DISCIPLINING MADNESS, DISCIPLINING YOGA

by

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Abstract

This paper will examine contemporary North American yoga, specifically the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center in Toronto, using theoretical frameworks taken from the work of Michel Foucault. Drawing on his work in *Discipline and Punish*, it will look at yoga as a modern “carceral” institution. Using Foucault’s analysis in *Madness and Civilization*, this paper will explore how yoga intersects, in some ways, with madness. The underlying argument is that yoga and madness, as discourses, are both based upon institutional disciplining of pre-discursive experiences. This paper contends that the pre-discursive “sources” of experience should not be seen as unified points of origin, but as an underlying “difference”, or capacity to be otherwise. This “difference” points to multiple, undifferentiated, mutual sources of yoga and madness.
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Introduction

Since Franklin Egerton’s work on the *Yogasūtras* in the 1920s, yoga has been translated (in scholarly circles) as “discipline” (65). But what is it that is being “disciplined” in yoga practice? Is it an exercise discipline? Or is it a discipline of mindfulness, or of relaxation, or of devotion? Perhaps it is a secular discipline, or perhaps a religious one. The answers of yoga practitioners are diverse, reflecting the diversity of contemporary yoga practices.

My concern here is what yoga disciplines do. What is disciplining and what is being disciplined? Do yoga disciplines shape the practitioner in some way? Are individual practitioners shaped differently by these disciplines? I would like to know how these disciplines are constructing the practitioner’s subjectivity. How do yoga disciplines construct the reality of the person doing yoga?

I am interested in a particular yoga community: the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre (SYVC) in Toronto. My interest in this community begins with my own participation in *āsanas* and devotional practices there. My analysis focuses on the way in which this particular community can be seen as a “disciplinary” yoga institution.

Yoga, particularly yoga in the anglophone West, has recently become a topic of sustained scholarly interest. Modern yoga has been studied from historical, anthropological and sociological perspectives. These studies have situated modern yoga as an Indian, North American and transnational phenomenon.

I build upon this literature by applying analyses drawn from the work of Michel Foucault. Specifically, I am interested in Foucault’s claims in *Discipline and*
Punish (DP), where he hypothesizes that modern institutions serve disciplinary or “carceral” functions. In DP, he engages in a careful and extended analysis of the disciplines enacted by contemporary institutions. Below, I extend Foucault’s analysis of “discipline” to yoga institutions. I maintain a yoga institution such as the contemporary SYVC is a modern “carceral” institution in Foucault’s sense. In what follows, I demonstrate that we can add a Foucauldian notion of yoga as discipline to the already well-established interpretations of yoga as “discipline”. This perspective on the discipline of yoga provides previously unconsidered insights into the role of yoga institutions.

Beyond this, I demonstrate how another discursive phenomenon, madness, can be alternately constituted by a yoga regime. Here, I turn to Foucault’s ideas of madness and its pre-discursive origins. My argument here is that discursive phenomena, for example yoga or madness, are not reducible to a single pre-discursive “zero point,” as Foucault suggests in Madness and Civilization (ix) (MC), but rather arise out of an irreducible pre-discursive difference, or a “power-to-be-otherwise” (Caputo 256). From this perspective, madness and yoga are parallel discursive, disciplinary constructions that can always be constituted differently. By examining parallels between yoga and madness, we gain insights into the constitutions of each, and we can make tentative claims about their “origins” in the pre-discursive.

A Foucauldian analysis of yoga is valuable for the novelty of the analyses it provokes. The perspective that this theoretical approach offers raises interesting questions about the place of yoga in contemporary North American society, as well
as about the constitution of the subject by his or her yoga practices. It asks questions about the nature of yoga as well as about the nature of madness, and posits parallels or similarities in their discursive elaborations. Ultimately this paper asks about the disciplining and the constitution of pre-discursive experiences by modern institutions.

In chapter 1, I situate SYVC yoga as an Indian, North American, and transnational phenomenon. I argue that this is necessary to consider the SYVC as a Foucauldian institution.

In chapter 2, I discuss how from a Foucauldian perspective, the SYVC is a disciplinary institution. I explain how a SYVC yoga discipline shapes subjectivity through discipline.

I argue in Chapter 3 that pre-discursive experiences are characterized by “difference”, which implies that they could be constituted otherwise. Subjective discursive experience of this “difference” is constructed by disciplines. My point is that “mad” experiences can be an alternately constituted by yoga.

In chapter 4, I discuss some critiques of Foucault’s theories. This helps problematize some of Foucault’s arguments. I aim to show that politically and historiographically, significant objections can be raised which point to certain limits of Foucault’s claims.

Lastly, chapter 5 considers two physical objects from the SYVC that illustrate the disciplinary character of the yoga practice at the Centre. These objects highlight the creation of the subject through disciplinary means.
Chapter 1: SYVC as North American, Indian and Transnational tradition

Contemporary scholarship on modern yoga raises questions about how we understand North Americans’ involvement with ashrams, gurus and beliefs that are in some sense Indian in origin. In this chapter, I argue that we need to consider the SYVC on several fronts: as a North American phenomenon; as an Indian religious phenomenon; and as a transnational product. I argue that each of these perspectives when viewed together provide a complete picture of the North American Sivananda community. This analysis will serve to contextualize the argument made in Chapter 2, where I consider SYVC yoga as a Foucauldian discipline.

Because yoga is often popularly seen as an “ancient Indian tradition”, it may seem from that perspective to be counterintuitive to address it as a North American religious phenomenon. However, when talking about the North American roots of SYVC yoga, I am deliberately turning the history of SYVC on its head to emphasize the frequently overlooked and, in my opinion, critical North American aspect of SYVC practice. My reason for doing this is that I am interested in the Toronto SYVC as a North American phenomenon.

Part of the reason for this approach is that I am interested in analyzing this yoga tradition with a Western theoretical toolkit. Situating SYVC in the North American context is helpful in this analysis. Addressing North American SYVC yoga, which is in some sense a Western phenomenon, with the theories of a Western thinker (like Foucault) is therefore plausible. In fact, I argue that it is important to do so. Framing North American yoga within Western scholarship and theory is
necessary to create a well-developed understanding of contemporary North American yoga.

How is SYVC yoga a North American practice? For Véronique Altglas, Western Sivananda practitioners’ involvement with Indian religious practices speaks to these practitioners’ specific, culturally situated attitudes toward religions.¹ She writes, “western disciples [of Sivananda] adopt a very pragmatic and selective attitude in order to slant Hindu practices and beliefs towards their own expectations of well-being here and now” (Altglas 2007, 234). In so doing, they often engage in “selective and interpretative appropriation of beliefs and practices” (Altglas 2007, 232). Altglas’s point here is insightful. Although we may question her use of the term “Hindu”, it is helpful to recognize that these “Hindu practices”, in her words, are often deeply modified and personalized by practitioners at North American yoga centres. A great deal of what I would call “religious creativity” is frequently applied by North American disciples in formulating their yogic religious beliefs.

Moreover, the very personal character of these North American yogic religious formulations ensures that these practices are hybrid and complex. Many North American Sivanandin practitioners display a great deal of earnestness in their practice, and I would argue that their earnestness ensures that their experience of “Hinduism” is further personalized and individualized. We could ask: when a North American disciple finds that a “Hindu” belief speaks to him/her at a very intimate or

¹ I use the designation “Western” when discussing Altglas because she is speaking about European Sivananda practitioners, not North Americans. Although my focus remains on North American yoga, Altglas’s analysis of European Sivanandin practices is helpful.
personal level, is that encounter a North American one, or an Indian one? I argue that it is an obvious oversight to claim that it is one in the absence of the other.

To further understand the North American character of such practices, experiences of North American yoga need to be historicized. The analysis of Catherine Albanese is a helpful guide here. Her historical analysis sets the practices of North American yogis and yoginis in the broader framework of the history of American religions. In *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (2007), Albanese sets American yoga in the context of American metaphysical traditions. Yoga is certainly not the primary thrust of this work (indeed it is discussed in only 26 out of the 628 pages), but I think her analysis provides a good starting point for further study of yoga within an American religious history. As I am concerned with the Toronto SYVC, it would be helpful to extend Albanese’s frame of inquiry beyond just the US, to address a broader North American yoga.

I should be clear that I am not equating North American Hindu movements with all of the broad range of metaphysical and New Age practices that Albanese discusses; the Hindu movements that have been brought to North America by Indian gurus are a much too specific, culturally distinct phenomenon to be lumped under Albanese’s broad analysis of metaphysical religion without careful qualification. Nonetheless, I think that following Albanese, to analyze yoga within the context of North American religious history is a fruitful and under-explored angle in the study of modern yoga.

There are other recent works that have shed light on the practice of yoga within a North American religious history. Lola Williamson, for example, makes
important insights while situating “Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements”, or “HIMMs” (4) in a North American context. Her approach in her book *Transcendent in America* (2010) is ethnographic. While its methodology differs substantially from Albanese’s historical approach, it nonetheless contributes significantly to a historically minded analysis of “Hindu-Inspired” practices in North America. The interviews that Williamson conducted in her fieldwork open the door for further historical exploration of the personal experiences of practitioners in North America.

The value of the analyses of Albanese and Williamson is that they treat religious phenomena of diverse origin in their distinctly North American manifestations. In my opinion this is a necessary analytical perspective. It offers fruitful avenues of inquiry. Looking at the SYVC community, we can see values and dispositions that are decidedly North American manifested in Sivanandin practices. North American influences on Sivanandin yoga might include: the lack of emphasis on monasticism at the Toronto SYVC; the austere Protestant-like aesthetics of SYVC devotional spaces; the particularly modern, Western encouragement toward personalization of one’s religious practices at the SYVC. I will not delve into these examples here. I point to them only as possible illustrations of North American influence on purportedly “Indian” SYVC practices. There is much more historical work that can be done here, and while much of it is beyond the scope of this study, it merits further attention.

I hope I have made clear the importance of the North American context in the following consideration of the Toronto SYVC. But certainly we are missing something if we do not consider the Indian aspects of Sivananda yoga as well.
Therefore, an important question is: how does North American SYVC yoga reflect the Indian “roots” of these practices?

Neo-Hinduism, in its many manifestations (including the SYVC), can be seen as a particularly Indian response to the West. Indeed, in contemporary academic histories of modern yoga, yoga is widely thought to have its intellectual roots in the “Bengali Renaissance”. Elizabeth De Michelis puts forward this hypothesis in her influential book *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004). Following her lead, we can say that the ideas of the Bengali Renaissance spread to the West through the work of export gurus, who while too numerous to list here certainly include Swamis Sivananda and Vishnudevananda, the founders of the SYVC.

Moreover, the Bengali Renaissance is seen as being largely influenced by imported Western values. The colonial ferment of 19th century Bengal is interpreted by De Michelis as an environment of great religious innovation, particularly as a meeting place of colonial ideas with Indian, particularly Hindu, ideas. Some scholarly histories of modern yoga (De Michelis 2004, Altglas 2005, Schnäbele 2010) analyze the roots of modern yoga as a product of this particularly fecund time and place.

De Michelis does a great deal of the groundwork when discussing the key figures of the Bengali Renaissance and their formative influence on modern yoga. She sets these neo-Hindu innovations against more traditionalist Indian perspectives, as well as against imported Western ideas. According to her narrative, there is a reflexive process at work, by which neo-Hindu pioneers in Bengal embraced Western ideas and then included these ideas into their new visions of
Hinduism. These pioneers in turn exported these ideas back to the West (Altglas 2007, 221). Despite their intercultural origins, these neo-Hindu ideas were promoted, both within India and abroad, as having a particularly Indian spiritual genius.

The export Hinduism that was brought to the West was therefore of a particular character. Altglas characterizes these exports as “counter-missions” (2007, 222), while Strauss calls the phenomenon a “countercurrent” (2002a, 220). They argue that export yoga has proved to be a successful counter-colonial product. Strauss observes, “Yoga … represents an example of an export moving from what has been assumed to be the outskirts of social, economic and political power toward ‘the centre’, where it has gained broad recognition and a wide following.” (2002a, 219).

Sivananda yoga sits in the midst of one of these “countercurrents”. The work of Swami Sivananda, as well as that of his disciple Swami Vishnudevananda, has explicitly situated Sivanandin practice in this cross-cultural space. Sivananda yoga, as practiced today at the SYVC, is therefore deeply influenced by cultural vectors of greatly varied provenance. It is Indian, North American, as well as colonial. As a result, Sivananda practitioners are often negotiating Indian practices, as well as North American practices, on a daily basis. We should keep in mind that these negotiations take place in a politically charged colonial context.

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2 A more explicit discussion of yoga and colonialism would be a helpful addition to the existing literature on yoga history. A broader academic literature on colonialism is not lacking, and portions of this literature could certainly be fruitfully applied to debates on modern yoga. This would be an interesting subject for further study.
More recently, Mark Singleton’s book *Yoga Body* (2010) has gone beyond the established narrative of the “Bengali Renaissance” pioneered by De Michelis (and reiterated by Altglas 2005 and Schnäbele 2010) to explore other varied sources for modern yoga practices. Singleton’s work has nuanced the picture painted by De Michelis, and has suggested that modern yoga is perhaps more culturally complex than her work may have indicated. The relationship between colonial practices and Indian practices in modern yoga is, according to Singleton’s work, one of cross-pollination, creativity and experimentation.

How are we to make sense of these cultural currents and “countercurrents” in SYVC yoga? I think it is helpful, following Sarah Strauss and Mark Singleton, to situate Sivananda yoga as a transnational phenomenon. In this view, Sivananda yoga is neither North American nor Indian, but the product of an encounter between cultures. Singleton makes similar claims about what he calls “transnational anglophone yoga” (10). We can see the in the Sivananda tradition an example of yoga in transition: from a regional, specialized, Indian religious discourse to a modern global phenomenon. This perspective moves beyond a simplistic opposition between “Indian” and “North American” practices and situates Sivananda yoga in a transnational space.³ However, I should be clear that transnationalism is not exclusive to Sivananda and his lineage.

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³ In her work, Strauss discusses the transnationalism of the Sivananda lineages at some length. For her, this global character of the SYVC had a direct impact on her methodology when studying the organization (2005, 88-90). I agree that she is correct in seeing transnational features in the Sivananda community. Certainly, we can say that Sivananda transnationalism greatly influenced the anthropological approach of her book *Positioning Yoga* (2005). Likewise, this transnationalism has had a direct impact on the methodology of this study as well.
The characteristics of Sivananda yoga that contribute to its transnationalism are fairly easy to enumerate: Swami Sivananda himself taught and wrote primarily in English, thereby making it possible to reach an audience that extended far beyond India. This reach was intentionally international. The Divine Life Society, which he founded in 1936 (Strauss 2002a, 233), pursued an extremely aggressive publication schedule for his works, and undertook equally aggressive distribution methods for those publications. He was at times referred to as “Swami Propaganda” by his followers (Ceccomori, 187).

Using print media as a teaching vehicle gave Swami Sivananda unprecedented influence and reach. It marked a decided departure from certain Indian esoteric traditions of guru-disciple relationships. Swami Sivananda’s publication methods embraced a methodology that was decidedly exoteric. It went so far as to include the possibility of maintaining disciples by mail, which Strauss describes a “postal discipleship” (2002b, 235).

Sivananada also initiated a number of non-Indian disciples over the course of his teaching career. He also inittated non-Indian women (for example Swami Sivananda Radha). These practices had a decidedly transnationalizing influence on the Sivananda community. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, The Sivanandin community became an international one. These practices set Sivananda organizations apart from mainstream Indian institutions not only by their novelty, but also by the implied challenges they posed to traditional notions of varnāśrama.4

4 Other transnational, neo-Hindu organizations, including the Self-Realization Fellowship, also adopted similar innovative techniques like “postal discipleship”.
This points not only to the modernity of Swami Sivananda’s organization, but also to its transnationalism.

Swami Sivananda also actively sent his disciples abroad to teach. Indian disciples were sent to the West, and non-Indian disciples who visited Swami Sivananda in India returned to their native countries bringing Sivanandin messages (Strauss 2002a, 235). Along with the Divine Life Society’s publication industry, Sivananda led an expanding international network of disciples, readers and yoga enthusiasts. The institutions he developed were high-tech for their time, and highly networked on a global scale.

These are only a few examples of the transnational inclinations of Swami Sivananda and his organization. These preoccupations speak to some of the transnationalizing forces shaping his contemporaries in a world that was rapidly globalizing. We can see in Sivananda addressing some important issues of his day through his religious teachings. Sivananda spoke to themes that situated his community in a transnational space. I would like to point to a few examples of transnationalism in Sivananda’s teachings and institutions.

Firstly, we can see a tension between religion and science in Sivananda’s teachings (Strauss 2002a, 225). This is an emphasis he shares with Swami Vivekananda, among others. It is a particularly poignant tension in Sivananda’s work. His Western medical background in his early life, followed by his later renunciation certainly set the stage for his sustained interest science and religion (Strauss 2002b, 233). Sivananda popularized a particular emphasis on religious practice as a countermeasure to science. He did a great deal to emphasize Indian
religion as an alternative to Western science, both within India and abroad to non-Indian shores.\textsuperscript{5} This can be seen as an element of Sivananda’s Indian “counter-mission” or “countercurrent” to Western discourses on science.

Second, Sivananda promoted a perspective that was at the same time Indian and universalist. He frequently situated his teachings within established traditions of Indian religious texts, themes and practices. In this way, he drew strongly on the Indian tradition. Yet he also frequently emphasized the oneness of all religions, thereby espousing a philosophy that went, in a notably Indian way, toward universals beyond the Indian tradition.

Conflicting nationalist and universalist tendencies figured prominently in the Indian politics of his time, as they do today. Sivananda tended toward universalism, and mostly leaned away from Indian nationalism. This emphasis on universalism has mostly been carried down through Sivananda’s organization (Altglas 2007, 230) and by his disciples.\textsuperscript{6} One of Sivananda’s responses to colonial influence has been his legacy of universalism.

Third, I argue that Sivananda’s teachings respond to the transnational pressures of his time with a decided exotericism and mainstream orientation, requiring neither renunciation nor harsh discipline (Altglas 2007, 230). The exotericism of his teachings for householders was well suited to his highly networked publication campaign.

\textsuperscript{5} At the Sivananda Centre in Toronto today we can see the legacy of these teachings. In contemporary SYVC teachings there is often an emphasis on yoga as an alternative means to health or as a way of healing.

\textsuperscript{6} With the possible exception of his disciple Swami Chinmayananda, who was a co-founder of the Viśva Hindu Parisad.
The result of these exoteric teachings is a proposed way of living in peace with the modern world through the disciplines of yoga. Strauss calls “the essence of middle class conformity, the perfect colonial/national subject/citizen, who never makes a fuss and expects that if one simply ‘adjusts, adapts and accommodates,’ everything will be fine” (2002b, 238). Thus, Sivananda’s transnationalism is decidedly quietist, practice-focused and largely apolitical.

Thus, we see transnational leanings in the preoccupations and teachings of Swami Sivananda, his disciples, and the SYVC. Sivananda himself developed a global discipleship, and the SYVC today is certainly an organization that has largely followed in his global footsteps.

SYVC yoga, when seen as a North American, Indian, and transnational phenomenon provides the groundwork for considering SYVC yoga as a Foucauldian discipline. SYVC yoga is not solely an “ancient Indian spiritual practice”; it is also a modern transnational “discipline”. Our analysis should not be confined to seeking the origins of SYVC practice among the sages of the Himalayas. SYVC is also modern, North American, transnational, and a composite of many different historical forces. I argue that because of this, we can scrutinize the SYVC with the same tools Foucault has used to scrutinize a number of other modern institutions. I intend to use portions of the theoretical framework that Foucault developed in MC and DP to address the SYVC as a modern institution.
Chapter 2: Yoga as Discipline

This chapter considers yoga as a religious discipline and as a Foucauldian discipline. Ultimately, in the next chapter, we will consider yoga as a means of disciplining madness. Following this thread will take us through a discussion of discursive expressions of “yoga” and “madness”, and also examine the possibility of insights into the pre-discursive sources of these experiences. Following Foucault, the emphasis will be on how these disciplines constitute the self. The Foucauldian self is, according to John Caputo, characterized by the possibility of always being able to be otherwise (256), and in chapter 3 I will examine how this pre-discursive “difference” gives us insight into how “madness” may be otherwise constituted in yoga.

For many in North America, yoga is an exercise program that provides fitness and relaxation through what are seen as primarily physical practices: postures and stretches that manipulate the body and presumably make it healthier and stronger. Indeed, it is a common North American perception that these exercise programs are the full extent of yoga. Indeed, much of yoga in North America is oriented to practitioners who are interested in exercise. Yoga, in this elaboration, has developed into an exercise industry with a great deal of popular appeal. Therefore, we can say that yoga in North America is in part an exercise discipline (see Singleton 2010).

But in other North American elaborations, yoga moves beyond exercise and takes on other dimensions. North American students who turn to sources like Patañjali, for example, often quickly come to the conclusion that it is possible that there are other elements to yoga beyond āsanas. At times, the “spirituality” of yoga is played up in some
North American settings, which perhaps makes the practice appealing to a different set of people, likely for different reasons. When yoga is defined more broadly beyond posture-based exercise practice (see, for example, De Michelis’s 2004 typology), a network of related yoga disciplines appear: bhakti yogas, karma yogas, seva yogas, among numerous others.

The SYVC will serve as our case study. At the SYVC, yoga draws upon various types of discipline. For example, meditation classes focus on mental discipline, āsana classes on physical discipline, cooking classes on dietary discipline, prānāyāma on breathing disciplines, and so on. In light of this, “yoga” at the SYVC has a broad and nuanced meaning.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the disciplines that we see at the SYVC in Toronto are in part characteristic of their place in a North American religious world. At the same time, they draw substantially upon Indian traditions and practices as well. The various disciplines at the Centre taken together are expressions of commitment to a “yogic” life. At the SYVC, a “yogic” life is very much framed as a “religious” discipline.

Of course, different practitioners will have differing opinions about whether the yoga they practice is “religion”, or even “spirituality”. The range of interpretations of these “spiritual” or “religious” behaviours is broad. Suzanne Newcombe (2005) provides further details on this topic in her article “Spirituality and ‘Mystical Religion in Contemporary Society: a case study of British practitioners of the Iyengar method of yoga”. She surveys British yoga practitioners, and finds that many of them have
“spiritual” goals for their practice. At the SYVC, many practitioners form an idea of a “yoga” that they would quite likely describe as a “religious” or “spiritual” practice.

I am interested in interrogating this SYVC religious practice on its conceptions of discipline. In doing this, I will draw on the work of Michel Foucault, who has written extensively on discipline. I have argued above that SYVC yoga is both an Indian and a North American construction, and that to adequately capture the significance of the SYVC movement, we need to situate it at such a crossroads. Therefore, interrogating the SYVC practice as transnational “discipline” takes into account its global origins.

Addressing yoga as “discipline” situates this study in a long tradition. Indeed, as early as 1925, Franklin translated “yoga” as “discipline” (65). What differentiates my argument here from many other interpretations of yoga-as-discipline is that I will be using “discipline” in Michel Foucault’s sense. This analytical framework will allow us to go further than the assertion that “yoga is discipline” to examine how it is a discipline at the SYVC. It is here that the work of Foucault will assist us. His writings on discipline provide us with a theoretical framework to examine the practices of the SYVC. This will allow us to suggest not only what SYVC yoga is disciplining, but also how it is disciplining, and what is being produced by this discipline.

To start with, what is Foucault’s notion of discipline? The first place we should probably turn to answer this question is DP. For Foucault, discipline is a continuous, uninterrupted application of power that permeates and manipulates coextensively with the society in which it is found. It is largely unspoken and unacknowledged, but deeply felt;

Unfortunately Newcombe does not, in her brief article, elaborate on what “spiritual” or “spirituality” means to the academic study of religion; indeed, it is too formidable a topic to tackle here as well. I refer the reader to the work of Paul Heelas (2008) and Catherine Albanese (2001) for in depth perspectives.
indeed, discipline for Foucault is experienced in a largely pre-conscious way. Discipline shapes the self fundamentally and in itself is constitutive of the subject. It defines, in a fundamental way, the self in modern societies. Discipline is most evidently elaborated through modern institutions such as the school, the prison, the factory, and the hospital, although its techniques permeate all manner of social interaction. Through these institutions, our disciplines shape our bodies and our self-understandings. As Foucault says:

> These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called ‘disciplines.’

(DP 135)

Thus for Foucault, “disciplines” are integral to the application of power in modern societies. For Foucault these disciplines arose in the latter half of the 18th century, nominally as a result of revulsion with physical torture as the predominant form of punishment, though more likely as a result of needs for new techniques of control and punishment (DP 77-78).

The essential characteristics of a Foucauldian concept of discipline are its permeating ubiquity (DP 206), its constitution of the subject through techniques of surveillance (DP 170ff), normalizing judgment (DP 177ff), and classification (DP 192ff), and its goals of rendering the body docile and submissive to techniques of control (DP 136-138). For Foucault, disciplines are nuanced, modulated and socially pervasive. From his perspective, there are few, if any, social facts that we can point to that have not been “disciplined”.
The metaphor used by Foucault in DP to express the ubiquity of modern discipline is the architecture of Jeremy Bentham’s ‘panopticon’ (DP 200). Foucault devotes a full chapter of DP to this metaphor. Within the panopticon, all actions of the inmates are observable. The world of the panopticon is structured in such a way that discipline is constant and unavoidable. There is no place in that architecture to step outside of surveillance and control. The discipline is total, but also individualized: the panopticon’s inmates are compartmentalized, situated unquestionably in the

*image redacted*

*Fig. 1: A panopticon-style prison, along the lines suggested by Jeremy Bentham*

architecture’s rigid hierarchy. For Foucault this architecture represents an ideal image of modern techniques of discipline: surveillance, compartmentalization and hierarchicalization act to discipline the individual, and situate him or her socially. Indeed,
these disciplines are constitutive of his or her social world. This metaphorical framework sets the tone for Foucault’s thoughts on discipline, which this paper will consider in light of the practices at the SYVC. Chapter 5 will delve into the panopticism of SYVC practices more explicitly.

When considering Foucauldian discipline at the SYVC, we need to evaluate the application of Foucauldian concepts of discipline in the setting of a yoga centre. It may not be immediately evident how a concept like “panopticism” might apply in such a setting. What is being disciplined at the SYVC? Is it a “religious” discipline? What do we mean by such calling a practice a “religious” discipline?

In this section, I focus on the relationship of discipline to “religion” in Foucault’s work, particularly in DP. An important question to ask is: how do religious disciplines fit into Foucault’s broader notion of discipline? To answer this, we need to clarify some terminology. For example, Foucault does not provide a complete conceptual toolkit to address religion and discipline; we therefore need to elucidate some of the concepts that we will be using.

I think it would be helpful to think of religious practices as they are organized into “religious regimes”. I have developed this term as a tool to frame various disciplines within religious institutions. It is very loosely derived from Sarah Strauss’s concept of an “oasis regime” (2005, 113-114). I define a religious regime not as a practice, but rather as a set of practices, that taken together constitute the practical religious life of a practitioner or devotee. It exists within its institutional elaboration, but is not coextensive with it. I argue that a religious regime is disciplinary. As a disciplinary program, it shapes and constructs the religious self-understanding and practices of the devotee.
We can ask whether it is reasonable to think of “religious regimes” as Foucauldian disciplines. Is a religious regime a disciplinary one? Is it disciplinary in the same sense that Foucault sees the prison, the school, the factory and the hospital? The question of where or how religious regimes fit within Foucault’s broader notion of discipline is also important. Are religious regimes like other Foucauldian disciplines, or are they not? Some commentators address this question. Jeremy Carrette, for example, situates religious disciplinary regimes alongside military and educational ones (19-20). Joseph Rouse argues that all disciplinary acts exist within the functioning of power because in a Foucauldian world there is no possible position “outside” of power (108).

Certainly this can be contested. Sarah Strauss, speaking of the Sivananda tradition, situates practitioners’ religious regimes outside of the power structures that otherwise discipline them, hence, her term “oasis regime”. This concept is essential to her analysis of Sivananda yoga in her 2005 book, *Positioning Yoga*. Her implication is that religious regimes can be used to step outside of the pressures of modernity (2005, 122). For her, practitioners can temporarily escape from the disciplines of their daily lives by attending a yoga class, by going on a “yoga vacation”, or even by travelling to distant parts the world to receive yoga teachings. In this regard, she claims yoga acts as a release valve to the pressures of modern mundane life. In this respect, I would argue that Strauss’s position serves as a counterpoint to Foucault’s perspective, although this is not her explicit intention. Nonetheless, Strauss’ “oasis regime” model rests on assumptions that are decidedly un-Foucauldian. The “oasis regime” runs directly contrary to a Foucauldian insistence on the inescapability of the power structures. Instead, religious
regimes, when seen as “oases”, actually raise the possibility of temporary relief from modernity insofar as they foster places of release and disengagement.

One interesting way of framing this question is to ask whether religious regimes are coextensive with “religions”? Is an institution like the SYVC a unified, systematized disciplinary institution, like Bentham’s panopticon? Or are there multiple, varying and contested disciplines or regimes that can coexist in this institution? From a practical perspective, can a practitioner at the SYVC choose to take on practices A, B and C, while leaving aside D, E and F? If the practitioner can choose her regime at the SYVC, it could be argued that the practice thereby provides her with a degree of disciplinary freedom. I am not arguing that this is generalizable across religious traditions. But perhaps the freedom to choose a religious regime at the SYVC is a means by which the practitioner actively chooses to constitute herself through discipline.

Perhaps it can be argued that this choice of religious discipline is a feature of the particularly modern character of the SYVC. Such an argument rests upon particular assumptions about the personalizing tendencies that are often held to be characteristic of modernity. However, Foucault might disagree with some (though not all) of these assumptions. For example, he argues in DP that, historically, the carceral character of our present institutions is itself a particularly modern phenomenon. In this carceral context, we mistake our personalized disciplines for actual freedom to choose. In this view, the supposed elective nature of religious regimes at the Sivananda Centre are therefore only more minutely elaborated applications of power through a disciplinary apparatus, in this case the SYVC.
Nonetheless, contra Foucault, it is possible to maintain that adopting a religious regime can be an active and effective technique of the practitioner to situate herself socially. From this perspective, one’s social place in the world is somewhat self-determined. The religious regime can be seen as a means of coping with the contemporary world. Following this argument, if a religious regime is acting as a retreat outside of power structures, then a religious regime is not simply an additional discipline, it is an act of taking on a qualitatively different discipline. By submitting to a religious regime, one can change the configuration of disciplines that one is subject to. It could be argued that a SYVC religious regime can be a means of resistance against other disciplines. If religious regimes can be both elective and transformative, it is not a great leap to consider them alternatives and techniques of resistance. In this sense, a religious discipline would be substantially different than other, presumably non-elective disciplines. It could be argued that this religious counter-discipline is therefore emancipatory or liberating from other disciplines to which the devotee is subject.

As I have suggested above, Foucault would probably disagree with this. For Foucault, the social power structures that we feel surrounding us, while dynamic and constantly changing, are inescapable. Even perceived points of resistance, such as an “oasis regime” in Strauss’ sense, ineluctably form a part of the “carceral” power network. For him, there is no point of release, whereby we can stand outside of power to critique it. Hence, there is no possibility of an effective “oasis”. This, as Joseph Rouse observes, is because power is co-constituted by those who support and who resist it (Rouse 109). As for Foucault, “power is everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (qtd. in Rouse 106). There is therefore, despite appearances, no
meaningful choice of religious regimes for practitioners at the SYVC: the disciplines that are practiced there are elaborations of a disciplinary apparatus that spans far beyond any individual religious practice or religious regime.

Situating Foucault’s “carceral” view of religious regimes in opposition to Strauss’ “emancipatory” view is helpful in contrasting their differing perspectives on religion as discipline. Between these two perspectives, I hope to make a convincing argument about what SYVC religious regimes are disciplining. If they are sites of resistance or sites of subjection, we nonetheless need to ask what they are disciplining, and how they enact this discipline?

In this light, what is a religious regime for Foucault? One could suggest that adopting a religious regime may be a perverse desire on the part of the individual for more surveillance and more discipline. Or, more plausibly, we could say that for Foucault, practicing or promoting a religious regime in fact invests that regime with power that is characteristic of broader social regimes. Unintentionally or not, the religious practitioner is reinforcing the social “microphysics” (DP 28) of power by enforcing and submitting to religious disciplines. In brief, by adopting a religious regime, power is exercised through that regime. The regime therefore produces the religious knowledge that is obtained through these practices. Through the application of power through religious discipline, certain types of knowledge are reinforced, and, as Rouse observes, other “errors” or “irrationalities” are suppressed (Rouse 103).

Thus for Foucault, power is inescapable. This is an important and substantial claim. But following Foucault’s argument takes us further: in this inescapable network, knowledge and subjectivity are constructed by the religious regime, just as they would be
constructed by other “carceral” regimes. The self is constituted by the disciplines that maintain his/herself in the social disciplinary network. As Foucault puts it: “Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production (DP 194).”

If the very self is created by social disciplines, that self has no leverage or handle by which to appropriate disciplines for its own ends. The self, as agent, has no effective access to the mechanisms or “microphysics” (DP 28) of power. The individual is shaped by them, rather than being an agent over them. One’s behaviours enact disciplines at the “micro” or personal level, and for Foucault, it would be a mistake to see this as agency.

Indeed, on account of his views on the inescapability of power, Foucault has been accused of being conservative, as well as a cynic. Jürgen Habermas, for example, calls Foucault a “neoconservative” (qtd. in Flynn 35), while Richard Rorty critiques the quietist politics of Foucault’s understanding of personal agency (Rouse 104). In this instance, as in others, the political implications of some aspects of Foucault’s work remain open questions. I will return to this issue below.

In light of the conservatism implied by this inescapable power network, we are justified in questioning the agency of the subject within the “carceral net”. From a Foucauldian perspective, perhaps the crux of the question is who is the subject rather than whether or not the subject has any autonomy or agency. In Foucault’s analysis, any question of the elective nature of religious regimes ultimately dissolves before a more fundamental question of who or what is the subject? Foucault would argue that the
subject herself is constituted by her situatedness within the power network. He would not see “agency” as the right lens with which to approach this problem.

In Foucault’s analysis, the supposed elective nature of religious regimes hypothesized above disappears. The disciplines that manipulate the subject are found to be prior to the subject’s own sense of self. The self becomes a much more limited agent. Moreover, religious regimes become a less well-defined category, and instead blur into the broad network of disciplines that Foucault ultimately concerns himself with.

This Foucauldian deflection of questions of agency has struck some commentators as problematic. For example, José Merquior argues that “Foucault’s scorn of interests, in his analysis of power, left him without much use for the concept of freedom as personal independence” and that “his conflation of subjectivity and subjection … made a mockery of the idea of freedom as individual autonomy” (117). These are stinging critiques, and this line of criticism has led some of Foucault’s critics to label him a “nihilist” (Prado 2). For these reasons, Merquior finds Foucault’s perspectives on power “as unsatisfactory as his history of punishment and discipline” (118). These critiques will be kept in mind as we proceed with our research. I will return to the political implications of these ideas in Chapter 4.
Chapter 3: Disciplining Madness

Next, let us turn our attention to what it is that religious regimes may be disciplining. We can ask: what behaviours are religious regimes, like those we find at the SYVC, shaping? What phenomena are produced by this discipline? What is being lost or suppressed by the actions of religious discipline? My argument is that religious regimes, like those of the SYVC, can be an alternate way of constituting madness.

In MC, Foucault adamantantly argues that the distinction between madness and sanity, however forcefully experienced, is a product of historical circumstance. The age in which we find ourselves, with the *epistemes*\(^8\) that govern it, create our experiences and understandings of madness. This would mean that our experiences of madness are not historically generalizable; they are contingent upon our present conceptions. Following from this argument, past experiences and understandings of madness would have been different from those we know today. Foucault unearths some of these past experiences through what he calls his “archaeological” methodology.

Foucault argues that historical (and present day) conceptions of madness play out amid knowledge/power relationships that are socially pervasive and therefore not exhaustively analyzable. For him, our role as historians is to find where these conceptions have shifted, and where breaks in our ways of knowing have occurred.

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\(^8\) Foucault defines an episteme as “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences and possibly formalized systems. ... The episteme is not a form of knowledge (*connaissance*) or a type of rationality which, crossing the boundaries of the most varied sciences, manifests the sovereign unity of a subject, a spirit, or a period; it is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when on analyses them at the level of discursive regularities” (qtd. in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 18). For further discussion of *epistemes*, see Canguilhem, 76.
discontinuities point to changes in power/knowledge that allow us to trace the development of our understandings and of our current institutions.

In MC, Foucault traces a narrative (he would call it an “archaeology”) of madness and how it was experienced in Europe from the Middle Ages up until the modern period. However, such a project assumes that there is some sort of underlying common experience of madness that is at the root of these historical conceptions. His narrative in MC assumes that there is a common story of madness to be told through the different historical periods he is analyzing.

Given the historical changes that Foucault sees in the discourses of madness over time, he assumes an underlying “madness” that must be a pre-discursive experience of some sort. As Foucault puts it in the introduction to MC, we “must try to return to that zero point … at which madness is an undifferentiated experience” (ix). He makes a similar point in his early work Mental Illness and Psychology (1962), where he seeks to regain “madness freed and disalienated, restored in some sense to its original language” (76).

Foucault was widely criticized for this suggestion. For example, Caputo calls such a search for pure origins “phenomenological naïveté” (243). Foucault himself backpedals in his later work, disavowing his earlier position. As Prado puts it, Foucault’s later position is “that archaeology does not attempt to return to some zero point, that it ‘does not imply the search for a beginning’” (Prado 29). Indeed, in his later works, Foucault has a different agenda. In these texts, as Caputo puts it, he is not trying to rediscover some particular “identity” that was being repressed, but that he is trying to uncover a “difference” that is being repressed (256).
The idea of pre-discursive “difference” implies not only a diverse range of lived human experiences (including experiences of madness), but also fundamentally diverse sources for those experiences. In other words, in this conception, madness does not arise because there is some fundamental root of “madness”; it arises in discourse as discourse tries to make sense of a diversity of pre-discursive experiences.

I agree with Caputo that the idea of a pre-discursive unity or “zero point” is simplistic, and perhaps not well suited to furthering our analysis. The danger with looking to the “zero point” of madness is that some unspoken concept of madness is still assumed. Even if it is left implicit and not verbally elaborated, this unspoken idea of the “zero point” of madness casts an unhelpful shadow over subsequent discussion.

Yet to consider the origins of madness as being in pre-discursive “difference” may be more fruitful. We should pause to consider the import of this claim. On the one hand, pre-discursive experiences could presumably be translated discursively into experiences of “madness”, while on the other hand it is conceivable that these pre-discursive experiences could take other configurations, and could also produce other discursive phenomena, which we may know by other names. Caputo interprets this as:

… the idea that there is always something other than or different from the various historical constitutions of human beings, some ‘freedom’ or resistance that is irreducible to the several enframing historical forms of life, some power-to-be-otherwise, some being-otherwise-than-the-present that radically, irreducibly, irrepressibly belongs to us, to what we are.

(256)
It is possible that this freedom to be otherwise, this capacity for difference, when translated into discourse, can lead us toward a more nuanced understanding of “yoga” and “mad” experiences.

What Caputo is arguing above is that difference is ultimately irrepressible. Under the socially pervasive configurations of power that permeate our experience, difference may remain pre-discursive and unexpressed, but that it forms a possibility of being otherwise. Taking Caputo and Foucault a step further, it is possible to say that differently constituted pre-discursive experiences can be posited, not only historically, but also in the present here-and-now. If we take these arguments seriously, we can posit different present enactments of pre-discursive phenomena. Caputo’s irrepressible capacity for difference means that pre-discursive experiences, in various and different configurations, will yield different discourses.

What does it mean to say that pre-discursive experiences can be manifested differently? It means that a religious regime may constitute a set of experiences that may have otherwise been “madness”. In this sense, religious regimes could at times be a way of disciplining what otherwise might be constituted as “mad” experiences. This is possible if we consider “mad” and “religious” realities to be discursive constructions that are pre-discursively constituted by “difference”. The idea of pre-discursive “difference” renders discursive constructions contingent, and takes away any essentialized pre-discursive unity.

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9 If pre-discursive difference is ultimately irrepressible, we could argue that madness, as a product of this difference is also ultimately irrepressible. Perhaps we can speculate that this is why the institutions that have attempted to suppress madness have in the end never wholly succeeded.
From a popular perspective, discursive phenomena we know can appear simple or singular. For example, because madness may seem at first glance to be a fairly intuitive discursive concept: we may feel we have a sense that we know what “madness” means. Perhaps we have a sense of what a “mad” person does or looks like. We think we are able to identify what is “mad”. Perhaps because of its apparent conceptual simplicity, we often falsely assume madness has equally simple roots. Foucault himself makes this mistake in the introduction to MC. The simplicity may be illusory. I argue that the pre-discursive sources of madness may instead be diverse and complex.

It is important to make clear that because we do not have easy access to pre-discursive experiences of madness, the claims we can make are limited. Our analysis must be based on the discursive concepts we have access to. Although flawed, analyses like Foucault’s in MC are a tentative attempt at drawing closer to pre-discursive “madness”. Foucault’s archaeological methodology attempts to uncover links between different discursive conceptions of madness, and thereby point at the pre-discursive experiences underlying them.

Because of the inaccessibility of pre-discursive experiences, our understandings of concepts such as “madness” are only partial. As academics, our perspectives are limited to only the discursive end of madness. We can analyze disciplines, and thereby attempt to understand what is being disciplined. For hypothesized pre-discursive experiences, our access points are greatly limited. Foucault’s contention is that his “archaeological” methodology provides a certain type of insight.

What we do readily have access to are the constitutions of our selves, played out in different iterations, variously constructed by our disciplines. These may not always be
analytically clear, but they are helpfully close at hand. Indeed it is in these constitutions of our selves that Foucault argues that power has a positive content. As Merquior says: “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production” (109). Following Foucault, power produces our realities, and it does so through the panopticon of disciplines that make up the “carceral net” of our contemporary society. It is these disciplines that construct our selves.

Let’s take a moment to consider the self, produced in discourse. Following Foucault, the practitioner’s self is constituted by discipline. His or her experience is produced by the effects of discipline on his or her self. Foucault speaks of the “soul” (DP 29-30), as a construction of disciplinary forces. I find the choice of the word “soul” an odd one, but the point is well taken. Despite the oddness of this vocabulary, I think Foucault is deliberately and provocatively using the word “soul” to cut at the core of our perceived self-identities. He is arguing that our most fundamental selves are the products of discipline. As Prado puts it, this soul is “a product of precisely those [disciplinary] techniques that supposedly only shape it.” (Prado 55). Thus, to paraphrase Prado: rather than the soul being prior to discourse, the soul emerges in discourse (Prado 55). Or in the words of Foucault himself: “The man described for us … is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. …The soul is the effect and instrument

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10 The French word being used by Foucault is âme, which he is apparently drawing from the work of 18th century philosopher Gabriel de Mably.
of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body” (DP 30). His argument here is that we are the prisoners of our discourses.11

Thus, the self that is constituted by yoga disciplines at the SYVC is also created by those disciplines. The disciplines that are produced at the SYVC are both similar (and complementary) to those of other “carceral” institutions, and at a societal level can be seen as part of the “carceral net”. But at an individual level, SYVC yoga disciplines ultimately construct each individual in a unique way. This is what Foucault had in mind when he spoke of the “microphysics” (DP 28) of power. In Chapter 5 I will look at a couple of SYVC disciplinary objects and practices more closely, with the intention of demonstrating how yoga discipline functions at a “micro” level.

We could make parallel arguments about selves that are constituted by other disciplines. For example, the “mad” self is constituted by the disciplines of madness, such as psychiatric disciplines or asylum disciplines, among others. A historical analysis of these “mad” disciplines is at the heart of Foucault’s MC. This “mad” self is thereby constituted in apparently different ways than, for example, the yogic self. But is the “mad” self substantially different from the “yogic” self? Are these different disciplinary constitutions in fact discrete, non-overlapping, philosophically sound categories? I argue that their apparent difference is not as substantial as it may initially appear.

11 If we look at yoga as a Foucauldian discourse, it is a discipline that controls our behaviours and make us docile. It entraps us through discipline and this disciplines creates our subjectivity. Contra Foucault, from an emic SYVC perspective, it can be argued that yoga is a way out of discourse through discipline. In this light, the practices are a tool for release from bondage. This latter might be called a emancipatory perspective on yoga. In this dilemma of whether yoga is liberating or not hinges on the question of whether yoga practices undo discourses, or whether these practices construct them.
My efforts in Chapter 5 notwithstanding, our analysis of “mad” and “yogic” disciplines is somewhat impeded by the fact that the mechanisms by which selves are constructed by disciplines are largely opaque. For the most part, we cannot say how our pre-discursive experiences are disciplined. In some ways Foucault’s work obfuscates rather than clarifies. This is because when he traces the histories of present institutions, in DP, MC, as well as in Birth of the Clinic (BC) (1973), he addresses different disciplines as though they were discrete objects of study. This is problematic. His methodological approach (the analysis of existing institutions) and his medium (the monograph) reinforce the distinct, separate character of different types of discipline. This method artificially creates discrete categories. Madness, discipline and medicine are seen in MC, DP and BC respectively as discrete subjects for analysis. Obviously this division is a discursive one. But the implication of studying these topics as though they were separate from one another leaves intact the assumption that this division reflects a pre-discursive division.

I argue that “mad” disciplines and “yoga” are parallel manifestations of pre-discursive difference. Pre-discursively, they are not discrete from one another. They are only discrete in their discursive formulation. Following Caputo, we can say that there is always a radical, unexplored difference that is possible: we could always be constituted otherwise. It is almost a platitude to say that given different circumstances our “souls” (Foucault’s word) could have been the product of entirely different disciplinary techniques. This is my point about yoga: it is a disciplinary phenomenon that could have been manifested otherwise. It could have been manifested as madness. June McDaniel makes a similar suggestion in her book The Madness of the Saints (1989).
My argument is that yoga, to a greater or lesser degree, can be a discursive manifestation of what may have otherwise been “madness”. This is possible because yoga is a discipline. And for Foucault, disciplines construct the self. I have argued that yoga serves a carceral function; I further maintain that this carceral function allows yoga disciplines to control “mad” experiences. Caputo’s notion of pre-discursive “difference” implies that “yoga” and “madness” are neither unitary phenomena, nor discrete ones. Their separation is only a discursive one. Pre-discursively we have no means to distinguish between one and the other. The significance of this is that pre-discursive phenomena may be manifested and controlled by diverse discursive constructions. What may have been “madness” may be elaborated and controlled as “yoga”. Of course other relationships are also possible.

There is a gap in this analysis, which we can situate in the pre-discursive. We can hypothesize pre-discursive origins of madness and we can describe the discursive disciplines of yoga that constitute the subject, but how do we move from former to the latter? Here we run up against the limits of discourse. There are arguments to be made that the pre-discursive remains fundamentally inaccessible. But Foucault’s work labours against such intellectual pessimisms. He aims to push against the limits of the discursive to glean insights about how the self is constituted.

My thesis on SYVC yoga as a manifestation of madness is therefore not so much an argument, as a suggestion of perspective. It is an attempt to consider the difficulty of tracing the roots of the phenomena of “madness”. It is also an attempt to consider how madness could be otherwise. I argue the SYVC yoga is an excellent example of how disciplines that we take for granted can be alternate constructions of phenomena like
madness. I concur with Foucault that “madness” as it is commonly known is a contingent and constructed phenomenon. I ask that rather than limiting ourselves to common views of “madness”, I think we need to ask “how else can these phenomena be manifested?” I think that when we do this, we see how other disciplines also construct the self, using entirely different vocabularies. Foucault maintains that disciplines construct the self. My contention is that madness can be otherwise constructed by such disciplines as religious regimes. In Chapter 5, I will illustrate this with examples from the SYVC. But first, Chapter 4 will consider some criticisms of a Foucauldian framework.
Chapter 4: Situating Foucault

Given that our analysis is heavily indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, it matters where we situate Foucault and his ideas. Criticism by his contemporaries and those who subsequently commented on his work provide important perspective. Our scholarship would be shortsighted if we did not consider this context. Those who have contextualized his work have provided insights, but they have also obscured. In this chapter I hope to distinguish between some helpful attempts at contextualization and those that are less than helpful. As we will see below, some critiques that are helpful in enhancing our understanding of Foucault’s work also raise important problems for our analysis. And while I cannot feasibly provide a comprehensive critique of Foucauldian ideas or methods here, I can point to the relative successes (or failures) of different critical approaches to his work. I hope that by suggesting some fruitful avenues of critique, I can problematize aspects of Foucault’s theories. This problematization is intended to nuance and clarify our use of his ideas.

To start, we can ask: how has Foucault’s work been historicized, classified, and understood? Foucault’s work has been classified in a philosophical tradition, scholars have traced his intellectual histories, and his thought has been situated in social histories. I find each of these approaches to be inadequate in some way. The reason these approaches are inadequate is that none of them reach to the heart of Foucault’s critiques of modern social institutions. While contextualization of his thought (through history writing, etc.) is important, it is necessary to ask: are the contextualizations addressing the most important aspects of his critiques? If they are not, what is their value in aiding our understanding of Foucault’s work? I argue below that historicizing Foucault, while
unhelpful in many attempts, can also sometimes provides important perspectives on his politics, as well as on his historiographic methods.

One attempt to contextualize Foucault has been to situate him philosophically in a tradition. In the anglophone world, this is usually done by situating him in a “Continental” style or method. Some Anglophone authors, like C. G. Prado, have attempted a rapprochement of Foucault’s “Continental” intellectual influences with the prevailing concerns of anglo “analytic” philosophy. Such an effort is said to be necessary because “Foucault remains intellectually distant to most analytic philosophers, not only because he is outside their tradition but because they tend to believe his writings belong to a tradition the standards and methods of which fall short of their own” (Prado 2). In an attempt to be helpful, Prado styles his own work as a bridge to make Foucault understandable to the “analytical” tradition. Whether Prado is effective in his attempt at bridging, or whether the task itself is well conceived, is open to question.

This type of classification is problematic for a couple of reasons. At a very basic level, when we draw philosophical divisions between French/“Continental” traditions and anglo/“analytic” traditions, we risk essentializing differences. Examples of essentializing classifications, such as Clare O’Farrell’s, are not helpful. Beyond this, we can ask if broad philosophical classifications ("schools", “traditions”, etc.) are helpful in understanding the work of a particular philosopher. Does labeling Foucault as “Continental” help us understand his work in any way beyond the most superficial gloss? I argue that it does not.

Secondly, we can situate Foucault in a specific intellectual lineage. Irrespective of the philosophical categories that authors like Prado use, a huge diversity of influences can
nonetheless be claimed as sources for Foucault’s thought. Indeed, authors who attempt such intellectual lineages have produced quite different stables of sources. Here, I give three examples with varying attributions for Foucault’s intellectual lineage:

Michael Mahon argues “Foucault saw himself in the tradition that extends from Hegel through Nietzsche and Max Weber to the Frankfurt School and more generally the tradition of anti-Platonism” (ix). Dreyfus and Rabinow, in their widely cited work, largely agree with this position (xxvi). Mahon’s claim is that reading Nietzsche precipitated Foucault’s intellectual journey (2). Mahon makes this principally Nietzschean heritage the backbone of his book: *Foucault’s Nietzschean Genealogy* (1992). Heading in another direction, J. G. Merquior makes different conclusions. While acknowledging Nietzsche, he situates Foucault in the “far staider inquiries” of Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre (12). Merquior situates these authors in a “Gallic philosophy in the twentieth century…one is tempted to call ‘litero-philosophy’” (12). Lastly, in another example, John S. Ransom turns to Heidegger, Kant and Nietzsche as those who most influenced Foucault (3-9). He sees these sources as the intellectual heritage that made Foucault’s critique possible. Through these examples, we can see a typically wide diversity of purported influences for Foucault.

My point here is that each of these authors provides a substantially different list of Foucault’s purported influences. What are we to make of this diversity of sources for Foucault’s thought? The examples above are representative of the lack of consensus among critics tracing his intellectual history. Most commentators would agree that he was influenced by Nietzsche, but their intellectual histories diverge from there. My point is
that intellectual history writing, while sometimes insightful, can be divergent to the point
of muddying our understanding of Foucault, rather than clarifying it.

Moreover, Foucault engages and interprets several major ideas within hegemonic
traditions of Western intellectual history. In this context our task of tracing influences and
writing intellectual histories becomes increasingly difficult and problematic. The breadth
of his arguments lie within very well-trodden, well-rehearsed, albeit broad field of
hegemonic Western ideas, and make the permutations of possible intellectual histories of
his work almost endless. Indeed, many book-length studies like those mentioned above
have added to this chorus. I will not attempt to add to this body of work here. My point,
instead, is to question the value of this historicization. These intellectual histories situate
Foucault, but when we attempt to apply his concepts, their value is often tangential and
limited.

Thirdly, instead of intellectual lineages, critics of Foucault have also advanced
social historical theories as to the origins of his ideas. For example, both Merquior and
O’Farrell posit an increased post-war interest among French intellectuals in disciplines of
the human sciences. For Merquior, French postwar philosophy was thrown “into
considerable disarray” (12) by the historical forces of World War II, and academics
coming of age at that time were drawn toward anthropology, linguistics and history as a
means “to regain vitality *by annexing new contents*” for philosophy (13, emphasis in the
original). O’Farrell observes a similar phenomenon, which he sees as arising out of a
post-war disillusionment with communism in France. For O’Farrell, growing disgust with
Stalinism led to desires for intellectual renewal, resulting in emerging academics having
new interests in “‘things’ and ‘systems’ rather than ‘Man’ and the problems of the
‘subject’” (6). These approaches frame Foucault’s study in more conventional historical terms, rather than in the language of intellectual history.

In one sense, this historical preoccupation on the part of authors such as Merquior and O’Farrell is consistent with Foucault’s own historical preoccupations. But we need to be clear that Foucault would not accept having his histories measured by the yardstick of their histories. From his perspective, social histories such as those just mentioned are helpful insofar as they contribute to the work of unmasking and challenging systems of thought. From this perspective, relaying a historical narrative is not particularly helpful in itself. Historicizing is helpful only when it takes apart our histories. Foucault’s “histories of the present” are an analytical dismemberment of conventional historical narratives, with the aim of showing how these narratives have constructed our present institutions.

I think it is important to point out that Foucault would likely reject all three of the classificatory approaches above. His dissatisfaction with the conventions of classification, history, and intellectual history are quite evident. Foucault asked that we use his theories like destructive tools: like “Molotov cocktails, or minefields” (qtd. in Merquior 118). In this respect, their most important feature is what they can destroy. Foucault’s analyses provide potent disruptions of ideas like “madness” and “discipline”. For this reason, Merquior describes the Foucault as a “counter-historian” and as an “anti-historian” (26). The social and intellectual histories described above are not “Molotov cocktails, or minefields”; for the most part, they construct discourses about Foucault, rather than take them apart. Nor do these social and intellectual histories help us with our concern here of moving closer to the pre-discursive origins of contemporary disciplines. For these reasons, I suspect Foucault would be critical of such approaches.
In the spirit of Foucault, our tools for history writing history need to be as contingent as the ideas or concepts that we are analyzing. In this sense, the conventional historicist assumptions are problematic. While it may make sense, from some perspectives, to situate Foucault in relationship to his contemporaries and his context, from Foucault’s perspective many such studies fail to undo the discourses of the past and of the present. In failing to do so, some important discourses are implicitly reified rather than taken apart. Foucault would ask of our histories that we undo the discourses that classify him.

Yet there are occasions where criticisms of Foucault’s works have proved more critically incisive than many of the aforementioned broad claims of intellectual and social history. This is apparent when look in a focused way at questions of his politics and methodology. Indeed, many scholars have done this type of analysis, sometimes reacting strongly to Foucault’s work. I will consider responses both to the politics of his ideas, as well to the quality of his historical scholarship.

Foucault’s work is frequently politically ambiguous and, as a result, he has been portrayed as working under any number of political banners. Such portrayals have ranged from active co-option of his work for partisan purposes, to accusations of all manner of problematic politics. I have already mentioned Habermas’ and Rorty’s accusations of “conservatism”. Foucault himself seems to delight in these classifications of his work. He writes:

I think I have in fact been situated in most of the squares on the political checkerboard … as an anarchist, leftist, ostentatious or disguised Marxist, nihilist, explicit or secret anti-Marxist, technocrat in the service of Gaullism,
new liberal, etc. … None of these descriptions is important by itself; taken together, on the other hand, it means something. And I must admit that I rather like what they mean. It’s true that I prefer not to identify myself and that I’m amused by the diversity of the ways that I’ve been judged and classified.

(Qtd. in O’Farrell viii)

The labeling of Foucault that is implied in these classifications that he describes further speaks to the desire of critics to put Foucault into intellectual boxes, political or otherwise. Foucault actively resisted such perceived pigeonholing. His refusal to commit himself undoubtedly drew him further critiques, but it has also undoubtedly facilitated the wide applicability of his work by politically diverse scholars.

Prado also describes Foucault relishing such accusations, saying Foucault “was ‘very proud’ that some thought him dangerous for being, in their view, ‘an irrationalist, a nihilist’” (1-2). Rorty is cited again as claiming “Foucault had a ‘dangerous’ influence on the American political left, prompting ‘disengagement’” (Prado 9). The idea that his views could be “dangerous” is an interesting one, and worth unpacking, although this is beyond the scope of this paper. Perhaps for now we can point to the perceived dangers of a perceived relativism in Foucault, which was, and is, sometimes seen as a threat by some of his readers.

Foucault’s debatable political engagement can be read from a wide range of critical perspectives. Although I questioned the utility of intellectual histories above, some critics’ histories of Foucault may be useful to contextualize some of Foucault’s political claims. For example, O’Farrell, while she does not contest the political
ambiguity of Foucault, situates his position in a broader de-politicization of French intellectuals in the late 1950s (5-6). This analysis taps into a deeper, historically minded politicization of Foucault’s work and how Foucault engaged with his contemporaries politically.

While I argued above that O’Farrell’s style of social history is not helpful in contributing to our understanding of Foucault’s histories, it is perhaps helpful in the contextualization of his politics. As Foucault is reticent to situate himself politically, we need to look at his writings in their historical context to grasp their political import. Social histories are able to set this context in a helpful way. Where these social histories fail at addressing the thrust of his critiques, they succeed at situating him socially.

However, this is a problematic distinction. It is of course difficult to separate Foucault’s politics from his theories as though they were separate categories. To see where such a separation breaks down, consider the claim of Dreyfus and Rabinow that situates Foucault’s work in the 1960s as operating “under the influence of the structuralist enthusiasm sweeping Paris” (16). Although it may be a stretch to argue that structuralism is a “politic”, what is clear is that Foucault was being influenced by his contemporaries’ ideologies. The distinction I make is between measuring his analyses with conventional historical analysis (Foucault would have found this problematic), and contextualizing his work in his social or political environs (which Foucault may have found amusing, but which I argue is both necessary and helpful).

Foucault’s work, in both MC and in DP, has been seen as historiographically problematic as well. Pointed, sustained criticism of Foucault’s history writing has come from many quarters. A brief and partial list of some scholars who have criticized
Foucault’s historical method includes: Andrew Scull, H.C. Erik Midelfort, and Peter Sedgwick on MC; Pieter Spierenburg and Jacques Léonard on DP (Merquior 27-29 and 101-103). These are particularly poignant critiques because both MC and DP lean substantially on historical arguments. Foucault’s conclusions about the evolution of concepts like “madness” and “discipline” rely heavily on his historical characterizations.

It may be argued that the main point of Foucault’s “histories of the present” lie in his critique of contemporary institutions, and that questionable historical details do not detract from his arguments to any great extent. However, his arguments in DP and MC are nonetheless histories of a sort. As Merquior puts it, a “presentist” history “does not release the historian from empirical duties to the data” (26). I think we therefore have to take seriously the sustained critique that Foucault’s history writing has received. If his historical analyses are called into question, his concepts of “madness” and “discipline” are correspondingly conceptually weakened. If we argue, as we did above, that our critiques are just as contingent as our subjects of analysis, we need to make sure that these critiques are accurate critiques. Foucault, of course, does not provide any other universal, teleological or non-contingent leg to stand on.

Thus, while some criticisms of Foucault lead us into unhelpful social and intellectual historical methodologies, other criticisms of Foucault reveal important and significant problems with his theories.

We need to ask: are the politics of Foucauldian concepts, such as “discipline” or “power”, tinted with cynicism or nihilism? We need to be frank: is this a problem? Of course, answering such questions is political in turn. But if we reject his analysis of power for political reasons or political commitments, the entire foregoing analysis is
called into question. My intention is not to make such a political claim, but rather to foreground the fragility of this analysis in the face of political criticism.

My approach has been largely to set Foucault in opposition to “emancipatory” views of yoga, such as that of Strauss or that of the SYVC. In this regard, I have portrayed Foucault, like Sivananda himself, as mostly quietist or apolitical. My reason for this is that my concern is primarily with the pre-discursive origins of madness and yoga. Politics, as a very obviously discursive practice, is in some sense very distant from the pre-discursive. Therefore, using Foucault as a tool to move toward the pre-discursive could be seen as a step away from politics. Whether this is ultimately politically tenable is a complicated question, and open to contention.

Moreover, are the well-documented weaknesses in Foucault’s history-writing a reason to discount his contributions to the history of madness or discipline? This, too, is not a question that we will succeed at answering entirely here. My approach in this paper is not historical and therefore cannot address detailed historiographic issues directly. However, it is important to raise such issues and problems, and to keep them in mind.
Chapter 5: The objects

Lastly, in this chapter, I intend to consider a couple of objects that illustrate the points I made above regarding yoga, discipline and madness. My intention is to
show how these practical yoga objects can be seen in Foucauldian terms to
discipline the practitioner, and to discipline madness. These are pictured above.
They are both objects that are used regularly in practice by devotees at the SYVC.

This image of a religious diary, the first portion of which is shown in fig. 2
above, is from an online reproduction of the religious diary that appears in the book
Sadhana: a textbook of the psychology and practice of techniques to spiritual
perfection (2010) by Swami Sivananda. The diary is meant as a very detailed and
extensive enumeration of the practitioner’s religious practices. The entries in the
diary describe the devotee’s day in great detail. There are 27 daily items altogether,
with concerns ranging from celibacy, to chanting, to charity. In enumerating these
intended practices, the diary fairly clearly presents an implied paradigm or model
for an ideal day of religious practice. In this way, it contributes to the regimenting of
one’s body, one’s mind, and how one spends one’s time throughout the day.

Obviously there is an agenda of observation and surveillance here, even if it
is self-administered. There is a desire for radical transparency implicit in this object
and its use. Foucauldian concepts of discipline are immediately discernable in the
practice that this diary implies. We can see overtones of panopticism, regimentation
and control, among other Foucauldian themes.

Interestingly, some courses at the SYVC in Toronto include maintaining the
diary daily, and sharing the results with one’s spiritual teachers and peers, as part of
the curriculum. In this way, it is actively used as a pedagogical tool in these classes.

12 According to Swami Sadasivananda at the New York SYVC, this diary has also
appeared in numerous other books by Swami Sivananda (in conversation, June 19,
2013).
In this regard it serves a dual disciplinary function: it is pedagogical discipline as well as personal, introspective discipline. Through sharing the diary, discipline is reinforced socially.

Perhaps even more importantly, through maintaining the diary earnestly, the practitioner disciplines him/herself directly, subjectively and personally. Maintaining the diary subjects him/herself to the implied disciplinary regime with more or less intensity. The practitioner is subject to this “whip for goading the mind toward righteousness”, to greater or lesser degrees.

From an emic perspective, the purpose of the diary is purity. The practitioner is intending to purify his or her life through strict regimentation. Such purification is seen as being an important step toward religious realization and emancipation from suffering in the Sivananda tradition. In this case, the process of striving for purity is, I would argue, a disciplinary one in Foucault’s sense.

Purity in SYVC practice is not easily obtained. To the non-practitioner or the casual practitioner, twenty-seven daily religious practices might seem like a lot. The ideal is a rigorous one. It would be a rare devotee who could perfect this religious regime. But the discipline of the regime is not only to be found in its ideal enactment. The discipline of the regime can be felt in the person who considers taking on even a fraction of this discipline. A practitioner may perhaps think: “maybe I should do kirtan more often”. Irrespective of whether they indeed do this kirtan, their experience is disciplined, their regime is defined, and for Foucault, their subjectivity is created.
Similarly, the *japa mālā* shown in *fig. 3* can also be seen as an object of discipline. Indeed, there is an intimacy to this disciplinary apparatus that is comparable, but different than that of the diary. The *japa mālā* is meant to be kept in proximity to the body. It is intended to be in hand during chanting, and it is also intended to be worn around the neck or the wrist at other times. It is therefore a discipline that is ubiquitous throughout the day. The *japa mālā* is an object that has quotidian and pervasive influence through its proximity to the body.

The practitioner who wears a *japa mālā*, or keeps it somewhere significant, or in fact uses it for *japa*, is subjecting herself to a religious discipline. The proximity of the beads to the person reminds her of her religious discipline. The practitioner’s yoga practice is brought to mind by looking at or touching the *japa mālā* beads. This, in itself, is disciplinary. The discipline is made even more explicit by using the beads for the practice of *japa*.

My point is that these objects structure experience. For example, the religious diary is a prescriptive template for quotidian religious practice. It implies an ideal practice to which the devotee can aspire. The beads serve as a physical reminder to practice. This structuring is a very explicit formulation of a religious regime, and as such contributes to the construction of a discursive religious world. The object, whether the diary, or beads, or other tool, discursively formulates Sivananda religious disciplines. My question throughout this paper has been: what are these discursive practices constructing and controlling? Looking to these objects can help us answer that question.
Disciplinary objects at the SYVC, such as the two examples above, serve to construct the subjective experiences of practitioners. The self, or “soul” in Foucault’s sense, is disciplined through mechanisms such as those implicit in the objects above. The disciplining of the body, through objects and practices, creates the subjectivity and experience of SYVC practice. Discipline not only creates the practice, but it creates the practitioner. The disciplinary objects can therefore be seen as constructing experiences and producing discursive religious practices. Prediscursively, these experiences would have been characterized by difference. They could have been constituted otherwise. But the disciplinary objects and practices of the SYVC have constituted them as yoga.

These examples of disciplinary objects at the SYVC are particularly illustrative of yoga as discipline. They point to a significant concern among SYVC practitioners with yoga as disciplinary practices. This concern can be seen in these objects in particular, but also across a broader range of practices at the SYVC. Perhaps this is evident at the SYVC because the “religious regime” at the SYVC is notably in the foreground of the Centre’s practice.
Conclusion

The recent rise of yoga in contemporary North American society is undeniable. The transnational, North American and Indian origins of organizations like the SYVC have produced unique exercise innovations and religious innovations. Yoga has developed novel practices and perspectives, as well as new institutions. We should be cognizant of the modernity and transnationalism of yoga in North America. It is important to address the SYVC as a modern institution.

The diversity of modern yoga practices and practitioners is interesting and worthy of study, but my focus is on another type of diversity. Indeed, my interest is in the diversity of SYVC yoga at a more fundamental level. My argument is that yoga draws on a pre-discursive “difference”, in Caputo’s sense. This difference is the possibility of our selves to be constituted otherwise. For Caputo, as for Foucault, difference is prior to discourse, and for him, this points to the ultimate irrepressibility of difference.

But difference is nonetheless disciplined. Pre-discursive experiences are disciplined by modern institutions like the SYVC. According to Foucault, in the modern world, it is through discipline that subjectivity is created, and discursive disciplinary forms like “yoga” are established. Controlling “difference” by discursively constructing disciplinary regimes demonstrates Foucauldian “power” in action. The subject is controlled and ultimately created by the disciplines that shape his/her experience. SYVC yoga is, in this sense, a modern disciplinary institution.
In this way, SYVC is “carceral”. It is part of the modern disciplinary network that exercises control through social institutions. These are socially elaborated in great detail: even down to a minute level, we experience the “microphysics” of power. According to Foucault, these “microphysics” dictate our subjection in elaborate detail. In his view, our disciplines are not elected, but are determined by a power network that fully permeates our subjectivity. Madness and yoga, while apparent different, are only different elaborations of disciplinary power being exercised by modern institutions. Discursively, they are constructed in different but parallel carceral institutions. Pre-discursively, they are undistinguished from each other in difference.

In a sense we are caught between Caputo’s optimism of irrepressible difference and Foucault’s apparent pessimism of inescapable power. But by following Foucault’s archaeological methodology, by looking for shifts and breaks in discourse, we can see moments when the underpinnings and transitions of power become visible. History writing, in Foucault’s sense, takes apart discourses and offers insights into how they shape our subjectivity. We are given moments of insight into the construction of yoga or madness. While this does not give us access to any experience of pre-discursive difference, we are reminded that we are constructed by our disciplines, and that ultimately, we do have the capacity to be otherwise.
Bibliography


