

**WHAT IS CRITICAL YOGA STUDIES?: GENDER, HEALTH, AND CROSS-CULTURAL CONSUMPTION OF YOGA IN CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICA**

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN GENDER, FEMINIST, & WOMEN'S STUDIES  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO

September 2018

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## ABSTRACT

This feminist ethnography of contemporary yoga communities in North America represents my exploration of inequalities in the yoga world. Through conversations about how we experience our bodies, our abilities, and social locations, I ask questions about inclusion and exclusion, body normativity, and authenticity. Yoga offers an intersectional lens through which to examine and shift intersecting inequalities not only in the yoga studio, but in the health and fitness milieu as well.

Key questions examine the factors that have led to the dominance of white, able bodied women in yoga. What makes yoga, yoga? How do we know what we are doing as yoga students is authentic, and what marks authenticity in a diverse climate of hybridity and transnational cultural exchange? This dissertation examines the ways in which contemporary yoga practitioners take up the issues of identity in yoga sites, particularly with regard to race, gender, embodiment, and class. It asks, how are ideological gender norms and embodiment produced and reproduced in North American yoga communities, and how do practitioners resist or conform to them?

Multi-site ethnography is the central research method. The fieldwork consisted of participant observation in yoga classes, one-on-one interviews with yoga teachers and students, a participatory action research group, and discourse analysis of social media conversations about yoga. As the dissertation takes up questions around race and authenticity in yoga, the Race and Yoga Conference in Oakland, California was an important site of investigation.

Research results showed that yoga in North America is not a unified practice, despite much debate as to what is considered valid and authentic in terms of what people think is the real yoga. Yoga is not a monolithic entity, and many approaches to yoga can function for those com-

mitted to social justice. The thesis also concludes that accessibility in yoga is multivalent, because people consider access to yoga in a variety of ways. Affordable yoga classes are great, but if people with disabilities can not get up the stairs to the studio, then they miss out. Intersectional feminism in yoga is one powerful way to address these issues.

**Keywords:**

**Yoga, Health as Social Value, Accessibility, Body Image, Authenticity, Precarious Labour, Gender essentialism, Whiteness, Multi-site ethnography**

## DEDICATION

In traditional yoga learning contexts and practices, a study, or *sādhana* is dedicated in honour of an important and influential teacher. Sometimes we chant an invocation as part of this dedication, or even say a prayer. The cornerstone of my yoga practice is to offer a *mettā* lovingkindness prayer, which I learned from my teachers at a Buddhist retreat centre on Salt Spring Island in the late 1990s. *Mettā* is a Buddhist practice to generate compassion, and it has been popularized by American Buddhist writers Jon Kabat Zinn and Sharon Salzberg. This, for me, is the cornerstone of my yoga practice in which we say, “May all beings be free from suffering. May all beings be safe, happy, and peaceful.” This dissertation is dedicated to every yoga practitioner and teacher who is working for accessibility and social justice through and in yoga. I also dedicate this dissertation to all beings for whom yoga has been a boon to their lives, but have encountered obstacles in their practice, whether they be pain, affordability, body image struggles, or isolation of any kind that makes them feel alone rather than unified in community or whole in themselves. It is my hope that this dissertation offers a ray of light towards the potential power of yoga to support self-awareness, equity, compassion, and true well-being.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks go to the women and men who shared their stories in this study. Without their thoughts and ideas about the culture of yoga in the West, this dissertation would not exist. To the inspiring yoga people who have been part of this study both virtually and in person all along, I bow.

I am grateful to my steadfast and patient supervisor, Dr. Jacinthe Michaud, who stuck with me from the first time I approached her to be on my comprehensive exams committee back in 2012. Her no-nonsense, suitably rigorous approach kept me on track and accountable to the discipline of Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies. Drs. Amar Wahab and Maggie MacDonald graciously formed the other two thirds of my committee, creating an inspiring, encouraging, and complementary team that rounded out my dissertation development. Thank you to my copy editor, Roseanne Harvey! Roseanne's critical eye on the yoga world and expertise in publishing is a gift for which I am extremely grateful.

I was fortunate to start my PhD with an Ontario Graduate Scholarship. The School of Gender and Women's Studies Ethel Armstrong Doctoral Award, Jerilyn Manson Hing Bursary, and Karen Hadley Award not only supported me during my PhD, but also provided much needed validation for my work. Thanks also to Faculty of Graduate Studies and CUPE 3903 for various funding support for field research and toward completion.

Many yoga teachers and academics struggle to balance their work with mothering. I also want to thank Dr Andrea O'Reilly, whose groundbreaking and affirming research into feminist and empowered mothering encouraged me that I could do this massive project. Andrea first extended her warmth and encouragement when I was in my Masters, and I was her teaching as-

sistant in Motherhood and Mothering for two years. My first conference presentation and book chapter was through Andrea's organization, Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, and for these scholarly opportunities I am most grateful.

I am also grateful to my many academic peers who were on the ride alongside me throughout this PhD and two CUPE 3903 (our labour union) strikes. Thanks go to Danielle Cooper, one of my first GFWS cohort friends and teaching assistant buddy, who first suggested I can do an ethnography on yoga communities back in April 2012. Kaila Simoneau was the initial convenor in our Not-Going-it-Alone Writing Group, thanks go to her for being a writing buddy. Thank you to GWST folks and teaching colleagues who offered a shoulder or a laugh as we worked together or walked the picket line together. I have a handful of dear friends who also helped me get through this PhD in non-academic ways. I have so much gratitude that these people have been part of my life and research: Martha, Sri, Oren, Amara, Martine, Twyla, Andrea B.

I am indebted to my family. I thank my mother, Joanne Mintz. Who else could I count as my Number One biggest fan? To my sweet children Shaina and Rachel, thank you for your patience while your mom constantly did her work. I hope that I somehow was able to instil in them a love for learning, reading, movement, and independent work. Raising daughters has provided me with countless hours of joy, silliness, and structure which are the counterpoint to this academic life. I am grateful to them both for tolerating my rants, and for growing with me as feminists through this PhD journey. And finally, my infinite gratitude goes to Stewart McIntosh, who showed me that it is possible to have your partner, lover, and best friend in the same person. Stewart's support and patience has seen me through the toughest times in this process with gentle encouragement and presence of being. There is not enough chocolate in this world to thank you.

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## **Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Toward A Critical Yoga Studies**

Who practices yoga in North America? Why are so many of them white able bodied women? This multi-sited feminist ethnography of contemporary yoga communities in North America represents my exploration of inequalities in the yoga world. Through conversations about how we experience our bodies, our abilities, social locations, and the ways in which we learn from each other as yoga students and teachers in spaces where we learn and teach yoga, this dissertation asks questions about inclusion and exclusion, about body normativity, and about authenticity. Yoga is an ideal field for feminist scholarship because it offers a lens through which to examine and potentially shift intersecting inequalities not only in the yoga studio, but in the health and fitness milieu as well. Before yoga became a topic of discussion for scholars, people practiced yoga as an exotic health and spiritual practice. By the early 2000s, yoga evolved into something for public consumption with its fancy Lululemon pants and wild yoga festivals in the mountains, to chocolate yoga, yoga for men, and rage yoga. In the twentieth century, yoga was a subculture activity, the sort that was commonly known for attracting crunchy granola hippy types and spiritual explorers who had reinvented yoga for their own purposes. Over the past two decades, yoga's explosion in popularity led me to ask how yoga's meaning as a spiritual practice shifted from subculture to mainstream health and fitness lifestyle.

This chapter presents two main research questions that guided the fieldwork, offers the historical context for a feminist study of the contemporary yoga world in North America, and provides a chapter outline. The first and overarching question that runs through the dissertation is, what are the factors that have led to there being a proliferation of so many white, able bodied

women in yoga, and who exactly are these women? What is their social location and how does social location influence their experiences with yoga? Second and even more salient, What makes yoga, yoga? How do we know what we are doing as yoga students is authentic, and what marks authenticity in a diverse climate of hybridity and transnational cultural exchange? A set of sub-questions also guides this research. This dissertation examines the ways in which contemporary yoga practitioners take up the issues of identity in yoga sites, particularly with regard to race, gender, embodiment, and class. How do yoga practitioners challenge dominant ideologies of body image, youthfulness, and ability? How are gender norms of ideal white femininity and embodiment produced and reproduced in North American yoga communities, and how do practitioners resist or conform to them? What are the factors that contribute to people of colour attending yoga less frequently than those racialized as white? My goal through this feminist ethnography of North American yoga communities is to examine the multivalent meanings of yoga and health so that we can create equitable opportunities for everyone to enjoy a good life. By “good life,” I mean that we all want to be living well, with health, contentment and prosperity. Different forms of inequality affect people’s ability to experience this good life, and it is through yoga, I argue, that many can find a path toward social justice. This is a lofty claim, and so this dissertation unpacks the nuanced stops on that journey.

### **The Fieldwork Context: Three Juxtaposing Vignettes of Contemporary Yoga Experiences**

Yoga practitioners have given yoga multiple meanings and expressions in contemporary society. This section will describe the field of yoga in contemporary North America, and set the stage for what it means to study yoga in the twenty-first century. Dedicated studios and health

clubs have sprung up to promote yoga as a cost-efficient way to decrease stress levels and get physically fit. Yoga practitioners look toward yoga as self-help for specific issues ranging from multiple musculoskeletal complaints, to body image acceptance, and for community building activities. Yoga studios are expanding their purview to include social events geared to expanding individual awareness and generating consciousness about social and political projects. A range of print and online publications support expanding interest in yoga, in which we can find advertisements for products meant to enhance individual practice. In addition, growing acceptance of yoga as a health practice (Impett et al; Daubenmeier; Cramer et al) has led to many hospitals recommending it for rehabilitation and cognitive behavioural therapies such as anxiety management and post traumatic stress healing protocols. Unfortunately, while doctors may send their patients to yoga, few public or private health insurance systems cover the costs of classes for ‘patients’ or the payment of yoga teachers. After working as a yoga teacher and shiatsu therapist since 1998, what had begun as my mild curiosity about the ways in which yoga had become a fitness and health phenomenon, mushroomed into an inquiry worthy of doctoral study about inequalities that I was perceiving in the yoga world.

The following section offers rich descriptions of three juxtaposing yoga classes in which I did participant observation. The first class is an Iyengar yoga class, which is the tradition I studied intensively between 1999-2004, and have revisited periodically over the years as though it is an old friend. Iyengar yoga, named after its founding teacher, B.K.S. Iyengar (1918-2014), came to international popularity in the mid-twentieth century, and despite its extensive awareness of and attention to biomechanics in minutiae, retains a strict connection to yoga’s philosophical foundations through the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is considered the foremost authority on yoga phi-

losophy (Iyengar 19). The second yoga experience I will describe is a classical hātha yoga class in the Sivananda Yoga Vedānta tradition. The third yoga experience in this Clifford Geertz-informed “thick description” is of the mainstream variety, and reflects an amalgam of the kinds of classes most easily found in Toronto. Through the dissertation, I will gradually draw the reader toward a fourth kind of yoga experience, one that is inclusive and accessible in a number of intersecting ways, and challenges aspects of each of the first three kinds of yoga classes. While many studios and community centres offering yoga may claim to be inclusive and accessible, they may not specifically explain the ways in which a certain class may attend to the needs of diverse groups, or the class may be accessible in one or perhaps two ways, but not in others. For example, if the class is affordable, it might not be accessible to people with mobility issues. The dissertation’s primary intention is to pay attention to these intersectional concerns and investigate how yoga practitioners work through the self as a pathway to social justice. The chapters of this dissertation lay the groundwork to discover the ways in which yoga and social justice can be both authentic to tradition and to contemporary individuals and groups living in North America.

### **Thick Description 1: Iyengar Yoga**



Photo source: Christian Scully for Yoga Source of Providence, RI <http://iyengaryogasource.com/studio/>. Used by permission.

Iyengar yoga is most known for its use of props. The first notable thing a person would see in an Iyengar studio is the rope wall. The rope wall enables practitioners to hold onto the ropes and stretch strategically areas that they might

not be able to access without it. In

particular, the rope wall enables people to “open the chest” or release into inverted poses without injuring the neck. It was very helpful for me personally. The other aspect of an Iyengar studio space is the amount of supportive props such as bolsters, blocks, straps, blankets, chairs, and even styrofoam boards. These props make yoga poses more physically accessible and properly aligned so that even students with a wide range of biomechanic limitations can experience a version of the pose. For simple example, *Pascimottānāsana* is a seated forward bend in which the practitioner folds from the pelvis, holds onto their feet with bent elbows and brings their head toward their legs with a straight back. If the practitioner has tight hamstrings, they would likely sit on a folded blanket, use a strap to hold on to their feet, and gaze at their toes with a lifted spine rather than strain their back to get their head down (Iyengar 166-167).



Model shown in the restorative yoga pose, *Supta Buddha Konasana*, also known as Reclined Bound Angle Pose. Note the multiple props. Photo credit: Judith Mintz, 2014.

When students enter an Iyengar yoga room, they usually rest in a pose to prepare them for practice; this could be anything from a Reclined Bound Angle (pictured above), a kneeling pose, or *savāsana* (known as corpse pose, lying supine with arms and legs spread and palms open). An Iyengar class begins with the dedication invocation to the sage Patañjali, which is chanted in Sanskrit:

*Yogena cittasya padena vacam  
malam sarirasya ca vaidyakena  
yopakarottam pravaram muninam  
patanjalin pranajaliranato'smi  
abahu purusakaram  
sankha cakrasi dharinamsahasra  
sirasam svetam pranamami patanjalin  
OM. (<http://bksiyengar.com/modules/IYoga/sage.htm>)*

Iyengar yoga classes are always structured in a 4-week cycle. Week 1 is standing poses; week 2 is inversions and backbends; week 3 is seated poses and twists, and week 4 is restorative. If a person came to class twice in one week, they would do two standing pose classes. Each pose is taught individually in what Iyengar teachers call a “come and look” approach, in which the teacher demonstrates a pose or gets someone else to model it, and they offer all of the alignment instructions and details with regards to props, entry into, and exit from the pose. This means that an Iyengar class, even at the highest levels, is slow paced compared to many other classes, and every experience is an opportunity to delve into the details of the pose.

Music is never used in an Iyengar yoga class, and the decorations in the space are usually simple, save for some photographs of B.K.S. Iyengar. Participants tend to be older than those in mainstream yoga classes, often because their bodies enjoy the healing benefits of increased accessibility and alignment that Iyengar yoga offers. A research participant who is an Iyengar

teacher believes that her classes attract older adults because “they have the maturity to deal with this kind of inquiry” (Catherine, Toronto, August 2015). When I have practiced Iyengar yoga, the participants are often white, as were most of my teachers, although there is a long-standing centre in Pune India, which is run by the family of B.K.S. Iyengar.

### **Thick Description 2: Sivananda Yoga**

The Sivananda tradition is a *sampradaya* (tradition, lineage) that draws directly on *Vedānta*, which are a collection of classical Hindu teachings starting with the nineteenth century sages, Ramakrishna (b.1836 - d. 1886) and Vivekenanda (b.1863 - d.1902). Swami Sivananda (b. 1887 - d. 1963) is considered the founding father of the Sivananda tradition, promulgated by one of his followers Swami Vishnudevananda (b.1927 - d.1993). Proponents claim that yoga is the path toward peace because not only do the practices of *āsana* (yoga poses) and *prānāyāma* (breathing exercises) bring generalized health to the person, but that in conjunction with meditation, yoga as a discipline with help the individual and communities who practice together (*sangha*) to achieve “physical, mental and spiritual well-being and attain self-realization” (Toronto Sivananda Yoga Vedānta Centre brochure 2018).

My first introduction to the Sivananda lineage was in 1999 when I attended a Sivananda ashram for a winter solstice holiday retreat. I appreciated the authentic, integrative and devotional approach to yoga that Sivananda lineage takes. At a Sivananda ashram, the day begins at 6:00 a.m. with devotional chanting, a lecture, and meditation; following this is an *āsana* class. No one eats until 10:00 a.m, at which point a robust Indian “brunch” is served. After this meal, people go study yoga texts, relax, or do their *seva* duties, also known as selfless service, and is a part of karma yoga. In the late afternoon, there is another yoga class, followed by meditation and dinner.

In her multi-site ethnography of Sivananda yoga, Sara Strauss reports that this lifestyle is challenging for many Westerners, but they generally claim they find it purifying and peaceful.

Sivananda yoga offers an authentic traditionalism. By authentic, I mean that in addition to offering classes in hātha yoga, Sivananda Yoga attends to the tradition as it is connected to the *Sanātana Dharma* (Hinduism) by way of study of Vedic texts, and *bhakti* practices such as *kirtan* (uplifting devotional chanting). In comparison to the flowing movements of Kripalu or Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga or the healing attention to anatomical detail that I learned in Iyengar yoga, Sivananda yoga's approach is more basic with regards to physical practice. In an open level Sivananda class, there is little to no instruction given with regards to alignment, whereas in a beginners class, some alignment instructions are given.

Some of the research participants in this study are practitioners in the Sivananda tradition, and they shared with me that they particularly resonate with the diverse group of practitioners and teachers there because of their own Indian heritage. The teacher who led the 9:30 a.m. open level class I took as part of my participant observation study recently was a wiry white woman in her late 50s. There were 7 people in the class I attended. They were all women. Three of them were racialized as Asian and South Asian, and the other four, including me, were white women. The youngest there appeared to be in her early 30s and was quite adept, one was in her 60s, and the other appeared to be in her 30s. The *sadhana* (practice) room was simple, fully laid out with four or five rows of studio mats with 6-8 inches between each one. Each mat had a small buckwheat husk cushion for seated meditation and *prānāyāma* (breathing exercises), but there were no other props in the room otherwise visible. The room is painted white, with 3 stained glass windows, a hardwood floor, and many photographs of Swamis Sivananda and Vishnudevananda

together and individually. Most notable was the presence of a carved wooden-framed altar with a lit brass *puja* (prayer service) lamp, and several deities lined up (see photo), which gave a sense of authenticity to an Indian yoga lineage.

The instructor, an austere-looking woman with short grey hair and no makeup did not give her name, nor did she announce that the class was Open Level, even though there was a concurrent beginner-level class happening in another studio. As the students waited for class to begin, they lay in *savāsana*. When the teacher entered the room, we sat up and class began with 3 OM chants, and the chanting of the Sivananda invocation. The class also ended with some closing chants in Sanskrit, the language of yoga Vedānta. As this was an Open level class, we were not provided with sheets with the words to chant along, so most of us in the room just listened. The *sādhana* began with 2 different *prānāyāma*, known also as breathing exercises. In the Iyengar



Sivananda Yoga Centre practice room, May 2018. Photo credit: Judith Mintz

gar yoga tradition, these *prānāyāma* are not done in a regular *āsana* class, but rather they are only carried out in an advanced class specifically for *prānāyāma*. My yoga teacher training at Kripalu incorporated *prānāyāma*, but since Kripalu classes are rare in Toronto, *prānāyāma* are not common in mainstream classes. Both of these *prānāyāma* are done with a specific number of repetitions. The first *prānāyāma* was 3 rounds of 50 *Kāppalabhāti*, known as “skull shining breath,” a rapid, forceful, diaphragmatic exhale in

which the inhale happens passively as the diaphragm relaxes. The other was *Ānaloma Viloma*, which is an alternate nostril breathing technique, in which the practitioner holds one hand in *vishnu mudra*<sup>1</sup> to their nose and closes off a nostril with an exhalation of 8 counts and releases it with the inhalation of 4 counts. The breath is retained at the end of the inhalation for 16 counts.

After the *prānāyāma*, there were 10 rounds of sun salutations (*surya nāmaskar*). The remainder of the yoga class was a sequence in which each pose was followed by a brief rest in *savāsana*. I expected to practice traditional inverted yoga poses such as *sirsāsana* (headstand), *sārvangāsana* (shoulderstand), and *halāsana* (plough); I was not disappointed, but the sequencing was very different from mainstream classes in that abdominal exercises immediately followed *surya nāmaskar*. After the abdominal work, the teacher had the class do inverted poses and backbends, one seated forward bend, and only a single standing pose, which was *trikonāsana*, also known as triangle pose. The balancing pose was the next to last pose practiced.

During the seated forward bend *pascimottanāsana*, the teacher approached me, put one hand on my back and the other on my arms, and attempted to get me to straighten myself to her satisfaction. My knees were bent so as to avoid straining my lower back and hamstrings unnecessarily and re-aggravating an old injury. I flexed my feet purposefully and lifted my stiff upper back toward them, feeling my shoulders tight from months sitting at my desk. This is an ironic feeling for me as a practitioner with 22 years of experience, but par for the course as an academic trying to complete a dissertation. I told the teacher, “I’m good like this.” She responded, “You’re supposed to feel it here,” and she ran her hand up and down my spine. I

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<sup>1</sup> *Vishnu Mudra* is a traditional hand position used in alternate nostril breathing in which the index and middle fingers of the right hand are folded down into the palm, and the thumb and 4th and 5th fingers are open (Baba Hari Dass, *Ashtanga Yoga Primer*. Santa Cruz: Sri Rama Publishing, 1981.)

was surprised to experience this, given the fact that unsolicited touch from instructors is a current topic of debate in yoga circles. Many studios currently offer “consent cards” in which students can turn them face up to indicate they want to a teacher’s assisting touch, or face down to refuse touch in that class. In Chapter 6, I address the gendered implications of these discussions.

In all the classes I have experienced in the Sivananda tradition, there have been little to no props used or offered, and this one I took during my participant observation was no different. The rest of the poses were fairly unremarkable; each one was held statically for 10-15 seconds.

### **Thick Description 3: Composite Mainstream Yoga Class**

The client who comes to a mainstream drop-in yoga class typically wants a class with minimal to no spiritual content. They want a class that is inspiring, upbeat, and also a good workout. A mainstream drop-in yoga class generally has little to no spiritual visual references in the practice studio, although a discretely placed Buddha, Shiva, or Patanjali statue might be tucked into a corner for aesthetic effect, likely as a nod in the general direction of yoga’s history. Since it is easy to purchase a Buddha statue at HomeSense nowadays, it is not unremarkable to find one in a yoga studio. The two Toronto studios where I did the bulk of my participant observation, one in a slowly-gentrifying downtown west neighbourhood and the other in the southern east end, offered a wide range of classes to suit their clients’ tastes. Note that I am referring to the mainstream studio practitioners as ‘clients,’ and the Sivananda studio participants as ‘students.’ This reflects the general approach of studio managers, although at the downtown west studio, there is a more obvious effort at maintaining a sense of *sangha*, or spiritual community through

generalized meditation practices and monthly gatherings. At the southern east end studio, which has since closed, the emphasis was on functional fitness, of which yoga was a central part.

A yoga class in either of these studios would often begin with gentle welcoming music to serve as background while participants waited for class to begin. This music could reflect a wide range of tastes, and is the subject of debate in yoga teachers discussion groups because some people find music distracting and others need it to focus in on their practice. I have heard anything from ambient sitar and tamboura music to pop music in a yoga class. In one Moksha hot yoga class I experienced, the teacher played a popular song by Coldplay during *savāsana*. One large outdoor free yoga class in downtown Toronto blasts upbeat, summery pop music mixes from a massive speaker before the classes begin, and teachers create playlists that converge with their tastes. The teachers must use a microphone in order to be heard in spaces such as parks and retail establishments. While these park large classes may not be intimate, they do invite a wide range of people to attend yoga classes for free, which is generally construed as an inclusive practice.

At one \$10 community centre class I attended in Mississauga, the class was massive, with up to 100 attendees who arranged their mats in concentric circles around the microphone-using teacher. The teacher was a middle aged white woman who played “yoga-ish” music, with tuneful renditions of traditional yoga devotional chants and Indian classical music. What was fascinating about this class is that the participants were from all over the globe, which not only demonstrates yoga’s popularity, but also the accessibility that the community centre setting offers. With its emphasis on fitness and relaxation to enhance well-being, a mainstream yoga class in a studio could be populated by any combination of people who can afford to pay upwards of \$22 per

class. At both the downtown west studio and the one in the east end, the participants are by and large white and in the age range of 25-50. Many are likely wearing Lululemon clothing, although nowadays there are so many more options for sleek, fashionable yoga wear; Lululemon has its competitors.

The sequencing of these classes is basically the same, with some basic warm-ups leading into variations of sun salutations, standing poses, seated poses and twists, and closing with some version of a back bend and then *savāsana*. All of the poses flow quickly into one another, as opposed to Iyengar's "come and look" structure. *Prānāyāma* is generally not taught in these classes beyond *ujjayi* breathing (see Glossary), but usually only in an ashtanga vinyasa flow class. The class would vary depending on whether it was a beginner, level 1, 2, or open level, and of course these vary from studio to studio, and between teachers. Many mainstream classes do not lead inverted poses because of current controversy over their safety, and the lack of sufficient training of teachers to teach these poses without injuring students. In mainstream classes, teachers have all but stopped giving physical adjustments to practitioners in recognition of people's variations of tolerance to touch.

Despite the range of uses to which yoga can be put and forms it can take, it is still dominated in North American urban studio culture by white able-bodied clients and teachers. While popular yoga discourse proclaims its accessibility for everyone, it is questionable that this is truly the case when most yoga classes in Canadian urban centres are populated and taught by white, normative-bodied women. This thought is even more concerning, considering the slogans in yoga advertising for clothing, classes, videos, and even yogurt, which suggest that yoga is for everyone. "Everyone," however, is a very broad swath of people to include in what was once a

subcultural practice with roots in pre-Hindu spiritualism and Western esotericism (de Michelis 11-13). According to de Michelis, Modern Yoga (capitalization de Michelis') has a pre-history that is rooted in a fusion of classical Hindu tradition and modern Western esotericism and its response to British domination of India (10). De Michelis refers to this form of Hinduism as "Neo-Vedāntic" because Westerners "eagerly absorbed and nurtured" it as a "New Age Religion" and alternative to mainstream Western culture (12).

While yoga has become so popular through the late twentieth century to the present that almost every studio has its own teacher training program, these trainings do not always speak to the lived realities of practitioners. They have to have a certain amount of financial liquidity to pay for these trainings, and have the time to devote to them. What this means, then, is that only certain people with specific life circumstances can actually participate, while others who have neither the time nor the money, are by default excluded from the opportunity. Indeed, while public health messages tell people that they should reduce stress through practices such as yoga and meditation, how do they obtain this knowledge or even the ability to teach it, if they do not have the resources? I am compelled to do a feminist academic ethnography of yoga in twenty-first century North America because the social, economic, and health trends that produce and reproduce yoga as a simple wellness practice that everyone should do are problematics through which to examine inequalities of bodies, power, race, class, and ability. Many yoga teacher trainees study in hopes of having a career centred on helping others lead vibrant lives, but success in the yoga world is dependent on mobility, flexibility, and self-promotion. In the *Gender and the Wage Gap Fact Sheet*, The Canadian Women's Foundation points out that women earn approximately seventy-five cents on the dollar and that their economic security is more precarious than men's

(canadianwomen.org). Drawing on Statistics Canada data and policy analysis from the Pay Equity Commission of Ontario, the *Fact Sheet* articulates that the gender wage gap is calculated in numerous ways such as actual hourly wages, the prevalence of more women working part-time than full time, and the fewer paid employment hours that many women work over the life cycle in comparison to men due to their family care work. As such, this dissertation also examines the political economy of yoga teachers, and so I ask, what are the ways in which yoga teachers and students consume yoga in a neoliberal economy that makes physical, economic, and mental well-being a moral imperative?

This research also explores the tensions around practitioners' claims that yoga is 'an evolving tradition.' Discussions that debate whether yoga as it is practiced in North America is cultural appropriation make regular appearances in newspapers such as the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Toronto Star*, and popular opinion websites, including [everydayfeminism.com](http://everydayfeminism.com) and [national-review.com](http://national-review.com) (Russell; Ghandi and Wolff). While some yoga enthusiasts are staunchly committed to keeping a close connection to yoga's spiritual origins in Hinduism, others prefer to be more secular and keep their practice focused on health and wellness. According to Jaswir Dhillon, a Malaysian-born Sikh yoga teacher in Ottawa, "yoga does not belong to one culture," ([ottawacitizen.com](http://ottawacitizen.com)) so it begs the question, what determines a yoga practice that is authentic, or true to yoga's Hindu origins, and for whom is that important? The sites of the communities under study are yoga studios, community centres, academia, and social media, because practitioners are not limited to a single or certain kind of space. Some yoga spaces are designed to be boutique studios with their own teacher trainings, lush décor, specific yoga props and class types, showers, and fresh pressed juices for sale. These studios tend to be in gentrified neighbourhoods and the

fees reflect that. Other yoga spaces in contrast, such as gyms or community centres, just offer basic hātha yoga classes, minimal props, and no special teacher training stream. Many yoga participants claim that this second kind of space is more accessible than the boutique studio because class fees are often more affordable and child care is often available in gyms and community centres. These two types of spaces, however, seem to compete in regards to questions around the authenticity of the yoga experience because of the lack of connection to a specific yoga tradition.

This Introduction chapter will draw out the problematics of the research questions that provide the context for the research, but first, it is important to establish some basic terms and historical contexts for yoga in contemporary North America. The first thing that should be established is the nature of the yoga under consideration in this study.

### **Yoga History Primer**

To offer a history of yoga is a massive undertaking with countless potential rabbit holes and diversions. In order to stay on a path that is consistent with the research questions, in this section I use secondary written sources about yoga's development in the West to chronologically describe the historical contexts of the transnational knowledge exchange that brought yoga into contemporary culture. This section will address the questions, how did yoga come to North America, and how did it get to be so popular with white people, and women in particular? My choice to use secondary historical sources to describe the knowledge transmission rather than to discuss yoga as an knowledge system in itself reflects the critical goals of this project, which is to examine how North Americans have come to experience yoga as a health and social practice. There is a cognitive dissonance in using mostly Western academic sources to decolonize yoga,

however, and this dissertation seeks to reconcile that tension in Chapter 2, “Theoretical Frameworks,” in which I take up feminist materialist perspectives on whiteness. One final note about my use of Western academic sources, which is to say that as a white feminist academic, I acknowledge the problems in framing yoga through this lens, but I use both Western academic and indigenous sources to do so by integrating basic classical yoga theory from Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* when it is thematically relevant. Even though I am discussing social and economic contexts of yoga in this dissertation, it is only logical that I use some yoga philosophy to frame the conversations. Furthermore, many of the interviewees refer to aspects of their experience using a yoga philosophy framework.

Going forward, key Sanskrit terminology will be italicized and translations can be found in the Glossary in Appendix A. Singleton & Byrne use the term, “Modern Postural Yoga” or MPY (8), to refer to what we are doing when we go to yoga classes in studios, gyms, community centres, and parks, but the classical definition of yoga that includes *āsana* and *prānāyāma* is referred to as hātha yoga. These forms of yoga include popular styles practiced around the world such as Sivananda, Iyengar, and Ashtanga. While yoga is touted as an ancient system originating in India, Mark Singleton points out in his monograph, *Yoga Body*, that the yoga practiced in contemporary studios and gyms is actually less than a century old. According to British yoga history scholar Elizabeth de Michelis, the yoga we practice in the West is quite different from classic forms of yoga, and as such, a section in this introduction chapter on yoga history will be cursory at best. In offering a basic yoga primer, I have to be selective of the details through the ways they are relevant to this dissertation, which emphasizes the contemporary physical and health-based

practices of yoga. Most of these practices, and the practitioners whose stories are shared in this ethnography, are far removed from the lineages of classical yoga.

Many scholars link Swami Vivekenanda's visit to the Chicago World Fair in 1893 as marking the official beginning of yoga in North America (De Michelis; Singleton *Yoga Body*; Strauss; Symans; Page). Elizabeth de Michelis explains that the crucial tie-in between India and the West was through British Orientalism, which spanned a period between 1773-1837 (29), and that it influenced the ways in which Hinduism evolved<sup>2</sup>. According to de Michelis' *History of Modern Yoga*, Swamis Ramakrishna and Vivekenanda are the figureheads who propagated yoga's esoteric spiritual roots. The tradition of the Brahma Samaj is a lineage of nineteenth century teachers of neo-Vedānta, including Debendranath Tagore and Keshubchandra Sen (12-13), but most contemporary yoga practitioners are barely aware of this.

In several prominent Western studies on the development of MPY, Vivekananda remains a central figure in the transmission of yoga knowledge from India to the West because of the accessibility of his message (de Michelis; Strauss; Alter; Singleton; Syman). Vivekenanda was definitely attractive because of his exotic allure as a delicate, orange robe-wearing man, and Americans received the teachings he offered with openness and receptivity. Yoga postures, however, were not even a part of Vivekenanda's message. It was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that physical culture, which originated in Europe in the late nineteenth century, intersected with yoga to become a wellness model (Syman; Singleton). De Michelis pinpoints two years as central to the formation of MPY and yoga as it is practiced in Europe and North Ameri-

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<sup>2</sup> Enoch Page claims, however, that British Orientalism ruined yoga, because it turned an esoteric spiritual practice into a political one that undermined yoga's essential aims of liberation and knowing of the self. De Michelis (2005) points out early in her book that her work has "nothing to say about the 'Orientalism' debate initiated by Edward Said." (9)

ca, and cites first the incident of transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau writing in 1849, “at rare intervals, even I am a yogi” (de Michelis 3). The second date is 1896, when Vivekananda published *Raja Yoga*, a volume on the lectures that he gave at the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions (de Michelis 3). Contemporary mainstream yoga classes remain silent on these teachings, however, lest they be construed as too religious. Interestingly, Vivekenanda and later, Paramahansa Yogananda who came to America in 1920, taught yoga and meditation in a way that was meant to make it accessible to Americans through notions of peace, unity and love (De Michelis; Sharma).

How then, did yoga become attributed to a sense of the ancient? To answer this question, we must trace the history of MPY further back than 1849. The *Hāthayogapradīpikā* is a fourteenth century text to which many contemporary self-ascribed serious practitioners refer as the authoritative manual that makes their yoga authentic (Alter 37). Its aphorisms dictate the ways in which postures and breathing exercises should be effectively performed in order to attain the goals of peace, unity, and wellness, and it serves as a foundational approach that the renowned B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga system employs. These goals range “from mundane concerns such as beauty, health, strength, and so on to those that are founded on esteemed ‘spiritual’ truths and realizations, the latter in the form one knowledge of the nature of reality and liberation from worldly attachments and afflictions” (Sarbacker 161). The goals of yoga differ between groups of practitioners; I consider the goals of yoga as a spectrum on which individual practitioners may find themselves at different times in their lives.

In her survey of the development of Modern Yoga, Suzanne Newcombe observes that the Hindu roots of yoga are nearly invisible in the many different contemporary Western adaptations

of Modern Postural Yoga, but many practitioners feel that its benefits are not lost if a practitioner does not follow Hinduism. Furthermore, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs have historically employed yoga's techniques while maintaining their own metaphysical beliefs (986). So what are the authentic roots of yoga, then? I would like to briefly problematize the definition of authenticity in yoga. The fieldwork for this dissertation probes research participants' understandings of authenticity, which I draw out in Chapter Four. Authenticity in this study refers to the ways in which yoga practitioners both identify yoga as "real" or rooted in their understanding of traditional spiritual practice, but this word is slippery because it also infers a sense of personal authenticity. Many yoga practitioners use yoga in a way that some might construe as appropriative in their adaptations of traditional Hindu practices, but they are being authentic to themselves personally. For example, people who engage in accessible and inclusive yoga, they may need to modify physical yoga poses so that they can access their benefits. When people give themselves to practice yoga in a way that is flexible to their personal truth, then this yoga is authentically theirs. This notion of authenticity in yoga, however, remains difficult to pin down with yoga's non-physical practices.

To correct our mistaken thinking that we are doing yoga in a so-called authentic way, Lieberman explains that there never was a "pure" yoga, and that what people in the West are doing now is actually a derivative of what has been syncretic from the outset (100). He sets this misconception straight by pointing out that medieval yogis used yoga differently than contemporary practitioners. Rather than focusing on yoga as a meditation or physical health practice, medieval yogis used yoga as way of awakening *kundalini*, a mode of transport for metaphysical energies, and more specifically, to achieve a sense of "mental equilibrium," a degree of control

over the baser energies of the nervous system, selflessness, and a sustainable reconciliation with being (101). Most important, Liberman emphasizes, is that yoga was never really “‘ancient’ but ‘medieval’ ...and is a hotchpotch of Buddhism, Śaivism, Vaisnavism, with even Islamic influence and non-Hindu tribal asceticism” (104). Most important to acknowledge here is that unlike yoga’s popularity today, medieval yoga was notably esoteric rather than accessible<sup>3</sup>.

North American and British women have been engaged with alternative spiritualities that also draw syncretically on Hindu metaphysical knowledges since the mid-nineteenth century. Historian Stephanie Syman explains that upper and middle class women sponsored Swami Vivekenanda to bring yoga from India to the U.S. in 1896 primarily as a form of meditation, also known as *Raja Yoga*, and published a book of the same name. At that time, Vivekenanda travelled to world fairs to deliver his speeches and taught yoga in wealthy white women’s parlour rooms, because it was Euro-American women who first welcomed Indian teachers. Joy Dixon’s study demonstrates that Victorian-era British women deployed theosophy as a tool for fledgling feminism, and they identified with a distinctly Indian “divine mother” deity that they associated with a “sanctity of motherhood” (195). While contemporary white, Western women might consider their forebears of a century ago to be quaint, occultist, and even racist toward the Indian women who they claimed to admire, the present study notes that Victorian women’s hybridized engagement with Hinduism and theosophy is indicative not only of their desire to find a spiritual practice that resonates and honours their experiences as women, but also that their curiosity in

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<sup>3</sup> By esoteric in this instance, I mean that medieval yoga knowledge was reserved for men in the Brahman caste. Before the mid-twentieth century, women in any caste were not permitted to acquire yoga knowledge through studying scripture or practicing hātha yoga. Indra Devi was the first woman to study and teach hātha yoga and this was not until the mid-twentieth century (Syman).

the exotic stemmed from Orientalism (de Michelis; Syman; Said *Orientalism*; see also Newcombe “Magic and Yoga”).

According to Said, Westerners’ interpretations and appropriation of knowledge systems of colonized peoples, is Orientalism, and is rooted in the claim that owning knowledge is power. I posit that the women who adopted theosophy and Vivekenanda’s teachings of *raja yoga* were in fact claiming a power in a borrowed notion of the divine feminine that did not exist within the confines of Western patriarchy. While Western women’s deployment of the divine feminine is essentialist, it also speaks to ongoing gender and race oppression in our own contemporary era.

As Strauss points out, Vivekenanda’s core teachings did not include *hātha yoga* and instead set squarely upon four pillars based on non-dualist philosophy called *Advaita Vedānta*. The four pillars are: *bhakti*, the yoga of devotion; *karma*, the yoga of service; *raja*, attributed to meditation under the guidance of Patanjali; and *jnana*, yoga of intellectual knowledge, which is guided by the Upanishads. As Strauss points out, and many of the people in the present ethnographic study agree, other forms of yoga such as *hātha*, *kundlini*, or *mantra* are “somehow less central or authentic” than the four pillars (35; see also Feuerstein). If Vivekenanda indeed brought yoga to the West in 1893 but *hātha yoga* was not part of these teachings, then how did *hātha yoga* become so central? Strauss attributes this to Vivekenanda’s insistence on seekers practicing yoga technique that would be accessible to all (36). Not unlike ourselves in the twenty-first century, late nineteenth-century North Americans’ hunger for an antidote to the stressors of modernity lay in yoga, and Vivekenanda offered succour through practice. Lears explains that the upper-class, Northeastern U.S.-led anti-modernity movement emerged as a response to capitalism. Vivekenanda’s “valorization of the middle class,” then, intended to uplift that population to universalist

balance, connection with a loosely-defined divine entity, and wellness (Strauss 34). Vivekenanda died in 1902 at age 39 (Strauss 33), but he left behind robust literature including his book, *Raja Yoga*, and many published lectures.

Vivekenanda's writings on universal brotherhood and peace captured the imagination and passion of the successful South Indian doctor born Kuppuswami Iyer. In 1924, Dr Kuppuswami renounced worldly living and became a *sannyasin* who called himself Swami Sivananda (Strauss 37-38). Swami Sivananda is the founder of the Divine Light Society (DLS), which is one of the oldest ashrams in India. Located in Rishikesh, DLS is now a pilgrimage destination for thousands of yoga practitioners annually, and is the site of study for Strauss's important ethnography, *Positioning Yoga*, in which she examines the transnational and dynamic ways in which Western yoga practitioners engage with yoga as a wellness and spiritual practice. Singleton points out that Sivananda and The DLS functions as a key turning point in the way yoga was practiced in the West from the 1920s onwards, because of the increased focus toward somatic yoga practices (*Yoga Body* 135).

According to social historian Stephanie Syman, Los Angeles in the early twentieth century was in the throes of a movement that focused on the "cult of the body" and "extreme health consciousness," which set the stage for hātha yoga to emerge as a central and eventually pervasive version of yoga (168). For practitioners of raja yoga, however, hātha yoga was inferior and appealed to the "forces of the *lower* nature" (170 italics in original), and raja yoga's proponents such as the famous Theosophist Madame Blavatsky and her protégé, Katherine Tingley, argued that hātha yoga "made you crazy" (170). In 1925, though, Bengali yogi transplant to Los Angeles Paramahansa Yogananda promoted hātha yoga as key for accessing physical wellness

and what he saw as concomitant spiritual well-being. He developed his own system of hātha yoga that appealed to Americans, who craved a disciplinary, physical practice. Challenging exercise and the physical culture that emerged alongside yoga at the end of the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries appealed to a capitalist work ethic while still embodying what Lears has called the “anti-modern impulse” that sought to reject the sterility of liberal Protestantism and nineteenth century positivism through the ethic of self control (xv, 13).

The body and the appeal of its materiality wins out over meditation’s loftiness; Iyengar’s vastly popular hātha yoga system did not become popular until the mid-twentieth century. Elizabeth De Michelis’ comprehensive study of the evolution of what she calls “modern psychosomatic yoga” (MPsY) and “modern meditational yoga” (MMY) offers significant explanation of yoga as it evolved in Euro-American culture over the past century. Tracing twentieth century developments through esoteric New Age religious and healing explorations through to an accelerated uptake of yoga through the 1950s to the 1970s, de Michelis argues that as “hippy travel to India peaked, [it led to]...more or less in-depth contact with yogic practices and ideas” (191). Between the 1970s and mid-1980s, a consolidation phase proceeded to popularize yoga’s presence in North America and Europe, and the connection with Indian teachers who identified as gurus became less personalized, and practitioners leaned toward an emphasis on physical, biomechanics-somatic practice (de Michelis 192-194). In *Yoga Body*, however, Singleton points out that not only does the modern āsana class today bear little resemblance to fifteenth century practices described in classical texts such as the *Hathayogapradīpikā* (32), DeMichelis’ analysis does not explain the roots of why historical figures bringing yoga to the West emphasized meditation practices rather than hātha yoga (4). These two strands indicate a differentiation between yoga

practices that focus on physical strength and health, and those of the mind such as meditation. In the introduction to her edited anthology, *Yoga Travelling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective*, Beatrix Hauser traces the transnational flows of yoga knowledge and the ways yoga practitioners produce and reproduce so-called ancient Indian traditions that are, in actuality, only just over one hundred years old (9-15). Hauser's literature review provides the overview of how yoga migrated from India to Euro-America, and comments that Western practitioners of yoga co-opted it to conform to or to suit their own individualistic ideals of perfect health. Newcombe establishes that yoga is a "semi-secular practice" that is focused mainly on the postures, also known as *āsana* ("Development of Modern Yoga" 986).

Another important transnational knowledge bridge between India and the West is Indra Devi, the Russian-accented, petite, sari-wearing yoga teacher who arrived in Los Angeles in 1947 (Syman 179-180). After he initially rejected her for study because of her gender, Devi began her studies in 1937 with Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, the acclaimed yoga teacher of the Maharaja in Mysore, India. Krishnamacharya is believed to be responsible for the rise of hātha yoga not only on his own accord, but also because of his work with Devi as well as Iyengar and renowned Ashtanga yoga teacher Pathabhi Jois (Desikachar 8; Singleton *Yoga Body* 20; Liberman 107; Sarbacker 177). Stephanie Syman's discussion of Indra Devi explains that Devi opened an austere hātha yoga studio on Sunset Boulevard twenty-two years after Yogananda's arrival and rise to success. Devi apparently faced many odds against her, not the least of which was discouragement from her friends that the Los Angeles population would see her yoga classes as cultish. Devi's studio "projected order and discipline" to clients who were mostly women interested in improving their figures, including many well-known Hollywood stars (180-182). Devi's

hātha yoga, according to Syman, offered both an intense physical practice that prepared its followers for spiritual development, and helped them preserve their youthful appearance, which was a social and economic imperative in Los Angeles (184-185). Lieberman attributes the attraction of wealthy women to Devi to the fact that she charged exorbitant fees for her classes because she “believed Americans were incapable of developing respect for anything that was free” (107). Devi’s book, *Look Younger, Live Longer* was published in 1950 and effectively articulated health with hātha yoga, with endorsements by actress Gloria Swanson (Syman 188-189).

Vivekenanda’s yoga and Indra Devi’s yoga are alike in name only, rather than in its signified meaning (Singleton *Yoga Body* 15). Singleton importantly explains, however, that while postural yoga and raja yoga may seem to be rather divorced from one another, their relationship is both dialectical and reflective of changing world views and practices in India and in the West (16). Alter explains that while yoga’s evolution in the twentieth century has become more focused on fitness, there are also many yoga advocates who want to emphasize that yoga is an “embodied philosophy” that engages with “mental self-discipline” (36). Strauss also demonstrates the importance of mental fortitude in her discussions with yoga practitioners at Rishikesh. Through his description and analysis of Indian *shivir*, which loosely translates as a yoga camp for immersion training in yoga, Alter’s study demonstrates that the performance of hātha yoga becomes a reflection not only of the practitioner’s mastery at hātha yoga and prānāyāma, but also of self-control. Further, this mastery confers the social currency of respectable morality on the practitioner who can triumph upon having achieved a certain level of proven proficiency. The *Yoga Sūtras* of second century Patañjali offer a guiding text to anyone wanting to cultivate this discipline, and the Ashtanga yoga system, as taught in the lineages of Baba Hari Dass, Kripalu,

and Pattabhi Jois is the physical practice through which North American yoga seekers have been doing this through the early 1970s to the present.

Interestingly, it is the sweat-inducing and often competitive Primary Series as developed by Jois, along with the 26 poses that Bikram Choudhry recently attempted to have patented, that started to attract the most men from the 1970s onward (Syman 269), but women remain the highest percentage of practitioners in these yoga rooms at 72% (*Yoga in America Study*). Many have claimed that these forms of hātha yoga will make them thin, or at least keep them that way. Substantiating these early speculations as to why hātha yoga is so popular in the West is de Michelis' observation that "at least to start with, Iyengar Yoga was more successful in the West than in India" (225). De Michelis ascribes Iyengar's accessibility with Western yoga practitioners as being linked to his lack of formal training in classical Indian philosophy, which she links to his taking more liberties with the *Yoga Sūtras*, and his development of hātha yoga as a health system (225-226).

Many scholars (Singleton "The Classical Reveries"; Liberman; Sarbacker; Newcombe "Development of Modern Yoga") agree that there is no singular notion of a unified, classical yoga, and that is the second mode of inquiry this dissertation examines. Yoga teachers and enthusiasts who participated in this study debated widely differing opinions as to whether yoga is something they can invent in order to feel good, or whether yoga practitioners must remain authentic to its historical and spiritual roots. For many, however, the answer lies somewhere in the middle, and most so-called approved North American 200 hour yoga teacher trainings offer a pastiche of traditional yoga philosophy and history, which yoga trainers often claim as authentic. A yoga teacher who casually throws in yoga terminology such as a reference to Patañjali's *ahim-*

sa - non violence - concept might feel validated in being able to claim such knowledge, but it is more authentic to “admit you don’t know,” as some of the respondents in this study have argued. In his chapter, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga, Singleton suggests that the *Yoga Sūtras* (YS) by Patañjali is at best complimentary to the Vedas, and draws from a variety of other metaphysical schools of thought. Followers of Ashtanga and Bikram yoga often refer to the *Sūtras* to lend credibility and supposed authenticity to their commitment to the practice. Ironically, however, Singleton argues that YS is actually a neo-Hindu inscription of Orientalism and nationalist contexts in nineteenth-century India (78-79).

In his monograph *Yoga Body*, Singleton specifically explains that he is not engaging with Said’s critique because he did not intend to “adopt such colonial discourse theories and apply them to modern yoga” (11). Singleton’s ambivalent position on using Said to unpack the relationship of Orientalism to yoga concurs with that of de Michelis, who makes the important distinction that her study “has nothing to say about the ‘Orientalism’ debate initiated by Edward Said” (9). Many contemporary yoga teacher training programs use Mark Singleton’s popular book, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* as a core text, especially in Ashtanga Vinyasa programs, in hopes that the book lends academic credibility and context to the posture sequence to which many “ashtangis” are so committed to doing on a daily basis<sup>4</sup>. Singleton’s monograph helps enthusiastic would-be yoga practitioners put their practice into some perspective and offer scholarly historical context to āsana, which they might think is central to yoga but is only a small part. *Yoga Body* is an investigation of the rise of modern, transnational yoga in the West, which identifies the factors that formulated hātha yoga, the posture-based yoga with which

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<sup>4</sup> “Ashtangi” is the urban slang for a yoga practitioner who is devoted to the practice of Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga.

we are familiar today, and its connections with health and physical culture a century ago. I coin the term, “transnational yoga in the West” to indicate a flow of yoga knowledge, classes and teaching streams that moves within Western, Northern Hemisphere, cultural frameworks. Transnational yoga acknowledges that yoga originates from India and it pays homage to its philosophical tradition as an important spiritual value, but the “in the West” part positions indigenous teachings of yoga as an add-on to the pre-existing Judeo-Christian framework from which many contemporary yoga practitioners in North America and Europe contextualize their yoga experiences. Transnational yoga in the West also means that there is an international yoga trend that is distinctly Western in its flavour while minimizing traditional Indian cultural and spiritual elements; this is particularly notable through social media. As Beatrix Hauser points out in her Introduction to *Yoga Travelling*, transnational yoga follows consumer and fitness flows internationally, but often dispenses with or cherry picks the aspects of yoga’s spiritual teachings that it deems inaccessible or not in alignment with Euro-North American belief systems. In this way, the Western voice establishes and maintains a dominant and perhaps misguided position on yoga such that the Indian voice can become subjugated (Malhotra; Strauss).

In Spivak’s classic essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” she says that Western people tend to cling to the authority of their own voice, and that their economic privilege allows them to ignore inequality. The power differential that makes one voice subaltern and another not, argues Spivak, is located in Marx’s insistence that it is economic inequality that creates class difference, which separates different groups from one another. In the context of a discussion of authenticity, yoga in North America, and power, I articulate Spivak’s essay here to ground my argument in an understanding that white people in the North American yoga world would often like to pretend that

everyone is equal. With the meritocratic rhetoric that claims all people are free to thrive if they work hard enough, many North American yoga practitioners unconsciously replicate libertarian values that obfuscate the lived realities of people whose lives are a daily economic struggle. Spivak claims that this practice is rooted in Orientalism, and colonial British misunderstanding and oversimplification of Sanskrit and Hindu law.

Like Singleton, Stephanie Syman has little to no critical impulse about the role of Orientalism and yoga in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yoga historians' lack of engagement with Said's deconstruction of power relationships between the British and the Indians whose subcontinent they colonized points informs my uneasy choice of a theoretical framework that is feminist materialist as opposed to poststructuralist or even post-colonial. I provide an explanation for my choice in Chapter 2, "Theoretical Frameworks." The following sections of this chapter will address the problematics of this ethnography, which focus on ideological pressures of racialized and gendered embodiment and the political economy of being a yoga instructor.

## **Chapter Outline of the Dissertation**

Chapter 2 offers the research questions to develop a materialist feminist theory of yoga culture as it articulates with race and whiteness, health and embodiment, and notions of cultural appropriation and knowledge translation. In Chapter 3, I draw out the methodology and sites of study for this project. I explain why I chose multi-sited feminist ethnography as the method for this dissertation, and set the stage for the places and contexts of the stories to unfold. Chapters 4 through 7 respond to and analyze the themes that emerged in the fieldwork, and address the initial research questions about the proliferation of so many white, able bodied women in yoga, and

how they negotiate tensions around the notion of a dynamic, changing yoga in contrast with ideals of authenticity and tradition. The subsequent chapters unpack these stories and analyze what they mean in the context of the research questions. Chapter 4 explores the ways in which research participants negotiate the concept of authenticity in contemporary North American yoga practice. Chapter 5 dives into their notions of health and wellness as they experience it through yoga as a physical discipline. Chapter 6 draws out the complexities of the variety of embodiments through gender and sexuality in yoga, and Chapter 7 is an intersectional examination of accessibility and social justice through the eyes of yoga practitioners in North American urban cities.

### **Yoga, “Authenticity”, and Race**

A major question this ethnography of yoga communities examines is the views yoga practitioners have around the idea of yoga, authenticity, and what is often referred to as cultural appropriation. Chapter 4, “‘Yoga is This, Yoga is That’: Contested Authenticities” examines the phenomenon of yoga ownership to articulate with theories of whiteness and argues that cultural appropriation accusations are one-dimensional. To say that yoga practitioners are claiming yoga for themselves complicates postmodern ideas of re-making culture. Inherent in North American yoga cultures is the understanding that yoga originates from India, but that the knowledge has been transmitted through Indian teachers who have come to the West to share yoga’s wisdom and integrated principles of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. The irony here, as mentioned earlier, is that brown and black bodies are in the minority in yoga spaces, despite the fact that yoga knowledge originates from places of brown and black people (Haddix). I have taught yoga in spaces that are decorated with statues of Lords Shiva and Ganesha, and painted mantras as sym-

bols known as *yantras* (Pott) on the walls. In casual conversations, interviews, blogs, and articles, people are asking, Who owns yoga?

This question is a feminist concern for many imbricated reasons that layer whiteness, women's health, and capitalism with yoga, as first discussed academically by Andrea Jain. Yoga's synonymity with white women is "absorptive of yoga," according to Kaushik-Brown (67). Whiteness absorbs yoga in its so-called colour-blindness, and in its apprehension of universal liberation. White women's active engagement in empowering health practices for themselves and for their families have also drawn them to yoga, because of its association with Ayurvedic medicine and its roots in accessible nutrition and herbal practices for home use (Londsdorf et al; Berger; Langford). Concomitantly, racialized people often are not in positions to access the benefits of yoga which historically have been "free," either because of monetary reasons, or because they experience yoga as exclusionary and hate being "the only one" (Haddix 22). Kaushik-Brown argues that the processes of profit-making through yoga are racialized. This is not only because studio owners in contemporary Western yoga are predominantly white, but also through colonial histories of white settler property ownership claims and commodity racism (Kaushik-Brown 68-69; Page 42).

The stories that unfold in the interviews, participant observation, and social media conversations, demonstrate that these three areas of embodiment, political economy, and racism are the most important issues to contemporary yoga practitioners. While many studies about yoga may focus on yoga's benefits as a method for healing and recovery or the philosophical nuances of one tradition or another, this study answers the as-yet unaddressed and uneasy questions about

how yoga has evolved from subcultural practice of self-inquiry and self-improvement to mainstream preventative health imperative.

### **Political Economy of Health and Yoga: Mothers and Teachers**

Chapter 5 is called, “It was such good medicine for me”: The Political Economy of Health and Yoga, and examines the tensions inherent in the gendered notions of the body as imperfect and in need of self-improvement. Research participants offer rich data that describe the ways in which they, too, have negotiated these tensions between the way they feel, the way they look, and the rules of health as a social responsibility. Many of the participants in this research revealed that they balance their work as yoga teachers with their work as mothers, and as such, negotiate similar tensions with work, mothering, domestic labour and relationships through what Arlie Hochschild Russell calls the Second Shift. I argue that while many folks consider teaching yoga to be a career, there are many structural barriers to making it so.

Discussions with mothers who teach and practice yoga articulates materialist feminist frameworks in this chapter. It is relatively easy to do the yoga teacher hustle if you are young, single, and a white, thin, able-bodied man or woman. Some of the teachers I interviewed fit into this privileged description of successful yoga teacher, but even some of those are resistant to this pressure to perform. Many of the women yoga instructors I interviewed are also mothers, and they must balance their passion for their career choice with their roles as mothers (Hays; Russell Hochschild). Mother-yoga teachers’ balancing act of emotional labour and running a business is dependent, of course, on the marital status of the mother, and the financial picture of the family that surrounds her. Success for a full time yoga teacher means that individual has won over a de-

voted following of students, and has a roster of anywhere of up to 15-20 yoga classes per week. So what of the mother yoga teacher who has chosen not to nurture a group of keen practitioners, but instead nurtures her own offspring? How does society honour her work? Since contemporary North American yoga teachers are disproportionately women, this means that many of these instructors fall into the mommy track, which we hear of frequently with regards to careers and mothering.

This dissertation also examines the inequalities that arise for yoga teachers themselves as precarious workers. As such, many although not all of the participants in this ethnography of yoga in North America are instructors of hātha yoga. Yoga teachers are the backbone of the industry, but in actuality, the sale of yoga teacher training programs, props, clothing, music, and home decor amounts to a higher dollar value than teachers are earning leading yoga classes and owning studios. According to *Yoga Journal*, Americans are spending \$16.8 billion on yoga props, clothing, accessories, and classes (*Yoga in America Study*). The yoga teachers thus produce and reproduce dominant ideologies of embodiment while also being subject to social norms and economic situations that dictate how they manage their careers. The yoga teacher in North America must create the impression for the clients of the yoga studio, gym or even community centre that they are embodying those ideals of healthy lifestyle, purity of speech, and thought. This chapter analyzes reflections from one-on-one interviews and social media discussion threads discussing the idealized yoga lifestyle.

Teacher trainings have evolved not only to produce more teachers, but also as a way to improve the prestige of a studio and its income. Yoga teacher trainings by extension then also produce more yoga teachers who have a higher social currency. While many studios cannot sur-

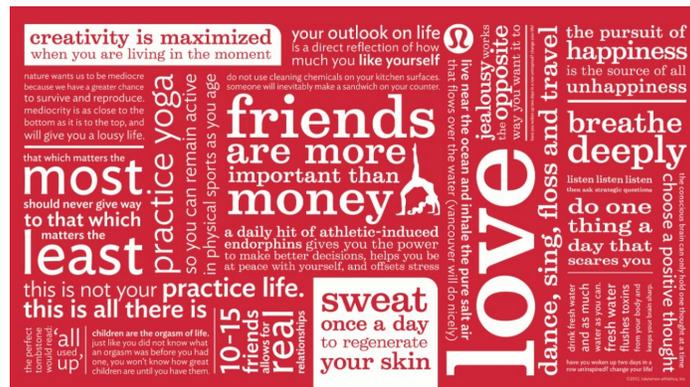
vive in our market-driven, advanced capital society unless they are charging \$20 to \$25 per class, renting mats, and selling alkaline charged water, there are some studios and other sites of yoga that are pushing back against a one-size-fits-all practice. Some of these yoga sites have been able to resist holding yoga teacher trainings (YTTs) costing between \$2500 and \$5000, but many have bowed to the pressure to either offer the trainings or perish. Running teacher trainings may keep a yoga studio afloat, but what kind of yoga teacher does it produce? Ultimately, many yoga teachers and studio owners have reluctantly accepted that they must hustle with products, retreats, and podcasts in order to be a full time yoga teacher rather than one who works part time and relies on other income sources to survive (see [jbrownyoga.com](http://jbrownyoga.com)). Drawing on my interviews with yoga instructors and blog writings by studio owners, this chapter develops a robust critique of the neoliberal frameworks that enable meritocracy-based structures that falsely encourage “yogapreneurs” to rely on selling health practices, imagined abundance, and prosperity as business models.

The discussions and stories of Chapter 5 help to explain the importance of yoga in the context of physical culture and the building of the ideal citizen, but what about those whose bodies do not reflect that perfectly healthy model? Can we envision a healthy citizen whose body is acceptable as it is? The next section introduces the context for the discussions around ideal femininity as yoga represents it, body image, and the Health at Every Size Movement.

### **The Body Project of Yoga: Health, Ideal Femininity, and Image Culture**

How do yoga practitioners experience their practice as a form of social and personal power? Social historians have demonstrated the convincing power of media and advertising on

consumers that their food, clothing or fitness can produce ideal citizens and confer social currency (Lears; Crawford “Health as Meaningful Social Practice”; Wolf). Our culture demands that its citizens are healthy, self-reliant, productive individuals, and it seems that print, television, and social media embrace and encourage any practice that helps people to become that embodied ideal. Neoliberal thinking about how we can earn our way to success on our merits underpin yoga in North America, as we can see in the dubious health claims and mottos on yoga clothing giant Lululemon’s shopping bags.



Lululemon shopping bag, classic design circa 2015

Yoga has also come to be considered a form of somatic therapy (Hoyez; de Michelis; Kern), but this notion is not without problems. In Chapter 5, I crystallize the concept, “neoliberal health-ism” by defining the ways in which the discourse of neoliberalism co-opts the transcendental path of the self in yoga for the purpose of individualizing responsibility of health through precarious work structures.

Chapter 6, “Embodiments of Gender and Sexuality in the Toronto Yoga World” problematizes the heteronormative contradictions inherent to the impossible perfect body, and their relation to the self-affirming messages that the yoga world perpetuates. Yoga offers its practitioners a host of contradictory messages: you’re okay as you are, but be like this, do this, and you’ll be better. How we experience our body from the inside is affected through the what Stuart Hall refers to as “the circuit of culture” by the meanings in images we consume and language (*Representation 4*) and also through the feedback loop of the negative self-talk that we generate when we feel that our reflection in the mirror is not what matches the images in media. Our image culture tells us that we must still emulate the bodies that we see and we measure ourselves against those bodies (Bordo; Wolf; Rice). I argue that despite mainstream yoga culture’s insistence on inclusivity, there is still a long way to go toward achieving true diverse body positivity. Fortunately, though, the research findings also demonstrate that people are indeed resisting body normativity pressures.

This project asks, how do we form community to create a radical yoga that provides care for diverse bodies and expanded, diverse subjectivities? Research participants involved with chair yoga, queer yoga, and yoga for brown bodies are all part of the shift away from hegemonic yoga toward a queered yoga space, represents social change happening through yoga practitioners. In other words, yoga becomes the vehicle for equity, and the practitioners are both the cause of this renewed sense of social justice and its beneficiaries.

How might people find radical, healing justice through yoga, when mainstream yoga tends to be exclusive of bodies with disabilities or people who might identify as fat or otherwise not fitting into a regular yoga class? Rather than encouraging participants to self-improve, is it

even possible in this fitness-promoting culture to create a yoga that invites all bodies to participate from wherever they truly are? The current work, then, examines non-mainstream yoga as a movement that is trying to extract itself from one that assumes singularity over its claims to health and the perfected body-mind.

### **Yoga and Social Justice: Toward a Feminist Ethics of Care**

Chapter 7 examines the ways in which yoga practitioners are not only reproducing mainstream ways of thinking about yoga, but also how they are resisting these social values of health, neoliberal constructs of productivity, and ideal embodiment. As the field research period came to a close, I came to understand more clearly that the traditional aims of yoga as a path of peace are, in fact, still closely aligned with what most practitioners are doing. This chapter brings together the threads of social action and access through the ways in which yoga teachers and enthusiasts are engaging in innovative ways of working with marginalized groups. In particular, I focus on my fieldwork journey to Brooklyn, where I experienced first hand the ways in which people are pushing back against racism, ageism, and ableism in the yoga world. It was so very refreshing to experience a yoga practice that directly addressed all of the things I have found to be problematic in yoga land over the past decade, and this chapter tells these stories.

In telling these stories of yoga practitioners who are working through the ways in which the self is a pathway toward social justice, I develop a conceptual framework of a method by which to reclaim and recreate yoga as an inclusive, ethical practice for this millennium. I call this framework a "feminist ethics of care." It is feminist because it is intersectional in that it attends to the complex and imbricated networks of race, class, gender, age, ability, and sexuality. The

“ethics of care” enters this framework because I am developing an ethical re-creation of yoga that combines attention to yoga’s historical, cultural, and philosophical roots in India, while also attending to its universal benefits for all beings who wish to know themselves and their place in healing themselves and the world. This ethos is also attentive to a notion of authenticity that, while it acknowledges yoga’s Indian roots, also acknowledges with ethical integrity the authentic subjective position of the practitioner in their path toward social justice.

Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation with a return to theory. This time, the theories in Chapter 8 seek to rejoin traditional teachings in yoga in an attempt to return to, or re-integrate indigenous Indian knowledge with contemporary understandings of social justice. As a concluding chapter is not meant to bring new knowledge into the discussion, the narrative identifies trajectory of the dissertation and overall conclusions, gaps and limitations to the research, and homes in on future considerations for social equity development in yoga. Yoga, it turns out, is not as simple as going to an exercise class. While classic yoga texts may not have mentioned body positivity, yoga for people with differently-abled bodies, or confronting racism, contemporary yoga practitioners are making their yoga practice to be about authentically working toward social justice.

## **Chapter 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURE OF YOGA COMMUNITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

### **Introduction: “Why Inequality and Oppression? Because Capitalism”**

I have been a part of North American yoga communities as a practitioner and an instructor for over twenty years. For the last seven or eight of these, however, I have felt a disconnection in rooms full of people who identify as so-called yogis and yoginis. The popular slogans encouraging practitioners to be peaceful, grateful, and positive that I heard and also said in yoga classes were no longer resonating for me, and I felt like a grumpy killjoy. Who were these healthy green juice-drinking yoga people, and why were they flocking to yoga classes when just two decades ago it was a fringe activity? Well-adorned in expensive yoga clothes, sitting on jewel-toned special yoga mats, these people, mostly white women, exude a sense of ownership of the yoga practice space that I do not share.

This chapter articulates the roots of this cognitive dissonance and the problematics of yoga in contemporary North America by providing the theoretical frameworks that help us to unpack it as more than just a health craze or fashion. By using a materialist feminist lens to see through commercialism, whiteness, and healthism in this yoga world, I will articulate a theory of what I call critical feminist yoga thinking. First, I provide a rationale for materialist feminism in the context of ethnographic research on yoga communities. Moving beyond the stories of why people, especially white women, enjoy yoga as a health practice, in this section, I dissect the connective tissue that articulates the structures and processes of racialization, gender, class exclusion, and embodiment at play in contemporary western yoga. I will offer a theoretical analysis for the proliferation of white, able bodied women in yoga, and the cultural projects at work that

challenge notions of yoga as an unchanging tradition amidst charges of cultural appropriation. I argue that a feminist materialist approach to creating a critical feminist yoga studies will help to mitigate the elision of class and ethnicity in the mainstream yoga world.

### **In Defence of Materialist Feminism**

At its core, materialist feminism links women's identities, bodies, desires, and needs to class (Hennessy and Ingraham 2), all of which are in play in this examination of contemporary North American yoga. Through a materialist feminist framework, this chapter offers a reading of post-colonial whiteness and body project narratives in yoga that seeks to uncover and disrupt what I consider to be the ontological crisis of the yoga world. Contemporary yoga is in the eye of a perplexing dialectical storm. Its practitioners have two choices. They can either perform what Hennessy and Mohan refer to as a "crisis containment" (326) that reproduces ideologies of capitalism, sexualization of women's bodies, and class and race exclusion, or yoga practitioners can actively disrupt these through feminist acts of working class insurgency, social movements of health, and body positivity projects. I argue here that yoga communities in the Western world are enacting what Hennessy and Mohan call the "global reach of capitalism," with its expensive fancy pants, designer juices, and perfectly sculpted yoga butts decorating the media in everything from banking and yogurt advertisements, to magazines telling us to relax and meditate our way to healing. With this articulation of materialist feminist theories to an examination of contemporary yoga in North America, my concern is that if we do not intervene with a theory to explain these phenomena that replicate inequality and oppression, yoga practitioners will unwittingly reproduce exclusionary practices inscribed through health perfectionism, whiteness and white su-

premacny despite their claims of non-racism. Similar to the way many yoga teachers and students approach their practice, Hennessy and Mohan articulate how discipline helps “produce the good subject necessary under the emergent conditions of production, exchange, and consumption, and to serve as the ideological foundations of... family, sexuality, and labour...” (329). By theorizing this good subject and the material conditions produced by patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies, we can begin to disrupt what I think of as hegemonic yoga.

In creating a critical theory of contemporary yoga studies, I use a materialist feminism approach grounded in local historical material conditions of institutional racism (Davis; Lorde), the notion of imperialist debris (Page; Stoler), and theories of gendered labour divisions and heteronormativity (Jackson; Hennessy and Ingraham). The feminist materialist theories that I articulate with yoga intersect with the social and economic processes that regulate our every day lives (Ingraham 277). Materialist feminism discloses how power and domination play out in ordinary situations that people leave unarticulated. I borrow from Chrys Ingraham’s explanation of materialist feminism as a “mode of inquiry examining the division of labour and wealth distribution in the context of historically prevailing national and state interests and ideological struggles over meaning and value” (277) in order to explain how contemporary yoga in the West is at the precipice of either major social change or simply reproducing class, gender, and race oppression. Discussions on social media, blogs, and in my fieldwork demonstrate that a tipping point is near. Materialist feminism evolved out of Marxist historical materialism and socialist feminism, and the following brief discussion on Marxist feminist theory helps to contextualize this development.

Following Marx's Thesis XI on Feuerbach, Hennessy and Ingraham argue that the world (theory) and change (practice) are integrally connected, and as such, it is time to theorize the yoga world and change the practices within it that reproduce intersecting oppressions of class, race, gender, age, sexuality, and ability (2). According to Hennessy and Ingraham, materialist feminism is the fusion of Marxist and radical feminism with postmodern discourses (9). Materialist feminism pays more attention to language, ideas, and culture than Marxist and socialist feminism does, which is important because while a Marxist feminist approach to understanding yoga can help understand the connections of colonial histories of yoga and capitalism, it does not fully explain the way representations of bodies in yoga speak to yoga-practicing populations in multi-valent ways. Lest readers worry that this dissertation dabbles in too many theoretical approaches, I argue that we can consider the multiple layers of contemporary yoga as both a culture and a social institution. This means that contemporary yoga in North America is both socially constituted as a dynamic process of performance and becoming, and also an ideology that constitutes us as subjects (Jackson 288).

Nancy Hartsock's engagement with Marxist theory helps to develop a materialist feminist theory that lays the groundwork for this dissertation. In particular, I am concerned with the ways in which contemporary yoga confers power on those who practice it. Following Marxian theorizing, Hartsock reminds readers that "if power is a relation, then institutions as such should be seen as social relations" (128). Furthering this equation, I propose in this work that contemporary North American yoga is a form of social relations in which we can see the agendas that both subjugate and confer upon the power of workers who both produce and consume it. As Hartsock explains, Marx's theory permits us to explore the effects of class division in capitalism (131), and

we see this played out in the relations of the “individual and collectivity” in yoga world (131). A materialist feminist approach to theorizing contemporary North American yoga particularly has proven to be useful as I unpack the relationships of power and community, ruling class domination, and proletariat resistance.

A materialist feminist approach to understanding yoga also helps us to untangle the often uncomfortable heteronormative whiteness that pervades yoga class spaces and online sites. For example, Ingraham coins the term, “the heterosexual imaginary” by drawing on the Lacanian and Althusserian notions of the “imaginary” to explain how images or representations of reality mask the material conditions of existence (275). The lovely images of bendy thin white ladies in yoga magazines exemplify this concept of the heterosexual imaginary, because not only is her appearance visually white, but she is also ideologically white and heterosexual, sculpted to fit into a social mould of perfect heteronormative productivity. We do not really know who this person doing the pretzel yoga pose is, yet we assume she embodies an ideal of dominant ideologies of normative, ethical, ‘healthy’ North American living. I extend this concept of the heterosexual imaginary to the contemporary yoga world because of the contradictory and conflicting ways that commoditization and simplification of yoga is used to sell an idealized heteronormative way of life. For example, Ingraham points out that materialist feminism is adept at analyzing what is omitted in a text or in a social space, in order to reveal the problems inherent in the ideology (279). The cognitive dissonance, or dialectic crisis intervention to which I refer in the opening to this chapter asks, what is not said in these images and yoga spaces? Who is excluded?

A brief examination of the limits of poststructuralism as a theoretical framework for analyzing yoga communities supports my argument for using materialist feminism. If we consider

yoga through a poststructuralist lens and only think of yoga as an evolving culture with no essential truth, then we risk losing how the real life stories of what actual humans do, feel, and experience relate to social structures and political economies of health and labour (Jackson 287). The fragmented nature of postmodern and poststructuralist thought is attractive with regards to considering yoga as an ever-changing truth and a product of conflict and contradictions (Maynard 12), but if we take a poststructuralist approach to the examination of yoga, however, we do so at the expense of articulating some of the objective and material structures of state and economic power that historically shape women's oppression (Sangster). Maynard does point out that poststructuralism is useful in discussing discursive power imbalances in representations, and thus offers places for resistance (12) against a universalizing tendency to place women inside of patriarchy or capitalism. The debate between whether to use Marxist feminism versus post-structuralism as a framework for theorizing contemporary yoga culture puts us squarely in the balancing act of negotiating the arguments of the two key informants in this dissertation.

I do have one other small caveat on the exclusive use of a materialist feminist theoretical framework. While materialist feminist theorizing is helpful in understanding class, race, and political economy aspects of the contemporary yoga scene in North America, we must also consider the effects of culture that media and its consumers produce, which postmodernism helps to explain. Media representations of bodies doing yoga are an important topic of discussion in the yoga communities. The other limit of Marxism is that it can attribute all structural inequalities to economy, whereas postmodernism revises Marxist accounts of capitalism as hegemonically produced cultural values (Jackson 286). Materialist feminist theorizing, then, balances in between

postmodernism and Marxism, and allows for us to consider the shifting ground of yoga communities as its practitioners shape the practice away from a fixed tradition.

This flexibility with the definition of yoga is not without difficulties, as this dissertation will demonstrate. Some yoga practitioners in fieldwork interviews and online discussion threads argue that they think yoga is something that they can create for themselves as an evolving, mindful practice doing whatever movement styles appeal to them at the moment. Several informants have made claims such as, “As long as you’re breathing and moving mindfully, it’s yoga.” Yoga traditionalists would disagree with this pastiche approach, however. They have argued that while poststructuralism’s claim that there is no grand theory works well for people wanting to get distance between traditional yoga practice and one that is evolving according to individual needs, yoga practitioners hold exclusively to these kinds of claims, can also risk minimizing and oversimplifying yoga’s roots in ancient India while colonizing yoga for their own purposes. For example, there is a trend in some North American white female yoga communities to valorize the notion of the goddess within all women. A feminist materialist approach helps to critique the obfuscation of class and ethnicity in the following example.

Celia Rothenberg’s study demonstrates that some women articulate their religious affiliation with yoga. For Rothenberg’s exclusively female research participants, “the language of sacredness is found in the body” (64), through links made between a healthy, flexible body, and Jewish concepts for living. While this approach not only excludes men and also entrenches the notion of women in social roles such as motherhood or other forms of unpaid labour, it also is complicated by imperialist claims to ownership of yoga that assumes it can change long-held traditions (Kaushik-Brown). Even more problematic with this syncretic Jewish approach, and oth-

ers, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters, is the uncritical swallowing whole of Jewish yoga as a postmodern answer to the hunger for missing meta-narrative of lost communal bonds. It is problematic because while Jewish yoga suggests that the postmodern self is fragmented and that is concomitant with a loss of connection to community, it also suggests that there is a post-modern marketplace through which one can purchase spiritual enrichment and health (69). As the fieldwork will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, many women feel that they are on the cutting edge of a yoga revolution in which they can literally re-construct yoga in their own image. With one foot on the mat of tradition and the other standing on a moving ground of cultural fluidity, we can begin to see yoga not as a thing, or an exercise practice or a spiritual ideology, but as a hybridized, fragmented, dynamic, cultural form that resists absolutism.

I have divided the remainder of this chapter into three sections that examine the literature in whiteness, feminist political economies of health, and culture and consumption theories. I interweave these writings to produce a materialist feminism that articulates with social issues in contemporary North American yoga. The following section on whiteness and racial capital explores the questions, why are there so many white women who feel empowered by yoga, and what kind of authority do they find in the spiritual? Who owns yoga, and what processes enabled white women to extricate it from its colonial entanglements? The second section examines the ways in which North American women have experienced health care, and how they have negotiated a patriarchal, medicalizing system. How do mainstream yoga practitioners experience yoga as a health practice? The final section of this chapter engages with postmodernist theories in anthropology, which question the ways in which the ethnographer represents the culture in which they are studying.

## Theories of Whiteness: The Hunt for the Spiritual Fix

What led to there being such a predominance of white women in contemporary yoga spaces? How can theories of whiteness within a critical race theory context help us understand this situation? There is an easy assumption that I want to undo in order to emphasize my understanding of “white” and “race” as a social construct. I follow the thinking of Baldwin, Cameron, and Kobayashi, who maintain that race and whiteness are constructed along broad social discourses as opposed to racial thinking as determined by biology or genetics (4). Baldwin, Cameron and Kobayashi point out that while Canadian multiculturalism discourse wants to consider itself post-racist, the very fact that the racialization of poverty, environmental racism, and racist law and immigration practices continue determines the rationale that we must insist on talking about race (4). According to Wander, Martin and Nakayama, “whiteness refers to a historical, systemic, structural race-based superiority” (15), and as such we study whiteness not only to de-centre white supremacy, to question its hegemony, and to create space for racial justice, but also to unpack the seemingly naturally cognitive dissonance and indeed insistence of non-racialized thinking of white women who tend to dominate in contemporary yoga spaces in North America.

In order to properly link a theory of yoga with materialist feminist analysis of race and class, we need to draw out the colonial and imperialist history that essentially was the effect of capitalism. Colonial and imperial histories give clues as to how white women acquired social currency as a commodity fetish. In *Women, Race & Class*, Angela Y. Davis reminds us that American settler colonialists justified their oppression and violence of enslaved blacks through racist claims of their white superiority because of the basic economic need to produce more sugar, cotton, in-

digo, or yams (9-10). Simply put, white supremacy was entrenched through the colonial American imperative to produce agricultural goods to ship to the metropole, and black slave labour was the means for that production. Whiteness was written on the bodies of white people to ensure their superiority on a racial hierarchy and demarcate difference (Baldwin, Cameron & Kobayashi 5). Although the economic context was somewhat different than the American South or Caribbean plantations, Canadian settler colonists were no kinder than their American counterparts, argues Afua Cooper (69). European settlers began bringing enslaved blacks to New France as early as 1701, and conditions for these slaves developing the colony were no less harsh than they were for those on southern plantations (72). In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock uses a Marxist analysis to explain how white settlers created racism in order to justify their harsh treatment of enslaved blacks, and through fetish commoditization, sold the idea of white supremacy to the public with advertisements, literature, and photography.

McClintock explains the ways in which nineteenth century colonial imagery and propaganda positioned white women as pure, ideal citizens to act as maternal subject producers of nationhood. McClintock explains that colonial governments positioned women as mothers of the nation, which relegated them to what McClintock refers to as the timeless anachronism in the private, domestic sphere of the family. As white women found themselves essentialized into the four pillars of ideal womanhood<sup>5</sup>, many also looked for ways to expand their purview into the public sphere as spiritual seekers and leaders (Dixon; Crowley). One way in which upper class white women emerged in the public sphere was as philanthropists and organizers. Stephanie Syman's 2010 monograph, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* explains how white

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<sup>5</sup> The four pillars of ideal womanhood were domesticity, piety, submissiveness, and purity. See Barbara Welter, 1976, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

women brought Swami Vivekenanda to the United States in 1893 to speak at the World Fair in Chicago, and then continued to sponsor him as an enlightened teacher for their community.

Enoch Page's article, "The Gender, Race, and Class Barriers: Enclosing Yoga as White Public Space," effectively links the pervasiveness of white women in contemporary North American yoga to the ruination of ascetic yoga in colonial India. Page connects capitalist imperialism with the British colony in India, arguing that one major reason that Swami Vivekenanda came to the United States in the first place was to garner economic support and sympathy from the democratic and recently independent Americans for colonized India. This approach offers Vivekenanda more agency than Syman's interpretation does, rather than portraying Vivekenanda as the property of white women who sponsored him. Page draws on Stoler's notion of "imperial formations" and the ongoing "processes of decimation, displacement, reclamation,...[which include] ...graded forms of sovereignty" (193) to argue that unequal power relations persist despite so-called imperial withdrawal. In other words, colonialism continues to perpetuate its inequalities of access with regards to class, racialized gender constructs, and religious constraints in mainstream yoga spaces. Until we examine the detritus of the imperial, Page argues, the historical explanations behind yoga's persistent white femininity represented in studios and in media will remain elusive. Page also borrows Stoler's use of the term "ruin" to contextualize what he considers to be the destruction of ascetic yoga. According to Stoler, ruination is a legacy of decay, and is neither static nor dynamic in its doubly noun and verb word function (195). In Page's assessment, the ruination of yoga happened in India when British colonial authorities effectively outlawed its ascetic practitioners, and continued when Swami Vivekenanda came to the U.S. in 1893 in an attempt to garner support for India's valour (48). As mentioned in Chapter 1, Vivekenanda dilut-

ed his teachings of traditional *raja* yoga in order to be easily accessible to Western audiences, large numbers of whom were white women.

We have to ask, who is not present in contemporary mainstream yoga studios in urban North America, and why do these spaces appear to be populated largely by white, normative-bodied women as consumers and business owners? While white female yoga practitioners might suggest that all women are sisters, Audre Lorde points out the “pretense of homogeneity covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist” (116). Colonial histories of racism made sure that black men and women can not have the same relations to patriarchal and capitalist structures that white men and women do. Franz Fanon reminds readers that the black person negotiates their blackness in relation to whiteness (18-19), which, in a yoga studio populated with white bodies, contributes to people of colour feeling unrepresented and misunderstood, as many in this study have claimed. Lorde’s rage at having been “born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female” (151) suggests another reason for an absence of people of colour in yoga sites and spaces; fieldwork findings will speak to this more fully in subsequent chapters. Enoch Page similarly explains that colonial Britain in India likewise excluded ascetic forms of yoga that white Christians found offensive, and subsequently white washed the version of yoga that Swami Vivekenanda brought to the U.S. in 1893 (47-50). People of colour, Page suggests, were not welcome on the American world stage unless they were sanitized versions of their exotic selves, selling a universalized, physically-centred spirituality that appealed to wealthy white women desiring power that their husbands would not afford them (46-47). This sanitization of yoga makes yoga white, as Page argues, and strips it from its authentic ascetic origins.

While whiteness and Christianity are not necessarily linked through scripture, Richard Dyer explains they are linked through culture as the religious export of colonial Europe and dualist, hierarchical thinking that pits white against black (17). Dyer implores us to make whiteness strange so that we can actually undermine its power, “to dislodge it from its centrality and authority” (10). It is my hope that through calling out white supremacy and the body normativity project in yoga spaces, that we can open up inclusive spaces for meaningful dialogue and change. Much of the literature on whiteness focuses on American-centric representations in the shadow of American slavery history, but because this multi-sited ethnography happens across the Canadian-U.S. border, we can benefit by using the literature by American scholars, but we also need to attend to Canadian histories of the production of a white nation and racial exclusion, and how this racial exclusion became discursively naturalized in mainstream culture.

The idea of a pure white nation extended into nineteenth and twentieth-century Canadian immigration policy. In the nineteenth century, the Canadian government actively recruited western European and British subjects to populate its growing western territories. Canada had specific exclusion policies limiting immigration from Asia and India to men only, and these migrations were predicated on a short term labour camp commitment and their wives (Dua 109). Drawing on feminist research by Franca Iacovetta that analyzes Canadian nation building and immigration discourse, Dua points out that Canada’s exclusionary immigration policies were designed to promote a white settler nation predicated on a “discourse of racial purity” and the notion of white women as “mothers of the nation” (Dua 108).

Eighty years later, the Trudeau government introduced multiculturalism, which was intended to promote mutual tolerance and the celebration of “other” cultures (Burman 103), and this poli-

cy formed Canadian national identity starting in the late 1960s (Peake and Ray 182). Culturally embedded dominant white society, however, insisted that multiculturalism meant that for racialized people, the cultural practices of their ethnicities were relegated to what Jenny Burman refers to as the “folklorization” of diaspora, wherein the cultural traditions of other, non- Euro-Canadian cultures celebrate traditional dances, foods, and space demarcated by specific borders and street signs (104). Peake and Ray point out that multiculturalism policy “has not dealt with systemic racism, nor has it adequately addressed the normalized qualities of uneven geographies” (182), which has led to the gentrification and erasure of people of colour from many spaces, and inequitable service provision across neighbourhoods in the Greater Toronto Area. Furthermore, as Abu-Laban and Gabriel point out, multiculturalism policy did not challenge Canada’s “symbolic order...and did not meet the needs of all groups in Canada”, and the inequities stemming from racism did not improve (109). Nakamura and Donnelly point out “it has been claimed that multiculturalism has failed” and as an alternative, the term, “interculturalism has been introduced as a way of facilitating dialogue between different groups (112).

Peake and Ray cite Sue Ruddick’s 1996 example of the well-publicized “Just Desserts” shooting in 1994 to point out the ways in which media has propagated the false belief that racialized people have invaded white gentrified spaces. Fast forward to 2018 and we see this institutionalized racism continues through the phenomenon of white people calling the police on black people minding their own business at a Starbucks, clothes shopping, doing a BBQ, or even leaving an Airbnb.<sup>6</sup> White people’s perceived transgression of people of colour into white, middle-class spaces become “signifiers of belonging and not belonging,” in which the dominant tropes

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/11/us/black-white-police.html>

are of “black others” threatening wealth and middle class comfort (183). Leslie Kern’s analysis of gentrification in urban Toronto and the proliferation of yoga studios populated by white women is a more specific example of this racial exclusion. Kern focuses her discussion on emotion, gentrification, and embodiment, with a four-tier analysis, of which the fourth is of concern here. She points out that in gentrification processes, the poor, the homeless, racialized minorities, sex workers, and single mothers all are subject to displacement (29), but that the majority of literature does not take into account how different groups resist or conform to gentrification. Instead, Kern points out that yoga in urban spaces not only shapes bodies, but also shapes social relations, which include relations of post-coloniality (31). Racialized others, however, still remain largely invisible in yoga spaces, the reason for which Peake and Ray attribute to mainstream white culture’s lack of attendance to their responsibility in producing social and gender inequality. In a yoga culture where many participants may claim to be “colour blind,” and not see race, I argue that yoga educators interested in social justice need to practice a “critical pedagogy that aims to de-essentialize and decolonize public spaces” (Peake and Ray 184).

Fortunately, there is a movement to decolonize yoga, which engages in the critical pedagogy that Peake and Ray, and many other scholars, write about (Srivastava; Batacharya; Kaushik-Brown). The term, “decolonize yoga” needs a brief explanation. First, the notion of decolonization draws on indigenous thought and social action that seeks intellectual and material sovereignty and recourse from colonial power and its representations of indigeneity<sup>7</sup>. By extending the

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<sup>7</sup> for Turtle Island discussions of decolonization see, for example, LaRocque, Emma. *When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850-1990*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010; Sunseri, Lina. *Being Again of One Mind: Oneida Women and the Struggle for Decolonization*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. For a discussion on theories of decolonizing Indigenous epistemologies in conjunction with yoga, see: Sharma, Ragini. *Decolonizing Yoga in Academia: Narratives of Young Adults Using Yoga to Manage Stress*. Diss. York University, 2016.

notion of decolonization to yoga, I suggest that some contemporary yoga practitioners in the West are taking up the responsibility to wrest yoga from the market-producing, over-commercialized, and physically homogenized representations that have become mainstream. Page argues that yoga has become a colonial resource co-opted by the “global project of white racial dominance” (44). Manigault-Bryant attempts to decolonize yoga by problematizing a normalized white space in his ethnography of Kripalu Yoga Center in Lenox, Massachusetts. Similarly to Enoch Page’s argument about the ruination of yoga through processes of imperial debris, Manigault-Bryant points out that in his teacher training there, yoga is divorced from its association with a guru. Instead, Manigault-Bryant’s yoga teacher training focused more on the *āsanas* and the professionalization of yoga, rather than its spiritual origins, by “naturalizing the young, white, female, fit body” through racialized body fetish organized to engender commoditization of yoga. The emphasis of the the professionalization of yoga over a connection with a spiritual teacher or “guru,” Manigault-Bryant argues, is that “by imprinting a form of labour onto yoga, it prepares aspiring teachers to willingly consume racial fetishes that distract from their own participation in an ongoing colonial drama” (8). By calling into question the naturalized white female body and a professionalized yoga that focuses on *āsana* rather than the Upanishads, Manigault-Bryant is engaging in an anti-capitalist decolonization of yoga.

I can verify from my own many visits to Kripalu and doing my yoga teacher training (YTT) there, that Manigault-Bryant’s assessment of Kripalu as naively colour-blind and capitalistic is accurate. I completed my YTT there in 2000, and there was only one black man in my class of 60. While no one there would say that they are excluding people of colour, a perusal through the Kripalu catalogue reveals no male teaching faculty on staff there ([www.kripalu.org](http://www.kripalu.org)). One re-

spondent shared with me that Kripalu would like to be able to offer more black presenters in order to offer a more inclusive curriculum. My field research has demonstrated that many white women engaged in yoga know little about the ways in which Britain's history as India's colonizer affected yoga, nor do they have an analysis of histories of white womanhood, ideal femininity, and morality that are rooted in colonialism (Srivastava 30). Manigault-Bryant's description of his experiences at Kripalu as the only black man in his yoga teacher training points to hegemonic racial exclusion in mainstream yoga settings. Women such as Marcelle M. Haddix recognize the benefits of yoga for many people, and cite the need for specific black yoga spaces, rather than people of colour simply tolerating behaviour that Srivastava refers to as "nonracist." Tired of being the "only one," Haddix became a yoga teacher as a "personal and political act" in order to create racially and culturally inclusive yoga spaces in which black women could practice without being ignored, doubted, or stared at (21).

Crowley rightly points out that white women in the New Age culture, and by extension, yoga, "have a deep investment in their 'racial innocence'" (8). Srivastava points out that many self-proclaimed feminists claim to be not racist, but prefer to "move toward deeper self-examination rather than organizational change" (31). Srivastava makes the important distinction between the terms anti-racist and non-racist, arguing that non-racist is more aligned with liberal feminism that might claim to not see race or racism (35), whereas antiracism is an active process of becoming, learning and teaching about how to make changes to institutionalized racist practices. Citing Deborah Britzman, Srivastava points out that antiracist work is a non-linear pedagogy of "difficult knowledge" that begins with self-study. The problem, Srivastava argues, is that self-study does not actually make for social change to systemic inequalities. Instead, she proposes

that “an antiracist feminism might aim at an unbalancing of historical links between racism and the poles of innocence versus evil, knowledge versus ignorance” (58). In their study linking yoga and law, González and Eckstrom demonstrate that self-study, or *svadhyāya*, can actually bring about social change through “encompassing the act of listening to and honouring the narratives of others” (218). This approach to bringing yoga and law together might address the problem of non-racism that Srivastava articulates.

White women’s spirituality and racial sensitivity is often based on a sense of what Benedict Anderson has called “imagined community.” I articulate Srivastava’s use of imagined community in conjunction with white women as non-racists with Crowley, who points out that New Age culture sees itself as a community of spiritual connection and longing. One of the most salient features of the fieldwork in this ethnography on yoga is the shared perception of spiritual community. For example, a few participants at a seminar I attended in February 2015 on yoga as a culture at a popular Toronto studio agreed that one of the things they love about yoga is their sense of shared commonality with regards to diet, “spirituality,” and lifestyle. Their morality is predicated on being good, on self-development and self-study, but does not actually change inequality even though the proceeds of a yoga class might be directed toward building schools in Africa. The white people doing charity in the name of yoga might, in fact have honestly good intentions of helping, but without examining colonial histories, they are merely replicating models of the good, white, feminine ideal. So what does a white person do to make these white-dominated yoga spaces more equitable to people of colour? According to Enoch Page, “to neutralize the toxicity of the white public space of yoga, we must help white women to relinquish their damaging control over yoga and wrest yoga out of corporate hands” (59). Page’s advice echoes

that of Dyer's, which points out the imperative to decentralize white power in society at large and in the ways white supremacy appears in the yoga world.

### **Feminist Political Economy: Women as Consumers of Health and Wellness Practices and Products**

Even in feminist spaces in which people are committed to antiracist theorizing and praxis, people of colour are often still rendered invisible. The white healthy body remains paramount in media representations of yoga and in histories of women's health organizing. Richard Dyer's analysis of representations of whiteness in media demonstrates the ways in which white people represent themselves as pure and morally upright, or, as Dyer says, "uptight" citizens (6), whose mind over body sensibility echoes the dualist, Cartesian norm (Samson 4; Lock & Scheper-Hughes). The Cartesian model also placed sex and gender, and male and female differences at binary odds (Grosz 6-7). On one hand, philosophy is part of the care of the self, but on the other, the body must also be attended to (Foucault *Care of the Self* 46, 51). In *Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault explains the biomedical gaze upon the body, in which the doctors of the eighteenth century claimed knowledge of the body as historical, and knowable by the diseases themselves (5). This process of medical knowing means that the doctor must "abstract the patient", in which the patient's body becomes the factual truth that determines the cure (8). This explanation of the biomedical gaze sets the stage for medical culture that centralizes an external, rational authority on the body that dehumanizes the person from the medical professional (Good, 73). By classifying and knowing the body, then, it becomes controllable.

As a result of Cartesian dualism, the body has come to be seen as a machine that doctors can compartmentalize and manage with technology (Mitchinson 304). As the biomedical body,

then, becomes knowable by a patriarchal authority (Grosz 9), it is normalized and controllable through medicalization, the process by which normal bodily processes such as childbirth are claimed by male doctors, rather than remaining in the hands of women (Mitchinson 24). By the mid-twentieth century, the hospital was where most women gave birth, especially those who wanted to cooperate in being good, national subjects (Krasnick Warsh 119). Upstanding Canadian women were expected to follow the expertise of medical doctors rather than traditions of their own mothers or grandmothers, which were positioned as backward and old fashioned. The Canadian medical establishment and, by extension, policy makers excluded, sterilized, or attempted to assimilate racialized and Indigenous women in their attempt to formulate a Canada as a white settler nation (Kelm 18, 133).

I draw on Cynthia R. Comacchio's historiographic essay, "Motherhood in Crisis: Women, Medicine, and State in Canada, 1900-1940" to elucidate the ways in which so-called scientific experts (306) aimed to design the "new mother" in the context of an emergent social policy in early twentieth-century Canada. As Canada was situating itself as a developing nation with the intention to create white, Anglo-Saxon citizens, women became the naturalized mothers of the nation in order to propagate the family as the next generation of workers (307). Bailargeon's research on Québec between 1910-1970 documents its governmental policies to improve its birth rate and infant mortality rates. She points out that while birth rates were high for the first half of the twentieth century, taboos around breast feeding meant that more Québécoise women were bottle feeding; this in turn led to a high infant mortality rate (37). Nationalist and humanitarian sentiment in North America led to the rise of a "social discourse on infant mortality" that attributed the potential of national and economic development to the education of women

on hygiene and child care (Baillargeon 45-46). The role of white women as social reproducers of the next generation of Canadian workers and soldiers was imperative in the early and mid twentieth century. Comacchio, along with Baillargeon, provide a materialist feminist analysis of health as a capitalist commodity, and as such, we can see the development of how Anglo-Celtic and French Canadian women shouldered the responsibility of producing the next generation of citizens who would be healthy, fit, productive, and content with their places in society (Comacchio 309; Baillargeon 47).

Women in the 1960s and 1970s sought to contest the normative, controlled white body as morally and perfectly in control of itself. Largely because of the work of feminist historians and like Comacchio, Ehrenreich and English, Ruzek, and also Mitchinson, many women came to realize that medicalization meant that they had been abused and treated unfairly by the medical system. Sheryl Burt Ruzek's history of the women's health movement tells about the ways in which women worked collectively in the 1960s and 1970s to empower themselves for their health and for some, reject mainstream medicine. They opened do-it-yourself gynaecology and abortion clinics to reclaim ownership of their bodies from the largely male medical profession that would have preferred women surrender to them, and led seminars to encourage women to become more aware and agentic with their physical and mental health care. Ruzek coins the term "gynecological imperialism" (11) to describe the ways in which doctors colonized women's bodies through claiming the female reproductive system as their purview. Physicians began imperializing the medical profession by undermining midwives in the mid-eighteenth century (Daviss 420). Pointing out that physicians performed far more surgical procedures on women's reproductive organs than other body parts, Ruzek explains that feminists viewed obstetricians and gynaec-

cologists with the suspicion that was a form of sexual politics in service of the male-dominated medical profession rather than women's interests (12). Implicit in feminist health care reform was the understanding that the patriarchal, capitalist system hindered the accountability and quality of care. Two well-known American self-care and empowerment initiatives are the Women's Health Forum, founded in 1974, and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (144-146; Morgen 34-37; Daviss). Québécoise feminist activists created their own health centres in response to the patriarchal medical system that sought to control women and their reproductive rights (Michaud 33-34).

What this means with regard to the contemporary yoga community is that the unfolding women's health movement supported and was in part supported by the social climate of the women's movement. As more women found their voice in the women's movement, they also began to explore ways in which they could free themselves of patriarchal health constructs and do more for themselves. At the same time, this women's health movement is not without critique. Thin, white, able-bodied women remained at the forefront of this movement, inadvertently excluding the realities of women of colour who often simply did not have access to the time and money to participate in exercise classes and organic foods.

### **The Problem with Health**

In his discussions on the trajectory of health as a social value, Robert Crawford makes several important arguments that are relevant to the ways in which contemporary North American yoga practices and health articulate with neoliberalism. He points out that health is central to our social identity. It is linked intrinsically to notions of work and fear of death, and that in de-

veloping ways to avoid illness, and the healthy self is defined by what it is not: the unhealthy self. Crawford argues that we draw sharp boundaries around the notion of a healthy, morally responsible self that avoids illness through its good actions. At the turn-of-the-twentieth century, governments established national programs of racial hygiene and eugenics meant to promote a healthy biocitizenry (Crawford “Boundaries of the Self” 1352; Crawford “Health as a Meaningful Social Practice” 406). Canada’s project to construct a white settler nation meant that white, middle and upper class women were upheld as mothers of the nation, while indigenous peoples and racialized immigrants were excluded (Baillargeon; Krasnick Warsh; Dua “The Hindu Woman’s Question”).

Brown et al point out that in labelling racism and sexism, along with patriarchy, classism, ableism, and ageism, the women’s movement has been able to affect shifts toward equity in health and science research (59). Brown and Zavestoski demonstrate that in part due to the groundbreaking work of the women’s movement, activists have gained mainstream acceptance combining scientific research with complementary and alternative medicine (72). We can articulate this history of women’s empowerment through health activism with yoga by remembering Crowley’s argument that the New Age movement emerged concurrently with the women’s movement. The women in Celia Rothenberg’s study claimed yoga as a health practice simultaneously with their spiritual explorations as self-empowering practices. In one particular case study, Crowley describes how a woman sought alternative medicine after her recovery from breast cancer. While some may have seen her New Age practices of yoga, eating organic food, and meditation as silly, now this woman can feel like has something she can actively do to “get better” (53). The problem with this model of yoga, meditation, and eating well, is that it sets up ideals for pu-

rity reflecting neoliberal constructs that blame the person for their failures. So on one hand, while the woman cited above is happy she can do something to be “better,” she may also find that she feels at fault for not achieving specific goals. In the yoga world, what I have come to call “neoliberal healthism” is particularly prevalent, and prominent yoga texts and social media campaigns can either re-inscribe or reject these values.

Neoliberalism is the discourse through which the flexible, free market is encouraged and valued, while the responsibilities of the individual are emphasized over government intervention (Cairns & Johnston; Evans). Historically, neoliberalism emerged in North America in the late 1970s as a backlash to social programs and civil rights movements in an effort to compete with the global markets (Evans). Decreased government involvement means that increased responsibility for social services such as health care, child care, and education falls on individuals, usually women, to fund and coordinate (Hamilton). When I link neoliberalism with healthism, I am considering the ways in which neoliberal values infiltrate our embodied ways of knowing and attitudes toward health and fitness. In his article, “Boundaries of the Self and the Unhealthy Other,” Crawford suggests that we seek to gain social capital through our health. Robert Crawford traces the history of healthism, explaining that the rise of complimentary and alternative medicine practices push back against the hegemony of dualistic thinking, but our cultural conditioning still pressure us to conform to identifying with our health as symbolic capital. While Crawford developed the notion of healthism in 1980, his 2006 revisiting of the concept explains that healthism represents a “supervalue” of self-care rationalized by neo-liberalism (“Health as a Meaningful Social Practice” 411). Unhealthy bodies, as Crawford argues, are then excluded from the privileges of citizenship. Bodies that do not conform to social norms are then labelled as dis-

abled or non-productive (1351). Crawford points out that as more people in the twentieth century sought a “new health consciousness” to inscribe their rightful place in the “perfection of man”, they engaged in activities to ensure the health of the body (1353-54; see also Crawford “Health as a Meaningful Social Practice 407-408).

Cairns and Johnston also effectively articulate healthism with neoliberalism; the healthy body is rewarded as the ideal responsible citizen and the unhealthy, fat body is discursively shamed and threatened (154; Kauer 91). We see this exemplified in the marketing of Lululemon clothing for yoga and wellness lifestyles. The text on their shopping bags, as I have mentioned in the Introduction chapter, promote a social value of health that praises sweating, buying clothes, drinking water, and mindful happiness. These attributes, claim Lululemon, is what defines yoga. In other words, if a person follows the guidelines set out by Lululemon, they will be not only a good healthy consumer, but also a good yogi. Finally, neoliberal healthism also infers a sense of biosurveillance<sup>8</sup> from a public health standpoint. If all beings are well and healthy because they are engaging in preventative health practices such as yoga and perfect nutrition, then disease and co-morbidity risk factors decrease.

In her exploration of orthorexia as a complicated manifestation of neoliberal healthism as a classed and raced response to gentrification in yoga studios, Jennifer Musial rejects neoliberal healthism, arguing that body vigilance is actually very unhealthy. While important yoga teaching legacies such as that left by B.K.S. Iyengar advise specific eating rules in order to have a pure

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<sup>8</sup> Willis and Moore define biosurveillance as a national policy aimed at detecting, monitoring, and characterizing national security health threats as pertaining to humans, plants, animals, water, and the general environment. Biosurveillance is monitored through health data collection and multi-jurisdictional data analysis and sharing in service of public health. Most of the literature on the subject comes from the field of public health and environmental biology, and is outside the scope of this dissertation.

body and mind as the route to spiritual liberation, Musial points out that many yoga studios take this too far and body shaming is often the result. Hātha yoga practice, with its self-disciplinary focus, helps to confer this healthy body status upon those who practice.

While many contemporary women have much to be grateful for the legacy of these women's achievements in the late 1960s and 1970s, many voices have been excluded. Sheryl Nestel's research includes these previously silenced stories (4). Racism, poverty, lack of environmental justice, and lack of access to health care for black, Latina, Asian, and Native American women affected their reproductive health. Latina and Asian women, for example, experienced alienation through language difference and their status as migrants. Many women of colour also wanted the medical establishment to recognize or at least respect traditional medicines, and many health collectives began to do this through integrating midwifery practices (Morgen 144). According to Betty-Anne Daviss, however, many African American midwives felt that white women spent time with them just because they were exotic (423; see also Nestel). In yoga communities, we see this racism inherent in white people's unconscious exclusion of people of colour. Musial points out that yoga's health perfectionism further excludes people who can not access the detox cleanses and expensive yoga passes, as studios gentrify neighbourhoods and "cleanse and rebuild them in the image of a healthy community" (149). Schnäbele, on the other hand argues that while the body is "more than just a carrier of capital" (137), our Euro-Western culture has seen to it that the individual still holds the responsibility to be a productive citizen and engage in preventative healthcare practices such as fitness and yoga (140; see also Singleton; Strauss).

As Emily Martin points out in *Bipolar Expeditions*, an individual's attitude is a major determinant to their career success, but mood can also influence collective economic stability. Using the American stock market workers as an example, she explains that mania works well for corporate CEOs and artists, but spells disaster for brokers trading on Wall Street (238). Hartsock reminds us that as workers earn money they attain social power. By extension, the worker turns their earnings to the yoga world in order to recharge and engage in self-improvement projects, which in turn help that worker develop greater productivity through mindful wellness pursuits. Lau articulates New Ageism with capitalism in her examination of the ways in which yoga, t'ai chi, and macrobiotics becomes both a marker of consumption practices and power, which in turn enables consumers of these practices and corresponding objects to embody their identity as supposedly mindful, socially, and spiritually evolved beings (15). This dissertation takes up these contradictions and moves beyond the problematizing to see how materialist feminist theorizing can point toward a remedy.

As the world of work becomes increasingly precarious, individual workers become more responsible for their company's economic success with minimal support from supervisors. The employee, in order to succeed at keeping their job, is faced with the moral imperative to look happy (Schnäbele 142-143). Yoga is the perfect tool, then, with which to manage the stress, for, as Schnäbele points out, yoga "trains practitioners to maintain a cheerful calm attitude [even] under difficult circumstances" (143). This reminds us then, that in our neoliberal culture, a person is responsible for their own fate of striving for success or failure. Yoga, then, becomes particularly important for women doing either domestic labour or paid labour outside of the home, because as Lindsey German argues, "whereas the male worker is exploited, alienated, and down-

trodden...at least in the home he is boss” (157). As a result of this patriarchal social structure, women who are on the other side of this labourer who is alienated from the product of their labour, do not generally have the same forum of control as the male worker. This is where yoga comes in handy, because of the ways in which practitioners learn to develop self-control and purity – not only of body and breath, but of mind. In her article, “Women Working Worldwide,” Swasti Mitter elucidates that the working class no longer includes only men, but also encompasses and increasingly part-time, invisible, self-employed, casual, and flexible work force populated by women and women of colour worldwide (164).

I link precarity to yoga as an integral part of neoliberal healthism. From the data, I concluded that many yoga participants and teachers feel that they are responsible for their own health and wellbeing and that their own initiatives toward fitness through yoga will make them good people. Ironically, the precarious nature of teaching yoga adds to the stress of yoga teachers. While yoga is a way that one can and should continue to strive and manage stress, or even get a job at all, it is also not always accessible. Some of those part-time and precarious workers are those who might desperately need the succour that yoga can provide and populate day time yoga classes, but often those classes are actually inaccessible due to their average cost of \$20 plus tax. Many women can not even access the yoga classes that might help them to manage the stress of their insufficient work, institutionalized or overt racism, and other sexist violence. As Mitter points out, racism and sexism prevent women from full participation in labour unions and conferences, due to having no childcare, no money for transit, or poor language skills with which to participate in social projects (168). Poor, working class, racialized, and disabled women, then, tend to be the forgotten people in the contemporary mainstream yoga world that is making itself

in its own image. Recalling my discussion on whiteness earlier, contemporary yoga and other fitness practices, for that matter, are for the most part constructed and reproduced with a thin, white woman's face on the cover.

### **(Re)making Yoga in Women's Image: Two Yoga Teachers, Many Yogas**

This section uses cultural anthropology theories to examine the ways in which representations of yoga often reify yoga as a tradition or as something that can change according to the whim of the practitioner. This ethnography functions in part as a dialogical process (Bakhtin) in order to demonstrate the polyvocal, dialectical discourse between two yoga teachers, Diane Bruni (59, white) from Toronto, and LJ (50, white). I say that this discourse is dialectical and polyvocal because of how yoga in contemporary North America seems on the surface to be one thing, but is in reality a highly contested practice expressed with multiple voices.

Diane's story is well-known in Toronto<sup>9</sup>. She was born and raised in this city, and when she was 19, she discovered first Kundalini yoga, which helped her move out of an addiction cycle and into a healthier lifestyle and then later, Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga in the tradition of Pattabhi Jois. Starting in the mid-1990s, Diane was a pioneer in bringing the Ashtanga vinyasa system which swept the yoga world with its competitive athleticism. With another Toronto-based yoga instructor in 1997, Diane founded Downward Dog Yoga Centre, but in 2012 after struggling for several years with a gluteal injury, her foundations around Ashtanga yoga finally came loose when she received a cancer diagnosis. She sold her interest in Downward Dog to focus on her recovery and re-develop her relationship with yoga. Diane opened a new studio, 80 Gladstone in

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<sup>9</sup> See Diane Bruni's website, <https://dianebruni.com/about-diane-bruni/>. Diane signed her Research Ethics form waiving her anonymity. This means that she formally agreed to be named in the dissertation.

early 2013, in which she focused on developing explorative movement forms that integrated t'ai chi, rebounding, and Axis Syllabus. When I interviewed her in February 2016 shortly after having closed 80 Gladstone, Diane told me that she is no longer interested in yoga philosophy, but rather, her life mission is movement for healing, and helping injured yoga teachers on their path.

LJ grew up in the United States Midwest and is the daughter of a dancer. LJ herself became a dancer, living in New York city in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and studying yoga at Jivamukti Yoga Center. She went to India in 1998 and became a disciple of yoga Vedānta teacher, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and lived at his ashram in Rishikesh until 2000. LJ describes her trajectory in India in conjunction with her extensive studies in Vedānta:

I first went directly to Varanasi, then traveled around, went to Tiruvanamalai, Nepal, Kanchi to Neem Karoli on my way to Rishikesh, where I had been tipped off by an American traveler about the Swami Dayananda ashram. I initially spent 5 months at the ashram in one-on-one study, Sanskrit/Upanishad/chanting in Rishikesh, then to Tamil Nadu for a 3 month course w/ Swamiji at our ashram outside of Coimbatore, then another course with Swamiji back in Rishikesh, then I came back to the United States because he was giving his first course on yoga sutra at our Saylorburg ashram. I didn't have any money. He paid for my plane ticket from my parents' in Chicago and allowed me to stay at the ashram for free...so that was my first stint in India; I have made something like 15 trips! (LJ, via personal email, May 2018)

LJ now resides in New Mexico. She regularly returns to India to study and teach with her community, and teaches dance and yoga āsana classes in service of Advaita Vedānta. I first learned about LJ and her work as a yoga activist from a friend who told me about her workshop in Toronto in the summer of 2015, in which she was exploring the dynamics of yoga and cultural appropriation.

Diane and LJ had met several years ago at a movement workshop called Axis Syllabus, which originator Frey Faust developed as a form for dancers to prevent injury. Diane came to use

Axis Syllabus as an alternative to hātha yoga after recovering from cancer and what she refers to as her “catastrophic hip injury” obtained through years of devoted Ashtanga yoga practice. Diane interprets Axis Syllabus as a feminine way of moving that frees her from the “robotic” movements of the Primary Series as taught by Pattabhi Jois. LJ comes to yoga from a place of spiritual inquiry rooted in the study of Vedānta in India, and her dance and movement practice included Axis Syllabus long before she was doing āsana. LJ claims that she does not need hātha yoga as part of her yoga practice, and for her, Axis Syllabus is a tool for better, more physically free movement. For Diane on the other hand, the movement itself is the yoga practice, and herein lies the conflict. LJ’s goal is to end what she and other yoga scholars and activists feel is the neo-colonization of yoga by white middle class yoga practitioners (Kaushik-Brown; Page), whereas Diane’s goal is to free herself from the confines of traditional yoga as she experienced it through the Ashtanga system according to Pattabhi Jois. Diane experienced the Ashtanga yoga system as a form of rigid patriarchal oppression and as a result, has been searching for what she sees as a more flexible practice that supports what she refers to as her “femininity.” Axis Syllabus offers Diane an experience of what she feels is a feminine embodiment.

The word “yoga” has become popular shorthand for āsana, but according to LJ, this is a huge misnomer because in her view, yoga should always be linked to some form of scriptural text such as the Upanishads, the Vedas, or even the *Yoga Sūtras*, as discussed in the first chapter. For Diane, “yoga” is the practice by which she has defined her life, but this yoga is bounded by movement that she would qualify as spiritual on the grounds that it is “mindful.” In other words, Diane’s version of yoga is more broad than LJ’s. While LJ’s yoga is bound through scripture study, Diane’s is and always has been constructed through āsana.

Reading these two women's brief stories, one would surmise that their positions are opposed to one another, and indeed, they became embroiled in an internet conflict in May 2016. It is possible to examine Diane and LJ's dichotomous views about yoga from a perspective not of duality, but rather, polyvocality. Diane's position is that you can make yoga be what you want it to be, and LJ's is that yoga must be in relation to yoga's traditional teachings of Advaita Vedānta. In one glance, their positions oppose each other, but in the other we realize that both are authentic to each person. In attending to polyvocality in a multi-sited ethnography of yoga, I thus resist representing and reducing yoga to a single, monolithic voice. Authenticity, then, becomes something more fluid than a correct representation of yoga. Yoga becomes authentic to the self, but also must be in integrity with the tradition from which it originates.

### **What is "Authenticity"?**

We need to talk about the notion of perceived authenticity in yoga because of the polyvalent ways in which people think about authoritative voices on yoga itself. Alessandro Ferrara pairs the concept of authenticity with validity, explaining that both of these notions are inherently tied up with modern Western society's collective understanding of value (1). Value as I understand it, and how it relates to yoga, is intrinsically connected to capitalism, and in what sources people are willing to invest their money and time. In other words, authenticity is contingent on value, and value is based on collective normative, universal ideals (Ferrara 5; Filitz and Saris 2). In the discipline of anthropology, the concept of authenticity has been under debate since Boaz and Evans Pritchard (Filitz and Saris 2-5). The questions of whether contemporary yoga practitioners in North America are doing authentic practice echo these arguments. As Sjørsløv ex-

plains, authenticity is based on three things; first, form and content, second is the processes by which material objects become fetish objects, and third, the ways in which the practice under question is socially constituted (112). Authenticity as it relates to yoga, then, is constructed through what and how the yoga is practiced, the material, usually consumer objects, that people use in practicing yoga, and the ways in which the practitioner gains social credibility as a teacher or student.

In Toronto, for example, many people consider Diane to be an authority on yoga because of her role in pioneering Ashtanga and then shifting the emphasis from an extreme athletic movement practice to a more intuitive and healing-focused one. Diane has over time developed a public role for herself as a purveyor of authentic, authoritative knowledge on yoga. The conflict between Diane and LJ lives in the question of whether that authoritative knowledge is even about yoga at all. For a person like LJ, whose study of yoga is rooted in the traditional teachings of Vedānta, the hātha aspect is just a small part of what yoga is. LJ's argument is that Westerners do not have the authority to change what yoga's ancient traditions are and that they should acknowledge those traditions rather than claim ownership. It is another form of colonization for Westerners to ignore these scriptural and practical traditions while not learning about the colonial histories of British domination in India and fetishizing the material cultural aspects of that tradition. Authenticity by LJ's definition, then, is more about staying true to traditional yoga teachings than being personally authentic.

In ethnographies prior to the post-modern feminist turn, the anthropologist would have attempted to find the most authoritative voice to represent their culture, but postmodern anthropology theory recognizes this practice as essentializing and universalizing (Clifford 15). While

materialist social relations remain central to the theoretical frameworks that support this dissertation, it is also important to address the utility of some postmodern, postcolonial theorists who have helped to correct universalist and master narrative approaches to ethnography and by extension, the study of contemporary yoga communities. One notion that many of my research participants do agree on is that has emerged in the discussions about what yoga is that there is no authentic yoga as it is practiced in contemporary North America. It is dangerous, argues Stevi Jackson, to “turn our backs on structural inequality in the name of scepticism about universalistic truth claims” (286), which means that we need to attend to the ways in which we reinforce historical colonialism-induced power differentials by claiming that yoga is something we can make for ourselves or that claiming is a singular monolithic institution or cultural expression.

In his classic text *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes that British and French colonial enterprises rendered colonized bodies as othered and subjugate. Said focuses his study on the eighteenth and nineteenth-century British, French, and American literature about Arabs, Islam, and India, which encompasses what Euro-Americans called the Orient (16-17). As a discourse, Orientalism is most importantly about power, rather than an “airy European fantasy” (6). So on one hand, Orientalism is an exotic other whose rich embroidered textiles and spicy palettes Westerners love to consume, but on the other, these flavours are spoils of a battle for material power. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said later argues that colonialism and its extended project, imperialism, has left a “residue” which must be unpacked in order to achieve justice for post-colonial peoples (24). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Page hopes that if white female yoga practitioners begin to do this work of unpacking the ruination of yoga by colonization, more justice can evolve in the yoga world. Said’s argument in *Orientalism* emerges out of his theorizing

about histories of imperialist power and their sense of ownership of so-called defined oriental knowledge, thus demonstrating how Europeans claimed non-European knowledge for their own consumption. One useful way of re-framing the cultural appropriation issue is through thinking about Orientalism as a power strategy in conjunction with cultural imperialism that seeks to own and then manipulate knowledge.

Ann Laura Stoler suggests that the notion of “ruination” gives us pause to consider the social and historical forces that create a “tinge of decay” (195); in the yoga world this thinking extends towards the ways in which North American yoga teachers and the fitness industry in general have diluted yoga’s potency. Stoler further points out that the notion of imperial debris infers that ecologies, traditional knowledges and cultural traditions, represent “the profit of some and the ruination of the lives of others” (197). While yoga may seem to North Americans as simply a nice way to get fit and relaxed, for those whose cultural and familial lineages are permanently marred by what Stoler suggests is our colonial intrusion, contemporary yoga is indeed a ruination, as some of the research participants in this study suggest. Furthermore, Stoler explains that nostalgia colours the sentiments of those who dream of studying yoga in context with India, but this nostalgia is for an India that they can never know and never see because of its colonial ruin (208-209).

In her article, “Towards Whiteness as Property,” Roopa Kaushik-Brown points out that it is useful to take up Said’s articulation of binary constructions of black/white, pure/sinful, authentic/fake in conjunction with yoga, whiteness and knowledge ownership (70). Many critics of western yoga attempting to call out cultural appropriation cite Said with this important and valid

argument.<sup>10</sup> What becomes problematic is when defenders of yoga's so-called essence in the name of anti-capitalism end up reducing yoga to being a single thing. This strategic essentialism serves some function for yoga practitioners wanting to initiate an approach to decolonizing yoga, but it is highly problematic and oversimplified because it in fact reinstates essentialism, which Spivak argues is difficult to avoid, particularly with the question of representation and its contingencies (Spivak 109; Fuss; Bhabha 3). Several theorists demonstrate that even when subordinated groups use essentialism as a strategy of self-empowerment, national, or cultural pride, it is actually quite limiting (Gilroy 31-32; Said 387). Uma Narayan argues that cultural essentialism is "detrimental to feminist agendas" (80). She points out that contemporary feminists have used intersectional and historicizing frameworks in order to avoid over-generalization about women, which is why I adopt a materialist feminist approach here.

As I have stated earlier, there are numerous and continuous debates about which yoga is authentic, and which practitioners are taking too much liberty with the "tradition." Quoting yoga scholar Joseph Alter, Schnäbele points out that "the problem... is that yoga, even more than religion and science... is constructed as both timeless and beyond time" (139). Recognizing that Alter thus situates contemporary yoga as a product of human imagination, Schnäbele explains that middle-class professionals are making yoga work for them so that they can perform their jobs within the increasingly precarious and demanding labour circumstances. As the fieldwork interviews will also reveal, women in particular have been interested in making their yoga āsana prac-

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<sup>10</sup> For blog discussions on cultural appropriation, racism and yoga, see: <https://medium.com/@Farah-Karenina/cultural-appropriation-is-a-toxic-concept-97340ff040e9>; <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/no-yoga-is-not-cultural-appropriation>; and this one, which engages with Said's Orientalism concept from a South Asian perspective: <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/coldplay-and-beyonc%C3%A9s-hymn-weekend-video-more-orientalist-appropriative>

tice do what they need it to do for them, as they recover from injuries, or move through life course phases such as pregnancy, childbirth, and aging. Diane and LJ demonstrate that there is a tense and long tightrope upon which many women balance as they navigate interstitial spaces between the so-called yoga tradition and making yoga their own “meditation in motion.”

### **Consuming the Material Culture of Yoga and Health**

Debates around contemporary yoga as an ancient tradition or modern health practice run similar to conversations about the influence of western medicine on Ayurveda, the Indian health practice with 2,000 year-old roots. Langford examines contemporary practices of Ayurveda in India in conjunction with postcolonial theories of nationalism. Much like this dissertation is not an engagement with yoga philosophy or the biomechanics and benefits of the postural sequences, Langford maintains a clear distinction that her inquiry is not intended to engage with ancient texts (4). Instead, Langford’s ethnographic engagement with Ayurveda demonstrates the ways in which both westerners and Indians embody a materialized cultural practice of nationalism. Langford shows that like contemporary yoga, Ayurveda is sometimes used to sell all manner of foods, decor, and personal hygiene products. More importantly similar to the theoretical approach of this dissertation, Langford demonstrates that Ayurveda has a “powerful polyvalence, whether in the economy of health and illness, the politics of culture, or the theoretical projects of the academy” (9). This is particularly salient when thinking about objects that come to represent a person’s yoga practice, such as mālā beads that are intended for mantra repetition but are used as jewellery, or meditation cushions with silk brocade covers used as decor. As in Langford’s ethnography, yoga is used to sell all kinds of supposedly complimentary objects that confer es-

teemed social status on the practitioner. This can be theorized through Marx's commodity fetishism concept. In Langford's example of "slippage between the sign, the name śilajī, and its referent, a chunk of boiled sugar" (208), some people posing as Ayurvedic doctors sell an imitation or poor quality version of an Ayurvedic herb in order to garner more sales. Drawing on Baudrillard's analysis of the commodity as sign, Langford explains that "an object's exchange value is never exhausted in its function," which culminates in cultural capital (208). But because the object proved to be an imitation, its value suddenly plummeted. Some of the respondents in this ethnography have shared verbally with me, or even non-verbally demonstrated how much they value their rose quartz, or other semi-precious stone mālā beads, claiming that they receive much comfort in wearing them. How do they know these things are even genuine? The value of these objects is infused by the dollar amount they paid.

Carrier's article on ethical consumption unpacks commodity fetishism more specifically in terms of yoga. Many yoga practitioners pride themselves on their ethical consumption choices, claiming a moral position on being either vegetarian, or eating fair trade organic foods, or sitting on organic meditation cushions. Carrier explains that ethical consumption is a product of neoliberalism in that people can purchase what they think is important, and their purchasing choices reflect their individual freedom to make those choices (673). Carrier reminds readers that "Marx was concerned with how commodities tend to be presented and perceived in a peculiar way under capitalism, one that ignores or denies the labour time entailed in the process involved in their production and presentation to the would-be purchaser" (674), and we can articulate this with the ways yoga practitioners blithely purchase organic yoga gear without much thought to the labourers who produced it. Yoga classes, too, are included in this theorization, because although the

class itself is not a material object, the yoga practitioner is still purchasing a commodity to experience, that they frame as “natural” (Carrier 675).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, as the fieldwork will demonstrate, many practitioners are looking for an authentic yoga experience, which sets a tension between an imagined yoga and the yoga class that the instructor needs to lead.

Kaushik-Brown further explains that in order to get at theory of consumption and debates around cultural appropriation, we need to dig into white supremacy as an “intersectional project” (69). In particular, consumption is implicated in colonial histories of white property ownership that are situated within a framework of white people owning black and indigenous slaves and land within complex structures of commodity production and sales. According to Kaushik-Brown, commodity extraction from the colony to the metropole never stopped, and she uses American legal battles over the notion of yoga as property as an example to show the continuity between occupation and colonial rule in India and contemporary white supremacy as it appears in the contemporary yoga world (70). Her case studies cite the red herring of late 2015 at the University of Ottawa, wherein its Centre for Students with Disabilities (CSD) decided to put a pause to the yoga classes they had been running there for seven years in order to “make it better, more accessible, and more inclusive”.<sup>12</sup> The white woman who was outraged at the closure of her classes went to the press and complained about how unfair it was that the CSD was cancelling her class, and the cultural appropriation-in-yoga discussions began to snowball from this important ethnographic moment. It remains unclear as to whether the class was cancelled simply because the instructor was white, or whether the issue was more complex and extended towards

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret MacDonald also writes about midwifery clients as consumers of the natural. It is her framing of a complimentary health practice as something natural to the consumer that grounds this discussion.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ottawasun.com/2015/11/20/free-ottawa-yoga-class-scrapped-over-cultural-issues>

ideas of true inclusivity. Kaushik-Brown asks that as white yoga practitioners, we hold dear the responsibility to “not proceed breathlessly profitable in the modern yoga gold rush” and not pretend to be colour blind or post-racial (85).

Further, while Kaushik-Brown uses western legal theories and logics to problematize whiteness and yoga ownership, Audre Lorde’s essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” comes to mind. While she does point out the case of court-reviled yoga teacher billionaire Bikram Choudhury (herein called Bikram after the manner of Kaushik-Brown’s referral to him), who attempted to protect through copyright his version of twenty-six yoga poses in a prescribed sequence as an instance of a “willfully myopic view of intellectual property” (84), Kaushik-Brown’s focus on the American drive for ownership inadvertently minimizes the agency of those who seek to push back against it, and the subaltern voice in general. Lorde reminds us that survival “...is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled” in order to “make common cause with those identified outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we all can flourish” (112). It could be useful here to add to Kaushik-Brown’s argument in considering Homi Bhabha’s “Sly Civility,” in which Bhabha considers the “hybrid tongues of colonial space [that] make even the repetition of the *name* of God uncanny” (144). If we add that layer to Kaushik-Brown’s analysis of Bikram’s intellectual yoga property case, we might indeed be able to see Bikram as invoking sly civility as a way of the colonized engaging in an act of resistance in a neo-colonial moment. In other words, Bhabha forwards the possibility of “native refusal” to return the authority that the colonizer demands, but which Kaushik-Brown does not articulate (142). To articulate this critical moment with whiteness, we can conceptualize Bikram’s legal claims to his yoga sequence not only of ownership but

as a reclamation of his definition of yoga. I agree with Kaushik-Brown's important analysis that for white people to think they are saving yoga by cancelling a class at Ottawa University, or to vilify Bikram for protecting his business, re-inscribes people of colour as either in need of saving or as childish savages. What Bhabha does in "Sly Civility" is show us the ways in which white people have historically and continued to evade the complexities of the post-colonial relationship while expecting fealty from the colonized subject (138-139).

Yoga critic and political scientist Carol Horton has pointed out on more than one occasion that the so-called yoga tradition is on shaky ground. Citing Diane Bruni's confession that "in my heart, it's all yoga," Horton states that she does not think there is a right or wrong side to this discussion.<sup>13</sup> Instead, yoga is, for Horton and many others, a means for finding interconnection and groundedness, much like the "interracial cooperation between feminists who don't love each other" that Audre Lorde calls for (113). Kaushik-Brown would argue instead that this is a case of when "whiteness absorbs yoga with its own mythology of supremacy...[therefore] causing exclusion and inappropriate use... in sites that could have been healing" (81). Written in the shadow of an incoming U.S. president whose often racist, sexist, and heteronormative vitriolic propaganda has somehow won that nation's votes, Horton uses yoga as a way to support herself through political division and fear-mongering. The problem with this is that as a white, liberal, educated, able-bodied feminist, it is easy for Horton to use yoga as a way to comfort herself through a painful and uncertain political climate. And what, then, as LJ, would ask, is the tradition Horton draws on, when it is not specifically linked to any yoga lineage? For Kaushik-Brown, Horton ought not have the privilege to say much on this matter of tradition, because she

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<sup>13</sup> <http://carolhortonphd.com/blog/> January 19, 2017

already embodies white ownership of yoga that comes from a history of knowledge and resource extraction (85).

In his collection of essays, *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford adopts a post-modern, poststructuralist framework in order to “displace any transcendent regime of authenticity,” while arguing that “all authoritative knowledge collections are historically contingent and subject to local appropriation” (10). While there are limitations in poststructuralism because of the reasons mentioned earlier in this chapter, it bears noting that Clifford draws on Bakhtin’s heteroglossia concept to acknowledge the importance of multiple voices and languages in intercultural discourse (23, 256). This echoes the emergent theme from the fieldwork that there is no master yoga narrative, although many players in this field would argue otherwise.

With this in mind, Clifford turns his analysis toward Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, and reminds readers that as I have also noted, while knowledge is “inextricably tied to power” (256), there is no such thing as a “pure” scholarship. Said’s notion of Orientalist knowledge as discursive power is, according to Clifford, too dichotomous (258), and this approach to *Orientalism* is useful for adding nuance to discussions about tradition in yoga. Do we reproduce said dichotomies when we argue that one style of yoga is traditional and authentic, and another is not? What Kaushik-Brown argues favours the discourse that Said puts forth that says that “Orientalism is a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient” (Said *Orientalism* 3 quoted in Clifford 259), which speaks to histories of colonial oppression and extraction. And yet, using *Orientalism* as a polemic in understanding the problems in the contemporary North American yoga world still reproduces Foucauldian Euro-ethnocentrism that renders women invisible. So while female yoga practitioners and teachers like to pick and choose from a pastiche yoga culture, they are essen-

tially furthering the fragmentation that Said problematizes as a “massive body of self-congratulating ideas” (Said 709; quoted in Clifford 266). What Clifford does in his analysis of *Orientalism* is to clarify that Said’s loose-knit deployment of Marxian and post-structuralist thought is useful for its position of oppositionality, which effectively delegitimizes authoritative knowledge claims.

Female yoga practitioners simultaneously resist and reproduce this fragmentation as they seek authority over their own bodies, relationships, work, domestic lives and spaces. In this dissertation, I attempt to show the ways in which yoga practitioners resist and engage in commoditization, healthism, and ownership that threatens the integrity of a liberatory self-care practice for healing. Yoga practitioners who call for a traditional yoga that is free from white ownership and those who claim that yoga is in their hearts remain in antagonism that is not easily resolved. The materialist feminist theories offered here reflect the difficult knowledge of hybridity and a master narrative that postmodern yoga practitioners actively disrupt, while demonstrating a rather unethical state of affairs in the yoga world after all. The notion of a dynamic culture that changes through time clashes tensely against traditionalists’ accusations of cultural appropriation. I articulate feminist materialism to theories of whiteness to tease out the complicated tension in conjunction with anthropology theories of culture, hybridity, and power dynamics. As more and more North American women claim yoga and, by extension, New Ageism as their own form of women’s empowerment (Crowley), we can also look to feminist political economy of health and consumption theory as a way of understanding why many contemporary yoga practitioners are re-making yoga as a cultural project, and why other participants in this study resist this notion.

## **Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND SITES OF STUDY**

### **Feminist Ethnography and Methodology**

This dissertation uses feminist multi-sited ethnography in order to explore the ways in which contemporary North Americans understand and experience yoga as a health practice. A multi-site ethnography is necessary in studying yoga in contemporary North America because so much of what happens in what we understand as “yoga culture” happens on multiple stages and through a variety of channels. As I stated in the introduction, the culture of yoga in contemporary North America does not only happen in a single yoga studio or in one town. A single-site ethnography is traditionally of a single community, but yoga in North America is reflective of the technologically diverse ways in which people practice and engage with yoga as a lifestyle topic, such as in studios, community centres, online videos, and in social media discussion forums. Like Sarah Strauss’ observation in her multi-site fieldwork (89), I noticed that people in local Toronto yoga studios would practice and teach in a number of different locations, so it made sense to follow them around. Diane Bruni teaching in several places in Toronto during my fieldwork is a case in point, as is LJ, whose trajectory has been not only different spaces within cities, but transcontinentally. LJ’s online presence is an additional factor.

In his article explaining why multi-site ethnography is important, Hannerz cites canonical anthropologist Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard’s prescription of so-called proper anthropology to contrast old school anthropology with contemporary approaches. In Evans-Pritchard’s view, the ethnographer must carry out the fieldwork through long, thorough, and exclusive engagement with a single group of people of which he is not a part. Only after working for years at a single field site could the researcher branch out to a different one to show that their area of speciality is

not limited to a single ethnic society. Hannerz, however, argues that in the twenty-first century, ethnographies are necessarily multi-sited because of changes in technology and globalization as compared to Evans-Pritchard's era. I have a somewhat irreverent approach toward canonical modernist anthropology, which I consider to be patriarchal and monolithic, and choose to not be encumbered by such auspicious professional restrictions of the single-site, objective outsider ethnography format. By the late twentieth century, globalization, multinational corporations, and transnational migration necessitated multi-site ethnographies (Marcus), and by the 1990s, feminist anthropologists were including their subject position in relationship with shifting post-colonial identities (Visweswaran; Behar; Narayan). With the permission of feminist anthropologists before me, I have the opportunity to do as Margaret Mead did, which was to use my pen to "explore genres ranging from ethnography to social criticism to autobiography" (Behar & Gordon 9).

The study of North American yoga communities is focused in urban and suburban Ontario because its population density offers a comprehensive cross section of potentially diverse participants. The research participants in this study emerged through snowball sampling from the yoga studio in which I worked and online yoga communities in North America. As my field research reveals, many yoga teachers and studio owners are embarrassed to admit to this erasure of people of colour, LGBTQ-identified folks, people with disabilities, and older adults in yoga spaces. This reluctance of many yoga teachers to address the absence of people of colour and non-dominant groups in mainstream yoga spaces could be in part due to the discourse of popular multiculturalism policy that pervades the thinking of many urban Canadians.

In my surveys of typical urban or suburban Ontario yoga classes with 30 people, the average maximum number of people of colour attending might be 5 or 8 depending on class size, and of those people of colour, two might be men. One might think that in such a multicultural city as Toronto there ought to be diverse participants doing yoga in studios and fitness clubs, but this is not exactly the case. In every North American urban yoga class I have taught, participated in, and observed for this study and in two decades of practice, the number of racialized students has been smaller than those who present as white. This fieldwork observation is consistent in classes I have attended in Ontario in Toronto, Hamilton, Peterborough, Vancouver, British Columbia, New York City, and Oakland, California. To address a potential rationale for why racialized participants were not particularly prevalent in the yoga spaces in my study, I draw on Nakamura and Donnelly's "GTActivity Study." Nakamura and Donnelly found that sport plays a role in promoting multiculturalism and intercultural understanding, and "offers a way to contribute to the social and cultural life of Canada" (111-112). While Nakamura and Donnelly's study mentions participation in dance and martial arts such as capoeira and explores the ways in which some ethnocultural communities are forming their own organizations (114), yoga is not included as one of these activities that immigrant groups in the study identified. One possible reason for this may be that some ethnocultural organizations do not regard yoga as a sport practice, even though many gyms and other fitness facilities include it in their scheduling.

I spoke with two South Asian female participants at a tea shop in downtown Toronto about their involvement with yoga. Diana is one of my former students at Purusha yoga and the other is the friend she introduced to me, Prajna, who teaches Sivananda yoga part time at her

Hindu temple, within the context of Vedānta. Having grown up Hindu, Prajna shared that she was highly skeptical of participating in yoga classes at first:

I walked past the Sivananda centre for 7 years when I was at university and I would not walk inside because I thought it was a cult. All these pictures, and guru stuff, I thought it was such BS, I don't wanna do this...then I did Bikram for a couple years because I thought that was what yoga is. Yoga for me at the beginning was very much a physical exercise. Now I know that it's not all a physical exercise; It's all mental (Prajna, August 2017).

Diana concurred with Prajna:

I had only had religious knowledge before practicing yoga and it was Prajna who actually told me. When I started practicing yoga I felt that it was understanding like spirituality in my body. and that's where it was beneficial, whereas religion, all that aspect was keeping me very high up and not in my body, and yoga has taught me to be spiritual in my body (Diana, August 2017).

Diana and Prajna demonstrate that while they have strong connections to religion and their diasporic South Asian identities while living in Toronto, yoga somehow brought them into their bodies in a way that was not exactly sport, and not within their ethnocultural group. Prajna, however, does teach yoga at her Hindu temple, which suggests that the answer as to where people practice yoga and how they identify is not so easily determined.

## **Methodology 2.0: Friendships, Confidentiality, and Ethics**

This section of the chapter discusses the ethical dilemma inherent in friendships that develop through the field research process. Doing fieldwork as a feminist ethnographer allows me the liberty to explore both my own subject position, as well as the subjectivities of many people in numerous sites of study that a traditional ethnographer might exclude in service to studying a single community over an extended period of time. I am studying “my people,” but instead of them being descendants of Eastern European Jewish immigrants as I am, they are yoga people.

And like Meena Khandelwal, I also question the “myth of rapport” and the “delusion of alliance” in working with women (see also Stacey 25). More importantly, though, is that like Khandelwal, it is not the common experience of being women or mothers that makes me identify with my research participants (113), it is our shared political and intellectual interests in yoga and anti-racist feminism and body positivity that bring us together. In the yoga studio where I was teaching and volunteering between August 2015 and May 2016, people shared details with me about their lives and their health. I usually divulged that I am a feminist researcher doing a dissertation about yoga communities, but for most of them, they were barely aware that I was doing anything else than being simply their yoga teacher, which was a bit like having a double identity. The real challenge in doing interviews and participant observation with yoga practitioners was that while it may have seemed easy enough for me to hang out with people who I know already, I was also conflicted with my position as supposedly impartial researcher. As Owton and Allen-Collinson put it, the researcher has to “work hard” to maintain self-reflexivity in conjunction with a pre-existing relationship and the research project (287).

Hannah Avis’s writing on interviewing participants who are her friends piqued my interest, because many of my interviewees are also yoga instructors I consider friends. Like Avis, in conducting these interviews as part of the ethnography, I had to focus on how to stay on track with the conversation and the interview questions, rather than to get carried away with personal discussions. Avis notices these challenges in the moment, in particular as they figure in her role as a researcher, knowledge producer, and as a friend. She also recognizes that even though her research participants have much in common with her, she still must bear her multiple subject positions in mind as she navigates the terrain (192). Avis wonders whether it is acceptable as a fem-

inist researcher to include herself as part of the knowledge discourse that she is actively producing (193), and so do I, as I grapple with what it means to be doing feminist ethnography of my own social and cultural group. Fortunately, Ruth Behar, along with Carolyn Ellis and many other publications have made vulnerability acceptable in the social science and humanities academic community. She reassures that our slippery position as ethnographers behooves us to place our subjectivity in the centre of the interactions with our research participants (29).

I worried about giving too much centrality to the interpersonal relationships (Avis 194-196) and how I positioned myself as researcher. But unlike Avis, I did not feel fettered by a pressure to adhere to the role of depersonalized ethnographer (202) nor did I worry as she did that I seemed too young or inexperienced. My many years in the yoga community lends me some experiential authority there, as I previously discussed. And yet, the complexity of the researcher-subject relationship persists. The feminist writing on intersubjective dynamics in ethnography insists that researchers position themselves in relation to their research subjects (Watts; Visweswaran; Hinson Shope). As Visweswaran explains, a feminist ethnography “can consider how identities are multiple, contradictory, partial, and strategic” (50). Furthermore, Hinson Shope urges us to remember that engaging with a community in which we are researching is also not without risk of emotional involvement and even discomfort; in her research, she was not expecting the ways in which her research would “disrupt her embedded epistemological assumptions” (164). Similarly to my research intention to listen to the unheard voices in contemporary North American yoga, Hinson Shope’s desire to “listen to the voices silenced by the lingering effects of minority rule” (165) was not without its risks. In fieldwork, things often turn out not as we expect them to be, and our well-thought out plans can change.

“Friendship as Method” is a resonant methodology that I have found useful with this ethnography, and drawing on Owton and Allen-Collinson, I articulate the ways in which my relationships with yoga practitioners who may have started off as friends became research participants. Some research participants became friends. Like Owton, upon whose research her co-authored article with Allen-Collinson is based, I found that my position as an interested researcher and yoga practitioner intensified my connection with participants but also added a complex nuance. While feminist research demands that we do not maintain any researcher-research subject power imbalance, it is also complicated by the fact that I often identified strongly, and even emotionally with the research participants. While Owton and Allen-Collinson point out that the friendship as method approach “seeks to reduce the hierarchical separation” (285), as I have mentioned earlier, my position as a yoga instructor complicates this relationship. In some instances with interviewees, I was the yoga expert, in others, I was a teacher in competition in a tight job market, and in other situations, I was the yoga student.

### **LJ and Diane’s Story: Ethnographic Subjects As Intersecting and Conflicting Signposts**

In the second half of my fieldwork year, I came to realize that Diane and LJ, who were emerging as central participants in my research held opposing positions on the question of yoga’s authenticity in contemporary North America. Their disagreements and concomitant friendship with me posed an ethical problem for me with regards to my relationships with them, and my position as a researcher. Visweswaran says that “betrayal allegorizes three distinct but interlocking sets of problems that impinge on the exercise of feminist ethnography” (76). In the case of my research, betrayal lives in the ethnographer’s awkward assumption of universal sisterhood.

While Visweswaran is speaking in the context of postcolonial relationships that complicate national, feminist, and “anthropological staging of other” (79), my ethical concern here is that the women in my study of yoga communities in North America seem to be the same – they are both white middle class, able bodied female yoga instructors. But they actually hold very different political and even spiritual viewpoints. To complicate matters further, one of these participants in my study prefers to ignore intersectional analysis of social inequality, while the other is intent on waking up yoga practitioners in service of social justice through activism, even if this process is uncomfortable or destabilizes her own or others’ privilege.

Judith Stacey puts this complex contradiction in the relationship between women informants and researchers forward in her seminal article, “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?” While I did experience “empathy and identification” (25) with the women I studied, not all of them were women, and furthermore, like Stacey, I have come to wonder whether a feminist ethnography is “falsely innocent” of its claims toward collaborative, innocent research (24). I can give such an example in the ethical problem that put me in the middle of a difficult relationship between two outspoken and prominent yoga instructors in online discussion groups. This ethical problem also pinpoints a key conflicting theory in this dissertation; how do we negotiate the tensions around tradition and modernity in contemporary yoga culture?

I have become close friends with both LJ and Diane over the past couple of years since I began my fieldwork. In one of our many Skype chats in the Spring and Summer of 2016, LJ asked, “How do I reconcile my privileged position as a white, middle class, yoga lady?” From her viewpoint living in New Mexico, LJ sees Diane as an uncritical, politically unaware, white, middle class female yoga practitioner. and shares with me that this kind of yoga practitioner

troubles her. My ethical concern as a feminist researcher is that I have close, warm, friendships with both of them. Each of them for me also represents a part of myself that I am trying to reconcile, and I identify personally with each of these women. In this dissertation, the questions that each of these women are asking is equally important as I work through the questions about cultural appropriation, the neo-colonialization of yoga, and cultivating a personally and socially resonant yoga practice.

The ethics of my position as an insider researcher is that LJ feels that she can say whatever she wants to in order to get her decolonizing points across. LJ's question, "What makes yoga, yoga?" in response to Diane's joyous Facebook post about her new classes on the Yoga and Movement Research Community page upset a great many people, as I will explain in further detail in Chapter 4. My decision for engaging in these discussions was such that I effectively told each of the discussants that I could not take a position on their debate, which was actually difficult for me because I do have opinions that I am developing. As a feminist researcher, however, my task was to stay aware of the levels of "betrayal" (Visweswaran) that could happen if I was not careful to avoid getting into the fray of the debates that were happening online. Both LJ and Diane were messaging me privately to convince me of their position, and I reassured them that I respected their position but that I was ethically bound to maintain confidentiality and neutrality so that no one's feelings or businesses were hurt because of anything that I said or did in my research. When I was with Diane in person in June 2016, this notion of betrayal was heavy on me because I knew that some of what she said was in conflict with LJ's opinion. I listened respectfully, and mindfully avoided agreeing or disagreeing. The answer to this ethical dilemma lay not in taking any position, but in the muddy waters of non-binary answers.

While it is imperative for us to resist reproducing dualistic thinking that one side of the yoga argument is more righteous or authentic than another, the narrative I share of Diane Bruni functions as the postmodern ethnographic subject who critiques ideal white femininity and ageism. Diane's journey represents that of many yoga practitioners and instructors who claim to re-make yoga as her own particularly as her body has gone through cancer and normal processes of aging, and thereby produce a new and culture gendered as white feminine. LJ is the contrapuntal ethnographic subject who critiques Diane's project of a new yoga, claiming that the tradition of yoga can not be re-made.<sup>14</sup>

### **Multi-site Ethnography**

Who are the people that inhabit these yoga communities, and where are they, if these communities are so diffuse? As a reflection on global trends in the expansion of yoga's popularity, I conducted this ethnography of multiple yoga communities in North America by engaging with 3 studios and a focus group in Toronto, 4 studios in New York, a conference in California, and social media discussion threads. The people who became my research participants are overwhelmingly women, and many of these are yoga teachers who are also mothers. Even though I made considerable efforts to interview male practitioners and instructors, I found it difficult to make these connections. I wrote to the studio where I had done my Restorative Yoga Teacher Training and sent a letter and a flyer calling for male participants, but received no response from

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<sup>14</sup>At the time of field research, this debate raged as a troubling conflict within the community, but eight months later, Diane has come through the other side of the argument, and is no longer calling herself a yoga instructor. At the time of conducting fieldwork for this dissertation, Diane has publicly disavowed herself as a yoga instructor and instead now calls herself a "movement educator." For her current work, see: <http://dianebruni.com/what-i-teach/>

the studio owner, who is also male. I was disappointed to find my hope dashed that in having some history with this studio, I could gain entry. Instead, people I had hoped would be enthusiastic research participants often did not return my emails or follow up on in-person conversations. In what I consider to be a similar ethnographic experience to her ethnographic fieldwork, MacDonald writes of similar frustrations with regards to being able to talk to certain groups of people despite the fact that she had some valid credibility with them; she calls these instances “failures to get to the field” (36). Not only did I have trouble talking with male yoga teachers and practitioners, I also found that most of my participants ended up white, educated, middle class women, many of whom are yoga teachers and mothers, as I am. According to Mears, even though a researcher can be from an insider position, “it is never easy to get elites to open up about their lives” (25). Maria Velasquez asserts that black holistic sites, both online and in real time, are “critical to black women’s survival” (176) that depend on their being spaces solely for black women. I would further this assessment to suggest that as a normative-bodied, white-appearing, cis-gendered woman, it was difficult for me to gain entry into non-white spaces of yoga because many racialized practitioners might wish to protect their experience from the white ethnographic gaze.

With this point in mind, I did not attempt to gain entry into black yoga spaces. Instead, I attended the Race and Yoga Conference in Oakland California in April 2016 so that I could listen to the voices of racialized yoga practitioners. During the Race and Yoga conference, I was able to connect with several other practitioners of yoga from marginalized groups; some identify as queer, some are racialized, and some are marginalized in multiple intersecting ways. I had only three contacts when I came to the conference. Two of these women I had not actually ever met in

person, and they were all white. After hearing some of the presentations at this conference, I approached the speakers and asked them if they would be interested in doing an interview. Since I was only in California for a total of 3 days excluding my travel time, the number of people whom I could interview was limited, but my field notes from the presentations and conversations in which I was a participant observer offer thick description (Geertz 9-10).

Concomitant with traditional ethnographic practice, I did extended participant observation at 3 different yoga studios in Toronto and 4 more as a visitor in New York City, and an overall total of 30 interviews with yoga teachers. Textual analysis of Facebook groups that engage with critical questions about the evolution of contemporary attitudes about yoga is also a “site” of this ethnography. I conducted 2 Participatory Action Research (PAR) groups in which we discussed ideologies of yoga and representations of health. Personal narrative is also a significant aspect of this ethnography, for reasons I will describe below.

### **Participant Observation**

“How much can bystanders, what we call participant observers, really understand” (Narayan 37)? Kirin Narayan asks this question in her now-classic essay, “Participant Observation.” In this ethnography, however, I position myself as something more than a bystander. I am interested, and even invested in the yoga communities I am studying. Feminist research (Behar & Gordon) demands that we put ourselves inside the observation so that we are, in fact, participating as well as observing. Not only must we situate ourselves within the ethnography in order to address potential power imbalances in the research relationships, but Behar and Gordon also remind us that women must also pay attention to “white feminist oversights” with

the goal of “creating new coalitions among women that would acknowledge differences of race, class, sexual orientation, educational privilege, and nationality” (6). While Toronto is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world, the yoga communities here are overwhelmingly white, able bodied, and middle class, so I take the same intention that feminist scholars do toward coming to terms with the fact that marginalized women, and men as well, have been excluded from so-called universal projects of liberation such as yoga and wellness. I have carefully watched the people going in and out of yoga studios and community centre yoga classes. I have silently counted the numbers of non-white people in yoga classes in Toronto, New York, and Oakland, and always come up with only a small percentage. Why is this?

My participant observation activities ranged from my simply taking classes and then writing down field notes afterward, to teaching regular weekly classes and workshops, and volunteering in the studio where I was also an instructor in Toronto. Volunteer work usually consisted of basic reception, checking clients in for class, tidying the studio, doing promotion for classes, and providing information to clients. Participant observation fieldwork also included visiting New York City to see how the yoga scene there would be different or similar to Toronto. I was particularly interested in whether New York could offer a model of yoga and social justice that I had not yet seen in Toronto. Both Toronto and New York City are similarly important urban centres housing a proliferation of yoga studios on nearly every corner, with diverse affluent and working class neighbourhoods. After classes, I would write field notes about my experiences and reflections on the yoga teacher’s use of language, my feelings in the class itself, my relationship with the teacher if I had any, and what kind of sequence that instructor offered and how it felt in my body. I kept my eyes open for signs of what might be inequality of any sort. I looked for

signs of fat oppression or body positivity. In contrast to my participant observation experiences in Toronto where people knew me and I knew the intimate histories of many of the studios and teachers, in New York I was an unknown researcher from Canada. Even though I have established friendships in New York and have been able to maintain the friendships I have developed there through social media and email, I remain the researcher from away.

### **Personal Narrative**

Women's life writing in novels, journals and letters show that we do, in fact, have transgressive thoughts and desires in the midst of doing mundane things like raising children and laundry. Readers of women's histories and autobiographies learn that a universal male voice is not one that speaks for all humans. Over the course of preparing to write my dissertation, I have used to a small degree autoethnography as a research method in which the scholar draws on their personal experiences in relation to the culture they are studying (Allen-Collinson 283). In autoethnography as a research method, the author's personal experiences comprise some or all of the research data in order to comment and critique the sociocultural significance of those stories (Chang). Autoethnography provides a site to do what Carolyn Ellis calls "collaborative witnessing" in the form of shared storytelling and conversation (18). Autoethnography is also becoming an important method for health research because it creates a space for research participants to tell their own stories within the context of their own participant observation (Chang; Peterson; Ellis & Bochner). With the feminist understanding that no single, authoritative, objective position actually exists (Haraway), this multi-sited dissertation research is autoethnographic in that I add my

story to many others' to speak to the cultural significance of yoga as a socioeconomic marker and health practice.

I am not using autoethnography as a central research method; instead I am offering personal narrative. I am attracted to autoethnography as a method, however, because of what it can do for us as researchers and as people. For Stacy Holman Jones, “autoethnography meant understanding fieldwork as personal and knowledge as an embodied, critical, and ethical exploration of culture” (19), which is exactly what this dissertation is about. Yoga in North America is an embodied practice centred on a notion of individual liberation and achievement rather than interdependence. Using personal narrative invites us to share our stories to relate to those in the culture we study. No longer is the yogi practicing by themselves in a space for one, or occupying a mat in a corner of a room of 60 people, trying to achieve the next advanced arm balancing pose. Autoethnography also allows us to reconsider “how we think, how we do research, and relationship, and how we live” (21), and as such, is a fitting method for telling the stories of how we negotiate intersecting tensions of race, class, and embodiment in the yoga world. As Ellis says, “autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world, it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively” (10), which is, as I understand it and the fieldwork stories will reveal, part of the goal of yoga. As is our intention on the yoga mat and on the meditation cushion, autoethnography is about “observing ourselves observing” (Ellis 10), and therefore, this dissertation practically demands autoethnography.

In the Introduction to the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis explain that autoethnography contains four important elements. First, they say that “autoethnographers intentionally highlight the relationship of their experiences and stories to culture

and cultural practices” (22), and in this ethnography of the yoga world, I am also engaging in its critique by telling not only my own, but also the stories of the people who inhabit it. Second, autoethnography not only situates itself within broader scholarly contexts (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis 23), but third, it also is vulnerable and personal (Behar; Allen-Collinson; Visweswaran). Finally, personal narrative as I use it in my fieldwork is reciprocal, which points to a sense of shared responsibility of readers and writers. These four characteristics of autoethnography address the need for “contingent knowledges” and honour the body and emotions through complex story and care (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis 25). For Jennifer Musial, autoethnography creates a space for a messiness that I consider implicit in the unruliness of women’s bodies as they take up space in the yoga world that might prefer to erase them (143). By sharing my personal narrative in this dissertation, I include my own vulnerability in the ethnography.

If this ethnography on yoga cultures is going to be remotely transformational for women in particular, then it has to take the body shaming of mainstream fitness and wellness activities and the covert racism out of the closet. Drawing on autoethnography theory, I argue for the validity of personal narrative in service of studying yoga communities. This is for two reasons. First, the researcher will have more credibility with interviewees if they have personal experience with the practice and the community, and second, yoga is traditionally predicated on the concept of *svādhyāya*, or self-study and knowledge of the self, as described in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*. De Michelis translates the terms as meaning “one’s own study” (221), but stipulates that *svādhyāya* was originally intended as the study of sacred Hindu texts. In her case study of modern yoga, however, de Michelis explains further that Iyengar had “rendered *svādhyāya* as ‘study of the Self’” (221). In Iyengar’s translation from his important text, *Light on Yoga*, “self-study” is actu-

ally about improvement of the self (de Michelis 223), which many contemporary yoga practitioners take to heart. In their discussion about the contemplative law movement, González and Eckstrom point out that Patañjali's ethic of *Svādhyaya* demands that practitioners not only study themselves, but also apply that knowledge of the self to the problems of daily life, "to understand the struggles of the past to better grasp where we stand, how we got here, the roads others have walked, and the paths we might pursue" (218). To this end, *svādhyāya* lends itself not only to yoga, but to social justice in a materialist sense.

For many of the people in this research project, the practice of yoga means working closely with ancient texts. In conversations in person and online they frequently cite the Upanishads, which are attributed as being the oldest and most important texts of yoga, saying that knowledge of self is part of the path to finding out the answer to the question, "who am I, and what is this universe?" Jaida Samdura argues that an anthropologist researching a kinaesthetic practice "may have to participate in the activities of their consultants to achieve relevant 'thought' or grasp the 'essence' or the subject of their research" and therefore, participation in a kinaesthetic discipline such as hātha yoga is crucial, and goes "beyond achieving rapport or gaining access to opportunities for close observation" (667). In this dissertation, I integrate my personal narrative of some of these practices as a parallel form of analysis with the experiences of research participants.

Some view autoethnography with skepticism, arguing that while it elicits the reader's sympathy, it might not offer enough critical analysis about the sociocultural phenomenon at issue (Chang 444). Others recognize it as a way of centring the researcher as a key player rather than

objective observer. Allen-Collinson defends the autoethnographer's choice to centralize their personal narrative as salient, and argues that:

autoethnography provides rare discursive space for voices too often muted or forcibly silenced within more traditional forms of research, opening up and democratizing the research space to those seeking to contest hegemonic discourses of whatever flavor (282).

Personal narrative is also particularly salient as a method for understanding practices of embodiment such as yoga. How else could a person write about a yoga community if she is unable to experience it for herself? I borrow from Ashley Mears' use of the term "carnal ethnography," which embodies not only the outward experience of the practice but also the "inward emotional crests and troughs" (26). Her examination of the New York City fashion world might seem to be a totally different community from the yoga communities I have immersed myself in, but they intersect at the junctures of the body and precarious labour. Like Mears working as a model in the fashion world and PhD student researcher, I strove during my fieldwork to be a good, popular yoga teacher, chasing after opportunities to run workshops in my area of specialty, to get my name out there, and to take on extra teaching work so that people would know who I am so I could then generate more yoga teaching opportunities. My fieldwork year of immersion in the Toronto yoga community hinged on the potential of another teaching gig, and hopes of the goodwill of both students and studio owners. Like ethnography, access to expanding my yoga teaching practice hinges on the favour of gatekeeper informants (Mears 26). Sometimes I could gain access to interviews with yoga teachers through my position as empathizer; I knew their plight well, both as a seasoned instructor from long before many current instructors were even

studying yoga, and as a yoga teacher who had re-emerged on the scene after a ten year absence and foray into academia.

Ethnographies have traditionally been written from the perspective of an outsider looking into a culture not their own, but a feminist ethnography with an autoethnographic component does something different. Feminist ethnographers critique the cultures in which they live, and by holding up the microscope to their own social conditions, they can also step back a little to gain further important perspective and even make suggestions for positive change. This ethnography examines women's perspectives while employing specifically feminist methodological principles such as "rejecting the separations between subject and object, thought and feeling, knower and known, and political and personal" (Stacey 21). In addition to engaging with Participatory Action Research, participant observation, and critical discourse analysis of social media discussions, I must also account for my own experiences and critical reflections on yoga as an inside participant, and so this chapter will share that narrative. As a continuation of the discussion of the development of yoga in North America, I will use my own experiences in my engagement with yoga as a case study.

### **My Personal Yoga Story**

People experience yoga on multiple levels and from multiple subjectivities, and as such, I situate my own social location as both a feminist academic and yoga educator with nearly 20 years experience. I write this dissertation as a life-long practitioner of yoga who has been both a student and a teacher in a variety of different contexts from studios and gyms, to schools, parks, community centres and libraries. I share it in this dissertation because like many dissertations,

they start off with an intensely personal narrative that evolves into a greater social concern. It is my hope that the reader will find something resonant in my story. Although the PhD is only 6 years, that last 15 have been leading up to my fieldwork in the yoga world of Toronto, Ontario. I have lived in this community and around it since 1998, both as a student of yoga and as an instructor. Like many of the participants in this study, yoga had been my saviour. I felt at the time that its structured disciplines guiding both embodied practices such as movement and diet, as well as psycho-emotional meditation practices, could teach me how to be healthy and even learn to love my body. Sometimes I have wondered, however, if it is the teacher, rather than the yoga itself that is so integral to healing. Chelsea Roff cites her yoga teacher as an integral aspect of her recovery from anorexia. “For years, I’d been starving myself in order to take up *less* space in the world” she writes, “...and here was Diana, a woman who could hold all 200 pounds of her sweet self up in Handstand with ease” (80). Hātha yoga and meditation teachers have helped women struggling with self-hatred and fat phobia to come to at least appreciate their embodied selves, and Roff declares that it may well have been her joyful teacher embodying spontaneous play rather than the *Yoga Sūtras* that was the most valuable lesson in her recovery (81). There are now numerous body acceptance movements in North America, and I further discuss their potential for social justice within contemporary yoga in Chapter 7.

The accident benefits I was accorded through insurance after a cycling accident in 1996 enabled me to take unlimited yoga classes, and thus began my earnest journey toward learning to “breathe, relax, feel, watch, and allow,” as I later learned in my Yoga Teacher Training at Kripalu Center in 2000. Many other research participants I interviewed and in casual conversation shared that they got into yoga when a health care practitioner or friend suggested that it would be useful

to help recover from a musculoskeletal injury. When I practiced āsana, I was focused only on my own experiences and feelings rather than seeing myself through the opinions of others. Concomitantly, I discovered what it meant to eat food mindfully in a way that pays attention to deep nourishment not only of my body, but of the self that lived inside the body. My eating, then, became intrinsically connected to my yoga practice. I wanted to eat food that I deemed perfectly pure, which was preferably vegan, in concordance with the yoga principal of *ahimsā*, the Sanskrit term from Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras* that contemporary yoga instructors understand as meaning non-violence.

In 1996, I began to devote myself to the Ashtanga yoga Primary Series as developed by Pattabhi Jois, a now-popular and vigorous and athletic form of hātha yoga. As mentioned in the Yoga History Overview, Jois was a renowned student of Krishnamacharya and a major proponent of hātha yoga's transformation from body-balancing stretching and breathing exercises to a vigorous, sweat-inducing, and austere physical discipline. Diane Bruni was one of my very first yoga teachers in the mid 1990s and was the person who inspired me to become a shiatsu therapist in 1997, which further attests to the importance of yoga teachers. It was Diane a year and a half later who sternly advised me, "Don't teach what you can't do," when I proudly shared with her that I had begun teaching yoga. Like many Ashtangis, I felt that if I did not do the Primary Series every day, I felt my discipline had slipped. I disciplined myself with an extreme preoccupation with consuming perfect food. While working at a natural foods store in 1997-98, I came across an article in a health magazine that talked about orthorexia, a condition in which the person obsesses about eating only the purest food (Håman et al; Brytek-Matera; Konrad). Orthorexia is a real health concern that affects devoted practitioners in yoga and fitness communities as

Musial demonstrates (143-145). I realized that I was headed in that direction, and through media representations, I have observed perfectionism in nutrition worsening over the past decade and a half.

My involvement in the yoga worlds of Toronto and Peterborough, Ontario allows me to offer this dissertation what Kirin Narayan describes as the native anthropologist position. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's 1988 article, "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place," Narayan explains that "native" embodies a sense of authenticity, which in the case of this study, can be extended to that elusive quality that practitioners of yoga seek from their instructors. While I am certainly not of Indian descent and contemporary yoga students have ceased to expect that authentically Indian practice from their instructors, many do look for teachers who honestly embody a guide who actually lives the supposedly yogic lifestyle, which is meant to consist of a regular *āsana* practice, calm demeanour, and eating a diet believed to be conducive to the lifestyle. A yoga practitioner often feels compelled to lead what is believed to be a yogic lifestyle (Lau), which not only is expected to elevate health, but also confer authenticity on the seeker.

Like many other yoga practitioners, my yoga practice and concomitant commitment to eating a physically and spiritually "pure" diet was predicated on a whole foods, vegetarian diet. The global yoga community generally believes that vegetarianism and veganism are the way to embody yoga's number one ethic of *ahimsa*, non-violence. American holistic nutritionist Paul Pitchford draws on what he calls the traditional wisdom of the Orient, noting that the standard American eating habits are contributing to two-thirds of deaths from heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some cancers (1). Like the Macrobiotic diet originating from Japan, the Ayurvedic diet is meant to improve health and in contrast to the processed foods North Americans are purported

to over-consume, traditional “Oriental” diets consist of whole grains and a high percentage of fruit, vegetables, nuts, beans, and legumes (Lau 71; Pitchford). While Lau critically explores the American consumption of whole foods as part of a fetishized commodity, Pitchford earnestly teaches that food is “medicine for the mind and body.” He calls this principal “*sattva*,” and borrows from the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sūtras* to draw out its importance (600-602). I followed these practices for many years, and over the past two decades, the yoga community has become known as well as satirized for its often over-zealousness about food purity. This topic of food purity as a health practice is taken up further in Chapter 5, but the following discussion explains my methodological position as “native ethnographer”; I am both a yoga practitioner who has experienced it first hand, and the feminist scholar telling the story.

A *sattvic* diet is mostly if not entirely vegetarian or vegan, and generates a healthy and peaceful attitude in the individual. A *sattvic* diet and lifestyle embodies the qualities of *sattva gunā*, which is the quality of purity and “leads to clarity and mental serenity” (Iyengar *Light on Yoga* 46). According to Rudolph Ballentine, *sattvic* food produces an “electrifying resonance... that energizes and awakens” (264). Pitchford concurs, adding that “the ancient Ayurvedic *Sattva* plan is a model of life-affirming principals... [and] ...presents comprehensive moral and spiritual practices” (600). While these descriptions might seem to the academic reader rather like New Age fluff, it also is resonant with two-thousand-year-old Ayurvedic teachings (Langford), and concomitant with the stereotypically peaceful mannerisms that mainstream culture expects yoga practitioners to embody. The opposite of *sattvic* foods are those that are either *rajasic* or *tamasic*. *Rajasic* refers to foods and drinks that are overly stimulating such as coffee, deep fried foods, heavy spices, and sugar, while *tamasic* foods are any that are not fresh or heavily processed. *Ra-*

*jas*, according to Iyengar, makes the person “active, energetic, tense, and wilful,” while *tamas* “obstructs and counteracts the tendency of rajas to work and sattva to reveal” (46; see also Feuerstein 608-610; Pitchford 605). Interestingly, as Langford points out, many adherents to yoga are also interested in Ayurveda, the health science of Indian origin that parallels hātha yoga. Keen practitioners often travel to India in search of an authentic yoga practice and also seek out Ayurvedic clinics. I have been a keen follower of Ayurvedic principles as a parallel practice to yoga. This position of more than fifteen years studying and living what is commonly understood as the yogic lifestyle offers me some credibility amongst other white yoga teachers and practitioners, and I had hoped, would lead to access to interviewees who are part of the yoga world in North America. It is important to note that I do not claim my knowledge as authoritative, but rather, it is the position of having been “in the industry” and “living the lifestyle” of which I claim ownership. Further, my years of living this so-called yogic lifestyle has to some degree afforded me the social capital of health (Crawford “Health as Meaningful Social Practice”).

How did it become normalized for yoga teachers to follow Ayurveda, and for yoga teachers to want to embody these qualities? My personal journey with yoga is an apt reflection of this trend, for I am not unique as a white, Canadian-born yoga teacher. This ethnography, then, is not unlike that of Narayan’s “native anthropologist” in which I am studying my own society. As a feminist anthropologist doing auto ethnography about yoga, which is an embodied subject, I am attempting to offer an authentic point of view to the academic community (29). By offering my own subject position, I am also acknowledging my individual experience as personal to me, and therefore admit the limits of my own perspective (Narayan 33). Like feminist knowledge translators before me, I am not seeking in this ethnography to create some positivist, authoritative thesis

of what the North American yoga community is, but rather, I am cultivating the ability, as Donna Haraway says, to “translate knowledges among very different power-differentiated communities” (580).

### **Feminist Participatory Action Research**

Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) is a research method that is grounded in adult education, and is meant to be a “bottom-up process” to help marginalized groups gain control of their life trajectories and social conditions (Glassman and Erdem 207). While I was developing my dissertation proposal, yoga practitioners who are not instructors and non-yoga practitioners often revealed in casual discussions with me that they felt that they have little or no expertise to discuss yoga. I wanted to find a way to hear from them that could explain why they felt their contribution to a conversation about yoga was insignificant, and to also elicit their opinions and experiences about representations of yoga in mainstream media and yoga classes. My goal in doing FPAR was to learn from the participants what aspects of their yoga experiences did or did not serve the aim of yoga: liberation of the self and to feel well in body and mind. In FPAR, the dialogue between researchers and community members should be non-hierarchical and highly participatory, which means that everyone’s contribution to group discussion is equally valuable. In many of the casual discussions I had in the research proposal phase of my PhD, I frequently heard people devalue their experiences particularly in relation to mine simply on the grounds that I have been a yoga instructor since 1998. FPAR actively integrates feminist theories in order to address power imbalances and the political economies that shape women’s lives (Ponic, Reid & Frisby). This method, then, seemed to fit with what I wanted to achieve in offering a transforma-

tive learning opportunity for both myself as a researcher, and for yoga practitioners who feel that they do not know enough about yoga in order to share their thoughts and experiences. In this way, we were able to co-create a yoga space that participants found shifted both their ideas about yoga in media, and more importantly, about how they felt about their embodied experiences with yoga.

Even more important with regards to why FPAR was an ideal method for this “site” of my multi-site ethnography is the ways in which feminist researchers have used it in conjunction with health care. In considering yoga as a health practice, and the ways in which it articulates community members with both public and private institutions, I borrow from Ponc, Reid & Frisby to support this methodological choice. Their intention to “work in meaningful and authentic ways with partners to promote women’s health” (325) parallels my desire to draw out expanded notions of what are the short and long term effects of yoga and the industry and culture on non-specialized, non-elite yoga practitioners. Equally important for my research and for my position as the researcher in conjunction to research participants is FPAR’s goal of working from a place of “power-with” as opposed to “power-over” (325), which assumes that the researcher is the one who holds the knowledge.

In the FPAR sessions I conducted, I specifically strove to be reflexive with my social location, my assumptions of understanding of participants’ experiences, and my own sharing. McDonald (2003) struggled with similar concerns in her FPAR. Although the scope of my project is significantly different from her Toronto-based project dealt, which with Latin American immigrant women survivors of domestic abuse, McDonald nonetheless points out the importance of the issue of self-disclosure in this research process (78). Like, her, I believed that “this project

was not about ‘me’ and I did not want to bias the data” (84), but I made a different decision about self-disclosure in the research than McDonald. While McDonald felt distanced from her participants throughout the process because she did not share her story soon enough (89), I did choose in some way to be part of the conversation with the participants, rather than a detached researcher. This is where personal narrative is important. We share our stories so that others may feel like they are not alone in their experience.

The people who came to the two FPAR sessions that I held in March 2016 expressed important critical concerns about the idea of discipline and health; they were prepared to challenge the ideology of health and healthy eating as a neoliberal project. Together, we unpacked imagery around food and body perfectionism, health ideologies, and visual imagery that challenges the notion of the ideal yoga body.

### **Multi-Site Ethnography and Online Communities**

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the Toronto yoga community, and the yoga community of North America is diffuse geographically and yet intrinsically linked through social media. It is important to note, however, that the links existed before social media. *Yoga Journal* began 40 years ago as a small publication spearheaded by Iyengar teacher, Judith Lasater, and through other magazines such as *Yoga International*, yoga associations, conferences, and traveling teachers, the communities of yoga became further diffuse. What online social media does that is more powerful than other forms of social networking is that it is a platform for all these means and it makes communications more inclusive. It speeds communications in multiple time zones such that the narrative and debates can move forward for some people while others are

sleeping. One particular social media page that I followed extensively as a participant observer is the relatively recently developed Yoga and Movement Research Community group on Facebook. Since its inception in early Spring 2016, its membership grew from 30 to over 24,000 members globally as of Winter 2018. It started as a public group, and then after conflict broke out amongst its members about questions of what is real yoga, membership became controlled by three site administrators, to those who would abide by the group's rules. These rules include the prohibition of self-promotion and the discussion of politically contentious topics, which potentially could include most subjects. This study, therefore, examines a community that has its participants living in Toronto, England, Australia, New Mexico, California, and the North-eastern U.S. How does one study a community so diffuse, and why is it good ethnographic practice?

In his now-classic literature review of the different forms of multi-sited ethnographic practice, George E. Marcus explains that it is precisely because of globalized processes and transnational movement that multi-sited ethnography is important. In two ethnographies, *Flexible Bodies* and *BiPolar Expeditions*, Emily Martin offers robust examples of how to conduct a multi-sited ethnography that follows a trope, which in her work is the flexibilization of the neoliberal citizen, and also that it offers a “comparative translation” of “fractured, discontinuous sites” (Marcus 111). I draw from Martin's exemplary methods in my ethnography of yoga communities in that I am comparing popular conceptions of yoga, health, discipline, and beauty through the tropes of happiness and also of a flexible, neoliberal citizen that enacts socially mediated wellness imperatives. The other way that Martin's ethnographic methods are useful to follow in my own methodology is that like her, I have also been a sort of “ethnographer-activist, renegotiating identities in different sites” (Marcus 113). I have been learning about contemporary

yoga communities as part of a world system of health and embodiment falsely predicated on consumption. In some iterations of my position as feminist ethnographer I am an activist trying to change the yoga world's penchant for OM jewelry and printed leggings; in others I am another member of the Yoga and Movement Research Community Facebook group. In other versions of myself as researcher, I am a yoga instructor commiserating the shared struggle in the business with colleagues.

This ethnography of yoga communities must be multi-sited due to its very diffuse nature, and attends to this question of location by casting a wide net that is sewn together through yoga studio spaces, private discussions amongst teachers and practitioners, blogs and social media. Therefore, my analysis of discussion threads to particular questions posed in Facebook groups attends to one aspect of this research. The other sites that I have examined in this ethnography are places in which I have been able to practice participant observation, which lends itself in the writing to personal narrative.

In order to explore the ways in which Toronto has developed its yoga identity, I have also travelled to New York City and Brooklyn to do comparative fieldwork, since both Toronto and New York are large, diverse populations with strong yoga participant base. Each city, in fact, has developed its own yoga identity, which might threaten or diverge from a homogenized or even authentic yoga, but is also necessarily and uniquely individualized in order to function as a part of modern capitalism and marketability. Many would say that the commercialization of yoga is unfortunate and contributes to its ruination, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, but this is the culture that is under consideration in this dissertation. In particular, I wanted to find places in New York that are both consuming and producing a dominant yoga culture, as well as those that

are resisting mainstream yoga. Two sites I discovered demonstrated that my findings were not universally disappointing. In Brooklyn, I attended a centre dedicated to what they call “health justice,” and where I met an inspiring woman, an African American yoga instructor who led the class with grace and ease. She warmly agreed to meet with me to discuss how she feels as a queer woman of colour yoga teacher. The meeting was squeezed in on her lunch hour from her day job in finance at the Rockefeller Center. At the other yoga site I went to in Brooklyn, the studio owner invited me to do participant observation at the weekly chair yoga class. After coming to that class, instructor Lara and her students invited me to return another time and I spent an afternoon in conversation with them about their experiences with yoga, and how their lives have changed since starting the practice. I will share that story as part of the sites of study section in this chapter, and the findings from my afternoon with these women will be in Chapter 7, “Yoga and Social Justice.”

I had to search a bit harder to find sites in which racialized people are practicing yoga. Some did not return my emails and calls to meet for an interview, while other meetings with racialized yoga practitioners came through specified introductions. Rather than consider the lack of opportunity to connect with non-white yoga practitioners as a failure in the ethnography, I look toward Margaret MacDonald’s discussion of failure in ethnography to suggest that even though a certain meeting did not happen, the very fact that it did not occur tells us something about yoga rather than myself as the researcher (36; see also Visweswaran 99; Owton & Allen-Collinson). I have two interviews with women of colour yoga practitioners, and one with a male yoga practitioner and runner from Trinidad. A workaround with this ethnographic challenge is that I learned about Black Girls Yoga in Toronto, and I learned about the experiences of women

of colour yoga practitioners through the Race and Yoga Conference in April 2016, and through some of the *Race and Yoga Journal* publications that have come out since then. I will unpack these discussions in Chapter 7.

### **Analysis of Social Media Discussions About Yoga**

In thinking through the ethics about this research, I became aware that there is no clear agreement amongst scholars of online forums in qualitative research as to the ethics of what constitutes public or private online forums. Jowett explains the debates around publicly accessible online forums. For example, some feel they are public domain and as such, gaining consent in this regard is unnecessary, while others claim that some users may feel that they are private. To clarify this debate, however, Jowett posits that “contributors can expect their posts to be read by strangers” (289). In order to be reflexively transparent about my own position, I regularly disclosed publicly in Facebook discussion forums about yoga that I was doing participant observation research, so people knew my identity as a feminist ethnographer. While Jowett writes from the psychology research perspective, his overview of the advantages of using online forums for discursive research is helpful to articulate why Facebook discussion groups are an important site for ethnography. Jowett points out that in an online forum, people can hide behind some anonymity and often be emboldened to say what they may not say in person. The actual identity of any individual in the group is less important than what they are offering to the conversation to the group membership itself, but instead informs what Jones et al call the dialogic character of new media texts (6-7).

Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of intertextual heteroglossia, Jones et al explain that users of digital media texts are making new forms of linked texts to create social relationships (7). In the multi-sited ethnographic field, these online textual conversations function as an articulation of the dispersed communities practicing, negotiating, resisting, and acquiescing to discursive forms of embodiment, discipline of the self, and of the neoliberal project. This is nowhere more evident as in the example involving one deeply inquisitive and socially aware female yoga instructor in England.

One methodologically interesting interview I carried out was via Facebook Messenger chat. I interviewed Laura via Facebook chat on August 5, 2016. The initial questions centred around her views and experiences as a yoga teacher and mother. In particular, questions asked how she balanced the two, and how being a yoga teacher informed her mothering and vice versa. Because of her rural location, Laura could not manage to get Skype to work with her poor internet connection and she suggested that she would be comfortable conducting the interview through chat. Not everyone can do this rapid typing style of communication, but for Laura, it was perfect. Written chat format responses allowed Laura's insightful thoughts to shine through the text, and I was able to copy the discussion thread into a document as a transcript. This method also allowed her the time to think about what she wanted to say, delete anything that she did not like, and I was able to do the same. While each of us went about our own days in our different time zones, we were able to think, reflect, and then carefully select what we wanted to say to each other. This is also a minor liability in the research because it does affect the immediacy of Laura's responses.

## Interviews

For the list of sample interview questions that participants received ahead of their session with me, please see Appendix A. To invite participants, I approached both students as well as teachers after class to ask them if they would like to participate in my research by doing an interview. I quickly learned from many of the yoga students I approached that they did not feel that they were well enough experienced to have anything of value to share, and they declined to do an interview. Some of these people would tell me that they thought my study was very interesting and timely, but that I would be better off focusing on talking to yoga instructors, since they were “only students.” That humble, self-deprecating comment in of itself is ethnographically valuable, and speaks to a discourse that produces an imagined hierarchy in which some participants feel they have less right than others to contribute to dialogue. Rather than argue with them and try to convince them of their value to my research, I allowed this refusal to be part of the participant observation process, which confirms the discursive hierarchy that many yoga students feel experientially between themselves and their instructors. This raises the question, how did yoga students come to feel that their teachers are more qualified to talk about their experiences with yoga? Fortunately, the Feminist Participatory Action Research portion of this ethnography offered some answers, which will be discussed in the Findings chapters.

All participants who did interviews with me or attended the FPAR sessions signed informed consent forms, although in a few cases with interviews conducted via Skype, consent had to be given verbally in the recorded interviews because the participant had no access to a printer and scanner. All interviewees via Skype were sent the informed consent form ahead of the interview. This seemingly small detail is significant because in academia, it is often assumed that

everyone has access to and the ability to use print technology, when in fact, some yoga instructors do not actually have such tools at their disposal due to limited income or precarious and/or transient housing.

Interviewees were self-selected for the most part, although snowball sampling did also generate participants in the FPAR sessions as well as some interviews. Many interviews were arranged through Facebook, whether they took place in person or via Skype (please see Appendix A for list of interviews and breakdown of Skype or in-person). The first set of interviews evolved after I posted a question on a Facebook page for yoga teachers, asking for any yoga teachers who were interested in being interviewed about their experiences teaching and practicing yoga to write to me in a private, anonymous message. I explained my position in the question as a doctoral researcher. All except one of these respondents were women, and some of these initial responses did not evolve into actual interviews at all. Some of the participants were known to me by virtue of my having been in the yoga community for many years. Some of these people were teaching colleagues, and others were teachers whose work influenced me. This is significant as a feminist ethnography methodological concern because there is a power differential between the yoga teacher participant, and myself as a researcher who is also a yoga teacher. I understand the situations of many of the research participants as full or part time yoga instructors because I have lived and worked in the same way as they, teaching fifteen classes a week in as many as seven different locations, and yet, I have also stepped away from this world in order to develop critical pedagogies for social change.

Many of the in-person interviews with yoga teachers happened outside of the yoga studio space. Some were in cafes, and others were in parks, or in their homes. The locations of these

interviews is significant because it suggests that interviewees preferred to be away from the work site in order to share their thoughts and feelings about teaching yoga and the yoga culture that they inhabit. Conducting interviews away from the yoga space offered participants greater confidentiality and a safer sense of anonymity in what is actually a small community, as many of them shared details about their feelings about teaching yoga that conflicted with the commonly accepted and expected code of conduct of unconditional happiness and so-called gratitude for yoga teachers. Furthermore, if respondents feel more free to express themselves outside of a space of oppression, then people can overcome cultures of silence. To help guide the ways in which yoga teachers can learn to challenge authoritarianism and capitalism within the industry, I draw on McKenna's explorations in using Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* for research about yoga. According to Glassman and Erdem, Freire believed that social change started through adult education (209), which is particularly relevant in considering yoga teachers as educators teaching about yoga, a practice that is intended for liberation. Yoga communities offer microcosmic examples of unequal power relations, and through this critical ethnography, we can pose the problems that encourage dialogue and reflection (449-450). Many yoga instructors shared with me their daily struggles in managing their physical and emotional energy for the labour involved in getting to classes in multiple locations through the week, for holding space for students, and demonstrating sometimes challenging poses, all for an hourly wage that works out to be less than \$10. While yoga communities discursively strive to encourage practitioners and teachers alike to be grateful for all they have, this ideology of gratitude is a bit of a smack in the face to the teachers as they are expected to be "grateful to the 'job creators' for letting them work" (McKenna 452). Much like the people in the fashion modelling world that Mears describes, the teachers in

the yoga world are morally obligated to say positive things and keep their mental outlook equally sunny as they ride the waves of precarious work. Further analysis of this tension is described in Chapter 5, “It Was Such Good Medicine For Me: The Political Economy of Health and Yoga.”

As women in yoga communities come together to practice, there is a tacit understanding of many spaces being by and for women despite claims that all are welcome. One teacher I worked with wanted to declare a certain class that she taught for women only, but I persuaded her not to do this. Male yoga participants with whom I did interviews expressed some concern over the way yoga spaces are decorated in that they look “feminine,” which leads me to assess these statements as indicative of a gender binary that yoga practitioners, teachers and studio owners are reproducing. The gender binary is less pronounced in gym yoga sites, but I did not spend as much time studying these because I wanted to focus on cultures of yoga in spaces dedicated to yoga. Several participants, however, have pointed out that gym yoga is less stereotypically “feminine” or spiritual, and by extension, might be more inclusive. When I taught yoga in gyms between 1998 and 2004, I found that I had more men in my classes than in dedicated yoga spaces, and my class population was more ethnically diverse as well. Obviously in a gym, there is less control over the decor, and as such, one would not normally find any Lord Shiva or Ganesha statues there, and colour schemes would often be gender neutral greys, black, white, and perhaps blue. The specific sites of this study will be further described in greater detail in the following section.

## **Sites of Study**

This section describes the participant observer work I did at physical sites of study, why I went to these specific places or engaged in these practices, and why they were important to answer the questions about able bodied femininity, the business of teaching yoga, whiteness, and decolonization of yoga. I will explain these sites sequentially in my fieldwork starting with Santosha Yoga Center in a borough of New York City at the outset of my fieldwork in August 2015. All studio names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants. Some of these sites of study overlapped each other in time, in particular my studies with Diane Bruni in Toronto between November 2015 and June 2016. I took Diane's classes and workshops as often as I could in this seven month period, during which I also conducted the Participatory Action Research sessions in March, and ending with the Race and Yoga Conference in California in April. The final site of study is the studio in which I volunteered as an administrator and receptionist, and taught regular workshops and weekly classes throughout the fieldwork period.

### **Santosha Yoga Center: August 2015 and January 2016**

Inspired by J Brown's blog ([jbrownyoga.com](http://jbrownyoga.com)) about yoga in urban America, I embarked on what I came to call my Yoga Reconnaissance Tour of August 2015. This unofficial field trip allowed me the chance to see what there was out there in the yoga world of New York City. I went to New York because of its similarity to Toronto in terms of its identity as a hub as a thriving multicultural urban centre with yoga studios and gyms with yoga on nearly every corner. J Brown's writing about yoga in North America resonated with me with his critical discussions of consumerism, gender, perfectionism, and yoga. In particular, Brown's blog posts, "Pros and Cons

of Yoga Teacher Training” (<http://www.jbrownnyoga.com/blog/2015/7/pros-and-cons-of-yoga-teacher-training>) and “Brogis Need to Recognize” (<http://www.jbrownnyoga.com/blog/2015/3/brogis-need-to-recognize>), touch on the economic pressures that studio owners and yoga enthusiasts feel with wanting to align their ethics with material reality. J’s line from the “Brogis” article speaks volumes about millennial imperatives in the yoga culture in which we operate: “male yoga teachers need to be more aware and take full responsibility for the role that they are assuming.”

At Santosha Yoga Center, the site that marked the beginning of my fieldwork, I explored the notion of yoga practice as social consciousness, health and community for aging bodies as a group of older women yoga practitioners in Brooklyn, New York experience it. I arrived at Santosha late on a Sunday afternoon after a day at the beach. Even though I had dragged myself away from the beauty of sand and the Atlantic Ocean, I felt like I had arrived home when I walked into the studio. I was warmly greeted by the studio owner, Peter, who was seated behind the desk at the door to the simply appointed studio, which had minimalist decorations and a few objects for sale. The scent in the studio was the familiar Nag Champa incense, noted for its sweet spicy sandalwood, champaca (<https://sensia.com/pages/more-about-nag-champa.html>), and geranium aroma and distinctly Indian personality. Nag Champa is ubiquitous amongst yoga enthusiasts as an authentically Indian incense and holds the aura of authenticity appreciated by hippies and Satya Sai Baba devotees alike (Babb; Srinivas). It is still made in Bengaluru, India by the Shrinivas Sugandhalaya corporation, who prides itself on holding manufacturer rights to the incense products since 1964. The Satya Sai Baba name is still on the famous blue box, and yoga

practitioners at Santosha can purchase some of this incense if they are so inclined, along with the owner's instructional video and tastefully subtle t-shirts bearing the studio name.

On the Sunday afternoon in August 2015 when I came to his class, Peter told me, "If you want to learn about yoga communities, you should come back and meet Lara and the Yoga Moms!" The following Tuesday at 2:00 p.m., I returned to Santosha Yoga Center to participate in the chair yoga class. Lara and I chatted briefly after the class. As I made some fieldnotes at a cafe across the road from the studio afterward, I realized that I needed to return to this class to listen to these women's stories, and to feel a little bit more of what they experience in their weekly class. These yoga moms highlight the understanding while that it is women who historically do the care work and emotional labour in families (Hoschild Russell), and who typically report and seek treatment for more pain and stress than men do (Vigil et al. 236), many are seeking support in the form of yoga classes in order to manage their stress loads. This particular group of women are remarkable in that they are less likely to attend yoga classes than other women, due to their generally medium to low fitness level, and socio-economic background as working class Polish and Italian Brooklyn-dwellers. I returned to Santosha and Lara's "Yoga Moms" in early January 2016. I took Peter's regular noon class, settled into my body, my breath, and enjoyed the sense of safety in the room that both Peter and the other yoga students created.

The Yoga Moms are a group of six women that Lara has come to regard as her surrogate mothers who offer both her and each other loving support and care in their daily lives. They are all in their mid sixties to late seventies, and are atypical yoga participants, with their working class background. The relationship that Lara has with these women is unlike any I have come across in my twenty two years practicing yoga in seven different North American communities.

These women are not doing fancy yoga poses. They are not meditating for hours or studying scriptures intensely, but they are practicing a genuine yoga, as Lara would argue. The Yoga Moms attend their class faithfully each week, and I share their narrative in Chapter 7.

In traditional ethnographic models, it may seem that I did not spend enough time with this group in order to consider this experience as ethnography (Marcus), but it is indeed more appropriate to consider Santosha Yoga Center and Lara's Yoga Moms as a continued thread in the quilt that makes up yoga communities in North America. If I work with this patchwork quilt analogy further, I can consider the historic practices of women around the world sitting together and each sewing their patches into the larger blanket that makes up the finished product. The Yoga Moms, then, each are their own patch, and their stories are a part of the quilt that is the assemblage of this yoga ethnography. I am an outsider to their group, but I am also a yoga teacher, and it is not unusual for people to travel and be easily connected across space through Skype technology and social media. So when I met with Lara and did a private interview with her after the group interview with the six Yoga Moms, we also discussed our politics as yoga teachers. Between August and December 2015, Lara and I communicated regularly by Facebook Messenger chat about our interests in yoga and the shifting meanings about what the practice should mean. We also engaged in intertextual practices (Jones et al) by sharing different videos and articles. Lara is not the only yoga instructor who has shared videos with me; through Facebook, yoga teachers demonstrate their rebellion against feminine body ideals of whiteness and fat phobia, as well as an increasing resistance to the former modes of yoga practice that either caused them physical or emotional stress. Fortunately, she does not feel compelled to engage in the yoga

and cultural appropriation discussion, so I feel safe enough to bracket this part of the research into a discrete section that is concerned with yoga and wellness.

Part of gaining participants' trust as a researcher is putting my personal assumptions and agenda aside and simply being with them. As an observer, I am not meant to have any opinion, even though in the friendship method, participants might occasionally assume that I am allied with them (Owton & Allen-Collinson). As an ethnographer, who am I to say that the different participants' use of yoga is correct or incorrect? Is feminist research not about honouring each person's subjectivity regardless of our own politics? We cannot claim to understand their experiences, so how can we judge? My political agenda to end white ignorant racism borne out of unconscious privilege is curbed by understanding that it is not always my job as a researcher to fix it.

### **Yoga as Health Practice: Participatory Action Research and Yoga for Non-Normative Bodies**

On March 1, 2016 I distributed a flyer on social media and in local community centres and cafes near the site of the events. The text on the flyer for the call for participants read:

Do you feel like your body doesn't fit into regular yoga or fitness classes? You are invited to share your ideas about yoga and health: Experience some gentle yoga and discuss. Light refreshments will be served. March 12 and 26, 12:00-2:30 p.m. 150 Dan Leckie Way Community Room. To participate, email [jrmintz@yorku.ca](mailto:jrmintz@yorku.ca)

The title of this portion of the fieldwork was "Participatory Action Research." As indicated in the flyer text, I ran the program over two days in the community room of the apartment complex in which I live. I had put up posters in my neighbourhood and in the building, but the only person who came from the neighbourhood was a person who I already knew and who works in women's legal advocacy. I served a light lunch and tea, and people came prepared to do some

gentle movement as well. I wanted to find out how people feel about the ways in which our society promotes health and how yoga fits into ideologies of wellness as discipline and personal responsibility. In particular, I sought participants who might not attend yoga classes because they feel that their body size is not welcome in a regular yoga space. Some people attended who do enjoy yoga, but have shared stories about receiving insensitive comments from their instructors. Through photo elicitation, conversation, and gentle chair yoga stretches, participants found that their perspectives matter with regards to their expression of their experiences of the discursive meanings about bodies and ideologies of health in the visual images and texts and that they see on a daily basis. We started the sessions with a slide show and discussed what impressions the participants had about each one. The following images are some of the slides we discussed in the sessions:



Participatory Action Research Group session 1 discussion slide: March 12, 2016. Photo credit: Judith Mintz.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU THINK OF YOGA?

- What do you imagine yoga should be?
- What should yoga offer you?
- What is the ideal yoga body?
- Is it even attainable?



Participatory Action Research Group session 2: March 26, 2016. Photo credit: Judith Mintz.

I encountered some barriers with the call for participants despite my consulting with a specialist in critical disabilities and fat studies. Together, she and I experimented with what we thought would be the proper wording and my ethical concern about being normative bodied while discussing healthism and leading a gentle practice for larger bodies. My field notes reflect my own doubt in the validity of this work: March 12, 2016: “*Is this really PAR?*” The transcripts and my own “jottings” as Emerson, Fretz and Shaw refer to this kind of note, speak for the scene itself. Insights from the discussions are reflected in Chapters 6 and 7.

## **Race and Yoga Conference**

The annual Race and Yoga Conference, run via University of California Berkeley College was being held in Oakland at Mills College this year, due to a speakers' strike action. The 2016 conference title was, "Yoga Justice/Yoga Violence." The morning keynote speech was from Kimber Simpkins on why queer yoga is important, and the closing keynote address was from Roopa Kaushik-Brown, whose writing I have drawn on considerably in my discussions on the ways in which yoga has been colonized by a white commercial interest. Knowing that I had not been having much success thus far connecting with racialized yoga teachers and practitioners, I thought that I might be able to learn a lot from people who are engaging critically with yoga through similar intersectional feminist lenses as I have been. Out of 10 presenters, 9 were women, and of those presenters, 6 were racialized. One workshop, entitled, "Turning Inwards: The Science and Practice of Health and Healing" was unfortunately cancelled at the last minute. In findings chapter 7 "Yoga and Social Justice," I discuss the politics of race and yoga that I experienced not only as a participant at the conference, but also through the conference presentations.

The most useful thing about attending the conference was the connections I was able to make with the participants. I attended a popular Saturday morning yoga class in Berkeley before my lunchtime interview. This studio had a huge reception foyer with lots of the typical yoga gear for sale including fancy colourful yoga clothes, bolsters, incense, scarves, and books. I also spent valuable time analyzing our experience of the Race and Yoga Conference with friends LJ, Brynn, and Amy. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, LJ and I had originally connected when she came to Toronto to lead her yoga and social justice workshop in June 2015, and then we contin-

ued to be in touch regularly throughout the year via Facebook. Brynn and Amy were new friends, and we ended up spending all our time together at conference and that evening together, unpacking our experiences. Amy had to go home to Sacramento, but Brynn lived in Oakland and we reconvened on the Saturday evening to continue discussing the ways in which even the Modi government in India was co-opting yoga for its own nationalist purposes. These relationships were important aspects of my field research because they kept me connected to the yoga scene in ways that critically analyzed the dynamics of race. In Canada, racism is more covert than overt, and as such, there are less obvious discussions around race and yoga.

On the Sunday after the conference, I visited Viveka Yoga Berkeley that reminded me much of Kripalu Yoga Centre in the 1990s, housed in an ashram with a pink carpet and white walls. When I arrived at this space, the person working the front desk asked me how I had come to be there. I told the instructor of this class, a tall white man with a sonorous bass voice, that I had attended the Race and Yoga Conference, and afterwards, he gathered all ten or twelve of us into an impromptu circle and we got into a fast and passionate discussion about what the notion of race and yoga meant to them.

### **Teaching Yoga and Purusha Yoga and Fitness<sup>15</sup>**

Although I had been teaching at Purusha Yoga and Fitness (herein called Purusha) since early 2014, in this section, I will briefly describe the space in the context of some of my personal experiences teaching and volunteering there for the period during my fieldwork. Thematic analysis on the experiences will be worked into data results chapters. Nestled into a lower level space

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<sup>15</sup> The name of the studio and its teachers have been changed to protect anonymity.

in an upscale neighbourhood in Toronto's east end, Purusha was run by a single mother who had been widowed in the second year after opening the studio. I say "was," because at the end of the summer 2016, she had to close the studio due to the personal difficulties she had making the studio work without a paid manager or receptionist, or the time the studio required her to be there in order for it to be truly successful. This studio owner, who will be called Shelley, had no funds to pay for a receptionist, so instructors at the studio essentially volunteered to arrive at the studio up to a half hour before class began in order to let students in. Shelley might have liked to have the studio run as a collective, but there was no equity for instructors to gain, nor were they sufficiently paid in order to cover the time required for essential maintenance work. Instructors were asked to clean the studio floor, clean any dishes, props, mats, as well as the stairs leading down from street level into the studio and the back door. Instructors often found themselves purchasing toilet paper, facial tissue, and paper towel for the studio, and if they wanted to use candles for their class, they were responsible for bringing them in themselves.

Purusha had a small but devoted locally based clientele who loved their home studio. Clients' average age was higher than many studios, perhaps because it did not offer hot yoga, which younger clients tend to prefer. One teacher at the studio was an advanced level Iyengar instructor who taught two weekly day-time classes, and she attracted a regularly attending group from their fifties to late seventies, with numerous musculo-skeletal issues. Other teachers at the studio had far less teaching experience. One of these teachers who I will call Patricia, had only been teaching yoga for two or three years, but her classes were packed. She offered vigorous vinyasa-style yoga classes in which she shared uplifting, affirming messages with tropes of the

warrior and the lover, directed toward women in their role as care givers. Here is an example of one of her social media messages encouraging people to come to her classes:

“The only way to go wide in life is if we are willing to go deep. ~Marianne Williamson  
Deep into our yoga postures, deep into our yoga practice, deep into our own precious lives.  
We are worth the time and the exploration --  
Come dig deep with me” (Composite Facebook post May 2016)

Patricia’s posts on social media are highly effective in encouraging participants. In addition to the text, the messages in which Patricia tags her regular yoga clients, also include an attractive visual collage image of objects that Patricia thinks would inspire people, such as a *māla* bead necklace traditionally used in *jāpa*, also known as mantra chanting practice. This visual use of material objects signifies what I consider to be indicative of consumerism in yoga culture, but it facilitates the yoga teacher’s goal of self-promotion through social media, which is to inspire people to come to classes.

Not offering its own yoga teacher training program was possibly a large reason why this studio was unable to sustain itself, but it is also quite likely that the proximity of two other yoga studios and a pilates studio that offered yoga within two kilometres of Purusha also negatively affected its success. As a yoga instructor with limited knowledge of business spatial marketing, these are my personal speculations with which many other teachers in Purusha’s community anecdotally agreed. One of the aspects that I personally appreciated about teaching at Purusha was that Shelley trusted my skills and sixteen year background teaching yoga and doing shiatsu therapy immensely. Besides having insurance, she did not pressure me to have any so-called advanced teacher trainings, although in 2014 I did do a forty-hour Restorative Yoga Teacher Training, which resulted in my being able to create somewhat of a niche for myself at Purusha. For the

year of my fieldwork, the majority of the classes I taught there were Restorative Yoga. After I had completed the training, Shelley fulfilled my request that she obtain the proper amount of bolsters, blankets, straps, and blocks for me to effectively run restorative yoga classes at Purusha, which I did, until the studio closed in Summer 2016.

### **Representing Yoga in the Twenty-first Century**

The stories I tell of yoga in North America in the twenty-first century are examples of the ways in which practitioners and teachers are resisting what I am calling the yoga hegemony. As one of the presenters at the Race and Yoga Conference said, however, “Even a yoga that invokes a radical humanism has to be attentive to inequality.” This dissertation asks whether and how teachers like Patricia, who encourage her students to go deep inside to listen and show up for themselves, are really doing the more challenging work of fuelling the arc of social justice. The data from the participant observation sites, interviews, participatory action group, and social media conversations will demonstrate the ways in which yoga practitioners are pushing back against stereotypes of body perfectionism endemic in the yoga fitness world. Field notes and transcripts reveal a corporeal knowledge of neo-colonial racism, sexism and ableism in the yoga world. In this work, I am trying to unravel these problems in order to develop an empowered paradigm of yoga that moves beyond fitness and health, and toward a vision of inclusive equity that offers a renewed vision of yoga’s potential. The following chapter provides a materialist feminist theoretical framework for examining yoga in conjunction with social inequality.

## **Method for Coding and Analyzing Fieldwork Data**

While there are data coding programs available such as NVivo, I was advised by my supervisory committee to do manual coding of my transcriptions and my fieldnotes. They recommended that by listening to each interview and transcribing it myself, I could be more intimate with the data. As such, I transcribed each of the 27 interviews that I conducted, using transcription software called Express Scribe. This program permits the user to upload audio files and play them back at variable speeds while typing into the word processing document. Once each transcription was copied into a Word file, I then added the pseudonym of the research participant to an Excel sheet, printed out the transcription, and combed through each one looking for salient words that show up predominantly. These, I colour coded, with the encouragement of my committee.

Some predominant coding themes from first readings of the transcriptions include “race”, “embodiment”, “authenticity”, “healing”, “self-care”, “women”, “precarious”, and “cultural appropriation.” From these transcriptions, I developed a rather complicated mind map with “YOGA CULTURE” at the centre, and the emergent themes, “Race”, “Gender”, “Political Economy”, “Healthy Practice”, “Authenticity”, and “Accessibility” as outreaching concepts. From these themes, I developed chapters and organized them as they seemed to evolve from one another in relation to the theoretical material I examined. These themes reinforced my choice to work with materialist feminism as the appropriate theoretical framework for this dissertation. The themes work in conversation with each other to describe how, despite a discourse of equality and sisterhood, power relations between women yoga practitioners are complicated by their roles as studio owners, yoga teachers, and yoga students. The data indicates that many yoga teachers and practi-

tioners claim to want to do self-care and are doing care work, they struggle against barriers that a feminist ethics incorporating the *Yoga Sūtras* has the potential to remove.

## Chapter 4. “YOGA IS THIS, YOGA IS THAT”: CONTESTED AUTHENTICITIES

### Introduction

This chapter examines the gendered, raced, and classed tensions between the people who claim to be practicing traditional yoga, and those who believe that yoga is a dynamic system subject to change. The underscore of these negotiations happen amidst a backdrop of women who seem to hold the most power in the Toronto and online yoga communities through their sheer numbers. As I discussed in the Theory chapter, white Euro-North American women in the late nineteenth and through the twentieth century have sought to empower themselves through alternative spiritual and health practices (Crowley). I asked, why are there so many white women in yoga, and what kind of authority do they find in the spiritual? Who has the intellectual or cultural licence to determine what is authentic in yoga, and how do they earn it? The dominance of white women in the North American yoga world can be traced back to both the early twentieth-century women’s movement and the so-called second-wave of feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s. Early twentieth century histories of North American white upper-middle class women feature tropes of women as maternal caregivers and spiritual leaders in their homes and in philanthropic settings. These tropes, which drew on Hindu imagery of the Divine Mother, set the stage for women exploring non-Judeo-Christian spiritualities as a way to assert some authority and claim agency (Dixon). By the second half of the twentieth century, North American women began mobilizing to resist the medicalization of their lives and bodies (Ruzek; Morgen; MacDonald), and yoga tied together the strands of women’s claiming authority over their bodies as well as their spiritual selves. What form of yoga, however, did these networks regard as the authentic yoga,

and how did they deem them to be appropriate? Through my research, I have aimed to find non-hegemonic practitioners of yoga who have been attempting to practice in a way that honours yoga in the context of its Hindu roots. As it turned out through the process of my fieldwork, many people stepped forward who wanted to discuss the possibilities of what Be Scofield has termed on her website, “decolonizing yoga.”

It may be difficult to immediately link racism to the yoga world, and yet there is a connection to be made here. I will illustrate in this chapter the ways in which white women have historically occupied positions of spiritual authority in New Age communities and how North American culture consumes the exotic. Theories and histories of cultural consumption (Mehta; Appadurai;), representation (Clifford; Hall; hooks), and identity (Crowley; Tumber) support the stories and debates around cultural appropriation. My fieldwork demonstrates that white women who practice yoga in Toronto and in online yoga communities often feel offended by any suggestion from racialized people, or even white people, that they might be racist and get defensive. There is a generalized resistance to dialogue in this area, to say the least. Despite their claims of desiring unity, “love and light,” many Toronto and online yoga practitioners would rather shut down difficult discussions that challenge white supremacy, class, and gender norms. Before launching into a fieldwork story of yoga drama on social media, I offer first some scholarship on whiteness and cultural appropriation in the context of contemporary yoga in North America.

### **Theorizing White Women in Yoga, and Eating the Other**

Recalling Angela Y. Davis’ explanation that the roots of white supremacy were meant to uphold the power of white plantation owners and rationalize the brutality against enslaved

blacks, we can then start to thread together the ways in which historically, white women fit into this patchwork of oppression, and how that history touches the yoga communities I am studying here. My fieldwork demonstrates that many yoga participants would rather avoid discussing anything remotely political in nature, preferring to keep the scope of their conversations to logistics about teaching āsana, biomechanics, yoga gear, or promoting their classes. The few yoga participants who are not afraid to call out inequalities and inauthentic practices they experience in the yoga world, find themselves either at the loss of a teaching job, or worse, a social pariah from the community. bell hooks explains that black women have long felt that the second wave of feminism did not speak for them, and points out that white women made the mistake of trying to emulate the white men in power, rather than attempting to usurp the white supremacy and sexism that holds all women down (*Feminist Theory* 85-86). We can layer these ideas with what I discussed earlier of Enoch Page's theorization of the ruination of yoga, which, according to Page, was the result of colonial British rule in India.

In order not to offend Christians who would disapprove of the radical yogi sādhus, the British colonial government regulated yoga as a physical practice for health rather than link it to Hinduism. When Vivekenanda started offering his version of *raja yoga* to Americans in 1893, he made many attempts to draw comparisons between Hindu and Christian teachings in order to create unity rather than division (deMichelis; Strauss) We see this similar tendency through what Andrea Jain calls “yogaphobia,” through which Christian people may approve of yoga for its benefits of creating disciplined citizens, but fears its Hindu origins as threatening to their Christian faith. As such, much mainstream yoga today is practiced by people who do not care whether their practice or their approach to yoga is authentic or rooted in traditional texts at all. Many

white women, as the Facebook group, Yoga and Movement Research Community proves, simply desire a yoga that they can call theirs, and claim that if it feels authentic to them personally, then it is yoga.

This whitewashing of yoga has progressed into the twenty-first century, as Benjamin Lorr points out in his memoir, *Hell-Bent: Obsession, Pain, and the Search For Something Like Transcendence in Competitive Yoga*. In his discussion of the *Kātha Upanishad* and Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* as the base of traditional yoga knowledge and the guidebook for cultivating the actualized self through control of the mind, he explains that the minimalist details in the *Kātha* lend themselves to uncertainty and multiple interpretations and misunderstandings (54). These interpretations leave much space for yoga practitioners' confusion and reinvention. As Angela Jamison observed in a yoga teacher training in Los Angeles back in 2001, the evolution of yoga in the West has become one in which practitioners feel an entitlement to say that yoga is whatever they want it to be, which invites accusations of cultural appropriation. I would extend her note to add the important critical point that it is neoliberal ideologies of individualism that has encouraged yoga practitioners to feel that they have "a right to say what was right for *her*; she did not have a right to say what it is for someone else" (169).

This broad sweeping generalized term, "cultural appropriation," deserves more attention, however. Cultural appropriation is a form of "shallow learning" (Haig-Brown 927), in which outsiders, usually but not always white people, capitalize on the cultural objects, teachings, or traditions of another group, which is usually colonized, non-dominant, or otherwise subjugated. Mary Grace Antony points out that because of globalization, cultural appropriation is ubiquitous in nearly every arena of social life, from music to fashion, art, and food (285), and that contem-

porary yoga instructors are adding their own work to the list as they are often pressured to teach without maintaining a connection to yoga's Hindu lineage. While these contexts might seem innocuous at first and positioned as cultural appreciation, Deborah Root explains that cultural appropriation is anything but innocuous because of the inherent power imbalances that obfuscate social inequality and histories of colonialism. Root refers to many white people's claim of cultural appreciation as an "alibi of cannibalism" (18) that capitalizes on commodity culture, and a sentiment we see first forwarded by bell hooks in her essay, "Eating the Other." For hooks, the "Other" is an exotic flavour to spice up mainstream white culture while reifying and exploiting the ideological primitiveness about the Other. This exploitation, according to hooks, "re-inscribes and maintains the status quo" of inequality and white supremacy (22) Root explains that for the use of images and aesthetic practices, this status quo is dependent on "explicit sets of power relations" that historically, colonizers have harvested at their whim (19).

As Jonathan Hart explains, cultural appropriation's role in imperialism and colonialism is deeply imbricated in the ways of "making someone else's culture into property" (137). Hart's cultural and historical background to the debates on cultural appropriation help to understand the complexities. For example, cultural exchange is innocuous enough, but we must consider questions of who can represent whom, and the power politics inherent in these relations (139).

In Chapter 2, "Materialist Feminist Theories for Yoga," I drew on Manigault-Bryant, whose auto-ethnographic research on Kripalu Yoga Center demonstrates this phenomenon as he experienced it as the only black man in his yoga teacher training. It is worth sharing the entirety of one of his passages in which he describes his initial aversion to being in conventional yoga spaces such as the one where I did my yoga teacher training:

I found myself in a sea of middle class, white women who seemed to claim studios as their own special cultural spaces of millennial feminism for expressing emotional vulnerability, releasing stress, and, of course, showing off the strength and power of their bodies through āsanās and expensive athletic wear (40).

This cringe-worthy point should be read by all white women who occupy these spaces so that they can have some clue of the racial exclusion that so many people of colour experience in these spaces. Manigault-Bryant was able to use the instruction from the teacher training program to create a focused, personal practice and surmount the socially isolating distraction of what Brené Brown refers to as the “lonely feeling.” Manigault-Bryant had to overcome the discomfort of being the only black yoga student in the room, which was compounded by his gender. The legacy of white supremacy’s rules of horrible punishments for miscegenation or rape is painfully written on the black male body. The yoga that Manigault-Bryant experienced was one that Kripalu yoga teachers invited him to create for himself, and his experience was literally coloured by his black subjectivity through which he examined racial fetishization and professionalization in both academic and yoga spaces (42).

Manigault-Bryant’s work is informed by bell hooks’ observations in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, which is that black people live with hundreds of years of oppression, which subjugates their own ways of looking at themselves. Through hooks’ notion of the commodification of difference, the exotic other becomes the desired and attainable object that white people have the privilege of consuming, and that black people often desire because of their own internalized racism. Yoga, the kind of internal practice that engages in *Svādhyāya*, known as the practice of self-inquiry, can be a vehicle for refuting that as Manigault-Bryant does. Alternately, like many other fetishized commodities, yoga can feed right into what bell hooks calls the “eating of

the other,” the consumption of a spiritual practice in order to acquire social capital. As I will later illustrate through the stories of some of the participants of yoga who think through these problems, many cultivate a deeply personal yoga practice to extricate themselves from being consumed by the other, and from racialized microaggressions and violence.

Gita Mehta’s 1980 razor-sharp satire peppered with personal narrative, *Karma Cola*, critiques the phenomena of British, European and North American tourists consuming India for its promise of spiritual enlightenment and exotic carpets, a trend that began in the 1960s, but has its roots in Orientalism. *Karma Cola* illustrates the variety of ways in which Westerners have misappropriated the word “karma,” and articulates her frustration with the shallow consumption and digestion of her culture. While Mehta wrote *Karma Cola* nearly two decades before Bhabha, she also enacts “sly civility,” Homi Bhabha’s term that represents the “political moment of cultural difference that emerges within the problematic of colonial governmentality” (134) as a result of ambivalence toward British rule in India. Bhabha articulates the “righteousness” of British government with their embarrassing misreading of the subjectivities of the Indian sub-continent, which threatened the authority of colonial rule with subtle forms of native resistance (135-6; 141). Mehta’s *Karma Cola* serves as a subaltern voice talking back to Westerners who think they can purchase India and its spiritual and cultural heritage.

As I will demonstrate in the fieldwork stories, many yoga practitioners in North America participate in a similar eating of the other. The most important concern of this consumption is that many people believe that a practice such as yoga should not be commoditized. As Edward Said explains in *Culture and Imperialism*, subjugated national groups will often engage in a strategic essentialism in order to strengthen their nationalist-infused identities as a way of push-

ing back against imperialist rule. Benedict Anderson later called it, “imagined community.” This imagined community is problematic, however, because people’s material lives are not always helped by public projects of identity. The postmodern school of thought turns away from the risks of essentialism and toward the notion of a cultural pluralism that fuses diverse, marginalized voices.

John Storey’s description of postmodernism and cultural identity is helpful for understanding that when we hold an ethnic group to specific tradition or practice, we instil it into a static position of “unfolding without change” (135). In the debates about authenticity and white women in the yoga world, we come up against postmodernist thinking that articulates identities as multiple and dynamic, but are also informed by our cultural consumption. What does this mean in the contemporary yoga world? It is that the possibility is opened for us to think through yoga philosophy in a similar manner, and we can consider Stuart Hall’s theories of cultural relativism and hybridity, such that we practice a politics of difference. According to Chris Rojek, cultural relativism reflects the penetration of globalization into local conditions (191). While some construe this as another problematic result of neoliberalism and the deregulation of markets, Rojek explains that Hall sees cultural relativism as the opportunity for diversity and cultural hybridity. As Rojek explains, “Hall’s politics favours widening access, exercising compassion, and encouraging collaboration and achieving social inclusion” (193). Theorizing Western consumption and practice of yoga through Stuart Hall invites us to soften our demand for tradition, while also leaving space for authentic dialogue through difference.

I am attempting to carefully, and in a nuanced way, articulate the freedom that postmodernist and post-colonialist theories can offer us within a historical materialist feminist frame-

work. Catherine Tumber traces the birth of New Age spirituality through the turn-of-the twentieth century feminism, which drew heavily on theosophy and orientalist cultural syncretism that upper middle class white women practiced in the late nineteenth century. Her book offers some historical explanation as to how North American and British women came to be attracted to and empowered by New Age spirituality. Read together with Karlyn Crowley's *Feminism's New Age*, which focuses on the twentieth century evolution of white middle class women spearheading the New Age movement, we can get a brief genealogy of the missing links that explain how they came to dominate yoga spaces. As I stated in Chapter 1, Vivekenanda, who came to the Chicago World Fair in 1893, is a central figure in the historiography of how yoga came to be popular in the West.

One of those links is through Feminine Bohemianism, the nineteenth century French sub-culture of sexual freedom and social equality after which upper class white women in Boston and New York attempted to model themselves. According to Tumber, this feminine bohemianism story begins in 1873 with Madame Blavatsky, the dramatic queen of theosophy, transcendentalism, and a gypsy lifestyle (142). Blavatsky was also an avid student of Swami Vivekenanda, and wrote extensively on his teachings about mesmerism spiritualism (de Michelis 162-63). Blavatsky's commitment to "cultural inversion" (Tumber 143) made the familiar unfamiliar, and called into question normalized ideals of femininity. Interestingly, Tumber articulates the phenomenon of journalists being more interested in sensationalizing Madame Blavatsky's exotically decorated living quarters and clothes than her theosophical classes, which points to the importance of self-promotion and commoditization in the New Age world as it evolved in the twentieth century. This self-promotion is a necessary hallmark of yoga culture in North America, as my

Toronto and online fieldwork demonstrate. Like transcendentalism as a marginal religion entering the public religious field and popular philosophy schools (Crowley 13), the feminization of religion that drew on outside cultures points directly at upper middle class white women's domination of the contemporary yoga world. Interestingly, Elisabeth de Michelis points out that Madame Blavatsky and other female disciples of Swami Vivekenanda such as Laura Glenn, also known as Sister Devamata, were part of the beginning of a spiritual pilgrimage tradition that foresaw the "hippy trail" to India (118). A century later at the height of this hippy trail, Gita Mehta, found herself more than frustrated by this phenomenon of white travellers in search of spiritual fulfilment, and *Karma Cola* offers an insightful, if not cutting, insider response to their entitled and ignorant mistakes in India.

Drawing on this genealogy of white women in yoga, what we have now in the contemporary yoga scenes in North America is the cultural consumption of Hinduism. But that is the predicament of culture, says James Clifford, arguing that no singular cultural expression or tradition ought to remain the same as it ever was because to do so is to postulate a yoga essentialism. Instead, Clifford, following Said's *Orientalism*, says that there is no "pure scholarship" (Clifford, "On Orientalism"), particularly when the colonized peoples speak back to the West and challenge its understandings of what those teachings are. Askegaard and Eckhardt consider what they call the "re-appropriation" of yoga by Indians, as an uptake process through which they consume yoga after the West has sanctioned it as a health practice (46). Thus, the Western, white, and neoliberal forms of yoga for individual health rather than spiritual growth have transformed yoga from being a spiritual and practice rooted in the ancient tradition of the Vedas and Upanishads, to one that is pragmatic for Western lifestyles and commoditized for maximum sales potential in a

neoliberal, globalized society (48). Colonial history points to Orientalism as a mode of power over the colonized subject (Bhabha 100), and as white yoga practitioners demonstrate through their claims of making yoga what they need it to be, they are often unconsciously reproducing these same unequal power relations.<sup>16</sup>

For contemporary Indians practicing yoga, their national identity is also bolstered by current Prime Minister Modi, whose annual National Yoga Day celebrations on June 21 valorize Hinduism while simultaneously subjugating Muslim identities, as Anusha Kedhar has shown. Kedhar describes International Yoga Day as an anti-colonial re-claiming of yoga, but argues that Modi's positioning of yoga as universal disguises intolerance toward Islam. As she explained in her presentation at the Race and Yoga Conference at Mills College in Oakland in April 2016, the "Hindu commonality irons out diversity... while privileging national conformity."

Askegaard and Eckhardt point out that as yoga becomes increasingly more popular, middle class Indians interpret it in specific ways that suit their needs. Some of these ways that Indians find benefit from yoga is not dissimilar to Westerners. In particular, many middle class Indians find that, as in the West, yoga's function as a stress reducer is important for their work and home lives, "...which underlines the double value of yoga as an enabling technique for the employee and as a productivity-driving force for the employer" (50). Schnäeble echoes this sentiment in her article, "The Useful Body: The Yogic Answer to Appearance Management in the

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<sup>16</sup> Homi Bhabha's discussion on essentialism, Said, and Orientalism gives insight into whiteness as an interlocutor with modernity and with power, in which he critiques Said's elision of the "unconscious pole of colonial discourse" (104). While modernist Orientalism specifically speaks to European colonial representations, stereotypes and racial fetish, this colonial discourse is also historically relevant to North America. The outcomes of course, were different, because rather than attempt to know an indigenous group and to conquer its lands and peoples through knowledge and control, eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth-century settlers to North America instead sought to vanquish indigeneity through rendering it not only savage, but also invisible and eventually vanished in service of Canada's civilizing mission to facilitate resource extraction.

Post-Fordist Workplace,” in which she argues that the employer comes to expect that employees are practicing forms of self-care such as yoga in order to increase productivity. The employee as a kind of cyclical response to the neoliberalism, feeds into the employer’s expectations of individualized self-care that compensates for care that the structures of work and society do not provide. Askegaard and Eckhardt also explain that as the U.S. popularizes yoga, Indians are impressed by its overseas appeal. What is particularly interesting for the focus of this chapter is Askegaard and Eckhardt’s valuable insight that many Indians actually feel freed up by the lax attention that Westerners give to tradition (52). In other words, because Westerners tend to care little about Hindu connections to yoga and more about yoga’s physical benefits, Indians give themselves permission to distance themselves from what for many, is their grandmothers’ yoga. They want a practice that is easy to relate to and comfortably packaged, and some of Askegaard and Eckhardt’s respondents explain that is their desire. On the other hand, others do express concern that Westerners derive benefit from yoga and as they re-package it to Indians, they do not contribute to its development (53). This would, in my understanding, equate to the Western colonization of yoga, and as one of Askegaard and Eckhardt’s interviewees said, “Some gurus are coming from America to teach yoga in India. We must resist it” (53).

In an attempt to engage a decolonizing theory toward yoga, I would like to briefly return to Said’s framework for describing “Orientalism.” In this section, I substitute here the words “East/orient,” “oriental,” and “orientalist” with “West,” “yoga,” and “yoga practitioner/teacher.” First, the “yoga practitioner/teacher,” then, is anyone who researches, writes about, or teaches yoga. Second, the yoga teacher often makes specific distinction between “East” and West, romanticizing the East as a consumable other about which they can say or write as they please, and

determine what is or is not authentic. Last, “yoga” becomes an institution that the practitioner/teacher dominates and regulates. In his essay on Said in *The Predicament of Culture*, anthropologist James Clifford critiques Said’s theorizing by pointing out that Said himself reproduces the dichotomizing tendencies that Orientalism does in its control of oriental knowledge (261). So what do we do with this framework, then, when to consider “East” and “West” reproduces the binary discourses from under which feminist theory attempts to disentangle itself? Perhaps the answer might be found in yoga itself, through the teachings of non-dualism.

While a study of non-dualism is most certainly beyond the scope of this dissertation, it would be useful to engage briefly with this concept as a function of working with a truly authentic decolonizing framework. As such, in order to examine how contemporary yoga communities unwittingly reproduce the dichotomous patterns of male-female and East-West, we can draw on ancient yoga philosophy texts such as the Upanishads for teachings on non-dualism. Non-dualism is the philosophy that informs Vedānta, which, while I risk over-simplifying these teachings here, Georg Feuerstein explains is personal liberation through the realization of the purity of the self and recognition of cycles of suffering and pleasure (173-174). Michael Stone (*Inner Tradition of Yoga*) explains that we can experience non-dualism in an every day yoga practice through a letting go of our sense of separateness from each other, our habits, preferences, and the earth itself (137-138). Non-dualism teaches us that once we understand that we are actually one with the universe, then we are free from suffering from cycles of aversion and attraction. Thus, by engaging directly with a core teaching of yoga philosophy, we can see for ourselves how our own sense of separateness from each other can reinforce difference and social inequality. In Chapter 7, I explore this ethos further, but in this chapter, I suggest that when we become fixated on dual-

istic thinking patterns, we risk mirroring ourselves in separateness and reproducing the sense of “other.” Non-dualism teaches that as long as we hold the other as separate from ourselves, we remain stuck in the cycles of suffering and lack of self-knowledge.

In *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*, Stephen Cope explains that at its core, yoga is meant to help seekers know themselves more fully and authentically. I use Clifford to analyze Cope, who follows a privileged humanist discourse of Western liberalism to speak to universalist values of the pursuit of happiness, love, good work, and death after a life of fulfilment (263). Cope offers no discussion of power or race or gender, but articulates the ways in which a community formed itself in good intentions of truthfulness and authentic practice centred within the framework of classical *rāja* yoga, only to find itself vulnerable to interpretations and misinterpretations of those meanings while unquestioningly following the Indian guru Amrit Desai. After Desai’s transgressions against his own versions of traditional yoga practices of sexual restraint became widely known, the Kripalu community had to ask itself deep questions about its direction as a centre for personal and spiritual transformation, and more importantly, if what they had been doing all those years was not, in fact authentically real, then what was the yoga that they were doing? Cope’s discoveries in his more than ten years of living at Kripalu reveal that yoga is “being feminized, democratized, and brought into relationship with contemporary medicine, Western psychology, and with Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism” (xv). In other words, yoga according to Cope, and later echoed by scholars such as Mark Singleton and also Elizabeth de Michelis, is a dynamic practice that is both an ancient Indian science, and a modern composite of diverse traditions that reflect the multiple subjectivities of its practitioners. Cope’s assertion, then,

and that of Kripalu Yoga Center's mission statement, opens us to the potential that yoga is whatever we can make of it.

### **Talking About Flexibility and Spirituality**

The following interview segments exemplify the tension between some people's need to be flexible with yoga and how they practice it, and more orthodox approaches. Cathy is a young mother and new yoga teacher living in Winnipeg who says that her yoga is connected with her happiness, and she fits in a pose here and there whenever she is able:

I don't have a regular practice right now; and for the longest time I was very guilty of that; I wasn't practising every single day. I was feeling like letting myself down - how can I be a teacher and not practising what I preach. But I realize those thoughts were just holding me back. That's not yoga; it's being happy, feeling balance, being positive and being the best that I can be. If I can't practise every day right now I don't have to feel guilty. I do stretches while my son is playing with cars. I do backbends while I'm waiting for something to cook in the microwave (Cathy, Winnipeg).

In a contrasting interview, we turn to LJ, a yoga teacher living in Albuquerque, New Mexico who has been a member of an Advaita Vedānta community for over two decades. In Chapter 2, I introduced LJ as Diane Bruni's challenger who questioned whether it is appropriate to change what yoga is according to one's own needs. Despite the physical geographic distance between LJ and Diane, through Facebook, LJ was able to clearly lay her position as opposing Diane's. LJ argues that yoga is a bigger commitment that demands deeper and more sophisticated inquiry than the approach that yoga practitioners and teachers like Cathy are currently taking:

I'm part of a tradition in which the desire to be liberated has to be translated into the desire to know.... There's a lot of preparation involved for the mind to embark on the kind of epistemological analysis and the kind of sphere of knowledge. And so the way in which I work in my classes is to bring a certain kind of critical inquiry into how one approaches the practice. It's one thing to do downward dog and another to say, what exactly, where is my

scapula? Do I know what my scapula is doing? There's something about knowing, something about not being blind to yourself, something to having a certain kind of clarity about the gross form and then becoming more and more subtle with that clarity (LJ via Skype).

LJ's emphasis on the importance of learning the traditional roots of yoga brings Karen Crowley's analysis back into view. Crowley points out that while white women are often blamed for "having ruined religion and culture" in America and often perpetuate the worst gender ideologies, "New Age practices may be a vehicle for identity formation and spiritual power; that is, they are a strengthening, not a weakening agent" that offers white women "certain kinds of authority" (25). Enoch Page, however, reminds us that what he calls the ruination of yoga happened first through British colonial rule, and not because of women. Cathy's quote above illustrates Page's sentiment that some white women limit their study of yoga to āsana and breathing practices rather than the spiritual study of yoga. Some yoga practitioners in the study choose what they find useful from yoga and other non-Judeo-Christian spiritual frameworks such as Buddhism, and leave the rest as unnecessary. Other practitioners on the other end of the spectrum, argue that to ignore the philosophical roots of yoga is to undermine the tradition or worse, is what Rajiv Malhotra calls "Hinduphobia." LJ herself has used this term to articulate the fearful resistance to traditional yoga philosophy that many mainstream Western yoga practitioners have. LJ points out that many are afraid that following or engaging in the traditional teachings of yoga would threaten their Christian orientation. Malhotra calls for productive dialogue so that rather than allowing Westerners to digest and absorb Indian culture, which reduces difference, the so-called dialogue between East and West honours difference and reduces Euro-centrism (36-37).

### **“It’s all just noise and distraction”**

How do we know that the yoga we are studying is authentic in a diverse climate of hybridity and transnational cultural exchange? As mentioned earlier, this chapter attempts to draw out the debates around authenticity amidst the often competing voices of authority in the North American yoga world. As Elizabeth de Michelis, a leading expert in tracing the history of yoga’s development in the West over the past two hundred years explains, yoga is part of a dialogue between “three great religious traditions: Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism” (17). As *Yoga Sūtras* translator Shyam Ranganathan points out, Jainism is older than the *Yoga Sūtras*, and therefore he concludes that its key text, the *Mahāvratas* would have influenced Patañjali significantly. More important is to note that Jainism and Yoga have one very important central aim, which is liberation (56). According to Ritesh, the Toronto-based naturopath, Ayurvedic practitioner, and meditation teacher I interviewed, “yoga is this, yoga is that; it’s all debatable.”

Ritesh and I had dinner together at the unassuming vegetarian restaurant Udipi Palace, in one of Toronto’s Indian neighbourhoods with LJ back in the summer of 2015. LJ and Ritesh hotly debated the differences between aspects of self knowledge according to *Advaita Vedānta*, the non-dualist spiritual philosophy that is the framework for Hinduism and classical yoga. I knew that much about yoga, and had a basic understanding of Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* and a handful of Sanskrit phrases and terms, but their conversation left me wondering about my own authenticity as a yoga instructor. By the time Ritesh and I met again for an individual interview in March 2016, I had an idea of how he would position himself with regards to mainstream yoga. Most of the discussion that night centred around obscure Vedānta concepts of different kinds of knowing of the self that were unfamiliar to me, and highlighted how limited mainstream yoga education

is. While important, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to go into the realm of detail into the Upanishadic texts.

As the interview data demonstrates, however, not even de Michelis' definition of yoga's origins is considered definitively true, as many consider that the word Hinduism itself is a western co-optation of the *Sanātana Dharma* philosophy that many practitioners of Vedānta follow. Further, some yoga practitioners who participated in this study emphatically claim that their yoga is authentic, despite rarely engaging with core texts considered by others as integral to the study of yoga, such as Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* or the Upanishads. Through an intersectional exploration of these discussions through the complexities of race, class, and gender, the following section of this chapter will tell the stories of North American yoga practitioners in urban centres and show how they negotiate these tensions. I will unfold the story that tells of the arguments between prominent yoga teachers, and examine the ways in which other yoga practitioners interpret and experience these debates. The stories of the yoga practitioners and teachers with whom I spoke about how they understand yoga and their specific vision of it illustrate the cultural shifts that have not only made us re-think what yoga is, but who has the authority to teach and practice. We can also consider further the authority of the so-called expert, who claims the right to be a teacher, and who is the student.

### **“What makes yoga, yoga?” On White Fragility and Cultural Appropriation**

Diane Bruni led a very controversial yoga class on May 15, 2016, in which she explored movement that many questioned as not being yoga at all. It was held at Toronto's Artspace multidisciplinary studios, and was one of Diane's first public classes after shutting down her studio

in September 2015. Drawing on her former student base through the then-local Facebook community of the Yoga and Movement Learning Group (YMLG)<sup>17</sup> as a way of encouraging people to attend, Diane was delighted to discover that she had no difficulties getting people to come experiment with her new discoveries in movement. Diane tagged me in a Facebook post that excitedly shared that there were twenty-two participants; she played music for the first time ever in a class; they danced, and all of them were women. Anna, whose story about accessibility and yoga I tell in Chapter 7 was there that night. In her interview with me a couple of weeks after the event, she told me that all the participants were white. This post was the catalyst for a storm that raised debates of white fragility and privilege and cultural appropriation. The following segment of that Facebook post is Diane's brief description of the evening:

We started in a circle a very tight circle we were standing arm to arm pressing into each other and growing taller. Then we opened the circle up and I stood in the middle guiding the group through movements, on the spot, no mat. Like Tai Chi, like Qi Gong, like axis syllabus, like functional fitness, like yoga. I'm thinking of calling the class YogaMotion... what do you think of the name? Any other ideas? (Facebook post, May 16, 2016)

Enter into the Facebook discussion thread LJ, who often calls herself a “yoga troll.” She responded to the post in a comment thread with what I interpret as a polite question, “Is this yoga? Unless someone can say what specifically this has to do with yoga, I would ask that you don't use yoga in the title... just a thought??” LJ went on to explain how she understands classical yoga, articulating it with her studies in Vedānta, and challenged participants to describe their understanding:

There are many meanings to the word. So we need to arrive at something more than a one word translation that is used so commonly, but to the best of my knowledge does not

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<sup>17</sup> I say “then-local” because now there are over 25,000 members in this group. The name has been changed to protect anonymity.

appear in any main scripture on the topic. Yoga is a *mōksa sādhana*, a means for self-liberation. This self is not to be confused with the body/mind/sense complex, because that confusion is the problem. Yoga is the means to remove *avidya*, self-ignorance. What part of this class is removing the self-ignorance regarding your current conclusions of self, god and the world? What's your definition?

As a response, one of these participants, who I will call “Beatrice”, enthused about her experience of the session:

Everyone was moving together in unison... no cueing by the teacher... we all moved with her... as one. It was quiet, meditative, focused, creative, relevant. We exercised our minds and our bodies... When the teacher spoke, it was about ideas that were relevant to our experience. She incorporated soulful music and poetry... By 1/3 way through the class, egos dropped away and all sorts of things evolved... laughter, singing, dancing, sounding, pressing together with an overwhelming sense of ease and relaxation. We left tingling, giggling, with a sense of deep connection to one another and everything. I felt so happy afterwards.. not about anything in particular... just happy. There was communication afterwards between us. This is how we all felt. It was not classical yoga... It was contemporary, feminist evolutionary yoga. It was relevant to our experience of being human beings who are alive here and now creating a form of yoga that speaks to the needs of the bodies we live in. It pays no homage to a guru. It lives, it breathes, here, now and through it, patterns, relationships, connections were formed. It was one big yoga fest. It was yoga.

In that moment on social media, Beatrice effectively and poetically redefined what yoga is to her, based on her personal understanding and from her subjective experience.

Beatrice is a Toronto-based lifelong yoga practitioner and studio owner who has seen the community here move through many transformations. While she does admit that the practice was not traditional, Beatrice’s reference to a “feminist evolutionary yoga” elides different identities in her post, and draws on the “all one” discourse popular in Western interpretation of New Age understandings of non-dualism. While all the people in attendance that evening were white women, Beatrice’s post in the discussion thread neglects to acknowledge any of the material differences that bodies that identify with intersecting oppressions experience. In subsequent comments in the

feed, Beatrice defends Diane's right to make yoga her own. Anna chimed in with her reflections of her experience of the class:

I'm participating in this class because it's not the typical yoga to be found in the studio setting. I'm participating because I want a space to experiment and breathe new life into my practice and teaching. I'm taking this class because of Diane's statement last night: "I don't want to teach people poses. I want to teach people how to move." I don't really care what it's called. Maybe it's not yoga anymore. I honestly don't know.

The movement class, then, is no longer even about classical yoga. Anna does not share the same commitment to the *Sanātana Dharma* that LJ or Ritesh do; she and other women who are interested in what Diane offered are merely looking for an experience that expands their sense of body and sense of self. The discussion thread continued and eventually, moved into an argument that page moderators eventually removed so it is lost forever. Before the discussion was deleted from Facebook, however, LJ was able to offer her insights further, which are influenced in part by Rajiv Malhotra's digestion theory of "Hinduphobia." LJ acknowledges her acceptance of a variety of approaches to āsana, whether it be stylistic or bio-mechanical, but calls out the lack of connection to traditional yoga and lack of justification in calling the class yoga:

...what I am opposed to is this being done as either a replacement to yoga, or as one of my comments from the thread said, the goal of yoga was nowhere in view... a total lack of understanding of what yoga is from its own standpoint, thereby making any re-imagination of āsana, almost entirely out of the purview of yoga... it's not that one cannot bring functional movement or biomechanical approaches, especially since that is what I have always done in my own practice... it is that this is a much larger issue of abduction/dismissal/digestion of western science. Diane is not using western science to understand yoga; she is using it to debunk yoga. She has no interest really in yoga, which is why I said, if she were being honest, she would realize she is actually averse to yoga...

Diane admitted to me in an interview earlier in 2016 that she had no active meditation or yoga scripture reading practice, and LJ articulates Diane's personal yoga injury narrative with her disengagement with the totality of yoga.

A week after the maelstrom of debates, commenters on the Yoga and Movement Research Community Facebook page then struck up a debate about whether it was right for Diane to shut down the argument. One anonymous commenter poignantly said,

It is very worrisome to me for us to silence and literally erase dissenting voices, particularly if those voices are of people of color. I didn't see the original thread, and now, because it has been deleted, I can't form my own opinion about it. Doesn't this just perpetuate existing systems of power? We as white people have a long history of shutting down difficult conversations, particularly when we find ourselves implicated in them. The conversation about race, privilege and appropriation is inherently an uncomfortable one, and we must increase our capacity to be with this discomfort if we are to make any forward progress around racial justice. I believe that we can do better!<sup>18</sup>

This commenter appears to be willing to have the difficult discussions around race, whiteness and power as they articulate with yoga and authenticity, but many others prefer to just continue with a purely physical practice rather than delve into the political realm of getting close to the challenges. Of course this does nothing to forward the cause of ending social inequality.

My colleague Amara Miller in sociology at University of California, whose work intersects with mine with regards to race, consumerism, and the political economy of yoga, wrote a lengthy blog in response to the raging debates that emerged.<sup>19</sup> In her discussion, Miller points out that white privilege and white fragility are at the heart of the conflict that influenced discussion thread participants to verbally abuse LJ, who was an active critical commenter, and then cause Diane to remove the entire post from Facebook. In her blog, Miller cites a post from American

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<sup>18</sup> facebook group identifier withheld for anonymity.

<sup>19</sup> <https://amaramillerblog.wordpress.com/2016/05/24/white-fragility-in-yoga-privilege-power-and-posts/>

mid-west Lutheran ministry candidate, Ellie Dowd, who writes, “White people like to think of ourselves as Nice.”<sup>20</sup> The real work of anti-racist and anti-oppression education, however, is not always nice. Sometimes, as Hess points out, anti-racism education and activism is difficult, but it is absolutely not nice to just pretend racism does not exist. As we see in my fieldwork findings and in anti-racist feminist scholarship, no one wants to think of themselves as racist (Srivastava), especially women who consider themselves as feminists. In her blog, Miller writes with sadness that Diane’s deleting the discussion thread on the post about her all-women movement class shut down the useful dialogue and forced people to silence themselves for fear of being attacked on either side of the debates. This silencing does not bring us closer to truth, unfortunately. Instead, shutting down conversations about authenticity and race in the yoga world effectively allows for the problematic aspects of yoga to continue. Miller furthers her analysis of the situation by suggesting that what was happening was a perfect example of what Robin DiAngelo calls “white fragility,” the definition of which is worth quoting in full here:

...a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium (54).

Mary E. Hess offers some possible solutions for dealing with “white fragility.” As a Christian educator, her approach draws on mystical traditions that bear striking resemblance to yoga philosophy, and follows the teachings of activist and criminal justice lawyer Bryan Stevenson. Hess explains Stevenson’s fourfold transformational method for dealing with racism: “getting proximate to the challenge, changing the narratives, finding where your own hope lies, and

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<sup>20</sup> <http://formerlyunchurched.com/white-niceness-as-the-enemy-of-black-liberation/>

embracing discomfort” (Stevenson quoted in Hess 46). In keeping with my intention to work with a decolonizing framework of yoga and stay in integrity with the tradition from which yoga has evolved (Sharma 100), I find it particularly interesting to see how these four methods articulate with yoga. I wish to explore two of these briefly here. The first is getting proximate to the challenge. In Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*, the *niyama* known as *svādhyāya*, or self-study, is an accurate way of getting proximate to the challenge. In *Core of the Yoga Sūtras*, B.K.S. Iyengar points out that this work is not easy, and one cannot overcome the challenges of moving through our own ignorance of the self without doing this deep internal inquiry (114-116). “Getting proximate,” according to Hess, means coming to a place of awareness of inequality, of suffering, and of our own history within the system of oppression (47). It is impossible to examine our stories without self-study. The other practice that relates to yoga study and for transforming white fragility is to “embrace the discomfort” (53), as Hess describes. Embracing the discomfort is akin to the *niyāma*, *tapas*, which is popularly translated in yoga classes as “heat,” or in a variety of texts as “penance, or austerities” (Ranganathan 319), “determined effort” (Iyengar 113), or “aceticism,” (Feuerstein 1998).

All of these qualities represent the difficult work required to transform white fragility and white resistance to racial stress. Hess claims that in spite of the often painful experiences that arise through this work, it can be very rewarding with regards to relationship. To link this again to yoga philosophy, to *ishwara pranidhana* the connection to the divine within each of us. If we bear in mind that Hess is working with a Christian mystic framework not so unlike yoga according to Swami Vivekenanda’s claims back in 1893, then we can find value in Hess’ claim that em-

bracing the discomfort of doing the difficult work of transforming racial inequality will offer us the “moment in which we let go of the ego-self...” (54).

In her blog, Miller asks important questions about authenticity and yoga that suggest that letting go of a singular notion of authenticity is central to moving through the racial tension that emerged from the disputes about Diane’s class being eligible for the title of yoga or not.

How do we make the practice relevant and meaningful to us, in other words, make it uniquely “ours,” authentically “ours,” while still remaining true to the heart of the practice? How can we modify the practice to be more just, equitable, and modern even as we acknowledge and honor the roots of the tradition of yoga?

As we have now seen from my illustration of the debates around what makes yoga yoga, we see that we can have the opportunity to do real social justice work around authenticity, yoga, and spiritual practice. Amara Miller and I agree about another *Yoga Sūtra* concept that is relevant to these debates, which is the *yāma* known as *ahimsa*. Translated as non-harm or non-violence, *ahimsa* is the first of the *yāmas*, and the term is applied broadly to all kinds of situations in which we want to avoid causing pain to ourselves or to any other being, whether it is the environment, another human, or an animal. The people – mostly women, I might add – who weighed in on the Facebook discussion thread were passionate about yoga. Many of them knew Patañjali’s ethics of yoga, and yet their attachment to being right about their opinions of yoga still caused social and emotional pain. Decolonizing, anti-oppression, anti-racist education work might not be nice, but it can still be done without causing harm.

These fieldwork findings prove that when practitioners engage in a yoga that engages with these concepts from Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*, they not only deepen their yoga experience in an authentic way, but also avoid the complex and problematic practice of cultural appropriation.

Many definitions of cultural appropriation liken it to a form of violence or aggression upon racialized people by whites. We can then articulate the resulting power imbalance from cultural appropriation to *ahimsa*. In this line of thinking, cultural appropriation is thus a form of violence. In other words, when people practice yoga shallowly, they engage in a form of cultural appropriation, which therefore is violence because it perpetuates power imbalance and non-recognition of source knowledge. This is the core of what LJ is getting at in the debates with Diane.

Sri Louise is a yoga teacher, dancer, and blogger who wrote a lengthy post with her own analysis of the situation, which offered pointed insight into the power dynamics of white women in the North American yoga world. While Sri does not disapprove of integrating Western biomechanics into āsana, she argues that white women in the Western yoga world have tended to focus on āsana and the scientific applications of biomechanics rather than “situate āsana in the larger framework of yoga.” Sri’s outright declaration, “To call what you do Yoga without understanding or even being interested in the cosmology or ontology of Dharmic traditions is not Yoga. It’s that simple,”<sup>21</sup> angered many women in the yoga world who feel entitled to claim the word for themselves. Sri claims that white women “play a prominent role in the subjugation and erasure of Hindu contributions to the conception and cultivation of Yoga as a *Mōksa Sādhana*, mainly through dismissing Indigenous voices...”<sup>22</sup> The indigenous voices that white women dismiss, according to Sri, are Hindu voices that attempt to uphold the ancient links of yoga to Hindu knowledge systems. Drawing on Rajiv Malhotra, Sri refers to this sentiment as “Hinduphobia,” a

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<sup>21</sup> Sri Louise, “Darth YogaBecky & Hinduphobia” *PostYoga*, June 10 2016, <https://postyoga.wordpress.com/2016/06/10/yoga-becky-hinduphobia/>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

term that as yet pre-dates much academic discourse<sup>23</sup>. These white yoga practitioners want to keep any connection to Hinduism outside of their own yoga, while maintaining claims that their practice is authentic. For Sri, this non-acknowledgement of yoga's roots in Hinduism is the height of cultural appropriation, or what has recently been popularized by critics of the contemporary yoga world as the colonization of yoga.

In her online article for the website, [decolonizingyoga.com](http://www.decolonizingyoga.com), bi-racial Indian and white American yoga instructor and Ayurvedic practitioner Susanna Barkataki makes some important suggestions for avoiding cultural appropriation in yoga. The five suggestions Barkataki offers effectively summarize what I have discussed thus far in this chapter, and include self-inquiry *svādhyāya*, learn and cite correct cultural references, ask difficult questions, practice all eight limbs of yoga, not just āsana, and finally, to be humble and respect yoga's history.<sup>24</sup> Andrea Jain locates Hinduphobia within a broader context of what she calls “Yogaphobia,” that is, the Christian-originating and essentializing fear that the popularization of yoga, with its so-called exotic, pagan, and amoral practices that were “antithetical to Christianity” (133). The other side of the spectrum in these conversations, then, is what Jain calls the “Hindu Origin Position,” through which its proponents argue for the Hindu origins of yoga (142). Jain crystallizes the two arguments from the Hindu origins camp as we have seen thus far: “First, they are concerned that popularized systems of postural yoga are corruptions of what they consider authentic yoga. And second, they are concerned that Hinduism does not get due credit when postural yogis co-opt

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<sup>23</sup> See also Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (142)

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/decolonize-yoga-practice/>

yoga” (143). As Antony explains with regards to yoga instructors’ use of Sanskrit in their classes, pedagogical problems evolve out of a yogaphobic or Hinduphobic approach to yoga.

Indeed, some of the yoga teachers who I interviewed expressed a reluctance or even resistance to using Sanskrit terms because of their commitment to social justice, equity, and accessibility. Alex, a male yoga teacher from Peterborough, Ontario says that he likes to keep his yoga accessible for as many people as possible, rather than risk alienating them with Sanskrit. In his insightful blog posting, “Cultural Appropriation Part Two,” British yoga teacher James Russell admits that “Here in ‘the west’ (for want of a better word) appropriation is something which I think most yoga teachers participate in, a lot of the time” ([jamesrussellyoga.co.uk](http://jamesrussellyoga.co.uk)). While Russell points out that most yoga teachers may have good intentions, he argues, “Western yoga teachers enjoy unhampered access to the fruit of thousands of years of Indian culture. How often do we stop to consider the oppression through which our privilege was secured or the legacy of socioeconomic inequality by which our vantage point is maintained”?

These are the questions that this dissertation seeks to explore in spite of the fact that Canadian multiculturalism policy silences the discourse around the fact that multiculturalism is what Rinaldo Walcott refers to as an “unsettled policy” (“Disgraceful”). As I suggested earlier, most Canadians would prefer to enjoy the pleasant cultural aspects of what migration offers, but do not want to talk about how multiculturalism “does not adequately support the transfer of power to racialized Canadians” and does not “challenge the national myth of Canada as a white nation space or raceless state (Walcott, “Disgraceful”). From my interpretation around the discussions of yoga and cultural appropriation and multiculturalism then, I argue that translation is indeed a form of cultural appropriation. Those who skim what they think is valuable off the top of

thousands of years of spiritual legacy are benefitting from this translation, despite their good intentions. It is not merely that the names of yoga poses and breathing exercises are translated from Sanskrit into English or whatever language is convenient, but rather that the translation in many ways shrinks a huge tradition and spiritual practice into a small fragment of its rich entirety.

Alex recognizes that not using Sanskrit terms in his class may detract from the authenticity of his teaching in terms of its connection to yoga's traditional philosophical roots in Hinduism, Alex hopes that if he can just get people into the room doing the yoga āsana poses, then perhaps later, they will come for deeper spiritual inquiry:

In terms of cultural appropriation, in particular, my training is Moksha so that's personal bias. They have 7 philosophical pillars, and one of them is about being accessible<sup>25</sup>. And that means not necessarily using Sanskrit in the room. Not bombarding students with the spiritual philosophical side of it. So that means that chanting OM and singing mantras at the end, that might say no, we're not doing that, or I don't wanna do that. Or again, it's another barrier. It's an idea of bringing people into the room and trying yoga and maybe over time developing a relationship with themselves and with yoga that they'd want to pursue things more deeply. It's not a no Sanskrit rule, we're allowed to, we're welcome to, but it's not built into our training or our teaching. It may not be a classic traditional yoga, but I think for better or for worse, just like almost everything else in the world, things are evolving (Alex, March 2016)

For Alex, then, keeping the Sanskrit out of his yoga classes equates to a more accessible experience, which he feels is more personally authentic to himself and his students, even if it is at the loss or omission of yoga philosophy. As this chapter demonstrates, some white yoga practitioners want to continue keeping politics and traditional yoga out of their lives and instead, focus on āsana as their yoga practice. If āsana is stripped of its linguistic and cultural heritage in service of an idea of accessibility, what is lost? This reduces yoga to āsana and perhaps prāṇayāma, and therein lies the problem. Yoga instructor Solange, on the other hand, who has been practicing

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<sup>25</sup> See Moksha website: <http://downtown.mokshayoga.ca/values/#seven-pillars>

yoga since she was in her late teens and is now in her late fifties, refuses to strip yoga's links from Hinduism in her work even if it at the expense of teaching fewer classes or being perceived as difficult. In early April 2016, Solange welcomed me up to her home studio just north of Toronto where she has an acre of sprawling gardens and rolling grass nestled behind an elevated barn.

Together, we attended a Nia dance class at the local community centre (see Glossary). Nia exemplifies the pastiche translation of body-mind-spirit somatic practices that emerged out of the 1990s. Blending dance, t'ai chi, and yoga movements, Nia is a fluid, breath-integrating workout set to music that I first encountered in 1998. Back then, classes were held at a church in my neighbourhood with Martha Randall<sup>26</sup>, one of Toronto's long standing Nia instructors and the participants were all white, middle class, middle aged women. I didn't notice that demographic then, other than that they were all older than me. When Solange and I met at the local community centre where they ran the Nia class, I observed the diverse range of ethnicities and ages in the room. What Solange loves about Nia is that it does not pretend to be yoga, or to be spiritual; it is simply a fun, often sweat-inducing, fluid, and "feminine" practice that encourages its practitioners to shake their hips and wiggle their flesh. The teacher there encourages participants to simply feel themselves breathe, sweat, and move authentically and freely. While the Nia teacher is clearly influenced by non-Western somatic practices, she does not attempt to label them as such, or claim to be doing a spiritual practice other than offering women a freeing, flowing movement form.

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<sup>26</sup> For information about Martha Randall, see <https://www.martharandall.com/about>

Solange finds herself frustrated with contemporary yoga in the Greater Toronto Area because people centre yoga as a physical practice and what they want it to be, rather than following or respecting the tradition and expertise of the teacher. She told me what yoga used to be like when she first started studying in the 1980s and 90s, comparing her experiences of the past with what she observes now, which is often devoid of any spiritual connection to the tradition of yoga. A long time follower of the Indian yoga teacher, Baba Hari Dass and the Ashtanga Yoga Fellowship<sup>27</sup>, Solange is committed to remaining authentic to her understanding of what yoga is, which includes chanting the sound of *OM*, which many yoga enthusiasts recognize as the following symbol: ॐ (see Glossary). In the following passage, Solange describes the authentic ways in which yoga students would learn from their teachers. Inherent in her description of her experience is the notion of respect, which from her description is absent in contemporary student-teacher relationships:

...back in the day they put a mirror in front of your face that said you are a narcissist... You stop showing off. It's not to embarrass you, although you might be embarrassed because you got called on your shit. You can't do that today. You'd get fired. It happened to me; someone complained...(Solange, April 2016)

Solange wishes that she could maintain that same type of respectful relationship between yoga students and teachers because it keeps the yoga authentic to the lineage. What remains instead is the bottom line of running a studio and keeping feet on mats, and the cost of that, according to Solange, is the authenticity of the yoga practice, as the following quote demonstrates:

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<sup>27</sup> This Ashtanga Yoga Fellowship is different from Pattabhi Jois' Ashtanga Yoga. The Ashtanga Yoga Fellowship has ashrams in California and on Salt Spring Island, and follows the teachings of classical yoga from their guru, Baba Hari Dass. <http://saltspringcentre.com/about/classical-ashtanga-yoga/>. The other commonly known Ashtanga Yoga was discussed briefly in the Introduction chapter, and its popular yoga series derives from the Krishnamacharya lineage. See <http://kpjayi.org/the-practice/> and also Mark Singleton (2010) *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Practice*, London: Oxford University Press.

I call it like I see it, and I said, what would you like me to do? Not teach yoga in my yoga class? The studio owner says, but I don't want the customers to feel uncomfortable. Well whose problem is that? Is it my problem that they're uncomfortable? And isn't it your job as manager and owner of studio to address your client & tell them that chanting ohm is part of yoga. [And the studio owner says to me,] well it's not part of Moksha. [And I say,] well I'm not a moksha teacher. So if they're coming to my class they should know that's what they're going to get, and I'm not about to change it (Solange)

Solange mitigates these issues by sidestepping the Moksha studio and teaching in other fitness settings by running her own small studio in the barn on her property. Even the price point that Solange sets is authentic for her, and in keeping with her values to be truthful to herself:

I created a space of my own and we have a lot of fun there; and I keep my rates very low. Part of the Occupy Yoga mandate is to take these elitist ridiculously priced classes out of the equation... I only teach pre-reg [pre-registered classes]. They can drop in, but I highly discourage drop-ins. The going rate for an 8 week Pre-reg is about 400. That breaks down to about \$40. a class.<sup>28</sup> So I charge \$100.00 for 9 weeks and here's where you're going to see my eccentricities. It carries the 11:11 vibrations. It breaks down to 11:11 each class, and that's important to me. So I do that. But it puts other yoga teachers off. I've received a number of correspondences saying why are you undercutting everybody else? I'm sorry you feel that way (Solange)

Keeping the cost of her classes low is possible for Solange because her overhead is negligible as a more mature yoga instructor with a previous thirty year work history, a retired-but-still working husband, and no further mortgage payments. More important than Solange's economic status, however, is Solange's commitment through her intention to keep the commoditization out of yoga as much as possible. The values that Solange espouses, then, are rooted in her understanding of yoga philosophy, in particular, the *yama*, *aparigraha* (non-greed), and the *niyama*, *santosh*a (contentment with what one has). The yoga industrial complex subverts these ethics for its own capitalistic needs as Solange explains further:

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<sup>28</sup> While the mathematics is not exact here, Solange's point is that many yoga teachers overcharge for their classes because they are more interested in money than delivering yoga with integrity.

I don't know how anybody could support themselves by teaching yoga unless they become a brand, which to me is anti-yoga. It's the commodification of yoga, you know, it's a business working from business model philosophies...that are not yoga. They're not grounded in yoga principles. We live in a culture where we over-consume everything -turn everything into a product and greed prevails.

So what is this real yoga of which Solange speaks? In the Introduction to this dissertation, I explained the trajectory of yoga as it has become a standard health and exercise regime in North America. What appears is a near schism between those who view yoga as health practice, and those who wish to maintain yoga as a spiritual path leading toward an enlightened sense of self and the universe.

Ritesh is an Indian-born naturopath and Ayurvedic doctor living in Toronto since he was in his late teens. I learned about him through a yoga philosophy discussion group on Facebook, and he was receptive to meeting and discussing my questions around yoga and cultural appropriation. We met for tea at an Ayurvedic clinic in Toronto in March 2016. He told me that to him, contemporary yoga is “noise and distraction” from what he understands to be the true aim of yoga. Ritesh’s practice is rooted in Advaita Vedānta in which he practices *rāja* and *jñāna* yoga. *Rāja yoga* “Yoga of Kings” referring to Patañjali’s system of “meditative introversion.” Yoga scholar Georg Fuerstein explains that practitioners of *rāja yoga* consider it superior to *hātha* yoga because it is committed to the “sacred ordeal of meditative practice and renunciation” (37). De Michelis points to other sources that confirm the generalized belief in the superiority of *rāja yoga*, because it is considered the yoga of the mind (178). According to Swami Vivekenanda, the goal of *rāja yoga* is to teach the practitioner how to develop the mind and reach self actualization (Fuerstein 38; de Michelis 13). *Jñāna yoga* is “the path of Self-realization” through the discernment of the real from the unreal (Fuerstein 40), and is

also the title of another of Vivekenanda's books, which Madame Blavatsky argued was basically the same as *rāja yoga* because of its focus on meditation. (de Michelis 178).

Ritesh is frustrated with people talking about yoga, but only doing the yoga poses, or even worse, not engaging with any texts:

People talking about hātha yoga, should read the HYP [*hātha yoga pradipika*]... and not just leave it to postures and *nadi shodhanam* and breathing and whatever. Read the fucking book that you're referring to! Stop doing postures, read. Understand. [There is] plenty of time to do postures, but people are not reading. Because confusion.

Feuerstein echoes Ritesh's sentiment, and says that both Indian and Western practitioners of hātha yoga "...do not always respect the spiritual goals or even the ethical foundations of this approach and often tend to pursue Hātha Yoga as a kind of calisthenics or body cosmetics" (37).

It appears, then, that just doing postures without having a base with which to fully understand the yoga as it was written by the sages 2500 or 5000 years ago, is surmountable to cultural appropriation.

Yoga for Ritesh is rooted in the study of "who am I, and what is this universe?" The nature of being is Ritesh's main preoccupation, followed by attaining *samadhi*, which in his understanding is a bliss achieved not through hātha yoga, but through concentrated and dedication meditation practice. He says, "I have no idea where the postures come into it, except as some historical thing, which is neither here nor there. I mean, yoga is like a word. When I use that word, I'm referring to this world view." He unsympathetically explains that his understanding of hātha yoga should be rooted in text:

If you're going to talk about hātha yoga, you're gonna be talking about *Hātha Yoga Pradipika* (HYP). I mean the HYP, there's a statement, and there are many statements of this sort, fix your gaze upon the inner light and across the ocean of existence. So if we don't approach that aspect of what is in the HYP and leave things only in the physical exer-

cise format, then you're not doing hātha yoga. You just made it up. You can't back it up with the HYP, none of the texts have any resemblance to exercise.

Neil, a Toronto-based practitioner and massage therapist, recognizes the importance of yoga philosophy and has done some study with scripture, but continues to use yoga mainly as a health practice.

I do practice yoga almost every day, and I will often draw on the philosophy or culture of yoga when I discuss issues of work/life balance, personal stress management and the importance of self-care with my clients, but I am poorly versed in the names of poses, the Sanskrit vocabulary, the chakras, and all the non-āsana yoga practices like prānāyāma, or higher order focusing meditations. I am still practicing mostly on the gross physical level, albeit with more of an awareness of how shallow my practice is... If you are going to practice yoga authentically, you have to live a life committed to easing the suffering of others.

Ritesh says that it is fine to do yoga as a physical practice, but he would like people to consider that what they are doing is health as opposed to yoga. Neil's approach respectfully acknowledges his shortcomings and that knows his yoga is not completely traditional, but still attempts to respectfully and mindfully apply the principles in a holistic health setting. Christine, one of the participants in the focus group about body positivity, yoga and health shared her mixed feelings about the physical and mental benefits of yoga in conjunction with the difficulties that yoga-phobia present:

I do think that practicing yoga or meditation can really help you...feel more in touch with yourself, whether that be your physical body or thoughts and feelings. But then, there is like, you're taking practices that originated in other countries, that are continually referencing other cultures. And employing them in a completely different setting that is divorced from the original meaning. I just feel so ambivalent about it because I think it can help you be more healthy, but it's so problematic! (PAR participant Christine, March 2016)

Christine had minimal experience with yoga beyond a few sessions as a teen while in care for mental health issues. These mandatory yoga classes were traumatic for her, because the program managers and physicians overseeing Christine care neglected to recognize her individual needs in conjunction with her situation and the treatment that she was undergoing at the time. She has identified this yoga while in hospital as not helpful at best and toxic at worst, but she did do one session with me several months prior to the focus group, and was open to yoga's potential for helping her current health issue. Christine had contacted me about her menstrual cramps when I suggested that a restorative hātha yoga practice could be helpful in easing the monthly suffering. She came to see me soon after, and experienced profound shifts in the way she felt.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown the dynamic and complicated tensions between yoga practitioners who wish to keep yoga in a context that remains connected to its Hindu roots, and those who do not care as long as it keeps them healthy. I have attempted to tie together the conceptual links between colonialism, white women, and the tensions between yoga practitioners' assumed understandings of authenticity and cultural appropriation with the stories of yoga practitioners in North America, in Toronto and online communities. The fieldwork demonstrates that there is a spectrum of attitudes toward yoga, authenticity, and cultural appropriation, but that some practitioners are increasingly aware of the cognitive dissonance between their use of yoga as a health practice and yoga's Hindu roots as a philosophy aimed at helping us know ourselves. The following chapter will dive into the compelling stories of people who experience yoga as a transforma-

tive health practice. I would like to end this chapter with a quote from Matthew, a yoga teacher in Toronto who specializes in a branded yoga for athletes class: “If you're not being taught one-on-one with a guru, then anything you do is for fitness.” He links yoga with his own healing journey from addiction and gender-based violence through his athletic practice, and his story will unfold in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: “IT WAS SUCH GOOD MEDICINE FOR ME”: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF YOGA**

The number of peer reviewed articles detailing the health benefits of yoga for all ages is increasing, lower back pain, anxiety, depression, and body image improvement (Zettergren et al; Tekur et al; Keosaian et al; Daubenmeier; Impett, Daubenmeier & Hirschmann; Rothenberg).<sup>29</sup> This chapter will examine the stories of trauma and healing of people whose lives were transformed by yoga, but yoga as North American yoga practitioners experience it, is still much more complex than simply being an expression of health and healing. Concomitantly, conversations about yoga are more nuanced than just whether a certain yoga practice is cultural appropriation or not, or which kind of yoga practice is good for this or that health condition. While there are countless memoirs and articles that detail health benefits for specific populations,<sup>30</sup> this chapter will share stories about how yoga has affected the lives of yoga practitioners and teachers, how yoga teachers who are mothers negotiate the double care challenges of working as a yoga instructor and mothering, and the ways in which these experiences affect their health. In telling these stories, I hope to uncover some ways in which people are envisioning the evolution of North American yoga culture.

This chapter will demonstrate through an intersectional feminist political economy of health lens how yoga and health access are tied to gender, race, class, age, and ability. In asking

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<sup>29</sup> A quick search for academic articles with the keywords “yoga AND back pain” yields 57 results, and 155 results for a search for “yoga AND anxiety OR depression.” Googling “yoga and health benefits” offers 36,700,000 results in 0.76 seconds. We do not need yet another study to extol yoga’s power to heal, because it has become so naturally commonplace that people assume that yoga is “good for you.” See also Kerrie Kauer, 2016: “Yoga Culture and Neoliberal Embodiment of Health”)

<sup>30</sup> See for example memoirs and investigative journalism from Claire Dederer, *Poser*. New York: Picador Press, 2011; Benjamin Lorr, *Hell-Bent*. New York: St Martin’s Press, 2012; William J. Broad, *The Science of Yoga*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012.

what brought people to practice and teach yoga, I have learned much about not only the reasons, but also the challenges that they experienced as a result of their coming to yoga. I ponder, how is it really so healthy that yoga teachers are running around, often from one studio to another, and then to a gym and perhaps then to a private, with zero employment security or benefits? What happens to that teacher if they get injured? How do they manage an injury that is exacerbated by work from which they can not afford to take time off? What kind of pressures do yoga teachers and practitioners have to embody the idealized version of a so-called yogic lifestyle and body, particularly when often they are unable to afford the level of affluence required to maintain such a lifestyle? Finally, and perhaps one of the most difficult topics that I discussed with some research participants, was how do they reconcile the often contradictory relationship of yoga as a spiritual discipline of knowing and liberating the self, to the fact that they are often teaching a secularized yoga in order to make a living and be healthy and happy? People who are yoga teachers come to the profession because they love sharing what they are passionate about, but as in many of the caring professions, often find high rates of burnout due to the precarity of the work. I argue that yoga's supposedly universal health benefits are often inaccessible to many people, and in particular, the teachers.

The first section of this chapter will explain the mechanisms of teaching yoga as precarious work, the ways in which it is gendered, and how that affects the health of yoga practitioners. The second section will flesh out a discussion from Chapter 1 about how contemporary North Americans understand health as a moral imperative, and the ways in which we link productivity and wellness with good citizenship in a neoliberal age, and articulate the notions of healthism with yoga. Next, I will trace the trajectory of these understandings of health with the stories of

yoga practitioners and teachers who participated in this ethnography, starting with sharing the stories of some of the people who decided to switch their careers and become yoga teachers. From my findings, I argue that the yoga culture that has evolved over the past twenty years in North America is steeped in a neoliberal discourse that sees the notions of choice and responsibility as determining individual health, rather than a social system that values health as a global responsibility. A social determinants of health model influences my analysis definitively, and the stories that research participants share prove theories to be true in these contexts. Several of the yoga teachers I interviewed shared that they need to focus on their own self-care in order to manage teaching multiple classes at different locations while also caring for their families. Yoga teachers' focus on health practices and self-care is crucial for working in a precarious work culture, where there is no job security and often no safety net for injury or other loss of work.

The yoga participants and teachers that I interviewed enthusiastically shared the various reasons for which they first came to yoga, such as back pain after having a baby, stress relief, or simply the search for deeper spiritual connection. They also share candidly about the benefits of their yoga practice and teaching for their mental health. Many frequently use the word "love" in conjunction with discussing how they feel about yoga or teaching yoga. This chapter builds on feminist political economies of health and histories of women's health movements, and examines the social conditions that produce and undermine health and access to yoga. The fieldwork stories paint a more bleak picture about contemporary yoga than what *Yoga Journal* is trying to sell us. Some of the stories reveal a shadow side to yoga, which is that the healthy lifestyle is accessible to some but not all.

## Teaching Yoga: Giving Health and Prosperity, Living Precariously

Amongst the casualties in this ethnography of yoga in North America are the yoga teachers, many of whom shared their reflections on their experiences of being the mouthpiece and visual reference for healthism. They express the ironic flip side of being a paragon of health for yoga students while simultaneously participating in a precarious work economy predicated on popularity, sales, and image. Their stories will prove that while neoliberal proponents of part-time work are cheerleaders for the so-called flexibility it offers, this flexibility when expected of yoga teachers often comes at the expense of their well-being. There is a conceptual irony here. As LJ pointed out in Chapter 4, yoga is about knowing the self, and being non-attached to outcomes or notions of selfhood. The scriptures speak to the development of the self, of the self in *samadhi*, which is understood as the bliss that comes in meditation from achieving a deep knowledge of the self. Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, the second limb concept of *svādhyāya*, known as self-study, is a way to see through attachments of the self, and must not be done in of itself. A shallow understanding of *svādhyāya* would overlook the important nuance of the *kleshas*, known as the five enemies of the self, that Michael Stone (*Inner Tradition*) explains function as repetitive psychological and physical patterns (65). The commodified mainstream yoga world shallowly co-opts yoga philosophy's notion of the self an individual responsible for itself in service of non-standard employment norms. This is basically a form of colonization of yoga by the processes of neoliberalism, and feeds into a circuit of precarious labour.

Yoga as a career option fits into the neoliberal framework of what Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich refer to as non-standard employment (NSE), which is predicated on part-time, precarious work, or what is casually referred to in the millennial era as the gig economy. Non-standard

employment is work that differs from the usual full-time, permanent, 9-5 employment, and has been increasing in frequency since the 1980s as employers discern the benefit to them of contract labour (Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich). What is especially important here is the fact that as Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich explain, the majority of part-time workers are women, and this labour is gendered in multivalent ways such as wages, the work itself, and also regulatory protection (456). This is not to say that all part time employment is bad, however; as Higgins, Duxbury & Johnson point out, there is a diverse range of positions and skill levels that part time workers can do, which includes health care. For yoga teachers, working part time can be an excellent opportunity to do lucrative work in a short period of time that fits in with the goals of the individual. In private sessions, or home studio arrangements, yoga teachers can set their own rates for times that are convenient for them. For popular teachers at privately owned studios, economic success can be a bit of a gamble if the pay rate is dependent on the number of feet on mats, particularly if a teacher is not leading a class in a prime time slot.

We will see in the stories of the yoga teachers who are mothers in this ethnography that their careers are often sublimated by their care work. Child care can be particularly tricky for mothers who are yoga teachers. Nichols points out that as the number of regulated child care spaces decrease, women risk their seniority and success in their careers because of their traditional roles as primary caregivers of their children (4). The fieldwork findings specifically demonstrate this fact, as many of the female yoga teachers share that their careers are not “superstar” due to the time they spend with their children. Mothers who are yoga teachers, as the data shows, subjugate their careers teaching yoga in service of their families, because they have a husband whose income supports them. In the interest of budget and intensive mothering (Hays),

the mother, then, becomes the child care provider and early childhood educator. As is evident in their stories, however, many of these teachers who I interviewed actually prefer to sacrifice that superstar yoga career in service to their family. This is all assuming, of course, that these families have a main breadwinner. This chapter explores the stories of yoga teachers who participated in my study, how they feel about earning a living teaching yoga, and how they take care of themselves.

### **Theories of Healthism**

Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper-Hughes' classic discussion of the body as a symbol through which we can consider nature, society and culture explains the notion of the healthy body politic in harmony with the social world. As Lock and Scheper-Hughes explain, we can understand the healthy body politic as a body that conforms to discursive social regulations of both reproduction and individual discipline of the self (7-8). Drawing on the Marxist notion of the body as alienated and E.P. Thompson's discussion of the body as subverted in service of industry, Lock and Scheper-Hughes suggest that the world in which we live is alienated from the body's so-called natural state. Instead, they suggest that the body represents a form of "commodity fetishism of modern life, in which even the human body has been transformed into a commodity" (22). Yoga teachers fall sadly but neatly into such a definition, as they run from one class to another in different locations, in order to lead classes in stress and body management to other workers. Like machines, the bodies of yoga teachers are expected to function optimally in order to produce yoga experiences that offer healing for the bodies of others. As we have seen in recent

discussions on social media and in some yoga magazines, there is a rise of awareness about yoga injuries that both yoga practitioners and instructors acquire as a result of their practice.

Foucault's "docile bodies" concept is also an important consideration in this chapter, particularly with regards to the ways in which yoga practitioners see hātha yoga as a health discipline that contributes to their self betterment. As Foucault explains, "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body [in economic terms of utility] and diminishes these same forces [in political terms of obedience]" (138). This concept articulates well with research participants' ideas of doing yoga as a good thing for themselves, as we will see in the examples later in this chapter. Through their stories later in this chapter, I will show the ways in which many of the people often said that they felt either pressured to do more yoga in order to be a better yogini, or they felt that they were not good enough because they were not practicing sufficiently and achieving certain levels of yoga poses.

Drawing on Foucault's discussion of the disciplined and docile body, I argue that the more a person practices yoga, the more useful they are as workers and if they are yoga teachers, they are also useful for workers. Furthermore, Foucault contends that disciplining the self makes it less likely to resist domination or regulation, a condition which manifests subtly and surreptitiously in the yoga practitioner as an embodied desire to conform to a physical or social norm wrapped in either goodness or happiness. Schnäbele explains that the post-Fordist workplace is predicated on flexibility of the worker. I extend this notion of worker flexibility to that of the yoga instructor. The yoga instructor's work is by its very nature contingent on their physical and mental flexibility; they must be willing to go where the work is, and work when other workers are not. The required flexibility of the yoga teacher's commitment to their work also means that

work and non-work time is often blurred. As I have become increasingly aware through both my personal experience as a yoga teacher on “the circuit” and other teachers have shared, the yoga teacher must sell their yoga classes through social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, or face a certain slow death in competition with other teachers who are more willing to photograph themselves in contorted yoga poses that look glamorous but are likely more physically injurious. The result of the flexibility required of the post-Fordist workplace, as Schnäbele argues, is higher stress that she suggests is remedied through hātha yoga (141). The yoga teacher then, is required to project an image of health, she is to be calm and cheery, as opposed to resistant and cantankerous about the frustrations of a work environment built on a house of sand. She must not only teach stress-reducing strategies to her students, but also practice what she teaches in order to maintain an optimism in the face of what Berlant explains is the “precariat” (192). The precariat is an important concept to extend toward our consideration of contemporary yoga teachers. According to Berlant, the precariat is an “affective atmosphere” or an “existential truth about contingencies of living, namely that there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built.” Precariat is also

a condition of dependency – as a legal term, *precarious* describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else hands. Yet capitalist activity always induces destabilizing scenes of productive destruction – of resources and of lives being made and unmade according to the dictates and whims of the market (192).

In order for the yoga teacher to stay in the yoga circuit, he or she must be willing to participate in this precariat, although it can also be proffered that in the present global economy, there is little choice to any worker. To be ever more legitimate and concomitantly healthy as a yoga teacher, then, means to be increasingly responsive to the demands of the feedback loop of social media,

dominant messages about health, and on point with ever-changing fitness and movement trends via notions of yoga as a practice and a form of self-employment that requires discipline to maintain. This notion of precarity, then, is an extension of the ways in which neoliberalism colonizes yoga in that it expects not only muscular flexibility of the yoga teacher, but also economic and structural flexibility of the yoga teacher as a worker. Furthermore, neoliberalism necessarily secularizes yoga because hospitals and other fitness settings use yoga as a form of “social prescribing”<sup>31</sup> and deliberately downplay or omit yoga philosophy to focus on the physical health benefits of the practice.

By extension of the notion of discipline in yoga, we need to also briefly consider Patāñjali’s *tapas*, which is the concept of heat, or concerted effort in practice (see Glossary). I hesitate to use Foucault and Patāñjali in the same context, however, because of the risks of re-colonizing yoga by articulating European poststructuralism with yoga scripture. If I do this, am I not simply appropriating yoga for my own purposes? Or perhaps it is the opposite, that I am appropriating Foucault for my analysis of yoga, which could be permissible in this context. In continuing with the spirited intention to decolonize yoga, however, I do think it is worthy for a moment to consider *tapas* as a signifier of the good yogi. I remember in my Ashtanga days when pushing harder toward the end range of motion of a stretch was the desired goal, and attaining the next pose sealed our success and perhaps approval of our teacher and peers. This ethos of concerted effort to the point of heat, however, often led yoga practitioners toward injury rather than enlighten-

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<sup>31</sup> Social prescribing is a referral pathway for medical professionals to allow patients with non-clinical needs to access social activities such as walking clubs, fitness classes, and other self-help and community-based social activities (South et al). See also CBC Radio transcript <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-march-27-2018-1.4594705/why-u-k-doctors-are-doling-out-social-prescriptions-to-treat-mental-health-1.4594830>

ment, as Diane's mission states. While it is important to bear in mind that Foucault is referring to penal institutions, military barracks, and later factories and hospitals, he explains that discipline requires an enclosed, "protective place of disciplinary monotony" (141). It becomes possible, then, to articulate this kind of disciplinary space to the yoga studio, or *yoga shala*, as it is called in the Ashtanga world, where discipline, *tapas*, and productive advancement in poses represents enlightenment and health.

This qualification of being a good yogini is predicated not only on health, but on disciplines of self-care. In Volume 3 of *History of Sexuality: Care of the Self*, Foucault explains the Epicurean philosophies that inform contemporary discourses on health. In particular, Foucault points out that not only does self-care take time, but it also is "filled with exercises, practical tasks, various activities. Taking care of oneself is not a rest cure. There is the care of the body to consider, health regimens, physical exercises without overexertion, the carefully measured satisfaction of needs. There are the meditations, the readings, the notes that one takes on books..." (51). To extend Foucault's discussion to yoga, then, is to understand that to be a good yogi, one must take good care of themselves, and this self-care is multi-disciplinary. Furthermore, Foucault points out that self-care is not actually only for the individual doing such activities, but rather it is a "true social practice" (51). Crawford (*Health as Meaningful Social Practice*) contends that self-care is an expectation that society places on the individual to acquire medical knowledge and other modes of disease prevention and treatment. Just as Crawford points out that people "come to define themselves... by how well they succeed or fail in adopting healthy practices" (402), the yoga practitioner similarly defines themselves as worthy of the moniker, "yogi" by how much and how well they practice. This discursive notion that our identi-

ties are wrapped up in our productivity is never more underscored than through this articulation of the healthy body as useful, productive citizen. Indeed, many of the yoga participants in my field research focus more on the health regimens and physical exercises than the meditations and readings, despite an admitted awareness that yoga is more than just exercise. This emphasis on health practices in the guise of self-care leads to a cognitive dissonance for some yoga practitioners. Except for Diane who professes zero interest in meditation or scripture reading because she's "done all that" when she used to help run yoga teacher trainings, most of the people in my study share that they feel ought to read or meditate more, but can not find the time.

We further complicate the issue with questions around authenticity in the yoga world. We have seen long, fiery, discussion threads on social media where people debate how authentic is someone's yoga practice if they are not engaging with the Upanishads, the Vedas, or Patāñjali's Yoga Sūtras. When people start making accusations of cultural appropriation toward those who practice only the physical aspects of yoga or commoditize yoga for the marketplace, we have to ask, who is in power here, and who is using that power over others for their commercial success? The feminist killjoy response is to call it as I observe it: most of the time, it is white women who are oblivious to their social privilege. This social privilege, in part empowered by liberal feminism, enables white women to define their yoga as what they want it to be, regardless of yoga's social and philosophical groundings in the Sanātana dharma, also known as Hinduism. They may call themselves feminists and they may feel themselves empowered by a so-called divine goddess energy, but they generally do not have an intersectional analytic framework to see the imbricated oppressions to which their intentions of marketing abundance contribute.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, yoga and health are inextricably intertwined, such that many studios and gyms that offer yoga classes emphasize the supposed, but inconclusive health benefits of sweating rather than mention anything in their promotional materials about yoga's roots as a philosophical practice geared at knowing the self. As an example, one anonymous yoga studio's chalkboard suggests that "good things come to those who SWEAT." The correlation of sweating to health and prosperity is indicative of the deeply ingrained work ethic that underlies meritocracy and neoliberal thinking. Many yoga studios promote their classes as being the best way for people to access their healthiest self, best posture, improve immunity, and so on, through vigorous, sweat-inducing exercise. Some critics on social media are starting to critique the false health claims that many yoga studios make, but this kind of advertising did not begin with contemporary yoga studios. The following section of this chapter will examine the intersections of healthism, the women's health movement, and yoga.

Chapter 1 explains the unfolding of Western yoga in the mid-to-late twentieth century with teachers such as Bikram Choudhry, Indra Devi, and B.K.S. Iyengar, who sold their yoga as a healing practice through which students could rid themselves of all kinds of ailments and become better people. In *Light on Yoga*, Iyengar repeatedly expounds on the benefits of various poses for all kinds of health issues that one would not normally attribute treatable by putting the body into a specific position. For example, headstand, *śirsāsana*, is touted by Iyengar as being "the king of all āsanās" (189). "The brain is the seat of intelligence, knowledge, discrimination, wisdom and power," Iyengar claims, therefore standing on one's head will benefit the brain, amongst many other things. Iyengar confidently claims that "regular practice of Śirsāsana makes healthy pure blood flow through the brain cells" (190), but medical research on the adverse ef-

fects of inversions on people with pre-existing conditions suggests that practitioners exercise greater caution in such instances (Cramer et al; Podesta, Lin and Lamas). Nonetheless, Iyengar says that *śirsāsana*'s enhanced blood flow to the head benefits the pituitary and pineal glands, and therefore:

People suffering from loss of sleep, memory and vitality have recovered by the regular and correct practice of this āsana and have become fountains of energy. The lungs gain the power to resist any climate and stand up to any work, which relieves one from colds, coughs, tonsillitis, halitosis and palpitations (190).

These kinds of grand claims are attractive, but many yoga practitioners I interviewed recognize that they are unlikely to experience benefits to this level. Most are aware that their health will generally improve, particularly in regards to their sleeping, but they attribute improvements in sleep to the generalized relaxation effects of yoga, rather than the specific benefits of headstand pose. Furthermore, Iyengar claims that headstand will help a person become “self-reliant in pain and pleasure, loss and gain, shame and fame and defeat and victory” (190). How this is supposed to happen is unclear, but what is interesting is the links he makes of the health benefits of yoga āsana to the spiritual goals of yoga to know the self and reach samadhi. What is particularly interesting is how we might articulate Iyengar's claims for the benefits of yoga poses, and of course headstand is but one example, with the notion that a healthy body makes a person a better member of society, or perhaps a more holy one.

In "Neither a Sinner nor a Saint: Health as a Present-Day Religion in the Age of Healthism," Pelters and Wijma make the link between physical health and religiosity. Their text-based analysis examines the ways in which society integrates notions of health with the sacred, morality, community, moods, and emotions. They make an important distinction between health as sci-

entific institution and the idea of perfect health as “divine,” but more importantly, stress that people who think they embody perfect health do so because they have been compliant with institutionalized demands of health (131). As Robert Crawford explained, health, especially preventative projects such as physical fitness and diet becomes a project of the individual to secure their claim to full citizenship. Many texts on yoga, including B.K.S. Iyengar’s, refer to the body as a temple, and many traditional hātha yoga practices are predicated on purifying the body as part of the entire ethics of yoga. The *niyama*, *saucha* means “purity of body,” and Iyengar claims that the practice of āsana and prānāyāma purify the body internally (36). Pelters and Wijma further conclude that risk-reducing lifestyle is a moral imperative that confers social status (36). The yoga lifestyle, as many of my research participants call it, revolves around preventative health activities that ought to confer this preferential status. The yoga lifestyle not only involves doing hātha yoga, but also embodying many of the characteristics that would fit Iyengar’s description of purity, such as non-smoking and eating “clean” and organic foods. Much of the social and non-medical determinants of health documents the ways in which preventative health care increases human lifespan, improves quality of life, and reliance on public health system decreases (Lalonde Report; Lavis; Larsen).

In the FPAR group about yoga, body image, and health that I did in Toronto in March 2016, some of the six participants were able to articulate the striated nature of access to yoga and its links with health. We looked at a word cloud image about health, and one participant, Christine, a white, queer, fat disabilities scholar, offered her critical social determinants of health framework as insight into our discussion:

When we think about if yoga makes people healthy, like yoga practices, and yoga classes, and instruction in yoga, OHIP doesn't cover that... I just wonder whether yoga causing health is not the most accurate thing. It's more of a correlation between wealthier people can afford to yoga, and are also more likely to have better health due to all kinds of other reasons including people being able to participate in calming and stressful and physically beneficial activities such as yoga, but also having really good food, stable good housing, possibly less stress, possibly better jobs with more control.

If yoga practitioners' basic needs are in order, they are more likely to have the resources to delve into individual pursuits such as alternative health modalities. What the fieldwork data reveals is that most of the yoga practitioners and teachers I spoke with are part of families with a primary income earner, which enables them to practice and teach while taking care of families with stable housing and other supports.

Askegaard and Eckhardt explain that not only has yoga been hybridized and commercialized, but it has also been packaged as part of a full technology of Asian self-care, which also involves t'ai chi (53). In her article exploring communications and health, Charlene D. Elliott also points out that health is commodified, and that its promotion is part of communication and health studies, which she differentiates between administration and packaging of preventative health measures (251). We can extend Elliott's discussion on health communication to include yoga as a mode of health promotion, and as such, this chapter also examines the ways in which yoga practitioners respond to the ways in which we theorize and package communications about yoga and health. Metzl and Kirkland's collection of essays, *Against Health*, reminds us that health is a discursive field upon which we project all of our anxieties about illness. Yoga fits into this field through which we also project success or failure at health onto ourselves and others.

In *Feminism's New Age*, Karlyn Crowley explains that many women have found solace in the self-empowerment language of what she calls New Age culture. Part of that comfort comes from the purchase of specific objects for “home shamanism” (46). Like Lorrie, a mother and yoga teacher in Guelph, the women Crowley describe use tarot cards, angel cards, special gem stones, or small Buddha statues to help them feel connected to a greater power and wisdom grounded in the notion of the divine feminine. For Lorrie, this wisdom is rooted in what she generally refers to as “the goddess,” and she has been offering restorative yoga classes specifically for women, because she feels that women need a space specifically for their needs. Indeed, many white middle class women feel a sense of bonding and spiritual growth through their virtual communities, yoga classes, and book clubs (Crowley 47).

I just find there's so much already out there for men, that women need something that's sacred for their own. Almost everything is male-dominated. Very few things are women-driven, and if they are, if they're successful, they're often squashed in some way or seen as a threat. And I think women are now rising up, stepping forward, remembering their own power and in that remembrance, creating tribe and sisterhood, and in that creation, becoming a strong force. So I think women need a sacred space that is their own. (Lorrie, May 2016)

Lorrie's story is a nuanced example of the ways in which many white, middle class North American women find strength and support in an online and imagined community of women doing similar practices for both physical and mental health while borrowing from a variety of non-Western holistic health modalities such as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Ayurveda is a health regime that many yoga practitioners come to find attractive as a compliment to their yoga. Originating from India over 2,000 years ago, Ayurveda is a holistic health framework known as “life science” that integrates the use of individualized nutrition plans, herbs, and bodywork, and has slowly become colonized by Westerners trying to adapt it

for their various maladies (Langford; Newcombe “Global Hybrids”). In her article, “Maharishi Ayur-Veda: Perfect Health through Enlightened Marketing in America,” Cynthia Ann Humes explains that Maharishi Mahesh Yogi introduced Ayurveda to the West in 1955 through transcendental meditation techniques rooted in Advaita Vedānta’s non-dualism philosophy. The basic tenet here is that it is our own ignorance of our true nature (*avidya*) that causes suffering. Ill health, according to Maharishi, is due to “our own mistake of the intellect” (315) that brings us out of harmony with natural law. The Maharishi Ayurveda method claims that meditation that can resolve these intellectual errors. Ayurveda programs in America, however, are marketed to promote an exotic, “feel-good, enjoyable health regimen”, and they minimize the less attractive traditional Ayurvedic practices by omitting any of the spiritual references that may appear remotely religious (310). Like many of the yoga practitioners in this study, Humes concludes that most adherents to Ayurvedic remedies in the West actually avoid or even disavow themselves of Ayurveda’s traditional links with Advaita Vedānta and its non-dualist philosophical position. While Ayurveda has a long history of functioning independently of yoga in India and many consumers of Ayurveda do not practice yoga, in the West, many yoga practitioners come to Ayurveda as a compliment to yoga. I agree with both Humes’ and Langford’s positions that Westerners have colonized Ayurveda for their own purposes, and extend this argument that yoga, too, as it is practiced in the West, is similarly appropriated and colonized. The argument here is that American ideologies of productivity, individualism, and commoditization co-opt the Maharishi’s non-dualism in using those philosophies to place blame on individuals for their failings, rather than examining social inequalities. Self-care,

then, becomes an operative of responsabilization and individualization, particularly when it is devoid of acknowledgement of social values.

Lorrie's involvement with Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as a modality of self-care goes back nearly twenty years since she first did her training, and now she integrates her knowledge of Chinese Medicine meridians, along with yoga mudras into her restorative yoga classes:

...I wanna offer medicine in my classes as opposed to just yoga and just the postures. So in restorative, we do mudras. Last month was all about TCM. The meridian system. Not in the way you and I did it, a bit different. I literally sat there and spoke about the liver. The gall bladder. What it was about. The element; all that stuff in depth. I gave a long version so they would sit in meditation, you see this, *akini mudra*, which is the gesture of the goddess. I speak the wisdom. We go on to fish posture. I'd have them feel it. See if you can sense and feel your liver meridian. Your gall bladder meridian. And as they rest in each pose, I give more medicine about that meridian. How to nourish it, what to do, disfunction and function, all that stuff. So this month I went back to the mudras. The other night I did this one, which is *anamika mudra*. This is all about self healing and coming into contentment, shifting away co-dependency. (Lorrie, May 2016)

It is tempting to make links between Lorrie's mudra and Chinese Medicine practices and how they exemplify cultural appropriation. Lorrie is careful to ensure that her trainings are legitimate and researches the background of the trainers to the best of her ability, but she is still employing a pastiche of alternative, "eastern" approaches to healing that represent these trends.

Evelyn J. Lau's book, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden* articulates the ways in which capitalism informs healthism. She discusses how yoga and macrobiotic eating confer a level of social currency that elevates the status of the consumer such that reflect the American values of the individualism and self-reliance (4). While this ethos is described as American, as Canadians with a still-intact public health care system, our policies and social

values are certainly not immune to those neoliberal values that seem inimical to our so-called just society. As a result, precarious work in the form of short contracts, self-employment, and consultancies have been replacing traditional employment, and a self-made healthy body functions as insurance against a lack of social safety net.

### **Does Teaching Yoga Make You Healthy?**

In the previous chapter, I introduced Anna, a Toronto-based yoga teacher who makes it her life's work to open up integrative, accessible pathways to yoga for underserved populations and mainstream yoga teachers alike. Anna had never thought that she would become a yoga teacher, but shared that her undergraduate degree in the humanities did not equip her for a specific career and before discovering yoga, she floated through various positions that had led her to working in a women's shelter.

So I was in this miserable social work thing that was absolutely, too soul crushing to be working at a VAW [violence against women] shelter with kids and women. Maybe I need to do this, maybe I need this immersion and do the whole thing, and not pick and choose. So somehow, I did that. Okay, I don't wanna be a yoga teacher, but I'm gonna do this whole thing. I thought, it'll be good for my body, it'll be good to have a discipline, to have that structure. (Anna, May 2016)

Anna discovered that yoga was not only the relief that she needed from the stresses of the women's shelter, but the studio owner where she was practicing also suggested that she could alter the course of her own life by becoming a yoga teacher. While at first, Anna had no intention of becoming a yoga teacher and initially did the yoga teacher training to enrich her practice, she eventually found herself falling into teaching at her studio organically, rather than struggling to create classes in libraries and gyms. For some new yoga teachers such as Neil, yoga therapy

training seemed like the right thing to do to help clients be healthy, and as he mentioned in the previous chapter, Neil practices yoga daily:

I was transitioning out of a career focused on the Crossfit movement, and my massage therapy practice within a Crossfit gym. I had some funds left over from the sale of a house I had partial stake in, and so the time was right to explore yoga seriously. I was attracted to Yoga Therapy Toronto because they offered a vision and approach to yoga that was based on the therapeutic application of yoga, which was a contrast to the ‘boutique/studio yoga’ culture that was the norm where I lived at the time in the Burlington/Oakville corridor. Yoga therapy seemed to me like a good fit with what I was already doing, and I went into the course hoping to gain more tools with which to work with my clients. (Neil, September 2016)

Neil’s yoga therapy training did not eventually lead him to a life changing career, but for others such as Alex in Peterborough, becoming a Moksha yoga teacher changed everything about him.

Alex had become a yoga teacher three years before our interview as part of the personal life shifts that happened concurrently with the end of his marriage. He discovered that yoga made him feel whole, and even though he experiences his career as a yoga teacher as precarious, he says:

When I was at the MNR [Ministry of Natural Resources] it was full time permanent, I was making a lot of money, paid vacation, pension, blah blah. But I was miserable. I was in a cubicle with no natural light, no fresh air. And [I] used to be a wildlife biologist and it was just such a shift in environment that I was miserable and I felt my body rotting. (Alex, March 2016)

Alex is upbeat and optimistic about his life, even though money is unreliable, he is running around a lot, and his schedule is often opposite that of his partner and son. He describes what his teaching week is like:

It’s sort of an average 10-12 classes a week. So Moksha is kind of my base income. It’s fairly reliable, fairly predictable. It’s not huge, but it pays rent. Flat fee per class.

We're independent contractors. I send an invoice for every class I teach. I love teaching yoga. But the precarity comes from, my biggest challenges are obviously financial. Moksha pays \$45/class. So, but I have to be there for 2 hours. For a 1 hour class. We have to be there [a half hour] before and after to greet students and check out after. Interaction with teachers is key. And other behind the scenes stuff to keep the studio going. For my business the way I've set it up. I was offering an 8 week chunks, people could pre-reg, take the 8 weeks. And then I added the 10 class pass option, which allowed people to come and go as they wished. And now all of my students are on that model. The 8 week, 6 week period has vaporized. Classes are running, people come and go. So the income is less predictable, but it's not the 2 month peak and valley.

Alex's description of his work week is not unlike that of other full time yoga teachers (see Appendix for demographics chart), which usually entails several weekly hours of unpaid labour. He buffers the income jags with small field survey contracts as an ornithologist, and leads bird watching courses in season. For Alex, the precariousness of the unreliable income from varying class sizes is a small trade-off for how his new lifestyle as a full-time yoga instructor makes him feel:

I love teaching yoga. Two of the people I said hi to since we've arrived are Moksha students. There's this community thing that happens; I love that. I love the way I feel when I'm teaching. I love the feedback from the students... (Alex, March 2016)

Solange did not experience teaching yoga in the same way as Alex did. For her, teaching yoga full time undermined her musculoskeletal integrity because she is hypermobile and frequent demonstrating of postures compromised her hips in particular. Solange wonders if a full time career teaching yoga is even mentally healthy:

I've been there, done it and I'm too old for that. it killed my body. My body is wrecked from that. Who wants to study with a teacher who's fried? She's taught 3 classes [*in a day*]; this is her fourth. She's exhausted. I don't want to be in that class... I have been that that person and it dramatically affected my vibe, my presence. I was on autopilot; every single class was a cookie cutter of the one before it. I was too tired to be present and to be

creative, or even open up to the moment, and then getting punitive with the students. I'd get frustrated. (Solange, April 2016)

Solange recognizes that teaching too many classes in one day is not even beneficial for the yoga clients. Some teachers, such as Moksha yoga instructor Jill, recognize that she simply is not useful to anyone if she teaches more than two classes per day, particularly because she teaches in a heated room.

Two classes a day is the max that I will teach in a hot room, and recently they realized that it's probably not okay for teachers to do that. It used to be allowed in our studio. I stopped doing triples a long time ago. But every time I taught triples, I felt crappy for days after. So I said no, don't schedule me. And shortly after that, in 6 months, they decided that triples just weren't going to be a thing anymore, and they're not going to schedule anyone else like that. (Jill, June 2016)

### **Yoga for Injuries, Injuries from Yoga**

For many teachers leading yoga classes full time, however, they get injured.

Renowned American yoga instructor and originator of the trademarked Yoga Tune-Up balls, Jill Miller, has recently posted about her hip replacement after years of teaching and practicing extreme yoga poses. Over the past five years or so, Miller has been promoting her Yoga Tune-Up balls and The Roll Model Classes as a form of yoga therapy, and yoga teachers have been enthusiastically buying these little spongy balls sold as a couple nestled inside a mesh bag.<sup>32</sup> The balls are used in restorative yoga classes as a way to mitigate injury and promote tissue healing. Miller has recently blogged about her diagnosis of degenerative osteoarthritis in her hip and subsequent total replacement surgery and recovery.<sup>33</sup> Miller's story is not unlike Di-

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.tuneupfitness.com>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.tuneupfitness.com/blog/2017/11/15/how-i-generated-a-degenerated-hip-cause-awareness-and-consequence-hip-surgery-part-2/>

ane Bruni's, whose Yoga and Research Movement Group on Facebook is dedicated to spreading the word about yoga injuries and teaching healthy yoga practice. Diane shared with me that as a teacher of thousands of yoga teachers over fifteen years, she feels a sense of guilt that she herself was perpetuating the discursive culture of discipline through *tapas*. Now, she is trying to change that culture that she herself had bought into and sold, starting with telling about her own "catastrophic glute injury," as she calls it.

So these teaching cues have been drilled into us. And it took me a long time to re-program my body, and how I taught. It took a long time, even though I learned such a hard lesson the hard way. It took a long time to reprogram. So I get it. And I'm sure there are still yoga teachers out there saying it, I'm shocked by that. I can't believe it. I can't believe that they haven't learned from the physiotherapists, the massage, therapists, the sports medicine doctors, the chiropractors, who are cashing in. Cashing in big time! On yoga injuries! It's ridiculous...! I was absolutely convinced that what had happened to me was a very strong message and it was my responsibility as a yoga teacher to be completely upfront about what had happened to my own body... You know, I feel so responsible...I'm just shocked that it took that kind of injury for me to do the research and open my ears and open my eyes and look outside of the yoga world and ask questions. That's what changed for me, because while I was in this yoga bubble, I would have done whatever my teachers told me to do, and I would have done it. I didn't question any of it... (Diane, February 2016)

Yoga teachers also are charged with the responsibility of protecting their students from hurting themselves in practice, a liability that is only somewhat mitigated by waivers and insurance policies. The emergent culture about biomechanical yoga injuries is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is worth noting the societal pressures to injure oneself in service of advancing one's yoga practice. Diane is a prime example of this, and she has made it her life's mission to help injured yogis recover. Yoga teachers who have the bodywork background such as Charlene take a therapeutic approach to caring for her students:

I wasn't a yoga teacher before I was a massage therapist either, so training in massage, yoga helped me understand the body really well so that was a big bonus. But now taking

the massage and mothering into the classroom, I'm not so protective of students, but I really observe people's bodies. There's no reason for this person who's really internally rotated and tight in the chest to be doing Wild Thing. That's not good for her body, so I'm not gonna teach that. Usually it's a group, so I might decide I'm not gonna teach that because it's so bad for so many of these bodies. So it's not so much a protective thing, but I guess it kind of is. (Charlene, July 2016)

Charlene's reticence at admitting she is protecting her students is interesting in light of her being a mother. On one hand, yoga teachers want to preserve the agency of the yoga practitioner who is expected to be responsible for their own safety. But on the other, yoga teachers feel obligated to protect students from hurting themselves as a result of wanting to advance further in their yoga poses. Considering Sarah Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* and the ways in which the mother's first and foremost philosophy is to protect, I asked Charlene if mothering informed the way she teaches yoga.

I think when you become a mother you become more empathetic, like I wanna protect you and take care of you. That combined with body mechanics and postural evaluation, I see we don't need to do wheel, or we can do this other variation instead so the person gets the chest opening and back bending but in a more healthy way for their body. (Charlene, July 2016)

Matthew, a popular athletic yoga teacher in Toronto, sees injuries in yoga much differently:

And you have to teach to the majority ability in the room and try to be as safe as you can be. But you're never gonna be perfectly safe. And you gotta remind people to be honest with themselves about their capabilities about what they can and can't do. It's what you use them for, and how much caution and care that you use. Because any fitness class that you do has movements like wild thing, or jumping up and down with weights over your head which can be damaging to any part of your body. But because we're talking about yoga, and because yoga is supposed to be in the minds of many a healing and gentle thing that connects that as soon as there's anything introduced that is remotely um, injurious or potentially injurious then that's when they're blowing the whistle or whatever.

Matthew maintains that it is the responsibility of the practitioner to be honest in their practice, to engage with Patāñjali's notion of *ahimsa* (non-violence), and take care not to hurt themselves. He argues that what he is teaching is authentic, healthy, and safe,

Because it [yoga] still creates a dialogue with the body and it gets people to start having the dialogue with themselves about what they're capable of, what they're not capable of, how to be honest with themselves. How to modify if they need to so they don't hurt their body. I don't like to use the word ego in my class. But sometimes I'll say that, and, I'm gonna ask you to be honest with yourself and if you start to sag in your mid-section when we're lowering down, touch your knees down, so that you don't sag, because it's better to modify your practice than to hurt your body. And so, that's getting closer to the root of being honest with yourself. And I believe that that's what yoga is (Matthew, September 2016).

### **Yoga as Care Work: Yoga for Mothers, Mothers Teaching Yoga**

The following segment of the discussion of the health effects of yoga for yoga teachers relates to a large but specific sector of the yoga teacher demographic. Since the large percentage of yoga teachers, 72 per cent according to *Yoga Journal* and Yoga Alliance's statistics, is established to be women (see *Yoga in America* study 2016<sup>34</sup>), we can also speculate that many of them are also mothers. Slightly over half, which is 55 per cent to be exact, of the women in my study identified as mothers, most of whom teach yoga part time to honour and express their passion for yoga and potentially, but not usually, augment the household income. Webber and Williams (2008) study of 54 women who voluntarily work part-time illustrate the conflicts that are emblematic of neoliberalism values of individualization and labour flexibility. While many of their participants say that they have "the best of both worlds," like most of the participants in this study who occupy subject positions of mother and yoga teacher, there are

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.yogajournal.com/page/yogainamericastudy>

contradicting benefits and drawbacks. Like most of the yoga teachers in my study, Webber and Williams point out that the mothers in their study on part-time work and gendered labour say they are grateful for the opportunity to work part-time. They draw on a 1998 study, however, that argues that women's part time work is a "gendered strategy" that reinforces the societal norms of gendered labour division, and as such, recreates stratified inequalities in the home and in labour (17). Arlie Russell Hochschild's notion of "gender strategy" differs somewhat differently from Webber and Williams', however, and this nuance is important here. Hochschild explains gender strategy as a "basic dynamic of marriage," that is, the man and woman's plan of action and the emotional preparations in preparation for it (18). What unifies these two arguments is that even though the woman might feel that she is egalitarian and feminist, the reality is a more traditional arrangement than their ideology may profess.

The mother yoga teachers I interviewed demonstrate that they are still doing the bulk of the housework, the child care, and the family organizing. My hypothesis, or the problematic that I am establishing here, is that our neoliberal, responsabilizing society does not make it easy for women to be empowered as mothers, and that for mothers who are also yoga teachers, there are more barriers over which they must hurdle than yoga teachers who are not mothers. Sharon Hays coined the phrase "intensive mothering" to describe the dominant ideology of motherhood that is rooted in neoliberalism in North America (414). Intensive mothering dictates that mothers must be the central caregiver for their children, while also holding down full-time employment. The intensive mother, then, must be embody all the roles of playmate, nurse, event organizer, fashion coordinator, and educator, and gracefully balance their work. A similar ideology to layer with intensive mothering is "the motherhood religion," in which

mothers are discursively regulated to embody ideal motherhood as media images would like us to believe (Douglas and Michaels; Warner). Without being aware of these theories, many of the women in this study feel pressured to conform to these motherhood ideologies.

We return to Lorrie in Guelph, whose advanced level of yoga training takes her skills beyond what mainstream yoga classes offer. She identifies as a feminist and earnestly wants to help women, while guiding them to experience life holistically in an empowering way. Lorrie recognizes that women inhabit a society in which the discourse is intensive mothering, but they are starting to quietly resist. In her response to this, Lorrie wanted to offer a yoga class that would meet the specific needs of women in her community. Lorrie has lost interest in trying to look like a certain body type or achieve an externally determined level of physical fitness.

I think we're all tired. I think we're all searching for a place to lay [sic] down. And this is a safe place. And we all want to move forward, we all want to heal, to expand ourselves. We all want to cry and be held, and not judged in this safe forum... I'm in my late 40s now. I don't wanna do Ashtanga yoga. I don't wanna do a fast vigorous hātha or vinyasa flow. I wanna do more fluid practice. And I need rest. I am running around driving kids. And doing this and doing that. And I need rest. So I often will be drawn to what I need, which I think others need too. So I was really drawn to restorative. So I took a training in that recently, and really loved that. And also yoga nidra. And I combine the two in classes. (Lorrie, May 2016)

Lorrie had been a full-time yoga instructor and bodyworker for five years before her children were born. Her husband was a full-time financial analyst and so like many other women who decided that part-time work was more stressful for the family than the cost benefits of not working, Lorrie had to let go of something.

So I let go of teaching yoga, stayed with the holistic arts. And now I'm teaching yoga again. It's good to be back teaching. Not just doing kids. I taught kids 2 years ago for a

while. I did some adult classes in the park. It feels really good; I don't wanna say niche, in a marketing way... (Lorrie, May 2016)

She and her husband had agreed that she would make her career work around the children's needs, and she has been gradually re-developing her career as a restorative yoga instructor in a way that for her, offers health not only to her family, but to her community. Lorrie's quote above indicates her awareness that she is in a sense, capitalizing on a specific market approach to teaching yoga through The Goddess Restore classes she offers. They represent for her a holistic approach to women's wellness.

Kitchener-based Moksha yoga instructor Jill is a mother of four, and also identifies as white and middle class with a husband as the primary earner. Like Lorrie, Jill recognizes the need for most people to slow down and feel, rather than do more:

I'm not a pushy instructor. It's not go go, harder harder. It's a lot more softer softer, chill out. I think we have enough go go in life, and we need to sit down a lot more. I'm not terrifically focused on core work. I don't know if that's anything to do with babies, but I've always hated core in yoga. Like, a specific, we're going to do core work now. As opposed to integrate the core into the pose. That makes a lot more sense. But were gonna do crunches in the middle of class? No. (Jill, June 2016, via Skype)

Veronica, a popular yoga teacher in Toronto who balances her role as a mother and wife with teaching, shares that she sometimes feels she has the energy for neither her son nor for teaching, but that once she is on the yoga mat, all the fatigue changes as she reconnects with her sense of compassion:

I feel like there are a lot of points in my life as a mother, where [I] feel depleted and where I feel like I give and give in both relationship and mothering, where I feel kind of have give fatigue, so it feels good to just be in my practice, where I feel like I'm giving something back to myself. It always feel like self-care. I've never felt that I've walked into a yoga class that I didn't get something out of it that was helping with my mental and physical health. I can also be quite an impatient and quite a controlling person, and so I feel like my exit mode after yoga class I tread more lightly on myself. Come here

let's sit, let's breathe, I feel more patient for you, more present minded for you. When I have trouble in my relationship and I feel really stuck or anxious or in emotional pain, sometimes I have to go teach a class, in the process of teaching the class and being there for them, and talking the talk and moving the body, I leave in a completely different state than when I went in. It's always a gift. It's a big tool. (Veronica, July 2016)

What is notable from Veronica's standpoint is that she says little about the parenting support she receives from her husband. Of course, individual circumstances in relationships vary between families, but standard breadwinner structures in conjunction with intensive motherhood ideologies tend to favour the mother as primary caregiver. For Charlene in New Brunswick, single mothering and teaching yoga is an even bigger challenge than for women with partners:

I don't have any family or a partner here. So that's really challenging. I have a really really good babysitter. Besides that, I don't have any support. ...I'm a lot more of an introverted person now than I ever was because I'm putting myself out there all day, talking in front of people in front of class, and communicating with a variety of people all day, and then I don't have as much energy to put out when I'm home in the evenings. So that's challenging. (Charlene, July 2016 via Skype)

Solo parenting combined with running her own studio means that like Veronica, Charlene struggles to manage her energy for her son, but unlike Veronica or Jill or Laura, Charlene must constantly negotiate care work with non-family members.

Other mothers, like Cathy in Winnipeg whom I interviewed via Skype, find that teaching yoga evens out their life purpose beyond mothering. Similarly to Veronica, Cathy has a husband who earns the primary income. Cathy had contacted me in response to a general call to talk with yoga teachers and mothers on a Facebook group that had started out as a local Toronto group but expanded to be continent-wide in the Spring of 2016.<sup>35</sup> She shared with me that as both a new

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<sup>35</sup> What was interesting to learn as an aside in this interview and in others with teachers in Fredericton, NB, Vancouver, New York, and even smaller towns in Ontario is that the culture of teaching yoga is not substantially different across the continent with regards to the precariousness of finding work as a yoga instructor.

mother and yoga teacher, she was looking for something else to do in addition to being with the baby while developing her skills as a novice instructor. Previously an employee for VIA Rail, Cathy found herself literally grounded as a new mother and hungry to put her new yoga teacher training to use:

I was looking into the prenatal & postnatal classes mom and baby classes. I saw an ad looking for a new yoga teacher. At this point I was getting up 4 times a night with my son, but I jumped at the opportunity. I'm so glad I did. It's very competitive. It's extremely hard unless you want to teach out of community centres on your own, or out of your home. I wasn't sure that I would ever be good enough to get a job teaching yoga, I was terrified, and then this opportunity fell into my lap. I was so grateful for it and absolutely love it. I teach prenatal yoga primarily; I had to be trained by Fit4two their curriculum, how they teach prenatal. So I got a little bit more certification and education. I don't actually have a prenatal teaching certificate; I just have my 200 hours. I don't have that specialization but I was still able to teach that class because I was trained by the company.

Cathy felt immediately gratified with this opportunity and feels like she should have been doing this years ago. She says that she wants to “delve into the yoga world, and become immersed in it read all the books, take all the classes, but I don't have the time. My life is devoted to my son right now and I'm being pulled in two directions.” This sense of being pulled in two directions is echoed by three other yoga teacher mothers I spoke to. What Cathy barely mentioned at all is the role her husband plays in raising her family, other than that he has a full-time position in information technology and is the primary breadwinner in the family. Cathy ultimately feels that yoga is the thing in her life that keeps her healthy and sane as she deals with the adventures of new motherhood.

Jill in Kitchener and Veronica in Toronto, along with Laura, a mother of three in the U.K., all express a resignation to the fact that their yoga teaching careers take a back seat to their mothering.

Scheduling is difficult. My work is all over the place. And I have to try to keep that all together, who's gotta be where, and where else. I try to get the scheduling in so I make sure that someone is home for the other kids if I'm not. Also my brother lives with us, so sometimes he's able to fill in childcare holes... I can't ever have a superstar yoga career because I don't have the time for that. You know, I can't do 8 hours of yoga a day. I would actually like to make some money, and I don't. But I don't have time. (Jill, June 2016)

The structure of my life has also meant that I have been unable to make yoga my career. In the time I have been at home with kids, hundreds of other teachers have appeared on the local scene. Some of those, I know for a fact, see no dissonance in putting their young children in paid childcare so that they can go and teach. (Laura, August 2016, via personal communication)

Veronica recognizes the privilege she has as a mother with only one child, and as a wife of a doctor who brings in a good income. She appreciates that she inhabits a positionality of privilege where she can afford to teach for virtually nothing for the love of teaching:

I'm lucky that my partner is financially able to support us. I understand that I'm coming from a place of privilege here. I don't have to freak out if I'm making \$10 from that class... and then if I had rent to pay there would be a lot more resistance and to be honest I probably would have been bringing him at 3 yrs old to the studio... you've gotta do what you gotta do. I've turned down some gigs, because I didn't want to be away from him anymore. I've had some options for night classes, but now that he's in school full time the only stuff I really want is daytime work. I want to be home with him in the evening if he has soccer, I want to be there. I recognize that my ability to choose that that I want to be with my son, and I want to work during the day, but also not having to work at night is a privilege. So I would say that that's where I really notice it... I would like to be working more... but not wanting to be away from my son has me prioritizing him over working even though I love to be teaching more... (Veronica, July 2016)

Like Jill and Laura, Veronica is willing to sacrifice her career as a yoga teacher in service of raising her son. She also points out that it is not simply having time to show up to classes; marketing is also necessary but time consuming, unpaid labour.

I feel that once you become a mother, your ability to really get out there, and market yourself to death, and accept all those gigs and market yourself to death; it's just constant putting yourself out there. Showing up to the classes, making yourself known, and really making your mark takes a lot of unpaid time. And can you do that, do you want to do that, when you have a child? (Veronica, July 2016)

This unpaid marketing time is the hallmark of the so-called gig economy, such that networking becomes part of the selling of the self. Laura shared with me the poignant complexities of supporting mothers who are yoga teachers in a highly competitive industry. Some of the women in her rural community are wanting to offer special pre-natal yoga teacher trainings and classes, and a colleague asked her what she thought. For Laura, this was a conflict of interest because she feels the industry is already saturated and she wants to support existing teachers who are also new mothers. In her response letter to the colleague that she shared with me, Laura says,

I am more interested in supporting the excellent teachers that already exist, rather than women like yourselves who have time and money to devote to training in this area - and, by extension, those who have the market clout to offer teacher trainings. In my view this is part and parcel of supporting women through their pregnancies and postnatal periods. Everyone I know who works in this area does so as an outflow of their own experience, which means that they are having to navigate the financially precarious times which come with starting (or expanding) our families. I am at a point in my life and my teaching career where I am frankly fed up of much of the rhetoric that goes on in the yoga world regarding community, support, sangha etc; it feels like so much hot air to me. Just like in any other industry, women need less, not more barriers to returning to work after they've had a baby. Generating, promoting, or unknowingly upholding direct competition, no matter how you cut it, is the creation of a barrier. (Laura, August 2016, via personal communication)

The body becomes the commodity, then, which many yoga teachers experience as complicated by external and internal pressures to sell themselves as worthy yoga instructors to maintain their livelihoods. Yoga students become clients, and the best way to sell classes to clients is not through spirituality as I discussed in Chapter 4, but rather, through the body. The commodified

body becomes another cog in the wheel of production and reproduction, and the yoga teacher's role is to help produce healthy, useful bodies that lead productive lives.

### **Selling Yoga, Selling Health**

With these discussions of Feminist Materialism and Feminist Political Economy in both Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter, it becomes clear that the yoga industry is conforming to pressures to basically sell health. It would be more accurate to say that the yoga industry is selling the idea of health, through ideologies of perfect health and the promise of achieved health through yoga. With the Iyengar tradition an exception, many yoga teachers, such as Charlene in New Brunswick, choose their yoga teacher training programs not based on the lineage of the spiritual practice, but rather, on the background in anatomy and biomechanics that the trainers have. Charlene's story is particularly interesting because she is a massage therapist and single mother who is also running her own clinic and studio. In fact, many yoga teachers like Charlene choose trainers who have background in the Iyengar lineage. She admits, however, that "Our training was very, um, very movement based. Very anatomy based" (Charlene, July 2016 via Skype). Charlene's teacher trainer is a massage therapist as well, so she felt confident that her choice would reinforce an āsana-based approach to body awareness and bio-mechanical knowledge. She explains, "That made it a lot easier than going to some random 200 hour and getting not good body mechanics."

As discussed in Chapter 4, however, this āsana-only approach to yoga is highly problematic, which frustrates many yoga teachers who would prefer to offer yoga classes the focus not

solely on the body's alignment, but in alignment with yoga's philosophical roots in the *Sanātana dharma*. Returning to my conversation with yoga philosophy teacher and naturopath Ritesh in Toronto, he reminds us that:

What people are doing is Ayurveda, for the most part. Health stuff, better improved health, mental focus. All those things are... I think most people are engaged in Ayurveda! ...Ayurveda refers to the quality of your health, and in a thin kind of way, then there's a connection that you're in a better condition to do this. Beyond that, no, there's no connection. Like, being healthy makes it easier to meditate? Fine, that's the connection. Not much there that way. People can approach Ayurveda without ever coming into the other stuff. Because Ayurveda could be about cooking your dinner; not about heavy duty graduate level philosophical questions... Yeah, because I think Ayurveda is simple, and not understood in a proper way. It's easy. It can help you toward your health. (Ritesh, March 2016)

We return to Matthew, who maintains that his brand of yoga is authentic. As we saw earlier in this chapter, Matthew recognizes the complexities between fitness yoga and yoga as a spiritual discipline.

If you're not being taught one on one with a guru then anything you do is for fitness. And it has to be treated that way. But it's still a group fitness class when you break it down in the west... And I think that what I teach, which is a very fast paced, fast breathing, vinyasa yoga movement yoga, with workout moves in between, is still yoga. I believe it's still yoga. (Matthew, September 2016)

Lorrie, on the other hand, prefers to keep an element of spirituality in her practice and in her teaching, and as such, recognizes that even though a yoga student might come in just wanting to stretch, that there is more to offer. She maintains that as people feel physical improvements in their health and being, they become more aware of yoga's deeper layers:

With yoga, we move the physical body which is in essence energy. We're giving ourselves the opportunity to unblock the stiffness, stretch out the muscles so we can make space for the energy that's perhaps blocked to move more freely and perhaps shift. And in that spaciousness as a result of the stretch, we have the opportunity to feel a bit better in our own skin and perhaps see ourselves again, as opposed to maybe rejecting ourselves and not

looking inward. Oh I feel a bit better now, what's this about? So I think yoga of course there's different layers as with everything. (Lorrie, May 2016)

Lorrie also reminds us that she feels strongly that yoga is more than about physical healing.

It was such good medicine for me. I remember being in pigeon [a deep passive stretch for the external hips and gluteal region] and we held it for 10 minutes. It was a huge emotional release and it was wonderful. (Lorrie, May 2016)

Lorrie tells us that she sees her yoga practice as a vehicle for emotional healing, and Alex, a white male yoga instructor in Peterborough, concurs: “If you're in pigeon [pose], it's normal to feel like you might want to laugh or cry or throttle the teacher. We store stuff in our hips! If crying is what you need to do, it's a safe place to do it” (March 2016, Peterborough). Pigeon pose tends to be the popular favourite for focusing on emotional release, but there is no specifically scientific language or evidence based research at this time to confirm such a claim. These quotes suggest that yoga is used to make medically unsubstantiated health claims such as that emotions are stored in the hips and that putting one's body into a challenging pose is cathartic. Joanne in Kingston recalls that yoga benefitted her beyond the physical level. When she was finishing her dissertation and doing a yoga teacher training, it was not only the physical postures of yoga that helped Joanne, but also the community of other yoga practitioners at her home studio that helped restore Joanne's faith in people after surviving what she refers to as the trauma of graduate school.

At restorative class, I'd be the one crying on the mat. Especially those classes at that time was helping manage and cope with the difficulty of being on the job market. And the unsupportive relationships with my colleagues and people who were supposed to be my mentors but were hurtful at that college. Having both a yoga practice and a yoga community there made me feel like people are not horrible. It reminded me that there are good people who care about me when my colleagues and fellow employees don't and sometimes are acting quite harmful toward me. (Joanne, May 2016, via Skype)

As we shall see in greater detail in the next chapter, many yoga practitioners acknowledge that yoga has helped them heal from trauma and intersectional oppressions wrapped up not only in race and racism, but also in body image struggles, sexuality, and gender identity. Complicating this is the fact that the preponderance of white, normative-bodied, upper and middle class women in yoga culture often has functioned as a barrier for those whose bodies fall outside of this norm.

### **Yoga and Social Determinants of Health**

Lorrie's experiences affirm that physical healing is not the only kind of health benefit of yoga:

The opportunity exists perhaps in the more advanced practice, perhaps coming into deeper meditation, to expand the body, and then in expansion, open up to really see different parts of yourself. Shadow parts, positive parts. In the seeing and awareness of the shadow of yourself, you can choose to come into healing. Knowing that yoga is a place that you can come and deep surrender and be safe in that classroom safe.

Like many other yoga practitioners, Lorrie accepts the medically unproven claim that we hold our emotions in body parts. Even I have been a purveyor of that unproven science as a shiatsu therapist back in the first decade of the twenty-first century. I was attracted to the holistic concepts of Zen shiatsu and lay theories in Asian medicine, which promulgate that the body stores specific emotions in energetic meridians that connect with Traditional Chinese Medicine. These are the same meridians, or lines of energy used in acupuncture. These meridians can be considered neuromuscular or energetic, and while TCM theory does subscribe to the notion that each meridian is connected to an organ, its function, and an emotional quality, the actual provability of this theory is anecdotal rather than evidence-based science. This is not to say, however, that just because a claim is not evidence based, gold standard proven medicine it is untrue. In my shiatsu

practice between 1999 and 2006 I found many moments when clients would have improved clarity after I worked on a meridian that shiatsu theory would ascribe to that specific emotion. It is widely understood that TCM has a poetic, metaphoric quality that defies literal or linear explanation on biological processes, that speak to the notion of humans as microcosms of the universe (Farquhar; Kaptchuk; Kuriyama). Classical Zen shiatsu theory holds that each of the meridians corresponds to a specific emotion, and that if the therapist treats an area on that meridian, the client will experience greater clarity or even resolution with those feelings (Masunaga; Beresford-Cooke).

The dualistic ways of thinking that are emblematic of the West are particularly notable when we consider differences between Eastern and Western epistemologies of the body. Following medical anthropologists Scheper-Hughes and Lock in their canonical article, “The mindful body: A prolegomenon to future work in medical anthropology”, I note that Western science maintains that mind and body are separate, while Eastern understandings of the body see it as a microcosm of the universe, and that what happens to the individual in their social milieu and environment can also have a direct effect on their physiological well-being. Scheper-Hughes and Lock give the example of a grand rounds presentation in medical school of a woman suffering from chronic and debilitating headaches. The medical students heard her sad life circumstances with sympathy, and then asked, “But what is the *real* cause of the headaches?” (8). In other words, clinical biomedicine, which stands as the gold standard for realities of the body, is unable to conceptualize a holistic picture of the individual that takes their emotional, social, environmental circumstances into account. What happens in the mind, according to Western biomedicine, is not perceived as real or as valid unless it is measurable as neurophysiological. The

body is lower, more coarse than the refined, supposedly rational mind, and as such, pain is either physical or mental, which leads to a “tendency to transform the social into the biological” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 10). What attracted me and many other Western women to alternative medicine, then, was the promise of a holistic health practice that honoured the social, emotional, and environmental processes that affect the body.

Social determinants of health (SDOH) theory is one way in which to quantitatively measure the ways in which race, class, age, ability, and gender affect population health (Evans, Marmor, & Barer), and it informs my analysis of yoga in the context political economies of health. Alongside the discussion of this chapter, I wish to formulate a theory that articulates SDOH with contemporary North American yoga practitioners’ experiences as a health equity concept. Who has access to yoga’s benefits as a health practice, and who does not? With generalized health promotion practices in Canada extending back to the early-to-mid 1970s (Lalonde; Lavis; Bryant, Raphael and Travers), we see that trends toward self-care make health the responsibility of the individual, rather than doctors or social policy. The Lalonde Report, which was a landmark study from the Canadian Department of Health and Welfare in 1974, identified alcohol and smoking, poor dietary habits, and reckless driving as key predictors of morbidity (16-17). Studies in population health enable us to research not only how individuals are healthy or not, but also examines risks, burdens, vulnerabilities, and conditions of living and working among population groups (Lucyk and McLaren 2).

I extend Gore and Kothari’s assessment that environment-based initiatives such as local food or activity programs are not going to improve population health unless structural initiatives are implemented (53). I further this logic to suggest that even if yoga is made more available to

people in community centres, it ultimately will do little to improve health or social inequalities unless policies and discourse around work and physical exercise change. Bryant, Raphael & Travers conclude that specific localized research helps communities to develop their own population health needs through four components: health promotion and SDOH, community-based participatory research, lived experience of people, and policy analysis and change (7-8). To extend a SDOH model toward precarious work and teaching yoga, I draw on Facey and Eakin's study on links between contingent work and ill health. They define contingent work as anything that is considered casual, contractual, part-time, or any kind of non-standard work (326), and argue that precarious work can and does negatively affect the worker's physical and mental health despite the neoliberal positive spin on contingent work as liberating and flexible (329-330). The sad irony of this flexibilization, then, is that yoga teachers, as precarious workers, are constantly subject in myriad ways to the detrimental effects of this unstable form of labour.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the thematic links between physical yoga practice, health, and political economy as yoga practitioners and teachers experience and perceive them. We have seen a trajectory that draws connections between discursive notions of healthism as social capital. I articulated these theories with examples from my yoga participants about how they have experienced pressures to be healthy and do more yoga as a signifier of health. Next, the fieldwork demonstrated that yoga teachers, especially those who are mothers, contend with inequalities with regards to becoming successful and prosperous by teaching yoga, and the physical risks that yoga instructors take to their physical and mental health by attempting to make a full time

living teaching a recreational practice. The final section of this chapter briefly explored the non-physical aspects of yoga and health, which offers a segue into the next chapter, which continues to explore the ways in which embodiment, gender, and sexuality intersect in the yoga communities in North America.

The findings of the data for this chapter are, in my opinion, rather glum. In the wake of yet another CUPE 3903 strike<sup>36</sup>, the irony of the precariousness of teaching yoga and academic labour and the ways in which these conditions determine health is not lost on me. I write this as I recover from picketing in the cold this week, as the union fights against what has now become known as the gig economy. A career teaching yoga in contemporary North America is another example of work in this gig economy, where teachers are useful depending on their flexibility as workers and the visibility and attractiveness of their profiles on social media. As the various respondents in my study have shared, however, they are not glum, or at least, they are not ready to admit that they are. They feel grateful for what yoga offers them as teachers and as practitioners. They report that their health is improved, and their relationships as a result of yoga, are also more clearly defined. While Alex does seem reluctant to admit his financial struggle as a result of quitting his \$80,000 per year position with the Ministry of Natural Resources, he does share that he makes ends meet doing seasonal and highly lucrative ornithology research and bird tours. This performance of gratitude exemplifies the height of the precariat that Berlant writes about. It is endemic in the yoga world that people are expected to be grateful all the time, and as far as I am

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<sup>36</sup> CUPE 3903 (Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 3903) is the labour union representing York University contract teaching faculty, teaching assistants, graduate assistants, and research assistants. <https://3903.cupe.ca/about/background/>

concerned, it constitutes a form of emotional and physical abuse that ultimately undermines health.

I bring precarious work into this discussion of yoga and health because of the known links between precarious work and health. The stealthy ways in which neoliberal structures of employment colonize yoga are such that yoga as a spiritual discipline is undermined for the cause of yoga as a health practice. There is an insidious kinship between the notion of yoga as a discipline of the self and neoliberalism as a public downloading of social services onto the individual, through which yoga is secularized in service of the health and wellness industry and commoditization.

If yoga teachers do not perform gratitude for scraps of work and income, they risk being invited to teach fewer classes. While the *Yoga in America* study suggests that yoga teachers earn up to \$75 as an hourly wage, the truth is that this wage is far from regular. Yoga teachers might earn \$55 for a class at a studio at 8:00 p.m., but if they teach a class in a community centre, the wage might be closer to \$30. The math is not promising to show good earnings. As Aaron explained, he must pay out of pocket for his dental care, and relies on the good health that his yoga practice is meant to bring him in order to avoid costly prescriptions. He expressed gratitude that neither his son nor partner has chronic health issues such as asthma, which could require a monthly prescription cost of over \$75. While Ontario has recently introduced universal prescription coverage for people under age 25 and this is a huge relief for many, there still remains countless other expenses that are difficult for yoga teachers to afford.

This story is not much different from any other part-time and self-employed worker. As so many members of the Toronto yoga community have shared, “If I don’t work, I don’t get

paid.” One anonymous Toronto teacher who owns a yoga studio, shared recently that she has had major debilitating health issues through which she continued to teach her classes while suffering intensely. When she could no longer perform adequately due to her health condition, she reached out to the community for financial support. Other yoga teachers I have interviewed have had to find other, less physically demanding work because their bodies no longer can manage running from studio to community centre to private class to gym, demonstrating yoga poses and sequences. Cathy, the Iyengar yoga teacher in this study, recognizes that her body may not look to be the epitome of health and fitness because it is no longer model-thin. She prides herself on the integrity of her practice. Diane Bruni has publicly declared how her devotion to the Ashtanga yoga practice injured her body, and is now doing everything but yoga. Other teachers tell me that they avoid certain recreational activities because they can not risk injuring themselves when they need their bodies in order to make a living. Many yoga teachers, and this is particularly applicable in the United States, struggle to make payments on their health insurance, which one successful teacher in the Berkshires of Massachusetts tells me cost more than \$500 per month. At least in Canada, basic health care is a part of our social fabric.

While some yoga teachers might call themselves “healers” or purport that they are healed by yoga, I argue that in order to claim yoga’s healing qualities, one needs to be supported in other ways so that they are not inhibited by the precariousness of the industry and the sheer cost of attending yoga classes in a studio context. Yoga can be so very beneficial for a massive range of physical, mental, and spiritual ailments, but if it is inaccessible through financial barriers, shallow body perfectionism, or white heteronormativity, then its benefits are of no use.

## **Chapter 6**

### **EMBODIMENTS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE YOGA WORLD**

#### **Introduction**

When I tell people that I am doing my PhD dissertation about gender and yoga, one of their first responses is to ask, “and why *are* there so many women doing yoga? Why do so many of them seem to be white?” It seems like an obvious question to set out with at the beginning of this research, but what I found is more complex than just thinking about white women in mainstream yoga, or why there are few women of colour yoga teachers in the North American yoga world. Not only is there a preponderance of white middle class women in yoga, which has been discussed by many scholars already (Kern; Horton; Miller; Berila, Klein, & Jackson Roberts; Ballard and Kripalani; Mehta), but the many ways in which people negotiate their gender, race, ability, and sexuality render multiple complexities in yoga culture in North America. Particularly within the framework of yoga and social justice, a discussion of contemporary yoga in this society is incomplete if we only talk about cross-cultural consumption or cultural appropriation, and it is likewise shallow if I only were to address body normativity and women in yoga. For all of the exclusion of non-white, thin, youthful, agile, heteronormative bodies that mainstream yoga perpetuates, there is a growing group of people who are shifting what I call, “the yoga hegemony.” More importantly, my research has demonstrated that people are, in fact, starting to think critically about the ways in which we mediate our embodiments of in the contemporary western yoga world. As Punam Mehta set out in her research to create a framework for feminist yoga practice (227), I, too, am also working to create a framework for a feminist yoga with an ethics of care that holds social justice central.

This problematic in North American yoga sets the stage for the current chapter, which explores the embodied dynamic of gender and sexuality. Despite yoga's claims that it is for every body, I continue to ask, who is included, who is not, and why? What are people doing to change embodiment norms in contemporary yoga culture? How, with the awareness of lingering tensions around tradition and authenticity in yoga, might practitioners shape its future? In considering materialist feminist and feminist anthropology theories of the body, I argue that the future of yoga is not bound by a static knowledge system rooted in India. I agree with Jacoby and Kripalani who "accept that there isn't one authentic homogenous yoga, and that there are and have been many yogas, responding to and in relationship with sociohistorical contexts" (297). While some champions of yoga insist that it must remain rooted in scriptural knowledge traditions from the Indian sub-continent, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 4, others argue that a complex network of transnational cultural exchange has allowed for dynamic transfer of knowledge across the Atlantic. In the constant struggle to define what is yoga, I negotiate traditionalist accusations of cultural appropriation against those who mindfully incorporate both the wisdom of yoga scriptures with the material realities and ethics of care of those who practice and teach yoga in contemporary North America. This chapter takes up complex notions of embodiment as it intersects with gender, race, and sexuality in North American yoga communities. To do this, I first briefly discuss intersectionality theory in the context of anti-racist feminism (Smooth; Wilson; hooks; Davis; Lorde; McCall; Kainer; Dua). In the second section of the chapter, I weave a critical analysis of embodiment and gender essentialism through the discussion of feminist embodiment theories (Rice; Bordo), along with a review of the literature on essentialism (Fuss; Crowley). The subsequent sections of this chapter will explore the stories of my research participants and the

ways they experience the divine feminine, their sexuality, and their gendered embodiment in yoga.

### **Intersectionality: A Material Analysis of Identities**

In her open letter to Mary Daly about her observations and questions arising from Daly's omission of African goddesses, Audre Lorde writes,

Your words on the nature and function of the Goddess, as well as the ways in which her face has been obscured, agreed with what I myself have discovered in my searches through African myth/legend/religion for the true nature of old female power. So I wondered, why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess images only white, western, european, judeo-christian? Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa?... Well, I thought, Mary has made a conscious decision to narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western European women (67).

Since the 1970s, black feminists have been calling for the development of an anti-racist, anti-sexist politics that takes into account the lived realities of black women (hooks; Combahee River Collective). As Lorde points out further in her letter to Daly, while they are both radical feminist lesbians, black women have statistically higher morbidity rates and experiences of reproductive discrimination than white women (70). While post-WWII white women emerged with from the kitchens with the "problem with no name" as labelled by Betty Friedan in 1966, black women, on the other hand, have never not worked outside the home, and have "carried the double burden of wage labor and housework" (Davis 231). Black feminists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and Patricia Hill-Collins have made their life's work about reframing feminism through the lens of black women's lived experience, thus integrating gender, race, class, and sex-

uality into a decades-long discussion of a theoretical framework that has come to be known as intersectionality.

Through an intersectional analysis of nearly any set of political or social relations, we can start to grasp the complexities race, class, sexuality, and gender that often produce and reproduce systemic inequality and exclusion globally. Lorde's letter to Daly highlights the near monumental blindness of white women in her milieu to the realities of black women. While Lorde recognizes that Daly does mention various issues with regards to non-European women, she points out that it is always in the context of oppression or violence (67), which obfuscates the empowered realities of many black women in spite of white patriarchy. Bourgeois class bias furthers the distance between black and white feminists, as hooks points out. hooks argues that white feminists often undermine the work of black feminists who may not hold the same levels of education that they have, and concomitantly, many women may conversely avoid "intellectual work" of theory as an anti-bourgeois rejection of unattainable standards that "do not have any connection to real life" (112).

In the yoga world, we see race, gender, and embodiment intersect in ways that reproduce inequality and separation. As Leslie McCall points out in her essay, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," the analytical categories that produce social differences do not constitute a generalized female identity. She explains that "the deconstruction of master categories is understood as part and parcel of the construction of inequality itself" (1777), but this anti-categorical approach undermines the lived realities of different identities. In the work that I have done as a feminist ethnographer, I have tried to attend to these complexities in a fine-grained way that recognizes

that intersectional identities often push people to the margins. On one hand, some feminist yoga practitioners desire to create identity-specific spaces to protect them from the traumas of white heteronormative patriarchy, and on the other, a drive to reject a perceived self-segregation that divides rather than unifies.

South Asian feminist and yoga practitioner Sunam Mehta argues in favour of a form of segregated yoga space: “Virginia Woolf wrote that a woman needs a room of her own. Today, I am saying that we need a feminist yoga space of our own” (230). As Kainer points out, intersectional identity complicates social inequality and replicates disadvantages that impinge activist mobility (103), and her study highlighted the way labour activists were judged based on hegemonic masculine standards of activism. With regards to yoga, we can consider how we also reproduce similar hegemonic ways of seeing and interacting with participants, and our assumptions about women’s intersecting subjectivities in a yoga space. A yoga teacher or practitioner’s attention or inattention to intersectionality can have deep impact on other people’s experiences of yoga; I hold yoga teachers and writers on yoga culture to be the most responsible for centralizing an intersectional analytical framework to deconstruct entrenched power imbalances in social and institutional spaces. The goal, however, is not to emphasize oppression, but rather, to draw out simultaneous political specificity and fluidity in order to articulate identity politics with intersectionality (Wilson 3). As Wendy Smooth explains, intersectionality evolved through black feminists’ activism toward societal transformation of status quo and inclusion (15). In situating intersectionality into a discussion of embodiment and yoga, we do so in order to explore what Smooth calls the “compounded privileges of the powerful” (17). In so doing intersectional analy-

sis of yoga as it articulates with embodiment and gender, we then can begin to unravel entrenched power imbalances in the North American yoga world.

### **Feminist Embodiment Theories: The Essential Feminine, The Goddess, and the Gaze on the Ideal Body**

#### The Essential Feminine:

Zen Buddhist philosopher Alan Watts writes that the division between the men and women has its roots in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Watts writes, “We simply find ourselves in a culture where nature is called Mother Nature” (142), and goes on to explain the etymological roots of the associations of women with nature, sexuality, and lack of control. Drawing on Watts’ argument that women are “simply” associated with nature and sexuality, Bordo explains that he made clear that “control is the central issue for the soul,” which leads to its by-product, dualism (145). As feminist scholars disputed essentialist claims of the unruly female body (Ehrenreich; Grosz; Bordo), many female yoga practitioners and New Age identified people sought to essentialize femininity, as a form of re-claiming womanhood. Grosz in particular outlines the notion of Cartesian dualism, a patriarchal philosophy that guided the social construct, which maintains that the body and mind are separate. More importantly, dualism holds that the mind, which is rational and guides the masculine, must control the body, which is associated with the irrational and the natural. Diana Fuss’ important work, *Essentially Speaking*, addresses the debates around the issues of what she calls “essentialist constructionist binarism,” which articulates the ways in which dichotomizing essentialism is the product of social construction (2). Essentialism, Fuss explains, is “commonly understood as a belief in the real, true es-

sence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (xi). Fuss points out that essentialism is a tool for deployment “in service of both idealist and materialism, progressive and reactionary, mythologizing and resistive discourses” (xii).

According to Ehrenreich and English, patriarchal authorities have been trying to regulate and punish women’s sexuality and health autonomy since early Christianity<sup>37</sup>. Patriarchal medicalization processes gained control over the unruly body through managing childbirth starting in the late eighteenth century with the persecution and marginalization of midwives (Mitchinson; Foucault *History of Sexuality Vol I*; Krasnick Warsh). By the 1970s, feminist health activists increasingly resisted patriarchal medicalization processes with do-it-yourself gynaecological exams, the resurgence of midwifery, and sexual health clinics (Ruzek; Michaud; Morgen). Crowley documents women’s adoption of the counterculture of macrobiotics and other vegetarian diets as they arose in the 1960s, arguing that these alternative ways of eating allowed some women to reclaim autonomy from authoritarian patriarchal and corporate food and health institutions. Crowley makes the important point that because of the exorbitant prices of organic foods, “what was once a threatening political statement has now become a political privilege” (89). Bobel corroborates this argument in her example of natural mothers who wish to embody a paradoxically liberated femininity. These mothers vow to engage in an “every day activism” to re-claim their bodies from the patriarchal medical establishment with the argument that they are keeping their babies safe through attachment parenting, extended breastfeeding, herbal and homeopathic remedies, and organic foods (782-783). Both Bobel and Crowley point out, however, that these New Age and natural ideologies not only reproduce gender essentialism by re-instating under-

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<sup>37</sup> See also Foucault, 1978 *The History of Sexuality*.

standings of femininity through food preparation and consumption, but they also conflate feminism with women's so-called natural, authentic bodies. Contemporary mainstream yoga is an expression of these beliefs, which many white middle class women felt freed them from the authoritarian confines of conventional medicine and empowered them to assert their own health, as has been stated various locations in this dissertation.

Thirty years after Fuss, gender essentialism is alive and well in New Age groups of which many contemporary yoga practitioners are a part. As journalist Susannah Weiss argues in her article, "4 Problems with the Way White Feminists Talk About 'Feminine Energy'"<sup>38</sup> white feminists deploy and reproduce essentialist constructionist binarism in New Age contexts. Weiss identifies as non-gender binary and as such, bristles at the thought of a certain attribute being pegged as masculine or feminine. She points out the problem inherent in determining a certain movement or characteristic as male or female, and says, "Feminine energy, I realized, sounded suspiciously like the Western stereotype of women and masculine energy sounded like the stereotype of men. And that makes it dangerous to propose that there's some spiritual, culturally transcendent principle behind both." New Age culture reproduces Cartesian dualism, coupled with over-generalized misappropriations of Native American spirituality characterizing feminine energy as wild and close to the earth (Crowley 57), whereas masculine energy is rational and logical. Fuss argues that essentialism rears its head in discussions about a "pure femininity," wherein the social undermines the natural, but for a constructionist theorist, however, the social produces the natural. Arguments that invoke a sense of timeless predictability, wherein history is understood as "an unbroken continuum" exemplify essentialist thinking (Fuss 3).

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<sup>38</sup> <https://everydayfeminism.com/2017/05/white-feminists-feminine-energy/>

When New Age people or yoga practitioners invoke what they may call the divine feminine as a way of encouraging women to pursue basic feminist goals of empowerment, freedom to choose, a right to vocation, and equality to men, they may likely be inadvertently invoking the worst of gender essentialism (Crowley 86). Crowley further contends that these spiritual seekers often invoke essentialist and racist appropriation as part of the way they can understand an other culture (86), but of course, this leads to mistaken assumptions of an impossible objective truth. Weiss argues that the concepts of masculine or feminine energy can actually bring harm to people, because it associates specific personality traits with certain bodies. This is especially problematic for trans and non-binary people because it suggests that if they are not embodying a certain trait, then there is something wrong with their body, or that they are not being “their true selves” (Weiss). Pointing out the risks of race and gender essentialism when Westerners misappropriate Eastern knowledge systems about male and female, Weiss directs readers to an article that examines the meaning of the feminine in Buddhism.<sup>39</sup> This article, which is an interview with Thanissara, the author of *Engaged Buddhism: Time to Stand Up, An Engaged Buddhist Manifesto For Our Earth*, examines the role of the “sacred feminine in addressing our environmental crisis.” One of the recommendations the interview gives to find a way into the sacred feminine is to “...be in nature. Even if in a city, notice trees, birds, clouds, and the presence of others...” (Williams oneearthsangha.org).

The problem with Williams’ advice, even though it claims to be “not defined by gender,” is that it replicates the same gender essentialism that we see in much other New Age material that

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<sup>39</sup> Amelia Williams, “Buddhism and the Sacred Feminine. An Interview with Thannisara - Part 1” September 21 2016. <https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/buddhism-and-the-sacred-feminine-part-1/>

equates female with the natural and the body, and male with sexual domination and the “hierarchy of attainment that reflects patriarchal structures” (Williams “Buddhism and the Sacred Feminine”). While these Buddhist teachings are not in and of themselves problematic and they can actually be helpful, Weiss points out that “When we appropriate concepts from other cultures, we end up replacing them with a whitewashed version of them – which really means erasing them” ([everydayfeminism.org](http://everydayfeminism.org)). In other words, we need to be very attentive to the ways in which we borrow from other cultures, such that we carefully learn these concepts fully, rather than cherry picking superficially.

In her article, “The Egg and the Sperm,” Emily Martin exemplifies the ways in which gender essentialism is endemic in biology. Her foray into mid-twentieth century science textbook descriptions of female and male reproductive systems demonstrate that science represents the female body with so-called feminine attributes such as passivity, culminating in wastefulness (488), and the male body with masculine traits such as strong energy (489). This scientific characterization of the sperm and egg with stereotypically masculine and feminine behaviours reflects the cultural mores of the authors, Martin argues. Martin’s research into the late 1980s biological science literature reveals somewhat of a shift in attitude, wherein the egg is a more “mutual partner” with the sperm, but that patriarchal views continue to dominate scientific interpretations of biological imagery (494-495). Fuss further explains that “for the essentialist, the body occupies a pure, pre-social, pre-discursive space” (5), which helps contextualize the ways in which scientists have assumed an authoritarian position on the reproductive systems of men and women. The egg and sperm, then, become the perfect players in the essentialist drama of the anything but objective discourse of the body. The final frontier of essentialism, Fuss contends in her

discussion of essentialism in poststructuralism, is such that the subject is devoid of race, class, or any other differentiating subjectivities, and so the essence of woman is outlined only along the biological (12). Fuss' remedial suggestion, which resonates with my research, is to personalize the body by substituting the word, "my," specifies the material conditions and lived experience of the person. The return to "my body" from "the body" also acknowledges the roles that social location and practices play in the ways in which we conceptualize "the body" (52). Thiele explains that medicalization has reduced women's bodies to their biological function. Thiele recommends instead that we "reconfigure the body as process," which allows us to return to a conceptualization of the body as dynamic and changing (54). In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler drives this argument further by reminding us that dualistic thinking has historically inscribed women's bodies to both biological and social reproductive roles, through an imagining of the maternal (7).

This chapter aims to point out the ways in which mainstream yoga practitioners, many of whom are self-identified feminists, unwittingly reproduce gender essentialism. It is my hope, however, that the stories that research participants have shared with me will refute this essentialism in their revelation of lived experience and their resistance to the digestion of an errant "oneness." I suggest an alternate option for yoga practitioners to consider, which is that of a feminist ethics of care. A feminist ethics of care looks outside the body's external appearance and performative position, and instead takes up what Jacoby and Kripalani, who draw on bell hooks, call a "queer politic as social justice" (297) in which we co-create communities of care founded in love, responsibility, shared knowledge, and respect. Following Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, I like to consider a feminist ethics of care as reflective of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, in which we embody

not only *niyamas* (self-care practices) such as *saucha* (purity) and *svadhyaya* (self-study), but also that we consider the *yamas* (personal and social ethics), for example, *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satya* (truthfulness) as a way of being in relationship with our community and the world.

### The Goddess:

The notion of the essential feminine makes a frequent appearance yoga and other somatic practice circles such as dance and Nia. Just recently, for example, a friend complained to me that the electronic music at ecstatic dance was “not feminine enough,” and she did not feel connected to moving her body. For my friend and others I have spoken to anecdotally, electronic music has what they may qualify as an unnatural sound, whereas music made at least in part with acoustic instruments feels more organic, and the movements that this music inspires are more fluid. This kind of thinking reproduces a binary construction of the feminine as natural and associated with the body, and masculine as mechanistic and rational. Folks in the ecstatic dance community and in the yoga communities here in Toronto often refer to a beautiful woman who gyrates her hips fluidly as a goddess.

In *Feminism's New Age*, Karlyn Crowley explains that the American Goddess movement arose in the 1970s as part of the second-wave of feminists rejection of all things deemed “patriarchal” and, as with yoga, as an alternative to conventional religious practices (113). Crowley argues that feminist academics have disputed the validity of Goddess and matriarchal culture as lacking scientific proof or historical specificity (114). The notions of an archetypical foremother and the crone as older woman are attractive for many women who are resisting and/or seek healing from the multiple oppressions of patriarchy (Stuckey), however, and resonates within the cultural ecofeminist movement (Leah; Mies and Shiva). While Goddess culture may inform what

Crowley calls a strategic “feminist function” to inspire women’s access to bodily empowerment, she draws on feminist sociologist Cynthia Eller, who argues that “the matriarchal myth harms contemporary feminism” through its non-political, prehistorical stance, rather than a “political present” (115). This critical perspective is obfuscated within Goddess worshipping communities, who, similar to Lorrie, “claim to have repressed memories of the Goddess that can be recovered” (115-116). Crowley’s critique of an ahistorical Goddess culture informs mine with regards to the notion of tradition and yoga. The notions of “memory” and tradition are “slippery,” as Crowley suggests (116), because while memory and tradition both infer authenticity, they also subjugate any potential for dynamic change or what we may consider a feminist future.

As Crowley explains, the significance of remembering the Goddess is “a reconciliation and unification with the past” (117). As such, this relationship with the Goddess, as Lorrie exemplifies, offers her followers a reciprocal love and appreciation for each other. How can one argue with such a convincing appeal, when the world – Mother Earth – desperately needs this kind of healing from sexism and the legacy of colonialism? The problem is that if Goddess followers focus on remembering, then a feminist future may not be in sight. Drawing on Mary G. McDonald’s theory of postfeminism, Balizet and Myers explain that much mainstream yoga replicates postfeminist thinking that the accomplishments of women negate the need for further work in abolishing gender inequality. Postfeminism, they argue, “says you can be strong *and* sexy [italics the authors’] – or rather, you can be strong *if you also remain sexy*” (279). The Goddess discourse sits within this framework.

### The Gaze On the Ideal Feminine Body:

As will be evident later in this chapter, many of the men I interviewed for this research and anecdotally have shared that they are highly conscious of the power of their male presence in the yoga studio. With the recent events of the Harvey Weinstein cases and the **#MeToo** Movement on social media, many men have become increasingly fearful of the effects their gaze, whether purposeful or inadvertent, may have on women. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* offered the public 46 years ago a renewed way to look at art, consume media, and then to reconsider the power of the public gaze. In the mid 1970s, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey pointed to the inequalities in sexual power between men and women as they play out on the screen through the male gaze, and Catherine McKinnon argued that "women live in sexual objectification like fish live in water" (340), and turned these debates around the male sexual role and the male gaze into national pornography law. Other feminist scholars have continued to theorize the male gaze as one that objectifies women in service of maintaining men's institutional power (Bordo 274; Wolf 13).

Mulvey's now famous essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," opened up conversations around the ways in which psychoanalysis informs how we look at women in film. With her intention to destroy the unconscious pleasure from women as sexual object in film by analyzing the power of the gaze (835), Mulvey explains that while there is pleasure in seeing, there is also "pleasure in being looked at" (835), but that filmmakers direct the female body in such a way that it is both passive and sexualized. While Berger was one of the first theorists to popularize the concept of film and visual media slicing and sectioning women's bodies into men's preferred parts, Mulvey explains that film's practice of doing close-up shots of women's legs dehu-

manizes women for men's erotic fantasies (838). Brost, however, points out that Mulvey's analysis fails to take into the account the female gaze, which effectively undermines women's agency as consumers of visual imagery. While MacKinnon's writings argued for censorship of pornographic images that glorify the abuse of women, Bordo's plea is instead for "recognition of the social contexts and consequences of images from popular culture" and the normalization of cultural images (275). Wolf concurs with Bordo that we need to re-consider the normalized role the youthful, slender, white, athletically fit female body plays in dominating visual media. It is from Bordo's and Wolf's plea where this discussion continues into an exploration of how image culture permeates the yoga world. In their book, *Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness*, Dworkin and Wachs identified the powerful pervasiveness of health magazines and their not-so subtle ability to manipulate both men and women to feel insecure about their bodies. For men, this means that to be fit and muscular is an ideal masculinity, while women's fit bodies must be slender and representative of a class status that clearly has the time to exercise. This ideal carries over into the yoga world, with its now ubiquitous picture perfect bodies in tight designer clothing on *Yoga Journal* and *Yoga International* cover pages, and on *YogaGlo's* instructional streaming videos as well as countless other yoga platforms.

While the fit woman's body is supposedly emancipated, it also projects an encoded image of wealth and access to time and resources. As Hall (2000) has said in his influential essay, "Encoding-Decoding," media teaches us to unconsciously consume and reproduce its representations and ideals through circuits of communication. Media representations of fit women's bodies, then, make idealized bodies more visible and render non-normative bodies as less desirable, despite body positivity campaigns like those recently found in *Yoga Journal*, as Amara Miller points out

in her article, “Eating the Other Yogi: Kathryn Budig, the Yoga Industrial Complex, and the Appropriation of Body Positivity”. Miller argues that although *Yoga Journal* claims to be body positive, they still replicate normative body ideologies in their choice of advertisements and feature articles, such as that which focuses on yoga star Kathryn Budig, who happens to be a somewhat voluptuous, blonde, size 4. This means that media usually excludes non-white, large, or bodies that do not meet standards of size 4 youthfulness and ability. Rice has demonstrated that media can actually cause body dissatisfaction. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, Rice points out that the imperfect, non-normative body is thus rejected as an object of displeasure and revulsion. In the context of yoga and non-normative bodies it is useful to use Kristeva to explain abjection as “a failure to recognize its kin” (5), which suggests a simultaneous rejection of the grotesque and imperfect in a person. Abjection also suggests a refusal to recognize the mutuality of all beings, and as such contributes to an excluding dehumanization. As Kristeva points out, “there are lives not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*” (emphasis Kristeva’s 6). As Rice explains, the process of abjection is also a learned process of rejecting that which is not the self (32).

Mainstream representations of idealized yoga bodies then, contribute to this abjection by depicting only bodies that have achieved this ideal. As my field research demonstrates, however, some yogis have had to do violence to themselves in the form of either disordered eating or extreme āsana practice in order to approximate what they thought the ideal embodiment of yoga would be. Unfortunately, self-harming behaviours such as anorexia, bulimia, and over-exercising are against the yogic ethic of *ahimsa* (non-violence), and as such, indicate that mainstream yoga needs an infusion of feminist ethics of care. An infusion of a feminist care ethics can disrupt

these toxic ideals of the body that do more harm than good and run counter to yoga's intention to support the individual toward healing, *viveka* (discernment), and *jivanmukta* (the liberated self).

### **Yoga Goddesses: Embodying the Feminine**

Lorrie in Guelph, Ontario, who I introduced in the previous chapter, is a good case study of a white, middle class female yoga teacher who aims to practice what Chris Bobel describes as natural mothering. Natural mothers “give birth at home, they homeschool; they grow much of their family’s produce, and sew many of their clothes...they reject almost everything that facilitates mother-child separation” (783). With two pre-teen daughters and a husband of nearly 20 years who works in finance, I have known Lorrie through the yoga community since the late 1990s, and like me, she has sought ways in her life through which she could practice natural healing methods and diet in order to free herself from patriarchal allopathic medicine and empower herself toward a life that she feels is personally authentic and holistic, while rejecting consumerism. Lorrie has observed trends of body normativity and neoliberal healthism trends in mainstream media and yoga, and points to the Goddess as an option for healing distorted body image and patriarchal regulatory and control practices over women and their bodies. I asked “Why are there so many women in yoga” as a general survey question to the Yoga and Movement Research Community page on Facebook in May 2016. The responses pointed to many of the complicating factors that explain why many yoga practitioners who do not fit into the norms of white, thin, able-bodied women tend to avoid mainstream yoga spaces. The responses to my Facebook question were fascinating, because they pointed not only to gender exclusion and rea-

sons why men might not do yoga, but also to body positivity and race. The following section of this chapter explores the risks of essentializing the feminine through movement, and the connections of the Goddess to yoga.

Mary Daly's radical feminist text, *Gyn/Ecology* is indeed compelling as a galvanizing force to bring women together. As Audre Lorde points out, however, it excludes the realities and also the archetypal traditions of women of colour (67). White feminist thinking that neglects to attend to the lived experiences and stories of women of colour reproduces essentialist notions of woman and thus marginalizes those bodies that do not easily fit into white women's prescribed notions of feminine, dainty movement. In my fieldwork, I explored the ways in which yoga and related forms of mindful movement do or do not reflect these so-called feminine movements. Nia is one form of mindful movement that, like contemporary yoga classes in the West, attracts a large number of female participants.

When I met with Solange back in early April 2016, we took a Nia class together, which we later discussed. I had appreciated the fluid movements and the instructor's encouragement to the women in the class, because there were no men, to move their pelvis and gyrate their hips. Solange and I unpacked the class together, analyzing it as a reflection of yoga culture as symptomatic of what she called "monkey see monkey do." We noted that at times, the instructor seemed frustrated with the participants' inability to move more spontaneously in the fitness room space, as she exclaimed, "There are no men here, so don't be afraid of your fire!" In her rapid-fire way, Solange explained that part of the problem with these women was that they had no confidence to just be themselves:

To gyrate your hips is very very threatening to women; nice girls don't move like that; little girls sugar & spice and everything nice. It makes me so sad that women are so... that that part of themselves, the most vital the most nurturing part of our humanity, the sensual component is so denied them – by themselves! through conditioning, programming, socialization, programming, culture, other women judging. (Solange, April 2016)

Interestingly, many of the women in community centre fitness room were Asian, and may have also had their own views about appropriate forms of movement. Concomitant with Solange's assumption that women feel that can not be free with their bodies is the gender essentializing belief that certain motions of the body are associated with masculinity, such as straight lines, whereas more fluid motions such as gyrations of the hips or spirals, are feminine. In his seminal essay, "Techniques of the Body," Marcel Mauss argues that every society has its own special habits, and it is our social conditioning that teaches us to move in certain ways. Mauss observed a specific "walking fashion" in which he observed that he was able to distinguish from the hand positions between a girl who had appropriated a style of walking from movies, and a girl who had been raised in a convent. He considers these arm and hand positions while walking a form of "social idiosyncrasy" (72). In other words, Mauss concludes that the social mediates the physiological and mechanical forms of movement, rather than there being the existence of a so-called natural walk. In particular, Mauss distinguishes between male and female techniques of the body, arguing that boys and girls are taught not only to behave differently, but to move their bodies differently (76). He gives as an example dance to indicate that men's and women's dancing are different from each other.

Diane Bruni has long made it known that she thinks the movements of Ashtanga yoga in the tradition of Pattabhi Jois are very linear, angular, and masculine, and encourages her students to practice more natural, "primal, authentic feminine" movements such as spirals,

undulations, bouncing, and rolling. These movement qualifications are derived from Axis Syllabus as developed by Berlin-based dancer and choreographer Frey Faust, who, like Diane, was injured through his practice, and wanted to re-learn how to move.<sup>40</sup> Diane received quite a lot of criticism on social media for making essentializing comments about movement forms, for which she has apologized and attributed to not knowing better. At the same time, Diane was posting on the Yoga and Movement Research Community (YMRC) Facebook page about how inspired she was by the Angela Farmer yoga video, *The Feminine Unfolding*. Diane was inspired by the way Farmer asks her students, all of whom are women in this video, to think about their bodies as organic, which reproduces the gender binary. Farmer, who started out as a student of B.K.S. Iyengar<sup>41</sup>, intentionally co-opts traditional yoga āsana to fit the bodies and social conditions of contemporary Western women (Cummins). Interestingly, Farmer uses language in *The Feminine Unfolding* that calls on the white liberal feminist wellness model of the body as individual and unique, which is predicated on a higher amount of social capital and privileged embodiment than most of the world possesses.

After watching this video, I asked the question, “why do you think there so many women in yoga” to Diane Bruni’s YMRC Facebook page in May 2016. At that time, YMRC was only a few months old but had quickly grown to a few thousand members<sup>42</sup>. My question sparked a long thread that indicated a central belief that men and women are different in their

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<sup>40</sup> See <http://axissyllabus.org/resources> for more information, and the site’s home page for basics; this practice is anything but basic, but Diane has basically co-opted it from dance and applied it to non-dance movement practices. See chapter 4.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/angela-s-āsanas>

<sup>42</sup> The following discussion will include fictionalized names of participants who shared their responses. These are indicated with “” around the names.

body expressions, which means that men are less inclined than women to participate in contemporary yoga classes. The comments also indicate the ways in which people experience their physical abilities as gendered, which concurs with Mauss's assertion that men and women are conditioned to move their bodies differently. Fat studies writer, performer, and yoga teacher Kimberly Dark responded to the question, saying,

I think it's more about how gender roles are socialized. First of all, in the body. Without biological cause, men tend to be tighter in the legs, hips - well, overall. I think that's a socialization issue. So, it's just harder for many men. Also, the many of the movements are "soft." Like, there's no doubt that ballet would be good exercise, but that may be the physical activity that has the least male involvement. As the poster above said, her sons want the burn. Of course, you could get that in yoga too, but the movements are less hegemonically masculine in yoga... (Facebook discussion May 14, 2016)

“Barb” agreed with Kimberly, but added,

I think boys and then men are encouraged to participate in things that are rougher or competitive, and women are not. In fact, girls aren't really encouraged to participate in much physical activity at all. And it becomes self-perpetuating: the more we see yoga as feminine, the fewer men and boys participate. (Facebook discussion May 14, 2016)

This point concurs with the anonymous respondent who told me, “yoga spaces are vag spaces,” to indicate that he experiences the decor, students, music, and the teaching population to be highly feminized. One popular downtown Toronto studio, for example, has as part of its mandate, to “LIVE IN UNION WITH MOTHER EARTH: We strive to be kind and grateful co-creative stewards of mama earth whose nature, beauty and intelligence shapes so much of who we are, and who we will become.” Hoyez explains that yoga spaces are conceived as healing therapeutic spaces and as such, have specific qualities in which the physical exercises and mental attitudes of the people who populate such spaces are meant to induce healing effects.

“Tracy” posits that some men do not enjoy yoga because they feel somehow inadequate:

I've heard men describe some of the poses in yoga as humiliating and that really surprised me. Many men have become accustomed to succeeding physically through strength alone and yoga challenges that by equally requiring strength, flexibility, balance and self awareness. I heard this during a yoga class several years ago when a few men were discussing difficulties with certain chest opening poses. One of the guys said that men feel very exposed in poses that thrust the hips forward. This had never occurred to me before, but the men all seemed to agree that poses such as Kapotāsana feel humiliating to males in the beginning. (Facebook discussion May 14, 2016)

But Matthew, the athletic yoga instructor I interviewed for this study in September 2016 disagrees with any notion that men might be intimidated by yoga. He argued that while many men's bodies are tight in the hips, chest and hamstrings, his classes emphasize the strength poses at which he himself excels.

Downtown at [the studio] where I'm going tonight, I generally have 50-85% men. They promote it as a class that everybody should go to. And so I guess the guys pick up on the fact that it's strength and workout yoga and they all come. At lunchtime it's usually more men than women. So yesterday I had around 24 or 25 people in the class, and 15 of them were men yesterday. And like, big muscular strong men, too.... A lot of straight men aren't going to go to something called Goddess Yoga.

My PhD student colleague from UC Davis, Amara Miller, weighed in on this discussion, and cites complex reasons from a feminist political economy perspective as to why contemporary women in the West are attracted to yoga. These valuable comments reflect much of the framework that I have been articulating thus far.

I think this is also intimately tied to the second shift. So many women I talk to come to yoga to destress. And often that stress is directly related to the extra work and responsibilities they have in their lives, not to mention the amount of pressure placed on looks for women that causes us to disconnect from our bodies, so yoga can be a re-empowering practice with a lot of benefits. Then combine this with the fact that the industry is feminized, products use female yoga models, often sexualized and uber-flexible, and men feel like the practice is less approachable for them so they aren't as represented, and you end up with an overrepresentation of women in the

practice. Historically this was also tied to the housewife phenomenon, where wives had more time during the day and the beauty myth encouraged them to stay fit. That's why when yoga first came to the West one of the largest demographics that swamis often spoke to was housewives. Also cue: race and class dynamics as tied to this, and which set the stage for the skews we see today in these measures. (Facebook discussion May 14, 2016)

Solange invokes Goddess imagery in discussing the way women in her community connect with their bodies, and links Goddess to yoga by comparing *kundalini* to The Goddess. According to Solange, this Goddess imagery galvanizes yoga for women as a feminine practice. “That is a connection to the goddess. The goddess undulates... *kundalini* is a snake. It moves up and down the spine; it gyrates” (Solange, personal communication). According to B.K.S. Iyengar, *kundalini* not a feminine or masculine aspect, but rather is simply the:

divine cosmic force in our bodies... symbolised as a coiled and sleeping serpent lying dormant in the lowers nerve centre at the base of the spinal column. This latent energy has to be aroused and made to go up the spinal column...to unite with the Supreme Soul...The arousing of Kundalini and forcing it up is perhaps a symbolic way of describing the sublimation of sexual energy (439-440).

While Iyengar does not specify *kundalini* as male or female, some yoga practitioners still somehow associate it with femininity. More important to note is that some practitioners and instructors believe that female yoga students need a man-free space in order to be comfortable to move fluidly and confidently in their bodies. In fact, many of the men I interviewed verified this potential necessity. For example, Brad, a yoga instructor in Victoria B.C., tries to make sure that his female students feel safe, because he is aware of gender power imbalances:

I'm very sensitive to the issues of male power, the fact that I'm white; so I think I can safely say that I don't sense or invite or feel a sexualized energy from the female participants in my class. I'm trying to be respectful. I try to actually orient people physically; so in downward dog they're facing that way and not this way. (Brad, September 2016, via Skype)

Brad goes to special lengths to safeguard students' comfort levels, and he avoids doing hands on assists with them. Neil, the RMT and yoga practitioner we met in the last chapter is well aware of the effects of the male gaze on women:

In studio group yoga classes, I feel I can sense when a female is uncomfortable or suspicious of my intentions when I am setting up my yoga mat in close proximity to her, or even in how I might move or interact with a female yogi as we pass in the hallway outside of the classroom. I tend to keep my eyes down and not initiate contact or conversation with someone I don't already know, both for the sake of my practice and to avoid creating discomfort or even the opportunity for harsh judgement in the minds of the female yogis I encounter. (Neil, October 2016, via email correspondence)

Brad's and Neil's consideration is warranted, but it is not only gender that yoga teachers need to consider in a space. Many racialized yoga practitioners have experienced revulsion and fear at the thought of being touched by a yoga teacher. Jacoby and Kripalani, for example, reflect on Kripalani's experience of an experience she had during exploring *baddha konāsana* [seated bound angle pose] while studying in India as being particularly traumatic; a teacher pushed down on her knees without asking for permission and caused long-term injury (309). Mehta says that one of the worst things for a yoga practitioner of colour to experience is to be physically adjusted by a yoga teacher of any gender or ethnicity. Her internal voice screams, "Brown bodies are made differently than yours – so just go away!" (228). In a similar vein that I am also developing, Mehta argues for what she calls a Feminist Yoga Practice (FYP), which, as she says, "understands that touching a student without consent may trigger further trauma as the individual is already experiencing internalized and externalized racism from just being in a white space" (228). Diana, a social justice-minded Toronto-based yoga practitioner whose family is from India, is not necessarily opposed to touch, but is aware that some yoga teachers use it to exert power:

There's one particular teacher who I stopped going to their class cause I felt they were trying to, and I don't know if this is cause I'm brown or not, but I felt they were trying to grab my power in class cause they're the teacher. Like, correcting me a lot, and saying things that I know were directed to me. I'm very aware of touch and I don't usually care, and some teachers don't ask for permission; it's not about asking for permission. It's about the intention and I can feel the intention of why a teacher would correct.

Diana feels that she can sense whether the intent of the teacher is good or whether it is rooted in power and control. Raj, a GTA-based running and yoga enthusiast of Trinidadian descent is also aware of the power imbalances in yoga spaces, and shares his somewhat self-deprecating considerations about being in class with women: "...I always close my eyes to make sure women know they're not being looked at. They don't need creeps checking them out" (November 2016, Toronto). Although he did not explicitly articulate this in our interview despite my trying to elicit a response, I have wondered whether Raj also feels a sense of racism in mainstream yoga and fitness spaces. To my questions he replied that while he recognized that they were mostly white and women, he did not seem phased by the fact, and pointed out that he is intensely private so most folks do not know where he was born. He told me it was Mt. Sinai in Toronto, which is where I was born.<sup>43</sup> "Jen," a respondent to the YMRC question "why do you think there are so many women in yoga?" was astute to the thinking of Raj and Neil. She may have been a bit cavalier when she said, "I think there's also a bit of a sexual element – men don't want women to think they're perving on them in their yoga pants, and they don't want to inadvertently pop a boner in their own yoga pants" (May 2016), but her assessment is accurate in conjunction with some of these participants.

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<sup>43</sup> Raj also shared that many yoga practitioners he has met expect him to be an expert in yoga on the merit of his skin colour. In the next chapter, I will discuss more of the stories that racialized yoga practitioners shared with me.

Alex, the yoga instructor in Peterborough that we met in the previous chapter, disavows himself of any potential power imbalance that might cause discomfort in female students by saying,

...I wouldn't say that I deliberately bring an affective masculinity. It's just me. I go in, and I teach. I'm a guy, but I'm not like a guy's guy. The feedback is partially my voice, and also that I create a space that makes people feel safe and comfortable. (Alex, March 2016,)

Matthew, the gay, white, Toronto-based yoga instructor we met in Chapter 5 who has popularized his brand of athletic yoga, does not mind being one of only a few men in a yoga space. He says,

Even though I knew when I went to yoga that there was mostly women in the class, I just expected that. I'm like, well whatever, you know. I'm not fearful of it being feminine; I just went and I knew that I'm the type of person that would go to that. Maybe some guys wouldn't, but I would...Not only was I never comfortable in heteronormative situations or whatever, but I also threw myself into the epitome of it by teaching what the media was saying was geared to hetero men! (September 2016, Toronto)

Neil also has no qualms about taking yoga classes, despite its associations with femininity:

I feel I have experienced a great deal of 'masculine' (martial arts, military) and 'feminine' (yoga, pilates, dance) movement training and experiences. Some of these are masculine by virtue of their histories. Some are feminine by the quality and degrees of force, speed or character of a gesture, pose or 'attitude' displayed in movement. I am not concerned that I would be thought of as a 'fag' or otherwise effeminate by others in my cohort or among those training me for doing yoga. At my age I am less concerned with these things. (October 2016, via email correspondence.)

Kerrie, a queer femme yoga teacher and body positivity activist from the Bay Area in California, shares a story of a black queer male yoga student. This anecdote is particularly poignant, as it

articulates the oppressing intersections of race, sexuality, and gender in conventional yoga spaces. When yoga teachers are insensitive to the dynamics of touch and power, especially in conjunction with race and gender, participants who embody marginalized subjectivities are particularly vulnerable. Here is the incident from one of her students that she shared with me:

This is told to me from a black, queer student of mine was telling me how he was once in a class in New York, where they were doing this exercise and he was partnered with this straight looking white woman. He was asked to do something very intimate, that involved pulling her legs apart, like some kind of thing with straps or hands, and it just felt incredibly dangerous to him. Like, it might be okay if she knew I was gay, but I'm a black man, and she's a white woman, and this felt really unsafe. And it must have felt unsafe for her too. And he was like, internally freaking out on all these different levels and then really feeling, especially since he was the only black guy in the room, that the teacher was insensitive to how triggering that would be. It was a really deep discomfort. It was really hard. (Kerrie, April 2016, Berkeley California)

Lorrie holds a similar position to Kerrie, which is that women need a space led by and for women only. Kerrie advocates for queer yoga spaces in particular, for reasons I will elaborate on later in this chapter. This echoes the Mehta's (2016) sentiment, which is that an FYP creates specific safe spaces for marginalized communities.

In Chapter 5, I briefly introduced the place "The Goddess" holds in contemporary North American yoga culture as securing this women exclusive space. Lorrie's story may also shed light on some of the reasons why yoga is so popular for middle-class white women. She shares about invoking the goddess, and maintains that women need an exclusively female divine presence in their lives to offer them a sense of empowerment. This divine feminine embodiment can make her appearance in the yoga studio:

I think there needs to be something that is sacred to women, and I'm content that my Goddess Restore classes are – I've never said women only, but it's kind of implied. I did have a man ask about it. I said, this is a class that is generally women, and he said, okay, forget it. And I'm good with that! I think there needs to be a safe space for women to soften, open, and heal. That's not, doesn't give any kind of let's say, fear... (Lorrie, May 2016)

Respondents in Karen Crowley's study echo this sentiment, saying that there is so much male-oriented culture, women want to turn to something that is by and for them. Neil concurs with both Solange's and Lorrie's position that women may exclusive spaces for somatic practices, saying:

It is my feeling that women in yoga classes go for the support and connection they feel to the other women there, in a feminine positive, uplifting environment free from the cattiness, judgement and petty jealousy of other all-women environments.

"Heather," one of the respondents to my YMRC question, "why do you think there are so many women in yoga," would agree with Lorrie's assertion that there should be classes just for them, and said, "Women are looking for a tribe that empowers them, where they can be authentic and support others in the same way" (May 14, 2014). Lorrie is aware that the Goddess material she is offering to yoga clients may be a little "out there" for many people, but she uses her marketing skills to generate interest by way of the more accessible notions of healing, feminine empowerment, and yoga:

My title Goddess Restore has different meanings. So to the lay person, it's, Oh! Goddess! That's become a fun marketing word. It's affirming, but it's also a juicy word that can be looked at in different ways. So there's this great, playful, aspect. People email me, hey, Goddess, I wanna come to yoga! There is also Goddess Restore. The Goddess is restoring herself. She's coming back. This is sacred medicine that I'm offering very slowly. And a vehicle in which this can be received is through yoga. Women also love yoga. Cause there's um, in a lot of cases, there's a spiritual aspect to yoga... I love yoga, so it was my thinking from the get-go, how can I combine this? I love when a class has medicine in it. You go to the class, there's a sacred offering of some sort. Not just during the poses. You go to the class and you receive wisdom. (Lorrie, May 2016)

Out of respect for Lorrie's passion and the ways in which the practice has been helping her and other women, I cautiously asked her to explain about the different Goddesses that she invokes. I warned her ahead of time that I might seem a bit pushy in the interview, so she would be aware that my questions might seem skeptical. She told me that she studies all of the goddesses, and that it is a "remembrance," which for her is an "awakening." When I asked Lorrie what is the remembrance about, she showed me her manual by priestess trainer Ariel Spilsbury<sup>44</sup> and explained,

The goddess herself. And her frequency, her essence. So if you look at a page like this one, for example, we go through Kali, her shadow qualities... So as we understand and learn about the different aspects of the goddess, for example, Kali, who has 3 phases, destroyer, she destroys with love in order for us to come back to preservation. Create, and then come back to preservation. So 3 phases, 3 colours... [looking at the manual] ...So down here, it says Goddess Archetype Kali Ma. These are the different goddesses in the different lineages of the different cultures who resonate with this kind of information let's say. Or this energy of the goddess. So we learn about her totem, her element, her colour, her scent. And we learn about the alchemical process that she wants us to engage in. (Lorrie, May 2016)

It is important to note the significance of Lorrie's deepening engagement with Goddess culture comes at a time in her life when she feels ready to integrate it into her yoga teaching and to her personal life. She explains her early identification with the Goddess and divine feminine energy:

I have always been interested in this, but I'm not sure of the word culture, though. So when I was going to the University of Guelph, I was living at home. I ended up house sitting for a friend in Guelph. I was always in the company of older women. For food courses or whatever I was doing. When I went to U of G I studied art history. The Goddess is everywhere. So in the end, my thesis was on vaginal imagery in women's art-work. So I think that's where it started, and that was 1992-94. I always dressed in more goddess wear. I'd wear goddess jewellery... I was always really drawn to anything goddess. It was a reawakening of the energy within me that I kind of lost over raising chil-

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<sup>44</sup> <http://femininealchemycourse.com>

dren and keeping house and all that. Domestic duties came in the way of my spirituality, I guess you could say... (Lorrie, May 2016)

Even more important is the nurturing sense of community and healing that Lorrie experiences.

And I guess there is a tribe. Like many people in the program, you find sisterhood. You find support. You don't know these people; they live all around the world. It's all women ages mid-20s to 70s, 80s even. And then they become your soul sisters and they have your back no matter what. So there's an online facebook group, and everyone is just holding you and holding space for you... We bring up all of this shadow quality of ourself. All these parts of ourselves we don't like. Instead of projecting and being triggered by it, we bring it up and we go, look at all that shit. Holy fuck, that's me? Well, then you're given the opportunity to come into a place of love, loving self and all that shadow is. And with the love you use that as a melting mechanism to melt away the shadow and actually love all those negative parts of yourself so then you come into a field of self-love as opposed to self loathing or fear. You can cut the core, and come to this place of transformation in the platform of alchemy. In the support of a certain goddess. Goddess of compassion; Quan Yin. Goddess of love. (Lorrie, May 2016)

## **Queering Yoga**

The self-love that Lorrie speaks of is a central tenet of contemporary yoga for women and other marginalized subjectivities in North America. This self-love often needs to take form through designated safe spaces, and yoga communities engaged in social justice are becoming more interested in these practices. Through the early 2000s, an increasing number of college and university spaces began adopting Positive Space Initiatives to challenge the marginalization of the LGBTQIA+ communities. Burgess explains the rationale for such spaces, claiming that “the domination of heterosexuality as a pervasive sexual ‘norm’ regulates spaces...” and therefore any sexuality other than heterosexuality is deemed Other (27). Hoyez links yoga to Arjun Appadurai’s “ethnoscapes” concept, which in the context of yoga and my own research, makes sense in terms of a specific identity-based space (113). Specialized identity-specific spaces could be particularly therapeutic for those traumatized by homophobia or racism, for example, and

could offer a healing salve to the rootlessness and alienation endemic in this world (Appadurai 29). In the late 2000s, one Toronto yoga studio picked up on the Positive Space Initiative and created its own specialized Brown Girls Yoga and Queer Yoga classes. When the ownership at this studio changed in late 2013, however, the Positive Space Initiative and specialized classes were determined to be too specialized and segregated, and were replaced with broadly inclusive signage and yoga classes for every body.

At the Race and Yoga Conference in Oakland California, keynote speaker Kimber Simpkins gave a moving talk that explained the rationale as to why the LGBTQIA+ community needs “queer yoga.” Considering the story of Kerrie’s black gay yoga student, we can recognize the importance of why the queer community needs safe spaces. In her talk that opened the conference, Kimber invited attendees to do a couple of minutes of self touch as a grounding, affirming practice. From our seats, we held our palms to our chests and bellies, and watched our breath. She asked, “What does queer yoga mean to you? What does it mean to queer yoga?” By turning the word, “queer” into a verb, Simpkins invites us to make strange our normalized assumptions about yoga. Many scholars have used word, “queering” to describe a sense of turning something regular on its head, or of putting something abject into a centralized view (Ahmed; Butler; Ballard & Kripalani). In her research of 20 surveys of queer yoga teachers in the Bay area, Simpkins concluded that, “We want to see ourselves included in the mix of yoga. Butch yoga, for example, allows you to be able to show up and be completely in your body.” Queer yoga, Simpkins asserted, challenges norms and breaks down prescribed relationships to one’s body by allowing participants to appreciate its difference, variation, and sexiness. Queer yoga, Simpkins continued,

“smashes the paradigm of yoga while allowing for healing of the queer community.” In yoga, Simpkins explains, “you get to be an expert on yourself.”

For Simpkins, a cis-gendered queer femme yoga teacher, the mainstream yoga world left her feeling isolated by a lack of queer community, stories, and history. Her apparent invisibility as a cis-femme queer further isolated Simpkins, particularly through the heteronormativity in languaging around yoga poses and energy, which included what she called “an uncomfortable conflation of masculinity with men and femininity with women,” much as we observed in the stories earlier in this chapter, and as I explain in the theory section of this discussion. Simpkins urged for an intersectional approach to queer yoga that has minimal or respectful appropriation. Therefore, just I stated at the end of Chapter 5, Simpkins centralizes the question of how to respect indigenous concerns of yoga while trying to re-make it. She paradoxically advised, “get comfortable with being uncomfortable,” while pointing out that we want to be careful with harmful and triggering language.

Matthew was initially uncomfortable at the prospect of discussing his subjectivity as a gay male yoga teacher with me, but because he has done more than two years of psychotherapy to work with his internalized homophobia, he has a lot more self acceptance and the difficulties with his identity have improved significantly. Growing up, Matthew experienced much of the fear and isolation that Simpkins described, along with the ridiculing and beatings that he was subjected to as a gay male in a small north-western Ontario town. In the following quote, Matthew tells the story of how he negotiated his discomfort at the prospect of doing a media-promoted Jock Yoga class for male athletes:

My internalized homophobia kicks in and I feel like I'm too gay to be the representative for such a masculine media spot... So it has caused me some problems and some fear there that I'm not legitimate even though I'm a man... A couple of years ago I did a jock yoga class with my friend who's not gay; he's one of my trained teachers. Pro Hockey players train there. I would say 85-90 per cent of the class was men. It was organized by Lululemon and that was one of the transitional points because I was a little scared because of the type of music that I played during my class. I am a big fan of Madonna, and some of the music that I play might not be as masculine as these guys might expect for a jock yoga class... And I've also found myself over the years trying to make my voice a little bit deeper or conscious whether or not I'm lisping or talking with too high pitch of a voice when I'm teaching a male dominated class. It was kind of a turning point that day because that day, I was like, you know, what, I'm just gonna start. I'm just gonna say what I'm gonna do, if they like me they like me and if they don't, they don't. And they were all tweeting and taking pictures and saying best yoga teacher ever and they didn't seem to care...(Matthew, September 2016)

Simpkins also advised that we need to create ways to make yoga spaces less gendered.

One anonymous respondent, a white gay man, shared his frustration about conventional yoga spaces with me over lunch in Toronto in October 2016. "What yoga space isn't a vag space? I know there's a lot of new age SNAGS [Sensitive New Age Guys] out there but for the most part, yoga's like a Dove commercial. But in general, I just have a lot of contempt for gendered spaces in general. They just reinforce gender binaries" (anonymous, October 2016, Toronto). Matthew also commented that feminine yoga languaging will alienate both straight and gay men:

A lot of straight men aren't going to go to something called Goddess Yoga. On the TV show that I did last week, I was doing this side stretch where you step the foot back, reach the arm up and pull up and come up and over. And then this woman called this pose Dancing Shiva. I call it side stretch. It's not that I think those things are feminine. It's not that at all. I just think the reason why I stay away from language like that is because it's not direct. I want, so my cues are direct as well. Lift through the centre of the chest. Draw your shoulder blades down the back. Don't grow a flower out of your heart; right? It's not that kind of stuff. It's not lift your heart to the sky. Lift up through your chest toward the ceiling. (Matthew, September 2016, Toronto)

Clearly, Matthew does not seem to conflate Shiva with any sort of goddess feminine energy, particularly because he is aware that Shiva is generally considered a masculine deity.

Simpkins projected slides of quotes from her research participants that affirmed that for butch women, an exclusively queer yoga class “gives people a chance to let go of posturing and not have to impress anyone” (Simpkins’ queer yoga research participant, 2016). Participants in her study reported “feeling less othered, feeling seen. Wearing what I want and not feeling like I’m scaring people” (anonymous research participant, Simpkins 2016). Another slide shared, “Queer teachers have held space for me to begin to heal and love myself, physically emotionally, and yes, even spiritually... I didn’t even know I needed queer yoga until I had it.” I wonder if Simpkins’ butch women would have appreciated Matthew’s Jock Yoga, or if its intense athleticism would have simply reinforced a gender binary. Similarly, though, Matthew recognizes that the gay community needs its own space to heal from gender violence.

Matthew started out teaching in his own community. He knew that the majority of participants in mainstream yoga classes are men, and so he started to brand his class as Jock Yoga. He explains,

Well, it started as a gimmick, to get more men into a class that I started teaching so I started teaching a class at a gym just off of Yonge street, that was mostly men, mostly gay men. I was looking for ways to promote myself as a yoga teacher and I saw the gym across the street, and I was like, I’m going in there and ask them about classes. My friend was like, yeah, try to tell them to do a class for men, or jocks, or something like that! So I went in there and asked how many people, and what kind of yoga they had, and they said they had a flow class and a hātha class and they were taught by women and I asked how many people attend. They said, sometimes, 2, sometimes 5. I was like, why don't you have a guy teaching the guys, and like, a powerful class? And they were like, when do you wanna start? I said they could call it yoga for jocks, yoga for men, athlete yoga, athlete flow, whatever. And they wrote,

Jock Yoga. And I was actually almost kind of offended when I saw it, because the name was so strong. (September 2016, Toronto)

Matthew said that he would like to offer a yoga class specifically geared to the gay community, but he has yet to dedicate a regular time and space for it.

### **Body Positivity, Body Image**

Through slow and mindful practice of yoga, students can access its emotional healing benefits for body image and eating disorders, which many scholars have documented widely, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. By revealing the unhelpful norms that mainstream yoga has perpetuated through its adoption of customer satisfaction practices, I hope to open the possibility for an intersectional, queered yoga that offers an opportunity for healing from toxic body ideals and aggressive, self-harming movement practices in yoga. Many teachers in my fieldwork have talked about working to disrupt these norms through teaching yoga to seniors, to people with round bodies, or in contexts that take yoga out of typical āsana practice. Even yoga teachers, however, are not immune to body normativity and toxic media norms that infect women who identify as feminist. Some have been able to access yoga to help them come to acceptance about their bodies, but not all. Veronica, for example, is candid about her struggles with disordered eating, and says that even though she knows that she may appear to be thin by mainstream standards, she has internalized her family's pressures about size.

It also almost feels like a farce to hear somebody say that I have a normative body, because my internal experience of my body is one of tension and suffering; since I was a kid a point of conflict in my family;. Body image has been very politicized in my family so it's been thinner is better in all kinds of ways, and now that I'm older I realize - it was really really hard. And then I started restricting food and then I started purging

went through massive massive anxiety years of just downward spiral disordered eating and purging as a way to find my way into liking myself. I would love to say that yoga was the reason why I was able to make it to the other side; I'm not 100% sure. (Veronica, July 2016)

Kerrie, a queer femme yoga teacher in California, shared that through yoga, she was able to start to recover from her struggles with anorexia:

When I first started to do yoga it was the first time I started to realize that I had the tools to work with that. Because I was completely identifying with the voice of my inner anorexic. That was what I thought my voice was. That was what my mind was. If it told me to jump, I jumped. It was in yoga that i started to see that not only was that only just one voice in there, but I had been identifying with that voice so strongly, that I let it drown out the other voices that could be healthier or more compassionate... the tools of yoga and meditation that helped me see that. I knew the loving and caring way to treat myself, and I knew the way I would want the people I loved to treat themselves, but I wasn't treating myself like that.

Kathryn Budig is a well-known yoga teacher with a brand called Aim True. While she characterizes her own body as “curvy” and it is true that there are other famous yogi bodies that are celebrated for their achievements that are more slim or muscular than hers, her brand of body positivity is self-limiting (Miller 7). Budig’s size 4 bendy body, however, still lives within normative frameworks, and as such, her claim to body positivity is appropriative and therefore excluding of truly non-normative ones. While Budig has experienced online critique for her soft body, she is still privileged because of her ability to fit into a normative shape (Miller 10).

## **Conclusion**

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, technologies of the self as espoused by neoliberal discourse perpetuate the mistaken notion that through yoga, individuals can achieve some imagined ideal self. Intersectional analysis helps us to articulate the complexities of multiple identities in order to dismantle entrenched power imbalances as yoga communities reproduce

them in studios and online spaces. Smooth reminds us that intersectionality is useful to help us to “resist additive models that treat categories of social identity as additive, parallel categories and instead theorizes these categories as intersecting” (21). Smooth’s approach bolsters the rationale for opening up contemporary yoga spaces to be more inclusive. As Jacoby and Kripalani contend, many racialized and queer people do not feel that they can identify with an imagined idealized self because many studios have prices that poorer people can not afford, or are filled with folks who do not look like them. Male and female change rooms and toilets perpetuate the gender binary, which often means that non-gender conforming people can not feel safe in such spaces. A queered yoga politic, then, confronts these spaces with what Jacoby and Kripalani call “discourses of care and responsibility” (301). Remembering and apologizing, however, are insufficient, they argue, and say that instead, what is important is attention to the ways in which practitioners pronounce words, sounds, āsana sequences, and the ways in which teachers approach bodies in the classroom space. Inattention by a white, normative-bodied yoga teacher to any of these factors can serve as microaggressions to practitioners whose embodied experiences are othered.

In spite of having intentions of universal acceptance, there are countless ways that a yoga teacher can accidentally make a student feel unsafe in a yoga space. For example, a white, thin yoga teacher might inadvertently say something homophobic, ableist, or racist. By acknowledging the pain that racist, sexist, thin-privileged, ableist, and ageist microaggressions cause, white thin, normative yoga teachers can start to move toward a practice of social justice and compassion that could be healing for those oppressed by repeated trauma. As some of my research participants have articulated in other places in this dissertation and as Ballard and Kripalani say, safe

spaces may in fact need to be identity-based spaces that acknowledge their collective positionality and traumas (309).

In a culture that teaches us that our bodies are too fat, too soft, too black, too queer, or too clumsy, a feminist yoga could be a boon to anyone who wants to free themselves of these oppressions. Having specialized spaces does not necessarily mean that yoga must be segregated, but it can offer a place for people to find solidarity. Even though most yoga spaces claim that they are for everyone, the field research proves otherwise. The following chapter will explore the ways in which the people who participated in my fieldwork are enacting social justice in their yoga. I will continue to draw on the ethical values of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* such as *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal) and *svādhyāya* (self-study) to articulate how yoga practitioners embody their activism through alternative channels. Tracey Ferdinand writes about how yoga and social justice connect not only to improve health, but also to embody social change. She says,

Social change, including health justice issues, begins with individuals. Health is significantly affected by an individual's behavior. Yoga has the capacity to change hearts and minds; it has the capacity to change behavior. So, it stands to reason that yoga can be utilized as an effective tool to improve an individual's health status. It can transform one's thoughts and actions. My womanist worldview allows me to envision my yoga teaching as one micro-level solution to macro-level community health problems (40).

The next chapter will explore the intersecting subjectivities and activism of yoga practitioners who are working to develop feminist frameworks of care. The following chapter draws out stories that exemplify Feminist Yoga Practices. As contemporary yoga culture in North America has revealed itself to be rife with contradictory messages of freedom, healthism, and consumerism, I have become increasingly disheartened with the shape of yoga today. Fortunately, however, contemporary yoga culture does show signs of improving, so all is not lost on yoga. There is a grow-

ing community fuelled by in person and online conversations about body acceptance and health justice; the stories in the next chapter demonstrate the ways in which yoga practitioners are resisting body normativity, ageism, racism, and classism both on and off the mat.

## Chapter 7

### YOGA AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: WAKING UP TO CHANGE

Yoga as a practice of mindfulness is akin to feminist consciousness-raising. Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s created consciousness-raising groups as a way for women to identify and combat internalized oppression and agitate for social change. This powerful and necessary tool was inspired by the practice of “Speaking Truth to Power” in the Civil Rights Movement and reminiscent of the Old Left’s focus on catalyzing workers by making them aware of their own oppression. In this way, yoga as an embodied practice that develops and heightens awareness, has the ability to heal, transform, and create change not only in individuals but in communities and the larger culture. (Chelsea Jackson Robert and Melanie Klein 321)

My take on yoga and social justice, is that I think that the practice of yoga is helping us to do the... inner transformative work that’s needed in order for social justice movements to really succeed – you look at communism, unionism, socialism, all kinds of social justice movements, that one of the things that happen is that people start to have these really beautiful idealistic visions about community, sharing, equality, that they’re trying to implement without having done the inner transformation needed to actually act from a place of inner connection in the sense that your suffering is my suffering. (Kerrie, California, April 2016)

#### Introduction

The preceding chapters in this ethnography have told the stories of yoga teachers and practitioners who struggle against racism, heteronormativity, ableism, and ageism to find a place in the yoga community. Despite many claims from yoga studios, teachers, and media that yoga is for everyone, there are even more claims that yoga is actually inaccessible. Yoga’s popularity shows no signs of waning even though the internet is becoming increasingly populated by blogs, articles, and social media postings about the problems in the yoga world, from cultural appropriation accusations, to charges of sexual misconduct and physical abuse against well-known teachers. As yoga has become mainstream, many who have participated in this dissertation study are disappointed as yoga has become riddled with nonsense that detracts from what yoga should be.

My experiences and reflections on the yoga community have evolved similarly to body positive activist and feminist media discourse analyst Melanie Klein, who wrote in 2012,

After examining the mainstreaming of yoga for several years with frustration and sadness, I put down the yoga magazines and withdrew from the increasingly commercialized yoga community. The community that had previously provided me with self-acceptance began to increasingly reflect the mainstream culture from which I thought solace. What sealed the deal for me is when I stumbled upon an advertisement for diet pills in *Yoga Journal*...In my opinion, the relentless focus on weight loss and the advertising of diet pills has no place in yoga. It runs counter to cultivating the unique quality of the practice that fosters healthy minds and bodies, which is what yoga is about” (42).

The first section of this chapter will briefly examine yoga and accessibility as a inclusivity issue, followed by a discussion of people’s experiences of limitations to yoga class access with regards to body normativity, race, and age. These stories tell us who is fitting in, and who is not. Following this discussion, I will then explore the initiatives of yoga teachers who are not only making complaints, but making changes. These changes are happening in bricks and mortar studios, community centres, church basements, and parks. Yoga community participants are sharing their experiences and feelings about these changes, and I will start this chapter off with a discussion of accessibility as exemplified by a studio in Brooklyn, New York, followed by the story of Carol, a woman who came to the Participatory Action Research session that I held in March 2016.

### **Yoga Access: “What Kind of Bodies Are Gonna Be Accepted in the Space?”**

I don't like supporting businesses that aren't physically accessible if I can avoid it. They're all upstairs! Definitely not wheelchair accessible. I don't think there's even the case where it's one little step; it's full flight of steps. Accessibility is not an issue for me because I can do stairs... the fact that there are studios up there is a message to me about who's expected, and who's welcome, and what kind of bodies are gonna be accepted in the space. (Christine, PAR participant, March 2016)

At the beginning of my fieldwork explorations in August 2015, I went to New York City to explore the yoga scene there. I wanted to explore how the yoga scene in NYC might compare to Toronto, given that both cities are diverse, gentrifying metropolises not that dissimilar from each other. I had read about a couple of places that were offering alternative approaches to mainstream yoga, and one of these was Seven Branches. I took an intermediate level yoga class one Saturday morning with Shri Ananda. Just around the corner from a subway in Flatbush, Brooklyn, Seven Branches is an intimate, naturally-lit, ground floor space with plants as decoration. A young woman with a shaved head sat at the desk, and a sign in the reception area signalled the presence of an all-genders washroom. Drying herbs hang from rafters and bulkheads; presumably these are used for some herbal practice offered there. The drop in class was \$15, which was reasonable for New York prices. Shri Ananda is a big African American woman wearing tights and a long sleeved T-shirt. She was calmly focussing herself before class, her head wrapped and long dreadlocks coming down past her shoulders. The class was mostly white women, and it felt full at 18 people. There were 2 men, and 2 African American woman, one of whom brought in her son who looked to be about 11 and seemed quite comfortable in the space.

The class was a slow paced flow, but because it was not geared to beginners, the slowness allowed practitioners to find their breath and feel themselves in each pose. This approach to practice is my preference; after years of fast paced vinyasa yoga classes, I crave the time to truly slow down and feel. There was gentle, soothing music playing in the background, and Ananda warmly encouraged students to follow their breath and make sounds as they moved in and out of poses. Ananda's languaging around anatomy was vague, and upon reflection, I realize that this was likely a deliberate choice. With the mandate of Seven Branches as healing justice, their use

of non-triggering, gender neutral language about the body is what Carla Rice would refer to as a “body equity approach” to health policy, medical language, and embodiment inclusivity (276).

In a borough of New York City, Seven Branches Yoga is offering yoga classes that are designed to be accessible in all ways, and they address Cathy’s concerns around commercial yoga spaces being unwelcoming to both people with mobility issues and round bodies. Seven Branches’s mission is to be a worker-owned, cooperative community health centre. I visited Seven Branches in August 2015, and was impressed by its main floor access, low-scent space that offers multi-level yoga by donation, yoga for parents and their babies and toddlers, therapeutic, and specific level classes. Because Seven Branches is located in a neighbourhood with a large Hispanic population, it has in the past offered classes in Spanish. Seven Branches, in its commitment to what they call health justice, also offers community acupuncture sessions, and yoga and meditation classes for queer and trans people. All services at Seven Branches, which also include massage and herbal medicine, are available on a sliding scale. This infrastructure at Seven Branches offers maximum accessibility to the community.

When I worked at a spa in the early 2000s, one of my issues with the industry of wellness and the business of yoga was the fact that only people of a certain income bracket could afford to go to spas and yoga studios, and that these patrons were overwhelmingly white. In November 2017, the social justice-based Health Centre known as Third Root delivered an episode on their Healing Justice Podcast titled, “De-Spa-ifying Healing & Accessibility,” which presents the spa industry as elitist in multivalent, intersectional feminist ways and seeks as its intention to empower listeners in their own time and space to explore healing. The podcast is set up as a conversation and corresponding practice, and invites listeners to join them, “whether you are grappling

with questions about social justice, community organizing, social movements, self-care/collective care/community care, trauma and resilience, wellness and healing” (Healing Justice podcast description, Ep. 01, November 25, 2017). While this podcast initiative is wonderful because it is online and thus precludes the necessity to be in the space, we need more of this attention to accessibility and healing justice in Toronto. Six Degrees Acupuncture Clinic is a close approximation of the Seven Branches healing justice model, but Six Degrees does not offer regularly scheduled drop in yoga classes, and they are located on the 2nd floor, which undermines its accessibility.

Economy also undermines accessibility. Urban centres with their high rents, however, do not support pay what you can fee structures, and ground floor studios are difficult to come by. Many studios in urban centres are closing due to the challenge of offering affordable classes with high overhead expenses. Toronto is known for its increasingly high housing and commercial rent prices and areas that had once been working class are now being gentrified, which makes yoga class costs rise (Kern). Purusha, where I used to teach, is but one example of over twenty yoga studios that have opened and closed in Toronto since 2013 (Facebook survey, December 2017). J Brown recently closed his yoga centre in Brooklyn New York, and had this to say about it on his blog from April 4, 2017:

I have witnessed the pattern enough to predict that an operation like mine can only keep pace with the rents for so long before getting priced out. What is surprising is how fast it happens and how hard it is to accept when the numbers turn against you. It’s easy to place blame somewhere. With myself for not running the business better. Or with the NYC real estate market for acting so seemingly against its own interests and humanity. Or with a larger economic system that is based on a grow-or-die model which precludes a healthy stasis for community-supported businesses. (J Brown Yoga 2017)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.jbrownnyoga.com/blog/2017/4/another-yoga-center-closing>

The scene in Toronto is so parallel to New York, that many studio owners and yoga teachers here in Ontario resonate deeply with J Brown's story. One anonymous yoga teacher in a mid-size Ontario city shared this about the closure of the studio she was so excited to be a part of closed:

We all felt sadness and upset. Sadness for the closing of our beloved studio and the end of a community and upset in how the owners did it. The new owners felt overwhelmed by the task of running a studio. One was used to living and working 9-5 and the other was a young, new teacher. Both tried with a vision of showcasing their teachings but when all the other teachers are teaching and the owners are paying out more then they are able to afford, a disheartened sense comes about. The owners' vision of letting their teachers lead did not work financially. The previous owners taught the majority of the classes so things were fine financially. But the new owners held a different way of being. This way of running a business of showcasing their teachers allowed us all to teach more, but then in the end, in less then a year it was all over. The owners were in upset which led to the quick dismantling of the studio. (Private message, December 30, 2017)

This yoga teacher's positive, upbeat attitude, which is in part fostered by her yoga and meditation practice, did not keep her sad for long. She explained, "It challenged me to establish myself again in a different community and to rebuild my offerings" (private message, December 30, 2017). She reached out to new owners of the studio, and asked if she could offer her kids yoga classes there. They said yes, and agreed that she would transfer her kids' after school and school board professional development day yoga camps to their studio on a pre-registered basis. This teacher feels much better about this arrangement financially, despite the fact that she is not on the regular drop in class schedule. As she says,

I can dictate my own schedule, I make more money this way and when I show up I already know there will be, say, 6 kids there. Not a wait-and-see to who shows up... My best current gig is teaching at a public school. I teach yoga to grades 7/8. \$10/student for. 45 min class. Pre-reg. So far 11 kids in the class with a request to create a second class! That's \$110/class with no split or rent to pay! (Private communication, December 30 2017)

It sounds wonderful, and indeed this yoga teacher seems delighted with the arrangement. I can not help, however, but wonder about the difficulties of precarious employment that this “gig economy” brings.

### **Carol’s Story of Fat as a Feminist Issue**

I had planned the “Participatory Action Session” (PAR) as a form of intervention that would function not only as a focus group that would offer my dissertation research insights into the ways in which people consider themselves included or excluded in mainstream yoga culture, but also offer participants a window into how they might move through the obstacles that media and its representations of health and yoga place in front of finding a personally empowering practice. We began with a discussion of what people understand as healthy, and how they consider themselves within a fitness or yoga setting. Participants shared their different experiences in yoga spaces and gyms, and Carol was an enthusiastic contributor to our session.

Carol works as a university program administrator and is a committed longtime yoga practitioner. In our session, she shared about how she was currently part way through a cleanse program she had purchased through a popular multi-level marketing company that specializes in body care and nutrition supplements they brand as natural. Almost as a confessional, Carol explained to the group about how she was recently able to attend a family Easter celebration and not be triggered by all of the foods, and how her family’s concerns about her weight have affected her own self esteem and perpetuated her emotional eating habits. I had met Carol, who practiced yoga at the now-closed Purusha Yoga and Fitness Studio where I had been teaching regular classes the previous year, and she was excited to participate in this research. With tears in my

eyes, I listened to Carol share her poignant story of an insensitive yoga teacher singling her out for her body size. Here is her story in her words:

I've been practicing yoga for a long time, and in my younger thinner days I was doing classes. That might be why I don't feel as uncomfortable now that I am a much bigger woman. But I did have an experience just last week at the studio cause I've been upping my exercise regime and I've been exploring other classes at Purusha. And, um, one of the classes that I went to... all the instructors there are fabulous, and they always say go at your own pace. However, when you're the only one in a bigger body, trying to do some of the poses and movements that they're doing, and everybody else is just doing them like flowing from, you know, one to the other, to the other, to the other, and my body isn't doing what they're doing. I was feeling really shitty. But that was me. Nobody's looking at me, nobody's paying attention. Except for one time, she came and gave me a strap so I could do one.

I asked Carol how she felt when the teacher did this, and she explained that of course she felt singled out. She continued, and added that the teacher said,

I don't want anybody not to be able to do it. Cause she said, do you want a strap? And I said no at first. I didn't want to be centred out that I couldn't do this pose, right? And, she basically insisted that I have a strap and do the pose. And I know she was trying to make me feel included, but I actually felt isolated and like, the centre of attention because I was on one side of the studio and everybody was on this side of the studio, cause I wanted to be away from the whole class so that I could do my own thing. And all of a sudden, everybody is looking at me, cause I couldn't do the pose and she brought me a strap, and then I could do it. But I was just like, "oh my god, get me outa here."

This example of a yoga teacher's insensitivity around body diversity angers me. I needed to know how a teacher could even get away with such conduct of not listening to a student's specific "no" to her offer of a strap, and how the teacher could have thought that disregarding a student's wishes was acceptable, so I pressed more questions to see what other ways in which Carol might have preferred the situation to unfold. I asked, What would you have liked the teacher to have done instead? How could they have made it a less exclusionary, isolating experience? "I think if she had come to me so that she was speaking to me beside me," Carol told me. I tried to

place a mild expression of neutrality on my face, but inside I was horrified, because it means that this teacher gave these instructions to Carol from her mat in front of the whole class and undermined Carol's right to privacy. Carol went on, "And so I'm sitting there. What's the one where you grab your legs from behind and you rock on your stomach?" "Boat pose," I say. "I could only reach one foot. I couldn't get both. And she saw that, and then she said from her mat, 'Well can you at least...'" So not only did this teacher single out Carol's inability to do what she was demonstrating, but she insisted that Carol try despite her insistence that she was fine without. By saying "at least," this yoga teacher frames her opinion of Carol's practice because "at least" signifies not enough. A yoga teacher's insistence that a student use a prop also signifies the emphasis on progression in the physical practice, despite the messages of yoga that attracted Carol and many other people that teach us that we are good enough as we are. This contradiction is frustrating.

In its best iterations, yoga helps people feel more confident in their bodies. Countless testimonial stories from yoga participants say that yoga's affirming philosophies made them feel like they are enough, but Carol's unfortunate experience with this teacher exemplifies the worst of yoga. Melanie Klein explains that yoga had helped her heal her relationship with her body with its messages of compassion and kindness, but that she, too has been struggling with mainstream yoga's contradictory messages of body perfectionism (28). All is not lost, though, because people are getting active in resisting and challenging mainstream media representations of idealized polished, thin, white, youthful bodies in yoga. The Yoga and Body Image Coalition has been busy for the past several years developing a community of other body positivity activists in the yoga world, and they now have a hashtag campaign called #whatayogilookslike. The campaign

features shirts for sale printed with the slogan, “This is what a yogi looks like,” in an attempt to challenge stereotypes of beauty in the yoga world. In 2014, while I was preparing to write my comprehensive exams, Klein co-edited with Anna Guest-Jelley *Yoga and Body Image: 25 Personal Stories About Beauty, Bravery, and Loving Your Body*. This book offers a comprehensive, but U.S.A.-centric, representation of the stories of yoga practitioners who have moved through shame, self-harming practices, racialization, fat phobia, and homophobia. My dissertation tells similar stories from a Canadian perspective, and incorporates intersectionality with a feminist political economy perspective. What had started for me as a marginal spiritual practice that I later came to critique silently as it exploded into a mainstream, commercialized phenomenon, is now largely contested with stories of resilience and healing from oppression and trauma through yoga.

*Race and Yoga Journal* has been publishing a regular series of testimonial papers from practitioners who have emerged from racial and sexual trauma, disabling strokes, anxiety, and eating disorders. Tawnja Cleveland is an African American woman who had a massive stroke in 2008 when she was in her 30s. Amidst her “constant whisper of I am NOT good enough” (8), Tawnja had discovered yoga in the early 2000s through a VHS tape and was happy for her home practice, away from others’ judgements of her practice and body, and the white middle class majority that reinforced her feelings of inadequacy. Her disabling stroke resulted in aphasia and decreased mobility on the right side of her body, but with persistent rehabilitation, she recovered such that she not only returned to yoga, but also became a yoga teacher. In spite of her right hand paralysis, and speech impediment Tawnja practices with modifications and encourages others to modify their yoga poses too (10-11). After a move to Atlanta, Georgia and much searching,

Tawnja found her yoga home at an ashram that follows the lineage of *bhakti* (see Glossary) yogi, Neem Karoli Baba. Wheelchair accessible, this studio offered Tawnja the comforting presence not only of affirming, supportive teachers, but also other women of colour. By 2014, Tawnja began to consider her dream of becoming a yoga teacher, but felt daunted by the disability that caused her limp and imperfect speech (13). Tawnja says,

Swami Jaya Devi and the Kashi yoga teachers taught me that regardless of my challenges, I am enough. I'm a classical yoga teacher today, challenges and all –it is not the aphasia-free and a strong arm and hand future I envisioned. I teach yoga to help people believe everyone is beautiful in their own way, radiating from the inside out. (14)

What is particularly important about Tawnja Cleveland is that she learned through yoga that not only is she enough, but that she can teach through her disability, which empowers other students to feel confident in modifying yoga poses in any way their bodies need. For as much as there are movements toward healing oppression and trauma through yoga, there remain the problems that racism, classism, ageism, homophobia, and ableism promulgate to create what I call the yoga hegemony.

Carol concluded her story and said, “I wanna feel included, not excluded” (PAR session March 26, 2016). While Carol’s story tells of her experience with an insensitive yoga teacher, stories like Tawnja Cleveland’s and other participants in my fieldwork research document the potential for intersectionality in yoga in order to engender change to the status quo in which the majority of teachers and images of yoga practitioners are thin, white, middle class women practicing for their individual self-betterment. While Balizet and Myers acknowledge that mainstream yoga proponents “rarely acknowledge systemic barriers to personal achievement, such as sexism, racism, homophobia, or poverty” (278), they point out that

there are contemporary yoga practices that are developing communities that resist competitive, post-feminist, neoliberalist values (279). Kimberly Dark shares a somewhat different but similarly demeaning experience of a yoga teacher who did not know what to do with a fat body in class. While Carol had experienced the teacher's concern for her practice, Kimberly has felt her teacher's simultaneous disregard and scrutiny. She is often expected to

... fend for myself when it comes to posture modifications, and still, I can feel scrutinized by the teacher and other students. I recall once, during my first class with a particular teacher, being told I wasn't capable of downward dog and should simply take a resting pose. Even as I explained that I had practiced downward dog daily for decades, the teacher's simultaneous scrutiny and erasure of my practice prevailed through class. (Dark 7)

Kimberly Dark is a feminist writer, performance artist, and yoga teacher who leads empowerment and body positivity workshops in North America, and she knows these politics intimately. I had the opportunity to discuss fat phobia in the yoga world with Kimberly, and hear her perspective on the often invisible ways in which the yoga and fitness industry discriminates against fat people. In her interview with me, she pointed out that people running yoga spaces need to consider that "there are far more people who feel fat than are fat, and that influences where they practice." Cathy, another participant in the Participatory Action Research sessions, shared her hesitations around attending yoga classes, and these corroborate Kimberly's statement:

I've always also just assumed that as a fat person, that I would not be welcome in most mainstream spaces for that reason. The impact of having the mirror, you need to suck in your stomach. I feel that the positives of checking out your form are outweighed by the self-scrutiny. (Christine, PAR March 2016, Toronto)

I was fortunate to receive from Kimberly her pre-publication essay for *Yoga, The Body, and Embodied Social Change* entitled, "Fat Pedagogy in the Yoga Class," in which she articu-

lates the importance of yoga teachers knowing effective ways of using inclusive language with students of all body types. Kimberly argues that visibility is an urgent priority in a culture that privileges thin, young, white, heteronormative bodies. Not only are yoga teachers offering pedagogical examples when they are talking, but also by the virtue of their physical presence can yoga teachers impart non-verbal lessons of acceptance, vulnerability, and strength. Kimberly's vulnerability and willingness to be seen at the front of the room is revolutionary because her body, which she claims is fat, queer, aging, and female, is marked by social interpretations and sanctions as slothful, unhealthy, and definitely unfit. One large bodied, African American yoga teacher I met with in New York City told me that she uses yoga in service to her community and as a form of activism. As a large woman of colour, Aisha challenges and shifts the ways that yoga is represented so that more women of colour can feel comfortable doing yoga and accessing its potentials for healing from trauma, illness, and even social oppression. Aisha shared that new students in her class often give surprised looks when they realize that she is the teacher.

Like Kimberly Dark, Aisha recognizes the political and pedagogical power of her presence as a fat yoga teacher, and when we chatted Aisha mentioned how she appreciates Instagram "badass" Jessamyn Stanley. Stanley is a 20-something fat black woman who posts pictures of herself doing advanced yoga poses in her underwear to challenge the stereotypical images of skinny white women in impossible yoga poses and expensive exercise clothes. I showed the PAR participants some images of Stanley, and one responded:

It's amazing. I would never be able to do that. Even when I was a small child, I was not even kind of even remotely as flexible as that. I was a thin child. It doesn't matter what size I am; I can never do that. And like, that's okay too. So if I were using this as

oh, this is like, my goal, that wouldn't be realistic for me. So if it becomes something where it's another kind of body norm or body ideal that we should achieve in terms of functionality and size, then that's an issue. I think it's great she can do that, but I don't think it applies to me. (Christine, PAR participant, March 2016)

Cathy's and other PAR participants' responses to the Instagram posts by fat activist yoga teachers Dana Falsetti and Jessamyn Stanley suggest that their hypermobility is an unattainable ideal for most people. Dianne Bondy's posts, on the other hand, appear to be much more realistic, according to PAR participants. As in Kimberly Dark's story, there has been a tendency in fat yoga teachers to want to prove their ability as if to say, hey, I'm fat, and I can do all these advanced yoga poses, too! Nowadays, however Kimberly Dark is less interested in proving her ability than she is in disrupting hegemonic body norms in yoga. By allowing her fat body to be seen, Kimberly engages in a process of "threshold of exhaustion into comfort and peace not only for myself, but for others as well" which means that as she allows herself to be content and visible with her "fat, aging, queer, female body", then it gives others permission to do the same (Dark 7). Liz, another PAR participant, fortunately has had the opportunity to take yoga classes specifically organized for round bodies, and shared what her teacher has said:

She was talking about stresses of every day life. And prioritizing time for the self, and she was always like, if your body doesn't feel good, then we will change it. Never feel shame for coming out of a pose, the most important thing is that you feel good in your body. Doing what's right is most important. Really supportive. It's also great to be in a yoga room where people identify as having round bodies, because it shifts the focus from, 'this is the practice that will help you lose weight.' Which suggests that health is losing weight. It should be a space for you to come and do what feels good to you. (Liz, PAR March 2016, Toronto)

These words from Liz and from Kimberly indicate that fat phobia in the yoga world can become a thing of the past, but there is much work to do.

## **Race and Yoga: We Must Not Be Colour Blind**

To say that it's in your spiritual power to do this, it's just not honouring the depth of separateness that people feel, right? Like, to make people feel welcome, there has to be an honouring of why they don't feel welcome. And that's the focus in general in the west on āsana, is what makes people feel excluded because it's racialized communities that are experiencing more physical disease, like obesity, or whatever. So why would they feel welcome in a studio, where to have that social capital and economic capital to invest in your health on a Saturday morning at 9:15 for a \$2000 annual membership. You have to be in a certain bracket of health to do that. You're not visibly seeing people who are more overweight, which are more predominantly racialized communities. (Diana, August 2017)

In some cases, the complaints about the yoga world are about diffuse issues that many people would rather simply not see. Racism, for example, is simply not within yoga's purview. Cathy, a Toronto-based yoga studio owner, recognizes that race is a social construct and attempts to be inclusive in her hiring practices, but deeper nuance is needed in order to understand the complexities of difference. Cathy told me, "There is no racism. No. We're humans with differences. They happen to be a different, quote, in your terms, race, but they're not of a different race, they're human... Just like I don't see colour, I'm just fascinated by faces and fascinated by colour; there are people of different colour in my family. I'm past that. I'm also past size" (Cathy, February 2016). The problem of invisibilizing white cultural supremacy and cultural appropriation in yoga is also sometimes bypassed by spiritual teachers who claim yoga's universality (Ballard and Kripalani 302), which is even more confusing. If we deny that "colour" and "size" differences exist, however, we obfuscate difference and undermine the implications that social location has on individuals.

Alex from Peterborough shared that "Peterborough is a very white town. We've got one East Indian person who comes to Moksha regularly, who comes up from Toronto. A couple of

Chinese students. That's about it. Peterborough is extremely white.” The whiteness in yoga studios in Peterborough is not that dissimilar from Toronto. Gina, a woman of colour who teaches and lives in Toronto says that folks need to make the yoga experience work for themselves in a studio space that does not have population-specific classes:

There are larger systemic things that work in those spaces where it's not catered for your body type. There's no racial component that deals with people of colour in those spaces. That's not what it's about. You have to figure out what classes fit you. I didn't start at the front of the room, I started in the back of the room. That was my space in the back. Back mat, back corner, right? I went to many many spaces. So I found my place outside of what was happening, you know, from those other populations. I didn't create any community there at all. It happens when you're in a marginalized, racialized body in spaces that are not made for you. You learn how to navigate those spaces. You learn to figure out what is it. Like how you're supposed to be or not be in those spaces... Once you figure out your purpose, it makes it more manageable. Right? (Gina, May 2016, Toronto)

Gina explains that she is well aware of race dynamics in yoga spaces, and that for her, it was not necessary that those spaces catered to her as a woman of colour. More importantly, Gina points out that skin colour does not determine politics. In particular, Gina's family comes from Trinidad, and therefore she says,

So the owner that says to you, we have a black person, like what does that actually mean? Like a South Asian person. Because those people are there doesn't mean that they're actually thinking of race, queer, feminist perspectives, or disability, right? Those people are also part of the larger society, right? This skin colour does not determine how one comes into the world. I identify as a multi-racial black person because my father is mixed race, South Asian, Portuguese, and black...

The implications of Gina's point here suggest a discord with yoga studio owner Cathy, who says she does not see colour. Cathy's words clearly represent a dissonance with the politics of which Gina speaks; Cathy proves that she is not thinking through intersectional feminist perspectives at all. While Cathy said that her studio does occasionally offer yoga for bigger bodies teacher training workshops, the rest of the regularly scheduled classes are yoga vinyasa, hātha flow, or varia-

tions on yin<sup>46</sup> and restorative yoga classes. There are no classes for specific populations. Gina is a member of a yoga collective called Brown Girls Yoga, in which she offers classes for women of colour, because, as she says, “people wanna see themselves reflected.”

As Ballard and Kripalani remind us that marginalized people “need folks we can fall apart with” (309). They explain that for many people, their yoga practice or teacher training is a retreat from the “world out there,” but for many marginalized groups, they can never escape those realities of racism, colonialism, economic disparity, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, and transphobia, because they persist in the yoga classroom (310). The Collective is a group of black yoga teachers in the St. Louis and Sacramento areas who are inspired by Patañjali’s teachings of *ahimsa* (non-violence), which claims Dr. Martin Luther King Junior embodied as he challenged oppressive racism and hatred (Harris, “MLK: Honouring a Great Yogi”). Dr. Terry Harris of The Collective noticed that the representation of black men in yoga was very small, and he became a yoga teacher as an extension of his career as an educator in order to offer black men effective, non-violent tools for dealing with racialized oppression and trauma (“The Collective,” Youtube video).

Diana, the Toronto-based racialized yoga practitioner whose epigraph opens this section, used to do Brown Girls Yoga classes at a studio that no longer offers those classes. She felt that the owners of the studio were making a sincere attempt to be inclusive, but that “it just didn’t feel like the right space” (Diana, August 2017). Diana, who has an academic background in equity and critical race studies, understands her own resentment about being the only brown person in a

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<sup>46</sup> <https://theyogasanctuary.ca/wood-yoga-studio/> “Yin Yoga is a slow, deep practice that increases your flexibility by stretching and stimulating the connective tissues of the hips, pelvis and lower spine. Postures are held for up to a few minutes to encourage a deepening of awareness and sensation in the body.”

yoga studio, and the complex ways in which she has experienced discrimination. I would like to share her thoughts here:

Before I started practicing yoga, and I have a lot of respect for the discipline now, I just thought it was for stupid white people. It might sound racist. But it was part of me that felt resentment toward white privilege and just added to that larger resentment. For me, practicing yoga has been somewhat of a making peace with that part of me that has whiteness and white privilege, or that I am that also. The deeper I go into my spiritual awareness, there is less separateness. I remember I felt guilt and shame for practicing yoga, cause it felt to me I was giving up my authenticity as a brown girl. Like I had to give up my brownness to practice yoga in white spaces. To talk about race in a yoga studio is very like... It feels taboo. Although race in general is a taboo subject. Especially in a yoga studio, it feels anti spiritual, which is bullshit, cause it's real. I find it kind of bullshit in yoga studios that they shy away from talking about race, because yes we're one race, that's the ultimate truth, but there are so many veils of illusion and to break down those veils of illusion, we don't not talk about them, we acknowledge the veils of illusion. There are racial differences of who is coming to yoga studios. That is a part of the truth.

Diana's experiences confirm that people are reluctant to discuss race and racism in the yoga studio, but that because race continues to be an ongoing issue in social, we need to not only address difference, but this intervention must also address how to negotiate those differences with intersectional feminist frameworks. Furthermore, some racialized women express discomfort and anger at having their own cultural heritage fed back to them by white people who claim to be experts. I offer the following blog posting from a British South Asian yoga teacher as an example:

...Academics studying South Asian philosophy or history from an embodied distance, maintain a penetrating voyeuristic lens, peeling away at layers, leaving a bare, exposed nothingness. In the process of omitting their own positionality and personal gains, knowledge making becomes objectifying or romanticising. It was for me, a pretty gruelling process going through a yoga teacher training, having your own dismembered culture taught back to you with such proprietorship. (Ansari "Decolonising Yoga")

Safya Ansari's experience in her yoga teacher training reflects the systemic and institutionalized racism to which Said refers in *Orientalism*. Said argues that colonizers' studying of Asian and

Middle Eastern cultures allowed Europeans to be in relationship with the Orient without ever “losing the relative upper hand”. (7) Orientalism, Said claims, is founded on discursive ownership, politics and power as much as it is an admiration of the Orient (9). In *Looking White People in the Eye*, Sherene Razack theorizes the experiences of racialized people in which the white gaze and its liberties subjugates the rights and freedoms of the racialized person, and racialized women especially (31). Carbado, Crenshaw, et al explain that resistance efforts to gender and race discrimination can actually reinforce and legitimize marginalization (304). Intersectionality, Carbado, Crenshaw, et al. explain, has far reaching influences at deploying change. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s term, “intervention” is an effective way for us to theorize how to deploy intersectional frameworks in order to change institutional and social structures that systematically erase racialization and other modes of marginalization. Furthermore, intersectionality is more than an intervention, it is also a way of mobilizing a social movement, as Carbado, Crenshaw, et al point out (305). It is for this reason that I include a discussion of seemingly disparate elements such as mobility, race, and body positivity in this yoga and social justice chapter. The intervention that I seek is to raise awareness of the intersectional social determinants that cause inequality, because as Lofters et al point out, if someone has not experienced poverty, racialization, homophobia, ableism, ageism, transphobia, or sexism, then they are not likely to be able to understand or recognize the role that social determinants of health play. The following section of this chapter will link the ways in which yoga can be used as an inclusivity intervention.

## **Yoga and Inclusivity: Chair Yoga is for Everyone: Anna, Lara, and Marissa**

Stephanie Moonaz points out that the emergence of hātha yoga has historically precluded the participation of people with mobility issues. As I have explained in other parts of this dissertation, as yoga became increasingly popular, it became a venue for practitioners to demonstrate their physical prowess (Moonaz 246; Lorr). Chair yoga is an alternative approach to hātha yoga in which the traditional yoga postures are adapted for the chair. Chair yoga is beneficial for people with mobility issues, and renders yoga accessible to people who might not otherwise think they can attend and experience its benefits. In her research at Johns Hopkins Arthritis Center into the effects of yoga for persons with both rheumatoid and osteoarthritis, Moonaz discovered that the significant predictor of participant attrition was minority racialization (251). She corroborates previous social determinants of health research (Lofters et al.; Price et al.; Patterson and Veenstra), which found that people marginalized by race tend to have higher morbidity and disabling disease rates due to their “differential access to quality care and lack of resources and infrastructure to promote self-care behaviours” (251). Gina’s work as a Brown Girls Yoga teacher here in Toronto are part of an important initiative to address these health differentials. More important to specialized classes, however, is that we consider how inclusive yoga can be an intervention to marginalization. This section will share the stories of three remarkable yoga teachers – one in Toronto, one in Vancouver, and one in Brooklyn, who are all engaged in intersectional interventions to create inclusive, accessible yoga experiences that, as Kerrie says in the second epigraph of this chapter, facilitate the inner work required to create true social justice.

## Anna

Anna is a Toronto-based yoga instructor who earns most of her income as the front desk supervisor at a downtown fitness centre. We met at a coffee shop in May 2016 after she answered my call for interview participants to discuss authenticity and accessibility in yoga; we talked for nearly two hours, and over the past year and a half, she has continued to share her stories of success and struggle in creating truly inclusive yoga in Toronto. Anna currently teaches chair yoga classes to seniors in a reform synagogue in mid-town Toronto; she also teaches a pre-registered class dedicated to adults with disabilities and their caregivers, plus a weekly drop-in inclusive yoga class in a church basement. As a newly trained yoga teacher two years ago, Anna was recommended by the studio owner she had trained with to lead a class for a Community Living Toronto group. Anna said that she had to learn simultaneously as she led these classes, and says about this experience,

It was like, yeah, do you have any training? My training was that I looked at people in front of me. So, that's how I came to teach these. I don't put down, I'm gonna take a chair yoga training at... I dunno who does them. Or yoga for seniors training. Like, you know what? Let me figure out. Like what can I do in a chair? How can I adapt this for a chair? I like to figure it out myself. A lot of the things they come up with I'll see what people do and they're naturally doing.

Anna's previous training as an arts psychotherapist helped equip her with the patience, mental flexibility, and humour for leading classes for adults with cognitive disabilities. Some of the people in her classes are profoundly disabled with little verbal communication or mobility, but these different embodiments are of little concern to Anna. In contrast with Ballard and Kripalani (2016), Anna actually believes that population-specific classes undermine what she understands to be yoga's true intent of connection and union, and instead, she desires the intervention of a

purely integrated, inclusive yoga experience. She asks many questions that open to possibility of yoga, while also remaining aware that there are definite challenges in teaching such a class:

What if that person practiced next to RJ [the yoga teacher trainer and studio owner]? That's the class that I want. And of course, HOW? Cause that's not gonna be an āsana class....Yoga for autistic people. I think that's ridiculous. Yoga for X. Yoga for Seniors. Creating a specialization, there's nothing wrong with that, but what if it's just yoga for everybody? Like, just not excluding anyone for any reason. One person said to me, well, who is it for? And I go, "everybody." "Well you have to have a target!" No. "Well how are you gonna do that?"

Despite skepticism from Anna's community as well as her own doubts as to her ability to effectively teach an inclusive yoga class, Anna managed to make it work. In her words:

...inclusion isn't just ramps and elevators; it's more than that. It's not just structural. And of course I'm figuring out the language. But I'm thinking about universal access, which is more the word. As opposed to integration. If this is a class for people with disabilities, you're still forcing people to identify. Why can't a person take a class in a community setting? Why does it have to be a special needs class? Why does it have to be a wheelchair users class? So someone said, you're casting the net too wide. How can you possibly serve every single person? I don't know, but I'm gonna try. It was pretty magical. It really happened!

These days, Anna is leading Inclusive Yoga Toronto classes at a downtown church. Her promotional material says, "An accessible and inclusive yoga community that welcomes people of all abilities to practice together." This, to me, is social justice and yoga.

### Lara and the Yoga Moms

I ran up against those same questions when I came to borough of New York City to spend time with Lara and her "Yoga Moms" in the weekly chair yoga class she had been teaching to the same core group since 2013. Lara refers to the people in her chair yoga class as "Moms" because they each have become so close to her that she considers them to be othermothers who provide

care for her and for their community in absence of a bloodmother (Hill Collins 178). I first met them in August of 2015, when the studio owner encouraged me to come visit this remarkable group, and I decided I wanted to spend more time with them to hear their stories. I joined them for their 2:30 class on a frigid Tuesday afternoon in early January 2016 to learn about how they came to practice yoga with Lara, who was for most of these women, their first yoga teacher. They shared with me what they got out of the yoga, and their weekly class time together. This chair yoga mom group was so warm; they hugged and teased each other with the familiarity of family.

It is not only women in their 60s and 70s with mobility issues who come to the Yoga Moms chair class with Lara. Aaron is back from L.A. after being away since September. I had met him back in August 2015 when I first came to the studio to check out the chair class. He had a shoulder injury then, which he is still dealing with, and shares that he loves being with the yoga moms not only to power down from an aggressive fitness background that he classifies as “overly masculine,” but also to be with this community of othermothers. The connection of the participants in the Yoga Moms chair class goes beyond attending class every week since 2013. Cathy, who moved to Indiana with her daughter and son-in-law six months ago continues to Skype into class regularly. Before she moved away, Cathy gave each of the Yoga Moms a beautiful silver necklace with an OM pendant, so they would always feel connected to each other and also to what yoga has meant for them in their lives personally. It is interesting that this group, who might never have been interested in yoga because of its Hindu origins, are now wearing an OM symbol. Their weekly class with Lara has opened their hearts to each other and their minds to new paradigms for wellness. Through their classes with Lara, they recognize the value of chanti-

ng for soothing anxiety, and are receptive to alternative modes of healing, such as using the gemstone Baltic amber for musculoskeletal pain. The fluidity of supportive conversation between teacher and students is another aspect of what makes this class special. The Yoga Moms allow their conversation in class to flow organically, rather than to adhere to some imagined script that yoga class ought to be. Lara and the Yoga Moms tell me that over the three years that Lara has been leading this class, she has received as much personal support and guidance from them as they have learned from her.

During our discussion following the yoga class, we share cookies and juice. The group gathers with me and we begin by signing the informed consent forms, which I have tentatively entitled, “Yoga, Age, and Disability.” When Natalia read the title on the consent form, she was noticeably disgruntled. Even though she is 75 and has disc issues in her back, she does not, judging from her reaction to the title, identify with aging or disability. Natalia reminded me to keep ageist and ableist thinking in mind, because in preparing for this work, I had automatically put this group into the age and disability nexus. What I found instead of age and disability in this chair yoga class is a group that cares deeply for one another, experiences physical relief from various discomforts with their yoga practice, and a kind of unprecedented spiritual comfort that they had never previously had. It is through the nexus of connection, then, rather than a shared identity and population-specific class, that brings the notion of inclusivity forward. For the Yoga Moms, yoga is about connection. Cathy said that she loves yoga for psycho-emotional reasons:

Not only physical incentive, but spiritual incentive, too, because a lot of it is the breathing and the meditation, but the... also the feeling that you're not abandoned, the feeling that you will get your life back together again. You know? And I've been sorry that after my first operation, I had a cast put on, and right after the cast, it would have been great to have the yoga to stretch out your leg again.

Pam corroborated that they have created a community of care, which is in keeping with the feminist ethic of care that I discussed in the previous chapter.

All of us have an issue with life, she has two knees redone, she's got knees, she's got her back, and plus she has a medical issue that we're all there for her, no matter what. So if one gets sick, we call her up, and one of us will go over there, and we'll go over there and do it.

Aaron, a young man in his early 30s, is part of the Yoga Moms. For him, being a part of this group is not dependent on age or ability; it is about being in community. Pam referred to him as “our grandson, but not by choice! He's got six grandmas!” Aaron said,

But I would choose you all. When I had started doing yoga, I had a huge amount of medical, physical trauma in my early 20s, uh, that never really got out of my body. And I started doing yoga, and bonded with Lara in her other classes, and she told me about this class, and she said, “you'd love the ladies,” and my schedule is flexible enough so luckily I can come at like, 2 on a Tuesday, so I came, and it was like an exploration of healing through gentleness. Cause I had done the whole American stoic male power through kind of thing and it wasn't working for me.

For Aaron, practicing yoga with Lara and the Yoga Moms is about thriving together in relationship as much as it is about doing a more gentle yoga practice, and for Aaron, Lara, and the Yoga Moms, this is truly authentic. While specialized settings offer marginalized people a tender space from where to experience recognition of their shared oppression, inclusive yoga spaces offer another version of yoga and social justice.

### Marissa

In Vancouver, Marissa teaches both yoga for seniors and general drop in classes at a yoga studio. The Inclusive and Accessible Yoga as social justice framework offers a predicament with relation to individual needs. Older bodies do need a specific physical approach that addresses

common acquired disabilities associated with aging, such as osteoarthritis and mild dementia. As both Anna's and Lara's stories demonstrate, the psychosocial benefits of accessible yoga are invaluable, and participants often report decreased severity and duration of symptoms. Multiple studies address the benefits of hātha yoga for older adults, both from a health and psychosocial perspective. In particular, older adults have experienced significant improvement to balance, gait, and body flexibility, but also with regards to their perception of health (Wertman, Wister, and Mitchell). Older adults who practice hātha yoga also have been reported to have reduced falls occurrence (Smith, Ross, and Nate) and improved sleep quality (Halpern et al.). Marissa not only corroborates with these results, saying that she teaches specific breathing exercises that she thinks would be good for sleeping. More important, though, is that her work with older adults, or "elders" as she refers to this population, reflects an authentic approach to spirituality that integrates her students' present religious practices with some traditional yoga teachings. Marissa explains how she does this in her classes:

I offer them something from the yoga practice. Sometimes it's not about the yoga philosophy, sometimes it's just about life. Like, what does it mean to be aging, and then a little discussion, usually about 15-20 minutes. And then some would rather be moving their bodies, and so those are the type A personalities, and I always mention yoga is much more than the āsana practice. It goes a lot deeper than that. Then we get up and I try to weave whatever we learned into the āsana practice.

Is it appropriate to make yoga teachings accessible to non-Hindu yoga practitioners? Gina does not think so. In her interview with me, Gina argued that the point of yoga is to offer the practitioner accessible ease and empowerment. This is in keeping with one of hātha yoga's primary tenets, *Stira sūkha āsanam*; the posture should be steady and comfortable. In asking again, whether a somewhat superficial or even introductory and incomplete approach to yoga philoso-

phy is appropriative then, I turn to Micaela di Leonardo, who points out that “whitebread towns” with stores selling the timeless exotic are performing the worst of cultural appropriation (2). Di Leonardo reminds readers that the Chicago World Fair of 1893, the very one where Swami Vivekenanda made his first North American appearance, was the pinnacle of American positioning of noble savage in juxtaposition to White Christian values (7). Even as I evaluate accessible yoga, I consider the dynamics of the neo-colonization of yoga. My hope is that with the intentions of accessibility and inclusivity, we can approximate an honest, authentic practice that is as close to what yoga ought to be by Sanātana dharmic standards, without hinduphobia or cultural appropriation.

For Marissa, teaching yoga to older adults is an extension of her own spiritual practice of integration and inclusivity. She feels, as does Lara, that our culture tends to ignore older adults. Many social gerontologists and cultural theorists have been making careers debating the invisibility of older adults, and women in particular (Woodward; Chivers). Both Lara and Marissa have pointed out that in working with older adults, they receive an opportunity to hear the stories that older women often just do not get to tell. Marissa says about her work with elders,

I really love teaching that demographic. And only because in our society we’re afraid of aging. We push our elderly to the side, we don’t want to see them. We don’t want to connect with them, because we’re afraid of dying, or aging, or whatever the fear is around that. And so for me, the goal is really to bring seniors back into community. And it’s somehow happening through yoga, but there’s going to be something aside from that. You would go and solve problems, you would visit the elder to get help, to get wisdom, to get a bit of support. And I think that we forget that aging gives us that wisdom. (Marissa, Vancouver, December 2015 via Skype)

Marissa's approach to working with older adults is not as a teacher guiding her students, but rather, it is a reciprocal relationship between her and the yoga participants she works with. As Marissa puts it,

If people took the time to talk to an elder, they would be amazed at how much they would receive. And yeah, for me, because I'm aging too, in a way it's selfish because I'm thinking about my self. What kind of community do I wanna live in as I'm aging? Do I wanna be in a place where I'm constantly worrying about about money for food, or am I gonna be supported, that kind of thing? But for me, aging is a returning to childhood. It's a returning. You're revisiting. You're coming back to that aspect of being vulnerable, of being innocent. Of being yourself. The actual self.

### **Decolonizing Yoga: Toward an Authentic Feminist Ethic of Care Using the Language of Yoga**

Building on Rangani Sharma's doctoral work on decolonizing yoga, I argue that any discussion of yoga, whether it is in the context of body normativity, accessibility, or the political economy of teaching, needs also to adopt a framework of the *Sanātana Dharma* (see Glossary, Appendix 3) in order to embody a feminist ethics of care. If this is not done, then the conversation is appropriative rather than productive within an integrative and authentic yoga framework. This is not to say that the question of authenticity is whether my arguments about yoga are really yogic, but rather, I mean to respectfully honour the complex spiritual tradition from where contemporary yoga descends, as I have come to know it. What this means is that I have carefully worked with some yoga terminology to some degree so as to enrich the nuance of the discussion. As Michael Stone reminds us in *Yoga for a World Out of Balance*, "Yoga is a path of peacemaking" (86). The stories I have learned and shared about people in North American yoga communities can be understood through Patañjali's philosophical framework of the *yamas* (ethics). In particular, I will focus on *ahimsa* (non-violence), *aparigraha* (non-greed), *satya*, and *asteya*. Much

has been written on the yogic social ethical practices known as the *yamas*, and it is beyond the scope of this project to go into that here. Suffice to say for now, however, that the ways in which we consider concepts such as *ahimsa* and *aparigraha* are infinitely expandable into broader notions of how we can care for one another and ourselves.

As we saw with Lara, her approach to yoga embodies her ethic of care and peace in acknowledging power differentials between marginalized people and white, privileged women like herself. For Lara, yoga is not a career option that she considers as economically viable because of the glut of teachers the yoga industrial complex has produced, and as such, she is motivated to teach yoga for the love of bringing the benefits of the practice to people in her community. Despite the closure of the studio where Lara's chair yoga classes have been taking place for the past four years, Lara is not concerned about the economic loss of the class, nor does she feel she needs to find another class to teach. Lara admits that she is fortunate to have her husband's support so that she does not need to find other employment. Instead of being a part of the yoga teacher trainings that once occupied her time, Lara is exploring other creative movement modalities such as developmental movement studies and Body Mind Centering (BMC). Lara has also been exploring other location options for her chair yoga class.

The *yama, satya* (honesty), relates to a personally authentic approach to living and being in the world (Stone). Gonzales and Eckstrom tell us that *satya* and *ahimsa* are "inherently connected" (215). As yoga practitioners developing a feminist ethics of care, it is important that we work toward power sharing rather than holding onto power, which would otherwise perpetuate violence (216). *Satya* is also more than telling the truth to others, it is also connected to the ways in which we focus our awareness on the honesty of our yoga practice, our desires, and how we

moderate these desires. For example, we can consider *satya* through the authenticity of how we are in our bodies when we practice yoga. Referring back to Matthew, the athletic yoga teacher in Toronto who encourages his students to do what is right for their bodies rather than anyone else's. This is a teaching that is fairly obvious, but given the fitness and health culture that suggests that people push their bodies to injury beyond normal ranges of motion, it is appropriate for teachers to encourage students to be authentic within themselves rather than trying to be in a different body than they have.

In Chapter 4, I had discussed the notion of authenticity with regards to cultural appropriation. Gina spoke of how she does not often use Sanskrit terms in her classes because she recognizes that the people who attend her class would not resonate with using them. Instead, Gina addresses the needs of the population of her students, many of whom are women of colour with intersecting oppressions such as poverty and identify as LGBTQ. For Gina, using Sanskrit in yoga class would feel inauthentic not only because it likely does not resonate for her students, but also because if they do not understand those terms, it perpetuates the power imbalance from which they are trying to heal. Authenticity and *satya* also show up in the conflictual stories of LJ and Diane as they each debated over what they thought is an authentic yoga.

*Asteya*, the yama translated as “non-stealing” (Stone), means “not taking what is not freely given” (107). Iyengar reminds us, however that *asteya* also relates to a person's sense of “desirelessness” (146), which purportedly brings spiritual and even worldly wealth. For Stone, however, *asteya* refers to our relationship with the environment. I consider this extension of the environment and non-stealing through the feminist ethics of care and how we negotiate our con-

sumption of material goods. I propose that *asteya* and the other yoga philosophy terms discussed above be integrated as an important part of how we can expand a feminist ethics of care in yoga.

## **Conclusion**

It is these questions of listening to our elders and creating space for marginalized groups that get to the heart of yoga, and the authentic meaning of the teachings. In the Upanishads (see Glossary) we learn that yoga is about, *samadhi*, knowing our true selves and understanding the nature of our true existence. As Ritesh told me, “The point is, do you understand what it all is, and who you are. That’s the focus” (Toronto interview, March 2016). Returning to the notion of a feminist ethics of care that I established earlier in this dissertation, I propose that as Western yoga culture evolves further into the twenty-first century, our yoga practice moves beyond a conception only of the individual self and toward an inclusive social justice practice that incorporates a notion not only of knowing and healing the self, but of living respectfully and sustainably in community. Stone asserts that we need to consider the inseparability of ourselves with our environments and with the people with whom we live, so rather than conceptualizing yoga as something to retreat away from and into ourselves, we must instead practice yoga as moving toward freedom from all suffering (Stone 2009).

Ritesh told me about the “Four Aims of Life,” of which the Upanishads teach. These are *artha*, *dharma*, *kâma*, and *moksha* (see Glossary). According to Rod Stryker, the Upanishads four aims, or four desires, help us to live our best life of happiness, prosperity, peace, and freedom. Drawing on *Bhagavad Gita*, *Mahanirvana Tantra*, and the Upanishads, Stryker is an American yoga teacher who offers specific lessons and individual practices to help seekers achieve

their personal goals. In his book, *The Four Desires*, he provides concrete tools to help people form a *sankalpa*, which he explains is an intention for one's life (140). It is important to remember that in order to heal the world, to live together in inclusive social justice, we must also heal ourselves. As Kerrie in Oakland California shared with me during our meeting after the Race and Yoga Conference, "we have to learn our own value from the inside. We have to reclaim our value," and that starts with the self. In *Core of the Yoga Sūtras*, B.K.S. Iyengar reminds us constantly that the body is the temple, and "conscientiousness is the key for our growth" (13). Iyengar draws on Patañjali to explain that "yoga is no less than *citta stambha vrtti*, or the stable state of consciousness, which is nothing but the suspension or pause in the movement of thought waves" (13). Iyengar follows the *Bhagavad Gita* (II.48) to define yoga "as a way to maintain an even temper in one's word, work and thought. This attitude of cultivating oneness in word, work and wisdom helps one to reach the goal of uniting the self with the Self" (14).

What many teachers have found, however, is that yoga for social justice does not necessarily bring in hordes of business and cashflow. While we can offer classes with donations boxes for disadvantaged groups, people still are looking for a quick fix. Theodora Wildcroft, a British yoga teacher and doctoral candidate doing research on the phenomenology and sociology of yoga, recognizes that "the depth of knowledge and understanding that can only come from experience (and possibly from at least one major disillusionment) doesn't, interestingly, bring a mass of students to my door. Quite the opposite. It's always easier to sell simple answers – a 6 week course to fix your lower back pain – than to sell a long term practice of self-enquiry and inter-relationship with no guaranteed outcomes but lots of common miracles along the way"<sup>47</sup> (blog,

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.wildyoga.co.uk/2018/01/realyogateachers-part-2/>

January 9, 2018). If yoga is not about business, however, then we can continue to practice *Svādhyāya*, self-inquiry, and discover our true selves. While Iyengar believes that the heart of yoga is through bringing union between “the intellect of the head and intelligence of the heart” (19), this dissertation research has come to prove that yoga can reach further than the self, and there is more than a single way to do it.

## Chapter 8:

### CONCLUSION: YOGA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Between 2011 and 2013, blogs such as Roseanne Harvey's [itsallyogababy.com](http://itsallyogababy.com) and Carol Horton's now-former site, [thinkbodyelectric.com](http://thinkbodyelectric.com) opened up public channels for people to discuss their reflections about the contemporary yoga world in North America as it was unfolding. These blogs, and others like them, finally created a space for people to openly critique cultural appropriation, consumerism, and the body positivity movement in yoga. Cultural appropriation and the slippery notion of what people consider to be real and "authentic" in contemporary yoga practices were issues that I knew I needed to take up with this dissertation early on. Many yoga practitioners have shared with me anecdotally that they have come to feel so uncomfortable with yoga practitioners' fascination with and consumption of the exotic Indian that they no longer want to say "*namaste*" at the end of leading a yoga class. *Namaste* is generally translated as "the divine in me greets the divine in you." *Namaste* is used globally in South Asian cultures as a greeting, but the only place one might hear it commonly used in North America is in a yoga studio or perhaps a Hindu temple. In his 1979 book on the use of *namaste*, Krishna Nambiar tells of the customs and deeper meanings of the greeting word, which he suggests can "help a man transform his attitude towards his fellow beings for cultivating the feeling of oneness and brotherhood" (xv). According to Krishna Nambiar, the original use of *namaste* is not known (19). With yoga's rise in popularity, many white yoga practitioners use it with earnest intentions, the word has become routinely used without thought. Now, many people are beginning to have meaningful discussions about whether or not it is appropriate to even say this in a yoga class.<sup>48</sup> It had be-

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<sup>48</sup> <http://lonestaryoga.net/blog/nomorenamaste#comments-5aa8224653450ad3cc977c63=>

come fashionable for so many yoga people to wear Indian fabrics and prayer beads (malas), get tattoos with Sanskrit lettering and Hindu iconography, but I could not see many yoga practitioners doing critical thinking to accompany this consumption.

Deborah Root reminds us that it is a sense of nostalgia for privilege and power that fuels people to purchase objects associated with colonial fantasies. These fantasies bring to mind a myth of “when Westerners ostensibly did precisely as they pleased... and for the white consumer bring to mind attentive servants and languid, sentimental encounters on verandahs” (121). Root goes on to suggest that it is the “lifestyle” of the lighthearted tourist that people want to buy, and with yoga, it is no different. While Westerners love to purchase the exotic East, Easterners in turn found industry in producing itself for consumption (Mehta 7). By 2012, however, increasing numbers of Western yoga practitioners were starting to have a lot to say about their thoughts on this phenomenon of people straining to have a piece of India’s “cosmic energy vibration” (Mehta 15), and there proved to be no shortage of explanations of what people consider to be the real yoga in their opinion. This dissertation has challenged the insidious and even, in some cases, toxic ways that yoga in North America has evolved over the past two decades, from a marginalized community of spiritual and wellness seekers taking classes here and there and studying yoga philosophy when they can, to yoga becoming a competitive, commodified career for health and fitness.

### **Overall Conclusions from the Fieldwork**

Through this dissertation, I have situated contemporary yoga in North America with feminist materialist theories of race, class, and embodiment to articulate a problematic of race and

gender consciousness with political economy of health. The chapters take on a trajectory that demonstrate the ways in which the colonial histories between India and Britain set the scene for a North American fascination with yoga and New Age spirituality that was rooted in Orientalism and an unconscious, anti-modern construction of the noble savage (di Leonardo 3). Swami Vivekenanda's 1893 entrance onto the stage via the Chicago World Fair gave wealthy white women an opportunity to make an impact beyond fundraising as they sponsored, promoted, and coordinated his talks about yoga and meditation in the U.S. The practice of yoga as it evolved through the twentieth century in North America carries this legacy of colonizing philanthropy and exoticism, and combined with capitalism's agenda of commoditization produce healthy productive workers, yoga became a practice steeped in exotic mysticism for transcendental subjectivity and perfectionism of the body. What emerged from the multi-site field research with yoga participants in studios, community centres, and online discussion forums was that people have such different views of what yoga is that there really is not a single yoga. The unfolding argument became apparent through the debates: there is no single expression of yoga, and people are passionate about the version that they practice.

I had initially struggled with the ethics of how to negotiate the different opinions of the research participants with whom I worked, because I consider many of them friends and each of them was trying to convince me that their position on what they think is real yoga was correct. What I found, however, was in the teachings of yoga philosophy itself, through the concept of *satya*, or honesty. It was possible to be collaborative, open, friends, and even passionate with research participants who held differing views from each other and even myself. While not being

“innocent” or even dishonest about my position, I was able to maintain integrity in my relationship with each of the research participants and my commitment to the ethics board.

In Chapter 4, my fieldwork notes, interview transcriptions and online discussion forums, revealed that people have different ideas about yoga’s true meaning for themselves personally, how yoga is practiced in spiritual contexts, and how it ought to look and be expressed in yoga spaces such as studios and discussion groups. The debates reveal that yoga is not a single practice or attached to any grand narrative, and as a wide range of opinions about what people consider to be authentic yoga, and what for them constitutes cultural appropriation. My research found that most people agree that cultural appropriation is when someone is consuming or selling yoga for financial gain and simultaneously “whitewashing” the practice from its Hindu roots. As yoga becomes more widely known and accepted as a wellness practice, however, it is becoming stripped to what is essentially a health practice with little to no spiritual context.

These discussions about people’s understanding of yoga as truthful to them personally and historically gave rise to fieldwork data that showed how whiteness and gender influence ideologies in health. It became evident that yoga teachers feel especially pressured to represent an idealized, healthy body. Yoga teachers who were earning a living from yoga wrestled with the conflict inherent in the commodification of yoga and yoga’s aim of self-knowledge, self-healing, and freedom from suffering. What was particularly salient in this chapter’s findings was the irony that yoga teachers’ health, both mental and physical, suffers most from the practice of teaching full-time. This means that these self-employed people are teaching up to 20 classes weekly, with no health, dental, or prescription benefits, nor vacation pay. From either the pressure to maintain a certain body shape or level of practice of proficiency, many yoga teachers

shared that they have either been injured or they push themselves to teach more in order to earn another \$50 or \$60. Even through the practice of what is essentially selling health, many yoga teachers suffer through the precarity of their labour. If they are injured, they can not earn a living and need to re-think their careers, because there is no safety net in the neoliberal workplace of the gig economy. The sad irony of my conclusion here is that yoga teachers are caught up in a neoliberal, precarious economy that expects their labour to sell self-knowledge and healing. Neoliberalism has basically co-opted yoga in North America.

The fieldwork data further demonstrated the insight that many yoga practitioners experience their bodies as outside the margins of normal. Furthermore, yoga teachers are aware of the pressure to fit into a pre-defined norm of femininity, and they struggle to resist those hegemonic norms to develop a yoga that is authentic for them in their own bodies and lives.

Intersectional analysis offers a way through layers of systemic racism, classism, and ableism that shows up in yoga classes. Findings from the discussions revealed that some yoga practitioners are starting to think through race and gender with some level of intersectionality, in particular Kimberly Dark, Amara Miller, and LJ. We may take it for granted that yoga is supposed to be about healing, and recent scholarship on specialized yoga programs for trauma recovery demonstrates that potential (Battacharya; Sharma). What about regular, everyday yoga class scenarios, however, that re-inscribe covert essentializing racist, ableist, heteronormative, and ageist assumptions?

In yoga classes and blogs, increasing numbers of people are challenging body norms that Lululemon and the fitness industry in general perpetuate. As Carla Rice explains, body normativity excludes anyone whose physical form does not fit into hegemonic ideals of beauty. In exam-

ining body normativity in yoga, I pinpoint the ways in which women reproduce gender essentialism in yoga spaces and blogs, social media sharing and self-promotion. While many female yoga teachers as well as male yoga teachers inadvertently reproduce a culture of exclusivity and body perfection, they are also trying to find equitable ways of practicing inclusivity and female empowerment in their yoga.

Many yoga teachers feel empowered by the notion of an archetypical, pan-spiritual Goddess as a way to reject patriarchy. Some women yoga practitioners have even gone as far as exploring ways of movement that they deem are feminine, or at least off the well-worn and repetitive track of the Ashtanga Primary Series as taught by Pattabhi Jois. Similarly to Andrea O'Reilly's empowered mothering theory in which the empowered, feminist mother rejects the patriarchal ideologies of motherhood through agency, autonomy, authority, personal authenticity, and political activism (12-13), many women in this study have turned to yoga to develop reclaim agency with their bodies, and engage with yoga as a feminine practice. For Lorrie, working with the Goddess archetype helps her to feel positively connected to her sexuality and her relationship with her husband in the context of her marriage of seventeen years. Goddess energy, then, helps Lorrie access a sense of gynocentric maternal empowerment, and to take pleasure in the femaleness of her body (Rich 93).

What research participants LJ, Ritesh, Kerry, Marissa, and many others have emphasized is the importance of acknowledging that an authentic yoga reaches back to traditional teachings that originate in India. As an attempt to decolonize yoga from the trends toward extracting the health part and leaving the rest out of yoga, I articulate teachings from Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* with interview, participation observation, and focus groups data from my fieldwork that spanned

the period of August 2015 to November 2016. By drawing on the *Sūtras* directly, I have moved yoga's focus out of the fitness and wellness frame, and trained the lens back to a yoga that looks through its historical philosophical frameworks.

### **Theoretical Contributions and Arguments**

The question, what is real yoga, opened up arguments across computers, continents, yoga studios, and cafes, but folks were mostly debating their right to practice the way they wanted regardless of contesting claims that they were taking only the physical aspects of yoga and making it into a business while ignoring its traditional philosophical teachings. Many yoga practitioners emphatically told me and continue to post on social media that they feel “Yoga is not whatever people want it to be,” but there still seems to be plenty of people doing yoga who do think that they can evolve yoga into an image of their own making. Feminist readings that articulate the merging of colonial histories with our collective moral imperative of health and wellness creates a social currency of the idealized self that valorizes thin, white, fit, and youthful bodies

Yoga practitioners, it appears, must be paragons of health! From peer pressure in yoga studios to eat “clean, vegan food” (Musial) to people turning to yoga to help their back (Lorr) or make them thinner or healthier (Strauss; Newcombe “Global Hybrids”), yoga has become a health craze. Cederström and Spicer point out that wellness is now a moral obligation, although Crawford has argued that this neoliberal notion of health as morality and social currency goes back to the late nineteenth century.

Yoga has become the physical and spiritual panacea for anyone trying to live what the internet and women's magazines refer to as “your best life.” Increasing numbers of yoga practi-

tioners prefer to study a pastiche of spiritual teachings such as *The Four Agreements* (Ruiz 1997), which is based on ancient Toltec philosophies, rather than yoga source materials. Lululemon shopping bags implore us to move outside our comfort zone, and yoga teachers have become life coaches and wellness coaches pushing us to be our best (Cederström and Spicer 21). It is common to hear comments like, “Yoga people have that glow, and I want that too...” The glow then becomes an object of desire, and herein lies the spirit of capitalism (Cederström and Spicer 27). In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant points out that “under capitalism, sickness is defined as the inability to work” (95). Yoga, then, becomes the facilitator of the capitalist imperative, because as people say, yoga keeps the body healthy and well, and therefore we can remain good, productive citizens in our society. In interviews, full time yoga teachers shared their frustration about the precariousness of their work, and also about injuries they sustain while teaching or practicing yoga. Meanwhile, many other yoga participants shared that they would like to experience more of the benefits of yoga, but can not afford to do so. Some yoga participants experienced feeling excluded from mainstream yoga classes not only because of their budgets, but because of what their bodies look like.

Returning to the *Yoga Sūtras*, however, we are reminded Patañjali intended yoga is a practice for all people. According to Michael Stone, the *Yoga Sūtras* transcend gender, while still addressing specific needs of both. In his chapter, “Brahmacharya: The Wise Use of Sexual Energy,” Stone posits that it is possible to remain sexually active and/or queer while working with the unconscious mind patterns that sexuality bring up (115). Many yoga practitioners in the field research shared that they feel pressure around the idea of the gaze. Men often said they felt the emphasized need to focus their eyes only on themselves lest they be seen peering around at any-

one else. This dissertation also explored the pressures of the gaze that many female yoga practitioners feel. Male yoga practitioners shared that they feel cautious about the ways in which they look at female yoga practitioners in class spaces so as not to offend them or make them feel self-conscious for fear of being watched. The male yoga teachers and practitioners that I spoke with generally did not express a sense of alliance with hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel; Pascoe), either because they identify as racialized, queer, or some other version of non-hegemonic masculinity. Men whose identities are intersectionally oppressed through race and sexuality have experienced extreme discomfort in mainstream yoga spaces, because simply their presence invokes a historically constituted fear (Fanon). Members of racialized and LGBTQ communities report that specialized yoga spaces have offered some safety for them to explore the full expression of their embodied selves (Ballard & Kripalani; Mehta 238). There remains some debate about whether or not segregated spaces are necessary; without understanding the nuance of access, experiences of racialized and LGBTQ+ people, some studio owners and recreation space planners feel that creating specialized spaces for identity-specific groups undermines accessibility.

Some female yoga practitioners have described going so far as to avoid yoga class or photographing themselves because they do not feel that their body fits in to conventional standards. Most importantly about these findings is that yoga practitioners withdraw from yoga if they feel that a yoga teacher is undermining their personal power, whether that be intentionally or not. Mainstream yoga publications such as *Yoga Journal* continue to sell clothing on the thin, toned bodies of “yoga girls” who gracefully hold difficult āsanās to demonstrate their disciplined, peaceful selves (Balizet and Myers 281).

Instagram, with its emphasis on the visual image has a place for re-visioning the body through the activism of fat yoga teachers such as Dianne Bondy, Jessamyn Stanley, and Dana Falsetti. In my focus group, I invited participants to discuss their responses to some of these images. They were pleased about the ways in which more women feel safe to present their bodies as they are and embrace the Health at Every Size movement, but there was concern that these women were still reproducing able-bodied norms in yoga of hyperflexibility and physical achievement in order to denote value. Kimberly Dark specifically argued that this kind of necessary physical prowess should not be mandatory for anyone to be considered proficient with yoga, and that fat people are under more pressure to perform in extraordinary ways in order to prove their worth in society. An empowered expression of embodiment suggests that in order for yoga and social justice to be truly linked, the yoga practitioners need to embrace a feminist ethic of care. With this ethos has accessibility and inclusion in yoga at the centre.

Access to yoga bears a multiple meaning. Every day, someone comes up with another way to make yoga classes more accessible or inclusive. For some, access is limited by steps leading up or down stairs to yoga spaces, too-narrow doors, or gendered change rooms and bathrooms. For others, access is about the often prohibitive cost of yoga classes in studios. For many others, it is because they do not see teachers who look like them at the front of the room so they feel like yoga is not for them. Many people have commented to me, and I myself in teaching, have come up against the costs of doing yoga business, but these thoughts are, in mine and others opinions, antithetical to yoga's true meaning. This true meaning is that yoga is a practice first and foremost, of knowing the self to liberate the self from suffering, and that this suffering originates through our own mental afflictions (*avidya*).

## **Yoga Futurities: Where Do We Go From Here?: Limitations and Further Research for Decolonizing Yoga**

At the time of writing this dissertation, the yoga world is imploding on itself. From the algorithms and advertisements of my own social media feed, I see both mainstream fitness and health posts that sell yoga as a way to ideal citizenship, and I also see ongoing dialogues about decolonization and cultural appropriation in yoga. Continuing research on decolonizing yoga and bridging practitioners' notions of a non-culturally appropriative yoga with social justice is emerging. Yoga Alliance, the U.S.-based organization about which I have spoken very little other than to show that some participants like the idea of a proto-regulatory body and others do not, plays an increasingly large role in determining so-called appropriate protocols and scopes of practice.<sup>49</sup> Yoga Alliance is working actively to improve its critical scope to be more inclusive of diverse bodies and racialized yoga practitioners, but there remains much work to do in terms of reconciling Yoga Alliance's emphasis on yoga as a physically and at times, mentally therapeutic practice with yoga in North America's colonizing tendencies. As more scholars are taking up these questions of what is authentic yoga and how to practice yoga with integrity, however, it is clear that Western yoga practitioners need to pay more attention to yoga and cultural appropriation, not just that yoga has healing benefits. Future research on Yoga Alliance in Canada and its impacts on yoga would be useful to see the different ways in which Canadian and American yoga

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.yogaalliance.org>. For critical writings on Yoga Alliance, see Amara Miller's blog post: <https://amaramillerblog.wordpress.com/2015/05/18/yoga-is-the-ultimate-2015-entrepreneurial-venture-think-again-huffpost/>. She describes the way Yoga Alliance purports to oversee yoga teacher certification programs, but fails to do this effectively. Miller also points out that yoga teacher trainings in the U.S. are usually based on Westernized understandings of yoga and bear little to no understanding of colonialism and its engagement and ruination of yoga.

practitioners approach yoga and the potentials for regulation, and also how yoga practitioners and teachers in Canada may attend to decolonization of yoga.

So where do we go from here in expanding a feminist notion of care and how yoga will be in the near future? While contemporary yoga practitioners often aim to engage with the principle of *ahimsa* and treading lightly on the earth by eating a vegan organic diet or even wearing organic clothes, I discussed that this lifestyle is often rather expensive and therefore inaccessible to many who do not have access or even the knowledge to have to such choices. A feminist ethics of care in yoga needs to use intersectionality to attend to multiple layers of people's social identities and histories, and recognize that not all people experience yoga in the same way. Furthermore, yoga communities will need to pay attention to intersecting oppressions and social inequality, which means that yoga will also need to be more flexible in its offerings.

As Kerrie tells us, in order to do social justice work, we need to care for ourselves and each other in order to be well in our bodies and spirits. And yet yoga is more than that. A feminist yoga ethic of care looks after for our bodies and selves, but also protects the earth, because as we learn from Demeter, if we are unhappy, unsafe, unsupported, and without autonomy, agency, authority, or personal authenticity, we can not do the advocacy work we need to create real lasting change to protect one another and the world. This means that we need to apply the *yamas* and *niyamas* to our daily thinking around what we are doing to the environment and to each other in society. If we are well and empowered in ourselves then we can begin to do this social justice work, and making these activist connections through yoga, social justice, and our bodies is the first step. In keeping with an intention to focus listening to marginalized voices, yoga communities need to also in future pay close attention to the indigenous knowledge from where yoga orig-

inates. This directive means that the commodification of yoga must be dialled back or at least reverted towards communities that experience the most social and economic inequality.

One of the questions that came up at the April 2016 Race and Yoga Conference presentation, “New Faces in Yoga Leadership,” is what is the future of yoga as you envision it? Increasing numbers of scholars and bloggers are writing about yoga and social justice, and there has been much discussion about decolonizing yoga. Since I started researching for this dissertation in 2012, I have discovered and met no less than 200 people who care about keeping yoga in integrity to the *yamas* and *niyamas*, and being more conscious of yoga’s roots in India and Hindu philosophy. While some are doing work around the notion of decolonizing yoga as waking people up to the realities of white supremacy as it manifests through cultural appropriation and greed in the yoga world, others are exploring the many ways in which we can practice yoga for wellness and healing of trauma. As I have worked through the lengthy process of probing these research questions to determine how to practice yoga in concordance with a feminist ethics of care as I defined in Chapter 1, there have been ongoing conversations on this evolving topic. In one online discussion group on yoga, I recently asked, “what decolonizing practices might we do in yoga classes?” Solange happened to comment on this question, and suggests that making literalist attempts at decolonization in yoga āsana classes might not be appropriate and actually alienate yoga practitioners. She suggests that many yoga practitioners in her classes come from privileged backgrounds that would react negatively to being asked to consider social inequality or Canada’s racist history.

I can't even talk about it without my own white privilege “showing.” What happens to me “personally” is that a sense of hopeless powerlessness and shame comes up when I dive in under the rage I have about what happened to First Nations people... The

knowledge of that story (residential schools) and the history of how we abused and destroyed an entire culture causes big stress and anxiety. So – are we are gonna raise that up in a yoga class? Unless we are explicitly addressing such topics within class or discussion – we need to know people have the tools to process their own stuff around it, i.e., stress and cognitive dissonance... How can we know if we are doing more harm than good? My own resistance is strong – I know if I were to start these conversations I would likely put myself out of business. Meanwhile, a horrible "unspeakable" wrong was done historically and is still being done currently...and the only thing that we can do to right that wrong – is to get loud and talk about it. Start to rattle the chains of complacent apathy and privilege, acknowledge and admit our responsibility, work to arouse those who are not cognizant and work to change the system. We have to have such conversations. But its impossible to have them short of a focused protest group – because we are silenced and abandoned otherwise; these uncomfortable conversations bear no fruit unless you are in a situation in which they are the focus and people come willingly. Trying to force the issue and push the envelope brings up INTENSE resistance and indignation with people digging their heels much deeper into their denials. So – how do we do that within the context of yoga? Other than make it a part of our own personal practice & sādhana? (Solange, Facebook discussion thread, May 2018)

An anonymous commenter suggested that land acknowledgment in yoga class is out of place:

...Empty words don't do much and have little to do with yoga. There's enough talking. Talking creates and destroys karma just as much as actions. If you want to honour the ancestors from your land, then demand humane living conditions for people on the reserves, tell Trudeau that you don't want any pipelines, organize your yoga students to clean up a neighbourhood or something. Don't bother with any empty words. Because there's no going back to change the past and you weren't the one committing genocide.

While another anonymous commenter said that she always does a land acknowledgement in her classes, LJ offered the suggestion that what is most relevant to yoga is that we acknowledge yoga as an Indian practice with its roots in Hinduism.

At the Race and Yoga Conference in 2016, LJ observed that attendees had an unquestioned assumption that not only everyone would benefit from yoga, but that they should do yoga. She then proposed, "Why? Why does yoga have to be everybody's emancipatory practice? Like, why does everyone have to be doing āsana anyway?" "Indeed," I said, and a shiver ran down my

spine. As I reflect on this two years later, it is clear: yoga is not a monolithic<sup>50</sup> entity or practice. If yoga is a path toward freedom, then there can be multiple ways in which we travel on that journey. A feminist ethics of care in yoga is one powerful way.

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<sup>50</sup> Margaret MacDonald's dissertation reference to midwifery not being a "monolithic discourse" inspired my use of "monolithic" to describe yoga. Both midwifery and yoga are widely considered to be "natural," and part of complimentary health practices, but as MacDonald points out, there many ways in which people express or agree that they should be.

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## APPENDIX A

### General Questions Asked to Interviewees:

#### I) For Yoga Teachers and Studio Owners:

1. Who are your students? What brings them to your classes in particular? How might these students be different now from years ago?
2. Describe the context in which you teach. Studio, drop in classes, pre-reg etc. How many classes per week?
3. Describe the ways in which you receive compensation for teaching yoga. How might you trace the changes from when the studio first opened to now? How are teachers and workshop presenters paid? How might you describe the feelings you have about this situation?
4. What are the ways in which your students challenge you? Emotionally, physically, or intellectually?
5. How does teaching affect your personal practice and your own sense of embodiment? How does it affect the ways in which you perceive yourself in your body?
6. How might your sense of embodiment as a yoga practitioner and teacher intersect with yoga philosophy as you understand it?
7. What is your connection with other yoga teachers? How might you categorize these relationships? How often do you communicate with them, and on what level? Are there barriers or challenges in these relationships? How might you characterize any changes in these relationships over the years?
8. I would like to know your thoughts about teacher trainings. What do you think about their proliferation since the mid-2000s? What about your current YTT?
9. Have you ever considered yoga in the context of social justice? Discuss.
10. I am interested in hearing more about your thoughts on the ways in which you work to deconstruct misconceptions of a yoga practice and how you might shift how you present it within various communities. How do you feel about the ways yoga is presented in general? Do various communities understand yoga differently? Do you offer yoga differently to different communities? If so, which communities? Why? and how?
11. How might your physical hātha practice intersect with yoga philosophy as you understand it, or are you making a connection with yoga philosophy at all these days?

12. What do you think about the ways in which authenticity is or is not happening in yoga? How much to traditional yoga teachings such as the Upanishads, the Yoga Sutras or the Hātha Yoga Pradipika matter to you, and in what ways?
13. How do you experience yoga classes in relation to your own social location? Another way of exploring this question would be to consider the ways in which you experience what it means to be a person of colour in Toronto yoga spaces.

## **II) Additional Questions for Male Teachers and Practitioners:**

1. Do you see some forms of movement as more masculine or feminine? Were you ever concerned that yoga is perceived as “feminine” activity? Discuss.
2. Have you ever had sexual tension with a female student, and if so, how did you negotiate it?
3. Have you ever experienced your ethnicity as a factor in your involvement in the running or yoga world? If yes, how? Have other students or teachers invoked it? Have you experienced assumptive/racist comments from anyone?
4. Have you ever considered yoga and running in the context of social justice? Discuss.
5. Can you say how many classes you've taken with men?
6. Did you feel that any of your yoga instructors or members of the running community have made racist or sexist comments?

## **III) Questions for Chair Yoga Participants:**

1. Describe your living situation
2. How did you learn about Santosha and chair yoga?
3. Have you ever done other forms of yoga? What makes you stay with these classes?
4. How long have you been involved with the group? Do you take classes elsewhere?
5. How has your life changed since starting yoga with Lara?
6. What does being a “yoga mom” mean to you?

7. What if any other social or physical activities do you participate in?
8. Do you have any trouble with ADLs (Activities of Daily Living)? If yes, how do you manage? Does yoga help? If so, how?

#### **IV) Questions for Yoga Practitioners and Teachers Who Are Mothers**

1. How long have you been teaching? Were you a mother when you began teaching yoga?
2. Who are your students? What brings them to your classes in particular?
3. Describe the context in which you teach. Studio, drop in classes, pre-reg etc. How many classes per week? Do you teach in more than one location?
4. Describe how you balance mothering and teaching yoga. What kind of support do you receive?
5. What challenges have you experienced as a mother teaching yoga?
6. How has mothering affected your yoga teaching practice?
7. How has yoga affected your mothering?
8. If you are comfortable, please discuss your relationship with your partner, if you have one. How does this relationship affect your teaching practice?
9. How does teaching affect your personal practice and your own sense of embodiment as a mother? How does it affect the ways in which you perceive yourself in your body?
10. How might mothering intersect with yoga philosophy as you understand it?

## **APPENDIX B:**

### **Notes on Site Descriptions**

Site descriptions are interwoven throughout the dissertation, but the following is a generalized discussion listing fieldwork site locations and their distinguishing features. Some of the site visits to yoga spaces did not culminate in an interview, such as my participation at the Race and Yoga Conference in Oakland, California, but I integrated the field note data from these participant observation sessions into the dissertation text. All actual yoga studio names are changed to protect anonymity of yoga business owners and teachers. Only one of the interviews actually took place in a yoga studio. The reason for this is to allow interviewees the space, privacy, and anonymity to express their opinions about their experiences and feelings with regards to the space and the people they work and practice with. As such, most interviews were carried out in coffee shops, parks, individuals' homes and offices, and others were conducted via Skype, if the participant was not in Toronto. Participants who were located outside of the GTA occasionally used email correspondence to convey their answers to interview questions. Social media conversations is another avenue through which interviewees offered their opinions. Sometimes these discussions were via Facebook messenger, such as in the case of Laura in the U.K. who lives outside of a reliable wifi area. Other times, such as the discussion in Chapter 6 about gender and the attendance of men in yoga classes, the "conversation" was actually a thread that followed my inquiry post.

## 1. STUDIES WITH DIANE BRUNI:

I chose to study with Diane Bruni through the fieldwork year. Taking classes with Diane meant following her around to the various places she was teaching, which is another rationale for multi-site ethnography. Not only was she one of the most influential teachers in Toronto in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the yoga scene was exploding here, but as I mentioned earlier, she was also a primary teacher for me in those years. These classes and workshops occurred in numerous places, because Diane had sold her small studio in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood in the Spring of 2015. Before she sold it and I was working on other parts of my PhD, I had attended many classes in that space, where we would explore movements that seemed so radically not-yoga. Diane's classes attracted dancers, bodyworkers, doulas, academics, and people just wanting to explore movement forms that would be different from Ashtanga yoga.

At 80 Gladstone, Diane was newly cancer-free, and the light birch hardwood main floor space was decorated with elements of nature such as branches and pinecones, quartz crystals, and plants. The walls were white and bright from the windows that spanned the length of the south facing studio wall on the quiet street just north of Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood. Because Diane's husband is also a musician, there was a grand piano in the space, and some sound equipment tucked into the corner. There were also piles of yoga props, but Diane did not use these in an orthodox yoga manner. Instead, we rolled around and bounced on big physio balls, and played with a tool Diane called the Body Braid, which was an elasticized strap that wound around the entire body, starting from the inner arches of the feet, hugging thighs, hips and lower back, and winding around the shoulders in an infinite loop. Admittedly, while the Body Braid was fun and comfortable to practice with, it was complicated to learn how to put on and I never

became proficient with it. Apparently, Diane ran into issues with the person with whom she co-developed the Braid, and she has now abandoned it as she became more fluent in Axis Syllabus.

After the sale of 80 Gladstone, many studio owners who had been former students of Diane's welcomed her to guest teach her "new" movement explorations. I followed Diane around to three different studios between November 2015 and June 2016. I hung out with her and other women after class, chatting and listening to their conversations with Diane as they shared how they felt. Furthermore, these sessions with Diane demonstrate the ways in which we can shift from embracing and emulating ideals of body perfectionism in yoga, toward a personally authentic practice that enables all bodies. Diane has been actively disrupting mainstream yoga by moving away from using Sanskrit terminology, standard poses, and offering breath cues. Her classes did not feel like a yoga class anymore, except that we all had been doing yoga as a primary movement form for many years.

There were three studios in downtown Toronto in which Diane was doing her guest teaching, plus a fourth one an hour north of the city. One of the studios was more committed to following the Ashtanga form than the others, and as a result, Diane skillfully modified her language during her sequence so that participants there would not be too upset by what she had to offer that it may have not actually felt much like a traditional yoga class. Another studio has been experimenting for a year with alternative movement form called Functional Movement, and the room in which we practiced there had lots of space for us to roll around, explore Axis Syllabus as Diane is synthesizing it, and hang on the bars bolted into the ceiling. The third of the downtown Toronto studios was attended by women in their 50s and 60s, many of whom had mobility issues. I attended three weekday afternoon classes there in the early Spring 2016. The final studio I vis-

ited with Diane was at the yoga barn of one of my other research participants, Solange, who is committed to disrupting all hegemonic views about yoga. In a seven hour workshop in early June, the group came together to explore Diane’s “new” forms of movement and to share about what was no longer serving them in the yoga world.

**COMPARATIVE YOGA SITE CHART:**

| <b>date(s) visited</b>                        | <b>name &amp; location of studio (pseudonyms)</b> | <b>stairs yes/no</b>         | <b>style of yoga offered</b>                                   | <b>YTT yes/no</b> | <b># of studio rooms</b> | <b>other notes</b>  |
|---|---|------------------------------|--|-------------------|--------------------------|---|
| August 2015, Jan 2016, July 2016, August 2017 | Santosh NY  | No                           | Vinyasa Krama, chair, pre/post natal                           | Yes               | 1                        | now closed  |
| August 2015                                   | Seven Branches NY                                 | No                           | gentle hātha, pre natal, queer, poc & baby & caregiver classes | No                | 1                        | offers herbalism & acupuncture  |
| August 2015                                   | Smiling Garland NYC                               | Yes but also elevator access | Vinyasa, Restorative, Flow, Yin etc                            | Yes               | 2-3                      | has 3 locations   |
| August 2015 & 2017                            | Yoga Community NYC                                | yes                          | mix  | Yes               | 1                        | has 2 additional locations in NYC                                       |
| August 2015                                   | Samadhi NYC                                       | Yes but also elevator access | vinyasa  | Yes               | 2                        | has other studios nationally and internationally; as well as affiliates |
| ongoing August 2015-June 2016                 | “Purusha Yoga” Toronto                            | yes                          | mix  | No                | 1                        | I volunteered and taught yoga there; now closed                         |

| <b>date(s) visited</b>    | <b>name &amp; location of studio (pseudonyms)</b>                             | <b>stairs yes/no</b>         | <b>style of yoga offered</b> | <b>YTT yes/no</b> | <b># of studio rooms</b> | <b>other notes</b>  |
|---------------------------|---|------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>February-June 2016</b> | <b>ongoing studies with Diane Bruni in 3 Toronto studios + 1 in Aurora ON</b> |                              | as discussed in dissertation | Yes               | N/A                      | see dissertation    |
| <b>March 2016</b>         | <b>Participatory Action Research</b>  | Yes but also elevator access | chair                        | No                | 1                        |                     |
| <b>April 2016</b>         | <b>Race and Yoga Conference</b>   | elevator                     | as discussed in dissertation |                   |                          | academic conference |
| <b>April 2016</b>         | <b>Viveka Yoga Studio; Berkeley California</b>                                | no                           | hātha                        | Yes               | 1                        | now closed          |
| <b>April 2016</b>         | <b>Satya Yoga Berkeley California</b>   | no                           | mix                          | Yes               | 1                        | several locations   |

## APPENDIX C: Glossary of Yoga Terms

| Yoga Term                            | Meaning   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Classical Texts</b>               |   |
| <i>Vedanta</i>                       | The philosophical tenets behind Hinduism and modern yoga, which emerged out of early nineteenth century diasporic Hindu traditionalism (de Michelis 40). Involves studying the Vedas and the Upanishads, along with practices of <i>hātha yoga</i> , <i>pranayama</i> , and meditation. See below.  |
| <i>Vedas</i>                         | Four Indian hymns dating between 4500-2500 B.C.E. that function as early the foundations for India’s psycho-spiritual teachings; also attributed to the Vedic people.   |
| <i>Upanishads</i>                    | 108 Ancient texts originating in India circa 1500-1000 B.C.E that comprise the beginning of India’s metaphysical framework (Feuerstein 84). The Upanishads develop from the <i>Vedas</i> , and coincide with the non-Vedic traditions of Jainism and Buddhism. Many of these texts discuss the nature of the mind as the creator of illusion and as the “source point of either bondage or spiritual liberation.” (Feuerstein 45)   |
| <i>Mahābhārata and Bhagavad Gītā</i> | Scriptural teachings that form the basis of the psychospiritual path of yoga, that of renunciation ( <i>samnyāsa</i> ) and social obligations ( <i>dharma</i> ). Dated to 1000-1000 B.C.E. (Feuerstein 84).   |
| <i>Dharma-shāstra</i>                | Ethical legal literature from the Upanishadic texts that connects yoga spirituality with ethics ( <i>dharma</i> ).  |
| <b>Approaches to Yoga</b>            |   |
| <i>Ashtanga Yoga</i>                 | Eight Limbed Path of Yoga of Patañjali: Yama (5 codes of moral conduct), Niyama (5 codes of inner conduct), Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi. See individual terms for definitions. This practice is also associated with the series of physical postures developed by Sri Pattabhi Jois in Mysore, India. Beginner practitioners start by learning the Primary Series, and slowly advancing posture by posture, through each of the series. Most Euro-American practitioners never advance Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtras 6 phases or limbs of as practiced in Ashtanga Yoga (Ranganathan 2008) |
| <i>Yamas</i>                         | Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtras rules of moral conduct (Ranganathan 2008)   |

| Yoga Term                            | Meaning  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Yama #1: Ahimsa</i>               | Non-violence   |
| <i>Yama #2: Satya</i>                | Truthfulness   |
| <i>Yama #3: Asteya</i>               | Non-stealing   |
| <i>Yama #4: Bramacharya</i>          | Restraint, non-excess; often translated as celibacy  |
| <i>Yama #5: Aparigraha</i>           | Non-greed  |
| <i>Niyamas</i>                       | Observances  |
| <i>Niyama #1: Saucha</i>             | Purity   |
| <i>Niyama #2: Santosha</i>           | Contentment  |
| <i>Niyama #3: Tapas</i>              | Self-discipline, training the senses   |
| <i>Niyama #4: Svādhyāya</i>          | Self-study, self-inquiry (Iyengar, 2012)   |
| <i>Niyama #5: Ishwara Pranidhana</i> | Surrender to God   |
| <i>Āsana</i>                         | Yoga pose  |
| <i>Prāṇayāma</i>                     | Breathing exercise; breath control   |
| <i>Pratyahara</i>                    | Withdrawal of the senses from external stimuli   |
| <i>Dharana</i>                       | Focus, uninterrupted flow of concentration on a single point   |
| <i>Dhyana</i>                        | Meditation, keenly aware without focus   |
| <i>Samadhi</i>                       | “Superconscious state” (de Michelis 143); Bliss from meditation, oneness with the divine   |
| <i>Mantra</i>                        | A string of several words chanted or sung as part of devotional practice. If sung repeatedly, the practice is called <i>mantra japa</i> .  |
| <i>Moksha Purusha-artha</i>          | Human goal of spiritual liberation. The Four human goals are: material welfare <i>artha</i> , pleasure <i>kāma</i> , morality, <i>dharma</i> , and liberation <i>moksha</i> . (Feuerstein 278) |

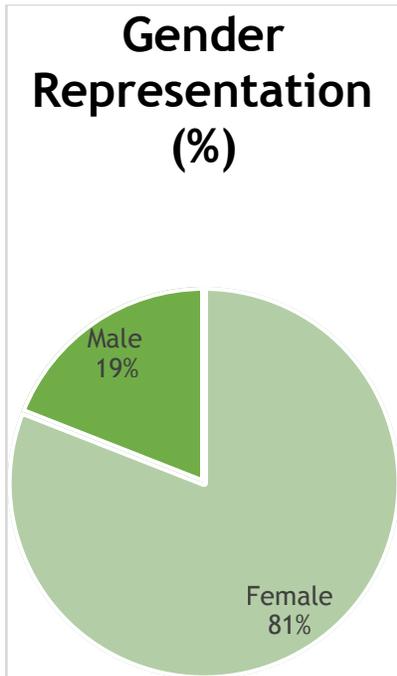
| Yoga Term              | Meaning   |
|------------------------|---|
| <i>Namaste</i>         | A generalized greeting in South Asia that means “the divine in me sees the divine in you.”<br>see: <a href="http://lonestaryoga.net/blog/nomorenamate#comments-5aa8224653450ad3cc977c63=https://www.yogajournal.com/practice/the-meaning-of-quot-namate-quot">http://lonestaryoga.net/blog/nomorenamate#comments-5aa8224653450ad3cc977c63=https://www.yogajournal.com/practice/the-meaning-of-quot-namate-quot</a>  |
| <i>Nadi Shodhanam</i>  | Alternate nostril breathing (Kripalu Yoga Teacher Training Manual 2000). Traditional spelling: <i>Nādī Śódhana Prānāyāma</i> ; meant for soothing, or the “purification” of the nerves (Iyengar 445)  |
| <i>Nia dance</i>       | Cardiovascular and whole-body conditioning movement program that integrates elements from martial arts, yoga, and dance. “Integrates body, mind, & spirit as well as flexibility, agility, mobility, strength, and stability” (Reis et al 689)  |
| <i>OM</i>              | The sacred syllable sound that represents the supreme Absolute reality itself (Feuerstein 47). <i>OM</i> also is thought to be a “seed” sound that stands for “a whole cosmos of ideas” (Feuerstein 85; Kraftsow 24). Many Sanskrit chants begin and end with <i>OM</i> . The symbol  is familiar to many yoga enthusiasts.  |
| <i>Sādhana</i>         | Practice, spiritual and physical. For some, <i>sadhana</i> is only <i>āsana</i> , and for others, it’s meditation.  |
| <i>Samadhi</i>         | “superconscious state” (de Michelis 2005:143)   |
| <i>Sampradaya</i>      | Spiritual tradition or lineage  |
| <i>Samskaras</i>       | Subliminal activators of the subconscious mind causing suffering, also referred to as “ <i>duhkha</i> ” (Feuerstein 1998: 320)  |
| <i>Sanātana Dharma</i> | The Sanskrit term for Hinduism, but is representative of a philosophy rather than religion. “Eternal law” (Feuerstein 96). According to Rajiv Malhotra, <i>Sanātana dharma</i> represents the culture and civilization that is characterized by what he calls “Sanskriti.” Sanskriti is not dependent on the understanding of the Sanskrit language, but rather, it embodies pan-Indian cultural traits and represents a unique way of experiencing the world (240). We understand this epistemology as yoga. |

| Yoga Term            | Meaning   |
|----------------------|---|
| <i>Sama-sthiti</i>   | Standing still and straight (Iyengar 1991:529)  |
| <i>Savāsana</i>      | Corpse pose in hātha yoga   |
| <i>Shaktipat</i>     | The conferring of spiritual "energy" upon one person by another (Feuerstein 1998: 356). <i>Shaktipat</i> can be transmitted with a sacred word or mantra, or by a look, thought or touch – the last usually to the ajna chakra or third eye of the recipient.   |
| <i>Ujjāyi breath</i> | “A type of prānāyāma in which the lungs are fully expanded and the chest is puffed out.” (Iyengar 1991: 533). In contemporary Ashtanga vinyasa classes, Ujjāyi is often taught as a breath with sound, or as an “ocean” or “whisper” sounding breath. It is also taught by instructing practitioners to gently close the glottis of the throat so it constricts the air going through.  |
| <i>Vairāgya</i>      | Dispassion, renunciation of the fruit of one’s labours (Fuererstein 1998: 42)   |
| <i>Vidyā</i>         | Clear seeing  |
| <i>Vinyasa Yoga</i>  | A contemporary style of hātha yoga. "These classes are dynamic and allow for a fluid transition from posture to posture, while developing awareness of the movement and breath connection. Vigorous sequences can be expected.” (The Yoga Sanctuary) From Downward Dog: “This class is all about attention to alignment and devotion to flow. It starts slowly to ease you into your body and gradually builds into a dynamic flow with peak sequences. The integration of movement and breath provides the ultimate mind-body practice. You’ll leave with an open heart, mind and soul.” <a href="https://downwarddog.com/schedule/">https://downwarddog.com/schedule/</a> |
| <i>Yin Yoga</i>      | a contemporary style of hātha yoga. “Yin Yoga is a slow, deep practice that increases your flexibility by stretching and stimulating the connective tissues of the hips, pelvis and lower spine. Postures are held for up to a few minutes to encourage a deepening of awareness and sensation in the body.” (The Yoga Sanctuary, <a href="https://theyogasanctuary.ca/wood-yoga-studio/">https://theyogasanctuary.ca/wood-yoga-studio/</a> )   |

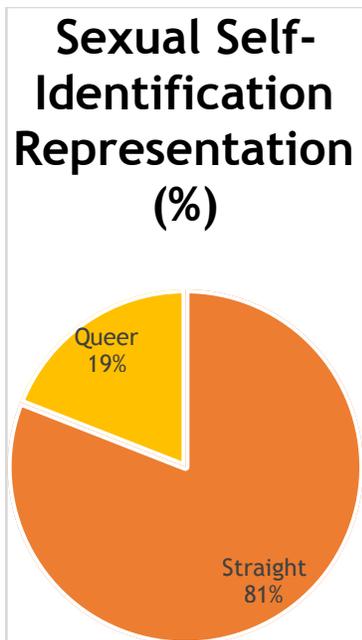
**APPENDIX D:**

**Intersectional Demographic Data Charts of Research Participants in Interviews and Focus Groups**

42 participants. Average age is 44.

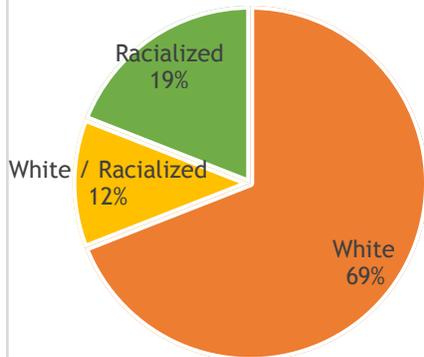


| Gender | Gender Representation (N=) |
|--------|----------------------------|
| Female | 34                         |
| Male   | 8                          |
| Trans  | 0                          |



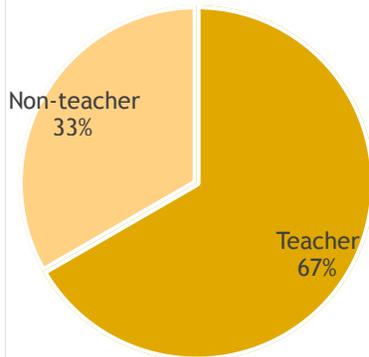
| Sexual Self Identification | Sexuality Representation (N=) |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Straight                   | 34                            |
| Queer                      | 8                             |
| Asexual                    | 0                             |

## Research Participant Ethnicity Representation (%)

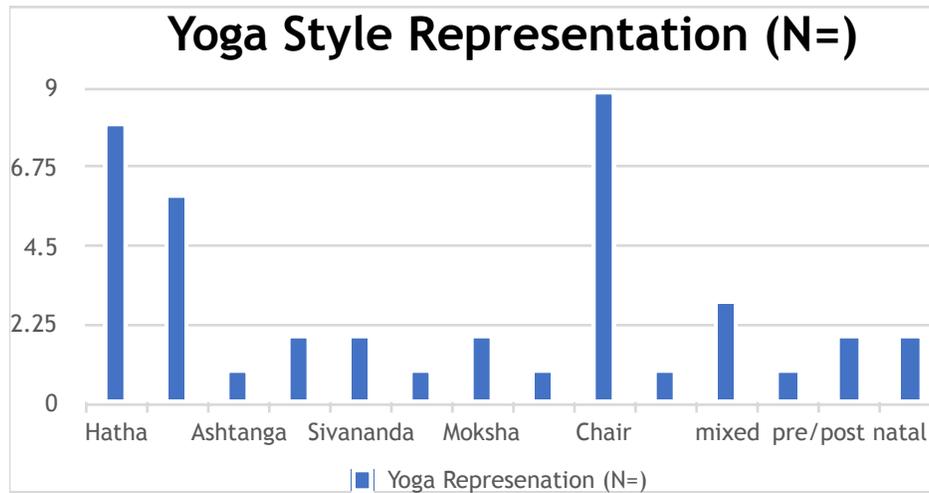


| Ethnicity / Race              | Ethnicity Representation (N=) |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| White/Euro-North American     | 29                            |
| White/historically racialized | 5                             |
| Racialized                    | 8                             |
|                               | 42                            |

## Teacher Representation (%)



| Yoga Teachers | Teacher Representation (N=) |
|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Teacher       | 28                          |
| Non-teacher   | 14                          |



| Styles of Yoga Practiced | Yoga Representation (N=) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Hatha                    | 8                        |
| Vinyasa                  | 6                        |
| Ashtanga                 | 1                        |
| Kundalini                | 2                        |
| Sivananda                | 2                        |
| Body Positive            | 1                        |
| Moksha                   | 2                        |
| Iyengar                  | 1                        |
| Chair                    | 9                        |
| Anusara                  | 1                        |
| mixed                    | 3                        |
| Restorative              | 1                        |
| pre/post natal           | 2                        |
| No Practice              | 3                        |
|                          | 42                       |