

DECOLONIZING YOGA:  
AUTHENTICITY NARRATIVES, SOCIAL FEELINGS  
& SUBVERSION IN MODERN POSTURAL YOGA

by

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B.A., Naropa University, 2012

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of the University of Colorado  
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Religious Studies  
2015

This thesis entitled:  
Decolonizing Yoga: Authenticity Narratives, Social Feelings  
& Subversion in Modern Postural Yoga  
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Decolonizing Yoga: Authenticity Narratives, Social Feelings  
& Subversion in Modern Postural Yoga  
Thesis directed by Associate Professor Loriliai Biernacki

**Abstract:**

This thesis works to identify the ways in which experiences are mediated through established, culturally-intelligible discourses of “authenticity,” by discussing how the blog *Decolonizing Yoga (DCY)* creates new models for “authentic” yoga subjectivity informed by feminist ethical principles. By identifying and analyzing articulations of embodied experiences on the *DCY* blog, as they appear in ways that reference broader “authenticity discourses,” this study highlights how feelings and emotional affect influence the shape and meaning of the “authentic” in modern yoga, and discusses the implications for progressive renderings of “authenticity” within modern yoga culture and for its future study. This thesis develops the concept of “affective-imaginaries” to show how established histories and visual representations affect how modern yoga practitioners understand themselves and their experiences practicing yoga. Through a close reading of the *DCY* blog, this thesis comes to the conclusion that *DCY* does not merely contest dominant affective-imaginative associations but is also productive of new ones; towards which yoga practitioners can orient themselves and through which they can identify.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the 23rd Annual Yoga Journal Conference at San Francisco's Hyatt Hotel in 2013, a collective of yoga practitioners found themselves disgruntled with the conference's choice of venue, as hotel employees had been in the midst of a long term strike in protest of poor working conditions and low wages. This constituted, the yoga practitioners proclaimed, a serious affront to the very ethical values that yoga espouses.<sup>1</sup>

Unite Here, a union and advocacy group for hotel and food service workers in the United States and Canada, initiated contact with *Yoga Journal Magazine*, host of the Yoga Journal Conference, as early as July 2012 to inform them of the impending boycott and to urge them to find a new venue for their upcoming event. When *Yoga Journal* proved non-responsive to Unite Here's communications, Unite Here began reaching out individual yoga practitioners and studios in the San Francisco Bay area. Their communication was met with varied responses. A spokesperson for Unite Here reported:

It's been a mixed bag. Some people view their life and practice of yoga in a spiritual sense, beyond the physical aspects, and I feel those folks have heard us out and shown sympathy and compassion for the workers. Then there's another whole sect of people in the yoga community who seem to be totally unphased by the struggles of the workers and their families. They just seem to be into their yoga. It's hard to generalize: some people have been really awesome, and then others that are outright hostile to the idea of workers standing up for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roseanne, "Yoga Journal ignores hyatt boycott: san francisco yoga conference to proceed as normal," *it's all yoga baby*, January 15, 2013, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.itsallyogababy.com/yoga-journal-ignores-hyatt-boycott-san-francisco-yoga-conference-to-proceed-as-normal/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Some yoga practitioners joined forces with the striking Hyatt employees (some of whom identify as yoga practitioners themselves), unions, and community organizations in the boycott against the hotel by staging a rally in front of the Hyatt hotel during the Yoga Journal Conference, and creating the Facebook event “I Pledge Not to Attend or Teach at the 2014 Yoga Journal Conference if the Boycott Continues,” which 340 people virtually “attended.”<sup>3</sup> Posts on the Facebook event page include quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and updates from the Unitarian Universalist Association, among other religious groups, who joined in the boycott against the hotel. In this way, these yoga practitioner-protestors linked modern interpretations of yogic ethics and spirituality with social justice advocacy.

The notion that yoga practice *should* be ethical comes most directly from Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*, a text which is “accorded the virtual status of revealed scripture” within modern yoga culture.<sup>4</sup> Offering a list of ethical precepts (the *yama*-s and *niyama*-s) the *Yogasūtra* makes basic claims for inter and intra personal conduct central to the “authentic” practice of yoga.<sup>5</sup> For example, Kenneth Liberman discusses how modern formulations of authenticity are constructed around the ethics prescribed in the *Yogasūtra*.<sup>6</sup> According to Liberman, these “basic moral

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<sup>3</sup> *Decolonizing Yoga*, “About,” accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/about-2/>; Roseanne, “yoga journal ignores hyatt boycott: san francisco yoga conference to proceed as normal,” *it’s all yoga baby*, January 15, 2013, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.itsallyogababy.com/yoga-journal-ignores-hyatt-boycott-san-francisco-yoga-conference-to-proceed-as-normal/>; Facebook event “I Pledge Not to Attend or Teach at the 2014 Yoga Journal Conference if the Boycott Continues,” “*Decolonizing Yoga*” Facebook page, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.facebook.com/events/449818455071581/>.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Singleton “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga,” in *Yoga in the Modern World Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jane Byrne (New York: Routledge, 2008), 78.

<sup>5</sup> According to the *Yogasūtra* 2.3, *yama*-s are: *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *aparigraha* (non-grasping, non-possessiveness). The *niyama*-s (sūtra 2.32) are: *śauca* (purity, cleanliness), *santoṣa* (contentment), *tapas* (discipline), *svādhyāya* (study), *īśvarapranidhāna* (surrender to supreme reality).

Kenneth Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Haṭha Yoga,” in *Yoga in the Modern World Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jane Byrne, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 111-113.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

practices such as honesty, good will, selflessness, and the like,” are the foundations for any yoga practice, premodern or contemporary, “without which,” he claims, “a daily practice cannot be considered to be ‘authentic’ yoga.”<sup>7</sup> While I disagree with Liberman’s insistence on the *yamas* and *niyamas* of Patañjali as objective characteristics of “authenticity” in modern yoga systems, I agree that ethics and sincerity, where one’s actions are aligned with one’s inner feelings of what is “right,” are central to interpretations of the “authentic” in modern yoga popular culture.<sup>8</sup> Given the culturally established connotation of yoga as a practice that entails certain ethical principles, it is not much of a stretch for some members of the transnational yoga community to overlay specifically modern ethics, for example, advocating for social justice, into this already-established framework.

The hotel boycotts precipitated negotiations between the hotel and the union, and eventually the strike ended. Yet the founding of the *Decolonizing Yoga Blog (DCY)* blog in the wake of these events irrevocably maintains this link between feminist ethics and yoga practice as a means for social justice. As an online community, *DCY* endeavors to “highlight the voices of queer people, people of color, disability activists and more in relationship to yoga, spirituality and social justice,” by creating an online collective of modern yoga practitioners concerned with social justice in terms of feminist categories of analysis.<sup>9</sup> Within this virtual space, bloggers discuss their own personal experiences of practicing yoga along with their insights and interpretations of those experiences. In addition to being a blog and social networking

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>8</sup> Russell Cobb, “Introduction,” *The Paradox of Authenticity in a Globalized World*, ed. Russell Cobb (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2-4.

<sup>9</sup> *Decolonizing Yoga*, “About,” accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/about-2/#sthash.ORhL5GP4.dpuf>.



community, *DCY* can also be seen as an online archive, insofar as *DCY* frequently reposts articles first published elsewhere, an uncommon practice among for-profit media spaces. In this way, *DCY* establishes a single virtual location where modern yoga practitioners can access a variety of experiential accounts of yoga practice and yogic ethics that are indexed into feminist categories of analysis.

While *DCY* specifically links feminist ethics with yoga practice more frequently than other mainstream yoga blogs, the insights and interpretations of *DCY* bloggers often align with other discourses and cultural narratives, particularly those of “authenticity.” While a single philosophical definition of “authenticity” remains contested, this study considers Charles Lindholm’s delineation, that there are:

two overlapping modes for characterizing any entity as authentic: genealogical or historical (*origin*) and identity or correspondence (*content*)... these two forms of authenticity are not always compatible nor are both invoked equally in every context but both... are in great demand.<sup>10</sup>

In modern yoga we see these two characteristics of authenticity as claims of yoga’s traceable and knowable history, and that modern yoga practice effects a sense of feeling authentically true or genuine, specifically insofar as these feelings engender a sense of discovering, having discovered, or a promise that one will discover one’s own “true self,” or have an “authentic experience” of one’s self.<sup>11</sup> This study, therefore, is not concerned with determining what schools or practices of yoga are more “authentic,” “true,” or “real” than others. Rather, “authentic,” as it is used here, serves as a category of analysis in order to better understand the ways in which

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authenticity TM* (New York: NYU Press, 2012); Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity*, 2008; Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Hatha Yoga,” 95-111.

modern yoga practitioners in general, and *DCY* bloggers in particular, articulate their experiences of practicing yoga in terms of broader cultural discourses of “authenticity.” In other words, because notions of authenticity are so common within modern yoga popular discourse, tracking these conceptions in the *DCY* blog affords a structure from which to analyze how affirming or re-conceptualizing the meaning of “authentic” can reiterate or dispute the mainstream conceptions from which they derive. Structuring this analysis around “authenticity” serves to identify how mediations of experience through language constitute identity and galvanize activism. According to Lauren Graham’s study of authenticity narratives in modern postural yoga discourse, “authenticity is one of the key pivot points from which media representations and practitioners negotiate the meaning of yoga.”<sup>12</sup> Because the category of “authenticity,” despite its multiple and often overlapping significations, occurs frequently and influentially within modern yoga discourse, analyzing how *DCY* bloggers understand their experiences, themselves, their community, and their activism through lenses of “authenticity” reveals a particularly interesting dimension to the model of modern yoga subjectivity *DCY* constructs — as this formation hinges upon normative discourses, while intending to deviate from them. As Graham insists, “authenticity often becomes an authorizing discourse for particular representations or practices rather than a verifiable fact.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, for *DCY*, what is deemed “authentic” is often grounded in existing cultural narratives, yet simultaneously authorizes new imaginaries of authenticity that deviate from those already established.

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<sup>12</sup> Lauren Christine Graham, “Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga,” in *The Paradox of Authenticity in a Globalized World*, ed. Russell Cobb (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 85.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

### *“Archaic” Authenticity*<sup>14</sup>

The question of authenticity as historical provenance or lineage has long been discussed in yoga scholarship. For instance, Elizabeth De Michelis’s *A History of Modern Yoga*, one of the first works to situate modern yoga as a contemporary religious practice, identifies the rise of the second century text, the *Yogasūtra*, as a “mistake,” insofar as “occultist definitions of yoga have gained enormous ascendancy in Modern Yoga circles because the full authority of the *Yogasūtra* has been mistakenly attributed to them.”<sup>15</sup> According to De Michelis, the framing of “classical” or “authentic” yoga was a project highly influenced by western biomedical, psychological, and transcendentalist discourses, particularly those put forth by the Theosophical Society in the early 20th century.<sup>16</sup> De Michelis uses the term “occultist” to sum up these expectations, and spends a great deal of her book analyzing appearances of these “occultist definitions” of yoga in Swami Vivekananda’s (1894) *Rāja Yoga*. Her work shows how the notion of “authentic” yoga was already, at the time of Vivekananda’s writing, a product of colonial contact and Orientalist scholarship on Hinduism. Similarly, Mark Singleton’s work constructs a genealogy of Orientalist scholarship on the *Yogasūtra*, highlighting important junctures where it influenced, and was influenced by, the emerging Indian nationalist movements during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Singleton’s work establishes a rich historical account of the emergence of the modern category of “classical yoga,” which, he suggests, frequently operates as code for “authentic

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth De Michelis, *The History of Modern Yoga*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), 179.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 177-180.

yoga” in popular discourse; due to the category “classical or authentic” being, as Singleton contends, “in many respects, a product of modernity itself.”<sup>17</sup>

Singleton is likewise suspicious of modern yoga postural practices that claim to be “traditional,” “classical,” or “authentic,” as such.<sup>18</sup> His 2010 book *Yoga Body* contends that sequences of yoga postures (*vināsa*) do not derive from medieval *haṭha* yoga practice manuals nor from ancient practice lineages, as is frequently suggested in popular yoga discourses, but, rather, postural sequences of practice emerged as a result of cultural exchanges during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Singleton convincingly argues that the growing Indian nationalist body-building movement in late colonial India adopted rigorous sequences of bodily postures from the YMCA calisthenics programs, which were then integrated into the cultural imaginary of “authentic” yoga. These new elements of postural practice were gradually naturalized and came to be presented, simply, as how yoga had always been done.<sup>19</sup>

For instance, according to the “official history” of the Ashtanga yoga system founded by Pattabhi Jois, the postural sequence of *sūrya namaskāra* (sun salutation) was given to Jois’ teacher, Krishnamacharya, by Himalayan yoga master Rāmmohan Brahmācāri. Upon Krishnamacharya’s return to India, he reportedly visited a Calcutta library where he discovered and transcribed the text from which the sun salutation practice was derived (the *Yoga Kurunta*). In the years following, the text is said to have been eaten by ants, and Krishnamacharya’s transcription is similarly lost. Singleton’s historical analysis suggests that, instead of deriving

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<sup>17</sup> Singleton says, “Patanjali and the “Classical Yoga” he symbolizes are today pervasively used to underwrite the authenticity of techniques engaged in by modern transnational practitioners... the label “Classical” functions as an affirmation of a technique’s soundness and verifiability.” In “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga,” 91.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-99.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2010), 113-141; Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2015), 119.

from the *Yoga Kurunta* or the *Vedas* (another origin myth popularized by followers of the Ashtanga system of modern yoga), the sun salutation sequence was actually coined by body builder Anand Rao, a late 19th century Indian nationalist. The sequence gained popularity through Krishnamacharya's extensive use and teaching, and the practice was subsequently disseminated by Krishnamacharya's students.<sup>20</sup> Singleton uses the gaps in the sun salutation origin myth to suggest that many of the postural yoga practices that exist today, such as Patthabi Jois' system of Ashtanga yoga, actually arose out of the late colonial period; but, nevertheless, these systems, along with the many others they continue to inspire, frequently continue to be championed as ancient postural practice lineages.<sup>21</sup> While there are medieval Indian texts that document particular yoga poses, Singleton argues that sequences of yoga poses, as they are practiced today, are more aligned with early 20th century Indian bodybuilding and nationalist movements, as influenced by YMCA calisthenics, rhythmic gymnastics, and biomedical and psychological discourses, than with these extant medieval texts.<sup>22</sup>

### *Authentic Self*

The second sense of “authenticity” as in having an “authentic experience” or discovering an “authentic self” remains, in large part, untreated in existing scholarship on modern yoga.

However, four recent articles do introduce it as a new category which might prove valuable to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 113-141.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 177-187; Singleton “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga,” 78-80, 91-92.

<sup>22</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 27-29, 170-174.

future scholarly work.<sup>23</sup> For instance, Kenneth Liberman’s “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Haṭha Yoga,” discusses constructions of authenticity, as historical and affective. Liberman claims that, while there is not one original, “authentic” yoga tradition, authenticity in modern yoga is constructed reflexively, in terms of “what people come to locate and admire.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, “authenticity” according to Liberman is already a value laden conception. In terms of *DCY* bloggers, what is located as admirable are feminist values, underscored by the themes of diversity and inclusion, operating beneath the broader banner of a social justice activism.

Liberman contends that validating the “authentic” in modern yoga communities is a reflexive process. Because there is not one yoga lineage to which people can refer, despite prevalent claims of one monolithic yoga tradition, modern yoga practitioners are left to decipher their own standards of authenticity. These standards of authenticity are usually informed by cultural assumptions regarding the history or tradition of yoga, or are otherwise constructed around modern ethics.<sup>25</sup> Liberman claims that:

self-produced standards are used reflexively to justify the very practices that led to the establishing of the standards... Instead of what is authentic offering some guidance about what one should accept, what one has accepted provides grounding that can authorize itself.<sup>26</sup>

Members of the *DCY* community identify important issues in the headlined “Tabs,” which organize the blog’s content. These are: “Queer/Trans,” “Body Acceptance,” “Race,” “Cultural

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<sup>23</sup> Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Haṭha Yoga,” 97; Graham, “Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga,” 85-100; Klas Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” in *Yoga in the Modern World Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jane Byrne (New York: Routledge, 2008), 119-139; Lars Jørn Langøien, “Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment,” *Approaching Religion* 2, no. 2 (December 2012), 27-37.

<sup>24</sup> Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Haṭha Yoga,” 110.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-109.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

Appropriation,” and, finally, “Feminism.”<sup>27</sup> According to Liberman’s analysis, in the absence of an “authentic offering” from above, which would *a priori* dictate what is valued as “authentic,” what is important and “authentic” within modern yoga practice are values that are already established and reflexively *authenticated*.<sup>28</sup> Lars Jørn Langøien’s anthropological study of Western Ashtanga yoga practitioners in Mysore, India, reveals a similar phenomenon, although Langøien uses a phenomenological approach in analyzing his findings, centering the human body as the nexus for this experience of authenticity. Langøien’s study finds that:

the physicality of the practice is crucial. Through the practice (at least part of) the philosophy of yoga is experienced physically to be true and yoga itself is embodied. That the truth of yoga can’t be understood (intellectually); it has to be felt and experienced (physically); is a common theme among the practitioners.<sup>29</sup>

Liberman’s account of reflexive authenticity is similar to the psychological appeal of authenticity that cultural studies scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser attests to. She claims that authenticity “is a symbolic construct that, even in a cynical age, continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and ourselves... and how we make decisions about how to live our lives.”<sup>30</sup> According to Banet-Weiser, authenticity is what “we *need* to believe” in order to feel that there is something meaningful to life, “that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions.”<sup>31</sup> Because the *DCY* blog indexes experiential accounts of yoga practice, the most common type of reporting on yoga blogs in general, into feminist categories of analysis, this study suggests that the predominant signs of reflexive authenticity in terms of “true

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<sup>27</sup> *Decolonizing Yoga*, “Homepage,” accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/about>.

<sup>28</sup> Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Haṭha Yoga,” 110-111.

<sup>29</sup> Langøien, “Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment,” 32.

<sup>30</sup> Banet-Wiser, *Authentic TM*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

experience” or “authentic self,” are, for members of the *DCY* community, articulated in terms of these feminist values.

### *Affective-Imaginations*

Also highly influential to this study is Klas Nevrin’s “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” as he provides a phenomenological account for the ways discourse and media representations influence yoga practitioners’ experiences of *actually doing* postural yoga practice.<sup>32</sup> Nevrin discusses how attending to heightened awareness of bodily sensations and emotions during yoga practice effect how practitioners develop conceptions of who they are and what yoga is. Nevrin’s work aligns with the approach of this study, insofar as he takes seriously the insistence on exploring the potential of “embodied epistemology” that modern yoga systems so heavily rely on.<sup>33</sup> He says, echoing the concern of Judith Coney, that “without taking embodied experience into consideration, one cannot do full justice to the nature and significance of contemporary yoga.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, Nevrin positions modern yoga practice as embodied and affective, where pre-conceived knowledge of yoga works to contextualize the actual experiences that people practicing yoga have. In order to account for this phenomenon, Nevrin introduces the term “affective-imaginary,” a phrase which both describes the discourses and visual representations that constitute cultural knowledge, while directly referring to the affective relationship between cultural knowledge and individual experience. To his account, emotionality is central. According to Nevrin, within the practice of yoga:

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<sup>32</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 119-139.

<sup>33</sup> Graham, “Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga,” 85.

<sup>34</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 120; Judith Coney, *Sahaja Yoga: socializing processes in an South Asian new religious movement*, (Richmond: Curzon, 1999).



emotionality is involved in a variety of ways, for example, through identification and belonging; through the sharing of experiences between practitioners, what we might view as the production of “emotional histories”; through the use of artifacts (e.g., particular lighting, icons of Hindu deities, incense, music, and so on, which invite for certain emotional responses); or through specific affective-imaginative engagements in yoga practice.<sup>35</sup>

Nevrin details “affective-imaginative engagements” such as music, sound and practice atmosphere, as well as bodily techniques which, he claims, are already “emotionally marked actions” due to the bodily process of kinesthesia, which is discussed in more detail later in this introduction.<sup>36</sup> Nevrin grounds his point by discussing the gestural performance of yogic sun salutations done in a “devotional style, directed toward an imagined other, such as “‘the sun’ or ‘God,’” which, he claims, elicits a different experiential effect than sun salutations done with attention placed on alignment or on simply experiencing the body itself.<sup>37</sup> Despite there being no observable difference in the actual gestural movements between these two types of sun salutation practices, Nevrin draws attention to their dissimilar “affective-imaginative engagement” which is, according to Nevrin, fundamental to how one perceives yoga and perceives of oneself as a practitioner of yoga.<sup>38</sup> By positioning the human subject phenomenologically, where both identity and agency arise through movement, and where movement or gesture is both influenced by and influential to broader cultural affective-imaginaries, Nevrin refuses to reduce the role of human embodiment to that of an empty vessel inscribed by cultural norms and expectations. Instead, he uses a phenomenological approach to situate the human body as the nexus for experience, and, furthermore, to understand how movement and gesture are influenced by

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<sup>35</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 128.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

culture, yet simultaneously have the potential to disrupt cultural expectations through creativity and innovation.<sup>39</sup>

Invoking the work of phenomenologist Marcel Merleau-Ponty, Nevrin locates the living, moving body as the locus through which experience, perception, consciousness, knowledge, and meaning is grounded and vitalized. Nevrin's study of modern yoga begins from a position where movement is central to the identity of all living beings. In this account, mind and body are not seen as separate entities to be pieced together, but, rather, the somatic experiences of the body and cognition of the mind arise together through movement.<sup>40</sup> Applying the work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, a philosopher working in the tradition of Edmund Husserl, Nevrin centralizes the role of movement as foundational to understanding conceptions of self and identity. Sheets-Johnstone's work posits that:

We literally discover ourselves in movement. We grow kinetically into our bodies. In particular, we grow into those distinctive ways of moving that come with our being the bodies we are... We make sense of ourselves in the course of moving.<sup>41</sup>

Using the blueprint provided by Sheets-Johnstone, Nevrin's article looks to understand how self-movement is foundational for the discovery and construction of self and world for yoga practitioners, by demonstrating how experiences in yoga practice are contextualized through social, discursive, and environmental conditions. In other words, established affective-imaginaries effect how modern yoga practitioners form their identity and understand themselves and their yoga practice. According to Nevrin, "stylistic differences (in a studio or yoga practice

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 128-132.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 121; also, Sam Gill, *Dancing Culture Religion*, (Boulder: Lexington Books, 2012), 195.

<sup>41</sup> Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999), 136.

environment) are not only a matter of holding different beliefs, but also influence the way in which a practitioner will *feel* in a particular practice.”<sup>42</sup> Nevrin reports on the fundamental importance of *feelings* in yoga practice and practice environments by detailing how practitioners “actively seek out a particular practice environment... where the style of performance and the atmosphere were experienced as conducive to their own personality, taste, and aspirations.”<sup>43</sup> Applying Nevrin’s work to this study implies that members of the *DCY* community do not simply advocate for social justice in their free time. Rather, social justice along with other feminist principles are actually experienced and felt as meaningful, valuable, and even “authentic” ethical expressions of yoga, at the somatic level of the body.

Nevrin’s incorporation of Sheets-Johnstone’s work also provides an account of how movement gives rise to not just identity, but agency. She says, “Aliveness is thus a concept as grounded in movement as the concept “I can.”<sup>44</sup> According to Sheets-Johnstone, movement, as “aliveness” is the foundation for identity. Furthermore, successful movement is the foundation for agency by recognizing self-moving gesture as not just reflections of “I am” but also as indicators of “I can.”<sup>45</sup> Nevrin’s work uses Sheets-Johnstone’s analysis of movement as giving rise to identity and agency in order to provide an account of the “effects of empowerment” for the modern yoga subject.<sup>46</sup>

Central to his work, as well as Sheets-Johnstone’s, is the role of kinesthesia, a non-verbal sense awareness of one’s self moving and interacting with the exterior world. Drawing from

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<sup>42</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 121.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>44</sup> Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*, 135.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 129.

Merleau-Ponty and Sheets-Johnstone, Nevrin forms an account of identity and agency for practitioners of modern yoga by situating movement as the foundation for conceptions of “self.”<sup>47</sup> Kinesthesia refers to the sense of feeling one’s own body in the process of moving, a perceptual awareness of one’s self moving in space. As such, the bodily process of kinesthesia detects movement of the “animate organism,” and operates in a “feedback loop” with the central nervous system.<sup>48</sup> This feedback communicates current movement to the central nervous system, and informs future movements by monitoring the consequences of movement, resulting in movement adjustments, as well as knowledge of interactions with self and world through movement.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, Nevrin discusses the ways that the “kinesthetic sixth sense,” particularly in yoga practice, produces a “multi-sensory awareness and a less stressed sense of identity,” as kinesthesia consists of the gestural elements that bear connections to broader cultural interpretations as they are felt by the moving body performing the gestures.<sup>50</sup> Incorporating Nevrin’s affective-imaginaries, cultural meaning informs gesture on an emotional-affective level, but emotional affects or feelings can also influence the “meanings” that gesture takes. By focusing on sensation, and taking seriously yoga’s “embodied epistemology,” Nevrin situates the sense of self as both intensified through the practice of yoga, but also multi-faceted. In other

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<sup>47</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 124.

<sup>48</sup> Husserl’s term, Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1973), 50-53.

<sup>49</sup> Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*, 139-140; Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual Movement, Affect, Sensation*, (Durham, Duke UP: 2002); Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 124; Gill, *Dancing Culture Religion*, (Boulder: Lexington Books, 2012), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 124; Kovach “The Body as the Ground of Religion, Science, and the Self,” 961; Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999), 141; Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), 9; Gill, *Dancing Culture Religion*, (Boulder: Lexington Books, 2012), 19; Langøien, “Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment,” 32-37.

words, the “true or authentic” self can change, or be re-articulated along different lines.

Anticipating Carrie Noland’s account of embodiment and agency, according to Nevrin, there is room to alter culturally constructed meanings through the performance of gesture, specifically, by attending to the emotional feelings that arise through these performances.

This paper suggests that members of the *DCY* online community, who have already, for a variety of reasons, adopted feminist values of diversity, inclusion, and social justice, actually feel these values as authentic representations of yoga, of yogic experience and of self, arising through movement during yoga practice. For example, blogger Nick Krieger attributes his embodied experiences “on the mat” as imperative to the process of realizing that he was transgender, and later as influential to his process of coming out and transitioning.<sup>51</sup> Krieger reports:

Simplistic as this was, yoga held the promise of something radical, an unlearning, a remembering, a dismantling of all that we’d constructed about ourselves and our world. Impelled by curiosity and inklings of sensations that existed beyond words, I returned to the studio again and again.

Within six months I came out as transgender. This is no coincidence. It makes sense to me that when I finally stopped distracting myself, actually learned to be still on my mat, truth emerged. Satya.<sup>52</sup>

In this way, *DCY* provides an online environment in which people share their experiences of yoga practice. According to Krieger’s account, it was through attending to the sensations and emotions that arose through the practice of yoga, that he came to identify as transgender. This and other experiences of yoga practice on the *DCY* blog draw on existing discourses, in Krieger’s case for example, the emergence of “truth” about himself. By drawing on culturally established

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<sup>51</sup> Nick Krieger, “How Radical is this Practice?” *Decolonizing Yoga*, accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/how-radical-is-this-practice/>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

meanings of yoga, *DCY* bloggers expand the application of these meanings to include people whose experiences are not regularly documented in more mainstream yoga blogs. Publishing these accounts and eliciting audience interaction, I suggest, is how *DCY* pushes back on more mainstream interpretations of “authenticity” and “authentic” yoga.

Nevrin’s account situates how the environment in which yoga practitioners engage socially, whether it be an actual studio or a virtual blog, also implicates a type of emotional involvement on the part of the practitioner. In an actual studio space, affective associations are elicited through lighting techniques, music, and certain artifacts, like icons of deities, incense, and candles, all of which invite certain emotional responses.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, “gym yoga” will usually not include the affective objects mentioned above, though they nevertheless espouse a specific type of environmental affect, frequently centered on health, fitness, and wellness. Virtual environments can similarly be a conduit for the affective. Reading personal accounts of bloggers’ yoga experiences, and interpretations of the meaning of yoga’s as influenced by those experiences, can elicit compassion, pleasure, understanding, disgust, rage, or any variety of emotional reactions. Comments left on blogs put words to feelings and, in the process of virtual interactions, connections are forged between writers and readers.

Nevrin’s work situates the affectivity of environment, social interaction, and established knowledge about yoga as culminating at the physical level of the body through the bodily process of kinesthesia, which incorporates cultural affective-imaginaries into the experience of doing yoga. Just as perceiving and knowing the world through movement is the foundation for identity and continues to change throughout one’s life, affective-imaginaries are not vacuous,

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<sup>53</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 129.

static entities. Affective-imaginaries morph over time and in response to different circumstances and conditions, and effect different bodies in different ways. Nevrin puts it this way:

yoga practitioners not only learn new ways of moving and sensing with the body but they will be emotionally involved in and through the particular action. One source for emotion is the bodily techniques themselves, as certain bodily performances, such as kneeling, slow breathing, and so on, will involve affective associations, *qua* “emotionally marked actions. Affective associations depend, of course, on cultural stereotyping but also to a certain degree on kinetic qualities involved in the action itself... As such, bodily actions entail structures of experience that invite for affective and imaginative elaboration in certain directions.”<sup>54</sup>

A similar phenomenon occurs in online environments, as blogs and visual representations orient the direction of these imaginative elaborations, particularly when established discourses are re-articulated in terms of practitioner’s felt experiences. Another way to theorize this would be to describe affective associations between established cultural knowledge or affective-imaginaries and the embodied human being in terms of Sara Ahmed’s notion of “affective economies.”<sup>55</sup> Ahmed positions emotions as a form of currency wherein “affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is is an affect of the circulation between objects and signs.”<sup>56</sup> According to Ahmed, feelings are generative in that they appear through associations with objects and histories “by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories, including histories of production, as well as circulation or exchange.”<sup>57</sup>

In other words, the bodily process of kinesthesia can be seen as a complementary process of emergence for both bodily sensations and already established cultural meanings,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>55</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text*, 79 (22), no 2, (2004): 117-139.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 120.

which are conveyed through discourse, objects, signs, and visual representations. Expanding on Nevrin's work, the environment in which experience occurs can be an actual practice environment, but it can also be a virtual, online space. Nevrin writes:

The environment will function as a setting that shapes and contextualizes experiences that will arise in the practice session proper... contextualization will involve adapting to a practice environment that supplies both articulate concepts and vaguely felt meanings that will influence the ways in which a particular individual will interpret the experiences that arise owing to performing certain bodily techniques.<sup>58</sup>

Differences in interpretation, which occur as a result of bodily sensations, *doing yoga*, but also discourse, in this case blogging, are influenced by “affective associations” or “vaguely felt meanings” are substantial in that, according to Nevrin, these interpretations can have “considerable consequences for how a practitioner might change his or her attitude toward various issues in everyday life.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, for yoga practitioners, emotional feelings and cognitive meanings arise through movement in yoga practice and this movement is central to identity and agency.

In sum, Nevrin focuses on both movement and culturally-situated affective-imaginaries as the co-source of “the empowering effects of yoga practice.”<sup>60</sup> His conclusion suggests that these “empowering effects” may “consolidate an unquestionable status and legitimacy to certain normative ideals,” particularly the association of “spiritual progress” with an “idealized or aestheticized body.”<sup>61</sup> In this way Nevrin establishes a line of thought that directly links bodily sensations experienced through the practice of yoga to the formation of identity and agency in

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<sup>58</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 122.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 135.



ways that can align with, or potentially subvert broader cultural affective-imaginaries.<sup>62</sup> The first two chapters of this thesis attempt to parse out the dominant affective-imaginaries of modern yoga's history and visual culture.

*“Embodied Epistemology”*<sup>63</sup>

The primacy of “experiential epistemology” in modern yoga systems, wherein practitioners are encouraged to “focus on practice, the *actually doing*, experiential core of modern postural yoga,” already underwrites popular yoga discourse.<sup>64</sup> Lauren Graham terms this ideological assumption underlying modern postural yoga as an “experiential epistemology.” She elaborates slightly:

MPYs (modern postural yoga systems) consist of a wide range of religio-philosophical articulations and practices, but are all grounded in an experiential epistemology. Their doctrines are, therefore, less developed and more polyvalent than most premodern traditions or other modern types.”<sup>65</sup>

Graham's study on authenticity narratives in popular yoga culture finds that “authenticity” in yoga tends towards a conception of historical or genealogical authenticity, as informed by embodied experience. She states that this

most often translates into ‘yoga off the mat,’ the application and embodiment of philosophies and experiences that are... firmly embedded in modern postural yoga both

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<sup>62</sup> Nevrin introduces and uses this term without explanation. However, Nevrin implies that this term is derived as a departure from Sheets-Johnstone's “corporeal” or “body concept” in order to directly address the affective qualities of socio-historical “meanings” as they arise during yoga practice.

<sup>63</sup> Graham, “Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga,” 87.

<sup>64</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 125-130; Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Haṭha Yoga,” 99; Graham, “Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga,” 85-100; Langøien, “Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment,” *Approaching Religion* 2, no. 2 (December 2012), 27-37.

<sup>65</sup> Graham, “Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga,” 87.

historically and practically. This contributes to the fluid aspects of authenticity, as it supports conceptualizing yoga in a nonrestrictive mode.<sup>66</sup>

Writers for *DCY*, as well as more mainstream online blogs, frequently articulate their understandings of yoga, the history of yoga and its philosophical underpinnings in terms of their own personal experiences in doing the practice.<sup>67</sup> What is attended to here are the ways in which *DCY* interprets the feelings that arise during modern postural yoga practice through, specifically, feminist categories of analysis. For example, Krieger's article concludes with an account of the value of inclusion of diverse gender expressions in yoga spaces. He says:

At one studio I visit, there is a sign on the bathroom door that says, "Boys... and Girls and Everyone In Between." In this very statement is the promise I've been seeking since my first yoga class, my hope for a community that includes all people, and the possibility of all that is truly radical.<sup>68</sup>

While the ways sensations are expressed carry different historical or affective significations, as "authentic" or "authenticity" invariably does, on the *DCY* blog, nonetheless, these experiential accounts are exclusively described in terms of feminist principles.

### *Chapter Summary*

The first two chapters of this thesis look at scholars' and popular culture's answers to the perilous question: *what is modern yoga?* Without actually seeking to settle on a singular definition, the first chapter discusses "authentic" yoga as a historical construction, a notion initiated and developed by Indologist scholars during the 17th-20th centuries.

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<sup>66</sup> Graham, "Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga," 87.

<sup>67</sup> For examples of "mainstream" yoga blogs: *Yoga Journal*, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://yogajournal.com>; *Elephant Journal*, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.elephantjournal.com>; *MindBodyGreen*, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.mindbodygreen.com>.

<sup>68</sup> Krieger, "How Radical is this Practice?"

The second chapter elaborates on how the knowledge inherited from early Indologist scholarship influences the ways contemporary practitioners experience and make sense of yoga practice. What was determined “authentic” or “classical” yoga according to these early accounts, I suggest, continues to exist today within historical affective-imaginaries of modern yoga. Affective-imaginative engagements are articulated in popular discourse in ways that maintain certain assumptions, expectations and definitions of what “authentic” yoga is. In analyzing how “authentic” yoga is framed within the *DCY* blog, I highlight a phenomenon I refer to as *double-authenticity*; where, at times when yoga’s historicity as a single, homogeneous practice tradition is under scrutiny, the second definition of authenticity, as the discovery of one’s “true self” can work to backfill the lack of a seamless linear yoga tradition.

The third chapter describes how the visual culture of modern yoga perpetuates certain “ideological nexuses of constructive Orientalism” which are incorporated into the affective-imaginaries of “authenticity” in modern yoga.<sup>69</sup> This chapter discusses modern yoga visual culture on the internet, in order to understand the abstract narrative that underwrites pop-culture representations of what “authentic” yoga is, and depicts what “authentic” yoga looks like. In attending to how “authentic” yoga is represented in terms of bodies, objects, and settings in yoga photography, this chapter reads these symbols of visual culture through Jane Iwamura’s “Oriental Monk narrative.”<sup>70</sup> The central idea presented in this chapter is that yoga practitioners do not start yoga from a place of neutrality, devoid of conceptions or expectations of what yoga is or what it offers; but, rather, the affective-imaginaries of broader popular culture are integrated into how modern practitioners experience, feel, practice, and make sense of yoga. As Langøen attests,

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<sup>69</sup> Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga,” 92.

<sup>70</sup>Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*, (New York: Oxford, 2011).

“For those coming into the practice without much knowledge of its philosophical and/or religious moorings, the teachings that by and by reach them are interpreted in the light of their experience of the practice, each reinforcing the other.”<sup>71</sup> This chapter highlights an example from the *DCY* archive that works to counter these dominant affective-imaginative associations.

The fourth chapter analyzes the ways in which *DCY* articulates what it means to be an “authentic” practitioner in ways that deviate from more mainstream affective-imaginaries. While there exist a great number of blogs dedicated to documenting the practice of yoga and experiences of yoga practitioners, what is particularly distinct to *DCY* are the ways in which first-hand, experiential accounts of yoga practice are explicitly articulated in terms of feminist values of diversity and inclusivity. Here, I argue that *DCY* bloggers incorporate a feminist ethical framework to their understanding of yoga, through which they articulate their personal experiences of yoga practice. Integrating Carrie Noland’s theory of embodied agency in an analysis of *DCY* articles, this chapter attempts to account for how emotionality and feelings during modern postural yoga practice are mediated linguistically in ways that can both affirm and subvert dominant cultural narratives. Particularly, I argue that *DCY* centralizes the role of embodied experience and affective “authenticity,” by drawing on and piecing together already existing discourses of authenticity, those of the historical and the self. In so doing, *DCY* articulates experiences of the “authentic” in terms of feminist principles, which are further validated through interactions and participation with others in the blogging community-- through comments, follow-up articles, and Youtube series. This, I suggest, results in the construction of a distinct type of modern yoga individual and collective identity as one who literally embodies

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<sup>71</sup> Langøien, “Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment,” 31.

feminist values of social justice, diversity, and inclusivity as the marks of “authentic” selfhood, experience, and yoga.

## CHAPTER ONE COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF YOGA’S ARCHAIC AUTHENTICITY

A cursory view of modern yoga as it is practiced in studios and gyms around the world today will undoubtedly include a vision of sweating, spandex clad bodies moving on rectangular mats, perhaps encircled by weights, foam rollers, and water bottles, quickly moving in front of large mirrors to the beat of electronic music, or slowly to somber chanting. Modern yoga classes generally consist of some type of repetitive physical movements, *āsana*’-s or body postures, punctuated by intentional breathing exercises, *prāṇayāma*. While the ornamentations (personalized mats, water bottles, special clothing) and the locations (gyms and studios) of modern postural yoga did not exist in ancient or premodern systems, most modern practices nevertheless associate themselves with a mythologized notion of “ancient yoga” originating in South Asia. Popular yoga discourses often attempt to situate the origins of modern yoga by linearly tracing back the history of yoga to premodern India.<sup>72</sup> Claims of yoga’s origins are usually hinged on the existence of what Mark Singleton calls a “touchstone of authenticity,” for instance, the Paśupati seal or other artifacts, philosophical texts including *Yogasūtra*, *Bhagavadgīta*, or *Upaniṣad*-s, or medieval practice texts, like the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpīka*.<sup>73</sup>

Contemporary religious studies scholarship on the history of yoga tends to arrive at the conclusion that there exists no single, “authentic” origin of yoga practice or philosophy. Instead,

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<sup>72</sup> Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga from counterculture to pop culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 2015), 1.

<sup>73</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 14.

according to Wendy Doniger, “there are a number of historical bases for contemporary postural yoga within classical Hinduism.”<sup>74</sup> Andrea Jain adds that these multiple conceptions of yoga can also be found within Jainism, Sikhism, Sufism, and Buddhism as well.<sup>75</sup> According to Mark Singleton, Wendy Doniger, David Gordon White, and Andrea Jain, the representation of yoga deemed “classical” by Orientalist scholars from the 17th to early 20th centuries selectively chose particular “respectable” versions of yoga as representative of this variety of systems.<sup>76</sup> In acknowledging the production of a monolithic definition of yoga during colonial times, rather than point to a single origin, most contemporary scholarship on the history of yoga focuses on specific socio-historical moments or syncretic events. The practice of disciplinary and area studies specificity has effectively produced a large body of evidence suggestive of a vast heterogeneity of premodern yoga systems that cannot be reasonably reduced to a single origin of yoga. This chapter briefly tells the story of the history of yoga as constructed by Orientalist scholars during the 18th-early 20th centuries, the remnants of which are retained in popular yoga discourse. These remnants, I suggest, constitute a constellation of affective-imaginaries, which narrate “authenticity” in terms of yoga’s history and purpose, while influencing how contemporary practitioners experience the practice of yoga.<sup>77</sup> As Jain puts it, “yoga has been

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<sup>74</sup> Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 124.

<sup>75</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 12-18.

<sup>76</sup> Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 117-125; Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 26-30; Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 14-23; David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>77</sup> “Affective-imaginaries” is Nevrin’s term for the web of affective associations with objects, philosophies, and texts, that are somatically and emotionally felt in the body during yoga practice. In Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 122, 128-129, 130, 132, 135.

perpetually context-sensitive, so there is no ‘legitimate,’ ‘authentic,’ ‘true,’ or ‘original’ tradition, only contextualized ideas and practices organized around the term *yoga*.’<sup>78</sup>

### *Orientalist Renderings*

Mark Singleton contends that Orientalist scholarship initially codified the modern conception of “authentic” yoga systems, which established a nexus of “classical” or “*rāja*” (literally “king”) yoga substantiated by early translations of particular texts and exaltation of certain artifacts.<sup>79</sup> Singleton identifies the discovery of the “Paśupati Seal artifact” during the 1921 archeological excavations of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, ancient cities of the Indus Valley inhabited around 2500 BCE, as a watershed event wherein the preoccupation with discovering material evidence to verify the origin of yoga overwrote the artifact with the Orientalist excitement over recovering the “wonder that was India.”<sup>80</sup> According to the reports of the excavation’s director general Sir John Marshall, the seal undeniably portrays a proto-Śiva figure in a seated yoga posture.<sup>81</sup> At the time, Marshall’s discovery was taken as proof of yoga’s ancient origins, offering material validation coinciding with Orientalist scholars’ documentation of “classical” yoga texts, as certain texts were translated and interpreted by English and German scholars aided by Indian Brahmins.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, xvi.

<sup>79</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*; Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992); Arthur Llewellyn Basham’s book title, *The Wonder that was India*, (New York: Grove, 1954).

<sup>81</sup> Sir John Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilizations: Being an Official Account of Archaeological Excavations at Mohenjodaro Carried Out by the Government of India Between the Years 1922-27*, Vol. 1 (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1931), 7; Mircea Eliade, *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 355.

<sup>82</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 15.

Modern scholars from the last quarter of the 20th century, beginning with Doris Srinivasan, overwhelmingly contend that the mere existence of this artifact does not conclusively verify that yogic practices of any kind were actually practiced in the ancient Indus Valley.<sup>83</sup> Geoffrey Samuel's *Origins of Yoga and Tantra* maintains that, despite the existence of the seal and the arguable resemblance of a figure depicting a Śiva-in-meditation scene, the actual religious practices and ideologies of Indus Valley civilizations cannot be known from archeological evidence alone. Samuel contends that Marshall's claim is "so dependent on reading later practices into the material that it is of little or no use for constructing any kind of history of practices."<sup>84</sup> While the Paśupati Seal does not provide conclusive evidence among scholars for the existence of ancient yoga, the prominence Sir John Marshall attributed to the artifact at the time of its discovery is, nevertheless, reiterated in popular discourses that uphold its status.

### *Extant Texts, Tracing the Word "Yoga"*

Extant textual sources commonly cited in popular discourse indicate that even the word "yoga" was used in a variety of ways which betray the credibility of the claim that there is a significant link between modern postural yoga practice with ancient or premodern yoga systems. The term "yoga" first appears in South Asia's oldest extant text, the 15th century BCE *Rg Veda Samhita*. But here, according to Geoffrey Samuel, the term exists in name only, and does not "imply yogic practice, in the sense of a developed set of techniques for operating the mind-body

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<sup>83</sup> Doris Srinivasan, "Unhinging Siva from the Indus Civilization," in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1, (1984): 77-89.

<sup>84</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, *Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 8.



complex,” but, rather, literally signifies a “yoke” that binds an animal to a plow or a war chariot.<sup>85</sup> According to David Gordon White, the syntactical connection of yoga and war found in Vedic hymns and in the later *Mahābhārata* (200-400 BCE) similarly represents a chariot understood to deliver “the dying warrior who is “hitched to his rig.”<sup>86</sup> The *Mahābhārata*’s *Bhagavad Gītā* outlines three stages of yoga which are often referenced as points of origin in modern popular yoga practice: *karma yoga* (action), *bhakti yoga* (devotion), *jñāna yoga* (wisdom). However, the text says nothing about physical postures like those found in modern postural yoga. Nevertheless this text is frequently situated as another “touchstone of authenticity,” particularly for yoga as a model of ethical civic engagement.<sup>87</sup>

The practice of yoga as inner body practices of meditation and breath-control, wherein, the “goal of yogic practice... (was) transferred to a place hidden within the body’s deepest recesses,” arose in the later *Upaniṣad*-s (first to third century B.C.E).<sup>88</sup> Yet, still, the term yoga continued to function as a metaphor for fastening an animal to a cart; “‘yoking’ the senses in order to control the spirit, and then ‘yoking’ the mind, ‘yoking’ the body to the spirit, and the soul to the mind of god, in order to obtain an immortal body ‘made by the fire of yoga.’”<sup>89</sup> The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* uses the term *yoga* to signify a meditation practice revealed to the young boy

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<sup>85</sup> English “yoke” is the Sanskrit cognate “yoga.” Samuel, *Origins of Yoga and Tantra*, 8; Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 117.

<sup>86</sup> White, *Sinister Yogis*, 73.

<sup>87</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 14.

<sup>88</sup> White, *Sinister Yogis*, 73.

<sup>89</sup> Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 117.

Naciketas as a method for leaving behind both joy and sorrow, defeating death and becoming immortal.<sup>90</sup>

Patañjali's *Yogasutra* (approximately 250 CE) is arguably the most frequently cited text in modern postural yoga discourse. The *Yogasūtra* and its commentary, the *Yogasūtrabhāṣya* (as well as the *Upaniṣads*) are strongly influenced by Buddhism, *Sāṃkhya* philosophy and *śrāmaṇa* (ascetic renunciant) traditions.<sup>91</sup> The *Yogasūtra* itself makes very little mention of *āsana* at all, besides the prescription that one should sit in a relaxed meditation posture conducive to breathing easily.<sup>92</sup> Patañjali actually recommends developing aversion to one's body, and approximately a quarter of the *Yogasūtra* is concerned with the development of magical powers (*siddhi*-s) like flying, immortality, knowledge of past and future, and mind reading, which result from successfully mastering the body and mind.<sup>93</sup> The influence afforded to this text within modern yoga praxis is a curious departure from an emphasis on physical *āsana* practice towards dualist philosophy, asceticism, and magic; due to the attempt to recall, according to Singleton, the "authority and prestige that the association with Patañjali confers on modern schools of yoga and their practices."<sup>94</sup> Singleton's analysis offers an account of the rising celebrity of the *Yogasūtra* due to it being one of the first texts to be translated into English and circulate in the Anglophone world.<sup>95</sup> In other words, the status of the *Yogasūtra* was not established by thousands of individual yoga practitioners independently checking out early translations from

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<sup>90</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 26; Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 117.

<sup>91</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 26.

<sup>92</sup> Sutras 2.49-53.

<sup>93</sup> Sutras 2.40, 2.43, and 16-34.

<sup>94</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 26.

<sup>95</sup> Singleton, "The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism," 77-99.

their local libraries, but, rather, the affective currency of the text is generated over time as translations, interpretations and commentaries of the text circulate in scholarship and popular culture as the “authentic” account of yoga practice. The notion that the text has “gold standard” value to modern yoga practice and theory can also be seen through Kenneth Liberman’s delineation of reflexive authenticity.<sup>96</sup> According to Liberman, when enough people claim the text has unshakable authority, it begins to carry with it that affective valence.<sup>97</sup>

On its own, the *Yogasūtra* isn’t necessarily more “authentic” than any other historical text on yoga. But the notion that it is an absolute representation of “real” Indian yoga is, according to Singleton, an “*idée reçue* of the modern era.”<sup>98</sup> Singleton provides a useful genealogy to show the history of the text’s authentication through colonial scholarship and Indian nationalist movements. As sociolinguist Nikolas Coupland puts it, the

authenticated takes its place within specific familiar, culturally-known and coordinated structures of value... to be aligned with and to be inducted into systems of cultural recognition.... Just as historicity is implicated -- overtly or covertly -- in authenticity claims, so are coherence and consensus.<sup>99</sup>

For instance, the earliest translations of the *Yogasutra* into English by James Ballantyne (1852) and Rajendralala Mitra (1883) were difficult projects at their undertaking, as it proved impossible to locate anyone who actually used the text as a scriptural basis to their practice

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.; Graham, “Authenticity Narratives,” 114; Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Haṭha Yoga,” 100-116.

<sup>97</sup> Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Haṭha Yoga,” 100-116.

<sup>98</sup> Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism,” 80.

<sup>99</sup> Nikolas Coupland, “Language Society and Authenticity: Themes and Perspectives” in *Indexing Authenticity Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, Véronique Lacoste et al, eds., (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 17.

tradition.<sup>100</sup> While the text was translated, interpreted and eventually published in both cases, its interpretation was a largely project of “constructive Orientalism,” according to Singleton.<sup>101</sup> In 1890, M.N. Dvivedi was commissioned to translate the *Yogasūtra* for the Theosophical society in Bombay. This translation along with Vivekananda’s (1896) *Raja Yoga* framed the text as “practical science” and “pure theory,” effectively meeting European intellectual standards for authority.<sup>102</sup> From the outset, English translations of the text championed certain ideologies in line with the “serious” European intellectual tradition, which was largely based on translating and interpreting texts. These early editions of the *Yogasūtra*, along with the influence they were granted by Orientalist and Indian scholars and statesmen, were readopted by Indian nationalist movements — adding another complex assemblage of construction, editing, and intention, to subsequent translations and interpretations of the text.

### *Postural Yoga - Medieval Texts and Modern Practice*

Explicitly postural yoga practices were first recorded in detail around the thirteenth century, comprising a canon of practice “manuals,” which, similar to the *Yogasūtra*, are often

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<sup>100</sup> Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism,” 80-81; De Michelis, *The History of Modern Yoga*, 91-119; James Ballantyne, *The Aphorisms of the Yoga Philosophy of Patañjali with Illustrative Extracts from the Commentary by Bhoja Raja*, (Allahabad: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1852); R. Mitra *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali with the Commentary of Bhoja Raja and English Translation*, (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1883).

<sup>101</sup> Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism,” 80.

<sup>102</sup> Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism,” 84; De Michelis, *The History of Modern Yoga*, 100-119; M.N. Dvivedi *Raja Yoga, or the Practical Metaphysics of the Vedanta*, (Bombay: Sobhodha-Prakasha Press, 1885); Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga, or Conquering the Internal Nature*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1896 [1991]).

cited in popular yoga discourse.<sup>103</sup> While most practices representative of modern postural yoga bear little to no resemblance to what is actually described in these medieval manuals, they are nevertheless named as important predecessors to modern yoga as it is practiced today. This association grants contemporary practitioners a semblance of a lineage tradition that can be historically traced, and, like the *Yogasūtra*, galvanizes a tautological authenticity that continues to be vitalized in the present.

Mark Singleton's *Yoga Body* contends that sequences (*vinyāsa*) of yoga postures practiced today do not derive from medieval *haṭha* yoga practice manuals, texts which outline only the postures themselves without prescribing a set sequence for which they are to be performed. Again, Singleton's work identifies cultural exchanges in late-colonial India as the historical moment of emergence for these modern practice sequences.<sup>104</sup> According to Singleton, the first systems of transnational, Anglophone yoga arose through an amalgam of modern influences including those of Indian nationalism, American transcendentalism, British body-building, Western psychology and medicine, Indian physical culture, Swedish gymnastics, and rigorous YMCA calisthenics programs.<sup>105</sup> These practices were popularized by T. Krishnamacharya and his students, notably, his son T.K.V. Desikachar (founder of the Viniyoga system, which now specializes in yoga physical therapy), brother-in-law B.K.S. Iyengar (founder of the Iyengar school), K. Patthabi Jois (founder of Ashtanga vinyasa school) and Indra Devi,

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<sup>103</sup> These include: *Goraṅṣa Śataka and Śiva Saṃhitā* (15th century), *Śiva Saṃhitā* (circa 15th century), *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* (15-16th century), *Haṭharatnāvalī* (17th century), *Gheraṅḍa Saṃhitā* (17th-18th century), *Jogapradīpakā* (18th century).

James Mallinson, "Rāmānandī Tyāgīs and Haṭhayoga," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 14, no.1, (Fall 2005): 107-121; C. Bouy, *Les Nātha Yogin et Les Upaniṣads, Étude d'histoire de la littérature Hindoue*, Collège de France, Publications de l'Institut de Civilisation Indienne (Paris: Edition-Diffusion de Bocard, 1994).

<sup>104</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 117-125.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-210.

who opened a yoga studio in Hollywood, California in the late 1940s. Students of these schools transnationally disseminated the sequences of modern postural yoga during the remainder of the 20th century. In this way, the advent of modern postural yoga, particularly those that prescribe certain linked bodily postures, is discussed by Singleton as a transnational revival of physical culture as informed by Indian philosophies that were carefully selected by Orientalist scholars and interpreted by Indian nationalist movements.

From another angle, Christopher Tompkins' forthcoming doctoral dissertation works to defend the antiquity of sequenced (*vinyāsa*) yoga by broadening the definition of "postural" to include seated meditation postures and internal visualizations. Tompkins argues that sequences of inner yoga (*antaryoga*) were widespread in Kaśmir Śaiva practices from as early as the 9th century CE.<sup>106</sup> So, while some scholarly analysis of premodern yogic texts might suggest a quest for origins, most recent scholarship most frequently maintains that no origin can be found.

Doniger says:

For, given the human obsession with roots, those claims generally take the form of arguments about the *origins* of yoga, a quest for purity of lineage, for undefiled racial descent, here as always a mad quest, since the history of yoga is, like most histories, a palimpsest.<sup>107</sup>

Nevertheless, the construction of yoga's history, which reifies the myth of its ancient origins, remains powerful in modern yoga's popular affective-imaginaries.

In sum, this chapter discusses the objects, texts and events that rose to prominence in the production of knowledge about yoga and its history. The following chapter demonstrates how

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<sup>106</sup> Christopher Tompkins, *The Integrity of Yoga within the context of Early Shaiva Ritual*, (University of California Berkeley, PhD Dissertation, forthcoming 2015).

<sup>107</sup> Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 116.

these signs of authenticity form affective relationships with modern day yoga practitioners, through an analysis of authenticity claims found in mainstream yoga discourses as well as on the *DCY* blog.

## CHAPTER TWO AFFECTIVE IMAGINARIES & DOUBLE AUTHENTICITY

As we can see from a sketch of the colonial production of knowledge about yoga, there is not just one grand meta-narrative of yoga's historical origins. Instead, the seemingly homogenous appearance of modern yoga today is an affective-imaginative construction. Affective-imaginaries are constituted by many overlapping, intersecting constellations of objects, bodies and signs that elicit embodied feelings and imaginings. According to Langøien's Mysore study findings:

As the practitioners get to know the philosophy surrounding the physical practice, they also relate their experience of this practice to the philosophy and learn to recognize the bodily changes that are parallel to the philosophical ideals. Or rather they are enabled to relate their experience to the philosophy and make sense of their physical changes and reactions in relation to the philosophy, as well as look for and feel their bodies against this background.<sup>108</sup>

While affective-imaginative engagements with yoga's historicity are prominent in popular discourse, they are also mediated in a plurality of ways. This chapter links the previous section's discussion of the construction of historically "authentic" yoga with contemporary mediations of "authenticity" as they are found in online blogs. The fourth chapter further elaborates on the role of feelings as they arise in affective associations with these constellations of already-established cultural knowledge of yoga. In other words, histories of yoga are significant to how the practice of yoga is explained, perceived, and felt by contemporary practitioners. In particular, this chapter

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<sup>108</sup> Langøien, "Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment," 35.

locates sites in popular online discourse where the notion of an “authentic self” is mobilized to backfill a lack of historical seamlessness, highlighting moments where the notion of discovering an “authentic” self slips into “authenticity” as historical provenance.<sup>109</sup>

### *Double Authenticity in Popular Discourse*

One consequence of constructing historical facticity within the academic study of yoga is that these certitudes circulate, gain momentum within popular discourse, and influence the ways that people feel, interpret, and, consequentially, talk about their experiences practicing yoga. For example, the article “Yoga History in 9 Easy Steps,” from the blog *Elephant Journal* presents a sort of guidebook for discovering how old one’s personal practice really is by providing a checklist of nine criteria.<sup>110</sup> The author, Ramesh Bjonnes, claims that:

If (your) yoga includes the long and complex co-mingling of the Vedic and Tantric (Shaiva) civilizations and its associated literature (many texts yet to be translated into English) and oral teachings, then textual, archeological, linguistic and genetic evidence suggests this history to be nearly 7000 years old...<sup>111</sup>

Bjonnes’ article presents questionable dates for texts and philosophical movements while citing anachronous scholarship, with the exception of his nod to Singleton whose book, *Yoga Body*, precipitated the *Elephant Journal* piece. For instance, Bjonnes suggests his readers dig up Marshall’s 1931 government report on the Paśupati artifact for further validation of yoga’s antiquity.<sup>112</sup> The reader comments following the article portray an overall enthusiasm for the

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<sup>109</sup> Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity*, 65-71.

<sup>110</sup> Ramesh Bjonnes, “Yoga History in 9 Easy Steps” *Elephant Journal*, October 8, 2012, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/10/yoga-history-in-9-easy-steps/>.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.



piece, with little contestation. This is due to, I suggest, the importance of yoga's historical origins to contemporary yoga culture; as the notion of yoga's provenance aligns with the construction of yoga as always already an ancient philosophical, spiritual, and wellness system. However, one uneasy commenter, Paul, declares:

Paul: The narrative authority is the only thing interesting me in this dating/migration issue, as I don't see a difference of thousands of years undercutting the revelations or practices...<sup>113</sup>

This comment stands out of the approximately fifty other comments, in an article with over 12,300 reader views. Commenter Paul goes on:

To have any useful opinion of this, one has to become a specialist in it, with a good grasp of not only linguistic, genetic, archeological and philological theory, but how these elements play into the story. The difficulty and obscurity allows any "bunch of stuff" to be used to give authority to whatever, be it tantra, a nationalism, or even the efficacy of academia. So I wonder, what really is the point, other than, "it's interesting"? What benefit? [sic]<sup>114</sup>

Paul illuminates a sentiment Lauren Graham documents in her sociological study of authenticity narratives in modern yoga.<sup>115</sup> Weighing *Yoga Journal* magazine's "straightforward" claims of yoga's ancientness against practitioner interviews held in Canada, Graham discusses how practitioners view "inauthentic" yoga, as in those systems not directly derived from "tradition."<sup>116</sup> Graham summarizes her findings:

Yoga was considered inauthentic when it contradicted these themes: if it was unhealthy, unbalanced, closed, provided no service, produced no social good, or deterred people from practicing... *Those forms of western yoga that were viewed as least authentic were*

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<sup>113</sup> Paul, Comment (A), Ramesh Bjonnes, "Yoga History in 9 Easy Steps" *Elephant Journal*, October 8, 2012, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/10/yoga-history-in-9-easy-steps/>.

<sup>114</sup> Paul, Comment (A), in Bjonnes, "Yoga History in 9 Easy Steps" October 8, 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Graham, "Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga," 85-100.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

*not necessarily seen as bad, but as unimportant... they (inauthentic practices) would eventually fade away or develop into authenticity, so inauthentic practices would not have a lasting impact. This was due to MPY's (modern postural yoga's) experiential epistemology and was based on (the claim) of its ancient, Eastern spirituality...* participants argued that even if a practice remained inauthentic in relation to tradition it would, at a minimum be harmless and could still help practitioners by improving health, for example.<sup>117</sup>

In other words, historical authenticity as provenance or age, is relatively inconsequential to some practitioners, like Paul, for instance. In these cases, the practice itself, as a *movement* practice, wherein practitioners are encouraged to gain knowledge through experiencing their embodiment (what Graham calls “experiential epistemology”) is promised to reveal yoga’s authenticity. Authenticity in this case is frequently articulated in terms of happiness, health and wellness. However, from this view, the feelings experienced in the practice itself might lead practitioners to further investigate traditional or “authentic” philosophy and religious practices. Paul’s second comment on the blog reflects this idea, saying, “I don’t think a few thousand years proves the authenticity, genuineness, or authority of anything. It is interesting, but I don’t see how it affects the truth of the revelations.”<sup>118</sup> Both Paul and the subjects of Graham’s study demonstrate that some practitioners seem to believe that there is an authentic truth of yoga that is revealed through actual embodied practice. According to Paul’s account, the authentic truth that is revealed through one’s practice overshadows attempts to insert the modern practitioner into an unbroken chain of yoga lineage. Here, the second definition of authenticity, as discovering or having an authentic experience of one’s “true self” is dramatized. As Graham’s study indicates, this is a result of modern yoga’s overwhelming exaltation of an “experiential epistemology,” the promise

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 97. (Italics mine.)

<sup>118</sup> Paul, Comment (B), Ramesh Bjonnes, “Yoga History in 9 Easy Steps” *Elephant Journal*, October 8, 2012, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/10/yoga-history-in-9-easy-steps/>.

that attending to kinesthetic sensation in the movement practice of yoga will lead one to discover the authentic “truth” of yoga, of oneself, and even, perhaps, of life.<sup>119</sup>

Certainly for some, explicit claims of yoga’s ancientness as historical authenticity will backfill this feeling, providing practitioners with the right affective associations to reflexively verify outright authenticity claims. However, when there is no historical authenticity to be relied upon or, as in the case of Paul, when such efforts are deemed trivial, the *feeling* of authenticity eclipses any claims to historical origins. As Nevrin explains, for practitioners:

the experience of attending to movement will... be understood as highly significant, compared to what one is used to, and the step toward talking about this as being of a “spiritual” nature -- not least because interpreted as a more “authentic” way of being -- is not a big one to take.<sup>120</sup>

Here, the gap in the affective-imaginary between yoga’s historical origins can be filled by the double-meaning of authenticity as experiencing the self “authentically” through movement. As the final chapter of this study will discuss further, awareness of movement is how one learns to identify the self as the self.<sup>121</sup> Attending to the kinesthetic sensations elicited through yoga practice, which modern postural yoga systems overwhelmingly prescribe its participants to do, is frequently articulated as experiencing one’s authentic self.<sup>122</sup> Sometimes, even when a

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<sup>119</sup> Graham, “Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga,” 85-100.

<sup>120</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 125.

<sup>121</sup> Kovach, “The Body as the Ground of Religion, Science, and Self,” 960-961; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by C. Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962); J. Morley, “Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga practice through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body,” *Philosophy East & West* 51, no.1 (2001): 73-82; Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 119-139; Sheets-Johnstone. *The Primacy of Movement*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999; Sheets-Johnstone, “Emotion and Movement” In *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, no.11-12 (1999): 259-77; Sheets-Johnstone, Consciousness: a natural history, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 5, no. 3 (2001): 260-294; Langøien, “Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment,” *Approaching Religion* 2, no. 2 (December 2012).

<sup>122</sup> Graham, “Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga,” 85-100.

practitioner claims to feel their authentic self, this insinuates historical authenticity, and can be used to signify both meanings simultaneously.

### *Double Authenticity in DCY*

The *DCY* blog integrates understandings of historical colonialism and how early Orientalist scholars codified the meaning of yoga in ways that are not frequently found in more popular blogs, such as *Yoga Journal*, *MindBodyGreen*, or *Elephant Journal*. Demonstrating an awareness of colonialisms violent histories offers members of the *DCY* community a uncommon way in which to articulate their conceptions of authenticity (both as historical and of self), from which a different type of modern yoga subjectivity can emerge.

For instance, Melissa Heather's article "Extreme Makeover: Yoga in the British Empire" on the *DCY* blog exemplifies this idea.<sup>123</sup> Providing a summary of Singleton's *Yoga Body*, which inspired the piece, the author writes with a clearer idea of the history of orientalist constructions of classical authentic yoga than Bjonnes' article. She writes:

What is typically practiced in North America, or Turtle Island (to use a pre-colonial name for this land) is an extraordinarily different yoga from the practice Sri Patanjali writes about in the Yoga Sutra, or the practices of the early Hatha yogis during the Tantric (medieval) India. The yoga that I teach, that most of us...practice today is a product of British colonialism in India.... there are Orientalist myths that persist in our practice today... We need to realize that Jois and Iyengar are products of a particular time and place, and that their teachings are not ancient, timeless pieces of wisdom. We need to move beyond the binary of everything Eastern being inherently wise, perfect and static and everything Western being devoid of any spiritual knowledge or content. We need to embrace the fact that yoga is and has been many different things to many different people and will continue to shift and change with time."<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Melissa Heather, "Extreme Makeover: Yoga in the British Empire" *Decolonizing Yoga*, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/extreme-makeover-yoga-british-empire/>.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

Heather shows that, although awareness of the construction of knowledge can undercut conceptions of historical authenticity, knowing can also influence individual empowerment. Heather says, “It’s been liberating for my own personal practice to realize that yoga is so much more than physical exercise.”<sup>125</sup> Drawing on the double meaning of authenticity, Heather’s article suggests the importance of yoga’s embodied epistemology in filling in the gaps left by the Orientalist construction of yoga’s historical authenticity.

Nevrin discusses the concurrent arising of meaning and feeling through yoga practice in terms of studio environments and social interactions, while keeping the role of *movement* central to his understanding of this phenomenon. He says:

prior to actually performing any specific yoga techniques, there are a host of things that provide an interpretive context... “the practice itself -- as it is called by most practitioners -- is a highly structured routine consisting of various body techniques. These uses of the body, too, will create certain reactions, both physiological and emotional, which are then contextualized by being related to pre-and post-session contexts, to previous experience, and to any acquired knowledge about yoga.”<sup>126</sup>

The process of contextualization that Nevrin refers to does not occur in a linear temporal frame. Not only are past experiences and knowledge about yoga integrated into present experiences, but present experiences will also effect the meaning or interpretation of the past, and this feedback loop provides context for future experiences.<sup>127</sup> While the actual space (studio, gym, ashram, etc.) in which one practices yoga is important to the construction of affective-imaginaries, I suggest here, that virtual spaces are also influential to these compositions. In both cases, movement practices typical of modern yoga are highly influenced by ideations, imaginaries,

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 122.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 125.

fantasies, stories, and the codifications of “authentic yoga” as they were put forth by scholarship and circulated in popular discourse. As Singleton says, “early scholarly editions... provided (practitioners and teachers of yoga) with access to the traditions from which their practices claimed to stem.”<sup>128</sup> As scholarly findings circulate in popular culture, they generate meaning for contemporary practitioners. Heather’s article urges other *DCY* community members to disown the colonial construction of “authentic” yoga and to create a new sense of “authentic” yoga based on embodied experience.

### *Authentic Self and Embodied Epistemology*

However, some modern practitioners do not readily embrace the notion of yoga’s historical authenticity. For example, in the *Elephant Journal* article “Thoughts on Modern Yoga: Perspective from a 21st Century Yogi,” Tamera Lee asserts:

I definitely respect the traditional teachings of yoga and think it’s important for us to know where this wonderful practice we call yoga comes from. If you want to carry the Bhagavad Gita around in your knapsack so you can read it on your lunch break, great. However, if you have never heard of it and are like Bhagavad-what, so be it.<sup>129</sup>

From Lee’s perspective, the *Bhagavadgītā* is foundational to modern yoga, yet, if practitioners aren’t interested in learning philosophy, they can still practice authentic yoga. As Lee attests, “Some just want to stretch and feel good. I think ‘true yoga’ means being true to yourself; if you’re doing something that you love and hold close to your heart there’s nothing superficial

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<sup>128</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 12; White, *Sinister Yogis*, 73.

<sup>129</sup> Tamera Lee, “Thoughts on Modern Yoga from a 21st Century Lululemon Loving Yogi,” *Elephant Journal*, February 2, 2013, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2013/02/thoughts-on-modern-yoga-perspective-from-a-21st-century-lululemon-loving-yogi-tamara-lee/>.

about it.”<sup>130</sup> From Lee’s perspective, a lack of history, or a non-spiritual “inauthentic” practice is inconsequential, because, for her, authenticity actually comes from “feeling good” and “being true to yourself.”<sup>131</sup> The embodied epistemology signature to modern yoga practices, here again, becomes pivotal when historical authenticity is scrutinized, or when the modern practitioner is simply indifferent to historical authenticity claims. As Langøien’s Mysore study finds:

the physicality of the practice is crucial. Through the practice (at least part of) the philosophy of yoga is experienced physically to be true and yoga itself is embodied. That ‘the truth of yoga can’t be understood (intellectually); it has to be felt and experienced (physically); is a common theme among the practitioners. The...changes that happen in one’s own body might be a motivation for practicing, but also *prove* the strength of the practice, and thus the philosophy that prescribes it.<sup>132</sup>

This slippage in rhetoric occurs when the notion of authenticity as historical provenance begins to cleave into authenticity as discovering or experiencing one’s “authentic, true self.” This second vein of discourse also has historical relevance, conveniently lending itself to recollections of the “yoking” of mind and body as discussed in the *Upaniṣad*-s or *Yogasūtra*, the promise to experience a transcendental “other” conflated with the romanticized notion of the true individual as the “authentic” self. According to Banet-Weiser, the circulation of yoga’s historicity in this way “repurposes Indian religion(s) as ‘authentic,’ in which the practitioner, not the actual practice, is ‘authentic.’”<sup>133</sup> This slippage is located throughout popular yoga discourse as well as on blogs that claim to be more countercultural, like the *DCY* blog. This demonstrates the

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Langøien, “Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment,” 32.

<sup>133</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Authenticity TM*, 195.

obliqueness of the “double” authenticity, and precisely within its fluidity and obscurity lies its efficiency.

The philosophy of the *Yogasūtra* combined with influences of Western and Eastern physical culture and medicine like diet, breathing, cleanliness, celibacy, and relaxation, are highly compatible with the values of modern individualism.<sup>134</sup> According to Doniger’s detailing of this process, these “new combinations of Western and Eastern physical culture methods were naturalized as ancient Hindu knowledge.”<sup>135</sup> I suggest here, that these (re)naturalizations endure as affective-imaginaries in modern yoga culture. One affective-imaginary is a distillation of many histories into the myth of a singular yoga origin, which comes to be representative of how yoga has always been done. Another affective-imaginary coincides with the former, indicating that the authentic self of the modern individual is congruent with historical origins. However, there exist an amalgam of abstract affective imaginaries. The following chapter further develops the notion of affective-imaginaries through an examination of the narratives underwriting modern yoga visual culture.

### CHAPTER THREE DCY COUNTERS MODERN YOGA VISUAL CULTURE

How do we shake up the yoga stereotypes and allow people to see *yoga as it really is*? We are not all white, able-bodied, super-flexible, thin, heterosexual beings. We are diverse in every way and it’s this diversity that makes life interesting... We don’t need to fit into these narrow yoga stereotypes to practice yoga.

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<sup>134</sup> Joseph Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Philosophy and Science*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004); Nevrin, “Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga,” 122; Langøien, “Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment,” 32.

<sup>135</sup> Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 123.



We must encourage people who feel marginalized and who are different that we need their uniqueness and experiences. *We need to develop a conscious culture committed to social justice and equality for every body....My challenge to you is to change the culture, change the language, and change the idea of what yoga teachers and yoga students look like.* Be a trailblazer. Share your uniqueness, your challenges, and your practice.<sup>136</sup>

This chapter discusses how the visual culture of modern yoga perpetuates certain “ideological nexuses of constructive Orientalism” which are incorporated into how modern yoga practitioners experience and understand the practice of yoga.<sup>137</sup> This chapter examines modern yoga visual culture on the internet, in order to understand the abstract narratives underwriting popular representations of what “authentic” yoga is, looks like, and who can practice it. *DCY* bloggers work to counter these normalized cultural narratives by featuring blogs that foreground issues of diversity, exclusion and cultural appropriation by discussing their first-hand perspectives of yoga.

In attending to how “authentic” yoga spirituality is represented in terms of bodies, objects, and settings in yoga photography, this chapter reads examples from modern yoga visual culture, highlighting the significance of this narrative in the pop-culture construction of both historical and individual notions of authenticity. This chapter seeks to show that yoga practitioners do not start yoga from a place of neutrality, bereft of conceptions or expectations of what yoga is, who can practice it or what the practice of yoga offers. Instead, the atmospheric conditions of broader popular culture are integrated into yoga’s affective-imaginaries, influencing how modern practitioners experience, feel, practice, and make sense of yoga. *DCY*

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<sup>136</sup> Dianne Bondy, “Confessions of a Fat Black Yoga Teacher,” *Decolonizing Yoga*, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/confessions-fat-black-yoga-teacher/#sthash.WsOJCudk.dpuf>.

<sup>137</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 92.

works to counter these dominant narratives by making cultural appropriation, lack of diversity, and exclusion of certain bodies central to their critiques of modern yoga culture.

The yoga postures (*āsana-s*) as practiced and portrayed in print and online media are often depicted as hallmarks of ancient mystical practices with the power to confer physical, psychological, and spiritual transformation to the perfected practitioner. This chapter reads a collection of these images through the lens Jane Iwamura offers in *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*.<sup>138</sup> Placing the late 19th century rise of religious pluralism alongside images of early 20th century Asian religious teachers, Iwamura’s work demonstrates how a growing tolerance of Asian peoples and cultures was mediated by American mass-media, which “relied on and reinforced certain racialized notions of Asianness and Asian religiosity.”<sup>139</sup> According to Iwamura, patterns of visual representation and discourse espoused positive stereotypes of Asian peoples and religions, largely divorced from earlier Orientalist myths of Asian strangeness or despotism. In these new images, the latent Orientalism lurking beneath these positive representations remains concealed and frequently undisputed.<sup>140</sup> Iwamura uses this framework to theorize how the icon of the “Oriental Monk,” the sign of “authentic” Eastern spirituality, became a culturally intelligible, popular, and sought-after figure in American popular culture and entertainment. A term designated to include religious figures from a variety of Asian religious contexts while alluding to American pop-culture’s monolithic treatment of these figures’ visual representations, Iwamura’s Oriental Monk narrative is useful in

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 5.

understanding the appeal of “authenticity” within modern yoga culture, and in describing how the “authentic” is represented in images that circulate on the internet.

With the rise of Internet use, the ability to produce and circulate representations of modern transnational yoga is no longer exclusive to professional journalists and media, as the historical moments Iwamura chronicles in her book were. Despite changes in medium and authorship, the contemporary online archive of modern yoga images recalls the narrative of the Oriental Monk through objects and scenes which still fulfill a crucial role in modern yoga affective-imaginaries. According to Iwamura, the spiritual wisdom of the Oriental Monk travels away from Asia, gathering white American disciples and bestowing spiritual authority onto his chosen student(s). This authenticated student becomes a lineage holder of sorts, and is sanctioned to further disseminate the wisdom teachings of the original Asian teacher.<sup>141</sup> Iwamura analyzes D.T. Suzuki, Mararishi Mahesh Yogi, and the show *Kung Fu*, to demonstrate that the Oriental Monk is an explicitly male figure, though her analysis reveals that his visual representation frequently undergoes a marked feminization, who goes on to train male American students. In departing from Iwamura’s analysis of male-male student-teacher relationships, this section provides the example of T. Krishnamacharya, an Indian teacher whose foremost female disciple, Indra Devi, went on to start one of the first yoga studios in America. This gendered dynamic of spiritual transmission from Asian male teacher to white female student ushers in a new narrative of the dissemination of yoga in the west — one which simultaneously positions the exotic,

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

spiritual and “authentic” East as underwriting yoga’s historical authenticity, and narrates how white, able-bodied women became the primary demographic of modern yoga practitioners.<sup>142</sup>

Photographs taken in the mid-2000s of transnational yoga teacher Shiva Rea, a direct student of K. Pattabhi Jois who was a student of Krishnamacharya and later founded the Ashtanga system of postural yoga, position her body in proximity to cultural artifacts that recall affective associations with an exotic, mystical East. Rea’s body placed in proximity to objects and environments that evoke Eastern spiritual authenticity inaugurate a new wave of white, able-bodied, cisgender female yoga teachers into yoga’s affective-imaginaries, offering a salient visual representation depicting who is permitted to be an authentic lineage holder and yoga practitioner. As Iwamura suggests, when viewed as an archive of representation, the visuality of modern postural yoga works to “further reinforce Orientalism’s hold on the western imagination by limiting alternative possibilities.”<sup>143</sup> This occurs not only in maintaining the division of the East as inherently “authentic” spirituality, and the West as “inauthentic” consumer culture, but also underscores visual representations which narrate the story of how “authentic” yoga came to the West, and explains the types of people and bodies who are “authentically” practicing yoga. While these representations are typical of modern yoga visual culture, the *DCY* blog works to destabilize the assumptions that these visual archives reinforce.

The images discussed in this chapter were first published in print media, and have now been committed to the internet archive, appearing in seconds in Google searches. Through a discussion of these images, I suggest that the affective-imaginary of historically authentic

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<sup>142</sup> *NAMASTA, YIAS, LiveStrong, Yoga Journal*, “Yoga Statistics,” July 28, 2013, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://www.statisticbrain.com/yoga-statistics/>.

<sup>143</sup> Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 7.

spirituality is reified through the genealogy of visual culture that modern postural yoga has inherited. On the other hand, articles published on the *DCY* blog work to undo the affective-imaginary of “virtual orientalism” that positions white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual women as the authentic practitioners of yoga.

### *T. Krishnamacharya and Indra Devi*

T. Krishnamacharya’s fame as a yoga teacher began to grow from 1933-1950, when he was commissioned to open a *yogaśālā* (“yoga hall”) at the Palace of the Wodeyar family, the Mahārājas of Mysore, after previously teaching yoga at the Mysore Sanskrit Institute.<sup>144</sup> Similar to what other scholars have claimed regarding Swami Vivekananda, who is often championed as the source of the West’s fascination with yoga as a secular science, Krishnamacharya also actively integrated Western physical fitness into his yoga training techniques.<sup>145</sup> Students of Krishnamacharya continued this project, founding schools of yoga that integrated physical health and yogic philosophies, further expanding upon Krishnamacharya’s teachings. Hence these teachings continued to circulate transnationally throughout the 20th century.

One of Krishnamacharya’s foremost female students, Indra Devi, a Latvian born aristocrat, sailed to India in 1929 and took up studies at Krishnamacharya’s Mysore *yogaśālā*.<sup>146</sup> Devi moved to China when her diplomat husband was relocated and opened a yoga school in Shanghai. Following the sudden death of her husband, Devi moved to Los Angeles, California,

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<sup>144</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 195-196.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.; also Joseph Alter, “Yoga Shivar Performativity and the Study of Modern Yoga,” in *Yoga in the Modern World*, eds. Mark Singleton and Jane Byrne (New York: Routledge, 2008), 36-48.

<sup>146</sup> Stephanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 180-182.

where she opened another *yogaśālā* and “taught a form of yoga that was intensely physical and made purifying your body the necessary first stage of spiritual training.”<sup>147</sup>

Promoting yoga as a “world religion,” Devi appealed to both American’s growing appreciation of ecumenical humanism and the worldwide revival of physical culture, while still retaining pieces of foreign intrigue.<sup>148</sup> According to Iwamura’s analysis, the “authentic” status afforded to the Oriental Monk and his students is dependent upon successfully balancing elements representative of mystical Eastern spirituality and Western modernization.<sup>149</sup> While Devi’s Los Angeles yoga school attracted movie-star students like Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo and Gloria Swanson, she renounced makeup and preferred a sari to western dresses, and often walked barefoot.<sup>150</sup> The photo below shows Devi, wearing a sari and sitting at the feet of Krishnamacharya at his 100th birthday celebration in Mysore.



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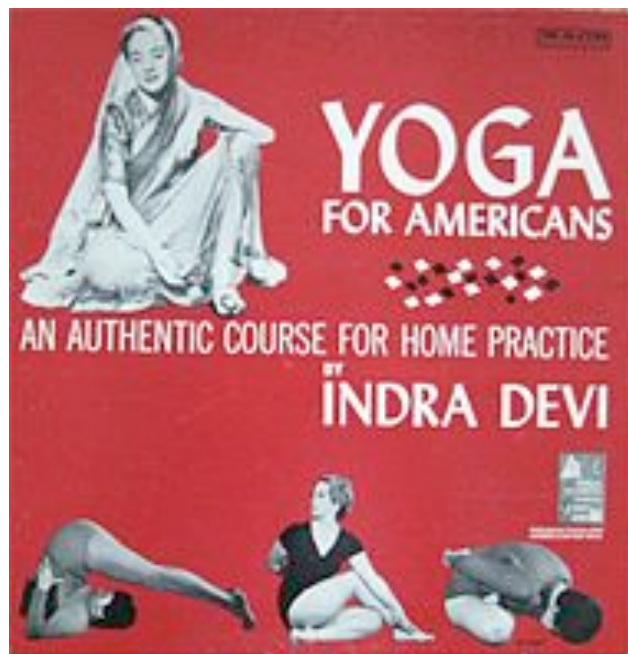
<sup>147</sup> Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 183.

<sup>148</sup> De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 195.

<sup>149</sup> Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 7.

<sup>150</sup> Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 183-187.

Devi's first book, *Forever Young, Forever Healthy: Simplified Yoga for Modern Living*, introduces yoga as a system of physical exercises, with only tangential references to philosophy, texts, or metaphysics.<sup>151</sup> According to Stephanie Syman, "Devi saw a system that offered something for everyone but not everything to everyone. So she reduced *yoga*, a bloated kitchen-sink of a word, down to something that fit more readily into American ways of thinking. Yoga was in effect a health tonic."<sup>152</sup>



Devi's second book (original cover pictured above), *Yoga for Americans An Authentic Course for Home Practice*, includes a more descriptive account of the spiritual aims of yoga practice. In it

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<sup>151</sup> Indra Devi, *Forever Young, Forever Healthy: Simplified Yoga for Modern Living*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1953), 37, 79-80.

<sup>152</sup> Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 192.

she discusses the Om symbol, the subtle body, *kuṇḍalinī* energy, *naḍi*-s and *cakra*-s.<sup>153</sup> According to Syman, Devi “made available the materials the counterculture would put to use, and she multiplied the kinds of experiences Americans could conceive of having.”<sup>154</sup> These conceptions were normalized through the circulation of visual images and discourse, and further popularized by celebrities and media.<sup>155</sup> Hence, the health and spiritual benefits of yoga, along with the visual imaginary representing the specific types of bodies who practice yoga, are retained in popular affective-imaginaries.

### *Authentic Self, Healthy Self*

For *DCY* bloggers, the health and spiritual benefits of yoga are defended as authentic, while popularized representations of who authentically practices or teaches yoga are frequently under scrutiny. For example, the *DCY* article “Confessions of a Fat Black Yoga Teacher” shows how the popularity of yoga as a system for better health has been retained in popular culture. Author Dianne Bondy says, “Yoga is a vehicle to wellness; it’s about the mind-body-spirit connection.” Articulating one aim of yoga as health, Bondy also recalls the term yoga as a “yoking” system through which mind and body are united. Bondy’s article also suggests that the practice of yoga merges with feminist ethics, asserting that inclusion and celebration of diversity within yoga spaces can encourage others to recover their “authentic” selves. According to Bondy, the practice of yoga promises to reunite one with their “true nature.”<sup>156</sup> Bondy claims:

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<sup>153</sup> Indra Devi, *Yoga for Americans* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2010 (1959)), 128-135.

<sup>154</sup> Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 197.

<sup>155</sup> Andrea Jain chronicles the rise of transnational yoga “from counterculture to pop-culture” in *Selling Yoga* (New York, Oxford: 2015); Jane Iwamura discusses D.T. Sukuki and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in *Virtual Orientalism* (New York: Oxford, 2011); Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 186-197; Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality The Silent Takeover of Religion*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 117-121.

<sup>156</sup> Bondy, “Confessions of a Fat Black Yoga Teacher.”



We can change the misperception of what yoga looks like by encouraging people to become stewards of their own wellness. They don't need external validation—they can find what they are looking for within themselves. And yoga can help them find it... Yoga is all about the breath, quieting the mind, and tuning into your true nature.<sup>157</sup>

These aims of yoga, as health, historical authenticity and finding an authentic self, are put forth into the affective-imaginary of authenticity in India Devi's second book, *Yoga for Americans*. The book cover (above) features a picture of Devi, sitting on the ground wearing a sari, as well as three silhouettes of females performing yoga poses. The book is advertised as an “authentic course for home practice.” With images portraying Devi in a sari, as well as women in yoga postures, “authentic” most directly signifies both a spiritually and culturally authentic ‘East’ (the sari). However, the figures at the bottom of the cover also allude to the “authentic” -- insofar as “authenticity” operates within the affective-imaginary of health and healing, which privileges biomedical and psychological discourses and modern individualism. According to Banet-Weiser, this doubling of authenticity espouses a “branding of yoga (that) repurposes Indian religion as ‘authentic,’ in which the practitioner, not the actual practice, is ‘authentic.’”<sup>158</sup>

For members of the *DCY* community, the dominant narratives of who can authentically teach yoga can be overcome by integrating body diversity into yoga classes, and creating accessible yoga spaces that are inclusive of diversity, particularly along the lines of race, body size, and ability.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 195.

<sup>159</sup> Bondy, “Confessions of a Fat Black Yoga Teacher.”

*Shiva Rea:*

Shiva Rea is a direct student of K. Patthabi Jois, Krishnamacharya's student and founder of the Ashtanga Vinyasa system of modern transnational yoga, establishing her role as a recipient of authentic teachings within the abstract Oriental Monk narrative. Her photos here are representative of Iwamura's "Virtual Orientalism," as the unquestioned and obscured appropriation of objects and locations that elicit affective associations with "authentic" eastern spirituality.<sup>160</sup> Rea's body, when placed in these locations and adorned by these objects, espouses affective-associations that position her, a white, able-bodied, cisgendered, heterosexual woman, as a bearer of the "authenticity" these objects signify.

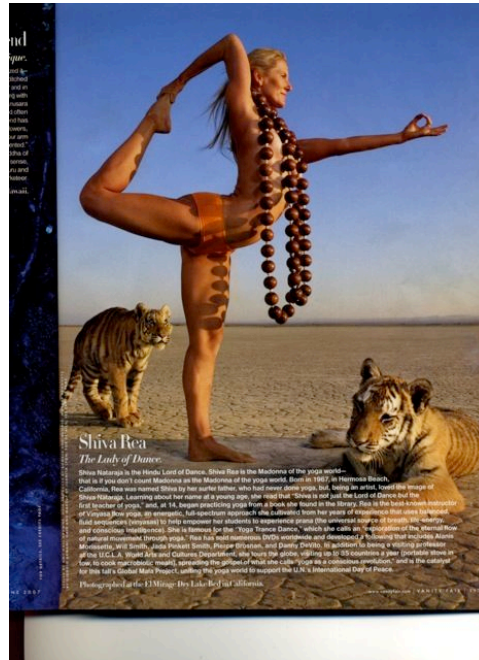
The photographs of Rea, one of the most sought-after modern yoga teachers in the world, discussed below exemplify how the appearance of religious artifacts adorning white bodies doing yoga poses is a normalized signification of the authentic religious traditions these objects represent, and also work to authenticate the body they adorn as a "real" yoga practitioner. The abstraction of the affective-imaginary in this way continues to perpetuate orientalist tropes of the "exotic orient" and also shows how the body of the white female modern yoga practitioner, once visually overwritten with cultural signs that signify authenticity, is integrated into the orientalist fantasy of eastern mysticism. The photographs of Shiva Rea discussed below first appeared in a July 2007 photo spread and article in *Vanity Fair* entitled "Planet Yoga," which featured a total of eighteen modern yoga teachers, the "new faces" of yoga.<sup>161</sup> These photos also reappear on Rea's professional website and in the print marketing materials for her "Samudra School of Global

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<sup>160</sup> Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*.

<sup>161</sup> Amy Fine Collins, "Planet Yoga," *Vanity Fair June 2007*, 137-142, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/06/Planet-Yoga>.

Yoga,” in which they are used to promote and sell her yoga teacher training programs, books, and retreats.<sup>162</sup>



The image above features Rea in a version of *natarajāsana* (‘dancer posture’), the yoga pose of her namesake the Hindu deity Shiva, also commonly known as “the lord of dance.” Drawing on this coincidence of names, the caption below her left foot calls Shiva Rea “The Lady of Dance,” putting her position as a western yoga teacher on par with one of the central deities of Hinduism. An abnormally large string of *māla*-s drapes across her bare chest while tigers surrounded her postured body, all elements that fuel the exotic imaginary by positioning authentic accoutrements commonly associated with the Hindu deity Shiva (*māla*-s and tigers), while Rea’s half-nakedness hints at the erotic.<sup>163</sup> The shape of Rea’s aestheticized body stands out against the open space behind her, an unnamed and seemingly unending desert landscape.

<sup>162</sup> Shiva Rea, “Samudra School of Global Yoga,” *Shiva Rea*, accessed November 21, 2014, <http://shivarea.com>.

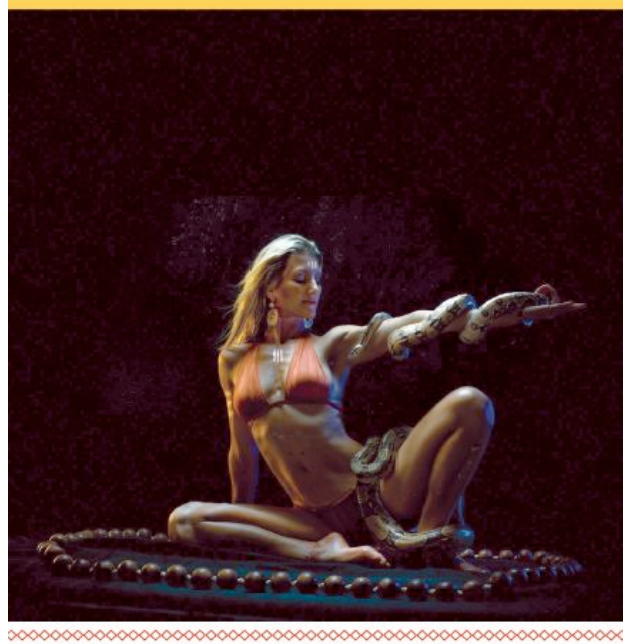
<sup>163</sup> Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 35.

The setting in this photograph recalls Linda Nochlin's description of "the picturesque" in orientalist art by both evoking a type of provincial setting in which the markers of western modernity and civilization are absent.<sup>164</sup> While the desert background recalls the orientalist fantasy of the unspecific yet inherently different "Other," it is onto this vast expanse of "nothingness" that the modern gaze can project its fantasy of the authentic spirituality of the East. According to Iwamura, "India's nontechnological, agrarian setting provided a romantic backdrop... to be enjoyed and experienced by spiritual tourists from the West."<sup>165</sup> By freely making use of and posing with cultural artifacts representative of the Hindu deity Śiva, Rea is portrayed as a legitimate representative of Hindu religious traditions. As the captions "Yoga World" and "Lady of the Dance" from the *Vanity Fair* spread suggests Shiva Rea is an authoritative modern yoga "lineage holder," a teacher legitimated by her Asian male teacher to pass on spiritual teachings.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 106.



The photographs of Rea (above) further demonstrate the transmission of the Oriental Monk narrative through the 20th century, where “authentic” spirituality and the promise of spiritual transformation operate as commodities to be purchased and sold within global markets. The reiteration of religious symbols and open backgrounds within modern yoga photography galvanizes a climate in which the fantasy of a mystical, spiritual and authentic “East” hauntingly persists. This process leaves unquestioned the appropriation of cultural and religious symbols, while simultaneously excluding other types of people from being seen as “authentic” yoga practitioners. As Andrea Jain argues, “Postural yoga’s... narratives reflect yogi’s deepest values and most sacred goals.”<sup>166</sup> DCY bloggers counter the assumptions of broader visual culture by incorporating feminist ethics into their values of what is considered “authentic” yoga. Countering Iwamura’s claim about the rise of positive stereotypes towards Asian peoples and cultures, Vijay

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<sup>166</sup> Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 124.

Prashad claims that the adaptation of South Asian religious symbols and practices into US culture is not merely indicative of a widespread “tolerance” towards communities of color.<sup>167</sup> Rather, in Prashad and Banet-Weiser’s analyses, the use of South Asian religious artifacts that circulate in visual representations depicting white, able-bodied women in close spatial proximity to these objects indicates a “loyalty and affinity” to the affective-imaginary of white, able-bodiedness as representative of “authentic” yoga.<sup>168</sup>

The preservation and proliferation of these types of images within modern yoga visual culture operate to bind yoga practitioners to objects through obscure notions of the authentic. The feeling of something, someone or some idea as “authentic” is not a function of the object in and of itself, but, rather, is a product of the relationship between subjects and objects. While bloggers on *DCY* maintain normative discourses of discovering the authentic self, they also work to push back on cultural narratives that uncritically accept whiteness as a mark of the “authentic” yoga subject. By emphasizing the “embodied epistemology” that modern yoga systems frequently evoke, *DCY* bloggers position all bodies and people as having the same potential for authentic spirituality and for discovering one’s authentic self. As Dianne Bondy insists, being legitimately open to diversity means training people of different body types and races to teach yoga. She says:

There is a place for everyone on the mat; we just have to change our mindset. The key to bringing diversity to yoga is to have a diversity of teachers. Inclusion on the yoga mat means everyone is welcome—to teach and practice. How do you get bigger people to go to yoga classes? Have more bigger-bodied teachers. How do you get a more culturally diverse yoga class? You train culturally diverse yoga teachers to teach.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 56-59.

<sup>168</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 196.

<sup>169</sup> Bondy, “Confessions of a Fat Black Yoga Teacher.”

So, for Bondy and *DCY* community members, bringing more diversity into actual yoga practice spaces, virtual media, and in visual representation are salient ways to talk back to pervasive visual cultural imagery that otherwise depicts a very narrow image of who is practicing “authentic” yoga. As a result, *DCY* blogs frequently call for more diverse yoga teachers, practitioners, and classes, while advocating for social justice and activism. The following chapter theorizes the relationship between naturalized discourses and images as affective-imaginaries, by addressing the type of yoga subjectivity *DCY* bloggers seek to espouse through a reorientation of the “authentic” in ways that advocate feminist ethical principles.

#### CHAPTER FOUR IDENTITY, AGENCY AND PROGRESSIVE YOGA

Continuing to practice, as well as to teach, is wanting to grow into a better person and love deeper. I can understand the trauma that’s triggered in my body in many different situations, or I can remain present even when put in a precarious position (literally and figuratively), which yoga reveals again and again. Or if I can return to a posture or meditation that angers me, with more and more love, attention, and presence each time, then I am necessarily growing off the mat as well.

... I never really wanted to teach in a studio, where I didn’t feel comfortable, welcome, and where no one else was visibly queer or political, where the community is mostly white, straight, and upper to middle class. There are so many assumptions in the typical yoga studio that come out through the teachers’ words that have triggered me as a trans, queer, working class survivor. —Jacoby Ballard<sup>170</sup>

This chapter theorizes the relationship between naturalized discourses and images as they circulate in the affective-imaginaries of modern yoga culture, and the type of progressive yoga

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<sup>170</sup> Nick Krieger, “Creating a Yoga Space for All: An Interview with Jacoby Ballard,” *Decolonizing Yoga*, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/creating-a-yoga-space-for-all-an-interview-with-jacoby-ballard/#sthash.I4GRDqgk.dpuf>.

subjectivity *DCY* bloggers seek to espouse. This type of progressive subjectivity, I suggest, occurs through a process of reorientation away from discourses and images that situate one particular type of yoga practice as “authentic,” or that otherwise privilege whiteness, skinniness or able-bodiedness as “authentic” representations of a yoga practitioner. Despite the integration of diverse bodies into the *DCY* affective-imaginary, *DCY* bloggers frequently recall “double-authenticity,” historical authenticity as something that can be discovered through yoga, which promises to deliver a reunion with one’s “true nature.”<sup>171</sup> In so doing, *DCY* bloggers acknowledge yoga’s “embodied epistemology,” while articulating insights gained through yoga practice in ways that advocate feminist ethical values of diversity, inclusion, cultural sensitivity, and social justice. Integrating lived experience into existing knowledge about yoga changes the ways yoga is “known” for individuals and communities, and constructs new affective-imaginaries which open up new ways for yoga practitioners to experience and articulate their yoga practices. In this section I return to Lindholm’s conception of the authentic as an identity or “correspondence,” and elaborate on his notion to show how, in modern yoga, this type of authenticity is rooted in the movement practice of postural yoga where emotions and feeling are central to experience. However, for individual bloggers on *DCY* this is not an isolated phenomenon that occurs just for one individual but, rather, there is a strong social dimension to authenticity as correspondence, a coherence of feelings that individual bodies share. Lindholm discusses this social dimension of authenticity in terms of country music counterculture, saying:

Through their familiar furnishings and the behaviors they elicit, these countercultural third spaces give regular patrons a comforting feeling of belonging to a subculture with more genuine values than the mainstream; a community where people really care about one another, where the authentic expressive self is welcomed, and where everyone is

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<sup>171</sup> For example, Bondy’s words in Dianne Bondy, “Confessions of a Fat Black Yoga Teacher.”



united by a common enthusiasm... that is believed to be especially deep, heartfelt, and real... and cultivate a sense of collective authenticity based on shared knowledge about what their music *really* is.<sup>172</sup>

Drawing on Carrie Noland's theory of embodied agency, this chapter situates kinesthetic sensations as central to understanding the paradigm of identity construction and agency as it applies to *DCY*.<sup>173</sup> This application attempts to understand how experiences of emotional and bodily sensations during postural yoga practice are mediated linguistically in ways that both affirm and subvert broader cultural narratives. This process, I suggest, results in the construction of a distinct type of individual and social modern yoga identity: where the embodiment of feminist values of social justice, diversity, and inclusivity become the marks of "authentic" self, experience, and yoga.

### *Who is a Yogi? Movement, Emotion & Self*

While modern postural yoga systems often incorporate various philosophical ideologies to inform and complement their practices, they all tend to emphasize "experiential epistemology."<sup>174</sup> In other words, because modern postural yoga systems prescribe repetitious forms of gesture, gestures which are themselves affective, then modern yoga as a practice can also be described in terms of feeling and affect.<sup>175</sup> While embodied sensations are subjectively felt, and what "feels good" to one individual might "feel bad" to another, the amalgam of affective-imaginaries that narrate yoga's arrival to the West and dictate who is authorized to

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<sup>172</sup> Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity*, 35.

<sup>173</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*.

<sup>174</sup> Graham, "Ancient, Spiritual, and Indian: Exploring Narratives of Authenticity in Modern Yoga," 85-100.

<sup>175</sup> Nevrin, "Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga," 122.

teach and practice yoga inform the feelings that arise within the practice of modern postural yoga. These feelings are then reiterated through discourse. As Langøen's study finds, "The philosophy, the social discourse on yoga, and the experience of the practice, feed into and strengthen each other, and together make up the reality of yoga in the 'modern Western context.'"<sup>176</sup> Cultural affective-imaginaries can both limit and open up the possibilities through which yoga practitioners experience and make meaning of yoga. In other words, affective-imaginaries are multiple and also adaptable, and emerging discourses that articulate lived experience differently, such as those on the *DCY* blog, create alternative affective-imaginaries with which one can self-identify.

Identifying movement as the primary practice of modern postural yoga avoids "the tendency to write off postural yoga as nothing more than mere commodification," the stance of Carrette and King's *Selling Spirituality*, which Andrea Jain vehemently critiques.<sup>177</sup> Jain's study of modern postural yoga situates yoga as both a religious practice and consumer culture, insofar as being part of one doesn't necessarily exclude the other. Jain says, "postural yoga reflects the dominant religio-philosophical mode of consumer culture, which links the self to the body so that the attainment of health and beauty is central to the transformative and transcendent process of self development."<sup>178</sup> Following Jain's advice to take seriously the perspectives of actual modern yoga practitioners, and the appeal of postural yoga forms for physical, psychological,

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<sup>176</sup> Langøien, "Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment," 36.

<sup>177</sup> Andrea Jain's critique of Carrette and King's *Selling Spirituality*, in Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 114-122.

<sup>178</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 105.

and spiritual transformation,<sup>179</sup> this chapter situates kinesthetic sensations and affective feelings as essential to the constitution of yoga subjectivities.

Because the terms “embodiment,” “agency,” and “kinesthesia” are accounted for in many contrasting ways across disciplines, this chapter follows Carrie Noland’s definitions wherever possible. Noland defines “embodiment” as, “the process whereby collective behaviors and beliefs, acquired through acculturation, are rendered individual and lived at the level of the body.”<sup>180</sup> In this account, embodiment is not merely the materiality that comprises the physical body, but is, rather, influenced by and influential to affective-imaginaries that inform an individual’s sense of itself. This sense of self is, according to Noland, articulated through acculturated patterns of gesturing. For practitioners of yoga, these acculturated patterns are not just habituated movement patterns done in yoga practice, these patterns are also ways of living, moving, interacting with others and, simply, being in the world. Broadly, for modern yoga practitioners, “the focus on sense experience grants primacy to the body,” as the nexus of lived experience.<sup>181</sup> For members of the *DCY* community, patterns of moving in yoga practice and in life are articulated in terms of feminist ethics, wherein bloggers articulate their emotional experiences of postural yoga practice in ways that promote the physical and psychological health benefits of the practice while advocating for diversity, inclusion and social justice. For instance, consider this interview with Jacoby Ballard, a yoga teacher and founding member of Third Root Community Health Center in Brooklyn. Ballard shares why he practices yoga:

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 169-171.

<sup>180</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 9.

<sup>181</sup> James Morley, “Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice Through Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of the Body,” in *Philosophy East and West* 51, no.1, 73-82, (January 2001), 75.

Continuing to practice, as well as to teach, is wanting to grow into a better person and love deeper. I can understand the trauma that's triggered in my body in many different situations, or I can remain present even when put in a precarious position (literally and figuratively), which yoga reveals again and again. Or if I can return to a posture or meditation that angers me, with more and more love, attention, and presence each time, then I am necessarily growing off the mat as well.<sup>182</sup>

Ballard expresses that sometimes, feelings that arise for him during movement practice “on the mat” are reflective of past physical and emotional traumas. Through engaging the movement-based, postural practice of yoga, wherein he can remain “present” in the midst of catharsis, Ballard reports achieving a type of personal growth and healing that also extends into his life “off the mat.” He goes on:

Most teachers whose classes that I attend as a student say something homophobic, sexist, racist, or transphobic... I wanted to create a class where those experiences were understood and welcomed. Where liberation internally and externally were equally valued. Where community was built, and where there is sincere care for fellow students, regardless of their body, their gender, their race, their class privilege.<sup>183</sup>

Ballard recalls the positive experiences of yoga as a movement practice as a useful method for reconciling embodied sensations of physical and emotional trauma, but also notes that his experience in “most” yoga environments was less than welcoming. Negotiating his positive experiences of the practice of yoga with the negative encounters he had with teachers and in yoga studios, Ballard began to create specifically “Queer & Trans Yoga” classes and spaces. Eventually he co-founded Third Root Community Health Center where, as their “About” page proclaims:

social justice is at the core of healing. Among our goals are to challenge systematic health disparities, hierarchies within different modalities of healthcare, and to provide a different

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<sup>182</sup> Nick Krieger, “Creating a Yoga Space for All: An Interview with Jacoby Ballard.”

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

model of care that grows out of love. We work to provide holistic healthcare for everyone, in acknowledgement of the living realities and histories of the many communities that our clients and students come from.<sup>184</sup>

For Ballard, feminist ethics of inclusion, diversity and social justice do not exist outside the scope of healing, of movement or of yoga. Social justice becomes an embodied reality that lived in the everyday. This aligns with Noland's account, where embodiment is intrinsically connected with agency, and it is "the power to alter those acquired behaviors and beliefs for purposes that may be reactive (resistant) or collaborative (innovative) in kind."<sup>185</sup> When the yoga spaces Ballard encountered were inhospitable to diverse bodies, socio-economic classes, and gender identities, he created yoga spaces where unique and diverse experiences would be accepted as legitimate. Ballard's interview goes on to discuss the role of affective emotions as experienced "on the mat":

I also really love practicing (yoga) when I am really sad, really angry, really upset. Because those emotions consume me, I really focus on my practice. I'm not looking at the guy next to me or my mind is not wandering away. I'm moving into those emotions, feeling them in my body. I've cried on the mat so many times, and am so grateful to the practice when I am so overwhelmed by emotions, because it lets me explore them in a heart-felt, embodied way.<sup>186</sup>

In Ballard's account, emotions are felt "in the body," and he alludes to the importance of "exploring" these emotions with awareness during yoga practice. Furthermore, for Ballard, creating inclusive spaces where queer and trans identified people can practice yoga and experience its healing benefits on an individual level is crucial to the bigger project of providing

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<sup>184</sup> Third Root Community Wellness, "About," *Third Root*, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://thirdroot.org/about-2/>.

<sup>185</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 9. While Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* works to push back against a construction of agency that is strictly defined in accordance with modern liberal ideals, this paper remains consistent with Noland's definition, simply because the application of this theory does look to identify, in embodied registers, resistance of cultural norms and expectations.

<sup>186</sup> Krieger, "Creating a Yoga Space for All: An Interview with Jacoby Ballard."

health and healing for all. Ballard’s work situates social justice and the healing of unjust social histories as central to the ethical values of yoga practice, recalling Lindholm’s notion of authenticity as correspondence — an account not limited to the construction of individual identity, but also as a coherence of social feelings.<sup>187</sup> Ballard’s interview reflects the general sentiment shared among *DCY* articles: broadening yoga’s access provides more people the chance to experience yoga’s health benefits *and* pushes back on the dominant affective-imaginaries that elevate certain kinds of yoga, or certain types of people, as “authentic.”

### *Body Functions: Kinesthesia and “Self”*

In Noland’s elaboration on the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Sheets-Johnstone, she suggests that identity and agency are dependent on the role of *kinesthesia*, the “sixth sense” that allows a subject to experience her own body as distinct from other bodies, without which the subject “would have no capacity for independent movement; and thus would be incapable of assuming agency at all.” Central to this concept of kinesthesia is self-awareness. According to Noland, kinesthesia is essential to an individual’s capacity to move independently, assume agency, improvise, and innovate. However, kinesthesia is not just an awareness of one’s moving body as oneself. Kinesthesia also implies already existing cultural meanings that are brought to life through gesture. In this way, self awareness of gesture in yoga practice, along with the gestures that one performs day-to-day, also has the potential to subvert dominant cultural meanings.

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<sup>187</sup> Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity*, 35.

In examining how the “authentic” is articulated in modern yoga discourse, we can see how the somatic sensations of the body are, in Noland’s words, “mediated by language or equally culture-specific systems of visual imagery.”<sup>188</sup> Thus, I suggest that modern postural yoga discourse frequently describes kinesthetic sensations in terms of their own “reflexive authenticity,” as they are articulated by rhetoric that advocates for diversity, inclusion and social justice, and indexed into feminist categories of analysis.<sup>189</sup> Andrea Macdonald’s article “With Your Permission: Yoga, Consent and Authentic Embodiment,” documents this broadening definition of authenticity as she experiences it in her yoga practice.<sup>190</sup> Macdonald says:

Yoga is my refuge. For most of my adult life I have turned to my mat, to my breath, when I needed solace, when I needed space... I have a busy mind and a constantly churning conscience. I am a yoga teacher sure, but I’m also a feminist and I care deeply about fighting injustice and untangling webs of oppression. Seeking stillness and peace isn’t always easy when you’re deeply immersed in resistance or facing a police barricade. As much as it can feel like my worlds are separate sometimes, yoga has taught me the value of being able to see the connection – the union – between my passions...

Like Ballard, Macdonald connects her practice “on the mat” with the values of social justice for which she advocates everyday, in her work as an activist and community organizer in Vancouver. She goes on to describe how she has witnessed this “union” of activism and yoga through teaching Trauma Sensitive Yoga (TSY) to her yoga students. She says:

TSY seeks to reacquaint students with their bodies in a safe and (as much as possible) non-triggering way. It acknowledges that people hold trauma in their bodies and offers yoga as a tool to address these deeply held experiences.

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<sup>188</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 10.

<sup>189</sup> Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Haṭha Yoga,” 108.

<sup>190</sup> Andrea Macdonald, “With Your Permission: Yoga, Consent and Authentic Embodiment,” *Decolonizing Yoga*, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/with-your-permission-yoga-consent-and-authentic-embodiment/#sthash.fTwt7xQm.dpuf>.

Macdonald offers a variety of ways to provide an environment that generates a beneficial experience for students that reconciles, rather than re-triggers, traumas “held in the body.” Macdonald suggests explaining consent at the start of a yoga class, using invitational language while instructing students, rather than commanding blind adherence to the teacher, encouraging students to ask questions, and asking permission from students prior to adjusting their bodies (giving “hands-on assists”).<sup>191</sup> Macdonald claims that by offering a consent based practice, students are empowered to “listen to themselves and honestly evaluate their needs,” rather than be coerced into performing poses with their bodies.<sup>192</sup> She claims that this breaks down the teacher-student hierarchy, and allows students

a path toward empowered, *authentic embodiment*. So much of our lives are shaped by influences over which we have little control. We are constantly subject to forces of power that shape our sense of self worth and our ability to act in the world. These forces keep us apart – apart from each other, apart from our selves and apart from our spirits. When we come together to hold sacred space for healing movement, free from coercion and pressure, *we learn to embody our truth* and acknowledge and meet our needs. In this way we learn to liberate ourselves and help each other to do the same... When we practice yoga based on consent we shape our safe space with solidarity and our movement is revolutionary. One breath and one pose at a time.<sup>193</sup>

According to Macdonald, establishing safe yoga spaces allows practitioners to effectively experience movement and embody their “truth” — in short, code for realizing an “authentic” self defined through feminist values of diversity and inclusion. By rejecting the hierarchy of typical yoga classes through requesting consent and respecting those students who refuse it, Macdonald expands the definition of “authenticity” to include the experiences of all those who practice

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.



yoga, rather than merely as something that is determined by a single teacher or a monolithic historical account of “authentic” yoga. For members of the *DCY* community, this vision of the “authentic” can hinge upon the historical provenance of yoga, the “authentic” self, or “double-authenticity,” as discussed in the previous chapters. However, feminist values of diversity, inclusion and social justice orient these articulations of “the authentic” to position otherwise excluded bodies and individuals and their experiences as just as “authentic” as any other.

### *Gesturing Generates Identity*

Noland’s work in *Agency and Embodiment* provides a rich view of gesture as movement that is both reflective of cultural systems and values, and also constructive of them. In Noland’s account, this interactive process does not stop at the level of the physical body, but, rather, central to her account is the idea that learned bodily movements, repeatedly practiced, actually construct the identity of the mover.<sup>194</sup> In her introduction, Noland discusses observing a graffiti writer:

In the magnified scope of the graffiti gesture, writing affords the writer an opportunity to impress the individual shape and vitality of the body’s motor power onto the contours of the cultural sign. Yet if the writer performs the motion repeatedly, his own body will eventually be inscribed, the muscles and ligaments physiologically altered, by the gestural routine that expresses and confines his body at the very same time.<sup>195</sup>

In graffiti writing, one’s gestural performance of replicating the sign, making the art, actually affects the body of the mover. According to Noland, kinesthetic experiences of moving are “a particular kind of affect belonging both to the body that precedes our subjectivity (narrowly

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<sup>194</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 1-5.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

construed) and the contingent, cumulative subjectivity our body allows us to build over time... as constitutive of -- not tangential to-- the process of individuation.”<sup>196</sup> Through repetitively practicing the learned art of tagging, the graffiti writer actually becomes a graffiti writer. Repeating acculturated movements constructs the identity of the doer, transforming the identity of the person who simply *does the graffiti* to that of *graffiti artist*. A similar statement can be made regarding modern postural yoga. The person who learns and repeats *āsana*-s, eventually becomes a bonafide practitioner of yoga, a *yogin/yogi/yoginī*. In other words, repetitive gestural acts constitute the identity of the person who performs the movements. For instance, the first criterion listed in the article “What is a Yogi?” on the popular blog *DoYouYoga* is “I practice... and practice more.”<sup>197</sup> According to the author, Anjana Duff, performing the gestures associated with yoga actually makes a person into a yoga practitioner. Repetitive gestures form identity.

For *DCY*, including diverse bodies into conceptions of “authentic” yoga pushes back on normative depictions of yoga identity (e.g., white, cisgender, financially affluent, thin). The culturally established affective-imaginaries of authenticity inform the mediation of kinesthetic sensation responsible for sensing the self into language. Already existing affective-imaginaries, deciphered through the threshold of one’s subjective experience, inform an individual’s sense of self and identity. According to Noland, kinesthesia is central to this process, as it “opens up a field of reflexivity in which the subject becomes an object (as body) of her own awareness.”<sup>198</sup> In terms of modern yoga discourse, cultural significations tend to imply that this reflexive self-

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>197</sup> Anjana Duff, “What is a Yogi?” *DoYouYoga*, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.doyouyoga.com/what-is-a-yogi/>; also, Ali Washington “15 Signs You’ve Stopped “Doing Yoga” & Have Become a Yogi,” *MindBodyGreen*, September 12, 2013, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-10923/15-signs-youve-stopped-doing-yoga-have-become-a-yogi.html>.

<sup>198</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 10.

awareness is the sign of a more true, more real self that can be discovered within the quotidian self. For example the *DCY* article “How to Decolonize Your Yoga Practice”<sup>199</sup> by blogger

Susanna Barkataki claims that:

Asana, along with dhyana or meditation, aim to harmonize body with breath in order to attain deeper and deeper states of meditative awareness or samadhi. The purpose of this kind of meditative awareness is to experience, practice, and live oneness of mind, body and soul...<sup>200</sup>

According to Barkataki’s account, an experience of one’s body as simultaneously subject and object, the self meditating on the self, allows one to discover a type of inner unity of seemingly disparate parts (“mind, body, and soul”) that comprise the individual.<sup>201</sup> James Morley’s article “Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice Through Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of the Body” compares the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty with T.K.V. Desikachar’s description of yoga practice as developing “witness consciousness,” of one’s own somatic sensation. Morley finds that “the identity of the practitioner is not extracted from the observable but is experienced as a totality that joins the observer and the observed.”<sup>202</sup> According to Morley, Merleau-Ponty’s account of self discovery through movement and the yoga philosophy found in Desikachar’s book *The Heart of Yoga*, a work which is itself positioned as an “authentic” teaching of yoga, are

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<sup>199</sup> Susanna Barkataki “How to Decolonize Your Yoga Practice” *Decolonizing Yoga*, accessed April 18, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/decolonize-yoga-practice/>.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Morley, “Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice Through Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of the Body,” 78.

T.K.V. Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1995).

consistent, in that attention to somatic sensations actually constructs the identity of the individual.<sup>203</sup>

Barkataki's article goes on to list some ways readers can "decolonize" their yoga practice. Her first suggestion both recalls affective associations with yoga as a historically "authentic" practice, while utilizing feminist principles as the language best fitting for articulating her own somatic experience. She advises that inward inquiry is, "one powerful way we can decolonize yoga and reunite it with its true aim and purpose... to practice Gandhian svadhyaya, or self-rule and inquiry, and to truly learn the full honest integrity of an authentic yoga practice."<sup>204</sup>

Barkataki's article stresses that self-awareness is critical to the process of inner self discovery, which she defines as "Gandhian svadhyaya." Her explanation alludes not only to an authentic self to be uncovered, but also to a single "authentic yoga practice" that can be discovered through self-awareness. Barkataki's discussion shows how the myth of yoga's authentic historical origins ("true aim and purpose") is conflated with modern liberal ethics ("decolonizing" yoga) and, in an interesting twist, Barkataki conflates Gandhian "self-rule" with modern individualist values of self-inquiry.<sup>205</sup> Despite this amalgam of overlapping discourse effecting "double authenticity," this example reveals how, in *DCY* articles, the somatic sensations responsible for unveiling this true, "authentic" self are attributed to self-awareness, the kinesthetic sensation of feeling one's own body moving during the course of postural yoga

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<sup>203</sup> Morley, "Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice Through Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body," 71-72; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945 (1962)); T.K.V. Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*.

<sup>204</sup> Susanna Barkataki "How to Decolonize Your Yoga Practice."

<sup>205</sup> This is a common association, according to Jonathan Dickstein, "Little Room for Theory: Mystocentrism in Modern Yoga," Fall 2013, [https://www.academia.edu/10882560/Little\\_Room\\_for\\_Theory\\_Mystocentrism\\_in\\_Modern\\_Yoga](https://www.academia.edu/10882560/Little_Room_for_Theory_Mystocentrism_in_Modern_Yoga).

practice and in life. This is aligned with Morley's findings on T.K.V Desikachar and the writings of Merleau-Ponty, as the moving body (engaged in yoga practice or, even more simply, at the level of the "lived body") is the ground for identity.<sup>206</sup> Barkataki's article on the *DCY* blog reveals a belief that creating diverse and inclusive yoga spaces, where practitioners can practice self-awareness, works to decentralize dominant conceptions of the "authentic" by creating new yoga identities that take seriously global histories of colonization and privilege.<sup>207</sup>

### *Gestural Agency*

Noland's work foregrounds the capacity for innovation and subversion of cultural norms through gesture.<sup>208</sup> In observing modern postural yoga's basis in performative, gesturing movement, we see how conscious awareness of kinesthetic sensations is "mediated by language and equally culture-specific systems of visual imagery," and described by rhetoric that either implies or overtly designates these experiences as manifestations of the "authentic" yoga tradition or "authentic" self.<sup>209</sup> Noland positions discursive constructions and visual imagery as paramount to describing the experience of self-moving in ways that are culturally intelligible to others. Central to her thesis, Noland claims that:

Gestures are a type of inscription, a parsing of the body into signifying or operational units; they can thereby be seen to reveal the submission of a shared human anatomy to a set of bodily practices specific to one culture. At the same time, gestures clearly belong to

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<sup>206</sup> Morley, "Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice Through Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body," 71-72; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

<sup>207</sup> Barkataki "How to Decolonize Your Yoga Practice."

<sup>208</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 5-8. Noland suggests that future scholarship altogether replaces the term "movement" with "gesture."

<sup>209</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 10.

the domain of movement; they provide kinesthetic sensations that remain in *excess* of what the gestures themselves might signify or accomplish within that culture.<sup>210</sup>

The “excess” of “kinesthetic sensations” for Noland is the potential for subversive agency, the ability to interpret experiences in ways that are culturally intelligible and based on already-existing discourses, but also in ways that might be subversive. In her examination of Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity, Noland, like other critics, claims Butler’s account leaves no room for affective feelings or somatic experience.<sup>211</sup> For Noland, the “gap” between the discursive mark and the embodied experience is essential to expressing individual agency that can subvert cultural gender norms. Noland’s critique poignantly emerges in her examination of Butler’s interpretation of Iris Marion Young’s “Throwing Like A Girl.”<sup>212</sup> Noland claims that, “What it *feels* like to perform the act of throwing is never at issue for Butler since, in her stringently antiphenomenological axiomatics, feelings are always mediated by words that make those feelings available by alienating us from them.”<sup>213</sup>

Noland argues that, while Butler cites performative discursive “citations,” she then affords these equal footing with gestural performatives, without adequately describing the kinesthetic sensations effected by the latter.<sup>214</sup> Noland zeroes in on Butler’s use of the term

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<sup>210</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 3. Italics mine.

<sup>211</sup> Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Roots of Power: Animate Form and Gendered Bodies* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Vicki Kirby, “Corporeal Habits: Addressing Essentialism Differently,” in *Feminism and the Body*, special issue, *Hypatia* 6, no. 3 (1991); Dianna Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>212</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 141-159; “Throwing Like a Girl”: Twenty Years Later” in *Body and flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.)

<sup>213</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 176.

<sup>214</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 176; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990, 2006).

“reexperiencing” in *Gender Trouble*, insisting that Butler’s analysis slips into a strictly discursive construction of identity and agency limiting the subject to a “reexperience (of) her own moving body as an embodied sign.”<sup>215</sup> Noland goes on:

The reenactment of conditioned gestures is what affords the opportunity to sense a discrepancy between “a set of social meanings” and the complex kinetic-kinesthetic operations upon which they depend... [By] tweaking Butler’s formations just slightly -- and stretching the analogy she herself puts into circulation -- one could say that gestural “formations” (like discursive “formations”) compel subjects to perform gestural routines (like discursive acts)... conventional meanings associated with gestural marks could be reexperienced as such, that is, as conventional gestures bearing conventional meanings. Then dissonance could arise from a *gap* between the meaning discursively attributed to the movement and movement itself as an animate (as opposed to disembodied) support.<sup>216</sup>

Noland critiques Butler’s omission of embodied agency insofar as Butler’s account overlooks both the kinesthetic experience of performative gesture, and the potential for the somato-emotional affects of performative gesture to re-signify cultural meanings. For Noland’s account of agency, somatic sensation is critical. Members of the *DCY* community attend to somatic sensations, in much the same way that more mainstream yoga culture does, by insisting on the importance of embodied, experiential epistemology. Yet, *DCY* insists that spaces be created for all bodies to participate in the practice of yoga, by expanding peoples’ access to safe spaces conducive to exploring this embodied epistemology. Through advocating for the creation of spaces where all individuals are welcome to feel and experience postural yoga as a practice of self-awareness, *DCY* refutes dominant affective-imaginaries that situate certain objects, ideas, and bodies as representative of “authentic” yoga. For individuals, such as Ballard, who were dismayed by their encounters and experiences in mainstream yoga environments, the

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<sup>215</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140; Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 191.

<sup>216</sup> Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, 192.

establishment of actual yoga studios and virtual environments provides spaces where people can *reexperience* the performative gestures of yoga practice as well as the “off the mat” gestures of feminist advocacy like writing and protesting. Attending to the *reexperience* in the way that *DCY* bloggers do, is crucial for Noland’s account of subversive agency.

For Noland, there are serious consequences for not taking kinesthetic sensations seriously. Ballard’s account documents the importance of reexperiencing the healing benefits of yoga in safe, inclusive spaces. Without exploring what it *feels like to reexperience* gestures, there exists no “gap” between meanings that are culturally established and those that might arise through “movement processes involving kinesthetic-somatic awareness of the body as it tries to inhabit these meanings.”<sup>217</sup> By centralizing the sensations of the body in performing culturally intelligible gestures, Noland shows how “reiterating a gestural performance, is... a kinesthetic... somatic experience that exerts a force on language all its own.” Reexperiencing gesture in this way constructs new cultural forms that are then articulated into language.<sup>218</sup> According to *DCY*’s accounts of gestural performances of modern yoga, practitioners are not limited to “on the mat” experiences, but gestural performances that “mark” the body of the yoga practitioner also include practices such as blogging, writing, reading, protesting, and interacting with other community members. *DCY* incorporates different gestures informed by feminist ethics into the nexus of yoga, re-signifying what it means to be a yoga practitioner and a yoga community. Noland expands:

It is the doing-body, not the speaking body, that senses most urgently the dissonance, the lack of adequation, between a cultural meaning and the embodiment of that meaning, between what the subject is supposed to be signifying and how she feels. And this

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 190-195.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 194.



sensation of dissonance is a product not of repetition in language but of *repetition in practice*.<sup>219</sup>

Creating spaces that are inclusive of people who fall outside of the normative affective-imaginary of “authentic” yoga provides more people the opportunity to experience the benefits of yoga. Through repetition of the themes of diversity, inclusion, and social justice in modern yoga discourse, *DCY* doesn’t only contest dominant affective-imaginaries but is also productive of new ones, towards which yoga practitioners can orient themselves and through which they can identify.

### *Social Feelings, Collective Identity and Agency*

Kimberly Dark’s article, “Yoga & Body Diversity: 5 Ways to Be Inclusive When Teaching or Practicing” from the *DCY* blog, describes being a woman of size practicing yoga in a studio environment.<sup>220</sup> At first, Dark says, she enjoyed the practice, but had difficulty using the props her instructor prescribed because they often didn’t fit her body. “Sometimes my body was too wide for the chair and too big for the strap,” she recalls.<sup>221</sup> Soon after, her instructor ordered new props for the studio that would better accommodate not just her body, but also the different bodies of all the students. After a discussion with her yoga teacher, who assured her that it wasn’t *her* body that was a problem, but rather, the issue was that the studio simply did not yet possess adequate props to accommodate the range of different bodies that frequented the studio. Dark recalls how she “...cried for a few moments, taking in my body’s feeling of is-ness. I actually felt my right to be exactly as I am. I felt it in my recently opened hips, in my extended triceps and in

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>220</sup> Kimberly Dark, “Yoga & Body Diversity: 5 Ways to be Inclusive When Teaching or Practicing,” *Decolonizing Yoga*, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/yoga-body-diversity-5-ways-inclusive-teaching-practicing/#sthash.YVyHd9ni.dpuf>.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

my heart-center.” While Dark’s account centralizes the importance of positive corrective intersubjective experiences, she also highlights the intense feelings that this reexperience of her body and herself affected. For Dark, this initiated new meanings for what yoga is and who she is, which she articulates through a call for inclusion of diversity within yoga classes. Dark describes:

We are all working with socialization that says that some bodies are “better than” others. Some bodies are not very lovable; they’re invisible, untouchable, pityable. We ALL carry those scripts – whether we choose to read from them, edit them or hide them. We carry our cultural scripts. That’s the thing about socialization: with awareness, we can decide what to do with those scripts. The influences of culture will always be there and we can learn to speak and behave differently through practice.<sup>222</sup>

Dark’s article demonstrates how *reexperiencing* both yoga practice and lived experience with awareness allowed her to utilize the “gap” between the cultural narrative of her body as “invisible, untouchable, pityable,” and her positive somatic experience of yoga practice itself.<sup>223</sup> Dark ultimately mobilized her intense feelings to make meaning of her own process of “self-acceptance” and to share her interpretation with others, galvanizing a sociality of feelings. This is congruent with Langøen’s Mysore study, where movement is not limited to postural yoga practice, but also social interactions between students before and after yoga practice that work to contextualize and collectively make sense of individual “on the mat” experiences.<sup>224</sup> Langøen reports:

Much reflection, and ‘sense making,’ is done, for instance, in conversation with other students. Through reflection, the physical experience of the practice is made significant, and this significance is made relevant and somatised when taken back to the asana practice on the mat. This is thus a process of soma-significance.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Langøien, “Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment,” 36.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

Dark's article highlights how somatic sensations are capable of assigning new cultural meanings to gestural performatives. Despite the situated context of certain gestures, accounts of somatic experiences can assist us in understanding the culture of modern yoga and the possible ways in which practitioners, as agents, can simultaneously refute hegemonic cultural affective-imaginaries and produce new ones. For Dark, first-hand experience led her to de-centralize the dominant visual culture narrative in which the skinny-bodied female represents the ideal yoga practitioner. In encouraging more body-diversity and inclusion in yoga spaces, she rejects the notion that her body is in some way "wrong," and suggests that others do the same, evoking Liberman's notion of social correspondence for the emergence of collective "authentic" identity and agency. By sharing her experience of not fitting into the stereotypical mold of a yoga practitioner, Dark opens up a conversation where others can share their experiences of misfitting, and also those of reexperiencing sensations and movement in spaces inclusive of diverse body sizes. In effect, Dark's account opens up a field of possibilities for what an "authentic" yoga practitioner can look like, and the types of "authentic" experiences that a self-identified yoga practitioner can have during yoga practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

Examining the *DCY* archive reveals it to be a salient example of the potentiality of individual and intersubjective experience for creating a modern spiritual ideology reliant on kinesthetic sensations for the production of new cultural meanings. By articulating felt experiences through feminist categories of analysis, *DCY* fosters a collective social identity that subverts pre-established meanings and dominant affective-imaginaries of modern yoga culture. This process is productive of new ways for countering existing, hegemonic affective-imaginative

associations, objects, signs, texts and bodies that are already culturally established as “authentic” representations of yoga. By reorienting “authenticity” towards feminist ethical principles, *DCY* establishes diversity, inclusion, and social justice as values that can be embodied through movement both “on” and “off the mat.” *DCY* produces new cultural accounts for yoga’s history and ethics by initiating actual and online spaces that foster the emergence of a progressive modern yoga society, re-signifying what yoga can be and what it can do. *DCY* as a social movement creates microcosms for yoga practice that reflect the way the world, according to this group, should be. This results in the production of new affective-imaginaries, towards which other current and future yoga practitioners can orient themselves; the complete effects of which have yet to be fully determined.

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