“It’s a Practice, Not a Performance”: Unraveling the Atomized Self and Becoming Nomadic Through Ashtanga Yoga

By

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Abstract

Modern forms of yoga practice are increasingly focused on the body, emphasizing the physical benefits of the practice while positioning the body as an effective tool for accessing and working with the mind. Holding patterns in the body are often interpreted in relation to psychological or emotional tendencies and certain postures are seen as manifestations of fears or anxieties encountered in daily life. In this way, the yoga mat can be interpreted as an intensely psychological space, one that mobilizes the body in the project of self-transformation and healing and lends itself to the creation of therapeutic communities and relationships. This work explores the links between the embodied nature of yoga, specifically ashtanga yoga, and the cultivation of more relational and nomadic forms of subjectivity. Through participant observation and individual interviews conducted with ashtanga teachers and practitioners at a specific yoga studio in Western Canada, I explore the contexts in which the practice of ashtanga yoga can unsettle bounded or atomized understandings of self. I focus explicitly on how, when practiced in an intersubjective environment that emphasizes healing over transcendence or enlightenment, the practice can provide an effective medium for identifying across and between difference, challenging conceptions of what a body is and does in ways that can open up the possibility for a more affirmative relation with alterity. By encouraging practitioners to understand the body as intimately connected to them yet exceeding their ability to fully know or control it, a sustained engagement with the ashtanga practice can introduce a quality of Otherness into practitioners’ understandings of self and can help relinquish some of the need for ownership and control characteristic of settler subjectivities. I examine the factors that render practice more accessible to certain segments of the population, namely the middle-class, and emphasize the need to continually investigate ways of keeping practice communities open and flexible.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This work will seek to revalue yoga, specifically ashtanga yoga, investigating the possibility of mobilizing the insights derived through practice in ways that are conducive to decolonial aims and agendas and thus become politically and ethically viable in these frameworks. My interest in the political potential of yoga proceeds from a belief that it is not enough to work solely on decolonizing the mind. For any process of sustainable and ongoing change, the body has to be mobilized in the project of cultivating a felt understanding of different ways of being, living, and relating. As the practice and popularity of yoga continues to grow so, too, do the communities and networks that emerge through practice. While yoga is often portrayed as being equally available and accessible to everyone it is undeniable that, particularly in the West, it is far more accessible to those with access to excess capital in the form of both time and money. In the context of the colonial nation-state of Canada, this often results in a majority of white, middle-class practitioners. Individuals who identify as yogis or as having a regular yoga practice often see themselves as invested in living life differently, in gaining new perspectives on their habits and actions, and as ethical agents or, at the very least, as invested in exploring questions of ethics. While this inclination towards self-awareness and ethical action is promising, the extent to which yoga is bound up with discourses of neoliberal rationality and responsibilization, serving to further processes of inequality, has been well documented (Kern, 2012; Koch, 2013; Markula, 2014; Schnabele, 2013). Given these tensions, in what contexts can yoga be mobilized in ways that could support decolonial efforts and contest dominant norms? Under what conditions does the practice become simply another way of reifying settler legitimacy? Is it possible to take up practice in ways that unsettle settler subjectivity, creating space for the emergence of more relational, nomadic subjectivities in the process? By attuning
practitioners to the agency of the body in a way that exceeds the control of the individual self, the practice of ashtanga yoga, when practiced in an intersubjective context, can unsettle the sovereignty of the autonomous self, opening the subject up to a more contingent and process-oriented sense of self all the while creating openings for more affirmative relations with alterity.

Yoga, Nationalism, and Shared Narratives

Modern forms of yoga practice are increasingly focused on the body, emphasizing the physical benefits of the practice while positioning the body as an effective tool for accessing and working with the mind. Holding patterns in the body are often interpreted in relation to psychological or emotional tendencies and certain postures are seen as manifestations of fears or anxieties encountered in daily life. In this way, the yoga mat can be interpreted as an intensely psychological space, one that mobilizes the body in the project of self-transformation and healing and lends itself to the creation of therapeutic communities and relationships. By rendering tangible psychological and emotional processes that are often abstract and hard to grasp, yoga can be valued as an effective practice for engaging with questions of subjectivity, providing the practitioner with a framework for evaluating the ways in which she both affects and is affected by that which surrounds, composes, and exceeds her. While I see a great deal of subversive potential in the psycho-social aspects of yoga practice, it is important to emphasize the extent to which modern forms of yoga are bound up with past and ongoing practices of nation-building (Singleton, 2010) and serve as an effective tool for mobilizing what Alter (1997) describes as “somatic nationalism”, a process whereby nations are imagined and constructed through discourses of public health in which anxieties are dealt with through ritualized self-care.

Practice does not happen in a vacuum. When individual practice is decontextualized from
the historical, social, and political forces through which it takes shape, we risk obscuring the ways in which certain anxieties or fears get selected and prioritized as those that are made manifest and purified in and through the body. In this way, the discourses and shared narratives that emerge through practice are more than just collective experiences that further bind a group of people, they are also revealing of deep-seated anxieties and political motivations that, in this intensely neoliberal climate, often become labeled as individual pathology and as work that needs to be carried out upon the individual self. Shared narratives are also a way of world-defining and world-building and, as such, can be mobilized in subversive ways. Shared ways of framing and speaking about lived experiences can provide a way of defining one’s self within a community of others and can include both implicit and explicit critiques of dominant structures, institutions, and practices. When those narratives can be developed and engaged in ways that resist stagnation and rigidity, remaining open and flexible to the contingency of the forces through which those narratives emerge, they can form a foundation for the creation of links of affinity and solidarity beyond the community in question. If we can examine the shared narratives and discourses that surround yoga practice to investigate what anxieties are driving the increasing practice and popularity of yoga, then those anxieties can be mobilized in ways that challenge atomized understandings of self and help practitioners contextualize the insights that happen on the mat and in their bodies with broader structures of systemic inequality and oppression. Cultivating a felt or embodied understanding of how neoliberal and capitalist rationalities literally become us can provide the foundation for and help propel collective action.

In exploring these connections, I will conceptualize settler subjectivity as profoundly melancholic, highlighting a need for certainty and boundedness that must be constantly reenacted through a perpetual process of physical and symbolic violence. Relying on a disavowal of
dependency and vulnerability, these patterns of violence allow the settler subject to cope with the glaring contradictions between the ongoing reality of colonial violence and the discourses of settler legitimacy and benevolence through which settler subjects are continually interpellated (Razack, 2015). The settler subject comes to know itself and persists as itself through violence and, in this way, violence becomes a way of being in the world, an effective or even the only coping mechanism that allows one to continue functioning as a “good” or “successful” settler subject. I am interested in what contexts the growing interest in yoga, a practice rooted in ahimsa or non-violence, is indicative of a willingness to recognize and disrupt these patterns of violence and to what extent it is serving as simply another ideological tool with which to quell cognitive dissonance. By emphasizing the distinctly affective dimensions of yoga practice, I will conceptualize practice as a method for engaging with the ambivalence inherent in subjectivity (Butler, 1997) in ways that actively contest the boundedness of settler subjectivity. Through the cultivation of a felt sense of permeability and contingency, the practice of yoga can allow the subject to open up to that which surrounds, composes, and exceeds it, coming to a different understanding of vulnerability and dependency that functions to extend the subject’s limits of awareness and consideration. In order to ground these insights and take them out of the purely abstract, I conducted interviews with yoga teachers and practitioners at a particular yoga studio in Western Canada with the aim of investigating the ways in which the practice shapes how practitioners relate to themselves and to one another, exploring the alternative forms of community that can be generated through practice. The interviews aim to narrate how processes of becoming play out at the level of everyday life, examining the therapeutic communities that emerge through practice and how these communities provide the support and space necessary for the cultivation of new representational parameters that foster more affirmative and ethical
relations with alterity. The interviews highlight the importance of the collective or community-oriented dimensions of this process and affirm yoga as a practice of depersonalization in the project of cultivating a non-unitary, affective, and relational self (Braidotti, 2006).

The interviews demonstrate the extent to which practice often centers around deeper concerns about the ethics of relationships and is often driven by a desire to relate to one’s self and others differently. While the ashtanga practice provides a method for defamiliarizing the body so as to open up habitual patterns and tendencies for inquiry and for potential change, the studio space and the community that emerges through it collectivizes an otherwise individualized process and, in so doing, creates the possibility for contesting and reworking social and embodied norms in ways that can extend beyond the community in question. The interviews examine the emergence of new shared practices that center around alternative ideals based on respect, care, and reciprocity and how the community context associated with practice at this particular studio cultivates both the willingness and ability to change. Due to the value placed on process instilled through sustained practice, the resurfacing of old patterns is not associated with failure but is instead seen as an opportunity for a conscious investment in alternative ideals. While ashtanga yoga is an individual practice, the interrelational character of the agency involved in undermining atomized understandings of self is shown to be of vital importance.

Ashtanga Yoga: Progress and Possibility

Ashtanga yoga is a physically demanding style of postural practice that has become increasingly popular in the West over the past forty years. Arguably, what most distinguishes ashtanga from other styles of modern yoga practice is the mysore method through which ashtanga is typically taught. Originally developed in Mysore, India by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois,
mysore-style is a highly individualized method for teaching the ashtanga system. As opposed to the typical led-class style where an instructor guides a room full of students through a practice, a mysore room is open. Students are able to start their practice at any point within a given window of time and a teacher is there to offer assistance when needed, adding on postures as the student is ready for them. Ashtanga is a progressive system, with the practitioner working her way through a set series of postures, memorizing the sequence as she goes, and becoming increasingly self-reliant. In some ways, the progressive nature of the practice caters to settler mentalities as it offers a sense of certainty and security with reference to what is coming next, what might happen on the mat that day, and what one is working toward over time; however, ashtanga’s sense of progression is also a site of possibility. By guiding the practitioner through the same set of postures, the practice works toward the development of a keener awareness of the subtle shifts in the body and mind from day to day, cultivating an understanding of the contingency of the forces that surround and compose the individual body at any given moment. In this way, the repetitive nature of the practice, while still offering a sense of certainty, defamiliarizes the body and reveals habitual patterns of a physical, psychological, and emotional nature that were previously obscured or taken for granted, opening up those ways of relating and being for inquiry and for potential change. When framed in the proper way, ashtanga becomes a tool for deterritorializing the body and mind in a sustainable and ongoing manner and can disrupt the melancholic circuit of settler subjectivity.

The following sections provide a brief overview of the key theoretical frameworks and conversations that drive this work. I highlight the importance of the body in projects that engage with questions of subjectivity and draw attention to the potentially subversive capacities of ashtanga yoga.
The Melancholic Subject: Questions of Ambivalence and Dependency

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler conducts an in-depth examination of melancholia, exploring the effects of power on the subject and identifying ambivalence as a core aspect of subjectivity. Butler shows how an inability to cope with ambivalence, coupled with an attachment to the notion of an atomized individual self, results in melancholic expressions of subjectivity, enacting a repetitious disavowal of the dependency constitutive of social and psychic life and policing a firm boundary between inside and outside, self and other. By characterizing all forms of subjectivity as melancholic, Butler’s work reveals the violence required to persist as one’s self in a psycho-social landscape defined by an ability to draw boundaries and oppositions. Ambivalence disrupts any notion of certainty and forces us into spaces where clear boundaries and rigid distinctions collapse. By highlighting the centrality of ambivalence in the constitution of the subject, Butler illuminates the need for strategies that revalue dependency and vulnerability in order to interrupt or circumvent pathological and narcissistic relations, promoting a greater sense of accountability that helps expand understandings of what constitutes the self. Here, the body is key and has the potential to situate the subject within an intricate network of support and reciprocity that includes both human and more-than-human elements. Butler (2015) defines the body as a “living set of relations […] that cannot be dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living and acting” (p. 65). The body is never separate from the conditions of life that surround and compose it, providing a felt sense of interdependence that challenges rigid notions of inside and outside. If all subjectivity is melancholic, then it is not only futile but also potentially dangerous to seek to do away with melancholia entirely. Rather, it is necessary to find ways of rendering experiences
of melancholia more permeable so as to remain open to the forces of encounter and the possibility of becoming. Engaged in the proper way, melancholia becomes a tool that allows the subject to critically and skillfully navigate various social and psychic landscapes, coming to an understanding of the foreclosures through which the subject has been formed rather than unconsciously reifying those foreclosures and divisions.

*Between Melancholia and Philosophical Nomadism*

Characterizing all subjectivity as melancholic means that a certain degree of separation is necessary to persist as one’s self. Placing theories of melancholia in conversation with philosophical nomadism can facilitate an exploration of more permeable states of separation that allow the subject to function while remaining open to the possibilities of becoming. This joint approach is strategic, seeking methods of transformation that are attentive to the subject’s psychological, social, and physical limits so as to avoid the risks of collapsing into either paralysis or psychosis. In her book, *Transpositions*, Rosi Braidotti deals with the ethical implications and responsibilities of a non-unitary vision of the subject and situates the body as key in cultivating the awareness and understanding necessary to realize a “new way of combining self-interests with the well being of an enlarged sense of community” (p. 35). She sees the body as a “highly contested social space traversed by capital flows and […] power relations” (p. 50) and a fruitful starting point for beginning to undo our sense of separation and trace the depth of our interconnections with others. The creation of “figurations,” genealogical understandings of one’s “specific positioning in both space and time” (p. 90), is a core component of becoming nomadic and involves the creative reworking of memory and the use of imagination in order to construct alternative, situated, or “micro” narratives of self and other that
provide the grounds for action that may have been foreclosed under the rule of dominant narratives (p. 90). Philosophical nomadism articulates a highly creative and aesthetic view of subjectivity that mobilizes both memory and imagination in a process of “expression, composition, selection, and incorporation of forces” aimed at the “positive transformation of the subject” (p. 145). Under this model, the “unity” of any individual subject is that of “a continuing power to synchronize its recollections” and memory becomes a tool for the “containment and actualization of a subject’s resources, understood environmentally, affectively, and cognitively” (p. 151). For Braidotti, our collective capacity for action is inextricably intertwined with and “held together by narratives, stories, exchanges, shared emotions and affects” (p. 199). Braidotti provides a framework for thinking through embodied practice as a sort of prefigurative politics of the self. In the context of ashtanga, the mat provides the framework for sustained encounters with one’s body. These encounters facilitate an ongoing practice in learning to relate differently to one’s self and to challenge preconceived notions about what a body is and what it can do. Working to extend these insights and relations beyond the mat is key in politicizing practice and belies the importance of developing critical and flexible narratives, both individually and collectively.

Positioning Affect

Affect theory plays a central role in valuing the body as a promising site for the cultivation of more relational ways of being. Affect theory is diverse and often contains contradictory and conflictual understandings and approaches. Two of the more pronounced ways of approaching affect consist of analyzing affect as or within the context of emotion (Ahmed, 2010) and the more Spinozist-Deleuzian understandings of affect as pre-personal forces or intensities between
bodies (Braidotti, 2002, 2006; Massumi, 1995). My interest for the purpose of this project lies primarily in the latter; however, affect theory in all its variations and complexities is a vital component in the project of articulating a relational or non-unitary vision of subjectivity, offering a way to shift the focus entirely to process rather than becoming fixed on ideals or rigid conceptions of truth. Affect facilitates a shift to what things are doing and how they work together, contesting the notion of a center or any fixed point. Bodies, in the realm of affect, become tools for examining flows and transformations, accepting the fluidity, contingency, and malleability of bodies in ways that challenge any notion of inside and outside. Affective approaches are also dangerously susceptible to incorporation into capitalist projects and discourses. Like yoga, affect can invite the subject to live in more liminal spaces, spaces of possibility but also spaces of fragmentation and deterritorialization that can lead to exploitation and violence. While both affect theory and yoga practice can be useful tools for challenging the pervasive dualisms that continue to structure many aspects of society and of our inter- and intra-personal relationships, an ongoing process of grounding and contextualizing our practices is necessary to maintain an awareness of where these tools are helpful and where they become oppressive.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter will expand on the profoundly melancholic workings of settler subjectivity and will link ashtanga yoga with past and ongoing projects of nation-building, contextualizing the practice within Hindu Nationalist movements and neoliberal expressions of somatic nationalism in the West. Due to some of the differences in approaches and styles between ashtanga yoga and other forms of postural practice, “ashtangis” are particularly prone to
more rigid mentalities, often defining themselves in stark opposition to other forms of practice. The sense of discipline and commitment required to sustain a daily ashtanga practice is often invoked in disturbingly hierarchical and elitist ways and, although there are differences in styles and approaches to the teaching of the ashtanga system, the pre-defined nature of the sequence ensures that a practitioner can walk into almost any mysore room in the world and be relatively confident and comfortable in that space. In this way, ashtanga fits well within Benedict Anderson’s (1983) definition of a nation as an “imagined community”. With these associations in mind, this chapter will explore the potential in the ashtanga method for unsettling settler subjectivity, questioning to what extent the practice disrupts or reinforces melancholic circuits of reflexivity. This chapter will draw attention to the potential latent in the practice for contributing to more insidious forms of nation-building and colonization better suited to the limitlessness of ever-expanding capital. By placing ashtanga yoga in conversation with the work and influence of Jack Kerouac as the quintessentially nomadic American figure, I consider the manner in which the global movement and extensive travel of many ashtanga practitioners can have the effect of reinscribing colonial power dynamics and extending the bounds of the settler-state. The first Western practitioners to seek out ashtanga yoga did so at the tail-end of the counterculture movement, their narratives echoing the nomadic ethos and sense of adventure and inquiry popularized by Kerouac’s, On The Road. I will examine how On The Road in particular and Beat culture more broadly served to conflate authenticity with movement. I argue that the attachment to the idea of an authentic self realized through movement and travel serves to abstract practice from place and forecloses the possibility of creating meaningful links of solidarity and affinity.

As such, I seek to conceptualize a different kind of movement that contests the existence of an authentic self, foregrounding movement between and across subjectivities and how this might
provide a framework that allows for movement through space in ways that contribute less to colonial dispossession. In the second chapter, I suggest that the practice roots practitioners not in the land but in the body. When the proper structures and narratives are not in place to link that body to the broader structures that support it, the practice becomes a useful tool for the expansion of capitalism, commodification, and dispossession; however, when properly contextualized, this somatic rooting could undermine violent needs for ownership and control of the land, providing a new framework for approaching actions and practices of solidarity from a “felt” sense of the body and the way it is affected by that which surrounds it. I suggest that by cultivating a greater sense of cohesion between the practitioner and her body, the practice allows the subject to relinquish some of the desperate need for certainty characteristic of settler subjectivity. The practitioner learns to cultivate a different kind of certainty, managing anxiety in and through the body to be able to engage the world in a less anxious, controlling way, creating space for a sense of belonging not arrived at through disavowal and difference.

The second chapter continues by focusing more explicitly on the shared narratives that emerge through practice, examining the interactions and dynamics at a particular yoga studio. I explore the ways in which the practice derives meaning through this particular space and how the community’s emphasis on healing foregrounds both the contingency and agency of the body in ways that can radically reconfigure individual understandings of self. The interviews demonstrate how involvement with this specific community can disrupt the desire to adhere to normative ideals and opens up new representational parameters that encourage a more affirmative relationship with alterity. I examine how the business aspect of the studio serves as a productive constraint on the community as a whole and opens up the ashtanga practice itself to more varied influences. This results in the cultivation of more flexible narratives, relationships,
and communities than might otherwise be associated with ashtanga circles. I argue for the need to understand this community as a viable practice in structural renewal, following Gustav Landauer, through its emphasis on the creation of alternative relationships between self and other and the work that is being done at the levels of identity and desire. The language with which practitioners refer to their bodies is shown to be of vital importance and cultivates an acceptance of ambivalence in a way that disrupts the need for a bounded sense of self and the violence through which that self is constituted. I will examine strategies that help contextualize the anxieties expressed throughout the interviews in ways that render them politically viable and explore how we might link the seeds of activism present at the studio with other movements and issues beyond the studio space.

A Note on Encounters, or, Bringing Critical Theory Back to Ground

Encounters happen in those spaces between, where boundaries are blurred and rigid distinctions are challenged. This work proceeds from the assumption that it is the spaces between things that matter the most. It is in relation that we come to know ourselves in a way that honours our transitory, permeable, and constantly shifting nature and it is in and through relation that we create the space necessary to begin to disengage from those habits and mentalities that hinder our ability to engage critically and productively with our individual and collective conditioning. By placing ashtanga practitioners in conversation with critical theorists, I hope to affirm the ways in which people are always already exploring questions of subjectivity and transformation, prefiguring more affirmative and just communities and relations in the process. Critical theory, and theories of becoming and subjectivity in particular, primarily deal only in very abstract terms and do not make a concerted effort to narrate how these processes play out at the level of
individual encounters and experiences. This research is an intervention in this regard and seeks to flesh out the connections between theories of becoming and daily life that have, thus far, been largely neglected. This work is motivated by a desire to affirm the many ways in which individuals and communities are already involved in intense and dedicated practices that take up and mobilize these questions in tangible and practical ways.
Chapter 2: Healthy Subjects, Dangerous Others: The Authentic Self and the Organization of Settler Space

This chapter will engage with yoga as a significant site of nation-building, looking at how nations are built on and through specific conceptions of what a body is, what a body should do, and which bodies matter. Examining yoga through the lens of nationalism is revealing of the spatial implications of practice and how the authenticity and modernity of certain bodies is secured through the containment and marginalization of others. Yoga exists in an ambivalent relationship with modernity, an ambivalence that is predominantly managed through discourses and practices of authenticity and health. In modern forms of yoga this often results in the institutionalization of systematic processes of self-discipline and ritual purification. These processes relegate social and political anxieties to the level of the body where they can be dealt with and cleansed through the application of specific practices in order to allow the practitioner to embrace the fantasy of a coherent, stable, and bounded self that exists beyond the chaos and tension of modern life. I will examine the ways in which yoga’s appeal to the authentic, modern self functions to secure and uphold middle-class values at the same time as it obscures the conditions of privilege on which those values rest. I explore how, when driven by a desire for authenticity, the global movement of yoga practitioners can have the effect of abstracting practice from place in a way that forecloses the possibility of creating meaningful links of solidarity and affinity. I argue that by contextualizing the development and experience of modern yoga, and thereby resisting the desire to romanticize practice as something pure or transcendent, the insights derived through practice can be rendered meaningful, serving to extend understandings of what a body is while stretching the limits of the practitioner’s awareness and consideration.
Most “traditional” ashtanga classes begin with an opening invocation and end with a closing chant, both in Sanskrit. The teacher calls “samastitihi”, the name of a basic standing posture, and all students stand at attention at the tops of their mats, hands in prayer, chanting either all together or call-and-response. This can be a bizarre experience for anyone new to the practice and can have the effect of visibly distinguishing those who know the chant and the routines of the practice from those who do not. While most systems of postural yoga have a certain style or set of customs that are unique to them, ashtanga is arguably the most self-enclosed, with a host of traditions, habits, and myths that serve to distinguish ashtangis from other practitioners. The set nature of the sequence ensures that a practitioner can walk into almost any mysore room in the world and feel relatively comfortable and at ease, while engaging in the practice of moving through the same set of postures day in and day out provides a touchstone that is often the foundation of many relationships. The ways in which both teachers and certain postures are mythologized create a shared history and narrative that practitioners can draw upon to connect with one another. These commonalities are not necessarily a bad thing and can provide an instant point of connection for practitioners from very different backgrounds and life experiences; however, the sense of discipline and dedication that has come to be associated with a daily ashtanga practice is often invoked in hierarchical ways and can create a climate of policing and surveillance within the ashtanga community itself, in that any deviations or distinctions from what is deemed “traditional” are easily and quickly identified. In this context, seemingly small and mundane differences become defining and significant. For example, the choice to use “props”, such as straps or blocks, rather than relying solely on the use of the body
marks certain teachers and practitioners as outside the norm and often signifies a certain distance from the authenticity of practice as it “should be” or was originally taught. As a result, ashtanga has become relatively resistant to change and often results in practitioners abandoning the system altogether, primarily due to injury, often with outspoken and scathing critiques.

While undoubtedly pronounced and regimented in ashtanga yoga, the desire for authenticity is not unique to ashtangis. By positioning the body as an effective tool for accessing and working with the mind, modern postural yoga in all its variations is often marketed as a tool through which practitioners can connect with themselves, propagating modern ideals of an authentic self to be uncovered that exists beyond the stresses of daily life and outside power (Lewis, 2008; Markula, 2014; Sharma, 2014). This becomes increasingly appealing in late-modern societies, providing an anchor of certainty and control in the context of the breakdown of meta-narratives and the widespread mistrust in any overarching political or religious institution (Atkinson, 2010; Jain, 2014). Discovering one’s true self is deemed to be something that is not only possible but desirable, a socially sanctioned form of empowerment and action that marks one as a rational and responsible agent, a subject invested not only in its own well-being, but in the greater good as well. Orthopraxy, debates over which forms of practice are the most authentic, is common between practitioners of different systems (Singleton, 2010, p. 8) and these debates over authenticity often lack consideration of how that authenticity has and continues to be constructed or why there exists such a desire to discover and take part in an authentic practice to begin with. Mark Singleton (2010) notes, authenticity in modern postural practice is often established through “hagiography and the editorializing of memory” (p. 8), where practice is radically decontextualized from the extensive processes of medicalization and demystification that legitimized modern forms of postural yoga on a global scale (Alter, 2004; Jain, 2014;
Singleton, 2010; Strauss, 2002). In this particular climate, tying certain styles of practice to ancient texts and ways of knowing becomes an outrageously successful marketing technique (Jain, 2014). Ashtanga yoga, for example, is often thought by practitioners to be the system most closely aligned with the philosophy and practice found in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* and the vinyasa system characteristic of ashtanga yoga is said to have been outlined in an ancient text called the *Yoga Korunta*, now conveniently lost.

In her book, *Self-transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*, Cressida Heyes, following Nikolas Rose, examines the concept of the “somatic individual”, the idea of an authentic self to be uncovered and “made visible through changes to the body” (p. 4). Heyes argues that this notion of a self to be “discovered or developed through transformations of the flesh” (p. 4) renders embodied practices liable to incorporation into disciplinary and normalizing regimes, creating docile and easily manipulated subjects. When the body is normalized as a tool for discovering an identity free of historical, cultural, and political context, we risk creating subjects that are willfully ignorant of the ways in which the world “‘houses’ some bodies more than others” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 12). Normalized and taken-for-granted, projects of self-transformation legitimized through an ethic of authenticity are often undertaken without consideration of which bodies are encouraged and supported in these goals. Which subjects are allowed to be authentic and which bodies must be contained and managed to affirm the authenticity and modernity of others? This chapter is largely concerned with the ways in which spaces are shaped around and through discourses of authenticity and projects of self-transformation and how, in the context of neoliberalism and advanced capitalism, this can have the effect of contributing to the creation of more insidious forms of nation-building better suited to the limitlessness of ever-expanding capital. Yoga bodies have and continue to be implicated in
projects of nation-building, enmeshed in a complex nexus of power relations that are revealing of the spatial implications of various nationalist aspirations, functioning to secure freedom of movement and self-actualization for some bodies through the containment and denigration of others. Embodied practice is never outside power and can, under certain conditions, become a crucial site of political and economic resistance. Examining how yoga facilitates or hinders movement for which bodies and in what contexts can illuminate potential sources of action and solidarity and render visible some of the spatial and symbolic violence through which practitioners are continually interpellated.

*Modern Yoga and its Constitutive Others*

The concept of a stable, authentic self is directly related to the project of modernity. The construction of the knowing, rational, and modern self requires the containment of various constitutive Others and propagates discourses of teleological development and progress (Braidotti, 2006). The figure of the “hatha yogin” engaged in physical austerities and postural practice is often invoked in modern forms of practice to bolster or confirm the authenticity of Western practitioners. Joseph Alter (2004) notes the image of the wandering yogin practicing in isolation in the Himalayas has been central to the development of modern postural yoga and continues to compel Western practitioners to travel to India seeking a guru and the discovery of “true” knowledge. While physical practice is now commonly assumed to be a core component of yoga practice in the West and elsewhere, “posture practice was not central to any yoga tradition prior to the twentieth century” (Jain, 2014, p. 37). Far from given, the legitimacy of posture practice has been carefully constructed, the product of a strategic and laborious process, undertaken transnationally, involving the careful distancing of yoga from colonial and Orientalist
representations by linking practice with modern values of rationality, scientific validity, health and well-being, and, later, with countercultural currents (Jain, 2014; Singleton, 2010; Strauss, 2002). When yoga was first introduced to North America by Swami Vivekananda in 1893 at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, the figure of the hatha yogin engaged in physical practice was a prominent aspect of the colonial and Orientalist imaginary, evoking images of postural austerities and contortionism that functioned to associate Indian spirituality and asceticism with “religious folly,” “perverse sexuality”, and “black magic” (Singleton, 2010, p. 35). Concerned with presenting yoga on the global stage as the “flower of Indian culture and Hindu religion” (Singleton, 2010, p. 80), Vivekananda promoted a version of yoga that emphasized the cognitive, philosophical, and meditative dimensions of practice while “condemning the obnoxious behaviour and queer ascetic practices” associated with hatha yoga (Singleton, 2010, p. 35).

Contemporary understandings of yoga bodies as signifiers of health and mobility have been made as such partially through the containment, demilitarization, and depoliticization of the hatha yogin and the systematic elimination of nomadic forms of organization and being that allowed for a certain level of equality and social opportunity otherwise denied through the caste system (Singleton, 2010). Singleton (2010) notes, “from the fifteenth century until the early decades of the nineteenth century, highly organized bands of militarized yogin controlled trade routes across Northern India, becoming so powerful in the eighteenth century as to be able to challenge the economic and political hegemony of the East India Company” (p. 39). As a major source of social and economic disruption that threatened the status of both British colonists and wealthy Indian merchants, the hatha yogin was a despised and condemned figure, increasingly targeted, “demilitarized and forced to settle in cities” (Singleton, 2010, p. 40). Contained within
the city space and deprived of a livelihood derived through trade-soldiering, many yogins were “forced into lives of yogic showmanship and mendicancy, becoming objects of scorn for many sections of Hindu society, and of voyeuristic fascination or disgust for European visitors” (Singleton, 2010, p. 40). Images of the “caste-less yogin” engaged in physical austerities and postural practice became almost inextricably linked with notions of “ritual impurity,” “savagery,” and “backwardness” (Singleton, 2010, p. 40). Although physical practice is now, arguably, the most visible and recognized aspect of yoga practice in the West, the weight and pervasiveness of the colonial and Orientalist associations between postural practice and black magic resulted in the almost complete exclusion of hatha yoga from yoga’s introduction to the West.

Vivekananda and Hindu Nationalism

The work and contributions of Vivekananda mark a turning point in the way that yoga was represented and conceptualized both in India and in the West, framing and mobilizing yoga in ways that were useful for efforts toward Indian independence and decolonization (Strauss, 2002). Vivekananda is often associated with Hindu Nationalism, his vision giving shape and coherence to an idea of Indian national unity and the universality of Hindu philosophies and beliefs. Chetan Bhatt (2001) describes Hindu Nationalism as “preoccupied with the discovery of primordial Hindu belonging” and examines how these ideas were formed through a “process of appropriation and interrogation of, as well as negotiation with ‘Orientalist’ and colonial scholarship related to the origins, languages and religions of the inhabitants of India” (p. 11). Yoga was a significant site of this negotiation, requiring the careful distancing of practice from the associations between yoga and black magic, while simultaneously affirming the ancient roots
of philosophical yoga, situating it among the ranks of the Vedas, Puranas, and the Bhagavad Gita, texts already familiar to the European imaginary as signifiers of ancient systems of sophisticated political, intellectual, and social organization. Bhatt notes, notions of India as “the cradle of all civilization […] or the original homeland of humanity […] were widely disseminated in Europe” (p. 11) through the work of Voltaire, Kant, Hegel, and others. These ideas allowed yoga to be presented and valued through discourses that glorified “India’s archaic Hindu past” (Bhatt, 2001, p. 12), drawing on certain forms of legitimacy and authority derived through Orientalist narratives and mobilizing them in ways that were relevant to contemporary efforts towards Indian independence and nationalism. Through the affirmation of yoga as an ancient cultural and philosophical practice that was almost entirely concerned with the workings of the mind, Vivekananda was able to provide a modern vision of both India and Hinduism, “using an imagined shared history to create a progressive, self-possessed and unifying identity” (Strauss, 2002, p. 248) that was in keeping with Enlightenment ideals of rationality, individualism, and autonomy. Vivekananda’s yoga emphasized personal reform as a way of improving the world and saw the development of the individual as the first step in contributing to the improvement of local, national, and global communities (Strauss, 2002). By emphasizing primordialist conceptions of belonging and linking yoga with pre-existing ideas of Indian civilization in the European imaginary, Vivekananda was able to promote yoga as a solution to contemporary problems that was both explicitly Indian and wholly universal, doing so in a way that was relevant to both Indian nationalists and Western audiences and, consequently, gaining currency and legitimacy for notions of India as an independent nation on the global stage.
Mysore, India: Physical Culture and Militant Resistance

The 1920s and 30s saw the consolidation of yoga with scientific practice, discourses of health, and the growing physical culture movement, allowing yoga to be further validated and mobilized in the service of anti-colonial efforts. The body became a crucial site for securing these connections. While the body was devalued in the initial stages of the yoga revival by Vivekananda and others, subsumed to cognitive and philosophical aims, the physical dimensions of yoga practice became sites of possibility in an increasingly health-valuing world. Through scientific experiments conducted in the 1920s by figures such as Swami Kuvalyananda which examined and measured the changes in blood pressure and heart rate that resulted from practice, the body became a tool for quantifying yoga’s compatibility with science and modernity (Alter, 2004). Having sufficiently distanced itself from Orientalist associations with black magic and yogic showmanship, physical practice could now be re-integrated into the emerging discourse surrounding yoga through modern values of science and health. Due in large part to royal patronage, Mysore, India was a prominent site for the development of postural yoga as a system of Indian physical culture (Hauser, 2013), seeking an Indian alternative to the prevalence of Western gymnastics that was being taught in Indian curricula. Singleton (2010) notes, “the modern Indian physical culture movement grew up in reaction to foreign colonial forms of body discipline” (p. 199) and sought to challenge colonial representations of Indian masculinity as degenerate and effeminate, myths used to justify continued British occupation of India. Similar to the work of Vivekananda, the development of an Indian national physical culture took place through a process of negotiation, contestation, and appropriation of existing colonial practices, values, and representations. Figures such as Krishnamacharya, considered by many to be the grandfather of modern postural yoga and who taught both Sri. K. Pattabhi Jois and BKS Iyengar,
drew from existing gymnastics systems and situated them within a similar kind of primordialist framework to that of Vivekananda, evoking and emphasizing images of India as an ancient civilization with timeless practices. The physicality and visually stunning aspects of gymnastics were linked with the discourses of spirituality and transcendence that surrounded yoga to create a new system of postural yoga that could challenge the legitimacy of British systems of physical education and create alternative representations of Indian masculinity. There was also a distinctly militant aspect to the surge in physical culture in certain circles, with “highly organized campaigns of militant physical resistance to colonial rule […] commonly run out of local […] physical culture clubs” and yoga shalas (Singleton, 2010, p. 82). The cultivation and demonstration of “physical fitness and strength” derived from an explicitly Indian system of physical culture became not only “a potent expression of cultural politics” in the context of damaging colonial narratives (Singleton, 2010, p. 96), but could also function as an “alibi for training in violent, militant resistance” (Singleton, 2010, p. 103). Here, the wandering yogin engaged in militant acts of resistance and trade-soldiering, previously condemned, gets taken up and revalued in the context of violent anti-colonial struggle. Whereas Vivekananda’s project required a complete disavowal of the hatha yogin as the antithesis of Indian modernity, the militant history associated with these bodies becomes, in this context, symbolic capital in the struggle for Independence.

Public Health and Somatic Nationalism

Post-Independence, the development of yoga in India becomes even more focused on health, engaging practice as a way of “strengthen[ing] the minds, spirits, and bodies of colonized subjects for the difficulties of modern independent life” (Strauss, 2002, 249). We have seen in
the previous sections how yoga was mobilized as a central tool through which India was able to struggle for its status as an independent nation. In the context of public health and the state of the Indian nation, yoga becomes valued as a way of dealing with what Alter (1997) calls the “sickness of modernity,” issues related to health and well-being associated with “specific aspects of Westernization, and office work in particular” (p. 315). Focusing on two specific yoga organizations in Northern India, Alter (1997) and Strauss (2002) explore how questions of Indian nationalism get taken up and promoted in postural yoga through practices of individual and public health, managing the ambivalence felt by predominantly middle-class individuals in relation to their status as modern subjects. In this context, the primary aim of yoga practice is to “heal the fragmented Indian consciousness by reconnecting […] body and mind” (Alter, 1997, p. 310). Yoga is understood as a way of bringing “back together that which modernity […] is thought to have broken apart — the self” (Alter, 1997, p. 310). By equating the problems of modernity with issues of public health, the body becomes a site through which practitioners can embody, manage, and expunge social, political, and economic anxieties, seeking ultimately to reveal a self that exists beneath the debilitating effects of modern life. Cultivating and “maintaining good health” becomes “the central duty of the true citizen” (Strauss, 2002, p. 246) and offers a simple and tangible solution to contemporary problems that are complex and abstract. Alter refers to this process as “somatic nationalism”, wherein “the relationship between identity and modernity is conceived of as a problem of health and health care” (p. 327). Under practices of somatic nationalism, “the nation gets affectedly reimagined in the process of trying to discipline bodies which are out of tune with themselves” (Alter, 1997, p. 328). The emphasis on the body allows these practices to take on a universal and democratic quality, being predominantly anti-intellectual and embracing an experiential doctrine; however, both Alter and
Strauss stress the specific class and religious interests that are being addressed and promoted through this formulation of public health, particularly those of educated, middle-class Hindus. By engaging in structured and regimented systems of postural yoga practice, middle-class anxieties surrounding modernity are exchanged for a sense of “biomoral security” (Alter, 1997, p. 311) wherein the individual can take control of his or her position in the world through a process of self re-orientation facilitated by increased bodily awareness and purification, while simultaneously reconnecting with “traditional” Hindu values (Alter, 1997; Strauss, 2002). Through ritualized yoga practice, predominantly middle-class urban practitioners can affirm their position in the modern Indian nation free of the perceived compromises and contradictions associated with this modern status. The necessity of the almost compulsive engagement in practice belies the ambivalence that lies just beneath the surface and the difficulty in resolving it.

The following sections engage with dominant Western conceptions of health and their implications for the organization of both psychic and physical space. I understand this framework and practice of health as “sedentary” as opposed to the more nomadic conceptions of health that will be explored later on. Although I will simply use the word “health” to refer to this sedentary framework, I do so primarily to draw attention to its taken-for-granted and universalized status so as to later revalue what constitutes “health” in more relational and ethically viable ways.

Somatic Nationalism in the West: Neoliberalism and Consumer Culture

Health is a defining feature of Western societies (Crawford, 2006). Normalized and taken for granted as an intrinsic aspect of modern life, health is a powerful vehicle for validating practices of self-care and individual responsibility, both of which are valued as indicators of
individual agency and rationality (Crawford, 2006). What is often obscured through this discourse is the privilege associated with the ability to access the resources necessary to take control and stay informed about one’s health and the broader social and political implications of the institutionalization of individual responsibility. In health-valuing cultures, personal responsibility for the cultivation and management of one’s health becomes the ultimate marker of good citizenship and individual autonomy (Crawford, 2006). The success with which one can demonstrate self-expertise and self-care in the realm of health and well-being serves to distinguish good and healthy subjects from dangerous and irresponsible Others. In this context, yoga is a very visible and easily recognizable way in which subjects can communicate their health-conscious and disciplined status. This has serious implications not only in terms of identity-formation and ethics, but also in terms of the organization of space and the separation and containment of individuals and groups. Yoga is often presented as a practice that is widely available and universally accessible; however, much research has shown that Western practitioners are predominantly middle-class, live in urban settings, and work in the immaterial knowledge and affective work sectors (Kern, 2012; Lewis, 2008; Markula, 2014; Schnabele, 2013). In a study investigating the social factors that shape and support individual exercise habits, Clara Lewis (2008) emphasizes the structural factors, in terms of resources and privileges, involved in first introducing yoga to an individual and then in supporting the adoption of a regular and sustained practice. She examines how the yoga studio can function as an alternative community space for individuals whose lives are defined more by professional and educational goals than by family obligations. Lewis found that an individual’s sense of belonging and ease within the yoga studio space was often directly impacted by that individual’s ability to access information about health, situating the likelihood of taking up a regular and sustained yoga practice.
practice within an adherence to one of the core values of middle-class experience and identity formation. Within this context, yoga is valued as a tool that allows individuals to function more productively and efficiently in the professional world. In relation to Post-Fordist working conditions, yoga can be an invaluable resource for a certain portion of the population, providing a space to practice the flexibility required by deregulated working conditions and a way of escaping the stress and competition of professional life (Lewis, 2008; Markula, 2014; Schnabele, 2013). In an employment market where the line between work and leisure is continually blurred, where individuals are required to market themselves, and expected to maintain a professional attitude at all times, the yoga mat becomes a safe and acceptable space where practitioners can work with and manage insecurities and difficult emotions that are otherwise hidden or suppressed (Lewis, 2008; Markula, 2014; Schnabele, 2013).

While yoga practice can provide a brief period of respite and equip the practitioner with the tools to deal more effectively and efficiently with stress, it often has the effect of reinforcing dominant systems, allowing subjects to work more efficiently for the perpetuation of those systems rather than challenging the structural forces that marginalize and harm bodies in various ways. Sarah Sharma (2014), in an examination of mobile yoga instructors teaching in corporate environments, asserts yoga practice, while presenting itself as subversive or resistant, often has the effect of “hail[ing] bodies” in a way that simply “reconfirms their relationships to the disciplinary and institutional spaces in which they spend their days” (p. 91-92). According to Sharma, yoga can function in a way that problematizes the individual’s relationship or inattentiveness to their own body as opposed to encouraging an interrogation of the structural or systemic forces that render that body vulnerable to various forms of stress, illness, and/or exploitation. Far from providing an alternative to oppressive work and life conditions, yoga
instructors often mobilize discourses of self-expertise and awareness in ways that have the effect of refashioning subjects to be “better adapted to a life spent at the desk” (Sharma, 2014, p. 85). In this way, yoga becomes the perfect vehicle for the creation of “neoliberal consumer citizens” and can have the effect of naturalizing or legitimizing widespread state disinvestment through its emphasis on individual responsibility and self-care (Markula, 2014, p. 149). Through its promotion of ideas of non-attachment and impermanence, yoga can have the effect of normalizing precarious and erratic work and life conditions and places the onus on the individual to better manage their own reactions to and cope with the unpredictability of life. In an analysis of the institutionalization of “mindfulness” practices in the corporate world, Carl Cederstrom (2015) examines how the body becomes valued as a sort of “truth system”, an anchor and reference point in a shifting and chaotic world. The body becomes the only reality that can be known and managed and “anything that violates [the] body, even in the most spurious way, comes to be perceived as a threat of the highest order” (p. 26).

The perceived harm of these bodily violations is amplified in health-valuing cultures. Robert Crawford (2006) examines the links between health and control, emphasizing their role in identity formation, particularly in relation to the middle-class. He identifies self-control as a “pillar of middle-class identity” that functions “as a shield against downward mobility” (p. 416). Crawford situates the obsession with health within the cultural contradictions of capitalism, the opposing mandate of both production and consumption, self-discipline and pleasure, that sits at the heart of middle-class experience. In this paradoxical state, health practices provide a framework that simplifies the world by providing the means through which middle-class individuals can grapple with and make sense of this tension of opposites. Through the framework of health, complex problems and anxieties are relocated to the level of the individual body where
they can be reimagined as controllable through the acquisition of medical knowledge (Cederstrom, 2015; Crawford, 2006), where, for example, one either smokes and gets lung cancer or refrains from smoking and does not (Crawford, 2006, p. 409); however, Crawford notes, the “gap between the perception of danger […] and the efficacy of action” only increases the more knowledge is acquired (p. 415). This gap between perceived threats and the capacity to protect against them fuels the desire for a bounded sense of self that is insulated from the dangers that are always already threatening to infect and unravel it. As Crawford states, “control, as the metaphorical core of health, is essential to the construction of […] a self that does not allow for illegal border crossings (physical, mental, emotional, social) […] and thus is the foundation of dividing practices that attempt to achieve immunity not only from threatening disease but endangering Others” (p. 416). The inability to confront this mounting insecurity and unpredictability results in an increasingly compulsive attachment to and need for control, externalizing threats by attaching undesirable qualities and characteristics to certain bodies that are marked as dangerous and/or degenerate and therefore in need of containment within or eviction from certain spaces and life conditions.

This need for control has implications for the organization of space, both physically and symbolically. Leslie Kern (2012) examines the role of embodied practices, specifically yoga, in processes of gentrification and the way that discourses of health and revitalization are used to position some bodies as desirable while naturalizing the eviction of others. She argues for the need to understand yoga not only as bodily modification but also as spatial modification in that the changes to the body experienced through extended yoga practice alters the relationships between various bodies and their environments, playing a part in determining which bodies come into contact and where, as well as affecting the way that bodies are able to move through space.
Kern states, “the language of gentrification implies an infusion of health to [a] diseased body/space” and emphasizes “revitalization [and] renewal” (Kern, 2012, p. 29). She focuses on the “geographies of exclusion” that are created through this discourse and how the neoliberal obsession with health is used to bolster fears of contact with certain bodies and practices. Kern frames gentrification and displacement in terms of the social practices and desires that are denied or “driven underground” and the places and opportunities of encounter that are foreclosed as a result (p. 33). Under neoliberalism, health is seen as the precondition for what passes as “the good life” and becomes the standard against which all actions, individuals, and practices are judged (Cederstrom, 2015; Crawford, 2006). Those groups and practices that are not seen as adhering to or striving for health and self-care become easy and common-sense targets for evictions of both a spatial and symbolic nature. This is particularly relevant in relation to yoga in that the depth of the associations between yoga and health means that practice can function in moralizing ways that depoliticize the norms, values, and exclusions in which yoga is continually implicated. As health becomes an imperative, yoga is increasingly mandated as a way for citizens to do their part to function as efficiently, productively, and happily as possible, to hold it all together in the face of external threats and ever-greater precarity. Focusing on the health of the individual body obscures the violence required to form and maintain an identity within these parameters and depoliticizes the processes that normalize neoliberal conceptions of health and action.

Consumer culture further depoliticizes yoga practice and provides the rationale for increasingly rigid distinctions between bodies. Andrea Jain (2014) explores the deep ties between yoga and consumerism, arguing that consumer culture enabled the popularization of yoga in the West. She examines how “Indian gurus as well as European and North American
yogis began to reconstruct modern yoga systems in ways that universalized them by attributing to them benefits that were removed from specific Indian nationalist and mystical contexts and instead reflected the self-developmental desires that dominated consumer culture” (p. 46). Sufficiently universalized so as to free the practitioner from any religious, ethnic, or nationalist affiliations or obligations, while still anchored in a sense of authenticity and spirituality that obscures its modern roots, yoga became a widely accessible way that middle-class practitioners could both mark their distance from the homogeneity and materialism of modern life while assuming a sense of control over their own conditions. Jain states, in “consumer culture, the inner and outer bodies are ‘conjoined’, meaning that body enhancement is taken to reflect self-development” (Jain, 2014, p. 78). In a culture where identity is assembled through consumption with the end goal of communicating and portraying an authentic and unique self through bodily transformations, the differences between products and/or practices and the meanings ascribed to them become exceedingly important (Jain, 2014). In this context, the struggle to define one’s identity is fought on symbolic terrain in which embodied practices themselves are often gentrified (Halnon and Cohen, 2006).

Halnon and Cohen (2006) explore what they deem to be a new kind of gentrification of a symbolic rather than primarily geographic character. Under this new model, embodied practices and values provide “new and creative ‘oppositional spaces’ and ‘authentic places’” through which the middle class can mark and communicate its “social and cultural distance from the everyday ‘banalities and generic character’ […] of commercial culture” (p. 36). They focus on how practices such as weight lifting and tattooing have been gentrified and removed from their associations with working-class life and identity, “revitalizing” and “upgrading” certain practices to communicate an aesthetic sensibility, creating “invested” rather than “working” bodies.
Building from Halnon and Cohen and keeping in mind the ways in which the figure of the hatha yogin has been condemned, re-imagined, and mobilized, it is possible to understand yoga bodies as themselves gentrified and examine how the cultural capital that is created and consolidated through this symbolic process gets used to naturalize spatial modifications and distinctions. By distancign postural yoga from “black magic”, Indian nationalism, and militant organization, while deepening the associations between yoga, health, and well-being, the ability to embody and mobilize the image of the yogi secures a certain degree of freedom of movement and self-actualization in neoliberal societies. When embodied practices are gentrified in this way and bodies are increasingly seen as commodities associated with certain identity markers and characteristics, establishing and maintaining stark differences between bodies becomes highly prioritized in a culture where visibility and coherence are established through disavowal and difference.

*The Melancholic Yogi?: Health, Anxiety, and Evictions in Settler-Colonial Societies*

In her most recent work, *Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody*, Sherene Razack explores how the colonial city is constructed through an ongoing series of evictions and expulsions and how settlers come to know themselves as both modern and legitimate subjects through encounters with Indigenous others who are seen as pathologically unable to cope with modern life. Focusing specifically on police and state actors, Razack argues that individuals become settlers through the regulation and containment of Indigenous bodies. Inquests and inquiries are viewed as performative spaces where settler legitimacy and benevolence are enacted and confirmed through individualizing and medicalizing narratives that reduce the effects of colonial violence and dispossession to individual pathology.
Issues of alcoholism and drug addiction are central to these narratives, demonstrating the enduring power of health to reduce an entire group of people to a single characteristic or pathology and mitigate societal responsibility for damaging and oppressive social, historical, and political conditions that are far-reaching and ongoing. The language of health saturates the ways in which, according to Razack, settler subjects are interpellated, providing the motive and rationale for the eviction of Indigenous bodies from public space. Razack frames evictions as “productive acts that constitute the nation” (p. 44), a sort of “cleansing” that protects the purity of modern city space (p. 33). She states, the colonial city is imagined as “belong[ing] to rational men and women, individuals who are owners of themselves” (p. 167) and the greatest threat to urban life is “waste within: that which refuses to be improved” (p. 169). Razack frames evictions in the contemporary moment as a continuation of the logic of the doctrine of terra nullius that justifies the dispossession and acquisition of Indigenous lands through the idea that Indigenous peoples do not “make rational use of their lands” and therefore can provide no legitimate claim to ownership (p. 169). This resonates strongly with the current neoliberal climate and offers some important insights for starting to critically engage with the ways in which yoga can function to normalize violent acts of expulsion through the manner in which it marks and distinguishes healthy subjects from unhealthy others. Rather than being overtly or exclusively associated with land and property ownership, rationality in the contemporary moment can be viewed as expressed and communicated largely through discourses of health in ways that obscure its spatial implications and motivations. The body, in this context, becomes a site for the demonstration and policing of an individual’s capacity for rational thought and action and those deemed incapable of caring for themselves are targeted, managed, and evicted. Where subjects are increasingly governed through individualized self-care and self-management, the limits of the
state’s power are most evident in those bodies that refuse to manage their health, that refuse to take care of themselves in those ways deemed appropriate by neoliberal and capitalist authorities. These bodies become objects of disgust and abjection, evoking strong affective responses that justify routine violence and eviction, clearing territory for occupation and ownership by those subjects deemed to be legitimate.

Razack argues that the Indigenous body occupies an intensely ambivalent position in relation to the settler, both affirming and challenging his legitimacy. She states, “the Indigenous body, so inextricably linked to the stolen land, must also be repressed, rendered simultaneously indispensable and expendable in the settler’s psyche” (p. 43). These bodies contest settler claims to land while also affirming the modernity and self-making status of settler subjects. The anxiety that is provoked in the face of this contradictory and ambivalent space requires the ongoing enactment of distinctions and divisions that affirm the settler’s rational capacity for control and discipline. The healthy, bounded self is constructed and maintained in a similar manner. The anxiety and threat of contamination that can never be fully warded off is managed through encounters with diseased others that serve to continually reaffirm the health of the subject, bolstering a sense of self that is predicated and dependent upon stark divisions between people. Not entirely unlike the Indigenous other, the diseased or pathological other occupies a paradoxical position in relation to the healthy self in that, to know itself as healthy, the healthy subject requires both the presence and elimination of disease. The body becomes the new frontier where an autonomous and rational identity can be confirmed. Individualized and medicalized, bodily pursuits and practices are severed from the structural conditions that support or hinder any given body, allowing the subject to imagine itself as separate from politically or economically oppressive conditions. Building on Crawford’s work on health and control and Razack’s
understanding of the violence through which settler subjects are interpellated, I argue that the neoliberal obsession with health in settler-colonial societies produces profoundly melancholic subjects, a melancholia that is managed through externalization, a joint process of projection and disavowal. Ambivalence is dealt with and the ego, which in consumer culture becomes synonymous or conjoined with the body, is protected by externalizing qualities that are deemed undesirable and then policing those bodies to which those characteristics are attached. This is only amplified in relation to the ambivalence that accompanies the cultural contradictions of capitalism so central to middle-class identity. In this way, there is a real possibility that yoga practice in the West, particularly in settler-colonial societies such as Canada, can have the effect of increasing the severity of melancholic expressions of subjectivity.

In his work on melancholia, Freud distinguishes mourning from melancholia by describing melancholia as “a loss of a more ideal kind” (p. 245), emphasizing the intense ambivalence that is constitutive of melancholic states. As ideals, health, and the authentic self it is thought to reveal, are always already lost. Surrounded by threats of contamination, the subject is always at risk of falling into a state of ill health or disrepair and is constantly reminded of its inability to protect itself against the precarity and unpredictability of life. Judith Butler (1997) notes, “the ideal of radical self-sufficiency is jeopardized by the body’s permeability and dependence,” where the body is seen to be a “site of contested ownership […] and a threat to the project of safety and self-sufficiency” (p. 54). As such, the body becomes a site of anxiety and discipline. Butler examines this process through the concept of “witnessing,” whereby the “watching self […] differentiates itself from the self witnessed as perpetually falling into contradiction” (p. 46). This act of watching establishes a “visual distance between a subject aloof from the scene and the subject in contradiction” (p. 46). Those attributes deemed contradictory to the autonomy and
self-sufficiency idealized by the subject get relegated to the body where they are continually disciplined and denied. Butler states, “only through the destruction of the body does the subject as a ‘dissociated unity’ appear” (p. 90). According to Butler, the melancholic knows that “the contradictory self is itself, but in order to shore up an identity over and against it, it renders the contradictory self,” in this case the body, “into an inessential part of itself, […] part[ing] with itself in order to purify itself of contradiction” (Butler, 1997, p. 46). The distance established allows the melancholic to suppress the anxiety induced by the experience of permeability and dependency. When the body and self are understood as one, those characteristics that are irreconcilable with the ideal of authenticity and autonomy must be externalized and policed. The individual body is still a site of anxiety and discipline, but this discipline is aimed not at distancing the body from the self but rather at bringing the two closer together, working on the body so as to become more closely aligned with the true self it is meant to represent. The ambivalence that arises in the face of the co-constitutive nature of health and disease and the impossibility of drawing a clear line between them means that disease is an essential aspect of the coming-to-be of the healthy subject. Like the Indigenous-settler relation described by Razack, disease becomes “simultaneously indispensable and expendable” to health. The healthy subject attempts to manage ambivalence and loosen the ties between health and disease by externalizing pathological characteristics and engaging in ritualized acts of self-care and self-discipline. To maintain the purity and boundedness of the body and self, those physical and social qualities that pose a threat to “the project of safety and self-sufficiency” are denied through their attribution to Others that are deemed to be outside the realm of health and modernity. Coupled with the management and/or eviction of these “pathological” bodies, ritualized self-care becomes a way of keeping those threats at bay while simultaneously
developing the boundedness of the healthy body and self.

The melancholic nature of this process of identity formation functions to reinscribe the kinds of colonial power dynamics and spatial relations elaborated by Razack under a new guise, creating more insidious forms of nation-building naturalized and depoliticized through the cult of health. When yoga is discursively constructed as transcendent and outside power, there is a real danger that practice is continually carrying out this work of evicting bodies and constructing settler space in a way that is much more able to conceal its political and economic implications. Freud identifies moralization as a prominent feature of melancholia as well as an intense “fear of becoming poor” (p. 252), both of which can be observed in modern postural practice. Ashtangis, for example, often express fears of “backsliding” or losing the progress they have achieved in their individual practices. This often fuels a compulsive attachment to practice and can result in injury. The fear around losing progress or “plateauing” can lead to the adoption of increasingly rigid lifestyles that exclude almost anyone who is not engaged in a similar practice. Bolstered by a sense of self-discipline and a belief in associations with “ancient wisdom” and philosophies, these lifestyle choices are justified on a moral register that institutes hierarchies between people and can lead to firmly enclosed communities. When yoga is imagined as universally acceptable, the decision to take up practice becomes individualized and severed from the structural factors that impact the ability to engage in and sustain practice. Being healthy and responsible becomes an individual and autonomous decision, one that is increasingly moralized and easily provides justification for the condemnation and marginalization of certain groups. Depoliticized through the naturalization of health, yoga can create the conditions for the management and eviction of bodies in ways that affirm bounded and atomized understandings of both territorial and psychic space. In this context, yoga can be seen as a practice that functions to secure settler legitimacy
and perpetuates settler subjectivity through its role in shaping spaces around and through certain bodies that are deemed healthy, modern, and desirable.

The Makings of a Nation or Seeds of a Counterculture?

As examined in the previous sections, yoga practice is intertwined with issues of space and movement, reifying territorial privileges for some bodies through the containment and management of others. In times of increasing individualization and the decline of strong political and social ties, yoga practice serves as a site of community whose claims to universality often obscure its middle-class values and nationalist tendencies. The remainder of this chapter will focus explicitly on questions of movement and belonging in relation to ashtanga yoga, contextualizing the introduction and subsequent popularity of ashtanga yoga in the West within the nomadic ethos popularized by Jack Kerouac’s On the Road. I examine how the Beats contributed to the conflation of authenticity with movement and how this can help us understand ashtanga yoga in the contemporary moment. Travel is highly valued amongst many yoga practitioners. Not only is travel to India mandated by the official system of authorization for teaching ashtanga yoga, it is also enshrined and mythologized in the shared narratives of Western practitioners. While the prevalence of mysore programs around the world allows practitioners to travel with relative ease and to feel an almost instantaneous sense of community wherever they go, the discourses and expectations in which their movements and practices are rooted often have the effect of reinforcing Orientalist representations and further entrenching systems of privilege and oppression through the networks of social and cultural capital this movement draws upon and mobilizes. I examine how the practice often gets abstracted from place and how this can
have the effect of foreclosing any possibility of solidarity or meaningful interactions across and between difference.

Authority and Authenticity in Ashtanga Yoga

As ashtanga yoga continues to grow in practice and popularity, there are now mysore programs that exist in almost every major center in the world. While there are many well-respected, even coveted mysore programs worldwide, none is more recognized than the Sri. K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KPJAYI) in Mysore, India. Currently run by Pattabhi Jois’ grandson, Sharath Jois, KPJAYI is considered the main or authoritative center of ashtanga yoga worldwide. KPJAYI is typically open for six months each year, drawing hundreds of practitioners from all over the world who come to study for anywhere from one to three months at a time. The official KPJAYI website provides visitors with a long list of ashtanga yoga teachers across the globe, many of whom currently run their own mysore programs. While this list is extensive, it contains only those teachers who are officially “authorized” or “certified” by the institute and does not acknowledge those teachers and practitioners who, for whatever reason, have either not been to Mysore, India or who have not been deemed worthy of authorization by the institution. This system of authorization is hotly debated within the ashtanga community and is often a point of division between practitioners. Some defend this process through recourse to values of tradition and authenticity, seeing travel to Mysore as a rite of passage and an indication of the practitioner’s dedication and devotion. This is often underscored by a certain mythologizing of the main teacher, Sharath Jois, and his ability to discern those practitioners who really “get it” from those who do not. These views do not take into account the structural privileges associated with travel and reinforce the moralizing and hierarchical
tendencies that result from discourses of dedication and devotion as seen in the previous sections. Authorization also comes with a significant fee and an agreement that the individual must return to KPJAYI to practice a certain amount of times within a given time period to maintain authorization, situating the ability to identify as an authorized ashtanga teacher within an individual’s access to excess capital in the form of both time and money. The fact that teacher trainings are strictly forbidden and policed by KPJAYI serves to consolidate authority within the institution and protects its exclusive ownership of and claims to authenticity. Practitioners critical of the system often evoke its seemingly arbitrary nature, its privileging of certain physical capabilities over others, and the potential lack of correlation between an individual’s aptitude for practice and their ability to teach. No matter where an individual stands on this question, it is undeniable that practicing at KPJAYI, authorization notwithstanding, bestows a certain sense of legitimacy on the practitioner and bolsters that individual’s standing within the community, providing them with a certain degree of social and cultural capital that opens up subsequent opportunities through the networks in which that experience is situated. To invest in ashtanga yoga as defined and managed by KPJAYI necessitates a certain amount of travel and acceptance into this community clearly comes with certain conditions. Taking into account the significant cost of practice at KPJAYI, it is clear that the ability to define, police, and protect exclusive ownership of authenticity in ashtanga yoga is a lucrative business.

“Seeking” Practice

While travel is now all but mandated in order to rise in the ranks of the ashtanga world, it has always been central to both the image and transmission of ashtanga yoga in the West. Until recently and compared with other recognized systems of postural yoga such as Iyengar yoga,
there have been few texts that describe the ashtanga system at length or in detail. As such, the narratives of senior ashtanga teachers and practitioners circulate as forms of instruction and authority in themselves. Particularly in the earlier days before the popularization of ashtanga yoga, the lack of textual guidance meant practitioners wanting to learn the system had to seek out someone versed in the practice, often necessitating extensive travel and the ability to leave behind family or employment obligations to devote great lengths of time exclusively to practice. This idea of “seeking” is heavily romanticized in the narratives of the first Western practitioners and serves to construct particular images of an exotic and mystical India that endure in the ashtanga imagination today. In 2010 many of these narratives were published in the form of interviews collected and edited by two well-known teachers and practitioners in the ashtanga world. *Guruji: A Portrait of Sri. K. Pattabhi Jois Through the Eyes of his Students*, frames the transmission and teaching of the ashtanga system as a sort of oral tradition and seeks to archive Pattabhi Jois’ influence and teachings through the narratives of his most prominent students. Due to the influence held by many of these practitioners in the ashtanga community both in the past and the present, the interviews are revealing of many authoritative positions and ideas that run through the ashtanga practice. Central to many of these interviews is the quest for knowledge that draws practitioners to an India not yet littered with the corporate debris of modern America, where the simplicity of the lifestyle, even amid the chaos and confusion associated with daily life in India, serves to amplify the transformative effects of the ashtanga practice.

The desire for a more authentic or a purer experience of practice continues to draw hundreds of ashtanga practitioners to Mysore, India every year from all over the world. Investigating the effects of this phenomenon, Callie Maddox (2015) examines the imperialist dynamics this search for authenticity perpetuates and how it denies the existence of a dynamic
Indian present, reifying static images of a pre-modern past that serves to condemn any bodies or practices that deviate from these Orientalist expectations. Maddox states, the “romanticism of authenticity is so fully ingrained within the Western mindset that for many tourists, ‘appreciating India does not require appreciating contemporary Indian people’” (p. 338). More than simply precluding interacting with Indian people, Western ideals of authenticity often lead directly to the condemnation of certain sections of Indian society. Maddox highlights how many Westerners practicing at KPJAYI often criticize “the local Indians for eschewing their traditions in favor of rampant materialism” (p. 340). This is a recurring theme in the ashtanga community and points to some glaring contradictions in the ways in which practitioners imagine themselves and their relationship to what they deem to be authentic, particularly when that relationship is mediated financially. Criticisms and complaints about rickshaw drivers or nannies charging “outrageous” prices to Westerners dominate message boards on social media while the high cost of study at KPJAYI is suspiciously absent. To maintain those Western expectations of Indian authenticity that have been constructed and perpetuated through a long history of colonial and Orientalist narratives, moralizing discourses emerge around contemporary Indian people and conditions. Indian bodies that are seen as out of line with these expectations of authenticity become objects of condemnation and play a key role in the construction of the authentic Western self, not entirely unlike the condemnation and containment of Indigenous bodies in the making of the settler self. By practicing in a place removed from the social norms and expectations of daily life and condemning any contemporary expressions of Indian culture or society, practitioners are able to achieve a level of “existential authenticity” otherwise unavailable in the West where their participation and investment in consumer culture and materialism are not so easily denied (Maddox, 2015). Travel, while heavily dependent on the material and structural advantages
derived from the individual’s position in Western society, becomes a way of escaping the
constraints and ambivalence associated with modernization as well as providing a vantage point
for an “enlightened” or “cultured” critique of those individuals and societies struggling to attain
some of the material benefits associated with modernization.

In the subsequent paragraphs, I trace the deeply-rooted desire for authenticity in yoga
practice through the work and influence of the Beats, focusing primarily on Jack Kerouac’s On
the Road. I examine the self-fashioning process adopted by the Beats and how the centrality of
movement in Beat culture contributes to a sense of belonging that relies on the simultaneous
mobilization and disavowal of extensive networks of social, cultural, and economic capital. I
explore how the achievement of Kerouac’s countercultural status relies heavily on his recourse to
a position of privilege and that while this status secures the possibility for some bodies to
actively and self-consciously transgress societal norms, it does so by further entrenching the hold
of those norms over other bodies. An examination of On the Road in particular and Beat culture
more broadly can provide a framework for analyzing and understanding some of the problematic
trends associated with the centrality of movement and authenticity in ashtanga yoga in the
contemporary moment. I engage with countercultural conceptions of movement and authenticity
as a vantage point for beginning to revalue movement in more accountable ways.

**Eastern Trends in the Beats**

Much literature has drawn attention to the intersections between the popularization of yoga
and the counterculture movement of the 60s (de Michelis, 2004; Jain, 2014; Singleton, 2010). By
the 1960s, postural yoga had become “something that was increasingly prescribed and consumed
as a product independent of ethnic, philosophical, or religious identities or commitments” (Jain,
With the rise of consumer culture, postural yoga became a commodity associated with the adoption and communication of a certain kind of lifestyle, one marked by bohemian and countercultural tendencies and currents. Mark Singleton (2010) notes the “rise of ‘flower-power’ brought yoga to the attention of a generation of young Americans and Europeans,” with prominent pop culture icons such as The Beatles “reinforc[ing] the position of yoga in the popular psyche” and encouraging travel and prolonged periods of study and practice in India (p. 20). Although yoga had been steadily gaining visibility in America prior to the counterculture, it still held a relatively marginal status and had, up until that point, endured a history of repression in the United States, with early proponents of postural and tantric forms of yoga often facing persecution and vilification (Jain, 2014). Jain (2014) notes, “it was not until the late 1960s that [yoga] no longer opposed the prevailing cultural norms of Americans and Western Europeans and became readily available to the masses in urban areas across the world” (p. 41). The paving of the way or the facilitation of this shift in cultural norms and social reception, as well as the trend toward travel seen in the “hippy trail to India” (de Michelis, 2004), can be traced in part through the broader influence of the Beat Generation and the nomadic ethos popularized by Kerouac’s *On the Road*. While the Beats did not focus explicitly on yoga, their work was involved in stimulating interest in Eastern traditions and practices and promoted a personal or individualized approach to spirituality and religion. Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder are particularly influential in this regard, their work understood as “instrumental in the growth of Buddhism in America” and as having enduring impacts on the landscape of American Buddhism in the contemporary moment (Skerl, 2004, p. 6). Sharin N. Elkholy (2012) notes, “in opposition to the materialism and prevailing standards that defined happiness as securing a place for oneself within the higher echelons of Corporate America, the Beats promoted a turning inward” and

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advocated for “the poetic voicing of personal experience”, seeing the “ills of modern life” as “primarily spiritual” (p. 3-4). As alienation came to be understood primarily as a “personal or psychological condition rather than as an economic or political category” (Holton, 2004, p. 14), strategies for addressing the issues associated with alienation became similarly individually-oriented and driven. In this context, the focus of certain Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism and Yoga, on questions of Self and identity make sense as frameworks for action in a climate where specific political or social avenues were not prescribed or readily identifiable.

*Keep on Moving: On the Road to Authenticity*

The depth of the associations between stasis and artificiality elaborated throughout *On the Road* serves to centralize movement in the possibility of achieving an authentic experience or identity. Authenticity, understood as an individualized experience requiring both agency and non-attachment, becomes a distinctly middle-class possibility realized through movement and travel. Rachel Ligairi (2009) argues Kerouac’s “fetishization of the authentic” drives the narrative and motivates the main character, Sal Paradise’s, “cross-country movement” (p. 141), seeking out spaces of marginality from which to craft a livable alternative to mainstream American values. Christopher Adamo (2012) examines the ways in which the centrality of movement in Beat culture serves to develop “a sense of community detached from any specific place” (p. 42). He notes, “rather than a spatial, political identity, belonging to the Beat community was a matter of social differentiation – of having certain musical tastes, employing a certain language, frequenting certain establishments” (p. 42). This self-fashioning process so central to Beat culture allowed for the development of a “sense of community and belonging without any permanent attachment to specific persons or places that would compromise one’s
personal liberty” (Adamo, 2012, p. 42). Significantly, however, the components combined to form this subcultural code had to be taken from some “place”, a place sufficiently Other to allow for a distinctly Beat identity to emerge. At a time when modernity was understood as severely limiting the “range of cultural and personal possibilities” (Holton, 2004, p. 11), various cultural and social aspects of marginalized groups were appropriated to make up the “self-fashioning processes of alienated whites” (Holton, 2004, p. 23). Robert Holton (2004) notes, “African American, Asian and Native cultures, ‘perverts’, drug addicts, carnie workers, and hoboes provided aspects of language, style, and culture allowing alienated [predominantly white] Americans to fashion a heterogeneous space distanced from the center” (p. 25). In this way, white middle-class Americans lacking “visible markers of distinction such as skin color […] could rely on coded subcultural language to attest to their outsider position” (Holton, 2004, p. 24), affirming their belonging within a broader Beat culture. It is significant that many of the groups Holton identifies as central to Beat self-fashioning are often labelled as “transient” by dominant institutions. This label is applied not in a liberating or politically subversive way, but often institutes their alterity in a way that can be used to justify criminalization, management, and/or eviction. The appropriation of movement toward individualized understandings of identity and authenticity divorced from broader political and economic structures is particularly troubling in this regard. Prominent figures of the Beat Generation, such as Kerouac, can enjoy temporary immersion in transient lifestyles and the countercultural status said immersion creates, all the while having recourse to a position of privilege that allows them to “opt-out” at any time. The ability to rely on and mobilize extensive social and familial networks creates the illusion of a form of movement divorced from economic capital and provides a level of protection from state-sanctioned forms of violence not afforded to other “transient” groups who do not have the same
degree of social and cultural capital at their disposal.

There are parallels to be drawn here with the ways in which Western ashtanga practitioners come to know themselves through their journeys to Mysore, India. As Maddox (2015) highlights, Westerners travel to Mysore “seeking refuge from the vices of modernity in the practice of a pure yoga unsullied by commerce or corporate interests” (p. 331). Maddox argues in this context “Ashtanga yoga in Mysore is also a form of the ‘cultural Other’ being consumed by Western yogis and serving as a reference point from which to define their own sense of self” (p. 334). Similar to the Beats, ashtangis draw from Indian traditions and scriptures to engage in their own self-fashioning process, complete with their own references, myths, shared narratives, and subcultural language. While the self-fashioning process associated with the Beats necessitates at least passing through some “place” and requires interacting with cultural Others, even if only on a very superficial level, in the case of ashtanga, as Maddox demonstrates, when the practice itself becomes the cultural Other it is then easily divorced from any specific place and disconnected from the histories and bodies associated with it. This is concerning in terms of how practice can become a root in itself and can be imagined as existing in a cultural, political, and historical vacuum. When practice gets abstracted from place it is easy to think embodied practice apart from past and ongoing processes of dispossession; however, as seen in the previous sections, embodied practice is always deeply enmeshed in the organization and management of space and is often used to facilitate the occupation or ownership of that space by certain bodies. While travel to India is understood as amplifying the authenticity and transformation derived through practice, the actual spatio-temporal context of that movement is rendered irrevlevant as the achievement of authenticity depends on a disavowal of contemporary manifestations of Indian culture as well as an ignorance of the modern construction of postural yoga. When movement
becomes the vehicle for the realization of the authentic Self, it can serve to instrumentalize any place or people it passes through, foreclosing any possibility of accountability or the creation of meaningful links of solidarity or affinity. Further compounding these issues, the practice can have the effect of actively discouraging a critical exploration of broader socio-political contexts through its predominantly anti-intellectual stance, emphasizing the experiential agency of the authentic self as the site to which one can look to address any ethical problem or quandary (de Michelis, 2004).

*Movement as Capital*

An examination of movement in both the Beats and in ashtanga demonstrates how movement can become a retreat from the constraints of everyday life and can function to obscure all of the structures that support and sustain this kind of life on the road. The valorization of self-realization and individual authenticity above all else lends itself to a highly idealized form of movement that encourages travel in the pursuit of enlightenment rather than employment or stability (Ligairi, 2009). While imagining itself as completely divorced from economic necessity, this kind of movement relies on other forms of capital for its realization. In the context of ashtanga yoga, it is important to examine the ways in which social capital impacts an individual’s ability to take up practice and how this systemic and intergenerational privilege is compounded through travel, reifying privilege both at home and abroad. Yoga is a form of embodied social and cultural capital that requires a considerable amount of personal investment of time, energy, and dedication. Being in a position that allows for those investments already places that individual within a network of others who have access to similar forms of disposable income and excess capital of various forms, holding a position of relative influence and privilege.
at some level of society. The influence of these systems of privilege then work to facilitate movement and further secure territorial privileges for those bodies. In this way, movement becomes a way of generating capital and, in the context of ashtanga yoga, is arguably the most effective way of accumulating social and cultural capital. The ability to invest in travel to various ashtanga hubs around the world, such as Mysore, India, opens up a multitude of possibilities economically, culturally, and socially through the extensive networks of global practitioners it connects that individual with. The extent of the individual’s experience and comfort with movement is then often marketed and portrayed through mediums such as social media in a way that serves to amplify their countercultural status, providing them with an identity marker that facilitates movement within increasingly elite circles. In this way, movement can function as a way of consuming places and experiences to produce one’s self as an increasingly marketable object. Authenticity realized through movement is the currency, with the body, seen as the material expression of the authentic self, as the ultimate commodity. While yoga is marketed as a method for connecting with one’s true self, it seems, through this model, the self being constructed is one that is increasingly objectified and valued almost entirely for its ability to turn a profit.
Chapter 3: Rethinking the Embodied Self: The Contingent Body, Psychoanalysis, and the Possibility of Politicizing Practice

Appropriating practice toward subversive and collectively affirming aims requires rethinking both self and movement and divorcing movement from authenticity. Braidotti (2014) asserts, philosophical nomadism “refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour.” She states, “it is the subversion of set conventions and the consciousness-raising that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling” (p. 182). This distinction has important implications for understanding and engaging both bodies and locations through a nomadic lens and how this can introduce a critical element into postural yoga practice in the contemporary moment. Braidotti (2006) claims nomadic ethics are about “learn[ing] to think differently about ourselves and our systems of values” and that this starts with the creation of “adequate cartographies of our embedded and embodied positions” (p. 31). Drawing from Spinoza, Braidotti’s philosophical nomadism understands bodies not as “passive entities”, but as “contain[ing] their own forces and seek[ing] for connection with them” (p. 148). Under this model, self-knowledge is not the achievement of some transcendent understanding of self but is, rather, the “synchronization with these [bodily] forces” and the ongoing realization of one’s embedded and embodied material existence (Braidotti, 2006, p. 148). Elizabeth de Michelis (2004) notes, “some notion of healing and personal growth is likely to provide the deepest rationale” in both taking up and sustaining long-term postural practice (p. 251). When the self is understood as an atomized entity and authenticity imagined as something transcendent and beyond power, healing can only take the form of a narcissistic investment and often has the effect of instrumentalizing anything that appears to be beyond the bounds of the individual self. Under this model, others are valued only for what they can teach or show you.
about yourself, valued more as means-to-an-end rather than ends-in-themselves. The ideologies that dominate postural yoga today encourage the “cultivation of Self and of privatized forms of religiosity” (de Michelis, 2004, p. 260). When the belief in the ability to separate one’s self from the surrounding environment guides practice, many political possibilities in the embodied elements of practice are neutralized and movement through space risks perpetuating imperial and colonial dynamics. If most people come to yoga in search of some form of healing, how might we alter our conceptions of health from those that actively manage and separate bodies to those that encourage an investigation of our roles in larger patterns of domination? Or, put a different way, how can we radically reconfigure what we understand as “health” in order to shift from what I referred to earlier as sedentary health to a definition of health that is more aligned with nomadic ethics and practices?

Limits, Boundaries, and Sustainability

Crucial to the construction of nomadic subjectivities is cultivating the capacity of the subject to sustain the ongoing impacts and encounters with affective forces of becoming. Braidotti (2006) advocates for the need to understand health as the body’s continuing capacity to “enter relations and experience affects” (p. 209). For Braidotti, health is a deeply ethical practice concerned with the “physics and biology of bodies” in that it “deals with the question of what exactly a body can do and how much it can take” (p. 129). She defines this as an issue of sustainability, concerned with questions of limits and thresholds so as to expand or create “new sensorial and perceptive capacities” that allow the subject to sustain the impact with affective forces of becoming (p. 103). Through the lens of sustainability, the body is valued for its ability to affect and be affected, seeking a greater sense of attunement with rather than control over or
distance from the environment that both composes and exceeds it. There is an inherent vulnerability in any process of becoming, requiring an ethic of sustainability that allows the subject to function and cope with the affective onrush of life. A nomadic conception of ethics is bound up with questions of limits and thresholds, concerned with increasing the subject’s understanding of their own limits and boundaries in order to more effectively enter into the kinds of relations and encounters that seek ultimately to depersonalize, destabilize, and undo the self.

Any process of change, particularly one that aims at what Braidotti would refer to as “in-depth transformations”, comes with a measure of instability. To be open means, to a degree, to be willing to be undone. In this way, a practice in nomadic ethics seeks to cultivate a sort of “sustainable unsustainability”. The subject must become unbounded enough to render itself open, but not so undone so as to enter a state of psychosis. A methodical embodied practice such as ashtanga yoga can facilitate a process of rendering the body more tangible and more describable, not in order to reify the self, but to embrace its impersonal nature, emphasizing the contingency of its emergence and the connections that compose it. By depersonalizing the self and emphasizing its intersubjective emergence, the self can become a modality, following Braidotti, for rendering affective forces available for selection, incorporation, and expression, a creative entity that continually seeks to bring new forms, combinations, and relations into being. Resisting the desire to affirm the truth and authenticity of a coherent and stable self beyond power can open up the ethical possibility of becoming something new.

There is some existing literature that has begun the work of mobilizing the insights derived through yoga practice toward a deeper understanding of contingency and relationality, emphasizing the relationship between working with and confronting limits and altering the practitioner’s subjectivity. Focusing on Iyengar yoga and Ashtanga yoga respectively, Jennifer
Lea (2009) and Michael Atkinson (2010) explore the effects of practice on understandings of self and other, arguing for its subversive and critically empowering potential. These scholars affirm yoga as an effective practice for bringing awareness to habits and patterns that were previously unconscious, advocating for the use of practice as a way of “unlearning” dominant ways of knowing and understanding the self (Lea, 2009). For Lea, yoga can encourage an ongoing interest in the shifting conditions surrounding the practitioner, allowing for the cultivation of an “immanent form of knowing, enacted in relation to the world” (p. 73). Similarly, Atkinson values practice as a way of escaping culturally and socially conditioned ways of understanding self and other, constructing a space in which the practitioner can engage in an experience of “boundary crossing” that can “thrust […] participants into liminal zones” (p. 1251). For Atkinson, practice can be conceptualized as a “space with physical boundaries, but where one’s identity boundaries may be temporarily erased or at least crossed in a ritualistic manner” (p. 1253). In this context, limits and boundaries construct a “confined space” that functions as a framework wherein the practitioner can “encounter the vastness of the self” or “the nature of one’s unhinged subjectivity” (p. 1253). While I appreciate the transgressive potential of this framework, I find the emphasis on boundary crossing in relation to identity formation disturbingly resonant with the ways in which settler subjectivities are often embodied and confirmed. Razack (2000; 2015) has convincingly outlined the spatial practices in which settlers engage to affirm their own superiority and legitimacy, necessitating an experience of both spatial and psychic boundary crossing wherein the dominant self is affirmed through its venture across the boundary of respectability and into the territory of the Other. Given the deeply entrenched nature of the achievement of identity through difference affirmed through boundary crossing, more attention must be paid to the ways in which this method risks perpetuating settler violence both physically
and symbolically. Central to the process of thinking through issues of subjectivity in ways that do not centralize the need for boundary crossing is complicating dominant understandings and compartmentalizations of mind and body, emphasizing their constitutive relations as well as the body’s capacity for complex processes of thought and action.

*Somatic Thought and the Intersubjective Self*

The body is a point of convergence, a meeting of forces that act upon it and exceed it in ways that are constantly shifting (Manning, 2010). Bodies are manifestations of expression open to disruption, incorporation, contestation, and transformation. By “thinking through the body and not in flight from it” (Braidotti, 2002, p. 75), the body becomes a register through which we can gain a felt understanding not only of our own relationality, but also of the contingency of those relations, cultivating the awareness necessary to become attuned to how the forces that become us are constantly shifting, allowing us to affect and be affected in new and unfamiliar ways. Although Braidotti emphasizes the centrality of the body in processes of becoming and engages with bodily conditions and behaviours, she does so largely without explicit reference to the biological. In the context of consumer culture where bodily development is equated with self-transformation (Featherstone, 2010), it is easy to neglect the agency of the visceral materiality of the body itself, engaging with the body’s role in experiences of subjectivity in a more abstract manner that ultimately subsumes somatic processes to cognitive ones. Elizabeth Wilson’s most recent work, *Gut Feminism*, is exceptional in this regard, providing additional insight into the entangled nature of the body and the subversive potential of embodied practice. Wilson uses biological data to argue for the need to understand the periphery or, more specifically, the gut, as a minded entity, investigating the capacity of the biological to “forge complex alliances and
diverse forms” (p. 27). *Gut Feminism* provides a way of rethinking the coherence of any manifestation of subjectivity, pointing to the existence of multiple sites of somatic and psychic modes of expression and deliberation enacted in relation to the world. Her concept of “organ speech” and her engagement with Thomas Ogden’s theory of the “analytic third” are helpful in rethinking the relationship between mind and body, providing a framework for a radical revision of self in a way that lends itself to more affirmative and accountable interactions with alterity. In the following paragraphs I advocate for the need to understand the self as the analytic third that is opened up through the engagements that are always happening between mind and body.

*Organ Speech and The Analytic Third*

Wilson uses the concept of “organ speech” to “make the entanglement of psyche and soma more explicit and to bring the psychically animated nature of biological substrata to the fore” (p. 76). She positions the organs themselves as active agents in managing and brokering object relations and processing the complex emotions and reactions associated with those relations. In a very visceral passage, Wilson theorizes how the organs themselves engage in a process of mourning, referring to the “savage responses of the bowel” as “modes of grief, enterically performed” (p. 76). She uses these examples to argue that “the difference between an enteric action and a minded response cannot be definitively made,” emphasizing the notion that the “routine actions of the gut (ingestion, metabolism, peristalsis, excretion) must be psychically alive to the consequences of loss” (p. 78). Organ speech provides a way of thinking about biological actions as active forms of engagement with the world, ways of processing and managing the subject’s existence. Wilson is clear that these forms of processing are not routine, but are minded responses to the intensity of being and becoming. This aligns with philosophical
nomadism’s understanding of bodies as containing their own forces and seeking for connection with them, but serves to highlight the psychic nature of this kind of bodily “seeking” in a way that gets lost in Braidotti’s work. Braidotti highlights how the nomadic subject is always seeking adequate forms of expression in relation to the environment that surrounds, composes, and exceeds it. *Gut Feminism*, with its emphasis on the seeking that happens at the level of biology by the organs and the visceral materiality of the body itself, renders visible the multiple, possibly competing, forms of expression and engagement that are always already happening even within the bounds of what appear to be our own individual, personalized bodies.

Wilson refers extensively to the work of Thomas Ogden to examine the idea of the “analytic third”, an intersubjective space that is opened up in psychoanalytic therapy between the analyst and analysand, a space that has a constitutive effect on both parties. The analytic third documents a “relationality in which each participant is profoundly (and asymmetrically) permeable to the other and their cocreated third” (p. 112). This space of intense relationality can be “creative or enriching or limiting or destructive”, but is never “eliminable from the analytic situation” (p. 112). Wilson states that what is curative in psychoanalytic therapy is an “intervention into the patient’s patterns of relationality” and that, in the context of the analytic third, this intervention can have the capacity to “momentarily and then perhaps chronically reconfigur[e]” both the analyst and analysand through the “dynamism of their working alliance” (p. 119). If we substitute the body and mind for the analyst and analysand then the self can be conceptualized as what emerges in the intersubjective space that opens up between them. A sustained engagement with the space of the analytic third can allow for a view of the self as an intersubjective space that opens up the possibility of intervening into oppressive or detrimental patterns present in both the body and the mind. Both Wilson and Braidotti demonstrate an
interest in the pathological or self-destructive behaviours that can result from an inability to cope with or sustain encounters with affective forces. Behaviours such as anorexia, bulimia, and alcoholism, seem to result, following both Wilson and Braidotti, when one entity, either the body or mind, loses sight of its relationality and dependence on the other, thinking itself as autonomous. Taking into account the vulnerability that already accompanies any process of becoming and the need for an ethic of sustainability, any practice in nomadic sustainable ethics must be able to take stock of and account for these multiple levels of affectivity and cognition, finding ways of cultivating their relationality in at least partially balanced and functional ways. A practice in nomadic sustainable ethics requires embodied practices that can intervene on multiple registers simultaneously to cultivate the subject’s ongoing and ever-shifting understanding of its own intersubjectivity and relationality. In the following paragraphs I will think through how ashtanga yoga can facilitate an intimate engagement with this intersubjective self, positioning the breath as the most effective tool for cultivating and maintaining a balanced relationality between mind and body. I discuss the mind and the body as distinct but not separate entities. This is a strategic choice that allows for a sustained engagement with both while still drawing attention to their deeply embedded and co-constitutive natures.

The Breath as a Nomadic Force

Wilson’s engagement with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) provides a helpful framework for rethinking the role of the breath in the ashtanga practice. Wilson frames a pill as an agent that “traverses the body and reanimates affinities between organs, and between biological and minded states” (p. 119). She highlights the potential for SSRIs to “promote a profound, long-lasting, permeability of the organic and psychic realms” (p. 119). Similar to the
manner in which the space opened up through the analytic third has the capacity to radically reconfigure both the analyst and the analysand, Wilson positions SSRIs as intersubjective agents that “intervene in one register”, the biological, and can effectively “reorganize patterns of organization in the other”, the psychological or emotional (p. 116). In this way, a pill can create an intersubjective space between the minded capacities of psyche and soma that can have a therapeutic effect on both through the quality of the relationship and level of permeability it provides. Yoga practice, with its emphasis on the breath, can function in a similar way. A common theme that runs through most, if not all, systems of postural yoga is an affirmation of the existence of an intimate relationship between the emotions and the breath. Systems such as ashtanga and Iyengar yoga position the breath as an effective tool for intervening into “habitual brain-body relationships” in ways that create the space necessary for discerning responses rather than quick or unconscious reactions (Lea, 2009, p. 78). In this way, the breath can be characterized as an agent that passes between the psychological and the biological, communicating between the two while rendering the boundaries between them more permeable. The breath is something that can be consciously and intentionally manipulated in ways that have tangible effects on both psychological and biological states. It is a language of sorts, if thought of in the framework of Wilson’s “organ speech”. The breath can communicate with and intervene into multiple registers simultaneously, blurring the boundaries between them in the process. More than simply a tool for “develop[ing] our inward gaze” (Lea, 2009, p. 78), the breath can be understood as a sort of analytic third with the capacity to unsettle the autonomy or sovereignty of the self, demonstrating that our experience of “self” is always already intersubjective, even within the seemingly enclosed space of our individual bodies. If subject formation rests on a constant process of reiteration (Butler, 1997), and there are always multiple and sometimes
competing tendencies present in our own individual bodies, as Wilson’s work indicates, then the breath can be engaged in ways that allow for the emergence and combination of new tendencies through the permeability between psyche and soma that it facilitates. In this way, through the breath, a methodical embodied practice such as ashtanga yoga can allow us to “practic[e] ourselves into something new” (Heyes, 2007, p. 9), coming to a different understanding of self in relation to the multiple forms of expression and minded capacities that are always emerging psychically and somatically.

** Appearing Differently: Practice at the Level of Embodied Norms

While the breath provides an ever-present tool for cultivating the individual’s awareness of the contingency of their own subjectivity, there is still the question of how to extend these insights beyond the level of the individual in ways that can address socio-political and spatial inequalities. Where I believe practice can be most effective is at the level of the embodiment and reproduction of social norms. Through its cultivation of awareness and its intervention into patterns of relationality, yoga practice can work on the “subconscious and pre-reflexive level at which much social reproduction occurs” (Holt, 2008, p. 234), opening up space for a disruption of the way norms get taken up and reproduced. Louise Holt (2008) examines bodies as “components of broader sociospatial relationships” (p. 242) through the concepts of habitus and embodied social capital. She defines habitus as those “embodied rituals of everydayness by which a given culture produces and sustains belief in its own ‘obviousness’”, stating, “dominant relations in society are often reproduced via habitus, as frequently social and cultural relations are not reflected upon, they are just ‘lived’” (p. 233). Holt goes on to state, “these norms and expectations become incorporated into individuals’ self-identity, as people recognize themselves
and are recognized by others as subjects/agents” (p. 238). Butler (2015) emphasizes the role that norms play in the subject’s ability to appear. She states, “to be a subject at all requires first finding one’s way within certain norms that govern recognition,” norms that allow the subject to “enter and appear in some form” (p. 40). Who or what we are recognized as is governed in part by norms that both precede and exceed us, and our agency within the field of appearance depends in part upon how well we are able or allowed to navigate that field. The concept of embodied norms, as indicated by Holt, disrupts the “dualism between the body and society”, understanding the body as “unbounded and cross-cut and dissected by broader power relations” (p. 237). In this way, an intervention into embodied norms at the level of the individual habitus can radically reconfigure an individual’s identity and can alter the field of appearance through which any subject emerges. Given the fact that norms are collective and extend beyond the level of the individual, any individual effort to disrupt the way those norms are taken up and communicated can have a broader impact than just the individual self.

Given that the ashtanga practice already attracts and is more easily taken up by certain segments of the population, it is necessary to find ways of rendering these communities more open and permeable, otherwise practice will just reinforce the embodied norms of this group, which are already tied into dominant structures in society, and will increase the view of the body and self as forms of capital in ways that justify dispossession and the policing of both public and private space. When practice communities become firmly enclosed, this subversive potential is contained and re-appropriated. Existing norms associated with the middle-class are reinforced in more insidious ways through their claims to universality, ethics, and self-awareness. Over time, as practitioners progress through the practice, they come to a different understanding of the body and start to move differently, affecting in ways both gross and subtle how that body is able to
move through space. As Kern (2012) argues, embodied practice is not only a practice in bodily modification but must also be thought of as spatial modification. As such, practice makes no sense without taking account of its spatial context. Habitual or routinized movement can only work in a defamiliarizing way when it is actively and critically connected to the constantly shifting conditions that surround and compose the individual body. There is a danger that the ease of movement found through practice will lead back to the kind of “sheer uncreative repetition” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 9) that unconsciously reiterates relatively static and atomized subject positions.

The remainder of this chapter will explore the possibility of politicizing yoga practice. By focusing on the experiences of practitioners at a specific ashtanga-based studio in Calgary, Alberta, the following sections will explore in more detail the defamiliarizing and disruptive process through which practice can function, while examining how practice communities can remain open and actively connected to place. Through individual interviews, I explore the process through which sustained engagement with both the practice of yoga and the communities that form through practice can help individuals see and understand themselves differently, emphasizing the centrality of the body in these ongoing processes of becoming. Although postural practice can be valued as a form of physical, emotional, and psychological therapy, more attention must be brought to the ways in which yoga operates through a discourse of universality that risks conveying ethical aspirations in increasingly moralizing ways. The focus on the perceived universality of practice often works to obscure the structural factors that must be firmly in place in order to place the individual in a position in which yoga can enter their lives in a significant way. In this way, the processes of becoming that are examined, while valuable and meaningful in practitioners’ lives, are themselves dependent on a host of middle-class
standards for their ongoing realization.

*Politicoizing Practice*

The previous sections stressed the need for practices that can intervene on multiple registers simultaneously, reorganizing patterns both psychically and somatically. Here, I want to place practice in conversation with Kaja Silverman’s *Threshold of the Visible World* to explore the role of the broader social or community context in furthering processes of becoming, stressing the interrelational character of the agency involved in intervening into normative understandings of self and other. While Silverman is concerned primarily with visual politics and elaborating an ethics of the field of vision, focusing predominantly on film and the possibility for a political cinema, I argue that the ashtanga practice offers another point of focus for challenging representational parameters in ways more closely aligned with a nomadic understanding of becoming. Silverman points to ideality as a crucial mechanism in identity-formation and argues for the need for aesthetic works that help us idealize differently so as to identify with bodies that are otherwise marginalized or despised, advocating for film as the most effective medium for this project. If a central component of becoming is displacing the primacy of the visual in favour of cultivating new sensorial capacities (Braidotti, 2006), stretching conceptions and understandings of what a body is and does, then embodied practices such as ashtanga yoga are an essential complement to projects such as Silverman’s and can help facilitate a more radical revision of self. Silverman states, “our experience of ‘self’ is always circumscribed by and derived from the body” (p. 9). She states, “one’s apprehension of self is keyed both to a visual image or constellation of visual images, and to certain bodily feelings, whose determinant is less physiological than social” (p. 14). Consequently, we need practices that work not only to
challenge our visual sense of self, but work also to challenge our felt, embodied sense of self. Since this bodily self is not only physiological but is also largely social, it is vital to take stock of the community conditions that encourage certain understandings of self over others and to investigate the kinds of relations that are opened up or foreclosed as a result.

While yoga is implicated in some oppressive processes and often encourages a violent relation to the Other, it is the conviction of this chapter that, when bolstered by certain community conditions and framed by the proper narratives, the practice of ashtanga yoga can function in a manner similar to Silverman’s aesthetic texts, facilitating an intervention into areas otherwise unavailable to conscious scrutiny. Practiced in an intersubjective context, ashtanga yoga can open up representational parameters that encourage a more affirmative relation with alterity in the way that the body is understood and mobilized. The way that ashtanga challenges representational parameters takes on an explicitly political quality when placed within an understanding of the state, capitalism, and colonization as, following Gustav Landauer, sets of relations between people (Day, 2005). If the state is a set of relations between people then any individual or collective effort at intervening into habitual relations has potentially broader implications and can be framed as a prefigurative effort in the creation of alternatives, however small. In this way, I want to advocate for viewing a specific yoga community, The Yoga Shala (the Shala), as an effort at structural renewal and examine the ways in which it demonstrates the associated tactics of “disengagement and reconstruction” (Day, 2005, p. 123), aimed primarily at the level of identification and desire. By creating a safe and supportive space for the exploration of embodied, psychic, and social patterns, the Shala facilitates active practices of “transpositions”, defined as the “active effort to reconnect oneself to the web of social exchanges, after one has subtracted oneself from their more [...] destructive effects” (Braidotti,
While the yoga mat is understood as a space that allows practitioners to engage with fears, anxieties, and desires, the Shala provides a space that collectivizes a process that could otherwise be seen as individualized or even narcissistic. While practitioners are unlearning or reworking individual patterns, they are doing so collectively, practicing new ways of relating to both self and other in the process. It is this emphasis on relationships that belies the potential to politicize practice and shows how the work that is being done at the Shala at the level of identification can provide strategies for extending those insights to struggles aimed at dismantling statist and colonial relations. Framing the Shala as a viable effort at structural renewal can be useful in affirming both the willingness and ability of people to disengage individually and collectively from normative, state-sanctioned relations and provide a foundation for thinking through ways of directing that subversive capacity toward more explicitly anti-statist and decolonial aims.

The Cultural Screen: Productive Looking and The Active Gift of Love

Central to Silverman’s project is the concept of “the look.” She states, “to look is to embed an image within a constantly shifting matrix of unconscious memories, which can render a culturally insignificant object libidinally resonant, or a culturally significant object worthless” (p. 3-4). Silverman’s project works primarily toward challenging what she calls the “cultural screen” and it is her insights into the ways in which individual practices undertaken collectively can work to “reterritorialize” the screen that provide a way of linking the work that is being done at the Shala with structural renewal. Silverman is interested in exploring the conditions under which we might be compelled to “look again”, to see something other than what she deems the “given-to-be-seen”, that which is dictated by the cultural screen. Silverman explains, “just as
certain words suggest themselves to us more readily than others, because they are the currency of daily use in our society, so certain representational coordinates propose themselves as more appropriate frames through which to apprehend the world than others, simply because they are subject within our society to a more frequent and emphatic articulation” (p. 221). Although the look is constrained by “the imperative placed upon it to apprehend the world via the screen”, it “nonetheless helps to determine the precise parameters through which the world is ‘pictured’” (Silverman, 1996, p. 222). If the cultural screen dictates much of what we see when we apprehend the world and if what we see in turn helps shape the world, then efforts toward changing the cultural screen can have profound implications for how people are able to perceive and understand themselves, broadening the repertoire of images with which subjects are presented and with which they might identify. Silverman asserts, when “the look acts in concert with enough other looks, it can reterritorialize the screen, bringing new elements into cultural prominence, and casting into darkness those which presently constitute normative representations” (p. 223). This process works primarily on how and what subjects are taught to idealize. As such, *The Threshold of the Visible World* explores strategies for productive looking in terms of idealizing not only in opposition to culturally defined norms but also idealizing “outside the corporeal parameters of the self” (Silverman, 1996, p. 37) in order to cultivate the ability to extend what Silverman calls the “active gift of love”, or that which makes possible a genuine relation to the Other. Silverman describes how normative processes of ideality most often result in a fetishization of the other, perpetuating relations of both subordination to and aggression toward the other, desiring in both cases the obliteration of the other as an other. An active relation of love, on the other hand, requires the “recognition of that other as an other” and the conferral of “ideality upon the face and lineaments of another” (p. 43). Since idealization
always implies identification, an active relation of love requires the ability to identify at a
distance from the self in a way that opens up the possibility of a genuine relation with the other.
This form of identification does not aspire to a sense of wholeness, but recognizes the lack from
which subjectivity emerges as an “enabling void”, a lack that makes up the agency of the subject
in its ability to continually seek out and enter into new relations (Silverman, 1996, p. 71), not
entirely unlike Braidotti’s nomadic subject.

Silverman emphasizes the need for a “constant disruptive and transformative labor at the
site of ideality” (p. 206), arguing against the conflation of ideality with culturally and socially
defined norms. She states, “although the given-to-be-seen imposes itself with a great deal of
insistence upon the eye, the eye is nevertheless capable of seeing productively – of occupying a
viewing position other than that assigned in advance, and, so, of apprehending its object under
radically different terms” (p. 222-223). Productive looking takes place “not at the moment when
unconscious desires and phobias assume possession of our look, but in a subsequent moment,
when we take stock of what we have just ‘seen’, and attempt […] to look again, differently” (p.
173). It is here that the need for aesthetic works comes most strongly into play, as much of the
processes that govern idealization and identification take place at the level of the unconscious.
Consequently, there is a need for an intervention of some sort that can work on this unconscious
level in ways that render it at least partially available to conscious interrogation and disruption.
Silverman states that this conscious intervention can only be done retroactively and requires a
constant effort to re-educate the look in an attempt to “reverse the process through which we
have arrogated to ourselves what does not belong to us, or displaced onto another what we do not
want to recognize in ourselves” (p. 3). It is this constant effort to achieve some form of distance
from ideality and identification that renders possible an “ethical or nonviolent relation to the
other” (Silverman, 1996, p. 3). I want to examine how, in the context of the Shala, the ashtanga practice functions in a manner similar to Silverman’s aesthetic works. Partially through the physical practice itself and partially through the desires brought to practice by the community at the Shala, alternative ideals are presented that work to alter the cultural screen, opening up new representational parameters that are evident not only in the contained space of the Shala but that seep out beyond the studio walls to challenge normative or previously existing apprehensions of the broader city space.

The Yoga Shala

To explore and narrate how ashtanga yoga works toward such aims, I sought to investigate the way practice functions in the context of The Yoga Shala (the Shala), an ashtanga-based studio in Calgary, Alberta that is home to the largest and longest running mysore program in the city. Although the Shala is ashtanga-based, a wide range of classes are offered that cater to a variety of interests and levels of experience. In addition to operating as a yoga studio, the Shala functions as a sort of social centre, facilitating connection and the sharing of resources. Before and after every class, practitioners hang around the lobby and catch up with one another as many have been going to the same classes for years and have developed an intimate sense of familiarity through their shared routines and experiences in the space. Bulletin boards advertise community events and workshops while providing space for practitioners to share information. Tea and cookies are often brought in to encourage mingling and interacting before and after classes and the owners take initiative to partner with other businesses and organizations in the area. The Shala has also taken an active role in times of emergency in Alberta. During the Fort McMurray fire in May 2016, for example, the Shala donated all of the proceeds from several
classes to the Red Cross and invited evacuees to practice and attend classes for free.

I first became involved with the Shala in the summer of 2013, upon completing my undergraduate degree, at which time I was practicing mysore daily as well as working reception several days a week. In January 2014 I began teaching regular ashtanga classes at the Shala. I spent the period between November 2014 and April 2015 traveling, during which I practiced at KPJAYI in Mysore, India for three months. Upon returning from my travels, I began apprenticing and eventually teaching in the mysore room at the Shala most mornings until I left to start graduate studies in September 2015. Due to the extensive amount of time I spent at the Shala during this two-year time period and the fact that I occupied many different positions within the space, I got to know the names and faces of most of the members, gained a familiarity with the way the Shala operates, and developed close friendships with many of the staff and teachers that continue to this day. Although I no longer live in Calgary full-time, I return at least twice a year, during which I teach and practice at the Shala.

In addition to in-depth participant observation, I conducted interviews with eight practitioners who have both a familiarity with ashtanga yoga and a history of extensive involvement with the community at the Shala. For the purpose of this project, community involvement could take the form of teaching, working reception, or attending classes regularly. Of the eight participants, four are mysore teachers with a daily ashtanga practice cultivated over many years. One of these four teachers is also co-owner of the studio. Two of the participants work between part and full-time hours on desk and are two of the most recognizable faces at the Shala, being the first point of contact for practitioners entering the space. Although these individuals do not currently practice mysore, they both have a history of and familiarity with ashtanga practice. The two remaining participants have both taught classes at the Shala, either
currently or in the past, and have a history with daily mysore practice. The participants range in age and backgrounds and live in close geographical proximity to the Shala. The interviews were semi-structured and conversational in nature. All interviews began and ended with the same questions but were structured in a way so as to create space for the sharing of stories, with enough fluidity to allow practitioners to discuss those aspects of the practice that have the most meaning to them while still touching on some key themes of interest, such as the relationship between the mind and body, the sense of community at the Shala, and the role of the breath in practice. As this is a space that I have a long-standing relationship with, the interviews themselves draw on a sense of pre-existing familiarity and intimacy with the interviewees and our shared experiences practicing, working, and teaching at the Shala. The interviews provide a more structured space for the kinds of conversations that we are all already engaged in and that largely make up the relationships that exist between us. In this way, I understand the interview process as a framework that allows for questions and insights to emerge in a slightly different, more focused way while still retaining the ease and fluidity of everyday conversation. To ensure that participants had final authority over what was said during the individual interviews, all interviews were recorded, transcribed, and sent back to the participants for review, at which time the participants were able to make any changes they wished to the interview transcript.

The Shala provides a useful case study for exploring how embodied, psychic, and social elements interact in challenging dominant representational parameters for apprehending self and other. The narratives that emerge among participants will be examined for their insight into this collective process of productive looking and how practicing in the environment fostered in this particular space provides new meaning to the practice itself and helps circumvent some of the normative tendencies present in the broader yoga world. I look at how involvement in practice
and community at the Shala alters the representational parameters through which practitioners view their surroundings and how this extends beyond the studio space to challenge previously held notions and feelings about the city of Calgary and the people who live there. I argue that this is done primarily through the ways in which the practice shapes and directs the relationship practitioners have with their own individual bodies. The body is attributed with a certain degree of alterity to which an active relation of love and generosity is practiced and conferred in an ongoing manner. The sense of ease and belonging experienced in the space of the Shala cultivates an ability to manage anxiety in and through the body without the need to externalize and police alterity. Through the relationship with the body, the practice cultivates a relationship with alterity that is based on a desire for understanding without control, underscored by the knowledge that full understanding of that other, in this case the body, is never possible, that it will always exceed our ability to know or predict it, no matter how intimate that relationship is. The body becomes the intimate Other on which practitioners confer ideality at the same time as the body continually disrupts their aspirations toward the approximation of normative ideals. This is seen most strongly in the interviews with female practitioners who are actively and self-consciously negotiating the tensions between the desire to adhere to normative beauty standards that lend themselves to the adoption of harmful practices and the desire to create and live by their own standards based on an ethic of care and respect for themselves and their bodies.

Through practice, practitioners are actively altering conceptions of what their bodies are and can do, challenging deeply-held notions of their limitations that are often intergenerational in nature. While the practice alters practitioners’ felt or embodied sense of self, involvement at the Shala is shown also to alter practitioners’ visual sense of self. The sense of space at the Shala alluded to in the interviews places practitioners in a setting where they feel as though people are
seeing them differently than how they might otherwise be seen in daily life or how they have been seen in life up to that point. In this way, practitioners are presented with new images of themselves that emerge from multiple registers simultaneously. The visual and the felt open up and bleed into one another. The results of this process lead to a desire to maintain the overall “feel” of the space at the Shala and consequently help propel that process for others. The way in which the practice derives meaning through the context of the Shala encourages an ongoing process of re-viewing and productive looking that can provide a foundation for engagement in broader political and social practices. With this in mind, it is necessary to remain critical of the specific socio-economic factors that render practice more accessible to some bodies over others and to continually investigate ways of keeping practice communities open and flexible.

Yoga Therapy: The Shala as a Safe Space

While the previous chapters identified some oppressive relations in which yoga is continually implicated, practice also functions as a source of healing and is a site of therapeutic relationships for many practitioners. Of the eight practitioners interviewed, four cited the need for healing of some sort as what first brought them to yoga and all eight referenced the therapeutic aspects of yoga as a primary motivation for continuing with daily practice. This focus on the therapeutic aspects of practice was understood by practitioners as creating an environment that is both spacious and intimate. This is best summed up by Ryan, a mysore teacher at the Shala:

Everybody’s there to kind of heal, so having that in common, […] it binds everyone. […] No one expects anybody to be perfect. Everyone’s working with something and it’s kind of acknowledged, so it’s kind of an intimate setting that way.
The understanding that most, if not all, practitioners are working through something at some point during their time at the Shala provides relief from the expectation of perfection, a sentiment that was echoed throughout many of the interviews and was described as creating a “safe space”:

I think it’s a very safe place for people to let us know or each other know that it’s been a rough day or a rough year […] for people to talk about what they feel like is going on that day or that year or [to say] what they need to say. (Nicole)

This particular environment is partially the result of a conscious effort on the part of the owners. Dana, co-owner of the Shala, provides a description of their approach in terms of building a supportive space that is worth quoting at length:

At the end of the day it’s why we want to keep doing this. It’s not because we think we’re amazing asana teachers, it’s because we both [the owners of the Shala] feel really strongly that the Shala is a safe place […] it’s this feeling where you know there are people you could talk to at the Shala if you needed to. If you really needed something we could probably gather the people around and help. […] I feel like if someone on our team or someone in our student-base had a terminal disease we would rally around and support them, and it’s happened, I’ve seen it, and it’s really beautiful because sometimes we have more lenient schedules and lives that we can pay more attention to things like that.

Whereas maybe their family or friends aren’t comfortable with it or don’t have that much time, we can be more present with them when they come in.

More than simply providing space for practitioners to express as much or as little as they might need at any given time, the Shala actively finds ways of providing structural and financial support to members in need, mobilizing some of the systemic privilege typically associated with yoga practice in affirmative ways. The passage above demonstrates an awareness to the ways in
which multiple forms of capital operate in and through the Shala and a commitment to mobilizing both time and money in ways that further the well-being of the community. While the Shala is not immune to the structural constraints associated with yoga practice, the studio does more than most to ensure that as many people as possible have access to the space and the possibility to take up practice, whether that practice is regular or intermittent.

The diversity of ages and bodies present at the Shala was consistently emphasized throughout the interviews, with practitioners drawing attention to the impact of witnessing such a wide range of bodies engaged in practice and how this has shaped how they feel in the space. During our interview, Jana, who works reception at the Shala, recalled a beginner ashtanga class in which a six-year-old was practicing next to a woman in her sixties. For a period of time there was a man in his early nineties in class every Sunday morning, modifying or leaving postures out as necessary, but still practicing. The Shala was described as a place where people can feel comfortable to come in and “know that they can do whatever they need to do for themselves and not feel like they have to measure up to something” (Jana). The desire to maintain a safe environment for others at the Shala creates a space that allows practitioners to re-evaluate initial prejudices or reservations towards certain bodies and/or situations. Wanting to maintain a safe space for others and approaching practice from an understanding of a need for healing or therapy encourages practitioners to hold back any initial reactions that arise based on preconceived notions of what kind of person typically practices or who “should” or “should not” be in the space. In holding back these reactions and working to keep the space open, practitioners are given the chance to bring a new awareness and interrogation to previously unconscious perceptions or ideas while broadening their scope of interaction with others. This is one example of the ways in which the business aspect of the Shala functions in productive ways. Although
there is a financial constraint potentially associated with entering the space, the business element of the Shala keeps the practice community from becoming strictly regulated, encouraging a diversity of styles and approaches that can cater to a wider range of people and requiring an increased level of tolerance of behaviour from all areas of the public. In this way, the Shala is maintained, to a degree, as a public sphere despite being privately owned.

Seeing and interacting with such a wide range of people in the enclosed space of the Shala was expressed as altering practitioners’ perceptions of the city of Calgary more broadly. Several practitioners described feeling more connected to more parts of the city, with the Shala as a sort of foundation to branch out from where they received information about events and issues that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. The Shala was framed as a place that cultivated a feeling of friendliness toward others, a place where, through daily interactions with a diversity of “strangers”, the city itself was made to feel more approachable. The perceived universality of practice and the idea that anyone can do it, no matter how different that practice might look, was what allowed for a feeling of connectedness that was naturally transferred beyond the studio walls. Some of the dangers associated with this discourse of universality have been addressed in the previous chapter; however, it is important to emphasize the manner in which this perception can also work in affirmative ways and can cultivate a willingness to engage with others that works in contexts outside of yoga, without the shared experience of practice to draw on.

As a “safe place,” the Shala often functions as a sort of refuge for people who are experiencing a time of transition and/or disruption in their lives, whether of an emotional, financial, or physical nature. In this way, the Shala provides the foundation for a practice in nomadic ethics, where nomadic ethics are not about the “avoidance of pain, but rather about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost, and dispossessed”
The “feelings” evoked through the physical practice itself provide a newly available site to which practitioners can attach fears, anxieties, and desires, allowing them to investigate and work with abstract aspects of self in a tangible way. Jeanine, a long-term mysore practitioner and teacher, describes “facing fears and fails […] through [her] asana practice” and how it has given her the courage to be the person that she feels herself to be. The physical practice was described by several practitioners as a place to practice approaching things that they are scared of in a safe and structured space. This tangible and, in some ways, measurable way of facing fears and anxieties developed a sense of strength physically and mentally that could then be taken “off the mat”, instilling an increased level of confidence that is felt in other areas of life. Several practitioners described how the sense of belonging they feel at the Shala allows them to “show up” on a consistent basis and to manage tendencies toward isolation and alienation that would otherwise compel them to “check out”. Feeling as though they are valued members of the community at the Shala lets them show up so that they can work with individual issues in an intersubjective environment that encourages the making of connections. The shared experience of working through practice and how certain postures are attributed with specific emotions and fears allows for discussions about very intimate things in a somewhat abstract and generalized way. The shared experience of working through something without necessarily having to get into the details creates a sense of intimacy that maintains space and provides a foundation for connection despite variations and differences. The Shala was described by many as a place without explicit expectations or mandates where practitioners can engage in a practice that is understood to be therapeutic on many different levels, doing so without feeling the need to explain themselves or justify their behaviour. In this way, practitioners are presented with an opportunity to see themselves differently and to perhaps
inhabit other roles than those to which they are usually accustomed.

The following sections will examine how this process of re-viewing derives its efficacy primarily through the manner in which practitioners are encouraged to engage with their bodies and how when the body is seen as contingent and in flux it becomes an effective medium for identifying across difference. I explore the different manners in which practitioners are presented with alternative depictions of themselves that create openings for processes of becoming that resist the tendency toward the cultivation of a bounded sense of self dependent on disavowal and difference.

*The Contingent Body: Extending Representational Parameters*

Drawing from the work of Jacques Lacan, Silverman (1996) states, the “bodily image plays [an] including and excluding role with respect to other images, specifying those which are acceptable loci of identification, and those which are not” (p. 11). Further stating, “the normative ego allows only those identifications which are congruent with its form” (p. 12). It is within the context of this including and excluding role of the bodily image and ego that the importance of projects aimed at stretching conceptions of what a body is and does becomes evident. When one’s embodied sense of self is more malleable and understood as contingent, the parameters within which one can identify become far larger and could theoretically encompass a wider range of bodily coordinates. In this context, the practice of ashtanga yoga works on several levels. By taking the body through an extensive set of physical postures on a daily basis, the practice literally changes how practitioners “feel” in their bodies and challenges previously held notions of what their bodies can do. Several practitioners described the feeling of moving differently and with more freedom as a primary motivation for sustaining practice after their initial encounters.
On a different level, since the structure of the practice is pre-given, just by virtue of practicing in the mysore room, practitioners see many different bodies working through the same set of postures and are provided with visual depictions of just how different the embodiment of the same posture can be. In this way, it becomes easy to identify with bodies that may otherwise appear to be radically different from one’s own while also cultivating an understanding of the multitude of different ways of approaching similar issues and situations. Patrick, a mysore teacher and long-time practitioner, sums this up nicely:

Being a person who walks around the mysore room all these years has given me an opportunity to observe many different kinds of bodies, many different kinds of personalities, many different kinds of circumstances, and the way those factors all change in the student if you have the privilege to observe them over a length of time. […] You see different variations just in the morphology of people, yet we’re all going through the same practice, and seeing that big of a sample size really gives you insights on how to treat different people differently, how to help them in different ways with the same stuff. There’s just so many things that happen and the ways things change and just knowing that there’s no one right way.

In this passage, Patrick also further sheds light on how the practice can facilitate a shift toward an embodiment of process and how the body becomes a medium for observing how various aspects of self that may initially be understood as fixed or static are, in actuality, in a constant state of flux.

Several practitioners emphasized that ashtanga is “a practice and not a performance”, a narrative that is echoed throughout the larger ashtanga community. This difference has important implications and was linked in the interviews with a shift away from goal-oriented desires to a
focus and emphasis on process. The breath was often centralized in these accounts. By increasing awareness of the breath and its effects on mood, heart rate, anxiety levels, etc., the practice provides a way for practitioners to extend what they do on their mats into literally every part of their days. The increased awareness brought to the breath through engagement with postural practice was described as allowing practitioners to significantly broaden what they consider as constituting “practice”. This extension of the definition of practice and its application to even the most mundane aspects of the day allows practitioners to begin to understand life through a processual lens and further lessens expectations of perfection. Framed by an understanding of healing, the practice as therapeutic process functions as a signifier of sorts to which practitioners can attach whatever values or issues that require addressing in their lives at any given time. The body becomes the tangible expression of this process and a medium for “re-viewing” past and ongoing issues, histories, and patterns.

As frameworks for “re-viewing,” the physical postures work to defamiliarize the body in a systematic way so that the practitioner begins to notice embodied aspects that were otherwise unconscious, narrowing in on specific parts of the body that had gone unnoticed or discovering places where they might habitually hold tension. The postures that make up the ashtanga sequence ask practitioners to position their bodies in unfamiliar ways and provide a structured space for taking the body out of its routine movements in ways that can be both uncomfortable and liberating. By bringing attention to the habitual movements and holding patterns in the body while simultaneously challenging or stretching those movements, the practice can work to generate an understanding of the contingency of the body in ways that reveal the capacity for intervention and change. The pre-determined nature of the practice has several advantages. One of the main benefits noted by practitioners is the manner in which the consistency of the practice
offers the ability to notice subtle differences over time. As Dana describes:

“…You’re kind of arriving on your mat to investigate each day what’s going on now […] without expectation of what it should be like and then acting accordingly […] I like to observe how what I ate or drank or how I slept the night before, how it influences my practice the next day.”

This investigative attitude provides a way of linking subtle embodied changes with the practitioner’s surrounding environment. Through consistent practice over a prolonged period of time, practitioners are able to come to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the interconnections that surround and compose the body through the ways in which they notice how subtle differences in their routine or environment affect the way they feel as they move through practice. By emphasizing awareness achieved through a daily and ongoing investigative process, the practice cultivates a form of self-knowledge that is based on an appreciation of the contingency of that experience of self.

Additionally, certain narratives built into the method of the ashtanga practice offer a way of attributing agency to entities beyond the human in ways that can further contest atomized and bounded understandings of self. Ashtangis typically do not practice during both the full and new moon, or what are called “moon days”. By observing moon days, the lunar cycle not only informs how practitioners organize and structure their time but also affects how practitioners interpret fluctuations in their emotions, perceptions, and energy levels. The moon comes to play a central role in the way many practitioners frame their understandings of their bodies and feelings as well as the interactions they have with others, constructing a sense of self that is more contingent and open to the influence of relational processes in the more-than-human world. New moons generally come to be associated with a lack or waning of energy, while a full moon is
seen as having a more energetic, even manic effect. Whether or not these effects can really be attributed to the moon is less important than the way the practice serves to centralize the moon in self-understandings and how becoming more attuned to the lunar cycle might serve to create space for the recognition and acceptance of external sources of agency that are not only acknowledged conceptually but are registered in a very visceral way at the level of the body. In this context, ashtanga yoga can be framed as a daily embodied practice that attunes the practitioner to the natural rhythms of the more-than-human world, encouraging an understanding of agency beyond the human so that practitioners can become increasingly aware of the depth of the entanglements and interconnections that make up their bodies, minds, and worlds. In seeking to flesh out connections between embodied practice and broader environmental processes, the practice creates space for more ecologically and socially conscious actions on the part of individuals, encouraging visceral connections between bodies and the planetary or environmental processes that impact them.

While the practice can encourage consideration beyond the human, it was also shown, through the interviews, to cultivate intergenerational awareness and consideration. More than addressing physical and emotional issues, the narratives that emerged from the interviews demonstrate a concern with deeper questions about the ethics of relationships and the ability to care for self and other. The patterns that practitioners were actively addressing through practice were self-consciously attributed as intergenerational in nature. Practitioners referred to the way that practice has helped them address family and societal dynamics, particularly in the way that those dynamics have come to be embodied and lived in terms of specific coping mechanisms, addictive tendencies, and reactions to stress and anxiety. Nicole provides a particularly insightful description of this process. Describing the manner in which practice has helped her “catch”
harmful “self-talk” on a more consistent basis and recognizing how this self-talk has shaped her understanding of self, she states:

If that was the kind of stuff I was hearing as a kid and that was so powerful to create how or shape how you make friends or how you interact with people or talk to yourself, then how is it not possible to sort of re-do that? It’s been done to you once before why can’t it be possible to sort of switch it back? […] If that can shape you, why can’t we reshape it? Obviously 40 years later it’s going to be hard, but possible.

In this passage Nicole reflects on how practice can function in a genealogical manner that allows for a methodical revision and even unlearning of ways of thinking, moving, and interacting that are derived from broader social and political structures and often stretch back through generations in very intimate ways. The way Nicole discusses the possibility for change and healing reflects a shift away from the adherence to some kind of authentic self or “essence”, questioning instead what kinds of new forms, relations, and understandings can be opened up through a willingness to break with what one has previously known, even, or especially, when the course of the alternative pathway for action is unclear. As Cressida Heyes (2007) states, “who we believe ourselves to be […] are beliefs based not in our essence […] but in our shared practices” (p. 16). As a supportive and therapeutic space, the Shala provides the foundation for the emergence of new shared practices that are social, physical, representational, and psychological in nature. Working on both the visual and felt sense of self, the shared practices that bind the community at the Shala work to cultivate an acceptance of and a certain level of comfort with contingency so as to allow new representational parameters to emerge that encourage a willingness to change. The following section will examine the importance of language in expanding upon this understanding of contingency to further cultivate the ability to
identify at a distance from the self.

*The Body as Other*

The language with which practitioners refer to their bodies has important implications for the project of learning to identify at a distance from the self and to cultivate the ability to engage in genuine relations with others. Heyes (2007) states, “someone is imprisoned by a particular way of understanding the relation between herself and her body if no alternative is imaginable for her” (p. 19). For Heyes, language is a key component in opening up alternative understandings and representations of the body. She describes how yoga can encourage practitioners to accept their bodies as “deeply unpredictable and, sometimes, immutable” (p. 132). While practice was described by most practitioners as helping them feel more “connected” and “put together”, cultivating a greater link between their minds and bodies, the body was still attributed with a quality of Otherness that served to institute a distance between practitioners and their bodies. This sense of distance is used to foreground the need for an ongoing relationship between practitioners and their bodies that is based on an ethic of care, respect, and reciprocity. Recognizing the agency of the body fuels a continuous effort to become increasingly attuned to the body’s “signals” or, put a different way, working to become proficient in the language of the body. The ashtanga practice provides a structured space for engaging in this alternative form of communication and a way of managing some of the anxiety that results from the recognition of the individual’s lack of full control over embodied processes. As Ryan states:

I think for a lot of people it’s unnatural to work with their body and then learn to understand what the body is telling the person […] that can take a long time to just sit and work […] with your body and start to understand what’s happening and how to read it […]
it’s all process-based.

The body becomes understood as something to which practitioners are intimately related and dependent upon but something that is simultaneously foreign and unknown, something that is at times a source of uncertainty and anxiety.

This process was most evident with the female practitioners interviewed. Of the six women interviewed, four recounted past histories with disordered eating practices and associated this behaviour with an attempt to manage anxiety through an emphasis on both control and disavowal enacted at the level of the body. The women variously described a sense of being “at war” with their bodies at different points in their lives. Where harmful eating and exercise practices were understood as stemming from a desire to mould the body into a preconceived ideal or to ignore the body altogether, putting the body through the ashtanga practice on a daily basis was described as cultivating respect for all the things the body does as well as all the things it has and continues to endure. One of the women emphasized the ways in which practice has allowed her to let go of some of the expectations around how she imagined her body “should” have changed with the adoption of an extensive yoga practice to focusing instead on “what [her body] has done”. Further stating, “[Yoga] is the first thing in my life that if I wasn’t perfect at it I didn’t quit”. This relief from the expectation of perfection gets integrated on an embodied level through daily practice and works to undermine “black and white” thinking, emphasizing both process and humility through a recognition of the agency of the body, an agency that exceeds the control of the individual self. The way practitioners refer to their bodies is emblematic of the process conceptualized by Silverman that seeks to shift the subject away from the desire to obliterate the other, cultivating instead both the desire and ability to extend an active gift of love. Even as the body disrupts how practitioners expect or would like to see themselves, they are actively learning
to confer ideality on the body as it is. The body can never be appropriated to the normative parameters and expectations held in the mind. Through practices of control and management, the individual seeks the obliteration of the body as other, striving to mould the body as the individual sees fit. An ethic of respect and care, on the other hand, is closer to what Silverman describes as the active gift of love, recognizing the agency and alterity of the body and conferring ideality upon it despite its failure to approximate normative ideals.

Practitioners emphasized the deeply-rooted nature of those harmful tendencies and thoughts, stressing the fact that they continually resurface and do not simply go away. The resurfacing of these thoughts and tendencies was understood as an opportunity for practitioners to consciously invest in alternative ideals based on values of “respect” and “longevity”. Over time, as Silverman argues, those alternatives come to be “libidinally resonant” and can counter previously held ideals with an increasing level of efficacy. Disengaging from normative ideals and investing in alternatives requires practitioners to depersonalize the attachment felt to the desires that propel them towards actions they recognize as in need of change. It requires a split of sorts, acknowledging the pull of habitual desire without identifying with it. Recognizing and respecting the agency of the body is key in this ability to depersonalize while also circumventing tendencies to subsume the body to the mind. The language with which practitioners refer to their bodies, as something that is both connected to and separate from them, serves as a constant reminder of this intimate Otherness that constitutes their embodied experience. When the body, something that is so intimately “me”, is understood as an actor that exceeds my control, there is an opportunity to introduce a quality of Otherness into my understanding of self. I am simultaneously “me” and “not-me”. Through control I can try to affirm the dominance of “me”; however, if I can take up a practice that allows me to manage the tensions between them in a
reciprocal way, I can consistently ward off that deeply-rooted desire for a bounded sense of self and, consequently, remain more open to challenging those tendencies that encourage the adoption of normative standards and representational parameters. I can, in this way, remain more open to seeing and living differently. Given that this understanding of self is fraught with ambivalence, the importance of spaces such as the Shala becomes amplified. The previous chapter examined some of the violence that results from attempts to resolve ambivalence at the level of identity. Spaces such as the Shala can provide the support necessary to not only live with ambivalence but to live from an embodied acceptance of ambivalence and contingency in ways that are stable enough to be sustainable, yet open enough to encourage creativity and change.

Revaluing Melancholia

By introducing a quality of Otherness into practitioners’ understandings of self, the ashtanga practice can work to unsettle profoundly melancholic expressions of subjectivity. As previously stated, if all subjectivity is melancholic then seeking to do away entirely with melancholia is both futile and dangerous in the manner in which it might render the subject vulnerable to all sorts of psycho-social trauma and instability. Rather than seeking to do away with melancholia, the practice of ashtanga yoga can render this expression of subjectivity more permeable, maintaining a less rigid degree of separation between self and other, body and world, by foregrounding the entanglements and connections between things. A sense of separation or lack at the heart of subjectivity renders possible the desire on behalf of the subject to investigate how it is affected by that which surrounds it. Rather than achieving and maintaining separation through projection and disavowal, separation can be valued as a state that creates the distance necessary to explore connections. The goal can never be to obliterate that separation since this
would require the obliteration of the other as an other and deny the possibility of genuine relation. Instead, I want to suggest that ashtanga yoga can create subjects that are neither entirely melancholic nor entirely nomadic, subjects that are perhaps closer to the figure of “the smith” (Day, 2005). These subjects would recognize the necessity of assuming an identity in order to enter and appear in some form, but would remain committed to using that appearance to continually alter the “screen” or the “field”. These subjects would exist both inside and outside dominant psychic and social frameworks, “seek[ing] to innovate by tracking and exploiting opportunities in and around existing structures” (Day, 2005, p. 174). An example of this can be seen in the interviews in the way that practitioners discussed the possibility of intervening into intergenerational dynamics. Rather than denying or disavowing an identification with the roles associated with these familial and societal dynamics, practitioners were committed to “re-viewing” them, using the intimate knowledge achieved through these identities in order to rework the patterns that emerge from them. The smith refuses to understand itself as the “product” of any sort of “essence” (Day, 2005, p. 175). No longer bound to fantasies of finding and embracing an essence or authentic self, the smith can become increasingly attuned to its surroundings to understand how best to orient itself from moment-to-moment. By increasing the affective capacities of the body, the ashtanga practice can teach practitioners to adopt positions or identities as ways of “appearing”. Coupled with an understanding of the contingency of any embodied experience, practitioners can come to accept the impermanence of any identity-position and cultivate a willingness to alter that position in relation to shifting psychic and social conditions. In this context, the way that any experience of separation is felt, a separation constitutive of subjectivity, is understood as meaningful only through the connections that can be drawn through it. As such, the community context of practice becomes vitally important as it not
only provides the support necessary to reconfigure existing patterns and tendencies, but also provides an “anchor point” amidst contingency and connects the subject with forces beyond the individual body.

Accountability to Place

The concept of the analytic third can be extended to broader geographical or city space in ways that can link practice more concretely to decolonial aims. I have suggested that the practice roots practitioners in the body rather than the land and that this can undermine some of the violent need for ownership and control characteristic of settler societies and subjectivities. The first chapter elaborated on some of the ways in which the organization of psychic space can come to be imprinted and imposed on the physical landscape and how, in settler societies where identity is confirmed largely through disavowal and difference, this requires the marking, containment, and eviction of certain bodies from public space. If the organization of psychic space reflects, to a degree, the organization of physical space and vice versa, then any intervention into our psychic realms, particularly on a collective level, can have spatial effects and can alter the relations that are able to emerge in those spaces; however, the first chapter also discussed some of the ways in which ungrounded practices, as examined through Kerouac and the Beats, can serve to reinscribe colonial power dynamics and negate any possibility for the creation of links of affinity and solidarity. How, then, can practice institute a sense of somatic or embodied rooting while still remaining accountable to place?

It is here that I think the idea of the analytic third can again be helpful for thinking through a different kind of relation to place. In the same way that the community context of the Shala can be thought of as an intersubjective space or analytic third, I think it is possible to imagine
geographical spaces as themselves thirds of sorts, containing their own reconfigurative potentials based on the bodies, histories, and desires associated with them. The therapeutic situation can be used to elaborate on this idea. Going into any psychotherapeutic session, however brief, an analytic third will, theoretically, be opened up between the analyst and analysand. Even if this interaction occurs only once and the session is not repeated it could still have some sort of effect on both parties, whether that effect is subtle or significant. Regardless, it would, more likely than not, take several sessions, or several revisititations of that intersubjective space, for its effects to be felt more deeply so as to allow the space of the third to reorganize patterns in increasingly complex ways. This can function in a similar way in relation to place. In order to begin to explore the effects and shifts experienced through any specific place, some sort of familiarity or intimacy with that place is required. Becoming attuned to the shifts in that environment and, consequently, the way those shifts are felt and embodied, requires a commitment of sorts to that third that opens up between bodies and locations, requiring also an investigative inclination grounded in an ethic of respect and reciprocity. It takes time to investigate who you are and what you might become in the space of any particular third. In this way, the practice can help shift from the need to confirm an identity through the control and containment of space toward the embodiment of an identity that emerges in response to the surrounding environment, made up not only of the land but of the shifting connections, desires, anxieties, and relations that inform the way that environment affects any individual subject. New relations to place are potentially opened up through an emphasis on the body’s affective capacities by foregrounding the contingency of any experience of self and cultivating the subject’s ability and willingness to investigate its role in larger patterns and processes.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

This research has been motivated by a desire to understand the difficulties in politicizing yoga practice and to explore the conditions in which the practice of ashtanga yoga can be mobilized in ethically viable ways. What has emerged is an attempt to undermine attachments to the concept of the authentic self, understood as bounded and beyond power, by demonstrating the violence required to form and maintain an identity within these parameters. I have largely argued that the practice of ashtanga yoga can be taken up in ways that are conducive to psychoanalytic theory and practice. In this framework, the communities that emerge through practice can be viewed through the concept of the analytic third. Not all mysore programs are the same. The desires and expectations that are brought to the practice by both teachers and students can lead to radically different practice experiences in different mysore programs. I have sought to examine how the shared narratives and values that bind the practice community at the Shala create an intersubjective space that values healing based on an ethic of respect and reciprocity and how this is conducive to projects that seek to reconfigure understandings of self and other in ethically viable ways, creating subjects more closely aligned with the figure of the smith than that of the melancholic.

The first chapter brought attention to the ways in which modern postural yoga is implicated in projects of nation-building and how, through nationalist frameworks, the body becomes an effective tool for dividing and demarcating people. Bolstered by discourses of authenticity and neoliberal conceptions of health, chapter one examined how yoga practice depoliticizes the policing and eviction of some bodies while affirming the legitimacy of others. In this context, I argued that the practice of yoga becomes a way of reifying settler legitimacy and normalizing the evictions that constitute settler space. This chapter emphasized the depth of the connections
between yoga, health, and well-being and how this serves as a foundation for dividing practices that distinguish desirable subjects from dangerous Others. I then examined the ways in which these dividing practices are often perpetuated through the movement and travel of ashtanga practitioners. The violence in which yoga is shown to be implicated is often hidden by its emphasis on awareness and ethical living. Yoga, particularly as practiced in the West, is still very much resonant with countercultural associations and “hippy” lifestyles, encouraging travel and lifestyles that value movement and the “seeking” of knowledge. I examined yoga through the nomadic ethos popularized by Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* to investigate the implications of the travel of ashtanga practitioners, emphasizing the depth of the associations between movement and authenticity. When movement is fueled by the desire to realize an authentic existence, it serves to reify colonial power dynamics, abstracting practice from place and extending the bounds of the settler-state.

If movement is going to be undertaken in ways that contribute less to dispossession, it must come from a different understanding of self, one that is always already intersubjective and resists the adoption of any “essence”. I began the second chapter by arguing that ashtanga yoga can help facilitate a visceral understanding of this intersubjectivity, particularly through its emphasis on the breath and the agency of the body. The second chapter affirms the potential of ashtanga yoga to alter the representational parameters through which practitioners apprehend the world so as to open up the possibility of engaging in genuine relations with Others. I examined the intersubjective conditions present at The Yoga Shala to emphasize the collective aspect of any practice that seeks to alter the way the subject identifies and desires, requiring the affirmation of multiple sources of agency and a foregrounding of the alterity of the body itself. The Yoga Shala demonstrates the importance of taking up practice in a framework of healing rather than a search
for authenticity or enlightenment. Healing is understood through a processual rather than goal-oriented lens and is shown to depend on an ability to function in states of contingency, whereas authenticity is dependent upon an escape from or the discovery of a place beyond contingency.

While I hope to have shown that yoga can be taken up in ways that can radically alter dominant understandings of what constitutes self, there is still work to be done on investigating concrete ways of mobilizing those insights in ways that are relevant to specific anti-statist and decolonial struggles. The Yoga Shala provides an example of the ways in which practice can cultivate an openness and a willingness to engage with others and how certain community conditions can provide space for a continuous revision of unconscious reactions and prejudices that can be seen as prefigurative in both their intentions and effects; however, the communities that form through yoga practice, while presented as universally accessible, are largely tied to specific work and life conditions associated with the middle-class. Entry and acceptance into these communities have financial and social expectations associated with them, expectations that are often communicated in pre-conscious and embodied ways. While The Yoga Shala is an example of how yoga communities can take steps to keep practice communities as open as possible and can work to allow a wide range of people to enter the space, they are still ultimately constrained by a need to meet their bottom-line. The Yoga Shala is a good example of an effort at structural renewal in that it works with and alongside dominant frameworks with an aim to creating alternatives based on principles of reciprocity, respect, and care for self and others. Future research would be beneficial to explore effective ways of connecting multiple individual efforts such as that undertaken by The Yoga Shala so as to create more extensive networks for individuals and communities to draw from. This would have to be done in ways that maintain the specific character of the community in question without subsuming it to an ideological whole. In
that recognizing the agency and contingency of the body was shown to be of vital importance in warding off the development of atomized and bounded subjects, such efforts must remain intimately connected to place and actively avoid creating links based on ideological assumptions.

The Yoga Shala demonstrates both the ability and willingness of people to engage in in-depth efforts at transformation at the levels of identity, desire, and relationship. Transformation is never “achieved” but is an ongoing effort at living, thinking, and relating differently. With the proper structures, narratives, and supports in place, individuals and communities are more than capable of engaging in prefigurative efforts that can have affirmative effects beyond the community in question. Practitioners must remain aware of the violence latent in yoga practice and find ways of warding off the desire for an authentic self beyond power so as to remain aware of the ways in which their actions, movements, and bodies are always implicated in broader socio-spatial processes.
References


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Appendix 1

Research Ethics Approval

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Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GCUL-060-16; Romeo # 6018710
Title: "GCUL-060-16 Embodying Place: The Role of Embodied Practice and Shared Narratives in Understandings and Accountability to Place"

Dear Miss Reid:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GCUL-060-16 Embodying Place: The Role of Embodied Practice and Shared Narratives in Understandings and Accountability to Place" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies". Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

John Freeman, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Richard Day, Supervisor
Dr. Dorit Naaman, Chair, Unit REB
Ms. Danielle Gugler, Dept. Admin.