Marking Sacred Space: Altars and Yoga Mats in Transformative Events

Amanda Lucia
University of California-Riverside, USA

ABSTRACT

This article presents data gleaned from ethnographic research in transformative events, with particular attention to those that incorporate yoga practice as an important educational site for the inscription and dissemination of “spiritual” values and as a pivotal site for testimonials of spiritual “transformation.” It draws from nearly a decade of research and practice in yoga environments in a wide variety of transformative events, including Bhakti and Shakti Fests (held in the high desert of Joshua Tree in Southern California), Wanderlust yoga festivals (global festivals in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and multiple regions of the United States), Lightning in a Bottle (held in central California), and Burning Man (held in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada). This research focuses particularly on the innovative ways that practitioners materialize and ritualize sacred spaces that represent their eclectic and personalized spiritual understandings and beliefs. In their imagined transition from institutional religion to transformational spirituality, yogic practitioners seek to develop alternative forms of devotional materiality that reflect and express their new metaphysical values. In creating sacred space in festivals—through building altars and spaces for spiritual and yogic practices (including the ubiquitous yoga mat)—practitioners use material culture agentively to re-enchant what many believe to be a disenchanted world. These efforts to re-enchant the self and its surroundings can be understood as an impulse to create counter-modernities that challenge the current order of things by simultaneously returning to ancient wisdom and envisioning new futures.
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Transformational festival events are extraordinarily diverse in their intents and purposes, missions, and visions. However, they overlap at the nexus of a fundamental desire to build forums for spiritual transformation, conscious evolution, and social change. In The Bloom TV series (2019–20), creator and director Jeet-Kei Leung introduces the multifaceted field of global transformative events as potent spaces for transformation, healing, and spiritual discovery.¹ The festivals in this article are a subset within a broad spectrum of transformative events occurring globally. These transformational festivals are explicitly focused on spiritual growth and incorporate postural yoga as a central practice and a primary means to usher in personal transformation and consciousness expansion. In this article, I draw on my field research in transformational festivals, with particular attention to those that focus on yoga, articulated as a generative and transformative spiritual practice. I argue that in their attention to “transformational” spiritual practice, yogic practitioners develop innovative forms of material religion that reflect their spiritual ontological values and are emblematic of their aim to re-enchant what many believe to be a disenchanted world.

Yogic transformational festivals are sites in which practitioners actively re-enchant their worlds, wherein they turn toward ritual, chanting, devotion, and introspection. Producers and attendees alike curate the geographical territory of the festivals as sacred space, supplying a canvas on which participants collaboratively create. By building altars and by aligning their practice on their yoga mats, participants generate sacred centers readied for the cultivation of spiritual and transformative experiences. In so doing, they cultivate new selves that are both receptive and penetrable, those that social theorist Charles Taylor refers to as “porous selves,” that is, vulnerable selves that are readily affected and influenced by cosmic forces—energy, spirit, presence, and divinity.² These efforts to re-enchant the self and its surroundings can be understood as an impulse to create counter-modernities that challenge the current order of things by simultaneously returning to ancient wisdom and envisioning new futures.

In this article, I build on extant research into spiritual and ritual practices in festival environments, but I focus particularly on data cultivated from my eight years of ethnographic research (2011–19) in transformational festivals, during which I examined the practice of yoga as a nexus of the cultivation and dissemination of spiritual values, that is, the metaphysics and ideology of those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR).³ The ideals of SBNR have been discussed at great length elsewhere, but as a brief introduction one might take religion scholar Lee Gilmore’s sketch outline to heart. Describing spirituality at Burning Man, she writes that participants tend to see spirituality “as better found outside the realm of institutional religious structures and doctrines and [that it] evokes a broadly and variously conceived sense of connection with something more that is beyond the individual and the ordinary.” In my field research, I found that this resonated with the views of most participants, and I concur with Gilmore’s further conclusion that spiritualities expressed in transformational festivals tend to be experiential, reflexive, and heterodoxic.⁴ But, as part of my larger project, which became White Utopias, I was also interested in how these spiritual populations tended to adopt only a distinctive set of spiritual discourses and practices.⁵ In particular, I was interested in how Indigenous and Indic (broadly conceived) religions became

⁴. Gilmore, Theater in a Crowded Fire, 57.
intertwined, and I was curious about the foundational logics behind such confluences. I began my fieldwork by attending Bhakti Fest (about two to three thousand attendees) held in the Joshua Tree desert in southern California in 2011. While immersed in the Hindu-inspired devotional (bhakti) ethos of Bhakti Fest (and, in time, its sister festival, Shakti Fest), I found that yoga classes included sermon-like expositions of New Age–inflected yogic philosophy. A bounty of workshops formed the structure of the festival, and most were emotional, therapeutic, and devotional. Through yoga classes, therapeutic workshops, and devotional exercises, participants were transforming the self, by “removing layers” of resistance and baggage, and thus being made “raw” and “open.” The “spiritual work” of “self-transformation” held close the goal of deep engagement with—and deconstruction of—the psychological and metaphysical composition of the self; this was understood in the community as “doing one’s spiritual work.” Through participant-observation and interviews with yogis, I began to recognize yoga practice as a conjoiner of multiple spiritual worlds and yoga classes as a key site for the dissemination—and maintenance—of spiritual values, a “yoga church” of sorts. Following this thread, and the yoga teachers and practitioners, I then entered other festival worlds; by 2014, I began attending multiple Wanderlust events and Lightning in a Bottle.

In 2014, I attended Wanderlust events in Oahu (Hawaii), Los Angeles and Squaw Valley (Lake Tahoe) in California, and Mont Tremblant (Quebec), and in the following years, Sunshine Coast (Australia) and Great Lake Taupo (New Zealand). Wanderlust festivals attract a more mainstream and less spiritually committed yogic audience. While some participants expressed reverence for a guru, lineage, or a distinct spiritual or devotional practice, most were dedicated postural yogis, who focused particularly on the presumed physical benefits of the postural practice (āsana). Wanderlust event producers recognized the “spirituality-lite” values of their intended market and targeted their programming accordingly. Wanderlust festivals engaged with yogic symbols and philosophy through their aesthetic (a strategy that calls to mind yoga scholar Andrea Jain’s critique of gestural subversions), while simultaneously they focused explicitly on wellness, outdoor physical activity, reverence for nature, and the neoliberal cultivation of the self. Mark Bentley, one of the producers, explicitly phrased it as such, saying that Wanderlust festivals—and yoga classes—are “filling that need for a secular church.” Wanderlust festivals and the yoga classes therein offered participants the experience of a kind of enchanted secularism. As I will discuss, yoga practice forms a kind of spiritual punctuation to the secular that invites affective forms of religious experience: cosmic connection, wonder, deep introspection, and emotional overwhelm.

That same year, I also began to attend Lightning in a Bottle, which was my first entrée into a more popular (more than twenty-five thousand attendees) and music-oriented transformative event. Though it has had multiple locations, beginning in 2014, it was held in Bradley, California (halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco). In contrast to the specifically yogic festivals that I had attended, Lightning in a Bottle was considerably more eclectic and less yogic in its “consciousness” programming. Workshops tended to focus instead on Indigenous wisdom and included a wide variety of spiritually oriented themes, mostly convened at four massive yoga tents spaced evenly across the event geography. But therein too, in yoga classes, teachers espoused their distinctive philosophies and cultivated spiritual experiences that aimed to “transform” the self, expanding beyond the physical practice and focusing on peak

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In what follows, I focus attention on their expressions of material religion (or more accurately, to stay closer to the emic view, *material spirituality*) and the ways these expressions illustrate a variety of spiritual ontological values. I argue that the festivals’ primary aim is re-enchantment, and this is made visible in multilayered contexts, expanded as participants go deeper into the “interior infinite” through spiritual engagement with the festival experience. In particular, I analyze how altars become public collaborations to express distinctive spiritual ontological values. At the individual level, I show how participants use their yoga mats as sites for personal introspection, therapeutic release, and communal belonging. In conclusion, I show how these material practices reflect the attempt to create material structures of spirituality that are individually designed but also re-enchanting and are imagined to be opposed to the negative valence with which most participants perceive institutional religion.
Placing Yogic Practice in Contemporary Spirituality

Many of these participants have become deeply engaged with yoga practice as a facet of their broader attempts to sacralize aspects of their lives, while rejecting direct engagement with institutional religions. As multiple scholars have noted, eclectic, autonomous, and personalized spiritual practices come together in incongruous yet collectively reproduced amalgamations of “exotic” religious resources deemed both available and productive for spiritual growth. This reach into non-white cultures for resources dovetails with assumptions about modernity and disenchantment, with Indigenous, Asian, and premodern European spiritualities providing fodder for re-enchantment of modernity and the sanctification of space and time (fig. 1).

These largely white, Anglo-European spiritual content creators turn to these alternative sources for inspiration under the broad-based and variously iterated presumption that the contemporary Western world—including its religions—has become corrupted and disenchanted in modernity. Furthermore, many participants see that disenchantment as the reason for the current crises of modernity, in that it fosters social isolation, anomie, melancholia, environmental destruction, and violence. These populations are nonspecialists operating within the popular myths of enchantment and disenchantment. They do not abide the scholarly notion that the myth of disenchantment is largely a discursive product of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and not an objective reality.

The festival event—with its multifaceted explorations into various spiritual forms and practices—is a means by which to re-enchant and reconnect, though the notion of precisely what participants

Figure 1. Krishna Das performing kīrtan at Bhakti Fest 2015. Photo courtesy of Niranjan Arminius - KDBhaktiFestWest_20150913, CC BY-SA 2.0, Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 2.0 Generic.
are connecting with remains largely undefined. At Shakti Fest, Naomi explained,

I come to things like this because it stirs my spirit. It stirs what’s in me, which is the greater part that I am connected to, and tonight—I don’t know what—I don’t know how to express that.... I know that I am connected to the larger world. My spirits, my body, and my heart speaks, and I feel differently when I’m in places where there’s a certain energy. It’s very noticeable. Like people talk about how they feel God or whatever, well I feel spirit. I feel energy when I’m in places like this.¹⁴

Many festivalgoers identify as empaths, energy workers, or at least those who recognize “energy” as a powerful force in social relations and human existence. The practice of yoga, too, is often understood as a means to tap into energies that connect the self, others, the earth, and the cosmos. Carly, an empath from New Orleans whom I talked with at Shakti Fest, explained that she “did yoga because of energy.”

I didn’t do it to like build my abs. I did it because I was crying in [yoga] classes [and] had no idea why.... I’m opening the shakras [sic] [chakras] but I’m not knowing that it is happening. I just know that I go into a camel [pose], and then I’m in a child’s pose, and I’m sobbing—no thoughts. So, I know that meant something because it’s so bizarre. So, I did yoga training for the spirituality, for the energy, for that—and it intertwines for me. So, then I found out [about] shakras—shakras [sic] are in Reiki. That’s what I mean. That they’re all kind of connected for me or at least the parts that I gravitated to. I mean the physical part I love and that’s also what is opening me up. I hold stuff in my body. That’s energy. So, that’s why I did yoga [teacher] training.¹⁵

Attuning to energy through metaphysical practices (yoga, Reiki, chakra balancing/healing, meditation, and so on) often becomes a primary focus for these spiritual seekers, and coming together in festivals becomes a means of fostering a collective experience of shared ideals and communal learning.

The communal gathering of the transformative event is relatively new, but this focus on becoming attuned, gathering, channeling, and transmitting energy for spiritual purpose is a long-standing foundational practice of metaphysical religion, one that religion scholar Catherine Albanese traces to early twentieth-century confluences of Asian metaphysical ideas including chakras, meridians, and postural yoga.¹⁶ In her ethnographic research on those whom she calls “the new metaphysicals,” sociologist Courtney Bender notes, “The physical and fleshy body can be a ‘container,’ but it is also a channel, conduit, or ‘switch.’ Meditation, yoga, Reiki, acupuncture, and a variety of other activities provided ways to find and maintain physical bodies that were open, aligned, or relaxed, and therein properly attuned to the energies that simultaneously coursed through them and constituted them.”¹⁷ In this view, attuning and aligning with cosmic energies that course through and sustain all life is one of the fundamental ways the world becomes re-enchanted, and as this article will reveal, material objects become especially sanctified as portals for the sacred.

All of this spiritual work is done, however, outside of the category of religion, which my informants routinely critiqued as a source of violence, corruption, and corporatization instigated and supported by churches (and other conventional religious institutions). Many of my informants verbally processed their rejection of religion through their affirmations of their spiritual beliefs and practices. However, as multiple scholars working in “spiritual” (or SBNR) field sites have found, their rejection of religion does not mean that they had no interest in the supernatural, prayer,
ritual, or cosmological and soteriological questions. Quite the contrary: there is considerable evidence that unchurched SBNR populations hold deep "metaphysical" convictions.

One clear distinction, however, is that a primary characteristic among SBNR populations is that personal experience (and not a religious institution or clerical figure) becomes the most significant barometer of religious authority. As the scholar of New Age religion Paul Heelas explains, "the inner realm of life serves as the source of significance and authority, the realm of transcendent theism does not enter into the monistic ontology." Religion scholar David L. McMahan traces this focus on personal experience also to the nineteenth century, wherein the term "spirituality" referred to attitudes and practices oriented toward a transcendent reality to which all major religions might provide paths and which was accessed not through the institutions of religion but through personal experience. It is characterized by a cosmopolitan embrace of the many different faiths as each having a "spiritual dimension," again over and above the institutional and social dimensions, and an emphasis on personal access to this reality through serene contemplation or ecstatic experience.

Thus, for the past several centuries, yogic spirituality has referenced a conglomeration of European harmonialistic ideas of energy, ether, and spirit, and also a variety of extractions from Indigenous and Indic religions (here glossed broadly to refer to religions originating in India, primarily Hinduism, Buddhism, and Tantra). In this eclectic amalgamation, contemporary spiritual worlds include tree spirit worshippers, yogis, Neo-Tantrics, Reiki practitioners, crystal skull communicators, ecstatic dancers, silent meditators, and so on. In general, they draw heavily from individualized forms of mystical and ascetic practices. In conversations at these festivals, I found that a large majority correlated the term "religion" with Christocentric forms of religion, specifically, and as a result, they tended to embrace noninstitutional and non-Western religious forms, which seemed to be the defining category of that which was deemed "spiritual."

Enacting various spiritual practices eclectically drawn from multiple sources, these populations enchant their worlds, building rituals and celebrating the confluences of a universe that is often believed to be sending them signs. In their rejection of the catastrophic consequences of modernity (totalitarianism, mass destruction, eco-death), they celebrate that which they regard as emblematic of the premodern (often indexed as pre-Christian). As the religion scholar Jason A. Josephson-Storm explains, "Moreover, the more 'magic' becomes marked as antimodern, the more it becomes potentially attractive as a site from which to criticize 'modernity.'" The magical, mystical, and supernatural intertwines with romanticized conceptions of non-Western forms of religion as pure, unsullied ancient wisdom that provide alternatives to modernity.

In a fascinating convergence, the social event of festival also emerges as a site of communal spiritual exchange and social revitalization that situates itself in contrast to modernist forms of institutional religion. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim famously regarded the festival as the most fundamental (and primitive) form of religion, arguing that the very foundations of religion were developed through these sacrificial communal gatherings. Taking this to heart, it is then somewhat unsurprising that contemporary spiritualists, when looking to re-enchant their worlds and to build new transformational spiritually oriented societies, turn to the festival as a potently generative event.
Marking Sacred Space: The Altar

It is somewhat ironic that these adamantly “not religious” communities routinely invest energy in recreating the conventional religious form of the altar. Creative and personalized altars are commonplace in Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, and Korean ancestral religions; Native American traditions; Catholicism; Neo-Paganism; and Wicca. Altars are designated spaces wherein relationships between humans and deities are established, maintained, and negotiated. In festival and gathering spaces, they are “ephemeral art,” and among Neo-Pagans, anthropologist Sabina Magliocco suggests that they are also an “individual performance—a display of the makers’ skill and artistry, their grasp of magical symbolism and affiliation with a particular tradition.” Building and maintaining personalized altars can be an important means to valorize, imagine, and sacralize ancestral paths while reinforcing ethnic, cultural, and religious identities. In many religious traditions, they also function as sacred portals through which to commemorate and communicate with ancestors, including the most recently deceased.

Given their deep connections to traditional forms of religiosity, it is somewhat surprising that participants and producers at transformational festivals build altars throughout event geographies. But it is precisely the altars’ immediate denotation of religious import that makes them effective markers of sacred spaces, able to transform conventionally profane locales, such as parking lots, hotel conference rooms, canopied tent spaces, and empty natural landscapes. The collectively constructed altars punctuate these landscapes and instigate curiosity and reflection, invoke the divine, and cultivate a multiplicity of affective responses, including (but not limited to) reverence. Many of the altars draw on a wide variety of religious traditions, and a multiplicity of philosophical and religious ideas are enlivened and illuminated through their construction. They represent the particular vision(s) of their creators, but then they are often manipulated and modified as participants engage with them throughout the event. Interacting with the altars becomes a means by which to initiate meaningful and personal spiritual experiences.

For altar builders, creating altars can become an impactful means by which to experiment with and create their personalized spiritual vision and also to imprint that vision upon the festival space for others to experience. In 2012, at Bhakti Fest, Sarah, a dark-haired free-spirited woman in her mid-twenties articulated her passion for creating altars and what she called “temple spaces” for workshops and ceremonies at a variety of transformational festivals. She was proud of her work to “create an energy, create a harmony, [and] create a flow throughout each day” that would build throughout the course of the festival. As she recounted her experience several weeks prior as the lead builder for the Temple of New Beginnings in the Sacred Spaces Village at Burning Man, she was excited about the deeply impactful spiritual spaces that she and her community had created, and she was honored to have had the opportunity to “hold space” in that way. As a Reiki master, she felt that she was particularly attuned to processes of manipulating energy and organizing space to create energetic epicenters.

At Wanderlust festivals, producers create altars to help transform profane spaces into sacred ones and to create a sense of magic and wonder; they disguise streetlamps and parking lots and decorate grassy lawns and tented workshop spaces. Altars serve as an invitation to interact with the geographical landscape and call attention to the beauty of the natural world. They also

27. Sarah [pseud.], interview by author, Bhakti Fest, Joshua Tree, California, September 9, 2012.
function as interactive displays, calling participants to connect with their poignant messages of spiritual communication. The altars are nontraditional in that they tend toward artful geometric designs, usually without direct references to deities. Participants do not interact with them through conventional religious practices, such as prayers, supplications, and offerings. Instead, the altars adorn the landscape with beauty and wonder, and participants sit next to them in quiet meditation or enjoy their spiritual backdrop while journaling, engaging in intimate conversations, or taking photos.

The altars at Wanderlust festivals invoke what McMahan calls an "enchanted secularism," meaning an attempt "to reenchant the disenchanted world, not through a rejection of disenchantment per se but through embracing the agents of disenchantment and reframing them in such a way as to reinfuse sacrality into the world."28 At Wanderlust, broadly, this means creating a space that cultivates "sublime experiences engaging with nature, personal introspection through yoga, and spiritual fulfillment in contact with community."29 The altars re-enchant the disenchanted world by repurposing natural materials, shaped to invoke the wonder of the natural world and the creative human spirit in combining them into something special and set apart—that is, sacred.30 Every altar is distinctive and reflects the particular spiritual preferences and proclivities of the crafters and designers. Volunteer altar builders are largely limited by the materials provided by those in charge.

In 2014, at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, the main thoroughfare of the festival took over the storefronts of the off-season ski village, while massive tent canopies occupied the parking lots and created spaces for yoga practice, therapeutic workshops, and communal gatherings. Handcrafted altars helped to sacralize these conventional and commercial spaces. Altars were built with driftwood, crystals, sea shells, quartz rocks, polished glass stones, selenite crystal sticks, succulents, moss, roses, carnations, pinecones, and feathers. Some were constructed in circular designs, others in triangular or heart-shaped ones that invited participants into energetic focal points. Several of the altars boasted a central point with a figure seated in a meditative posture resembling a Buddha. In the example below (figure 2), the shadowed Buddha figure rested above decorative flowers, driftwood, and found natural objects, and, most interestingly, a mirror, flanked with more peacock feathers (a symbol of Krishna) and other bird-of-prey feathers (possibly invoking Native religions). Nearly all of the altars at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, that year had small circular mirrors at their central focal points. The practical effect of the mirror was that when participants approached the altar, they saw a reflection of themselves, instead of or in addition to a representation of divinity.

This sacralization of the human (and their bodies) can be viewed multiply: as a reaction against theologies that condemn the body as sinful; as the Neo-Vedantic ideal that the individual Ātman (essence of self) is divine (tat tvam asi, the “great saying” [mahāvākyā] of the Chandogya Upanisad); or in the celebration of human life itself as composed of sacred, energetic “stardust” made popular in the 1960s counterculture.31 In such a view, the self is an internal source of divinity, and not that which is to be denied or rejected. Heelas explains this fundamental reformulation of the self as an affirmation of “spiritualities of life.” He writes, “Whether it be yoga in Chennai or yoga in San Francisco ... one will encounter the theme that what matters is delving within oneself to experience the primary source of the sacred, namely that which emanates from the ‘meta-empirical’ depths of life in the here-and-now.”32 The mirror at the center of the altar
provocatively invokes this revaluation of the self and challenges conventional understandings of precisely what should hold space of divinity. In asserting the divinity of the self, the altar encourages participants to interact with this alternative worldview as they view their reflections alongside found objects from nature on the altars.

Figure 2: Altar at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, California, 2014 (note the mirror as the centerpiece).

Producers and participants at other transformational festivals were less explicit about the self-as-sacred philosophical intervention but instead invoked other commonplace themes of SBNR ontology and metaphysics: eclectic amalgamations of religious traditions, the veneration of nature, and the belief that the divine is immanent in all of existence. The altars at Lightning in a Bottle in 2014 used found objects from nature and statues and photographic images from a variety of religious traditions, particularly Indigenous and Indic religions and occasionally Catholicism (fig. 3). In contrast to Wanderlust, many of these altars honored some reference to Native American religiosity (dream catchers, feathers, and sage), statues of the Buddha, Quan Yin (aka Guan Yin/Kuan Yin), Hindu deities (mostly Ganesha, Kali, Shiva, and Vishnu), the Virgin Mary, female goddess figures, tarot cards, and prayer cards. They included geodes and crystals, driftwood, woodchips, and rocks. Some incorporated colorful items that might conventionally be regarded as trash (bottle caps, crushed cans, empty nitrous oxide canisters, and colorful food wrappers). Altars were often placed in beatific natural environments and were constructed according to a variety of patterns of sacred geometry (yantras and mandalas).

The inclusion of what conventionally is regarded as trash also makes an important theological point that challenges participants to question the boundaries of what is commonly considered to be beautiful and divine. Inherently, it rejects conventional religious assumptions that the sacred
is confined to specific religiously ordained objects or persons and asserts the immanence of the divine. The eclecticism of the altar reflects the communal commitment to perennialism, the notion that while there are differences between religious traditions, they are expressions of a singular truth or essence. The inclusion of trash marks a radical democratization of the sacred reimagined as an all-inclusive category, applicable to all of the creatures and components of the natural world.


Figure 3: Altar at Lightning in a Bottle, 2014 (note the decorative repurposing of “trash”).

These altars not only were designed to be beautiful spaces but also functioned as interactive art installations. In some cases, participants were invited to contribute by creating special things (poetry, drawings, notes, and blessings) with supplied art materials or their own self-designated sacred items (figurines, stones, and so on). Writing journals for collective use were placed around their exterior parameters and often used for communal messages, meditations, reflections, or drawings. The altars tended to be built in public spaces—on hilltops or under large trees—that invited participants to congregate at the altar as a site of both creative expression and spiritual reflection. As a result, they also became points of curiosity, wherein participants read messages in the communal journals, viewed art, and witnessed the collaborative amalgamations of communal spiritual expression.

Following a more traditional religious form, at Bhakti and Shakti Fests (both festivals that focus on yoga and Hindu devotional practices [bhakti]), the altars populating the festival grounds boasted images and figurines of Hindu gurus and deities. At the main interactive altar at the front of the main stage, participants positioned photos of all of the most famous global gurus of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Muktananda, Mata
Amritanandamayi, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Neem Karoli Baba, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Swami Nithyananda, Shirdi Sai Baba, and Ramana Maharshi, among others. Presiding over all of this at the center was the Hindu deity Ganesha, known to be the remover of obstacles. Directly beneath him was a plate with all of the necessary accoutrements for pūjā (ritual worship): red vermillion, water, camphor, a brass bell, and incense. Scattered throughout the multilayered altar were small diyā (lamps), candles, flower petals, plants, water vessels, and peacock feathers (symbols of Krishna). There were also images and figurines of Hindu deities, including Radha, Krishna, Hanuman, and Saraswati; a small painted elephant; and a painted image of the Virgin Mary. While most of the photos placed on the altar were famous images of celebrity gurus and recognizable deities, there were some that were less so, perhaps pictures of local family gurus, parents, and loved ones.

The public altar at the main stage at Bhakti and Shakti Fests was often overshadowed by exuberant crowds, who twirled and swayed at the foot of the stage keeping time with the repeated mantras of the kīrtan musicians. But nevertheless, its presence invoked the teachings and spiritual power (śakti) of revered gurus, as well as their authority imagined as being grounded in ancient Indic lineages and traditions. The gurus on the altar were not present for the beautification of the event grounds or for a picturesque backdrop for a photo opportunity. Instead, they served as representatives of the devotional commitment of participants who had placed their images there with intention. Their visages reminded participants that the meditations, prayers, mantras, and devotional music were supplications offered to someone—not just projected into the nebulous ether or to a vague semblance of a divine force. For these altar creators and contributors, the images that they brought to the altar represented a family of spiritual exemplars, each in their own way, guiding seekers to higher planes of consciousness.

For Bhakti and Shakti Fest participants, constructing altars was a practice cultivated at home and then reproduced within the festival. For example, Hannah described the contents of her home altar similarly as containing “pictures of my [spiritual] teachers and Shiva, and a little bit of Buddhist stuff. It’s basically things that inspire me. Teachers that have inspired, whoever; it’s like my heart is on the altar. I have a picture of my kids on there. And a picture of the Himalayas—things that inspire me.”³⁴ For some, their domestic altars occupy small corner nooks and windowsills adorned with special objects. For others, particularly those who host satsaṅgs (religious gatherings), yoga, or kīrtan in their homes, domestic altars can comprise entire rooms fully dedicated to pūjā, yoga, kīrtan, Neo-Tantric rituals, and meditation.

Personalized altars are a commonplace way for spiritual seekers to express their unique amalgamations of a variety of objects of devotional affection, and creating a personalized altar is often a first step to cultivating a spiritual practice in the home. For example, John, an older participant at Bhakti Fest told me that he was one of the few thousand who had ordered and received the countercultural American guru Baba Ram Dass’s original spiritual care package, From Bindu to Ojas, back in 1970. The famed book, which later became the countercultural classic, Be Here Now (1971), arrived in a box replete with a “cookbook for a sacred life,” an LP record of kīrtan, and all the accoutrements needed to construct your own altar: mandalas and photographs of gurus, gods, and goddesses.³⁵

Nearly fifty years later, during our interview, John told me about building his business and selling
altar boxes that people in his spiritual community fill with treasures of their own selection. He explained,

I got into building salvage ... and I saved moldings and wood and bleacher wood from old schools and years ago I started building these altars. They hang on the wall and they are sort of Moorish architecture and Indian architecture and temple architecture and sort of reduce it down to small—some of them weigh sixty or seventy pounds—but some of them are small, you know, like five pounds and they hang on the wall. You know, they are just a little focus, a center to focus, a reminder.  

For many, domestic and festival altars alike function as a visible reminder of divine presence. Notably, John sells his altar boxes empty, allowing for purchasers to design their sacred landscape by choosing personalized objects of veneration.

The practice of maintaining a domestic altar also translated into the festival space, wherein some participants created altars in the center of a cluster of tents and recreational vehicles (RVs) or in front of their personal living spaces. Some might contribute notes of affirmation or small gifts to these altars, but often they remained untouched by the public. Instead, they served as a means to decorate and sacralize participants’ temporary homes and to create the festival time and space as distinctively spiritual. For example, at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, in 2014, tent camping was high at the top of the chairlift with a 360° view of the surrounding Sierras and Lake Tahoe. My neighbor, Chrissy, was a sprightly young blond yoga instructor who was a veteran of the festival circuit. After she set up her tent, she unpacked a square of brocaded cloth, a Buddha statue, and a string of LED lights, from which she made an altar outside of her tent entrance. When I admired it, she explained that she takes it with her to all of the yoga festivals she goes to and that it serves as an object for meditation each morning and a comforting way to recognize home after dark.  

In contrast to the collective public altars, which were interactive spaces for communal spiritual engagement, her individual altar invited opportunities for personal reflection, meditation, yoga practice, and the practicality of marking home.

**Marking Sacred Space: The Yoga Mat**

While public altars are spaces for interactive communal spiritual reflection, the yoga mat is a deeply personal intimate space carved out for personal spiritual introspection. For many practitioners, the yoga mat is not only a material object but also a physical space, a mental state, and a community of practitioners. Those who align in community through yoga practice recognize each other as members of a subgroup of spiritual seekers. As Jeremiah Silver, a breathwork and healing arts teacher, explained during his workshop at Shakti Fest in 2015, when participants see each other on the street or in the airport with their yoga mats strapped to their backs, there is an instant recognition, an inner knowing, that “we are of the same tribe.” The controversial term “tribe,” which I have discussed elsewhere, is used unapologetically by many throughout the yogic spiritual community to refer to fellow spiritual seekers and yoga practitioners. White kirtan artists employ the term (for example, Larisa Stowe and the Shakti Tribe), transformational festivals use it in their marketing materials, and online yoga channels and yoga studios brand themselves with the term (for example, Om Yoga Tribe and Yoga Tribe). As the yogi Dana Damara reflected on her experiences at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, on the popular platform Gaiam:

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My yoga tribe, on the other hand, remembers me. The knowing of tribe members is unexplainable and may show up as synchronicities or mystical encounters... When I arrive at Wanderlust every year I can’t help but feel like I’m with my family... We travel to each other and gather with a common interest and passion of making sustainable change with our various forms of art, music, dance and yoga. We know that, when we come together, the energy creates a vortex that is mystical and magical. We know that in one breath, big change can be made. We know that bringing other like-minded individuals into our tribe makes our vortex bigger and more powerful, so there is support and unconditional love... One love—one heart—one tribe.

In festival spaces, it is on the yoga mat that these populations come together to commune and create and to collectively generate energetic "vortices." The yoga mat becomes a portal to re-enchantment through spiritual introspection. The object itself cultivates belonging and recognition, a visible means of unifying the spiritual community through common practice.

During festival yoga classes, it was common for practitioners to somehow sacralize their yoga mats prior to the start of class. At the minimum, many set aside a notebook and pen for noting down poignant thoughts, inspirations, favored āsana sequences, and teaching advice that might arise during the forthcoming class. Some took off their prayer beads (mālās) and piled them neatly in a corner or centered across the top of their mats. At Shakti Fest in 2016, a young man laid down his yoga mat next to mine and then pulled out a long wooden ceremonial flute with strips of leather twined around the top and descending colored gems inlaid to invoke the seven chakras (an Indic improvisation on a Native American theme). Carefully, he laid the flute horizontally at the top of his yoga mat and then made a deep and reverent prostration. He then knelt and pressed his hands together in silent prayer or meditation while he waited for the class to begin.

While his behavior was particularly pious, a large majority of yoga practitioners in these festivals understand their yoga mats to be special, if not sacred, places. While most recognize that the yoga mat itself is merely rubber or vinyl and do not relate to the object itself as sacred, the space that it designates is. The rectangular boundaries of the yoga mat differentiate the practice as a space of introspection and spiritual solace. At Wanderlust, Oahu, the popular yoga teacher Katie Kurtz encouraged her students, saying, "Every part of our journey is sacred. One great soul journey we’re on and we’re coming to our mats as a way to remember the sacredness and the mystery of this journey." It is a matter of routine that yoga teachers commend their students for “coming to their mats,” for “taking time on their mats,” and for “being present on their mats.” The yoga mat creates a designated time and space for yoga practice and meditation, and how one “comes to the mat” invokes a distinctive cosmological worldview and ethical values. Practitioners reward themselves for “showing up” and establishing their yoga practice as a reflective time and space separate from their daily lives (fig. 4).

Through habituated use, practitioners also develop conditioned responses, wherein their approach to the yoga mat itself invokes a sense of sacrality, introspection, and calm centeredness. The yoga mat “invites,” “centers,” “calms,” and “stillts.” As Delilah, a yogi from Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, explained, “when I'm on it [my yoga mat], there's an energy that calms me down.” Many yogis make similar associations, with the yoga mat cultivating a distinctively special energy. For Delilah, this reference is so strong that she has kept her same yoga mat for the past thirty years—refusing to replace it—because it is her personal "sacred space." Such rules...
follow anthropologist Mary Douglas’s theorization of a Durkheimian relationship between purity and sacrality. She writes, “For us sacred things are to be protected from defilement. Holiness and impurity are at opposite poles.” For this reason, it is a social faux pas to step on someone’s yoga mat while wearing shoes and many yogis would not loan their mat to someone else. In nearly every yoga class and personal practice, the yoga designates sacred time and space for spiritual introspection and yogic practice.

During one particularly crowded yoga class at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, in 2014, famed yoga teacher Kaylie Moon invited everyone to roll up their yoga mats and set them aside to make more room. To convince reluctant yogis, she explained how the rectangle of the mat can confine us into routine and habituate us into stagnation. Her call to yogis to leave behind their yoga mats was a radical affront to some, and some practitioners left the class instead of practicing without a mat. Others experimented playfully with this temporary community to expand their yoga practice beyond the familiar confines of the mat. But this social transgression is an outlier that reveals the rule, that in nearly every yoga class the yoga mat itself possesses sacred space and time and, when used, deploys the intention of time dedicated to spiritual introspection and transformation.

It is important to remember then how the yoga mat, while many scholars tend to reduce it to a mere yoga commodity (or a representation of yogic capitalism), in fact, serves a religious function. It is not only a marker of communal identity (“yoga tribe”) but also a marker of yogic time and space as sacred. For example, in the following passage from Henry Stevenson’s (HS) yoga class at Bhakti Fest in 2013, the yoga mat—and yoga practice—also serves as a protector against “sin.” While inviting his yoga class to chant a mantra taught to him by Krishnamacharya, he explained as follows:

From the first cell of life that arrived when you arrived. Mother, father, one cell that now blooms as the whole body. Just rest your attention on that womb from the heart. For its own sake, you don’t have to realize anything. You’re not trying to make anything happen. You never have to make anything happen. Enjoy what is given. Rest
in the structure of the Padma Devī and the lotus. Now we give this vibration: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha, and the whole lotus shimmers. Please.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

HS: Good, gentle throat inhale.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

HS: Gentle inhale.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

HS: Just pause for a moment. [flute plays a gentle melody for several minutes]

[flute pauses]

HS: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha. Please.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

HS: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

[flute resumes with gentle melody] With the power of all the saints and sages and realizers, avatars of humanity, you are blessed. The power of reality itself that has appeared, that is arising as beautiful you, as extreme intelligence and function as you. [flute stops] So we bless you in this endeavor to stay in that continuity. You know, it’s the definition of not to sin is: stay on the mat, stay on the point, the point that you are reality itself. And we acknowledge your sincere interest and your sincere need for an actual yoga practice that is suitable for you, for your body type, your age, your health, that acknowledges your cultural background. We give that to you now, it’s a blessed day, an auspicious day.45

In Stevenson’s vision, the yoga mat is also protector against sin and a touchstone through which the yogic practitioner is able to “stay on point” and to recognize that the self is reality (the Upanisadic maxim that Ātman is Brahman).

Conclusion

The attention to creating and defining sacred space in transformative events—whether through altars or yoga mats—ultimately is an attempt to reinvent the material landscape to reflect and assert distinctive spiritual ontologies. These sacred spaces are formulated by their creators as an invitation into the particularistic understandings of spiritual ways of worlding, and they invite participants into communion, reflection, and engagement, at both communal and individual levels.

Overarchingly, there is a clear emphasis on collaborative creation and democratic participation. Many of the festival producers merely reserved space for altar creation: hilltops, grassy lawns,
dressed platforms, or a designated corner (or center) of the yoga tent or music stage. Thereafter, particularly for high-visibility altars, a second tier of high-level organizers collaborated to ensure that something special would be placed there. For example, at Bhakti Fest, Kamala, a high-level organizer of the festival, loaned her extraordinarily beautiful and valuable murti (figurine) of Shiva Nataraja to the festival to be used on the main stage. At Wanderlust, Squaw Valley and Sunshine Coast, key organizers purchased the supplies for volunteers to create altars (and mandalas) throughout the festival grounds. Similarly, at Lightning in a Bottle, teams of designers worked on sections of the festival, crafting the foundations of a variety of interactive spaces to which participants would add their sacred objects. In each case, festival producers provided the canvases and the raw materials, and then a team of codesigners implemented the first level of creative processes. Then, in the course of the festival, participants engaged with the altars in unique and unpredictable ways. The results were collaborative fields of material expression that conveyed the distinctive spiritual and ontological values of the impromptu community.

At Bhakti and Shakti Fests, the main altar predominantly displayed Hindu deities and gurus and traditional objects used for ritual worship. While there was freedom to add items to the altars, participants tended to stay within the confines of the initial ontological direction, largely drawing from Hindu religiosity broadly construed. In contrast, altars at Wanderlust festivals reflected the enchanted secular ethos of the festivals, with reverence for nature and beauty but only minimal references to religion. At Lightning in a Bottle, altars embodied an eclectic amalgam of both of these theological impulses: they included eclectic religious figurines, natural materials, and also reconstituted trash.

In various ways, each of these altars reflect the fundamental values embraced among these spiritually diverse yogic communities. The rejection of religious hierarchy is a fundamental tenet, as is the valuation of all existence as divine. Each of these altars expressed theological ecumenism, without any demand for confinement to any singular deity or religious tradition. Even the Hindu-centric altars of Bhakti and Shakti Fests included Sikh gurus, images of the Virgin Mary, special stones, shells, flowers, trinkets, and drawings by the end of the festival. As discussed, Wanderlust altars provocatively asserted this metaphysical assertion of the self as divine by placing mirrors at the center of their altars in Squaw Valley in 2014. Lightning in a Bottle altars in 2016 repurposed trash, including colorful crushed cans, bottle caps, and empty nitrous oxide canisters, and placed them decoratively in the altar design alongside figurines of deities and humans and natural objects. Here, most provocatively, the altars invited participants to reconsider precisely what was being designated as sacred, invoked as special, and consecrated as divine. They called on participants to defy the conventional boundaries of the sacred and to conceive of divinity as immanently present in all things, including drug use and trash.

These altars are communal expressions, but they are also a catalyst for personal spiritual reflection. Underlying their creation is the widespread valuation of any means of opening oneself to introspective spiritual experience. It is for this reason that the yoga mat becomes much more than a square of rubber or vinyl but a marker of sacred space and time, and even a sacred object that can protect against sin and keep practitioners on the yogic path. The yoga mat also designates a vortex space wherein introspective, psycho-affective, and sometimes mystical experiences can occur. Expanding from the individual to society, sociologically, the yoga mat represents a communal identity, with yogis imagining themselves as family or as a “tribe.” This
is not only because of the somewhat simplistic reference to the fact that those carrying yoga mats “do yoga” but, more importantly, because those who “do yoga” value the daily practice of reserving time to cultivate spiritual experience. Altars and yoga mats are material objects that aim to re-enchant both the community and the individual through personal transformation. Making sacred spaces in festival events is a visible means by which to express and convey distinctive spiritual and ontological values, such as democracy, collaboration, co-creation, ecumenism, individualism, freedom, and an understanding of the self as divine and the divine as immanent. The material culture of these environs reveals the distinctive ontological values of “metaphysical” spirituality, all the while recreating the structures of the more conventional modes of religion.
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AUTHOR BIO

Amanda Lucia is a professor of religious studies at the University of California-Riverside. She is author of *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals* (2020), which intervenes at the intersection of whiteness, religious exoticism, and contemporary yoga spirituality. Her previous publications include *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace* (2014) and numerous articles. She is also the principal investigator for the Religion & Sexual Abuse Project, [www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org](http://www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org). Her current research focuses on celebrity gurus and negotiations between religious authority and secular law.

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