

# **Producing Ayurveda: Authenticity and Race in the Beauty and Wellness Industries**

**Hareem Khan**

## **Introduction**

In a 2021 article titled, "The Beauty Brands Placing Cultural Appreciation Over Appropriation," Roberta Schroeder described "plenty of promising brands... stepping in to fill" what she called an "authenticity void." In her view, "these niche brands are bringing ancient beauty rituals alive, connecting consumers to their heritage in a way that can't be imitated."<sup>1</sup> The depths of this "authenticity void" raise the specter of contemporary global capitalism and reveal the constitutive ways racialized narratives around the consumption of beauty and wellness claim to be the antidote to this void. Ayurveda, as one manifestation of the "ancient" beauty and wellness rituals to which Schroeder alluded, is the overarching site for this study of authenticity. It is one of the oldest indigenous medical traditions of the Indian subcontinent, dating back thousands of years. Today it is often articulated as a set of practices, diets, applications, and regimens geared toward longevity and holistic health that has been made more visible by the burgeoning of Ayurvedic wellness and beauty industries represented by spas, clinics, credentialing courses, and skincare and makeup lines.<sup>2</sup> Although integrated with the American wellness landscape for decades, Ayurveda has recently launched to the forefront of beauty and wellness discourses that draw on racialized conceptions of culture, identity, and authenticity.

Unlike other forms of alternative medicine, Ayurveda is often

authenticated by its tethering to a particular understanding of India, Indians, and to some degree Hinduism. The early reception of Ayurveda in the United States also differs from other racialized medical systems due to its popularity among non-South Asian clients. Traditional Chinese medicine, for example, emerged out of “ethnic enclaves” and circulated via diasporic routes. Ayurveda, on the other hand, was disseminated through the language and embodiment of universality even while securing its links to India. As a result, its marketing as a “cultural commodity” activates unique forms of authenticity such that Ayurveda gets located to a racialized tradition while simultaneously deeming itself an inclusive ideology.<sup>3</sup> These constructed proximities warrant a critical analysis of race-making, which underlies the production, circulation, and consumption of transnational wellness and aesthetic practices alongside producing the conditions of their global palatability. As one Ayurvedic practitioner I interviewed opined, “Ayurveda may have had its origins over there [India], but it belongs everywhere.” Thus, what are the particular racialized narratives surrounding Ayurveda that allow it to be both specifically “over there” and generally “everywhere”?

This article focuses on the accelerated growth of Ayurveda, its linkages to—and migrations from—the Global South, and its contemporary productions in the United States. Specifically, I am curious about the processes of racialization that structure the Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries, which rely on an imagining of the Global South to bolster Ayurveda’s legitimacy in the West. Scholarship on the visibility of Ayurveda in the West often focuses on its role as a cultural alternative to Western or allopathic medicine.<sup>4</sup> Other studies explore Ayurveda’s expansion into the wellness industries and the proliferation of Ayurvedic spas and resorts in India and globally.<sup>5</sup> My work is shaped by this scholarship; however, it takes race as a central logic to understand how authenticity is given value in the global marketplace. Borrowing from Paola Bacchetta, Sunaina Maira, and Howard Winant’s definition of global raciality as a network of “contextual relations of power,” I analyze how racialized discourses utilized within the Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries can be strategically invoked to secure the project of contemporary global capitalism.<sup>6</sup> I explore multiple sites in these industries, set within and against the backdrop of Los Angeles, where the desire for authenticity is used to repudiate hegemonic institutions and values even while it simultaneously concretizes its commitment to the values and desires of neoliberal autonomy. The sites I explore include clinics where Ayurvedic treatments, consultations, and therapies are offered as well as Ayurvedic beauty and skincare companies that market and sell their products online and vis-à-vis social media. The authenticity that is commodified and sold at these sites affirms not

simply an authenticated practice or production of Ayurveda, but also an aspirational ideal of the authenticated and racialized self affirmed through the consumption of these products and services. I argue that processes of racialization in this market are simultaneously overt *and* subtle due to the boundaries they demarcate between proper global citizens and those on the outside, thereby activating forms of inclusion and exclusion endemic to the current global order.

Throughout my fieldwork in the beauty and wellness industries, categories of difference designed to authenticate services and products presented themselves all around me, including the projection of identifiers, such as Ayurvedic, Ethnic, Eastern, and Indian, which serve as not simply a means to critique Orientalism but, rather, as a register through which I can understand the production and circulation of racialized Otherness. These genealogies of racialized aesthetic practices and commodities deserve further examining as evident logics of multicultural belonging and neoliberal consumer citizenship. I begin this piece with a theoretical intervention in the study of Ayurveda by drawing attention to the mechanisms of racialized authenticity that give it form. Borrowing from Gyanendra Pandey's discussion of the universal prejudice of modernity, I argue that the ways authenticity is racialized by Ayurvedic practitioners and Ayurvedic beauty business owners activates the "universal prejudice of authenticity," thereby obfuscating the racial mechanisms of exclusion and enacting homogenous and reductive South Asian representations of racial and ethnic inclusion.<sup>7</sup> From there, I position this universal prejudice of authenticity as a central modality through which to understand the functioning of neoliberal multiculturalism, which requires the overall synthesis of universalist discourse alongside the specificity of racial and ethnic difference.<sup>8</sup> To further support these arguments, I incorporate interviews with practitioners of Ayurveda alongside an examination of burgeoning Ayurvedic beauty companies that are premised around desires for South Asian representation, which together configure relationships between power, knowledge, and identity that ultimately rest on racializing Ayurveda through processes of authentication. These examples draw together divergent discourses of racialization in the beauty and wellness industries to exhibit their compatibilities and their ultimate inability to integrate a conceptualization of race that considers how differential values are attributed to groups of people marked by class, caste, religion, ethnicity, and gender to sustain global capitalism.

While this special issue seeks to address the registers of racialization across Global Souths, in this work, I examine how dimensions of the "Global South" are themselves racialized as authentic. Consequently, this article seeks to address two central questions: 1) What are the processes of racialization that differentially locate South Asia as well as participants in the beauty and wellness industries along a spectrum

of authenticity? 2) How do these patterns of race-making define and disrupt the boundaries between inclusion and obfuscation that valorize particular forms of belonging and citizenship? These questions inform my analysis of the place (or places) of differently racialized groups under neoliberal multiculturalism offering openings to understand seemingly paradoxical registers of racialization. Ultimately, this work highlights the relational processes of racialization that place the “authentic” subject into histories of racial formations that extend Western liberal discourses of multiculturalism and inclusion.

### **The Universal Prejudice of Authenticity**

Authenticity, its productions and negotiations, is studied extensively within cultural anthropology.<sup>9</sup> Often, the anthropological interrogation of authenticity is understood through its generation of value for the global consumer market.<sup>10</sup> This generation of “authentic” value can be enacted vis-à-vis authentication processes enmeshed with particular ethnic and racial groups that allow it transportability as a global commodity.<sup>11</sup> Racially authenticated products and services are then encountered by consumers in ways that contest or legitimize their place in the consumer imagination as authentic. In the case of Ayurveda, authenticity is produced through the practitioner’s or entrepreneur’s *claims* to authenticity either through prioritizing the racial genealogy of Ayurveda as in the case of the non-South Asian practitioners I interviewed or an explicit identification with racial and ethnic identity as in the case of the South Asian entrepreneurs featured here.<sup>12</sup> I argue that, despite their claims to authenticity, these efforts rely on a discourse of multiculturalism, albeit in different forms, that draws strategically upon racial sameness or distinction to make the commodity in question accessible within global markets.

Ayurveda circulates as a medium through which authenticity gains value and legitimacy, which is uniquely exhibited by the interviews as well as the content analyses of social media marketing and advertising presented in this article. Cavanaugh and Shankar explore these linkages between values tied to particular ethnic groups and regions and the production practices that yield economic value through their research on local food production in Bergamo, Italy, and advertising agencies catering to Asian American consumers, respectively. They introduce “linguistic materiality” to examine the ways linguistic practices and representations of authenticity are attached to material objects during the production process.<sup>13</sup> This framing informs my study of the commercialization of Ayurvedic products and services in the ways racialized claims to authenticity as well as representations of authenticity are linked to the products and services practitioners and entrepreneurs sell in the market. I am interested in these claims and the ways racial genealogies and racial identities are deployed to generate value for a multiracial and multiethnic

consumer base. Presently, knowledge production around Ayurveda is still strongly facilitated by an understanding of India as the originating site of a set of ancient traditions and practices. Yet it is in this articulation of India as the authenticated origin that activates and strengthens patterns of racialization configuring the identities of a wide spectrum of industry participants.

My own interests in Ayurveda are influenced by scholarship on South Asian beauty aesthetics in South Asian and diasporic contexts.<sup>14</sup> While Ayurveda was reaching American audiences throughout the twentieth century, it was mostly associated with the realm of spiritual liberation and enlightenment. It has only recently been incorporated into the beauty and wellness industries as a commodifiable object, treatment, or service. Beyond Ayurveda, South Asian aesthetic forms found other avenues of entry into these industries through, for example, the introduction of "Indo chic" in Western and Asian markets that reached an apex of popularity during the 1990s facilitated by mainstream, often white, artists and celebrities. While Indo chic has waned in terms of its legibility, the production and consumption of Ayurveda offers a site from which to continue the study of race, authenticity, and commodification enacted by racialized goods and practices and consumed by South Asian and non-South Asian consumers around the world.

I have previously used "racializing authenticity" to situate the authentication processes women employed in the beauty industry navigate through their own embodiment of race, class, gender, and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> In this study on Ayurveda, I argue that evocations of authenticity are activated by race that effectively bolster de/racialized narratives of multiculturalism. To explore this further, I draw from Gyanendra Pandey's text, *The History of Prejudice*. In it, Pandey theorizes the universal prejudice of the modern in relation to the particular prejudice of the vernacular specifically in reference to the relationality of Black histories in the United States with Dalit histories in India. Vernacular prejudice is what he refers to as "localizable, relatively visible, and sometimes acknowledged," prejudice that includes racism, casteism, heterosexism, and so on.<sup>16</sup> "Universal prejudice" is what Pandey describes as the "language of law and state" that passes for common sense, making it difficult to acknowledge as prejudice. In his discussion of the "prejudice of the modern," focusing on post-WWII political discourse, Pandey locates the history of the word "modern" as an attribute or quality that was generally preferred or desirable in the ways it activated a self motivated by rationality, secularity, and liberalism. The premise on which the racialized beauty and wellness industries are built is an extension of the universal prejudice of modernity.

Interestingly, in these industries, something different from modernity is articulated, encapsulated, in this case, by the search for authenticity.

Authenticity, thus, serves as an antidote to the unquestioned secularization of modernity through the consumption and production of “Othered” practices and skills, not as a form of whitewashing, but rather as a form and mechanism of race-making. As an example, one South Asian woman-owned company explained that its brand, “fuses the cultural richness, rituals, and spirituality of India with the contemporary energy and technologies of the West to create a first-of-its-kind hybrid beauty brand.”<sup>17</sup> This complex interpellation of the imagined “East” and the “West” is not at all new; however, its contemporary utilization by Ayurvedic beauty brands demonstrates the new forms this articulation takes under neoliberal multiculturalism. It presents the consumption of Ayurveda as the most authentic and fulfilling cure to the ills of contemporary globalization, paradoxically strengthening the very foundations upon which this criticized rationality rests. Consequently, authenticity, in the Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries, shores up its own universal prejudices animated by discourses of post-raciality and multicultural inclusivity. Next, I conduct a closer examination of the ways this universal prejudice of authenticity enshrines the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism.

### **Authenticating Ayurveda Under Neoliberal Multiculturalism**

The popularity of Ayurveda has further deepened the visual, symbolic, and discursive markers of India in the Western imagination that extend and depart from previous articulations of the racialized subcontinent. Historically, the popularization and professionalization of Ayurveda in India was entangled with its nationalist project, which sought to craft Ayurveda as indigenous and uniquely Hindu and, therefore, a counter to British colonialism and other medical traditions in the region.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, efforts today, due in part to the growing consumption of Ayurveda in the West, continue to further locate Ayurveda and other practices such as Yoga as inherently Indian, fueled in part by Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalism as well as Ayurveda’s and yoga’s recognition on global platforms such as the United Nations.<sup>19</sup> Ayurveda can, thus, be seen to entrench particular narratives of India’s global significance that rely on selective modes of inclusivity while also resting on the realities of exclusivity sanctioned by the state itself.

While it is true that the proliferation of Ayurveda has been used to envision an ahistorical and monolithic set of traditions and practices inextricable from the Hindu state, I am particularly interested in the ways it also activates a logic of racial and ethnic belonging that is central to a state-sanctioned systematization of multiculturalism dominant in the West.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the universal prejudice of authenticity encapsulated by the Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries is itself a product of a global capitalist modernity, which buttresses the construed rationality of what Jodi Melamed terms, “neoliberal multiculturalism.”<sup>21</sup>

In this construction, the continued success of neoliberal capitalism is its ability to detach understandings of racialization from its material conditions, ultimately affirming that the contemporary mode of multiculturalism is best when in service to the spirit of neoliberalism that exists today.

When I was conducting my research, India's representation globally was one of inconsistency and incongruity. Akin to the American Orientalism examined in the 1990s, Indians and India today are thrust into mainstream media and left to reconcile contrasting images: that of an India replete with ancient traditions and cultures that could cure the ills of modernity through the register of representation, appreciation, and celebration alongside less mainstream but still visible images of India as the site of some of the world's largest protests in repudiation of the Hindu nationalist government that routinely enacts violence directed at its marginalized and subjugated populations.<sup>22</sup> The Ayurvedic practitioners I interviewed along with the observations I made on social media platforms such as Instagram overwhelmingly align with the former rendering of India such that Ayurveda now stands in for an ancient solution to today's problems. For example, neither the practitioners nor the entrepreneurs included in this study acknowledged the roots of casteism that are central to the history of practices such as yoga, meditation, and Ayurveda, which eliminate caste altogether from imaginings of India.<sup>23</sup> Curiously, some of these individuals did acknowledge or used their platform to uplift the racial justice issues located within the boundaries of the United States, such as vocal support for the Black Lives Matter uprisings following the killing of George Floyd. Melamed argues that neoliberal multiculturalism is powerful precisely because of its ability to "justify inequality using codes that can signify as nonracial or even antiracist."<sup>24</sup> Excluding caste from discussions of Ayurveda alongside using state-sanctified antiracist language to condemn violence directed at racialized groups are technologies of the same system. The horizons of practitioners' and entrepreneurs' activism stopped at the level of the U.S. state given their relative silence on matters related to caste, Islamophobia, and classism—all of which require a transnational interpellation of struggle and make essential an understanding of identity and belonging that would ultimately condemn the neoliberal multiculturalism upon which they, along with their businesses and practices, are dependent.

I argue that the integral nature of neoliberal multiculturalism and the universal prejudice of authenticity give what some have called "New Age Ayurveda" its form and salience.<sup>25</sup> It allows for a mode of production and consumption that heralds an autonomous, liberal, rational self that refuses to be homogenized by the forces of modernity and instead can pursue an authenticated self that continues to benefit from and uphold the national and global institutions that give this self legitimacy.

The Ayurvedic practitioners and entrepreneurs are, thus, relying on authenticated narratives to bolster their positions in the market. These authentication practices—even if located within the realm of antiracist discourse—are strategically inept at addressing the market as the site and instrumental factor in the creation of differential value based on race. Next, I draw on two disparate and entangled sites to argue how the utilization of *seemingly different* racial narratives of authenticity can still bolster the same racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism either through an emphasis on racial genealogy or racial and ethnic identity.

### **Post-racial Inclusivity and Racialized Representation: Notes from Fieldwork**

As shown, the productions of Ayurveda find their locations in both the beauty and wellness industries. For example, there is a proliferation of Ayurvedic clinics and spas where Ayurveda-trained practitioners serve a growing clientele of regulars as well as newcomers seeking alternative therapies and remedies for a spectrum of aesthetic, physical, and mental healing and rejuvenation. Los Angeles is one locale where this growth can be observed due to the nearby California College of Ayurveda that graduates practitioners each year as well as the ubiquitous climate of wellness that structures this city landscape. In addition to wellness, Ayurveda has gained a presence in the beauty industry exhibited by the visibility of Ayurvedic skincare brands that sell products such as facial masks, body oils, and hair treatments. Through my conversations with Ayurvedic practitioners and the content analyses I carried out examining media circulation of Ayurvedic beauty brands, I observed the ways racial discourses were strategically incorporated in both contexts to either deracialize Ayurveda or explicitly racialize Ayurveda, both through productions of authenticity. The following sections discuss each of these sites separately and then in conjunction to emphasize how they form the constitutive elements of neoliberal multiculturalism that rely on both deracialized inclusivity *and* racial and ethnic representation as its instrumental elements.

#### **Ayurvedic Practitioners**

During the initial stages of this research, I had the opportunity to interview two Ayurvedic practitioners from a clinic in Los Angeles. These practitioners offer treatments including Panchakarma, biomagnetic therapies, astrology readings, Abhyanga massages, and general Ayurvedic consultations to a racially and ethnically diverse mix of clients, a majority of whom were initially unfamiliar with Ayurveda and were introduced to it through attending yoga classes or word of mouth.<sup>26</sup> I interviewed one of these practitioners, Daniel, over Zoom. As the video image went from hazy to sharp, I observed Daniel seated in a cozy, tightly

packed room that had a large tapestry of a Hindu goddess hung on the back wall. To start things off, I asked him to share how he identified, to which he replied, "Mexican-American," followed by "I guess that's the *correct term*." Later in the interview, Daniel shared his observations of what he called an "identity crisis" afflicting many around him, particularly in the wellness space. He went on to explain, "... in reality, we tend to gravitate towards all these attachments—to these identities—but they don't really define us, right? I've done so much work to get rid of all these attachments; I'd like to keep it simple."

Interestingly, in the same conversation, Daniel also acknowledged the historical authenticity of Ayurvedic practice by Othering it as inherently Indian. Aware of this linkage, he attempted to deracialize this authentication effort by stating, "[Ayurveda] tend[s] to originate from India, but not everybody in India believes it, right? Not everybody in India practices it. So I don't link it to the people of India; I link it to India itself." While he made an effort to remove the racialized category of "Indians" from the authentication of Ayurveda, he instead tied it to an imagined Orient, devoid of people but replete with ancient texts and practices through which the truth of Ayurveda is revealed. He put this in dialogue with the corporatized nature of social media that profits off identity politics to further its aims of making profit and nurturing the ego, both of which he finds faults with. Furthermore, Daniel is an observer of Hinduism and has studied Vedic texts that he integrates with the services he offers at the clinic. His own experiences and observations in the industry are telling because they reveal his own articulations of boundary-setting even while he claims to deconstruct boundaries for the sake of accessibility. For him, courses taught in English that make Ayurvedic knowledge easily digestible are necessary for people in the West to find meaning in the practices. At the same time, however, he draws a line that dictates how diluted these practices can and have become through the ubiquity of Ayurvedic knowledge in the form of bite-sized social media pieces that circulate through the networks of influencers, founders, and self-made CEOs. In addition to Daniel, I also had the opportunity to interview Jessica, another practitioner at this site who arrived at Ayurveda after being diagnosed with a serious medical condition. After finding no success within Western medical paradigms, she began to explore wellness through the lens of alternative therapies and solutions. Like with Daniel, I began by asking Jessica how she identified, to which she replied, "My identity has gone through many different transformations." She then described herself as both "mixed" and "half Asian." Both Daniel and Jessica's simultaneous submission to, and repudiation of, race compliments the post-racial inclusivity and individual autonomy heralded by many in the wellness industry.

As Jessica explained, "I'm so not into these boxes anymore. And I

think it's because I lived this life of not feeling like I'm in a box racially. [And] I'm like, 'I don't categorize myself.' In addition to acknowledging their identities while simultaneously expressing a desire to jettison them, these practitioners emphasized that their individual implementation of Ayurveda was a counter to the elitism and capitalism of the medical industrial complex as well as a challenge to the categorical emphasis they feel is placed on individuals to express their identities rigidly within racial and ethnic boxes. In the case of the Ayurvedic industry, then, difference becomes a marker of value, and difference in this case is a self unmarked by racial difference.

But despite largely avoiding the topic of racial identity, both Daniel and Jessica went on to authenticate their practice and business of Ayurveda by either highlighting their training by South Asian practitioners of Ayurveda or through their own individual encounters with South Asia. Jessica elaborated, "I've never been to India, but we've been trained by all these doctors from India. So it's not that we're not getting the authentic training. Whereas you know, there's other schools that have, like, no faculty from India at all." While deemphasizing racial and ethnic categories when it comes to personal identification, Jessica and Daniel are analyzing their positionalities on a spectrum of authenticity situated somewhere in between Ayurvedic practice by South Asian individuals and those who are jumping on an Ayurvedic bandwagon to reap quick profits.

Drawing from these interviews, I argue that race is an operating logic where India and Hinduism are imagined to be the origin of traditional Ayurvedic practices and are consequently used to authenticate an individual's practice of Ayurveda while deemphasizing the relevance of their own racial and ethnic identities. For Daniel, Jessica, and other likeminded practitioners, there is something unsettling about the co-optation of Ayurveda and its oversimplification on social media platforms. For them, Ayurveda is intimately intertwined with Hinduism even while it simultaneously can function to serve the needs of anyone. This is evidenced by the fact that Daniel and Jessica offer these services to a wide range of clientele with varying degrees of familiarity with Ayurveda and its origins.

Both Daniel and Jessica uplift a counternarrative to identity politics, one in which identity is itself one of the root problems that results in general confusion about one's body and health. While this might run counter to the ways beauty entrepreneurs in this study approach the practice of Ayurveda, it does not offer a counter to the mechanisms of neoliberal multiculturalism and, in fact, strengthens it. By advocating for open accessibility to Ayurveda in the marketplace—even if expressed as a counter to the medical industrial complex endemic to the United States—these two practitioners regurgitate a post-racial envisioning of individuality, transcendent of racial and ethnic categorization, and also

negligent of the differential ways race and ethnicity together mark value in the global market.

A similar practice of authentication is explored next; it focuses, however, on Ayurvedic beauty brands and their digital advertising efforts. In this context, authentication in the marketplace is pursued not through the irrelevance of racial identities, but rather through their inherent importance.

### **Cultural Productions of Ayurvedic Beauty Brands**

Shahnaz Husain, an Indian beauty entrepreneur often credited with globalizing Ayurveda, stated in a 2021 interview with the Indian publication *PinkVilla*, “It is a dream come true to see the worldwide recognition of Ayurveda. I strongly believe that Indian plant power will lead the international cosmetic industry within the next decade. It has been tested by the most exacting test of all... the Test of Time!”<sup>27</sup> Husain is not the only entrepreneur who is convinced of the potential of Ayurveda’s successes in the beauty and wellness space. In recent years Ayurvedic skincare and makeup lines have catapulted into the consumer’s purview and are available in major cosmetic supply stores and easily accessible across social media sites such as Instagram. Prior to this age of popularity, Ayurveda had gained significance as an alternative dietary system of restraint, a rejuvenation system, and a regimen incorporating asceticism and spiritual advancement. While there is a continuation with these representations in what is visible today, I am especially interested in social media sites where crafted Ayurvedic knowledge and products/services are sold and where an accelerated growth of beauty and skincare companies that center a South Asian individual as an entrepreneur and founder are made visible. I observed across these sites a number of business owners and influencers who also activate and engage with aesthetic practices coded as Indian/Ayurvedic.

For example, as Arjun Sampath, founder of Soma Ayurvedic skin care, explained to *Beauty Independent*, “I believe Ayurveda is where yoga was in America 20 years ago, when it was known in some niche pockets, but wasn’t that popular. It’s going to grow exponentially over the next five to 10 years.”<sup>28</sup> Soma Ayurveda anchors its identity as an authentically Indian company rooted in and inspired by Ayurvedic practice and tradition while also projecting exponential growth—even in an increasingly saturated market—due precisely to its universal marketability.

Soma Ayurveda is not the only brand following this formula. Previously, there may have been Ayurvedic skincare products in the market, but they were seldom accompanied by a narrative of someone such as Sampath or one of the other entrepreneurs featured below. These narratives around racialized acceptance, belonging, and identification become central to their branding strategy by linking a

founder's personal connection to Ayurveda—often through introduction to it as a young person by a South Asian elder or family member—to their desire to “introduce” their specific brand to Western markets.

Authenticity and representation are the most dominant discourses that serve as the registers through which South Asian–owned Ayurvedic businesses market and sell their products and services. For example, Ranavat, an Ayurvedic beauty company launched in 2017, was described in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine as a brand, “featur[ing] Ayurvedic ingredients or rituals, creating products for those who've used the practices and opening the door to newcomers.”<sup>29</sup> Others have dubbed this niche market as “Ayurvedistry” that fuses prepackaged Ayurvedic tips with discourses of empowerment directed at all consumers through the image and representation of the liberated South Asian woman.

In an interview with *InStyle* magazine, beauty influencer and self-proclaimed “Global Indian” Diipa Büller-Khosla described how she “developed the concept of Ayurvedistry—the combination of Ayurvedic studies and chemistry—to create the world's first ever Ayurvedistry beauty brand, which will carry quality products made from superfoods used in Ayurveda that are catered towards those with brown skin, but is still safe for all skin types.”<sup>30</sup> These Ayurvedic companies are just a sampling of many that capitalize on discourses of empowerment, “BIPOC representation,” and environmental consciousness to authenticate their brands to the contemporary needs of consumers. They illustrate how influencing and the brand management of global Indian aesthetic practices can serve as a mechanism of neoliberal self-governance that consumers and producers enact through a discourse of self-discovery, agency, and autonomy. For many of these beauty business owners, influencing has also become a means to engage with their racialized identities that are directly used to authenticate the products and services they sell.

For instance, some of these South Asian influencers have created short trendy videos in which they highlight the contradiction between being ridiculed when they were younger for certain practices, such as oiling their hair, and now being asked to share their healthy hair secrets. The subject of this is not only the South Asian influencer, but also the presumably non–South Asian or white subject who now wants in on the practice. Ayurvedic beauty companies, thus, capitalize on collective experiences of cultural appropriation and racism. As Vanita Reddy states in her book *Fashioning Diaspora*, these interactions “produce embodied practices of citizenship and belonging” by boiling down individual experiences of racism, making them devoid of any systemic or structural analysis.<sup>31</sup> This piecemeal extraction of racialized narratives bolsters these companies' claims to authenticity in the global marketplace further enhanced by the visibility of a racially marked subject as the key

figure in their branding.

But what does it signify for a consumer to witness this heightened visibility of South Asians as authenticators of Ayurveda? Bakirathi Mani's understanding of "diasporic mimesis" helps situate this desire to represent and be represented within the medium of fine art photography.<sup>32</sup> Building on this work, I believe the carefully crafted and curated images and videos these beauty brands circulate also center a desire for representation while simultaneously raising questions about the *impossibilities* of representation. For example, many of these beauty companies that distinguish themselves on the basis of being South Asian-owned are vocal about ensuring that the employees at their companies are racially and ethnically diverse. The discourse of representation in the Ayurvedic beauty industry, then, encourages us to celebrate a corporation otherwise abiding by the rules of neoliberalism that perhaps just *looks* different. Through this, we can follow Mani's invitation to reflect on the unfulfilling nature of representation.

Alongside this, South Asian business owners, observing an authenticity as well as a representation void, offer products that specifically cater to "brown skin." Even in popular accounts of the history of the beauty industry, there is an association between the dominant beauty industry and its catering to a largely white clientele, thereby excluding women of color. As a result, women of color-led branding offers an antidote to these exclusions through the register of visibility.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, beauty businesses launched by South Asian women focus on "inclusive products" and use the language of decolonization, radical innovation, diversity, inclusion, and representation as token markers of their viability in the global marketplace. As Adhikari explains, there has been a growth in the number of women of color "tapping into their heritage, their culture, their skin, and their hair, decentralizing and individualizing the beauty industry."<sup>34</sup> When this discourse on representation is always set against the hypervisibility of white women in these industries, I argue that we lose sight of processes of racialization that allow for the politics of representation to thrive as well as drive the consumption of authenticity, which together fit in very neatly with neoliberal and capitalist projections of business growth. For example, rather than a counter to systemic racism, South Asian influencers rely on an understanding of multicultural citizenship that ignores (intentionally) the class, caste, and religious dynamics of South Asian communities as well as their material conditions. In the following section, I explore this further by discussing the convergences of the processes of authenticity utilized by both Ayurvedic practitioners and beauty entrepreneurs.

### **Convergences of the Universal Prejudice of Authenticity**

One cannot simply criticize the popularity and perhaps dilution of

Ayurveda as resulting from its increasing ubiquity without acknowledging that its projected growth is following a formulaic global capitalist trajectory. The commodification of Ayurveda is greatly facilitated by the racial and ethnic discourses heralded by both practitioners as well as entrepreneurs and further legitimized by neoliberal multiculturalism, which relies on a confluence of representation, diversity, autonomy, and authenticity to validate its operations.

Thuy Linh Tu's research on Asian American fashion designers focuses on the convergence of these designers with a global "taste for Asian chic."<sup>35</sup> Specifically, Tu writes, "...the sartorial imagination produced Asianness as a fashionable commodity and how Asian American designers were, as a result, able to access Asianness as a resource... to be utilized for instrumental ends."<sup>36</sup> While the commodities, services, products, and practices I observe transcend the category of "Asian chic" focused on in Tu's work, I argue that they are instead rooted specifically to India and Hinduism even while simultaneously marketed as universally accessible. These discourses of origin, preservation, and distribution are used by both Ayurvedic practitioners as well as consumers and beauty business owners in their private and public reflections on the significance of Ayurveda.

As discussed, the Ayurvedic practitioners whom I interviewed did not simply whitewash the practice of Ayurveda. They repudiated racial categories while simultaneously claiming an authenticated genealogy either by way of their training or religious or spiritual practice. Similarly, the South Asian beauty entrepreneurs also claim authenticity through a shared experience of invisibility and a desire for branded visibility in the marketplace. By claiming a BIPOC, South Asian, Indian, or woman of color identity, these entrepreneurs legitimize the cultural products they sell, thereby activating a commodification of diversity and difference that can be celebrated as well as bought. Taken together, both examples serve as sites where negotiations around racialized authenticity occur and universal prejudices of the authentic subject are inscribed either through a rejection of race or through an affirmation of race by means of representation.

To note, both practitioners and entrepreneurs embody authenticity in seemingly divergent ways. For example, the two practitioners I interviewed did not identify as South Asian and distanced themselves from any "boxes" that could potentially constrain their identities; however, their embodiments of Ayurvedic practice through deep study and training, extensive certification, and spiritual practice relegated them as authentic. In other words, they relied on a discourse of post-raciality that advocated for a transcendence of race even while authorizing the particular racial genealogy of their practice. This served to simultaneously authenticate their practice in that it still had links to an "authentic"

Ayurveda practiced by Indians in India, and it allowed for a deracializing of their identities that justified their own consumption of an Othered practice. In a seeming contrast, beauty business entrepreneurs literally embodied authenticity through their racial and ethnic subjectivities and highlighted these embodiments through visual representation and linguistic markers. Ayurvedic beauty entrepreneurs and practitioners are, thus, brand ambassadors for neoliberal multiculturalism, where their specific uses of the rhetoric of empowerment, identity, and racial and ethnic solidarity ultimately serves to strengthen the supposed rationality of neoliberalism while ignoring the material conditions that have resulted in racialized differences in value. Capital is accrued for the producers of Ayurvedic products, services, and knowledges, an accumulation that does very little to denaturalize the power imbalance between the Global North and the Global South. Ultimately both efforts serve to strengthen the same networks of capital, labor, production, and consumption that epitomize our contemporary moment.

### **Conclusion**

In this piece, I explore how Ayurvedic services and products have a particular salience in the global beauty and wellness industries such that their value is often based on a perceived Otherness that is mediated by workers, business owners, practitioners, entrepreneurs, consumers, and other industry participants. Additionally, transnational aesthetic practices are often presented as vehicles for a set of values tied to an ideal racialized and gendered subject. This subject is attuned to racial and ethnic difference only to the degree it justifies their investment in the idea that striving for individuated authenticity in the marketplace is a resolution in and of itself. In turn, Ayurvedic products and services serve as a means for the subject to achieve modernity—or in this case a modern authenticity—within the realm of production and consumption. While I situate this work in the global city of Los Angeles, the industry is inherently transnational and informed by the networks of mobilities, capital, and labor that shape the more recent popularity and growth of businesses offering racialized services and products.

The sites I examine demonstrate how the productions of Ayurveda can provide a context for understanding the logics of the universal prejudice of authenticity as well as analyze the modalities of racialization perpetuated by the facilitation of state and economic policies. The racialized subjects as presented here are not depicted as manifestations and acculturations of Western values and ideals, but instead are viewed as being concurrently global and authentic, transgressing and deconstructing the bounded categories of the traditional and modern in ways that suit capitalist needs. By drawing from Pandey's work on universal and vernacular prejudices, I situate racialized authenticity in the

Ayurvedic beauty and wellness industries as a universalizing discourse that draws on neoliberal codes of belonging, such as individuality sans categorization alongside multiculturalism, which work to gloss over the materiality of vernacular prejudices. I examined the convergences and divergences of two production sites: interviews with Ayurvedic practitioners and media content produced by Ayurvedic beauty business owners. I argue that both of these sites, while resting on contrasting formulations of race, are necessary and inherent to the requirements of neoliberal multiculturalism, where diversity and inclusion are strategically configured so as to mask its inherent exclusions. The underlying processes of racialization in both instances, whether centering India or Indians, makes invisible the ways the universal prejudice of authenticity uplifts a hegemonic and homogenous India, one that is reliant on exclusions of class, regional, religious, and caste intonations that would ironically make it more authentic, however, less legible for markets.

### Notes

1. Roberta Schroeder, "The Beauty Brands Placing Cultural Appreciation over Appropriation," *Harper's Bazaar*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/beauty/a35613683/best-niche-beauty-brands/>.

2. Ayurveda dates back at least 2,000 years and has existed alongside other medical traditions in the region, including Unani, generalized as Islamic medicine, and Siddha, generalized as Tamilian medicine. For more, see Rachel Berger, *Ayurveda Made Modern: Political Histories of Indigenous Medicine in North India, 1900-1955* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

3. See Sita Reddy, "Asian Medicine in America: The Ayurvedic Case," *The Annals of the American Academy* 583 (2002): 97-121.

4. See Berger, *Ayurveda Made Modern*; Sita Reddy, "Reinventing Medical Traditions: The Professionalization of Ayurveda in Contemporary America" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2000); Dagmar Wujastyk and Frederick M. Smith, eds., *Modern and Global Ayurveda: Pluralism and Paradigms* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

5. Nazrul Islam, "New Age Orientalism: Ayurvedic 'Wellness and Spa Culture,'" *Health Sociology Review* 21, no. 2 (2012): 220-231.

6. Paola Bacchetta, Sunaina Maira, and Howard Winant, eds., *Global Raciality: Empire, Postcoloniality, Decoloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 9.

7. Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

8. Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

9. There has been significant work on authenticity within sociocultural and linguistic anthropology. For more, see Jillian R. Cavanaugh and Shalini Shankar, "Producing Authenticity in Global Capitalism: Language, Materiality, and Value,"

*American Anthropologist* 116, no. 1 (2014): 51-64; Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, "Laying Claim to Authenticity: Five Anthropological Dilemmas," *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): 337-360. For approaches to authenticity within the anthropology of tourism, see John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Mengpi Wang, "The Social Life of Scripts: Staging Authenticity in China's Ethno-Tourism Industry," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 41, no. 2/3/4 (2012): 419-455. And, for approaches to authenticity from the lens of material culture, see Siân Jones, "Negotiating Authentic Objects and Authentic Selves," *Journal of Material Culture* 15, no. 2 (2010): 181-203.

10. David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

11. Cavanaugh and Shankar, *Producing Authenticity in Global Capitalism*, 54.

12. I acknowledge that these boundaries are in constant states of negotiation and adjustment. I happened to interview Ayurvedic practitioners that emphasized the racial genealogy of Ayurveda as opposed to centering their own racial and ethnic identities; however, as this study expands to include a more diverse set of practitioners, this observation is subject to evolve.

13. Cavanaugh and Shankar, *Producing Authenticity in Global Capitalism*, 54.

14. Sunaina Maira, "Henna and Hip Hop: The Politics of Cultural Production and the Work of Cultural Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3, no. 3 (2000): 329-369; Anita Mannur and Pia K. Sahni, "'What can brown do for you?' Indo Chic and the Fashionability of South Asian Inspired Styles," *South Asian Popular Cultures* 9, no. 2 (2011): 177-190.

15. Hareem Khan, "Racialized Authenticity: South Asian Migrant Women in the Ethnic Beauty Market," *Ethnicities* 22, no. 1 (2022): 42-65.

16. Pandey, *A History of Prejudice*, 1.

17. This is the description that appears on the website for Prakti Beauty: a South Asian-owned beauty brand selling a range of cosmetic products branded as Ayurvedic. For more information, visit <https://praktibeauty.com/pages/our-story>.

18. For more on the history of Hindu nationalist discourse representative of Ayurveda in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries please see Saurav Kumar Rai, "Brahmanizing Ayurveda: Caste and Class Dimensions of Late Colonial Ayurvedic Movement in Upper India," *Summerhill* 25, no. 2 (2019): 4-9; and Saurav Kumar Rai, "Invoking 'Hindu' Ayurveda: Communalisation of the late colonial Ayurvedic discourse," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 56, no. 4 (2019): 411-426.

19. This is made evident in the inauguration of the United Nations International Day of Yoga as a result of a draft resolution proposed by India and 175 other member states. For a detailed description of the International Day of Yoga launched by the United Nations, see "2021 Theme: Yoga for Well-Being," United Nations, accessed September 1, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/yoga-day>. For more on India's prime minister's efforts to claim yoga, please see, Morgan Baker, "Root to Rise? Hindutva and the Propaganda of Yoga's Origins," *The Yale Historical Review*, May 2021, <https://www.yalehistoricalreview.org/root-to-rise/>; Tanya Basu,

"Who Owns Yoga?" *The Atlantic*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/01/who-owns-yoga/384350/>. For a critical examination of the International Day of Yoga, see Anusha Kedhar's insightful article "Choreographing Tolerance: Narendra Modi, Hindu Nationalism, and International Yoga Day," *Race and Yoga* 5, no. 1 (2010): 43-55.

20. It is worthwhile to note that the processes of authentication that make Ayurveda legible in sites such as the United States and India translate in other regional contexts, such as the Caribbean, where there is also a significant South Asian population.

21. Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*.

22. I draw this discussion of American Orientalism from Vivek Bald's essay on the topic focusing on "desirable" and "undesirable" forms of brownness. Please see Vivek Bald, "American Orientalism," *Dissent Magazine* (Spring 2015). <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/american-orientalism>.

23. In her powerful and personal interrogation of the wellness industrial complex, writer Fariha Róisín examines the links between caste and meditation to critique the invisibilities inherent in the practices of South Asian traditions today. Fariha Róisín, *Who is Wellness For? An Examination of Wellness Culture and Who It Leaves Behind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022).

24. Jodi Melamed, "Reading Tehran in *Lolita*," in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, eds. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 87.

25. Scholars have termed Ayurveda's presence in the West as a form of "New Age Ayurveda" due to its entanglements with New Age counterculture movements alongside a growing suspicion of Western biomedicine. See Reddy, "Reinventing Medical Traditions"; Kenneth G. Zysk, "New Age Ayurveda or What Happens to Indian Medicine When It Comes to America," *Traditional South Asian Medicine* 6 (2001): 10-26.

26. Panchakarma, an Ayurvedic purification remedy, is made up of treatments and therapies designed to eliminate the body of toxins. Abhyanga, often included in Panchakarma treatments, is an oil massage using curated mixes of oils adjusted to each body type. Abhyanga massages are commonly found in Ayurvedic spas and clinics, whereas Panchakarma is usually provided by an Ayurvedic practitioner and is significantly more involved than the massages. See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/health-fitness/home-remedies/everything-you-need-to-know-about-panchakarma-therapy/articleshow/70510360.cms>.

27. "Exclusive: Shahnaz Husain on Completing 50 Years in the Beauty Industry, Her Journey so Far and More," *Pinkvilla*, August 24, 2021. <https://www.pinkvilla.com/fashion/interview/exclusive-shahnaz-husain-completing-50-years-beauty-industry-her-journey-so-far-more-869146>.

28. Rachel Brown, "From Ancient India to the Present Day: Soma Ayurvedic Turns to Time-Tested Ingredients to Tackle Contemporary Skin Concerns," *Beauty Independent*, July 31, 2019. <https://www.beautyindependent.com/soma-ayurvedic-skincare/>.

29. Madge Maril, "17 Asian-Owned Beauty Brands We Love," *Harper's Bazaar*, June 29, 2021. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/beauty/makeup/g36077180/asian-owned>
30. Tessa Petak, "Influencer and Activist Diipa Khosla Launches the First Ever Ayurvedistry Beauty Brand," *InStyle*, October 5, 2021. <https://www.instyle.com/beauty/diipa-khosla-ayurvedic-beauty-inde-wilde>.
31. Vanita Reddy, *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 3.
32. Bakirathi Mani, *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.
33. Sadichchha Adhikari, *Beautiful People: Women of Color Centralizing Innovation in Beauty* (Potomac: New Degree Press, 2021).
34. Adhikari, *Beautiful People*, 3.
35. Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *The Beautiful Generation: Asian Americans and the Cultural Economy of Fashion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 100.
36. Tu, *The Beautiful Generation*, 101.

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