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The Body of Yoga: A Feminist Perspective on Corporeal Boundaries in Contemporary Yoga Practice*

Abstract: The practice of yoga has grown globally in the past 20 years, with professionals, publications and practitioners furthering it as a way to improve physical and mental health, reduce stress, lead a more conscious and productive life and experience mental and physical wellbeing. Widely regarded as a practice 'for all', yoga questions the authority of norms and practices produced by institutionalised religions, Western biomedicine and sports, tracing the foundations of a personal and collective politics of the body. This discourse of accessibility – integral to the way yoga is marketed today – is the point of departure for a sociological perspective on contemporary yoga. By inscribing itself in a seemingly countercultural ethics of and from the body, yoga is entangled in the relations of power in which bodies are immersed. In that respect, gendered configurations are crucial to the way the body of yoga participates in tracing corporeal, spatial, social and cultural boundaries. Feminist reflections on corporeality can unravel the workings of power exercised by and upon bodies, calling into question the very processes through which they operate in contemporary yoga practices. Crucial to this approach is the tension between the fixity of corporeal normativity and the experience of movement, change and transformation that underscores the practice of yoga.

Keywords: yoga; body; corporeal boundaries; feminist theory; materialisation

Introduction

This paper proposes a feminist perspective on the study of contemporary yoga that calls into question the processes through which relations of power exercised by and upon bodies operate in contemporary yoga practices. It looks at yoga as a politics of the body¹ that, by tracing a connection between conscious experience of the embodied self, individual empowerment and paths of existential repositioning, participates in tracing corporeal, spatial, social and cultural boundaries. Crucial to this is the tension between the fixity of corporeal normativity and the experience of movement, change and transformation that underscores the practice of yoga.

¹ Rosalind Coward, *The Whole Truth: The Myth of Alternative Health* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990).

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In this paper, yoga is used as an overarching term for a wide-ranging set of practices that, following De Michelis,² include postural and meditative forms of yoga.³ This use of the term assimilates phenomena that might differ in terms of their social and historical trajectories. However, an analysis of different yoga schools, teachings and practices is beyond the scope of this paper, which proposes instead a reflection on their sociological relevance based on their self-identification as ‘yoga’. As Strauss puts it, “the word yoga combines a range of images and ideas, from white-bearded Indian mystics on mountaintops to cross-legged hippies burning incense and urban business people at a lunchtime fitness class.”⁴

Yoga schools and practices have grown globally in the past 20 years, with professionals, publications and practitioners promoting them in order to improve physical and mental health, reduce stress, lead a more conscious and productive life and experience mental and physical wellbeing.⁵ In the literature, they are often treated in connection to Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM), a wide-ranging set of disciplines that intersect spiritual, healing and wellness practices predicated on a nexus of conscious experience of the embodied self and physical and mental wellbeing.⁶

A growing body of literature – mainly from the US and Australia – offers a picture of a rather homogenous gender, socio-economic and cultural composition of the CAM community, with a predominance of female, higher income, young to middle-aged users with high educational levels.⁷ According to recent studies, the demographics of the yoga community tend to match the above characterisations.⁸ And yet, yoga is also widely regarded as a practice ‘for all,’⁹ accessible notwithstanding the relationship be-

² Elizabeth De Michelis, “Modern Yoga: History and Forms,” in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (New York: Routledge, 2008), 21–22.

³ While the former tend to emphasise the practice of asana (posture) and rely on rather fluid and unstructured philosophical and religious teachings, the latter privilege meditation practices and often refuse affiliation with the transnational postural yoga community.

⁴ Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga* (Oxford & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), 1.

⁵ Federico Squarcini and Luca Mori, *Yoga: fra storia, salute e mercato* (Roma: Carocci, 2008).

⁶ See Ruth Barcan, *Complementary and Alternative Medicine: Bodies, Therapies, Senses* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2011).

⁷ J. A. Astin, E. Harkness and E. Ernst, “The Efficacy of ‘Distant Healing’: A Systematic Review of Randomized Trials,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 132, 11 (2000): 903–10; Gurjeet S. Birdee et al., “Characteristics of Yoga Users: Results of a National Survey,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 23, 10 (2008): 1653–58; D. M. Eisenberg et al., “Unconventional Medicine in the United States. Prevalence, Costs, and Patterns of Use,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 328, 4 (1993): 246–52. Ellen B. Gold et al., “Cross-Sectional Analysis of Specific Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Use by Racial/Ethnic Group and Menopausal Status: The Study of Women’s Health Across the Nation (SWAN),” *Menopause* 14, 4 (2007): 612–23; M. Kelner and B. Wellman, “Who Seeks Alternative Health Care? A Profile of the Users of Five Modes of Treatment,” *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 3, 2 (1997): 127–40; K. J. Thomas, J. P. Nicholl, and P. Coleman, “Use and Expenditure on Complementary Medicine in England: A Population Based Survey,” *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 9, 1 (2001): 2–11.

⁸ Crystal L. Park, Tosca Braun and Tamar Siegel, “Who Practices Yoga? A Systematic Review of Demographic, Health-Related, and Psychosocial Factors Associated with Yoga Practice,” *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 38, 3 (2015): 460–71.

⁹ This characterisation is actually at the core of the yoga discourse particularly in the way it is marketed as

tween users' social and cultural positioning and the context of practice. In this paper, this discourse of accessibility – integral to the way yoga is marketed today – is the point of departure for a sociological perspective on contemporary yoga practices and their entanglements with the relations of power exercised upon and by bodies.

Unpacking the politics of the yoga body

Whether by emphasising spiritual and/or personal growth, physical and mental wellbeing, health, freedom or social change – or a combination of these – most yoga practices and teachings share a commitment to (re)define the connection between experiential corporeality and existence. More specifically, by rooting itself in a corporeal realm that transcends anatomical and physiological boundaries, yoga interrogates the authority of norms and practices produced by institutionalised religions, Western biomedicine and sports, tracing the foundations of a personal and collective politics of the body.

“Peace in the body brings balance in the mind” recites a phrase commonly repeated in yoga circles and printed in numerous yoga-related merchandise and products. Attributed to the late BKS Iyengar – yoga master, founder of the homonymous method and one among the most authoritative figures in the modern yoga world – the quote is quite representative of a practice that seeks to attain some form of individual and/or societal transformation by rooting itself in an empowered corporeal realm. Similarly, yoga teacher Gabriella Cella Al-Chamali writes that “if the body changes, the spirit changes too and if the spirit changes the whole universe transforms”, suggesting that individual strength and power radiate outside the boundaries of individual bodily experience.¹⁰ In this sense, as a practice of, experienced by and inscribed in the body, yoga is meant to effect change by facilitating the conscious experience of transformation. These considerations are all the more relevant as yoga's possible entanglements in the mechanisms that configure corporeal, spatial, social and cultural boundaries are rarely addressed in mainstream yoga, despite its projection as a spiritual/corporeal practice that should be appealing to, accessible by and potentially transformative for ‘all’. The next section discusses how a feminist lens can provide an angle to conceptualise yoga's politics of the body by tracing the processes through which corporeal boundaries are cut out, recognised, practiced, transgressed and normalised in the practice of yoga.

Feminist theory and the body

From questioning biological determinism to reflecting on the incorporation of sociality, the body in feminism has always been a matter of debate, critique and

opposed to other physical activity. See for example this article appeared in the NYT <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/well/beginner-yoga> or this video realised by one of the most popular and fashionable brands of yoga merchandise: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHbnXteh5R4>, acc. February 22, 2019.

¹⁰ Gabriella Cella Al-Chamali, *Il grande libro dello yoga: L'equilibrio di corpo e mente attraverso gli insegnamenti dello yoga Ratna* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2010).

political struggle.¹¹ Feminist critiques of conventional spaces and modes of knowledge production have questioned the hierarchy inherent in the mind-body dichotomy, which underpins women's exclusion from the realm of rationality, relegation in a devalued bodily-material condition and ensuing marginalisation in the relations of power and knowledge. At the heart of feminism is thus an engagement with corporeality as the site of construction and deconstruction of sexed differences and patriarchal power. According to Judith Butler,

any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized.¹²

Over the past twenty years, feminist 'new materialists' have theorised on the morphology of becoming, on the entanglements between biological, social and historical forces as part of the ongoing configuring of the world.¹³ Their reflections have stemmed from a critique of the primacy of discourse and culture in post-modern and

¹¹ To mention just a few relevant examples see: Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (ed.), *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (50th Anniversary Edition) (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013); Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). In the field of body, race and post-coloniality see: Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Psychology Press, 2000); Ketu H. Katrak, *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Jyoti Puri, *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2002). On gender and body image: Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Nita Mary McKinley, "Feminist Consciousness and Objectified Body Consciousness," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35, 4 (2011): 684–88. On the materiality of embodiment: Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs* 28, 3 (2003): 801–31; Lynda I. A. Birke, *Feminism and the Biological Body* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, 3 (1988): 575–99; Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, *Vital Signs: Feminist Reconfigurations of the Bio/Logical Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998). On disability: Kim Q. Hall, *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). On gender, power and the body: Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 129–54; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Psychology Press, 1993); Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo, *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 12.

¹³ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," Rosi Braidotti, "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism," in *Anthropocene Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012); Grosz, *The Nick of Time*.

post-structural theory,¹⁴ and of approaches that look at the body as a pre-existing natural block waiting to be marked by cultural constructs. The relevance of contributions that have revitalised a conversation on matter and corporeality should not however overshadow feminism's long history of engagement with matter and corporeality as both effects of, and active players in the (re)configuration of power.¹⁵ In that sense, while Butler's work has been criticised for reducing matter to culture,¹⁶ her contributions seem in fact deeply rooted in a notion of active materiality.¹⁷ Butler's theorises matter in terms of a process of materialisation which stabilises over time, producing and crystallising corporeal, social and cultural boundaries. The sedimentation of bodily matter through the repetition of regulatory practices of and by bodies allows us to contextualise corporeality while simultaneously recognising how movement in time and space constitutes processes of (bodily) materialisation. In Butler's words, "that this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled".¹⁸

The materiality of the body is, in Butler's formulation, impossible to disentangle from the process of its materialising, outside the boundaries set through the repetition of regulatory norms. Yet, precisely because of this constant movement, bodies always point to possible configurations beyond the constraints of the specific regulatory norms within which they consolidate.¹⁹

Corporeal experience is thus always embedded in a cultural configuration "predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality."²⁰ The hierarchical duality between mind and body, between culture and nature is in that sense instrumental to maintaining specific power configurations that underpin the boundaries of corporeal intelligibility and the extent to which bodies recognise, embody and practice them. Limited within those constraints, change is movement *towards* a promise of wholeness, fixity and finality rather than *of* unfolding corporeal experiences, as the yoga teachers quoted above seem to suggest.

¹⁴ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 78; *The Nick of Time*, 2; Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 70.

¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, "Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the 'New Materialism,'" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15, 1 (2008): 23–39.

¹⁶ Kirby, *Telling Flesh*, 101–3.

¹⁷ See Ahmed, "Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions," for a position on feminist new materialists' critique of Butler and post-modernism.

¹⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2.

¹⁹ It is indeed difficult to ignore the continuities between Butler's notion of materialisation and Karen Barad's theory of sociality as material-discursive, Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 803. For Barad, matter and culture are in fact always embedded, as they emerge in practices that constrain and contain phenomena by effecting distinctions, boundaries and exclusions. The boundary-generating processes of mattering are both constrained by and productive of possibilities for new configurations which is what Barad calls "agency". Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 54.

²⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9.

And yet, according to Butler, lived corporeality is never fully contained by the boundaries of cultural intelligibility, suggesting that bodies certainly matter to reproduce but also subvert the (gendered) power structure. Unveiling the mechanisms whereby social norms stabilise in and as bodies purports the inherent instability of the corporeal, social, cultural boundaries that bodies need in order to matter.²¹

The yoga body and how it matters – the gendered subject re-loaded

The above discussion points to the interface between the body and society, between corporeal boundaries and social practices that configure the relations of power in which bodies are immersed. The notion of bodily materialisation in particular points to a tension between (a promise of) finality that configures the boundaries of corporeal intelligibility and the experience of embodying, experiencing and performing corporeality. Corporeal configurations are inherently unstable as they constantly co-produce their own context of intelligibility in their entanglements with sociality. In that respect, the politics of the yoga body matters precisely in relation to its degree of (dis)continuity with the practices of corporeality in the wider social order.

In the words of an Iyengar yoga teacher:

People think that in order to emerge in yoga you need to be a contortionist. Women are more flexible than men and therefore women are more suitable for and inclined to do yoga. This is so wrong! Or, another argument that comes to the same conclusion: yoga is relaxing, man in our culture is expected to be active, to work, to be at the forefront of society while woman is expected to be socially less active and therefore she's more suitable for a relaxing discipline. I'm obviously critical when I say these things because none of these arguments are true. Neither the former nor the latter. They are both the product of a patriarchal society. Paradoxically, in India, which is another patriarchal society, historically yoga was only for men. Because yoga in India is perceived as a practice of spiritual evolution and therefore it is not appropriate for women. Think about that! Think about how both the Western and the Indian medieval and modern visions got it all wrong in terms of gender!²²

This quote highlights some common stereotypes widespread in yoga culture but reveals a deeper layer of gender normativity in light of the “yoga for all” discourse. In that sense, yoga's politics of the body, while distancing itself from other healing-religious-sportive practices, is inevitably confronted with – albeit sometimes oblivious of – the relations of power practiced by and on bodies.

²¹ I borrow here from Butler's use of the term “mattering” in *Bodies that Matter*.

²² Biographic interview with S. Iyengar yoga teacher, on September 25, 2018.

For the past decade, some academic publications, conferences and public debates on and off-line have initiated a conversation on the sexist, ageist, racist and ableist stereotypes²³ embedded in the yoga industry, shedding light on the workings of gender, age, race and socio-economic differentials in the mutual configuration of yoga spaces and practices. While the debate has developed in the Western, English-speaking yoga scene it now seems to matter to other yoga contexts as well.

A quick look at the covers of the Yoga Journal's Italian edition²⁴ reveals a stark prevalence of white, slender female models wearing tight outfits while performing specific *asanas*²⁵ (in the year 2017 only the November issue featured a male model in the cover). This trend is common to most international yoga publications and reveals how mainstream yoga participates in an imagery and practice of the body that reiterates specific norms of corporeal intelligibility. In general, the way yoga is marketed and used for marketing purposes²⁶ often reiterates the gender norms that in turn normalise specific bodily configurations.

In fact, commercial advertising has begun to capitalise on yoga's popularity as a practice associated with white, slender, young, performative and moneyed women's bodies.²⁷ While the practice is not exclusive to them, the body of yoga materialises by drawing the contours of a specific version of corporeality, constrained by its own adherence to and reproduction of normative boundaries of admissibility.

The pervasiveness of such imagery in the yoga industry is thus not incidental but constitutive of the 'yoga-for-all' discourse that re-centres around the corporeal, social, cultural boundaries of a normative female body and is thus also marked by what the body of yoga is not. In that respect, the fixity of the norm that foregrounds the promise of a yoga experience is already contradicted by the actual exclusions it entails.

Indeed, voices from within the yoga community are now attempting to reframe the politics of the yoga body. For example, feminist and yoga instructor Melanie Klein has drawn a clear connection between yoga corporeal practice, the quest for an existential re-positioning and a (feminist) politics of the body:

²³ See for example the discussions on websites like yogadork.com or elephantjournal.com. Also, see the recently-founded journal *Race & Yoga* https://escholarship.org/uc/crg_raceandyoga, acc. February 28, 2019.

²⁴ *The Yoga Journal* is a monthly magazine addressed to the yoga community. It is among the most popular publications in the sector and has several international editions including an Italian one.

²⁵ Sanskrit word that refers to yoga poses.

²⁶ Indeed, yoga is increasingly referred to in advertising campaigns for all sorts of goods. Sonia Squilloni, yoga teacher and graphic designer, provides some poignant examples of this marriage between yoga and publicity here <http://soniasquilloni.com/2016/12/29/yoga-e-publicita/> acc. October 23, 2018. See also these commercials <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjlrESsYxxI> acc. November 23, 2018.

²⁷ It is not my intention here to discuss the commodification of yoga in commercial advertising as the issue has been dealt with in other publications Søren Askegaard and Giana M. Eckhardt, "Glocal Yoga: Re-Appropriation in the Indian Consumptionscape," *Marketing Theory* 12, 1 (2012): 45–60; Amara Lindsay Miller, "Eating the Other Yogi: Kathryn Budig, the Yoga Industrial Complex, and the Appropriation of Body Positivity," *Race and Yoga* 1, 1 (2016), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2t4362b9>; Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Squarcini and Mori, *Yoga: fra storia, salute e mercato*. Its relevance to the materialisation of the body of yoga as female, white, slender and able is however a matter that deserves further reflection.

by remaining committed to my breath and not approaching my time on the mat as a competitive sport or a beauty competition, I engaged in a practice that ran counter to everything I had been taught my whole life [...] this is where personal power and innate bodily wisdom can be accessed. This is yoga. This is the root of transformation. [...] I have vowed to remain true to myself. This is my intention: to feel beautiful, rather than merely looking pretty.²⁸

Klein's words point to a feminist ethics already entrenched in and emanating from her yoga corporeal experience which is also a form of existential re-positioning vis-à-vis the gendered norms that crystallise through and around bodies. In her practice, transformation means waking up to corporeal experience, which she considers both socially subversive and personally empowering. Whether as the context of materialisation of an empowered gendered yoga body or by transcending the fixity of gender norms and tracing the boundaries of a new practice of corporeality, the body of yoga is productive of and produced by a politics of the body. Indeed, as multiple yoga styles flourish, a reflection on how the boundaries of the body of yoga materialise can shed light on the extent to which they foreclose or open up possibilities for reconfiguring relations of power emanating from corporeal experience.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a feminist reflection of yoga's corporeal practices as expressing a politics of the body. Gender norms in particular are constitutive of the relations of power that link practitioners, context of practice and the promise of a yogic experience. In fact, multiple yoga forms are acted out in the body as a historically situated and productive context of experience and reproduction of specific practices of health, healing, spirituality, wellness and personal growth. In that sense, the body of yoga redraws corporeal boundaries entangled with the relations of power in which bodies are immersed. The yoga discourse, practice and experience can thus provide an insight on how corporeal boundaries can be performed, expanded and transcended in the process of affirming an existential framework for the embodied self.

²⁸ Melanie Klein, "How Yoga Makes You Pretty: The Beauty Myth, Yoga and Me," in *21st Century Yoga. Culture, Politics and Practice*, ed. Carol A. Horton and Roseanne Harvey (Chicago: Kleio Books, 2012), 42.

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