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Yoga, Sexual Violation and Discourse: Reconfigured Hegemonies and Feminist Voices

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ABSTRACT

What can we learn from cultural practices that are simultaneously narrated as the cause and cure for sexual violation? In recent years, yoga has come to exemplify one such practice. The world of yoga has been roiled by accusations of violation, yet yoga has also gained prominence as a therapeutic tool and even as a policy recommendation to reduce assault. I analyse such competing rhetoric from India and the United States to shed light on how patriarchal and capitalist discourses can gain new vitality in the name of contesting violations they enable. Such cultural logics frame yoga-themed narratives solicited and archived under the sign of the #MeToo hashtag. Cultivating yoga as a feminist practice requires us to examine more radical visions found before and beyond #MeToo, exemplified within memoir and fiction.

KEYWORDS

Yoga; sexual violation;
#MeToo; neoliberalism; India;
United States

Well before the hashtag #MeToo, the world of twenty-first-century yoga has been roiled by high-profile cases of sexual harassment and abuse. In the same historical period, yoga has also been extolled as a therapeutic tool to treat violation and even as a public policy recommendation to reduce assault. To what ends does a cultural practice like yoga become narratable as both cause and cure for sexual violation? What implications do the tensions in this discourse hold for contemporary feminist critique? I argue that this phenomenon reveals how patriarchal and capitalist discourses can potentially gain new strength in the guise of contesting sexual violation, while I illuminate how feminist literary voices can challenge such reconfigured hegemonies.

Through textual analysis of twenty-first-century rhetoric from India and the United States, I investigate a transnational Anglophone discourse of yoga for several reasons. Most broadly, discourse matters because it reveals normative assumptions that shape conditions of possibility. Yoga offers a particularly instructive discourse because it is both a transformative person-making project and a commodifiable market practice popular in India and the US. The yoga industry has been valued globally at \$80 billion USD, with \$16 billion dollars in the US alone, and India's market share is estimated at Rs 490 billion (Ipsos Public Affairs 2016; Sharma 2016). Yoga practitioners, especially in the US, are likely to be women (Park, Braun, and Siegel 2015, 462), while influential authorities within the practice are still likely to be men. Yoga thus exemplifies a practice in dialogue

with gendered inequalities that remodulate themselves in capitalist configurations: two conditions that conduce to concentrations of power that enable sexual violation.

As the practice has expanded, media reports, political rhetoric, spiritual advice, activist campaigns, scientific research, memoir, and fiction have all invested yoga with particular imaginative power. While this imaginative work takes place in many languages, English has been historically important for the development of the practice (Singleton 2010; Aravamudan 2006). India looms large in this history as the self-presented birthplace of yoga, while the United States represents a dominant market space in the globalised yoga industry. Looking at Anglophone discourses in this landscape can shed light on both the transnationally shared and the nationally inflected currents that shape yoga's contribution to ways of thinking about sexual violation.

My argument is informed by feminist critiques of neoliberalism in the context of expanding transnational capitalisms. Throughout this article, I integrate three theoretical perspectives. First, I take a feminist lens to discourses of yoga to analyse the ways they produce and reproduce gendered hierarchies. Yoga's broader benefit flows to masculine authority have been political, such as the making of militant young men in India; devotional, exemplified by religious and secular celebrity cultures; and financial, since yoga-oriented commercial empires are often headed by men (such as Swami Ramdev in India or Chip Wilson in North America). Despite (and because of) high female participation, yoga is intimately tied to diverse structures of patriarchal inequality that, as Vrushali Patil contends, are 'always already imbricated within multiple axes of power that are advanced by, complicit in, and often the vehicle for various border crossings' (Patil 2013, 848). Such mobile gendered inequalities shape the practice as it expands.

Second, I analyse yoga from a perspective critical of expanding capitalisms and their neoliberal logics. In this capacity, I join forces with feminist critique that has stressed the salience of capitalist norms to gendered inequality. As capitalist practices have expanded, they have been supported by new logics that redefine freedom as autonomous choice-making in the market (Harvey 2005, 7). Yoga benefits from neoliberal assumptions that encourage individuals to perfect their lives through market choices. The practice has grown in popularity with women in part because of its compatibility with neoliberal feminism, articulated by Catherine Rottenberg as a stance that 'clearly avows gender inequality' yet 'simultaneously disavows the socio-economic and cultural structures shaping our lives' (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020, 5). Considering these logics within yoga discourse, I build on the work of Andrea R. Jain, who critiques modern capitalism as the factor that unifies globalising yoga and reproduces gendered inequalities within the practice (Jain forthcoming). My approach evaluates interconnections between gendered inequality and neoliberal logics as they shape responses to sexual violation.

Finally, I advance the perspective that sexual violation in yoga is often indebted to broader projects of gendered submission that reveal intimacies between authoritarian and neoliberal structures. Yoga's history of sexual violation is often explained with recourse to important genealogies in which liberation and wellbeing are promised through social or spiritual submission: the instrumental violation of sexual bodies can be rationalised as a path towards a greater good, such as enlightenment. When yoga is presented as a prevention or therapy for sexual violation, in contrast, it tends to animate neoliberal concepts of individual self-management that compensate for the failings of modern public institutions (such as law or health care). On the surface, such an

approach appears to be the antithesis of submission to authoritarian structures. Yet it is precisely by emphasising freedom through individual responsibility that neoliberal discourses can conceal their own projects of submission to specific norms and institutions. I thus elaborate on Farah Godrej's claim that contemporary postural yoga's capacity to formulate neoliberal subjects may open the door for yoga to participate, often unwittingly, in broader projects that encourage submission to political, capitalist, and gendered hierarchies (2017, 785).

These three perspectives are woven together throughout this article. In the first section, I chart how yoga has been implicated in histories of sex, violation, and gendered inequality. In the second section, I argue that patriarchal and capitalist discourses can develop new rhetorical strength by contesting violations. Even therapeutically beneficial projects may control vocabularies in ways that potentially leave hierarchical structures undisturbed. Three cases – Isha Yoga, a US crowdfunding campaign, and trauma-sensitive yoga – reveal this logic operating in both India and the US, within both spiritual and postural industries, and across both devotional and scientific discourse. Yoga-themed survivor testimonies solicited through #MeToo enter into, and exemplify, this broader cultural logic. The marketplace, with its larger replication of gender norms and inequalities, becomes their archive. Yet valuable feminist critique can also be found. In the third section, I offer two short readings of memoir and fiction about sexual violation and yoga to show how the narrative approaches of two women writers expose underlying structures of power. These texts have been selected to indicate the possibility of such critique within Indian and US writing, across scholarly and popular genres, and in relation to both devotional and nondevotional discourse. It is my hope that yoga survivor stories narrated under the sign of #MeToo can move beyond the first form of patriarchal and neoliberal governmentalities, where they are often embedded, towards the second form of structural critique, which shares the intersectional social justice orientation of Tarana Burke's 2007 original Me Too movement.

Yoga, sex and violation

Sex has long been vital to yoga as a chance to manipulate the cycle of life. As Joseph Alter argues, within 'the heart of yoga' lies 'the physiology of sexual power' (2011, 158). Although—or perhaps because—yogis in classical texts were sometimes thought to transcend ordinary sexual desire (Flood 2004, 79), they were often released to engage in actual sex. Tantric rituals allowed male practitioners to instrumentalise female bodies (Flood 2004, 107); yogis in folklore appeared sexually powerful (White 2009); and ascetics in the colonial period had wives, concubines, and children (Pinch 2006, 160–61). Sex could be seen as a force to improve yogic practice under gendered as well as caste-based hierarchies that privileged the spiritual seeking of particular men.

By the mid-twentieth century, many practitioners appeared more interested in the reverse set of benefits: yogic practice was promoted to improve sex. Pandit Shiv Sharma, an Ayurvedic physician and Indian Member of Parliament in the late 1960s and 70s, produced what Alter calls 'the first book in what has subsequently become a discrete sub-genre describing how to perform asana and pranayama in order to increase sexual stamina, potency and pleasure' (2011, 134). Gurus generated a spiritual-sexual babble (Ara-vamudan 2006, 253); Tantra gained a reputation as a sexualised yogic practice, promoted

by Western celebrities like Sting (Urban 2003, 2015); Western scholars began to write about religious erotics (Doniger 1973; Kripal 1995); and advice manuals proliferated. American hip hop now exhorts its listeners to 'Let yo booty do that yoga' (Monae and Jidenna 2015), the *Times of India* advises how yoga can improve sex (Mumbai Mirror 2016), and smartphone apps offer guided experiences ('Yoga for Better Sex (IOS, Android), Gadgets Now' 2016). Such discourse has given female practitioners new ways to advocate for sexual pleasure, especially beyond heterosexual marriage. Yet it has also continued to reinforce gendered hierarchies in which bodies are often valued as sexual objects of male desire and commodified within capitalist contexts.

This remaking of yogic sex for a politics of pleasure has thus remained remarkably compatible with narratives of harassment, abuse and rape in the practice. Paramahansa Yogananda, Sathya Sai Baba, Swami Muktananda, Amrit Desai, John Friend, Bikram Choudhary, Ruth Lauer-Manenti, Manousso Manos, Pattabhi Jois, Kaushtub Desikachar, and many other prominent individuals have been accused of sexual violations. Yogic institutions such as the Satyananda Ashram in Australia ('Report of Case Study No. 21' 2016), the religious group Adhyatmik Vishwa Vidyalaya in India (Safi 2017), and yoga centres associated with the Hindu right have been accused of child abuse, rape, and sexual torture (Haneef 2017; Philip 2017). Numerous discourses, including religious histories of instrumental sexuality, countercultural quests for sexual liberation, and neoliberal beauty ideals, have all helped to shape the idea, central to diverse formations of gendered inequality, that certain bodies are available for sexual manipulation.

While many narratives of violation predated the 2017 surge in the #MeToo hashtag, new testimonies were also produced under the explicit sign of #MeToo. The US Instagram celebrity Rachel Brathen, in a callout for #MeToo yoga stories on the internet, received hundreds of accounts, while US media began to report on the 'open secret of sexual abuse in yoga' (Leitsinger 2018). In Bengaluru, women influenced by #MeToo created a comic strip, 'The Illustrated Women's Guide to Yogabuse', to expose violations within Indian postural practice (Dhar 2018; Dharmadhikari 2018). #MeToo has offered an opportunity for survivors to produce important testimonies, but—as I will explore—it has also offered an opportunity for patriarchal and neoliberal forms of authority to reconstitute themselves.

Yoga's patterns of violation take shape within diverse cultural logics produced through gendered and capitalist inequalities. While there have been accusations of abuse levelled against female authority figures, the vast majority of the accused are men, which indicates the ongoing salience of patriarchal structures. Equating such authority figures with broader goods and values, as yogic systems often do, makes sexual access to their bodies seem synonymous with these goods and values—a logic that interconnects gendered hierarchies with economic ones. Leaders embody symbolic capital, while followers or students often experience the precarities of labour. Gurus can hint to disciples that secret ritual practices will promote enlightenment (Caldwell 2001, 18–19), while teachers can leverage student trust in their professional beneficence (Goldberg 2016; Leitsinger 2018). The inequality of the distribution of tangible and intangible resources renders sexual violation not only possible, but potentially an extension of the asymmetries between capital and labour. Such structures not only reflect but also perpetuate gendered inequalities. The changing modern conditions that brought yogic authorities into celebrity and consumer culture have produced new anxieties about masculine authority. As yogic

authorities compete in a transnational attention economy, their power must be endlessly and repeatedly confirmed to the public as well as to the self. Epistemologies of entitlement, coupled with anxiety, have overlapped to produce regimes of disciplinary power on the ground of sex.

Reconfiguring hegemonies

Feminist activism has long promoted attention to sexual violation in India, where gender violence is considered a systemic problem. Public discourse on sexual assault in India reflects diverse explanatory narratives, ranging from victim-blaming to monstrous masculinity to inequality and poverty (Simon-Kumar 2014). While media formations in the Global North have unwittingly revived colonial-era constructions of India as a land of rapists, Indian newspapers have documented a wealth of local protests and social activism against sexual violence (Patil and Purkayastha 2018). Indian feminist groups have orchestrated campaigns to assert women's rights to public spaces, shifting away from 1970s and 80s concerns for women as victims towards an emphasis on affirmative sexuality (Taneja 2019). Indeed, advocating for gender justice in the wake of prominent rape cases has prompted new Indian youth activism that melds depoliticised neoliberal feminisms with more radical critiques of gendered structural inequality (Gilbertson 2018). Many Indian initiatives have met with mixed results. In 2013, the judicial Verma Committee Report offered a transformative reframing of gender violence, and in its wake, India updated its sexual violence laws and introduced new legislation on workplace sexual harassment (Lodhia 2015). However, given legal ambiguities, institutional complicities, and entrenched public cultures of rape and harassment, many feminists argue that the law alone cannot adequately prevent or address sexual violation (Dutta and Sircar 2013, 300).

In this context, yoga has emerged as a politically useful practice that resonates with feminist concerns for personal and social transformation, rising Hindu nationalist interest in solutions that can be presented as indigenous, and neoliberal state tactics that individualise responsibility. Yoga appears to offer an Indian solution to a globally visible problem at an astonishingly low cost. In 2013, the energy minister of Karnataka, Shobha Karandlaje, argued that yoga could serve as an effective way for India to address rape. *The Times of India* reported her as saying 'Men's thought process can be directed towards something positive and constructive. This can be achieved through yoga. ... Yoga can serve as the most cost-effective and preventive medicine' ('Yoga Can Help Prevent Rape: Karnataka Minister' 2013). These claims attract some popular support. After another politician, Murli Manohar Joshi, made a similar claim in 2015 ('Yoga Will Bring Down Rapes' 2015), Rediff.com asked readers whether they agreed with Joshi about yoga for rape prevention. As of 15 January 2018, 67% of the 2535 survey respondents agreed ('VOTE: Can the Yoga Pill Prevent Rape?' 2015). While members of the Hindu right tend to dismiss sexual violence as a Western problem (McCartney 2018, 749), proffering yoga for prevention can be positively received by right-wing constituencies. This political discourse suggests expedient uses of yoga as part of India's rising citizenship-making regimes. When presented as an opportunity for men to perfect their masculinity rather than for women to claim empowerment, yoga does not threaten existing hierarchies, expose gendered inequalities, or support survivors seeking redress, yet it appeals to neo-traditionalists seeking what can be presented as indigenous solutions as

well as to middle classes allured by yoga's global popularity and understandably sceptical of state delivery in law or health. Such framings can allow patriarchal and capitalist agents to reconstitute themselves in the name of contesting sexual violation.

Engineering devotional discourses

Prominent Indian religious leaders have used national attention to sexual violence to reformulate and even expand their own authority. The rhetoric of the Indian spiritual entrepreneur Jaggi Vasudev, leader of the influential institution Isha Yoga, illuminates this dynamic. Isha Yoga is a transnational enterprise that approaches yoga as a pragmatic technology of 'inner engineering' to manage hypermodern lives (Waghorne 2014). Jaggi Vasudev, often known as Sadhguru, has explained rape in the following terms: 'It needs to be understood that though there may be a sexual stimulus to rape, it is not about sexuality alone. It is about the power to possess' (Sadhguru 2015). On the surface, some of this rhetoric is compatible with feminist perspectives that explain sexual violation through theories of power. But the statement goes on to attribute these acts of possession to early childhood experiences, such as a mother force-feeding her child (Sadhguru 2015).

If we approve one forceful act, the other one will naturally evolve out of it. This starts from the home situation. If you can force-feed your child, you can be forcefully sexed also, tomorrow. I want you to understand this, this is how it starts. If you think you can force-feed your child, if you think force is okay as long as you get to do what you want to do, then everything else follows (Sadhguru 2015).

Jaggi Vasudev's explanation—addressed implicitly to mothers—suggests that sexual violence reflects a delayed rebellion against female power exerted in early childhood. This point of view works politically to make maternal subjects potentially responsible for patriarchal cycles of violence. This rhetoric goes even further by inviting middle-class followers (the target audience for Isha Yoga) to equate rape with shopping:

The fundamental thing is that one wants to possess, humiliate, and subjugate another human being. This is happening because of a certain level of inadequacy, a certain level of incompleteness from within – that only by possessing something will you feel a little better. Whether to fulfill this possession you go shopping or you go raping, it's the same thing (Sadhguru 2015).

These statements appear to critique capitalist consumption, and they appear to critique patriarchal sexual violence. Yet effectively they do neither. Instead, these statements invite middle-class followers, especially women, to think of their positionality within consumption-oriented economies as 'the same' as that of a rapist. The statement redirects attention away from blaming or punishing the agents of sexual violence towards an intensified focus on implicitly female projects of self-improvement.

Such statements reconstitute new forms of patriarchal and neoliberal authority for Isha Yoga. Opposed to the force-feeding parent, which is implicitly the mother, the guru emerges as the alternative parent—a father, not a mother—who operates through consent. While structural critiques of sexual violation might threaten the concentrations of power that Vasudev, as the male head of a lucrative spiritual empire, exemplifies, his discourses on sexual violation reframe him through neoliberal forms of authority-making that emphasise his consensual power to guide individual transformation. Because his rhetoric constructs middle-class followers as analogous to rapists, it gives

them a problem that the technologies of Isha Yoga are designed to solve. Because controlling shopping habits is presented as relevant to reducing rape, followers are encouraged to direct their attention toward personal self-perfection in ways that make them more reliant on submission to the social norms that underpin Isha Yoga's spiritual guidance.

These logics shape the ground that #MeToo discourse now enters. In a televised interview with three young women at Sophia College for Women in Mumbai, posted to YouTube under the hashtag #MeToo, Jaggi Vasudev responded to a young woman who asked how survivors might move forward without guilt. The terms of her question reflect patriarchal power structures in which survivors of sexual violation are implicitly expected to feel guilty. Vasudev responded, 'This is a choice we have—either we can become wise with it or we can become wounded with it' ('Sadhguru on MeToo Movement—Sadhguru At SCW' 2018). Using language that verges on blaming survivors for their pain, he declared it 'fashionable' and even 'stupid' to suffer, because such physical violation is part of the past rather than part of the present moment to which yogic practices encourage attentiveness. Individual choice-making, rather than critique of the concentrations of power that enable violation, reflects a marker of spiritual advancement. While Vasudev's discourse promotes skilful mastery over traumatic memory—a worthy therapeutic project—it remains markedly dismissive of sexual violation. This explanation lets patriarchal norms off the hook, so that through conspicuous silence about who performs acts of violation, gendered inequalities remain undisturbed. Individuals are expected to confront problems of violation through personal mental management with no recourse to institutions of law, health, advocacy, or politics. Even spiritual community thoroughly invisibilises itself. Under the guise of perfecting control over their individual experience, survivors submit to a larger worldview of which they may not be aware, but through which institutions like Isha Yoga can derive benefit.

Such leaders can thus contest sexual violation through discourses that reformulate their authority within gendered hierarchies and capitalist structures. Constituting spiritual seekers as choice-makers who operate within a metaphorically free market of options, such gurus align their followers with the logic of capitalism. By critiquing the family as an origin point for violence, Jaggi Vasudev's rhetoric asserts the need for gurus as private providers of diminishing family and public services. In 2015, for instance, yoga received advantageous status within India's tax code on the grounds of charitable provision—a potential windfall for Indian spiritual entrepreneurs (Murlidharan 2015). These cultural logics and structural changes add a new dimension to what Sarah Sharma has exposed in yoga's ability, by mitigating the stresses of capitalist life, to expand capitalist formations. As she puts it, the practice can 'extend the limits of capitalism via a limitless body' (Sharma 2014, 100). Framing yoga to hyperfocus on the individual self potentially mystifies and even reinforces the structural norms that produce this self as isolated.

Seeking grassroots support

This cultural logic appears, with different intersectional implications, in US discourse as well. To be sure, despite interest in yoga for sex offenders (Derezotes 2000), the United States has not witnessed India's level of political speculation on yoga as an assault prevention tool. Feminist anti-rape movements in the US have taken a wide range of approaches, including criminal justice systems, therapeutic initiatives, community-based direct action

strategies, and campaigns to shift social norms of gender and sexuality (Baker and Bevacqua 2018). Such efforts have sometimes reflected neoliberal approaches, often in partnership with the state (Bumiller 2008), while activist initiatives have also pursued feminist critique of systemic injustice shaped by intersecting histories of race, class, gender, and ethnicity (White 2001). Yet within this broader landscape, yoga has entered a neoliberal discourse that sometimes resonates with the cultural logic that Isha Yoga promotes.

We can witness this cultural logic at work in a 2013 US-based campaign on the fundraising platform Indiegogo called 'Stop Sexual Abuse in Yoga – I Am My Own Guru', run by yoga teacher and wellness entrepreneur Lucas Rockwood. In the genre of popular bracelet campaigns in which politics is pursued as a project of distinction, the campaign sold bracelets with the phrase 'I am my own guru' to raise money for a charity that supports yoga for female survivors of sexual abuse (Rockwood 2013). The campaign aimed, laudably, to educate prospective donors by highlighting sexual violations in the world of yoga. In material terms, the project was not a great success. According to Indiegogo, it was backed by 112 contributors and raised \$3,427 USD out of a desired \$10,000. Nor does it appear to have received wide attention, although it was covered in the US blog *Yoga Dork* and the magazine *VICE* (Syfret 2019; 'I Am My Own Guru' Campaign Launches in Response to Yoga Sex Scandals, n.d.). What makes this project worth contemplating, I suggest, is how a cultural logic of reformulated patriarchal and neoliberal authority might unfold at a grassroots level within the US postural yoga industry.

Why would a project developed to critique sexual violence in yoga suggest yoga as a natural therapy for survivors? This slippage appears to depend on the implications of the word 'guru', which (presumably unintentionally) outsources threats of violation to a South Asian religious paradigm of hierarchical knowledge transfer. By inviting practitioners to declare that they are their own gurus, rather than the disciples of one, the campaign implies that following an external 'guru'—an emblem for a South Asian leader to whom devotion is offered—is inherently suspect. This logic relies on the assumption that a 'guru' is a leader of South Asian origin, or a person (of any origin) operating within a South Asian cultural structure, and that this role is authoritarian or exploitative.

This critique can animate racialised assumptions about the dangerous alterity of the guru in a US public sphere. As Andrea R. Jain has argued, a focus on the guru as an inherently exploitative leader can replicate Orientalist fears of South Asian despotism:

though yoga gurus certainly can slip into authoritarianism, the assumption that corruption is somehow inherent in that model betrays an orientalist stereotype of South Asians, their religions, and other cultural products as despotic in contrast to white, so-called democratic religions or cultures (2016).

When the word 'guru' is presented as problematic, it is understood as a style of South Asian religious leadership that has long raised US anxieties about sinister, yet seductive, Oriental charlatans—a sign of the essentialised despotism to which Jain alludes.

But when the 'guru' becomes the self and, in a US multicultural context, is no longer necessarily racialised as South Asian—'I am my own guru'—then the campaign reclaims the concept of gurus for neoliberal self-management. Gurus appear dangerous when racialised as South Asian others who demand devotional submission, safe when racialised as a style of multicultural selfhood. This seeming liberation, I suggest, not only indicates potential Orientalist othering at work. It also performs and conceals the submissions

demanded through neoliberal projects of self-management. By subscribing to the rhetoric that practitioners are subject to no external authority, such practitioners may be conscripted into new modes of conformity, exemplified by the wearing of the bracelet. When individuals declare 'I am my own guru', their liberation appears limited to market transactions and consumer self-fashioning.

The larger logic is not dissimilar from that found in Isha Yoga. Whereas Jaggi Vasudev's rhetoric aims to reassure followers that twenty-first-century gurus like him are consensual and democratic, 'I am my own guru' promises participants democratic access to the top of the pyramid of gendered, racialised, and capitalist inequality. Just as the idea that 'everyone can be an entrepreneur' encourages subjects to enter the inequalities of capitalism under the guise that they are the capitalists, not the labour, the promise of being one's own guru threatens to mystify, under the guise of contesting, broader concentrations of power. As Rockwood sought to promote his own teaching services through the campaign (they were offered, unsuccessfully, for contributions to charity), contesting sexual violation allows him the potential to reconstitute his own authority.

Pursuing scientific legitimacy

Projects that explicitly resituate yoga away from spiritual or religious discourse into secular biomedical institutions reveal related silences. One place in which this construction occurs is trauma-sensitive yoga (TSY), also known as trauma-informed yoga, which offers a therapy for survivors of sexual violence. This approach was developed and branded at the US-based Trauma Centre in 2003. From that point of origin, it has expanded formally in many parts of the world, with scholarship documenting its promise as a treatment for PTSD (Rousseau and Cook-Cottone 2018). The approach is not yet well-established in India, although yoga has been used with some success to treat traumatic experiences there (Telles et al. 2010).

TSY is not only a postural regime but also a discursive project that promotes a highly controlled English. This claim may seem counterintuitive because trauma-sensitive yoga was designed as an alternative to talk therapy. Testimony is not invited in TSY classes (West, Liang, and Spinazzola 2017, 181). Yet attention to word choice is extremely deliberate. Heavy use of conditionals and modifiers (perhaps, may) and passive tenses that bypass the 'I' are often recommended. Facilitators 'ask' or 'invite' rather than 'instruct' practitioners; they forego the word 'pose' in favour of 'shape' or 'form' (West, Liang, and Spinazzola 2017, 180). Descriptions of trauma-informed yoga in scientific papers note that 'simple, noninterpretative language without metaphors is used', and instructors '[use] key words such as "notice" and "allow"' (Kolk et al. 2014, e2). As one study emphasised, 'The classes were developed to create safety and predictability for the participants to facilitate better the practice of making choices in their bodies based on what they felt in the moment' (Price et al. 2017, 301). As the practice constructs the individual body as a site for self-governance, the restrained English promoted by TSY appears effective in helping survivors make valuable gains around their own wellbeing. This highly restricted language offers feminist potential through its contribution to the actual work of healing survivors.

Yet it is worth asking if this controlled vocabulary, like that of Isha Yoga and the Indiegogo campaign, also allows broader structures of inequality to remain undisturbed. If TSY

envisioning an isolated self-governing selfhood that cannot be placed in a larger story about inequality and power—in other words, in a story that reveals how choices are constructed as available options—it potentially leaves individuals vulnerable to further structures of abuse. In this sense, TSY may be read within a broader genealogy of American therapy that, as Dana L. Cloud has argued, ‘translates political questions into psychological issues to be resolved through personal, psychological change’ (1998, xxi). The idea that the ‘I’ is in control may be what precisely blinds subjects to the ways they are not in control—thus ironically normalising submissiveness to larger and often invisible regimes of gendered and capitalist inequality. Practices like TSY may construct individuals as subjects in control of their own freedom, while they may invisibly and unwittingly reinstate these individuals as objects of inequitable regimes that benefit patriarchal and capitalist structures. It is thus significant that new guidelines to clinical practitioners, developed by Danielle Rousseau, Kimberleigh Weiss-Lewit, and Mark Lilly in 2019, emphasise attention to power dynamics within yoga as part of referring clients to yoga for sexual trauma (Rousseau, Weiss-Lewit, and Lilly 2019).

Containing #MeToo testimony

These broader logics of reconfigured hegemonies shape the conditions under which #MeToo produces new testimonies of sexual violation in yoga. Rachel Brathen, the US yoga celebrity who recruited #MeToo narratives and spoke out strongly against sexual violation, exemplifies such unwitting transmutation. In 2017, Brathen put out a call for survivors to send her stories of their experiences. Receiving over three hundred accounts, she published anonymised selections on her website (Rachel Brathen Collects More Than 300 #MeToo Yoga Stories: The Community Responds 2017).¹ By 2019, the #MeToo narratives posted on her personal website in 2017 had migrated, in selective form, into blog posts on her corporate website (Brathen 2019).

These testimonies now live within the heart of yoga as a lifestyle branding exercise: they become tributes of invisible submission to the new, trademarked, corporate category of the YogaGirl® (Brathen 2019). The marketplace serves as an archive for survivor testimony, selecting and limiting which stories are readily available. These testimonies work to reinforce Brathen’s branded construct of the ‘YogaGirl’—the eternally youthful, potentially infantilised, feminine ideal of perfected positivity—without calling attention to broader systems of gendered or capitalist inequality. As a result, while survivor narratives are usefully amplified through YogaGirl’s sizeable social media platform, they are also compelled to serve corporate interests and gendered ideologies that have created important conditions for sexual violation in the first place. #MeToo appears to be a resonant discourse of testimony precisely because it enshrines individual voices while insisting that they are not alone. But #MeToo’s commendable ability to prioritise autobiographical narrative may not protect it against the continued ability of patriarchal and neoliberal forces to reanimate themselves through the very act of amplifying those individual voices.

Feminist alternatives

These cultural logics do not go undefined. Feminist writing from India and the United States has powerfully articulated explicit challenges to structural problems of gendered

and capitalist inequality. Taking us well before and beyond the #MeToo hashtag, these writings show the importance of looking beyond the hashtag to help guide its potential direction. I now explore these visions in the writings of Sarah Caldwell and Shweta Taneja.

In a 2001 memoir and scholarly essay 'The Heart of the Secret', the US scholar Sarah Caldwell invites us to consider the power of metafictional narrative techniques as the simultaneous site of concealment and revelation around sexual violation. Her essay reflects on ritual sexual practices within Swami Muktananda's Siddha Yoga in the early 1980s. While Muktananda was revered as a liberated leader, he was also accused of exploiting young women. In the wake of these accusations, Siddha Yoga experienced dramatic decline (Jain 2014, 192). As a resident of his ashram, yet not invited into these rituals, Caldwell grapples with how Muktananda could be understood as both authentic Tantric leader and injurious sexual abuser. Her essay was published shortly before her withdrawal from academia, a move that occurred during a period when the work of Caldwell and other Western scholars of South Asian studies came under attack from Hindu right-wing activists for their analyses of sex and eroticism (Taylor 2011, 157). This broader landscape of discursive contestation signals how disruptive the act of speaking about sexual violation can be.

Caldwell exposes how powerful figures use metafictional stories to shape invisible norms that benefit patriarchal structures. She describes how Muktananda encourages his followers to read a study of the Shaiva master Abhinivagupta in a Tantric ritual where all that is forbidden—sex, alcohol, meat—becomes the vehicle for spiritual ecstasy (Caldwell 2001, 14). In a second meta-moment, Muktananda compels a proxy to tell his followers a story of a yogi who can perform extraordinary feats with his sexual fluids (Caldwell 2001, 19). Such stories work to shape epistemological and moral boundaries that benefit Muktananda's instrumental sex under unequal conditions. If disciples were to hear of, or experience, Muktananda's sexual encounters, they could interpret them as evidence of Muktananda's advanced yogic powers. Through the indirections of text and story, Muktananda retains both authority and deniability over these structures of meaning. He can benefit from explanatory and exculpatory readings, yet he cannot be held directly responsible for the consequences of reading the world in this manner. What Caldwell exposes, thus, is how Muktananda uses stories to normalise his perpetuation of gendered inequalities.

If Caldwell contributes to a feminist project of exposure, she herself turns to metafictional techniques to challenge Muktananda's ability to author the terms of his world. Caldwell's essay seeks to portray the world in two ways at the same time: one in which Muktananda is the controlling author and she the unwitting character, and another in which she is the author and Muktananda the character subject to her powers of representation. Rather than resolving these contradictions, Caldwell's narrative structure aims to keep them alive. The ethical value of doing so, she argues, is that it opens up the capability to hear and witness a much wider range of testimonies in ways that challenge concentrations of interpretative power. Caldwell's essay emphasises diverse accounts about the effects of Muktananda's sexual practices, which range from serious abuse to puzzled indifference to (provocatively) redemptive healing. 'I personally have found it extremely powerful and liberating to contemplate the uncomfortable dichotomy presented by the actions of the Siddha Yoga gurus', Caldwell concludes. 'It is precisely in that moment of

cognitive dissonance and emotional discomfort that the key to greater understanding can be found' (Caldwell 2001, 44). This kind of multipistemological approach can offer no clear accountability, especially in a legal sense. But drawing attention to the way stories are composed, and how they can be told from multiple angles—the collage of voices that include Caldwell's narrative 'I', Muktananda's theatrical self-direction, and the voices of survivors—pushes against an uncritical patriarchal authoritarianism as well as against a neoliberal focus on individuals responsible for their own healing. By using metafictional techniques to expose rather than to conceal, the essay offers feminist potential as a way to visibilise and critique the unequal norms that conduce to sexual violation.

If we turn to representations of yoga in popular culture, we can also find feminist critique of gendered structural violence under capitalist inequalities. Shweta Taneja, a Bengaluru-based writer of urban fantasy, addresses sexual violence at the heart of yoga traditions in her Ananyta Tantrist mystery series. The third novel in the series, *The Rakta Queen* (2018), was published in a year when #MeToo became a critical keyword in Indian social media discourse. It continues Taneja's story of a female tantrik in a male-dominated world where tantriks largely derive power by extracting female energy (shakti) through the instrumental sexual ritual known as maithuna.

The novel calls attention to what happens if feminist critiques leave structural inequalities intact. In the novel, tantriks frequently seek energy from a special category of submissive female personhood known as chandaalis. Eventually, chandaalis rise up against tantriks and become murderous agents of revenge under the leadership of a mythical Rakta Queen. In the final battle of the novel, Ananyta is herself supernaturally compelled against her will to become an incarnation of the fearsome Rakta Queen. To defeat her male opponent, she uses maithuna: she becomes a woman raping a man through yogic sex. While this might seem like a feminist revenge fantasy, this reversal does not change fundamental structures of exploitation: it only changes who benefits from these structures. The chandaalis turn from the dominated to the dominators, but they do not imagine a world which challenges the concentration of resources or the instrumental uses of different life forms.

A desire for such a new structuring principle constitutes the feminist position that Ananyta Tantrist takes as she throws off the supernatural Rakta Queen and vanquishes the murderous chandaalis. While she—like some of the voices critiqued in this article—preserves a male-led status quo, she does so explicitly questioning the broader exploitation of vulnerable subjects along intersectional lines of gender, species, and category of being. 'All tantriks reached for shakti, the energy of the universe, through some form of violence to another being', Ananyta concludes. 'Through sacrifice, through sex, extracting it forcibly and painfully out of living beings' (Taneja 2018, 312). Ending sexual violation thus demands a radical shift beyond the logic of extraction.

It is the process of becoming, and disavowing, a rapist herself that leads Ananyta to yearn for new sources of yogic energy that do not so closely resemble gendered or capitalist extraction. Reflecting on her intimacy with such destructive control, Ananyta wonders, 'But was there a new path of weaving shakti that I'd found?' (Taneja 2018, 312). While *The Rakta Queen* leaves us with no clear political answer, it suggests that a feminist path should make visible how the concealed foundations of many forms of power may rely on gendered and capitalist hierarchies. This is the challenge that remains for discourse produced under the sign of #MeToo.

Conclusion

By investigating transnational discourses that envision yoga as both cause and cure for sexual violation, we can better understand how patriarchal and capitalist structures may reconsolidate themselves through critiques of violation. Discourse produced under the #MeToo hashtag remains vulnerable to this genealogy of sometimes unwitting or inadvertent reconsolidation. But alternative sites of storytelling that shape yoga for feminist critique show that this is not the only way. These works align more powerfully with the values of Me Too, seen as a movement of social justice concerned with exposing broader structures of power.

Recognising these possibilities matters for those invested, as I am, in the world of yoga: those who reproduce, write about, and learn from the practice. Yoga claims a long history of aiming to illuminate the unseen forces that govern our perception. Yet it is also capable of offering illusions of freedom and choice in a world where gendered and neoliberal inequalities remain behind the scenes, shaping invisible conditions of possibility. To best realise the liberating potential of the practice, it is important that we consider its underlying assumptions and investments.

More broadly, feminist scholars can work to advocate for ongoing attention to how structures of inequality shape regimes of sexual violation and to advocate for visibility beyond the terms set by patriarchal or neoliberal actors. As the fiction of Shweta Taneja suggests, such a project does not need to be isolated from popular culture or divorced from readers' experiences of pleasure. We can encourage attentiveness to cultural logics before and beyond #MeToo, decentring the hashtag to allow for a more capacious vision.

Note

1. As of December 2017, these stories could be found at www.rachelbrathen.com/blog. This page in 2019 redirected to Brathen's YogaGirl website, where selected #MeToo stories are posted in blog form.

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