

Introduction

Shakti Fest, 2015

As the sun crests over the arid desert of Joshua Tree, California, Chandan (Isaiab), a middle-aged white man in the attire of a Hindu priest, sits at a fire pit and leads the assembled crowd in reciting Vedic mantras. A large audience of participants responds with cries of “svāhā!” to each of the hundreds of Sanskrit invocations that he recites as he offers oblations into the fire. There is palpable excitement in the air; the homa (fire sacrifice) invokes an auspicious beginning of Shakti Fest, a five-day yoga and kīrtan (devotional music) festival. Homas are ancient Vedic rites traditionally performed by Indian Hindu brahman priests for auspicious occasions. But here in the California desert, whites define, create, and administrate the Hindu rituals at Shakti Fest; participants may be serious, dedicated practitioners of Hindu rituals, but they identify as “spiritual, but not religious.”

Several days prior and one hundred yards away, the temple is silent in the Joshua Tree Retreat Center, the home of the Institute of Mentalphysics¹ and for this weekend, the sacred geography of Shakti Fest. Over the course of the upcoming festival weekend, the temple will bustle with thousands attending lectures, workshops, and yoga classes with some of the leading yogis and kīrtan artists in the United States. But this morning, the sacred geometrical architecture of the temple reverberates with a more subtle and calm energy as the famed yoga teacher Eli Gordon intones in a soft lilting voice and invites a small group of dedicated yogis to enter the “waters of consciousness” with a series of deep breaths. He begins this full-day intensive yoga workshop by drawing participants into the heart space that he is creating, weaving together an aura of sacrality with ideas drawn from multiple religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Zen, Sufism, and Native American

religions. His poetic spiritual tapestries create a narrative that reveals humanity and the earth in crisis: there is a problem with modernity and a dire need for a solution. Like many others before him, he articulates the need in terms of a recovery project: ancient wisdom has been lost, and it needs to be found and revitalized. In his words,

[Albert] Einstein said very beautifully, “The ancient people seem to have understood something very important that we have lost.” And the answer is not of course to go back to the way things were thousands of years ago because that would deny all of what’s happened since. This evolutionary wave is coming together which is so beautifully evident here in the desert. All these practices and different tribal members and colors of the rainbow creating a new way. There are certain principles which are so important. And of course, nothing is more important than the Mother, the Earth.²

In these few sentences, he weaves together an admiration for science, but also the mourning of the loss of premodern knowledge, a demand for a new evolution, an affirmation of creating a bricolage of practices and people for spiritual innovation, a celebration of the unification of tribes, and a demand for the centrality of ecology. These are the ideals; yoga is the method.

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Burning Man Work Party, Summer 2016

After an hour-long drive wearing my tattered, paint-smearred, get-ready-to-work overalls, I carried my light and somewhat unscathed toolbox through the driveway gate at the Sunland property. In my other hand, I had a cooler, filled with frozen homemade green juice I had pressed for day five of my juice fast. Standing in the courtyard, to my right, was the Blind Mistress, a two-story vision of an art car built out of an old RV, currently languishing in various states of disarray. Looking back, I stood at the precipice between two worlds. For the past five years, I had been inculcated into the world of yogic transformational festivals. I had arrived at this French Quarter Village work party in Los Angeles prepared to learn about the grandfather of these festivals, Burning Man. But instead of continuity, there was difference, which I noted as the cigarettes lit up after the hearty work crew rewarded themselves with a midday meal of loaded pizzas and beers. I longed for all of it, but instead I sipped my green juice—eyes wide open. The collected crew of about ten Burning Man veterans laughed and told stories of life and Burns past. Immediately, I felt at home in this tightly knit and intimately connected established community. When the jokes and stories became marked with silences, it was time to get back to work. I climbed into one of the top-floor sleeping compartments of the Blind Mistress, which was oven hot in the afternoon sun, and I began to wire the outlets.

That morning, when I had first walked in, I had set down my toolbox and cooler of green juice. My presence in the early morning somewhat surprised Sloane and Michael, who were already hard at work. I was a stranger and felt a bit like an intruder, but I explained I was here to help and introduced

myself. They exchanged a glance that conveyed a semblance of, “Who is going to take this one?” Sloane stopped what he was doing, looked at me, and said, “What can you do?” I said something like, “I’m fairly handy. I am smart, and I can learn things. I can paint, but I don’t do electrical.” He paused for a beat and said, “Well—do you want to learn electrical? Because I need an assistant.” I learned electrical from Sloane all that day and every weekend for the next month. By the end, I could pull and run wire, wire an outlet with attached switch or stand alone, and climb a twenty-foot ladder safely without being nervous.

From the outset, Sloane was very concerned with teaching me to learn for myself. He would show me and then let me do it. When I was done, I would ask him to check my work, and he would ask: “Do I need to? How do you feel about it? Does it need to be checked?” Several weeks later, on the playa³ during build week of my first Burning Man (the week before the gates open), I was struggling to throw a heavy cable fifteen feet in the air to him. I tried and failed, repeatedly. A friend walked by, saw my struggle, and threw the cable up to him for me. Sloane laughed, thanked him, and then dropped the cable back down to me, telling him, “I want her to learn to do it.” I kept throwing the cable, and eventually, he caught it. While we worked, I learned the basics of how to throw a cable and how to do electrical wiring, but I also learned to recognize that my mental frame had set limitations for my own potential when I had said, “I don’t do electrical.” At one point during our working banter, Sloane said, “I can’t even tell you how many women I have done this for,” meaning that he felt he had empowered these women to accomplish tasks they hadn’t thought they could do. We might imagine Sloane, over his twenty-year career as a Burner, as an enabler of personal transformation. Burning Man is filled with leaders like him, who actively open avenues for others to exceed their existing sense of self.

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In the four years since that day, that old toolbox fell apart from overuse and I bought a bigger one—and an impact driver. I know more about propane mechanics than I ever thought that I would. I recently told an old friend that I was looking into buying a trailer. He laughed in surprise because a decade ago that idea never would have crossed my mind. Have I been transformed by transformational festivals? Certainly. There is a gallon of homemade green juice in my freezer, and I have a new toolbox. With that said, my decades-long practice of yoga has waned in the course of this fieldwork, as I have focused more explicitly on its global reformulation as a practice for supple bodied, affluent, white women. As a white woman, I moved freely through each of my field sites, and at the close of this research, I am painfully aware of that privilege and the ways in which it, for me, tarnishes the radical potential of these utopias.

There is an ocean of difference between these two transformational festival worlds, and this book does not intend to minimize that fact. But

they are also held together by similar utopian visions and a shared commitment to personal and social transformation that is intentionally crafted in the reformulation of everyday practices and perspectives. Both are deeply embedded in much larger interlacing and overlapping networks comprised of organizations, events, literatures, and discourses that echo similar themes. Sloane drew on his experience in other transformational workshops to enable me to reframe and expand beyond what I imagined to be my limitations—for example, “I don’t do electrical.” Eli Gordon invited us (yoga practitioners) to imagine the world differently, to participate in an “evolutionary wave,” and to create a “new way.” But Eli Gordon’s vision of all of the “different tribal members and colors of the rainbow” coming together to be present in his Shakti Fest yoga class and to actualize that utopian vision doesn’t quite match reality. In fact, in the United States, these communities, whether they are made up of yoga practitioners, transformational festival participants, or those involved in metaphysical spirituality, are approximately 85 percent white. This book centralizes this demographic fact and questions why. Especially in a state like California, where whites comprise only 38.8 percent of the population,⁴ why do these particular spaces of spiritual seeking remain predominantly white?

White Utopias attempts to unravel this uncomfortable demographic reality in the pages that follow. I argue that while transformational festivals create fecund opportunities for spiritual growth, their dependence on religious exoticism serves as a deterrent to nonwhite potential participants. My ethnographic research reveals that in their critique of the existing status quo, participants turn to Indigenous and Indic⁵ religious forms because they imagine them to be expressions of alternative lifeways existing outside of modernity. This fundamental act of distancing and appropriation means that these movements tend to gravitate toward neoromantic forms that stem from nineteenth-century conceptions of the Anglo-European self as civilized and modern while relegating nonwhites to the primitive and premodern.

In his research on the viscosity, or the stickiness, of whiteness in countercultural spaces, Arun Saldanha writes, “It is a commonplace assumption that whites have for a long time been fascinated and transformed by drawing on other people’s cultures and landscapes. . . . Yet the fact that white appropriations of otherness were fueled by a conscious effort to transcend the constraints of white society—that European exoticism and primitivism, though intertwined with colonial subjugation, also tell of the self-critique and self-transformation of

whites—has seldom been put at the center of theorization.”⁶ *White Utopias* is an attempt to put this exact notion at the center, engaging the uncomfortable juxtaposition between problematic religious exoticism and productive self-critique and self-transformation.

I argue that these populations identify with alterity to forge personal solutions to the struggles of modernity. They identify as “spiritual but not religious” and, as Christopher Driscoll and Monica Miller argue, aim to enact the “decentering or death of whiteness, with ‘spiritual’ signifying on the manufactured closeness to the ‘empirical other.’”⁷ In drawing closer to the “other,” they destabilize whiteness by rejecting systems of white supremacy in which they are enmeshed, but they do so from within safe spaces of white ethnic homogeneity. At festivals, they speak in self-affirming echo chambers imagined as evolutionary paths to enlightenment and rarely engage with ethnically diverse populations. Because people of color are rarely present as authorities teaching and sharing their own religious and cultural forms, white SBNR adopters and their representations end up reinforcing the logics of white possessivism despite their idealized attempts to decenter whiteness.

My research also reveals that the more yogic the field, the more it is focused on internal self-transformation as the primary agent of social change; as the famed yogi activist Seane Corn writes, “Our evolution *is* the revolution.”⁸ While some yogis follow Corn’s broader call for humanitarian activism, a much larger majority directs attention to personal evolution by engaging with ascetical and mystical modalities. In her analysis of women in the New Age, Karlyn Crowley questions, “Why angels and not activism?”⁹ In these fields, with a few notable exceptions, there is a similar focus on spiritual transformation over social engagement.¹⁰ The result is an affective experience of freedom and not the freedom work of building social and political solidarities with the “exotic” populations these communities so deeply admire.

THE AVAILABLE EXOTIC / THE USABLE PRIMITIVE: PLAYING INDIAN

Long before the New Age dawned, Americans turned to religious others when dissatisfied with the dominant culture. As the historian Philip Jenkins explains, “The perennial American interest in Indians grows and shrinks in inverse proportion to satisfaction with mainstream society. . . . Throughout American history, romantic Indian images are most sought after in eras of alienation and crisis.”¹¹ Americans have engaged with Indigenous

and Indic cultural and religious forms in multifarious ways as a means to protest and reject Euro-American culture. By adopting exoticized practices of marginalized religious minorities, they have offered critiques of industrialization, consumerism, rationality, violence, sexual repression, and the devastation of nature. At the turn of the twentieth century, white women flocked to Swami Vivekananda to practice meditation and breathing exercises. Several decades later, South Asian swamis and yogis crisscrossed the United States, drawing large audiences as interested in their mystical personas as in their yogic techniques. Even at that time, whites quickly positioned themselves as representative authorities of yogic traditions. Oom the Omnipotent (Pierre Arnold Bernard from Leon, Iowa), for instance, built his Tantric utopia first in San Francisco and later in the sanctity and seclusion of rural upstate New York. Following the model of white appropriation of Native religions, whites have instrumentalized Indic religious forms to find direction and to craft an outlet for their critique of the existing status quo.¹²

In the wake of World War I, the bohemians of the 1920s flocked to the American Southwest and founded intellectual and artistic communities from which they critiqued assimilationist policies and Christian missionaries; some even argued for the supremacy of Native culture. World War II revealed the fragility and moral failings of European culture, and the subsequent destabilization of Europe called into question Euro-American claims to cultural superiority; subsequently, the 1940s saw a notable popularization of Native American traditions. Similarly, in the 1970s, massive public distrust in government fueled another turn toward Native American traditions. Philip Jenkins's careful historical account of white engagements with Native American religions reveals that one of the primary errors of the 1960s counterculture was to assume that "all previous generations had shared the racist contempt of the early settlers, the dismissal of native religions as crude devil worship."¹³ Instead, the 1960s exemplified only the twentieth century's latest expression of a counterculture deeply informed by religious exoticism.

Once again, as a result of dissatisfaction with the status quo, the counterculture of the 1960s was partially constituted by the commonplace practice of modern Anglos "searching for primal authenticity."¹⁴ Employing the modalities of religious exoticism, the leaders of the counterculture embraced symbols and practices extracted from Indic and Indigenous religions. While Frank Waters may have made "the Ganges flow into the Rio Grande" in his writings in the 1950s, as Jenkins suggests, the 1960s counterculture easily blended the Indic and Indigenous, creating a conflu-

ence (*sangham*) of distinct cultural rivers. Gary Snyder protested the war in Vietnam by identifying with Native religion and cursing the white man in the *San Francisco Oracle*, penning the famous lines:

As I kill the white man
 the “American”
 in me
 And dance out the ghost dance:
 To bring back America, the grass and the streams,
 To trample your throat in your dreams.
 This magic I work, this loving I give
 That my children may flourish
 And yours won’t live.¹⁵

The following year, the Beatles sat at the feet of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in Rishikesh, India, which would lead George Harrison to take the *māhāmantra*¹⁶ of the Hare Krishnas to the number-twelve position on the UK singles chart in 1969 and again in the chorus of the major hit “My Sweet Lord” in 1976. Jimi Hendrix wanted the cover of his 1967 record *Axis: Bold as Love* to reflect his Cherokee heritage, but in an impactful miscommunication, David King, the commissioned cover designer for the Track Records label, misinterpreted his notion of “Indian” and found a mass-produced image of the Hindu deity Vishnu in a London shop and superimposed Hendrix’s face (alongside Noel Redding and Mitch Mitchell) over the image. The resulting famous image of Jimi Hendrix in the omnipresent form of the incarnation of the Hindu god Krishna (*virāt puruṣan viśvarupam*) became one of the most iconic album covers in rock history.¹⁷ While centuries had passed since Columbus’s infamous error of mistaking Native Americans for Indians, 1960s counterculture blended and sometimes conflated the two seamlessly.

The turn to the exotic is the response of a population seeking a solution to feelings of malaise and dislocation derived from “feeling uprooted from cultural traditions, community belonging, and spiritual meaning.”¹⁸ It begins with a salient critique of hegemonic Western modernity, but instead of tackling those challenges through reform, rebellion, or revolution, this population looks to inhabit other social models for alternative solutions, and, more predominantly, to find existential meaning. Its solutions are often therapeutic rather than political, aimed to alleviate the feeling of “rampant alienation that characterizes modernity—the sense of being rootless and adrift, cut off from tradition and history.”¹⁹ The exotic other is established as an unsullied premodern subject and

diametrically opposed to the “cold conformity and ecological devastation of white America, the ‘dead city,’”²⁰ whose “own cultural heritage of meaningful ritual seems like a well run dry.”²¹ Religious exoticism romanticizes racialized others as unsullied, exotic, premodern subjects whose cultural products supply practical, therapeutic tools. Exoticism is a mask for utopianism.²²

This book employs the framework of exoticism as a theoretical tool to define a set of relations between segments of the “spiritual but not religious” populations and those deemed as radically other. As a category, exoticism has been discussed primarily in cultural studies, the arts, and anthropology in reference to the ambivalent portrayal of others as both alluring and repulsive. In her recent work, the French sociologist Véronique Altglas introduces the term *religious exoticism*, which I build upon in this book. She writes,

[Religious exoticism] suggests an attempt to grasp otherness, yet what is exotic is not an “inherent quality” of particular social groups, places, ideas or practices. Indeed, no one is intrinsically “other.” Exoticism is instead relations; it is a “particular mode of aesthetic perception” that emphasizes, and to a certain extent elaborates, the otherness of groups, locations, ideas, and practices (Huggan 2001, 13). Moreover, the exotic is attractive *because* it is seen as being “different” (Todorov 1993, 264); exoticism makes otherness “strangely or unfamiliarly beautiful and enticing” (Figueira 1994, 1). Yet it is less about accounting for cultural differences than formulating an ideal, by dramatizing and even constructing differences. . . . Furthermore, Todorov (1993, 265) argues that, to elaborate and maintain the representations of idealized others, it is necessary to ignore the “reality” of other peoples and cultures.²³

Thus, exoticism is a constructed representation of the other in service of the production of the self. In his seminal work on human diversity, Tzvetan Todorov explains that exoticism is the antithesis of nationalism. While nationalists valorize the values of their own country as superior to those of others, exoticists retort that “the country with superior values is a country whose only relevant characteristic is that it is not my own.”²⁴ Its allure is also dependent, at least at the outset, on a lack of knowledge about the other. He writes, “The best candidates for the role of exotic ideal are the peoples and cultures that are most remote from us and least known to us. Now it is not easy to equate unfamiliarity with others, the refusal to see them as they are, with a valorization of these others. It is a decidedly ambiguous compliment to praise others simply because they are different from myself. Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet

praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be. This is its constitutive paradox.”²⁵ In the ethnographic fields of transformational festivals discussed in this book, behaviors exhibiting appropriations of the exotic often correlate to the place on the spectrum of knowledge that participants occupy. Those enraptured with the allure of the exotic but holding little knowledge may be seen in exotic costumes playing at inhabiting the imagined identities of radical others. Those who have more experience in proximity to those radical others tend to exhibit a more tempered realism in their dress and behavior. They may still maintain the ideals of exoticism, but they are more serious in their identifications. In the religious field, this identification often takes the form of full lifestyle modifications, conversions in all but name.

Altglas notes that Orientalism, a term introduced famously by Edward Said, follows this same pattern and can be regarded as one example of a larger paradigm of exoticism.²⁶ The adoption of religious exoticism substantiates claims of a new self, one that is autonomously governed and free from regulatory boundaries and institutional affiliations. As Altglas recounts, “[Pierre] Bourdieu (1984, 370) viewed individuals’ involvement in Transcendental Meditation, yoga, Zen, martial arts, holistic and post-psychoanalytic therapies, as well as esotericism, as ‘an inventory of thinly disguised expressions of a sort of dream of social flying, a desperate effort to defy the gravity of the social field.’”²⁷ Bourdieu argued that in their attempt to break free of their finite social station, the *petit bourgeoisie* perform a “practical utopianism,” “which predisposes them to welcome every form of utopia.”²⁸ The turn toward alternative utopias, including the adoption of the practical spiritual wares of religious others, is the result of a therapeutic process of self-definition and class distinction. The *petit bourgeoisie* engages in religious exoticism to garner distinction in efforts to “detach itself both from the non-cosmopolitan working classes and the conventional fractions of the bourgeoisie.” This process employs the domestication of otherness in efforts to “produce an emotionally and culturally competent self.”²⁹

In this vein, the Dakota scholar and historian Phillip Deloria argues that in postmodern spirituality various codes are reformulated into complex amalgams suited to particular therapeutic desires. The dislocation of codes from their Indigenous cultural context and their amalgamation into a spiritual self becomes an index for an alternative aspiration of wholeness, established in contradistinction to the fragmented self of postmodernity. In fact, in Deloria’s view, New Age religion is greatly informed by a crisis of meaning generated by postmodernism, which abolished

metanarratives while relativizing claims to truth. He explains, “Heavily based in self-help and personal development therapies, its [New Age’s] proponents await a large-scale change in human consciousness and a utopian era of peace and harmony. In New Age identity quests, one can see the long shadows of certain strands of postmodernism: increasing reliance on texts and interpretations, runaway individualism within a rhetoric of community, the distancing of native people, and a gaping disjuncture between a cultural realm of serious play and the power dynamics of social conflict.”³⁰ The New Age further dissociated from real actors in favor of a romanticized imaginary, creating indices more malleable and controllable than their flesh-and-blood referents.

White Utopias argues that the commonplace ideals and practices of religious exoticism are directly related to the overwhelming whiteness of alternative spiritual communities. Although she does not directly address this white majority, Altglas argues that religious exoticism is dependent on feelings of entitlement. She writes that “exotic representations and discourses are overwhelmingly elaborated by the observer, not the observed (Todorov 1993, 264). This presupposes the entitlement and the power to do so (Figueira 1994, 2). . . . Practicing yoga or meditation, joining Native Americans in a sweat lodge, studying Kabbalah while expressing disdain for Judaism . . . are all contemporary practices that unavoidably presuppose a sense of entitlement.”³¹ As will be discussed in a forthcoming section, this entitlement aligns easily with neocolonial logics of white possessivism.

SPIRITUAL, BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

Twenty-seven percent of the US population identifies as “spiritual, but not religious” (SBNR) according to a 2017 Pew Research study, and that figure is growing exponentially.³² A similar study, also conducted by the Pew Research Center, identified that just under 20 percent of the US population responds with “none” when questioned about their institutional religious affiliation, and of those, 37 percent identify as SBNR.³³ However, and somewhat surprisingly, only a small percentage of those who respond with “none” identify as nonreligious or antireligious. Instead, a large majority of them say that they believe in God (68 percent) and feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58 percent), and a significant percentage of them say that they pray every day (21 percent).³⁴ There is growth in SBNR populations across the various demographic groups in the United States, but the most accelerated

growth and the highest numbers emerge from white women who are college educated and vote Democrat. It is no wonder then that American yogis also tend to identify as SBNR, as many of them fall into this very demographic.

There is a broad diversity to the beliefs and practices of people who identify as “spiritual but not religious.” The religion scholars Catherine Albanese and Courtney Bender have named *metaphysical religion* as that which draws on long-standing traditions of New Thought, Swedenborgianism, Christian Science, Spiritualism, magic, science, and the occult. Albanese suggests that it stands for “an American religious mentality” that focuses on a preoccupation of mind, a predisposition toward the ancient cosmological theory of correspondence between worlds (as carried out in the esoteric tradition of the West), thinking of the mind and its correspondences in terms of movement and energy, and a yearning for salvation understood as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing.³⁵ Bender argues that metaphysical religion privileges experience and mysticism and operates through “entangled” networks in an institutional field, in “cultures that catch people in relations to each other.”³⁶ This book envisions transformational festivals as one form of institution wherein SBNR communities congeal and reproduce their common ideologies. It demonstrates how transformational festivals create temporary utopias that invite participants into the celebration of eclectic, bricolage forms of spirituality.

However, I also see a divide in metaphysical religion that has not been thoroughly investigated. One end of the spectrum relies heavily on Christian principles, doctrine, and practice. It is in some sense a creative improvisation in the key of Protestant Christianity as much as it attempts to be “post-Protestant.”³⁷ At the other end of the spectrum are those who turn away from institutional Abrahamic traditions (in the United States, mostly Christianity and Catholicism, but also, to some extent, Judaism) and toward practical tools adopted from non-Abrahamic religions (usually Hinduism, Buddhism, and Indigenous religions, and occasionally Sufism, Kabbalah, and Western esotericism). This subsection of the SBNR population adopts religious exoticism to produce mystical experiences, awakenings of consciousness, and spiritual growth through meditation, yoga, chanting, visualization, dreaming, psychedelics (medicine), and ascetic practices.

Scholars have frequently argued that SBNR populations are defined by unimpeded individual choice that emerges as a result of freedom from religious institutions.³⁸ Such theories support the notion that

today's SBNR populations are creating self-designed bricolage spiritual conglomerations that are personally tailored to their individual preferences. The most famous example of this is Robert Bellah's 1985 account of a woman named Sheila, who described her faith as listening "to my own little voice" and framed her personalized spirituality as "Sheilaism."³⁹ Bellah, like many sociologists of religion at the time, saw the increase in SBNR populations as a signal for the declining importance of religion in modernity. Many bemoaned the individualism of millions of Sheilas and feared that SBNR populations would not create strong communities. In contrast, *White Utopias* argues that there is much unrecognized soteriological continuity in these fields and that transformational festivals and yoga classes are two examples of underrecognized institutional communities wherein collective ideals are reproduced and disseminated.

Furthermore, religious exoticism also reveals a historical continuity in the particular cultural ideas and discourses it circulates. In the New Age bookstores of my youth, I found translations of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* alongside Ram Dass's *Be Here Now*⁴⁰ and translations of the *Dao de Ching*, shelved next to Motherpeace tarot cards, statues of Egyptian deities, Native American smudge sticks, and Pagan ritual manuals. This amalgamation was congealed in the religious explorations of the Transcendentalists in the 1840s, renewed at the turn of the twentieth century, revived by the counterculture of the 1960s, and sold in the New Age bookstores of the 1990s—and today, nearly the exact same set of texts and ephemera of religious exoticism continue to inform the spirituality of transformational festivals.

My research uncovers the reasons why Indigenous and Indic religious traditions come to be formulated together as ready materials and instrumentalized in the construction of personalized spiritualities. I also demonstrate the remarkable continuity in SBNR communities and focus on several ways in which that continuity is reproduced. Altglass writes that "the claims of religious freedom made by 'spiritual seekers' are in conformity with a collective discourse, which is encouraged and shaped by their teachers."⁴¹ My research builds on this premise, showing how ideals are codified and repeated in the alternative institutional spaces of yoga classes and workshops in transformational festivals. Chapters 2 and 5 demonstrate how yoga teachers reiterate and reinforce communally supported ideals, sermonizing to somatically receptive audiences during their festival yoga classes. The level of ideological continuity between classes with differently branded teachers and among the intel-

lectually diverse SBNR populations in attendance reveals an underlying ideological commons that binds participants together.

In this way, transformational festivals have the potential to successfully do resistance work by bringing like-minded people together into a *commons*. Silvia Federici positions the commons as a point of resistance, “like the grass in the cracks of the urban pavement, challenging the hegemony of capital and the state and affirming our interdependence and capacity for cooperation. . . . The politics of the *commons are today the expression of this alternative world*.”⁴² Federici uses the notion of the commons in the Marxist sense of collective property, as an economic alternative to capitalism: “Lodged halfway between the ‘public’ and the ‘private,’ but irreducible to either category, the idea of the commons expresses a broader conception of property, referring to social goods—lands, territories, forests, meadows, and streams, or communicative spaces—that a community, not the state or any individual, collectively owns, manages, and controls.”⁴³ The idea of the commons as neither public nor private matches the liminal space of the transformational festival, as does the notion of creating an alternative world.

Contemporary transformational festivals are an attempt to bring together a community of people united in shared values of alternative ways of being. Burning Man has its 10 Principles; Lightning in a Bottle has its 6 Ways of LIB. At Burning Man, there is an explicitly different social and economic utopia that the organizers and participants seek to establish; it relies on a gift economy (Gifting), and is founded on Radical Self-Reliance and enriched by Radical Self-Expression. At Bhakti and Shakti Fests, focus is on *bhakti* (devotion) and yoga. At Wanderlust festivals, there is a focus on health, vegetarianism, connection with others, personal feelings of harmony, peak experiences, eco-consciousness and environmentalism, spiritual exploration, and personal development. In general, these are spaces that I identify as *ideological commons*, where people come together to share their convictions and critiques with like-minded others.

At both LIB and Burning Man, there are numerous practical and instructional workshops about how to build alternative economies and social networks, whereas at the more explicitly yogic festivals, there are few concrete initiatives aimed at revisioning society. Instead, in these environments, yogis come together to do their “inner work,” and they are convinced that their personal transformation will change the world. Their goal is not to directly activate social change through pragmatic forms but rather to lead loving and conscious lives and to spread that vibration through personal connections, by spreading yoga and *bhakti* and by

becoming living examples of more evolved ways of being—changing the world one person and one connection at a time. Celebrants exuberantly come together to share ideas and connectivity with like-minded people who unite in their collective critiques of the status quo and their attraction to imagining other ways of being. In this sense, they run the risk of becoming what Federici calls a “gated commons,” a utopia “joined by exclusive interests separating them from others.”⁴⁴ Forebodingly, and as we will see in the next section, the danger with “gated commons,” Federici warns, is that they “may even deepen racial and intra-class divisions.”⁴⁵

WHITENESS AND WHITE POSSESSIVISM

Each of the transformational festivals in this study is distinct in mission and ethos, but in each case most participants are white. Drawing on my visual perception during my field research in these environments, I observed that the more yoga that festivals incorporated, the whiter they tended to be. According to the 2017 Black Rock City Census, 77.1 percent of Burning Man participants identified as white/Caucasian (non-Hispanic);⁴⁶ Lightning in a Bottle has a similar demographic representation. Yoga practice, in general, tends to be even whiter, with approximately 85 percent of American yogis identifying as Caucasian.⁴⁷ The transformational festivals that focus on yoga—for example, Wanderlusts—appear to be even whiter than that, with upward of 90 percent of participants presenting as white (though demographic information is not published on these festivals). Bhakti and Shakti Fests, with their explicit focus on the Hindu practice of *bhakti*, appeared to be upward of 95 percent white. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all informants in this study are white.

National statistics reveal that the United States is still a majority-white nation, with 76.5 percent of the population identifying as white and 60.4 percent identifying as white (non-Hispanic/non-Latino).⁴⁸ Thus, one could argue that the ethnic composition of Burning Man and LIB closely mirrors national averages. In contrast, the more yogic festivals (Wanderlust, Bhakti and Shakti Fests) exceed national statistics of white majority by 15 to 20 percent. These figures become more incongruous if one considers the population percentages of non-Hispanic whites; when compared to those statistics, these festivals range from 20 to 45 percent whiter than the national average. The figures become even more stark if one attends to geography a bit more closely. Burning Man and LIB are as white as Oregon (77 percent white [non-Hispanic]), and the more yogic festivals are whiter than Maine (93.7 percent white