

PREETIKA RAJGARIAH



Wild, Wild Country

OCTOBER 5, 2019 – NOVEMBER 14, 2019

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

In **Preetika Rajgariah's** exhibition *Wild, Wild Country*, culture, capitalism, and classism collide on the yoga mat. Through sculpture, video, and performance, Rajgariah explores how this spiritual practice with deep roots in Hinduism has proliferated into nearly every subculture of American society. Fascinated by yoga's popularity but also its dramatic transformation, Rajgariah calls attention to yoga's long history, its profound spiritual origin, and the nuanced line between appropriation and appreciation.

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How to Decolonize your Yoga Practice

decolonizyoga.com February 7, 2015

Susanna Barkataki

As an Indian woman living in the U.S. I've often felt uncomfortable in many yoga spaces. At times, such as when I take a \$25.00 yoga class by a well-known teacher who wants to "expose us to the culture by chanting Om to start class" and her studio hangs the Om symbol in the wrong direction, my culture is being stripped of its meaning and sold back to me in forms that feel humiliating at best and dehumanizing at worst.

It took me going to India to really connect with the roots I was seeking on the mat in yoga studios. As I walked the streets of Shimla's legendary markets I learned that Indians had been forbidden to tread the main thoroughfares.

It was here that I started to apprehend the true meaning of colonization. Did you know that Yoga and Ayurveda were banned in India under British rule and colonization?

The practices millions of Westerners now turn to for alternative health and wellness therapies were intentionally eradicated from parts of India to the point that lineages were broken and thousand-year old traditions lost.

To be colonized is to become a stranger in your own land. As a desi, this is the feeling I get in most Westernized yoga spaces today. Of course, powerful practices that reduce suffering persist, despite all attempts to end them. These facts are critical to understanding the power and privilege we continue to possess or lack, to clarifying the positionalities we embody as we practice, teach and share yoga today.

Now, when so much of what the Western world sees as true yoga is beautifully achieved physical postures, (accomplished, photographed and displayed by popular yoga magazines, journals and sites) executed by mostly young, white, stylish-yoga-apparel clad women and men, yogais going through a second colonization. This colonization is the misrepresentation of yoga's intention, its many limbs, and its aims.

Yoga is not now, nor has it ever been, a practice aimed at physical mastery for its own sake. Nor is it a practice aimed at “stress-reduction” so we can function as better producers and consumers in a capitalist society.

Yoga was originally intended to prepare the body as a foundation for unity with the spirit. The limb of asana aims at strengthening the body. Asana, along with dhyana or meditation, aim to harmonize body with breath in order to attain deeper and deeper states of meditative awareness or samadhi. The purpose of this kind of meditative awareness is to experience, practice, and live oneness of mind, body and soul with the divine. This kind of freedom is called samadhi or liberation. It is ironic that practice meant to free us has becoming so confining.

The current state of yoga in the United States and elsewhere in the Western world highlights the power imbalance that remains between those who have access to wealth, an audience and privilege in contrast to those who have been historically marginalized.



If someone from the dominant culture completes a yoga teacher training that is primarily asana based, and remains blissfully unaware of the complexity of yoga’s true aim or the roots of the practices, they are culturally appropriating yoga. By remaining unaware of the history, roots, complexity and challenges of the heritage from which yoga springs and the challenges it has faced under Western culture, they perpetuate a re-colonization of it by stripping its essence away.

Now, this is not to say that there can’t be some true, heartfelt and deep liberation possible. Or that only Indians can practice or teach yoga and white people can’t. There can be

authentic cultural exchange, harmony and understanding. Clearly, since the true aim of the practice of yoga is liberation, uniting mind, body and spirit, this form should not limit us. Liberation here, is no joke.

Yoga means liberation from every construct, including that of race, gender, time, space, location, identity and even history herself. However, in the current cultural context where there is a billion-dollar industry profiting off taking yoga out of context, branding and repackaging it for monetary gain we need to address this. Or else we perpetuate a 2nd colonization, i.e., eventually eradicating the true practice, as was accomplished in many places under Britain's occupation of India, and we stray further on the path of maya, or illusion.

These are a few ways to decolonize your yoga practice:

1. Inquire within.

One powerful way we can decolonize yoga and reunite it with its true aim and purpose is to practice Gandhian svadhyaya, or self-rule and inquiry, and to truly learn the full honest, integrity of an authentic yoga practice.

2. Explore, learn and cite correct cultural references.

As practitioners of yoga I would love to see more of us citing cultural references as we attempt to understand and connect with the complexity, culture and history from which this tradition comes. I'm not suggesting people put on a watered down, context-removed faux Hinduism. To me that is not the answer.

3. Ask ourselves, and other yoga teachers, the hard questions.

These tension asks us to bring all of ourselves to the table. So what I am suggesting is for us to decolonize yoga we need to inquire deeply. We each have our unique story and gifts to share as do all the practitioners we teach or learn from. Lets ask ourselves "For whom is yoga accessible today and how might that be a legacy of past injustices that we have the opportunity to address through our teaching practice and our lives?"

4. Live, know, share and practice all 8 limbs of yoga, not just asana.

We can also decolonize yoga by studying the depth of practice beyond the postures. In addition to asana we need to understand, practice and teach all 8 limbs of yoga: yama or ethical conduct, niyama or personal practice, pranayama or working with the breath,

pratyahara awareness of the senses, dharana, meditation, concentration and insight, dhyana or being present with whatever arises and samadhi, or interconnection with all that is.

5. Be humble and honor your own and other people's journey.

When we humbly and respectfully consider yoga's history, context, many branches and practices we give ourselves a fighting chance achieving yoga's aim of enlightenment of mind, body and spirit.

By really engaging the full, whole and multifaceted face of yoga we not only liberate ourselves but we may just overthrow this 2nd colonization of yoga, freeing ourselves as well as the yoga practitioners of the future to experience the full, liberatory, authentic and true practice of yoga. We allow our own practice to grow and our gifts to really shine.

With mutual understanding, respect, and a deep reverence and caring for the history we can decolonize ourselves, the yoga-industrial-complex, and stage our own ahimsa, or nonviolent revolution of the mind, body and spirit.



About the author

Susanna Barkataki, M.Ed., RYT 500, E-RYT 200, LAc, often cries on her yoga mat from joy. A descendent of a lineage of Ayurvedic healers and teachers, she integrates tools from Ayurveda, yoga, mindfulness and energy wisdom. Susanna has taught K-12 for 14 years where she loves to teach poetry, writing, and social justice integrated with yoga and mindfulness. She loves harmonizing lives as a one-on-one Ayurvedic Wellness Counselor and also teaches 200 Hour Yoga Teacher Trainings with Cloud Nine Yoga in Pasadena, CA

Find out more about how yoga and Ayurveda can transform your life at www.healthyhotgoddess.com

What's the Difference Between Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Appreciation?

A first-generation Indian-American yoga and mindfulness researcher and teacher reflects on what feels misrepresented and appropriative to her in modern yoga.

RINA DESHPANDE

MAY 1, 2019



Unsure of the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation? Read on to find out.

When I began contributing to yoga research five years ago, I was invited to a meeting to discuss how to bring yoga and mindfulness practices to university campuses as wellness initiatives. Thirteen out of 15 American administrators and researchers at the conference table happened to be white, the only exceptions being me and another Indian-American

woman. The person in charge had thoughtfully invited both of us; though newer to research, we were experienced in yoga teachings because of our South Asian culture and decade-long practices. Entering the room was both moving and intimidating. On one hand, I was honored to share my cultural and personal understandings of yoga. On the other hand, I was one of only two nonwhite people in a group gathering to talk about a practice that originated in India.

Conscious of my identity, I used [yogic principles](#) to set aside my conditioned fears and preconceptions and opened my mind to discussing yoga—the practice of self-realization that has transformed my life.

I soon found myself in respectful conversation with everyone at the table: Yoga and mindfulness-based practices can provide what we call “healing” in Eastern tradition, and what we call psychological and physiological “benefits” in Western research. Although we used different words, we were saying similar things.

Until the middle of the meeting.

One of the administrators said, “We’ll need to create a set of guidelines to ensure absolutely no Eastern symbols, bells, or words are used in yoga classes. We can’t make anyone uncomfortable or offend them by suggesting [spirituality](#).”

I don’t believe that Indian words or symbols are required for people to benefit from yoga, but this leader, who was in favor of creating an inclusive yoga experience “for all,” wanted to remove any sign of the land where the practice originated. She overlooked the fact that two yoga teachers with Indian heritage sitting right across from her were the ones left to nurse our exclusion and offense.

Invisible oppression is something many Indians have been forced to endure in quiet pain for centuries. Like when you learn about a popular yoga movement and book jarringly titled [No Om Zone: A No-Chanting, No-Granola, No-Sanskrit Practical Guide to Yoga](#). The title itself

normalizes ethnocentric views of yoga, India, and people who [chant](#). The irony of a movement like this is that it renders fear of foreign words while allowing itself to brand and use the Indian practice of yoga, a [Sanskrit](#) word signifying “unity” or “yoke.”

Those without access to an in-depth history education might lighten this to a question of political correctness or cries by minorities for cultural recognition. But it goes so much deeper.

Yoga is an ancient spiritual practice of self-realization that originated in India, but, in addition to Indian devotional practices such as sacred dance, it was perceived as threatening, ridiculed, and banned among its own people in its own land under British colonization, beginning in the 1700s and lasting until the mid-1900s. Today, yoga is often marketed by affluent Westerners to affluent Westerners—and Indians, ironically, are marginally represented, if at all. While this multibillion-dollar industry is offering much-needed well-being to Western practitioners, it’s re-inflicting the same violation on India and Indians: invisibility and misrepresentation.



Cultural appropriation is the taking, marketing, and exotification of cultural practices from historically oppressed populations.

What is Cultural Appropriation?

In recent years, conversation has begun around the “cultural appropriation” of yoga. Cultural appropriation is the taking, marketing, and exoticification of cultural practices from historically oppressed populations. The problem is incredibly complex and involves two extremes: The first is the sterilization of yoga by removing evidence of its Eastern roots so that it doesn’t “offend” Westerner practitioners. The opposite extreme is the glamorization of yoga and India through commercialism, such as Om tattoos, T-shirts sporting Hindu deities or Sanskrit scriptures that are often conflated with yoga, or the choosing of Indian names.

Yoga teachers and students are starting to ask the questions, “What is the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation?” and “How can I still practice yoga without being offensive?”

According to [Rumya S. Putcha, PhD](#), a scholar of postcolonial, critical race, and gender studies, we’re still asking the wrong questions. “The terminology ‘cultural appropriation,’ in and of itself, is a way of diluting the fact that we’re talking about racism and European colonialism,” she says. “It undermines what is happening as only ‘culturally inappropriate’ so as not to disrupt mass yoga marketing, leading us to ask surface-level questions like ‘I don’t want to be culturally inappropriate, so how can I show cultural appreciation appropriately?’ It’s not about appreciation versus appropriation. It’s about understanding the role of power and the legacies of imperialism.”

[Shreena Gandhi, PhD](#), a religious studies professor at Michigan State University, and Lillie Wolff, an advocate with [Crossroads Antiracism](#), emphasized in their 2017 article “[Yoga and the Roots of Cultural Appropriation](#)” that the goal of these conversations should not be for white practitioners to stop practicing yoga, but rather for them “to please take a moment to look outside of yourself and understand how the history of yoga practice in the United States is intimately linked to larger forces”—such as colonization, oppression, and the fact that a devotional practice that was free of cost for thousands of years is now being marketed and sold.

As an Indian-American teacher, practitioner, and writer, I often ponder why this means so much to me and why I can't offer simple bullet points for what makes something "appreciative" versus "appropriative" of yoga. I just know when I start to feel sick or hurt—like at a conference table when an administrator suggests that Eastern elements, such as bells used to train the mind to focus on the present ([dhyana](#)), will threaten the comfort of white American practitioners. Or when the young CEO of a new yoga organization asks me where she can get her 300-hour yoga certification done the fastest, missing that yoga is a lifelong process of balanced living. Or when I see social media celebrities and yoga advertisements promoting athletic, model-like bodies in sexy apparel, potentially encouraging more attachment to items and creating insecurities rather than relieving people of suffering. Or when I'm walking by a shop with my parents, only to see their confusion over why holy Hindu scriptures—which my father can read, being literate in Sanskrit—were printed on a hoodie and tossed into a sale pile.

"I think they don't realize that these are not just designs. They are words that carry deep meaning for people," my father says.



Ask these questions to deepen your understanding around cultural appropriation.

Questions to Ask about Cultural Appropriation

His sentiments make me realize that many Western yoga companies and consumers are unaware of what they are branding and buying. And that's what we need to change together, by asking deeper questions such as:

- “Do I really understand the history of the yoga practice I’m so freely allowed to practice today that was once ridiculed and prohibited by colonists in India?”
- “As I continue to learn, am I comfortable with the practices and purchases I’m choosing to make, or should I make some changes?”
- “Does the practice I live promote peace and integrity for all?”

Educating ourselves, like the practice of yoga, can be seen as an evolutionary process. Start where you are. You may have already developed a lot of awareness that is becoming more finely tuned. And for some—Indian or not Indian, experienced yoga practitioners or not—this article is a first-time exposure to something you never realized.

About the author

Rina Deshpande is a teacher, writer, and researcher of yoga and mindfulness practices. Having grown up with Indian yoga philosophy, she rediscovered its profound value as a New York City public school teacher. For the past 15 years,



she has practiced and shared the benefits of yoga across the globe. After studying yoga and mindfulness as self-regulation at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, she designs curriculum for science research and K–12 education. She is the author of *Jars of Space*, a new book of handwritten and illustrated yogic poetry. Learn more at [@rinathepoet](https://twitter.com/rinathepoet) or rinadeshpande.com.

Why Your Yoga Class Is So White

The practice seriously lacks diversity—but some studios are trying to change that.

ROSALIE MURPHY, JUL 8, 2014



Teacher J. Cole Thomas leads students Rochelle Citizen (left) and Kris Williams (right) in tree pose.
ROSALIE MURPHY

Thick, glossy copies of *LA Yoga*, *Yoga Journal*, and *Yoga Magazine* cover the rickety folding table in the lobby of Green Tree Yoga and Meditation. The magazines share tales from Malibu, Santa Monica, and Pasadena. Nearly every spread features a thin woman, usually in slim yoga pants and a tight tank, stretching her arms toward the sky or closing her eyes in meditation. Nearly all of these women are white.

But in South Los Angeles, where Green Tree opened last year, fewer than one percent of residents look like the people in those pictures.

“You can look at all those journals and you’ll not see one woman of color,” said Raja Michelle, herself a white woman, who founded the studio. “We associate yoga with being skinny, white, and even upper class.”

“You go to classes and you’re the only black person, or there are very few,” said Robin Rollan, who practices yoga in New York and D.C. and runs the popular blog [Black Yogis](#). “People who find my blog say, ‘I thought I was the only one.’”

The magazine images may seem like stereotypes, but they're grounded in reality: About one in every 15 Americans practices yoga, according to a 2012 Yoga Journal study, and more than four-fifths of them are white.

"Racism is so implicit that you never even notice that it's a white girl on the cover every single time," added Amy Champ, a PhD from the University of California, Davis, who wrote her dissertation on American yoga. "But when you begin to ask yourself, 'What does yoga have to do with my community?', then you begin to question all these inequities."

L.A. yoga studios are heavily concentrated in wealthy white neighborhoods. In a corner storefront beside a tattoo parlor and across from a used car dealership, Green Tree recognizes that religious, economic and social divisions underlie yoga's racial divide. Its neighborhood is about 80 percent black and 20 percent Latino. Household incomes hover around L.A.'s average, but crime rates are high and college diplomas are rare.

When students arrive for Green Tree's ten weekly classes, they borrow mats and drop donations (the studio recommends \$5) into a basket in the back. There are no mirrors, no candles, and there is strictly no preaching, because there are 12 churches less than a mile away. Yoga's cultural divide begins with its fluid status as both sport and spiritual exercise.

For Americans unaffiliated with a faith tradition, Champ said, yoga often becomes a spiritual activity. But in religious communities, it's a little more awkward.

"This community is kind of steeped in Christian fundamentalism," said J. Cole Thomas, one of Green Tree's volunteer teachers. "You have to have an education about yoga. Otherwise people think it's some kind of devil-worship."

A 2009 study in the *Journal of Religion and Health* found that 63 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Hispanic Americans pray to improve their health. Only 17 and 12 percent, respectively, reported relying on an alternative spiritual practice like meditation or yoga to stay healthy, and almost everyone in that group also prays. In contrast, twice as many white Americans identify with alternative spiritual practices and don't pray at all.

"It's easier for someone who's not committed to anything to do yoga," Champ said. "Ethnicity is connected to spiritual practice. Culturally, African-Americans and other ethnic Americans have their own [spiritual culture]. To get buy-in from those communities is pretty heavy lifting."

Michelle said many local church leaders are friendly to their studio. Pastors have taken classes and asked to learn more about yoga, most regular students are members of local congregations, and Green Tree closes on Sundays. Some churches nationwide offer yoga in-house.

"I go to church, of course," said Kris Williams, who practiced yoga in Santa Monica for three years before switching to Green Tree in 2013. "But yoga is my medication. I feel good—soul, mind, and spirit in clarity."

Like Williams, more and more people have begun practicing yoga for physical health. The studio franchise Bikram has capitalized on the fad, to the point of patenting poses that “maintain optimum health and maximum function,” the company claims. In this part of L.A., though, access to any form of exercise is critical. 35 percent of adults and 30 percent of children are obese, compared to 22 and 23 percent, respectively, in L.A. County. But often, yoga is a privilege of the upper class. An average one-hour yoga class in Los Angeles costs \$17. Most require students to bring their own equipment. A mat costs around \$20; lululemon yoga pants, \$82.

Links between race and poverty are well documented, but according to Rollan, the blogger, the problem isn't that people of color can't afford yoga. They just don't value it very much.

“When people talk about money as a deterrent, I'm like, yes and no,” Rollan said. “People find money to buy thousand-dollar bags and shoes, and weaves, those cost hundreds of dollars to upkeep. But African Americans don't have a great track record when it comes to preventative health. Wellness is not really valued.”

And all those white women on billboards and in advertisements don't encourage that attitude to change. “That upscale white woman is the image of yoga,” Rollan said. “I think a lot of us see yoga as something that's not for us, because of the lack of imagery [of people of color in yoga]. It is changing, but the image of a white, affluent, thin person is still very entrenched.”

“We're bridging a gap of people of color being certified teachers,” said Michelle. She hopes to offer the program annually, in part because the fees from 20 students would cover Green Tree's rent for the year, but also to provide a fresh supply of teachers for L.A. studios. Rollan believes more teachers of color will help change that. Green Tree has six active teachers—two white, three black, and one Hispanic. The studio is offering its first teacher-training program this fall. Ordinarily, the 200-hour program required for certification costs about \$3,000—much more prohibitive than the price of classes. Relying on volunteer leaders, Michelle will offer the program to Green Tree students for \$500 and to outside students for \$1,500.

“The black community has worked really hard to create empowerment and support each other, and the game is ultimately integration, not separation,” Michelle said. “There's something really cool about seeing all these beautiful women, different sizes, different ages—what is it except for unifying?”

ROSALIE MURPHY is a writer based in Los Angeles.