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Yoga's Material Power: Yoga Pants in Twenty First–Century Imaginaries

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Abstract

This article investigates the cultural politics of the yoga pant to show how a popular US fashion item has recalibrated new meanings for a South Asian religio-philosophical practice. In twenty first–century US discourse, the yoga pant appears in cultural spaces as diverse as textile design, mom fiction, and music video. Drawing on feminist materialisms, I analyze representations of the yoga pant to track its journey through transnational circuits of power. I propose the dialectical concept of surfacing, understood as a drive towards flatness that also exposes depth, to analyze the contradictory work that the yoga pant can perform. The yoga pant enmeshes the postural practice of yoga within industrial textile engineering, contributes to gendered body discipline, and often occludes yoga's South Asian dimensions. Yet the yoga pant can also support visions of radical freedom from gendered and racialized hierarchies. The active materiality of this fashion item sheds new light on how the practice of yoga participates in twenty first–century projects of constraint and liberation.

Yoga, a practice with significant religio-philosophical roots in South Asia, has gained a new cultural icon in yoga pants, a marketable athleisure commodity in North America and beyond. In a twenty first–century discourse spanning textile design, mom fiction, and music videos, diverse representations of the yoga pant illuminate racialized and gendered engagements with idealized bodies within circuits connecting India and the United States. These entanglements show how the everyday power of yoga is not only found in bodies, minds, and relations, but also in objects.

My focus integrates the discourse analysis of literary and cultural studies with feminist materialisms that assert the liveliness of material things, encompass scientific perspectives, and situate objects within political and economic inequality.[1] The textual traces found in design and marketing discourse, popular fiction, and music video yield fresh insights into the yoga pant as an energetic materiality that negotiates environmental economies, gendered corporeal discipline, racialized power, and transgressive

aspirations. These elements inform yoga's longstanding dynamic capacity to further projects of inquiry, control, and liberation.

To explore the material significance of yoga pants, I draw on the concept of flexibility, understood "as a project of resilience, sustaining and sometimes revitalizing particular power relations in times of stress and change." Such flexibility "is always about something just out of reach."[2] As scholars of flexible aesthetic labor have argued, flexibility reflects neoliberal practices of capitalist accumulation in which individuals undertake material responsibilities and perform hybrid subjectivities to navigate political structures more smoothly, often at a cost to their own bodies.[3] This dynamic between elasticity and rigidity, compression and expansion, constraint and creativity, flourishing and suffering, and force and agency lies at the heart of how ubiquitous commodities perform cultural politics.

Building on scholarly perspectives that explore the yoga pant's layered ideological work,[4] I argue that the yoga pant in twenty first–century US cultural contexts produces three dominant effects. First, it enmeshes yoga as a postural practice within the environmental consequences and gendered norms of a transnational textile economy. Second, the materiality of the yoga pant threatens to overwrite South Asian connectivities, with potential consequences for subjects in the diaspora. Third, the yoga pant can also forward queer challenges to normative structures of social control. These overlapping, knotted actions show how the flexible surfaces of the yoga pant shape yoga as an everyday practice of power.

This essay begins by grounding itself within feminist materialisms and historicizing the rise of yoga pants. It then applies a cultural studies lens to three sites: synthetic textile design; North American mom fiction, with a focus on Laurie Gelman's *Yoga Pant Nation* (2021); and North American music, with a focus on Janelle Monáe's performance in the music video "Yoga" (2015). These diverse sites illuminate how the yoga pant not only entangles yoga within material inequalities but also provokes new perspectives on freedom.

Feminist Material Surfaces

My approach draws strength from feminist theories of materiality articulated through Karen Barad's language of matter as "*not a thing, but a doing*."[5] Understanding materiality as a verb shapes Jane Bennett's vocabulary of "vibrant materials," or "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."[6] Bennett's work proposes "a vitality intrinsic to materiality" that reveals "the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other."[7] Rather than asking how humans make meaning through objects, this approach invites the question of how objects make meaning through humans. This reconfiguration offers feminist possibilities by illuminating how objects entangle humans within structures beyond conscious control. By investigating how objects take material shape, circulate in networks of inequality, and accrue intertextual

meanings, we can analyze how vibrant materials shape the power of everyday life practices. Such materialist methods reveal new dimensions of "the active body" and "the moving body's capacity for agency, affect, ecological being, and deep corporeality."[8]

Such material agency operates in part through a process I call surfacing, or the dialectic that generates illusions of flat exteriority while also testifying to the depths that enable such illusions. Read as a noun, "surface" usually means, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, the "uppermost layer of something." If we apply Barad's perspective on matter as a doing, "surface" expresses a drive toward flatness. Read as a verb, "surface" can also involve motion through depth, as in "come up to the surface of the water or the ground." Placing these multiple connotations into play in the concept of surfacing, I argue that "surface" traverses the unseen depths that enable the outer layer. This intimacy between the making and breaking of flatness shapes surfacing as a metaphorical and material project.

This dialectic frames my approach. Yoga pants seem to be superficial surfaces with only one side that matters. Producing this flatness, however, requires agency on the part of the material object, activity which exposes the depths that the surface conceals. Readings of the yoga pant shaped by chemistry, identity politics, and art expose surfacing as a dialectical doing that aspires to one-sidedness and reveals multidimensionality. The pages that follow explore how yoga pants, animating themselves as textiles and texts, surface these contradictory meanings. This investigation may reveal how people wear yoga pants, but it mostly shows how yoga pants exert power through and on people.

How Yoga Leads to Yoga Pants

Yoga often signifies a constellation of mental, philosophical, religious, and postural disciplines that transform body, mind, and energy. These transformative aspirations are often rooted in practices from the South Asian subcontinent.[9] While yoga can include many elements,[10] I focus on modern postural yoga. Common in North America, modern postural yoga derives important foundations from early–twentieth century dialogues between Indian innovators and Western physical culture.[11] In this period, yoga developed through multiple cultural genealogies, entered scientific discourse, and served diverse political and religious aims.[12] Since exclusionary laws in the US, such as the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924, restricted migration from India, white subjects who could travel to India, study with Indian teachers, and promote yoga through mass media often transmitted variant traditions in the United States.[13] The portability of yoga as a cultural practice, often considered Indian, coexisted with limitations on Indian mobility and belonging within US public space.[14]

As yoga gained popularity in the US, it acquired new meanings within social landscapes of inequality. In the 1960s and 1970s, US postural yoga often signaled a countercultural rejection of Western industrial modernity. By the 1990s, its mainstream commodification responded to a landscape of increasing labor precarity and

escalating health costs.[15] After 9/11, yoga signified an acceptable cultural practice of benevolence from and toward Hindu religious authorities, even as other South Asian religious communities experienced disempowering suspicion and violence within American public space.[16] Pricing methods, social norms, and state disciplines that often disadvantaged Indigenous, Black, and Latinx communities informed the contours of access to, and belonging within, the practice.[17] Yet practitioners of color have also activated yoga to support critiques of inequality and injustice.[18] The entanglement of constraining and liberating projects has thus marked yoga's spread.

Women, especially those who were white, middle-class, and educated,[19] catapulted yoga to new heights. The practice has flourished in the context of pressure on women to pursue professional success, achieve beauty ideals, keep fit and healthy, provide family care, and maintain social status. Because flexibility, a signature element of postural yoga, has historically been compatible with femininity,[20] it has not threatened dominant US gender norms. Postural yoga has often offered real therapeutic benefits to women facing impossible demands. Yet the structural conditions that make yoga so attractive as a solution can also shape yoga into a factor that perpetuates these problems.[21] Such pressures shape the rise of the yoga pant as a cultural icon.

Before yoga pants, what did practitioners wear? Photographs of early twentieth-century postural yoga in India show a range of attire.[22] Midcentury American *LIFE* magazine photos portray Indian men bare-chested in shorts or wrapped cloths, white American women in shorts or dance attire, and white American men in diverse clothing, such as a 1940s photo of a man doing a headstand while dressed in tailored pants, a button-down shirt, and boots.[23] Indra Devi, a Latvian woman who taught yoga in Hollywood, appeared on the cover of her book *Yoga for Americans* (1963) in a sari. Postage stamps produced in India in 1991 show practitioners in t-shirts, shorts, and leotards with footless tights.[24] Before the late twentieth century, these images suggest, a singular norm around what to wear did not predominate.

The yoga pant as a distinctive commodity reflects neoliberal responses to contradictions that structure North American femininity.[25] The Canadian athleisure company lululemon is popularly credited with positioning yoga pants as a specific category when it began to market stretchy pants to women in 1998 from a store inside a yoga studio.[26] Promoted through discourses of responsibilized selfhood,[27] by 2014 the popularity of yoga pants in the United States had begun to surpass denim.[28] As Shreena Gandhi has argued, such apparel offers a space to negotiate longstanding demands on women to produce sexually desirable, yet socially pure, bodies.[29] Although women of diverse heritage and body shapes wear yoga pants, Elizabeth McKibben has shown how their aspirational quality often activates beauty ideals that center on youthful whiteness.[30] Yoga pants have thus promised to help women reconcile competing ideas about their values, responsibilities, agency, and dreams within broader structures of inequality.

Chemical and Environmental Enmeshments

As a textile, yoga pants stretch while retaining a defined surface. While they can be made from many materials, the signature flexibility of yoga pants generally indicates synthetic fibers derived from oil and made in laboratories. Luon, lululemon's signature fabric, is a blend of nylon and Lycra traditionally produced by the factories of Eclat Textile Company in Taiwan and Vietnam.[31] Nylon and Lycra (also known as elastane or spandex in untrademarked forms) reflect US midcentury engineering in plastics that morphed military applications into new consumer products.[32] The DuPont company, for example, began to sell nylon stockings in 1940 and Lycra girdles in 1959. Nylon's enthusiasts promoted it as an emblem of modernity, a fabric made from "coal, air, and water."[33] The nylon used in clothing can be produced by mixing adipic acid with a solution of hexamethylenediamine, a substance extracted from crude oil.[34] This substance resembles diamines found in putrefying flesh, so, as one chemistry professor puts it, "[freshly-made nylon] smells like a dead animal."[35] Lycra is a polyurethane-based plastic that begins with the synthesis of a macroglycol and a diisocyanate monomer. The resulting prepolymer undergoes a series of chemical reactions before being spun into solid fibers, twisted into yarn, and finished with another polymer.[36] The chemical discoveries of fabric-making that underpin the yoga pant have emerged within industrial processes directed largely by men, produced in the context of DuPont's military applications, and dependent on fossil fuel extraction. These chemical, political, gendered, and environmental forces shape the yoga pant as a seemingly flat, but all too multidimensional, object.

As synthetic fibers have become commercially viable, they have generated planetary environmental effects. Making fabric generates a massive carbon footprint as raw materials move around the world for processing. Textile manufacturing demands water and creates toxic effluents, with regulations rarely enforced.[37] Industry–media–influencer complexes promote consumer fast fashion in which rapid clothing turnover cultivates personal identity and maintains social capital.[38] As well, washing and maintaining fabrics demand ongoing resources.[39] When discarded, synthetic fabrics shed microplastics that travel across the earth and oceans as pollution.[40] Communities in the Global South tend to pay the highest costs associated with resource extraction, factory pollution, and clothing waste.[41] The materialities of yoga pants thus enmesh postural yoga within an ecosystem of extraction and mobility in which chemical innovation, manufacturing, consumption, and disposal produce environmental damage that amplifies geographical, racial, and gendered inequalities.

The commercial success of engineered fabrics reflects ambivalent quests for control over women's bodies while amplifying the latter's sexuality. Stretchy fabric enabled a comfortable replacement for the girdle, the compressive undergarment that many 1940s American women considered essential for respectable womanhood.[42] The girdle introduced layers of concealment while it literally pressured women's bodies to conform to a patriarchal ideal. Two decades later, Lycra reappeared in leggings for

fitness activities, such as aerobics and eventually yoga. Women saw in this stretchy fabric new aspirations toward their own bodily power. As Kaori O'Connor argues, "in one of the many ironies that surround Lycra, what had been the ultimate fiber of control now became the defining fiber of freedom."[43] This intimacy between control and liberation shapes the material history of the yoga pant.

Yoga pants negotiate multiple forms of power over gendered bodies. One form of control regulates the body internally through diet, movement, and discipline. Much as the ideal nylon stocking was meant to be transparent,[44] the materiality of yoga pants promises to reveal the truth of the wearer's internal state. Since physical discipline has often signified moral virtue, especially for women, yoga pants allow wearers to gain social credit for good custodianship of their bodies.[45] At the same time, these items control the body from the outside. As most wearers will know, yoga pants do not passively conform to the shape of an unclothed body. By dominant social standards, they tend to improve it. Compressive synthetic fabric smooths out lumps, elevates sagging parts, and wicks away sweat. Like the invisible yet necessary nylon stockings, the yoga pant materially alters body parts while disavowing such cultural work.[46] The yoga pant thus activates a highly engineered architecture of surfacing that pretends to reveal the wearer's natural state, yet whose unseen interior depths press that body toward a socially disciplined ideal.

The discourse of yoga pant textile design reflects these intertwined projects of bodily control. Like the DuPont quest to create a more comfortable girdle, twenty first–century research into yoga pant design seeks to "improve the wearing comfort of clothing"[47] by following the movement contours of the human body. This quest encodes measurable assumptions about the normative body type to which such a yoga pant should conform. One yoga pant design study, using 3-D scanning, measured only young women, because "female[s] in [their] 20s are the main target consumers of yoga clothing."[48] Within this demographic, the study limited itself to participants with a body mass index (BMI) between 18.5 and 22.5, with more than half below 20.[49] The World Health Organization (WHO) defines the condition of underweight as having a BMI of less than 18.5 and overweight as greater than or equal to 25.[50] The weights favored in this study thus skew toward very slender people, even though the population considered overweight or obese can range from thirty-one percent in Southeast Asia and Africa to sixty-seven percent in the Americas.[51] Low BMI also tends to exclude women experiencing perimenopause body composition shifts, despite women over 50 comprising a significant postural yoga demographic.[52] However, this explicit design bias toward the thin and youthful is unlikely to surprise consumers of yoga pants. The ideal yoga pant ostensibly reveals the natural slenderness of the practitioner's body, yet its design disciplines bodies toward this normative size or simply excludes those who do not fit.

Such projects of concealed control find their logical extension in the development of yoga pants as "wearables," or clothing that integrates information technology. Wearable X yoga pants, for instance, include accelerometers and haptic sensors

that provide real-time feedback on postures. The Wearable X website promises that "the pants will guide your attention during each step of a yoga pose via gentle vibrations, so you always know which part of your body you should focus on—just like a yoga teacher giving you a gentle adjustment."[53] This rhetoric demonstrates a resilient twentieth and twenty first–century logic, often promoted by Indian gurus, that yoga shapes the self into a piece of advanced technology.[54] Yogic self-development through and as technology links the visible and invisible surfaces of yoga pants to the internal contours of emotional and spiritual growth. The Wearable X website promises "Inner Confidence through Contact" to make this connection.[55] Such yoga pants, therefore, not only aspire to perfect the physical body but also to support invisible pursuits of equanimity. These projects attest to the flexible surfacing of the yoga pant as a wearable technology that usurps traditional teachers, treats the body as a product to be developed, and regulates unruly emotions.

Yet emerging voices also seek to challenge the extractive, unsustainable, or patriarchal foundations that have brought yoga pants into being. Materials engineers inspired by biomimicry, for example, have envisioned biodegradable yoga pants from bacterial rather than petroleum fibers.[56] Textile designers have begun to construct more inclusive yoga wear for a broader range of women.[57] Self-reflective practitioners have shown how to turn the material elasticity of the yoga pant against itself to promote cultural critique.[58] Such diverse practices of scientific, design, and autoethnographic inquiry seek to interrupt the chemical, environmental, and ideological networks that shape the outer sheen of yoga pants.

Liberal Multiculturalism in the Yoga Pant Nation

While yoga is often assumed to be from India, yoga pants are not. While South Asians and members of the South Asian diaspora sell, buy, and wear yoga pants, these garments do not generally secure the identity of "Indian." They therefore differ from clothing such as the sari[59] as well as from other South Asian norms around legwear for women, such as the Indo-Persian *churidar paijami*.[60] Often exemplifying the Western commercialization of yoga, the yoga pant can potentially overwrite diverse Indian practices and histories. How, then, do yoga pants negotiate the unstable racialization of yoga in the United States?

To explore this question, I turn to the novel *Yoga Pant Nation* (2021), by the North American writer Laurie Gelman. Gelman's work explores twenty first–century upper–middle class motherhood as an unending extraction of labor, perpetuated by emotionally intensive parenting, a competitive education environment, and an underresourced public school system that relies on volunteer culture. Inspired by Gelman's experience in a high socioeconomic echelon of Manhattan,[61] transposed to an upper–middle class Midwestern setting, *Class Mom* (2017) and *You've Been Volunteered* (2019) tell the story of a white mother in Kansas who negotiates the perils of parenting politics while seeking to be a mother on her own terms. *Yoga Pant Nation* continues this

narrative of the irreverent class mom, Jen, within a world of intensive mothering that revolves around "comparison, competition, and consumption."[62]

In this work of mom fiction, the yoga pant exemplifies the aspirational white mom who seeks to do it all. Published in a period where yoga pants had overtaken denim as everyday wear, *Yoga Pant Nation* shows how yoga pants help women pursue social norms of gendered beauty, express themselves as disciplined subjects, and mitigate the discomforts of paid and unpaid labor. "Yoga pants are so comfortable, and I pretty much have a pair for every occasion—cropped, flared, high waisted, even ones that look like dress pants but are stretchy and forgiving," Jen declares. "Yoga pants just might be the world's most perfect piece of clothing."[63] Jen usually wears yoga pants, even on elevated occasions, as her endlessly flexible solution to whatever life demands. Yoga pants gain ubiquity within a broader cultural universe in which South Asian–inspired therapeutic practices, such as yoga, can be unironically assimilated into Om Sweet Om, the yoga studio that Jen and her husband own. As a commodity, the yoga pant promotes the surface image of yoga as a multiracial practice at home all over the world.

Yet, if cultural products such as yoga pants produce these surfaces, people who embody multiracial subjectivities exemplify the depths of asymmetric power relations structuring US society. A key subtheme of the novel lies in a custody dispute over a toddler who is the child of Jen's white daughter Vivs and her estranged partner, Raj, who comes from India. Vivs begins her parenting journey as a single mother. However, after she tells Raj of the birth of their daughter, Maude, he becomes an engaged parent. When Raj's mother, Varsha, comes to visit, it soon becomes clear that Varsha wants to take her granddaughter to Mumbai for an extended stay. This desire fills Vivs and Jen with anxiety and anger. When Varsha and Raj initiate legal proceedings to claim his parentage, the two sides of Maude's family commence a battle over her custodianship.

The logic of the novel echoes longstanding logics of liberal assimilation that welcome migrants of color as long as key structures of power—in this case, the family—remain securely under the control of white agents within American social norms. White characters value immigrants such as Raj for the labor they provide (Vivs freely celebrates Raj's helpful and effective fathering), yet do not immediately acknowledge Raj's genealogical family claims as equal to those of white family members. The novel registers emotional threat when Varsha makes a structural claim to Maude's identity: "The hammer came down the first week of the new year, when, according to Vivs, Varsha sat her down and told her they wanted to take Maude back to India for a visit. 'I can't really take time off work right now' was her response. Varsha said she didn't expect her to come and wanted Maude to go for a few months. Vivs rejected the idea outright." Varsha tells her, "'Maude needs to know her heritage and where she comes from,'" to which Vivs replies, "'She comes from Kansas City.'"[64] Maude's white family members thus do not see her South Asian ancestry as equal. The novel amplifies anxiety by raising the possibility that Maude will be taken against Vivs's will

to India, metonymically linking Indian family connection with fears of child abduction. Even though the novel also tries to show its characters that their fears of international child abduction are excessive, the emotional energy of the novel runs on these anxieties. The white characters in the novel treat Maude much as they treat yoga pants: as beloved figures who may have some nominal relationship to South Asianness, but whose South Asianness is entirely subordinate to the claims of white subjects. Yoga pants thus draw attention to the predicaments of liberal multiculturalism in which acceptance of difference relies on terms set by the dominant racial group.

In this context, the novel uses yoga pants to register South Asianness as threatening to white American senses of self. Jen's "dressy black yoga pants" begin to act differently on her once she encounters Varsha in person: "Half an hour ago I thought I looked great, but after seeing [Varsha], I have to downgrade myself to so-so."[65] Varsha's South Asian fashion norms not only exceed the "yoga pant nation" of the novel's title, but also interrupt the seamless logic of yoga pant selfhood. The novel thus pits Jen as the white, yoga-pants-wearing hero against Varsha as the South Asian never-to-be-caught-dead-in-yoga-pants villain.

The flexibilities signaled by the yoga pant conceal rigidities around what Jen sees as nonnegotiable, namely her family's primacy in the custodial and genealogical relationship to Maude. Such questions of access and custodianship resonate with debates in American yoga, where liberal and often celebratory multicultural engagements with nonwhite cultures can lead to "white utopias" that resist critical reflection on uneven forms of racialized power.[66] These yoga pants, rather than offering a point of union between white and South Asian subjectivities, bring to the surface fears of a South Asianness that cannot be fully domesticated by white characters. Ultimately, the novel resolves some of these conflicts for its characters. Prompted by a South Asian American friend, Jen gains more empathy for Varsha; Raj, to his mother's frustration, recognizes Vivs and her family as real family members; a mediator officially awards both parents joint custody; and Raj engineers an ideal solution by persuading Vivs to spend time in India so that Maude can connect with her Indian family without separation from her mother. Yet the novel remains haunted by anxieties about a South Asianness that exceeds the terms of assimilability set by a white upper–middle class family structure.

The supposedly smooth and flexible surface of yoga pants thus masks a third dimension that reveals friction between the acceptable South Asianness attributed to cultural practices and the potentially threatening South Asianness attributed to people. Although surfaces appear to have only one side that matters, acts of surfacing invite readers to acknowledge unrecognized depth. *Yoga Pant Nation* leaves its story in a state of ambivalence about its own acts of surfacing. As the "yoga pant nation" of the title excludes Varsha as a non-American, non-yoga-pant-wearing threat, the novel suggests how the yoga pant can stand in opposition to South Asian agency in US space.

Transgressive Yoga Pants

Yoga pants can, however, also bring to the surface broader quests for liberation. Such potential emerges within the music video "Yoga" (2015), by Black artists Janelle Monáe and Jidenna and directed by Dave Meyers. As a nonbinary artist who creates complex and layered popular performance art, Janelle Monáe is often seen as an Afrofuturist visionary of queer Black freedom.[67] They describe their high-concept music videos as "emotion pictures for the mind."[68] The track "Yoga" appeared on the album *The Eephus*, produced as a partnership between Epic, Sony Music Entertainment, and the Wondaland multimedia entertainment collective cofounded by Monáe.[69] Monáe is credited as a "lead artist" for the song in fan discography, while popular music platforms, such as Apple Music, invite listeners to "experience the power and pull of the Janelle Monáe-led collective."[70] On YouTube, "Yoga" has been viewed more than 81 million times and has attracted more than twenty-two thousand comments, some of which note the song's 2026 revival on TikTok.[71] In the context of Monáe's broader work, this video links the sexualized commodification of yoga pants to a search for social and political freedom.

In this section, I examine the agency, intertextuality, and meaning of pants that perform potentially subversive acts of surfacing. Clothing often works in Monáe's performance art to challenge hierarchies of race, class, and heteronormativity; subvert gender norms of respectability politics; and interrogate the relationship between technology, sexuality, and consumption. Monáe's early work features a color palette of black and white that pays political homage to uniforms of working-class professions and extends legacies of queer Black performers.[72] On the early album *The ArchAndroid* (2010), Monáe appears as an android in a tuxedo and matador pants that question conventional forms of gender expression.[73] Music videos linked to the 2018 album *Dirty Computer* show Monáe in "labia pants" that celebrate pansexuality and extend the protests of the 2017 Women's March against President Donald Trump and his administration's broader threats to women's bodily autonomy in the United States.[74] Themes of women's sexual self-sufficiency, queer inclusiveness, and an aesthetics of bliss suffuse the music video "Water Slide," part of the 2023 album *The Age of Pleasure*, which features Monáe in orange flower–adorned bikini bottoms.[75] Though diverse in color, shape, style, and coverage, the pants worn by Monáe in performances contribute to broader critical dialogues concerning themes of race, freedom, constraint, desire, and pleasure in an unequal world.

Yoga pants in the 2015 music video "Yoga" participate in such dialogues. The choreography of this video seems somewhat uncharacteristic for work featuring Monáe, neither reflecting the crisp, staccato, funk-inspired contours of *The ArchAndroid* nor embodying the erotic "jiggle" of polymorphic orgasmic pulses in *The Age of Pleasure*.[76] Instead, the style of "Yoga" appears to reflect a more mainstream Hip Hop approach in which Monáe's character wears heteronormative female clothing, including white yoga pants and denim. The backup dancers, who appear to be women,

alternate between synchronized movements and dance-party freestyling. The drama of the music video appears to revolve around a fraught heterosexual affair between characters played by Monáe and Jidenna, who seems to be the unfaithful object of desire.

Elements of this sexualized, heteronormative portrayal of yoga resonate with longer North American histories of bodywork that engage South Asian traditions. One such legacy emerges through the theme of sexuality in dance.[77] In the early twentieth century, Orientalist practices merged cultural fascination with the possibilities of South Asian dancing bodies with broader exclusions of those bodies from rights and respect, especially on the grounds of dark skin. Much of this fascination was then transferred to white dancers whose acceptably erotic bodies could perform fantasies attributed to South Asianness while leaving racial hierarchies intact.[78] Such practices of oriental dance, which often figured a symbolic connection to India but drew deeper roots from Euro-American philosophies and physical culture, influenced the growth of yoga in North America.[79] Elements of "Yoga" thus inherit practices associated with South Asian traditions, such as mudras and levitation, through a Western legacy of "somatic Orientalism."[80]

The history informing "Yoga" further reflects the complex racial politics of Black women's sexualization and visibility in US popular culture. Black women in the early twentieth century often performed oriental roles that negotiated racialized expectations about their physicality and hypersexuality.[81] In contemporary contexts, scholars have suggested that Black women's participation within contemporary wellness cultures can perpetuate dynamics of somatic Orientalism.[82] These engagements locate yoga within competing pressures that have shaped embodiment, visibility, and performance for Black Americans.

At the same time, the video also contributes to the history of Black women's yoga for political struggle and spiritual resistance.[83] "Yoga" appeared during an intense moment of racial reckoning in the United States, a time when Monáe and their collaborators actively supported the Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality and racial violence.[84] *Essence* praised "Yoga" for insisting on joy amidst crisis: "Janelle Monae presents the perfect #CareFreeBlackGirls moment […]. […] We love it!"[85] The video thus offered resources to Black communities confronting inequality, injury, and injustice. In this context, yoga's associations with wellbeing and self-care assume specific political significance. Stephanie Evans argues that Black women have historically pursued wellness as a political act of self-determination over their own bodies, a legacy compatible with Monáe's longstanding interest in defending autonomy over physical, artistic, and economic aspects of their career.[86] This politics of resistance contributes to broader discourses around what yoga can offer minority, queer and transgender practitioners.[87]

Read in isolation from Monáe's past and future work, "Yoga" can appear as a song about subordination. The chorus line, "Baby bend over, let your booty do that yoga," aligns yoga, dance, and sex.[88] The lyrics suggest that postural yoga, especially

in yoga pants, renders practitioners desirable and vulnerable to the power of others. Red yoga pants with red stockings and high heels eroticize the dancers, so that yoga pants surface expectations around sexually available bodies. When the character played by Jidenna appears in the song, wearing a three-piece suit and surrounded by adoring women, his lyrics can be read through the lens of hegemonic masculinity: "So when she downward dog I jump up on her / I lo-lo-love the way you bend it / Oh Lord, I'd love to break you in."[89] As Monáe's character and backup dancers arrive on the scene, they seem to reclaim Jidenna's character from the competitive attention of other women. In some respects, thus, the music video appears to show how the materiality and flexibility of yoga pants promote a power dynamic in which subjects inevitably orbit lovers who seek domination over relation.

However, yoga pants in "Yoga" can also be read as a cyborgian-inflected, queer Black Futurist critique of patriarchal oppression and a concomitant search for liberation. While the video shows yoga pants worn in a style compatible with normative femininity, the opening lines queer this persona. Monáe's character mouths the words "[l]et your body do that yoga," but the voice heard is not theirs.[90] Instead, a deep voice interrupts the camera's presentation of conventional femininity by appearing to come from the lips of Monáe's character, gesturing at a depth of identity that cannot be predicted by surfaces. The lyrics sung by Monáe suggest their affiliation with women: "Sipping Killepitsch, got my black yoga pants on / Me and Brittany, we've been down in Atlanta."[91] The lyrics insist on personal sexual primacy, with lines such as "I'm my own private dancer" and visuals that include dancing in front of a mirror.[92] The black (in the lyrics), red (on the backup dancers) and white (on Monáe's character) of the yoga pants connect "Yoga" to the color scheme used in liberation manifesto videos such as "Q.U.E.E.N." on Monáe's *The Electric Lady* (2013). Lyrics in "Q.U.E.E.N." declare, "[s]ay is it weird to like the way she wear her tights? (But I like it)" and proclaim "[e]ven if it makes others uncomfortable / I will love who I am."[93] In short, the yoga pant animates a network of queer sensory associations across Monáe's oeuvre in which subjects do not seek approval from, much less subordination to, hegemonic masculinity. While the yoga pant may invoke heteronormative expectations for women's bodies, viewers are also invited to experience these pants as flexible queer practices that surface unexpected interiors and new resistances.

These intertextual connections to queering and self-love invite us to ask whether Jidenna's character is actually an object of desire. Instead, the video suggests that assuming this character as the heteronormative object of desire reflects an expectation projected onto the video, rather than an evidence-based interpretation of Monáe's character's words, signs, and actions. Lyrics sung by Monáe's character directly oppose those sung by Jidenna. Whereas Jidenna's lines include "I'd love to break you in," Monáe's character sings "I'm too much a rebel, never do what I'm supposed ta / Bend it never break it, baby watch and I'ma show ya."[94] The word "bend" thus challenges dynamics of subordination and links the signature flexibility of the yoga pant to a more resistant stance.

These yoga pants surface South Asian yogic practice in ways that exceed, even while engaging, Orientalist constraints. Extending the longstanding interest in the intimacies among clothing, technology, and de/rehumanization that mark Monáe's work, the music video begins with Monáe's character in yoga pants in a seated levitation with hands in a mudra. In the middle of the video, the character levitates again from a standing position while wearing white yoga pants. While levitation animates Orientalist stereotypes of exotic mysticism, it also activates South Asian traditions in which yoga promises technologies of power. Levitation gestures toward a possibility beyond the everyday, linking the video to South Asian yogic traditions of *siddhi*s, or supernatural powers.[95] This element, found in Ibn Battuta's medieval descriptions of yogis,[96] was systematically erased by modernizers such as Swami Vivekananda.[97] Invoking this disavowed South Asian history, the levitating yogi can be read as another incarnation of Monáe's android, a cyborgian presence on the posthuman border, marginalized in the human world yet connected to a deeper reality beyond everyday perception. This image resonates with perceptions of the yogi in South Asian contexts as "the quintessential outsider."[98] Signaling the border between entrapment and liberation, the synthetic pants of the cyborgian yogi materialize this dialectical surface that entangles South Asian and North American worlds.

"Yoga" thus negotiates the interface of restrictive and liberating projects, testifying that a surface always has (at least) two sides. The yoga pant can be read as extending the role of the tuxedo in Monáe's previous work, which enacts "tensions between the performance and preaching of restraint and abandon, typicality and queerness, captivity and freedom."[99] The intimacy between the tuxedo and the yoga pant appears in "Q.U.E.E.N.," where Monáe is shown in a tuxedo jacket with black compressive tights that could be yoga pants. Such interweaving extends the flexible capacity of the yoga pant to embody normative expectations, knit queer alternatives, and, in the levitating Wondaland universe of "Yoga," rise above constraining expectations.

Conclusion

The flexible surfaces and surfacings of the yoga pant as a material object expand understandings of yoga as a transnational social and philosophical phenomenon. To read the yoga pant as part of yoga helps to address David Gordon White's provocative question: "If these be yogis, then what is yoga?"[100] Engaging with the yoga pant's contradictory pressures, its ambivalent uses, and its illusory flatness yields new insights into the material force of yogic ambitions. The projects enmeshed through the yoga pant—inquiry into the physical nature of the world, power over matter and people, and liberation from visible and invisible structures of constraint—also constitute philosophical projects that have shaped the diverse history of yoga over centuries. Although the specific modality of stretchy activewear betokens a distinctly Western

product of the new millennium, the yoga pant uncannily inherits the South Asian lineages that it sometimes works to occlude.

These genealogies testify to complex forces shaping the circulation of commodities. Understood as an engineered textile, the yoga pant implicates the practice of yoga within the chemical manipulation of the world through economies of fear and desire. These forces enmesh postural yoga within global crises, such as environmental damage and racial, gendered, and economic inequality. As the yoga pant aspires to meet many needs, its hidden depths reveal inequalities and exclusions, especially concerning South Asians in US space. Yet the yoga pant can also surface within and against these structures. Understood as a surface for queer transgression, the yoga pant can be reclaimed to question the nature of freedom. As a flexible form of surface-making, the yoga pant works on its wearers in politically unstable ways. While on the outside yoga pants may all look somewhat alike, their materiality can also surface worlds of difference and depth.

Notes

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