

EXCURSIONS INTO OTHERNESS: PERFORMATIVE COSMOPOLITANISM AND  
MOVEMENT CULTURE

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## **Abstract**

Embarking on an interdisciplinary study of movement practices that transcend traditional spaces and modes of transfer, I ask if it is possible to politicize our use of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira. Can framing these practices as part of movement culture allow us to view the complexity of performative cosmopolitanism?

Introducing my project, Chapter One argues for the importance of theorizing practices we use to regulate our bodies and express our identity. Chapter Two offers theoretical backbone – a literature review of cosmopolitan theory and scholarship on consumerism, Neo-Primitivism and Orientalism. Exploring how cosmopolitanism is signified by consumption of otherness, I suggest alternatives highlighting the terms of cultural exchange. Chapter Three analyzes how each practice is framed through advertising and social media in order to signal specific lifestyles and identities. I consider how myths are activated in order to consolidate whiteness. In Chapter Four a performance analysis of cultural festivals allows me to position cosmopolitanism as performative – generating difference as much as embracing it. Displaying, performing and consuming otherness at festivals simultaneously butts up against more resistant challenges to dominant culture also being created. Embodiment of form is my focus in Chapter Five. Through autoethnography I consider classes as performances of everyday interculturalism.

Describing how practices function to perpetuate myths of Neo-Primitivism and Orientalism and become vehicles to inscribe power and consolidate whiteness, I also consider the forms of resistance created at the level of individuals and communities. My conclusions analyze how movement culture highlights the performative nature of

cosmopolitanism, and the power embodiment has in de-centering, challenging and re-positioning us in intimate ways. I suggest that recognizing the structures of inequity we live through, marking the myths of otherness we consume and seeing the places where power is subverted through practice can describe a form of embodied postcoloniality that reflects our globalized, networked world and moves us toward interconnection.

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## Chapter One

### Excursions Into Otherness

*It's like the start to a bad joke – three men walk onto the subway. An Asian man, a black man and a white man. They are obviously colleagues or friends, discussing someone they all know. When the Asian man speaks it is with the cadence and inflection of Britain's BBC. In response the white guy chimes in with a strong Jamaican accent, quickly followed by a comment from the black guy that makes them all laugh, simultaneously revealing his Canadian accent. The black guy re-crosses his legs in a luxurious way, nylons gliding, and adjusts his skirt. A toss of his head as he laughs frees his shoulder-length hair and he softly smooths it back in place. The high-heeled shoes he wears seem in contrast to his deep, rumbling voice that rings out loudly as the three continue their banter. One seat over, all of the assumptions I wasn't even aware I was making rise to the surface and burst as they contact reality. This is Toronto, and I should know better.*

From a subway encounter to a dissertation may seem like a leap, but this moment crystallized something for me. Although it wouldn't be clear until much later just how I would find myself recalling the exchange I witnessed, contained within it was the seed to this project. These fifteen seconds on a dreary winter afternoon reminded me of just how "cosmopolitan" Toronto is, in the most general and vague sense of the word. Since I arrived here seven years ago, the energy of diversity, and vivid cultural mashups continually surprise me. I can't help but be drawn to the everyday performances we give that reflect this influence, how they speak to the uniqueness of an entangled city. Accents

and backgrounds mix with cultural traditions we are born into or adopt. People invent and re-invent themselves, their definitions of family and community, and reflect a certain form of cosmopolitanism that flourishes on proximity. In this crowded city cultures press up against each other, mix and mingle to form new combinations and challenge the boundaries of what culture means. I am fascinated with the ways we engage, modify, deface, embrace and celebrate cultural difference—how it manifests and erupts at unexpected times.

From this very personal position I write about the city I live in and the globalized practices of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira that thrive here. I consider these practices to be part of a larger movement culture where forms like Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira transcend specific aesthetic traditions and spaces. Embarking on an interdisciplinary study of movement practices I am better able to see how each form is positioned within a broader social context of cosmopolitanism. Rather than tracing histories or focusing strictly on the intricacies of one practice, I look at movement culture as something that reveals how advertising rhetoric and assumptions around each practice extend colonial narratives of otherness.

Also within the framing, distribution, and spillage of these movement forms in pop culture, what becomes clear are the ways practices of “the other” are used yet refracted through the lens of the familiar (Lau 6). As Kimberly Lau points out, we adopt culturally specific practices that allow us to make our bodies foreign. But at the same time the promises of transformation “are packaged within the context of dominant ideologies of the body. Thus, the body is made foreign to make it fit the familiar, to become the culturally valued shape, strength, size” (95). Regulatory and normalizing

ideals are translated through Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira when they are practiced as methods of self-discipline and self-transformation in our quest to become healthier, sexier, more educated cosmopolitans. Through movement practices power, very literally, has the ability to inscribe us. But also hidden within the practice itself – the movement patterns, approaches to breathing and balance, or mental focus required – are potentially subversive elements that seem to sneak up on the practitioner. As an embodied form, our physicality is altered on an interior, cellular level, even as power writes over and marks our exterior. These tangled ideas and politics are something beyond just an intellectual exercise for me; they are something I have felt and experienced.

I have practiced Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira for over 10 years, at various locations, in multiple cities, and with varying degrees of dedication—from the totally consumed, committed practitioner who lives and breathes the practice, to the detached participant who takes an occasional class. My vantage point is also as someone who teaches bodies, works with embodied ideas and understands what happens on a physical level when people engage with movement-based forms. As a movement practitioner my background is in dance and movement analysis, and I am currently a personal trainer who specializes in martial arts conditioning, a core yoga instructor, and an academic interested in critically analyzing these forms. While this project is not entirely autoethnographic, I fully acknowledge how my position firmly within dominant culture (white, able bodied, heterosexual, welcomed easily into the studio, etc...) frames how I experience and participate in each practice. I write from this position, and the postcolonial reality I am a part of, even though I fear that in doing so I reinforce a hierarchy of dominance that I attempt to write against.



My choice to discuss these practices in particular is in part because of the interesting ways they are positioned and offered to mass culture, and because my longstanding relationship with each form means that I notice when it appears in advertising, marketing, newsfeeds and trending memes. Based in Toronto, my focus is on the particularities of this city. Unlike other large cosmopolitan/multicultural centers within North America, Toronto is unique in the sense that everyone, it seems, comes from somewhere else. There isn't one dominant immigrant group, but large pockets of people originating from all over the world. According to the Statistics Canada 2011 National Household Survey, Torontonians identified themselves as having over 230 different ethnic origins, and of the 2.615 million people who live in Toronto, 49% identify as immigrants and 49% as non-white visible minority.<sup>1</sup> Currently considered one of the most multicultural cities in the world, these statistics highlight the diverse racial/cultural background of Toronto's immigrant communities. Not covered in the Stats Canada report are the people who do not identify as a visible minority, who have migrated to Toronto from elsewhere in the country. While the cultural differences may not seem as dramatic, the regional differences people bring with them also contribute to the multicultural vibe of Toronto. However, given the inescapable fact that we are connected globally through technology, my paper also moves beyond the boundaries of the GTA.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to mark the kind of city I am based in as one where cultural identity is tied closely to multiculturalism<sup>3</sup> (even as it is seen as a given, or just passé). On the problematic side of this idea is the fact that rather than offering diverse perspectives represented in city planning and infrastructure, multiculturalism is usually sidelined as decorative. Distilled into festivals of culture or specific community events, the diversity

doesn't necessarily translate into political representation. It is reflected primarily in restaurant options and activities to do like Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira. But the vibrancy that can be felt pulsing through the city is unique and exciting, even as it is limiting and fraught with problems. And depending on the layers you peel back or the angle from which you look, there are various levels of engagement and cultural exchange taking place.

In the pages that follow I will offer a short overview of my project that crystallizes my thesis and central assertions, and then highlight the aims and interventions of this dissertation. An explanation of my project title, "Excursions Into Otherness: Performative Cosmopolitanism and Movement Culture," extends into a discussion of how Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira have been framed recently by other scholars. This background provides a foundation on which I layout the chapters of my dissertation and my methodology, and I end by clarifying some of the terminology I use.

### **A Bird's Eye (Over)View Of My Project**

Within this project I argue for the concept of movement culture as a tool of analysis to read how Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira function as examples of performative cosmopolitanism. I ask if it is possible to politicize how movement practices are used or embodied. Can framing Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira as parts of movement culture allow us to view the complexity of performative cosmopolitanism?

At a basic level, I am concerned with what it means to be cosmopolitan in a world fused together through social media and distorted by advertising. From my vantage point, the expansive cultural traditions that Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira belong to are

often distilled into catchy advertising strategies or inspirational memes. Classes are sold as ways for us to optimize our health and transform our minds/bodies/spirits into something better than we are already. Sometimes they offer us tastes of “traditional,” “authentic” culture that is somehow more pure than the cosmopolitan world of Toronto we live in. Dangerous colonial stereotypes get re-packaged, re-imagined and remixed into what pop culture defends as celebrations of difference. But at the same time, individuals who choose to participate seriously in Yoga, Muay Thai or Capoeira often end up forming what Beatrix Hauser calls “epistemic communities” (“Introduction: Transcultural Yoga(s)” 20-21). While these communities<sup>4</sup> may normalize and re-affirm certain rhetoric and myths about each practice, a more subversive element of repeated practice lies in embodiment. Unlike other cultural forms (art, music, food etc.), Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are deeply physical. Changes to muscle, bone, breath, posture and body awareness alter and influence the body at a cellular level.

My dissertation argues for an analysis of movement culture as a way to politicize our engagement with physical culture. To do this I put movement practices in conversation with theories of cosmopolitanism and critiques of consumerism. Drawing on performance theory and intercultural theatre scholarship I suggest reading our fascination with Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira as performative ways we act as cosmopolitan citizens of a globalized world (both online and off). I consider each movement practice as a window into our negotiation with the ways power works to inscribe and regulate bodies and the ways we navigate our postcolonial world in an embodied way. Embracing the conflicts and contradictions that result, I suggest we consider how movement culture functions to reflect a contemporary worldview.

## **Aims and Interventions**

My biggest aim in this project is to offer one way we can make sense of dichotomy—where cultural practices are used and distorted in ways that continue lineages of Orientalist and Neo-Primitivist stereotypes, but are simultaneously extremely powerful places of community and possibly of self-awareness. Although I may only be able to offer a portrait of how this dichotomy looks, feels and exists, this project is my attempt to think through conflicting and sometimes uncomfortable ideas. One of the things I am certain of is the need for theorizing about movement culture. Practices like Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are hugely popular and reflective of transcultural/intercultural engagement, yet they seem to operate without a critical framework. I hope to offer a theoretical analysis we can use to politicize our understanding of how movement culture functions and what it does.

A second intervention I am making with my dissertation is to map out how power works to inscribe, discipline and regulate bodies through ideas of self-transformation attached to and emphasized by the advertising for each practice. Discussing how we use practices of “other” people in order to transform our bodies to achieve the size and shape culturally valued in the west, the rhetoric surrounding each practice will become clear. I consider how Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are each refracted through a lens of familiarity when they are offered as benefits of a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

**“Excursions Into Otherness: Performative Cosmopolitanism and Movement Culture”:** My Title Explained

In a sense my title has a double meaning, even as it is situated by the subtitle “performative cosmopolitanism and movement culture.” The excursions I discuss are the shallow and decorative ways we project otherness in an attempt to add exotic flair, or to have an “authentic” experience of what it means to be other. Often cloaked in rhetoric of health and wellness, through virtual or physical proximity to “others” we engage with fantasies and constructions of otherness. From disciplining our bodies and minds through martial arts or Yoga, or eating a macrobiotic diet and using aromatherapy as Lau focuses on in *New Age Capitalism* (2000), our framing of “feel-good multiculturalism allows Orientalist fascinations to pass for political correctness” (8). Extending what Stuart Hall suggests is the “desire for commodified, but imagined, difference” Lau’s position is that we seek to “maintain impressions of difference through a type of cultural flattening that provides only the impressions of particularities” (Hall qtd. in Lau 8). Difference and authenticity become commodities even as they are fictive, imagined things.

From my perspective, our surface interest in projections of otherness, made tangible through advertising, and embodied at festivals and in classes, are best seen as excursions – temporary things we do that usually don’t require any real change, discomfort, or challenge to our positions. Entangled with this critique however, is a conflict. As problematic, depoliticized, and hegemonic as the positioning of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira may be, within the physicality of the form exists potential transformation. Each form is recorded in our bodies at a muscular level; the practice leaves imprints on our bodies. Through continued practice each form can change our movement patterns, body awareness, posture and breath in distinct ways. I suggest that

analyzing movement culture can help make visible these contradictory positions, and the intercultural encounters they are part of.

### **Other People's Words: Scholarly Focus on Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira**

Each of these practices is the focus of research by numerous scholars in various fields. Social anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and researchers of physical culture, religion, history and education often engage with Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira from interesting perspectives honed in on community and group dynamics or with the expansive view of transcultural flows of knowledge and rich histories of lineage.<sup>5</sup> Many academics trace contested histories in ways that force us to consider the implications of each practice. For example, as Hauser puts it, studying Yoga can help us “understand the process of knowledge transfer” and the ways a practice can be “preached, exported, translated, appropriated, touted, assimilated and modified” (“Introduction: Transcultural Yoga(s)” 11). But while scholars engage with Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira in relation to politicized terms like transculturalism and appropriation, the body (as a practicing, living, *political* thing) is often silenced or erased. The very performative, embodied act of practicing these very physical forms is bypassed in much of the literature.

Dance scholars concerned with Yoga, Muay Thai and (much more prolifically) Capoeira, do focus on the body, offering thick descriptions, charting twists and turns of movement patterns and limb positions. Through vivid and often ethnographically informed writing, sensations of weight, balance, and attitude guide the reader to consider movement in social context. Cristina Rosa's work in “Playing, Fighting, Dancing” (*TDR* 2012) offers a rich example of a writer who seeks to identify and critically analyze “how

capoeira players employ a particular kind of bodily syncopation, known as *ginga*, to produce and transmit a series of aesthetic values connected to African heritage” (142). Like many dance scholars, Rosa’s words weave in and out of larger issues, but in a way that highlights the deeply situated knowledge within the movement/repertoire itself. Movements, choreography and gesture are read for the often subversive, resistant and resilient qualities contained within. For me, reading this scholarship is inspiring and rewarding, but I often find the focus and specificity on movement techniques, choreography, body positioning and implicit knowledge is not as politicized as it could be.

In a similar, somewhat apolitical manner, if Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are discussed within theatre studies, the analysis is usually limited to Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira as “foreign” practices that can enhance actor training. For example, practitioners use the Suzuki Method<sup>6</sup> to connect to their center and unleash natural expressiveness through concentration and movements derived from martial arts. Other scholar/practitioners like Phillip Zarrilli emphasize a depth of learning that takes place both inside the body (as students learn elements of martial arts or Yoga for example), as well as intellectually and philosophically engaging with culturally specific forms. Most intercultural theatre practitioners like Zarrilli devote years to intense training in a particular form.<sup>7</sup> While it seems that within theatre especially we have moved toward a more thoughtful, political, multi-centered approach to intercultural exchange in performance, this doesn’t seem to be the case with the study of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira. Especially in relation to how they are taken up, positioned and used in everyday life.

My project takes a different perspective on each practice than those I just described. I am interested in reading each form as an example of movement culture that reflects the fraught nature of embodied experience. I ask if it is possible to politicize our practices in ways that move beyond consumption, and that speak to the politics of globalism.

### **Chapter Layout**

In order to situate and contextualize my perspectives, the following chapter (Chapter Two) is a literature review that puts into conversation elements of cosmopolitan theory, ideas of consumer culture and postcolonial perspectives on Orientalism and Neo-Primitivism. While there is a vast body of work in relation to each of these areas, the literature I cover narrows in on scholars who offer perspectives that touch on the themes I am writing about. Relatively little is written connecting performance studies and cosmopolitanism, and the literature review serves as a spotlight on the interventions I am making in this area.

Weaving together body culture, consumerism and colonial legacies thinly disguised as postcolonialism, my literature review reveals the ways I position and overlap larger, more general fields of theory. Within each subsequent chapter I develop more nuanced and specific arguments in relation to theory pulled from each of these overarching areas. Perspectives on digital performance, performativity and embodiment of postcoloniality are all derived from the fields presented in my literature review, but I only touch on them in Chapter Two. I save a more detailed theoretical discussion for the body chapters of my dissertation.



From representations of cultural exchange in print-based magazines like *Sweat Equity*, to public performances of warriorhood on Facebook and Zen tidbits hashtagged on Twitter, in Chapter Three I am interested in how Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira is used and displayed. I engage in textual and image analyses of *Sweat Equity* magazine, numerous Facebook pages, galleries and walls, Twitter feeds and YouTube channels. Within these everyday texts are structures and semiotics that reflect our contemporary moment; they are places where our immediate, improvised, un-censored assumptions about the world are made visible and public. Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are promoted, sold, embraced, shared, worshiped and distorted through these media. I read the ways practitioners of each form incorporate or draw on the practice as a way to project certain identities online. Social media in this sense starts to act as a barometer for how people understand, view and use cultural physical practices. As Sarah Bay-Cheng has convincingly argued, “our participation within digital media—through social networking sites, blogs, and phone-based communication—constitute forms of performance. When we reenact, record and circulate these performances through digital media, we participate in a kind of mediated exchange that takes on all of the hallmarks of theatrical performance” (“A Digital Historiography of Performance” 32). Through various forms of media we display our devotion to forms of practice, performing in ways that offer glimpses of underlying assumptions about culture, otherness, and cosmopolitanism.

Shifting gears methodologically, Chapter Four seeks out Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira at three different summer festivals of 2013: “Yoga Meltdown,” “Taste of Thailand,” and “BrazilFest.” In festival advertising, practices are simultaneously a lure, a

performance, and a spectacle that relies on imagined associations with tradition, culture and physicality. I analyze each practice and festival through the lens of performative cosmopolitanism. For me, performative cosmopolitanism is behaviour that simultaneously creates the difference it seeks to embrace or celebrate. A performative act *does* something. It creates a specific reality or truth. If we see difference as performed into being by the cosmopolitan who seeks otherness, potentially we can disavow connections between certain bodies as containers of difference – certain bodies as always, inherently strangers. Performative cosmopolitanism argues that we can both celebrate and create/produce difference at the same time. Hinging on an understanding of performance that differs from the previous section (performance in/as display), I weave performativity into cosmopolitan theory that only sometimes takes material realities and bodies into consideration. Considering the festivals I attended from this angle, I ask what performative understandings of cosmopolitanism can enable.

In my final chapter, I consider the implications and influences movement culture has on us as individuals, and as members of “imagined communities” of practitioners (to use Benedict Anderson’s phrase). In Chapter Five the conflict is between how otherness is framed, reproduced, remixed and repurposed for advertising, and the ways each practice has the potential to offer powerful physical and social experiences. Writing about my experience (as a white, western woman) taking a Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira class, I ask what analyzing movement culture can offer us as we embody contradictions and possibilities. Potentially it is a way to think through our embodied experiences to reveal the uneven postcolonial politics we live through and our everyday intercultural encounters.

## **Methodology**

I stand at an intersection. A place where cosmopolitanism contends with colonial legacies of Orientalism and Neo-Primitivism, where interculturalism considers postcoloniality and the consumer culture that organizes our lives. What grounds me is an understanding of the body and how we perform through it. From a performance studies perspective I engage conversations taking place in cultural theory, cosmopolitan studies, digital performance theory, and postcolonial theory. I will explore the major theoretical concepts I work through in my literature review, but flag them here in order to provide the context for my project. I am concerned with the politics that underpin and inform our consumption choices, the ways we position cultural practices, and how we imagine a multicultural society through specific bodies. Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are entry points into my discussion, and the most salient examples I have of the ways that *doing something* can be at once shallow and appropriative and profoundly moving.

I cross disciplines and weave together various theoretical ideas. Since I also intentionally overlap various understandings of what performance is or can be my methodology reflects the shifting terrain I work with. To help construct this multi-leveled argument, I begin with an analysis of public and online displays of culture. Websites, print magazines, Facebook profiles, YouTube channels and Twitter feeds are the mediums I consider for their evocative portrayal or alliance with cultural tropes, images, stereotypes and reproduced mythology. Due to the representational nature of the sites I look at, cultural tropes and stereotypes are often glaring or sometimes only thinly veiled. Although cultural representations are usually understood as exaggerations, these

stereotypes continue to be used and circulated in multiple forms of media. Expansive and complicated culture is distilled into colourful, simplistic, decontextualized elements of tradition that can be easily bought, sold and melted into other forms.

To analyze this I include textual and image analyses of print and on-line promotional material, as well as social media sites like blogs, tweets, Facebook posts, and YouTube videos. While these may not be traditional objects of study, they are valuable flashes into how certain people are thinking and performing in everyday life. I view social media as a performance archive, and the act of posting/commenting a performance of self. Through the computer or smart phone screen we display a distinct version of ourselves. And this digital performance isn't just reserved for individuals. Most training centers and instructors have Facebook groups, offer updates and advertise their classes through Twitter, and have blogs to discuss ideas, classes, and teachings. Many groups also promote their studios or practices through YouTube videos. These are all strategies designed to appeal to and reach out to the consumer. In effect, each studio/instructor/group brands their style or approach to the practice.

Methodologically speaking, in the first section I mine social and print media for how people are publically talking about, performing, or positioning Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira. At times this has felt creepy. While the perspectives and positions I study and cite are all from public profiles whose content is open for anyone to look at, I am keenly aware of the bigger privacy debate my project falls into. Taking this into account, where possible all names, studio names and profile names/handles have been replaced with fictional ones. The studios I discuss are all branded and advertised as places of authenticity, where people go to get “real” and “traditional” training. Often training

spaces promote themselves as having direct connection to where a form “originated” (names highlighting a studio’s affiliation with an ashram in India for example, or a connection to Muay Thai “sister gyms” in Thailand). Group names sometimes speak to the lineage of training they are a part of, offering clues about positionality, framing, and histories of practice. As much as possible I alter the group names in ways that will retain this essence though it results in a fairly shallow anonymity.

The publications I critique fall into the same category as the public events/festivals I use as my other sites of investigation. Their names have not been changed since they are long-standing, big scale events/publications. Anonymity is not possible, and because of their very public nature I feel that a certain amount of critical inquiry into their function is healthy and productive. I analyze cultural festivals as performances, taking cues from performance scholar Maurya Wickstrom (*Performing Consumers* 2006). Following in her footsteps I pay attention to the ways festivals manipulate somatic experience, how they brand and market specific elements of culture and safely package it for consumption. Narrowing in on how and where Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are positioned within these events, I read these “shows” as performative exhibitions of cosmopolitan engagement. Involved in my process is a performative description of my experience and analysis of the festival as a performance I witnessed. In this section I write from both inside and outside the show.

Writing in this way, however, reveals the limits of sight. My description of people, their actions or identity markers, are surface representations. It is an easy presumption to make that “the relationship between representation and identity is linear and smoothly mimetic. What one sees is who one is” (Phelan 7). In *Unmarked*, Peggy

Phelan argues, “visuality is a trap” (6). For her it summons surveillance, voyeurism/fetishism, and possession (6), and, in a similar way, I see that describing/representing who someone is, by relying on their exterior assumes that identity is fixed and stable, or that a person’s exterior reflects their interior. For Phelan this is “an ideology which erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken, and unseen” (7). For me it points to the failures in knowing a person’s motivation, sensitivity, history, or positionality. We can’t necessarily “read” the way a person thinks, or feels, or is moved, without them disclosing these things. Even then, how do we judge truth? This is a risky place to write from, and I don’t claim that by charting a person’s exterior actions, mannerisms, and their visual appearance we can somehow know their interior.

Instead, my “reading” of festivals, participants and instructors is a descriptive impression, a reflection perhaps more of the questions I am working through, than intimate knowledge about other people’s identities. A person’s interiority, what the practice means to them, and how they are engaging with it is an ephemeral thing. Continually shifting, subjectivity is more expansive than I could ever “capture.” In Phelan’s words, “what I do not see and do not write is so much more vast than what I do” (27). Following this train of thought, as I discuss the events of festivals, my attempts at description are intended to help the reader visualize my experience. It offers a glimpse into my perceptions, impressions, responses and the challenges I find in representing the event through words that cannot capture essence.

In a third methodological shift, my last section investigates theories of movement culture and embodied postcoloniality through a very personal reflection of my body in class. It is autoethnographic in the sense that I pay close attention to my embodied

experiences, to the ways they resonate with the theory I describe. To frame this, I straddle intercultural theatre scholarship and writing about embodiment, and I am very aware that this approach could seem similar to the “parachute approach” championed by classic anthropology that assumes bounded place and enacts removed observations (Kearney, *Changing* 18).

Michael Kearney describes parachute anthropology as a mode of practice where “the anthropologist figuratively drops into a community from out of the sky and takes that place as a bounded, self contained unit of analysis, with little attention to how it is situated in regional, national, and even global context” (18). In a similar way, my final chapter reveals my perception of a single class in each Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira. But my relationship to each form, to the choreography of the class, the organization of space and how practices are positioned (what is emphasized, what is downplayed or removed) is informed by long-term engagement with each one. My relationship with Yoga started in 1995 and spans multiple styles, cities and countries. In a similar way, I have practiced Capoeira since 2001 with four different academies in both France and Canada. My Muay Thai history is also varied – between four primary schools, and one other mixed martial arts studio across Canada, since 2008.

My years of training allow me to see nuances in teaching approaches, philosophies and marketing strategies, and I believe this gives me a unique perspective in my autoethnography. I have not simply walked off the street and “tried out” a class. I bring years of experience as a practitioner, who is now interested in studying these forms from a different perspective. Flipping this image, I am more than just a practitioner, but a scholar trained to see the politics of everyday life that surround each form. Beyond this,

my aim is not to offer an ethnography of each studio, but a reflection of the potentials within the *doing* of each form to offer us valuable information. I try to describe the complexity of postcolonial politics, moments of contradictory transcultural engagement and the kinds of intercultural encounters that can happen through Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira. This is from my perspective as someone deeply invested in these practices, and concerned with the kind of world we are creating in everyday moments.

Determining hard and fast conclusions within this project seems challenging – just when I think I am coming close to a firm stance something unexpected jumps out of my research and I lose footing. This is partially because of the shifting, evolving, trending-then-discarded nature of social media where everything can have multiple meanings, depending on where you look. Festivals re-invent themselves every year, and instructors grow, develop and change what they focus on. Although at times these have seemed like pitfalls and methodological quicksand, there are also strengths to be found here. My research offers a very embodied version of a particular moment in time.

Autoethnographic research in the final chapter, and the decision to write from and highlight the social position I occupy, also allows me to reflect on the questions I raise. I hold theory up to everyday life to see what happens when we live through it, with an aim to explain the snarled and knotted politics we exist in. This isn't theory to make things tidy. As will become clear in the following chapters, theory is a frayed lifeline in an exciting, chaotic and turbulent ocean of rapid cultural change. Methodologically I embark on a process that is messy. It requires a kind of double vision from the reader, and documents how I work through an intangible space. I am not sure how I can measure reflexivity, or sincerity, or engagement, or transference, so I paint the landscape each



practice exists in, noting the overlaps, the gaps, the conflicts. Structurally, especially in the final chapter, I am suggesting a way of thinking that asks us to view practices from multiple angles that includes the generative space where bodies sweat together. Multiple, conflicting things happen here, and there are no easy answers or clear-cut positions to take. The chapters that follow are my attempt to politicize everyday life by layering theory and refusing to see it as separate from practice.

### **Clarifying Terminology**

Following one of Edward Said's methodological approaches in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), I use this section to clarify how I am using certain words. This should help crystallize the way I am asking my readers to consider certain topics, and will develop the nuances and mobilizations of words (like performance) that are key to my paper.

### **Culture**

In *Culture and Imperialism* Said distinguishes between two uses of the term culture. One implies "those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure" (*Culture and Imperialism* xii). The second is connected to nationality and the state (usually highly aware of race and ethnicity) and comes to stand for identity (xiii). Within this paper my understanding and use of the term is a blend of both. Culture as I discuss it is physical and aesthetic practice, which to me is inherently political. What I mean is that

the formation, distribution, and resistance within cultural practices happens in relation to political climates. Our consumption, celebration and uses of practices today, is also political. Even though Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira may exist in the realm of pleasure, for many people they become the expression of identity. Forms invoke history, nationality and sometimes-violent transcultural exchange. They also reflect blended, interconnected realities of contemporary life. When discussing cultural identity in relation to practice, I take what Said says seriously: “partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic” (xxvi).

But the term “culture” can mean different things in different contexts. Culture is a slippery shape shifter that needs to be situated by the discussion it is used in. In this project sometimes I use it to invoke an understanding of mass/dominant positions in society (dominant culture), or in terms of a community (Facebook culture or the culture of a specific gym), or in relation to traditions that connect people across historical time periods and geography (cultural performances at heritage festivals). I use the term in places to signify our organization around consumption (consumer culture) and at times as a very broad and malleable idea of how we experience daily life informed by consumerism, technology obsession, and built on foundations of colonialism and imperialism (Western culture). When I write about the culture of Toronto in general, like cosmopolitanism it is fluid, porous and something we perform.

## **Otherness**

Since I also use the term other or otherness, I feel the need for a similar acknowledgement of position. The question always is, of course, other to whom? Often, other/otherness means anyone or anything not inside dominant, white, Western culture. Connected to racial privilege, other can also be used to indicate positions that hinge on wealth, status, education and location to or from the center. My discussion of otherness, read through George Lipsitz, tries to account for the very real ways that whiteness demarcates what the centre is and who “others” are. Rather than simply charting the ways otherness is marked on certain bodies associated with Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira, I attempt to translate the project of whiteness that gets consolidated through movement practices.

I follow Lipsitz’s understanding of whiteness as “a system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility” (*Possessive* viii). Whiteness is an unmarked category “against which difference is constructed” and doesn’t need to acknowledge its role “as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (1). While a large part of my dissertation is to describe the project of whiteness associated with movement culture and in relation to performative cosmopolitanism, I am keenly aware that in doing so I run the risk of maintaining the hierarchies I discuss. In using the conflicted term of other/otherness, it reifies the assumed category and in ways frames “other” as belonging to dominant culture. Other is always in relation to a dominant centre.

Explaining this in a canonical text, Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States* (1994) positions race as a matter of both social structure and cultural representation, two interconnected areas that inform how we view and

participate in the world (56). Omi and Winant's term *racial formation* is helpful to understanding the ways our "interpretation and experience in racial terms shapes our relations to the institutions and organizations through which we are imbedded in social structure" (56). We use race to explain, expect, and create social differences, and for these authors everything about our daily life and experiences becomes racially coded "simply because we live in a society where racial awareness is so pervasive" (60). Even though there are calls for "color-blind" attitudes and policies (especially within the context of multicultural Canada) the pervasive privileges of whiteness continue to structure our world.

Although I attempt to argue with awareness of pluri-versality, and with a multi-centric framework rather than centre vs. margin, I am afraid that I have failed many times. As hard as I try to broaden my understanding and live through the politics I study, my experience of the world is as part of dominant culture – white, Western, educated and not discriminated against for the age, shape or ability of my body. Although I critique hierarchies of power, call attention to the project of whiteness that hegemonically structures the world around us, and describe ways each practice can resist or challenge oppression, dominant culture is still central. My fear is that I paint "otherness" as subordinate, as defined by the relationship to dominant culture. I attempt to counter this by providing insight into the challenges and resistance the forms contain, as well as by focusing on the possibilities for transformation each one may offer.

Following Said's contrapuntal understanding of how cultures are intertwined and interconnected, my project attempts to discuss both acts of cultural domination and resistance fostered through practice. Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are a form of what

Said calls cultural narratives. In his work, cultural narratives both enabled and resisted the inequity of colonization, and the empire building projects of imperialism. Some consolidated oppression and domination while others offered counter-narratives of anti-colonization and resistance. What is clear are the ways cultural narratives can engender social movements that uphold or fight against structures of power.

In my work I position practices as both normalizing dominant perspectives, but also at times subverting them. For example, Yoga in Toronto seems to be targeted toward a specific demographic – white, educated, middle class women with disposable income ([globalmindbody.org](http://globalmindbody.org)). But it is also beginning to be associated with “alternative” social movements. New Leaf Yoga Foundation, for instance, takes Yoga into prisons and offers free classes in spaces without access to studios for at-risk youth. In a similar manner, Muay Thai becomes an anti-bullying strategy and at Old School Muay Thai is turned into an outreach program for at-risk youth and “new Canadian youth” ([oldschoolmuaythai.com](http://oldschoolmuaythai.com)). Capoeira gets featured as part of multicultural education projects when they tour schools and perform at Canada Day celebrations. From one perspective these may all seem linked to social outreach programs, and no doubt they can make a difference in peoples lives. But I am cautious here, because these cultural narratives of outreach can also be read in ways that seem highly problematic. Each of these organizations, in their earnest attempts at creating a better world, upholds the “privileged/underprivileged,” “us/them,” “cultural/Canadian” divide. In doing so they extend what Lipsitz sees as dominant/white culture acting with “unctuous paternalism to protect ‘helpless’ people of color” (*Possessive* xiv) without opposing white supremacy, or the structures of whiteness they benefit from. I mention this to call attention to the

complexity of the situation and the politics each practice is caught up in. While it would be easier to avoid conflicted terms like “otherness” the practices I study are usually considered “foreign.” Ignoring the politics these terms activate seems irresponsible, so it is from this uncomfortable place that my project unfolds.

## **Performance**

As I continue to clear up my use of terms, the idea of performance is also a slippery one. In the following chapters I consider performance in relation to our assumed and created online identities. While it would be simpler to discount the influence/infatuation of technology in relation to this project, I feel that to ignore it would be only a partial examination of the ways we perform culture. For many people how we understand the world is mediated through technology and social networking platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. How we learn about culture, spread ideas and opinions about the world, where we get inspired from or perform our engagement with culture, happens online. In this sense, I consider our online actions to be performances of self. We display, show and present ourselves to the world. Through our re-combining, re-posting, re-visiting online performances expressed through posts, videos, status updates, uploads and memes,<sup>8</sup> we perform our engagement with the world around us.

As Bernie Hogan signals, “the conflation of performance and online profile is likely because of the notion that a blog or profile signifies a single individual, it does not merely stand in for that individual but is that individual” (*Presentation of Self* 380). I recognize that once recorded, performance is altered and lacks the liveness, energy, and exchange between performer and witness. However, I think that there is usefulness in

excavating public profiles, commentary and digitized/mediatized performances, as performative archives. Not only are they records of performances (of self) that have taken place, in the act of reading them, engaging them by re-commenting, re-constructing/combining text or context and sharing or re-situating them, they become new performances. Engaging with an archived digital performance becomes a performative act, and a performance in itself. With this in mind, how I frame performance in Chapter Three is twofold.

My use of the term performance in the fourth chapter can be better understood as performativity. By this I mean that we perform ourselves into being. The performance we give (of gender, culture, class for example) creates that reality, rather than it being an assumed, unbroken truth that we are subject to. In terms of my project, our performed cosmopolitan behaviour creates “otherness” as much as it celebrates it. And at the same time, the power within performativity allows room for more critical ways of being.

Stemming from this the third way I use performance is in relation to embodiment. In my fifth chapter performing is an action, something we do. It is the nuanced ways we use our bodies to articulate movement concepts, or change our movement and breathing patterns. While performance isn't the explicit focal point within my final chapter, clarifying that I mean the physical performance we give as we engage foreign (to us) practices is important. As I have been discussing, the terms I deploy in my dissertation can all be considered tricky, shady, shape-shifters.

## **Conclusions**

Within this chapter I introduced my reasons behind this project, my position as a white, western, female practitioner, and my fascination with culture and movement practices in Toronto. Highlighting the need to theorize movement culture as an interdisciplinary area that connects practices of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira, I also suggest that these forms are examples of performative cosmopolitanism. These two interventions frame my project. Through them I ask if it is possible to politicize our practice of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira, to view the complexity of contemporary cosmopolitanism in Toronto. Also within these overarching questions, I aim to discuss how power inscribes and informs movement culture, especially as practices are refracted through the lens of the familiar.

Outlining the ways most scholarship tends to analyze Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira individually for movement qualities, training and cultural practices, group formation and identity, or detailed histories, I position myself in a different direction. This introduction also serves to mark the ways I am attempting to look at practices as overlapping and interconnected – as an interdisciplinary field of movement culture rather than isolated forms. To accomplish this I described a methodology that shifts in each chapter. In Chapter Three I frame Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira as expressions of identity and deeply connected to myths of Orientalism and Neo-Primitivism using textual and visual analysis of print magazines and social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Chapter Four draws on performance analysis of cultural festivals in order to flesh out my thoughts on performative cosmopolitanism. I end with autoethnography to describe my experience in class, and the possibilities/limitations that come with embodiment.



What follows in Chapter Two is a literature review that grounds my project and my perspectives. I outline some of the major theoretical areas my dissertation brings together – cosmopolitan theory and consumer culture in dialogue with postcolonial perspectives on Orientalism and Primitivism. I also touch on performance theory and embodiment, though each of these is developed more fully in Chapters Four and Five respectively.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

Attempting to give an overview on the fields my project winds between seems at times like a mountainous task. The pages that follow connect theories of cosmopolitanism, consumerism, and postcolonial scholarship about Orientalism and Neo-Primitivism. My hope is to clarify the context I am writing in, and to highlight the ways my project re-situates conversations within several fields. The first section briefly outlines some main approaches and discussions within the field of cosmopolitanism. The veins of cosmopolitanism I outline broadly fall into three categories. Moral cosmopolitanism is the first and tends to be concerned with philosophy of ethics and equality. Political or sociological cosmopolitanism is the second category, focusing on rights and mobility. The third broad and very porous category is cultural cosmopolitanism that seems to cover all other ways of imagining our position and engagement with culture in our increasingly globalized world.

In our current situation I feel that any discussion of cosmopolitanism has to contend with consumerism and the mass culture it produces. Through consumption practices certain forms of cosmopolitan engagement are visible, and I discuss issues and ideas of consumer culture in relation to how it structures our world (or how we imagine our world to be). My review focuses in on scholars who discuss consumerism in relation to culture as product. As many of them suggest, our everyday performances are directly linked to the consumerist culture we are part of. While the literature about consumer culture doesn't normally discuss cosmopolitanism per se, the ways I link the two fields is the start of my attempt to bridge the two fields.

From a discussion of the tropes, association and distortions of culture as product, I then examine colonial legacies that extend into our postcolonial reality. The last major section of this chapter discusses the concepts of Neo-Primitive and Orientalist myths/fantasies, but also a way to re-imagine the self/other dichotomy. While I am selective in the works I include in this chapter, they serve as foundation for more nuanced conversations in later chapters. In one form or another, the arguments presented in this literature review weave their way into my case studies.

### **Moral Cosmopolitanism**

In his book *Cosmopolitanism* (1988) David Held outlines the main ideas of cosmopolitanism as it oscillates throughout “world” history. Starting with the Stoic notion of a worldwide community of human beings and Kantian “weltburger,” or world citizenship, the “world” history Held discusses is very exclusionary and very colonial. The notion of “universal” that became integral to the Enlightenment and to cosmopolitanism is built on principles of equality, dignity, and respect. But as seen throughout colonialism, it only applied to certain groups of people. Although Held cautions that these notions of “world” are firmly situated within the complexity of culture and history, he neglects any in-depth acknowledgement or critique about the racialized category of human<sup>9</sup> during Kantian Enlightenment.

It is important to mark Kantian lineage since current forms of cosmopolitanism are often critiqued as extending it and celebrating a universalism that assumes evenness and equality that does not exist. For example, Held and others argue for a world where political affiliations and identities can move away from limited ideas of nationality to be

more focused on citizen groups, social movements and IGO's (inter-governmental organization) or NGO's (non-government organization). However critics ask if this type of global re-imagining comes at the expense of cultural specificity (Calhoun 2002). I am also skeptical, since the celebration of culture is often only decorative and superficial, rather than reflected in approaches to politics, governance or changes to institutional structure.

Other theorists writing about the ethical or moral philosophy of cosmopolitanism suggest a type of world citizenship or world community that can both underline our connection as human beings, and make room for the particularities of culture and history. In his book *Cosmopolitanism* (2007), for example, Robert Fine argues that cosmopolitanism is a form of consciousness and an ability “to deploy this concept in imaginative and reflective ways” (x). Echoing some of Kant's ideas, Fine discusses the possibilities of recognizing people as equals within the “context of our multiple differences” in ways that reminds me of Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2006) “universality with difference.” Appiah argues convincingly that we can create ourselves in ways that are both rooted in national or local culture and still faithful to a universal concern for the wellbeing of all people. Appiah's version of “rooted cosmopolitanism” argues for difference within the universal, and he firmly believes in the “freedom to create oneself” (qtd. in *Cosmopolitics* 97). Taking this idea further, another key figure in the field, Gerard Delanty, sees it as an interplay or moving relationships between Self, Other and World (*Handbook of Cosmopolitan Studies* 2012). He places an importance on a “post-universalistic” conception of truth where there are no absolute universal values (of truth or justice for example), although he believes we can still make judgments (about truth or

justice). For Delanty “universal” is best seen as a differentiated thing (42). If Held and others tend to be too optimistic in their positioning of universality, their emphasis on human rights and solidarity does make a strong appeal for a shift toward cosmopolitan democracy.<sup>10</sup>

### **Political/Sociological Cosmopolitanism**

The UN and EU are touted as examples of successful forms of political cosmopolitanism, even if they are simultaneously seen as Eurocentered projects supported by imperial capitalist globalism. Aware of this criticism, many of the writers who fall into the category of political cosmopolitan still write with a focus on mobility, migrancy, and human rights. They seem to unanimously accept, to varying degrees, that people will have multiple allegiances, often operating outside of the confines of the nation state. As critics like Arjun Appadurai (*Modernity at Large* 1996) argue, nationalism has been superseded by alternative forms of community or belonging in part due to globalization and but also due to new technologies.<sup>11</sup>

Most scholars concerned with political/sociological cosmopolitanism frame cosmopolitanism as a challenge, answer to, or extension of nationalism and neo-liberal corporate agendas. Many writers acknowledge that affiliations and solidarities are increasingly transnational and that technology is changing our concept of “the world.” Vertovec and Cohen, for example, see cosmopolitanism as “a non-communitarian, post-identity politics of overlapping interests and heterogeneous or hybrid publics” (*Conceiving Cosmopolitanism* 1). This hybrid public challenges conventional notions of identity and belonging. Unfortunately, national culture is often framed as a

homogeneous thing that cosmopolitanism can fix or destabilize. Little attention is paid to the complicated politics of diversity internal to nation-states, and the reality of multiple cultures existing within the same borders. As James Clifford points out, cosmopolitanism is often invoked in contrast to multiculturalism, in an attempt to avoid the essentialization of culture, as well as “ethnocentric, racialized, gendered and national narratives” (qtd. in Vertovec and Cohen 3). But for theorists like Vertovec and Cohen cosmopolitanism gets equated to aesthetics of pastiche and hybrid identity creation first, and politics second.

Often in writing about cosmopolitanism, the political views that earnestly argue toward the world peace agenda of Kant are informed by a moral/ethical standpoint of openness. For Gerard Delanty this creates a form of “critical cosmopolitanism” that contains possibilities of transformation (*Routledge Handbook* 45). Extending this idea, Ian Woodward and Zlatko Skrbis suggest a movement toward separating “social action and imagination from national or local anchors” in ways that emphasize cultural cross-pollination, hybridity and fluidity (qtd. in Delanty 128). Within this argument cosmopolitanism is characterized by openness “to new experiences, peoples, ideas” and we are encouraged “to enjoy the play of otherness upon oneself” (131). Many scholars like Woodward and Skrbis argue that cosmopolitanism is never absolute or fixed. They are attempting to counter cosmopolitanism’s elitist reputation, but this benign and celebratory cosmopolitanism seems to ignore people forced into migration for economic or political reasons. Perhaps not acknowledged as such, violent, un-chosen cosmopolitanism is often overlooked or passed over in favor of the more positive view of people choosing a life of diversity. This clearly extends the colonial form of

cosmopolitanism, ignoring the unequal politics that deems some cultures as inherently more open for consumption than others. “Cultural cross-pollination” is encouraged as long as it is profitable to dominant culture, and does not ultimately threaten to shake the current world order.

Vocal about the role of mobility associated with cosmopolitanism, Bruce Robbins suggests that the word cosmopolitan “immediately evokes the image of a privileged person: someone who can claim to be a ‘citizen of the world’ by virtue of independent means, expensive tastes, and a globe-trotting lifestyle” (248). He goes on to link cosmopolitanism to capitalism that knows no boundaries, and implicates it as a gendered privilege that becomes, in Donna Haraway’s framework “a conquering gaze from nowhere” (248). Implicating the white male gaze, his writing hints that cosmopolitanism can be seen to perpetuate the institutions of colonialism that afford certain bodies/people the ability to have a cosmopolitan lifestyle. The danger of this, of course, is that the cosmopolitan perspective is inextricably linked to dominant culture, marking everything else as “other” which becomes “culture” to be sampled, taken in, rearranged and decontextualized/dehistoricized. As both Craig Calhoun and Walter D. Mignolo sharply point out, the very foundation of cosmopolitanism – elite, Western, capitalist – needs to be recognized in a much more obvious way in order for an “actually existing” cosmopolitanism based on equality to be brought into view.

These two scholars offer perhaps the most pointed critiques of the celebratory politics of cosmopolitanism, which I am keenly aware of as I construct my own argument. First, from a post 9/11 critique of cosmopolitan ideals, Calhoun’s essay “The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travellers: Towards a Critique of Actually Existing

Cosmopolitanism” (2002) reminds us that we need to be cautious of what kind of cosmopolitan citizenship we argue for. Implicating himself, and other mobile academics along with him, he points out that we often imagine the world “from the vantage point of frequent travellers, easily entering and exiting polities and social relations around the world, armed with visa-friendly passports and credit cards” (872). It’s an obvious but necessary reminder that cosmopolitan discourse is a Western-centered one that often uses cosmopolitan ideals to mask inequities (871). Since many cosmopolitan arguments orbit around the development of world government or global political institutions, he criticizes how cosmopolitanism is set up as a “‘Third Way’ between rampant corporate globalization and reactionary traditionalism or nationalism” (874). Within this rationalization, the West is both the site of globalization and cosmopolitanism – both the problem and the solution, while the Non-West is painted as problematically traditional or too tightly bound by national ideals.

Cosmopolitanism-as-solution is set up as a lifestyle choice that is ours to make that emphasizes our (partially differentiated) unity. Calhoun’s critique is that “this vision of unity amid difference echoes on a grander scale that of great empires and great religions, and it underwrites the cosmopolitan appeal for an all-encompassing world government” (874). The elitist position he writes about is directly tied to capitalist desire to see cosmopolitanism as an all-access pass to the world, rather than as a philosophy or practice that could pursue social justice. He warns: “cosmopolitan ideals of a global civil society can sound uncomfortably like those of the civilizing mission behind colonialism” (875).



Taking Calhoun's critique even further, Walter D. Mignolo unapologetically criticizes cosmopolitanism for being a Eurocentric project supported by globalism. In a beautiful and pointed argument, Mignolo states: "it is necessary to understand how imperial cosmopolitanism operated by inventing, transforming and maintaining imperial and colonial differences. Border thinking and de-colonial cosmopolitanism requires histories other than the one we have, histories that re-inscribe in the present the silence of imperial histories" ("The Many Faces" 86). He pursues an idea of re-writing history in a way that acknowledges and makes relevant the strategies of colonialism/neocolonialism. From this, potentially, a de-colonial cosmopolitanism may come into being. Even though Mignolo sees that cosmopolitanism doesn't hide the fact that it requires agency – someone has to make it happen – it does hide the fact that there is a project of neoliberal globalism behind it (87). In this sense, his de-colonial cosmopolitanism remains only a possibility and not a reality.

What Mignolo ultimately suggests is a re-imagining of the connections between us. His vision of de-colonial cosmopolitanism focuses on the commonality of colonial experiences "between people with uncommon local histories" (95). It is a call for pluriversality to replace uni-versality in a way that critiques cosmopolitanism and results in dialogue (from the border) among civilizations. For Mignolo this fundamental principle "changes the horizon of life and vision of the future: life, of the planet and therefore of human beings...shall be the final horizon of a world in which many worlds shall co-exist" (97).

Mignolo's pluriversality and de-colonial cosmopolitanism informs how I am imagining embodied postcoloniality within the realm of cultural cosmopolitanism. Both

Calhoun, and to a greater extent, Mignolo argue convincingly for a more rigorous postcolonial/de-colonial politics to be considered before we embrace cosmopolitanism as a salvational theory. Although the area of cultural/aesthetic cosmopolitanism seems under theorized in comparison to the work done in moral/ethical and political/sociological cosmopolitanism, my hope is that I will be able to inject some of these more politicized arguments and perspectives into the discussion.

### **Cultural/Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism**

A newer trend in the field of cosmopolitanism, cultural/aesthetic cosmopolitanism is the most interesting to me because I see it acknowledging the way cosmopolitanism is performed. As I argue throughout this project, viewing cosmopolitan identities as performative, or as a performance of self through action and consumption, allows us to approach identity and postcolonial politics from a different angle. While the writers I highlight in the following section do not overtly connect intercultural performance and cosmopolitanism, their work discusses some ways, spaces and frameworks we use to perform our cosmopolitan identities. I offer this analysis in order to ground my intervention into the field of cultural cosmopolitanism, and as the foundation to my idea of what performative cosmopolitanism can be.

Situated within cultural studies, Paul Gilroy cautiously argues for a more politically responsible approach to cultural cosmopolitanism. In *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), Gilroy discusses what he terms “‘vulgar’ or ‘demonic’ cosmopolitanism. This form of cosmopolitanism “finds civic and ethical value in the process of exposure to otherness. It glories in the ordinary virtues and ironies – listening,

looking, discretion, friendship – that can be cultivated when mundane encounters with difference become rewarding” (67). While the “process of exposure” to otherness may be indeterminate and plural, as Mica Nava (*Visceral Cosmopolitanism* 2007) suggests, what I admire in Gilroy’s analysis is his attention to cultivation. I read this as suggesting that, beyond a surface encounter with otherness, cultivating relationships demands an investment on our part beyond restaurant choices and an appreciation of world music. Gilroy’s position, which Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo seem to extend with their focus on cosmopolitics, seems hopeful and practical (*Cosmopolitics* 2010).

According to Gilbert and Lo, global citizenship of cultural cosmopolitanism “can be described as an attitude or disposition characterized by openness to divergent cultural influences, *as well as* a practice of navigating across cultural boundaries” (8). Although sometimes overly optimistic, they carefully construct a vision of cosmopolitics in order to recognize the uneven terrain of globalization; they also pay attention to cosmopolitanism’s “historical associations with imperial privilege” (10). Resting on a base of postcolonial theory, they point out that cross-cultural engagement operates within structures of power that are “dominated by the forces of commerce, imperialism and/or militarism” (10). Their attention to the politics of cosmopolitanism creates a discussion of *cosmopolitics*, emphasizing the “hybrid spaces, entangled histories and complex human corporeographies” (12). I follow their attention to interwoven histories and embodiment of politics, but whereas their work digs into theatre festivals, mine emphasizes consumption and construction of cosmopolitan lifestyles.

Contributing to this conversation from the intersection of performance and consumer culture, Maurya Wickstrom’s perspective (*Performing* 2006) offers a unique

bridge between the work of Gilbert and Lo and Gilroy and theorists of consumer culture. Arguing for emphasis on the materiality of the body in order to understand how it is manipulated and controlled through advertising, her work offers us a way to re-imagine our role as performers in consumer culture. As Wickstrom points out “we know that buying and consuming branded products will change little in lives we most likely wish could be different. We know the sensorial riches of the stores serve the brand’s inventions. But we nevertheless flock to them, desiring the pleasure of materializing the brand’s transformative promise as if it were our own” (3). Unlike Gilbert and Lo’s cosmopolitics, or Gilroy’s vulgar cosmopolitanism, Wickstrom emphasizes the role that branding and corporate manipulation plays in our experiences of culture. Even in a small-scale yoga studio, the branded experience is what most people consider engaging with culture, or being an enlightened consumer of alternative lifestyle products.

As with the advertising of Yoga and to a lesser extent with Muay Thai and Capoeira, “producers are increasingly aware that cultural difference, exoticism and novelty offer powerful framing devices for goods in globally networked markets” (Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis 8). Similarly to Gavin Kendall, Ian Woodward and Zlatko Skrbis (*Sociology of Cosmopolitanism* 2009) I am interested in the ways consumption creates “fluid forms of identity that increasingly embrace cultural difference and the search for novelty” (8). As these writers point out, responses to production of culture can either stimulate banal engagement or something more reflexive. Cosmopolitanism becomes more than just a disposition of openness and willingness to consume “otherness.” It is a flexible outlook that can be turned on or off, and performed when required (105). While not overtly stated, the performative element

is highlighted. It involves action on the part of the consumer, and isn't just a default result of globalization. We can read our engagement with these practices as performative – the performances we give to enact our cosmopolitanism.

Ulf Hannerz also hints at this when he suggests that cosmopolitanism can be seen as “a perspective, a state of mind...an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards divergent cultural experiences” (qtd. in Featherstone 238-9). As Mica Nava points out in *Visceral Cosmopolitanism* (2007), the underlying assumption is that “the cosmopolitan (who seems always to be a ‘he’) has cognitive and semiotic skills which enable him to maneuver within new meaning systems while remaining culturally and emotionally detached” (8). In a different twist, Nava approaches cosmopolitanism from the space of the unconscious. She turns to the “non-intellectual, emotional, inclusive features of cosmopolitanism...feelings of attraction for and identification with otherness” (8). Her “intimate and *visceral* cosmopolitanism” is based on “everyday domestic cultures” (8) that have developed in London over the past few decades.

Following theorists Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha, Nava asks us to pay attention to the “increasingly undifferentiated, hybrid, post-multicultural, lived transformations” that are the result of mixing and indeterminacy rather than plurality and coexistence (13). This interesting position only scratches the surface of the ways social relations are structured and formed from the imperial history Mignolo so thoroughly lays out. In my mind, more attention could be paid to how the “feelings of attraction for and identification with otherness” are mediated and invented. As proponents of cultural cosmopolitanism argue, culture is fluid, constantly in flux and the only given is change and diversity. While this may be true, we need to be cautious of the fact that a lot of our

experience with culture is mediated by advertising and media then exploded by social and online media.

Assuming access to media, the technology-infused world we live in allows us to see, communicate with, and be influenced by ideas, people and experiences/events far beyond our local borders. On one hand, greater connectedness among countries of the world can be positive – for example spreading new ideas in the realms of health care and science, connecting and informing ordinary citizens in ways that result in more effective organization and activism. But the flipside to the argument, as Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehardt conclude in *Cosmopolitan Communications* (2009), is a loss of traditional, indigenous cultures, a reduction in minority languages, along with Americanization/Westernization of “world” culture and values (290). They suggest that the focus on fusion and hybridization that comes from globalization (and the project of globalism that backs it) encourages a “cross-border fertilization” that results in a blending of music, art, foods and languages.

While this may seem problematic but ultimately not so harmful, Norris and Inglehardt point out that this new application of cosmopolitanism in everyday life is “believed to generate values, attitudes, and lifestyles that are neither traditional nor modern, but a new synthesis of both” (290). A surface engagement with culture, and a distilling of history into consumable “products” like music, art, food and languages removes the attention to the relationships between nations/cultures that already structure the exchange. Rather than delve into the nature of the exchange to promote a more level “cross-border fertilization,” the narrative that marketing/advertising portrays is that tradition can be injected into dominant culture in exchange for Western modernization.

## **Cosmopolitan Consumption, Consuming Cosmopolitanism**

What is framed as “culture” is highly mediated by marketing/advertising of consumer culture in connection to what Hal Niedzviecki terms “lifestyle culture” (*We Want Some Too* 2000). This concept rests on the disappointing facts that in a country born and bred and educated through TV culture, pop culture and mass entertainment, our perception of life and culture is always in relation to the entertainment industry. Real life is forever translated and in perspective to the images, ideas and counter-ideas that seep through media. According to Niedzviecki even our attempts to separate from pop culture/consumer culture, to critique it and subvert it, put us firmly in its hold. It frames and influences the ways we see and interact with culture. Kendall et al implicitly address this in the first of their three categories of cosmopolitan engagement.

The first, which they call a “sampling style” of engagement is based on fleeting connections, symbolic appropriation of otherness and a fantasy of authenticity (115-117), isn’t the only form available to us though. Immersive style cosmopolitanism is their second category, which seems deeper and more strategic. It is a conscious attempt, based on learning and cultivating engagement for the purpose of self-knowledge, improvement and change (119). Arguably this kind of political engagement is sold through festivals of culture, museum exhibits and displays. However immersive cosmopolitanism has limitations as culture is distilled into something that is visitable, knowable, and practicable.

Immersive forms of cosmopolitanism involve a destination, an exhibit, or something that will help us to grow. We learn about historical contexts, social movements and lineages of performance traditions. It is strategic in the sense that we

purposefully immerse ourselves in culture (temporarily), in order to learn. It isn't passive and accidental. We pay a lot of money for Yoga retreats in the Caribbean, or for a two week stay at a Muay Thai gym in Thailand. When we engage with culture in this way, we are usually scathing of superficial quest for authenticity. We consider ourselves too smart to think in terms culture that starts and stops at arbitrary borders. We look for connections, overlapping styles or tastes, seeking out neo-traditional elements or recombined versions of things. Cultural festivals become educational as much as pleasure, and we are taught to be critical yet open to the specifics of culture. It is this kind of immersive cosmopolitanism that Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira thrive on and promise.

Going even further on the cosmopolitan continuum, Kendall et al's third term is a reflexive style of cosmopolitanism – at its core an authentic, earnest commitment to living and thinking beyond local or national boundaries. Echoing the older, more revered and elitist philosophical cosmopolitanism, it is a privileged position. While limited to people with the time and finances for mobility – job postings or extended travel abroad, international conferences, volunteerism and the inequities it upholds – Kendall et al present it as quite positive. For them it fosters an actual ethics of cosmopolitanism, demonstrating “a broad willingness to step outside stable, privileged and established power categories of selfhood” (Kendall et al 122).

What I hear under their words is that engaging with otherness/other-than-self brings change to the person experiencing it. It suggests that it is possible to really know that which we are not. But even with this seemingly very earnest desire/ability to “step outside” ourselves and engage with the world, how we view “the world” is shown to us,



packaged, created, and produced within a consumer society that distills everything into signs, memes and symbols. Consumer driven media has “always, already” shaped our framing and understanding in a specific way; but Kendall et al don’t seem interested in probing this angle.

## **Consumer Culture**

Don Slater (*Consumer Culture* 1997) succinctly reminds us “while consumption is an act, consumer culture is a way of life” (4). And as Turlow and McAllister articulate in *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader* (2009), what structures our world/way of life has been co-opted by advertising. Whereas in previous eras structures like religion and government offered us a map for how to live our lives, for Turlow and McAllister, advertising now holds greater power. This isn’t to say that religion and government aren’t embraced by contemporary societies. Their point is that advertising provides a simplistic flow of images that are “democratic in the sense that an empowering philosophy becomes available to a huge number of people” (213). In the logic of advertising ideas like freedom and rebellion are made available to us if we buy certain products. Through ads we are instructed on what is good, beautiful, meaningful and important, and we are shown images of what we should aspire to be/do/have. We can have the security of anonymity yet feel we belong when we buy into these “universal,” impersonal ideas. Advertising replaces the need for critical thought (about freedom, rebellion, what is good/beautiful/meaningful/important), and promotes a sense of belonging that makes people feel good. For Turlow and McAllister it also “tends to bury

the relationship between biography and the socio-historical conditions within which people live” (213).

Walter Rodney is one theorist who directly emphasizes the relationship Turlow and McAllister nod towards. What he terms the underdevelopment of the other explains “the fact that human social development has been uneven and from a strictly economic view point some human groups have advanced further by producing more and becoming wealthier”<sup>12</sup> (*The Underdevelopment of Africa* 13). George Lipsitz weaves some of Rodney’s foundational ideas into his discussion of contemporary racism that directly counter myths of advertising like those I just described. His work in *How Racism Takes Place* (2011) explains in concrete terms the way “democratic” selling strategies based on ideals of universality and belonging are highly racialized. Lipsitz writes how racialized space – in advertising and in lived experience – “gives whites privileged access to opportunities for social inclusion and upward mobility” (6). From unequal access to education, economic opportunities, social amenities and valuable personal networks, “the lived experience of race takes place in actual spaces, while the lived experience of place draws its determinate logic from overt and covert understandings of race” (6). In any discussion of advertising and consumerism we need to remain critical about what perspectives are being constructed and normalized. The socio-historical conditions that shape peoples lives may be buried as Turlow and McAllister point out, but they structure reality and have material expressions. Advertising creates a world where politics and histories/realities of domination, oppression and inequity are covered over and the world is framed as an open market for those who want it. However it can’t erase the fact that

empowerment and self-definition through advertising is very unstable, hinging on disposable income and structures like race, gender, class, ability, age and geography.

Regardless of the instability, public culture (including both mainstream and non-mainstream perspectives) is often created, framed, and molded by advertising or marketing techniques. Increasingly stylized and turned into aesthetic choices, public culture relies on consumption as a large part of what Celia Lury calls “self-conscious creation of lifestyle” (*Consumer Culture* 1996). Lury explains that consumer goods, and more specifically the advertisements connected to them, have become aestheticized to the point that we consider them in the same realm as art and synonymous with culture. She argues that because of this, a huge amount of importance is placed on the signs, images and context of presentation in marketing and advertising (78). We consume the works created by culture makers (advertisers) in order to define ourselves. In other words, we create our lifestyles partially through the images and ideas we consume, whether directly related to the goods bought, or not.

It is the fantasy we purchase, the idea of something we desire, the lifestyle we want to perform, not the product itself we buy. This strategy and the narratives attached to it often reinforce dominant ideology – where whiteness, youth, beauty and health (represented by thinness) are held up as the structures to aspire to. These ideas and the images representing them are marketed in ways that make us feel as though we have choice, and that through consumption we can define our lifestyles. In this form of lifestyle consumption, Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are not just hobbies, or practices to do. They are marketed as culturally specific, traditional, authentic, and the key to making us youthful, beautiful, and healthy.

These practices may be sold as “cultural,” or “multicultural,” terms that translate into exotic, foreign and essentially non-white. As they are incorporated and absorbed by dominant culture they become part of mainstream culture. Even if they are seen as decorative or slightly alternative, they are commodified as excursions into otherness. They are marketed as an experience or an escape, and used to justify forms of cosmopolitanism backed by consumerism. What interests me most about this process is how “corporations construct motifs that depict globalization with imagery of liberalism, multiculturalism, and universal humanism” (Turlow and McAllister 220). Ideas of global citizenship, cosmopolitan lifestyle and safely removed political engagement are manufactured and sold to us through advertising—even if the product or service has nothing to do with any of these ideas. Consumption of otherness is tied to the kinds of lived inequity both Rodney and Lipsitz describe, but is cleverly concealed when framed as practices of self-expression, identity creation, and multiculturalism. In relation to my project, Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira become a doorways to achieving a more meaningful, interesting, exotic life.<sup>13</sup>

Don Slater argues in *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (1997) that consumption goes beyond integrating a set of practices or products into the construction of our self-image. For Slater the “most private act of consumption animates public and social systems of signs” (4), not just in the sense of display or performance of conspicuous consumption but through reproductions of culturally specific ways of life, even if that reproduction is a rejection, a re-imagining, an evolution or an entrenchment (4). In what Slater terms mundane consumption, we construct personal and social identities, “enacting our citizenship of the social world” (5), which is always a political performance. Often

the politics reflected in the images, strategies and tactics of contemporary marketing highlights a type of diversity flavored with decorative multiculturalism. The result is a type of benign cosmopolitanism. These are the ideas we are encouraged to consume and perform and they are sold as strategies to achieve these simplistic and reductionary politics. As Slater points out, this is not a new thing.

Throughout the modern period, from the Industrial Revolution onward Westerners began filling their homes and decorating their bodies with foreignness. From paintings to ‘Oriental’ rugs and knick-knacks to china tea services and decorating ideas based on Asian inspired myths and fantasies, westerners embraced certain aesthetic, exotic dimensions of otherness. As Slater states, this is evidence that a consumer revolution happened in conjunction with the industrial revolution, and has continued to strengthen its hold as the primary influence on society. From the Industrial Revolution onward he notes the “transformation of modernity itself into a commodity, of its experiences and thrills into a ticketed spectacle, of its domination of nature into domestic comfort, of its knowledges into exotic costume” (14-15). This shift was propelled by various “manufacturers and the style-making elite who modeled consumer ideals for the masses” (Mullins 10). However the scope of who could fully participate within consumer culture, based on racial, gender, economic or geographic reasons, was narrow, even as it promised liberation, freedom and possibility. Within scholarship on consumer culture in general there continues to be a division between those that argue about the ways consumption perpetuates social inequity, and others who highlight the agency and subversive or creative potential of consumerism (Mullins 10).

Also stemming from this birth point in consumption history, the debate over whether consumers are in control of the market or not continues today. Some theorists argue that consumers' whims and trends dictate the direction of advertising strategies, while others argue that consumer desire is manufactured through advertising, putting much more control in the hands of mainstream culture makers/advertisers. What can be said with certainty is that regardless of the limitations on consumer citizenship, or the directions of power between consumer and advertiser, since early modernity, society has been oriented toward mass consumption. We use it to define ourselves. Consumption emerged as one of the strongest structuring forces of social and economic culture. Although religion, 'high culture,' and politics continue to have varying degrees of hold over society, Slater argues that with the shift in consumer culture since the nineteenth century, they too became instances of consumer culture. They become things we shop around for, try on and discard or exchange according to our lifestyle (31-32).

Slater describes how advertising tells us that products to make our life better are available and within reach. That we can be beautiful, fit, healthy, depending on what we purchase, that we can have meaningful lives and status if we buy the things those ideas are attached to. That we can express our autonomy and individuality through products designed to make us anonymous. All promises that will never be fulfilled. But rather than this signaling a deep mistrust in advertising, the built-in failure gets spun around as precisely why we need to consume. Slater explains that the "manipulation, conformity, and loss of meaning are transformed into reasons to consume...we express our disgust with consumer culture through consumption" (54). Advertising strategy changes so that

it no longer sells a commodity, product or service so much as it sells a “rebellion stance” against these things.

Even though for Slater “hip consumers” may be anti-consumption, that stance is expressed through what they buy (54). We construct identities around ideas of social awareness, environmental impact, health, contemporary spirituality and quality of life. Regardless of cultural or geographic orientation, religion, values or beliefs, identities are defined and performed through what we consume – the kinds of Yoga classes we take or the form of martial arts we try out. Advertising capitalizes on this, which helps explain the surge in products labeled as Fair Trade, natural and organic, derived from raw materials, recycled, or enlightened. Performing a socially conscious, environmentally friendly, enlightened identity through consumption, hip consumers (also sometimes referred to as New Age consumers) address “social, political, and cultural disenchantment” (Goodman and Cohen 57), through purchase power. In Joanne Finkelstein’s words, consumer culture “functions to regulate lifestyles and produce the belief that every consumer choice is a free choice, a way in which individuals invent themselves. Such practices can co-opt self-identifying groups into the consumer cycle, even those who may be politically and ethically opposed to it” (qtd. in Goodman and Cohen, 58).

Kimberly Lau takes this idea further in her book *New Age Capitalism* (2000). For Lau diversity is embraced as an experiential quality, as something that will purify or heal us by “re-connecting” us to “traditional” or “authentic” culture. Whether it’s eating a macrobiotic diet and practicing Tai’Chi as Lau focuses on, or becoming a Yoga convert, weekend Muay Thai warrior or Capoeirista, it’s a “foreign” experience we search for, on

a physical level. Doing so “allows people to render their own bodies foreign...to encourage their bodies to become, very literally, the “other” bodies commonly associated with these practices” (4). We make our bodies foreign through our consumption but in a safe way that continues to uphold our Western beliefs, aesthetics, attitudes, comforts and processes. Any difference we are able to attain through bodily mimesis is simultaneously “refracted through the lens of the familiar” (Lau 4).

This kind of familiar-otherness is pushed further by “processes of traditionalization, commodification, and globalization” which operate on both ideological and practical levels (Lau13). The culture behind any specific product or practice can be blended, edited, and combined to create the most saleable transcultural option. Lau’s argument is important for a number of reasons. First, culture becomes a product for sale to people who are bored, disconnected or disenchanting. It promises them a renewed sense of purpose and purity through connection to supposedly more traditional and authentic others. Second, as Lau suggests, otherness is sold as something that can be embodied – something that we can mimetically consume and become. We value otherness as long as it adds enough to make life interesting, but not so much that our aesthetics or worldviews are changed.

An idea that I will come back to in later chapters, the cosmopolitan consumption Lau describes has value only while we gain something from it. As soon as it challenges or threatens our Western values it is discarded as dangerous. Less politically volatile, Slater suggests something similar:

society appears as a kind of fancy dress party in which identities are designed, tried on, worn for the evening and then traded in for the next. Appearances – the images we construct on the surfaces of our bodies, our living spaces, our manners and our voices –



become a crucial way of knowing and identifying ourselves and each other, but again, precisely at the moment when these signs have become detached from any fixed meaning or reference. (30)

Consumerism reassures us that we don't have to belong to a culture or know its struggles and histories, and the details and nuances that form its practices, in order to use it.

Instead, we can sample different aesthetics or ideas, combine them with other cultural forms we find similar or complimentary, and ultimately create something familiar to us, but with enough exotic "otherness" to make it interesting, trendy, cosmopolitan or "traditional" and authentic.

Within consumerism, culture itself is a commodity. We use cultural practices and buy the products attached to them as a way to perform our social identities, but also as a way to exert our subjectivity, our political and social convictions, and we are placated into believing that through consumption we are powerful members of society. While to an extent this may be true – that we participate in culture through where and how we spend – the concern I have is that the meanings around identity performance through consumption are mediated and highly choreographed.

Slater outlines three ways that identity is performed through consumption – first in that actions, experiences and objects are reflexively seen as means to construct or maintain self-identity. Second, identity itself is a commodity for sale, "not an inner sense of authenticity but rather a calculable condition of social survival and success" (85).

Lifestyle becomes our performance of self that is carefully calculated and invested in based on projected assumptions of what it will mean to our social standing, our careers, our images of the life we want to create. And thirdly, both material and symbolic resources we use to sustain our identities take the form of consumer goods and activities

“through which we construct appearances and organize leisure time and social encounters” (85). Each product or lifestyle conditions our position within society.

Part of Slater’s large contribution to the work on consumer culture is his clear view that “the whims of the present take precedence over the truth embodied in history, tradition and continuity; needs, values and good are manufactured and calculated in relation to profit” (63). For him, consumerism is the triumph of economic value over all other forms of social worth, and everything from cultural values to rebellion and outrage has a price (63). It becomes a “lifestyle” that can be bought and sold. Since consumer culture is how we organize and value the world, how we intimately define who we are, what we want and how we want to live “‘what is at stake’ is profoundly and fundamentally *political*” (qtd. in Horne 210).

### **Theories of Neo-Primitivism and Orientalism: Other Theories of the Exotic**

In the following section I outline current scholarship around Neo-Primitivism and Orientalism, and begin a discussion about consuming otherness through cosmopolitanism. My use of the term Neo-Primitivism is heavily influenced by the self-reflexive work of Victor Li. In his insightful and razor sharp book *The Neo-Primitivist Turn* (2006), Li reveals how contemporary critiques of primitivism set up a paradox. In an attempt to develop a critical, non-Eurocentric understanding of alterity, most writers end up reinforcing the ideas of Primitivism they claim to challenge. This is based on the fact that they too call into being a kind of pure, unassimilable primitive.

For Li terms like “individual culture” and “traditional culture” are just euphemisms for a Primitivism that sets up “culture” as something that is distinctively

linked to pre-modern, traditional/primitive society, and is used to oppose globalizing modernity. He suggests the term and the concepts it holds up have transformed into the “liberal creed of multiculturalism, the preservation of cultural diversity in the age of globalization. Politically acceptable terms like ‘individual culture’ and ‘ethnic group’ may appear to oppose evolutionary narratives of primitive inferiority, but they still fall into the ‘savage slot’ that primitivism has always reserved for the Other of Euro-American modernity” (viii). Similar to Orientalism, everything that can be considered to oppose Western lifestyle and thought falls under the umbrella of the Primitive. In our attempt to engage with Primitivism in a more politicized, non-Eurocentric and expansive way, we end up re-inscribing it.

Within this logic, the Neo-Primitive is valuable only in relation to the “full” and “valid” alternative it provides to the West (Li 21). Li draws on the work of Rey Chow who succinctly puts it: “our fascination with the native, the oppressed, the savage and all such figures is a desire to hold on to an unchanging certainty somewhere outside our own “fake” experience” (*Writing Diaspora* 138). The concept of the neo-Primitive as I will explore in the next chapter is framed as containing the ability to purify, as carrier of ancient knowledge, and as inherently spiritual or connected to nature. Gayatri Spivak points out clearly that we are enamored with the ideas/tropes of “classical” Eastern culture, which we study with “primitivistic reverence, even as the ‘contemporary’ East is treated with realpolitik contempt” (qtd. in Chow 138). As Li frames it, one of Spivak’s points is that although it seems to be disappeared or vanishing, it has not been obliterated, but rather gains strength in its ability to haunt us (32). Following Spivak, one way to counter Primitivism is by focusing on the “*mechanics* of the constitution of the Other,”

rather than trying to probe or prove its authenticity (qtd. in Li 24). This concept is central to my task in the following chapter.

For Marianna Torgovnick (*Gone Primitive* 1990) Primitivism reveals more about the West than about the Primitive, and the contrast is what structures Western ideas of self. We find otherness within ourselves, since our constructions are what create the Primitive in the first place. Li's synthesis of Torgovnick's argument is that "Primitives are seen negatively, as child-like, untamed, 'libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous.' But they are also praised for being guileless, generous, unrepressed, and free, and admired as 'mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies'" (qtd. in Li 69). It seems in critiquing negative Primitivist stereotypes, Torgovnick's celebration of certain qualities like being unrepressed or natural ends up reinforcing and reifying an idea of "the Primitive" anyway.

The non-Primitive Primitivism Li feels Torgovnick's work engenders is one where cultural myths are haunted by colonial stereotypes of otherness. For Li, terms like "traditional culture" signify these ideas, even as these same terms are used in celebration or to signal emphasis on diversity. In the following chapters I discuss Neo-Primitivism as a marketing strategy and framing device that will hopefully address what Spivak considers the mechanics of producing the other. As I do this I am critically aware of the power lines and racial hierarchies that inform and organize our attitudes and positions within culture. While deconstructing some of the celebrations of otherness can reveal the "mechanics" at work, I run the risk of reproducing the Primitivist attitudes Li warns against, or worse, perpetuating alterity as defined entirely by subordination. My hope is that through continually marking the ways whiteness structures hierarchies and

consolidates power I will make room for resistance to be seen as well. The assumption of an invisible normal, or for Lipsitz the unmarked category of domination, is what everything is measured against. Whiteness creates the terms “exotic,” “cultural” or “traditional;” reminiscent of and deeply connected to the role Orientalism plays in the construction of Western consciousness.

Closely tied to ideas of Primitivism, Said’s Orientalism is a complex understanding of the interconnected nature of culture. He discusses it as “...the corporate institution or dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (3). His famous work lays out the structures, discourses and power imbalances that position the West as superior to everyone else, especially the East.

In *Orientalism* (1978) Said writes specifically of the East as Arab nations, but further work that developed from his groundbreaking ideas includes South East Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. One of Said’s major arguments is that the West deploys generalizations and stereotypes to divide reality into races, types, colors, and mentalities that are evaluated in relation to the West (227). Through this process and the institutions that uphold them, the West comes to define itself as not East. Without this counterpoint, the West would suffer an identity crisis. As Gauri Viswanathan points out in his introduction to Said’s *Power, Politics and Culture* (2001) the analysis within *Orientalism* is on discourse and power used to construct an imaginary version of the East built on multiple stereotypes.

It is the myth of the Orient, the mythic East that to me clearly resembles the myth of the Primitive. Some of the stereotypes and generalizations are different – the East as spiritually evolved, feminine, exotically sexual and available, or bloodthirsty barbarians. But the myth of the East as being somehow more physical, sensual, irrational, and inherently spiritual as opposed to the rational, evolved, distinguished West echoes the refrain of Primitive vs. West.

Even with decolonization and the reclamational work of many postcolonial artists, scholars, and everyday citizens, the myth continues to haunt us. As Jane Naomi Iwamura writes in *Virtual Orientalism* (2011), newer forms of communication like television “rely on a ‘more and more standardized mold,’ further reinforcing Orientalism’s hold on Western imagination by limiting alternative possibilities” (7).

Iwamura’s discussion of the virtual forms of Orientalism that circulate in magazines, television and film is potent in part because of her insistence that images contain an “immediacy and ontological gravity” (7) that words do not. As consumers, she argues, we are trained to respond to visual representations, and so the images of “the Orient” become imbedded in our imaginations. Sage monks, flexible Yogi’s, powerful, dangerous Capoeiristas, and blood thirsty Muay Thai fighters float around the internet, beckon us from ads or t-shirts, and lurk around most corners at heritage festivals. Of this idea she writes:

Promoting other sensory associations, our visually informed contact with Asian religious figures in news pictorials, television, and film generates its own simulated environment that brings to life our often-unconscious notions about the spiritual East. In this way, Orientalist stereotypes become *embodied* and hence objectified in mediated form. (8)

Adopting Iwamura's critique in relation to Said's Orientalism, my discussion of Orientalism and Primitivism in relation to the marketing of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira will pay attention to the embodied stereotypes they bring up. In many of the ways culture is framed, Orientalist/Primitivist images and strategies are stronger than ever, even if the processes of othering are more covert. As Iwamura suggests, even when the icons/images serve as a vehicle for social critique, they can still be seen as reinforcing newer forms of Western dominance, whereby the west is now the caretaker/protector of ancient culture (21). The effect of this is a kind of haunting we seem unable to escape from.

### **Resisting Cosmopolitan Consumption of Otherness**

Considering the West as unable to define itself without the East is similar to an argument about needing the Primitive in order to define our modern, urbanized selves. Both exist as ghosts of colonial thought, and exemplify what Jacqui Alexander sees as the framework of separation and opposition that sustains both knowledge and lived experience (*Pedagogies* 2006). Alexander's work imagines an alternative way that articulates the "reciprocal investments we must make to cross over into a metaphysics of interdependence" (6). She calls for "appropriate ceremonies of reconciliation that are premised within a solidarity that is fundamentally intersubjective...that plots a course toward collective self-determination" (18). Accountability, respecting Sacred practices as political work rather than in opposition to progress and modernity, and community not based on hierarchy and subordination are all suggestions Alexander makes for creating an intersubjective reality. Perhaps this is one way we can envision the terms of cultural

exchange differently. While it may not erase the myths of colonial stereotypes, or release the hold they have on peoples imaginations, I find Alexander's critique to be expansive and inclusive of the both the structures of inequity that shape our world, and the possibilities for creating communities where we are accountable to one another. Placing importance on interdependence is also Gilroy's project in "A New Cosmopolitanism" (2006).

Writing of the ways that South Africa can offer us valuable insight into how race is intimately connected to politics, Gilroy believes the postcolonial world is beginning to "generate an alternative sense of what our networked world might be and become" (289). Gilroy is critically aware that there is no "workable precedent for adopting a more generous and creative view of how human beings might communicate or act in concert across racial, ethnic, and civilizational divisions" (291). But he argues compellingly that if we look to the various anti-colonial battles that effectively ended the French and British empires, we may be able to glimpse a different form of global citizenship than Kant imagined (290). Similar to Alexander's call for interconnected and interdependent communities, Gilroy asks us to consider the network of solidarity and cross-cultural connectedness that united people in anti-colonial struggle. He describes a "precious result" of anti-colonial struggle that helped change the scale we imagine the world by:

not a limitless globe, but a small, fragile and finite place, one planet among others with strictly limited resources that are unequally allocated. This is not the globalized mindset of privileged, unrestricted travellers, or some other unexpected fruit of heavily insulated overdevelopment. It is a critical orientation and an oppositional mood, triggered by comprehension of the simple fact that environmental and medical crises do not stop at national boundaries, and by a feeling that the sustainability of our species is itself now in question. (290)



Perhaps both Gilroy and Alexander offer us a change in perspective, a way to re-imagine cosmopolitanism that is not completely Euro-American centered. We can remain critical about the images and myths consumerism perpetuates, and the structures of racial hierarchy it holds in place. My work in the following chapters attempts to do this by focusing on the ways we construct otherness. But I also flag the areas of resistance, of transgression, and possibilities that speak to ways community can practically exist across difference. Forms of resistance created through individual practices like Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira do not necessarily result in transformative social movements, or large-scale political interventions. Investing in personal practice cannot replace looking outside the studio to the very real social struggles taking place around us. But as I discuss in the final chapter, form and practice can de-stabilize us, de-centre us, and ultimately help us to re-imagine ourselves differently.

## **Conclusions**

Dividing the world of cosmopolitan theory, a few opposing views come into focus. Within each of the “areas” I discussed—moral, political and cultural—theorists are grappling with how to understand our increasingly globalized lives. Some follow Naussbaum, opposing nationalism even as it manifests in local and regional particularities in favor of a broader responsibility to “humanity” and global citizenship ([davidharvey.org](http://davidharvey.org)). Others argue for a more differentiated version that finds alternative forms of community and solidarity as the basis for cosmopolitan thought. Many focus on specificities of class, gender and racial issues and hierarchies. I signaled Mignolo’s discussion of de-colonial cosmopolitanism as an example that directly counters the Euro-

centered notion of universal (based on Enlightenment values). He suggests including non-dominant histories in order to highlight commonality of experience between people impacted by colonialism. Pluri-versality rather than uni-versality could hopefully foster dialogue call to attention the terms of cultural exchange, and the racial hierarchies that structure our contemporary world.

Paying attention to how reality is structured through the consolidation of whiteness and normalized through advertising and consumer culture, I emphasized how our lives are influenced by images, ads and ideas of consumerism. As part of what Lury calls our self-conscious creation of identity, we consume to define ourselves, our lifestyles, and to align with particular ideas. What gets smoothed over when the world is advertised as ours to enjoy, are the inequities and racially coded limitations people live and experience. Even celebrations of “difference” are usually designed to shore up hegemony as they pay lip service to tradition and diversity.

Honing in on the mechanics of otherness, I focused on how Neo-Primitivism and Orientalism work. Tracing ideas through the work of Li, Torgovnick, Said and Iwamura I paint a picture of how otherness manifests in two dominant forms. From these writer’s description we get a clear impression both of how deeply ingrained Orientalist and Neo-Primitivist constructions are, and the ways each operates to demarcate hierarchies of difference. Cautious about reproducing myths of “the Primitive” or Orientalist fantasies, I call attention to the structures of whiteness that benefit from constructions of otherness. But I also lean on Alexander and Gilroy who offer alternative ways to imagine community and cosmopolitanism.

Springboarding from this theoretical work, in the following chapter I delve into the spaces where consumerism overlaps with social media and constructions of otherness. Tracing the ways Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are used in advertising and in online-performances of self I describe some of the stereotypes associated with each form. Signaling how advertising and cultural tropes are the means through which whiteness is consolidated is my primary focus, but I also consider what the limits to this are. Potentially this can leave room to challenge our blind consumption of stereotypes.

## Chapter Three

### Distilling and Displaying Otherness

From memes to tweets to uploaded image galleries, social media now factors into how we perceive culture. Social media networks are also places where cosmopolitan consumption and the commodification of culture come fully into view. Chapter Three opens with a theoretical discussion of social media to help frame my analysis of platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter as performance archives. Textual and image analysis of how Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira each get positioned in media divides the body of this chapter into three distinct parts. In each section I consider the plethora of advertising and marketing material in terms of what is being sold/promoted. Finding connections between surface cosmopolitanism and consumption is easy, and many lineages of Orientalist or Neo-Primitivist stereotypes are usually blatant, running just below the surface. What is more challenging is to consider the potentially subversive qualities within the framing of each practice. Since I analyze personal comments and material people post on their profiles or the groups they are part of, I do need to point out that for many people there is an earnest, deep commitment to each practice. I try to hold this in mind even as I critique appropriative language and lineages of colonialism. Although social media may engender differentiated and diverse publics, my overarching concern in this chapter is to consider the ways we are encouraged to think about Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira as ways to play with, mimic, and embody what “otherness” is.

In my first case study I give a textual analysis of four issues of the Canadian magazine *Sweat Equity*. It is a print magazine that, unlike other media platforms, isn't fluid and constantly changed by added comments or circulated through re-posts. There is

something about the concreteness of print that makes representation very powerful. Ads don't just get lost in the online world; they are solid and unchanging once printed. As with most things related to Yoga, the industry surrounding the practice makes a lot of money, and of all the practices Yoga has a wide enough base to support a paid-for, printed magazine. But I also consider how Yoga is framed, used and commented on through the social media platform Twitter. I chose this platform since it is quite populated by instructors/students/yogis who tweet constantly about classes, poses, philosophy and trends related to Yoga. While I haven't changed the name of the magazine I analyze and critique, all names of instructors, profiles and Twitter handles have been altered to create a sense of anonymity. My attempt to anonymize the Muay Thai gyms I discuss proved more challenging.

With Muay Thai, many of the gyms I focus on are named in ways that denote lineage or the kind of Muay Thai they offer (traditional vs. modern/mixed martial arts standup Muay Thai). The names I use are all fictional, however I tried to preserve the type or importance of the original name in my creation. In this second case study, I look at how Muay Thai is positioned, framed and sold on websites, and how people respond to or perform their dedication to the form through the social media site Facebook. My scope was limited to the gyms that either have the biggest online presence, or are most active in the community through demonstrations and public events.

My third case study looks at how Capoeira is positioned through websites and Facebook and how it is received, primarily through the medium of YouTube. While Toronto Yoga studios and Muay Thai gyms may post occasional videos to YouTube, this medium is used heavily by many Capoeira academies. It is a place for branding,

displaying, and connecting to the larger, worldwide communities many academies are part of. Whereas Yoga studios and Muay Thai gyms may have affiliates in one or two other countries, Capoeira is often a worldwide network. Many academies have multiple locations in multiple countries, all under the same *Mestre* or Master. As with the other case studies, all names, profile names and YouTube subscriber names have been altered.

I close this chapter with a more cohesive analysis of cosmopolitan engagement through social media. I argue that each practice is positioned to offer decorative cultural “experiences” and that they inherently facilitate excursions into otherness for dominant culture. The advertising of each practice through print and social media is infused with colonial stereotypes – Neo-Primitivist and Orientalist fantasies called up through celebratory engagement. As I will discuss throughout this chapter, I read the texts/digital performances in magazines, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter as a barometer of what certain people think about each practice. By doing this we can glimpse how practices are being framed and understood and used in people’s lives. But in the closing paragraphs of this chapter I also ask if there are any subversive qualities or effects related to how these practices are displayed through social media. My hope is to offer counterpoint and to make room for resistance to the dominant framing of practices.

### **Key Features of Social Media and SNS**

Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth point out in *Understanding Social Media* (2013) that social media crosses multiple platforms, contexts and with smartphone technology infiltrates even the most mundane part of many people’s lives (1). The term social media has a broad reach, and any media site that has a social element to it falls into this

category. The key ingredient is interactivity – where users can generate content, usually through comments, uploads, profiles or applications. It differs from traditional media in the reach, permanence, production and purpose, and there are many online media sources like websites, online newspapers and magazines that exist in both media worlds (social and traditional).

Social Networking Sites are a version of social media designed for people to connect in online networks or communities. Often they have a profile element where users create and display networks of other profiles (of friends or strangers), and many are platforms for users to create and share information, videos, pictures and messages (both public and private). As Hinton and Hjorth point out Social Network Sites (SNS) are perhaps the most used interface through which people engage social media and increasingly, with the web in general. They are networks, or networked publics that function as virtual communities, depending on the platform and how people are using them. Hinton and Hjorth describe SNS as “user-oriented, providing a space for people to make things, share things, communicate and connect with each other, allowing for a wide range of empowering practices from activism to creative production” (53). However this liberating element to social media is tempered by the fact that they are all commercial ventures, and for many theorists like Mark Adrejevic and Geert Lovink “users’ free labour is exploited for the benefit of corporations” (qtd. in Hinton and Hjorth 2). Since social media permeates our everyday life, questions of privacy, control and the changing definition of intimacy need to be highlighted. The control over information we post (direct control) and how our online choices are monitored and sold as data to companies that directly profit from it (indirect control), are hot topics in the realm of social media.<sup>14</sup>

A related issue that the rest of this chapter focuses on is the ways that our offline assumptions and knowledge of the world both influence and are influenced by the online world. As Hinton and Hjorth note, “notions of presence and its impact upon public and private spaces” changes in relation to mediated social intimacy. For Hinton and Hjorth, intimacy can simultaneously signal relationships between friends, families and lovers, but also something that exists between strangers brought together by a common cultural group (44). While groups can be formed on the basis of location, nation or religious affiliation, for this project I consider culture to be the space created by interest in a common activity like Yoga, Muay Thai or Capoeira. Social Media capitalizes on these connections, and can be seen as “technology that mediates intimacy” (45). The shift in understanding and use of intimacy has a far reach. In journalism, magazines and websites very intimate forms of address are used. Many of these media platforms have SNS that accompany them, since personal referrals and targeted advertising through social media has proven very lucrative. This same “intimacy turn” in media is reflected through platforms like Twitter that function more like text messaging than traditional advertising (of brands or people) (Hinton and Hjorth 139).

Another key feature of social media is the perceived reach or “perceived audience” of each person. Whether the number of people who actually read your comments/status updates/tweets is reflected in the number of friends or followers you have is hard to tell. But the idea that you have the potential to reach a worldwide audience is enough to drive most people to participate.

What seems to be encouraged and accepted through social media is the display of the intimately personal perspectives/lives/activities we do. From mundane posts about



what we eat or where we are going (including locating devices that offer up our specific locations) to information about our private lives, our feelings, and our photos of intimate events, our lives in vivid detail are uploaded, monitored, and mined for data that is then re-purposed for marketing campaigns. What used to be considered the private realm is now public, and most of us on SNS embrace the shift.

### **Performing Self in Networked Publics**

Although most platforms that I look at have certain privacy settings to filter who has direct access to information, many people seem willing to sacrifice privacy for the idea of connecting to a worldwide audience. danah boyd is one theorist who argues that people respond to networked media by creating networked publics. Her understanding of the various meanings of public<sup>15</sup> follows Mizuko Ito (2008) to reference the growing engagement with digitally networked media, emphasizing how publics are shaped. boyd suggests we focus on how networked technologies “reorganize how information flows and how people interact with information and each other” (“Social Network Sites as Networked Publics” 41). Publics and individuals are shaped by their networks and transformed by networked media (43). Information made available to these publics is assessed in terms of the social value for revealing or concealing it, rather than just an on or off privacy setting. When we understand how information like status updates, comments, pictures and “likes” are distributed in very deliberate ways it is easier to see our online profiles as performances we give of specific versions of ourselves. In boyd’s words “profile generation is an explicit act of writing oneself into being in a digital environment” (43).

Our lives as performances through social media are put online for display. For Hinton and Hjorth “social media affords certain kinds of social performance that involve making intimacy more public” (3). The public display of our lives through status updates, uploaded photos and videos, or the comments we make become documents of our performance of everyday life. In many contexts what we display is highly personal, intimate aspects of ourselves that, in an unprecedented way, have helped to collapse the distinction between public and private spheres.

In an article titled “All the World Wide Web’s a Stage: The Performance of Identity in Online Social Networks,” Erika Pearson opens by stating: “Online, users can claim to be whoever they wish. Like actors playing a role, they can deliberately choose to put forth identity cues or claims of self that can closely resemble or wildly differ from reality” (1). Many theorists like Pearson<sup>16</sup> whose work focuses on performances of identity through social media platforms like Facebook, draw on the work of Erving Goffman (1959). Scholars like Bernie Hogan (*Presentation* 2010) describe Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to understanding identity as something that is performed and managed; where we put forward an idealized version of ourselves in the “front stage” that is carefully thought out and constructed in the privacy of the “back stage” (378). danah boyd takes these ideas further describing three fundamental dynamics of performances on SNSs: perceived/imagined audience, context collapse and a blurring between public and private (49).

Who we imagine to be our audience – the millions of internet users surfing the web – is in actuality very different from the number of users connected to our networks and the number of users who actually see our activity on SNSs. Touted as platforms to

connect us with the world, the perceived reach is important because it creates a mythology about the powers of social media to connect us. boyd's second characteristic of SNSs responds to the idea of publically displayed intimacy. The context collapse she writes of meshes multiple audiences into single contexts, and fosters her third characteristic of SNS, the blending of public and private. Navigating an online world where, on any SNS, there could be connections to family, friends, co-workers, and strangers, is complicated; the amount and type of information we offer to our networks gets tricky. The fact that we are encouraged to display ourselves through one profile that combines our public and private lives is often gauged as a marker of authenticity. As Mark Zuckerberg has indicated, Facebook encourages us to have one identity – and “the days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly...Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (quoted in van Dijck, 199). There seems to be an insistence on integrity equating to an exhibitionist portrayal of life – where private/backstage life is considered somehow dishonest.

Although we are encouraged to have one, authentic identity we share with the world, we are usually highly aware of how we portray ourselves. Photos are censored (no one puts the ugly ones up), we post status updates and share content with an awareness of how we come across, and the persona we create to share with the world. We perceive a worldwide audience, even if this doesn't happen, and to an extent our performance is measured on authenticity (Marwick and boyd 2010). What Geert Lovink calls “a collective obsession with ‘identity management’” (38), authenticity is highly chosen, calculated and in many cases fabricated. We present perfected identities online through

social media and SNSs like Facebook and YouTube, but in the blending worlds of real and virtual, online and offline, some theorists see a fracturing in our identities. We are encouraged to be authentic, and to be ourselves, but in a highly controlled, conformist environment where “being yourself” is a matter of performance.

Whether as a branding tool, a place for self-expression or a slightly narcissistic performance of self (what Manuel Castells calls “mass self-communication”), social media and SNSs have penetrated mass culture. It comes to influence what the general public believes is important, normal, credible and correct. Supporting this perception, Jose van Dijck discusses how social media platforms have become “the very tools for shaping identities” (213). Using social media as a means of mass self-communication, we put versions of our lives online in distinct ways, to shape and present our lives as we create them. As part of our routine identity performances, we create and self consciously display a censored version of ourselves through the kinds of images we post and share, the material we post to our walls, the things we give “likes” to, the groups we join, and the ways we communicate what is happening with our lives through status updates.

### **#Social Engagement Through SNS**

Social media buzz, and platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter also offer us a perspective on culture, not just in marketing terms, but as a reflection of how people perform their engagement with culture – what they think about it, how they distill it or blend it. As Michael Strangelove writes in *Watching YouTube* (2010), “[a]mateur video may be closer to the audience and better at representing emerging tastes simply because it is made by the audience” (168). Although the audience who comments is very partial,

YouTubers can give a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” to any video they watch, and everyone has the ability to leave comments. It is within the comments where we see how certain people feel about the content, what they think about or how they frame the material they watch. In this sense, the viewer has an option to interact, participate and directly engage with the videos rather than watching them as passive consumers. It is a different kind of consumption than reading a magazine – users have the potential to generate content rather than a production team – which can be read or seen as an interesting mode of performance. The idea that an audience co-produces meaning is not new, but what intrigues me with YouTube is how through the comments section of YouTube, people act out personas that are often highly charged and fiercely opinionated.

The fact that people feel compelled to comment and perform their interaction with the video is very different than the interaction people have with other media forms like websites or magazines. Both websites and magazines as I frame them in this project offer information that is created by a centralized producer, and is more reflective of traditional advertising techniques. Although the communication through these more traditional mediums is unidirectional, the consumer is still positioned as central, something that parallels the type of control platforms like Facebook and YouTube seem to offer. Hinging on the directionality between user and producer, social media plays an increasingly important role in how traditional media sources like magazines have to compete. One of the main reasons is an emphasis on interactivity ushered in by the web.

In Strangelove’s words the discussions that happen on social media or SNSs like YouTube “are communicative, dialogic events” and indicate that we now live in a “culture based on digital storytelling...wherein every story can be changed and altered”

(185). What Strangelove emphasizes is that engagement doesn't end with an uploaded video people watch. It is altered, re-contextualized and re-framed through the comments, thumbs up/down, the number of hits/views it gets, and the contexts it is shared in. If we read the interaction with social media as performance, the comments people leave become a performance archive as well. Attitudes and opinions become a performance archive that tells us how some people respond to the content online. Following the direction Strangelove takes the spectator's performance is as important as the content originally produced. Comments tell us what some spectators see and understand or deem relevant or interesting, partially indicated by what goes viral, is re-posted and re-circulated in networked publics.

Without this generative, vital and dialogic component to social media, it is easy to see the time spent online and engaging with the world through SNS as a co-opted form of labour that serves corporate interest. But as I will discuss throughout this chapter, we can read our online engagement as performance archives – the traces of our online performances of self, our expressions of identity, belonging, community and intimacy. This same performance I also see as a form of surface cosmopolitanism, where the world is literally ours to explore. What interests me in this chapter is partially viewing social media as sites of performance. But I also consider how media in general (print media and social media alike) frame our engagement with otherness. As cosmopolitan as the world seems through our online networks, this doesn't guarantee that the assumptions, stereotypes or prejudices created offline don't filter into our online understanding of culture. In many cases, as I will discuss in relation to YouTube videos about Capoeira,

social media fosters a somewhat extreme or exaggerated performance of our attitudes and beliefs.

### **From Theory to Analysis**

In the following sections I consider the landscape Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira exist in, and how culture is sold as a “thing” to enhance life. As such, it is a knowable, purchasable, and performable. Within this context, culturally specific practices become appropriated, distorted and decontextualized as much as they can be platforms to pass on cultural and historical knowledge. They are subtly advertised or marketed as a physical way to bridge difference and promote understanding, or are distilled into useful, inoculating elements to purify the physical/psychic problems of the West.

Often the marketing of these physical forms, and the centers that offer them, are sold under guises of authenticity or tradition that one can purchase. They are advertised as hybrid expressions of cultural fusion between the urban West and its exotic others. In both cases, the cultural practices I discuss are often marketed as practices to enrich your life to make you more balanced, less stressed, more beautiful and sexy, more powerful. While practicing Yoga, Muay Thai or Capoeira may do all of these things, this is a highly problematic engagement, one that easily manifests Neo-Primitivist and Orientalist fantasies. Consumer culture both promotes and is fed by a cosmopolitan attitude that suggests the consumption of physical culture demonstrates hip, global citizenship.

Secondly, by focusing on the display of these practices as performances, the fluidity of engagement, the performative acts or ways people demonstrate/act out their commitment to the practice can be analyzed as theatre. What they do, what they say, the

points of reference they draw on, the stereotypes/cultural tropes/codes they perform through speech, setting, costuming, staging, are all amplified. Since I am less concerned in this chapter with understanding the personal psychology of the practitioners, and more interested in analyzing what is sold and performed, viewing the “culture” that cosmopolitanism is so concerned with as mediated by marketing and performed by people becomes important. It makes visible underlying attitudes, presumptions, and ghosts of colonial imaginings of what “culture” is within our postcolonial world. In a city like Toronto, where it seems everyone comes from somewhere else, the plethora of cultural activities is spun as the obvious and pleasant result of diversity. Implicit, but not overtly visible, is the fact that all of these assumptions position the contribution of “other” cultures as decorative and aesthetic, or within the realms of mind/body/spirit/health. Non-Western culture is used to justify, purify or physically support dominant culture’s needs and caprices. This dominant audience, to whom most ads are directed, is assumed to be white, middle class, heterosexual and able bodied.

### **New-Age Hipster Yoga**

Looking at the covers of four issues of *Sweat Equity*, from September 2012 to April 2013, I find the Yoga-focused content suspiciously informed by the standards typical of the mainstream magazine industry. The cover models are all thin, young white women. The headlines offer “4 Beauty Tips for Winter” and “10 Tips for Happiness,” and in more of the Yogic vein, an article on Deepak Chopra “Guru of...Everything,” and “3 Tips for Mindful Meditation.” They shout out to us that within the pages of the magazine we will learn how to get paid for what we love, discover simple ways to live a



greener, more eco-friendly lifestyle, revitalize our love life with Yoga, and of course run better and become more functional through kettle bell or crossfit workouts. The magazines promise success and beauty through a Yoga infused workout, vegan and ethical cooking/eating that helps boost energy and gives you good karma. And, as indicated by the cover models, it will tell us secrets for getting thin, shapely, fit, white bodies.

The first cover model, Sadie Nardini (“A Radical Rockin’ Yogi”), is dressed in black, and holds her coat open, hands in what she calls her “Rock and Roll Mudra” as if to flash us (Sept/Oct 2012). For Nov/Dec 2012, the model’s personality is less important than the gorgeous, graceful backbend she performs. Her flowing red dress contrasts with the blue background, and the hair and dress blown toward her legs outlines her calves, hamstrings and bum. She is beautiful and evocative. Who she is doesn’t seem to be important, since the article is really about Robert Sturman and what he is able to capture through his lens and focus on “Art +Yoga.” The Jan/Feb 2013 cover model also isn’t advertised as a name or brand – she has a tough stance, hands on hips, gazing straight into the camera, one eyebrow cocked coquettishly and a demure smile on her mouth. Her outfit of sports bra and spandex shorts allows the following text to be branded across her bare abs: “I run. I crossfit. I do Yoga. The perfect Trifecta.” The next model to grace the covers sits serenely on the ground, soles of her feet together, hands holding her pregnant belly. The green tube top allows us to see not only her pregnancy, but also her half-sleeve tattoos. They contrast nicely with her very light skin and dyed blond hair, and qualify her persona – “Sarah Blackwood, Rockin’ Yogi Mama” (March/April 2013).

With celebrities like Blackwood joining the ranks of Madonna, Jennifer Aniston, Lady Gaga, Russell Simmons, Russell Brand and many, many more who practice Yoga, it is undoubtedly perceived as a mainstream, hip thing to do. As Kimberly Lau points out, “Yoga’s social status has changed with its movement from the cultural periphery, where it was most commonly perceived as a countercultural practice for hippies, flower children, and ‘granolas,’ to its place in the cultural center” (2). Although the practice now may be only lightly associated with its origins in sacred Hindu texts, it is still advertised to a market obsessed with all things “Eastern.” Lau remarks that spiritual belief systems are converted into exercise programs and products to reduce stress, and transform yourself. These ideas are clearly embodied in the magazine *Sweat Equity*. The magazine has branded itself as “The ONLY Canadian publication dedicated to yoga, fitness, lifestyle, food and YOU- the teachers, trainers, gyms, studios, restaurants and fitness lovers that make our community tick” (Facebook.com). It reflects the current positioning of Yoga as a lifestyle product and also offers us an interesting perspective on what else the producers/contributors associate Yoga with.

The magazine’s contributors have a few things in common – many are dedicated to health and wellness in the Yoga or fitness industries, and quite a few choose to mention their love of travel, adventure, culture and traditions. Their lifestyle choices include raw food, the Paleo diet, vegan and vegetarian lifestyles, a commitment to Yoga and the outdoors. Like Grace Van Berkum, many reside outside Canada, in tropical places. Van Berkum, is described (most likely in a self-written bio) as a “health conscious Canadian” living in “beautiful tropical Nicaragua” where she runs “Gracious Living Yoga Adventure Retreat.” The retreat offers detoxification of body and mind,

meditation and breathing exercising, raw food, surfing and hiking. Other contributors have created health-centered iPhone Apps, run gyms, teach yoga classes, or work in the beauty industry. One quotes the Indian poet Rumi. Most are young, white, beautiful and happy doing what they love. A Yogic lifestyle full of eco-conscious clothing and gadget options, images of delicious organic-raw-vegan-healthy food tantalize us, how-to guides for happiness, better sex, lean, toned, beautiful bodies that look great in booty shorts and the feeling like the world is yours to take, all radiate from the magazine. Its super-cool, slightly edgy, slightly hipster attitude indicates that everyone from 20-50 can live incredible, traveled, serene and blissful lives.

### **“Love Life. Do Yoga”: Advertisements For Yogic Lifestyles**

By default, since they are included within the pages of lifestyle guidance, advertisements frame how Yoga is represented. Unsurprisingly, many of the ads have very little to do with Yoga, and/or are only connected by the Oriental myths they use. It would seem like anything that can be considered remotely Eastern is used to sell products to an audience assumed to be enamored with “traditional culture.” For example, the Enso Pearl clock/interval timer/alarm offers you “a choice of soothing chimes of Tibetan or Japanese singing bowls” (March/April 2013 1). Regardless of the fact that Tibetan and Japanese singing bowls are very distinct and aren’t used in Yoga, since they are Eastern, they are framed as something to “soothe the soul” and allow you to “see time clearly.” In a similar use of culture to sell product, supplement company GNC shows off the body of a beautiful, thin but shapely, fit but not too muscular, white woman in various Yoga poses. She is the dominant image, and it is only on the right

hand column where we see that it's an ad for Women's Ultra Mega Vitapack (March/April 2013, back cover). Her body is qualified by the little text there is: "Me on GNC. Live well. Respect Yourself." It is implied that I too can look like the sultry Yogini, and if I do then I must be living well and respecting myself. If I fail to live up to the image, then I must not be living well/respecting myself; luckily their GNC Vitapack will help repair that damage. While there is no obvious use of Orientalist stereotypes present in the ad, what is there is a deeper, highly problematic discourse at work.

In ads like these and many others in *Sweat Equity*, Yoga is a commodified form, nearly/completely removed from its cultural heritage/context. As Lau argues what this decontextualization does is efface the ethnic associations of the practice, allowing the idealized white body to represent the practice (127). The replacement of racially coded bodies by white Western bodies that are both foreign in what they are doing, and familiar in their idealized form "enables the full commodification of yoga...with the promise and potential for permanent transformation as evidenced by the tall, slender, slightly muscular, slightly curvaceous bodies" of the ads (129). We feel comfortable with the practice, claiming that it isn't appropriation since we have made it our own, and dominant culture is content thinking that once again we transcend difference and embrace culture – even if what the ad also suggests is that "culture" is to be embraced primarily through the familiar bodies of dominant ideology.

In all of the magazine ads from the four issues I examined, only one product – Purica, a supplement line that uses mushroom extract among other things for pain relief – uses a non-white model. She is visibly "other" but her skin is very light, her hands are

folded in prayer/namaste, and her head is bowed slightly as she smiles for the camera. That she is the only non-white model, and that they chose a light skinned woman to sell this product containing “ancient, natural ingredients” isn’t a coincidence. Nothing in advertising is by accident. She is there to signify, through her skin and her presence, the authenticity of natural, secret ingredients, or “traditional” medicine. She offers a multicultural decoration with her body, as the only non-white person within the ads.

An ad offers a more overt celebration of the ability to live multicultural lives. The banner at the top of the ad has Sanskrit writing, and underneath, in a similar Sanskrit-esque font is the slogan “oil the machine.” Beneath, on a beach with waves rolling onto the sand behind her a white woman sits. Her soles touch, her knees unfold gracefully to either side, and her head is bowed. All we can see of her are her palms pressed together in a prayer position, and her wheat coloured hair being swept to the side by a breeze. She is central on the page, in supplication, and below her right elbow on the left of the page the text reads: “We are spiritual machines with capabilities beyond imagination. Through practice we shape the future and discover our potential. The future is now” (March/April 2013 92). What the ad affectively does is make the white woman’s body both exotic and familiar, suggesting that through the Eastern practice she has adopted she has discovered her potential. She embodies Eastern culture, signified by the Sanskrit writing, and the prayer position most practitioners adopt at the end of a class, bowing in *namaste*. Drawing on Orientalist fictions that suggest Eastern people are more in tune with nature, the image suggests that through Yoga and through taking Udo’s Oil, so is she. And since she is beautiful, white, non-threatening and everything dominant culture suggests we aspire to be – multicultural,

beautiful, healthy – it legitimizes these Orientalist myths, materializing them in the image.

Orientalist stereotypes that suggest Eastern culture is traditional (not modern), spiritual (not seeking material wealth), and natural (closer to the earth than the urban West) play out in other ads as well. From drink mixes that offer great sex, fat loss, body re-shaping, anti-aging and the health benefits of raw kale, to the various Yoga teacher training schools and Yoga retreats, the rhetoric of nature runs through. Light, airy spaces for spiritual enlightenment are a predominant theme, as are the emphasis on untouched beaches, tropical destinations and unique blends of spirituality in the form of Qi Gong, meditation, sage smudges, surfing and hiking to commune with nature away from the hustle of urban life. From Lau’s perspective, common tropes of Orientalism “entangle the East in a romanticized past: the East as a timeless place that transcends the problems of this world, a place where the West can escape from its ills, a place where the West can seek peaceful solace” (8). Within the pages of *Sweat Equity* and the advertisements for programs, studios and products however loosely associated with Yoga, the practice is set up as containing the ability to transform, reconnect to nature, and allow you to experience in Lau’s words ““other” people’s ‘intuitive’ ability to live holistically” (112). It is reflected in the ways products are shot, in the ways studios are portrayed, and in the language of the magazine.

### **Writing Orientalist Myths**

Articles like “Good Thinking: The Importance of Meditation” by Grace Van Berkum (Sept/Oct 2012 24), instruct readers on the benefits of meditation, positioning it

as a cure for the stresses of modern western life. While she mentions that Yoga is considered to be a moving meditation, she also describes other forms that include mantra meditation and mindfulness meditation. All forms promise to help us breathe more deeply, calm our minds and to help us battle hypertension, heart disease, anxiety, and depression. Blending scientific understanding/lingo about how brain activity is heavily influenced by meditation, she also scares us with what happens when we don't battle stress with meditation. She maintains that terror inducing ailments like stomach ulcers, cancer, insomnia, depression and accelerated aging can be cured, without having to go to an ashram, if we commit to meditating. She offers the instructions made popular by "guru of everything" Deepak Chopra, who many people see as a New Age, monk-like spiritual figure, but with the qualifications, dress and education of a Western trained medical doctor. The article equates meditation to exercise and training for the brain or using a different image, like taking a bath for your mind. A mysterious Eastern practice is qualified by science and medicine, authenticated by a mainstream guru Chopra, and ultimately tied only loosely to Yoga in case the audience is put off by spiritual elements. All bases seem to be covered – the skeptics are reassured by science, while the spiritualists are comforted knowing that the famous guru supports these methods.

The dance between West and East in the most generalized, homogenizing sense is explored in other articles as well. It comes across in the way writing is constructed, the framing of practices, and as seemingly deep-seated Orientalist views of culture made obvious in word choice and what is emphasized. For example, writing about the

instructor Alanna Kaivalaya within the “Teacher’s Story” section, Erin Moraghan has the following to say:

Western Yoga has gone to great lengths to make the practice relevant for our culture, molding poses and spiritual messages to fit our modern lives. We even have streaming yoga classes online, yoga apps, and twenty-minute classes at the office. Yet despite these shifts, some people are still wary of buying in .... Many studios still share the spiritual and philosophical aspects of yoga, but let’s face it, it’s not for everyone. Monkey gods, many-armed deities, Sanskrit chanting, flutes and Drums; it just makes some people uncomfortable, has them wondering if they’ve inadvertently joined the hare Krishnas when all they wanted to get limber and improve their golf swing. (17)

The article is primarily about Kaivalya’s innovative approach to morph the “mystery and mysticism” of Yoga into something that is Western-friendly, cool, fun, and “relevant” for today. Within Moraghan’s writing, some of the predominant Orientalist assumptions that unconsciously inform our sorting of the world show through. To return to the quote above, Moraghan first ensures that she qualifies that she is talking about “Western” Yoga, which is more relevant to our culture (I assume she is comparing it to what she considers non-Western/Eastern Yoga) since the postures and spiritual messages of Yoga have been changed to fit “our” lives. Her use of “our” seems to assume the West as white, secular and sharing the same values of lifestyle and culture. For Moraghan there is an “Eastern Yoga” that isn’t relevant or reflective of modern life, and the postures and spirituality contained within it somehow don’t resonate with practitioners in the West. The stage is set with West vs. East that she subtly frames as opposites in the rest of her article. She marvels at how technologically infused we (the West) are and how that translates into Yoga apps and online classes, how in our busy,



stressed out urban life we can have short, packaged, convenient 20-minute classes at the office.

What Moraghan suggests by framing the West in this way is that the East is not technologically advanced, but rather is stuck with Monkey gods, many-armed deities, chanting, drums and flutes. Whereas Yoga is spiritual/religious practice in the East, in the West it is something done to improve a golf swing and limber up. Her article goes on to praise Kaivalya's attention to sound vibration, attributed to her being born with a cleft pallet and hearing impairment. She describes Kaivalya's classes as "user-friendly" and discusses how she combines the holistic concepts of Yoga (what she means by this we don't know) into her teaching "in ways that make sense for current society." Again, the East is positioned as ancient, stuck with rigid traditions that don't allow it to exist in modern/current society. Their gods are weird, they spend time chanting and drumming like other Primitive societies, or they are destined to become Hare Krishnas. Her praise of Kaivalya is built on showing how Western she is and how she has developed techniques to connect with the mysterious East because of her physical deformities in early life. There is a good chance that Moraghan never intended her article to come across as such a great example of Orientalism at work. She may have focused on writing in a hip, edgy way that would provoke response. But regardless of how committed she may be to Yoga, culture and tradition, like many of the other contributors in the issue her framing of the East as backward, mystical, ancient and weird upholds ugly dynamics of colonialist stereotypes and Orientalist ideals.

Like Van Berkum's article on Meditation, the East is framed as something to use in order to cure our Western lives of the burdens of modernity – stress, technology

overload, workaholism, and lack of traditions to keep us grounded. But within both articles we are assured that we don't need to change religions, join an ashram, or even believe in any of the Yoga philosophy/spirituality that is sometimes made available to us. Instead, Yoga is framed as the means to an end, something that will make us happier, calmer, more present and less stressed. It's backed by science, and as clearly demonstrated by rock star Yogi Sadie Nardini, it is also pretty badass.

In an interview with Mairead Walsh, Nardini discusses success, commercialization and brand power through online presence. She defines herself as a new radical on a mission to live Yoga in her own unique way, and to help her students "be a little more fierce, a little more courageous, a little more mindful" (March/April 2013 33). Her strategy relies on Twitter and Facebook, and promoting Yoga to different populations, based on what will appeal to them – sleeping better, stronger relationships, confidence, weight loss, better alignment. Although this may sound thoroughly capitalist, she is portrayed as wanting to help transform people's lives, help them lift up to a new place of consciousness and understanding (33). Her punk rock attitude juxtaposes the image of Yogi as hippie, Yogi as spiritual flake, and Yogi as Eastern. She is 100% behind creating Yoga that compliments our contemporary society and spreads her message through Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.

### **Yoga on Twitter In 140 Characters Or Less**

Many instructors featured in *Sweat Equity* promote their brand, display their knowledge and proclaim their love of Yoga through Twitter. Highlighting only two among millions, one instructor tweets "It's my understanding that the practice of yoga is

not in the postures but in the way we consciously respond to the challenges they represent” [sic]. His probing of the psychology behind Yoga offers his audience a glimpse into the depth of his understanding. Aware of his position as educator, and bringing Yoga to the level of everydayness, another tweet suggests: “Like brushing your teeth or tuning a guitar yoga is meant to be performed daily as part of your routine to restore and maintain health.” And of course since this is social media, the self-promotion is an undercurrent, either subtly displaying a depth of knowledge, or accessibility as in the previous two tweets, or more overtly, in this tweet: “Class Praise: ‘I left feeling lighter and I walked in the world in a different way. It was as if I had been transformed.’” But he also asks reflectively, in my mind to distinguish himself as a “real” instructor of “real” Yoga rather than an instructor of the passing fad, “Are we teaching yoga students or serving yoga studio customers?”

In contrast to the serious, professional, guru-esque attitude of the first Twitter user @MentalYogi, @moxiyoga blends self-promotion and branding through Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr, and Pinterest. Her tweets are varied, decontextualized snippets of inspiration, celebrity buzz, yoga instruction or philosophy and fun, motivational pictures from Pinterest, Instagram or her smart phone. She will tweet something like “‘Set your life on fire. Seek those who fan your flames.’ Rumi” followed by “Sunglasses, Advil and a Bridesmaid Dress: Hangover Yoga Post-Bachelorette Party” with a link to a *Huffington Post* article, and then “Asteya is the third yama of the ethical code of yoga. It literally means non-stealing or generosity,” demonstrating the wide range of her personal brand. As with @MentalYogi, she promotes herself by re-tweeting what @JennyS tweeted to her: “Just watched @moxiyoga videos for the first

time and I'm super impressed! I think yoga is going to be my new found obsession ☺.”

One difference between @MentalYogi and @moxiyoga, is that @moxiyoga has 5,411 followers and over 4,615 tweets to @MentalYogi's 117 followers and 51 tweets. I mention this because of the perceived reach each of these instructors potentially has.

In the world of Twitter, @moxiyoga can spread her interpretation of Yoga, attached to Zen sayings or bits of the Yoga Sutra to an audience that is inspired and looks to her for expertise. The first instructor may be world-class, but without promoting himself through social media, his knowledge and understanding of Yoga philosophy has less impact on the positioning of Yoga. Even though his interpretation of Yoga philosophy may significantly change people's bodies and minds, @moxiyoga's de-historicized, partial translations are seen by more eyeballs<sup>17</sup> and have a greater potential influence on more people. @moxiyoga's Twitter following is a good example of how social networking sites can become evidence of how many people are interested in, talking about, using, quoting, being inspired by, or performing identities influenced by Yoga.

@moxiyoga's persona uses Yoga to show us how fun, rewarding and flexible life can be if we practice Yoga, how it can influence other people to lead a more Yogic life (without giving up the Internet), and how inspiring poets like Rumi, activist like Martin Luther King Jr., and writers like James Oppenheim are (all quoted by her in recent tweets). Or, like @MentalYogi, we can perform a profound, guru-like persona that calls to mind wise sages, elders or beloved professors who bestow wisdom on us through tweets about philosophy or daily habits.

Beyond personal performances, Twitter is also a medium for promoting classes, workshops, or the brand of Yoga that individual studios have created. The Yoga Refuge, for example, whose tagline is “A safe haven for inward journeys,” tweets about upcoming Yoga for Fertility classes, classes on Chakra Balancing, or an invitation to “Celebrate the moon's lunar awesomeness with our Full Moon Yoga class at the Danforth on Monday!” Other studios like Yoga + Wellness that “inspires happy, healthy, peaceful lives” promote their “Yogini goddess” Susan Vanderwater, who will be giving a Yoga class set to a Janet and Michael Jackson soundtrack at #yogaunplugged event. DoshaYoga’s tagline instructs their Twitter followers to “Be Healthy. Be Accessible. Live Green. Sangha Support. Reach Out. Live to Learn. Be Peace.” Their branding through short, punchy tweets suggests an urban, hip vibe based on ancient, cultural understanding. Their use of the word Sangha is a little vague (it means basically a community of Buddhists) but offers a little exotic flair, and connects their brand of Yoga to an ancient tradition, translated and updated for a modern urban audience.

I am in Twitter as an archive for identity-based performances. It “prompts users to answer the question ‘What are you doing?’ creating a constantly updated timeline, or stream, of short messages” (Marwick and boyd 116). The performances of self-promotion or branding offer us a barometer of how people think about, talk about and use the idea of Yoga, or the stereotypes associated with it, to portray themselves. The medium itself consists of fractured, fragmented, decontextualized text, which in turn further fractures, fragments and decontextualizes the teachings of Yoga into short, inspirational tweets. Maybe we can consider it as Yoga distilled into feel-good snippets

of something much larger, but my concern is that for every hashtag #yoga, the stereotypes of Orientalism embedded deeply into our social subconscious are brought up to re-contextualize the tweet.

Some tweets promote “Enlightenment and Understanding with #yoga instructor and life coach @LizabethLu in Thailand” drawing on the Orientalist belief that portrays the East as inherently more spiritual and enlightened, promoting a vision of Thailand as place of exotic understanding rather than a key player in the sex trade and sprawling, hectic urban life. Another example is tweeted by @karinmithyoga who posts about “the Conquering Lion spring term getting their first taste of shamanism. #yoga.”

The photo attached to the tweet is of a group of people sitting in a circle on the floor of a Yoga studio. In the centre is a shrine of candles, tree branches and flowers. Scattered on the floor are what seem to be tarot cards or medicine cards, and since the gaze of most everyone is on the woman holding a gourd or rattle, I assume this is what they are using as a talking stick. The image and the tweet accompanying it suggest a *mélange* of spiritualness: Yoga, Native American beliefs, New Age mysticism.

Although some uses of Twitter move Yoga out of the product-driven spiritual/self-help market and into the realm of science and alignment, some further reinforce the myths of Orientalism and the collision of metaphors and beliefs into something “alternative” and perceived by many as an authentic spiritual journey. Regardless of the fact that it seems to be a decontextualized spiritual mashup with no self-reflexive awareness of privilege, one person comments on the photo: “Ugh I miss this!!!!!! What a beautiful amazing journey they are on. I’d do it all over again in a

heartbeat.” An opportunity for politicized engagement is passed over in favor of celebrating what the use of cultural practices can do for us.

Intertwined with marketing strategies to promote sensual, beautifully shaped bodies on the fast track to enlightenment, and deeply embedded stereotypes associated with Orientalism, the comment above highlights how politics get stripped away from the practice, especially in social media. What is lost, according to Mark Singleton in *Yoga Body* (2010), are the important contextual histories that constitute cultural practices. The culturally specific belief systems and meanings that shaped the practice are bypassed in favor of a view of Yoga as an ancient, traditional, Eastern practice. Appropriating only the *asanas* or physical postures, with a sprinkling of Orientalist-infused discussion of spirituality, many Yoga classes can be read as distorted and only partially complete understanding of the many facets Yoga entails. Disturbingly, this kind of narrow vision is perpetuated through magazines like *Sweat Equity*; their sometimes-valuable information and articles are often overshadowed by commoditization of Yoga-lifestyle products and attitudes. The distortion and/or distilling of a complex practice into an inspirational meme, happens with Muay Thai as well. Thai Boxing, like Yoga, becomes a practice used to create specific identities online – of the dedicated, committed student/fighter. Perhaps less commercialized than Yoga, it is another practice infused with Orientalist stereotypes, and used by people to perform specific versions of their commitment to and understanding of “culture.”

## **Web Presence: Selling Muay Thai**

Kruthai boasts one of the newest and largest Muay Thai fitness centers in the GTA. Located in a neighborhood that is part hipster, part pre-gentrification, its website reflects a sleek, urban, totally cool vibe. Their logo is designed with font inspired by Thai characters that projects authenticity and cultural specificity. On the home page is an ad for their recent Muay Thai Expo, an elite training 2-day seminar given by world-class fighters. Below that, etched out of the black background in white text, the school's description:

Designed to carve the most sculpted physique, clear the mind of stress, shed the pounds, and gain some serious martial art skill, as well as so much more, Kruthai has many classes to offer for all levels. Muay Thai, Spinning, Boot Camp, Strength Training, and Private Lessons. Kids, Youth, Adults, and Fighters. Kruthai is taking the city by storm.

Their write up calls to mind lean fighters, free of stress, focused and disciplined with “serious martial art skill.” Orientalist images of warriors and samurais who are trained in the brutal art of fighting are also floating behind the portrait they are painting. Ever aware of the market they are targeting, however, they are quick to mention an array of other fitness classes for regular people, kids as well as fighters. The language on their website fluctuates between pumping you up with promises of personal transformation, making you feel like part of a tight knit community when they talk of “rising above” and “taking the world by storm.” It is empowering, and frames Muay Thai as a means to mental health, lifestyle wellness, perseverance and dedication to reaching your goals, self defense and self awareness, as well as getting a sculpted fighter's body.

A sense of community is reflected in the photos that promote their ideals. A variety of people, mostly young, mostly all fit, and definitely all very focused and looking



fierce/tough hit pads, throw kicks, elbows and knees, or are pictured from a distance running toward the camera during one of the very performative “mob runs”<sup>18</sup> they do all over the city. They represent the diversity and multicultural dynamics of Toronto – united in their Thai shorts, Kruthai tank tops or t-shirts, and usually posing with fists clenched, held up by their shoulders in a Muay Thai guard, or palms pressed together to bow in respect to more senior students or instructors.

In a review posted on their website, BlogTO writer Monica Bowman writes about her experience trying a class. With good-natured humour she talks about sticking out like a sore thumb, since Kruthai is “nothing like your generic chain fitness club.” She points out that at nearly 40 she was a decade older than most everyone else, and definitely less tattooed and pierced – more of a Lululemon wearing soccer mom than a young fighter in Thai shorts. Bowman emphasizes the fact that in place of top 40 music they played something that was a mix of “Latin, Indian and East Asian music” instead, perhaps to distance it even further from the mainstream, or to express how “cultural” the atmosphere is. She describes a grueling workout, but finishes by saying how cathartic the punching was, how friendly everyone was, and how seriously everyone is taken – even the nubies.

Her article reveals a few things I find interesting. First is how “cultural” the image of Thai Boxing is, even though it is quite mainstream and popular thanks to Mixed Martial Arts and the fitness industry. Bowman’s emphasis on the clothing, the music choices and the serious dedication expected even of newcomers all set it aside from dominant culture, as something specific and “cultural;” although inhabited by tattooed and pierced 20/30 year olds, it is also inclusive and non-judgmental. The open-minded inclusivity she highlights seems to be in contrast to dominant, mainstream culture that we

can assume isn't inclusive and is quite judgmental. She paints a picture of multiculturalism at its finest at home in this Toronto neighborhood.

But not everyone agrees. In the comment section to her article, the first post is by BkB who writes: “walked by the sign the other day totally over-commercial looking! I wish they did something that fits into the neighborhood more. This sucks!” The responses to his post ranged from SSM calling him a hipster, to discussions of how involved Kruthai is in the community (according to Nicole’s response a very famous graffiti artist created the murals inside), to responses like: “There is such a hugely diverse group of people in the gym, from bay street types to students to starving artists! It fits perfectly with the inclusionary vibe of the neighborhood!” [sic]. Other people like AMG and Yves M play up the diversity of the people in the Kruthai community, and as Kiki challenges: “buddy – Kruthai is the most genuine thing in the neighborhood. What's wrong with you?” More than just an online debate about what is considered overly commercial for the neighborhood, what this reveals is how some people feel about Muay Thai. Beyond the fact that over half of the comments discuss how Muay Thai is the best workout ever, many people mention how “authentic” the training is and how diverse, skilled and inclusive the people who make up Kruthai are. More than a fitness facility, many of the comments suggest that you feel like part of a family, even if you're just starting to train there, and regardless of your social position. Muay Thai is positioned as the glue that holds a diverse community together, is the key to a sculpted, agile, disciplined body that is powerful and strong – in the physical sense and in relation to mental focus. Their page is an archive of expressions of this, and the kind of pride, lineage and respect for the practice occurs from other groups as well.

## Displaying Dedication On Facebook

Of the 612 photos Authentic Muay Thai had uploaded when I wrote this section, hundreds are shots from sparring sessions or demo fights with people in the ring. Clearly the gym emphasizes fighting/the fighter's spirit, over fitness. This makes sense since they are located in a North York industrial area – just getting to the facility requires dedication. Along with the fighter pics there are images of people training – shadow boxing, doing pushups, or midway through a workout. Some of these images have been made into inspirational memes. In one, the image is of a woman doing a pushup, her elbows bent at 90 degrees, her forehead touching the ground, and agony written all over her face. She is the central image but what stands out more is the capitalized word DEDICATION. Underneath that her title and name – *Poo Choi Kru* (assistant instructor) Y. Moscovich. The entire image is black and white, except for the medium sized York Muay Thai logo, in color, popping out from the bottom right corner. The text surrounding the logo reads 100% [Authentic Muay Thai] Made. I find the image interesting for a number of reasons. It shows a woman doing a pushup in excellent form, obviously struggling and pushing herself to the max to get there. It is her dedication that is celebrated. By including her title of *Poo Choi Kru*, we understand what is required in order to be an assistant instructor. Beyond this, she is a product of her gym. In the Muay Thai world you represent more than yourself. You come to stand in for the gym you belong to, and as with Kruthai, most gyms operate as a family. What that means is that everything you do is to benefit the gym, and your attitudes toward training are taken as attitudes toward your gym and family. Through the photos other expectations become clear.

One of the values shared and displayed by many Thai gyms is respect. In another meme posted to the Authentic Muay Thai Facebook page wall, is an image of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson who frowns at the camera as he lifts two incredibly heavy weights. His quote “Blood, Sweat and Respect. First two you give, last one you earn” garnered a lot of “likes” and the following comment by Alfred Jackman: “I respect each & every person who step through that gym's door. Wether they do 1 rep or a 1000... The fact is, they had tried their best & they had the determination to come to the gym... I salute you!!!” [sic]. The focus on respect and physical dedication through blood and sweat, Jackson’s comment reflects an emphasis on personal determination and hard work.

Also quoted is an explanation of their slogan “Love, Respect, Believe” given by *Ajahn*,<sup>19</sup> considered by most schools in Toronto to be one of the grandfathers of Muay Thai in Canada. He explains: “if you love one another, respect follows. With respect comes faith—you begin to believe in yourself and your community.” Other affiliate gyms put a personal twist on the slogan: “Courage, Sacrifice, Devotion.” While these inspiring words can be moved around and used to motivate you to get up in the morning and go for a run even though you hate running, or train a little bit harder at the gym, or to try and be a better person, what they also do is rest on Orientalist myths of Eastern fighters – blood thirsty, living only for combat, willing to train until bleeding for their art. The ideal most people try to embody or at least perform on Facebook is one of complete devotion and dedication to Muay Thai or their gym, and of having the discipline, strength and mental focus of a warrior.

Many members of AMT on Facebook seem to perform the kind of dedication, sacrifice, belief and embodiment of Orientalist stereotypes. This is clear in the numerous

posts on the Authentic Muay Thai website that discuss being a modern warrior, usually blending together or superimposing various martial arts beliefs onto the Eastern warrior attitude many at AMT adopt. For instance, one post is a brush stroke painting of an anonymous Asian man, a meme that contains many Orientalist tropes. His long robes are swirling, two swords hand through his belt, and his long dark hair is tied up on top of his head, allowing us to see the characteristic thick, pointed, bushy eyebrows framing his intent gaze. The quote in the upper right hand corner is by Reverend Kensho Furuya: “Man is only as strong as his convictions and beliefs.”

Furuya was an Akido sensei and an ordained Zen priest, and not the man pictured in the meme. But what the man in the image does is call to mind all the previous images of “Oriental Monks” and warriors we are familiar with from TV, movies, advertisements and pictures like this that float around the internet. His nationality isn’t important, he could be American, or Cuban, or from New Zealand, nor is the physical practice he seems to be skilled in – Kung Fu, Tai Chi, Aikido, Muay Thai – all these become interchangeable because what is recognizable is the myths he represents. The serene, Zen-filled monk/deadly warrior, enlightened through discipline and sacrifice, is mapped onto the image of an Asian man. By posting this to their Facebook page as inspiration, it signals a commitment to the ideas and myths contained within the image.

In the post, below the image is a long passage quoted from Bohdi Sanders’ *Warrior: The Way of Warriorhood* (2012). It discusses how convictions and beliefs are a determining factor of who you are as a warrior. According to AMT’s post, Sanders argues that your beliefs “determine your commitment to the warrior lifestyle, to your training, to your friends and family, and to your overall self-improvement.” With

importance placed on honor and integrity, the post comments on how challenging the “warrior lifestyle” is and how you need to know why “you have chosen the path of the warrior.” Beyond the interesting subtext of warriorhood being a lifestyle choice available to anyone willing to live with honor and integrity, Sanders’ writing supports the image accompanying it, upholding Orientalist fantasies where Westerners become Eastern warriors. This idea has been played out since audiences were introduced to Kwai Chang Caine through the TV show *Kung Fu* (1972), and recycled in movies like *Karate Kid* (1984), *Kickboxer* (1989) and *The Last Samurai* (2003) among many, many others (Iwamura 2010). The values woven into this myth are used as motivation, inspiration and a reminder to train as a warrior, since Muay Thai too is an Eastern martial art form.

In another post this idea is taken even farther. Copied out as a status update titled “Thoughts on Warriorship,” is a long passage from *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (1988) written by Chogyam Trungpa. In this message to AMT through the words of Trungpa is a reminder that “discipline is not selective. The warrior never neglects his discipline or forgets it...the warrior never gives up...the warrior’s duty is to generate warmth and compassion for others. He does this with complete absence of laziness. His discipline and dedication are unwavering.” To me, judging from the number of “likes” it got, and from the various students who shared the sentiment of Bob Prentice who responded with “one must read it...study it...above all PRACTICE IT,” people really believe and are motivated by the idea of becoming a modern warrior. From the quote it seems as though AMT is offering these pieces of warrior wisdom to push people to train harder and to embody the discipline they see in these sorts of Eastern myths.

In the Facebook image, above the title of the book is a quoted review by *Yoga Journal* that speaks of Trungpa's warrior as "a most appealing figure, embodying qualities that every spiritual tradition would hold dear." It's a little unclear what spiritual traditions they are speaking of. What *Yoga Journal* suggests in their review is that Trungpa recommends "being genuine moment after moment" as a way to allow "one to discover the magic inherent in phenomena, where synchronization of body and mind becomes an attunement to the natural order."<sup>20</sup> What the reviewer brings into the background of these lines is the correlation of Eastern spiritual beliefs as somehow magical, and inherently connecting mind and body in a way that allows "them" to be more in tune with nature.

While these kinds of memes are posted to help focus the students of Authentic Muay Thai, it is important to look at them as examples of how Orientalist stereotypes associated with Muay Thai (or any Asian martial art for that matter) are woven into popular imagination and perpetuate a covert form of Orientalism. As Paul Bowman observes, "the authentic, is pre-mediated by the simulation, by myth, by phantasy, by discourse. And there is no getting away from this supplement and its constitutive mediating place and skewing/orientating function" ("I Know Kung Fu" 2013). His argument is about the complexity of entanglement, starting at the moment when something claims authenticity – a moment he believes is always built upon myth or stereotype. The politics of representation, Orientalist narratives and perpetuation of stereotypes aren't necessarily seen as this by the people who read AMT's wall. Rather, it seems to translate as motivation and a serious approach to training, displays of reverence

for their gym and it's instructors, and allegiance to the lineage of Muay Thai they belong to.

Celebration of Thai culture infuses the AMT gym. Literally posted on the gym walls, and then as a pic on their Facebook page are posters with Thai words people are expected to use while at the gym. Titled "Another Thai Lesson," people are instructed and expected to greet each other in Thai, say thank you, excuse me/sorry, see you later, no worries, I don't know/I don't understand, where are you and how are you? Another image shows you how to count in Thai. These may seem like basic things, but to include them in the expectations of the gym, and to post them on Facebook functions to ground the practice in its cultural heritage. Most gyms have a shrine to Buddha and/or the King of Thailand, even though the practitioners may not call themselves Buddhists. Since every Thai gym in Thailand has a small shrine, and since the King is such a publicly revered figure and the practice itself closely linked with Thai Royalty, those traditions become important to continue abroad. In part, this is what Authentic Muay Thai means when it advertises itself as "authentic." Included in Muay Thai instruction are lessons in context – of Thailand and the ways ritual and religion are associated with the "art."

Similar to Kruthai, the deep commitment to the gym as a family/community can also be seen as a form of resistance. Although prices are steep and the practice itself physically challenging, most communities of practitioners come from diverse backgrounds. United by a love for the practice and invested in the myths it may offer, gym culture is usually described as a large, extended family who train and play together.



One post by AMT reads: “[p]eople will hurt you and try to tear you down. Wake up and go the other direction of these people. AMT fam for life.” This isn’t just a branding scheme. Many people post deeply moving, emotional messages about how much their gym, Muay Thai and their instructors mean to them. For example, Krista Sandu writes: “I’m very grateful to all of my fellow students, poo choi Krus, Krus and my Kru Yai at Authentic Muay Thai for helping me every single day in my training. I’m proud to have earned my blue shorts today and even prouder to represent our school. I’m looking forward to continue improving every single day in Muay Thai. Love. Respect. Believe.”

Perhaps more than Kruthai and Authentic Muay Thai, KMTT advertises being a space where women feel welcome, and their website boasts that they have over 50% women, more than any other Muay Thai school. Along with the emphasis on publicity through events like Pride, the World Wildlife Federation CN Tower Stair Climb and appearances on the morning show “Breakfast Television” their Facebook profile demonstrates a version of inclusivity that goes beyond that of Kruthai and AMT. While all of the gyms come across as very open and friendly, the kind of inclusivity KMTT demonstrates is very cosmopolitan. From the images of white women dressed in traditional Thai dresses, to various non-Thai members performing the *Ram Muay* (a dance completed before fights to show each fighters prowess), to other sword and stick methods of fighting with the caption “Original Thai Culture,” or the photo of a Buddha as decoration at an event, overlooking a few empty beer bottles, KMTT seems to embrace culture as something to be tried on, used, or experimented with. From their Facebook page, learning about and exploring Thai culture is part of the experience. They seem to

embrace an everyday interculturalism that grants permission for people to explore culture in a way that places an equal emphasis on fusion as it does on tradition.

KMTT positions Muay Thai as the means to an end – getting fit, feeling confident or as a “new combat sport” to try out. Their website offers a very long section on weight loss and nutrition, giving sample meal plans and other advice about sugar, coffee and grocery shopping. Describing the uniqueness of their gym they emphasize cleanliness, friendliness and professionalism, and comment on how they have eliminated the negative stigma of martial arts/boxing gyms known for “traditional ‘meathead’ and ‘thug’ attitudes.” Their website goes on to remark how they appeal to the “mass population,” that they offer discounts to law enforcement officers, and that they are available for corporate/media events as well as community-based charity initiatives.

Their Facebook page reflects their advertising angle and is used to promote upcoming events, comment on the classes held each day, or as a place to post promotional material for their gym. Most of the posts are from KMTT, but without the motivational/inspirational angle that Kruthai and AMT take. Perhaps it is due in part to their size – the third location in Toronto opened in the spring of 2013 – but the emphasis is on personal growth over the creation of a family. This isn’t to say there isn’t a huge community at KMTT. Judging by the size of the demonstrations and the amount of people who are pictured taking part in events, business seems to be going well. But with an emphasis on fitness rather than fighting, this gym is often seen as less authentic than the others, even if they are more visible in mainstream culture.

KMTT is an example of what Calhoun warns us against – cosmopolitan celebration to mask sharp inequities. Culture is celebrated, but in a way that focus on the decorative elements – costume, images, food, festivals – rather than investigated through commitment to learning the history, language, and philosophy behind Muay Thai. While Orientalist tropes may be less overt, the cannibalistic cosmopolitanism encouraged by the wording of KMTT’s website and Facebook with images that promote Thai culture as something to be sampled rests on Orientalist attitudes. The East becomes something to be purchased, used for creating interesting images and sexy bodies, and something to be celebrated at gym events. Culture, and the practice of Muay Thai, becomes very much a product. KMTT’s emphasis is on expanding their business, bringing people into their gym for a culture infused workout, and performing a watered down cosmopolitan celebration of culture at public events.

But KMTT’s presence at public events like Pride, exist in an interesting grey area between branding and solidarity. When I asked about the decision to join Pride Parade, one event in a ten-day celebration of the LGTB communities of the GTA, KMTT responded with the following post: “We strive to achieve solidarity, inclusiveness, and harmony not just within our gym members but also within our community. This is KMTT’s 3rd year in joining Pride and we hope to continue to be a part of it to support and celebrate with our fellow Torontonians.” The images on Facebook of their 2013 float show a mixture of Thai inspired iconography, statues and symbols, an archway of rainbow balloons, and an assortment of Thai Shorts, feather boas and bright hand wraps. While in some ways KMTT’s participation rejects an assumption of heteronormativity within North American fight culture, there were very few men pictured on the float.

Without completely disregarding the ways Muay Thai communities can resist heterogeneity through building a diverse “family” of practitioners, I am not sure if it is enough to counter the appropriation and distortion of culture.

### **Online Capoeiristas**

Capoeira pages on Facebook are fewer than those of the Muay Thai gyms I looked at. Salve Capoeira Toronto for example, post class schedules, some videos of their street performances, and the occasional motivational picture/tip from their instructors or instructors from other cities. Posts that got a lot of “likes” and “shares” include one meme that says: “Eat, Sleep, Capoeira, Repeat” and beside an image of two Capoeiristas, one kicking, one escaping: “It’s a lifestyle. Train like there’s no finish line” Both memes had at least three comments each, exclaiming how much they love Capoeira, or simply “Axé!!”

Salve Capoeira dedicates a lot of their website to paying homage to the origins and history of Capoeira, and to clearly discussing their philosophies of Capoeira. Lineage and an emphasis on worldwide enrolment, performances, and participation in competitions are as important as the promotion of “the history, music, art, and culture of Brazil.” Discussing their philosophy and methodology, their website states: “respect all the mestres, preserve the roots and traditions of Capoeira, and train Capoeira in all its aspects: as a fight, art and culture.” They state their mission: to educate and “grow” Capoeira in a healthy way. Continuing with this ideology, they write “in North America, we not only teach movements, but the Brazilian language and customs as well, so that the students may become true capoeiristas.” Salve Capoeira’s objectives are clear: “Through

historical research, travel and event participation, we hope to increase our knowledge in the art...we take pride in providing a positive atmosphere where youth and members of the community have a place to build self-confidence, self-image and improve their lifestyles.” While the rhetoric echoes with current trends in lifestyle improvement and fitness, the insistence on passing on knowledge, history, art and culture (through language as well as movements) is deeply ingrained in their methodology and branding. They distinguish themselves by their emphasis on the art of Capoeira, and the philosophical outlook that Capoeira is more than just an activity/sport; it is a way of living. On their website Salve Capoeira offers a lengthy section describing the history of Capoeira, as well as information about the music of Capoeira, what a *roda*<sup>21</sup> is, along with a section about styles and groups of Capoeira that primarily lays out the differences between *Regional* and *Angola* forms of the practice.

Doing a quick search for Capoeira Toronto on YouTube, Salve Capoeira (Toronto and Vancouver) seems to be the most prolific, with over 33 videos ranging from instructional videos to promotions to random filmed events. They have 1,736 subscribers to their channel in July 2013, and 560,945 views of their videos since joining YouTube on July 27, 2008. Comments from YouTubers like AN46MTK, who succinctly states that their half-time show at a Raptors Basketball game represents “more stealing of African culture,” demonstrate anger and frustration with Capoeira (in general, or possibly Salve Capoeira specifically), and iRyanosaur’s comment “shit dance bruh” writes Capoeira off as a dance form. Even though not all commentary is positive or reinforces what they are trying to do, Salve Capoeira is effective at promoting their brand through YouTube.

The group's ten instructional videos garner responses and comments from all over the world. Viewers in the Philippines and Hawaii ask the group to come and instruct there, and PolOniObeQa gives "Respect from germany" [sic]. Some ask questions about flexibility or the nicknames most Capoeiristas are given at some point. To this question CapoeiraBodyFit answers "your Capoeira name will come naturally .. it is given to you by your teacher. It represents a characteristic of yourself, or the way you play, act, how you look, etc" [sic]. Her name Neném, she tells us, means baby since she was the smallest person in the Academy for a long time. Her looks, complete with long, dyed blond hair also get a lot of attention by viewers, many asking for her phone number, suggestively asking her to "teach" them, or exclaiming like Mheera Darji "you look like Capoeirista Barbie!!" Gender is highlighted in comments that seem surprised and overtly supportive of her impressive strength and skill. Her nationality and race are also emphasized in a couple of comments that state that she isn't bad as an instructor, even though she isn't from Brazil.

Other Capoeira schools in Toronto may not be as prolific on social media as Salve Capoeira, but groups like Angola Capoeira are as prominent in the Toronto cultural scene. Their YouTube videos contain clips of *rodas*, *Batizados*,<sup>22</sup> and performances at festivals like Taste of Lawrence, or as part of Black History Month celebrations at Don Montgomery Community Centre, RibFest 2011 and the prominent Canada Day Celebration at Toronto's Harbourfront. While they don't offer YouTube instructional videos as Salve Capoeira does, they do post on Facebook and YouTube the song lyrics they are practicing as well as promotional material for upcoming specials, classes and international events. This seems to be a theme with the Capoeira schools I looked at, and

given the worldwide network most schools are a part of, YouTube is a good way to stay connected. Beyond just visual promotion, the videos also signify the style or type of Capoeira each school brands or is known for. For example, Capoeira Aviso has videos that showcase the diversity of the members, rather than spectacular acrobatics or professional shows. This really embodies their emphasis on inclusivity. As their websites states: “we welcome everybody.”

With a focus on health, Capoeira Aviso positions Brazilian culture on their website as something to be learned through food, dance, education about geography and by learning Portuguese. They also emphasize that through Capoeira you can “increase your coordination, rhythm and balance, work all muscle groups with one activity, learn to play new musical instruments” as well as benefit from a friendly atmosphere where you will grow friendships. What they seem to be selling is all inclusive: “Capoeira works your entire body from your head to your toes as well as your mind and spirit.” While the emphasis may seem to be on fitness, socializing and spirituality rather than on history or tradition, they do clarify that they tailor workshops “to learn about the history of the martial art, Brazilian culture, capoeira instruments, techniques and movements. We will perform capoeira for your group and then teach you the basics so that you can do it too!”

Also trying to corner the market on inclusivity and the general public who may otherwise not be interested in the practice, Capoeira Toque is a “community” that prides itself on being “the first to create Capoeira programs specifically designed to a variety of different groups and interests; from capoeira in condominiums and corporations to classes for people with disabilities.” In a Facebook post advertising their upcoming workshops for dancers, founder Afonzo Alva is quoted saying: “our goal is to transcend the physical

by moving with the soul.” Focusing on what he says are the holistic, philosophical and all encompassing elements of Capoeira, his angle is much more spiritual than any of the other schools’ advertisements. The limited videos posted of their group and lack of commentary on either their Facebook page or YouTube channel could indicate that the group isn’t as interested in using social media as a platform to reach potential viewers, or that unless you are searching specifically for them, you may not be exposed. Or perhaps, the already fringe martial art is further distanced from dominant culture with the emphasis on philosophy and spirituality. Regardless of their reasons, in order to appeal to mass culture and “go viral” in social media, spectacular videos are needed.

### **Going Viral On YouTube: Capoeira vs. MMA**

A two and a half minute video. 12,844,308 views. 16,134 “thumbs up” and 843 “thumbs down.” This YouTube clip of an event called North American Challenge #24 that took place on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009 in Vancouver, BC pitted Salve Capoeira president Joao Soza against an MMA fighter, producing an incredible knockout and for many Capoeiristas proved that Capoeira can be a serious form of fighting. The twelve million plus views have catapulted Capoeira into mainstream YouTube consciousness, inspiring 5,507 text comments in response to it.

The range of attitudes and responses to this fight and to Capoeira in general run from contempt to adoration. While I won’t analyze all 5,507 comments they do tend to fall into a few categories. Many debate the effectiveness of Capoeira, going back and forth between comments like Ralf Hersh’s: “Guy is lucky that kick didn't break his neck. The force capoeira can achieve through the kicks is amazing.” Jigga727 isn't as



celebratory, and their comment performs a common attitude full of opinion and contempt for the martial art: “Hardly impressed. The white guy was the dumbest fighter ever for standing there while that capoeira “fighter” telegraphed his stupid floppy kick thing a mile away. Capoeira is a show martial art and only would work on a guy has who has no idea how to fight, like that bum there.” While the majority of comments focus on whether or not Capoeira is useful in combat, some add their commentary equating it to dance, like Delanao who writes: “Capoeira is the world's most violent fucking dance.” This post gets the response; “it aint a dance...its a fucking murder technique” [sic], and vsa254 chimes in calling it “breakdance fighting.”

In this context dance is portrayed as something the opposite of fighting. If fighting is seen as an aggressive, masculine activity, positioning Capoeira as dance feminizes the form, and thus the practitioner. Even when vsa254 and Delanao defend Capoeira, they attempt to show how violent it is in order to legitimize it in the world of MMA. This example of gender paranoia (everyone seems preoccupied with whether or not Soza appears masculine enough) extends into issues of sexuality. Oxo54xo demonstrates this clearly: “not sure this 1 ko in his life is worth all the times he looked gay fighting like that.” Most of the comments don’t challenge Soza’s physicality; this homophobic comment is about the form itself being inferior and “gay” – somehow less masculine, less aggressive, less powerful than “real” MMA fighting. As in the previous comments, the issue that preoccupies most commenters is about masculinity as something distinctly unfeminine, straight, brutal and aggressive. Soza’s body and the form of Capoeira itself are positioned as less-than-masculine, regardless of his spectacular knock out. Even those

who defend the fighter or the practice do so by attempting to re-enforce how masculine and aggressive each one is.

Another predominant issue these comments reveal is a debate about whether or not Capoeira is a fighting style of martial arts or a dance form. When Andy Jacob posted his opinion: “Capoeira is a waste of energy” it received a few responses sharing his opinion, but also one from Eli Craig saying “Capoeira was made by slaves in order to escape and they had to be all sneaky about it so they incorporated dance/acrobatics and whatnot with martial arts. You do what you gotta do to not be a slave anymore lol.” The dialogue opened up by the YouTube text is a worldwide conversation about Capoeira’s authenticity as a serious martial art, its usefulness or effectiveness against other forms, or whether or not it is best seen as a really tough dance form, regardless of its history as a means to fight colonial oppression.

Issues of race, and the upset of a non-white man knocking out a white man with a martial art that is arguably more of a dance, get highlighted throughout the commentary. This framing of the fight suggests to me some of the Primitivist myths still in operation within dominant culture. I see this from the names Soza is called – “monkey boy” by Cali1995 and worse names by others. More subtle racism also fertilizes comments made by TheSteel50, who condescendingly refers to Capoeira as “a free flowing art that wouldn’t like to be constricted...leave Capoeira to fckin mardi gras where it belongs” [sic]. Primitivist tropes frame Soza, and the practice of Capoeira, as uninhibited, flashy but ultimately non-threatening (or, since the knockout is hard to ignore, only partially threatening) downplaying Soza’s skill to luck.

Many of the negative comments ignore Soza's impressive fighting abilities, and instead discuss how the white fighter can't be that good if he lost to Soza. These comments echo a lineage of polarized and racialized views in fight culture. As Harvey Young thoroughly describes in his chapter "Between the Ropes" (*Embodying Black Experience*, 2010), black fighting bodies have been constructed as threatening to dominant, white culture since plantation boxing matches. Young focuses on the repeated experiences of Tom Molineaux, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali, all professional boxers who became symbols of hope for certain black communities and simultaneously symbols of threatening destabilization of racial hierarchies for some white society. Soza's knockout and the comments that draw attention to the fighter's races echo this lineage. Their position in the ring becomes a symbol of something larger (Young 94). In this understanding Soza becomes a symbol of Brazil, Capoeira, the non-white body, and a potential threat to dominant culture in his win over a white opponent. In the world of MMA, Capoeira destabilizes the expectation that it is just a feminized form of dance. Both the fighter and the form prove more effective.

Seen in TheSteel50's comment, many people easily write-off this threat by offhand remarks about going back to carnival. They describe an emasculating effect of the dance-like movements in Capoeira, which causes the fighter to be feminized and renders the martial art into something showy, flashy, but not effective against "real" martial arts. But also within the comments, Capoeira's history of resistance is frequently mobilized. In part this is done to explain why the form was hidden in dance-like form. But I also think it is to show the potential violence of Capoeira, its "realness," and to call up images of slaves terrorizing their masters, attacking the Portuguese colonizers. All of this points to

the practice's destabilizing potential, and the ways racialized impressions of both the fighter and the form take prominence in online comments. In another shift of perspective, Soza's non-white body is recognizable as something many of the YouTube commenters have "tried on" through the video game avatar Eddy Gordo.

### **Racist Avatars: Gaming and Capoeira**

"Eddy Gordo wins!" or a version of this comment appeared more times than I could count. Some marveled at how Soza was a real life version of the Tekken game character, some remarked at how both the character and Soza as Eddy, lacked real skill, "since all you have to do is mash down the keys in order to get Eddy to do something." Another comment claimed that even after 50 years of losing to Eddy Gordo they still didn't know how to pronounce Capoeira. These two comments serve to hold the practice, and the fighter, firmly in the space of exotic, other, non-mainstream, and too different for Westerners to grasp fully. Others like André Lacar point out that Tekken is the reason they got involved in Capoeira to begin with. He says: "the pants, dreadlocks, and music he had in Tekken 3 was awesome...And the attack [Soza] knocks him out with is in fact my favorite move...double OO like this dude performed it" [sic]. As well as highlighting the fact that many non-Brazilians first learned about Capoeira through a video game, his comment emphasizes the characters' physical appearance – dreadlocks, wide-legged capoeira pants, and from the images I viewed, bronze skin, disproportionate upper body build to head size, and Western looking features.

Discussing representations of race in video games in their article “The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games” (2007) Anna Everett and S. Craig Walkins argue “the commitment to designing games that are more realistic points to the need not only to capture more honest character portrayals, human motion and environments, but also and perhaps more importantly, to capture the cultural sensibilities of a particular racial or ethnic group's world experience” (114). The worldview captured by Eddy Gordo’s character in Tekken is one where he is taught Capoeira in prison, by an old fighter, and then uses it to get revenge on the people who killed his father.<sup>23</sup> Going beyond the easy answer that video games try to capture real life sensibilities, Everett and Walkins push their analysis further. Citing the work of Adam Powell and David Leonard, both theorists of digital minstrelsy or “high-tech blackface,” they discuss how race is digitally manipulated through caricatures with “distorted body types and facial features, clothing, voice acting, and over-the-top behaviours and movements that reflect a design ethos that mobilizes certain notions” of race and ethnicity for easy consumption (149). Everett and Walkins point out that historically minstrelsy “became a means for white men to occupy and play out fantasized notions of black masculinity, but in ways that were entertaining, nonthreatening, and committed to sustaining racial hierarchies. The same dynamics, in many respects, are at play in the case of urban/street gaming” (149). It certainly seems this way when we look at the character of Eddy in Tekken. His features showcase gleaming bronze skin, an incredibly muscular body, and hair that is either dreaded or worn natural in an Afro, depending on his costume. Criticism of his character runs from the simplicity of his play style to the limitations of his Capoeira moves; and for the authors on Tekken Wiki (a Wikipedia style

database for the game), he is seen as a less-skilled character. The associations with Soza, and the hundreds of comments on YouTube discussing how he is the “real life” Eddy Gordo, rest upon this stereotyped character of a Capoeirista. The people commenting may have no outside knowledge of Capoeira or Brazilian history, but they have played a Brazilian character in a videogame. Through the game stereotypes and caricatures are made “real,” and are then the lens through which they view Soza. The human Capoeira master from Brazil who did the motion capture movements the character is based on, Marcelo Pereira is one of the voices of criticism for the character. In an interview from *GamePro Online Magazine* posted to the Capoeira Mendinga website, Pereira discusses how he, like many other *Mestres*, have always been concerned about the misrepresentations of Capoeira. He is clear that “[f]or us, tradition is a treasure that expresses the roots of the art. Therefore, it reveals the truth, the spirit and the soul of a capoeirista, bringing love, harmony, peace and understanding to us and our communities” (capoeirashanghai.com). He expresses his distaste for the name Eddy (not a Brazilian name) Gordo (meaning fat), and what the developers called the Capoeira movements, ignoring the traditional names he called them. Further, “Eddy's attire could be improved to better reflect the capoeira standards, and a strong drum beat if not traditional capoeira music...Please keep in mind that I am very critical because I am very authentic to my art...Plus, to be appealing to an audience that knows practically nothing about capoeira, maybe that is just the way he needed to be presented at first” (capoeirashanghai.com). Since it seems as though more than half of the YouTube comments were about Eddy Gordo, and only 1/4 of them spoke about the history, skill or development of Capoeira,

*Mestre* Pereira seems right in his last remark. Mass culture seems to know more about Tekken than they do about Capoeira.

What I find most interesting is that the majority of comments associate Capoeira with the stereotypes presented in Tekken, and there are multiple remarks that discuss race and/or nationality as being closely tied to the form. Linking the form to its history and birth through slavery, as many comments try to do in defense of Capoeira, point to its “global” origins, “created in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade” (Wesolowski 83). Within her article, Wesolowski contextualizes how today Capoeira is consumed as an exotic, hip, multicultural activity (83). Seeming to engage with the comments on YouTube about Soza’s fight, she argues that it is because of Capoeira’s “malleability and multivalence” as a dance/fight/game that “has kept it alive, adaptable, and eminently attractive to so many for so long” (84). This rather positive spin on Capoeira and how it figures in the minds of people who watch YouTube videos of it can’t ignore the Primitivist stereotypes associated with it. Although celebrated as a multicultural form from its beginnings, it is also turned into a cultural product/show featured at restaurants and events like Toronto’s Bridal Fair where women Samba and men perform acrobatics, or at street festivals to promote the culture and heritage of Brazil.

## **Conclusions**

Resting firmly on a foundation of whiteness against which everything else is considered “cultural,” “other” or “exotic,” the marketing of each practice suggests that through Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira we can explore what otherness feels like. Couched in rhetoric of health, wellness and beauty, cultural practices become objects to

make us unique. Through them we can learn ancient secrets of wisdom, attain or preserve youth, and discipline our bodies into the sizes and shapes desirable by mainstream beauty standards. Mediated through consumer culture, myths of warriors or Eastern Spiritual connectedness are perpetuated, as are images of Neo-Primitivism that promise us rhythm and un-bound physicality through the embodiment of practice. What connects the marketing material of these practices is how they promise us superficial cosmopolitanism – that somehow, by doing these practices we will be the same but different. We will be enhanced – our normal selves will become supercharged and we will become more cultural.

Our engagement with Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira through social media demonstrates how influential each practice can be. We give digital performances that run from fetishistic, mimesis of otherness, to convivial celebrations of difference, to displaying commitment to alternative lifestyle philosophies (even if these may be based on myth). What I have tried to make legible are the politics underneath our fascination and essentialization of “other” cultural practices. These practices are more than just hobbies, or a way to get slim, toned, sexy, powerful, and healthy, or a way to deal with stress. They are performances of our cultural openness, understanding and how we celebrate/tolerate/engage with the diversity of Toronto in a clean, contained, and convenient way that is (often) refracted through the familiar. Each practice, to varying degrees, holds up structures of whiteness

Reading how practices are positioned in magazines and social media offers us glimpses into what mass culture sees/is told is available for purchase in our cosmopolitan, globalized world. When we look at our engagement with practices like Yoga, Muay Thai



and Capoeira through SNSs and other forms of social media, we can begin to see how active we are in constructing not just the myths surrounding the practice or the re-contextualization of the forms/images/beliefs associated with it, but also the ways these practices inform our sense of self. As Iwamura points out, these images activate “our often unconscious notions about the spiritual East. In this way, Orientalist stereotypes become *embodied* and hence objectified in mediated form. Although their recognition still depends on our imagination, they achieve an existence all their own” (*Virtual Orientalism*, 8).

But on the other hand, perhaps there is also something subversive going on. With the creation of networked publics, each practice becomes unifying glue that holds a wide range of people together. In aligning with a practice and/or a specific training facility we can expand our sense of community and family. Diverse groups of practitioners that exceed boundaries of race, class and geography are brought together through their love of a movement form. SNSs facilitate contact, exposure, and cultural sharing on a worldwide scale. While most of this chapter discussed the stereotypes and myths that get re-circulated, I do want to make room to acknowledge the potential for a more democratic, de-centralized form of communication that makes visible the diversity of practitioners.

From my perspective, what can be highlighted is movement culture – where people from various backgrounds are brought together through movement practices that have been translated from their traditional contexts. Evidence of this is everywhere. Facebook groups like “Fat Yoga” and “decolonizing yoga” expand notions of inclusivity and political agency; KMTT express solidarity with LGBT communities; Salve Capoeira promotes distinctly anti-colonial histories of Capoeira. These are all ways resistance can

be seen bubbling up.<sup>24</sup> But as hopeful as each project may be, the overwhelming momentum of consumer culture's distortion of practice into complex regulating politics cannot be ignored.

In the following chapter I trace how Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are used, framed, embraced and embodied at three cultural festivals. They exist in the physical world, and become examples of what I call performative cosmopolitanism.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Performative Cosmopolitanism: Tasting Otherness at Cultural Festivals**

*It's too hot to be in the middle of a concrete plaza filled with people. Sweat mingles with smells of Thai food and exhaust from the bustle of Queen St and chokes out any breeze that might blow by. By 11am most of the shade in Nathan Phillips square has been taken. It's blistering hot, and I think to myself that I should have worn more sunscreen. This is "Taste of Thailand and ASEAN 2013"<sup>25</sup> and the first thing we do is buy coconut water from the Thai Embassy of Ottawa tent. It's canned but it still provides a little relief from the heat. The neighboring tent is giving away fruit cups filled with what supermarkets label as exotic fruit – mangosteen (supposed to cure cancer), lychee, and mangos, but the line is long and moving slowly so we pass up the opportunity for free treats. I sip the coconut water and spend time talking to a middle age white guy about how cheaply our tiny family of three could spend the winter in Thailand. Apparently if we're not big drinkers we can do it on \$600/month including accommodation. I heard him name drop the station in Bangkok where they have the best coconuts for sale; I suppose this is in order to set himself apart from the other white people at the festival as someone with authentic, insider knowledge about Thailand. He talks like an expat, as*

*someone who, through the force of many winters spent in the Thai sun, is an expert on all things related to Thailand. I ask him if he has been to the festival before (he has – every year), and if it's good reflection of Thai culture (he doesn't answer that part). He starts telling me a story about a perfume that he is importing, but by the end he is complaining about how many people think they can start an import business and get rich. Apparently his import lifestyle is working for him, but his white male arrogance is making my white feminist hackles rise, so I end the conversation and walk away.*

*Wandering around as an individual (my family is now parked in the shade of City Hall), taking pictures with my phone is a little lonely compared to the groups of friends/families attending the festival. Although I use the fact that I'm there to witness the event to keep the feelings of exclusion at bay, they are there. I'm here to celebrate Thai culture, but its clear that I am an outsider looking in. I don't speak any of the languages I hear around me, and I stand out as a cultural tourist. It's a bit unsettling, not since I was expecting something otherwise, but because my whiteness seems to be stalking me – quietly asking to be acknowledged. What I recognize is that in my day-to-day life and interactions in the city, I rarely feel excluded because of culture or the codes to understand what's taking place. I'm youngish, white, able bodied, and fairly mainstream. I also speak in ways that enact my education. It's an odd moment, and I reflect on it as I wander around with no one to talk to.*

At “Taste of Thailand” my project was jostled. What I intended to be a performance analysis ended up implicating my position as spectator in ways I hadn't imagined or prepared for. Issues of cultural objectification and commoditization, cosmopolitan celebration of difference, and very problematic ways racial hierarchies are

held in place resonated across the three festivals I attended. But as the narrative I opened with suggests, my position as cultural outsider demanded I recognize the centrality I normally walk around with. This is also something that echoed through each festival. During “Yoga Meltdown” the practice becomes a lure; myths of tradition and purity are played up and fed into peoples obsession with “real” Yoga. It is a deliberate marketing strategy that turns the tables as desire for “authentic otherness” is capitalized on. “BrazilFest” distinguishes between Brazilian, Brazilian-Canadian, and other people who want to celebrate Brazilian music, heritage, history, food and culture. Isolated at the periphery, regardless of the fact that I would prefer to feel welcomed, highlighted how the failures of cosmopolitan openness are opportunities to think through our positionality.

Theoretically, my experience at these festivals helped me to clarify how important it is to consider cosmopolitanism as a performed thing. Performative cosmopolitanism highlights our performance of embracing otherness. It can be seen in the ways we display our commitment to a practice, our presentation of self to signify our interest in other cultures, the acts we do to engage otherness. Within Chapter Four I expand on this idea, focusing on the performative ways we construct cosmopolitan identities.

Rather than limiting cosmopolitanism to a philosophical outlook or mental disposition that encourages openness to other cultures, performative cosmopolitanism can be seen in everyday actions. It is the ways we use our bodies, the places we go, and how we interact with the spaces where we come into contact to with unfamiliar/partially familiar practices/ideas/people/and products. It is how we live and perform “being multicultural.” Grounded by the work of the previous chapter, I take for granted that we

are already living in a transnational, intercultural space. Our performances of everyday life already put us in contact with a globalized world.

I also view performative cosmopolitanism as an *exaggeration of openness*. Our overtly performed inclusiveness or curiosity can be seen as camouflage to deflect from the harsh inequities that structure our world. Our excursions into otherness, and brushes with difference are in place of actual equality. Rather than framing cosmopolitanism as proof that the world is becoming more inclusive, tolerant of difference, welcoming of multiple positions, it as a reminder that the basic structures of power (a continuation, with revision, of those set up during colonization) firmly hold in place a world where otherness is used to enhance life (in which the white body is still the measure for the universal human). If our world did operate through equality, cosmopolitanism wouldn't be marked in the same way. It wouldn't be presented as an option, or an alternative way to view or "deal with" the world. It would be the normalized idea against which everything else is measured. Performative acts of cosmopolitanism help reveal these gaps primarily when we see them as behaviours/actions/the physical experience of cosmopolitanism. The cracks in philosophy that happen when we perform and embody it are made visible.

In the pages that follow I begin with a theoretical discussion to contextualize how diversity is celebrated/tolerated and how otherness is engaged with/performed. Usually this is done in ways that exoticize and sanitize difference, to ensure it is conveniently familiar to dominant culture. Attitudes bent on fostering tolerance and inclusivity often smooth over tensions and conflicts. They offer instead, a seamless merger into the mainstream, with a sprinkling of cultural differences that pays lip service to tradition and

offers a modicum of variety. Cosmopolitan engagement through festivals of culture can be seen then, as performances that reinforce multiculturalism as separation/cultural distinction at the same time as they celebrate a cosmopolitan aesthetic of inclusivity. In this sense, cosmopolitanism continues its elitist, imperialist trajectory.

The festivals succeed in part because of the Orientalist/Neo-Primitivist stereotypes they often end up citing/referencing –familiar tropes that are easily recognizable since they continue to circulate in pop culture. Whether it’s the “exotic massage” at “Taste of Thailand,” or the call to “feel the passion” of “BrazilFest,” the advertising/narratives of the festival often end up reproducing quite obvious stereotypes. If practices like Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are used as draws that appeal to a broader public who may not otherwise be interested in the festival, then we need to consider how they are both positioned in popular culture, and framed by the heritage festival in which they are highlighted. Through their integration into the festival, Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira stand in and possibly become exemplary of everything the festival represents.

From a different angle though, what happens simultaneously to the commodification and activation of stereotypes and myth is something more subversive. Each festival takes up space and profits economically from their positionality within Orientalist or Neo-Primitivist discourse. Hyphenation of identity is made visible – not signaling partial citizenship, but celebrating transnationalism and the power it contains. I include this section in the general discussion of festivals, because to varying degrees each cultural event I attend represents a challenge to hegemony. Marking this as well helps to reveal the constructs we perform through cosmopolitanism.

My argument then moves to a discussion of the power of performativity (which I use in a blended way to reference citationality, performed acts and performance) in relation to cosmopolitanism. I use the idea of performative cosmopolitanism to untangle the knotted ideas of identity, fantasy, and subversion that appear in various ways at the festivals I discuss. In part this section of my paper asks us to again reconsider the previous discussions – that offer a fairly standard critique of the framing and consumption of otherness – in terms of performance. I suggest that understanding the performative power of cosmopolitan identity (the *creation of* otherness while simultaneously embracing and desiring it) can allow us a more nuanced and subtle understanding of what Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira do (as tempered by the framing of a cultural festival). Or at least what thinking through performative cosmopolitanism does/did for me and my experience of the practices and festivals.

Keeping the theory I work with grounded in physical experience, I blend my embodied understanding with critical analysis of the environment of the festival, the narratives surrounding it, and the choreography of the event itself. At times a very imperialist, cosmopolitan celebration of otherness to be consumed clearly dominated, but at other times something much more complicated, entangled and paradoxical was taking place. Sometimes it was unclear which was which. But even in the moments where multiple, simultaneous things were happening (depending on the angle I looked from), I tried to stay attentive to the atmosphere, the environment produced or manufactured through the official festival framework, and the unsettling or surprising performances we gave in our attendance. In my participation, in my note taking and reflections, as well as

in this writing process I place an importance on the visceral experience of the festivals, rather than just a generalized description of them.

Following Maurya Wickstrom's work in *Performing Consumers* (2007), the bodily/somatic experience produced by festivals is as important to me as the analysis of vendors, shows, demonstrations and marketing material. This is partly because of my fascination with how and what we do with our bodies – the ways we engage culture through them – and this is why I consider cosmopolitanism to be performative. It moves the concept beyond a mental outlook, to the realm of physical existence. Our corporeal experience at a festival (or in a class) sometimes offers us a different understanding of community, belonging, implication and inclusivity. It is also an integral part of creating the fantasy of the festival.

In order to believe the happy, celebratory, mosaic-tile version of multicultural inclusiveness, we are asked to commit to what Wickstrom calls the “really made up.” Her work takes a slightly different angle, but is applicable here, to the somatic labour required for the festival to succeed. As a performative act, that cites previous exposure to and understanding of culture in order to make sense, the festival needs our participation. Through our bodies and our willingness to participate in the versions of culture presented by the festival “we play out its fictions, making them appear in three dimensions, as if they were real. Embodied, the story...feels real” (2). Our physical engagement with the space, people, products, myths and challenges to these myths transfer stories of otherness from the realm of concepts to something that “feels real.” Through our bodies we perform into being ideas of Orientalism and Neo-Primitivism but also subversion and interconnectedness.



## **Performing The Familiarly Exotic**

Writing in 2009, David van Belle asked “while we are gathering information on what festivals *are*, we need to ask the question of what it is that festivals, as performance entities in and of themselves, *do*” (“*Festivalizing*” 2009). Starting my analysis from this point allows me to focus on how the performance event—the festival—influences how culture is perceived, framed, used and referred to. Beyond simplistic consumption of culture, most festivals are framed as celebrating history, heritage and tradition. I am highly aware that the language used to market the festivals usually fits into what Li considers to be the “savage slot” – politically correct versions of Primitivist/Orientalist terms used to categorize “others.”<sup>26</sup> As I discussed earlier in my project, naming something as “cultural,” “distinct,” “traditional,” or “fusion” has replaced more exploitive, openly racist, oppressive terms, but these are essentially new words for the same problematic ideas. While the language may seem cleaner, less harmful and more politically correct, it operates in the same way as the more overtly problematic terms of Neo-Primitivist/Orientalist discourse.

The tropes called up by multicultural lingo have circulated since colonization. They are displayed in images on Facebook, in media, and in advertising. To say they do not exist, or exist without the reference/understanding of Orientalist/Neo-Primitivist fantasy is perhaps too optimistic. Language of “traditional culture” distances any non-dominant/non-white practice, idea, or product as “other,” not-normal, not-central. It also keeps in circulation certain problematic images and framing of culture, as I illustrated in Chapter Three. Reinforced is an us/them dichotomy that is simultaneously seen as the

only way to retain cultural plurality, to celebrate distinct heritage or history, or to offer inclusive space for “others.”<sup>27</sup>

The marketing of festivals plays up the distinction between us/them, and the advertising often rehashes stereotypes and associations already circulating and characterizing cultural groups. For example, in the advertising of “Taste of Thailand,” (a festival celebrating the culture of Thailand and Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN)<sup>28</sup> Thai women are positioned as exotic, silent objects to be looked at and admired, or who give deep “exotic” massage. Underlying both the subtly racist Neo-Primitivist/Orientalist terminology and the stereotyped caricatures, is the assumption that culture is something fixed, tied to certain bodies, that needs to be displayed, translated and interpreted for a Western audience in order to authenticate it. Problematic and conflicted history is removed. Culture is positioned as something to visit, to know and possibly to learn, to enjoy in small, clean doses that enhance our lives and infuse them with a taste of otherness.

Connected to Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira, culture is framed as a lifestyle, and as such, it is accessible. We can know it, learn/teach it, gaze at it and purchase it. Bella Dicks describes the mosaic model of culture as “something that ‘belongs’ to a place and a people” that have been marked as special and distinct; their culture can be “described, documented and displayed” (*Culture on Display* 27). This model underpins multiculturalism “with the idea of clearly distinguished, homogenous cultural identities, even though these are not necessarily tied to geographical territories” (27). Celebrated as an aesthetic by-product of hyphenated identities, the mosaic tile understanding of culture in Canada seems to celebrate the decorative/edible elements.

Dicks writes, “consumerism tends to turn particular cultures into quotations – that is, into samples and fragments – rather than allowing for the full expression of complex identities” (33). These samples are positioned as non-threatening ways to retain tradition, cultural distinction and heritage. What this model does, in effect, is clean up the messy or troubling facts about inequity, conflict or violence, and oppositional perspectives. Culture, history and contemporary politics are distilled into a food vendor area, handmade crafts and traditional dances/music/performances or demonstrations. Traditions are simplified and decontextualized, then packaged for easy consumption under the guise of education, heritage, and inclusivity.

The emphasis on mosaic tile culture within Toronto masks the troubling, complicated elements of our current social situation; instead it is sanitized with rhetoric about how inclusive our society is, how welcoming we are of difference and traditions – as long as they fit in with Western ways of life, values, morals and aesthetics.

Neil Bissoondath says it best:

For the purposes of multiculturalism ... Canadians, neatly divided into “ethnic” and otherwise, encounter each other's mosaic tiles mainly at festivals. There's traditional music, traditional dancing, traditional food.... We take a great deal of self-satisfaction from such festivals; they are seen as proof of our open-mindedness, of our welcoming of difference. Yet how easily we forget that none of our ethnic cultures seems to have produced poetry or literature or philosophy worthy of our consideration. (newint.org)

Instead, Bissoondath argues, we come away from “cultural” festivals with stereotypes further lodged in our belief systems. Differences are highlighted and used to define individuals. In our best-intentioned celebration of diversity and difference we participate in a “gentle marginalization” that positions non-dominant culture as not “just part of the landscape but always a little apart from it, not quite belonging.” This creates what

Bissoondath calls mental ghettos for various communities that are exoticized and trivialized through mosaic-tile representation. He reflects that “[o]ne's sense of belonging to the larger Canadian landscape is tempered by a loyalty to a different cultural or racial heritage” (newint.org). As people continually point out, the emphasis on hyphenated identities that are part Canadian, part something else does more than celebrate lineage or background. While in ways it works against cultural homogeneity, it also serves to distinguish between full-fledged Canadian (represented by white dominant culture), and racialized/ethnic other (the hyphenated Canadian). Often this happens regardless of the number of generations people have been Canadian.<sup>29</sup>

What Bissoondath considers to be “gentle marginalization” is not always obvious distancing, marking or naming someone as other. It can be in the celebration of a version of culture as seen through festivals. Representing Thai culture through 6 or 7 food vendors, “exotic massage,” traditional dances in traditional costumes and a few Muay Thai demonstrations, the more nuanced, problematic, historically conflicted elements are removed. What is left is a clean, packaged product that encourages consumption – through food, traditional shows, travel and luxury items that are somehow more authentic since they are directly imported from Thailand. In this way, through well-intentioned participation at the festival, where people go to celebrate Thai culture in Canada, Thai people are “gently” nudged into allegiance with Orientalist stereotypes. Their hyphenated identities are part traditional culture (as seen through the festivals) and part modern (since they live in Toronto), regardless of whether or not their actual lives reflect this.

My problem with cultural festivals, which lines up with aspects of Bissoondath's argument, is that what gets celebrated is partly fantasy. Culture is much more complicated and entangled than what is cleanly and simply presented. These fantasies have to be understood through the legacies of cultural oppression and hierarchies set up through colonialism, rather than something benign that will add flavour to our lives. I recognize that we aren't currently operating in the kind of extreme, overtly racist mentalities of colonialism. However our social structure, and what is considered exotic, different, cultural or traditional is tied to concepts, assumptions and lineages of thought that can be seen as Neo-Primitive and Orientalist. They have direct relation to ideas of racial hierarchy set in motion during colonization. Newer terms, re-packaged in a more "politically correct" form, perhaps with more cultural sensitivity in the process, cite the older narratives that continue to have currency in today's globalized world. With greater access and emphasis on inclusivity, dominant culture is encouraged to play with "different" ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

But this different way of seeing and being is often tempered by the familiar – to ensure the comforts of western thought, aesthetics, habits and culture. Difference is something to be tasted and celebrated through food, aesthetics, and short-lived festivities that highlight the decorative elements of cultural otherness. It is less welcomed if difference becomes confrontational, challenges dominant positions or ideas, or threatens to shake up the ordering of the world as it currently is (an extension of colonial dichotomies).

Celebrations like "Taste of Thailand," "Yoga Meltdown," and "BrazilFest" offer the public a taste of otherness, reassurance that Canadian society is both welcoming and

supportive of various positions and traditions, and an opportunity to experience the marvelous tastes, sights and sounds of travel, without leaving the comfort of Toronto. Festivals put culture on display, and participants are encouraged to consume it in multiple ways, “tasting” culture through their visceral experiences. Watching, listening, eating and participating, produce sensations through which we physicalize and internalize “foreign-ness.”

Our consumption isn't random, but rather is guided by the framing and naming of each festival. Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are all associated with these festivals, and seem to act as hooks to draw participants interested in these activities even if they aren't as interested in learning about the specific cultural heritage each practice is associated with. Practices are advertised as something to witness or possibly participate in, offering our bodies a taste of what is billed as culturally specific movement forms.

Contextualized by the movement practices and the assumptions or myths circulating each festival, as David Overton has pointed out, the naming of festivals is equally suggestive. In his essay “A Festival By Any Other Name” (2009), Overton argues that names offer hints, characteristics, and implies how to view the purpose of a festival. For Overton, names serve as anchors (24-25). Following Overton's train of thought, the name “Taste of Thailand” suggests to me that participants will be able to sample all things Thai – the sights, smells, and sounds, but also the physical experience of “tasting” a culture through our presence. “Yoga Meltdown” calls up images of heat, sweat and stripping bare (physically but also spiritually), but in other ways is quite vague – perhaps part of the mystique about this festival. “BrazilFest” implies a party, a celebration of Brazil, but not a sampling as with “Taste of Thailand.” In connection to

my experiences at these festivals, Overton, drawing on writing by Vicki Ann Cremona offers another salient point. He discusses how through our participation in attendance at a festival we innately make community (9). But following Laura Levin and Kim Solga's article from the same journal issue, I have to ask what kind of community gets activated through the event. If we are investing, to use their phrase, "in the act of *just being there*" ("Zombies" 49) are we building a community of interested, invested *participants*? With an emphasis on consuming, gazing, and sampling, the multicultural celebration of each festival and the kinds of work each event does shifts depending on whose perspective we look from.

As many theorists who write about festivals and tourism note, festivals are one way a city brands and markets itself. Throwing support behind the businesses and cultural associations who produce the "Taste of Thailand" for example, is a smart, business-driven decision. Emphasizing the exotic flair and multicultural makeup of Toronto is another political choice in offering City Hall as a backdrop to the festival. But seen from another angle, there is a lot of power in staging "Taste of Thailand" in the centre of downtown Toronto.

Kelly A. McClinchey has argued that festivals remake and reanimate space and social life, regenerating urban space ("Urban Ethnic Festivals" 2010). She argues, "cultural practices are also viewed as important practices through which people connect with their place, attach specific meanings to place, as well as contribute to a sense of place" (252). Using "Taste of Thailand" as example, in the centre of the city Thai culture is reaffirmed; marginalized people occupy space as the festival literally camps out on the doorstep of municipal government, their presence demanding recognition. Emphasizing

Thailand's involvement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations expresses solidarity to a geo-political and economic network that overtly works "to promote economic growth, social progress and cultural development as a means to promote regional peace, as well as training and educational sharing resources" (aseansec.org). Infusing Nation Phillips Square with this political agenda means that Canada too, is forced to participate. In comparison to social movements and other forms of protest, the festival may seem only mildly connected to demands for full citizenship or equality. But I want to highlight that even within a very commoditized form, occupying space with the intention of celebrating Thai-Canadians is powerful.

Following Inderpal Grewal's work in *Transnational America* (2005), the identity politics Bissoondath outlines are complicated. For Grewal concepts like "hyphenated identity" or "cultural citizenship" can be activated to affirm hegemonic hierarchies, but can also be seen as a challenge to those same power structures. She explains that "rather than simply become hybrid subjects that incorporate one or two races or nationalisms, these subjects...are flexible and changing, moving from one subjectivity to another, able to coexist with contradictory and diverse subject formations" (201). Going farther Grewal suggests that multiculturalism produces positionalities where "hyphenation" marks "a contingent ability of those with such an identity to switch from one side of the hyphen to other" (201). Subjects may affirm their place within the state but they can also exist outside of it and in opposition to it. One of the places Grewal sees this changing affiliation made possible is through popular media and consumerism (201). I see it achieved through our everyday performances of self.



The performance of cosmopolitanism is seen through our interpretation of cultural otherness. But not just in what we discuss philosophically, or pay lip service to in our understanding of openness to new cultural experiences. The performance happens in our bodies. What we do with them, how we engage in the spaces associated with cosmopolitanism, how we perform and translate our openness through acts involving our physical being are all areas of performative cosmopolitanism. Viewing cosmopolitanism as performative offers insight to the nuances, conflicted terrain and problematics of the space between theory and practice. Since our bodies are tied to history – to various positions in relation to stereotypes and dominant culture – reading performative cosmopolitanism at the level of the body helps to untangle and make visible some of these conflicts. No body is neutral, and positioning cosmopolitanism as a performed thing offers us glimpses of the workings and failures of cosmopolitanism in everyday life.

### **Performative Cosmopolitanism**

I use the term performative in a blended way, partially based in spectacle, partially citational and partially generative. It is an act of performance (conscious or otherwise), how we present and expose ourselves to the world. My understanding of this element of performativity is informed by the work of Dwight Conquergood (1989, 2013). For Conquergood, performance is a way of living/being that includes “those cultural fabrications where ambiguity and artifice are most conspicuous” (*Poetics* 89). Performance is a lens through which we make sense of the practices we do, how we do them, and where/how we position ourselves through them. It is what we *do* both in action, and also in terms of what gets set in motion or cited through that action. In this

sense I use the term performative also in relation to the work of Judith Butler (*Bodies That Matter* 1993), where performative acts are treated as constitutive of the world.

Our cosmopolitan identities are enacted and created by multiple, layered performative acts that are performed/mis-performed, repeated and citational. Their power comes from the recognition and understanding of the citation. As Hans Rudolf Velten puts it, performativity “repeats known codes embedded in specific ritualized acts” (*Performativity* 253). Past/repeated performances of cultural identity, and spaces of rupture from citational performances are all elements of performative cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is performative in the sense that it is generated through physical acts, and embodied by people displaying and performing themselves in specific ways. It is also performative in the sense of layered and repeated constructions of cosmopolitanism that cite previous versions and understandings of difference. In the cultivation of openness toward other people/cultures, and our performance of embracing diversity, what is enacted alongside our openness, is a citational reification of otherness.

Like with race and gender, otherness isn't inherent, it is something that is performed over and over, by people from the mainstream as well as the “others” being marked. Racialized categories are not inherent, natural, pure states of being; they are continually performed and cited. As Stuart Hall presents it, differences exist to our eyes, but what matters are the systems of thought and language we use to make sense of those differences. How difference is organized and represented is always connected to power, and is always inscribed (*Race the Floating Signifier* 1996). Otherness is a cultural system we activate through our cosmopolitan openness. When we navigate cosmopolitan desire for certain kinds of otherness, it is always in relation to what we already know and

understand about culture. Even if we are not aware of the history of colonial oppression through Neo-Primitivist or Orientalist representations, their legacy has filtered through to the comparatively mildly racist images we see in advertising, film and pop culture references. Our performative, cosmopolitan identities call up past performances of culture that are positioned somewhere in the spectrum between “other” and “normal.” While this may seem like a simplification, and certainly there are many times and places where this is deliberately challenged, what I want to point out is that we exist in reference to past performances (as a continuation or a subversion). Focusing on performative constructs emphasizes the ideology behind our celebration of cosmopolitanism.

When we highlight this form of performance, the colonial/imperial history of who is able or allowed to blend into normal, and even what counts as normal is brought to the forefront. The globalism Mignolo calls out as the driving force of cosmopolitanism, is performed, rather than left as a silent momentum to the project. We watch it create and reify the idea of celebrated difference. Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis also discuss cosmopolitanism as performed behaviour, but they describe it as a disposition that can be used strategically in relevant social settings. To them it is a “*disposition performed in particular contexts and settings,*” suggesting that cosmopolitanism is a type of repertoire (107). While in ways this may be true for everyone, people come to the repertoire from different positions, and I think that fact needs more attention. A white body performing a certain disposition of openness when the situation calls for it or when it benefits them draws on a “toolkit” of cosmopolitanism, that can be used or ignored, operates in a different way than an “othered” body. The white body, assured that their life is normal, central and a position that is basically invisible, is afforded the quality of being able to

put on or take off various degrees of “openness” to cultural difference, depending on the situation or what it wants. The othered body, by contrast, is always, already forced to be cosmopolitan. The space occupied by the othered body forces a version of cosmopolitanism (although not marked as such) every time it falls short, is reminded that it doesn’t fit within dominant culture’s mainstream ideas (and yet is expected to welcome and embrace them).

The idea that “being cosmopolitan” is a skill set available to people “for the purpose of dealing with cultural diversity, hybridity and otherness” (Kendall et al 107) frames otherness, cultural diversity and hybridity as something to be dealt with. Rather than diversity, otherness and hybridity as something that already forms the foundation of our societies, Kendall et al’s work seems to present it as something that can be opted in or out of (which just isn’t possible). They go on to clarify that cosmopolitanism “is a cultural repertoire performed by individuals to deal with objects, experiences and people and which is encouraged by particular contexts, fusion of circumstances and motive, and frames of interpretation” (107). I am not arguing against this, since I see it happening everyday. But whereas they seem to even out the positions people have, assuming a kind of equal access, politics and worldviews, I think that pushing the performative elements of cosmopolitanism can reveal the underpinnings of the contexts, circumstances, motives and frames of interpretation.

I see a connection between how we stylize our bodies/lives through performance, and our experience or physical understanding of cosmopolitan openness. Performative cosmopolitanism creates a version of reality (lived and experienced through the body) that is both what we do (how we perform ourselves in the world), and what we cite

through that performance. Capturing this idea, James Loxley writes, “our activities and practices...[are] the very means by which we come to be what we are” (118). When we move cosmopolitanism from being just an intellectual position to being the actions and behaviours we perform, cosmopolitanism as a force that shapes us becomes clearer. Kendall et al frame cosmopolitanism as a repertoire of performed (but intellectually understood) skills that we use to navigate the world. Although there is no doubt that social engagement can be seen as a repertoire that helps us navigate the world, my view is that performative acts of cosmopolitanism create/reinforce/re-inscribe the world. These acts create identities that infuse our everyday activities, even if they aren’t marked as cosmopolitan. Re-framing cosmopolitanism to include the power of the performative emphasizes the way cosmopolitanism is displayed, how it operates, and how the mis-performances of it (to use Butler’s phrase), can reveal a deeper understanding of the entangled politics we are caught in.

Making the leap from a psychological disposition that values difference (from a moral standpoint) to physically enacting behaviour that resonates with that philosophy is challenging. It is easy to claim to be culturally open, or interested in exploring the cultural differences between us, but when asked to radically shift our behaviour to prove in a sense just how open we are, it becomes much harder — especially when it demands that we let go of Western notions, sensibilities or positions of power. But understood through performance, the attempts, the failures, the partial successes can be highlighted and learned from. As Kendall et al point out, cosmopolitanism has “a tendency to view otherness and cultural difference as something desirable” (105). If we allow ourselves to see what gets excluded as not different enough or too similar to dominant culture, or even

too extremely and offensively opposite to Western moral/aesthetically appropriate, the constructs of cosmopolitanism are made visible. Potentially, within these failings are more truthful points of contact. In a different context, Grewal suggests something similar. Using connectivity as a metaphor, she sees value in considering incompleteness and pursuing “a theory in which unevenness, failure, exclusion can be included” (24). For Grewal it foregrounds power relations, places where communication or translation breaks down, and ultimately creates new possibilities for imagining ourselves.

Highlighting the performative within cosmopolitanism makes room for subversions, misinterpretations or ruptures from repetition and possibly offers different forms of engagement. In the moments where cosmopolitanism fails, and openness is rejected, or happens only partially, or in the places where openness may be coveted but is ultimately refused, there are valuable lessons. If failures are highlighted, the constructs of the “openness” are made visible. The limits to our ability to engage, influenced by our social positions and ability to decode performances that are necessary to achieve cosmopolitan engagement, come into view. Sometimes the repertoire of skills Kendall et al discuss do not work, or misfire, and all we are left with are challenging moments where cosmopolitan access/understanding/welcoming is denied. Our entangled, performative positions generate difference, put our moral stance into physicality, and the failures can be framed not as shortcomings, but as moments when larger political issues and implications of cosmopolitanism burst through, spoiling the fantasy with something real.

It is important to not simply withdraw from engaging with otherness, which may be tempting to do if we only focus on the power structures our presence reinforces.

Instead, we can recognize our participation in creating myths of otherness and consider the kinds of cosmopolitanism we are encouraged or drawn to perform. We can critique the ways festivals are complicit in consolidating whiteness, and also re-consider the subversive agency they may simultaneously have. Most of all I suggest that we *engage critically*, rather than just consume. Potentially then, we can approach a more interconnected existence that both Alexander and Gilroy describe.

### **Being Cosmopolitan**

The following section attempts to untangle these politics using performative cosmopolitanism as a lens through which to view the festivals of culture I attended in Toronto during the summer of 2013. I offer a description of my experiences at each festival as a way to contextualize my discussion of performative cosmopolitanism. Within the description of each festival, I pay close attention to the environment created and my corporeal experiences as a participant. During my note taking I was sensitive to the ways the event influenced my body, how it was crafted/choreographed, and how it shaped my perception of the festival as a performance. Following Wickstrom, I tried to open myself up to the experience. I was a spectator/participant more than a removed, calculating observer. This deliberate choice offers a different perspective – someone participating in the fantasy being created, someone able to eavesdrop on comments said quietly to other participants in passing, and someone people would give uncensored answers to since I asked casually, out of curiosity, rather than in the construct of a formal interview. The notes I made are more reflective of my own perception rather than empirical evidence, and my embracing of the “poetics of culture” (as Conquergood calls

it) reveals my interest in how we re-imagine and refashion our world and our positions within it (Conquergood *Poetics* 83).

While I frame and consider the festivals as performances of culture, I am also interested in how my interpretation can be read as performative cosmopolitanism in practice. Rather than a narcissistic diatribe, I frame my notes (and my impulsive, immediate analysis of them) as a performative archive, and analyze them as such, in relation to my discussion of the festival itself. To distinguish between layers, my notes and initial reflections are in italics, and the analysis of my experience is in regular font.

My attempt at this multi-layered discussion will hopefully offer a critical perspective through performative cosmopolitanism as both a lens to view our world, and as a self-reflexive checkpoint where failures are as important as the ways our performances succeed. Doing this is my response to feeling that as part of dominant culture I shouldn't critique cultural events not targeted toward me. As Spivak asks, "why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced?" (*The Postcolonial Critic* 62). She recognizes the risks involved in criticizing something that is other, but not critically engaging allows hierarchies to be kept in place. It means we don't grow, or have our ideas and positions challenged. If we don't look at the things that make us uncomfortable we lose out on the ability to see ourselves as interdependent; as tangled up in each others stories.

### **Taste of Thailand Festival, 2013**

*We're a little early for the opening ceremonies – apparently the most important part of the festival. Earlier I posted a question on the "Taste of Thailand" Facebook*



*page asking what I should be sure to see at the festival, and the page admin replied that the opening ceremonies were something “not to be missed.” Even though it’s close to 30 degrees, hotter in the middle of the concrete, there are still quite a few people here, maybe, like me, in time for the opening ceremonies (but maybe also because it’s lunchtime and the smell of Thai food is mouthwatering). Most people are sitting together in small groups, gathered in small pockets of shade. There isn’t the kind of milling about that some festivals have – it seems like everyone is here with family or friends, content to share big plates of meat skewers. They stay in the shade and talk among themselves, often not in English.*

*The two main focal points seem to be the large covered stage and the Garden Gate that later we will parade our way to for the cutting of a ribbon. It stands tall, and proud, decorated with Thai Carvings, ribbons and flags. It is well attended on either side by two long rails carved as snakes, and a banner that reads Thai Society of Ontario. Between the gate and the stage is where most of the festival takes place. Vendors are scattered between these points around Nathan Phillips Square.*

*The food vendors border the water fountain and seem to have a constant stream of people lined up. As at most street festivals, there are stalls selling imported, flowing clothing made from silks and reminiscent of what you would wear on a tropical beach somewhere. Other vendors sell beauty items like imported perfumes or natural products like shea or cocoa butter. The kitschy, dollar store variety of paraphernalia like scarves, Toronto T-Shirts, umbrellas/parasols are also in abundance, with the added texture of some very elegant, but very expensive Thai traditional dresses and parasols. There are*

*stands selling insurance, and a games area for kids set up by a George Brown ECE class raising money for a trip to Jamaica.*

*Their hand-written sign was a bit confusing – it read “Educator, Team Jamaica. Torontonians & Thai for Jamaican Children.” When I asked one of the young women about it she gave an equally confusing answer, basically saying that their group takes the knowledge of Early Childhood Education games/techniques and teaches disadvantaged kids in Jamaica. Their sign is all kinds of multicultural fabulous. On the top is a heart that on one side is the Canadian Flag, and on the other the Jamaican Flag. “Team Jamaica” is written just below it, followed by a picture of the globe that is circled by cartoon figures of multicultural kids. Below that, an image of a white sandy beach, blue skies and a palm tree are posted serenely. I try not to judge. I’m sure their hearts are in the right place, and this festival is supposed to celebrate multicultural understanding. Besides, who am I to suggest that their teaching extends a civilizing mission, or reinforces the problematics of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> world aid projects, superimposing North American techniques and worldviews on top of local ways of learning/knowing. I have no proof that this is what they are/will be doing. I just have the uncomfortable, prickly sensation of my back going up, and the deflated sense of failure that I just said “oh, interesting” without engaging or pressing further. It could have been a good moment for critical conversation, but I didn’t go for it.*

*In that failure I gave my consent, I ignored my impulse that could have led to dialogue that would have been useful to all of us involved. My actions or lack of action make me complicit in their project. Since I am part of the traditionally oppressive dominant culture, this failure goes beyond just not making conversation. But before I*

*have time to think too much about how my performance of whiteness threw support to this project of “development,” something interesting and even more disturbing tugs at my attention. Near the audience seating area in front of the stage, flanked by the vendors and the students promoting their trip to save Jamaican youth while working on their tans, is a very curious, very well attended symbol of Canadian Multiculturalism.*

*Standing separate from the vendor tents, to the right of the stage and audience seating is a colourfully decorated shrine housing a larger than life photo of the King of Thailand. He overlooks two life sized cardboard cutout “standees” of Thai dancers, in colorful costumes, captured mid-dance, with their faces cut out. People from all over the festival pose for pictures as Thai Dancers – men and women, of all ages, colors and sizes. Everyone, it seemed, all want to have their picture taken as a Thai dancer. It felt uncomfortable and I felt personally embarrassed as I watched a group of white women laughingly “become” the dancers for multiple photos. The problematics of festival celebrations of culture were distilled for me in this moment. Maybe I am too critical, or somehow just don’t see how disconnected each event is. Am I looking too hard for problems/moments to prove my theory that these kinds of festivals are surface engagements with culture?*

*But how different is it when people move on from this experience to buying an “exotic massage” from a silent Thai woman at the neighbouring booth? Observing the show – the ways people contorted their bodies to fit behind the cutouts, the expressions on their faces as they became Thai dancers for a moment, and the laughter of the crowd around the standees – I wonder why I don’t just let myself enjoy it. I wonder why, to me, it’s not really a celebration of difference, but a symbolic kind of cultural/misogynistic*

*violence. My attempt at fostering an attitude of open-minded celebration falters. Is this what being cosmopolitan is about? I mull this over as I stand in the shade of the stage, waiting for the opening ceremonies to get underway.*

With zero contextualization, historicization or understanding, in this moment culture becomes very literally, something to try on. The audience was invited to decorate itself as a Thai dancer, to pose as “other.” The female Thai dancers the cut outs stood-in for were silent, faceless, bodies to be used. As a moment of performative cosmopolitanism, it works. People perform their engagement with otherness by posing for photos that may seem like a celebration of Thai-ness (the rationale would probably be that if the Thai Society put the standees up, then they must be okay with it, which gives us, the audience, permission to enjoy taking our pictures there).

But through this performance what also gets activated are all they myths of diminutive, silent, objectified “Oriental” women: women stuck in tradition, open and available to be used for entertainment. They are tropes that still circulate in the popular imagination, and the standees cite the images and fantasies of Orientalism that continue to inform us of what it is to be an Asian woman. Through our performance with the photos we produce and reify these tropes, re-activating them, giving them a refreshed sense of purpose (just for fun, not serious, not political) and currency. And in my refusal to participate, my insistence on looking at the event as tightly and inescapably woven into a history filled with oppression and racism, I end up doing the same thing. But does looking at the performative elements of cosmopolitan engagement mean we are doomed to forever be in the shadows of colonialism?

What performative cosmopolitanism does in this situation is also point to ways of highlighting potential subversions. There is a certain kind of power the standees contain. They represent a proud heritage, and they demand from the participants contorted, awkward bending and shifting of the body in order to find their faces in the cutout hole. Physically, they hold power over the participant and require a subtle change in stature, stance, and movement of the body. They permit a re-imagining of the body, and although this produces all of the problems I mentioned earlier, perhaps there is a certain subversive strength in the fact that for a moment, we can see ourselves from a different perspective. The performative also has the power to cite the follies, the ridiculous behaviour we have toward our others, where even as we disavow them, we jump at the chance to be like them, to view ourselves as them, to try for a moment to become them. This kind of challenging, power-shifting performance of cosmopolitanism can also be read through the opening ceremonies.

The ceremony that opens “Taste of Thailand” emphasizes that the “real Thailand” is showcased, with an emphasis on the good relationship between Thailand and Canada. It is not simply a celebration of being Canadian, a hyphenated Canadian, or even a testament to the inclusive nature of multicultural life in Canada. Although the framing of the festival does this, within the set up of the festival itself the emphasis is on Thai heritage, customs, traditions, and language. My first impulse considered these elements to be just folkloric demonstrations that again portray Thai culture/Thai culture in Canada as a combination of simplistic customs and dances, beautiful, silent women and delicious exotic food.

On the Toronto.com website, for example, Thai culture is portrayed as food and entertainment. Their write-up is enticing: “the Taste of Thailand Festival is a thorough sampling of Thai culture...cooking demonstrations of traditional Thai dishes like green curry and Pad Thai paired with Thai boxing and dancing shows” (Toronto.com). Culture is something to be sampled, tasted, and experienced in small amounts. It is not necessary to know about Thai politics, its burgeoning tourist/sex trade, or the massage parlor girls brought to Canada by organized crime. Rather, Thai culture can be summed up by “dancing shows” that include folkloric circle dance, Cha Cha, Jive and Rumba, interspersed with culinary demonstrations like fruit carving and crepe making. For the most part, though, this reflected the festival and all that was offered to the public. On a surface level it seems that by eating the food, watching the dancing and the fight demos, and possibly buying some imported goods or getting a massage, we are performing a dedication to learning about other culture. We celebrate the diversity or history of Thai people in Canada without knowing anything much about it beyond beautiful, traditional women, lots of delicious food, nice dances and powerful male fighters.

But considering how the event and the opening ceremonies can be constructively viewed as performative cosmopolitanism, it allows us to shift the focus to the potentials of the situation. One of the clearest elements of this can be seen in the use of language. Although most of the speeches began with a short introduction in English, the majority of speakers – officials from various levels of government, the director of the Thai Society of Ontario, and even the MC – delivered their messages in Thai. Sometimes there would be someone on hand to translate what they were saying to English, or give a short summary

at the end. But the jokes were in Thai, and didn't easily translate. The de-centering effect this had on me was interesting.

During many moments I was unsure of what was going on, the significance of a person or an element of the ceremony. And it was clear that the organizers and Thai audience was fine with that. Reflective of lived reality, where a kind of doubling takes place on a daily basis, the purpose of the festival ceremonies was not for the sake of appeasing, explaining or educating an ignorant Western audience. It seemed to be a celebration of Thai culture, Thai presence, and cohesion in Canada—and from a Thai perspective. The symbolism of the warrior drum being hit to announce “to all of Canada that the Thai festival has opened” enacted a certain kind of power and challenge. Based in the plaza of City Hall, a space of civic strength, the de-centering power of coded performances that many Western audiences may not understand seemed to fly in the face of expectations. The cosmopolitan performance demanded the non-Thai speaking audience members re-locate to the periphery, amid the symbolic space of domination represented by City Hall. In contrast to other forms of cosmopolitanism that rest lightly on the shoulders of travellers and curiosity seekers, the festival wasn't just about consuming the products of culture.

We may think that we perform a cosmopolitan attitude by attending the festival, eating vendor Thai Food and watching traditional Thai dances or getting a massage, but the performance is more powerful when viewed as the uncomfortable moments where we do not know, and do not have the tools to read the significance of a speech, gesture, action, reference, performance. We are forced to watch from the sidelines, guessing at what is taking place, forced into a different perspective.

The ebb and flow of the audience watching the shows on stage seemed to indicate either what people found most interesting, or what they had the tools to read. Performers of traditional dance entertained a predominantly Thai audience, whereas the first Muay Thai demonstration drew a huge, mixed crowd. Perhaps this is because fight culture circulates widely and is easier to de-code/understand than the various traditional dances, or perhaps because it is just more exciting to most people than dance. After Pad Thai and massage girls, Muay Thai is one of the biggest references to Thailand in pop culture. It has been absorbed into Mixed Martial Arts, and many gyms and fitness studios offer a rendition of it. Its currency circulates widely, forever being re-appropriated, decontextualized, and like with most martial arts, authenticated, changed, distilled, or ruined, depending on who you talk to.

Onstage, the grandfather for many Muay Thai practitioners in Ontario, Ajahn Suchart, holds pads for one of his current world champions, Simon Marcus. Marcus is impressive, powerful and dominating, but shows ultimate respect and devotion to Suchart and his martial art. His *Ram Muay*, a dance to showcase his skill and prowess usually performed by each opponent after they enter the ring, isn't skipped over or shortened. It is an integral part of the tradition of Muay Thai that is almost never seen in its various adaptations, certainly not performed by hyper-masculine MMA fighters. But Marcus has trained extensively under Suchart and his associated teachers in Thailand. His embodiment of tradition, respect and cultural integration show through not just his exemplary skill, but through subtler forms – bowing to the audience, the space, and most importantly to Suchart. Marcus destroys the pads<sup>30</sup> and, as he does, the MC talks to the audience, in English only this time, encouraging them to cheer, shout, and clap. He says



a few times that we should be honored to have Marcus here, since he is a world champion who gets paid \$5000 a round, and is performing at the festival for free. Another testament to his dedication to the art, and the culture it comes from.

*I watch the crowd watching Marcus. I wonder what people are seeing, how they engage with the representations on stage. Suchart is pure muscle, standing at about 5'5'' embodying what most people consider a martial arts master to be – demanding ultimate respect and devotion, easily directing, molding and mentoring the power of Marcus, who towers above him. I have trained with both men. I know the immense amount of dedication, the physically brutal training, and the mental focus required to achieve the level of mastery each of them has. Quite literally, they have dedicated their lives to the art, and when I watch the demo I see all of this. For the first time at the festival, I feel comfortable. I know what is going on and how to read what is happening on stage. But this does not come from attending a festival. It doesn't come through sampling food, getting massaged or posing for photos as a Thai dancer. It comes from years of my evenings spent in a Thai gym, learning what a proper kick feels like.*

The surface ways we perform cosmopolitan identity can simultaneously give us a sense of difference and excitement, but can also leave us feeling hollow and limited. Distance is created as much understanding and engagement is promoted. But one of the slightly jarring, unexpected elements of my experience at this festival was a realization that perhaps through celebrating the aesthetic and surface elements of culture we can be enticed and inspired to know more. Maybe we join a Thai gym, or develop an interest in the history of Thai dance forms. Perhaps through watching other people perform their dedication to cultural practices they were not born into we can be inspired to do the same.

Although my focus was on attending the festival, observing, and then ultimately writing about the successes and failures of cosmopolitanism I had witnessed, what happened was much more subtle. There were many more moments than I have described where I felt very self-reflexive, where my assumptions and critical analysis were challenged or caved in on themselves, and where I was forced to recognize the power contained within celebration.

Looking in from the outside, the opening ceremonies are designed to symbolize the unity and strength of Thai people in Canada. Literally positioned as central to the city and its government, including prominent members of their board of directors, and publically celebrating being Thai-Canadian offers a political challenge. While social movements like Justice For Migrant Workers (who defend the rights of temporary workers often abused under various labour laws) offer one form of protest, the seriousness, affluence and international attendance at “Taste of Thailand” is another. Combatting stereotypes of migrant workers from Thailand, this festival demonstrates a synthesis of cultural traditions and fully integrated Canadian citizens. When dominant culture recognizes Thai-Canadians in this way, it may make migrant rights less easy to dismiss.

### **Smile If You Love Yoga: Yoga Meltdown and the Festival of India, 2013**

*From the ferry over to Toronto Island the “Festival of India” and “Yoga Meltdown” has a presence. Standing in the already sweltering heat, waiting for one of the morning ferries I talk to the 3 Hare Krishna’s standing behind me. Their peach coloured robes, face markings, mala beads and shaved heads perform without them*

*saying anything. I felt a little embarrassed for them (or for myself?) as I watch them walk up. They look like three young white guys dressed up for a Halloween party. But the tricky part is that they are really, performatively, true Hare Krishna followers. I wonder to myself if that makes it okay to dress in cultural drag, so to speak. If the qualifying commitment they have made to a spiritual practice makes it better, or makes it not as appropriative, or if this is true cosmopolitanism – the complete appropriation of everything: religion, culture, ceremonial clothing, and worldview.*

*In my attempt to remain open and not critical, since I wanted to approach the festival with an attitude of celebration, I mildly ask them if they are on their way to the “Festival of India” (they are) and if they have any suggestions of what to see (they do). The most jovial and talkative Hare Krishna speaks with a Quebequois accent, and tells me that they are doing a play called the “Gita Concise” which distills the Bhagava Gita into a 20-minute drama. I shouldn’t miss it. He comments on my Yoga mat and asks if I’m attending the Yoga festival (I say I am). I think I detect a slight sneer from one of the Krishnas who has the disinterested, grudging attitude of a white Toronto hipster (complete with the ear spacer that he had clearly removed). I don’t quite know what to make of the moment, or the attitudes of the Hare Krishnas. They represent a lot of complicated things. More Hare Krishnas seem to be joining the lineup, which is understandable, since it’s the only boat over to the “Festival of India” which “Yoga Meltdown” is a part of. I have a passing thought that it is nice of them to come and celebrate Indian culture.*

*We’re among the first people on board, and I sit on one of the benches looking out over the water. I am in the middle of giving myself a reminder pep talk to be open,*

*celebratory, and to just enjoy the environment when I hear a woman seated behind me begin to tell someone that there are “often festivals of different ethnics on the island.” She tells them about the “mayhem” of Caribana. Her commentary clearly distinguishes between Canadian and Ethnic in ways that imply Canadian is white, British descent and everyone else falls into the category of Ethnic, regardless of how many generations Canadian they are.*

*Her attitude stands in contrast to the Hare Krishnas, who at the other end of the boat are celebrating and singing the Maha Mantra loudly, encouraging everyone on board to join them and participate. As I clap along, I am struck by how many people of all ages and backgrounds belong to the Hare Krishnas. There are a lot on board – at least a lot dressed in robes or saris singing along to the makeshift performances that are easy to spot. They are welcoming and smiling, which makes me think that this tactic is part of their appeal. A wide cross-section of Canadians seem to be entranced enough by the welcome that they devote their lives to the Hare Krishnas.*

*I am an hour early to “Yoga Meltdown” so that I have a chance to look around before the classes start. Since there is only vague information about both it and the “Festival of India” that it is connected to, I’m not sure what to expect. The “Yoga Meltdown” Facebook page only says “...we are inviting Toronto’s yoga community, from the simply-curious to the seasoned veterans, to come experience a new yoga revolution never seen before at Yoga Meltdown” (Facebook.com). Since most Yoga is spun in new, unique, fusion types of ways, their claim that this is a “new revolution” doesn’t surprise me. My first guess is that since it is featured as part of the “Festival of India,” there will be an emphasis on making it authentic by playing up the connections to*

*India, or focusing on the spiritual elements. I am right in ways, but not the ones I expected.*

*I weave my way through massive panels that depict essential teachings from the Bhagava Gita in graphic collages that trace the cycles of reincarnation. I ask before taking photos of the temple space set up for people to worship (they say it's fine), and notice some other non-worshippers doing the same. The temple becomes an exotic background for the two white women posing in front. I wonder if this setting confirms and lives up to the idea of "festival of ethnics" my bench partner had described. Making my way past the empty tents labeled Spiritual Awakening, Vegetarianism, Cow Protection, and Spiritual Clothing, I am starting to grow concerned. Is all of India, the rich heritage and diversity of cultures, distilled into places to buy recycled T Shirts with the Om symbol?*

*I ask the woman setting up what makes her clothing spiritual, and she tells me this: when you buy a car you can just drive it around, or you can drive it to church or temple. The same goes for clothing. I get it, but I don't buy anything. I weave through the tents for astrology readings, and a tent advertising an Indian dating service, to the most troubling/"fun" spot in the festival grounds. It is a place where people can get wrapped up in saris, put on "traditional face painting (gopi dots)" or get a henna tattoo for added dramatic effect. Pictures are encouraged. This blatantly appropriative part of the festival, where people can try on the costumes of Indian culture, where they can play at being the other, or experiment with how different they can make their own selves/bodies, seems in stark contrast to the tents focused on spiritual growth. But maybe this is a way to entertain people, and encourage them to physically see themselves*

*differently. Following that rationale, if you can imagine yourself physically different, you can imagine yourself becoming mentally/spiritually different.*

*It makes a certain kind of sense as I watch the white volunteers near me go about their duties while dressed as Hare Krishnas. They don't seem to feel odd or appropriative in their peach coloured robes (complete with a bag containing Japa beads worn over one hand). My guess is that they accept it as part of their openness to their chosen religion. As I start thinking about group mentality and how people feel a sense of normality/confidence when everyone surrounding them is doing the same thing, another realization interrupts me. Everyone who is setting up seems to be dressed as a Hare Krishna. There are many spectators trickling in who are not signified by peach coloured robes, but regardless, my interest is piqued.*

*I'm confused, since I was under the assumption that "Festival of India" would be more than a Hare Krishna display. I ask about this at the Hare Krishna Information and Book-Selling Tent. The person I talk to discusses how the festival is based on something called the Chariots Festival that takes place in India, and a "tent group" that tours the Hare Krishna display around the province giving information about reincarnation and the teachings of the Hare Krishnas. His answer is slippery, but he basically confirms that yes, the "Festival of India" is being put on by the Krishna Consciousness Society, and their aim is to bring "the true spiritual awareness" to people. He tells me that "Yoga Meltdown" – a festival within a festival – is a way to reach a western audience who might not otherwise be open to Eastern Spirituality. He talks about how true spiritual yoga – Bhakti Yoga – is what Yoga Meltdown is based on. HMMMMM. I feel a mixture of disbelief, anger, and skepticism.*

I was intrigued at how the marketing techniques turn Westerners' obsession with all things Eastern into something to benefit their religious conversions and a little put off that I was unwittingly coerced into joining the Hare Krishna festival. In a sense they tricked people interested in Yoga to come to the festival in order to reach more Westerners with their spiritual message. Doing this couple of things were set in motion. They frame their festival not as a Hare Krishna gathering, but as the "Festival of India," basically mapping their religion on top of all other religions/practices in India. India is now represented by the Hare Krishnas. Their clever marketing also frames/re-claims Yoga as a spiritual practice that the Hare Krishnas are the key to interpreting.<sup>31</sup> Manipulating the West's obsession with Yoga, they draw people to their festival (since the Hare Krishna's view Yoga Meltdown as a festival-within-a-festival, rather than a distinct festival in and of itself). Anyone who attended Yoga Meltdown was counted as one of the 40,000 attendees, regardless of the fact that it was advertised as a Yoga festival without any connection to the Hare Krishnas. People who may not otherwise be interested in attending a religious festival are lured in by free Yoga classes in a beautiful setting.

*I can see the lineup for "Yoga Meltdown" registration starting to swell, so obviously many, many people are interested in experiencing the Yoga Festival; my insider information about the manipulation of Yoga makes me feel quite uncomfortable. Although I attempt to remain open to what the Hare Krishna is telling me about how their religion basically supersedes all others, engulfs and embraces all others, since theirs is the one true path, I feel my back going up, my arms crossing, and I notice I take a couple of subtle steps backwards while he talks. Obviously it's time to exit. I thank him for*

*clarifying, and when he encourages me to come back and talk later I just smile. Walking over to the registration area I take stock of what's going on. I feel duped, tricked into coming since I wanted to experience a Yoga Festival. Seeing the mostly white Westerners dressed in robes or saris, celebrating their adopted spirituality (I assume most of them weren't born into this religion) makes me uncomfortable. Most of all I am bothered that the entire festival is trying to convince me that the Hare Krishna religion will save us and help us find peace and happiness within our lives.*

*It is the same message many Yoga studios sell, and the ways the Krishnas frame culture and play with aspects of Indianness is just as complicated. They encourage people to dress in Indian clothes and customs – saris, henna, gopi dots, vegan food free of garlic and onion – as a way to engage with Indian culture, and ultimately as a way to join them. I focus on changing my perspective while I wait in the lineup. Reminding myself to stay open, I allow a few cleansing, yoga-type breaths to calm me down. Since I am qualified by my Yoga mat, tight stretchy clothes and the lineup for “Yoga Meltdown” this isn't seen as strange. It signals my dedication to my own adopted practice/spirituality.*

*After a disorganized registration process we receive our Meltdown swag bag. This consists of a thin book about reincarnation, a coupon for a free lunch or dinner at Govindas, the Hare Krishna restaurant downtown, and a schedule of classes for the day. I unfold my mat in a shady part of the park, near the Q & A tent and Food Demo tent. Inside the “Yoga Meltdown” area, there is a tent for Kirtan, a tent called Questions and Answers, and a Food Demo tent.*



*I ask the man getting set up for the food demo how he chose his menu, and he talks about how this year the theme is Tex Mex (with a few Indian spices and no garlic or onion since it follows Hare Krishna guidelines). He also notes that almost everything except the churros are gluten free, explaining that at a festival in Guelph most Yogis said they were wheat free or gluten free. He personally thinks it's a fad, but will go with it since it's what people want. It's a good marketing strategy, and again, representative of multiple and conflicting things. In ways his whole demo seems like another covert strategy to proselytize a food loving audience. He isn't cooking Hari Krishna Indian-style food, most likely since it wouldn't be as big a draw as gluten free, vegan Tex Mex. He is completely aware of how his presentation is spun to ride the waves of the latest health trends. But he also uses it as a platform to preach about the Krishna's laws in relation to food. My distaste for the festival is growing. Not because I have anything against the Hare Krishna religion, but because of the element of parasitic deception and their covert methods of religious promotion.*

In the various forms of advertising for Yoga Meltdown, the language used is equal parts cunning and vague. "Culinary Artist" Shashank Parkh promises a vegan cooking demo, with no mention of how he will later frame the demo as an expression of Hare Krishna religion. Their Facebook page also promotes "group meditation sessions and yoga lifestyle workshops," a Q&A tent that explores issues like how to handle anxiety, and "what is behind the yogic asanas and postures." Their language frames the *Kirtan* workshop tent as a place to demonstrate traditional Indian instruments, where you can learn to sing from the heart. There is no mention that the only thing sung is the Hare Krishna Maha Mantra. Phrases like "ancient spiritual culture" and "traditional face-

painting” frame the larger festival experience (Facebook.com), lending it authenticity and history, in ways that operate similarly to “Taste of Thailand.” The words are used to encourage people to attend who are looking for a “cultural” experience.

In this context, the language appeals to Western Yogis seeking a more authentic, ancient, cultural experience of India to infuse their practice with. The fact that it is a specific religious organization putting on the festival is never mentioned. Also omitted is that the Hare Krishnas have decided to stand in for all Indian people and religions, using Yoga to target a western audience who may otherwise ignore them.

*Walking around I ask myself if I would be as disparaging toward these methods if it was for a cause I fully supported. While I can recognize this blindspot/failure on my part, I can't shake the discomfort welling up. And I am curious. I wonder about the connections between the four prominent Yoga schools offering the free classes and the Hare Krishnas. I ask two Yoga teachers who are setting up flyers about the kinds of spiritual-based Bhakti Yoga that will be offered. They are quick to say that none of the classes will be spiritually based, that it is all physical asana practice. They reassure me that it will be various interpretations of Hatha. Interesting. This dramatic divide between what the organizers claim, and the very physically-based Yoga the instructors discuss is apparent as the festival gets underway. I wonder if they chose this as a way to distance themselves from the Hare Krishnas, or if they think participants won't be interested in spirituality. The first instructor sets the tone, embodying this oppositional approach to Yoga, and the other instructors seem to do the same thing.<sup>32</sup>*

*Deva, rocking his bleached blond Mohawk and tattoo sleeves is “warming-up” at the front, framed by the trees and the lake. His warm-up consists of extreme bonds and*

*very advanced, difficult postures. He seems very aware that this is a show and that he has an audience, so his internal Yogic focus is very flashy. It looks like he is performing what he thinks a Yoga instructor should look like/be, snapping in and out of difficult contortions. I guess meditation is too boring. Directly in front of him are two very blond, very thin, and very skimpily dressed Yogis, who lap up everything he says. Their placement in space, their dress, their own performances of extreme physical postures all give me the impression that they are also very aware of being watched. But not everyone is young, thin and white like the two front participants (although a majority are). People of all ages and background will flow in and out of the classes during the afternoon.*

*Though many people seem like they practice regularly, there are some newcomers to the practice. But even in such a space, there is little instruction given to the newcomers, and there is zero instruction on how to navigate a pose if you have a round body (what the mainstream calls fat), or a body that is inflexible from age or injury. After a few reminders to rest in Child's Pose (if you can't handle what the rest of the class is doing) it is clear that the instruction is reflective of mainstream Yoga. The tenets seem to be: look good, wear Lululemon clothing, approach Yoga as a workout, and if you are round, inflexible, older or injured, good luck (please don't disrupt the rest of the class). The discourse and narratives embodied by mainstream Yoga reflects our social values, even within the context of a spiritual festival. While I don't think that buying into the Hare Krishna version of Bhakti Yoga is the answer, challenging some/any of these and other issues that plague contemporary Western Yoga would be refreshing. Most instructors and studios seem unaware of how they perpetuate oppressive ideologies. Their rationale of advertising to the demographics that are most interested in Yoga*

*(white, mainstream, able-bodied, middle class) both extends these highly problematic politics, and further hedges their central position, since everyone – yogis included – wants to make a living. Branding is one of the most effective ways to do that.*

By branding themselves as Yoga instructors with specific versions/understandings/translations of Yoga, each instructor/studio offered a different take on what Yoga can be. For example, Deva embodied a fairly mainstream attitude. He joked at least five times for us to “smile if we love Yoga,” while offering challenging abdominal exercises in order to augment the Yoga practice with “exercise.” Feeding into the egocentric, competitive vibe fostered at some Yoga studios he asked one lithe, flexible woman who clearly practices frequently to demonstrate a challenging pose. Introducing her as “the Vanna White of Yoga” which sets up a trajectory of perfection (lithe, flexible, blond haired and white as optimal).

In ways, Deva’s approach is echoed by other instructors. Most took the approach that Yoga is something to be played with, adjusted to make it interesting to the individual, but at the same time they neglected to offer suggestions for round bodies, aging or ill bodies, or any way to connect to the non-physical elements of Yoga (breathing, meditation, purity etc). This was an interesting choice. Within a festival designed to produce religious confirmation or conversion, that approaches Yoga as a Bhakti or spiritual practice, spirituality was evacuated from the postures. What replaced it was Yoga to make people stretch and feel good (or get a good workout), but with hypnotic vocal techniques that were employed by all of the instructors. Each one seemed to elongate words and change inflection as if vocally encouraging the same thing to happen in our bodies. Sentences were chopped, with long pauses put in at odd places in order to

let the words sink into our tissues and press us into certain positions. Catch phrases like “get to empty,” “surrender,” “be aware of the chaos surrounding you and then let it go. Let. It. Go;” are reminders of the new-age interpretation of Yoga’s transcendental past that emphasized meditation.

In a place where the manufacturing of spirituality is palpable, these kinds of phrases both fit in perfectly, and seemed a little out of place. The whole experience was highly performative – from the white Hare Krishna women dressed in saris to the Yoga instructors who perform their duty/brand in order to pass on enlightenment. Both the Hare Krishnas and the Yoga instructors encouraged the participants to make their bodies and minds different. They asked us to embrace a form of otherness, setting it up as something that will save us (spiritually via the Hare Krishna’s, or physically via Yoga) from our corrupt, stressed out, unhappy, misguided Western ways.

Outside the confines of the festival, Yoga is positioned as an individual path to a serene, spiritual, flexible life. It is sold in relation to the Orientalist myths circulating in media and our collective memories, and so the Hare Krishna’s use of it as a lure for Western culture in order to force exposure to a certain set of Eastern spiritual values, kind of makes sense. At “Taste of Thailand,” Muay Thai’s overt connection to Mixed Martial Arts plays off an already established spectator/performer (fighter) dynamic. Rather than being a sport available to anyone, it is held up as the domain of only the toughest, most dedicated individuals – true athletes who embody the idea of a Thai fighter with reverence and respect, lethal skill and power (all elements perpetuated by various martial arts movies).

I see a connection between festivals like “Taste of Thailand” and “Yoga Meltdown” that run a fine line between offering versions of culture that seem vibrant and current and playing into stereotypes of “traditional” culture. These stereotypes seem to draw a crowd of good intentioned, open-minded citizens hoping to experience a version of culture that is contained and lives up to their fantasies of the Orient. While I discussed the possible subversion of performative elements at “Taste of Thailand,” I am hard pressed to find the same at “Yoga Meltdown.” The Yoga festival seemed to fly counter to the conversion mission of the Hare Krishnas, while the Krishnas cleverly turned the web of exoticization Westerners usually spin back on them in order to increase attendance at Festival India. But these subversions both seem to prop up the commodification of Yoga. Whereas the connection between the Hare Krishnas and Yoga was conflicted, the links between “BrazilFest” and Capoeira seemed completely naturalized. Capoeira is framed as an authentic expression of Brazilian culture, heritage, and along with soccer, as something central to definitions of Brazilian community.

### **2013 International Brazil Fest (BrazilFest)**

*I can hear the samba drums before I see the tents of the festival, and everyone walking toward the park seems to be in a good mood. The energy just getting to EarlsCourt Park is lively and shimmering with excitement. It's the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “BrazilFest,” and everyone seems to expect big things, even though it's located in an out of the way park with little exposure to pedestrian traffic. Like with the “Festival of India” and “Yoga Meltdown,” people come because they've planned it, rather than because they just happened to be walking nearby and stumbled across it. Since they are*

*running late, I have time before things start to look up the itinerary and advertising for the festival on both their website and Facebook page.*

*I am sprawling on the grass, enjoying the relaxing vibe and the samba tunes, watching an announcer and three samba dancers in stunning costumes practice an entrance. It looks like they will be filmed, as indicated by the film camera, clapperboard, and TV style host. The clutter onstage doesn't seem to matter to the dancers, who easily maneuver in high heels among the drum kits and microphones already set up. Behind them – stretching his arms wide in a symbol of inclusion – is an image of Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer statue on the "BrazilFest" banner. I am reading their website in relation to what I am seeing, and it seems positive, thoughtful and somehow different from what I have experienced in my previous weekends of heritage festival hopping. The "About" section discusses how the festival was started in order to maintain the unity of the Brazilian Community (Facebook.com). On their website "BrazilFest" is described as an "opportunity for Brazilians to reconnect with their roots...to educate North Americans about their culture" (brazilfest.ca), setting up a distinction between people born in Brazil and Brazilians born in Canada. These aren't the typical language tricks that assume ethnicity and culture go hand in hand, or that just because someone is of Brazilian background that they have access to/experience with Brazilian customs or culture.*

*However, not all of the marketing for the festival is so nuanced. According to Vice-President/Co-Founder Arilda de Oliveira, "BrazilFest" is a "one-stop cultural trip to experience the richness and energy of the Brazilian people through dance, food and festival"(brazilfest.ca). This "international festival" encourages us to "feel the passion"*

*of Brazilian culture, and it definitely seems to place emphasis on celebrating. Many times throughout the advertising the party is emphasized – beer tents, caparinhas to be enjoyed alongside various types of churrasco (BBQ) and other traditional dishes.*

*Forcing myself off the cool grass and out into the sun to look around the vendors section, I see that the BBQ and dessert vendors already have long line ups, even though the afternoon is still young. The smells are divine and the mood of everyone I'm observing seems to be happy, excited, and positive. But this isn't really reflected by the vendors. I walk by people selling phone cards, manicures/pedicures, palm reading, bathing suits and underwear; there is a booth for legal services, President's Choice Financial, and one for an insurance company. The neighboring vendor is taking donations and raising awareness for disadvantaged people in northern Brazil. One company is giving away free coconut water. What strikes me is that none of them tries to engage me. Nobody calls me over to sell their product or tell me about their services, unlike the other vendor booths I experienced over the summer. I wonder if it's my gleaming, slightly sunburned whiteness that is the problem, or if it's just a different approach, the no-pressure way to sell. It doesn't feel hostile, but I don't feel all that welcomed. For the second time in a few weeks, I am reminded of how unique this feels, and how privileged I am in my everyday settings.*

*The un-official vendors selling bracelets, Brazilian flags and whistles while their friends and families sprawl on the grass, are more interested in exchanging polite conversation while I look at their products. It's clear I'm alone, which is in striking contrast to everyone else here laughing with friends/partners/families. They seem to take a little pity on me. Even with my slight awkwardness, the vibe around me is happy, and*



*so my uncomfortable moment is short lived. I savour the tastes of a plate of black beans, rice and churrasco as I sit again in the shade, listening to the opening ceremonies. Most of the announcements and commentary is first in Brazilian Portuguese, and then in English. I get the feeling that it is a conscious choice, which makes sense since this is a festival to celebrate Brazilianness. It is a performative subversion, where language is used to reinforce cohesion and belonging (or separation and exclusion from those of us on the outside). This resistance seems to embody the insistence on celebrating culture and history, emphasizing that Brazilian Canadians are part of a select, distinct group, not just hyphenations.*

*What this does, though, is reinforce the feeling I get that I am somehow, partially, subtly trespassing. There was absolutely no behaviour that made me feel unwelcomed, but at the same time, my outsidersness was apparent. It doesn't matter that I practiced Capoeira for over 6 years in Vancouver or performed traditional Brazilian dances on stage. Since I have no ties to the Brazilian community to vouch for me, I feel like an outsider. As a cosmopolitan subject, this is a little uncomfortable. How can you prove your openness, or perform your "welcoming" attitude when you are being excluded? I laugh at myself a little for these thoughts, and try to enjoy the awkward sensations. If nothing else, it shows I'm growing. I remind myself that these moments of failure highlight the performative elements of cosmopolitanism, and they can be just as powerful as the times we "succeed." I allow myself to experience this shifted perspective – from center to margin, and enjoy the performances on stage.*

*I stay for the samba shows, the musicians who play everything from Classical Brazilian music to Gospel to Samba and Rock. The women are dazzling, and their*

*dancing is amazing; the various bands and singers gather big crowds of dancers. But missing in all of it is Capoeira.*

There is no Capoeira demo during the time I spent there, it's not on the list of events/program for the festival, and there isn't even a *roda* on the outskirts of the festival. Its absence is noticeable, although from the pictures on "BrazilFest's" website of previous years, many different Capoeira schools attended. Judging from the number of people in the photos crowded around the *roda*, playing in or watching the demo, it seemed popular. But this year, Capoeira is absent. As with my approach to "Taste of Thailand," I had contacted the organizers of "BrazilFest" through their website and Facebook page asking about the festival in general and specifically about Capoeira demos. Nobody answered. Likewise, the messages I left at a number of major Capoeira academies received no reply. I had specifically gone looking for the places I assumed Capoeira would be at, only to be frustrated. Even months after the fact this event reminds me that my expectations as a white academic (people will accept me, help me and encourage me) are based on an inflated and distorted sense of reality. I got a nice taste of what it feels like to be shut out. Since I am not currently part of a Capoeira Academy in Toronto, I only find out after-the-fact where the street *rodas* and performances are. Unless I am lucky enough to bump into an Academy at an event I attend, my outsidership means I don't have access and I don't have any right to have expectations. Even with the sting of rejection and the mild concern at the implications of absence on this project, "BrazilFest" was clearly celebration of Brazilian music, dance, food and culture.

In many ways the framing of "BrazilFest" as a place to experience the passion of Brazil was tempered by restrictions to access, primarily in relation to language. Most of

the festival was in Brazilian Portuguese, with a little English translation after the fact. These language choices are attached to bigger issues – marking Brazilian-ness as distinct from Brazilian-Canadian any other outsiders. Clearly falling into the outsider category, only partially welcomed, is de-centering. Accordingly, I performed my cosmopolitan identity in relation to this. Balanced somewhere between being outsider and being included in the festivities, I see this situation as something uncomfortable but necessary in order to experience fully what cosmopolitanism can offer us.

Rather than a fake, surface engagement that encourages us to consume cultural products/culture as product, performative cosmopolitanism helps us see what our cosmopolitanism creates. At “BrazilFest” my attempt at cosmopolitanism was stunted, partial, and can even be considered a failure. But it allowed me to experience the visceral effects/affects of being on the periphery, not welcomed (different than being unwelcomed), and for the most part, ignored. It fostered a kind of growth in my perspective that I hadn’t anticipated. Bissoondath, writing about cultural stagnation in mosaic tile multiculturalism writes: “[c]ulture is life. It is a living, breathing, multi-faceted entity in constant evolution. It alters every day, is never the same thing from one day to the next. Stasis is not possible. A culture that fails to grow from within inevitably becomes untrue to itself, inevitably descends into folklore” (Bissoondath 75). Although my quotation of him may be decontextualized, since he isn’t writing about dominant culture, I think it should be applied to this situation. Perhaps the performative cosmopolitan moments I had at “BrazilFest” can be seen as reminder that I need to embrace the changing dynamic, the fluidity between centre and margin, or risk remaining in a fantasy world where otherness is something that happens to others, not ourselves.

Recognizing the constructs of power lines, the ways hierarchies are continually subverted, and the ways our myths are capitalized on to turn profit weaves us into interconnection. Moving beyond separations of dominating/dominated to something much more complicated and real, attention to performative cosmopolitanism can help us view the situation as entangled and intertwined.

## **Conclusions**

Nikos Papastergiadis, reading Julia Kristeva, implicitly responds to this idea when he stresses “the need for an inward investigation of the strangeness that occurs at the borders of the self” (*Cosmopolitanism* 195). For Papastergiadis, cosmopolitanism contains the potential to provide us with “a framework in which we can engage with the plurality of differences without the violent annihilation of the other” (196). Whether through “gestures of hospitality” that enact cosmopolitanism, as Papastergiadis suggests, or viewing the failures as performative moments that offer us pertinent information, cosmopolitanism is not something silently understood. It is a performed, enacted, rehearsed and repeated thing.

Performative cosmopolitanism allows us to place attention on politics of representation, on the ways our body betrays us or becomes an obstacle to our mental commitment to openness, and is the place for potential subversion of all of these things. When cosmopolitanism as a disposition, or an exaggeration of the openness we assume to have toward others fails, what is left are the constructions. Culture, language, race, communities of belonging and the reality of uneven social positions are laid bare.

Performative cosmopolitanism, as a lens to view this, changes the terms. It challenges dominant culture's position as central. Walking around each festival I was other, outsider, marginalized and my attempt to be included was only partially successful, regardless of how open I tried to be, or how much I wanted to feel welcomed. For me this is a powerful translation of cosmopolitanism.

The word performative allows an emphasis on bodily presence and the following chapter will develop the ideas of performative cosmopolitanism in relation to embodiment. My hope is that by placing emphasis on the individuality of the body, and the places where differences are reconsidered, politics are made visible, and transcultural flows take place at the level of muscles and breath, we can begin imagining a different form of connection. This different form of political community is reflective of what Sara Ahmed calls for as “one that moves beyond the opposition between common and uncommon, between friends and strangers, or between sameness and difference” (*Strange* 180).

## **Chapter 5**

### **Embodying Movement Culture**

In my previous chapters I have attempted to untangle ideas of cosmopolitanism that are knotted together with Orientalist and Neo-Primitivist legacies that mark certain bodies as strangers – bodies out of place, the containers of difference. In our current globalized, technology-driven situation, the multicultural celebrations of this difference are woven together with practices of consumption and advertising that turn on selling otherness. My focus on performative cosmopolitanism attempts to shift the focus slightly in order to remain critical about the ways we consume otherness, but also to look at the performative ways our cosmopolitan behaviour produces the otherness it seeks to engage with. To me this is an important distinction, because it turns the camera back on us. We become then, complicit and visible in continuing colonial legacies. But at the same time, the generative and subversive power of performativity potentially offers us room to change, to become more thoughtful, and potentially more critical of the roles we are playing. The shift in perspective hinges on engagement, but is always in relation to

consumption and display as well as larger political issues our bodies are tangled in. This is the territory of the final chapter and is an attempt to work myself out of a corner.

In essence, in practice, and in thinking through the influences Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira have on us as individuals and as members of various communities, very conflicting things arise. On one hand the social critiques of how otherness gets mythologized, turned into packaging for studios selling authenticity, or grafted onto each practice are exemplified almost daily. The performative ways we engage with, use, incorporate and take excursions into otherness are also quite clear. On the other hand, simultaneously and running counter to most of what I have just said, are the very real, experienced, physical dimensions of practicing Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira. For all of the social and cultural critique I have offered, the embodied knowledge that is deeply embedded in each movement form sometimes offers surprises that seem to fly in the face of critical analysis. Mobilizing each practice as a space of critical engagement with social struggles and everyday politics of postcoloniality is another undercurrent beginning to shift how people envision community in relation to movement culture.

To implicate myself in this messy conversation, and to remove myself from the position of a gazing voyeur of other people practicing, I offer a snapshot of myself in three different classes. My attempt is to ground the theory and arguments I am making in the experience of taking a class. I write from my body – what the classes feel like, the challenges, conflicts, and implications of what I describe along with the problems I have sorting through these experiences afterward. Embracing Susan Leigh Foster's now canonical work in *Reading Dancing* (1986) I look to embodied expressions, body presence and personal subjectivity within movement techniques as places that offer

valuable information. Driving this chapter is a question of how movement culture functions in today's digitized, globalized, commercialized world. What can analyzing movement culture offer, and is it actually possible to become more politicized in our "use" or practice of it? My hope is that through critically considering those stereotypes, colonial legacies and approaches to cosmopolitanism as a lifestyle to consume (as in Chapter Three) or perform (as in Chapter Four), we can approach movement culture from a more politicized angle.

The dichotomy of Chapter Five oscillates between very real ways power works through movement culture, how the physical experience of practicing Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira can actually feel transformative, subversive, and an exploration of connections between individual experiences and communities of resistance. As I analyze my experiences in each class, I am aware of the politics surrounding each one that I flesh out in this project. I understand how we use and practice movement forms is partially in order to help us achieve the body size/shape promoted in the West, to optimize our wellbeing, health and potential, and to demonstrate our integration into a cosmopolitan city. Power in the form of dominant cultural aesthetics and values—of individual self-awareness and transformation, economic worth over other forms of value, the transformation of culture into an object to be commoditized—literally shapes and molds our bodies. Access is restricted to people who have leisure time and funds available to purchase classes and equipment.

But, as I discuss in relation to my experience in a Restorative Yoga class, movement practice can also offer profound physical experiences even as it is packaged by fantasy and myth. Opening ourselves up to critical conversations using Yoga as a lens



may also allow us to consider politics of access and equity on a larger scale. Tempered by the biopolitical rhetoric of health, wellness, strength and discipline surrounding Muay Thai, the feeling of empowerment surprised me. Describing the class I took, and the ideas of warriorhood grafted onto it seem to be both a performance of Orientalism in action, and a reconsideration of the capabilities of my (white female) body. Extending beyond the individual, I see martial arts creating communities of resistance and becoming a positive outlet for fostering social change. Getting further entangled in conflicted politics, I consider how taking a Capoeira class offers the possibility of very strong communities of like-minded practitioners. Transcultural flows of knowledge, form, technique and attitude seems to respond to and embrace a diverse, global network. But I am also aware that feeling a part of a global community aligns easily with appropriative legacies of whiteness that do not ask us to re-think privilege, or what it means for a white female body to adopt a practice created through slavery. Within this conflict though, is an uncomfortable space for dialogue, critical engagement and a place to foster politicized interconnection.

Sweating together is an intimate act – normal social codes are transcended, bodies are united in learning technique and the space between stranger and self diminishes. It reflects collective work, proximity, vulnerability, and as a political tool mobilizes the idea that *doing something together* has the power to help us re-imagine our interconnection. Although our bodies are positioned differently by politics, they are equalized through effort, strain, scent and a desire to enhance ourselves with a form and the endless hours of practice it requires. We sweat next to each other. With each other. And at the end of a challenging class there is an unspoken acknowledgement that we have survived

something, together. As a political tool, this is one way in which sweating, moving and practicing can help us re-imagine the spaces that separate us.

As a methodological tool, sweating together asks the reader to be active, to read with double vision both the positive and transformative potentials a practice can have, but also the problematic lineages it may extend, and the limits or challenges to adopting a form. Following Pyla Srinivasan's perspective in *Sweating Saris* (2012), the final chapter "demonstrates multiple and contradictory paths" (8). Srinivasan writes: "I am restless as I find it imperative to unpack multiple points of view...for these reasons, throughout the book, I participate as the 'unruly spectator'" (8). In a similar way, in the final chapter I write from a conflicted place, and I choose not to hide this fact. The sweat stains of my autoethnography reveal the strain of choosing to look from multiple perspectives. They speak to the challenge of critical engagement, of perseverance in a belief that we can politicize and allow practices to change us, and to the work required in embodying postcoloniality.

Before walking into the unclear terrain I find myself in, I attempt to contextualize my argument with some salient theory. I offer a very brief history of each practice, in connection to intercultural performance practitioners and theorists who discuss the ethics, politics and reality of intercultural exchange along with ideas of embodiment. Through performative writing I then offer a glimpse into my experience of each class, after which I spend time writing through the politics, implications and areas of resistance that arise. Drawing on theoretical work from both practitioners and academics, I paint a portrait of movement culture that reveals the challenges, failures and pluralities of how practices function. I consider the politics of embodying each form. I ask how we can approach

practicing from a more politicized place, and work through some possibilities offered by each practice for different kinds of intercultural encounters. Concluding this chapter the only firm resolution I have is that, through practicing Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira, we embody contradictions and possibilities.

### **Theoretical Backbone**

Beginning with brief histories of each practice, I need to add a disclaimer. Scholars from various backgrounds build careers on tracing the histories of each form, and attempting to distill the volumes of information about each practice into a few paragraphs seems problematic and very partial at best. Inevitably something will be left out. The information I provide outlines some of the contemporary thoughts about the origins of each practice. Since this project does not attempt to trace the movement patterns of practices as they make transcultural journeys, I provide this background more to contextualize some of the myths, assumptions and inherent contradictions between where practices start, and how they currently figure in movement culture.

### **Yoga**

Asking a confrontational question, Beatrix Hauser writes: “on what basis is it still identified as (Indian) yoga?” (2). Her discussion centres around transcultural exchanges between Hindu-revisionists like Swami Vivekananda in the late nineteenth century (and his speech at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893), influences of American and British transcendentalists in popularizing his meditative and physical techniques for meditation, the impact of the international physical culture movement on building Indian

national identity, alongside a use of calisthenics and gymnastics, all woven together into what we consider to be Yoga.<sup>33</sup> Rather than a practice that has continuity with thousand year-old yogic teachings and philosophy, many scholars argue that “Yoga” is no more than 150 years old (“Introduction: Transcultural Yoga” 27). Hauser expands stating “around 1900, yoga gradually emerged as a hybrid exercise system for the everyday use of laypersons in search of personal growth and a physical ideal of one sort or another” (27).

Mark Singleton has built a career demystifying the origins of modern postural practice, and indicates that “the yoga renaissance” as he terms it was largely influenced by a gymnastics movement that “swept the world” from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and “cross-pollinated with the modern discourses of yoga” (“Transnational Exchange” 38). At the same time, “Europeans and Americans were appropriating and blending these new export forms of yoga according to their own understandings of the body and its place within “spiritual” practice” (38). These two points contain important contextual information about how we currently situate Yoga. First, as Singleton has claimed, female dominated contemporary forms of Hatha Yoga are the result of influences of western “harmonal” gymnastics classes for women, rather than a continuation of the male dominated tradition of *hathayoga*.<sup>34</sup> A second important element in the development of Yoga traces back to images and perceptions of the “Orient” and a construction of otherness/Western-ness created through Orientalist myths. When transcendentalists first began adopting “Eastern” spiritual practices, it was already with a specific Orientalist framing. This continued through the 1960s and 70s when Yoga was associated with Gurus and alternative lifestyles, and as I have argued in

Chapter Three, extends into images and depictions of otherness in Yoga advertising today.

### **Muay Thai**

Similarly vague origin narratives of Muay Thai also exist, though without the same transnational beginnings. Like Yoga, Muay Thai's origin stories and histories are subject to alteration and imagination. Relatively little academic work is available on the origins of Thai martial arts; most is found within martial arts books that often seem to perpetuate the myths surrounding its origins. Peter Vail's work is an exception, and in "Modern *Muai Thai* Mythology"<sup>35</sup> (1998) he discusses the four stories found within royal chronicles on which most current history/origin stories are based. For Vail, confirming the historical accuracy of the events is less important than discussing how they function in contemporary understandings of Muay Thai in the Thai imaginary. The stories of the royal chronicles link the practice to Thai royalty, or to commoners containing the "warrior spirit" who become equated with royalty. These stories serve to legitimize and authenticate Muay Thai as part of Thai nationhood, and in Vail's opinion, contribute to a belief in inherent characteristics of Thai men as able to draw on the "warrior prowess" described in the texts (83).

Each story has been "widely propagated and embellished upon through word of mouth, the print media, schoolbooks, movies, guidebooks (especially outside of Thailand), and even on the internet" (76). Since the standardization of Muay Thai rules within the past fifty years, most people in Thailand know the performance structure of a fight, the rituals associated with it, and some of the myths of its origins. For Vail this

confirms the significance of Muay Thai in the Thai imaginary – regardless of their level of interest, nearly all Thais know the form and the culture around it. The most famous story, and the most embellished upon, is of Nai Khanom Tom “a legendary hero allegedly taken prisoner and removed to Rangoon after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767” (81). The original story, only eight lines long, is that while in captivity Tom succeeds in beating the top nine or ten Burmese boxers, to which the King said “if the nobles of Siam had fought like him Ayutthaya would never have fallen” (81). In contemporary re-tellings, details like the kinds of technique Tom used are added (spinning heel kick, clinch etc) which “legitimizes those techniques as canonically *Muay Thai* even though it is uncertain whether they date as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century” (81). For Vail, through the incorporation of these stories into Thai culture, and as grounds for the origins of their national sport, a link is established between current practices and the warrior spirit of ancient heroes. In Vail’s terms “the present becomes inextricably a part and a product of Thai history” (81). Refiguring history in this way extends a myth of the warrior as “man of prowess” into a cultural model that lives on in the present day performances of Thai fighters who draw on “images of the warrior spirit” (83).

As I discuss in later pages of this chapter, the myths surrounding Muay Thai are transported with the form. But whereas, in a Thai context, Muay Thai signals something intrinsically Thai and deeply connected to constructions of Thai masculinity, outside of Thailand an added dimension of Orientalist stereotypes also frames the practice. Drawing on images of the bloodthirsty warrior, or brutal and extremely physical fighting styles, contemporary visions of Muay Thai use these assumptions to legitimize the

effectiveness of training techniques, or as a way to verify its origins as an ancient martial art form.

## Capoeira

If the practices of Yoga and Muay Thai stem from origins that seem unclear, contested and sometimes downright conflicting, so too does Capoeira. Summing up the complexity of what Capoeira, and the myths associated with it entail, Matthias Assunção writes:

It features African warriors and their initiation cultures, the horrors of the Middle Passage, black slaves fighting policemen on the squares of colonial cities in the New World, and gangs of ‘tough guys’ promoting mayhem, terrorizing citizens or helping corrupt politicians to rig elections. Capoeiristas confronted Portuguese stick fighters in the streets and Japanese *jiu-jitsu* champions in the ring. They were flogged, imprisoned, and deported to distant Atlantic islands because of their practice. (*Capoeira 2*)

Capoeira was created through slavery, a product of the Black Atlantic and symbolic of transnational culture exchange. What started as a combat game blending various forms of sport, ritual and rites, morphed into a practice heavily repressed in the nineteenth century. For Assunção it is a commemorative performance that re-enacts Capoeira’s past through song lyrics that tell stories of historical events, famous Capoeiristas and fights against oppression (2). Though various myths of origin – a martial art disguised in dance to avoid detection from slave owners, originating in maroon (runaway slave) settlements, as transmitted practices from Angola, or tied to the environment as slaves, mimicking animals, fought slave masters for liberation – conflicted narratives are passed down, gain the authority of truth, are retold and embodied. What seems to be encapsulated within

these narratives of the history and purpose of Capoeira is that it epitomizes resistance and the question for freedom from oppression – an idea reiterated today.

Contemporary forms of Capoeira from the 1930s onward grew into two distinct styles, the attributes of which are frequently debated and challenged. *Mestre Pastinha*, a traditionalist of *Capoeira Angola*, symbolized the preservation of a more traditional style of Capoeira. According to Greg Downey (*Learning Capoeira* 2005) qualities such as musicality, strategy, deception and efficiency as a form of self-defense, represent more of the “traditional aesthetics, mores, wisdom as well as the integrity” of the older styles (9). In contrast to this, *Mestre Bimba* is held up as the originator of *Regional* style, which Downey frames as an innovative “modernized” version of Capoeira (10). It features a systematic pedagogy, a faster pace and is played more upright rather than lower and crouched like *Angola*. *Regional* is also credited with increasing Capoeira’s status as an art rather than a form of street fighting. Furthering the adaptation, alteration and modification of Capoeira to reflect a range of social contexts, in the 1960s another style began to form. *Contemporânea* is seen as a blending of the more important or effective aspects from both *Regional* and *Angola*. While proponents see the more acrobatic version of Capoeira as evolution, other, more traditionalist Capoeiristas see this as a degradation of form and culture.

Along with the myths of origin that are continually circulated in contemporary Capoeira, what started in Brazil has become a worldwide practice. Brought to other countries by *mestres* and instructors, with a continual flow of students, practitioners and *mestres* traveling back and forth to Brazil to study or play, the transnational form is now practiced/played in a wide range of contexts, by diverse groups of people from all



ethnicities, genders, cultural and class backgrounds. Regardless of the transnational nature of today's Capoeira, as Assunção points out, "identity politics have always played a core role in the discussion of what capoeira is all about and in which direction it should evolve" (207). For some it serves as an expression of "bodily memory of Africans and their enslaved decedents" (Assunção 207); for others it offers an anchor in (sometimes forced) diasporic movement and resulting cultures. In a contemporary context, it seems to provide identity, regardless of background – to the art of Capoeira as a whole, to a form, or a specific group to which a practitioner belongs. It is a window into what Beatrix Hauser talks about in relation to Yoga: a transcultural phenomena that challenges simplistic notions of cultures as "territorially bounded and homogeneous social entities" ("Introduction" 2). What movement practices contain, along with embodied cultural knowledge, is the ability to make visible the dynamic plurality of "the network of practitioners that exist in today's globalized world" (Hauser 2).

### **Performing (Inter)Cultural Practices Through The Body**

Regardless of the plurality of our networks, as Ric Knowles observes in *Theatre & Interculturalism* (2010), culture exists only insofar as it is "enacted, performed into being by the daily and (extra-daily) ritual and performative activities of individuals and communities as they negotiate their place in the world" (1). Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are all embodied forms of cultural practice. My understanding of how they can operate in the context of movement culture is informed by work of both scholars and practitioners who study intercultural performance. As Knowles suggest, interculturalism can focus on the spaces between cultural traditions – "the contested, unsettling and often

unequal spaces” (Knowles, 4-5). Potentially, viewing intercultural exchange that happens through classes of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira, we can understand how to get beyond the “use” of other cultures for our own decorative, invigorating, self re-affirming benefit.<sup>36</sup> Placing emphasis on spaces of negotiation, change, resistance, and recognition through the practices I discuss, we can possibly see what Knowles calls “new social formations, new diasporic, hybrid and intercultural social identities” (45).

What Knowles signals as the beginning to new social formations based on intercultural identities, he confirms a formation of identity that Stuart Hall has championed in “Old and New Ethnicities” (1997). Considering the multiplicity of identities and the ways they are continually changed, Hall writes: “understanding that those identities do not remain the same, that they are frequently contradictory, that they cut across one another, that they tend to locate us differently at different moments” (59) suggests that identity is a process. In Hall’s example, during the era of de-colonization and intense nationalism in Britain the term “Black was created as a political category in a certain historical moment. It was created as a consequence of certain symbolic and ideological struggles” (54) rather than a physical description. Black as historical, political, cultural category, based on racialized experience unhinges identity from bodies, calling attention to experiences and self-recognition even as the processes of history are inscribed on skin. For Hall “we are all complexly constructed through different categories, of different antagonisms, and these may have the effect of locating us socially in multiple positions of marginality and subordination, but which do not yet operate on us in exactly the same way” (57). Extending this line of thinking, George Dei notes that in looking at the fluidity of ourselves, we need to include the relational component to

identity – the relationship between self and the other. In Dei’s words “ you cannot understand the self unless you look at it in relation to the other” (aurora.icaap.org).

Following Hall and Dei, seeing identity as a fluid and political process can potentially move us into a space of action. Activists, artists and scholars of color have struggled in very real, material ways over representation, voice, homogeneity, hegemony and self-expression. For example, Carol Tator, Frances Henry and Winston Mattis’s work in *Challenging Racism* (1998), carefully considers cultural production in Canada in the 1990s as a “source, site, and inspiration for radical forms of social change” (6). Mapping the struggle of non-dominant culture allows us to see “the possibility of new constructions of Canadian identity, new forms of social relations, and a new, transforming multiculturalism” (6). Their work focuses on sites of cultural production constructed and controlled by dominant culture “which promotes, supports, and affirms forms of exclusion” (8). Representations of otherness in theatre productions like *Show Boat* and *Miss Saigon* shore up Orientalist discourse, while art exhibits like *Into the Heart of Africa* maintain Neo-Primitivist rhetoric. Tator et al’s work also discusses the CRTC’s multiple decisions to deny a Black/Dance music radio station, and the Writing Through Race conference of 1994 that “challenged the power of the White writing and publishing establishments” (86). These writers capture “cultural flashpoints” that crystallized and magnified social issues in a time when identity and representation in Canada were shifting. Their analysis of how communities, activists, artists and cultural critics attempted to redefine boundaries of mainstream/marginal, difference and otherness, serves as a politicized foundation to the kinds of intercultural identities Knowles describes ten years later.

Knowles sees the potential for a rhizomatic, non-hierarchical form of interculturalism based on embodied collaborations and solidarities that account for material differences and performance ecologies (59). What I find powerful about this is the attention placed on responsibility – where privilege can be recognized, material struggles over cultural representation and space held in view, and ideas of “intercultural” become politicized, fluid categories that implicate dominant culture as well. As Dei suggests, through thoughtful interconnection that takes into account personal place in society and our “collective identities” we can begin to understand the society we live in (aurora.icaap.org). Dei’s theoretical project is manifesting in concrete ways as he re-thinks education to include Spiritual learning that focuses on the inner self, indigenous knowledge as opposed to Eurocentricity, and social justice. The Africentric Alternative School illustrates Dei’s concepts and move us beyond an assumed, Eurocentric universality that intercultural critics like Rustom Bharucha condemn. It attends to the physical, material realities of inequity, and propels us toward a form of interconnection where everyone is responsible to consider and speak out against oppression. A critical component of this is embodiment, and the fundamental way we experience the world through our bodies.

Offering critical insight into the potentially subversive elements of intercultural work, Bharucha states:

It is not only a matter of learning other disciplines and techniques...where one is compelled to ‘break’ one’s existing reflexes and rhythms, balance and co-ordination; the demands on the body in intercultural work are so infinitesimal that they are invisible in their subtle pressures, as one takes in different physical and sensory stimuli from an alien space. These stimuli interact with the memories and sensations that have already been internalized in the body from another space and time – a space

and time so intimate that one tends to describe it as 'home.' (*The Politics of Cultural Practice* 153)

What Bharucha so eloquently expresses is the intense physicality required of anyone who trains seriously in a practice. Not just the mastery of skill and technique, but an unlearning of habitual corporeality: ways of moving, posture and even breathing. It requires a shifting of tissue and bones – the invisible, subtle pressures – that generate memories and sensations of familiarity. We experience the world (like the concept of home, normal and natural) through our bodies. While this may seem like a downshift in terms of politicization, I see embodiment as crucial to how we experience the world. Challenging, subverting, shifting and expanding our notions of self as we experience it through bodies marked by culture, is political. Ideas of identity that Hall describe, negotiating space, representation and access as Dei is doing, and the kinds of embodied solidarities Knowles defends are all lived, felt and explored through our bodies.

Connected to this, performer/scholar Martin Welton argues for the need to consider shared processes of embodiment that run across martial arts and performance practices (“From Floor to Stage” 161). Emphasized in his work is the “condition of movement” as certain practices are translated either into the martial arts body or the body of an actor. For Welton “movement itself carries with it and develops certain conditions of knowledge, even as it travels across contexts and across cultures” (162). Highlighted is the inherent knowledge contained within movement forms that is translated into different contexts, for different uses (as a martial skill or a tool in performance). But then, going in a different direction than one would expect, he positions movement not as a motion or choreography, but as the “meeting point of body and culture” (162). On one hand he discusses how movement carries certain conditions of knowledge, but on the

other, if movement is understood as the meeting point of body and culture, it is the act of embodiment itself that generates meaning. This is controversial, especially for people who see meaning inherently contained within a repertoire of movement patterns, breath-control, postures and energies associated with specific body positions.

I am equally skeptical and fascinated, because if we follow Welton, the importance is placed on primarily on learning – as we take movements into our bodies and are changed by them. He expands by suggesting that part of our engagement with practice is a function of “doing” it, which shapes our knowledge of the practice, the culture and our selves. Citing Joseph Alter, he sees cross-cultural movement as a subversion of our own bodies, rather than “using” a form for the “otherness” it may seem to contain (175). Welton’s argument often walks a thin and shaky line between a very body-centric understanding of cultural exchange and a more dangerous position that ignores the function of cultural practices in maintaining/creating identity or resisting hegemony (to name two functions practices can have).<sup>37</sup>

Following Welton’s line of thought, when we adopt a practice like Yoga, Muay Thai or Capoeira, we offer our bodies up to be changed by that practice. Our kinaesthetic awareness is altered; movement habits, cadence and rhythm of daily activities are changed and then re-solidified through repetition and practice. The “cultural exchange” isn’t just a series of movements or movement qualities studied in order to be used/incorporated/experienced as inspiration for theatrical productions or remixed into new training regimes. It is a re-negotiation of posture, force and equilibrium, as we not only take in, but are also changed by a movement practice. Explaining this, Carrie Noland (*Migrations of Gesture* 2008) discusses how Theodor Adorno claimed gestures

and movement offer kinesthetic experiences that can stimulate nerves in ways that create *different* kinds of self-awareness.

Taking this idea in another direction, Noland goes on to suggest that “by retrieving gestures from the past, or by borrowing gestures from another culture, subjects can actually produce new innervations, discover new sensations to feel” (x). Through Adorno, Noland highlights the potential for intercultural learning that produces new (to us) ways of stimulating muscles, new ways of activating the body, which produces an unfamiliar feeling/sensation/awareness of the body. In essence a movement practice like Yoga, Muay Thai or Capoeira is a sequence of gestures, movement qualities, and specific rationality (of bodies and what they do). If we consider these practices to contain culturally-based movement knowledge,<sup>38</sup> then adopting them, letting our bodies be changed and stimulated by them, can be seen as a deep engagement with interculturalism. We are literally, at the level of nerves and muscle activation, influenced by unfamiliar culture.

My concern with this position is that practitioners like Welton<sup>39</sup> use it to justify their use of form. They cite years of in-depth training, or immersion into histories and cultures but omit a discussion about how our bodies (however influenced they are by a practice) don't exist equally in the world. Focusing only on the physical ways we embrace intercultural movement (through hard, devoted work), tends to stand in for an engagement with the larger political systems our bodies exist in.

What I do find useful about Welton and Noland's analysis is the challenge to our understanding of how embodiment (and culture) works, with emphasis on body learning as the creation of movement. This allows us to see bodies as always accenting a practice,

based on their movement history and habitus. I picture a sedimented, layered body forming, offering us views of how practices are recorded in our muscles and bones, and then piled up on each other. Reading a similar concept through Erika Fisher-Lichte (*The Transformative Power of Performance* 2008), “by bringing forth their specific and individual corporeality, the artists perform processes that embody their bodies’ vulnerability, their exposure to violence, their aliveness, and the resulting dangers and risks” (90). The act of living and learning (or performing in ways that self-harm) is marked on the body. Fischer-Lichte is talking about the performance work of Marina Abramovic, but these could all be descriptors of what training in Yoga, Muay Thai or Capoeira does/feels like. Through our adoption of practices we are changed. Although the risks of perpetuating the “use” of other cultures for self-rejuvenation are visible, if change comes in part through a de-centering, through being destabilized and vulnerable, potentially we can be changed in deeper ways.

Adding a more politicized layer to this discussion Sara Ahmed describes the potential of embodiment “as lived experience” to move us “beyond the privatized realm of ‘my body’” (*Strange Encounters* 47). Her theory of inter-embodiment is founded on the knowledge that “the lived experience of embodiment is always already *the social experience of dwelling with other bodies*” (her emphasis, 47). Our sense of embodiment is in relation to our experience of ourselves in society, with other bodies. But rather than seeing plurality of bodies as merely inclusive, Ahmed allows for differentiation. It gives attention to the social and political forces that mark out difference. In Ahmed’s concept “‘my body’ and ‘the others body’ would not be structurally equivalent...but in a relation of asymmetry and potential violence” (48). The asymmetry and violence she notes is



very important. Our embodied realities are not even, regardless of how deeply we invest in intercultural exchange, or how thoroughly we commit to a practice. We are always already in relation to one another in a political/social system that is often unjust, violent and coercive.

Doreen Massey touches on this in her discussion of “power geometry.” Following Marx’s use of the term “time-space compression,” her argument is concerned with an era of globalization that allows rapid flows and interconnections of people, goods, information and knowledge. Massey points to how certain people are more in control over mobility than others, and the ways people are positioned “in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections” (unc.edu). Some people benefit from this, while others are effectively imprisoned by it. Beyond seeing flows and interconnections simply as unequal distribution, Massey’s argument is that “the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people. Differential mobility can weaken the leverage of the already weak” (unc.edu). Echoing a sentiment similar to Ahmed, Massey reconceives of mobility as constructed “out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (unc.edu). Attentiveness to specific bodies, their histories, their shifting and fluid identities, and their social moorings can move us away from sweeping generalizations and allow us to see positionality as particular and unique and a point of intersection with our “place” in the world. Massey imagines this as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (unc.edu). The strength of conceptualizing an inter-embodiment that accounts for power geometries (historical and current) is that we can see individual stories/bodies within larger political structures.

These broad and quite general ideas serve as a framework through which I read my experience in each class, and the political implications that reverberate from it. I draw on more specific theoretical support throughout this chapter in order to tease out the nuances and complexities of what analyzing movement culture allows us to see. In each section following my description of the class I ask what gets embodied, what myths get re-activated, and more importantly I ask if it is possible to *approach a practice in a more politicized way*.

I have practiced each of the movement forms I write about for the past 10 years, although my dedication to each continually shifts as my body/mind requires different things. What equalizes the situation is that during the past year and a half (at the end of a pregnancy and for the first year of caring for an infant) I have not practiced any of these disciplines. So I came to the classes in ways that felt like I was meeting an old friend. You know them; you have shared history together and a deep understanding of them or what they mean to you. But at the same time they are new, un-familiar and you don't know how the conversation will go. It was an interesting position to be in, since I am technically skilled in all three areas, but out of practice and not associated with any of the gyms or studios I visited. My agenda was to witness myself experiencing the class, to pay attention to what my body felt, and to write about it afterward with clarity.

### **“Do Nothing” Yoga**

*It's pouring rain when I cross the road and walk up the steep stairs to the studio. The studio manager and I share small talk above the sound of pelting water and car horns. I'm early, so I sip the complementary herbal tea and admire the bamboo yoga*

*pants and jute mats. At one point the instructor from the class that is just ending tiptoes into the room. He makes comments about how it sounds like India outside. He then proceeds to tell us about when he was traveling to “his” ashram and the intricacies of horn signals there – short honks for when people are approaching and getting ready to turn, and then a stream of long but consecutive honks while they are turning. He seems arrogant, in a mellow, yogic kind of way, smug about his authentic, insider knowledge about India. Glancing at the schedule it seems as though he is the instructor for our class too. Great. I kind of tune him out, since I want to be really present – grounded and focused on the class I am about to take. I want to connect to how my body feels as I prepare for the class, and I am mentally preparing myself to dive into the moment. It is internal, intimate work, and similar to the kind of focus I have felt right before a dance performance.*

*I am preparing myself to shift my attention from the choreography of the class (the asanas, the set up, the instructions) to the sensations in my body. To the weight each limb has and the space between tension and release where I will try and move from. I prepare to fold my intention inward to the rhythm of breathing that is thoughtful, slowed, and cleansing. Rather than “emptying” my mind I draw my attention deeply into these areas. I am out of practice with this, but I try my best.*

*The setup for Restorative Yoga requires more props than most other forms of yoga – but its aims and purpose is also different. This is healing Yoga, an opportunity to release and relax into each posture with the aid of bolsters, blocks, straps and meditation cushions. Each posture is held a very long time, to encourage the body to release, relax and soak up the physical and spiritual benefits from each specific movement. There are*

*10 other people in the room, and although our instructor doesn't ask about any injuries we may be working with or through, he does shake everyone's hands at least, welcoming them into his class.*

*With a reminder to myself not to wander into the territory of judgment, or get taken to a place where I think about the struggles of the poses, I sink into the first savasana.<sup>40</sup> In a calm, confident and peaceful voice we are guided into a relaxing pose. The tension from my day drains slowly through my body, sinking into the floor below my mat. We are in corpse pose, our knees supported with bolsters so our legs can drape easily from our hips, our heads resting on a thin pillow made of soft cotton blankets. The instructor guides us to release the tension in our glutes, our foreheads, to let our eyes sink deeply but gently into their sockets. With a few deep, conscious breaths I feel myself sink slightly deeper into the mat, and simultaneously I seem to lose the sensation of my body. It's an odd feeling to describe – for example I know my hands are still there, they aren't asleep, but my perception shifts to just focus on my breath and I truly can't feel where they are. I can't feel where they touch the ground, and I don't know what position my fingers are in.*

*I try not to get thrown by it. I have experienced meditative states like this before. Mentally I give permission to myself to dissolve, to just concentrate on the feeling of breath as liquid poured from one vessel to another, not stopping just continually flowing. I feel like I am sinking, or expanding beyond my body, or both but I am not really feeling my muscles, bones or skin. It is deeply internal and intimate, and for a moment I just surrender to the sensation and to the breathing. And then I start to cry. Tears slip down my cheeks and pool in my ears, which pulls me back to my physicality. It becomes the*

*focus of what I feel. I remind myself that it's ok, that I can release, and I make a little plea to myself to stay present, to allow the emotions, images, sensations to float to the surface and then be released. These are all things I've heard and read about in Yoga. I just go with it. It's what you are supposed to do.*

*Lying there in the first 5 minutes of class we focus on stilling the body, attuning our awareness to our breath as it fills our body, pauses, and slowly seeps out to end in another pause. I deeply enter corpse pose. And for a split second – long enough to trigger emotional outpouring – I am my mom. Lying in a hospital bed in the middle of a living room, her body shutting down, organs failing below the surface of a still, calm body. Her mind surrendered to the peace of it all. Her last three breaths. One long inhale, then two short inhales, and then the quiet exhale of her spirit leaving her body. The phrase “we all die on an exhale” drifts into my mind as I exhale. For a brief moment I re-feel the intensity of it all – a deep, bone penetrating grief, the awe inspiring experience of witnessing death, and the peace and freedom I somehow knew she felt. It's really too much, actually. I try to stay connected to my breath and my body, present here in this class, but I lose it. I wish I had chosen a different class. I could have gone to a flow class, or a Hatha class. My attention would be focused then on struggles for balance, the teetering place between strength and stretch, where areas held tight would be my concern. I don't think I was ready for this one, and I wasn't expecting this. I wasn't aware of how much emotion I was holding in my muscles; or how the simple yet rigorous task of releasing and relaxing, focusing on breath and stilling the mind enough to let sensations come into focus, would allow deeply felt, deeply contained emotions to*

*surface. As if speaking to me, our instructor reminds us to just be there. It is our chance to “do nothing,” and give in to the posture.*

*The language our instructor uses places emphasis on and confidence in the healing action within each of the poses. It is as if just by doing them we will get some magical benefits. And if we can be present, focused on the interior of our being, the areas where space is created and the mind stills enough to let sensation flow and where organs can be light, soft and fluid, where skin can drape like silk over our bones, this magic does happen. I fully believe it. This isn't my first time in restorative Yoga. I healed a torn meniscus this way, a broken heart, and marked the passing of a professor through this practice. But I hadn't prepared or even thought that I might face the somatic experience of my mom's death through research for a Ph.D. project. I think I should have known better.*

*In this class I actually feel my internal, visceral landscape – places where tension grips muscles while others are released and calm, parts of my body I've neglected and strained through the sedentary lifestyle I've had recently. I experience my body at the level of muscles, ligaments and tendons that gently stretch and open, allowing bones to shift slightly, which allows a further release of muscles, ligaments and tendons. I experience an awareness of how I have abused my body through stilling it, sitting for long hours. I have to face the ways I haven't cared for it in a gentle way, since my focus is always on fitness, endurance and overwork. The postures we relax into feel nourishing, and dare I say it, divine. Not in a new-agey spiritual way, but in a profoundly physical way that connects breath, mind and body.*

*I'm not buying into the mysticism our instructor, the advertising of the studio, or the soundtrack of waves crashing and flutes softly playing seduces me with. But there is something to the kind of expansiveness I feel in my body and mind, the sharp emotional insights that seem to flash into me briefly – connecting me to my mom to something beyond our physicality. The challenges and benefits of Restorative Yoga are more than trying to relax your body, or even to still yourself into a meditative state. The challenges I feel are, I suppose, of a more spiritual nature, and my guess that in this class, on this day, I experienced a physical kind of prayer.*

### **Flowing Into Asana**

Thinking through the Restorative Yoga class I am embarrassed and unsure of what I experienced, let alone my choice to write about it. As a trained critic of performance and culture, what I just described veers between decontextualization, mysticism, and articulating the profoundness of physical experience; the latter seems too ephemeral, intimate and spiritual to be included in a dissertation project. And yet this awkward moment exists.

In a powerful, deeply physical way, this Yoga class in particular offered me some interesting insights. To start with, before the class began I was attempting to get into “the zone.” Psychologists, sports coaches, and performers may describe this as hyper-focused, immersive attention, or finding a flow that brings a calm but energized mental focus. Some claim this state of mind/being allows us to better synchronize our conscious and subconscious minds, taking us to an elevated place of consciousness. For me, accessing this state requires a folding inward of my attention, stilling and coiling my energy and

focus in ways that result in me performing movement differently but also in experiencing movement/myself in an altered way. Things are magnified. I am more in-tune with myself. I have always considered this a version of physical meditation, and most people writing about flow discuss the similarities to practices that elevate consciousness, most visible in “Eastern” religions.

Being deeply internal as a way to begin the class is my only explanation of what happened after. Lying in *savasana*, or corpse pose, we can move beyond relaxation into a state of meditation. Although many would argue that meditation is purely mental/spiritual, for me there is an embodied, physical component as well that allows me to reach an altered state. Following Jacqui Alexander, who asserts that Spiritual practice can be understood as bodily praxis (*Pedagogies* 297), memory too can be seen in this way. As I lay there in a state that felt bodiless, I *felt* like my mom. It wasn't a conscious thought noting similarity in body position, or even thinking about death and associating it to her. I had not been thinking about her at all. For an instant that collapsed time, I was transported through memory. I felt lightness, expansion, and peace that somehow I knew she felt. The only way to describe it was peaceful, familiar, and truthful. The strength of this brought a wave of tears that ultimately signaled I had lost the unique feeling. The sharper memories of the experience crashed in, and my reaction (wishing I had chosen a different class etc...) confirms that something had happened. And herein lies my challenge. In a practice so distorted myth, fantasies of Orientalism and mysticism, I had what I can best describe as a profound physical/emotional/spiritual (?) experience. A shift in consciousness.



Suzanne Newcombe writes that even in very franchised styles like Bikram Yoga, or structured classes of Ashtanga, or even the more flexible but systematically arranged forms like Iyengar, the ritual-like environment serves to assist practitioners to effect a change in their internal consciousness. She notes that “for some this might be articulated within a spiritual framework, while others would be more likely to describe the change of consciousness more simply as ‘relaxation’ or a reduction in stress” (“Magic and Yoga” 67). Many practitioners and studios describe the meaning of Yoga as “union” with a higher power, and Norman Sjoman suggests that this is why Yoga is prescribed for healing physical issues like bad backs and diabetes or helping with “ultimate questions of teleology (such as suffering and liberation from it)” (qtd. in Hauser 67). Iyengar, one of the grandfathers of many contemporary Yoga teachers and styles, saw the “physical postures as means of achieving the ultimate goal of yoga, as *moksa* or absorption with the Universal self” (qtd. in Hauser 68). Using the practice as a vehicle for this more spiritual pursuit explains why, in Newcombe’s words, “many *asana* practitioners would also affirm that there is something to the transformative experience of yoga practice that cannot be reduced to biomedical ‘scientific’ mechanisms” (69).

Perhaps my experience can be explained as a momentary brush with higher consciousness, but I’m unsure about Newcombe’s assertion that it is transformative. To me this calls up a lineage of white westerners seeking to “transform” themselves through/at the expense of/in complete disregard of the other. Further complicating this, while Yoga may promise relaxation/meditation, from the start it has been framed as something to enhance women’s bodies. When we embody the form we also embody this history.

### **A White Woman Walks Into A Studio....**

Tracing just two examples in order to contextualize some of the problematics involved in a white woman's embodiment of an "Eastern" form, the theme running through each frames Yoga as a practice to transform and enhance us: something through which we gain culturally valued aesthetics – a nice body, youthful glow, a calm, controlled, mind and emotional balance.<sup>41</sup> Writing in 1936, Louise Morgan is credited with popularizing the sun salutation series based on interviews with the Rajah of Aundh (Newcombe 69), "essentially re-packaging sun salutation as an elixir of youth and beauty for the modern woman" (Elliott Goldberg qtd. in Hauser 69). Morgan claimed that Yoga contained the ability to transform "both the inner psyche and outer material body in accordance with a woman's will to maintain her youth and beauty" (Newcombe 70). Ten years after Morgan, Eugene Peterson, better known as Yogi Indra Devi also harnessed the "qualities of health, youth, and beauty" as ways of being in the world made possible through Hatha Yoga (Newcombe 70). While Devi's project was also to spread spiritual enlightenment through Yoga, the linkage was made stronger between inner and outer transformation in line with promises/expectations of beauty and youth for women.

A staggering number of articles, books, websites and classes exist and continually market Yoga's mystic powers as the means of optimizing health, reversing or stopping aging, and harnessing glowing beauty (inner and outer). These "intercultural" encounters transform Yoga into a product: the means to achieving what is culturally valued in the west. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Yoga is predominantly advertised through thin, white bodies, so the "intercultural" encounter also works to reinscribe power and reaffirm

the white body as central and containing the ability, opportunity and choice to gain this knowledge. It gives me the assurance that I can choose to either adopt Yoga as a spiritual practice, or decontextualize it to focus on the physical form as a way to better myself, or graft on the assumption that practicing Yoga is symbolic of an eco-conscious, alternative lifestyle.

As a consumer of Yoga culture I expected the aromatic, essential oils, the organic herbal teas, and the jute mats the Yoga studio was selling. These are all objects used to represent an environmentally conscious/globally aware/holistic lifestyle. As I discuss in the advertising of Yoga, many practitioners and advertisers consider these things synonymous with Yoga.

Ascribing health and well being to Yoga practice, what gets created are links between personal/individual health and the health of the world. Sarah Strauss and Laura Mandelbaum's recent work discusses how many practitioners adopt a view that by individually living more holistic, eco-conscious, peaceful lives they will impact the global community they are part of. Strauss and Mandelbaum point out that a specific demographic – "LOHAS," or "Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability" represent a lucrative target market willing to spend their money "consciously" ("Consuming Yoga" 176). Also discussing this, Lau sees Yoga positioned as a "means of promoting enhanced social relations by reducing individual stress...through the discursive fields in which these bodily practices are embedded, personal transformations become political as social and planetary wellness is directly correlated with individual health" (5). Myths of ancient wisdom, non-Western paradigms of health and spirituality, and a practice that offers personal transformation are the packaging to Yoga. The discourse around the practice

spins Yoga as a form to cure modern/Western/urban ailments – the frenetic pace of our (mostly sedentary) lives. Further in this rational, we are encouraged to consume Yoga as the best way to make a positive influence on the health of the world.

In the class I took, we were frequently, gently reminded that it was our opportunity to do nothing but relax. To meditate the hour and a half away in poses that would heal our bodies and give our minds a break from technology. Embodying these ideals our instructor seemed to represent what we should all long for – being enlightened enough to “opt out” of the rat race and teach Yoga, spiritually advanced and committed to a healthy, Yogic lifestyle. He knew the lingo, he used the Sanskrit names for the *asanas*, he talked about his ashram in India, all indicators of his authenticity as Yoga instructor. But it came off as slightly pompous and manufactured. He was a Yogi by all of the marketing standards – he reflected the images circulating in media about what Yoga is and does. But my inner critic mistrusts that, and I opt instead for decontextualization.

Defending this choice, I feel that a lot of the packaging of Yoga as ancient tradition rather than a modern practice, are connected to fantasies of Orientalism that decorate it is a selling strategy. It reflects our desire for exotic otherness, a way out of hectic lives and a search for deeper meaning than consumption. And yet as a white western woman embodying the form, and rejecting the potentially spiritual element (as translated through the instructor), my choice is reflective of a long lineage of privilege that allows me to decide what to adopt/appropriate and what to refuse (either as too unfamiliar and strange, or not “authentic” enough). And I do this easily. Nobody looks at me as other or stranger – my body reads as normal or normal plus (since I have the elevated consciousness to be practicing Yoga). Even if my body shape and size isn’t the

ideal thin, flexible Yoga body (yet), I am congratulated for wanting to be there and work on it. As Strauss and Mandelbaum suggest “the social construction of the self through bodily practices is an important aspect of the meanings and value ascribed to yoga” (180). Along with confirmation that I am working to better myself, which translates into practicing something that will make me a more desirable symbol of western aesthetics, the social weight of being a Yoga practitioner affirms my position.

### **Politicizing Possibilities**

On one hand my physical experience taking the Restorative Yoga class offered me an intense, deeply personal experience that seemed to approach the spiritual/mental elements of Yoga. On the other hand, embodying and “using” the form as a means of personal transformation (physically or otherwise), I run the risk of extending legacies of appropriation and re-affirming/reifying Orientalist myths of the East as more spiritually evolved. So I wonder how to make my embodiment of the practice more politicized? Perhaps one answer is to consider the implications of viewing Yoga as something more than just an Orientalist-infused product or means to a toned, flexible body and calm mind.

If we view Yoga as part of a movement culture based on experimentation with physical forms that have distinct cultural ties, possibly the transcultural knowledge it produces or transfers can be highlighted. Although heavily influenced by the Orientalist myths, fantasies and images surrounding the practice, intercultural encounters within Yoga offer another perspective on the possibilities contained within our bodies. The classic Cartesian distancing between mind and body is passed up within a practice that specifically works to join the two. Promoting somatic awareness, Yoga provides space

and instruction for how to achieve meditative attention/a quieting of the brain, but framed in a palatable way for people not interested in viewing the form as spiritual practice.

Physically our bodies respond to the breathing techniques, deep stretch and strengthening exercises, and the form itself can trigger somatic/emotional release like the one I experienced. Regardless of the verbal Orientalizing that often happens in the vocal techniques and banter of Yoga instructors, at a cellular level our bodies are shifting, adapting to the physical demands of the form, and being altered by knowledge contained within the *asanas*—knowledge of a non-Western way of viewing the relation between body and mind that flies in the face of North American modes of experiencing the world.

Considering Yoga as an element of movement culture also allows us a more politicized view of how it functions. As Strauss and Mandelbaum articulate, “the meaning that practicing yoga can have for people is symbolic capital, linked to social class” (181). Using Bourdieu’s theories of taste and preference, “which are parallel to and reinforce, class hierarchies,” they argue that Yoga is a manifested cultural preference that become “naturalized, embodied daily practices” for many people (181). Read in this way, class distinctions are conveyed through Yoga. In the words of Strauss and Mandelbaum, “Yoga and the making of a yogic body through lifestyle choices associated with practicing yoga, are therefore valued not only as a fitness fad, but also as part of a bourgeois, cosmopolitan class identity entailing membership in a yogic community of practice, which is available for purchase on the global market of health and wellness” (181). Movement culture can offer us a window into how practices like Yoga are both used in order to enhance and transform, and as reflections of cosmopolitan tastes. Being aware of the myths and exoticism surrounding the form, that ask us to imagine “others”

in a specific way, could potentially politicize how each practice is taken up and used by movement culture.

But the transformations I speak of, and the ways to recognize biopolitical regulation and habits of cosmopolitanism are really individual, even though they may be practiced en masse. What would politicized engagement with movement culture look like on a larger scale, and how can we foster communities of resistance through Yoga, given all of the distortions it goes through? One answer is offered by a Facebook group (who now have a more extensive website) called “decolonizing yoga.” Emphasizing a place “where spirituality meets social justice” the members/Yogis/activists first created the group as a place to post news, resources and solidarity following an effort to protest the 2013 Yoga Journal Conference at the Hyatt Hotel in San Francisco (decolonizingyoga.com). Founded by Be Scofield, a transgender writer, activist and Yogi, the group has morphed into a place highlighting “the voices of queer people, people of color, disability activists and more in relationship to yoga and countering oppression in general” (decolonizingyoga.com). Discussions of access, safe spaces of welcome and acceptance, issues of racialization and other forms of privilege are all viewed through the lens of Yoga studios and classes, and the larger mobilization of the practice in general. What I find exciting and energizing about the group are the differentiated perspectives that show a commitment to dialogue that brings social justice into the studio.

Featured recently on their site is an interview with feminist Melanie Klein who suggests that Yoga is the best space to have conversations about race and other uncomfortable issues. Her position is that many practitioners are already connecting on a

different level than they would in other situations, and are often invested in learning from each other. Klein stresses the need to do our own work on internalized oppression and privilege, but positions the Yoga community as potential actors in social change, if we step up and engage in these conversations. While the members of “decolonizing yoga” are not representative of all people who attend classes, their growing numbers indicate that issues of oppression, race and social justice are at the forefront of many people’s minds. In Toronto, for example, some studios now advertise specific “positive space initiatives.” One downtown studio, Kula, states: “we aim to be an anti-racist and fat, queer and trans positive space” (annex.mykula). Beyond a declaration, their website offers eloquent, politicized reasons why their studio has made these particular shifts toward inclusion. They write:

Even in a yoga community filled with good intentions, we recognize that we each have a unique set of privileges that have the potential to create further separation and suffering (the opposite of what we are often aiming to do within our practice). Sometimes when talking about concepts like oneness, collective enlightenment and the light & the dark we fail to truly celebrate/affirm diversity and/or honour the reality of many peoples’ lived experiences in a world that continues to systemically privilege some groups over others. (annex.mykula)

I see Kula acting consciously, fostering spaces of welcoming and generating communities of resistance to mainstream oppression. As example, their schedule offers classes for “queer and brown girls” in an attempt to “actively create safer space within a community that is predominantly heteronormative and white” (annex.mykula). In ways we can read Kula as challenging other studios to take a close, introspective look at the kind of Yoga and larger perspective they are perpetuating. Regardless of whether or not mainstream



studios will take up the same kind of progressive stance that reflects our world, what Kula is doing is offering a translation of politics into practice.

### **The Power Of “Ish” In Muay Thai**

*We are early for the class and the gym is booming with hip-hop. It smells like sweat and rubber. We slip off our shoes and introduce ourselves to the man at the front desk. He is warm and welcoming, happy to see us ready for our first class. We fill out a form and he assures us that will be the easiest part of the class. He is smiling and keeps his tone light, but it seems like he is trying to scare us. He looks at me and says the instructor loves abs, and that we should just try to do what we can. Failure and not being able to keep up seems guaranteed. I suck my abs in a little more, pay, and follow him across the mats for a tour of the gym. As we walk past the mirrors he throws a few punches and elbows, as if to authenticate himself but I wonder if he would have done it without us there to be his audience. We pass a boxing ring with Tibetan Prayer flags hanging above, a shrine to Buddha, and 3 heavy bags. Down a set of rickety steps to the basement carpeted in fake grass where typical gym equipment is scattered, he shows us to the change rooms. It's bare bones, but at least there are two showers, and a few notes stating not to leave anything valuable here. Comfort isn't the focus here.*

*I opt for yoga pants and a tank top – not the pair of Thai shorts I have, since I am trying not to stand out today. It has been two years since my last class, and I'm scared. It's a type of scared that can be described as deep-in-your-guts anxiety. It's a feeling I know well, since it happened even when I trained regularly, 6 days a week.*

*A Muay Thai class is the most physically intense thing I have done – for an hour and a half minimum you push your body and mind to the point of failure. Not the point when you say it's time to slow down, or stop, but the point when your muscles give out. When they stop firing and shut down from lactic acid or exhaustion. When you nearly fall down the stairs afterward because you are so tired, or you throw up (but keep going). I think it is the combo of adrenaline and duration that makes it so intense. I'm sure the punching and kicking sends cortisol<sup>42</sup> levels skyrocketing, as we practice the fight part of our fight-or-flight response. Our body doesn't know the difference between real and simulated (chemically speaking). I try to breathe deeply, mentally focusing on staying present. Now is not the time to panic and waste energy.*

*Upstairs, I push my bag as far into the wall as I can, so as not to incite any comments or draw any more attention to myself. Today I don't need the extra pressure of someone reminding me that I should be able to do more, push harder, that I shouldn't have quit. In this world people don't pull punches – literally and figuratively. People are encouraging and supportive, but equally upfront about telling you very publically about your shortcomings, your failures, or telling you to push harder. As a woman there is an added level of weirdness. On one hand, the men in the class are respectful of how hard their female counterparts are – how hard they can kick, how they keep up or surpass men in physical stamina and effort. But on the other hand there is a tendency for us to adopt a very masculine way of being. It's hard to explain, but I have always noticed that in order to be taken seriously, we act and talk in ways that mimic or reflect the highly masculine world of Muay Thai. At a certain level (of serious Muay Thai training) you never quit or complain about things hurting. In the gym you talk about training and*

*fighting – I don't think I've ever heard discussions about nails or fashion or anything else set apart as "feminine." Women may still be highly aware of their fashion, and at special events when the dress code is "dress to impress" many wear flirty, sexy clothing to highlight their female-ness. But in the Muay Thai gym our female-ness is measured by our toughness, our ability to push ourselves to become lethal, effective fighters. There is an assumption that you are there to learn to fight – and being in the ring against an opponent, putting your technique into action, representing your gym – is what everyone (male or female) should aspire to.*

*I'm thinking about this as I stretch, try to warm up, and try to blend in. It's a tight community and we definitely stand out as people new to the class. Nobody is talking to us. At 11am we are instructed by the guy at the front desk to start skipping, even though the instructor is late. Arms swinging, feet pounding away like boxers rather than kids in the schoolyard, we skip. There are only a few times I lose the rhythm and feel the snakebite of rope hitting shins. It leaves a mark each time. We skip for 5 minutes, then 7 minutes, and still no instructor. He saunters in a short time later, at a relaxed pace but full of energy. He starts skipping with us, shouting out when to sprint (skip as fast as possible), when to relax (skip as normal). I am exhausted already, and my head is starting to pound with my increased heart rate. Of course the previous 8 minutes of skipping don't count. We go through another full 5 minutes while he warms up. I say a silent "thank god" when we are told to drop the ropes (for now).*

*The exercise portion of the class is manageable. I keep pace with the Burpees (squat, jump as high as you can, land in a pushup and from there jump up to the squat and repeat), the walking knees that emulate driving your bent knee into your opponents*

*solar plexus or face, the pushkicks to simulate kicking someone directly in the face/chest/leg, and the million tricep dips and pushups we do. I am slower in the next round of Burpees, squats, mountain climbers (a kind of running on the spot while holding plank) and “spring-ups” – a specialty in Muay Thai where you lie fully stretched on your back, do a sit up and hit your stomach with both fists, reach forward and hit your shins with both fists, then on the way back to lying down hit your stomach again. 3 punches to your body for every fast crunch you do, in order to “condition” yourself for what it feels like to get hit during a fight. In various forms these exercises are repeated and repeated. Sometimes we skip in between. And at the end of the 45-minute fitness-conditioning portion of the class I am drenched in sweat, purple in the face and ready to go home. But this is when the class actually starts. What we just survived was the warm-up (thankfully there wasn’t a mandatory 10km run for this class as there are to many others).*

*We partner up for pad work, and even though my partner (the other girl in the class) has an injured shoulder, each one of her punches and kicks requires a lot of my upper body strength to brace against the assault. We are reminded to “ish” as we exhale – an audible sound to help insure we are breathing, to generate power and to help us explode into the movement. Most of us are continually corrected to be more explosive, to push harder and faster, to put everything into each strike, and to correct our form slightly in order to do this. There is very little time to catch our breath before we move on to the next sequence (which we will do many, many repetitions of). We practice punches to the face, knees, and different kinds of kicks. As we are reminded, each one we do is supposed to damage (break ribs, knock out your opponent, physically move him away from you). Quite a few times I feel like I can’t do 5 more, or even 1 more. But true to Muay Thai*

*spirit I do 5 more, and then 10 more. Pushing way beyond physical discomfort, beyond exhaustion, into a zone where it becomes a mental fight. At this point you are fighting your own exhaustion and the rational part of your brain that says enough, that wants to highlight the sensations of pain and fatigue, the tension and tightness building and the bruises forming under raw and inflamed shins or skinless knees and knuckles.*

*Aside from getting praised on technique, the best compliments are about the “heart” that students put into training, the ways a person embodies the “spirit” of Muay Thai. This translates to the intensity they train at, the commitment they show, the fact that they don’t give up and throw the towel in. When fighters lose in the ring, there is similar language used. You only fail if you don’t show heart, don’t give it your all until the fight is finished, and don’t learn where you need to improve, how you need to train harder, or what you need to do next time to win. Similarly, in class you are seen as tough and committed when you can vomit from exertion and then keep on training. It isn’t a safe or sustainable way of working, and a big part of me now resists this idea.*

*Pushing to these limits and then beyond is definitely exhilarating. We end the class with more pushups and abs, but the sense that it is over gets me through these last exercises. We bow to our instructor and to our partners, showing respect and saying thank you in Thai: “sawadee kap” for men or “sawadee ka” for women. After a shower and a wobbly walk up the stairs I pass the instructor brutally hitting and kicking a heavy bag, his “ish” echoing throughout the gym. I bow again to him in thanks, which he returns in between combos.*

*Walking out into the fresh air of Kensington Market I feel like I’ve survived something, been through an experience most people don’t understand. My hands shake*

*from arm fatigue for a good half an hour after the class. Once the throbbing in my head subsides I have the sense that every cell in my body is vibrating. Exhausted, exhilarated, I walk with a slight limp. I'm aware of pain in my right hip flexor and knee and the raw skin on my right shin from a hundred or more kicks. Aside from the limp, I am walking differently. More aware of how powerful my body is, even though fatigue is embedded deep within each muscle of my arms, legs and abs. I know I will feel the soreness of a terrific workout in the days to come. The class was a good reminder of the reverence within gym culture for the instructors, the knowledge they contain and the awe of how hard they train to get to the level they are at. Although I was slower than I used to be, I showed heart, discipline, and mental focus that pushed me to continue, or use my weapons harder, or simply to not stop. There was little time to think about anything except harnessing physical power to make punches and kicks more brutal, effective, precise. I had forgotten how in Muay Thai, as with other martial arts, you redefine your body as a weapon. In place of arms and legs you have punches, kicks. Knees and elbows are re-visioned as you imagine them smashing into various points on somebody's skull. The potential for violence though is structured, disciplined, and rarely used outside of the gym or the ring. Nobody boasts about getting into street fights. There is an unspoken code of conduct that unless necessary, you use your skill only against those as skilled as you, and (unless necessary) only in the space of the gym or ring. I feel my body as something containing the potential for violence. And after the class I walk around as if I have a secret, a physical and mental strength only I am aware of, and in spite of the fact that I'm going to get a pedicure.*

## **Bodies As Weapons**

What impressed me most about my experience is that it allowed me to feel my body differently. The very act of surviving the grueling physical warm up, of pushing my body beyond limits I am normally comfortable with, and practicing fighting techniques is outside of my usual perception of myself. What I embodied was strength, stamina, the potential for violence and the ability to do damage and a kind of mental disciplining of my body. Discussing embodiment in *Beyond Words* (2012), Carol-Lynne Moore and Kaoru Yamamoto write: “we dwell in a concrete world of kinetic experience; this is the indescribable visceral domain that we, and only we, can know in our bones” (47). By embodying Muay Thai – the physical elements and the prized “heart” and “spirit” that are closely associated with the ability to mentally discipline yourself to keep going – the “kinetic experience” is physical but also mental. While admittedly this was only temporary, I left the studio feeling empowered, tough, and capable of things ordinary people don’t choose to do.<sup>43</sup> In ways I was able to reconsider myself as a woman.

Without delving into an analysis of the performativity of gender and the socially constructed ways we perform/mis-perform our versions of “male” and “female,” I want to highlight my experience of being a woman in a hypermasculine setting. In their fascinating article, “Managing Emotional Manhood: Fighting and Fostering Fear in Mixed Martial Arts” (2010), Christian Vaccaro, Douglas Schrock and Janice McCabe emphasize that manhood “is not a static concept, but a malleable image that is constructed for public consumption” (416). Their study of controlling and transforming emotions (primarily fear) within Mixed Martial Arts outlines the hypermasculine world of martial arts like Muay Thai, but also the ways “organizational social structures can

emphasize or de-emphasize gender” (416). In the class I took, the physical strength and speed, skill with weapons, and the ability to “fight” is taught as gender-neutral, and available to all students. But it is worth noting that these are all characteristics of masculinity. Stéphane Rennesson’s phrase for the moral and social values embedded in the form is an “embodied curriculum in Thai manhood” (“Competing Cultures of Masculinity” 43). She writes “the development of a strong, manly physique, the mastering of one’s strength and of violence, and learning to be self reliant are among the Muay Thai skills that lead to the mastering of manhood” (45). Outside the context of Thailand, these versions of masculinity seem to be similarly praised and shaped through North American fight culture.

Women entering this world are not seen as posing challenge to masculine traits, but are positioned as things females can embody and excel at. In one sense this is very empowering, and in ways it promotes an equality based on physicality. But it also limits other expressions of female-ness that are seen as frivolous, superficial and not in line with serious Muay Thai training. My experience has been that training in this environment tends to alter the performances we give as women. We approach training differently and expect to be physically on par with the strength of our male peers, it changes the manner of speech we use and the topics we discuss. One female who has won five championship belts and trains at the gym I took the class at writes in her blog: “my gym is my family. When I open the door, I’m home. I put on my gear and it doesn’t matter what I do for a living or what happened that day. No judgment and no words needed. Muay Thai is blood, sweat, and tears. But with the goal to always, *always* improve, you are your own reward.” Her words are inspiring and resonate with her dedication to Muay Thai. They



also reflect the rhetoric of biopolitics as self-improvement or self-discipline and hint at some of the warrior myths that wrap around and through the positioning of Muay Thai in movement culture.

### **Transforming Into A Warrior**

From a certain angle, the embodiment of a form as demanding as Muay Thai symbolizes a commitment to transforming your body into something healthy, strong, skilled and disciplined. In movement culture the body is the primary site where “self-transformation” takes place. In their work on Yoga, but equally applicable to Muay Thai, Strauss and Mandelbaum frame physical practices as “techniques of self.” Drawing on Foucault, they set up movement practices as “techniques of the self [that] are integrated into structures of coercion” (Foucault qtd. in Strauss and Mandelbaum 185). Dominating social values and aesthetics, supported through the rhetoric of health and wellness, self-discipline and self-improvement, are translated through movement practices. They are chosen as strategies for people to effect change “by their own means” (185). Practices like Muay Thai allow people to perform “a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves” (185).

Nikolas Rose extends this idea into what he terms “ethopolitics” where “life itself, as it is lived in its everyday manifestations, is the object of adjudication” (“Politics” 18). We try to optimize our corporeality in order to be more successful, beautiful, or happier. For Strauss and Mandelbaum, it is hard to separate the mandate of self-transformation and self-improvement that permeates Yoga (and I would argue all of the practices

associated with movement culture) “from the capitalistic and neoliberal ideology of self-reliance, hard work, and individualism” (186).<sup>44</sup> Muay Thai perhaps embraces even more aggressively the discourses of self-discipline, self-transformation and a commitment to mental and physical control and conditioning of the body.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, many gyms advertise as places of tradition and authenticity, promising the coveted physique of a fighter’s body, the skill to defend yourself, and the opportunity to train as part of a select community. On one hand, the biopolitical techniques Strauss and Mandelbaum outline are embraced and celebrated. They are considered good, noble and valuable approaches to contemporary life. Most marketing of Muay Thai promotes the transformative possibilities, mental clarity and control, self-confidence and physical changes that are possible through training. Muay Thai is set up as the antithesis to western problems of stress and danger. Ensuring a broad reach though, the gym I trained at for example, advertises the effectiveness of the workouts, selling classes as fitness training rather than the means to learn a martial skill. On the other hand, aside from contributing to the ways power gets inscribed, this ideological framing of Muay Thai also reflects Orientalist myths of warriorhood circulating in our imaginations.

Surrounding many martial arts are images of Eastern warriors that call up codes of honour, strength and morality that exceed that of normal people. What is written about contemporary warrior myths in Western imagination is found mainly in pop culture and writing by martial artists, where numerous books/websites/articles offer descriptions, advice and meaning of what a modern warrior is.<sup>45</sup> According to some, the warrior lifestyle is characterized by honour, integrity, wisdom and courage (wisdomwarrior.com).

In a somewhat confusing article titled “The Warrior Lifestyle” Dr. Bohdi Sanders writes: “the only absolute that the warrior lives by is that of what is right and wrong. If it is not right, he doesn’t do it. He determines what is right and wrong by his strict code of ethics, not some arbitrary laws or the politically correct standards of the day” (wisdomwarrior.com). Within this passage, and reflective of the article in general, there is a very clear, specific story being told. The warrior (a he) operates by an elevated code of honour and justice outside the constraints of what society deems right or wrong or socially acceptable. Sanders goes on to state:

The warrior lifestyle is for anyone who wants to live a life of excellence; a life which adheres to a strict code of ethics. You must be willing to live your life based on honor, preparedness and what is right. This lifestyle requires that you put your ethics before your comfort, and that you put what is right before what is profitable. It requires filial duty, dedication to family and friends, and a willingness to help those in need. It requires independence in thought and action. This lifestyle is a decision, not a profession. (wisdomwarrior.com)

Sanders was quoted at length numerous times on Facebook posts of Muay Thai students (see Chapter Three for analysis), and the kind of mythologization of training as a warrior infuses the words of the female champion fighter I quoted earlier. She discusses devoting herself to her practice, reflecting that “Muay Thai is blood sweat and tears” where the goal is always to improve yourself. In her statement “you are your own reward” she echoes the attitude of Sanders and the suggestion that martial artists/warriors operate according to a different set of moral/ethical principles. Hard work, discipline, transformation into something better than you already are seem to be the goals. As John Keenan points out, in place of the contextualized meaning that martial arts has in its

culture of origin, “a grand mystique has grown up to invest the martial arts with a spiritual vigor and a purported inner wisdom” (“The Mystique of Martial Arts” 422).

In my reverence for the physicality of the class I took, what I describe as the “unspoken code of conduct,” and the feeling as if I had a secret, potentially violent ability underneath my female exterior, I am also guilty of embodying these myths. While the experience of the class did leave me feeling empowered, the Orientalist fantasies of disciplined brutality condensed in (Asian) masculinity that surround my experience can’t be ignored.

### **Possibilities Beyond Orientalist Fantasy**

Even with the myths of Oriental warriors/ contemporary urban warriorhood, there is another way to consider the physical experiences of training in martial arts like Muay Thai. Perhaps offering a more politicized engagement with the context Muay Thai exists in, being open to the rituals associated with Thai fighting is a place to start. The round music, for example, played during every class while students practice technique, and usually accompanying live fights in Thailand both opens a student’s ears to a different tonal structure, and weaves the fighting into a more complete contextual web. Equally as important is the *ram muay*, performed by fighters before the fight begins (that I discuss in Chapter Four), where the ideas of a bloodthirsty fighter are challenged by seeing them dance in the centre of the ring. Stereotypes of people with a penchant for violence are cracked slightly when Muay Thai fighters reveal a deeper investment in complex traditions when they include dance as part of the fight. In a way this challenges notions of masculinity to include rituals that are often seen as feminizing within North American

fight culture. For fighters to embody the *ram muay* shows a commitment to the entirety of the form, rather than just picking out elements of technique.

According to Orion Lee, a writer for Breaking Muscle website, “the *ram muay* is performed by fighters in order to pay homage to their teachers and family and to bless themselves with victory in the ring” (breakingmuscle.com). Unique to their training camp, the *ram muay* is passed down to the fighters from their teachers, and will sometimes include actions to challenge or intimidate their opponent. Lee describes how before this dance fighters “seal” the ring by walking in a counterclockwise circle around the ring, often stopping to pray or be blessed at each corner. The entire ritual can take up to five minutes to complete, and in Lee’s position it is “ a deeply meaningful performance that has been a part of Muay Thai for centuries.” In an interesting twist, he goes on to say “if you ever have the opportunity to watch a live Muay Thai fight please do not boo the fighters if they choose to perform the *wai kru*.<sup>46</sup> It is a beautiful part of the martial art and should be respected and admired by its spectators” (breakingmuscle.com). The picture of Lee, underneath which his accomplishments in Muay Thai, kettlebells and boxing are listed, shows that he is a fairly young white man. As a white man he is calling for a respect of traditions – by both fighters and spectators. This part of his argument speaks to the potentials for more conscious practice that comes from dedication to learning the history and rituals of a form. While, in places, Lee’s writing does evoke ancient warrior traditions, it leaves me with an impression that intercultural learning can happen in a Muay Thai gym.

Thinking through how to unsettle the discomforts of biopolitical rhetoric, or myths of warriorhood and still foster politicized communities, I look to Robert Wyrod

who argues that martial arts can create more than individual bodies. His work in “Warriors of the South Side” (1999), describes the ways martial arts training—as something that empowers individuals and re-builds self-confidence—also creates communities of practitioners that collectively enacts resistance. Describing one of the *dojos*<sup>47</sup> in his ethnography about South Side Chicago, Wyrod states: “bodily practices, when performed collectively, open the door to the creation of a collective identity, one that intends to oppose domination” (127). He goes on to suggest that transformative aspects of fighting-style practice link the body to resistance. Rituals, hierarchy and family-like structure within martial arts spaces allow for “coordinated, collective, physical action of individuals [that] can shape their relationship to each other and to the larger social world” (128). In Wyrod’s formation of resistance, it is always a response to power dynamics, and “it can be individual or collective, conscious or not” (134). What his work shows is the possibility for collective resistance. He makes room for politicizing training even though groups may not necessarily agitate for changes in social politics. Nevertheless, the work they do as a collective can be seen as fighting oppression by offering counter-narratives.

In the Muay Thai world there is not the same importance placed on creating safe spaces to consciously work through social justice issues as in Yoga. Perhaps one reason is that for most people Muay Thai’s purpose is combat. But following Wyrod, we can see how through bodily self-discipline, identification with a gym or training center that becomes a safe, inclusive space can also be profoundly political. Both founders of the *dojos* Wyrod writes about attempt to mold martial arts training into a particular form of community activism. He writes, “although they are not engaged in an active political

struggle to redefine the social forces impinging on their communities, they are focused on altering the lives of individuals within the community of the dojo” (133). Each sees their work addressing and resisting the oppressive living conditions and intense racialized oppression facing their communities. Old School Muay Thai’s Youth Outreach Program does something similar.

Providing mostly accessible Muay Thai training to at-risk and new Canadian youth, Old School’s Youth Outreach program was created as a way to give back to the community. Describing this, founder James Hines writes “through the discipline and self-knowledge engendered through the study of Muay Thai, they gain the self-awareness and leadership skills required to then, in turn, support their community. Through self-growth comes more opportunity to...give good out, mentor and lead in turn” (mymuaythi.com). Hines and Wyrod both place importance on the creation of healthy community through positive mentorship. The importance on bodily practice is central, and it is through the rituals of disciplining the body in a social space where you are welcomed, accepted and encouraged that strong ties are established and resistance as politics of connection and cohesion is created.

### **Capoeira – When You Get Blisters On The Soles Of Your Feet**

*Like usual I am the first one there. I like to be early, quietly stretching and taking in the energy of the space. I can look around, feel grounded, and focus myself for the class ahead. In this space drums are stacked up next to heavy bags, tambourines touch focus pads, and there are an equal number of bright, feathered headdresses as belly pads to protect against kicks, punches and takedowns. In one corner is a thick stack of mats for ariel/acrobatic practice; in another the walls are decorated with berimbau.<sup>48</sup> The*

*floor is shiny, new wood that contrasts with a bright, white almost complete circle that takes up much of the space. Joining and breaking the circle is the word Axe printed clearly and emphasizing its significance to the group I'm going to train with. My understanding of the term has shifted with every instructor I have ever talked to. What resonated most recently is that it means flow, energy and life force. I stretch outside of this circle, taking in the huge wood carving hanging on the wall above the mirrors. Cut deeply into the wood is a fist clenching a berimbau, the wrist still circled by an iron cuff and chain that has been broken (in defiance/freedom). To me it represents the life force and flow of energy in this Capoeira academy, which spills directly from the history of Brazilian slavery. I see this because I know the history, I've sung the songs of resistance, and I've been told I'm too white to perform as an Orixa.<sup>49</sup>*

*Earlier, as I filled out the waiver, I noticed that the questions they asked about my reasons for joining were not typical. In addition to the standard boxes to check like health reasons, weight loss and muscle toning, were also the categories of acrobatics, music, martial arts, Brazilian culture, dance, community, family and fun. Judging by this Capoeira holds something for everyone, and it kind of upholds the blurry debate about whether the form is a dance or a martial art or a blend of both. It seems like in this academy it's both. As I fill out the form a woman walks in and greets the man who will be our instructor, with "salve." With ease they perform what looks like a secret handshake. As she passes she offers her hand. I go to shake it, she goes in for the secret version and we laugh at the messy result. Clearly I am not a member.*

*Stretching and chatting with another woman the questions I seem to keep getting asked is how much I am going to train. She has been practicing "for 4 years, or just 2*



*years depending on how you look at it.” At the start she came a couple of days a week, which, for her (and I’m guessing the rest of the academy), meant she wasn’t serious. 2 years ago she started training everyday, often twice a day, and she proclaims that she is now very devoted to Capoeira.*

*Two things strike me about our conversation. The first is that there is a conversation happening. It is a much more social environment than I am used to. People joke and laugh and generally make you feel welcome. In Muay Thai there isn’t much chit chat if you’re new – and it’s more an every person for themselves kind of space. In Yoga there definitely isn’t any talking. Most people are trying to meditate, relax and focus beforehand, or are busy checking email or answering text messages. The second is an expectation is that if I’ve walked through the doors to the academy, then I’m in. I’m committing to Capoeira. There is no “trying it out” to see if I like it. It isn’t a pressured sales tactic, and later nobody will talk to me about membership options. It is assumed that I’m already committing to Capoeira and this studio, just by attending the class. Regardless of how good I may be, or my background (ethnic or economic), it feels like I could be part of a diverse community.*

*The music is on, and we start our warm-up as Mestre Barrão’s voice sings out to us. We jog in a circle for a while, and then follow the instructor in a series of long, deep stretches. We practice a few of the various kicks we will do, and that’s it for the warm up. Nothing vigorous like Muay Thai, and I wonder if it is partially due to the length of the class, or the instructor’s preference. I am partnered up with a woman who came in late, and whose son sits watching and sometimes copying us. She tells me they both practice regularly, but she is also relatively new and has trouble figuring out some of the*

*combos. For the rest of the hour we figure out how to maneuver our bodies in space in relation to our partner. We practice how to escape and turn it into an attack that is then countered and defended against with another attack; then we fall back into the ginga. Twisting and kicking, moving upside down and in surprising ways makes me dizzy, and the balls of my feet start reminding me I haven't practiced in a long time. I have no calluses built up, and blisters are threatening. It's fun, we laugh occasionally when we get tangled up in each other, and in slow motion we try to figure it out well enough to get a "good" from the instructor when he asks we demonstrate that we've got it.*

*Aside from the repetition of where to move your feet in relation to your hands in relation to your partner, the other instructions border on philosophy. We are reminded that we need to be prepared for anything in the roda – for example if we play against someone who is stronger or bigger than us then we need to escape quickly and use all of our force and tactic against them. It seems kind of like a metaphor for life. The kicks and escapes we are practicing are interspersed with the ginga that acts as a rest and a time to re-connect to the rhythm of your partner.*

*We practice the variations of kicks, blocks and counters over and over. My thighs start to burn. Sometimes I get lost in the rhythm of the music and the flow of the kicks, but when I stop I notice that I am really sweating. I don't have the feeling of wanting to throw up as I do in Muay Thai, but I am working hard. Unlike Yoga or Muay Thai, the class isn't just about mentally working through discomfort. The turning, kicking and escaping is a low-grade exhausting but the class is only an hour so it seems to end quickly. Thankfully there isn't a roda at the end. It is the whole purpose of Capoeira, and the thing I shy away from the most. I like the clapping, the singing, the music, but*

*not really the playing. It always seemed dangerous since I was never sure where a kick was going to come from, or if I would react quickly enough to escape. Playing against more skilled practitioners often made me feel mentally and physically slow and being in the roda usually bordered on humiliation. I get that these feelings are part of the hierarchy in the group I belonged to; that the unexpected attacks and need for quick thinking is part of the game, but I didn't like it. I'm relieved that today was just technique. I pull on my socks, aware of the burgeoning blisters. Walking down the step to find my shoes I notice my left hamstring is hovering dangerously close to a charley horse. It is a reminder of how hard my legs worked in the continual ginga. Hobbling down the stairs to the street I notice my right hip flexor, but as I hit the pavement I feel good. Happy, light, humming the last Capoeira song we were listening to. I also feel slightly guilty that they took the time to teach me their secret handshake to welcome me into the group.*

### **Learning A Secret Handshake**

As in the other classes, the information I valued most was transmitted through the form. With Capoeira, unlike Yoga and different from Muay Thai, at some point you have to train with another person – communicating through coordinated effort, play, and finding the rhythm within the movement together, rather than alone. Through the form, lessons in philosophy and the logics of Capoeira seem to spring up. In this class, our instructor discussed being prepared for anything that might happen in the *roda*, and the ways we need to effectively and quickly use our force and tactics against people who are stronger or bigger than us. Rather than trying to out-power someone when they are

clearly bigger and stronger, we are instructed to use the element of surprise, our cunning, and our knowledge of where they are exposed. Since most every history of Capoeira is in relation to slavery and liberation, this seemed to have a deeper resonance, and possibly speaks to inherent resistance in Capoeira.

The game is a dialogue, and you are always playing in relation to another person who could be a friend or enemy. Syncing rhythmically to your partner during *ginga* requires concentration and cooperation – listening, feeling and anticipating what the other player will do is paramount. Our personal rhythm – how fast we spin and kick, our style of *ginga* has to respond to what the other person is doing. If you ignore that, Capoeira doesn't flow. As one woman pointed out to me, you have to play to the other person (their speed, skill, aggression etc.). In ways that sound problematic, there is a physical recognition of the “other” embedded in the form. This seems quite potent in a postcolonial moment when many people are struggling to find identities that speak to globalized culture and counter the inequity we see every day. On a physical level anyway, this gives the academy the impression of inclusion. Regardless of your social or cultural background, you are here to play and learn Capoeira. This includes history, music, songs and mental elements that resist oppression, discussed in ways that make all of these things relevant today.

United under one *Mestre*, this academy is part of a school that spans 22 countries. A truly transnational, transcultural group, there is strength in knowing that you are part of something that transcends geography. On the surface, the academy appears welcoming, cohesive and part of something bigger than the local school. As with most schools, their mission is to spread a history of Capoeira as resistance and its emergence from slavery in

Brazil. Joining an academy you are aligning yourself with this history, a particular style, philosophy and codes of playing. It seems this group expects members to train Capoeira as a fight, art and culture, teaching Brazilian language and customs in order for students to become “true Capoeiristas.” Feeling welcomed into a space whereby walking through the door signifies you have come to stay, is rare in a large urban city. And while their reasons for welcoming may be economic, imagining yourself as part of a worldwide network offers a strong pull and a more globalized sense of place.

### **Politics Of A White Capoeirista**

While the experience of participating in this Capoeira class wasn't as physically demanding, it was thought provoking in the kinds of associations I made and the weight I gave to what the form stands for. In my autoethnographic writing I focused on community, feeling included, and the kind of intercultural cooperation required of the form itself. Reflecting on this I am very aware of the larger implications my embodiment of the form signifies.

First, wanting to be included or expecting to be included activates a long line of appropriative behaviours that assumes I have the right and knowledge to do so. Although scholars like Assunção discuss that even in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century whites were also playing Capoeira, the form itself is linked to the institution of slavery. Continuing today, Capoeira represents resistance to oppression and dominant culture, something practitioners from domain culture embrace as well. While my embodiment of the form can signal a desire to learn about history (as uncomfortable as it is), or embrace the

moves toward equality (racial and gender) that contemporary Capoeira is slowly being changed by, for some people it continues a lineage of cultural appropriation.

These issues were wrestled with in a heated, intriguing and thought provoking Capoeira blog, *mandinguera.com*. Through an extremely long debate in the comment section, some challenging questions were raised about racism, sexism and cultural appropriation. In the original blog post, the author discusses some overtly sexist behaviour by a *contra-Mestre*.<sup>50</sup> She quotes *Mestre Pastinha* as saying “Universality. All-inclusiveness. ‘For men, women, and children,’” (*mandinguera.com*). She then asks “In that case, wouldn’t that mean that a capoeirista who is sexist (or racist, or in fact discriminatory in any rights-violating way), and lets it show in the capoeira environment, *lacks true understanding of one of the most basic, fundamental concepts of capoeira?*” (her emphasis, *mandinguera.com*). Sparking a passionate response from one reader, their position was that the overt sexism experienced by some female Capoeiristas needs to be contextualized and viewed as reflecting a tradition designed by men. She writes “Our traditions as Black people have allowed us to endure the last 500 years, and I don’t think we should abandon them so we seem more acceptable to some twisted notion of white equality.” Layering and simplifying issues of race and gender inequality (problematic in its own right), she does raise important issues of traditions and their role in our contemporary world. Her later comments also ask us to think about intellectual property, and how forms like Capoeira continually evolve, are changed and influenced by the social and political landscape they exist in. She takes a polarized view that Capoeira is being “whitewashed” and traditions are being destroyed, rather than simply changing with the views of its practitioners.

But from its inception, Brazil and Capoeira were part of what Gilroy has termed the Black Atlantic – reflecting the experience of slavery and colonization, transcending singularities of nation and of race. Understanding Capoeira as shaped by multiple forces and as a hybrid practice has the potential to move us beyond dichotomies of “us/them.” But complicating this view, Ahmed issues a warning about the same thing. Her take is that “hybridization becomes, not a means of transgression, but a technique for getting closer to strangers which allows the reassertion of the agency of the dominant subject” (125). While practitioners may honestly feel that through practicing Capoeira they find inclusivity and a way to embody the plurality of contemporary life, I think we need to take what Ahmed cautions against seriously.

Without politicizing our engagement with cultural practices like Capoeira, the “use” of practices runs the risk of reflecting a shallow cosmopolitanism that is celebratory more than critically engaging. In order to have a more thoughtful, uncomfortable conversation about the larger politics involved in each practice, people have to be willing to see the myths, the appropriations and also the potentially transformative elements of embodied knowledge. I believe that this is what Ahmed calls for when asks us to think about “how we might work with, and speak to, others, or how we may inhabit the world *with* others...imagining a different form of political community” (180).

### **Possibilities Of Interconnection**

The value in discussions about political meanings of who practices Capoeira is that it requires us to re-think our positions, our privilege, and what being part of an international community means. To do so in any depth means we need to tackle these

challenging issues. Although I talk about the feelings of community and identity that come with joining an academy I am very aware of the power geometries that structure groups and limit this inclusion (to recall Massey's term). For example, I have been told directly that I am too white to dance as an Orixa, that it needs to be performed by a brown or black body. Regardless of my love or skill in dance I have to accept this and understand why. In this situation, like many others, there is a loss of power. Practicing Capoeira comes with a specific history that often rests on the idea of Capoeira as a form of resistance against white oppression. Even if some of that history may be a creative blending of fact and fiction that people continually commemorate, it speaks to the value of myths and reflects contemporary struggles against dominating culture. To fully participate in Capoeira requires that students learn these stories, and sing songs about oppression and resistance. White practitioners of Capoeira are asked to really face histories of oppression and slavery, to feel woven into them rather than viewing them from a comfortable place where history is just part of the past. To embrace Capoeira requires that we accept a loss of power and a change in perspective – the world and traditions of Capoeira, the songs we sing celebrating resistance – are not from a dominant cultural perspective. In a way, Capoeira asks us to face our positions historically but also our relations to the inequity existing in our contemporary world.

Viewing Capoeira as part of movement culture that tends to decontextualize, smooth over tension and frame practices as celebrations of cosmopolitan engagement can allow us to see how important discussions of race and gender are. Glossing over racial, gender and class politics Capoeira was created through leaves an empty shell. Seeing how movement culture operates in a globalized world can highlight the need for a more



politicized understanding of the practices and traditions the form transmits. And I suggest that it can have some positive and potentially rhizomatic effects that Knowles indicates.

Wyrod asks us to consider how bodily practices give new meanings to collective identity in ways that resist and counter domination. He speaks about the sense of purpose and community training gives people. Bound together by the love of a practice and the understanding of what is required by the form both physically and mentally, networks of “like-minded practitioners” solidify regardless of their backgrounds. Whereas, from one angle, biopolitics of training can be seen as inscribing power, domination and control, Wyrod’s position is that the physical action shapes individuals in a positive way that serves to resist power. To me this extends the original spirit of Capoeira. He writes eloquently, “even at the margins, where the effects of domination would seem most determined, the body emerges as a source of both individual and collective agency” (128). His words punctuate the contemporary moment, but could easily be describing Capoeira as it was practiced on the docks of Rio in the 1800s.

However, we must keep in mind that we come to the academy from different social positions, which to an extent influence or determine what we take out of our experiences with Capoeira, its history, or the kind of intercultural/transcultural community it creates. When I ask myself what is required for critical engagement, I keep circling back to the need for individuals to reflect on racialized hierarchies, power geometries, and ways to live more thoughtfully in solidarity with social justice. In many ways Capoeira has the potential to help us do this. Facing the realities of slavery, the struggles Capoeiristas faced after emancipation, and the continued inequities of our

contemporary world allow us to reflect rather than ignore. Drawing again on Wyrod, I am reminded that “bodily practices only take on meaning in a social context, and as that social context changes, the meaning of bodily practices shifts as well...social relations give meaning to how people understand their bodies, and the collective, physical action of individuals in turn shapes those social relations” (144). If we agree with him, then the process of training in movement culture contains the potential to alter our society, which in turn will change the meaning of the practice as well.

Creating a more politicized movement culture has to take theory to an embodied, visceral, experiential place. I imagine spaces where dialogue happens through the lens of practice and solidarity reflects interconnection and the realization that we really are all in the same boat. Materializing these issues is a loose group of activist organizations and schools identifying as “Social Movement Capoeira.” Highlighting one UK group, Bidna Capoeira offers social Capoeira programming in places like Palestine and Syria, “to help vulnerable and traumatized children living in conflict zones and refugee camps” ([bidnacapoeira.org](http://bidnacapoeira.org)). By assisting youth to deal with the fear and instability of living in occupied territory, or supporting safe space in the middle of a devastating war, Capoeira becomes a tool of social justice. Writing on the inspiring work of Social Capoeira activists, the website Cultures of Resistance states: “activist have also highlighted the legacy of capoeira in their successful push to incorporate black history and culture in school curriculums nationwide....capoeira offers the opportunity to immerse oneself in a foreign culture and adapt its rich tradition of resistance to a local setting” ([culturesofresistance.org](http://culturesofresistance.org)). Although there are no overt Social Capoeira organizations in

Canada, many academies tour schools giving workshops on the culture and history of Capoeira. Offering Canadian youth images of what resistance to slavery and oppression looks like, and celebrating the cultural forms birthed from that horrific project challenges what Dei terms the Eurocentric bias in education. Inserting multiple perspectives and histories of the Black Atlantic into mainstream schooling is a concrete example of transforming politics from the level of the body to a more politicized, collective movement.

## **Conclusions**

As I mentioned in my introduction, the only conclusion I can firmly rest on is that movement culture becomes a window through which we can view how we embody contradictions and possibilities. Practicing Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira can offer us (sometimes) profound ways of reimagining our bodies, but run the risk of re-inscribing colonial legacies that I have worked hard to explain in previous chapters. I trace the essence of those problems, but then close by discussing how using movement culture as a tool for analyzing each practice, more politicized ways of viewing each one may come into view. I have tried to articulate the ways and strategies that resistance can happen physically, in concrete ways, rather than remaining at the level of theory.

For me, the Yoga class I described unsettled the ways I would usually write-off the more mystical or esoteric elements of the practice. Though I often focus on the *asana* as an attempt to avoid Orientalist packaging, I found the meditative quality of the practice deeply moving. At the same time, to cite the transformative power of Yoga calls up a long lineage of white women “using” ancient secrets of “the East” to better themselves

spiritually and physically. In Muay Thai I felt an empowerment through brutal physical training and violence that outside of a hypermasculine environment I may not gravitate toward. Embracing a different way of being, I embodied what a Muay Thai fighter is (or is in my imagination). Training as a fighter physically pushed my body into a place where I was able to reconsider its capacity. However as with Yoga, Orientalist myths of warriors (ancient and contemporary) seem to hover around the edges of how I describe my experience. Within the Capoeira class I seemed to latch onto the idea of cooperation and community required in order to learn and play the game. However trying to embody these ideas as a white woman seems to run counter to the history of the practice, based on fighting white oppression.

When the contradictions and possibilities are framed by movement culture, potentially more politicized ways of understanding each practice may become visible. As a tool of analysis it can help us to identify the myths and fantasies about Oriental enlightenment or a masculinity defined by warriorhood. It may help us to tease apart the very complicated politics of race/gender/identity that are the foundation of Capoeira. Movement culture helps to explain the ways each form gets decontextualized and reduced to its myths and fantasies by advertisers wanting to sell products or by practitioners wanting to imagine themselves as part of a cosmopolitan community. By considering these distortions against the experiences of embodying a practice, possibilities for re-imagining ourselves can be created. But this in itself is not inherently political. In order to politicize our practices, we need to allow this re-imagining of our bodies to be understood in relation to their normativity – our socialized modes of experiencing the world. Some of the theorists I draw on feel that contemplation happens at the level of the

body, where embodiment allows us to experience difference within ourselves. While this may be the case, it is only partial. I argue that we need to reassess our positions to dominant culture to see how that influences the experiences we have with myths and practices like Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Endings/Beginnings**

I set out to argue for the concept of movement culture, an interdisciplinary study of movement practices that transcend traditional spaces and modes of transfer, and attempted to demonstrate how simultaneously it can consolidate whiteness and offer ways of fostering resistance. As a mode of analysis, I use movement culture to read how Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira function in Toronto as examples of performative cosmopolitanism. I ask if it is possible to politicize our use of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira and if framing these practices as part of movement culture can allow us to view the complexity of performative cosmopolitanism. As a scholar and practitioner these are important questions to me. When movement practices like Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira are taken up as sites of research, their conflicting cultural histories, or their value as tools to effect change in bodies (physically or socially), are most often the focus. The larger social functions, and their use by people to express cultural openness or embrace “feeling exotic” is not as prevalent. My project tries to initiate a conversation about the ways we use, frame, understand and approach Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira, both as scholars and as practitioners.

The practices themselves are situated in a gap – between sport and art – and the literature around each one reflects this. My objective in this project is to re-frame them as part of a larger movement culture. As I argue throughout my dissertation, movement culture contains practices that are hugely popular and reflective of transcultural

engagement and everyday intercultural encounters that seem to operate without a critical framework. Like Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira, practices are often fragmented, recombined and marketed as exotic, cosmopolitan, transformative practices to help individuals achieve desirable western aesthetics or worldviews. Another key objective is to consider each practice as an example of performative cosmopolitanism that allows us to see the ways we produce difference as much as we embrace it. Performative cosmopolitanism becomes a lens through which to view the ways we re-inscribe difference onto each practice through the myths and fantasies of Orientalism or Neo-Primitivism. This knowledge tempers the profound physical transformations each form offers, instead allowing us to see both the conflicts and possibilities in our engagement with Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira.

Weaving together the various chapters, in this conclusion I offer a synthesis of my findings and an answer to each research question. Following this I discuss the implications of my project and how it may contribute to perspectives or scholarship on Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira. I end this chapter with reflections on the limitations to my project and offer some concluding thoughts.

### **Findings Through Practices**

In different ways (and in different chapters) I have seen how people activate certain myths in order to perform specific identities that reflect their commitment to a specific practice. Ideas of enlightenment and spirituality that Yoga stands in for, or the myths of warriorhood grafted onto Muay Thai, or the world-beat fusion elements of Capoeira that press up against issues of slavery and resistance are all incorporated into

our digital performances as cosmopolitan citizens. I observe how people engage with these same myths during public festivals that re-package and re-affirm many cultural tropes and stereotypes. It solidifies and seems to authorize culture as simple, contained and commodified into an object or lifestyle. However, the ways festivals can also be read as challenges to dominant culture, resisting or reframing Orientalist and Neo-Primitivist discourse runs parallel. Participating in classes offered me both the opportunity to reflect on what my white, western female body activates in relation to the marketing of each practice, and to experience the potential each form contains to change us. I reflect on this at the level of individual bodies, but also the larger social movements in which bodies participate.

To answer the first question, is it possible to politicize our practice of each form? Yes. Is it easy to do that? No. Being aware of the myths and colonial stereotypes still circulating around cultural practices is the first step. Being open to the fact that by engaging with culture there is often a loss – of power, of your normal position within social hierarchy, of how you view yourself – and a de-centering that can occur is a second step. Required is the vital work of examining the hierarchies and privileges we have, and opening to the possibilities of resistance, challenge, and subversion that can happen at the same time as dominant culture exerts control. Keeping both in mind allows us to see a more expansive, potentially global interconnection.

My second question asked if framing Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira as part of movement culture allows us to view the complexity of performative cosmopolitanism. My experience in this project suggests that understanding movement culture offers us valuable ways to see how cosmopolitanism is performed and is performative. It makes



visible the ways people take-up and use practices – online, through heritage festivals or classes for example – as ways of experiencing a type of foreign-ness that signifies their cosmopolitanism, and potentially changes them into something more exotic, or more culturally blended than their national identity. Focusing on the performative element also reveals how “otherness” and “foreign-ness” is performed and repeated in ways that reify the “other.” However, by highlighting the performative element rather than just the consumptive and appropriative nature of cosmopolitanism, individuals can find room to discuss how adopting a practice like Yoga, Muay Thai or Capoeira could alter us. Understanding performance in relation to embodiment is critical. Cosmopolitanism becomes more than just a moral or political openness, but a visceral experience where power can operate in multiple directions. Focusing on performativity of cosmopolitanism can also draw attention to our shifting, fluid identities and the power geometry that locates us. It can also challenge static notions of otherness as always in subordination to dominant culture. I have argued for the need to re-frame Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira as part of a larger movement culture because it will allow us to consider how they function – what they do, what they challenge us to consider, and how they are currently being used. Through this lens we can see how Orientalist and Neo-Primitivist myths are activated, but also the ways we demonstrate solidarity and resistance through each.

In Chapter Three, “Distilling and Displaying Otherness” I explored how we are encouraged, through marketing, to embrace otherness as something to enhance our lives, and that it is possible to experience ourselves differently – partly familiar, partly foreign – if we practice Yoga, Muay Thai or Capoeira. Extending these observations, I consider how we display our engagement with practices online. From reading Facebook profiles,

Twitter feeds and YouTube comments, it is clear that our profile performances are used to reveal the degree of dedication we have to a form. This dedication then signals the extent to which we have become “the same but different.” Our identities as cosmopolitan, multicultural, sophisticated people aligned with the values of marketing, are confirmed through the ways we tweet, comment or post about what the practice means to us.

Chapter Four, “Performative Cosmopolitanism” continued the conversation of the previous chapter to theorize an understanding of cosmopolitanism that can allow us to see the performances, attempts, failures and constructs of our contemporary world. I suggest that performative cosmopolitanism as an idea calls attention to the politics of representation and the ways our bodies can sometimes prevent the openness and welcoming we wish to foster. By viewing the failures or mis-performances, dominant cultural positions are seen as constructs, offering instead a view of something much more plural and multi-centered. Resistance can be highlighted, and categories of self/other, dominating/dominated can be challenged.

Closing with Chapter Five “Embodying Movement Culture” was my attempt to pit theory against the body. Practicing and embodying a form suggests some of the power Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira can have. From a change in perspective in Yoga, to a re-imagining of gender in Muay Thai, to fostering thoughtful questions about community through Capoeira, potentials exist. But the conflicts associated with legacies of appropriation, and marketing that reinforces stereotypes are also present, as are the possibilities for a more complex intercultural encounter. Safer, more inclusive Yoga studios, youth outreach and building communities of resistance through martial arts like

Muay Thai, or mobilizing the strength and oppositional spirit of Capoeira as the basis for social movements, all point to concrete ways practice can influence our world. Chapter Five complicates the relatively easy ways that practices are consumed and commodified as lifestyles, objects or products as I discuss in Chapter Three. It also extends the idea of performative culture that I flesh out in Chapter Four, from representation to embodiment.

Weaving these three chapters together offers us a way to see how movement culture informs and influences those who adopt it. As a whole, the chapters work together to illustrate how performative cosmopolitanism both challenges and upholds hegemonic ideas, and can also be a way to see this conflict as practiced through the body. Shifting perspectives from either/or to both/and politicizes our engagement with the practices. We are more aware of the lineages we extend, the myths we re-animate, the possibilities to experience alternative modes of physicality and definitions of community. Building on one another, the three main sections of my project offer one way to see the power of practices that are neither sport nor art, but part of a movement culture. The ways they are used in marketing, in online performances, as entertainment at festivals or the means through which we become different, demonstrate their value as currency in our globalized world.

### **Implications**

I have argued for the need to put Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira into conversation with cosmopolitanism, consumerism and intercultural theory, because I see them existing and flourishing at this crossroads. Suggesting we consider these practices as part of a larger movement culture is one implication of this project. It means that we

can view the use of culturally specific practices beyond their individual histories, trajectories, communities or techniques. Extending and connecting academic work in the fields of consumer culture and cosmopolitanism, and movement culture starts to reflect our transcultural expressions and a plurality of practices that get blended and influence a more global identity. As I have stressed, this is not without problems. Creating different kinds of communities/networks of “like-minded” practitioners, movement culture does speak to the reality of a technologized world where many people act as though cultural boundaries are just ideas. Potentially, it can move us toward a more thoughtful form of intercultural interconnection.

There is a lot of fascinating, challenging scholarship about each practice and theoretical domain I fuse together in this project. By bringing various forms of writing on digital culture, performance theory, embodiment and intercultural theatre together with cosmopolitan and consumer culture theory, I attempt to document how people are engaging with Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira today. The view is partial, and very situated in the contemporary moment. It also springboards off existing work deeply invested in the subtleties and particularities of each individual practice. My project takes that understanding and widens the view, hoping that it will offer insights into what movement does for us on many levels.

Within the realms of cosmopolitanism and consumer culture, I have tried to add to scholarship that discusses our lives as performative. Following Papastergiadis, Ahmed, Wickstrom, and Lau, I seek to stretch theories into everyday, performed ways of being in the world. I also hope that my work will build on conversations that critically analyze Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira and discuss them in relation to identity performance.

Drawing on work by Alexander, Gilroy, Hall, Grewal and Massey, discussion of transcultural, intertwined communities has enriched the potential I see within our engagements. But unlike each of these scholars, my work is in broader brush strokes, attempting to chart trends in our engagement with otherness.

### **Limitations**

My decision not to pursue an ethnography of one studio/gym/practice meant that I was left with more general impressions, outside of my personal reflections and observations. Due to this, my project is quite theoretical, which may seem odd given that the topic I chose is very physical. One of the challenges of writing as a participant/observer is that my understanding and perspective is completely based on my experience as a white, western female who has a background in movement and is welcomed easily into studio spaces. So while I can write about otherness, cosmopolitanism and transculturalism, I do so from firmly within dominant culture. Many times I have wondered if I am the best person to be writing about these issues. As well, since I chose to offer a very broad view, the changes within a studio/gym, or a festival, or a class are not noted or accounted for. I attribute this to my decision to write about three very different practices, rather than honing in on the subtleties and complexities of one.

The strength of my choices, though, is that I offer some insights into the ways cultural movement practices operate together. It is my perspective woven into the pages of this dissertation, and a white, western woman who is trying to find a more politicized, conscious way to exist in the world while still practicing these forms. It is unlikely I am

the only one. My hope is that by offering a theoretical framework through which to view movement culture in general, we can realize the power and potential it contains.

Potentially that will be a reason to more critically analyze how it functions and in doing so, politicize the use of Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira. The arguments I make in this dissertation are firmly situated in my experience, and they come from the physicality of practice. In this sense, the empirical evidence I base my conclusions on is drawn from how I have experienced Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira.

## **Conclusions**

This project argues for the importance of theorizing movement culture as the means through which we explore and express identity. Movement culture is a general framework through which we can see how Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira become performative ways we express cosmopolitanism. I explore advertising, digital performances, myths of Orientalism and Neo-Primitivism and the embodied experience of each practice to offer unique insight into how movement culture functions. My project speaks to our technologizing world and the ways we define ourselves in it. I suggest that it is possible to approach our use of each practice in a more politicized way. And my experience has been that Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira can each be used to reinforce dominant cultural norms, but can also challenge them at the level of the body and community.

My re-positioning of each practice as a part of movement culture describes a more interconnected field. Rather than encouraging isolated histories, I ask us to consider how people use movement and what it means. While each practice offers different

perspectives and areas of analysis, they work together to give a picture of the importance embodied practice has in people's lives – whether superficial or profound. I contend that instead of seeing Yoga, Muay Thai and Capoeira as hobbies that lie somewhere between sports and arts, that have no real significance, we can see them as expressions of cultural identity. This cultural identity is not defined by national boundaries but is delineated by who practices and who doesn't. Communities of practitioners embody politics, conflicts and possibilities, and through their bodies, theory becomes physicalized. This is imperfect, partial and immensely complicated, but also a visceral reflection of the politics that inform our lives.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> toronto.ca/demographics.

<sup>2</sup> Greater Toronto Area.

<sup>3</sup> While this paper won't take on the structural/institutional racism associated with how Toronto is run or the problematic Canadian multicultural project the above statistics perpetuate, I do mention it because it is the foundation to the city I base my project in. These issues are also closely tied to the forms of cosmopolitanism that assume mobility, lifestyles of choice and options, and the luxury of "open-mindedness" that allows the cosmopolitan to sample difference, experience otherness and then retreat back to a safe place of privilege.

<sup>4</sup> A more detailed discussion about the limits of "communities" based on accessibility and ideas of welcome is developed in Chapter Five.

<sup>5</sup> See Mark Singleton *Yoga Body* (2010), Carol Horton and Roseanne Harvey, *21<sup>st</sup> Century Yoga* (2013), Beatrix Hauser *Yoga Traveling* (2013), Peter Bail *Modern "Muai Thai" Mythology* (1998), Paul Bowman *Theorizing Bruce Lee* (2010), Stéphane Renneson "Competing Cultures of Masculinity" in *Queer Bangkok* (2011), Matthias Röhrig Assunção *Capoeira* (2005), Maya Talmon-Chvaicer *The Hidden History of Capoeira* (2008), Barbara Browning *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (1995) among others.

<sup>6</sup> A method of actor training created by Tadashi Suzuki.

<sup>7</sup> I am thinking of Phillip Zarrili's devotion to the Indian martial art of Kalarippayattu as described in *When the Body Becomes All Eyes* (1998), and Daniel Mroz's mastery of Chinese martial arts as described in *The Dancing Word* (2011).

<sup>8</sup> "A meme can be considered a mimicked theme, including simple phrases or gestures. An Internet meme may take the form of an image, hyperlink, video, picture, website or hashtag. It may be just a word or phrase, including an intentional misspelling. These small movements tend to spread from person to person via social networks, blogs, direct email or news sources" (wikipedia.org).

<sup>9</sup> The barbaric terror of colonization and slavery, integral to Western thought and inextricably tied to this period, clearly and brutally marked who was accepted into the category of universal (or human for that matter).

<sup>10</sup> However, a strong argument can be made against problematic solidarities that are mediated by technology. Televised fundraisers for third and fourth world alongside other developmental projects suggest cosmopolitan engagement with the world, but perpetuate



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uneven politics and neo-colonialism. See Alexa Robertson “Media Cultures and Cosmopolitan Connections” in *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*.

<sup>11</sup> There are defenders of national imaginary like Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities* 1983), Timothy Brennan (*At Home In The World* 1997), and Pheng Cheah (*Inhuman Conditions* 2009) who all, in various ways, point out the confluence of and dependence on nationalism and transnational capitalism. Ironically, theorists from both sides of the discussion use the influence of globalization, consumerism and technology to support their positions.

<sup>12</sup> His work locates African underdevelopment to capitalist and imperialist systems that drained wealth, often through extremely violent practices of domination (27).

<sup>13</sup> In the concealment of material realities, and with the emphasis on each practices as a movement-based routine, there is an evacuation of what Jacqui Alexander terms the Sacred (*Pedagogies of Crossing* 2006), from each practice. Hindu religious practices that influenced Yoga philosophy, the Bhuddist rituals surrounding Muay Thai, or places where Capoeira overlaps with Candomblé, are usually glossed over or distilled and used as examples of authenticity or purity of tradition in opposition to urban life in the West.

<sup>14</sup> This is part of a larger discussion about the potentially democratizing force of the web – whereby information can be accessed and disseminated freely and widely and in many cases for activist purposes, vs. the ways we willingly submit to being controlled. This is reflected in the ways we have become dependent on social media, the kinds of data collected and then sold to companies and marketing campaigns, to the ways our navigation and browsing methods and choices are instantly recorded by multiple sources. The dichotomy between control and freedom (Hinton and Hjorth 26) get conflated by many who position freedom in relation to the kind of control we have, and in a different sense, the freedom we want means we willingly submit to various forms of control (the example Hinton and Hjorth use is of airport security measures we willingly support because they suggest safety).

<sup>15</sup> boyd outlines various approaches: public as collection of people who share common understanding/identity/consensus of interest following Sonia Livingstone (2005); imagined community as Benedict Anderson (2006) outlines it, or the idea of a public sphere Jürgen Habermas describes (1991).

<sup>16</sup> See Guy Merchant *Identity, Social Media and Online Communication* (2006), Jose van Dijck *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013), EJ Westlake *Friend Me If You Facebook* (2008), among others.

<sup>17</sup> Within my research, “seen by more eyeballs” is a phrase used frequently by theorists who discuss the reaches of social media.

<sup>18</sup> A “mob run” is usually a 5 or 10km run that happens before a Muay Thai class where all students get together and run around various routes of downtown Toronto. It serves as

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promotion for the gym since most people wear the gym's shirts and Thai shorts. Usually there are between 10 and 20 people running together (creating a mob).

<sup>19</sup> This title means Master in Thai, and is the highest rank someone can achieve in Muay Thai.

<sup>20</sup> shambhala.com.

<sup>21</sup> The circle comprised of Capoeiristas and musicians in which the game of Capoeira is played.

<sup>22</sup> A ceremonial *roda* where a student of Capoeira receives a belt and moves up in rank.

<sup>23</sup> His full story is that he was born to one of the richest families in Brazil, and before his father died after being attacked, he told Eddy to go to jail for the crime so that he would be safe.

<sup>24</sup> A more detailed, comprehensive analysis of subversive groups associated with each practice happens in Chapter 5.

<sup>25</sup> ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

<sup>26</sup> Rather than understanding that phrases/ideas/terms are inherently racist/oppressive, people find a more "accepted" way of saying the same thing, without addressing the underlying racism or oppression. Since this discussion isn't directly the focus of this section of my paper, I add an endnote only to qualify how I understand and use the concept.

<sup>27</sup> As I have mentioned before this ownership, where alterity isn't even a subjectivity without the relationship to the center, is extremely telling and a systemic problem. In effect the language used holds in place the centre, and marginalizes anything that isn't dominant culture, even as people claim to be inclusive/respectful of cultural distinction. The only way into the mainstream/centre position is if it is referenced by, taken up/used by or somehow incorporated into dominant culture.

<sup>28</sup> ASEAN is a geo-political and economic network comprised of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Phillipines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. ASEAN aims are economic growth, social progress and cultural development as a means to promote regional peace, as well as training and educational sharing resources (aseansec.org).

<sup>29</sup> Some black New Brunswick and Nova Scotian families, for example, have been living in Canada since before it was a distinct nation, but are still considered as hyphenated others, whereas white, European families are assumed to be the original settlers and therefore are representative of what a true Canadian is.

<sup>30</sup> This is an expression used by many Muay Thai students to signal someone with impressive power hitting pads with extremely good skill and force. It is kind of a

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metaphor of the potentially destructive force a person would have if they were fighting a live person.

<sup>31</sup> I find it interesting that they just recently started offering one Yoga class a week at their Toronto temple (for women only). If this is reflective of their connection with Yoga, it is a weak one.

<sup>32</sup> The organizers of Yoga Meltdown seem to be Hare Krishna, but they didn't respond to my questions about the conflict in perspectives on Yoga (between Bhakti Yoga and what actually happened).

<sup>33</sup> For a much more detailed and sophisticated explanation of this trajectory see Joseph Alter *The Wrestlers' Body* (1992) and *Yoga in Modern India* (2004); Elizabeth De Michelis *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004); Mark Singleton *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010); David White *Sinister Yogis* (2009); Norman Sjoman *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace* (1996).

<sup>34</sup> *Hathayoga* in the work of Singleton and White literally means "violent effort" or the "yoga of force" "suggesting increased self-mastery for attaining a goal, possibly supernatural powers, immunity from illness, or immortality if not outright union with god" (in Hauser 12). White articulates that these forms of premodern yoga were often practices by yogis "regarded as dubious individuals, associated with supernatural powers, prone to take over people's bodies, and thus often objects of dread and fear" (Hauser 15).

<sup>35</sup> Vail's spelling *Muai* is another variant on Muay but both translate as "boxing." Muay Thai literally translates as boxing Thai.

<sup>36</sup> Bharucha suggests "We have to get beyond the 'use' of other cultures for the assumed rejuvenation of our inner states of desiccation; instead, we need to develop a more heightened awareness of the ecology of cultures, whereby we do not enrich ourselves at the expense of others" (*Politics* 59).

<sup>37</sup> Welton might argue though that it is through the learning of movement (where culture contacts bodies) that identities are created and resistance to hegemony is formed.

<sup>38</sup> Ways of understanding the body, how it moves, what is privileged or coveted, what is considered to be "good" or desirable shifts from culture to culture, and region to region, and between time periods. All of this is what I consider culturally-based movement.

<sup>39</sup> The most famous of these include Phillip Zarrilli, Richard Schechner, and Ariane Mnouchkine.

<sup>40</sup> *Savasana* is also called Corpse Pose, and is practiced usually at the end (or beginning) of a class. Used to promote deep relaxation, the practitioner lies flat on their back, arms and legs stretched out and slightly to the sides. Also considered a lying meditation the objective is to release as much tension as possible and to move into a state of meditation.

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<sup>41</sup> The gendered elements to this framework are disturbing, as historically Yoga seems to be advertised as a cure for the woman problem (or feminist perspective), serving as a vehicle to reassert that women's transformation is limited to maintaining or achieving youth and beauty. While not in the scope of this project, Newcombe raises an interesting point that Yoga can also be seen to validate women's somatic experiences and directly counter this patriarchal attitude.

<sup>42</sup> A chemical released in response to stress.

<sup>43</sup> The myths of warriorhood attached to what I just described will be fleshed in the next section.

<sup>44</sup> These authors go on to note that this "neoliberal ideology of selfhood" legitimizes the shift from state concern for the welfare of its citizens to making health an individual's personal responsibility (186).

<sup>45</sup> Academically, writing about warriors and warriorhood is usually anthropologically based studies of "warrior cultures" found in Africa, or within Japanese religion studies of *Bushido* or the samurai way of life. There is very little written about the performance of warriorhood from a critical, academic, performance studies perspective.

<sup>46</sup> The *wai kru* is the entire ritual of sealing the ring, prayers and the *ram muay*.

<sup>47</sup> The training space Japanese martial arts like Karate take place in.

<sup>48</sup> A Brazilian musical instrument – a single stringed musical bow that is the primary instrument for Capoeira songs.

<sup>49</sup> Adopted/adapted from the Yoruba religion, an Orixá is a manifestation of God.

<sup>50</sup> A rank just below full *Mestre*/master

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