

**Flexible Indian Labor:  
Yoga, Information Technology Migration, and U.S. Technoculture**

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**Abstract**

In today's United States, yoga seems to provide a popular antidote to the increasing demands of technology. But, this essay contends, the practice also plays an important part in a larger cultural logic whereby labor from India nourishes a seemingly endless appetite for technological innovation in the United States. This essay shows how imaginative representations of yoga in the autobiography of the Indian guru Paramahansa Yogananda helped to create fantasies that could alleviate U.S. anxieties about technological development. The essay then exposes an inverted mirror of this cultural logic in the representation of information technology migrants from India, whose experiences of grey market exploitation in the United States show the nation's reliance on a disavowed Indian labor source. This essay contends that both the Indian yogi and the Indian technology migrant can be read as U.S. technology workers. This labor has become important both to the U.S. body politic and to the Indian state, but it can be distinctly debilitating for the Indian diaspora.

**Keywords:** Yoga; Technology; Paramahansa Yogananda; H-1B Visa

On a stressful day in the United States, you might be urged to put down your phone and go to yoga. The glow of the smartphone illuminates the grip of capitalist technology, while the yoga studio promises an antidote to technology's rule. Yet, in an influential twentieth-century Indian life narrative, an Indian master of yoga can look suspiciously like a perfected iPhone. Indeed, visions of the counterintuitive compatibility between yoga and technology are proliferating in contemporary U.S. discourse. How, and to what political ends, do these visions emerge?

This essay investigates how imaginative visions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century yoga shed light on the nexus of culture, politics, and technology, or technoculture (Penley and Ross 1991), in the United States. This approach builds upon the scholarship of Srinivas Aravamudan (2006), whose work has shown how a language he calls "Guru English" has historically portrayed Indian spiritual experience as a form of technological advancement. I suggest that this imaginative work operates in dialogue with a very different source of Indian labor: information technology professionals. Since 1990, information technology professionals from India have been able to migrate to the United States through the H-1B visa program, which created opportunities for college-educated workers in specialty professions. By the twenty-first century, these two Indian exports – yoga and information technology work – have begun to play an uncannily linked role in U.S. technoculture. Yoga and H-1B migration, I argue, constitute inverted mirrors of the same cultural logic. Both the Indian yogi and the Indian H-1B technology migrant can be read as U.S. technology workers: a labor source that has become important both to the U.S. body politic and to the Indian state.

Taken together, these two forms of migrant Indian labor uphold a shared cultural logic that serves the needs of U.S. corporate capitalism and the nationalist aspirations of a rising India. By investigating the interplay between symbolic and material worlds, we can appreciate how the U.S. has not only turned to fantasies of Indian culture to alleviate its anxieties about technology. It has also, with distinct political and cultural ambivalence, relied on the labor of Indian bodies. While yoga has been advertised by Indian yogis (and others) as a practice that enables one to enjoy the benefits of technology without falling prey to anomie and alienation, such optimistic visions are symbolically shadowed by a darker narrative of embodied Indian migrants who live and work in a grey legal economy of global traffic in technology labor. Both visions install fantasies of Indianness within the inequalities of capitalist globalization.

To investigate the cultural politics of a discourse that links yoga to the aspirations, anxieties, and labor histories of technology, this essay makes use of three approaches: cultural histories of legal and economic structures, textual analyses of literary and media rhetoric, and creative practice. It draws attention to some of the contradictions, complexities, and even abuses that structure a logic in which the United States strives to perfect its cultural relationship to technology through strategic uses of Indianness. This logic signals overlapping meanings of the word “technology.” On the one hand, technology implies the artificial creations of machine or digital culture. On the other hand, technology implies broader ideas of cultivation captured in the utopian idea of “technê” as craftsmanship or in the Foucauldian technology of the self, where individuals alter themselves in the search for “happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (1988, 18). Embodied and imaginative labor from India has helped to converge these two meanings of “technology,” but at a price.

I begin with a brief look at the U.S. and Indian intellectual context that shapes yoga’s engagement with technology, then offer a reading of a foundational Indian diasporic text, Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946). I examine how Yogananda portrays authoritative Indian yogic selfhood as advanced technology and creates a cultural logic which continues to influence the rhetoric of contemporary yoga in the United States and India. I then analyse the cultural history and media representation of Indian technology migration where a distinctly dystopian set of flexible labor practices from India underpins U.S. technological advancement. Finally, taking a step back from traditional scholarly method and voice, I end with a short memoir. Through this section, I suggest how, as a multiethnic Indian American woman with a yoga practice, I am also implicated within these interconnected cultural logics. Experimenting with how yoga prompts a counterstory, I reflect on my experience practicing yoga under the guidance of a digital teacher.<sup>1</sup> Today’s digitized yoga teacher reflects the transformation of Yogananda’s logic through structures of U.S. capitalism, racial privilege, and consumerism. I shopped for this spectre in the App store late one night when I realized that I was not ready to face my mat alone. My memoir is not above or immune to the cultural logic I describe in this essay’s analytical sections. Yet I hope it may also offer an alternative space for the diaspora to articulate more of its own stories and its own contradictions. This essay thus aims both to critique, and to contribute to, a larger imaginative economy in which technoculture in the United States relies on spiritual and embodied migrant labor from India.

### **Flexible Fantasies: The Technological Ideals of Paramahansa Yogananda**

The U.S. search for an ideal cultural relationship with technology has long relied on ideas from Asia. In *The Buddha in the Machine* (2014), a dazzling cultural account of Asian aesthetics and technology in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States, R. John Williams argues for what he calls “*Asia-as-technê*: a compelling fantasy that would posit

Eastern aesthetics as both the antidote to and the perfection of machine culture” (2014, 1). Technê, in the sense Williams attributes to Heidegger (need reference here), refers to ideals of creation through craftsmanship (Heidegger 1977, 34). As Williams argues, technê conjures a metaphysics of organic wholeness. It counterpoints “techno,” or industrial ideals of machine culture, which rely upon metaphysical divisions between self and machine. Technê offers the allure of a beautiful and unified human spirit, while techno threatens the tyranny of dehumanization. Williams argues Asian aesthetics allay fears of, and provide a solution to, the emergence of new technologies. While Williams’ cultural history refers to Chinese and Japanese aesthetics, ideas from India, too, as I suggest here, have helped to shape such cultural fantasies in the United States.

One particularly powerful vision of technê has emerged through the discourse of yoga, a transformative practice often traced to India. Never a singular or unified tradition, yoga has grown especially diverse in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yoga in this historical period can invoke classical Indian philosophies and ascetic spiritual pursuits, while it can also reflect twentieth-century transformations of these ideas through physical culture, wellness norms, and beauty ideals. In speaking about yoga, I refer to practices that may often look very different from each other. Yet these practices can perform remarkably consistent cultural work in addressing anxieties inspired by technological change such as the imperative to increase productivity or the powerful sense of being overwhelmed by devices.

Yoga’s forms of mental, spiritual and bodily cultivation have a history of integrating ideas of human flourishing with machine and digital culture. Srinivas Aravamudan shows how Indian discourses of spiritual experience – which encompass yoga – offer a vision of a supposedly ancient indigenous technê that can support and give meaning to an industrial and colonial techno. This integration of spirit with science often reflected the influence of U.S., British, and European movements, such as Theosophy and New Thought (Aravamudan 2006, 105-141; De Michelis 2004, 112-119; Goldberg 2010, Kindle Loc 893-1222). It also served the interests of Indian and Hindu nationalists. Early twentieth-century Indian writers often presented Indian mysticism as the powerful equal of Western technology, while new military technologies, such as nuclear weapons, were promoted through what Aravamudan calls a “‘Hindu sublime’ enabled by Guru English” (2006, 142). The merger of scientific rhetoric with Indian mysticism also flourished within consumer capitalism, as seen in the late twentieth- and twenty-first-century spiritual empire of Deepak Chopra (Aravamudan 2006, 259). In these discourses, making a yogic self has sometimes seemed like making a piece of technology.

We can explore this fascination with yoga and technological production in a classic guru autobiography that circulated between India and the United States in the mid-twentieth-century. This work is Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), a text that inspired many Westerners to seek spiritual enlightenment (Goldberg 2010, Kindle Loc 1959). Yogananda’s vision of yoga represented one strand of its larger transformation in twentieth-century India, when the practice was reshaped into a discipline suitable for a broader set of participants through anticolonial nationalism, muscular Christianity, new spiritual philosophies, scientific methodologies, and Western physical culture (Singleton 2010; Alter 2004).

*Autobiography of a Yogi* appeared in a period of distinct U.S. ambivalence about ideas and bodies from India. Yogananda arrived in the United States at a transitional moment when a craze for things Indian that emerged in the 1880s was giving way to tighter restrictions on migration from the subcontinent (Bald 2013, 16). As a result, Yogananda was one of comparatively few Indians who could establish a strong institutional foothold in the United States in the mid-twentieth-century.<sup>2</sup> As Sunaina Maira, Anita Mannur, and Pia Sahni have shown in the contexts of other Indian exports, a cultural fascination with Indian

practices was paradoxically framed by a larger political resistance to Indian people (Mannur and Sahni 2011; Maira 2000). Such a paradox sits at the heart of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, in which positive appraisals of "Oriental" culture contributed to a larger imperial project that deemed "Orientals" incapable of self-government (Said 1979).

Speaking against this assumption of Indian weakness, technological prowess became a defining feature of yogic selfhood in Yogananda's account. Like many others of his era, Yogananda was keen to think about the ways in which human beings could be understood as machines. Yogananda considers yogic siddhis, or what seem to be occult powers, as sophisticated forms of technology that societies may not yet have the language to understand. While gurus in his book subdue tigers bare-handed, leave their bodies, live without food, and levitate, none of these powers are presented as magic. Instead, Yogananda references Einstein and other key figures of mid-twentieth-century Western science to develop what he calls "the law of miracles" (1946, 315). The voice of the autobiography thus presents seemingly miraculous feats as facts that will one day be seen as rational technologies.

A mystically-awakened yogi, in Yogananda's view, constitutes a form of futuristic technology. In one moment of awakening, facilitated by a holy man he calls Master Mahasaya, Yogananda finds himself experiencing the world as a living cinema. After Master Mahasaya thumps Yogananda on the chest, Yogananda transforms into a new modality of vision:

As though possessing an omnipresent eye, I beheld the scenes that were behind me, and to each side, as easily as those in front. The whole spectacle of activity in that small section of Calcutta passed before me without a sound. Like a glow of fire dimly seen beneath a thin coat of ashes, a mellow luminescence permeated the panoramic view.

My own body seemed nothing more than one of the many shadows; though it was motionless, while the others flitted mutely to and fro (1946, 95).

As the street scene becomes a bioscope, or motion picture, this perspective suggests a body that sees in ways available only to the panoramic imaging techniques of the camera. Master Mahasaya turns this living camera on and off through the tactile touch sometimes referred to as shaktipat, or the transfer of divine energy through the touch of a guru. Mystical transfer again mimics technology: it is, effectively, an on-and-off switch. To become spiritually awakened is to become a master engineer, one capable of controlling the world as if it too were a set of devices. Yogananda's awakened body becomes both technological producer and technological product.

This advanced yogic selfhood anticipates and preempts twentieth-century technology. "My guru was a perfect human radio," Yogananda writes,

Just as a correctly tuned radio picks up a desired musical number out of thousands of other programs from every direction, so Sri Yukteswar had been sensitively receptive to a certain pertinent thought...out of the countless thoughts of broadcasting human minds in the world (1946, 177).

At this moment, Yogananda tells us, radio had not yet entered his world. Only later, when radio became available, did he connect the telepathy of his guru with the ways in which "age-old concepts of time and space were annihilated" by radio (1946, 176). If Yogananda were writing his *Autobiography* today, he might have compared his guru's telepathic powers to the seeming omniscience of an iPhone. Throughout his book, Yogananda repeatedly insists that guru paranormal powers unite with Western understandings of science: a claim that performs nationalist political work by challenging assumptions that the West was superior due to technological expertise. The seemingly mystical and occult powers of the guru, in his view, constitute prior technology. They seem mysterious only because Western science has yet to catch up.

As Yogananda extends the logic of a mystical technological body that already had currency in the early twentieth-century U.S., his vision of this universalist Indian body adds one crucial difference: race. Individuals of Indian ancestry were produced racially in particularly complex ways within twentieth-century U.S. history. They were seen as historically “Aryan” or “Caucasian” progenitors of twentieth-century whiteness, yet simultaneously perceived as “brown” bodies who could not qualify for the social, material, and legal benefits of such whiteness.<sup>3</sup> They were understood to originate geographically from “Asia,” but their differences in culture and appearance from East Asian migrants rendered solidarity with other “Asians” in the U.S. problematic. The passage of Indians to the United States brought colonial Orientalist categories to bear within United States borders (Menon 2006, 359–60). Moreover, Yogananda’s cosmopolitan vision of Hinduism (a concept that blurred race and religion) reflected early twentieth-century debate in India over the meaning of “Hindu.”<sup>4</sup> When Yogananda identifies technological futurity in India, he locates the idea of technological perfection within this ambivalent racial space that is at once white and not white, Asian and not Asian, colonial and not colonial, and Hindu and not Hindu.

This complex form of Indianness challenged common assumptions that technological prowess properly belonged to white Western men. Even though many readers may have seen Yogananda’s persona as fictional, his autobiography nonetheless became a “cult classic” for Western seekers who devoted themselves to his teachings (Narayan 2007, 127). This vision of Indian power inherits and furthers the kind of nationalist intellectual agenda that energized the work of Yogananda’s fellow Bengali advocate of neo-Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda. In his public lectures on yoga in the United States in the late nineteenth-century, Vivekananda often presented India as the original source for the very futurity that Americans eagerly sought. Similarly, *Autobiography* uses the rhetoric of technology to recode the idea of “Indianness.” In Yogananda’s vision, India should not be pitied for its supposed non-white inferiority. Instead, its ambivalent and flexible positioning should be taken as the vision of an emulatable future. This emphasis on the racialized Indian guru body as an advanced form of technology unsettles some of the assumptions of technology-as-whiteness that Joel Dinerstein critiques in mainstream fantasies of hypertechnology in the United States (2006).

Yogananda’s vision of yoga as a redemptive technê that unites machine culture with self-care makes spiritual development remarkably compatible with capitalist production. This ideal form of selfhood takes shape within a discourse of secrecy that produces yogic selfhood through proto-commodity development. Throughout *Autobiography*, Yogananda mentions kriya yoga, often understood as a meditative and soteriological practice is the core of his method. But *Autobiography* remains conspicuously coy about what kriya yoga actually involves. Though Yogananda contested capitalist and nationalist controls over yoga – he was keen to spread his ideas even if people could not pay much, and he argued strenuously that yoga was not simply for Indians – his approach to yoga is not exactly open-source. To learn his kriya yoga, one must join Yogananda’s Self-Realization Fellowship. In this sense, Yogananda lays out the business model for a number of twenty-first-century kriya yoga fellowships, which ask students to sign confidentiality agreements, prohibit recordings, and cultivate insider-only discussion. These practices gesture towards the intellectual property rights exemplified by the trade secret (Waghorne 2014, 289). The perfected yogic technology of the self emerges through the workings of such capitalist mechanisms. It becomes available in the United States through the gatekeeping of the Fellowship, which regulates how kriya yoga can become available for appropriation by new recruits. Yogananda’s body and autobiography simultaneously market and conceal the full promise of yoga. The yogi, as portrayed in *Autobiography*, is the living technological trade secret.

This technologized yogic self works to reconcile tensions within the internal structure of a changing Indian identity under late colonialism. Yogananda seeks to spread kriya yoga

as an Indian contribution to a capitalist U.S. *and* to reassert a romantic Indian mountain tradition outside a globalizing economic order. The technologized guru allows for this productive paradox in ideas of Indianness. Yogananda argues that gurus are iconic national signifiers of India: “The characteristic features of Indian culture have long been a search for ultimate verities and the concomitant disciple-guru relationship,” he declares (1946, 3), promulgating an essentializing assertion that already held sway in Western discourse (Narayan 1993). Far from contesting Western Orientalist stereotypes of India as a spiritual land, Yogananda enthusiastically embraced them for his own purposes. The technê of the guru legitimates both the myth of ancient Indian renunciate and the spread of yoga into capitalist America.

In the twenty-first century U.S., the symbolic promise of Yogananda’s thinking has made itself integral to the cultural work that yoga now performs. While it is unlikely that Yogananda’s love of technology was his main allure for a white Western audience, his intellectual vision, I suggest, laid the seeds for a late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century fantasy that has become increasingly powerful in recruiting new bodies to yoga. According to metastudies of yoga’s U.S. demographics, “these studies present a picture of the typical yoga practitioner as female, upper socioeconomic status, educated, middle-aged and White” (C. L. Park, Braun, and Siegel 2015, 463). Representations of yoga in popular culture have appealed to these audiences by promising a technê of bodily cultivation – presented as both ancient and hypermodern – to reduce the anxieties of their increasingly device-driven and digitized lives.

In the simplest alliance between yoga and technology in the twenty-first century, yoga is therapeutic. For practitioners who understand themselves as organic bodies surrounded by a sea of external machines, yoga promises to help individuals cope with the stresses of too much machinery. Since the first years of the new millennium, it has become routine to encounter mainstream U.S. publications offering advice columns such as “The Best Yoga Sequence to Do After Work,” where “work” is assumed to be a desk job in front of a computer and “yoga” is presumed to make this work sustainable (*Shape* 2003). Yoga is often understood to make practitioners physically flexible, by loosening muscles stiff from screen time, as well as mentally flexible, by promoting habits of dispassionate observation. In some of its forms, yoga can serve as a conduit for fantasies of an imagined ancient India that refresh the device-dependent practitioner. The sensory and visual language of U.S. studios that hang photos of Indian deities, burn incense, or present English in fonts inspired by the Devanagari script, for instance, create practice spaces that provide respite from mainstream U.S. office environments where computers, smartphones, and tablets rule.

The more penetrating aspect of Yogananda’s vision rooted in twenty-first-century U.S. culture is more than simply therapeutic. When people in the United States think of technology through yoga, they can now conceptualize themselves as devices. In Yogananda’s autobiography, the human body has the capacity to resemble an advanced technological object. Spiritual development thus becomes remarkably compatible with emergent processes of capitalist product development.

Yogananda’s vision of the technologized yogic body, which helped to produce new forms of authority for Indian gurus in a Western context, has now become increasingly promoted to ordinary practitioners in the United States. As described by the influential U.S. yoga center Kripalu, in language that Yogananda (and Foucault) would have appreciated, yoga represents a “technology for life transformation” (McCall 2005). The contemporary Indian yoga guru and business consultant Jaggi Vasudev puts the matter starkly: “The human body is the greatest gadget” (Padmanabhan 2015). Yoga has been embraced by so many corporations because it promises to alleviate the stress of technocentric corporate life while simultaneously encouraging practitioners to treat themselves as products that can be developed and improved.

It is thus not surprising that U.S. tech companies have been at the vanguard of corporate yoga. Google's Chief Evangelist of Brand Marketing, Gopi Kallayil, has argued to business-oriented audiences that the most important "technology" people have is their bodies and brains, and disciplines like yoga (a practice he helped popularize at Google) "optimize this technology" ("How Google Uses Yoga, Meditation to Increase Productivity" 2015). This rhetoric gives Google's digital technology a connection to a humanist wellspring so that its products seem to emerge as new and natural forms of self-development, even as they reflect the values and social hierarchies of global capitalism and U.S. popular culture.<sup>5</sup> Yogananda's heirs, thus, are not only in yoga studios. They are also in the heart of corporate capital. The language of yoga, as a technology of the self, lends a halo effect to the increasing digitization of modern life.

### **Import-Export: Technology and Yoga in India**

Yogananda's understanding of yoga is also important to the Indian state. Yogananda may have exported yoga to the United States, but his visions of yoga as an integration of human flourishing with technology have circulated back to India. Returning to themes that were crucial during the turn-of-the-century struggles for Hindu reform and independence from colonialism, contemporary India, at the turn of the millennium, articulates itself as a rising power in Asia that draws strength from its claims to ancient spiritual heritage. This project is currently dear to the heart of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, which proclaims yoga as Indian precisely because of its global popularity within neoliberal capitalism. In 2014, India elevated its bureaucracy tasked with control over yoga to create a national ministry (Gowen 2014). Yoga has been particularly central to the public persona of Prime Minister Modi, who has eagerly presented himself to the world practicing yoga, offering books on yoga as diplomatic gifts, and presiding over the first United Nations International Yoga Day in 2015 (Ayres 2016). This public rejuvenation of yoga has worked to articulate the practice as the newest expression of Indian soft power. Deflecting attention away from darker questions of communal violence or political corruption, yoga has allowed Modi, and India with him, the opportunity to look both peaceful and powerful before a wide public. The yoga promoted by Modi, thus, is one that is deeply commensurate with the neoliberal platform of Digital India over which he seeks to preside. It is, in many ways, heir to Yogananda's vision.

As in the United States, this Indian vision is itself rife with political ambivalence about who benefits from such an imagined India. State support for yoga has been welcomed by the Hindu right, for whom the practice bolsters a dream of a politically Hindu nation. Hindu diaspora groups, as well, have promoted yoga as a distinctively Hindu practice as part of a larger bid to increase Hindu visibility in the U.S. (Vitello 2010). While the Indian state has ostensibly promoted yoga as a secular practice, drawing upon more than a century of India's history in this regard, the new government's enthusiasm has been taken as a surreptitious promotion of Hinduism by some Indian Muslims, other minorities, and defenders of secularism.<sup>6</sup> The Indian state's neoliberal repositioning of yoga within a narrative of technological advancement, thus, reflects a fraught political space for the cultivation of bodies.

### **Shopping for Bodies: The Cultural Politics of the H-1B Visa**

One rhetoric of yoga at the turn of the millennium implies that, through Indian legacies of yoga, U.S. practitioners can have it all. They can counter the ills of too much machine and digital culture by turning to an Indian export that provides a break from devices

through postural practice, but that also affirms technology's underlying logic of incessant product development. But what about the labor that supports this U.S. thirst for an unending series of technological gadgets and services? Increasingly, this labor is also an Indian export, this time of information technology professionals.

At just the moment in the 1990s when yoga was becoming more mainstream in the U.S., this parallel movement brought a new wave of Indian migrants who represent the cultural obverse of yoga. This decade saw the rise of the H-1B visa program, which attracts specialty workers in skilled professions. While the H-1B was not created specifically with technology, or India, in mind, the rise of the computer industry in the 1990s transformed it into a pathway for Indian information technology workers to come to the United States. By 2012, 64% of all H-1B visas were granted to Indians (Department of Homeland Security 2013, 6). The definition of skilled professional used by the H-1B has favored fields such as computing, not yoga.<sup>7</sup> At the same time that this visa category has encouraged a new kind of Indian labor, the expansion of U.S. yoga training programs has shifted the teaching demographic away from the once iconic Indian male body towards individuals who are more likely to identify as white ("Yoga Teacher Training" 2016). The 1990s and beyond mark a moment of transformation in the kind of Indian labor desired by U.S. technoculture.

The popularity of the H-1B visa continues a twentieth-century history in which U.S.-centric technological skill has often been seen as integral to modern independent India. Jawarhalal Nehru was famously enthusiastic about science and technology, and connections to the United States were historically vital to the growth and prestige of information technology skills in India. As Ross Bassett shows, an U.S.-oriented Indian elite promoted computing within the country.<sup>8</sup> The symbolic pressure to keep up with U.S. technology within urban India propelled the success of Rajkumar Hirani's popular Bollywood film *3 Idiots* (2009), a film based on the first bestselling Indian novel in English, Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone – What Not To Do at IIT* (2004). This story of three friends critically exposes an Indian thirst to measure success by becoming engineers, especially in the United States. These values have inspired thousands of Indian technology workers to migrate through the H-1B visa program, which promises a job in technology and a life in the United States.

Yet the H-1B visa actually pulls many of its participants into a distinctly different kind of work and life: one defined by a capitalist search for a flexible workforce leading to an often vulnerable social position. The H-1B visa is highly controversial in the United States. It has been the subject of protracted political battles that have pitted high-tech capital against organized labor, anti-immigration groups, and conservative Tea Party elements of U.S. politics (Kennedy 2015). Mainstream media reporting on the H-1B visa has exposed companies that replace expensive older domestic workers with young Indian migrants who work for lower wages.<sup>9</sup> In 1995, *The Washington Post* ran a front-page story titled "White-Collar Visas: Back Door for Cheap Labor?" U.S. companies, the story reported, laid off workers to hire programmers on H-1B visas (Branigin 1995). Twenty years later, a *New York Times* headline revealed the persistence of this phenomenon: "Pink Slips at Disney. But First, Training Foreign Replacements" (Preston 2015). Critics of the program have testified before Congress that the H-1B unfairly disadvantages domestic workers ("Testimony" 2015). While the social status of those who gain H-1B visas may be high in India, their standing in the United States is more uncertain. At its best, the H-1B program places workers in situations where they are likely to be publically perceived as the cause STEM job loss in the United States.

At its worst, the H-1B system imprisons Indian tech workers in a globalized grey zone of economic and legal exploitation. While advocates of expanding the program argue that bringing skilled foreign workers encourages entrepreneurialism, the great majority of workers

on H-1B visas are not largely in positions to begin exciting ventures. A 2014 expose published by *Reveal*, in association with *The Guardian* and NBC Bay Area, noted that “critics have sounded alarms about immigrant tech workers being treated as indentured servants” (Smith, Gollan, and Sambamurthy 2014). The *Reveal* article exposed widespread exploitation in the system: “From 2000 through 2013, at least \$29.7 million was illegally withheld from about 4,400 tech workers here on H-1B visas, U.S. Department of Labor documents show” (Smith, Gollan, and Sambamurthy 2014). Even enthusiastic defenders of the global circulation of technology professionals have acknowledged, as Vivek Wadhwa does, the “deleterious effects” of the program (Wadhwa and Salkever 2012, Kindle Loc 573). Climates of fear, intimidation, uncertainty, and dependency pervade the world of the H-1B.

This middle-class indenture is most visible in what are, chillingly, called “body shops”: Indian-owned subsidiaries that bring Indian technology workers to the U.S. and contract them out to U.S. corporations. These Indian labor brokers are actually some of the biggest users of the H-1B visa program. Migrants come to the United States to wait, often without full pay, until an appropriate job is available. If they seek to find a job on their own, they face expensive penalties. This material flexibility – which requires workers to wait indefinitely without pay and to move cities to conform to the availability of technology work (Fuchs 2014, 205) – might be understood as a grim variant of the physical and mental flexibility cultivated through yoga. U.S. technoculture appears to require worker flexibility from H-1B migrants to produce it, and consumer flexibility from yoga to survive it.

To produce a flexible workforce that bends to the changing shape of tech work, body shops circumvent labor protections. While an IT worker may work for a U.S. company, he or she is technically managed by the body shop, which means that such workers enjoy few of the labor protections that the company would be required to provide regular employees (Xiang Biao 2007, 4–6). An intermediary like a body shop supplies U.S. companies with the most flexible workforce possible, a labor source that can be turned on and turned off, much as Yogananda learns to control the energy flow of shaktipat. Here, control over technology has transformed into control over the human labor to produce that technology. As a practice in which Indians manage the labor of other Indians, the exploitation experienced by the H-1B migrants in body shops is not one of simple white-against-Indian racism. But it colludes with larger patterns in which non-white labor in the United States has often struggled for power and recognition.<sup>10</sup>

The metaphor of the body shop, I suggest, is not an accidental one. This is a rhetoric of dehumanization and even dismemberment. Bodies, rhetorically bereft of cognition and culture, become commodities to be ordered, reorganized, and sold. In the connotation drawn from the automotive industry, Indian workers are treated as objects rather than as people and regarded as fundamentally interchangeable exports. While the technology sector frequently invokes the language of innovation and entrepreneurship in its promotion of the H-1B visa, arguing that the program allows the U.S. to attract and nurture “foreign talent” or the “best and the brightest,” the rhetoric of the body shop forcefully reasserts Fordist images of automated, repetitive, and alienated labor. The body shop thus positions IT workers as objectified bodies to be sold or rented for their labor, and conjures up a form of employment in which they become twenty-first-century factory automatons. Belying the highly skilled mental capacities that these workers are supposed to represent, the phrase “body shop” becomes the professional analogue to the working-class “sweat shop.”<sup>11</sup> Information technology workers constitute both the objectified technology being traded and the supposedly robotic makers of digital culture. Their representation figures a dystopian posthuman synthesis between the human body and technology production.

The racialized bodies of the H-1B workers thus represent the inverted mirror of that other form of Indian bodily cultivation, yoga. Here we find the obverse of the idealized unity

of process and product that yoga, in Yogananda's style, connotes. The workers represent the inverted shadow fantasy of the guru as technê, in which Indian yogic powers of technology represent mastery, control, and autonomy. Here, skilled Indian professionals are effectively sold, traded, and rented in a grey market in order to support ongoing U.S. desires for ever cheaper, and ever more advanced, technological life. Yet even as these Indian workers make these desires possible, they are also critiqued within the U.S. body politic because they are seen to displace more expensive and less flexible domestic labor. Against the benevolent, powerful, and unique Indian body figured by yoga, we find in U.S. media a faceless and nameless set of Indian workers who are not uncommonly reduced to acronyms, known only, bureaucratically, as "H-1Bs."

Unlike the gurus of the early and mid-twentieth century, who found some sympathetic audiences in the United States, Indian migrants on the H-1B visa program have few friends. Their most visible support has come from Indian Americans, but this support has been limited in its impact. Ronil Hira, an Indian American critic of the H-1B visa program, has testified before Congress of recipients' susceptibility to exploitation ("Testimony" 2015, 7). The most systematic political advocacy has come from a group called the Immigrant Support Network, founded in 1998 and backed by Indian entrepreneurs in the United States, which was successful in pushing for limited reforms in 2000 (E. J. W. Park and Park 2005, 103–4; Rajan 2006, 228–29). But this network was no longer active a decade later.<sup>12</sup> Workers have also encountered obstacles towards their own organizing capacity (Xiang 2007, 92). Indeed, H-1B workers face concerted suspicion in a U.S. public sphere from both liberal and conservative factions that Indian American groups have not been able to counter.

H-1B workers do not find strong support for their situation from the state of India either. When India began its program of economic liberalization in the 1980s, Rajiv Gandhi moved away from India's nationalist attempts to hold onto its workers and instead encouraged the mobility of Indian workers worldwide. He argued that mobility could create a "brain bank" of Indians that could be tapped by the state (Haniffa 2009). Indeed, while the temporary nature of the renewable 3-year visa makes workers' lives more uncertain, it benefits such a circulatory system. Inheriting this logic, Prime Minister Modi in September of 2015 urged Indian workers in Silicon Valley to contemplate returning to India, exhorting them to consider how India's "brain drain" could become its "brain gain" (Shahani 2015). Furthermore, the Indian government has historically lobbied for the expansion of the H-1B visa program because it benefits the Indian body shops (indeed, government officials have equated the program with outsourcing) ("153 Congressional Record-Senate S5689-03" 2007, 11589). With its capacity to produce and manage fully flexible labor, the program as it exists suits the aspirations of a rising Indian state that is increasingly invested in its international branding as "Digital India" ("Shri Narendra Modi Shares His Vision for Digital India" 2014).

Unlike Yogananda, who became the leader of an emerging spiritual empire, many information technology migrants labor in the shadows. Contemporary yoga is thought to reshape bodies to make them better fit for the physical and mental tolls of a technology-driven life, developing the self as a product (as prefigured through Yogananda) that is both aligned with and designed to ameliorate global capitalism. In this parallel logic, Indian migrants are in many ways forced to become the ultimate flexible citizens of capital and technology. Controversies over their role reflect distinctly ambivalent desires about Indian bodies in the United States. They affirm the cultural logic in which cultural practices from India like yoga can be absorbed and celebrated, but people from India still remain vulnerable to xenophobia and legal mistreatment.

The cultural fantasies that enable U.S. technoculture thus simultaneously rely on, yet threaten to erase, ideas of Indian labor. While Yogananda's vision of yogic technological futurity offered power and prestige to Indian bodies, the seamless absorption of his logic into

U.S. capitalist product development has spread authority over yoga well beyond those of Indian descent. When members of the Indian diaspora take a class in the United States, they may well study with white teachers. Demographic data on yoga teacher training programs suggest that graduates are likely to be both white and female (“Yoga Teacher Training” 2016), statistics that correspond with the dominance of white female bodies as authority figures and beauty ideals on *Yoga Journal* magazine covers (Eichenseher 2015). The technê once associated with brown male bodies has effectively transferred to a range of racial and ethnic bodies, particularly white ones. At the same time, U.S. technoculture relies on the racialized work of Indian H-1B migrants to provide an undervalued source of repetitive labor in the shadows. Brown male bodies are now more likely to be linked to the “techno” of IT labor, the industrial side of technology that is at once needed and feared. It can seem to members of the diaspora that prestigious forms of authority available to Indians are diminishing while undervalued sources are on the rise.

Increasingly, members of the Indian diaspora are publically asking hard questions about such contradictions in the status of Indianness (SAAPYA 2014). In the short memoir that follows, I turn to postural and creative practice to meditate on this ambivalence. The memoir explores some of the contradictions of my role as a multiethnic Indian American who seeks tutelage in yoga from a digital app with a white teacher. This practice continues the logic nestled within Yogananda’s vision, but in ways that he may never have predicted. As the Indian American poet Reetika Vazirani describes in her essay “The Art of Breathing,” the changing racial dynamics of yoga raise potential discomforts for members of the diaspora. “Learning yoga from white people is, for me, like copying down the ingredients of a vegan lentil dal burger from a Whole Foods deli sticker,” she writes (Vazirani 2001, 72). When we add in “digital white people,” the process becomes even more complex. I do not see whiteness and Indianness as exclusive (indeed, both shape who I am), nor do I think the transmission of yoga should depend on a notion of racial purity. But the passage of yoga through structures of U.S. racial privilege and technoculture can indeed offer a complicated form of nourishment.

Both yoga teaching and technological development reflect currents that have historically relied on embodied Indian labor. Yet now those histories are sometimes hidden, even as they continue to shape diasporic bodies like mine. Is it possible for yogic practices to reshape the forms of white technological authority they now enable? How can yoga, I ask, not only partake in this cultural logic, but also afford the tools to peer within it?

### **Yoga By iPad: A Speculation**

When I’m working from home, I sometimes put on one of these classes from the Yoga Studio app for my iPad. They are beautiful, minimalist, spare. Each time, no matter what sequence I choose, the same calming voice greets me. I pretend I’m listening to National Public Radio, the reassuring and intelligent voice of order I heard in the warm twilight from the backseat of my parents’ Camry. Each time, the same yoga model appears on my touch screen.

She is young, slender, flexible, and white. She practices in empty space against a white background. There is no actual room; the camera follows only one angle from the front. The model looks like a real person who’s accidentally lost her third dimension. The blue of her top matches the blue in the Studio icon at the bottom of my screen. It’s a perfect alignment of human body and glistening device. The whole visual space is clean, flat, depthless. We are nowhere, except in iPad land. I love it.

The antiseptic screen is refreshing. It allows me to ignore that I’m practicing next to my unmade bed, next to my son’s puzzle pieces and my daughter’s paper clippings. She loves

to cut things out. She is five; scissors do her bidding. She cuts out princesses, fairies, and crowns. She makes castles. All over our house, little flecks of white paper trail in her wake. It's like practicing in a sea of confetti.

Caring for space is part of yoga. This I know. Back when I took classes at an actual studio, the teachers would hand out Swiffers and have us polish the floors if they thought they were not clean enough. First the wet wipe, then the dry, and only then the practice. But now, with two small children in my house, I cannot keep it clean. If I wait to pick up everything, there will be no time for yoga. It'll be time to get in the car and bring them home and start the exhausting, exhilarating, but mostly exhausting second shift of feeding and bathing and storytelling and lunch-packing and tantrum-calming that makes tomorrow even thinkable. So I just swoop my arms up over the clutter and focus on the brown-haired woman in her shiny white Lalaland. It's like a modern Himalayan cave, no distractions, but comfortable and climate-controlled.

She is the perfect yogic body, the yogi as technê. I find her safe. There is no untamed facial hair, no smell of sweat except my own. Her body, the body of a young flexible woman, is like the newest model iPhone, glossy and unbroken. My body – my body feels more like the mobile that my husband left on our gate the night of a driving thunderstorm. It works, but behind the screen, strange lights pulse with anxiety.

She is a cipher, a subtle map, like the abstract bodies I find in my books on the art of yoga. She is all symmetry and ease. When I look at her, I think that yoga is perhaps best done by iPad graphic designers. Let's just remove the human body from it all. It is only an inconvenience.

The app is calming. We practice in unison, she and I. As I move my arms to the sky and glimpse the glowing mountains through the window, I forget for a moment about my untended Facebook page, my unwritten tweets, my unread emails. My neglected selves fall from me like invisible leaves scattering to the ground. I become a cleared screen.

But after days of this monotone, I begin to long for a little human touch. It's so, well, white. It never changes. At the end of every sequence, I'm exhorted to take this lovely yoga feeling into the rest of my life. Yes, I think, but what about you? Are you taking this lovely yoga feeling into the rest of your life? What does it mean to have a life?

The more I stand in *tadasana*, mountain pose, before the screen, I start to think about the 1s and 0s that call the beautiful yoga body into existence. Code, the new subtle body of our visible world. Did any of the programmers who created this app once board planes from India, headed to "America" with the H-1B visa firmly stamped in their passport?<sup>13</sup>

The H-1B brings Indian techno-bodies to American shores. It's the latest in the long history of mixed messages that the U.S. government likes to send. It shackles you to your employer. If you stop programming, you can go back to where you came from. But sometimes it lets you apply for a green card, to stay forever in America, if you like. You become a techno-body, the cyborg to build the cyborg nation, summoned by the great capitalist machinery with its free espresso machines and speculative IPOs. You might make intellectual property. If you stayed in India, you probably wouldn't. Most Indian jobs in IT, they're just tech support for U.S. software giants. That's what my husband tells me one morning as we're picking up jagged flecks of white paper from our bedroom floor. In America, perhaps you can create something. Maybe you'll end up creating a beautiful white yoga model on a beautiful white screen. I think for a moment, eyes closed, about the hands on the keyboard. Were they the color of coffee, or more like mine, tea with a little too much milk? Behind the white screen are the 1s and 0s; behind the 1s and 0s are the hidden Indian bodies. And behind them – what?

I would never have been the Indian chosen by America. As far as I know, there is no visa for readers of poetry. But, the more I stand in *tadasana*, my mind wanders back to the

first time I ever saw a headstand. It was my uncle's, it was in his Bombay flat, and it was only a few meters from the cabinet that housed his precious store of Johnnie Walker. My uncle didn't call himself a yogi. He was an engineer and a businessman. He made things, technical things, in his factory until India liberalized its economy and Japanese companies decided to undercut the market. "We were good, we were competitive," my uncle told me at his round glass dining table. "Then this chap came to me and said, 'I have orders to set prices lower than anyone else until we have the right market share.' So I said, 'Where do I sign?'"

It's a moment he probably never imagined, back in the 1960s, when he persuaded his parents to let him travel across the ocean to study engineering in America. When his younger sister wanted to go abroad too, my grandparents made sure she stayed close to MIT. They wanted my uncle to keep an eye on her. "You'll marry an American and never come back," my grandmother lamented. That's essentially what happened. I grew up in Reagan's America, wore jelly shoes and leg warmers, and didn't fully understand what yoga was until I moved to California. I didn't come to the U.S. on an H-1B visa. But, in a way, I was born there because of the march of Indian techno-bodies. When I slowly kick up into my headstand, guided by the voice on my iPad, this history rises too.

Digital yoga, I think, may be the truest legacy of older forms of yoga. Yoga is a posthuman project with an all too human history. I am unnerved by the threshold of digital yoga precisely because I think that it is not a subversion of older models but a radical realization of them. This was Paramahansa Yoganada's vision: we could all turn into technology. This is what Google wants me to become.

But the more I look into the white screen of my iPad, the more I feel my actual body. I see the fine bones on the backs of my hands that remind me of my mother's. I sense the plumpness of a belly where children can bury their heads. The more I wonder about what it means, today, to have a flexible body. Is it the body that unfurls into new and beautiful shapes? Or is it the body that moves to a strange city the instant an email promising work arrives? What are the shapes that we contort ourselves into? And can we recognize ourselves in these new postures?

The more I do digital yoga, the more I sense that technology, even faster than bodies, decays. Soon my tablet will be too dated to play the newest version of Yoga Studio. Somewhere in India, children will be making secret caves inside mountains of discarded iPad parts, inhaling the fumes, stretching their arms to wave to a friend. The more I think about it, technobodies die too.

The white screen of digital yoga never flickers. But surrounding it is always my cluttered bedroom. I've come to like the Himalayan snowflakes of paper cuttings that my daughter leaves on the floor. I watch her cutting and twisting and folding, always resizing, always in search of that perfect crown or castle, always in search of the perfect shape.

## Conclusion

Indian yoga has lent strength to U.S. technoculture, while that technoculture has also drawn strength from an often troubling treatment of Indian technology workers. In contemplating these interconnected imaginative and material economies of tech work, I have aimed to uncover the links that bind two very different visions of India in a U.S. public sphere. Yoga has often circulated a powerful and benevolent image of Indian authority in the cultural spaces connecting India to the United States, while H-1B migrants have figured darker anxieties about Indian labor and its effect on an increasingly globalized marketplace. These doubled visions, moreover, have not simply remained on U.S. shores. They have also entangled themselves with the interests of the Indian state. By examining the cultural history and media representation of this workforce, we become more aware of the ways in which

utopian promises about technology, offered through a particular discourse of yoga, may mask potentially exploitative forms of racialized labor that enable an increasingly technocentric world.

It is not a coincidence that the main literary work I have used to reflect on such imaginative economies is, in its way, science fiction. Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* uses speculation to develop powerful ideas about selfhood in an age of technological development. In lending my own speculations to those of Yogananda, I have tried to suggest one way in which the Indian diaspora might search for new shapes – in the body and on paper – with which to frame these dual and sometimes debilitating legacies. These quests are never complete. But in telling more stories, in adding more voices, in thinking through metaphor, we might challenge visions of technoculture that benefit corporations and states at the expense of unique laboring lives.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The concept of "counterstory" has helped to unmask racial narratives behind legal and social norms (Delgado, Stefancic, and Liendo 2012, 49).

<sup>2</sup> Other Indian gurus with a presence in the mid-century U.S. were the monks of Swami Vivekananda's orders.

<sup>3</sup> The 1923 United States Supreme Court Decision denied Bhagat Singh Thind U.S. citizenship on the grounds that he would not be considered white by an average (white) person (United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind 261 U.S. 204, 1923.)

<sup>4</sup> Obviously not all Indians are "Hindus" in a religious sense, but the word "Hindu" was often used in the U.S. to describe a person from the Indian subcontinent.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of yoga's entry into popular U.S. culture, see Jain 2015.

<sup>6</sup> It is important both to note Muslim discomfort with compulsory yoga in public institutions and to recognize that arguments about the incompatibility between Islam and yoga are relatively recent. On public reporting about discomfort with the possible political agenda behind yoga, see Naqvi 2015.

<sup>7</sup> On informal U.S. legal advice discussion boards, yoga instructors seeking the H-1B have been encouraged to consider P visas instead (Sunapee, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Bassett 2009, 791–798.

<sup>9</sup> The program is also used by universities, but most media reporting focuses on corporations.

<sup>10</sup> Roli Varma argues that Asian immigrants "are permitted to work mainly in those S&E roles that are non-competitive with white males" (2002, 338).

<sup>11</sup> Xiang Biao's informants saw themselves through the rhetoric of a laboring body in opposition to a thinking head (2007, 5).

<sup>12</sup> Its 2009 LinkedIn page encourages its revival ("Immigrants Support Network (ISN)" 2009).

<sup>13</sup> "America" signals a cultural fantasy.

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