**Part I: Preliminary Information**

**Title:**

Constructing and Performing Authority in Yoga Traditions: An Ethnographic Approach

**Abstract:**

Yoga is a layered set of traditions with a colorful past rooted in India’s ancient history. With yoga's astounding recent popularity in the United States, practitioners and scholars have engaged in debates about what constitutes “authentic” yoga and who “owns” it. Particularly as India itself seeks to “reclaim” yoga from the West, contemporary yoga teachers worldwide must continually negotiate their roles as sources of authority vis-à-vis yoga traditions. My ethnographic research project, which entails participant-observer fieldwork, interviews, and academic study in both the US and India, analyzes how such authority is established and maintained in both contexts in order to better understand the complex interplay of text, ritual, bodily practices, philosophical teachings, and nationality at work in contemporary yoga. This project examines the ways that yoga teachers construct and perform authority, focusing especially on gendered experiences and relationships to yogic texts, thereby contributing to a burgeoning subfield within Religious Studies.

**Personal Statement:**

I participated in my first yoga class *in utero*. Subsequently I joined my mom for an array of classes, from postpartum and children’s yoga to adult yoga where we sweated in heated rooms or chanted mantras while seated on sheepskins. In tenth grade I began my 200-hour yoga teacher training as the youngest student, captivated by our weekends of anatomy and philosophy, and soon began teaching classes myself. Mentored by my teacher, Cheryl Crawford, I became certified to teach children’s yoga and undertook my first paid yoga teaching positions. Her confidence in my intuitions and developing teaching abilities helped me build my own sense of authority as a yoga teacher. I later trained in yoga for athletes and yoga for trauma-sensitive populations, each time taught by experienced professionals who guided and empowered me. My career as a yoga teacher carried me from high school—where I taught classes for female sex trafficking survivors at a shelter, athletes at school, and people of all ages at studios—to Elon, where I teach Burlington community members at a local studio and peers through Campus Recreation and Elon Yoga Club. At Elon, I also discovered yoga in the classroom.

I enrolled in Hindu Traditions with Dr. Amy Allocco my first semester, aware only of a vague connection between yoga and Hinduism. I was enthralled as the texts and deities woven into my yoga training came alive in our classroom. Dr. Allocco was the next mentor to inspire and guide me in exploring new dimensions of yoga traditions. Her dedication to researching lived religious practices—and their significance for individuals and societies—drew me into Religious Studies, which I declared as my major. Courses like Hindu Goddesses and Jewish Traditions exposed me to gendered religious experiences and the importance of studying marginalized and excluded perspectives. I soon declared a Women’s, Gender, and Sexualities Studies minor.

As an Elon College Fellow, I know the value of asking questions and cultivating my academic curiosity. Wanting to explore yoga’s origins my second semester at Elon, I delved into primary texts like the *Yoga Sutra* (150 BCE) and secondary sources in undergraduate research hours with Dr. Allocco and encountered competing voices of authority across the tradition’s history. My concomitant interest in yoga’s physiological aspects inspired me to collaborate with Dr. Svetlana Nepocatych and Exercise Science students investigating yoga’s effects on stress in another undergraduate research experience. Excited to learn more about yoga and wellness from health perspectives, I declared Public Health Studies as my second major.

When I discovered two entire panels on yoga in theory and practice would be presented at the American Academy of Religion’s (AAR) 2015 conference, I eagerly arranged to attend. I listened in awe to papers locating yoga vis-à-vis materialism, social media, and Hindu nationalism, and met the scholars whose research inspired my own developing academic work. Most significantly, I discovered that the types of questions I was beginning to pursue are part of emerging conversations within distinguished scholarly circles.

My collective experiences have ignited my desire to use my academic training to critically engage the yoga traditions I approach as a practitioner. The mentors who have guided me are undoubtedly authorities in their fields and in my life, and my work as a Lumen Scholar will endow me with authority both as a yoga teacher and an emerging scholar so that I might emulate them. My Lumen research will lay the foundation for post-graduate experiences such as Fulbright and other international fellowships and subsequent graduate studies, and will indelibly shape the yoga classes and workshops I teach at Elon and beyond.

**Part II: Project Description**

**Focus:**

Antiquity is often closely associated with authority, and in religious traditions sacred texts are regularly invoked to authorize various beliefs and practices. With regard to yoga, visual evidence of its practice appears on clay seals from the Indus Valley Civilization (2500 BCE) and Hindu texts reference it as early as 300 BCE (Singleton 2010). Comprised of Sanskrit aphorisms, the *Yoga Sutra* attributed to Patanjali (150 BCE) is yoga’s text par excellence: it discusses yogic practices including physical postures, meditation, breath exercises, and devotion to a higher being. Because the aphorisms are notoriously difficult to decipher, commentators and scholars have translated and interpreted the malleable text over time, creating a rich biography of the text itself (White 2014). Although contemporary yoga teachers typically refer to very limited passages, invoking Patanjali’s writings confers authority and prestige on modern yoga practices (Singleton 2010). For example, the influential B.K.S Iyengar (1918-2014), whose teachings became popular in the US in the 1960s, introduced an opening prayer to Patanjali at the beginning of each class and thus connected his brand of postural yoga with ancient Indian yogic traditions (Jain 2014).

While many teachers continue to assert authority by positioning themselves in relation to Patanjali’s text, contemporary yoga systems in the US bear little resemblance to premodern yoga (Jain 2014). A history of cross-cultural interactions and the influence of consumer culture have resulted in a diverse array of modern yoga traditions. However, some have attempted to retrieve or reject yoga by claiming that it has a geographical or religious origin. In 2015 Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appointed the first Minister of Yoga and declared the first International Day of Yoga (Barry 2015). Modi’s recent drive to claim yoga as Indian may serve his political goals to unite Indian Hindus against perceived foreign influence and assert India’s intellectual rights within the multibillion dollar yoga industry (Suri 2015). Modi’s maneuverings build on the Hindu American Foundation’s 2010 “Take Back Yoga” campaign that aimed to recover yoga as a traditionally Hindu practice, using Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* as evidence (Nicholson 2013). Positioning yoga as inherently Hindu has significant implications for some practitioners: some Christians, for example, have equated yoga practice with idolatry (Jain 2010). Questions about who defines and owns yoga have occupied religious communities, schools, and legal courts, and have animated scholarly discourse.

Andrea Jain argues against the idea of an “authentic” yoga with some monolithic essence, instead suggesting that “yoga is a symbol that has dramatically shifted in meaning across social contexts” (2010, 158). Both premodern and modern yoga traditions developed and evolved as they migrated into new contexts, and many agree that practicing yoga offers a range of benefits to practitioners without requiring adherence to any fixed ideology (Chapple 2008, Lucia 2010). But if yoga has no “authentic” origin or center, who is to say how authority may be constituted and transmitted within yoga traditions?

Although a relatively new subfield within Religious Studies, yoga studies has quickly developed a robust presence. At the AAR’s 2015 conference, leading scholars presented exciting new research on modern yoga traditions, but commented on the paucity of current feminist perspectives within yoga studies. Whereas generations of yoga gurus in India have been primarily male, white females predominate in US yoga culture. Mark Singleton discusses the dichotomy between gendered physical activities in the US, noting that “men are primarily concerned with strength and vigor while women are expected to cultivate physical attractiveness and graceful movement” (2010, 3099). While yoga today fits with prevailing gendered expectations about grace and beauty and surely owes some of its current popularity to this alignment, it initially provoked suspicion by featuring independent Euro-American women engaging in physical practices with Indian men (Gandhi 2009). The gendered dimensions of historical and contemporary yoga practice prompt questions about how gender affects the process of establishing and maintaining authority in yoga traditions, issues that I intend to investigate in my Lumen research.

Rather than attempting to answer essentializing questions concerning authenticity or ownership, I am interested in examining how yoga teachers in the US and India negotiate evolving yoga traditions. Through participant-observation, interviews, and textual analysis, I hope to expose competing discourses about so-called authenticity and trace their claims, thus elucidating the roles that factors including gender, nationality, textual knowledge, Sanskrit proficiency, and location in a lineage may play in performing authority within yoga traditions.

**Proposed Experiences:**

If I am selected as a Lumen Scholar, I will immediately seek IRB approval for my project. I will spend half of Summer 2016 participating in “Jaina Yoga,” an intensive four-week course offered through the International School for Jain Studies in North India. Taught by Dr. Christopher Chapple (Loyola Marymount University), this program examines the intersections between Indian religions and yoga traditions through textual study, lectures, and site visits. Although it is intended for Dr. Chapple’s Master’s students, I am fortunate to have been invited to enroll due to Dr. Allocco’s relationship with Dr. Chapple. This experience would offer me a first set of direct insights into yoga traditions in India via a structured program led by a widely respected scholar-practitioner who has indicated his willingness to facilitate my Lumen research.

I will conduct short-term fieldwork in the Atlanta, Georgia yoga community later in Summer 2016 to test and refine this project’s animating questions about authority in a US context. As an Atlanta native my personal relationships with five yoga studios make me confident in my ability to participate in and observe classes and interview teachers and students with whom I have spent years building trust, paying specific attention to text and gender as I focus on authority. However, I am aware that I will need to consistently account for and address my own biases and assumptions as an insider to this community.

In Winter Term 2017 I will study abroad in South India on Drs. Allocco and Pennington’s course focusing on religion, caste, and gender. This course will offer me a second academic experience in India, this time under the tutelage of my mentor, before undertaking independent fieldwork in India in Summer 2017. It will also provide me with a more informed understanding of gendered experiences and religious authority in South India that will be crucial to my project.

During Summer 2017 I will conduct four weeks of independent research in South India. Ravi Shankar, an internationally renowned yoga teacher-scholar (<http://www.yoganidhi.net/>), has confirmed his willingness to host me and assist me in making contacts with various yoga teachers and schools in Tamil Nadu. Having taught at Denison University and various US yoga schools, Shankar knows what kinds of introductions would be most helpful for my comparative project on authority, text, and gender in yoga traditions. Most exciting is his confidence that my research question is appropriate and relevant within Indian yoga contexts. Shankar’s enthusiasm notwithstanding, I am fully prepared for aspects of my project to shift as I navigate these proposed experiences and learn more about my topic and the people involved.

After returning from India I will conduct a second stint of fieldwork in Atlanta with the same yoga schools, bringing insights gained in India back into this US context and deepening my comparative perspective. I will begin to formulate conclusions from my ethnographic fieldwork by the end of Summer 2017 and will develop and bring them into conversation with theoretical literature in 498 hours in Fall 2017. I plan to attend the regional AAR conference in 2017 and to present there in 2018, and will consult Dr. Allocco about Yoga in Theory and Practice panels at the AAR’s national meeting to evaluate whether these sessions would warrant my attending.

**Proposed Products:**

As my research project combines two key aspects of my identity, the outcomes will also be directed towards two audiences: the academic and the yoga communities. I will prepare one full-length scholarly article as the cumulative product of my research, to be submitted to the *Journal of Undergraduate Ethnography* or the journal of the national Religious Studies honor society, Theta Alpha Kappa. In my senior year I will submit a proposal to present at the regional AAR, the Southeastern Women’s Studies Association (SEWSA), and the NCUR conferences, and will present this work to the Elon community at SURF.

I will also write a shorter, less formal article intended for the yoga community, to be submitted to online journals such as *Mantra Magazine* or *Elephant Journal*. In tandem with this article, I will create a yoga workshop pairing a physical yoga practice with a lecture summarizing my fieldwork findings and discussing the ways that yogic practices are presented and deployed in Indian and US yoga contexts. This workshop could be offered through the Elon Yoga Club, at studios, or as part of yoga teacher training programs. These proposed products not only disseminate my Lumen-supported research in academic forums, they also function as a form of reciprocity in that they give something back to the yoga communities that make my research possible.

**Part III: Feasibility**

**Feasibility Statement:**

This project yokes my experience with being a yoga student and teacher and my training as an emerging scholar in Religious Studies with my lack of experience in Indian contexts. As the only knowledge about India I had prior to this proposal process was what I had learned in Dr. Allocco’s courses, I was originally daunted by the idea of traveling to India alone and executing an independent research project. However, I believe the progressive nature of my proposed experiences, where each builds on the last, lends itself well to a project that will develop in stages as I alternate between the US and India. The first two proposed courses in India (Summer 2016 and Winter 2017) are led by professors who know the country well and can situate me in and teach me about this new environment. My two periods of research in Atlanta (Summer 2016 and 2017) will effectively serve as bookends to my independent phase of research in India (Summer 2017), enabling me to transfer learning across contexts and allow the knowledge I gain in each field experience to inform and shape the next. Furthermore, my experience studying abroad this semester at the University of Cape Town in South Africa during a time of tumultuous racial tension in the universities has provided me with the experience of engaging and interacting with people in unfamiliar, and sometimes uncomfortable, situations. I am confident that my current and proposed experiences will prepare me for a safe, productive summer of fieldwork in 2017. To further ensure successful independent research, I will take ANT 215: Qualitative Research Methods in Spring 2016 to develop my abilities in ethnographic methods on top of experience I am gaining through fieldwork in my current Medical Anthropology course.

I have also considered the feasibility of integrating my Lumen research into my multiple existing academic and extracurricular commitments and achieving some balance across these undertakings. I am certainly no stranger to juggling different responsibilities and deadlines: at present I work eight to ten hours per week, serve as Vice President of Elon’s Yoga Club, participate in my sorority, and have two majors and a minor, all while carrying a rigorous course load and maintaining a 3.79 GPA. I have already completed most of my Religious Studies major requirements, and strongly value the option of choosing classes that feed my intellectual curiosity and guide my personal academic journey over receiving multiple undergraduate degrees. For this reason I am willing to put my Lumen project before my second major, Public Health Studies, if necessary. I have also set aside two summers to devote to my Lumen research. I am certain that with careful planning I can balance my various commitments over the next two years and prioritize my Lumen research as a central pillar of my Elon experience.

**Budget:**

* **“Jaina Yoga” Summer Course in India (2016)—$2,650**
  + Round Trip Flights—$1,800
  + Tuition—$650
  + Books—$200
* **“India’s Identities” Winter Term Course in India (2017)—$3,900**
  + Program Fee—$4,300 (minus $1,000 subsidy from Elon College Fellows = $3,300)
  + Immunizations—$300
  + Incidentals—$300
* **Fieldwork in India (2017)—$3,900**
  + Visa—$150
  + Round Trip Flights—$1,800
  + Accommodation—$700
  + Meals—$250
  + Local Transportation—$150
  + Yoga classes and fees—$650
  + Research Assistance—$200
* **Conference Travel (2017 and 2018)—$450**
* **The balance of $4,100 will be applied to Elon Tuition**

**= TOTAL: $15,000**

**Timeline:**

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|  | **Proposed Experiences** | **Proposed Products** |
| **May 2016** |  | IRB certification |
| **Summer 2016** | “Jaina Yoga” summer course at the International School for Jain Studies in India (June-July); Fieldwork in Atlanta, GA (July-August) | Syllabus of preliminary readings on feminist ethnographic research method; Completion of field notes on experiences and transcripts of interviews recorded during “Jaina Yoga” summer school course in India; Field notes from ethnographic work in Atlanta |
| **Fall 2016** | LUM 498—2 credit hours; Elon College Fellow junior seminar; GBL 186: Pre-departure course for India’s Identities | Organize and thematize data from summer research; Extensive literature survey and annotated bibliography |
| **Winter 2017** | REL 286: India’s Identities study abroad in South India | Short Paper focusing on lived yoga traditions; Field notes |
| **Spring 2017** | LUM 498—2 credit hours; ANT 215: Qualitative Research Methods; WGS 300: Current Controversies in Feminism; Regional AAR conference (participating) | Continued literature survey and annotated bibliography with focus on preparation for independent research in India; Continue to augment knowledge about research methods; Develop additional models for data analysis (e.g., thematizing and coding); Pair critical academic inquiry related to sex, gender, and sexuality with a feminist activist project |
| **Summer 2017** | Independent ethnographic fieldwork in Chennai, India (June-July); Second stint of Fieldwork in Atlanta, GA (July-August) | Completion of data collection (interviews, field notes about participant-observer fieldwork); Transcribe interviews |
| **Fall 2017** | LUM 498—2 Credit Hours | Organize and thematize data from summer research; Design and write content for yoga workshop based on information gathered; Draft academic article; Draft yoga article; Submit conference proposals |
| **Winter 2018** | Yoga workshops | Finalize design and begin implementing yoga workshop |
| **Spring 2018** | LUM 498—2 Credit Hours | Complete academic article, submit to undergraduate journals; Complete yoga article, submit to online yoga journals; Present at regional AAR conference, SEWSA, NCUR and SURF |

**List of Sources:**

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