of yoga to be negotiated through various bodies, voices, and stories. In this way, Instagram allows for the witnessing of societal shifts surrounding the practice of yoga, which unfolds each second, with each new post and like and follow, and have probably changed even as you read this sentence.
Chapter 3: Biography, Yoga, and Capitalism: Commodifying Identity

“Biography, and the comparison of biographies, is a vicarious means of sustaining encounters with oneself. As the scholar presses deeper and deeper in search of the facts and feelings of a life, a vicarious adventure into self-exploration beckons. In the proper sense of it, biography- researched and written, or just simply read- can help us live, and to live more fully.”

The story of a life, as history tells us, is integral to the creation and continuation of yogic practice. In an attempt to understand where the teachings of yoga originate, biographers have continuously gathered the life stories of gurus and teachers from whom yogic practice is born. With these biographies come both a contextualization of the practices as well as a lesson on how one might go about living a similar life. Whether about an Indian guru or a Hollywood celebrity, the medium of biography allows its consumers a lens for exploring the self.

The commodification of yoga in Western society has rapidly expanded over the course of the past three decades. In a 2016 study conducted by the Yoga Alliance and Yoga Journal it is estimated that yoga represents a near 16 billion dollar industry in the United States alone. Yoga as commodity allows for and indeed requires ‘yoga’ to encompass more than just a physical exercise. Since the 1990’s the yoga industry has surpassed the confines of the yoga studio, becoming less of a product to be sold and more of an identity to be consumed. Andrea Jain writes, “Today, consumption depends on whether or not products and services are linked to consumer desires - according to Jean Baudrillard, consumers construct a desired self-identity by consuming

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Therefore in the making and selling of yoga related products, self-identity and the construction of identity have become defining factors in the publics’ decision of which products to consume.

The connection between yoga, self-identity, and commodification can be observed in no better place than the yogic autobiography. In using the term ‘yogic autobiography’ I refer to an emerging genre of writing that has developed over the past decade alongside Instagram. The yogic autobiography allows for a single book to encompass multiple literary genres including memoir, self-help, health and wellness, spirituality, fitness how-to, and even cook book. Dissonant from the principles of Instagram, yogic autobiographies require a publishable voice. Some authors are more established yoga teachers such as Kathryn Budig, who recently published her book *Aim True*[^84], and former supermodel turned yoga teacher Colleen Saidman Yee, who published her book *Yoga For Life*[^85] in June of 2015. Other authors include both women mentioned in chapter 2, Jessamyn Stanley and Rachel Brathen, whose careers as yoga teachers began only recently as a result of Instagram.

Much like yoga Instagram accounts, yogic autobiographies follow similar patterns and themes within the context of yoga. Each feature a jumble of the trials and tribulations of the author's own life along with yoga postures and sequences aimed at supporting certain emotions or garnering certain energies. In telling their own life story and sharing personal encounters with life’s less exciting visitors such as body image issues and emotional trauma, the authors of yogic autobiography offer readers tools for living a better life. These ‘tools’ range from postural yoga

sequences to recipes for vegan meals and even self-care exercises, each of which become conflated with yoga practice. In this way, the yogic autobiography allows yoga to become an identity.

Throughout the following section I give a brief overview and comparison of two specific examples of yogic autobiography. Rachel Brathen’s *Yoga Girl* and Jessamyn Stanley’s *Every Body Yoga* act almost as a collection of the stories they tell on Instagram, each with their own distinct voice and story. In sharing their personal life stories, both Brathen and Stanley continue to shape Western imaginations of yoga and bolster the commodification of yoga by expanding its limitations beyond the mat.

**Yoga Girl by Rachel Brathen**

Rachel Brathen published her first book, *Yoga Girl*, in 2014. The half memoir, half self-help book launched itself to the *New York Times* Best Seller’s list within a matter of weeks. The American cover photo features Brathen in a bright purple tank top and hot pink leggings. She is barefoot, her toes painted a bright blue-ish green, and upside down in a handstand variation with her hands in the sand. Behind her, a bright turquoise sea with a wave crashing on the shore; an almost cloudless sky behind her. “Rachel Brathen” is in all caps at the top of the page. Beneath it, in a script font, reads *Yoga Girl*. Inside the front cover, there are no words. Instead: a collage of 24 images depicting Brathen on the beach, in yoga poses, with her husband, or simply photos of food.

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Before the table of contents she dedicates the book, writing, “For every single person who’s ever stepped on a yoga mat. And for those out there who haven’t...especially for you.”

The book is established from the onset as a lesson about yoga: what it is, who should practice, and how it’s done. Seven chapters and almost 200 pages long, Yoga Girl tells the story of Brathen’s life and the story of a yoga practice as one synonymous journey. The book is structured around these seven chapters, each one with its own theme indicated by the title of the chapter. Each of these sections include five different features of the book: image, text, recipes, yoga sequences, and sections entitled ‘loving insights’, which go over major themes from each chapter in one page of bullet points.

Throughout each chapter Brathen explores a particular theme in relation to her own life and her personal journey into yoga practice. She began her life in Sweden, where she was born and raised until the age of 19 when she left for Costa Rica. Her first few chapters discuss her early childhood and teenage years filled with loss, drug and alcohol abuse, and relative chaos that resulted in her mother sending her to a weeklong meditation retreat. She cites this moment as the onset of her interest in spirituality and yoga. Once in Costa Rica, she lived a quiet life on the beach, and began seriously practicing yoga. After waitressing and assisting the construction of an eco-resort, Brathen landed herself in Aruba on a vacation with her father. During this trip she met a man named Dennis at a surf shop, and promptly moved to the island and began a life with him. There was only a very small yoga community in Aruba when Brathen first moved there and she helped tend to the only small studio she could find. From there, Brathen began teaching small yoga classes in front of a local hotel, which eventually developed into a full time job after the hotel owner approached her. Brathen continued to complete a 200-hour teacher-training pro-

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89 Brathen, Yoga Girl.
gram after which she continued teaching at the hotel; both regular *vinyasa*-style classes and SUP (stand up paddle board) yoga classes on the water. All in the midst of her Instagram gaining the world’s attention.

The success of *Yoga Girl* in comparison with other yogic autobiographies is unparalleled. Brathen’s career and celebrity status were solidified with its publishing and subsequent reception. It’s pages compile various stories in both image and text which, when compiled, tell a unique story of yoga as a pathway to happiness, love, and adventure.

**Be Happy, Don’t Worry: Major Themes of *Yoga Girl***

The life Brathen tells her readers about, one so deeply rooted in the context of yoga, is a life centered upon the concept of happiness. She writes in her very first chapter, “Life is about finding happiness. Balance. Love. Yoga is a beautiful tool to help you find all those things you’ve been looking for…”\(^9\)

This happiness is ostensibly the goal of an entire life: a treasure to be discovered. In order to obtain this happiness, Brathen posits, one can use yoga. In writing on her first experiences with meditation Brathen states,

“As I peeled off the layers of who I had become and started finding out who I truly was, I realized I didn’t need any of those things. I didn’t need a single object or situation to be happy. Happiness came from me...I knew that if I kept meditating, if I kept enjoying life, life would take me to the places I needed to be.”\(^9\)

Brathen is not simply sharing personal experience but giving an instructional lesson. If one simply aims to enjoy their life, regardless of situation, happiness comes easily according to Brathen’s

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\(^9\) Brathen, *Yoga Girl*, [Page 10].
\(^9\) Ibid., [Page 51-52].
personal experience. The relationship between happiness, ease, and yoga is a recurring theme throughout Yoga Girl.

Tonally, Brathen speaks directly to her readers when offering advice and lessons on living a better life. Her language is deeply personal and allows the reader to feel as if Brathen is speaking to them personally. On the very last page, Brathen writes,

“Don’t judge your life as good or bad. Love what is. And know this—that bumpy road you’re on? I’m on it too. We all walk down the same path, and our destination is the same. You are not alone.”92

This pointed language reflects Brathen’s commitment to the value of honesty, both in her writing and perhaps in her own life. In revealing deeply personal information, she hopes to offer her readers confidence in their very own lives. This is a theme shared both on Brathen’s Instagram page and within the pages of her book. Perhaps Brathen’s apparent esteem for honesty comes from its ability to counter her image. Through sharing the harsh realities of her life, Brathen’s picture-perfect images of happiness fall somewhat counter as if to say ‘that is not the whole truth’. In this sense, Yoga Girl helps to further construct Brathen’s identity as one that encompasses more than the image of a beautiful woman on a beach.

Every Body Yoga by Jessamyn Stanley

On the cover of Jessamyn Stanley’s book, Every Body Yoga: Let Go of Fear, Get on the Mat, Love Your Body, Stanley is in a variation of king pigeon pose, her legs in a sort of split with both knees bent, both arms catching her lifted back foot. She is pictured in black underwear and a black bra looking upwards with a light smile on her face. The floor beneath her is a light

92 Brathen, Yoga Girl, [Page 150].
turquoise; the wall behind her is gray. The title is big and bolded in white writing, layered over the photo with her foot protruding through the O of “Yoga”. Beneath the writing one can make out a tattoo on her inner forearm that reads, “Whose world is this? This world is yours.” and an additional line of text too covered up by the overlaying text to read clearly. The inside page is blank except for a small paragraph about the book and the book's title. In bold red marker font a line reads, “Meet the unforgettable Jessamyn Stanley.”

In 5 distinct sections and 122 pages, Stanley introduces the reader to her conception of yoga. The first two sections of the book give readers Stanley’s personal answers to questions she is asked often on her Instagram page such as “What the Fuck is the Eight Limbed Path?” Her responses offer logistical and realistic answers that educate the reader about the particulars of yoga in its contemporary form and previous iterations. For nearly 42 pages Stanley explicates the difference between ancient and modern forms of yoga as well as the various 20th century yoga gurus who helped in yoga’s move to the West, after which she includes a section outlining various yoga postures and sequences.

Stanley’s yogic autobiography functions a bit differently from others, namely in its structure. There seems to be, at least structurally, a definitive separation between her explicative descriptions of yoga practice and her autobiographical information. It is not until the fourth section entitled “Okay, But How Can I Do This On My Own?” that Stanley delves into an autobiographical account of her journey into the practice of yoga. Throughout this section Stanley accompanies 10 personal accounts of her life each with a lesson she learned from the experience and a sequence of yoga postures inspired by that lesson.

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93 Stanley, *Every Body*, [Inside Cover Page].
94 Ibid., [Page 35].
95 Ibid., [Page 30-31].
96 Ibid., [Page 137].
Stanley grew up in North Carolina, the daughter of two high school sweethearts. She writes about her childhood struggles with beauty standards, body image, and race, all within the cultural context of contemporary American society. She continues through the autobiographical section to talk about her life as a young adult, dealing with an intensive binge drinking habit, coming to terms with her sexuality, and losing loved ones. The final 4 stories are dedicated to Jessamyn’s discovery of yoga, specifically a home yoga practice, and its concurrent influence on her life.

While Stanley makes a very concerted effort to describe and educate readers on a yoga practice that can exist beyond the pages of her book, there is an undeniable connection to Stanley’s own life story. Stanley explained to me during an interview that her book was truly a response to all of the questions she had received from various people; people who wanted to know how to practice yoga from Stanley specifically. She said,

“...When you ask how did I start practicing yoga I can’t tell you that without telling you how I started practicing yoga and why I started practicing and the shit that’s happened in my life that made it ...so that I would need to practice yoga and need to understand myself in a different way...”

Biography, for Stanley, is inescapable in relation to the teaching of yoga. In order to teach yoga, she must tell her own life story as a means of explicating how yoga became part of her identity. *Every Body Yoga* offers an expansive approach to yoga in its many forms and with its many contradictions. Instructional in nature, Stanley embraces her voice as the author by teaching through her own experience. In this exploration of identity, she gives readers the possibility of a practice that can change a life.

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97 Stanley, videoconference interview by the author.
Identity and Acceptance: Major Themes of *Every Body Yoga*

Stanley’s life story reveals an inextricable connection between societal conceptions of acceptable personhood and her own personal struggles with identity. America’s continuously conflictual relationship with race functions as a key theme in Stanley’s autobiographical tale. She writes about her experience growing up black in North Carolina and how certain societal influences lent to her issues with body shame. Growing up in a society that associated beauty with white European features and thin athletic bodies, Stanley was left to idolize mainly white thin women.

In a story entitled “The Oreo”98 Stanley tells the story of her mother putting her hair into locs. She writes that for her mother it functioned as a, “...way for us to reclaim our strong black heritage while deflecting the beauty ideals that a white-centric society viciously thrusts upon the lives of black women.”99 While in retrospect Stanley seems to both appreciate and respect her mother’s decision, she writes about the confusion she experienced as a young girl who did not imagine locs as a connection to heritage but rather something that would make her stick out in comparison to her peers. In an attempt to conform to societal standards Stanley eventually cut her locs. In retrospect, Stanley recognizes this as a traumatizing decision, writing, “...I became scared to show my natural hair to people. I concealed a crucial aspect of my identity from the outside world and, in effect, from myself.”100 This story echoes multiple instances throughout *Every Body Yoga* in which Stanley explicates her struggle to accept and embracing her existence as a black woman in a society that actively denies black equality and beauty.

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99 Ibid., [Page 153].
100 Ibid., [Page 157].
Societal standards of beauty specifically in relation to the body are equally, if not more so, discussed throughout *Every Body Yoga*. Stanley chronicles her childhood relationship to the body expressing her dreams of becoming a cheerleader and dancer, and her brief stint on the pageant circuit, each of which were met with rejection or disappointment. After she had been turned away from her middle school cheerleading team she says, “I felt supremely ugly and excluded, and this became the furnace fuel for a rapidly blooming bottomless pit of self-disgust.”

The words “self-disgust” and its equivalents are not unique in Stanley’s writing; this type of self-shaming language appears quite frequently throughout her biographical stories, however all are used to explain past emotions.

Stanley’s persistent theme of the body can be seen most obviously in the third section of her book, prior to her personal story, in which she explicates and visually depicts various yoga poses. Stanley uses image in this section to shift the narrative about who yoga is accessible to. There are 3 different models used to depict poses in this section: a thin balding white man, a curvy black woman, and a thin white woman with tattoos and hair that is shaven on each side. This choice of individuals is very pointed and explicates Stanley’s main message without using words. In showing these individuals who are not ‘typical’ yoga practitioners in multiple yoga poses, Stanley visually explicates that yoga is accessible to any body type.

Beyond the body, Stanley touches briefly upon the theme of sexual identity within her book. Despite being one of the only non-heterosexual yoga celebrities of her caliber, Stanley’s writing on the subject does not pointedly speak about this as an additional struggle in her life but rather as a part of her identity. She writes, “...Coming out as a lesbian at the age of seventeen and coming out again as queer in my early twenties…I held a fantasy of a loving wife and adopt-

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ed babies at the epicenter of happiness goals.”¹⁰²Unlike her writing on body image and race, Stanley interestingly writes very little on her role as a queer person in contemporary society.

In essence, *Every Body Yoga* is framing yoga as a practice not of betterment but of acceptance. Yoga is framed as a way in which someone can understand and feel good about the body they have been given rather than making it “better” or different. In sharing her own personal journey from self-destruction and self-acceptance, Stanley shares the lesson with her readers that acceptance is the true path towards a better life.

**Yoga Girl and Every Body Yoga: A Comparative Exploration**

**What Is ‘Yoga’ for Brathen and Stanley?**

While *Yoga Girl* never explicitly indicates or defines yoga, Brathen continuously refers to yoga as a way of life. Quotes such as “...there was something pulling me strongly toward this five-thousand-year-old way of life”¹⁰³ and “It didn’t take long before I completely fell in love with yoga as a lifestyle and started looking forward to every moment on the mat”¹⁰⁴ explicate Brathen’s sentiments that yoga is an actual way of living rather than a meditation practice or exercise routine. Aside from her postural instruction sections, Brathen does not reference yoga’s history or philosophy other than to explicate her own personal interest, which came through meditation and posture practice, although no specific lineage or system of yoga is referenced.

In stark contrast to Brathen, Stanley speaks about yoga rather academically. She acknowledges in the first section of her book that “...when Westerners talk about “yoga,” they are invariably talking about “asana,”” otherwise known as the fancy, gymnastics-esque postures

¹⁰³ Brathen, *Yoga Girl*, [Page 51].
¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
that someone in your state is probably teaching at this exact moment.”

Stanley goes on to give her readers a well-rounded summary of the yoga that exists today while paying attention to the history that brought it to the contemporary moment. Mainly focusing on 20th century yoga onwards, Stanley offers an overview of gurus such as Krishnamacharya and Iyengar, even mentioning Indra Devi. Her writing includes a brief introduction to Patanjali’s yoga sutras and her take on their translation to contemporary life. After this history she overviews various styles of yoga available today and even offers the readers her advice on what practitioners might buy at the start of a yoga practice. In this regard, Stanley offers her readers a definition of yoga that is expansive, all encompassing, and rather honest in its non-linear nature.

Stanley’s most interesting approach in considering the practice of yoga is her understanding of yoga in its cultural context. She writes,

“As devoted to our yoga practice as we Westerners may be, we need to remain conscious of the offense that can come when we appropriate aspects of South Asian culture that are not solely connected to the yoga world...no Western yoga practitioners should consider themselves exempt from Eastern yoga cultural appropriation, even if it is accidental.”

Stanley is not just suggesting that yoga may be appropriated and to be aware of it, she is unswervingly making the claim that it is. In all of my reading of this genre of book, Stanley is the only one to talk about the issues involved with the contemporary Western approach yoga.

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106 Ibid., [Page 46].
**Spirituality**

The term *spirituality* has become common vernacular in the world of contemporary yoga, where the concept of religion must be negotiated and brought to terms. Spirituality acts as an answer to the Western question, *is yoga a religion?* In its highly ambiguous and amorphous nature, terming yoga as *spiritual* allows for the existence of multiple traditions and identities including theistic, agnostic, and possibly even atheistic viewpoints. Both Brathen and Stanley use the term spirituality in relation to yogic practice throughout their books.

In *Yoga Girl*, Brathen references spirituality after explaining her weeklong stay at the meditation center, towards the end of her tumultuous childhood. She writes that after the retreat she “...started meditating daily and began devouring spiritual books.”107 There is never a specific reference to which books or what this elusive spirituality refers to, just that Brathen conforms to it. Similarly, Stanley makes the claim that,

> “Any yoga that “eliminates,” “avoids,” or “Ignores” yoga’s spiritual side is not actually yoga: it’s a fitness routine...This is spirituality that transcends any kind of religion, and being able to consistently tap into it provides unparalleled emotional and mental relief”108

In using the terminology of spirituality both Brathen and Stanley are able to subscribe to multiple identities and traditions all while sharing the practice of yoga. This type of language is very all-inclusive and accessible for readers of any faith or personal belief.

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107 Brathen, *Yoga Girl*, [Page 37].
Food

In *Yoga Girl*, Brathen establishes a strong relationship between food and yoga. One such example is her suggestion that the best way to start the day is with a glass of warm lemon juice, to help the digestive system clean itself out and get ready for a new day of food intake. Throughout the book Brathen offers recipes for various types of food including drinks, snacks, and meals, each pictured with vibrant color and amazing quality. In her fourth chapter Brathen explains her history with eating vegan. When she moved to Aruba, vegan food options were not as widely available as they had been previously. This in combination with a need for more energy led Brathen down a more vegetarian path. For Brathen, food is never mentioned in a negative light and rather seems to bring her joy. While she does exhibit an understanding of the sensitivity some have towards food, she does not seem to have much of a personal connection to the subject aside from her experiences with veganism.

*Every Body Yoga* antithetically approaches food in a deeply personal way. In her story entitled “A Chick-Fil-A-Bandit Walks Into Weight Watchers” Stanley talks about her conflicted relationship with food in conversation with her socio economic standing. She writes, “When you’re raised in a family with limited means, it’s a big deal to be a in a situation where food is plentiful.” This connection Stanley makes between money and food are unique to the yogic autobiography. While authors such as Brathen give food recipes with ingredients such as kale, lemons, and almond milk, Stanley writes that “Even as an adult, I find purchasing expensive grocery items like individually wrapped string cheese and eight ounce boxes of coconut wa-

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111 Ibid., [Page 172].
ter to be absolute signs of financial prosperity.“\textsuperscript{112} Money, in the contemporary world of yoga, is not a subject talked about often, therefore Stanley’s connection between money and food is unprecedented in the story of yoga.

**Body Image**

Brathen’s approach to body image is brief and indirect. Much like food, it is clear that she understands and recognizes the importance of body acceptance but does not seem to have much personal connection to the subject. She writes, “It’s not that difficult to love our bodies when we’re working out a lot, following a strict regimen, eating a specific diet—when we fit ourselves into a mold that society has told us we need to fit into.”\textsuperscript{113} This quote supports the assumption that Brathen herself may not have experience dealing with body image concerns. In claiming that anyone can feel good about themselves when working out and on a diet, Brathen excludes the narratives of those who experience eating disorders or serious body dysmorphia. Perhaps Brathen’s experience as a beautiful thin white woman has prevented such encounters with body shame.

*Every Body Yoga* approaches body image from a deeply personal place, and while Stanley certainly touts acceptance, her writing suggests that body acceptance is a continuous struggle. She writes, “Accepting our bodies is the most crucial aspect of holistic health and happiness—and a strong yoga practice. But it can be really effing hard to reconcile the realities of our anatomy with the delusions of our mind.”\textsuperscript{114} Stanley’s approach to body image, I posit,

\textsuperscript{112} Stanley, *Every Body*, [Page 171].
\textsuperscript{113} Brathen, *Yoga Girl*, [Page 87].
\textsuperscript{114} Stanley, *Every Body*, [Page 194].
would greatly disagree with Brathen’s. Body acceptance, for Stanley, is not something one can simply fix but is rather a practice and a goal to journey towards.

**Emotional Trauma**

Emotional trauma arrives in each of these yogic autobiographies very similarly in dealing with death and the use of substances. In the case of Brathen, she writes about the death of her stepfather when she was very young and the effects of his death on her family. Her mother’s attempted suicide followed shortly after; Brathen recounts not finding out about the suicide letters that were left for her and her brother until she was much older. In addition to this death, Brathen talks about her life in Sweden where, as a young teenager, she took up a very serious smoking habit along with drinking and drugs. She recounts multiple times she had to be hospitalized, including a drunk driving accident that nearly took her life. It was during this time at sixteen years old when she mentions briefly that her boyfriend at the time became physically abusive.¹¹⁵

In a similar vain Stanley speaks about the impactful deaths of her aunt Tirah and grandmother, both of which happened over the course of two years. Jessamyn, in her early 20’s at the time, was suddenly faced with the loss of two major support systems and role models all while deciding to drop out of graduate school and move away from home. Towards her late 20’s Stanley tells the story of waking up at the wheel of a car at 2 am. She was in the middle of an intersection and had fallen asleep after attempting to drive home drunk. She explains her drinking problem that had manifested throughout previous years as a means of escaping emotional pain. “...I was unable to fully process my emotions, and drinking became the key to unlocking my

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¹¹⁵Brathen, *Yoga Girl*, [Page 35].
emotional vault”\textsuperscript{116} This emotional pain, as she writes, was greatly attached to her feelings of loneliness and grief over the loss of her aunt and grandmother.

Death and substance abuse appear to be major factors in both Brathen and Stanley’s development as individuals and perhaps their path toward yoga. While Brathen’s trauma forced her into a meditation retreat, Stanley’s forced her into a home yoga practice both as a means of coping with loss.

\textbf{Works in Progress}

The final and perhaps most intriguing similarity between the two books is the room they leave for error. Brathen writes in the introduction to \textit{Yoga Girl}, “There is no grand recipe for a perfect life...I am not here to tell you to change your life so that you can be better. I’m here to tell you you are good enough the way you already are.”\textsuperscript{117} She offers her readers the premise that she will not solve their personal issues or be able to fix their lives. Rather, she shares her own story and experiences as a means of connecting with her audience and offers her readers the caveat that they are not alone.

In Stanley’s case, she writes at the beginning of \textit{Every Body Yoga}, “…make no mistake—I’m not naive. I don’t think the shitty parts of life are over for me just because I’ve cultivated a vigorous yoga practice. On the contrary, I think shitty things will continue to happen. But that’s life…”\textsuperscript{118} Similar to Brathen, Stanley reveals to the reader that she does not claim to be perfect or have life figured out. Both women offer their readers an allowance of pain and struggle. In allowing themselves to be flawed, both Brathen and Stanley make no promises to the reader about

\textsuperscript{116} Stanley, \textit{Every Body}, [Page 204].
\textsuperscript{117} Brathen, \textit{Yoga Girl}, [Page 1].
\textsuperscript{118} Stanley, \textit{Every Body}, [Page 19].
their advice being right or effective. Instead, their self-forgiving language allows readers to connect to them in a more personal capacity.

**Marketing Personhood**

When yoga becomes conflated with biography and thus identity, its existence as a commodity becomes more than just a rubber mat. Kimberly J. Lau explores the ways that the alternative health marketplace has become so successful in her book *New Age Capitalism*. She writes,

“A way of life becomes another commodity to consume and to sell. With New Age capitalism, the instructional products, brochures for niche tourism, and even the more banal logos, t-shirts, caps, and pins associated with these alternative health practices come to mark the contemporary consumer landscape in which our bodies themselves become part of the signage.”

As contemporary Western imaginations of yoga become centered on lifestyle and move away from mere physical practice, opportunities for selling yoga expand. Suddenly, anything within the realm of alternative medicine becomes yoga, too, whether it is books, food, incense, acupuncture, air diffusers, essential oils, vacations, or even body positivity. Yoga, when situated in conversation with self-identity and thus autobiography, becomes a limitless commodity.

Lau references sociologist Rob Shields who, “...describes consumption as an active means of enacting a chosen lifestyle or social persona.” Construction of identity is integral in regards to consumer practices. The identity any given consumer is trying to construct directly

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119 Lau, "Ideology Incorporated," [Page 6-7].
correlates to the products they will buy. In regard to commodifying yoga, celebrities such as Brathen and Stanley construct and represent certain identities that their followers connect with and aim to emulate. In this way, both women become implicit in marketing products that align with their identity.

Through their Instagram accounts and yogic autobiographies, Brathen and Stanley exhibit yoga as a way of living that can bring about greater satisfaction. In sharing their personal stories in regard to yoga, each develop a relationship with their audience, allowing their readers and followers to become increasingly invested in their identities. Whether it be spirituality, food, emotional trauma, or body image: each experience allows Brathen and Stanley to prescribe to wide audience bases that are invested in similar pursuits. Ultimately, all of these themes and synchronic stories offer both women not just a wide audience base, but a wide consumer base.

As contemporary yoga teachers Brathen and Stanley are using this consumer base to their own advantage. Since their start on Instagram five years ago, both have been able to make full-fledged careers out of yoga. Stanley works as a yoga teacher and motivational author, writing on her relationship with body positivity. In addition to her writing, she is featured in multiple advertisement campaigns. Brathen’s career as a yoga teacher and author still remain intact, however her wide reach has allowed her to take on the role of entrepreneur, founding multiple non-profit and for-profit organizations. Each of these women’s influence upon Western imaginations of yoga would be incomplete without giving an overview of their relationship to the massive industry of yoga within which they exist. Below, I briefly outline the major careers these women have been afforded, mainly with the help of Instagram.
Rachel Brathen Incorporated: From Yoga Girl to CEO

Brathen’s reach does not end with Instagram posts. Rachel’s website features an image of Rachel with the heading “Rachel Brathen: Yoga Lifestyle” on it’s main page. The website features various opportunities to invest in this yoga lifestyle in some way. As a teacher, Rachel teaches regularly on the island of Aruba, normal vinyasa-inspired classes and SUP yoga classes, which cost about 50$ per session. She also leads yoga retreats across the world ranging from 1-3000$ per person. Her website also features a “shop” section where you can purchase addition one of the 13 different language copies of her book. In addition to her physical teaching presence, Brathen just released her very own podcast entitled “From The Heart: Conversations with Yoga Girl”, where she has shared multiple personal stories including the entire story of her daughter's birth.

Despite all of the consumable content regarding Brathen herself, she has made a very pointed effort to use her newly found fame for good, establishing more than a few major corporations and companies. Below I give just a brief summary of the massive network Brathen has garnered, most due to her following on Instagram.

Sgt. Pepper’s Friends

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122 From The Heart: Conversations with Yoga Girl, first broadcast March 31, 2017, narrated by Rachel Brathen.
Brathen’s flagship organization is an animal rescue stationed in Aruba. The organization was founded in 2015 after Brathen and her husband rescued a puppy named Sammy who would become the foundation’s first rescue dog. Named after Brathen’s own beloved dog Sgt. Pepper who was rescued on the island, Sgt. Pepper’s friends was born, as everything with Brathen seems to be, on Instagram. She posted the photo of Sammy on her Instagram page, asking if anyone would be interested in adopting the dog. As she writes on the “Our Story” page of the rescue’s website, “…hundreds of requests started flooding in. It worked! Social media really is an amazing way to connect people – and apparently, animals as well.” It grew slowly into a small animal rescue which they are now raising funds for in order to build an actual shelter, as it seems right now the rescue runs out of the 5 company operator’s homes. Despite the foundations seemingly minimal resources, they function as a multi-national rescue, allowing “adoption in the United States, Canada, Aruba, the Netherlands and Sweden” from the largeness of this corporation, which is multinational, fostering adoption in multiple countries outside of Aruba. Since it’s birth, Brathen doesn’t seem to be too involved in the corporation other than being its founder. Aside from the occasional Instagram post promoting a certain animal’s adoption, Brathen has given over logistical control to other employees.

One-O-Eight

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Brathen’s second organization, an online yoga platform, goes by the name “One-o-eight”\textsuperscript{125}, named after the 108 beads found on traditional meditation or \textit{mala} beads, and also the “...sacred number that keeps occurring in different aspects of life; astrology, geometry, mathematics, literature and more.”\textsuperscript{126} The website began its life in 2015 on Kickstarter\textsuperscript{127}, an online platform for fundraising, where Brathen’s campaign crowd funded $430,943 greatly surpassing their $108,000 goal in order to get the site running. Oneoeight functions as an online yoga studio, cooking class, meditation room, and vacation planner. For $14.99 per month, you are given four sections of the site to explore. The first is entitled “move”, containing hundreds of yoga \textit{asana} classes from any of the 29 yoga teachers featured on the site. These teachers are hand picked by Brathen herself and include many other famous Instagram yogis. The classes can be filtered by instructor, mood, intensity, and even time length. The next section is entitled “calm”, where you can find different types of meditations. Beyond that, Brathen has recruited therapists and mental health specialists including a grief counselor and a body image specialist, each of whom have videos speaking about various ways to heal. Finally included in this “calm” section is the site’s very own astrologist, who gives a monthly overview to each sign as well as videos teaching astrology in general. The third and final video based section is entitled “Nourish”, consisting of videos from nutritionists, and Ayurvedic specialists. The videos range from how-to cooking instructions to teachings on ancient Ayurvedic practices. The final section of the website is entitled “Explore”. This section offers a few possibilities: you can choose to click on the “retreats” option that brings you to a page with all of the upcoming retreats that Oneoeight guides are leading or

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{125} OneOEight, OneOEight - Yoga anywhere and everywhere, https://oneoeight.com/.


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co-leading so you can buy your own ticket in and get real life experience with the online teacher you love most.

**109 World**

Brathen’s other non-profit organization goes by the name ‘OneONine world’. According to the website, the organization “…offers curated experiences for organizations and social media influencers to leverage their communities for the betterment of our planet.” Essentially, the company offers various travel experiences that allow for both a retreat experience and a service opportunity within areas in need. As of May 2017, the organization has conducted mission trips to Nicaragua, Latvia, Ecuador, and Aruba. Each trip follows one of the organization’s “passions”: education, animals, water, environment, children, and women. The foundations motto is “You have the power to change the world.”

I was able to speak with Ariāna Ūle, an American born Latvian student at Bard College, who was in Latvia at the time of the non-profits visit. The mission trip consisted of a team of employees and guests who visited an orphanage in Latvia and met its various children as a means of combattting Latvia’s orphan crisis. After asking how she could get involved, Ariāna was invited by the organization to be their translator for a day, as none of the employees or guests spoke Latvian. The attendees of this trip were, for the most part: middle aged white women, a lot of whom were yoga teachers themselves.

In talking about her experience at the orphanage, Ariāna stated,

“I was standing in the kitchen next to one of the teenagers who lives at one of the children's homes. We were chopping celery for the vegetable soup one of the 109

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leaders was preparing for lunch, when the girl turned to me and said (in Latvian), “It's so easy for these blonde, beautiful, thin women to come tell us that life will get better as long as you stay positive.” I couldn't agree more.”

Organizations and mission trips such as 109 bring with them a heavy connection to the concept of a “white savior complex”, regarding privileged white persons traveling to under developed countries or communities to offer their assistance.

The class distinction required to be able to attend one of these trips alone is overwhelming, the trip to Latvia in particular cost upwards of $4000 without airfare. The funds, no doubt, allowed for their amenities at a beach resort, along with yoga classes that were taught each morning. I do not intend to make any truth claims in regard to 109’s work, rather, I question the organization’s certitude in regards to the lasting aid they provide to the communities they serve.

**Island Yoga**

Brathen’s final and most recent project has been the construction of Island Yoga; one of Aruba’s largest yoga studios’ to date. The studio finished construction and opened to the public in January of 2017. Featuring a multitude of classes in one of their multiple shalas or yoga classrooms, the studio also offers plenty of SUP classes on the water. The studio also features workshops and teacher trainings. Along with yoga, there is a boutique at the studio where practitioners can purchase everything from clothing to yoga mats. Lastly, the Nourish Aruba Cafe is attached to the studio, equipped with a full bar to service breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

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129 Ariāna Ūle, interview by the author, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, April 27, 2017.
Brathen spoke often on Instagram of the struggle and financial strain building this studio took on her and Dennis, who put nearly their entire life savings into its creation. Construction almost had to stop, in which case it would have been halted until after Rachel had her child. However, an anonymous donor was able to help its creation, as Brathen talks about on her podcast.\(^\text{131}\)

Brathen’s role as a yoga entrepreneur is vastly unparalleled, as with most of her other distinctions in the yoga world. In creating this vision of an island life, Brathen has been able to sell her lifestyle in ways thought unimaginable. Yoga, through Brathen, has become an online TV channel, a service trip, and an animal rescue. Her influence in the contemporary world of yoga has allowed for its reinvention continuous evolution.

**Jessamyn Stanley: Advertiser in Chief**

Stanley’s website, Jessamynstanley.com, is very purple.\(^\text{132}\) In big black cursive writing, her name is printed at the top. Links to various workshops, retreats, online classes, and even private lessons appear at the top of her page. Teaching yoga has become Stanley’s full time job due to her fame. Currently on tour with her new book, most of her Instagram posts tend to surround *Every Body Yoga*, which will be on tour until September of 2017. Unlike Brathen, whose fame in most part came after book, Stanley’s celebrity and career as a yoga teacher are rather new. Although Stanley has not founded a yoga studio or any non-profit companies, her personhood has been and continues to be clearly marketed through multiple online platforms and Instagram sponsorships.

\(^{131}\) From The Heart.

Online Yoga Classes

Stanley is a large advocate for online yoga classes and studios. Online platforms offer yoga classes that have been pre-recorded by various teachers and range in theme, length, skill level, and website. Stanley has filmed classes for CodyApp\(^{133}\) and StreamYoga\(^{134}\). CodyApp is an online yoga and fitness site that started as an application for smartphones. Members can sign up for free and then purchase various classes or class packages to own. Stanley offers 7 different class options on Cody, there is one individual class costing $9.99 and the rest are class packages which range from $39.99- $159.99. In total to buy every one of her classes on CodyApp it would cost a member $389.99. Some are taught by Stanley alone and other times she is joined by co-teacher Dana Falsetti, another yoga personality focused on body positivity. StreamYoga is starkly different from CodyApp in its elementary web design. The site features only 3 teachers, Stanley being one of them. In terms of payment the website offers various pricing dependent upon how long members would like access for, $5 for 24 hours, $20 for a month, etc. Stanley’s online classes range from titles such as “Every Body Yoga” to “Get Loud”, and are primarily focused on self-empowerment, body acceptance, and letting go of negativity.\(^{135}\)

Sponsorships

Stanley takes part in multiple sponsorships on Instagram. A sponsorship on Instagram essentially acts as advertisement for various companies and corporations. These businesses fund Instagram users with wide audiences related to their consumer base to post photos of themselves promoting certain products. Stanley has made wide use of sponsorships in her existence on In-

One example is her recent partnership with Jade yoga mats. She partnered with the major yoga mat vendor in order to promote her new book, offering a sweepstakes in which one winner was awarded a free mat and copy of Stanley’s book. Other sponsorships include the FabFitFun box, which offers its consumers a box of beauty related products for an affordable price. Stanley advertises on her Instagram that her followers can gain an extra $10 off by using her special offer code. These sponsorships are not unique in the world of social media, and it is suggested that certain companies will pay Instagram users upwards of $5000 per promotion post, depending on the accounts follower base.

Stanley’s use of marketing as a means of profit does not end on Instagram as she has taken part in multiple advertisement campaigns for major companies, some of which do not align with or associate with yoga. This includes Motrin’s #womeninprogress campaign highlighting women who have overcome pain and hardship to achieve success. Stanley’s success in the field of marketing her identity is astounding in comparison to Brathen, who’s Instagram very rarely offers sponsorships or advertisements. This utilization of Instagram and personhood has allowed Stanley a career beyond the confines of a yoga studio.

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137 Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram. [February 6, 2017]
139 Stanley, "mynameisjessamyn," Instagram. [March 21, 2017]
Yogic Industry, Yogic Image

Much like the public of Instagram, Western societal norms are often reflected through the marketplace. The identities most represented within the marketplace are the identities which society deems most important and most popular. In the case of yoga, the marketplace has invariably aided in the evolution and appropriation of its existence in the West. The more media and marketplace reflected yoga as a practice for the feminine, the Caucasian, and the upper class, the more acceptable it became. In looking at the examples of both Brathen and Stanley, it is clear which bodies and visualities society deems more consumable. Brathen has been able to construct an empire, founding four organizations, a yoga studio, a podcast, and two books, one of which reached the New York Times Best Sellers list, the other she is in the process of writing. Stanley, while creating her Instagram just a few months after Brathen, has been able to gain traction as both a teacher and writer, but has not garnered the same attention or means as Brathen.

These discrepancies could be the result of multiple differences between the two personalities. One is thin and one is fat, one lives on an island and the other lives in North Carolina, one is white and one is black, one comes from means and the other a working class family. I do not intend to give an exact answer to the question of why Brathen has garnered more success than Stanley; rather I offer the factual reality of their perceptions and successes. These differences make evident the fact that Western standards of beauty remain inequitable.

In thinking about a contemporary yogic image, the place of industry and consumerism play pivotal roles in deciding how the West’s imaginations surrounding yoga will continue to evolve. In this way, the contemporary yogic image hangs in a constant balance of change. What once existed as a practice solely for Indian Brahmin men slowly became a practice for Western

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142 Learned on From The Heart.
white women. Today, practitioners such as Jessamyn Stanley are advocating for yoga in spaces such as Instagram and are continuing in the active evolution of Western imaginations of yoga. Imaginations that define who yoga belongs to and what, in fact, yoga is.
Conclusion

On the third floor of a commercial rental building in Rhinebeck, NY, a heavy door opens onto a hardwood floor. A table and stool function as a front desk directly behind the door, where a woman sits, welcoming guests. To her right, a shelving unit displays various jewelry, books, and clothing for sale. Large red curtains separate this space and a large open room filled with the chatter of soft voices. Blankets line the stage in a semi-circle, surrounding a harmonium. Various chairs and blankets are lined up in the center of the room, facing the stage. A woman begins to hum and play the instrument as a quiet falls over the room. I am sitting on the stage this time, beside 11 women dressed in all white. I sing along to the Sanskrit words; I know them this time around. The hardwood floors are less foreign, as well as the images of various gurus who line the studio’s altar. I stand when my name is called and get a fake flower crown placed on my head. It is June of 2016 and I have just become a yoga teacher.

My place in the telling of this story has acted both as an entry point and a self-reflection upon the Western imagination of yoga in which I am a complicit participant. Through both the 20th and the 21st centuries, Western perceptions and definitions of yoga have changed in regard to gender, race, moral positioning, and its existence as commodity. These changes have taken place, in large part, due to Western society’s relationship with mass media and the development of social media in the 21st century. In overviewing the histories of Western imagination regarding yoga, the shifts it has undergone become clear through media, marketplace, and the identities they represent.

In examining the gurus of the late 20th century, I posit that figures such as Krishnamacharya, Jois, Iyengar, and Bikram have allowed for yoga’s existence as a physical and athletic practice. Their conflation of hatha yoga with the athletic body allowed Westerners access to
a practice that had previously existed as a form of exhibitionism. Western attitudes regarding physical beauty granted this more athletic approach to yoga increased popularity and acceptance throughout Western society. Indra Devi, while not proliferating the image of yoga as an athletic practice, shifted Western perceptions through her physical appearance and societal situation. As one of the first renowned yoga teacher to the stars, Devi introduced yoga to many Westerners as a practice accessible to anyone, even the white female. Her influence in teaching Hollywood celebrities allowed Western imaginations of yoga to further evolve into ones that regarded yoga as a feminine practice.

Devi’s mark upon Western conceptions of yoga was proliferated through print media and its representations of yoga throughout the late 20th century and early 21st century. In periodical publications, yoga’s existence gradually shifted from more traditional Western representations of yoga in the Indian male practitioner to more contemporary representations of yoga as a feminine practice. In tracking references to yoga in periodical literature, one can observe its emergence in periodicals specifically targeted at female audiences. This, in relationship to yoga’s promotion by Western celebrities of the late 20th century, further conflated the practice of yoga with Western female beauty standards.

With the development of social media in the early 21st century, Western conceptions of yoga have become increasingly visible and negotiable on sites such as Instagram. Through its public and cooperative structure, Instagram allows users to become active participants in the creation of their own identities and, further more, the decision of which identities become celebrity. Yoga Instagram accounts such as Rachel Brathen’s and Jessamyn Stanley’s have afforded each a large follower base and have allowed each to pursue full time careers as both yoga teachers and authors. While Instagram does function as a reflection of the public which uses it, mainly
Westerners, its platform serves as a community in which the Western conception of yoga can be negotiated and changed in real time.

Both Brathen and Stanley have been able to share their own personal stories and identities through Instagram and individual yogic autobiographies. These works of literature have lent to the evolution of a yogic image that includes the multitude of realities inherent in an identity. In their conflation of yoga and biography, both Instagram and the yogic autobiography are allowing yoga’s commodification through its relation to identity. Brathen and Stanley’s unique stories of personhood have afforded them a consumer base for numerous profitable endeavors.

The body of this work aims to unravel the myths surrounding yoga’s existence in the Western imagination. One such unraveling is the appropriative nature of its acceptance in the West, which is often overlooked in contemporary Western yoga communities. However, in approaching yoga through spaces like Instagram and the personalities it is intertwined with, one can observe, perhaps, yoga’s continuous evolution and progress within Western imaginations.

Over the course of the writing of this paper, I cannot say that I have become comfortable with my authorization as a yoga instructor. I do not say “namaste” at the end of my classes anymore, nor do I chant “ohm”. I do my best to allow my students to know where this practice comes from, and understand my own place in its existence. I continue to grapple with the realities of a contemporary practice that gives both joy and meaning my own life while understanding the Western notion that the practice is somehow ‘better suited’ for my body than it is on others. While these pages do not solve the problem of yoga’s appropriation or make clear its future trajectory in the Western imagination, I trust that it has shed some light on a tradition which has found a home quite far from its roots, in screens and books and bodies far different than any it could have imagined in its conception.
Bibliography


