

THE TEACHING AND PRACTICE OF THE “YOGA BODY”: A POSTSTRUCTURAL,  
QUEERCRIP ANALYSIS OF YOGA EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

A Dissertation  
by  
LAURA SHEARS

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APPROVED BY:

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Alecia Jackson, Ph.D.  
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

---

Shawn A. Ricks, Ph.D.  
Member, Dissertation Committee

---

Matthew Thomas-Reid, Ph.D.  
Member, Dissertation Committee

---

Vachel Miller, Ed.D.  
Director, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

---

Marie Hoepfl, Ed.D.  
Interim Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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## Abstract

### THE TEACHING AND PRACTICE OF THE “YOGA BODY”: A POSTSTRUCTURAL, QUEERCRIP ANALYSIS OF YOGA EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Laura Shears

B.A., Hope College, Holland, MI  
M.Ed., North Carolina State University  
Ed.S., Appalachian State University  
Ed.D., Appalachian State University

Dissertation Committee Chairperson: Dr. Alecia Jackson

The purpose of my study is to reveal and deconstruct the relations of power and dominant discourses about health and embodiment in the field of yoga education in the United States. In this post-qualitative inquiry, I employ poststructural concepts of power, discourse, and subjectivity as well as the work of theorists at the intersection of queer theory and disability studies (sometimes called queercrip theory). Using a thinking with theory approach (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), I think poststructuralism and queercrip theory with a complex collection of texts, including yoga teacher training curriculum and materials, scientific research into yoga’s effectiveness, media representations such as *Yoga Journal*, and my own embodied experiences.

In thinking with all of these texts, I reveal how relations of power within yoga education contribute to an image of a “yoga body” – a healthy, able, gendered, pure, and moral body undertaking a physical practice for the control of individual health. I also consider how yoga teachers shape their own subjectivities in response to the discourse about this “yoga body.” Finally, I consider how my own embodiment and that of other queer and disabled yoga teachers and practitioners can resist these dominant discourses, opening up possibilities for how we think, teach, and practice yoga.

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my partner, Peter Kleczynski. And in memory of Murphy. I love you both.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Dedication</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
What is Yoga? .....	6
The Eight Limbs of Yoga .....	7
My Relationship to this Inquiry .....	10
Summative Review of the Literature .....	11
Purpose and Significance of My Study .....	14
A Queer and Disabled Approach to Inquiry.....	16
Method: Thinking with Theory .....	18
Organization of Dissertation .....	19
<b>Chapter 2: Theory and Method</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Poststructuralism .....	22
Foundations and Origins.....	22
Key Principles and Assumptions.....	23
Queercrip Theory .....	27
Foundations and Origins.....	27
Key Principles and Assumptions.....	29
Post-Qualitative Inquiry .....	34
Foundations of Post-Qualitative Inquiry .....	35
Key Principles.....	35
Method: Thinking with Theory .....	41
Conclusion.....	42
<b>Chapter 3: Yoga as a Measurable, Medical Intervention</b> .....	<b>44</b>
Introduction .....	44
Quantitative Research on Yoga and Lower Back Pain .....	48
The Studies .....	48
Defining Yoga .....	49
Justification for Research .....	52
Research Design .....	54
Measurement Tools .....	55

Conclusion.....	60
<b>Chapter 4: Yoga as a Healthy, Natural Intervention .....</b>	<b>63</b>
Healthy/Unhealthy .....	66
Natural/Unnatural.....	69
Conclusion.....	73
<b>Chapter 5: Yoga Teachers as Self-Monitoring Bodies .....</b>	<b>77</b>
The Profession of Yoga Teaching in the United States .....	80
Yoga Alliance.....	83
Yoga Alliance’s Core Curriculum.....	85
Becoming an RYT.....	86
Reading Yoga Alliance with Foucault.....	86
Yoga Teacher Training Curriculum .....	93
The RYT-200 Core Curriculum .....	94
Conclusion.....	98
<b>Chapter 6: Yoga Teachers as Strong, Docile Bodies .....</b>	<b>101</b>
Teacher Training Materials .....	103
Rational Recreation and the Responsibility of Health .....	107
Yoga Teacher Training in Media .....	109
Physically Focused .....	110
Personally Transformative.....	111
Normalcy and Yoga Bodies .....	114
Ability.....	115
Gender and Sexuality.....	119
Conclusion.....	120
<b>Chapter 7: Yoga as an Act of Resistance .....</b>	<b>123</b>
Yoga and Embodied Inquiry .....	126
Embodied Resistance .....	128
Resisting the Healthy/Unhealthy Binary .....	129
Resisting the Natural/Unnatural Binary .....	132
Embodied Possibilities .....	133
Transforming Yoga Spaces .....	134
Queering and Crippling Yoga.....	136

Conclusion.....	138
<b>Chapter 8: Yoga as Union .....</b>	<b>140</b>
Significance and Implications: Returning to My Research Questions.....	140
Contributions.....	147
Contributions to Inquiry .....	147
Contributions to Yoga Education .....	149
Contributions to Educational Leadership .....	153
Areas for Future Inquiry.....	154
Yoga, Colonialism, and Cooptation .....	155
Yoga and White Supremacy .....	156
Yoga, Class, and Capitalism.....	156
Conclusion.....	158
<b>References .....</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>Vita .....</b>	<b>180</b>

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

According to a 2016 study conducted by *Yoga Journal* and Yoga Alliance, 36.7 million people in the United States practice yoga (Yoga Alliance, 2016a). Such practitioners cite motivations including flexibility, stress relief, general fitness, and improving overall health as their reasons for incorporating yoga into their lives (Yoga Alliance, 2016a). Yoga is historically rooted in the traditions of India, and the word “yoga” may be translated from Sanskrit to mean “yoke” or “union” (Iyengar, 1966/1977). The *Yoga Sutras*, a foundational text of yoga as practiced in the West, describe yoga as an entire system of living that unites mind, body, and spirit (Patanjali, 1978/2012). Yoga is made up of eight limbs, which are not a step-by-step or linear process, but eight intersecting elements of a whole-life philosophy. According to the *Yoga Sutras*, “by the practice of the limbs of Yoga, the impurities dwindle away and there dawns the light of wisdom, leading to discriminative discernment” (Patanjali, 1978/2012, 2.29). The eight limbs of yoga are yama (regulations), niyama (observances), asana (posture practice), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (absorption). All of the limbs are essential to the practice of yoga and in the classic texts, no one limb is elevated as more important than the others.

However, most Western yoga education is centered primarily around the third limb of yoga (asana, or posture practice). In fact, much of the representation of yoga in the media equates yoga with asana, leaving out the other limbs entirely (Freeman et.al., 2017). It is easy to photograph and depict asana and to recognize specific postures as yoga. As a yoga teacher, I find most students expect that attending a yoga class will mean following a series of poses. And it *is* often our default as teachers to focus on the physicality of the postures, which we can see, rather

than to delve into the complex world of ethical principles or the internal experience of concentration and meditation. Asana can more easily be made into a curriculum that can be taught and measured within yoga classes and yoga teacher training programs.

Qualitative and quantitative studies about yoga accept this centering of asana as a given and focus on the effectiveness of yoga for a variety of physical and mental benefits (Kelley & Kelley, 2020; Nizard, 2020). If yoga is equivalent to a specific set of physical postures, then researchers are able to isolate and use these postures as an intervention. Researchers have studied yoga's effectiveness for anything from illnesses such as diabetes (Dutta et.al., 2021; Sharma et.al, 2020) to traits such as creativity (Bollimbalaa et.al., 2020). They separate the practice of the postures from the other elements of participants' lives and evaluate whether yoga "works" as an intervention. In their results, they can then state that yoga is effective or ineffective, often in comparison to other interventions.

In yoga teacher training programs, new yoga teachers are also taught to focus on the physical practice. Yoga Alliance is an organization that serves in a voluntary, member-based accrediting role for more than 7,000 Registered Yoga Schools (RYS) and more than 100,000 Registered Yoga Teachers (RYT) (Yoga Alliance, 2020c). These 100,000 teachers enter the profession through 200-Hour teacher training programs, and Yoga Alliance provides a common core curriculum standard for yoga studios to follow in administering these programs (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). The largest component of the standard is 75 hours of "techniques, training, and practice," which primarily means asana, or posture practice (Yoga Alliance, 2020e).

This focus on the observable, physical practice also reflects an overall focus on the body and embodiment in modern yoga classes and in Western cultural conversations about yoga. These conversations tend to center around cultivating a natural, healthy body that will be able to

practice more and more advanced postures. The process of creating and maintaining this natural, healthy body is assumed to be well within the control of each individual. For example, the manual for my yoga teacher training program (which is one of the most popular in the Southeastern United States) encourages prospective teachers to “be a pure vessel” of the yoga practice through a variety of lifestyle instructions such as eating organic food, avoiding carbohydrates, moving to an area with an abundance of yoga studios, and attending to the specific biological experiences that the author associates with men and women (Keach, 2003, p. 126).

Within these instructions and other conversations about yoga, several binary oppositions emerge, including healthy/unhealthy, organic/inorganic, natural/unnatural, Eastern/Western, and masculine/feminine. In a binary opposition, the assumption is that there is no middle ground. For example, someone is either healthy or unhealthy. Their lifestyle is either natural or unnatural. And in binary oppositions, there is always one term – the first one – that is privileged and placed as superior to the other (Burman & MacLure, 2011).

These binary oppositions in the yoga community come together to produce a “yoga body” – a healthy, natural, able, gendered body that is lifted up as an ideal. Aspirational images on social media *dominantly* depict a thin, able-bodied, cisgender white woman in specifically designed yoga wear doing an athletic pose in an outdoor setting such as a beach (Hinz et.al, 2021; Lacasse et.al., 2019). This “yoga body” is assumed to be pure, in touch with nature, and working toward both health and spiritual enlightenment. The yoga practitioner is expected to look thin, athletic, and beautiful without openly working toward that ideal (Hinz et.al., 2021).

As a queer and disabled yoga practitioner, I have firsthand experience of these binary oppositions. I began to practice yoga in 2015 after a series of spinal surgeries, including one to

insert metal rods into my spine. As part of my post-surgical physical therapy, my therapist recommended a yoga class at the neurosurgery center designed specifically for patients recovering from neurological and orthopedic conditions. I began my yoga practice with therapeutic classes designed to help me recover mobility and strengthen the muscles that support the spine. And my asana practice did (and still does) help with mobility, flexibility, strength, and management of chronic pain. However, my yoga teacher also included teachings and principles of yoga philosophy, and eventually, I found that I was approaching my own embodiment in a new way. At the beginning, I was interested in returning to an imagined pre-surgical version of myself. But as my practice continued, how I conceptualized myself, my body, my mobility, and my priorities changed. Through my yoga practice in community with other people managing chronic pain and illness, I became less past- or future-oriented and focused instead on my embodiment as it was in the *present*. I began to think of myself as disabled and to embrace the messiness and complexity of my own ever-changing embodiment. Over two years of consistent practice and through conversations with my yoga teacher, I decided to be trained as a yoga instructor myself.

I attended a 200-Hour Yoga Teacher Training program in a privately owned yoga studio, and for the first time I encountered the mainstream yoga culture of the United States. Before this experience, I had practiced only with other people who had experienced major illness, injury, and chronic pain; those classes were predominantly therapeutic, and the instructor acknowledged that many of our conditions were chronic, complex, and always shifting. I was entirely unprepared for what I experienced in my teacher training program. I expected to learn about teaching methodologies, class sequencing, anatomy, and how to make a yoga class inclusive for all. What I found instead was a curriculum centered on three things: performing athletic poses

such as handstand, giving hands-on assists (a process where the instructor physically moves students into poses – in this case, with or without consent), and living naturally with a yogic lifestyle. The lessons about this lifestyle included the biological differences between men and women, clean eating, and the importance of not using Western medicine or surgical interventions. I started to wonder how I fit in as a queer, disabled person who wasn't seen as healthy or natural due to the metal in my back, my genderfluid identity, and the fact that I don't believe I can be "healed" in a practice that is so often focused on the organic, natural, gendered body unencumbered by medicine or technology.

And as an educator, I started to consider how these norms come together into a discourse. According to Cheek (2008), "Drawing on Foucauldian understandings, discourse refers to ways of thinking and speaking about aspects of reality. Discourses operate to order reality in certain ways" (p. 357). The norms around health and embodiment in yoga education order the reality of Western yoga practice around a specific style of practice and a specific body. Ideas about an ideal yoga practitioner and an ideal yoga body inform the way that yoga is represented, studied, taught, and practiced. Of course, not everyone's experience aligns with this discourse. However, when a discourse becomes dominant, it "may also constrain or even exclude the production of understandings and knowledge that could offer alternative views" (p. 357). The discourses around healthy and natural bodies in yoga education limit the representation of bodies that do not fit the ideal and may even discourage those bodies from participating in the yoga community as teachers or practitioners.

In my post-qualitative dissertation, I conducted a "thinking with theory" analysis to deconstruct these dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Poststructuralism, as well as queer theory and disability studies, provided the

framework for my analytic work. For my conceptual analysis, I used an assemblage of previous research, normative yoga media, yoga teacher training curricula and other educational materials, yoga philosophy and concepts, and embodied data from my own yoga practice. The analytic questions that guided my analysis are:

1. How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?
2. How do the dominant discourses create an image of a healthy, natural, gendered body in yoga education?
3. How do the discursive norms of a pure and moral gendered body in yoga education produce the subjectivities of yoga teachers?
4. How do queer and disabled embodiment within the yoga practice resist the dominant discourses in yoga education?
5. How might these resistances open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga?

### **What is Yoga?**

Yoga in the West is often equated with asana, or the physical practice of specific postures. However, yoga is a complex philosophy with a rich history and has many meanings and paths of practice. It is one of six philosophical traditions that originated in India around 2,000 years ago (Bryant, 2009; Iyengar, 1966/1977). There are many types, or paths, of yoga. According to yoga historian Jois (2015), these paths may be grouped into three general types: Jnana Yoga (yoga of the mind), Karma Yoga (yoga of action), and Bhakti Yoga (yoga of devotion). When considered from this perspective, Karma Yoga (yoga of action) is the path most often practiced in the West, and a foundational text is the *Bhagavad Gita*, a section of the Indian

epic *Mahabharata* that tells the story of a warrior embracing his duty and taking action unattached to results. This general path of Karma Yoga includes the path of Hatha Yoga, sometimes called the yoga of the body, as outlined in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. It also includes Classical or Ashtanga (Eight-Limbed) Yoga as outlined in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. This is the path of yoga that I personally practice and teach, and the one that I will describe in more detail, as my dissertation is concerned with examining the practice and teaching of yoga in the West.

There are many definitions and conceptions of what yoga “is.” As Jois (2015) describes, “Though the definitions vary, they all lead the practitioner to the same ultimate experience of the Great Light” (p. 28). Many definitions translate the word “yoga” from Sanskrit to mean “to bind, join, attach, or yoke” (Iyengar, 1966/1977). The *Bhagavad Gita* (2000) states, “Self-possessed, resolute, act / without any thought of results, / open to success or failure./ This equanimity is yoga” (2.48). Action without attachment to results requires a practitioner to live in the present moment and be open to experience. According to the *Yoga Sutras*, “Yoga is the cessation of the turnings of thought” (Patanjali, 1998, 1.2) or “The restraint of the modifications of the mind-stuff is Yoga” (Patanjali, 1978/2012, 1.2). This cessation or restraint of the “mind-stuff” leads the practitioner to a state of equanimity or union with others and the universal Self. In classical yoga, or the yoga of Patanjali, which is the philosophy with which I am most familiar and practice in my own life, the process by which a practitioner works toward the “cessation of the turnings of thought” is the eight-limbed path.

### ***The Eight Limbs of Yoga***

The *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* describe eight practices, called limbs, through which “there dawns the light of wisdom, leading to discriminative discernment” (Patanjali, 1978/2012, 2.28).

These limbs are not a linear process and one is not more important than the others; rather, “In yoga, all limbs must cooperate to take us to the final destination” (Jois, 2015, p. 80). The practice of each limb supports the practice of the others. Below, I briefly describe each of the eight limbs of yoga.

**Yama.** The first limb is Yama, translated as “abstinences,” “great vows,” (Patanjali, 1978/2012, 2.30; 2.31), or moral principles (Patanjali, 1998, 2.30). There are five yama: ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truthfulness), asteya (non-stealing), brahmacharya (continence, moderation), and aparigraha (non-greed, non-grasping).

**Niyama.** The second limb is Niyama, translated as “observances” (Patanjali, 1978/2012, 2.32). There are also five niyama: saucha (purity), samtosa (contentment), tapas (accepting but not causing pain, purification, heat), svadhyaya (self-study, study of spiritual texts), and Isvara pranidhana (worship, self-surrender).

**Asana.** The third limb of yoga is Asana. As translated by Satchidananda (1978/2012), “Asana is a steady, comfortable posture” (2.46). This limb is what many Western practitioners may recognize as “yoga.” While the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (2002) offers descriptions of several postures that many would recognize as “yoga poses,” the *Yoga Sutras* only describe a “steady and easy,” posture that allows for the practice of the following limbs (Patanjali, 1998, 2.46).

**Pranayama.** The fourth limb is Pranayama, or “The modifications of the life-breath” (Patanjali, 1978/2012, 2.50). By practicing specific patterns of inhalation and exhalation, the yoga practitioner is able to regulate prana, or the life force, and further prepare the body to practice the following limbs.

**Pratyahara.** Limbs five, six, and seven are often considered together as stages in the process of preparing the mind and body for meditation. The fifth limb, Pratyahara, may be

translated as “sense withdrawal” (Patanjali, 1978/2012, 2.54). When the practitioner focuses less on the external world and the information received through the senses, they are able to turn inward for meditation.

**Dharana.** The sixth limb, Dharana, or “concentration” follows from the withdrawal of the senses and involves the practitioner further focusing on a single point of attention (Patanjali, 1978/2012, 3.1).

**Dhyana.** The seventh limb is Dhyana, or “meditation.” This limb follows from pratyahara and dharana and involves “unwavering attention to a single object – a continuous flow of attention” (Patanjali, 1998, 3.2).

**Samadhi.** The eighth limb of yoga is Samadhi, a word that may be translated as “pure contemplation” (Patanjali, 1998, 3.3), or “profound absorption” (Patanjali, 1978/2012, 3.3). Unlike the other limbs, Samadhi is not a practice but a state or feeling that may arise through the practice of meditation.

I offer this history and background in order to situate my study within the context of how yoga is often taught and practiced in the United States. As I completed a yoga teacher training program, I learned about the path of Karma Yoga, and the approaches of Hatha Yoga and Ashtanga (Eight-Limbed) Yoga. The *Yoga Sutras* provide the grounding for my personal practice and that of many Western yoga teachers and practitioners. My study is not an analysis of the historical traditions of yoga, and my intent is not to interpret the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, or the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* or to say what the original writers of these texts “really meant.” Rather, I include this history with acknowledgment of and gratitude for yoga’s rich and complex Indian heritage and to locate the practice of yoga in the West within a global context.

## **My Relationship to this Inquiry**

As I described above, I came to yoga like many practitioners in the West: through the physical practice undertaken in order to change something about my embodiment. And like many practitioners, I found myself drawn to the philosophy of yoga and moving with and beyond the physical practice. Today, yoga is an important part of how I see myself, my body, my approach to life, and my research. In addition to my own practice, I have also taught yoga classes in two settings – as a part of a physical therapy program at a spinal clinic, and as a curriculum class in a community college physical education department. In both settings, the classes are intended to be primarily asana, pranayama, and meditation focused, though I do include discussions of the other limbs as well. As a yoga instructor and practitioner, I do not attempt to “stand apart,” objectively studying the practice of yoga. Rather, I embrace my personal, embodied experiences and the way that they guide and shape my inquiry.

My own subjectivities as a yoga teacher and practitioner were important to consider as I conducted my analysis of the practice of yoga in the United States. I am a white, Western yoga instructor who studied in yoga teacher training programs with other white, Western yoga instructors. In my dissertation, my aim is not to say how yoga “should” be practiced or how it was intended to be practiced by ancient Indian scholars. Instead, I examine how yoga *is* practiced at this moment in the United States, revealing the power relations and dominant discourses within this practice, and considering what those relations of power and dominant discourses “do” and how they “work” in the field of yoga education in the United States. This examination relates to my first three analytic questions: How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education? How do the dominant discourses create an image of a healthy, natural, gendered body in yoga education? How do the discursive norms

of a pure and moral gendered body in yoga education produce the subjectivities of yoga teachers? In deconstructing these discourses, I open up possibilities for the “queering” and “cripping” of yoga practice through my fourth and fifth analytic questions: How do queer and disabled embodiment within the yoga practice resist the dominant discourses in yoga education? How might these resistances open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga? An important part of my analysis is to consider the current literature about yoga in the West, so in the next section, I offer a brief review.

### **Summative Review of the Literature**

In recent years, as yoga participation in the United States has continued to increase, researchers have become more interested in yoga, particularly in determining its effectiveness. Researchers seek to test and evaluate the claims that many yoga teachers and practitioners make about yoga’s perceived benefits. Both qualitative and quantitative studies explore the physical benefits of yoga practice. Many of these studies consider a specific physical illness, injury, or disability such as diabetes (Dutta et.al, 2021; Sharma et.al, 2020), depression (LaRoque et.al, 2021; West et.al, 2021) or lower back pain (Kim, 2020; Roseen et.al, 2021; Zhu et.al., 2020) and ask whether yoga “works” in their treatment. Additionally, other qualitative and quantitative studies consider various non-physical benefits of yoga practice, seeking to determine whether yoga helps to improve personal qualities such as positive body image (Cox et.al, 2017), creativity (Bollimbalaa et.al, 2020) or self-care (Matsuba & Williams, 2020). Most of these studies are set up in a similar way: researchers administer a pre-test to determine a starting point for the physical, mental, or emotional trait they are measuring. They then conduct a yoga intervention, lasting anywhere from forty-five minutes (Bollimbalaa et.al., 2020) to eight weeks (Cox et.al., 2017) with a post-test at the end. Research into yoga’s effectiveness raises questions

about the ways that yoga “works” in our society. However, these studies also “work” in their own way, creating and maintaining flows of power and reinforcing binary assumptions in the discourses about the body, embodiment, and health within the yoga community.

Many other researchers build on the effectiveness studies, using them as proof that yoga is a beneficial practice with a variety of physical, mental, and emotional outcomes. They then seek to understand how yoga exists in society – how it is represented in the media, how it is approached by instructors, and how it is received by diverse communities. Researchers studying the portrayal of yoga in the media examine various sources such as Instagram (Hinz et.al., 2021; Lacasse et.al., 2019), yoga-specific publications such as *Yoga Journal* (Markula, 2014), and mainstream publications such as women’s magazines and advertisements (Bhalla & Moscovitz, 2020; Blaine, 2016). These studies find that yoga is primarily represented as being for white, able-bodied, thin, athletic cisgender women. Researchers such as Markula (2014) have noted an increasing portrayal of yoga as asana in media like *Yoga Journal*. Specifically, she points out that *Yoga Journal* images and articles increasingly focus on the use of specific asana for specific outcomes in terms of health and athleticism. And Hinz et.al. (2021), in their content analysis of yoga images on Instagram, note that “in addition to a thin ‘yoga body’ there may also be an increasing trend for yoga to promote a ‘functional ideal’ through performative demonstrations of physical strength and/or flexibility” (p. 118). Yoga practitioners are expected to embody a thin, attractive ideal while stating that they are more interested in functional outcomes such as strength and flexibility. The image of yoga in media is a well-studied area, and many researchers have pointed out that yoga media content highlights a specific type of body and practice. In my study, I consider the work that this “yoga body” does within the yoga community, how the focus on

healthy bodies influences and is influenced by the power relations within yoga education, and how yoga teachers shape their subjectivities in relation to this body.

Other researchers consider how yoga exists in traditional and nontraditional practice settings. Some researchers question the role of the yoga instructor in traditional studio settings in terms of injury prevention (Lein et.al., 2020) and the specific presentation of the postures (Blazkiewicz, 2020). Others seek to understand the number and types of locations where yoga is offered – including in non-traditional spaces such as public libraries (Lenstra, 2017) or public school classrooms (Rashedi & Schonert-Reichl, 2019). Researchers also examine the attitudes toward and participation in yoga within diverse communities and ask whether diverse populations will benefit from yoga practice. For example, Matsuba and Williams (2020) studied the impact of a yoga workshop on teachers in Nigeria, while Thind et.al. (2021) asked whether yoga is accessible to members of a Latinx community center.

Many yoga practitioners and writers question these assumptions and dominant discourses, sharing their personal stories of marginalization in the yoga community due to race (Barkataki, 2015; Haddix, 2016), weight (Klein, 2012), gender identity (Ballard & Kripalani, 2016; Krieger, 2013b), and sexuality (Danis, 2018). And yoga instructors are challenging these assumptions, working to create yoga spaces that are oriented toward a queer, fat, feminist praxis (Dark, 2016; Mehta, 2016) and that support activism and anti-oppression pedagogy (Berila, 2016; Ford, 2016). These stories, along with my own story and research for this dissertation, push back against the dominant narratives of normative yoga research and practice and open up opportunities to think differently about yoga education.

Yoga teachers and researchers also draw from the work of neuroscientists such as van der Kolk (2014) around the embodied experience of trauma and consider how yoga allows for those

who have experienced trauma to feel supported in a safe environment. Yoga therapists such as Parker (2019) advocate a practice of restorative yoga, yin yoga, or yoga nidra to allow participants who have experienced racial trauma the “therapeutic experience of resting in safety” (para. 7). As Parker (2019) states, “Ethnic- and race-informed Restorative Yoga teaches people to experience safety in their vulnerability, which is a new learning for people experiencing the ongoing, cumulative, and recurrent nature of racial stress” (para. 7). These yoga teachers challenge the discourse that yoga is always a physically challenging series of poses undertaken to control health and increase athleticism. They explicitly acknowledge the impacts of oppression on the body and embrace a restful practice of yoga as an act of resistance.

### **Purpose and Significance of My Study**

As a queer and disabled yoga instructor and practitioner, I am interested in deconstructing the normative discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education. I have personally encountered the binary oppositions of healthy/unhealthy, natural/unnatural, and masculine/feminine that often pervade yoga discourse. Specifically, I have encountered the embodied experience of being on the “wrong” side of these binary oppositions. When I first had this experience in my yoga teacher training program, it was hard to put into words the visceral feeling that someone giving me a hands-on assist (“helping” me into a pose) was doing so because they thought my body was wrong. It was hard to describe the look on an instructor’s face when they realized that my body would present a problem for the sequence of postures they had designed. As Berlant (2011) writes, “Change is an impact lived on the body before anything is understood, and as such is simultaneously meaningful and ineloquent, engendering an atmosphere that [we] spend the rest of the story and [our] lives catching up to” (p. 39). My dissertation is part of the “catching up” that Berlant describes, as I sought to understand my own

experiences and the way yoga is researched, taught, and portrayed in research, media, and yoga teacher training programs. In particular, the flowing together of poststructuralism and queer and disability theories provided an important theoretical and analytic lens that allowed me to examine and deconstruct these discourses, and ultimately, to imagine ways to think differently about yoga education.

The purpose of my study is to reveal the dominant discourses of health and embodiment at work in the yoga education field. I investigate how these discourses are created and maintained within a flow of power and how the “yoga body” comes to be defined as a healthy, natural, able, gendered body within them. I also consider the resistances produced by my own embodied experience and the writings of other yoga teachers and practitioners.

In this post-qualitative study, I use a thinking with theory methodology (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) to conduct an analysis which plugs poststructuralism, as well as queer and disability theories into the following analytic questions:

1. How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?
2. How do the dominant discourses create an image of a healthy, natural, gendered body in yoga education?
3. How do the discursive norms of a pure and moral gendered body in yoga education produce the subjectivities of yoga teachers?
4. How do queer and disabled embodiment within the yoga practice resist the dominant discourses in yoga education?
5. How might these resistances open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga?

This inquiry is important because while yoga has been a practice in India for thousands of years and in the United States for over one hundred years, both the practice and the study of yoga are becoming more and more popular in the West. Untroubled assumptions about bodies, ability, embodiment, health, and gender pervade the way we teach yoga, what is included in the curriculum, and the way yoga instructors are trained. Research into yoga often asks “does it work?” in an attempt to understand or justify its use among various communities. However, such research rarely asks “*how* does it work?” – how does our teaching and practice of yoga reinforce dominant discourses and binary thinking about bodies and embodiment? And what are the discursive effects of compliance to the norm?

I intend for this study to be helpful to yoga instructors and practitioners who want to better understand the discourses that shape how we teach and practice yoga, and how that practice creates and maintains flows of power. This work also has implications for the way we instruct new yoga teachers and the way we structure the curriculum and pedagogy in yoga teacher training programs. Additionally, I challenge the way we approach inquiry and research about yoga teaching and practice. I do not plan to provide clear answers about the “right” way to teach and practice yoga, but to open up possibilities for how yoga can be thought, practiced, and led differently.

### **A Queer and Disabled Approach to Inquiry**

The flowing together of queer and disability theories, sometimes known as queercrip theory, will help me in this process of thinking differently as it calls into question the ways we talk about “normal” bodies, embodiment, and health. Drawing first from poststructuralism, then from both queer theory and disability studies, queercrip theory incorporates elements of each and flows out of and through them. Poststructuralism, developed by theorists such as Derrida,

Foucault, and Deleuze, challenges the notion of fixed realities, truths, and identities and deconstructs the binaries and power relations that structure our dominant societal narratives (Williams, 2014). Queer theory, based upon the work of theorists such as Sedgwick, Edelman, Butler, Halberstam, and Berlant, challenges heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and compulsory heterosexuality. Disability studies, through the work of theorists such as Shakespeare, Garland-Thompson, Zola, Linton, and Davis, similarly challenges compulsory able-bodiedness and ableist normativity. These foundations and origins contribute to queercrip theory's potential for thinking differently about embodiment practices such as yoga.

Theorists such as McRuer, Clare, Sandahl, and Kafer draw together queer and disability theories. These queercrip theorists point out that in both theory and in wider society, the thought that individuals can be both queer and disabled is rarely considered. Long (2018) states that “to be LGBT/queer *and* disabled seems beyond the realm of what culture deems possible, let alone desirable” (p. 84, emphasis in original). Queercrip theorists consider how queer and disabled individuals interrupt flows of power and celebrate queer and disabled embodiment. They challenge both the invisibility/hypervisibility of queer and disabled individuals, as well as the fact that both identities are considered to be lesser, or even tragic, in our society. Dominant narratives don't acknowledge that anyone would desire to be queer and/or disabled if given the option. These theorists also point out that queer theory and disability studies both challenge norms and normalcy (Sandahl, 2003). Both queer theory and disability studies are concerned with dominant narratives of “normal” bodies and lives. Queercrip theorists both “queer” and “crip” these dominant discourses, deconstructing the binaries around identity, visibility, and embodiment. I further explore this theory and its relevance for inquiry into yoga education in Chapter 2.

## **Method: Thinking with Theory**

Thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), like other forms of post-qualitative inquiry, is not a method. Instead, it involves the refusal of particular methods and embraces concept as method. In this approach, I did not view data as something separate and able to be collected. Instead, I explored my analytic questions through a process of plugging in: writing and thinking with theory and data, asking not “what does it mean?” but “what does it do?”

Drawing from poststructural philosophy, as well as the work of theorists such as Lather, St. Pierre, and Jackson and Mazzei, post-qualitative inquiry invites us to refuse normative concepts of data and method. St. Pierre (1997) describes the linear process of traditional qualitative research: the application of method, the collection of data, the analysis of data by coding, the interpretation of that data, and ultimately the answering of research questions or the production of new theories. Post-qualitative research challenges the assumptions of a stable, knowable subject and of stable, knowable data embedded in such a linear process.

In refusing this linear approach, we also refuse specific methods that keep us from being open to what may arise in our inquiry (St. Pierre, 2019b). Instead, we embrace using our concept as method (Taguchi & St. Pierre, 2017). In this approach, we read and study theory along with research texts, and theory becomes a guide and partner to “think with,” allowing us to reject easy, normative explanations and think differently (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). I further explain my process of thinking with poststructuralism and queercrip theory in my post-qualitative analysis in Chapter 2.

In my dissertation, I took a post-qualitative approach that allowed for the use of queercrip theory as method. Thinking with theory is not a pre-given method to follow. Instead, “It is about a creativity that overcomes habitual repetitions and sedimented, or inherited, ways of being”

(Jackson & Mazzei, 2017, p. 719). I deconstructed the dominant discourses in yoga education by starting in the middle of my own experiences and knowledge, embracing complexity and contradiction as I considered research, theory, curriculum, media, and embodiment. As Jackson and Mazzei (2017) state, “Thinking with theory uses concepts in the making of new assemblages, renders meaning unstable, and allows for multiple entryways and exits in thought” (p. 725). In the following section, I will outline the “entryway and exits in thought” that make up each chapter of my dissertation.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation contains eight chapters, including five analytic chapters that illustrate a plugging in of my analytic questions to poststructuralism, queer and disability theories, and current research, media, yoga teacher training materials, and my own embodied experiences. This Chapter has provided an overview of the field of yoga education in the United States and the purpose and significance of my study, along with a brief introduction to the theoretical and methodological approach.

In Chapter 2, I further explain the post-qualitative, thinking with theory approach. I also discuss the foundations and origins of poststructuralism and its key principles of discourse, binary oppositions, deconstruction, power, and subjectivity, as well as the foundations and origins of queercrip theory and its key principles of normalcy, (in)visibility, and bodies and embodiment. Readers should note that typically, a literature review might appear in Chapter 2; however, because I use empirical literature for my analysis, those texts are woven throughout Chapters 3 - 6, discussed next.

Chapters 3 through 6 make up my thinking with theory analysis. In Chapter 3, I analyze current peer-reviewed medical research about yoga’s effectiveness for a specific health condition

(chronic non-specific lower back). I think with the work of Foucault's biopower to reveal discourses of control, measurement, medicine, and validity. In Chapter 4, I further analyze medical research about yoga's effectiveness, reading it alongside the work of queercrip theorists around the healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural binaries to reveal discourses of a healthy, able, independent body that is managed through the use of yoga. In Chapter 5, I consider the regulatory organization Yoga Alliance, which credentials and provides curriculum for yoga teacher training programs. I analyze these materials along with the work of Foucault on power and subjectivity to consider how new yoga teachers shape their subjectivities within programs that are focused on physical practice. In Chapter 6, I further analyze the work of yoga teacher training programs, considering the materials included in the programs, as well as the way they are represented by media such as *Yoga Journal*. The work of queercrip theorists around (in)visibility, embodiment, ability, and gender help me to reveal discourses of yoga teachers as healthy, able, gendered bodies completing a physically rigorous training.

In Chapter 7, I continue my analytic work with an embodied analysis, considering data from my own practice of yoga alongside the work of other yoga teachers and practitioners who challenge the normative discourse of health and embodiment in yoga education. In Chapter 8, I conclude by revisiting my analytic questions, exploring areas for future research, and considering the significance of my study to the field of yoga education.

## Chapter 2

### Theory and Method

As an embodiment practice, yoga celebrates the union of opposing elements and forces and encourages us to flow with a complex mind-body experience, rather than to fit ourselves into pre-existing structures. Therefore, as I approached my conceptual analysis of the dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education and how those discourses are created and maintained within relations of power, I did so from a theoretical and methodological approach that allowed for exploration and the opening up of possibilities. Theory and method in my study are intertwined and inseparable. As I considered the normative discourses of embodiment in yoga education and how those discourses create an image of a healthy, able, gendered “yoga body,” I took a post-qualitative approach to inquiry, thinking with poststructuralism and queercrip theory. This inquiry, thinking alongside poststructural and queercrip theorists, allowed me to explore the richness and complexity of embodiment and yoga practice.

In this chapter, I give an overview of the foundations and origins of poststructuralism and several key principles and assumptions: discourse, binary oppositions, deconstruction, power, and subjectivity. I then discuss the foundations and origins of queercrip theory and its key principles of normalcy, (in)visibility, and bodies and embodiment. I also describe the key principles of post-qualitative inquiry, including refusal of method, concept as method, the approach to data, and plugging in. Throughout, I demonstrate how the principles of poststructuralism and queercrip theory speak to the dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education and how I think with them in a post-qualitative analysis to answer my analytic questions:

1. How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?
2. How do the dominant discourses create an image of a healthy, natural, gendered body in yoga education?
3. How do the discursive norms of a pure and moral gendered body in yoga education produce the subjectivities of yoga teachers?
4. How do queer and disabled embodiment within the yoga practice resist the dominant discourses in yoga education?
5. How might these resistances open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga?

## **Poststructuralism**

### ***Foundations and Origins***

Poststructuralism, developed by theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze, challenges the notion of fixed realities, truths, and identities and deconstructs the binaries that structure our dominant societal narratives (Williams, 2014). Poststructuralists challenge the positivist view of knowledge as “out there” to be discovered and instead acknowledge that how we construct ourselves and understand the world is a “product of the meanings we learn and produce” – of discourse (Belsey, 2002, p. 5). Poststructuralists deconstruct dominant discourses and examine the relations of power that these discourses create and maintain. They challenge binary oppositions and point out the complexity and contradiction of our multiple subjectivities. This process of deconstruction opens up possibilities for living and thinking differently. In the following section, I discuss the key principles and assumptions of poststructural theory and how each connects to the power relations and dominant discourses in yoga education.

### ***Key Principles and Assumptions***

**Discourse.** According to Foucault (1981/2017), “Discourse does something else entirely than purely and simply represent reality” (p. 242). Discourse is not a representation of reality; instead, discourse works to shape, order, and transform reality (Foucault, 1981/2017). And discourse does not only refer to speech, writing, and text – the assumptions, norms, and practices that we take for granted are also part of discourse. Thus, language is not simply a structure for meaning-making but a *social practice*. In Western yoga education, the discursive norms surrounding health and embodiment *order* the reality of yoga practice around a specific style of practice and a specific body. Discourse, then, makes possible an ideal yoga practitioner and an ideal yoga body, which informs the way that yoga is represented, studied, taught, and practiced. When a discourse becomes dominant, it “may also constrain or even exclude the production of understandings and knowledge that could offer alternative views” (Foucault, 1981/2017, p. 357). Therefore, discourse creates norms through both inclusions and exclusions. Dominant discourses in yoga education both produce and limit what can be known about yoga and who can know it, excluding certain bodies and experiences from normative assumptions about what yoga is and who can (or should) practice it.

**Binary Oppositions.** Within dominant discourses, binary oppositions order and constrain possibility. In yoga education, several binary oppositions emerge, including mind/body, healthy/unhealthy, organic/inorganic, natural/unnatural, Eastern/Western, and masculine/feminine. In a binary opposition, with its either/or structure, the assumption is that difference is always bound to its Other. For example, someone is either healthy or unhealthy. Their lifestyle is either natural or unnatural. And according to Burman and MacLure (2011), “There is always a hierarchy in these oppositions. One term always represents some higher

principle or ideal or presence, while the other is always a kind of supplement – something lesser or subordinate” (p. 286). The first term is privileged, and is recognizable in discourse, over the second. In yoga education, someone described as healthy and natural is recognized as the norm, and someone described as unhealthy and unnatural deviates from this norm.

**Deconstruction.** Poststructuralists work to deconstruct binary oppositions, undermining their claims to truth and pointing out their inherent contradictions (Williams, 2014). Developed by Derrida (1974/1997), deconstruction is an iterative process of “inhabiting” binary oppositions in order to put pressure on them and demonstrate how they limit possibility (p. 24). Burman and MacLure (2011) describe deconstruction as “the act of bringing pressure to bear on the cherished oppositions” by “forcing/allowing them to reveal their ... points of impasse – where the integrity of the oppositions is fatally compromised” (p. 287). In my study, I deconstruct binary oppositions such as healthy/unhealthy, natural/unnatural, and effective/ineffective, showing how these binaries break down and revealing their “points of impasse.” For example, my own embodiment in the context of a yoga practice breaks down the healthy/unhealthy binary. In my day-to-day life, people tend to assume that I am able-bodied, which they associate with health. Some even assume that because I practice yoga, I am capable of above average strength and flexibility. But in the context of asana practice, as more focus is placed on the body in specific postures, my yoga teachers and classmates notice that my body looks different in the pose, and my health is called into question.

In deconstructing dominant discourses and binary oppositions, poststructuralists point out how these binaries constrain and therefore open up possibilities for living and thinking differently. Deconstruction is an ongoing process that is never complete. According to Derrida (1974/1997), “the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own

work” (p. 24). In my study, I am not seeking to determine the “best” way to teach and practice yoga, and in my conclusion to the study, I deconstruct my own recommendations.

**Power.** Poststructuralists examine how flows of power create and maintain dominant discourses and binary oppositions. Foucault (1977) differentiates between sovereign power (the power held by monarchs over the life and death of subjects) and disciplinary power, which often operates through norms rather than laws. We all participate in the flows of disciplinary power, both maintaining and resisting it:

This power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it;’ it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them.

(Foucault, 1977, p. 27)

In the field of yoga education, yoga teachers, studios, or regulatory organizations do not “have” the power over yoga practitioners. Instead, power is *relational* and functions to influence which discourses become dominant and which embodied experiences are included or marginalized. For example, in Chapter 5, I consider the power relations circulating around the regulatory organization Yoga Alliance. Although Yoga Alliance serves in a credentialing role in the yoga community, the organization does not “have” the power over yoga teachers and studios. Rather, in my analysis, I explore how yoga teachers and practitioners participate in the relations of power that surround Yoga Alliance, both incorporating and resisting the discursive norms influenced by Yoga Alliance’s role in yoga education.

**Biopower.** In particular, Foucault (1977) describes biopower as the power that impacts the body – both the body of the individual and the body of the population. This power serves to create citizens who self-monitor and who engage in behaviors deemed healthy, to the overall

benefit of the state through a manageable, docile population. Flows of biopower therefore create “subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (Foucault, 1977, p. 138). These docile bodies created within relations of biopower are strong, productive, and available for work. In becoming strong and productive, these bodies also become compliant and do not resist relations of power.

My study reveals that yoga is part of the circulation of biopower as participants undertake a yoga practice to manage their health. As I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, researchers who study the effectiveness of yoga for reducing illness and disability become part of the relations of biopower through their role in validating the yoga practice as a measurable medical intervention that is effective at “returning” participants to a state of health and independence. Researchers encourage participants to comply with a yoga program, taking on the personal responsibility of creating strong, flexible, able, pain-free bodies. Yoga participants become self-monitoring, docile bodies who use yoga to increase their ability to work and reduce their burden on others and society. Yoga then becomes a tool to create docile bodies that are strong and productive, rather than a framework through which participants question and resist oppressive structures.

**Subjectivity.** Rather than a fixed notion of identity, poststructuralists embrace multiple and potentially contradictory subjectivities (Belsey, 2002). Foucault (1981/2017) describes subjectivity as “the set of processes of subjectivation to which individuals have been subjected or that they have implemented with regard to themselves” (p. 282). Subjectivities are neither fixed nor determined but are continually in the process of becoming. We create ourselves and shape our subjectivities in response to dominant discourses and relations of power. As yoga instructors and practitioners, we shape our own subjectivities within and against the discourses that are

accepted as “true” about yoga. In Chapter 6, I consider how yoga teachers create our subjectivities in relation to the norms of purity, morality, and gender in yoga education.

### **Queercrip Theory**

Theorists in both queer theory and disability studies extend Foucault’s work on relations of power surrounding bodies that operate through heteronormative, cisnormative, and able-bodied norms. They examine how the body comes to be defined as the cisgender male/female, heterosexual, and able body and how that construction of the normal body creates and maintains binaries and relations of power.

### ***Foundations and Origins***

Queer theory, developed by the work of theorists such as Sedgwick, Edelman, Butler, Halberstam, and Berlant, challenges heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and compulsory heterosexuality. Rich (1980/2003) introduced the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, which is the way that normative discourses in our society compel heterosexuality through our assumptions of what is and what should be a “normal” relationship. Other early queer theorists, such as Edelman (2004) and Sedgwick (1990), challenge heteronormativity by introducing the cis gay and lesbian figure, who stands in contrast to the normative discourses of heterosexuality, reproduction, and a child-centric culture. Such a figure is paradoxically both silenced and held up as an example that maintains the norm through its difference. However, other queer theorists challenge this work, taking up notions of gender and compulsory gendered embodiment. They challenge the very notion that such identities are fixed and measurable in the first place. For example, Butler (1988) theorizes that gender is performative – that rather than being a fixed quality, gender is something we are constantly “doing” through our embodied being in the world. Queer theorists argue that gender and sexuality, rather than being the result of clear differences

between individuals, create and maintain each other in what Butler (1990) describes as the “heterosexual matrix.” We are compelled to embody and perform gender, and to perform it in a specific way. Our bodies become the site of cultural narratives and consequences, and queer theorists explore the way narratives around gender and sexuality play into our embodied experience.

Disability studies, developed by theorists such as Shakespeare, Garland-Thompson, Zola, Linton, and Davis, similarly challenges compulsory able-bodiedness and ableist normativity. Disability studies first sought to challenge the dominant medical model of disability, which maintained that disability was the result of individual impairment and that individuals with disabilities must work to “overcome” their disabilities in order to become “normal.” Disability studies scholars challenged this medical model by introducing the social model, which conceptualized disability as caused by an ableist society rather than by the impairments of individuals with disabilities. However, other disability studies scholars have challenged and built upon the social model, bringing forward the complex experiences of individuals with chronic pain and chronic illness alongside the traditional focus on mobility and sensory differences. As Corker and Shakespeare (2002) describe, “Both the medical model and the social model seek to explain disability universally, and end up creating totalizing, meta-historical narratives that exclude important dimensions of disabled people's lives and of their knowledge” (p. 15). They argue that disability cannot be explained by a simple model; rather, it is a complex and sometimes contradictory experience that can involve individual, medical, social, environmental, and relational factors. They conceptualize disability not as a fixed notion of bodily difference or a simple matter of social structures. Instead, they view disability as a fluid concept shaped by individual embodied experience, environmental structures, relationships, and policy. Disability

studies theorists now question the very notion of a fixed able-bodied/disabled binary. Instead, they explore the fluid and unpredictable nature of embodiment.

Theorists such as McRuer, Clare, Sandahl, and Kafer have drawn together queer and disability theories into what is sometimes known as queercrip theory. Some queercrip theorists raise the issue that in both theory and in wider society, the thought that individuals can be both queer and disabled is never even considered. Queer theorists tend to assume able-bodiedness, while disability studies theorists tend to assume heterosexual and cisgender identities. These theorists embrace and celebrate the challenge to social norms, and the interrupting of the flow of power, that queer and disabled individuals present. These theorists also point out that the two traditions share some commonality, particularly around the challenging of norms and normalcy. Sandahl (2003) argues that both take a “radical stance toward concepts of normalcy; both argue adamantly against the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds (corporeal, mental, sexual, social, cultural, subcultural, etc.)” (p. 26). Both queer theory and disability studies are concerned with dominant narratives of “normal” bodies, relationships, experiences, and lives. Queercrip theorists both “queer” and “crip” these norms, deconstructing the binaries around identity, visibility, and embodiment. In the next section, I discuss how I think with these key principles about the dominant discourses and power relations in yoga education.

### ***Key Principles and Assumptions***

The intersection of queer theory and disability studies works to challenge normativity and assumptions of heterosexuality, cisnormativity, and able-bodiedness. Theorists working from this tradition raise questions about “normal” bodies and embodiment, as well as the visibility, invisibility, and silencing of certain bodies and experiences. In my study of yoga education, which is very concerned with the body, I think with queercrip theory to deconstruct binary

oppositions about bodies and health and to open up possibilities for embodiment and yoga practice.

**Bodies and Embodiment.** In yoga education, when we speak of the body, the unspoken implication is that this body is cisgender and able-bodied, strong, flexible, and able to perform acrobatic poses such as headstand. In yoga education, when we speak about “calming the body,” or “centering the body,” it seems as though this healthy, natural body is the one that we are referencing. Haraway (1991) calls this ideal body the “imagined organic body” – this is the body that we are recalled to, an origin myth of human nature in a pure world before the corruption of technology (p. 154). However, Haraway asks us to consider the fact that this natural body is itself a human construction – we define what we see as nature and what we don’t. She asks what a human body is, and where the human body ends and technology begins. Queercrip theorists do not just accept this imagined organic body as ideal or research whether yoga interventions will help students to achieve this body. Instead, they challenge not only the idea of an idealized imagined organic body but of a stable, knowable body at all.

Queercrip theorists are particularly concerned with the ways that the relations of power and constructs about normalcy and visibility both reflect upon and shape the embodied experience. Clare (2001) writes about the importance of the body for itself: “I want to write about the body, not as a metaphor, symbol, or representation, but simply as the body” (p. 359). Clare acknowledges here that the queer/disabled body is often used as metaphor or as a lesson in overcoming and seeks to reclaim the body for itself. Both queer and disability theories are concerned with the body – with our embodied knowledge, desire, and pain, and the messiness and complexity of our embodied experiences. In fact, Swan (2002) states that our very theorizing comes from the body, in “an understanding that writing is not only *about* the body but *of* and

*from the body too*” (p. 284, emphasis in original). It is impossible to “queer” or “crip” without those actions coming from our bodies themselves. In my analysis, my own embodied experience is an essential part of the analytic work. My own queer and disabled embodiment is a site for theorizing, particularly as I consider the mind-body practice of yoga.

Within queercrip theory, we explore the complexities of the body, acknowledging that the body can be the source of both pleasure and pain (even at the same time). We acknowledge that our embodied experiences sometimes cause hardship and that we sometimes wish to transcend our painful embodiment (Wendell, 1993). Such an admission can be part of the complexity of a lived life, rather than a desire to be “normal.” In fact, exploring the sometimes painful experiences of embodiment can itself be a site for theorizing. Kafer (2013) writes that “I long to hear stories that not only admit limitation, frustration, even failure, but that recognize such failure as ground for theory itself” (p. 141). The body, in particular the queer and/or disabled body, can become a means from and through which we write and theorize. In my study, I write and theorize from my own embodied experience of the yoga practice. The complexities of (in)visible embodiment within a society shaped by a flow of power around compulsory heterosexual/cisgender/able-bodied norms can be a site for thinking with queercrip theory.

**Normalcy.** A key concern for queercrip theorists is the narrative of normalcy. Theorists question not only why queer and disabled individuals are left out of the category of “normal,” but what work such a category does in the world. Our ideas of normal shape who we see as acceptable and unacceptable, which bodies are permitted and encouraged to thrive, and which are hidden, forgotten, shamed, or punished. In yoga education, “normal” bodies are those that are able to perform a challenging physical asana practice. These bodies “use” yoga to control and manage their health and are not a burden on others.

If we examine the very idea of normalcy with any scrutiny, we find that the category is inherently unstable. What makes someone normal and someone else not normal? What about bodies that seem “normal” in some contexts and “not-normal” in others? In my case, many people assume that I’m able-bodied until I am engaged in an asana practice, where my “not-normal” body is on display. Long (2018) describes such “bodies as inhabiting a borderland between the acceptable and unacceptable” (p. 82). Such a borderland challenges the binaries about normalcy that we take for granted, pointing out the fluidity of subjectivity and the role of perception in how we categorize people as normal or not. Pieri (2019) challenges the fixity of identity, showing how “queer and disabled are wide categories with blurred, often unfathomable boundaries” (p. 560). It is impossible to draw a clear line around either queer or disabled as identities with some people clearly inside the lines and others outside, as bodies like mine move across borders. In terms of both gender and ability, perception of my body tends to shift depending on context. And both my gender and ability shift day-to-day: my gender identity is fluid, and my experience of chronic pain and chronic illness is characterized by better and worse days.

Any bodies that aren’t normal are subject to criticism, either through the overcoming narrative (“you could be normal if you just worked harder”) or through suspicion of someone’s description of their own experiences. As Scarry (1985) points out in her exploration of how pain is treated in our society, “to have pain is to have *certainty*. To hear about pain is to have *doubt*” (p. 13, emphasis in original). I have personally experienced this narrative in yoga spaces, as my disability is often framed as a failure to adequately practice yoga. Such doubt of others’ experiences is a way for power to flow through narratives of normalcy and control which experiences are heard or believed.

Conversely, queer and/or disabled people can be portrayed through the narrative of overcoming, where they are shown to overcome their differences or disabilities through individual drive, hard work, and willpower. Such people are celebrated for their ability to appear normal (or even superhuman). I hear many stories in yoga spaces about people who “overcame” their illness, disability, or difference on their own through their yoga practice. These yoga practitioners are celebrated for not only returning to “normal,” but in doing so on their own, without the need to burden others or participate in the medical system. Queercrip theory challenges both the narrative of tragedy and the narrative of overcoming, showing how both help to create and maintain the category of “normal” by their opposition to it. They also point out how these narratives render queer people and people with disabilities as invisible and/or hypervisible.

**(In)Visibility.** Queercrip theorists are concerned with the complexities of the visibility and invisibility of embodied experience and how narratives around queer and/or disabled identities shape this (in)visibility. Visibility and invisibility, in queercrip theory, are not positioned as opposites of each other. In fact, invisibility and hypervisibility can paradoxically exist at the same time for the same person or the same notion of an identity. Queer and disabled bodies, in yoga spaces, may be ignored and/or drawn into the spotlight in order to highlight their differences. In yoga classes, I often feel like I am both invisible (through the way the class is not designed for me) and hypervisible (through the way my body moves differently from others in the class). Compulsory heterosexual/cisgender/able-bodied narratives create a situation of invisibility and/or hypervisibility that can shift and change depending on context, with individuals navigating how visible they are in a variety of settings. Mitchell (2002) argues that disabled individuals can paradoxically be ignored or silenced while the concept of disability itself is held up as a narrative device, often through stories of either tragedy or overcoming. This

use of disability as a narrative concept renders it hypervisible, while at the same time, real queer and/or disabled peoples' experiences are sidelined or silenced, which shows that visibility and invisibility can be possible at the same time.

Visibility and invisibility don't work against each other as opposites in a binary. Rather, as Pieri (2019) points out, "both visibility and invisibility are produced within these systems as means to bolster normalcy" (p. 563). Both serve to create and maintain a flow of power, enforcing norms that determine the type of body or life that is considered "normal" and the type that is either worthy of ignoring or of drawing into the spotlight for the purpose of highlighting its difference. In yoga education, both visibility and invisibility serve to reinforce the notion of the healthy, gendered, "yoga body" that is held up as an ideal. In my study, I think with poststructuralism and queercrip theory to deconstruct this discourse of an ideal yoga body and the binary oppositions that are created and maintained within a field of power relations. Thinking with the work of these theorists in a post-qualitative inquiry allows me to open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga.

### **Post-Qualitative Inquiry**

Yoga is a practice that breaks down distinctions such as mind/body and asks us to bring together complex and contradictory experiences and to move with what arises. Similarly, queercrip theory asks us to consider that embodiment is a complex, messy, and often contradictory experience that cannot be easily tied down, analyzed, or captured by specific methods. Therefore, I approached my study with a post-qualitative methodology that did not shut down exploration or prescribe specific processes or methods to follow. Post-qualitative inquiry allowed me to plug in queercrip theory and yoga education and move with what arose, which opened up an opportunity for a rich exploration of the normative discourses of embodiment in

yoga. Drawing from poststructural philosophy, as well as the work of theorists such as Lather, St. Pierre, and Jackson and Mazzei, post-qualitative inquiry invites us to refuse normative concepts of data and method and to embrace thinking with theory and concept.

### ***Foundations of Post-Qualitative Inquiry***

Discussing the tradition of qualitative inquiry in educational research, Lather (2013) conceptualizes four movements that have created shifts and changes within that field. She refers to Qual 1.0 as traditional qualitative inquiry that embraces rich description as a means of validity; Qual 2.0 as the moves toward regulation and normalization of qualitative methods and practices; and Qual 3.0 as the introduction of some poststructural concepts into qualitative inquiry. In her analysis, Lather explores how this turn toward poststructural philosophy challenges the disciplining of qualitative research and the moves toward regulation and focus on method. Post-qualitative inquiry (which Lather calls Qual 4.0) comes from this space of understanding that a poststructural approach is incommensurable with traditional qualitative methods because of its opening up of ideas such as concept, data, and analysis. She asks how such an inquiry, which “cannot be tidily described in textbooks or handbooks,” might allow us to “produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (p. 635).

### ***Key Principles***

Post-qualitative inquiry is not a method; instead, it involves the refusal of pre-given methods. Rather than prescribed methods that limit inquiry, post-qualitative work involves thinking with theory and using concepts as method. In this approach, data is not something “out there” to be collected. Instead, when we work in post-qualitative inquiry, we explore and flow with a process of plugging in – writing and thinking with our theory and data, asking not “what does it mean?” but “what does it do?”

**Refusal of Method.** St. Pierre (1997) describes the “ruthlessly linear nature of the narrative of knowledge production in research methodology” that involves a linear process of the application of method, the collection of data, the analysis of data by coding, the interpretation of that data, and ultimately the answering of research questions or the production of new theories (p. 179-180). This approach assumes a stable, knowable subject and the existence of a separate entity known as “data” that can be collected. As I discussed in Chapter 1, much traditional quantitative and qualitative research about yoga follows this approach, assuming that there is a stable, knowable yoga practitioner “out there” who can be captured, measured, and controlled. In poststructural philosophy and post-qualitative inquiry, I refuse this linear approach and its assumptions about the finality of knowledge production and the ability to ever fully capture and record meaning. This refusal is more in line with my experience of yoga: a complex physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual practice that evades description or capture.

In refusing this approach, I also reject pre-selected or prescribed methods. St Pierre (2019b) states that method will not allow me to open up thought and to engage creatively with what arises. Instead, “method will, in fact, shut down thought, capture it, and consign it to the strata, to the normal, to what everyone knows, to the dogmatic image of thought” (p. 2). In fitting my inquiry into a particular method, I may be shutting down possibilities and focusing on collecting and coding data (as if such data is collectable), all of which will likely lead me to simply restate normative discourses rather than opening them up and challenging them. As I explored in Chapter 1, much research about yoga focuses on describing the healthy, natural “yoga body” and on determining how participants may achieve this body. But this body is under-theorized, and researchers do not examine the work that this ideal *does* in the world. I may feel compelled by “the desire to create a coherent and interesting narrative that is bound by themes

and patterns” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. viii). In that desire to create something that “makes sense,” I will likely overlook the complexities of lived experience and revert to dominant narratives. When I release the notion that I need to enter into my inquiry with a set method, I open up possibilities for the shape my inquiry can take and allow myself to flow with experience. For example, as I considered scientific research into yoga’s effectiveness, I allowed myself to explore the felt experience of reading this research. As I read, I felt a sense of judgment about my own body, ability, and experience of pain. Rather than simply accepting the authority of this validated, peer-reviewed research, I flowed with my embodied experience of encountering it. This experience led to a deeper reading of these studies as I thought with poststructuralism and queercrip theory about the dominant discourses about health that circulate through medical research on yoga.

**Concept as Method.** Post-qualitative inquiry does not prescribe particular methods; however, Taguchi and St. Pierre (2017) argue for using concept *as* method in post-qualitative inquiry. Drawing from the Deleuzian idea of concept as not a stable image but a creative experimentation, they encourage us to use concepts that cross and transcend discipline to inquire into problems as they emerge. There is not a specific way to use concept as method in inquiry. Instead, as Rautio (2021) describes, the approach of using concept as method asks, “What did you happen to think with, and how did it help you to produce insights?” (p. 229). I happened to think with poststructuralism and queercrip theory, which helped me to produce new insights into my analytic questions. St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) similarly state that there is “no recipe for this kind of analysis,” that rather “one has to first read and study theory carefully, and then put it to work in a particular project” (p. 717). Theory becomes a guide and a partner to “think with” through my inquiry, not a specific set of techniques or methods. As I refuse method and think

with concept rather than method, I then need to explore what I consider to be data and how that data interweaves with theory and concept.

**Data.** Post-qualitative inquiry challenges traditional notions of data, including what counts as data and how we think about both data collection and data analysis. In traditional qualitative research, data are “collected” from participants in an attempt to capture an authentic participant voice. These “collected” data are privileged above other potential forms of data (St. Pierre, 2019a). Such an approach places “discourse, mind, and culture over matter, body, and nature,” creating binaries of mind/body and nature/culture (Koro-Ljungberg et.al, 2017, p. 469). This approach to data privileges the presence of subjects and researchers, a position that I challenge from the perspective of a researcher with physical disabilities that at times prevent me from being physically present in certain spaces. Data are often conceptualized as words spoken to or observed by the researcher, which St. Pierre (1997) challenges with her concept of transgressive data. Transgressive data may include data arising from dreams, emotions, physical experiences, and our response to the research process. In this study, I embrace the concept of transgressive data, including as data curriculum, texts, and pedagogy from Yoga Alliance and yoga teacher training programs, scientific and medical research about yoga’s effectiveness, media related to yoga and yoga teacher training, and my own physical and embodied experiences.

When I challenge the ideas of what constitutes data, I then have to challenge how I go about “collecting” that data. St. Pierre (2019b) writes that “the concept of *data collection* is itself problematic because it points to an ontology that assumes data are separate from human beings and so can be ‘collected’” (p. 4, emphasis in original). In a poststructural ontology of becoming, complexity, and incompleteness, it is not possible for me to separate myself from a fixed set of

data and collect them. Data are not stable, stagnant, and meaningless, waiting for me to come collect them and assign them meaning. Data elude capture and are always still becoming for themselves. As Koro-Ljungberg et.al. (2017) state, “we always start in the middle of things” (p. 469). As I describe below, I started “in the middle of things” in my analysis, coming to the research process from my own experiences with yoga. I was not a separate observer who “collected” data but a queer, disabled, yoga participant and yoga teacher (among many other complex and contradictory subjectivities). All of the data I consider in my study were already in existence for themselves, not waiting for me to collect them or to generate them. Both the researcher and the data are bound up together in complex relations that cannot be broken apart or made into a linear progression for the purposes of data collection.

If data are not able to be “collected,” then how we conceptualize data analysis must be challenged as well. St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) discuss the problems with reducing data analysis to coding. When we code data, we attempt to take “brute data” (in the form of words that we have “collected” from participants) and convert those words into numbers in order to find themes and answers within the data (p. 715). This approach implies that words can be reduced to numbers and contained in a predictable, manageable fashion. However, if we question what counts as data, as well as our ability to collect it, we have to question whether data will ever be able to provide us with clear themes and answers. Koro-Ljungberg et al. (2017) state, “Data do not provide answers but may leave behind some potentially disturbing keys to be used at a later point” (p. 468). If we don’t demand that data provide us with answers so that we can create a clean, linear analysis, then we are open to flow with what arises as we plug our data and our concepts into each other.

**Plugging In.** In post-qualitative inquiry, we refuse a prescribed set of methods. We challenge what we consider to be data and what we do with that data. Instead, we use concept as method in order to think differently. So what do we “do” when we undertake a process of post-qualitative inquiry? There is not one set path to follow, but Jackson and Mazzei (2012) describe the process of plugging in as one approach that post-qualitative researchers can take as we think theory and data together. Plugging in involves three potential elements:

1. Putting philosophical concepts to work via disrupting the theory/practice binary by decentering each and instead showing how the *constitute or make one another*;
2. Being deliberate and transparent in what analytical questions are made possible by a specific theoretical concept .... and how the questions that are used to think with *emerged in the middle* of plugging in; and
3. Working the same data chunks repeatedly to “deform [them], to make [them] groan and protest” (Foucault, 1980) with an overabundance of meaning, which in turn not only creates new knowledge but also show the *suppleness of each when plugged in* (p. 5, emphasis in original).

These elements are not a checklist or a linear model; instead, they are three potential “maneuvers” that allow me to think with theory and data and embrace the movement of what emerges (p. 5). This process of refusing method and instead plugging complex and evolving data in with our theory provides rich potential for educational research and inquiry. In the next section, I discuss the process of analysis that I undertook for this study, describing how I plugged in all of the texts, materials, and experiences that I considered as data with poststructuralism and queercrip theory to answer my analytic questions.

## **Method: Thinking with Theory**

In my post-qualitative analysis, I started “in the middle of things” (Koro-Ljungberg et.al., 2017, p. 469). I began with my own experiences and observations in the yoga education community, and as Jackson and Mazzei (2012) recommend, my analytic questions emerged as I began thinking with poststructuralism and with queercrip theory. As data, I considered qualitative and quantitative research about yoga, yoga-specific media such as *Yoga Journal*, the regulations and curriculum of Yoga Alliance, materials from my yoga teacher training program, and my own experience. I plugged this data in to multiple concepts and theories in order to produce knowledge and address my analytic questions. Below, I offer two examples of this process.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I deconstruct the dominant discourses about the body in quantitative research about yoga’s effectiveness. I started with my own personal story; as someone with a spinal injury, I often hear informal conversations in yoga spaces about how yoga “heals” conditions of the back and spine. These conversations often include a vague reference to research that supports the claim that “yoga works.” As I began reading Foucault’s concept of biopower and queercrip theorists’ critique of the normalization of bodies and the narrative of overcoming, I formed my analytic questions with the intent of thinking with these concepts about quantitative research. I selected ten peer-reviewed articles about yoga as a treatment intervention for chronic non-specific lower back pain. As I read them, I felt a connection to biopower and to the healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural binaries emerging. As I wrote, I started with what felt “off” about the knowledge claims and those binaries, and I plugged in those statements with theory. Through my writing, I thought further about how research into yoga’s effectiveness is

part of a flow of biopower, and how these studies support a discourse of measurability and control of an independent, normal, natural body.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I reveal the power relations at work in yoga teacher training and how those power relations contribute to and maintain a discourse of a yoga teacher as an able, gendered body who self-examines and self-monitors in the context of a physically rigorous asana practice. Again, I began with my personal experience of yoga teacher training, which I have been thinking about for several years. My analytic questions emerged through the initial thinking of this experience with poststructuralism and with queercrip theory. As data, I considered official regulatory materials and curriculum standards from Yoga Alliance as well as materials from my own training program. I thought about these materials along with my analytic questions, and I continued to read theory, which led to me to think further with the concept of subjectivity about the forming identities of yoga instructors, and of biopower about the physical nature of the program. I plugged in these same data again to the works of queercrip theorists about health, ability, and gender in teacher training materials. As I wrote, I also became interested in the wider conversation in media surrounding yoga teacher training, so I sought out articles in yoga-related media like *Yoga Journal*, and plugged in those writings to queercrip theory. I wrote and thought further in a cyclical process to reveal the relations of biopower flowing through Yoga Alliance and yoga teacher training programs. I considered how those relations of power produce dominant discourses of yoga as a physical practice and yoga teachers as advanced physical practitioners who self-monitor and engage in behaviors deemed natural and healthy.

## **Conclusion**

In my post-qualitative dissertation, I use a thinking with theory approach to inquiry, plugging in a complex collection of experiences, regulatory and curriculum materials,

empirical/medical research, and media to poststructural and queercrip theories. In the following five chapters, I plug in theory and this assemblage of data to engage my analytic questions. This process of thinking with theory allowed me to reveal the relations of power at work in the yoga education field, to deconstruct the dominant discourses of health and the body that flow throughout these relations, and to think differently about the body and about yoga education.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Yoga as a Measurable, Medical Intervention:**

#### **How Yoga Effectiveness Research Contributes to a Discourse of Productive, Manageable Bodies**

##### **Introduction**

As part of the introduction to a weekend workshop that I helped facilitate for yoga teachers seeking continuing education about spinal injuries, I shared my personal story. I had first encountered the yoga program at this same spinal clinic as a patient after a series of three back surgeries, the last of which had included the insertion of metal plates, rods, and screws into my lumbar spine. After a period of recovery, my physical therapist recommended joining the twice-weekly yoga class offered by the clinic, facilitated by a physical therapy assistant. Yoga had certainly helped my recovery process, had helped me to re-learn my now-limited mobility and to manage the pain and stiffness that comes from the addition of an artificial joint. It had provided me with a framework for thinking my own embodiment and a philosophy with which to approach not only my physical recovery but my life as a whole. And now, several years later, I had trained as a yoga instructor and was serving patients at the same clinic.

Throughout the day, in conversations with various members of the training group, I learned of their surprise and discomfort with this story. Would I have needed surgery, they wondered, if I had been consistently practicing yoga beforehand? Why hadn't yoga completely "healed" my pain and stiffness? "If yoga doesn't work," one trainee asked, "Why do you do it?" And everyone seemed to have a story of someone whose doctor had recommended surgery, but who defied that doctor and healed themselves with yoga.

This was not the only time I'd had these conversations in a yoga space. I had them countless times during my yoga teacher training program, as several of my classmates shared similar stories of how they had healed themselves with yoga in defiance of doctors. I have it nearly every time I attend a yoga class for the general public. The discourse of yoga as self-healing, in binary opposition to medical treatment, plays out across conversations in yoga studios, in yoga videos online, and in yoga media. According to Foucault (1981/2017), a discourse not only represents, but shapes and molds reality, influencing how we see ourselves and how we create our subjectivities when we accept this discourse as truth. This particular discourse of yoga as a healthy, natural intervention is so pervasive that it's hard to imagine that anyone could practice yoga without encountering it.

When a discourse such as this one – about yoga as a healthy, natural practice that leads to a superior type of healing – becomes dominant, it limits who can know and what can be known (Foucault, 1981/2017). It constrains whether bodies like mine are permissible in the yoga community and whether our lived experiences are heard and accounted for in yoga classes and programming. This dominant discourse interacts with power relations around bodies, embodiment, and health, determining who is considered to be living a healthy, natural, yogic lifestyle and who is not.

In recent years, not only yoga participants but also researchers have become more interested in yoga as a natural health practice, particularly in determining its effectiveness relative to other health and medical interventions. Both qualitative and quantitative researchers seek to test and evaluate the claims that many yoga teachers and practitioners make about yoga's perceived physical benefits. In sum, many of these researchers consider a specific physical illness, injury, or disability such as diabetes (Dutta et.al, 2021; Sharma et.al, 2020), depression

(LaRocque et.al, 2021; West et.al, 2021) or lower back pain (Kim, 2020; Roseen et.al, 2021; Zhu et.al., 2020) and ask whether yoga “works” in their treatment. Additionally, other qualitative and quantitative researchers have conducted studies to consider various non-physical benefits of yoga practice, seeking to determine whether yoga helps to improve personal qualities such as positive body image (Cox et.al, 2017), creativity (Bollimbalaa et.al, 2020) or self-care (Matsuba & Williams, 2020). Most of these studies are set up in a similar way: researchers administer a pre-test to determine a starting point for the physical, mental, or emotional trait they are measuring. They then conduct a yoga intervention, lasting anywhere from forty-five minutes (Bollimbalaa et.al., 2020) to twelve weeks (Kim, 2020) with a post-test at the end. Some researchers only use measurement or survey data, while others also involve participant voices in a qualitative approach (Leledaki & Brown, 2008). Most of these published studies ultimately conclude with the determination that yoga is an effective intervention in reducing the symptoms or increasing the personal traits under examination.

These studies play an important part in the discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education. Appearing in peer-reviewed journals and conducted by researchers at premiere universities (Berlowitz et.al., 2020; Roseen et.al., 2021) and medical centers (Highland et.al., 2018), these studies contribute to a discourse about yoga’s effectiveness. Because of this prominence, they serve in a legitimizing role, “proving” that yoga “works” in a scientifically and medically validated way, and that it is effective for certain conditions. The results of effectiveness studies are used by yoga studios in their marketing efforts (Britton, 2017), by yoga-specific publications to further their work of promoting yoga (McCall, 2021), and by retailers who sell yoga props and products (Dodson, n.d.). Other researchers build upon these works, arguing that if yoga is so effective, it should be readily available to a variety of populations

(Lenstra, 2017; Matsuba & Williams, 2020; Thind et.al., 2021). And they are part of the dominant discourse of yoga as a healthy, natural intervention that informs conversations about yoga, pain, and healing in yoga classes and yoga teacher training programs. Yoga instructors and practitioners shape their subjectivities within a discourse informed in part by these studies, and they form their habits and behaviors accordingly, self-examining and self-monitoring according to their assumptions about health and natural embodiment.

Yoga researchers help to define the way we talk about yoga, specifically about yoga's health outcomes. Medically-focused researchers ask if yoga is effective or not, defining "effective" in a very measurable way. They set up yoga as something that can be easily defined, observed, and measured. Through their experimental research designs, they position yoga as an intervention to be contrasted with another intervention, such as physical therapy. And in doing so, they help to create and maintain some of the dominant discourses in yoga, including binary definitions of healthy/unhealthy, Eastern/Western, and natural/unnatural.

The purpose of this chapter is to conduct a poststructural analysis to address my first and second research questions:

- How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?
- How do these discourses create an image of a healthy, natural, gendered body in yoga education?

I examine several quantitative studies about yoga's effectiveness for one specific condition: chronic non-specific lower back pain. I read these texts alongside the work of Foucault's concepts of biopower, surveillance, and self-monitoring. Plugging in all of these texts reveals flows of power around the dominant discourses of measurement, control, efficiency, validity, and

individualism. These power relations produce a yoga practitioner who self-monitors and self-manages by using yoga to control and mitigate physical symptoms, thus maintaining a pure, able, docile body that is not a burden to others and to society.

### **Quantitative Research on Yoga and Lower Back Pain**

Research on yoga's effectiveness has proliferated to an extent that it would be impossible to cover it all here. Therefore, to analyze this genre of research more deeply, especially regarding its un-critiqued assumptions about the body, embodiment, and health, I examine a small body of research for yoga's effectiveness in treating chronic non-specific lower back pain. I chose this particular condition for several reasons: 1) I have experience teaching yoga in a spinal clinic, so I am familiar with the description of symptoms and the medical terms used in these studies; 2) yoga studios often offer classes specifically for back pain, so this is an area of interest for practitioners (Tomlinson, 2021); and 3) publications tout the use of yoga for the treatment of back pain (Schatz, 1992; Schwartz, 2018). And while I do not experience chronic non-specific lower back pain, I do have a different spinal condition and have some experience of living with back pain.

#### ***The Studies***

I chose 10 articles written between 2017 - 2021, all addressing the effectiveness of yoga for the treatment of chronic nonspecific lower back pain (defined as pain in the lower back, lasting longer than three months, and without an accompanying diagnosis of another spinal condition) (Berlowitz et.al., 2020; Colgrove et.al., 2019; Giorgio et.al., 2018; Groessl et.al., 2017; Highland et.al., 2018; Kim et.al., 2020; Lewis et.al., 2019; Neyaz et.al., 2019; Rae et.al., 2020; Roseen et.al., 2021). These studies were published in peer-reviewed journals, including the official journals of the American Congress of Rehabilitative Medicine (Highland et.al., 2018)

and the American Academy of Pain Medicine (Berlowitz et.al., 2020; Roseen et.al., 2021). The researchers are faculty members at university medical, nursing, and physical therapy schools (Colgrove et.al., 2019; Lewis, et.al., 2019; Neyaz et.al., 2019; Rae et.al., 2020) and receive funding from sources such as the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (Berlowitz et.al., 2020; Roseen et.al., 2021) or the Veterans' Administration (Highland et.al., 2018). Such articles are intended either for medical professionals who are thinking of incorporating or recommending yoga as part of the clinical treatment of their patients with chronic lower back pain or for other researchers who want to further examine the effectiveness of yoga. All of the selected studies have an experimental design of randomized controlled trials (or secondary analyses of randomized controlled trials) that compare the impacts of yoga to another intervention. All researchers determined yoga to be an effective intervention, citing at least one positive measure of yoga's effectiveness, either in comparison to baseline measures or in comparison to a control group. These studies – through their prominence, their scientific or positivist approach, and their findings about yoga's effectiveness – contribute to a discourse of yoga as a definable, measurable intervention that is proven to improve an equally definable, measurable medical condition. The researchers also share several other qualities in terms of how they define and measure yoga and its effectiveness and how they design and justify their research.

### ***Defining Yoga***

The researchers often begin their studies by offering a definition of yoga. Some define yoga broadly. For example, Roseen et.al. (2021) state: “Yoga, a mind and body practice that includes postures, breathing, meditation, and relaxation, is increasingly popular in the United States and is often practiced in groups” (p. 166). At most, these studies define yoga as a

combination of postures, breathing, and meditation/mindfulness – there is no mention of the other limbs of yoga. Also notably missing is any reference to yoga’s historical rootedness and cultural history in India. Others define a specific lineage or practice of yoga (usually Hatha Yoga). Rae et.al. (2020), for example, state that “Hatha Yoga, the form of yoga most commonly practiced in the United States, uses physical exercise and mental focus that is intended to improve strength, flexibility, and balance in the body and mind” (p. 102).

These definitions position yoga within a flow of biopower, as participants actively use yoga to exert control over their bodies and “improve strength, flexibility, and balance.” Foucault’s (1978/1990) concept of biopower involves the power that impacts the body and its health, both the body of the individual and the body of the population. Foucault argues that biopower does not belong to an individual such as a researcher or yoga instructor; rather, it flows through relations, often operating through norms rather than laws. Participants then self-monitor in relation to these norms and engage in behaviors deemed healthy, which not only improves their own health but the health of the overall population. And a healthy population is more docile, able to contribute more through its productivity and requiring less in return (such as medical care and rest from work). Yoga is a behavior that is deemed healthy by yoga instructors, researchers, and the wider society, and participants engage in it to actively control their bodies and contribute to a healthier society.

These studies also examine the practice of yoga in a predetermined “controlled” setting – such as a rehabilitation center (Lewis et.al., 2019) or a veterans’ center (Groessler et.al., 2017) – with a predetermined set of interventions. While that may be true to some practitioners’ experience of yoga, for others, yoga is a fluid practice that may look different day to day. People may practice yoga in their own homes or with family and friends, or they may attend classes in

diverse settings or use online videos. And long-term practitioners may also see all of their actions as related to yoga practice, not just their time performing physical postures and breathwork. Additionally, these studies are short-term, generally lasting a few weeks, while many people practice yoga throughout their lives. Researchers draw a clear line around yoga, defining it and limiting its practice to the research intervention and research setting and setting up a binary of yoga/not-yoga. They measure whether yoga is effective in a limited and clearly defined way, while yoga practitioners may consider that yoga has long-term, shifting, and complex impacts on their lives.

These studies become part of the flow of biopower through norms about what makes a yoga practice and a yoga practitioner. As Powell (2013) states, “Classifying practices and techniques of normalisation designate both the objects to be known and the subjects who have the authority to speak about them” (p. 10). The normalization processes of research into yoga’s effectiveness places the research participants and their yoga practice as objects to be known. Participants do not only get the opportunity to attend yoga classes – they are also required to fill out questionnaires and other assessment tools for researchers to determine their level of disability and their compliance with the yoga treatment protocol. And the researchers become the authorities who can speak about participants’ embodied and lived experience and whether their yoga practice “works.” Yoga practice is normalized as a physical asana practice undertaken with the intent to create specific physical outcomes. And a yoga practitioner is normalized as one who complies with this practice, following an outlined program to control their embodiment. An element of surveillance enters into these studies as researchers monitor participants’ behaviors, both during the yoga practice times and during the rest of participants’ daily lives. And according to Foucault (1980/2014), within the field of biopower, participants then learn to self-monitor and

to adjust their behaviors. Because the researchers have been established as authorities, and because the effectiveness of yoga has been “proven” as a truth, participants engage in self-surveillance and shape themselves and their behaviors according to this truth. As Foucault (1980/2014) states about any governing entity, “The more it pegs its action to the truth, the less it will have to govern,” as people govern themselves (p. 4). In this case, they govern themselves in relation to the yoga practice that they have learned through the study. The justification for such a practice, and for research into this practice is often framed as a measurable benefit to patients, clinicians, and society.

### ***Justification for Research***

The researchers often mention other studies about yoga’s effectiveness for a wide variety of conditions, then hypothesize about whether yoga will help patients with lower back pain. There are several factors that researchers cite as important reasons for their work. In particular, almost all studies include a reference to the financial cost of back pain. It is “the most common cause of chronic pain in the United States with over 100 billion dollars spent annually managing it” (Colgrove et.al., 2019, p. 252); “Billions of dollars are spent on back pain-related health care annually” (Groessel et.al., 2017, p. 600); “Chronic low back pain is among the top 10 most costly health problems in the United States” (Lewis et.al., 2019, p. 239). In addition to the cost of healthcare for lower back pain, researchers discuss the cost of “billions of dollars annually in lost productivity and loss of wages” (Rae et.al., 2020, p. 101). It is the cost of treatment and the cost to employers that researchers consider to be important reasons to determine whether yoga is an effective treatment for lower back pain, rather than the lived experiences of the participants or the participants’ interest in yoga. In this flow of biopower, yoga participants are viewed primarily as workers who must create and maintain productive, active bodies that are able to

serve their employers. Participants self-monitor and engage in self-surveillance, actively working toward becoming compliant, productive workers. They become part of a healthy population that reduces cost in terms of medical care and lost wages. The discourse here is one of productivity, of yoga as a tool to create a healthy, productive workforce that reduces the cost to society.

Additionally, researchers justify the inclusion of yoga as a treatment protocol because of its low cost. In particular, they compare yoga's cost to that of MRI imaging, surgery, and opioid use (Highland et.al., 2018; Lewis et.al., 2019; Rae et.al., 2020) and even time taken away from work for patients to rest (Rae et.al., 2020). Researchers use these justifications – the reduced cost of healthcare, the increased worker productivity, and the cost-effectiveness of yoga – to set up yoga in contrast to other interventions (or non-interventions) and to determine its effectiveness. The implication is that if effective, yoga will be a worthwhile component of treatment plans because it offers an increase in productivity and a decrease in cost. Researchers don't consider that outside of the study, which provides the classes to participants for free, yoga as an intervention is still expensive. In many areas, yoga classes are only available at yoga studios, and few offer sliding scales or free classes. And yoga as a medical intervention is only covered very rarely by insurance.

The dominant discourses about yoga in these studies are that yoga is a healthy, low-cost intervention that is the responsibility of individuals to engage in for the purposes of reducing the cost to the medical system, employers, and society. There are intersecting discourses of efficiency and individualism, as yoga is valued for its low cost and as participants are expected to adjust their own behaviors, taking on the personal responsibility to engage in a yoga practice. The participants need to have a docile body and be led by the researchers into practicing yoga in a certain way, for a certain outcome. According to Foucault (1977), when people take on a

discipline (such as yoga as defined in these studies), they self-discipline, creating more productive, docile bodies: “Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (p. 138). Participants are more economically productive through their ability to return to work and to reduce their cost to the medical system and to society. At the same time, they are more politically docile through their compliance with an individual yoga practice that does not include political engagement, such as working toward better working conditions that are less likely to lead to injury.

### ***Research Design***

In order to determine whether the yoga intervention is successful, quantitative researchers often create a group that receives yoga as a treatment and compare their outcomes to a control group. Control groups include participants receiving physical therapy (Berlowitz et.al., 2020; Neyaz et.al., 2019; Roseen et.al., 2021), stretching classes (Rae et.al, 2020), educational programming around back health (Berlowitz et.al., 2020; Roseen et.al., 2021), or waitlisted/non-intervention groups (Colgrove et.al., 2019; Groessl et.al., 2017; Highland et.al., 2018). These groupings position yoga in opposition to another intervention (usually one considered to be Western or deriving from “conventional” medicine). Yoga is often placed in contrast to (even in competition with) these other treatments, rather than in addition to or alongside them.

The members of the yoga treatment group participate in a variety of yoga interventions lasting anywhere from six weeks (Lewis et.al., 2019; Neyaz et.al., 2019) to twelve weeks (Berlowitz et.al., 2020; Groessl et.al., 2017; Roseen et.al, 2021). The type of yoga treatment varies, with some researchers simply mentioning that participants attended yoga class sessions (Lewis et.al., 2019; Rae et.al., 2020; Roseen et.al., 2021). Other researchers specify a specific lineage of yoga such as Hatha Yoga (Berlowitz et.al., 2020; Groessel et.al., 2017; Neyaz et.al.,

2019), and others include a list of postures and the time spent in each posture (Giorgio et.al., 2018; Highland et.al., 2018; Neyaz et.al., 2019) or even a script (Colgrove et.al., 2019). These interventions draw a clear line around the yoga practice as intervention, determining that participants “did yoga” during the 30 minutes (Neyaz et.al., 2019) to 75 minutes of the class (Berlowitz et.al, 2020; Roseen et.al. 2021). The yoga treatments also had a clearly defined beginning and ending, with measurements taken at both the beginning and the end to determine yoga’s effectiveness. This approach creates a clearly defined concept of yoga – a treatment intervention consisting of specific postures undertaken for a specific, measurable outcome.

### ***Measurement Tools***

In order to measure and compare the control and intervention groups, researchers use a wide variety of survey and measurement tools including the Pain Self-Efficacy Scale (Lewis et.al., 2019; Rae et.al, 2020), Modified Oswestry Disability Index (Colgrove et.al., 2019; Lewis et.al., 2019), Roland-Morris Disability Questionnaire (Giorgio et.al., 2018; Groessl et.al., 2017; Highland et.al., 2018; Neyaz et.al., 2019; Roseen et.al., 2021), Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (Giorgio et.al., 2018), Tampa Scale Kinesiophobia Questionnaire (Giorgio et.al., 2018), Brief Pain Inventory (Rae et.al., 2020), Fear Avoidance Beliefs Questionnaire (Rae et.al., 2020), and Perceived Stress Scale (Berlowitz et.al., 2020). In addition, some researchers consider demographic data (Roseen et.al., 2021) and medical data such as blood work, spinal rotation, hip flexibility, muscle endurance tests, and pain medication usage (Neyaz et.al., 2019). Researchers state that all of these tools are medically valid. Therefore, their use is implied to measure objectively whether yoga “works.” The researchers do not consider that these tools are often normed for white, male participants (Cundiff, 2012) and that in medical research settings, the pain of white participants is treated more seriously than the pain of participants of color

(Hoffman et.al., 2016). They do not discuss the work of scholars challenging the racial bias in all aspects of psychological and scientific studies, including funding, participant selection, assessment tools, and the publication process (Buchanan et.al., 2021).

While the researchers examine a variety of factors and use many different tools to measure yoga's effectiveness, I will further examine two types of measures and their impacts on the discourses of health and ability surrounding yoga: tools to measure disability and tools to measure self-efficacy and fear avoidance. These tools contribute to a discourse of measurement, control, and prediction, positioning the body and the yoga practice as something quantifiable, with clear, measurable outcomes.

**Disability Measures.** The choice of measurement tools contains many hidden assumptions about the participants. Two disability measures – the Roland-Morris Disability Questionnaire and the Modified Oswestry Disability Index – were each used in several research studies. Through the use of these tools, researchers assume that disability can be quantified, measured, and (hopefully) improved. Again, these studies support a discourse of measurement, both of the initial disability and the “improvement” of that disability. This discourse is also one of health as an individual responsibility and disability as a failure of individual bodies and as a problem to be solved. It is a taken-for-granted assumption of these studies that people do not want to be disabled, and that if they can't fully remove their disability, they can at least reduce it. These tools also treat disability as a burden to others and to society (especially a burden in terms of cost), and the assumption is that removing or reducing disability will create a benefit not only for the individual, but for their family and for society.

The Roland-Morris Disability Questionnaire includes statements such as “Because of my back, I try to get other people to do things for me” and “Because of my back pain, I am more

irritable and bad tempered with people than usual” (Roland & Morris, 1983). These questions center on the impact that the participant’s back pain has on others. The assumption behind this questionnaire is that finding interventions (such as yoga) that decrease back pain will then decrease disability, which will in turn decrease the burdens of that disability on others. Disability is assumed to be something that resides entirely within individual bodies, not within societal structures or systems of oppression. And the disability of those individual bodies does not only harm the person with the disability, but those around them in a clearly definable, measurable way.

Both the Roland-Morris Disability Questionnaire and the Oswestry Disability Index also include many questions about the activities and functions that individuals with back pain are able to carry out. The Roland-Morris Disability Questionnaire includes questions such as “Because of my back I am not doing any of the jobs that I usually do around the house,” and “I get dressed more slowly than usual because of my back” (Roland & Morris, 1983). And the Oswestry Disability Index includes statements such as “I can look after myself normally without causing extra pain” and “I can lift heavy weights without extra pain” (Fairbank & Pynsent, 2000). Both measurements define disability based on the activities that an individual is able to do on their own and imply that treatment interventions can and should reduce disability, therefore making patients more independent and able to be more productive. The disability questionnaires seek to measure how disabled a person is in relation to an implied norm of a strong, productive, independent body. They make disability a clear and definable trait, determined by how much someone is able to be functional and independent and how they avoid placing burdens on others. In addition to these questionnaires about physical disability, researchers looking into yoga’s

effectiveness for back pain are also concerned with the way that participants view their own pain and disability and how they cope with those experiences.

**Self-Efficacy and Fear Measures.** Several of the measurement tools used by researchers are concerned with patients' self-efficacy, coping skills, and fear surrounding movement. The discourse of measurement continues through the fear and self-efficacy questionnaires as both are framed as a clearly-defined, quantifiable experience that can be "captured" in a survey. Researchers justify their study of yoga in part through the concern that back pain patients have "maladaptive pain coping" strategies (Colgrove et.al., 2019, p. 252). Fear was the "maladaptive strategy" most often referenced by these studies, and researchers were concerned that participants' "fear avoidance beliefs" would keep them from compliance with the studies (Roseen et.al., 2021, p. 169).

We might choose to view fear of movement as the body's protective response to pain signals. We could see fear as an adaptive strategy, as participants listening to the signals sent by their bodies and adapting their movement accordingly. Instead, fear is framed as obstinance, as maladaptation, as something that participants are doing *to* others or the study rather than something they are doing *for* themselves. Even in the discussion of the results, researchers who found yoga to be an effective intervention specify that yoga is effective "if patients comply with treatment recommendations" (Lewis et.al, 2019, p. 239). Fear and non-compliance are tied together through the use of assessments such as the Fear Avoidance Beliefs Questionnaire, which claims to measure how a patient's fear is impacting their day-to-day activities and willingness to participate in movement-based treatment. Questions include, "I should not do physical activities which (might) make my pain worse" and "I have a claim for compensation for my pain" (Waddell et.al., 1993). The use of the word "might" in the first statement implies that

participants don't know their embodied experiences and may be acting out of "fear" (which is implied to be "only" perceived), rather than out of something "real." And the second statement ties injury, pain, and disability back into financial cost for others, implying that if someone could potentially "gain" from their pain financially, they won't have the motivation to work on improving that pain.

The participants in these quantitative studies don't have the opportunity to say whether they are experiencing fear, what that fear feels like in the body, and how that fear serves them. Instead, they are given an assessment by a researcher who then laments the fact that this fear may cause non-compliance, with a hidden implication that the patient *wants* to be in pain (perhaps enjoys what they "get" from others as a result of the pain), and therefore does not want to cooperate with what others say is best for their body (in this case, a program of yoga classes). Fear is positioned as both a symptom of disability and a mechanism for keeping disability in place and preventing the docile, compliant body needed for a good outcome of yoga.

Self-efficacy is another trait considered by researchers, often placed in opposition to fear and measured using the Pain Self-Efficacy Scale. Lewis et.al. (2019) define self-efficacy as "an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance standards and reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment" (p. 241). This definition places all of the expectations of coping with pain on the individual, implying that mindset about pain is all that stands in the way of participants returning to a "normal" life. Statements on the self-efficacy scale include "I can live a normal lifestyle, despite the pain" (Nicholas, 2007). Researchers don't consider whether a participant may not want to return to a normal lifestyle, or that a normal lifestyle in our society may involve excessive hours of painful physical work and the embodied

experience of racial, class, and ability trauma. “Normal” is held up as a standard for patients to aspire to, and reaching that normal is their individual responsibility. These tools also carry an implication that the problems facing a participant lie with that participant’s attitude, and that a negative reaction to pain is pathological. The causes of the pain aren’t examined or removed, systemic oppression that causes pain isn’t questioned, but yoga is used as a tool for people to deal with it.

## **Conclusion**

Researchers’ work on the effectiveness of yoga is influenced by the dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga and in turn continues to influence and legitimize those discourses. Through the design of the studies and the measurement tools used to determine yoga’s effectiveness, researchers become part of the relations of power that shape the discourses of healthy, normal bodies and of yoga as a natural, effective intervention that can be used to create those bodies. Biopower flows in, around, and through these studies as participants self-monitor and engage in self-surveillance, taking on the role of compliant, docile bodies who are personally responsible for their health. Researchers are concerned with the bodies of the individual participants, who are framed as in need of intervention in order to improve their health, become more independent, and decrease their burden on their families and society. They are also concerned with the body of the population, with creating a population that is more productive and less likely to need medical interventions or assistance with daily tasks.

As I conclude this chapter, I return to my research questions, considering how the discourses of measurement, control, individualism, and medicine all weave together in their creation of a healthy, natural body that can be purposely shaped through the practice of yoga.

***How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?***

Studies “proving” yoga’s effectiveness operate within a flow of biopower as they influence, and are influenced by, dominant discourses about health and the body in yoga education. Flows of biopower in such studies position researchers as authorities who know what is best for the body, both the body of the individual participant and the body of the population. And they position participants as needing to comply with a yoga *program*, to take individual actions in order to improve their health, and therefore, to become more productive and less burdensome. These flows of power produce dominant discourses of measurability and control, which further validate the ways in which yoga should be properly taught and practiced. Participants’ embodiment, disability, self-efficacy, and fear are defined and measured, with an attempt to contain both the bodies of the participants and the yoga practice itself. These discourses of measurability and control are entangled with a discourse of medicine, as yoga becomes a treatment protocol undertaken to reduce symptoms. And all of these discourses intersect with a discourse of individualism. As participants shape themselves as yoga practitioners, they do so within these discourses, self-monitoring and complying with yoga treatment protocols devised by others with the intention of controlling their embodiment and producing productive, healthy, able bodies.

***How do these discourses create an image of a healthy, natural, gendered body in yoga education?***

These dominant discourses of control, measurability, medicine, and individual responsibility create an image of a body practicing yoga. This body is healthy, able, pain-free, and independent. This body uses yoga as a natural intervention to control symptoms and

therefore to cause less of a cost-burden to the medical system and to society. In this discourse, yoga is positioned in binary opposition to other, less “natural” interventions. However, within these studies, yoga is still a “natural” intervention within a Western medical system. Yoga is placed in opposition to Western medical approaches while simultaneously (and contradictorily) being validated by them.

I see this contradiction in my own embodied experience of yoga. I began my yoga practice, often conceived of as “alternative” medicine, in a physical therapy clinic, where the goal of the yoga program was to reduce symptoms of pain and disability. I often hear in yoga spaces that if I had practiced yoga, I would not have needed other Western medical treatments for pain. And in these same spaces, I hear a discourse of validity – that we should practice yoga because it has been validated by Western medical research.

All of these discourses come together in complex and at times contradictory ways to create an image of a healthy, natural, able body in yoga education. In the next chapter, I will further consider this body, thinking with queercrip theory to deconstruct binaries such as healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural that pervade quantitative research as well as the wider conversation about the body in yoga education.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Yoga as a Healthy, Natural Intervention:**

#### **How Yoga Effectiveness Research Contributes to a Discourse of Moral, Independent Bodies**

Much like the participants in quantitative studies on yoga's effectiveness, I came to a yoga practice through a medical facility – a neurological and orthopedic center specializing in disorders of the spine. I had just completed a series of three spinal surgeries and was in a considerable amount of pain – pain caused by nearly two years of nerve damage, as well as the pain and stiffness that arises after a joint replacement. But the pain I felt was nothing compared to the pain before I began the surgeries, so I was full of hope.

I completed several physical therapy sessions then received a referral to the yoga program, run by a physical therapy assistant who would later become my mentor. I started with a gentle class conducted beside a therapeutic pool, in a warm room that felt like a greenhouse. My newly-fused spine had very limited mobility, so I began practicing poses such as downward dog with my hands on a chair for assistance. The very first session, I could do almost none of what my classmates, women in their sixties and seventies, seemed to do with ease. Years later, I don't remember if that first class "helped" with the pain I experienced. What I do remember is lying beside the pool in savasana, listening to the gentle sounds of the pool and my teacher's voice, smelling the chlorine, and feeling surrounded by a humid warmth.

I have a complex relationship with the concept of yoga as a healthy, natural intervention to manage pain. It is the reason I started practicing in the first place. But the community, the warmth of the teacher, and the nonjudgmental place to explore my changing embodiment are why I continued. Today, I still find my asana practice an important aspect of my chronic pain

management. But my yoga practice as a whole led me to identify as disabled. I have taught yoga in a medical setting, hoping to help my students reduce or manage pain. But because I still have pain myself, I am often treated as an outsider in yoga spaces, as one who has failed at the practice.

My experience lies outside of easy binary oppositions or simple statements about the body or about yoga. But the dominant discourses of measurability, control, medicine, and individualism in yoga education, created and maintained in part by scientific yoga research, include several binary assumptions about the body and about yoga. The body is either healthy or unhealthy, painful or pain-free. People are either taking charge of their well-being through self-efficacy or remaining disabled through fear. Yoga either reduces disability and is effective, or fails to reduce disability and is ineffective. The body can be directly and predictably managed through yoga, which is defined in opposition to everything else in a person's life, creating a yoga/not-yoga binary. Yoga is then held up as a natural or holistic intervention to be contrasted with Western, reductive, or conventional interventions (while paradoxically, asana practice is validated as a medical intervention through quantitative research).

These binaries all play into the dominant discourses about health and embodiment that are shaped by relations of power in yoga education. Medical research into asana practice validates its effectiveness and frames the management of pain as within the direct control of an individual if they comply with a yoga program. Yoga becomes part of the medical system, as medical professionals read these studies and recommend yoga to their patients (often, as an alternative for a more costly intervention). Some traditional medical spaces, such as the physical therapy clinic where I practice, even incorporate yoga classes into their treatment programs. In traditional yoga spaces such as yoga studios, asana practice is framed as a way to avoid Western

medical interventions altogether. However, yoga studios also cite quantitative research into yoga's effectiveness on their websites or in their classes as they advertise the benefits of yoga (Britton, 2017). Yoga teachers learn about specific asana to treat or manage specific medical conditions in their teacher training programs and incorporate them into their classes. For example, teaching at a spinal clinic, I often consider the specific diagnoses of my students in creating a class sequence. And in the informal conversations that happen in the yoga community, we talk about whether yoga "worked" for us in the treatment or management of medical diagnoses and ask whether it "worked" for others. We lift up and celebrate those who "used" yoga to become healthy, while we suspect those we label as unhealthy or those who use "unnatural" means of achieving that health.

The work of queercrip theorists and their deconstruction of the healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural binaries helps me to examine these discourses and the way they serve to create an image of a healthy, natural body in yoga education. Queercrip theory draws from poststructuralism, as well as from the fields of queer theory and disability studies, challenging normativity and assumptions of heterosexuality, cisnormativity, and able-bodiedness. Theorists working from this tradition raise questions about "normal" bodies and embodiment, as well as the visibility, invisibility, and silencing of certain bodies and experiences.

The purpose of this chapter is to conduct a poststructural analysis to address my first and second research questions:

- How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?
- How do these discourses create an image of a healthy, natural, gendered body in yoga education?

I continue my analysis from Chapter 3, examining several quantitative studies about yoga's effectiveness for one specific condition: chronic non-specific lower back pain. I read these texts alongside the work of queercrip theorists around the healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural binaries. Plugging in all of these texts reveals flows of power around the image of a healthy, natural "yoga body." These power relations produce a yoga practitioner who takes responsibility for maintaining their health in a pure or natural way, and they produce a yoga practice that is individual and centered around controlling personal embodiment.

### **Healthy/Unhealthy**

Yoga interventions in these studies, stripped of their philosophical and cultural roots, are positioned as a tool to return participants to a healthy "normal," to decrease their disability, and to decrease their personal burden on others and their cost burden on society. Yoga becomes part of the creation of a docile, productive body rather than an approach that participants take to their complex embodied experiences and lived lives. According to Foucault (1977), a docile body is a useful and productive one that becomes "more obedient as it becomes more useful" (p. 137-138). A docile body is also a strong, healthy, independent body that is useful to others and to society, rather than a body that requires help from others. A docile body takes on all of the responsibility for personal health and does not question whether social structures and power relations are creating an unhealthy environment for everyone.

A discourse of health weaves through these studies, carrying a hidden code about the body, specifically the body in pain. The code is that a healthy body is productive, able to work, and not a burden on society. If pain can't be mitigated, people can at least use yoga as a tool to deal with that pain and therefore, to avoid causing problems for others. The body in pain is treated as itself a cause of pain to others, impacting not only the health of the individual, but the

health of the entire population through the time and physical energy that friends and family members, employers, and medical professionals will expend in helping the person with pain. As Bailey (2019) writes of her own pain, “I’ve worked my entire life not to be bothersome, not to be a pain, but my own pain – acute or chronic – doesn’t much care about that” (p. 2). People who experience chronic pain (myself included) are very familiar with the dominant discourse that pain creates a societal burden, but researchers do not consider the complex experiences of having pain while simultaneously trying to keep that pain from impacting others.

None of the researchers studying yoga’s impact on pain include stories of their own pain and the lived experience of that pain. Rather, they positioned themselves as those objectively helping others to return to “normal” and as those who are able to define what that “normal” is. Lofgren-Martenson (2013) calls this supposed objectivity into question, pointing out that “how a ‘normal’ life should be lived [tends] to be determined by the interpretations of others, and not by those whose lives and experiences are in question” (p. 421). The studies do not include any element of the participants’ own experiences or their views of what returning to “normal” could mean (or even whether they would choose to return to normal if given the option). It is assumed that participants either share the researchers’ goals – to return to a state of healthy productivity – or that they would rather remain noncompliant and receive benefits from their pain and disability.

In this research, an unhealthy or pained body, especially one without a clear “cause” is burdensome, expensive, and inherently suspicious. As Scarry (1985) states, “To have pain is to have *certainty*. To hear about pain is to have *doubt*” (p. 13, emphasis in original). This doubt pervades research on yoga’s effectiveness, through the use of questionnaires that ask whether participants benefit from their pain as well as through the call for “objective assessments of

chronic stress biomarkers” (Berlowitz et.al., 2020, p. 2535). Fear, stress, and the need to depend on others are always portrayed as negative and potentially even self-serving. As Wendell (2001) states:

Suspicion surrounds people with chronic illnesses – suspicion about how ill/disabled we really are, how or why we became ill, whether we are doing everything possible to get well, and how mismanaging our lives, minds, or souls may be contributing to our continuing illness. (p. 28)

These suspicions carry with them an element of morality, evidenced by the focus on compliance within the research studies. “Good” participants are seen as those who want to comply with the yoga program, thus doing everything they can to get well and to overcome their pain and disability.

These studies and their use of yoga embrace a narrative of overcoming. Yoga becomes part of returning the body to “normal” and returning the mind to a state of valuing independence and productivity. In order for yoga to work, though, people must be compliant with the treatment program and get over their fear. They must commit and take individual responsibility for their health and their pain in order to recover. “Beliefs in recovery as the sequel to illness take on moral imperatives,” Charmaz (1991) states (p. 15). Participants are encouraged to reduce their pain through yoga, and if that is not possible, to deal with pain with a positive attitude and to “live a normal lifestyle, despite the pain” (Nicholas, 2007). While overcoming pain is positioned as the ultimate goal of yoga practice, there is a secondary focus on stoically enduring pain in a way that does not draw attention and impact others. The use of tools like the Pain Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, with questions such as “I can cope with my pain in most situations,” let participants know that coping (and using yoga in that coping) is an important way to deal with

pain (Nicholas, 2007). Similarly, Jackson (1992), in her study of the experience of patients with chronic pain, observed, “Hence, the discourse on chronic pain frequently becomes a moral discourse” (p. 140). Health and morality are intertwined and weave together with a physical yoga practice to create a discourse of a healthy body that practices yoga either to eliminate pain or to endure it without complaint.

Health in these studies maintains a linear pathway – one is healthy, then experiences pain or disability, then undergoes a treatment, then recovers. There are no mentions of the possibility that one will experience ebbs and flows of pain, or that one may “cope” better with their pain on some days than on others. Participants fill out questionnaires at the beginning and ending of the study, implying that pain and recovery are a linear process with a beginning and an end. And in a “successful” intervention, the end is defined as less disability, less pain. As queercrip theorist Kafer (2013) states, “How one understands disability in the present determines how one imagines disability in the future; one’s assumptions about the experience of disability create one’s conception of a better future” (p. 2). A better future, as conceptualized by researchers examining yoga’s effectiveness, is a future without the burden of disability. And yoga becomes part of creating that future, specifically through its status as a natural treatment option.

### **Natural/Unnatural**

Researchers examining yoga’s effectiveness often begin their studies by placing yoga as a natural or holistic intervention in opposition to a medical or reductive intervention. They describe yoga as “an effective holistic and complementary approach” for the treatment of pain (Lewis, 2019, p. 238). Researchers then justify the use of yoga in their studies by contrasting it against the “inappropriate use of imaging, rest, spinal injections, surgery, and opioid prescriptions” (Rae et.al., 2020, p. 101). Of particular concern to researchers seems to be opioid

medication, which is mentioned often in the rationale for the studies (Groessler et.al., 2017; Highland et.al., 2018; Rae et.al., 2020). Researchers consider yoga to be a natural and moral intervention in contrast to the use of a dangerous and immoral substance. These assumptions create a binary – either one is practicing yoga, a natural, medication-free treatment, or they are using “inappropriate” medical options.

The natural option becomes the better, more moral option in part because of its cost. While researchers consider surgery, medication, and imaging to be high-cost options (implied to be a burden to both the participant and society), they consider yoga to be a low-cost option (Highland et.al., 2018; Lewis et.al., 2019; Rae et.al., 2020). Participants receive yoga classes as part of their enrollment in the study; researchers do not mention whether these classes will continue once the study is over or whether affordable yoga classes are available in the local area.

In the experimental design, researchers also contrast yoga with more traditionally Western interventions such as physical therapy. The design itself sets up a binary opposition, with yoga on one side and physical therapy, stretching, back pain education, or a waitlist/control group on the other. While a stretching class may look similar to a yoga class to someone unfamiliar with both (or in a context where yoga is not situated in its cultural or philosophical roots), this similarity or overlap is not acknowledged. And when yoga is set up as the natural or holistic approach in this binary, the other intervention automatically seems to be unnatural. In this binary, the more natural approach is the better one, and this natural/unnatural binary opposition wraps around the healthy/unhealthy binary opposition. If the only concern was the reduction of pain symptoms, researchers may be more likely to consider any option for meeting that goal. But when the natural/unnatural binary intersects with the healthy/unhealthy binary,

reduction of pain is no longer the only concern. Instead, it is important that participants return to health in a more natural way. In this way, health becomes linked with naturalness or purity.

According to Shildrick and Price (1999), “the ‘purity’ of the ‘healthy’ body must be actively maintained and protected against its contaminated others – disease, disability, lack of control, material and ontological breakdown” (p. 439). The healthy body becomes something that needs to be defended against outside forces that pose a threat. Yoga, in these research studies, is part of the barrier to protect people against the disease and disability that Shildrick and Price describe. And as they describe, this barrier must be pure. It is clear that researchers want people to experience less back pain and fewer impacts on their day-to-day lives, and that they would like participants to return to a “normal” life. But it is also important that participants achieve these normative bodies through interventions deemed appropriate. So yoga takes on an important normalizing function, returning bodies to health in a way that does not compromise purity (as would happen with opioids, for example).

In flows of biopower, the concern is not only for the body of the individual, but the body of the population. Medical researchers are concerned with returning the bodies of the individual participants to health in a natural way, as those participants are encouraged to comply with a yoga practice. They are also concerned with the health and purity of the overall population, in this case the specific population of those with chronic non-specific lower back pain. The assumption is that returning this specific population to health through natural means such as a yoga practice will also help the entire society. Through the use of measurement tools that seek to quantify the social burden of bodies in pain, as well as the concern for lost wages and worker compensation claims, researchers seek to encourage a population in good health that will be more productive and less costly.

Queercrip theorists challenge both the natural/unnatural and healthy/unhealthy binaries, pointing out the complexity of lived experiences and the instability of categories like healthy and natural. Stewart (2017) writes, “this is a world deliteralized, one in which there is no endemic divide between a naturalized, given order and the exceptionalism of event or mobilization” (p. 195). Our act of creation of the natural order, our imposition of that order, is what causes it to take shape. Very quickly this binary begins to break down – what is it that makes yoga “natural”? Does that naturalness start to collapse as we introduce more speciality props and equipment? As we confine it to class sessions that meet once a week for eight weeks? How is it more natural than a stretching class when some people may not be able to tell the difference? As Haraway (1991) points out “in short, the certainty of what counts as nature – a source of insight and promise of innocence – is undermined, probably fatally” (p. 153).

Both the natural/unnatural and healthy/unhealthy binaries fail to take into account the complex and ever-changing nature of embodied experience. The portrayal of pain in research on yoga’s effectiveness makes health (and the achievement of health through natural means) seem like something within our direct control. The implication is that if we just want to be better and to stop burdening others, we can comply with a yoga program and create a healthy, natural, normal body. Butler (1988) challenges this assumption by reflecting on the way that “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body” and that one does one’s body in a complex context informed by dominant discourses, such as those of health and naturalness (p. 521). We are constantly creating ourselves and our bodies within the relations shaped by biopower. And in yoga research, participants are encouraged to “do” their bodies in a specific way, to take responsibility for creating and maintaining a healthy body in a natural way so as not to create additional burdens on others and society. Researchers studying the impact of yoga on

pain (or on the tolerance of pain) define what counts as a healthy, normal body and a healthy, natural life.

Butler (2004) asks, “Whose life is counted as a life? Whose prerogative is it to live? How do we decide when life begins and ends, and how do we think life against life?” (p. 205). The lives of people in pain do not “count as a life” in the same way – those lives are portrayed as burdens to others and to society, or as selfish and self-serving ploys for financial and personal gain. Yoga is lifted up as a way to gain the “prerogative to live” by living naturally, healthfully, and normally. It is not only the bodies of participants that are defined and confined by the dominant discourses of the healthy, natural body in yoga research. The practice of yoga itself and the bodies of yoga practitioners become part of a wider discourse about why yoga “works,” why we should practice it, and what we can expect of our bodies if we do.

## **Conclusion**

The healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural binaries wrap around each other and intersect with the binaries of effective/ineffective and yoga/not-yoga – all within a flow of biopower in research on yoga’s effectiveness. Plugging in the work of queercrip theorists’ concepts of normalcy and embodiment allows me to deconstruct these binaries and reveal their inherent instability. This plugging in also exposes the way that relations of biopower create dominant discourses of personal health, morality, and purity that serve to manage the bodies of individuals and the body of the population.

As I conclude this chapter, I return to my research questions, considering how these relations of biopower produce dominant, intersecting discourses of individualism, purity, and morality that weave together into an image of a healthy, natural, pain-free, able body practicing yoga.

***How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?***

Relations of biopower flow through research into yoga's effectiveness. Researchers conducting these studies are concerned not only that the participants will "return" to health, but that they will do so in a natural, cost-effective way. Suspicion about the body pervades these studies, especially about the body in pain. Painful bodies become framed as burdensome bodies, as participants who continue to experience pain are labeled as noncompliant or as wanting to "hold onto" their pain in order to reserve monetary benefits or help from others.

These relations of power produce dominant discourses of morality, purity, and independence. "Good" participants, and good yoga practitioners, are those who either eliminate their pain in a pure and natural way or those who endure it without complaint. They use their yoga practice to control their embodiment, making themselves more independent. And independent, pain-free yoga practitioners contribute to a healthy, manageable population that does not require treatment and assistance. "Good" yoga teachers are those who have become experts in healing themselves and living a moral, pure life. They can then create and deliver a yoga intervention that "heals" participants. And a "good" yoga curriculum is measurable, efficient, and effective. It is oriented toward a goal of specific physical health outcomes and is proven to deliver results if participants comply with the program.

***How do these discourses create an image of a healthy, natural, gendered body in yoga education?***

These discourses of morality, purity, and independence come together into an image of a healthy, natural body practicing yoga in order to reduce pain and disability. This body contributes to an overall healthy population as it is not dependent on or interdependent with

others. In the complex intersection of these discourses, yoga practitioners actively use yoga to maintain pain-free, independent bodies. And the healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural binaries interact and intersect with each other so that healthy bodies alone are not enough. That health must contain a measure of naturalness or purity.

The yoga practice itself becomes framed as a manageable, predictable intervention to achieve and maintain a certain standard of health, specifically health as a lack of pain and disability. Yoga practitioners are encouraged to think of the practice as a physical one, intended to manage their personal embodiment. Yoga as a complex philosophical approach, yoga as a collective experience, or yoga as a politically engaged or resistant practice are not included.

In the last two chapters, I have plugged in quantitative, medical research to the work of poststructural and queercrip theorists, which has revealed dominant discourses of measurability, control, validity, individualism, purity, and morality in yoga education. These discourses are all created and maintained within relations of power among medical institutions, positivist research, workplaces, insurance companies, yoga studios, and yoga teacher training programs. Discourse and power come together to produce an image of a docile, self-monitoring “yoga body,” of a practitioner who is actively striving to create a healthy, independent, pain-free body in a pure and natural way. These studies play an important, though complex and at times contradictory, role within the relations of power in yoga education. They serve in a legitimizing function, influencing and being influenced by a discourse of validity, medicine, and science in asana practice. They “prove” that yoga “works,” which more traditional yoga spaces (such as yoga studios, teacher training programs, and publications like *Yoga Journal*) cite in their marketing or recruiting efforts. Many practitioners, myself included, come to yoga practice because we have heard from our doctors, physical therapists, family members, or friends that yoga will help with

the physical symptoms we are experiencing. Yoga has become part of the Western medical community while simultaneously being contrasted with it.

These discourses of yoga as a healthy, natural intervention with proven outcomes pervade the way we teach and practice yoga. They flow through the way we are trained as yoga teachers and how we, in turn, teach our classes. In the next chapters, I will expand on the analysis of the relations of power and how they produce dominant discourses in yoga education, specifically considering the role of Yoga Teacher Training. I will first think with poststructuralism and relations of power surrounding the regulatory organization Yoga Alliance.

## Chapter 5

### **Yoga Teachers as Self-Monitoring Bodies: How Relations of Power Surrounding Yoga**

#### **Alliance Contribute to the Developing Subjectivities of Yoga Teachers**

The second day of my yoga teacher training program, I sat at a picnic table in the heat of a North Carolina summer and wondered what I had gotten myself into. The studio where I attended my training was in the middle of a wealthy neighborhood in Asheville, NC – from the table, I could see a Whole Foods, a juice bar, a spin studio, and an organic cafe. It was day two of a three-week immersion program – I was going to spend the next twenty days with the same thirty people in the close quarters of a yoga studio that served as both practice space and classroom. My back and hips ached from eight hours of alternatively practicing asana and sitting on the floor, which we had been told was concrete overlaid with hardwood.

I was waiting for the instructor. On the second day of the program, each student was assigned one pose that we were to master and teach to the rest of the class. My pose was salabhasana, or locust pose, which is similar to what is known in fitness circles as superman. To perform it, a yoga practitioner lies face down on the floor with their arms at their sides. Then they perform what is sometimes called a “baby backbend” by lifting their head, arms, and legs (YJ Editors, n.d., para. 1). When the instructor arrived, I told her about my limitations: I have metal rods in my back; I cannot physically perform this pose. I will never be able to physically perform this pose. We had shared our injuries in front of the class on the first day of the program, so none of this was news to the instructor. She insisted that I should be able to perform the pose, that I shouldn’t be so negative, so “stuck in my story,” as to predict the future or insist that my body would never change. Eventually, she agreed that I could ask someone else to perform the pose while I explained it, which is what I ended up doing for the next three weeks.

I was already exhausted from two days of performing physically challenging asana, from being touched by twenty-nine other people who were there to help me “go deeper into poses,” from knowing that as they touched me, they believed I should be doing more. From hearing over and over, as I performed hands-on assists to help the others “go deeper into poses” that I wasn’t working hard enough, wasn’t giving enough pressure, when in actuality, I was giving all I had and still coming up short. So I didn’t ask for a different pose, didn’t voice my concern that if I couldn’t perform locust pose, I couldn’t be a yoga instructor at all. I didn’t share my shock in the transition from being a yoga participant at a spinal clinic to a prospective yoga teacher at a studio next to a juice bar. And I didn’t share my embarrassment at being asked to disclose a disability in front of a group of able-bodied people, something that had never happened to me in any other context.

I had been excited about yoga teacher training for months, ever since I had signed up early to get the “Early Bird Discount.” My own yoga teacher had encouraged me to enroll, and I had so looked forward to being among people who enjoyed the yoga practice as much as I did, and who also planned to teach in the future. By the second day, that excitement was over, and I was already wondering whether I should quit. I did complete the program and went on to become a yoga instructor. But the experience of yoga teacher training is one that I am still considering, still processing, still examining through lenses of theory, embodiment, and practice.

Of course, my experience is likely unique in some ways, shaped by the complex intersection of my own embodied experience, the studio where I completed my training, the lead instructor for my immersion group, the other students in the course, and my expectations going into the experience. But in others, my experience in its individuality may nevertheless resonate with others, especially those with disabilities. The program I attended is the most popular in my

local area and one of the most popular in the Southeastern United States, and the curriculum is based on the standards of a certifying organization that influences over 7,000 similar programs (Yoga Alliance, 2020c).

Regardless of our experiences, yoga instructors are undoubtedly shaped by our yoga teacher training programs, which in turn influences how we teach our students. In the field of yoga education, yoga teacher training is an important part of the relations of power that shape the dominant discourses of health and embodiment. These discourses do not reflect a “truth” or reality about bodies, embodiment, and yoga; rather, they shape and order that reality. They determine how we can think about, talk about, and practice yoga and whose experience of yoga becomes the most visible and important. According to Foucault (1977), no one entity (individual, organization, or state) individually “owns” power or holds the power to create these discourses. Instead, these discourses operate within complex relations of power that flow in, around, and through all of the relationships between all of the participants in a loosely-defined community of yoga practitioners. This power does not operate through laws and mandates and is often not explicitly stated at all. It operates more often through the norms that we internalize, as we participate in the relations of power through self-monitoring. When a discourse becomes dominant, it limits what can be known and who can know it (Foucault, 1981/2017). And it creates hierarchical binary oppositions such as healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural that place some people and experiences above others. Therefore, yoga teacher training programs do not “hold” the power in the field of yoga education, but they are part of complex relations of power and serve to maintain those power relations. These programs are often the first step that someone takes when seeking to become a yoga teacher and may therefore be the first interaction that they have with the “right” way to teach and practice yoga. So in order to reveal and deconstruct the

dominant discourses surrounding health and embodiment in yoga education and the way these discourses weave together into an image of a healthy, natural, gendered “yoga body,” it is important to consider the work of yoga teacher training programs.

The purpose of this chapter is to conduct a poststructural analysis to address my first research question:

- How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?

In this analysis, I examine texts related to yoga teacher training, particularly the curriculum designed and implemented by the accrediting organization Yoga Alliance. I read these texts and materials alongside the works of Foucault around power, subjectivity, and health. Plugging in all these texts reveals flows of power surrounding teacher training programs and the accrediting organization Yoga Alliance, as well as the way those power relations shape the forming subjectivity of yoga teachers, particularly as self-monitoring, docile bodies. These relations of power shape the discourses surrounding how they construct themselves as yoga teachers in the context of a physically focused training.

### **The Profession of Yoga Teaching in the United States**

It is difficult to determine exactly how many certified yoga teachers there are in the United States. There is not one particular path to becoming a yoga teacher. Depending on the lineage of yoga, the studio or organization that provided the training, and the decision of the individual teacher about whether or not to pursue certification, yoga teachers may or may not be accounted for in studies and statistical measures. For example, the Iyengar school of yoga, founded by B.K.S. Iyengar and regulated by the Ramamani Iyengar Yoga Institute in Pune, India, certifies instructors in the Iyengar lineage but does not require those instructors to seek

certification or register with any other organizations (Iyengar Yoga, n.d.). Gold's Gym asks only that teachers provide "verifiable proof of specialized skill/training such as Yoga" (Gold's Gym, n.d., "Qualifications" section). Yoga teachers can attend training in specific lineages such as Iyengar, Ashtanga, and Ananda yoga, which have histories rooted in India; in specifically Western lineages such as Jivamukti yoga; in fitness-oriented approaches such as hot yoga or acroyoga (a combination of yoga and acrobatics); or in population-centered approaches such as children's yoga and prenatal yoga (Fajkus, 2013). Or they can attend training at independent, privately owned yoga studios that aim to serve a general population (as I did).

Yoga teachers are not even legally required to have attended any training at all. There are currently no states in the United States with licensure requirements, so while many yoga teachers pursue a training program before beginning their teaching, it is not a legal requirement to do so (Asheville Yoga Center, n.d.; Yoga Alliance, 2016b). However, there are many yoga teachers in the United States currently certified with an organization. Yoga Alliance, a non-profit certifying organization founded in 1999, currently has over 100,000 yoga teachers as members (Yoga Alliance, 2020c; Yoga Alliance, 2020d). Yoga Unify, a new organization founded in 2020, offers qualification status to yoga teachers through a peer-review process (Yoga Unify, n.d.-a; Yoga Unify, n.d.-b). Yoga Unify currently has 29 individuals and several studios registered in its Professional Directory (Yoga Unify, n.d.-c).

And the number of certified yoga teachers (or even the number of people currently teaching yoga) does not reflect the number of people completing yoga teacher training each year. Many yoga studios offering training programs claim that training can serve to "deepen [one's] practice," as much as (or even more than) prepare them as a teacher (Mia, 2019; Ambrose, n.d.). It is difficult to determine how many people have attended or plan to attend training for that

purpose. In any case, yoga teacher training is popular, and there are many programs and opportunities to choose from. And according to a 2016 study conducted in partnership between the accrediting organization Yoga Alliance and the yoga magazine *Yoga Journal*, “There are two people interested in becoming a yoga teacher for every one current teacher” (Mackey, 2016). If that statistic is accurate, it is likely that we will continue to see growth in the number of people seeking out yoga teacher training each year.

Therefore, it is impossible to consider anything about yoga in the West without a deep consideration of yoga teacher training. While not everyone teaching yoga completes a teacher training program, these programs are popular enough that they have a powerful influence on the teaching and practice of yoga in the United States. Yoga teacher training is the way that many new teachers enter the field of yoga instruction, so the standards of teacher training, the materials used in teacher training, and the lived experience of completing the training have a profound impact on what many new teachers come to see as the “right” way to teach and practice yoga. This “truth” about how yoga teachers can and should teach is a discourse that influences the way that we think about and practice yoga. Because of this dominant discourse, it is necessary to deconstruct how standards and practices of regulatory institutions are embedded in the power relations that work to *produce* this discourse. Thus, I consider the work of the regulatory credentialing organization Yoga Alliance and how this organization creates and sustains discourses related to yoga teacher training. Because of the space that Yoga Alliance holds in the field of yoga education in the United States, it plays an important role in the way that discourses of health and embodiment become dominant and normative.

In the next section, I will consider policies of the regulatory organization Yoga Alliance, as well as the organization’s curriculum standards for yoga teacher training. These texts will help

me to explore my first research question: How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education? Through what they include and exclude, the curriculum standards and policies shape the experience of new yoga teachers and what they come to think about who is able to practice yoga and how yoga should be practiced. I will plug these texts in with the work of poststructural philosopher Foucault on subjectivity, disciplinary power, and biopower and how power flows through our ideas of health.

### **Yoga Alliance**

As I detailed above, there are many paths toward becoming a yoga teacher. It would be impossible to examine every one of those processes and lineages that yoga teacher trainees experience. However, while there are many different ways that someone may become a yoga teacher, and many different organizations that may certify them, arguably, none is more influential in the United States than Yoga Alliance. Yoga Alliance is a nonprofit accrediting organization that serves to certify Registered Yoga Schools (RYS), which are often privately owned studios offering yoga teacher training programs (Yoga Alliance, 2020c). Registration with Yoga Alliance is voluntary, and there are no governmental agencies preventing yoga teacher training programs from operating without registration. However, until 2020 and the formation of Yoga Unify, there were no other general accrediting organizations for yoga teacher training programs from a variety of lineages (Yoga Unify, n.d.-b). Studios must also become certified as an RYS in order for their graduates to register with Yoga Alliance (as Registered Yoga Teachers, or RYT). Because some employers require RYT status for hire as a yoga teacher, this places additional pressure on yoga studios to register as an RYS. Currently, there are over 7,000 RYS and over 100,000 RYT registered with Yoga Alliance (Yoga Alliance, 2020c). So

while there are certainly programs in a variety of traditions operating independently of Yoga Alliance, this organization still holds a major influence on the field of yoga instruction.

According to Yoga Alliance, the mission of certifying yoga teachers and maintaining a registry of RYTs is to establish:

minimum curricular standards relating to: yoga techniques, educational methodology, health and safety of the human body, and yoga principles and ethics. Yoga Alliance Registry advances education by developing, monitoring, and improving standards for high-quality yoga instruction, and promotes health and safety of the public by providing a mechanism for aspiring yoga teachers to ensure that the training they receive covers fundamental health and safety basics as well as core yoga principles and techniques that are common to the diverse forms of yoga practice. (Yoga Alliance, 2015, para. 1)

Additionally, the mission states that such a registry “serves the public by providing an easy method for yoga students and practitioners to find yoga teachers who have received yoga teacher training that meets minimum standards in safety, anatomy, and yoga techniques and principles” (Yoga Alliance, 2015, para. 2). Both of these statements position Yoga Alliance as a protective force, looking out for future yoga teachers by ensuring they have access to quality teacher training programs, and ultimately, looking out for anyone who takes a yoga class by ensuring they are served by well-informed instructors who will keep them safe. This positioning of Yoga Alliance in a protective role contributes to a discourse about who is qualified to teach yoga, who gets to determine that qualification, and what dangers unqualified teachers pose to the yoga community.

Yoga Alliance currently offers six certifications: RYT-200 (completion of a 200-hour training), RYT-500 (completion of a 500-hour training), E-RYT-200 (Experienced Registered

Yoga Teacher, completion of a 200-hour training plus 1,000 documented teaching hours), E-RYT-500 (completion of 500-hour training plus 2,000 documented teaching hours), Registered Children's Yoga Teacher, and Registered Prenatal Yoga Teacher (Yoga Alliance, n.d.). Of these certifications, the RYT-200 is considered to be the entry-level requirement for many yoga teaching positions and is the most heavily regulated by Yoga Alliance. Therefore, I take up this particular certification and its accompanying curriculum in this analysis and deconstruct how it produces and sustains a discourse of docile, self-monitoring bodies in yoga education.

### ***Yoga Alliance's Core Curriculum***

In order to sign up for the registry and be accepted as an RYS, yoga studios must base their programs on Yoga Alliance's RYS-200 Core Curriculum that was implemented in 2020 (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). This curriculum outlines a common core that all RYS must use to instruct new yoga teachers and remain certified with Yoga Alliance. The 200 hours are broken into four categories:

1. 75 hours of Techniques, Training, and Practice: Asana, pranayama and subtle body, meditation
2. 30 hours of Anatomy and Physiology (20 of which may be completed online): Anatomy, physiology, biomechanics
3. 30 hours of Yoga Humanities (20 of which may be completed online): History, philosophy, ethics
4. 50 hours of Professional Essentials: Teaching methodology, professional development, practice teaching practicum (Yoga Alliance, 2020e).

The remaining 15 hours are electives to be decided by the studio, but those electives must fall under one of the four categories listed above. In comparison to the previous common core

standards, the new standards feature a decreased focus on techniques, training, and practice and an increased focus on anatomy and professional essentials (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). In addition to the requirements that Yoga Alliance maintains for the curriculum, there is also a requirement that 150 of the 200 hours be taught by someone designated as a lead trainer (who has earned an E-RYT certification through Yoga Alliance).

### ***Becoming an RYT***

To become an RYT, a prospective yoga instructor must first complete a 200-hour program designated as an RYS, then officially register as an RYT with Yoga Alliance. This registration includes signing an ethical commitment to the Yoga Alliance Code of Conduct, Scope of Practice, and Commitment to Equity as well as paying a \$50 application fee and \$65 annual fee. Additionally, to keep up certification, RYTs must participate in 30 hours of Yoga Alliance certified continuing education every three years (Yoga Alliance, n.d.).

### ***Reading Yoga Alliance with Foucault***

Because Yoga Alliance is the largest credentialing organization for yoga teachers, we can assume that it influences the relations of power in yoga education. But how do we define or measure power? Poststructural philosopher Foucault (1978/1990) argues that power is not something that one “has” or owns, but that flows throughout society and throughout relations. He differentiates disciplinary power from the sovereign power held by kings, able to order their subjects’ deaths. Rather, disciplinary power operates through routines, habits, and norms, through governing the conduct of individuals (Foucault, 1980/2014). As Oksala (2011) explains it, “Unlike older forms of bodily coercion, disciplinary power does not destroy the body, but reconstructs it. Individuals literally incorporate the objectives of power, which become part of their own being: actions, aims and habits” (p. 88). When we experience disciplinary power, we

do not always feel as if we are being imposed upon; rather, we become part of the flow of power that shapes our conduct in certain ways. We become active participants in the flow of power by modifying our own goals and habits.

In particular, Foucault's concept of biopower involves the power that impacts the body and its health – both the body of the individual and the body of the population. Biopower does not belong to an individual or to the state; rather, it flows through society, often operating through norms rather than laws. Foucault (1978/1990) argues that “a normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life” (p. 48). As people internalize “healthy” norms, they self-monitor according to those norms, shaping their behavior and their concept of self accordingly. In doing so, they become docile bodies – bodies that are healthy, strong, and productive and not resistant.

Within the field of yoga education, Yoga Alliance is part of the flow of disciplinary power and of biopower. Through the setting of norms and standardizations, Yoga Alliance is positioned to influence how we think about teaching and practicing yoga and the way we incorporate new teachers into the field. However, it is important to note that Yoga Alliance is not inflicting this power on others in a one-directional pattern. There is not one central place that power “comes from” in the field of yoga teacher training; rather, power flows through complex relations. Yoga Alliance influences the flow of power through the common core curriculum and the financial commitment that yoga instructors must make in order to register with the organization. Each individual training program (particularly the lead instructor), participates in the flow of power as they have an opportunity to expose students to their particular point of view. And the yoga teacher trainees influence the flow of power in that they choose to register for and complete certain trainings for their own individual reasons (including the lineage of yoga

they follow or their desire to travel to a specific location). Teacher trainees will also bring their own ideas of the yoga practice into the experience through their previous classes, readings, reflection, and embodied experiences. As Oksala (2011) states, “Bodies are both docile and anarchic ...They are always inevitably intertwined with mechanisms of power, but they also open up the realm of creative politics and personal experimentation” (p. 97). Yoga teacher trainees complete their programs within the power relations influenced by Yoga Alliance and the curriculum of their teacher training programs. But that does not mean that Yoga Alliance “holds” all of the power and that the yoga teacher trainees are powerless. Rather, they simultaneously participate in and resist these relations of power (Foucault, 1977).

**Yoga Alliance and Power.** Through the setting of standards for yoga teacher training, and through its status as one of the only credentialing options for yoga teachers, Yoga Alliance is an important part of the flow of power in yoga education and the influence of that power on the discourses surrounding health and embodiment in yoga. Its status as one of the only credentialing organizations (and certainly the largest) serves to ensure its dominance in setting the standards for yoga teacher training programs. Speaking of disciplinary power, Foucault (1980/2014) cites the “mechanisms and procedures intended to conduct men, to direct their conduct, to conduct their conduct” (p. 12). Yoga Alliance has many mechanisms and procedures that “conduct the conduct” of its member schools and teachers.

The RYT-200 Core Curriculum determines what participating RYS can (and should) teach to their students and who can teach them. The 200 hours must include 75 hours of Techniques, Training, and Practice, 30 hours of Anatomy and Physiology, 30 hours of Yoga Humanities, and 50 hours of Professional Essentials (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). While there are certainly many ways to teach these topics and different approaches that particular lineages or

teachers may take to the topics, the topics themselves and the time spent on them are set as a common core for all yoga teacher trainees. Through the setting of these standards, new yoga teachers will learn that these are the important aspects of yoga and they will observe the time spent on each category, which may influence what they emphasize when they teach their own students in the future. The flow of power in, around, and through Yoga Alliance does not begin and end with the yoga teacher training programs. As yoga teachers “conduct their conduct” according to what they learn and observe in their training, that conduct may model for their students the “correct” way to practice yoga.

A majority of the hours (150 of the 200 required hours) must be taught by a lead trainer with RYT-500 status who has attended at least two Yoga Alliance approved teacher training programs and paid the application and annual fees to maintain their certification (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). This requirement limits the approach that RYS can take to teaching; team teaching or the division of the program into a number of courses taught by different instructors (as with many certification programs) is not permitted. Therefore, the lead trainer has a larger influence on their students, and the lead trainer’s preferences will likely become a larger part of the training. For example, the lead trainer in my RYS specialized in yin yoga (a type of deep stretching), so that became more of a focus than it may have in another program. Foucault (1981/2017) spoke of the role of relationships and teachers in what he called the “arts of living:”

Relationship to others means that the arts of living are learned. They are learned by a teaching, a listening (learning, teaching). That is to say, the presence of the other, his speech, and his authority are clearly indispensable in these arts of living. The arts of living are passed on, are transmitted, are taught and learned in and through a certain relationship of master to discipline. (p. 32)

In the “art of living” of yoga, specifically in the Yoga Alliance 200-Hour Curriculum, the lead trainer may take on the role of the “master,” and the relationship between the students and the lead trainer will be an important part of the way those students come to view and practice yoga.

Once yoga instructors have completed their training programs and are ready to begin teaching, they continue to interact with Yoga Alliance and to be shaped by the organization’s policies. Most obviously, if they pay the \$50 application fee and \$65 annual fee, they are entering into an exchange relationship where they pay Yoga Alliance for the ability to register as an RYT and to claim that credential as proof of their legitimacy as a yoga teacher. Teachers also agree to Yoga Alliance’s Code of Conduct, Scope of Practice, and Statement of Equity in Yoga, which all draw explicit boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable practice and behavior in the profession. The stated purpose of the Code of Conduct, for example, is:

- a) broadening the public understanding of the role of the Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT™);
- (b) ensuring and upholding professional behavior within the Yoga Alliance community;
- (c) developing and encouraging high standards of professional conduct; and
- (d) promoting and protecting the interests of the profession of yoga teaching and of the Yoga Alliance members we serve. (Yoga Alliance, 2020a, “Purpose” section)

In asking its members to behave in certain ways deemed professional (in “conducting their conduct”) Yoga Alliance seeks in part for the public to be aware of and to respect the role of RYT, a title only used by Yoga Alliance. In this way, yoga class participants are brought into the flow of power through their ability to use their attendance and purchasing power to select for yoga classes taught by RYTs. And through Yoga Alliance’s Code of Conduct as well as its mission to “promote health and safety of the public,” the organization again places itself as a protector, looking out for the bodies of yoga class participants (Yoga Alliance, 2015, para. 1).

As Foucault (1977) reminds us, power does not “belong” to Yoga Alliance. Rather, the organization is just one element of the flow of power in the yoga community, and flows of power can continually shift and change over time. The position that Yoga Alliance holds within the power relations in yoga would be challenged by additional regulators or credentialing organizations. For example, it will be interesting to see in the coming years whether Yoga Unify, which uses a peer-review process and offers “qualifications” instead of certifications, will have an influence on Yoga Alliance’s policies and procedures or role in the yoga community (Yoga Unify, n.d.-a). Additionally, the space occupied by Yoga Alliance would be challenged significantly if states began implementing licensure processes such as those used for massage therapists or acupuncturists (AMTA, n.d.; NCCAOM, n.d.). Yoga Alliance maintains an official stance against government regulation, speaking of “the threat that government regulation poses to our beloved practice” by limiting consumer choice and deterring people from owning yoga-related businesses (Yoga Alliance, 2016b, para. 1). These concerns speak specifically to the financial aspects of the power relations in the yoga community. Yoga Alliance is concerned whether its members would continue to make an income (and presumably, continue to pay dues to Yoga Alliance) in the face of a different regulatory structure.

Individual teachers can participate in this flow of power in a variety of ways. Like me, they may have attended a Yoga Alliance certified RYS. Like me, they may also choose not to register as an RYT. Or they may do so. Either choice may be influenced by financial and employment factors and may or may not impact a yoga teacher’s career going forward. Once a teacher is registered, they can obtain additional credentials by pursuing additional training or by documenting and submitting the required teaching hours to move into an E-RYT-200 or E-RYT-500 status. They may be certified to provide continuing education workshops or become lead

instructors in their own teacher training programs, allowing them to move into a role where they have a greater influence on the next generation of yoga teachers and to earn a higher income through these offerings. According to Foucault (1977), the relationship individuals have to relations of power is complex and constantly shifting:

This power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it;’ it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. (p. 27)

Yoga teachers are not “those who ‘do not have’” power in relation to Yoga Alliance. They feel the pressure of that power, as no matter the way that yoga instructors interact or don’t interact with Yoga Alliance, they are most likely aware of the organization. The decision to participate or not participate at various levels is a choice they must make. And at the same time as they participate in this power, as this power is “transmitted by them and through them,” they also resist this power through various decisions about their level of involvement.

As yoga teachers, we learn through our teacher training programs what it means to be a yoga teacher and the “correct” way to teach and practice yoga. Curriculum standards determined by Yoga Alliance are a part of the disciplinary power that flows in, around, and through the bodies of yoga teachers and yoga participants. Yoga Alliance sets curriculum standards that become the norms of yoga teacher training programs and therefore the norms that new yoga teachers internalize. Yoga Alliance both influences and is in turn influenced by the dominant discourses in the yoga community, particularly related to health. As new yoga teachers participate in their teacher training programs, which are influenced in part by Yoga Alliance’s standards, they self-monitor and shape themselves according to those standards. The yoga

teachers themselves become part of the power relations as they change their actions and habits to become “healthy” or “good” yoga practitioners. In doing so, they become docile bodies, increasing their physical ability while conforming to norms that render them less resistant (Foucault, 1977).

### **Yoga Teacher Training Curriculum**

One element of the flow of power in yoga education that is important to deconstruct is the RYT-200 Core Curriculum. As I have previously discussed, the fact that there is a core curriculum that RYS must follow is itself part of the power relations in the yoga community. RYS and the lead instructor of each program are limited in the amount of variation that they can bring to their teacher training programs. Additionally, the curriculum itself – what is covered, what is given the most time, and what is left out – operates in these relations of power.

As yoga teacher trainees move through their programs, as they begin to self-examine and to reflect on the type of yoga teachers they will be, they often do so within the Yoga Alliance RYT-200 Core Curriculum and by reading and studying the materials required and recommended through their programs. As Foucault (1981/2017) explains, subjectivity, or the creation of ourselves as subjects, is influenced by what is taken for granted as the truth. Our creation of ourselves as yoga teachers is influenced by the dominant discourses in yoga education. We are not forced to become a certain way by Yoga Alliance or by our teacher training programs; rather, we examine and study ourselves in relation to what we take as truth, then mold ourselves accordingly. Foucault (1980/2014) states that when we are new members of a group, we are taught to look inside ourselves:

If one really wants to teach the novice to obey the other completely and exhaustively, it is also necessary, and as a condition of this, to teach him to examine himself ... The second

important element is that within this examination, in this obligation to examine oneself, you see a very strange coupling between the obligation to keep watch on oneself. (p. 289)

As new yoga teachers, we are taught to self-examine, and we both self-examine and self-monitor in part through the 200-Hour Core Curriculum.

### ***The RYT-200 Core Curriculum***

Within the RYT-200 Core Curriculum, the greatest emphasis is placed on the category of Techniques, Training, and Practice, which includes what people often think of as “yoga:” asana and pranayama (poses and breathwork) (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). These 75 hours, plus the 30 spent on anatomy and physiology, contribute to an overall 105 hours spent on the physical practice of yoga. The other six limbs of yoga according to Patanjali – yama (moral restraints), niyama (observances), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and Samadhi (union) – are not explicitly mentioned. Yoga Alliance encourages RYS to teach the historical context of poses as well as safety and alignment within poses. Which asana and pranayama to include are left mostly up to the RYS’s particular lineage, though two asana (*sukhasana*, easy seated pose, and *savasana*, corpse pose) and three pranayama (*Ujjayi*, warrior breath, *Nadi Shodhana*, alternate nostril breathing, and *Kapalbhati*, breath of fire) are required. It is interesting that the two asana are a seated and a supine pose, not the acrobatic poses often featured in yoga media and photography. However, this emphasis on physical practice will still likely prepare yoga instructors to teach classes that are themselves primarily physical. And in examining themselves and forming their subjectivities as yoga instructors, they will learn to particularly monitor their physical asana practice. And in focusing on and monitoring their physical practice, they may not consider the other elements of the practice, such

as the moral and ethical principles, that could lead them toward a view of yoga as resistant to dominant discourses about bodies and health.

The other two elements of the curriculum – 30 hours of Yoga Humanities and 50 hours of Professional Essentials – are less about the physical elements of practice and more about the history of yoga, the ethical elements of yoga, and the professional activity of teaching (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). The inclusion of a practicum as part of the Professional Essentials offers future yoga teachers an opportunity to practice teaching and to have a mentorship or apprenticeship relationship to support them in that practice. The rest of the professional essentials include Yoga Alliance’s Code of Conduct and Scope of Practice as well as a commitment to continuing education (a service offered by Yoga Alliance), and training about the business and marketing aspects of being a yoga teacher. These essentials reinforce Yoga Alliance’s position within the yoga community. The professional essentials category also serves to acknowledge the fact that many graduates will eventually teach other yoga practitioners and gives them a chance to practice in that new role. However, the greater emphasis on technique may send the message to new yoga teachers that the most important part of their subjectivity as a yoga instructor is to themselves perform asana.

While Yoga Alliance has a new Commitment to Equity in Yoga, notably missing from the RYS-200 Core Curriculum is any explicit mention of diversity, equity, or access in yoga. The one mention of equity falls under Professional Essentials with a brief mention of the Commitment to Equity document (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). This document states in part:

By focusing on equity, we are able to center our work around facilitating change in the areas of diversity, accessibility, and inclusivity. This emphasis on equity aligns our hopes for everyone to have access to resources and support as well as recognizes that there will

be distinct work required to ensure all communities are able to leverage opportunities across the training, teaching, business, and practice of yoga. (Yoga Alliance, 2020b, “Why Equity” section)

While the commitment states that there is important work to be done to foster equity and recognize the deep inequities in yoga, the teacher training curriculum does not include anything about gender-inclusive language, a recognition of racialized trauma, accessibility for yoga practitioners with disabilities, or making yoga affordable in our communities. This exclusion is part of the dominant discourse of yoga education. Discourse is not only what is spoken but what is unspoken, excluded, invisible, or cut out. Yoga teacher trainees observe that while there is a stated commitment to equity, equity is not something that is consistently “done” in the setting of a yoga class or training program. As new yoga teachers examine themselves, they are doing so in an environment where the issues of inequity in yoga are largely invisible. In their creation of themselves as yoga teachers, they may think that signing a commitment to equity is the entirety of the work they need to do in making their classes inclusive. They may think that equity is important but ultimately not the role of yoga teachers, studios, or practitioners.

In my own experience, this absence of explicit language surrounding equity in yoga had a deep impact on my journey into becoming a yoga teacher. At the beginning of the training, I had publicly identified as disabled, and that fact was alternatively dismissed by the trainers or alluded to as a cautionary tale about the importance of regular yoga practice. During conversations about “women’s bodies” (bodies that experience menstruation, childbirth, and menopause), I kept waiting for trainers to discuss the complexities of gender and the importance of not assuming anyone’s identity or experience by simply looking at them. When my classmates or I brought up any of our lived experiences, whether around race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability, we were

met with the same comment I heard at the beginning of training: We were “stuck in our story,” convinced that we were different from others, and not embracing the unity of yoga in which we were all the same.

The dominant discourse flowing through this program was that yoga is primarily a physical practice meant for bodies that are ultimately all the same (in terms of everything but a biologically determined gender) and that a focus on power relations and the lived experiences informed by power relations was at best a distraction and at worst an insult to the principles of yoga. And our trainers described us as “stuck in our story” when we spoke of the lived experiences of racism, classism, or oppression surrounding gender, ability, sexuality, or body size. But white, cisgender, heterosexual, thin, able bodies were never described as “stuck in their story” – these experiences were not named and became accepted as the invisible (and at the same time hypervisible) norm of a body practicing yoga.

This normalized body contributes to a discourse of purity in yoga teacher training programs. Blackman (2008) writes of the “othering” processes that are “enacted and reproduced across a range of material and social practices that position actual bodies in relation to regulatory ideals. This positioning produces certain bodies as inferior, lacking, dangerous, deficient and abnormal” (p. 60). Paradoxically, while the explicit statement was that yoga breaks down difference and that we are all the same underneath, there was a simultaneous discourse that a white, cisgender, heterosexual, thin, able body is a pure and ideal “yoga body” and that all other bodies fall short in terms of this ideal and are seeking to violate the practice of yoga by drawing attention to their differences. Shildrick and Price (1999) state, “Just as we perform our sexed and gendered identities, and must constantly police the boundaries between sameness and difference, so too the ‘purity’ of the ‘healthy’ body must be actively maintained and protected against its

contaminated others” (p. 439). In this case, the contaminated others were not only pain and disease, but bodies that threatened the purity of the healthy (and white, middle class, cisgender, and heterosexual) yoga body. The implication was that this pure body was uncontaminated by color, disability, queerness, poverty, or fatness and that anyone sharing their embodied experience was contaminating the yoga practice.

## **Conclusion**

As yoga teacher trainees shape their subjectivities as yoga teachers, they do so within a field of power relations influenced in part by the curriculum and standards of Yoga Alliance. Yoga Alliance’s 200-Hour Teacher Training Curriculum is an important part of the process of becoming a yoga instructor in the United States. This program emphasizes a physical practice, focused primarily in asana and pranayama. While Yoga Alliance expresses a commitment to equity, no specific mentions of equity, justice, and inclusion or of race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability are included in the curriculum.

In my teacher training experience, trainees were encouraged to shape our subjectivities as yoga teachers by embracing a challenging physical practice and to view yoga instruction as an “advanced” form of asana practice. Our other subjectivities (in my case, as a disabled yoga practitioner and a practitioner from the LGBTQ+ community, among many others) were framed as a deviation from the oneness of yoga in which everyone is the same.

As I conclude this chapter, I return to my research question to consider how power relations influencing and influenced by Yoga Alliance produce dominant discourses in yoga education.

***How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?***

Yoga Alliance is an important part of the relations of power in the yoga community in the US. According to Foucault (1977), this does not mean that Yoga Alliance “holds” or owns the power, imposing standards on others who only accept them passively. Instead, power is “on the move,” flowing through the 200-Hour Curriculum as well as through the yoga studios and instructors who instruct training programs and the students of these programs who eventually become yoga teachers themselves.

The relations of biopower surrounding Yoga Alliance produce dominant discourses of yoga as a physical practice and yoga teachers as “advanced” practitioners, who are able to complete rigorous asana practice and to live according to a yogic lifestyle. Yoga teachers shape themselves according to the “truth” of these discourses (Foucault, 1981/2017) and eventually teach their own students from that subjectivity. They become self-monitoring docile bodies focused on asana rather than on yoga’s potential for resisting dominant discourses about bodies, embodiment, and health. “Good” yoga teachers are pure and moral, constantly examining their own bodies and lifestyles. They are primarily focused on their own personal ability to perform asana. And while they commit to an ethic of equity, they do not explicitly discuss oppression and take the viewpoint that everyone is really the same under the surface. A “good” yoga curriculum is one focused on the physical practice and one in which the teacher or trainer becomes the “master,” knowledgeable about all aspects of the practice and able to guide novices into the correct way to teach and practice yoga.

The RYS-200 Core Curriculum provides a scaffolding for RYS to create their yoga teacher training programs and to bring new yoga teachers into the profession. However, the curriculum is not the only influence on the new yoga teachers as they seek to examine themselves and the type of teachers they will become. Within teacher training programs, trainees

encounter a variety of texts and activities that help to shape their view of the teaching and practice of yoga. In the next chapter, I will consider these materials to more deeply examine the discourses of health and embodiment in yoga teacher training.

## Chapter 6

### Yoga Teachers as Strong, Docile Bodies: How Discourses Surrounding Yoga Teacher

#### Training Programs Shape the Subjectivities of Yoga Teachers

At the beginning of my three-week yoga teacher training program, our instructor told us that we were about to experience something physically that we were not prepared for. “This is not a retreat,” she said. “You’re going to be in pain.” She was right. I was in pain for three solid weeks – for months, counting the recovery. Each day, we practiced asana (physical postures) as a group for at least three hours, with much of the practice being devoted to headstand, handstand, and balance postures. In addition to the group asana practices, we were required to practice at least 30 minutes on our own each day and to attend 10 yoga classes during the three weeks. Three students were injured during the training, one so severely that she had to leave the program.

Throughout the training, our instructors reassured us that this intense and even painful experience would ultimately serve to make us better yoga teachers and practitioners. “It will deepen your practice,” one instructor shared, while another claimed that “We’re teaching you how to be a person. Teaching will come naturally after that.” The implication was that a particular form of physical practice would have a purifying and moralizing effect, shaping our bodies and minds and making us more than just *better* yoga practitioners, *better* yoga teachers, or *better* people. This physical practice would actually make us “become people” in the first place: an act of creation that assumes an absence of embodiment, lived experience, and subjectivities that we always-already carry into our social worlds.

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the relations of power embedded in Yoga Alliance and the RYT-200 Core Curriculum for yoga teacher training programs and considered how those

relations of power shape the forming subjectivities of yoga instructors as self-monitoring, docile bodies. My experience was certainly shaped in part by the RYT-200 Core Curriculum's emphasis on asana above the other limbs of yoga and its centering of the physical practice. Yoga Alliance's regulation of yoga teacher training programs and the curriculum itself (what it includes as well as what it excludes) are certainly important elements of the relations of power that produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education.

But Yoga Alliance does not hold or own the power to control the experiences of yoga teacher trainees as they complete their training programs. My experience of a painful physical experience and the promise that such an experience would transform me into both a yoga teacher and a person was also influenced by complex relations among Yoga Alliance, the yoga studio where I completed my training, the texts and reading materials, the pedagogy that I encountered during training, and the instructors and classmates in the program. All of these elements come together in complex ways to shape the forming subjectivities of yoga teachers as they move through their training programs. They also bring their own embodied lived experiences into the programs, and it is likely that they will have encountered discourses related to yoga teacher training programs even before enrolling.

The purpose of this chapter is to conduct a poststructural analysis to address my third analytic question:

- How do the discursive norms of a pure and moral gendered body in yoga education produce the subjectivities of yoga teachers?

I include, in my analysis, the reading materials assigned to yoga teacher training participants, as well as the representation of yoga teacher training in publications such as *Yoga Journal*. I plug these texts in with the work of Foucault around subjectivity and rational recreation, as well as

queercrip theorists around normalcy and normal bodies. Plugging in all of these texts reveals the ways that new yoga teachers shape their subjectivity in relation to norms about yoga teachers as healthy, able, gendered bodies completing a physically rigorous and emotionally transformative training.

### **Teacher Training Materials**

Yoga Alliance's Core Curriculum does not specify certain texts or training materials that must be used, and only mentions one text (the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*) as an example of an approach to yoga ethics. Registered Yoga Schools (RYS) often include in their training programs a list of required or recommended reading. For example, in my yoga teacher training program, there were 10 required texts. Two were classical texts from the Karma Yoga tradition in India (*Bhagavad Gita* translated by Steven Mitchell and *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* translated by Sri Swami Satchidananda). Two were modern texts of asana, modifications, and breathwork by the leaders of two Indian schools of Hatha Yoga (*Light on Yoga* by B.K.S. Iyengar and *The Heart of Yoga* by T.K.V. Desikachar). Another text focused on meditation was by a Vietnamese monk from the Engaged Buddhist tradition (*Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hahn). The rest of the texts were written by white yoga teachers from the West (*Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Stillness* by Erich Schiffmann, *Back Care Basics* by Mary Pullig Schatz, *Yoga Anatomy* by Leslie Kaminoff and Amy Matthews, and *The Breathing Book* by Donna Farhi). In the class sessions, we discussed the *Yoga Sutras* several times and the *Bhagavad Gita* once. We used *Yoga Anatomy* as a reference book when learning about the anatomy and physiology of various asana. The rest of the texts were required readings that my classmates and I completed before the training began.

These texts, even in their limited use in the program, helped to shape my forming subjectivity as a yoga instructor. I learned that it was important to consult the *Yoga Sutras* for the “original” form of yoga, and I learned a little about the history and traditions of yoga in India. However, I was exposed more to the thoughts and practices of people who have similar experiences to myself: white, middle class, educated people experienced in Western versions of yoga. Through my reading of the texts, I was exposed to different thoughts and traditions on asana, pranayama, and meditation, many of which I still use in my personal practice. But the emphasis in our classes, much like the emphasis of the Yoga Alliance Core Curriculum, was not on the reading and study of classical or modern texts. The emphasis was instead on physically practicing asana (and occasionally pranayama and meditation).

While these texts were the prerequisite reading for the program, there was one text that we used consistently throughout the training: *The Yoga Handbook*, an in-house publication written by the studio’s founder (Keach, 2003). The emphases of this book were reflected in the emphases of the training program: the practice of challenging asana such as handstand and headstand, hands-on assists, and living naturally with a yogic lifestyle. Each day, we spent at least an hour on the practice of headstand or handstand, and at least several hours learning how to guide participants “more deeply” into poses by physically moving their bodies. These emphases served a normalizing function. Yoga became normalized as a physical practice, particularly one in which participants could reach an “advanced” status through their performance of specific poses. And the role of the yoga instructor became normalized as one who understands the bodies of students well enough to know whether a pose could be better performed by those bodies, which sustains a flow of power between yoga students and instructors.

Much of the remainder of our time was spent in concern for our lifestyle habits outside of the yoga studio – were we eating organically, avoiding medication and surgery, respecting the “natural” biological differences between men and women? *The Yoga Handbook* encourages yoga teachers to “be a pure vessel” (Keach, 2003, p. 126). This purity is achieved in part by avoiding revealing clothing (p. 19) and eating an organic diet (p. 194). The section on women’s health is called “honoring the rhythms of the womb” (p. 197) and states that “Oh, we women are such hormonal beings” (p. 199), while the men’s health section includes topics such as anger management, sports injuries, and “sexsexsex” (p. 207). These assumptions about bodies and about maintaining the purity of those bodies became directly tied into the study and practice of yoga. The taken-for-granted perspective was that bodies have a pure and natural state (specifically tied to a biological definition of sex) and that it is the responsibility of the yoga practitioner to maintain such a state and to guard the body against corrupting forces. Because my body is not and will never again be in what this discourse considers a pure and natural state, I constantly felt under a state of scrutiny and even felt the pressure to apologize or atone for my body. I had undergone medical procedures and had incorporated technology into my body, so it felt like the teachers were saying that I was a corrupted rather than a “pure vessel” and that I was somehow contaminating the yoga practice. Relational power flows with this curriculum and pedagogy, sustaining the discourse of purity that dominates yoga education.

This text and the pedagogy surrounding it certainly operated within a complex flow of power – there were those in the class who vocally opposed the portrayal of men and women. There were students who had already learned these approaches from their own yoga teachers, as well as those who had learned very different approaches. The curriculum of the yoga teacher training program and the texts incorporated into the program were not an indoctrination, but they

did influence the conversations that were available and permissible regarding bodies, embodiment, and health. In the dominant discourses about yoga that move through this curriculum and these texts, there is a clear boundary around what yoga is – the performance of specific (and often challenging) asana. The inclusion of texts such as the *Yoga Sutras* somewhat situates the modern practice of yoga within a historical context, but at least in my experience, we did not think deeply with those texts. Neither did we think with texts that revealed or deconstructed the dominant discourses in yoga education and how those discourses limit possibilities for yoga teaching and practice. Instead, we formed our subjectivities as yoga teachers in an environment focused primarily on a curriculum and supporting materials that reinforced the normative image of a white, able, gendered body performing asana. As Foucault (1980/2014) points out, as novices, we learned to self-examine and self-monitor in part according to the discourses that we encountered in the teacher training programs. And through conversations and texts dedicated to the importance of pursuing a form of “yogic health,” we learned to self-monitor and adopt behaviors deemed healthy by Yoga Alliance and the teacher training instructors.

As I explored in the last chapter, yoga teacher training instructors can take on the subjectivity of “masters” within the “art of living” of yoga (Foucault, 1981/2017, p. 32). As Foucault (1981/2017) states, “The presence of the other, his speech, and his authority are clearly indispensable in these arts of living” (p. 32). The trainers in yoga teacher training programs can step into the subjectivity of the authority, actively instructing new yoga teachers on the norms that they must follow. In my yoga teacher training experience, the trainers became authorities who commented on how our bodies looked in poses, whether we were complying with norms around gender, and what we were eating and drinking. They also spoke often of their own lives,

offering themselves as examples for us to follow, shaping their subjectivities as authorities not only of asana, pranayama, and meditation, but of how to live a moral and pure life.

### **Rational Recreation and the Responsibility of Health**

Sassatelli (2017) uses a Foucauldian perspective to examine physical spaces designed specifically for fitness. According to Sassatelli, gyms and other fitness spaces align with the Foucauldian notion of rational recreation: “Rational recreation stresses that recreational activities should be morally uplifting for the participant, good for his or her body, and have positive benefits for the wider society” (p. 379). Yoga teacher training programs can operate within this notion, positioning the practice of yoga as rational recreation – yoga, as they claim, is good for the body and spirit and will therefore have positive benefits for society. In turn, the programs can position themselves as promoting health, which in turn promotes morality and benefits society. Yoga teacher training instructors similarly position themselves as those with the authority to say what health and morality mean in the context of a yoga practice. Yoga Alliance, through its mission to protect the public through well-trained yoga teachers and safe yoga classes, positions itself as a protector, looking out for the bodies of the individual students who will eventually participate in a yoga class led by one of its members.

*The Yoga Handbook* used in my teacher training program instructs teachers to “be a pure vessel” of the yoga practice (Keach, 2003, p. 126). This instruction to be a pure vessel is an individual responsibility of each yoga teacher, and the implication is that each teacher’s students will benefit from that purity. The power relations that impact the author’s view of purity are never discussed – there is no mention of the fact that organic food is expensive or that clean water is a privilege. In fact, to address the perceived argument about financial constraints, the author writes, “Put your money where your morals are and stop worrying about spending money

on quality fresh, organic food. From the Yogic perspective, worrying is the antithesis of enlightenment” (p. 194). This passage assumes that the only thing stopping people from making the correct purchases and eating the correct food is a misplaced worry and an incorrect mindset – a “poverty-mentality” that does not take into account the actual embodied experience of poverty (p. 196). The responsibility on the individual to engage in yogic practices even includes moving to a town with more yoga studios (p. 153) and quitting full time work in order to teach yoga part time (p. 148).

All of these suggestions are offered from a position that assumes the moral responsibility to maintain a certain standard of “health” through a certain practice of yoga. The emphasis on lifestyle without the inclusion of equity places the responsibility of health on the individual yoga instructor. Then presumably, when the yoga instructor teaches a class, they will conform to and repeat these discourses and place the moral responsibility of health on their students. As Fullagar (2017) explores in an analysis of the discourse of “exercise as medicine:”

We are urged to constantly improve our wellness, active lifestyles and sense of happiness, while balancing mind and body, work and life through a desire to prevent illness, improve productivity (reducing the burden of disease and profitability) and thus be valued as self-managing citizens. (p. 405)

In the yoga community, these messages are passed on by training programs, then by yoga teachers, contributing to a dominant discourse of health as responsibility and lack of health as moral failing. As Foucault (1981/2017) explains, this discourse becomes taken as truth, and we form our own subjectivities as yoga teachers around that truth. Power flows around and through this truth and we “conduct our conduct” accordingly, taking it upon ourselves to make health our primary goal and to manage ourselves so as to be as healthy as possible (Foucault, 1980/2014, p.

12). Yoga teachers and teacher training instructors can then take on the subjectivity of “healer” – of one who has the authority to make not only themselves, but their students, healthier and more moral. Within this subjectivity, the healer does not ask whether yoga participants want to change their bodies or question systemic inequities that lead to illness and injury. Rather, the healer knows the correct way for yoga participants to live and assumes that anyone experiencing pain, illness, or injury has not embraced a yogic lifestyle.

As yoga teachers’ subjectivity is formed in part based on their experiences with yoga teacher training, they repeat the lessons and the dominant discourses surrounding that training, both with their students and through their writing and reflection. It is important, therefore, as I consider the role of yoga teacher training in the flows of power surrounding health and embodiment in the yoga community, that I also consider how yoga teacher training is represented in media by those who have completed it. Publications such as *Yoga Journal* and *Yoga International* feature articles about yoga teacher training, which create and maintain images and perceptions of training, as well as influence what new teacher trainees may expect to encounter.

### **Yoga Teacher Training in Media**

In the yoga-focused publications *Yoga Journal* and *Yoga International*, several authors have discussed yoga teacher training – offering advice on what to expect, how to physically and mentally prepare for training, and how to select a training to complete. Authors on related sites, such as *Yoga Renew* and *Ekhart Yoga* also reflect on their own yoga teacher training experiences. Examining these articles and how they portray yoga teacher training programs can further allow me to reveal the power relations and the discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education. The discourses around yoga teacher training influence what future yoga teachers come to expect

and what they see as normal. As Foucault (1981/2017) explains, we create and define ourselves in relation to a certain discourse, a certain notion of truth. The truths that yoga-related media create and maintain are part of developing the subjectivity of yoga teachers.

### ***Physically Focused***

A primary element of most articles about yoga teacher training is preparing students for what they can expect – and one of the main things they can expect is physical difficulty. Authors tell prospective yoga teacher trainees that they can expect to perform asana for three to four hours a day (Kakenya, 2021). They can expect “to be a little (or, well, a lot) sore” (Rabbitt, 2016, Section 4). Some even acknowledge that attending yoga teacher training carries an inherent risk of injury (Newlyn, n.d.). Even the articles that are not specifically about the difficulty of the physical practice or the advanced nature of the poses performed often feature a photo of the author performing asana on their own, rather than in a teacher training group or in front of a class that they are teaching (Trueheart, 2016). The unquestioned assumption in this discourse is that in order to train as a yoga teacher, someone must be willing to physically push their body up to and through its limits.

While there was one article on *Yoga Journal* that told the story of someone with an injury completing yoga teacher training (Eichenseher, 2016), the rest of the authors on *Yoga Journal* and elsewhere seem to fondly recall their own physically intense experiences. Articles with titles like “Survive Yoga Teacher Training” paint the experience as a physically painful, challenging one that will push people to extremes (Plakans, 2010). But these extremes are not described as negative or a reason to avoid the program. Rather, the implication is that through these extreme physical experiences, yoga teacher trainees will bond with their training group, learn about themselves, and leave as different people. Many authors across various publications and websites

tell anyone thinking of completing a yoga teacher training program that they should “prepare to be transformed” (Erickson, 2014; Norman, 2018; Plakans, 2010). Within this discourse, this transformation can only be achieved by those who embrace and comply with the demands of training (and who have the physical and emotional ability to do so). A transformation requires a body that is docile, that is strong and flexible, and that is willing to take personal responsibility to achieve a certain standard of health (even if the process is painful).

### *Personally Transformative*

In addition to, and because of, the intensity of the physical experience, authors of articles about yoga teacher training tell trainees that they should “prepare for shifts” (Costa, n.d., Section 9). These shifts take the form of emotional breakthroughs and heightened emotional experiences: “Invest in tissues ... there’s going to be a lot of crying!” (Newlyn, n.d., Section 5); “I know yoga teacher trainings can bring to the surface some pretty heavy emotions” (Gorrell, 2016, “I don’t want to share” section). The assumption is that yoga teacher training, due to the asana practice and the closeness with classmates, will lead to transformative emotional experiences (Murphy, 2016).

While many authors do not explore what may be behind these emotional experiences, others consider the role of svadhyaya (or self-study, one of the niyamas). As yoga teacher trainees embark on a journey of learning more about yoga, self-study is a necessary component and may lead to shifts in perspective. Newman (2016) writes:

This journey is about self-study and about how we can take that awareness and use it to release some of the negative, nervous energy we constantly feel swirling around inside – an energy I’ve found to be of no use in my day-to-day life. (para. 3)

This particular representation of self-study recalls Foucault's (1980/2014) observation that when we are novices, we are taught to examine and look over ourselves. And it is impossible to examine ourselves without doing so through the discourses that surround us. Through the teacher training program (and therefore through the dominant discourses sustained by that program), the yoga teacher trainees learn to self-monitor and to change our actions and habits to better align with those deemed "healthy."

The authors of these articles speak about these emotional transformations in relation to a physically demanding asana practice that pushes the body to its limits. The implication is that in order to achieve emotional transformation, a yoga teacher trainee must have the physical ability to engage in a rigorous asana practice. They don't consider the work of other yoga teachers and researchers who discuss what Parker (2019) calls "the therapeutic experience of resting in safety" (para. 7). Yoga teachers such as Parker (2020) and Stanley (2021), work with restorative yoga and yoga nidra to help students heal the impacts to the nervous system that come from living with racial trauma. These practices are about connecting to the body and the impact of trauma on the body, which often allows students to experience emotional transformation. In the articles about yoga teacher training that I considered, as well as in my own experience, the practice did not allow students to "rest in safety." Rather, it felt as if we could "earn" an emotionally transformative experience through several hours of challenging asana practice. That is, a "good" yoga practice is limited to an intense physical practice during which the performance of specific challenging asana allows a practitioner access to an emotional transformation. Here, the discourses of health, morality, and purity intersect within relations of power circulating among yoga curriculum and pedagogy, determining who is allowed a transformative yoga practice, and therefore, who is able to "become a person" and a yoga teacher.

One of the common phrases used in discussions of yoga teacher training in these spaces is “deepening your practice” (Ambrose, n.d.; Mia, 2019). In fact, deepening your practice may be mentioned even more often than the outcome of potentially becoming a teacher at the end of the process. Many authors use this phrase, but few define what it means. This phrase has become an important part of the discourse about yoga teacher training – that completing a teacher training program will above all make one a better yoga practitioner with a “deeper” physical practice, which will in turn make them a better person. Discourses set up rules to follow and draw lines around what is permissible or not. This particular discourse produces docile bodies of yoga teacher trainees who are creating themselves and shaping their subjectivity around the idea that a “deep” practice (formed through intense physical and emotional experiences) is what makes a better yoga teacher. This discourse also encourages yoga teachers to view their teacher training (and the yoga community more widely) as the only possible place to achieve transformation, growth, and fulfillment. Some yoga teachers even speak of the spiritual experience as so transformative that they fell into a depression afterward (Rabbitt, 2016), while others mention that they let go of friendships in favor of friends made during yoga teacher training (Flavio, n.d.).

Discourse shapes not only what can be known but who can know it (Powell, 2013). The discourses of ability, purity, and morality enable the conversation about emotional transformation and deep practice in spaces like *Yoga Journal*, which is very focused on the experiences of young, thin, white, able-bodied, cisgender women. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Yoga Alliance’s 200-Hour Core Curriculum, on which most of these programs are based, does not explicitly mention equity or trauma around race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability. In my experience, the trainers in my program did not discuss (and I assume they did not consider) creating a space where students who have experienced this trauma could “rest in

safety” (Parker, 2019). Rather, I felt contradictory pressures – that if I was not having a visible emotional experience, then I was not really practicing yoga, and that the visible emotional experiences were only “allowed” to the young, thin, cisgender, white women. When the trainer told us that we would learn how to “be a person” through a transformative yoga teacher training program, I had to wonder who counted as a person.

This discourse of yoga teacher training as physically intense and personally transformative is so pervasive that it would seem difficult for future yoga teachers to have never heard it before beginning their training programs. These expectations for yoga teacher training, along with the program regulations from Yoga Alliance as well as the materials that teacher trainees encounter, all work together to influence their subjectivities as yoga teachers within relations of power. Particularly, they interact in complex, messy, and even contradictory ways and come together into a discourse about what makes a normal body in the context of yoga teacher training.

### **Normalcy and Yoga Bodies**

The curriculum of yoga teacher training and its regulation by Yoga Alliance, as well as the materials and texts used in teacher training and the way such training is conceptualized in media all flow together into a discourse surrounding normalcy and what makes a normal “yoga body.” Ray (2019), speaking specifically of Australian football, states, “It can be somewhat reckless, therefore, to attempt to group and stratify bodies based on any singular activity in which they participate” (p. 95). But this is exactly what happens within the context of yoga teacher training. As yoga teacher trainees examine themselves and reflect on their future role as yoga teachers, they do so in a context influenced by norms. The dominant discourse encourages yoga teachers to self-monitor according to the “singular activity” of yoga asana and its associated

behaviors. As we progressed through our teacher training program, my classmates and I were continually asked to self-reflect about our personal choices and behaviors related to diet, exercise, and purchasing.

As Oksala (2011) states, “We modify our behaviour in an endless attempt to approximate the normal, and in this process become certain kinds of subjects” (p. 89). The types of subjects we can be as yoga teachers are influenced by this flow of power around the ideas of normal bodies. When the trainer spoke of “being a person,” the implication was that we were to become normal subjects – white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and cisgender. This power circulates throughout the entire process of becoming a yoga instructor – the influence of and relationship with Yoga Alliance and the curriculum standards of the training program, the way that lead instructors speak to teacher trainees about yoga practice and lifestyle, and the way that we as new yoga teachers reflect on ourselves through journaling, meditation, and asana practice. In the following section, I plug these experiences and texts in with queercrip theory to further consider the ways that bodies come to be categorized as normal in the context of yoga teacher training. Specifically, I consider the normalization processes surrounding ability, sexuality, and gender identity because of my personal experiences. In my concluding chapter, I consider future research opportunities to examine the discourses of classism and white supremacy in yoga teacher training programs and materials.

### ***Ability***

The articles in *Yoga Journal* and other yoga media emphasize the physical nature of yoga teacher training, but they do not do so in a vacuum. With Yoga Alliance’s core curriculum requiring at least 75 of the 200 training hours to be focused on techniques, training, and practice, it is likely that the authors of these articles did experience a physically demanding program. The

warnings from these previous yoga teacher training graduates, along with the experience of an asana-focused training, the messaging from lead trainers, and even the physical space itself all send the message that yoga is above all an intense, even painful, physical experience. And that the bodies that can complete the training are those who are able to withstand such an experience. Yoga teacher trainees shape their subjectivities as yoga teachers within this context, as they learn that a body that is not able to handle such expectations is simply unqualified to complete yoga teacher training. This message sets up individual bodies as deviant in relation to the expectation of training. As Stiker (1999) writes about disability, “All deviation is defined in relation to a line, every abnormality in relation to a norm, every sickness in relation to an idea of wellness” (p. 158). In order for some people to deviate from the norm, there must be a norm to deviate from.

But in the yoga teacher training discourse, that norm remains invisible and taken for granted. We ask participants, “Are you ready for the physical challenge of practicing asana for four hours a day?” or “Are you able to sit on a hard floor?” But we just as easily could ask, “Is there a way to arrange this program so it is less focused on asana?” or “Could we get tables and chairs to make this experience more comfortable?” The physical expectations are hypervisible, but the underlying assumptions behind them are never questioned. The participants themselves are not ready for the program; the curriculum and the physical environment are never called into question. Participants will complete their program and come to define their subjectivities as yoga teachers within these unquestioned norms. They will then likely go on to assume the same physical abilities of their students as they plan and teach yoga classes.

These assumptions take place within a flow of power. Not only the power sustained by the delivery of the programs and the influence of Yoga Alliance and yoga teacher training instructors, but of ability and disability. Disability is never named in any of these conversations –

it was never mentioned once in my teacher training program; it is not included in the manual. The only mention of disability from Yoga Alliance is about programs teaching new yoga teachers how to deal with the disabilities of their students (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). The fact that a new yoga teacher may themselves have a disability is never considered. The way that disability is excluded is part of the discourse of healthy, strong, able bodies in yoga education, particularly in yoga teacher training. Discourse both enables and constrains, and here, the possibilities of yoga instructors with disabilities is constrained through its absence. The dominant discourse normalizes able bodies (especially strong, flexible bodies) as yoga teachers and treats disability as something that must be “dealt with” by those able bodies. The subjectivity of a disabled yoga instructor is constrained and excluded within this discourse.

Disability is invisible, but in its invisibility, it is paradoxically hypervisible at the same time. As Mitchell (2002) states, “Whereas the able body has no definitional core (it poses as transparently average or normal), the disabled body surfaces as any body capable of being narrated as outside the norm” (p. 17). Yoga teachers do not reflect on the able body in yoga teacher training when they write articles about their experience. They don’t reflect on the subjectivity of an able-bodied person going through training or include that element of their embodied experience in their reflections at all. Those experiences are positioned as normal and a deviation from that norm is not even considered. But as a disabled practitioner in a yoga teacher training program, that fact was incredibly visible, both to myself and to my fellow classmates and instructors. The moment someone like me steps into a training program, their presence is immediately noticed because of the physical nature of the program and the amount of time we spend observing bodies in various asana. Eisenseher (2016), the one author on *Yoga Journal* who

shared a similar experience, also wondered about her ability to complete the training and knew that she would stand out.

This paradox of disability as invisible within the structures of yoga teacher training curriculum but hypervisible in the lived experiences of teacher trainees with disabilities flows with and through our notions of health and discourses of health as personal responsibility. When we do speak about illness, pain, and disability within the context of yoga teacher training, these lived experiences are often treated as if they are an individual failure (especially a failure to perform asana enough or correctly) rather than a reality of our complex lived experiences. “Unfortunately, we yogis cannot get to everyone in time,” *The Yoga Handbook*, upon which my teacher training was based, reads, “Sometimes, they have already progressed too far in their bad habits” (Keach, 2003, p. 149). Health, defined in this text as freedom from injury, is a personal responsibility, and the implication is that ill health is the result of impaired morality or “bad habits.” These assumptions about health create and maintain relations of power around disability, positioning able-bodied people as hard working, moral, and in control of their habits with disabled people portrayed as those who simply didn’t practice yoga the correct way. As Herndl (2002) states:

The myth most of us embody is that we get a choice ... that being abled or disabled, male or female, visibly different or normal is something real. The myth is that there is a right way of doing things, that there are right choices about the body, that all bodies are the same (p. 153).

The discourses of health, embodiment, and morality in yoga teacher training reinforce this myth, implying that we simply choose through our behaviors whether we are able or disabled and that one is the “correct” and good, moral choice.

## ***Gender and Sexuality***

Norms about ability in yoga teacher training are also wrapped up with intersecting norms about gender and sexuality. A normal body in yoga teacher training is not simply an able body but also a cisgender and heterosexual body. On my first day of yoga teacher training, the lead instructor said, “There are only two guys here,” basing her observation on simply looking at the students, not on an introduction that included gender identity or pronouns. In their lower number, these “two guys” were drawn into the spotlight and their difference was highlighted and celebrated, though when these two classmates tried to work together for partner yoga, the instructor said, “We can’t have guy on guy.” Gender and sexuality were assumed based on physical appearance, and both were open for commentary and approval or disapproval by the instructor. The subjectivities of queer yoga teachers were constrained and limited within this program. And the yoga teacher training instructors stepped into a subject position of authority, not only over asana practice, but over the correct way to perform gender and sexuality.

Gender and sexuality are not explicitly mentioned in the coverage of Yoga Teacher Training in *Yoga Journal* from the last ten years, and none of the authors mentioned the coverage (or lack thereof) of gender and sexuality in their training programs. As with ability, the fact that gender and sexuality are never mentioned indicates an assumed norm. This norm is reinforced by the imagery associated with these articles, which often feature photos of people who appear to be cisgender white women, either performing asana on their own (Mia, 2019) or sitting together in a group (Flavio, n.d.).

Similarly, Yoga Alliance’s 200-Hour Core Curriculum contains no mention of gender and sexuality. However, my yoga teacher training contained many references to “natural” differences (coded as biological differences) between men and women. The different sections in

the *Yoga Handbook* for men's and women's issues treat gender as a clear binary, and none of the issues in these sections were overlapping, implying that men and women have distinct, biologically determined experiences (Keach, 2003). This emphasis on biological differences reinforced a dominant discourse that there is something "natural" about cisgender/heterosexual bodies and experiences, which implies that there is something "unnatural" about queer bodies and experiences.

Butler (1988) theorizes a performative view of subjectivity, claiming that gender is enacted, embodied, and performed in specific contexts. Gender becomes "natural" through our repeated performance of it in accordance with certain norms, and "the authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness" (p. 522). In the context of my yoga teacher training experience, the naturalness of gender was embedded in the norm of yoga practice as "natural" (versus the outside world of technology, medicine, and other "impure" habits). If we are to live a pure and natural lifestyle through yoga, the implication is that a cisgender/heterosexual body is a natural one. The reinforcing of norms related to gender created a situation where the leaders were "entranced by their own fictions" and perpetuated dominant discourses about gender and sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

Yoga teacher training programs and the conversation surrounding them are produced by relations of power within discourse in yoga education in the United States. The experience new yoga teachers have with their teacher training programs is not simply influenced by "official" regulations, like the 200-Hour Core Curriculum set by Yoga Alliance. Rather, power is kept on the move by the programs, by the curriculum and pedagogy, by the knowledge expressed through trainers, by the books and materials that are included and excluded (both published

materials and informal, program-specific materials), and by the wider conversation about these programs in spaces like *Yoga Journal*. All of these complex relations, within discourse, produce the subjectivity of a healthy, able, natural, pure, moral, gendered body who creates themselves as a person and a yoga teacher in the context of a rigorous asana practice.

As I conclude this chapter, I return to my research question to examine how norms about healthy, natural, gendered bodies in yoga education shape the subjectivities of new yoga teachers.

***How do the discursive norms of a pure and moral gendered body in yoga education produce the subjectivities of yoga teachers?***

Most yoga teachers in the United States come into the profession through a 200-Hour teacher training program. These programs are produced by relations of power and discourse, enabling the way that yoga practitioners come to see themselves – and create themselves – as yoga teachers – or, their subjectivity. Through the use of curriculum, texts, and pedagogy, yoga teacher training programs contribute to a discourse of what it means to be a yoga teacher and produce a limited range of subject positions. A yoga teacher’s subjectivity complies with the dominant discourses by completing a physically demanding training and being transformed through that training. In fact, in my program, the studio’s founder promised she would teach us to “become a person,” guiding us to create ourselves not just as yoga teachers but to form ourselves as human beings.

When my classmates and I were taught “how to be people,” the implication was that we were to be certain types of people. We were to have certain types of bodies and to engage in certain practices in order to create our subjectivities as yoga teachers. A yoga teacher in this discourse is one who is a “pure vessel” of the practice – a white, thin, able-bodied practitioner

who lives in accordance with a biologically prescribed gender, is able to afford expensive yoga classes and organic food, and who does not need medications or surgery. Through the cultivation of this body and this healthy, natural lifestyle, we were promised that teaching “will come naturally after that.” In order to be a yoga teacher, we learned that it was necessary to comply with the norms considered healthy and natural by our trainers. Compliance with these norms requires constant self-examination and self-monitoring, as well as engagement in practices that can be seen and measured by others.

Foucault (1977) states that, “In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another” (p. 184). The norms within yoga teacher training encourage new yoga teachers to shape their subjectivities around a specific type of body and a specific practice that serves a homogenizing effect. As I explored in the previous chapter, the trainers in my teacher training program labeled any student attempting to discuss race, class, ability, gender, sexuality, or weight as “stuck in their story.” However, as Foucault (1977) points out, this normalization process also highlights difference, as it becomes obvious when the subjectivities of yoga students and teachers do not comply with “normal” practices. In the next chapter, I consider how such subjectivities, specifically those of queer and disabled yoga teachers and practitioners, resist the dominant discourses of the moral, pure, healthy, gendered body in yoga education and how those resistances open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga.

## Chapter 7

### **Yoga as an Act of Resistance: Thinking with the Queer and Disabled Body**

When I began the process of writing this post-qualitative dissertation, thinking with queercrip theory and poststructuralism, I did so with the intention of continuing my yoga practice (physical posture practice, breathwork, and meditation as well as the incorporation of the moral and ethical principles throughout my daily life). Though I was deconstructing dominant discourses that describe embodiment as a linear process and yoga as a means to control that embodiment, I was still personally challenged with a dramatically changing embodiment and the need for my practice to shift and adapt. I have been chronically ill since I was 10 years old, and I have been dealing with chronic pain related to a spinal condition for nearly a decade. But in September 2021, I was diagnosed with COVID-19, then with post-COVID syndrome. I suddenly found myself resisting the need to adjust my practice to accommodate changes to my breathing, balance, and cognition, all considered important elements of the physical asana and pranayama practice.

It is impossible to examine the teaching and practice of yoga without a deep consideration of the embodied experience of that practice. Yoga is a practice lived in and through our bodies. But as I struggled with illness and found my own body changing, I was challenged to put into practice the work of “queering” and “cripping” the yoga practice, including my own relationship with the yoga practice. I had to confront the ways that I still held onto the notion that health is a moral responsibility and that embodiment is within our direct control – how I was conforming to those dominant discourses. Queercrip theorist Clare (2001) writes:

Our bodies – or more, accurately, what we believe about our bodies – need to change so that they don't become storage sites, traps, for the very oppression we want to eradicate.

For me, this work is about shattering the belief that my body is wrong. (p. 363)

This work – the complex intersections of my experience with pain and illness, my yoga practice, and my post-qualitative analysis of the dominant discourses and power relations in yoga education – became more and more about “shattering the belief that my body is wrong.”

Thinking with queercrip theory was and continues to be an important element of this work. Through its foundations first in poststructuralism, then in queer theory and disability studies, queercrip theory allows me to shatter the normative beliefs and discourses surrounding embodiment. It allows me to think differently about embodiment practices such as yoga, asking different questions and seeing what emerges through the plugging in of theory, experience, and my own body. Similarly, the practice of yoga is itself about becoming, about what arises with the flow of postures, breathwork, and meditation through not only our physical practice but our entire lives. In traditional qualitative research, data are often conceptualized as words spoken to or observed by the researcher. But post-qualitative research allows for an embodied practice of yoga to itself be considered as data – as a source of embodied knowledge. St. Pierre’s (1997) concept of transgressive data includes data arising from dreams, emotions, physical experiences, and our response to the research process.

In the field of Physical Cultural Studies, researchers similarly embrace *movement data*, writing of their own experiences with physical practices and the contexts in which those practices happen (Denison & Markula, 2003). They write of their experience of learning a sport or physical practice (Parrott, 2003), the physical materials that they encounter (Ray, 2019), the spaces where they play or compete (Theberge, 2005), and the other bodies that shape their physical experiences (Bruce, 2003). In Physical Cultural Studies, researchers recognize that it is not enough to write about an embodied practice – it is crucial to experience that practice in our

bodies (Tiihonen, 2003). It would be impossible just to write about yoga; the practice itself is part of the inquiry. That embodied experience then informs our reflection, creating what Denison and Markula (2003) call “moving writing” (p. 1). For example, Stirling (2016) included her yoga practice in her study of loss and grief, journaling about her practice and including pieces of that journal in her writing. Following her example, I kept a journal throughout this research process, reflecting not only on my writing process but on the inquiry I engaged in through my practice of yoga.

The purpose of this chapter is to conduct an embodied, queercrip analysis to answer my third and fourth research questions:

- How do queer and disabled embodiment within the yoga practice resist the dominant discourses in yoga education?
- How might these resistances open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga?

According to Foucault (1977), power is not held by any one person or institution. Instead, it is diffuse and circulates throughout complex networks of relations:

This power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it;’ it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. (p. 27)

We are part of the relations of power, both participating in and resisting them. In Foucault’s (1977/1996) theory of resistance, we resist dominant discourses through our thoughts and our local, day-to-day practices. As Pickett (1996) describes, our resistance “must simultaneously involve concrete agitation and ideological critique” (p. 455). Yoga, as a mind-body practice, can be a means of resistance. In particular, our bodies can themselves be sites of resistance. As

Manning (2007) states, “Our bodies are resistances – to ourselves, to each other, resistances to knowledge, to language, to sensing, as well as to ignorance, to being touched, to being meaningful, to being there” (p. 9). In my personal experience, I both participate in and resist the relations of power and dominant discourses in yoga education. My body can be a resistance to these dominant discourses, particularly through disability and queerness.

In this chapter, I examine my own personal story with yoga and my own embodied experiences, along with those of other yoga practitioners seeking to resist dominant discourses about health and the body in yoga education. I read reflections from yoga teachers and practitioners on sites such as *Decolonizing Yoga* and *Elephant Journal*, which offer a more critical lens on Western yoga teaching and practice. I also read the work of queercrip theorists such as Kafer, Sandahl, and Clare, who all advocate writing of and from the queer and disabled body. I embrace St. Pierre’s (1997) notion of transgressive data, especially embodiment data, as well as Physical Cultural Studies scholars’ notion of moving writing. Plugging in all of these texts reveals an embodied experience that cannot be captured, contained, or explained in easy binaries like healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural. It opens up possibilities for the thinking, teaching, and practice of yoga in a way that resists the dominant discourses that I have deconstructed in previous chapters.

### **Yoga and Embodied Inquiry**

As a practice of movement and breath, yoga is concerned with the body. Yoga in Sanskrit can be translated as “union,” often interpreted as uniting the mind, body, and spirit (or breath). It is impossible to practice yoga without a deep consideration of the body and the complex learning that can take place through the body. And when considering this learning, it is important not to contain the practice of yoga by speaking only of the asana practice. Rather, we can break down

the mind/body binary by acknowledging that meditation, breath, movement, and the philosophical approach of the yamas and niyamas are all part of the mind-body experience. And when I consider “the body” in yoga teaching and practice, I must continually challenge myself to ask whose body I am considering. Ray (2019) writes, “the anatomic map of ‘the’ body represents nobody but is taken to represent *everybody*: a cohesive, intact, unified subject. In this map, bodies are stripped of their individuality, their shapes, sizes, skin, indeed their *surface*” (p. 96, emphasis in original). As I discussed in previous chapters, I have the personal experience of not being included in conversations of “the body.” When yoga teachers tell students that they are “stuck in their story” for considering “their individuality, their shapes, sizes, skin, indeed their *surface*,” they send a message that “the body” is a specific body that is fit for yoga practice.

Often, when we speak of the body, the unspoken implication is that this body is white, cisgender, able-bodied, strong, flexible, and able to perform acrobatic poses such as headstand. Haraway (1991) calls this ideal body the “imagined organic body” – this is the body that we are recalled to, an origin myth of human nature in a pure world before the corruption of technology (p. 154). Within the normative discourses in yoga, the assumption is that any individual is able to align their own body with the ideal imagined organic body through their own hard work and natural lifestyle. But bodies like mine challenge this discourse. As a body modified by technology, I have heard over and over that my body is not “natural,” and is therefore an insult to the practice of yoga. But I continue to practice, and I continue to explore my “unnatural” embodiment through my asana practice. And that practice, read alongside the work of queercrip theorists, allows me to see that such discourses do not acknowledge the inherently unstable and unknowable nature of the body and the way it changes through time and space. Price and Shildrick (2002) argue that “it is not just that any body can ‘break down’ in illness or as the

result of accident, but that, for all, the ‘bits and pieces’ are held together in contingent ways. Final integration is never achieved” (p. 72). I certainly have the experience of a body that feels “held together in contingent ways.” I have had many conversations in the yoga community with someone who says, “You’ve *already* had surgery?” It is clear they worry for what they see as the fixed and permanent decision to add technology to my body. But there is nothing fixed and permanent about the experience of having an artificial joint – each day feels different, each asana practice feels different, and I am more aware of the technology on some days than others. Our bodies are not stable in a clear and measurable way, and our bodies exist in time and space with other bodies, with nature, and with technology in a way that makes it impossible to determine where the imagined organic body ends and the world begins.

Gatens (1999) states, “By drawing attention to the context in which bodies move and recreate themselves, we also draw attention to the complex dialectic between bodies and their environments” (p. 228). It is my intention to draw attention to the context in which bodies move and recreate themselves in the field of yoga education. As I have discussed in previous chapters, power relations in yoga education create and maintain dominant discourses that position yoga teachers and practitioners as self-monitoring, docile bodies who work to individually maintain their healthy, productive, natural state with a practice that is medically proven and validated. But the queer and disabled body resists these discourses, opening up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga. In the next section, I consider how queer and disabled embodiment breaks down the healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural binaries.

### **Embodied Resistance**

Queercrip theory embraces the complexities and contradictions of the embodied experience. Thinking with queercrip theory, I acknowledge that my body can be the source of

both pleasure and pain (even at the same time). I acknowledge that my embodied experiences sometimes cause hardship and that I sometimes wish to transcend my painful embodiment (Wendell, 1993). Such an admission can be part of the complexity of a lived life, rather than a desire to be “normal.” In fact, exploring the sometimes-painful experiences of embodiment can itself be a site for theorizing. Kafer (2013) writes that “I long to hear stories that not only admit limitation, frustration, even failure, but that recognize such failure as ground for theory itself” (p. 141). Throughout my dissertation process, I have been challenged through illness to “admit limitation, frustration, even failure,” acknowledging that there are times when I actively want to change my embodiment (and even “use” my yoga practice to do so), while at the same time theorizing through my ill and disabled body and deconstructing discourses that ask me to change it.

In the following sections, I consider how my own embodied experience resists the healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural binaries. I read my experience alongside the work of queercrip theorists who deconstruct and point out the inherent contradictions in these binaries.

### ***Resisting the Healthy/Unhealthy Binary***

As I considered the dominant discourses of health in yoga education, my journal also indicates my experience of physical pain and a new illness (post-COVID syndrome) at the same time as reading and writing about yoga and health. I had the perhaps contradictory experience of wanting to be “healthier” and being frustrated with illness while simultaneously considering the way that discourses of health constrain bodies like mine in the yoga practice. In the yoga classes I have encountered in the past, health is positioned as a measurable, achievable goal that is within the individual’s control and that is therefore the individual’s responsibility. But when I consider the idea of health with any scrutiny, it starts to fall apart. As Berlant (2011) asks, “Is

health a biological condition, the availability for work, or a scene of longevity?” (p. 109). We all believe that we know health when we see it, but it is unlikely to come across an agreed-upon version of health, even throughout the yoga community.

In their challenge of the discourse of bodies as stable, knowable objects, queercrip theorists also question the healthy/unhealthy binary. A body that cannot fully be contained, measured, or controlled also cannot be “made” to be healthy. Bodies like mine that inhabit a blurred space between the healthy/unhealthy binary point out the inherent instability of that binary. Theorists considering embodiment also point out that in the healthy/unhealthy binary, as in all binaries, a hierarchy emerges, where bodies considered healthy are placed above those considered unhealthy. Metzl (2010) discusses how health becomes a type of morality, and how “‘health’ is a term replete with value judgments, hierarchies, and blind assumptions that speak as much about power and privilege as they do about well-being” (p. 1-2). In making health a moral, personal responsibility, and yoga a part of that responsibility, we hold up the binary of healthy/unhealthy, placing able bodies as superior to disabled ones. Throughout my journal, I noted the experience of practicing asana on my own, due to the pandemic, rather than in groups. While I love practicing in community, I did find that not having my body “on display” allowed me to live and move in a new way, not always considering how my body looks in asana and whether anyone is going to be suspicious of my experiences. And as a teacher, I instructed yoga courses online for the first time, noting how the experience of not seeing my students in poses changed not only the way that I demonstrated and presented asana, but the relative emphasis that I placed on all of the eight limbs of yoga.

A queercrip approach to embodied practice can challenge the healthy/unhealthy binary and the discourse of health as morality and as personal responsibility. Taylor’s (2018) words

were particularly powerful in my own practice: “Equally damaging is our insistence that all bodies should be healthy. Health is not a state we owe the world. We are not less valuable, worthy, or loveable because we are not healthy” (p. 85-86). Even as I practice asana in part to manage pain, I attempt to embrace these words and to deconstruct the discourse that says that health is our responsibility.

In particular, as I analyzed research into yoga’s effectiveness, I found myself needing to work with and through the visceral, embodied reaction that I had to the suspicion of participant experiences in those studies, especially the way that participant pain was measured and treated. Participants in yoga research often complete several questionnaires about pain, self-efficacy, and fear, implying that researchers believe pain can be measured in a scientifically validated way. As I examined these tools, I read statements such as “Because of my back, I try to get other people to do things for me” and “Because of my back I am not doing any of the jobs that I usually do around the house” (Roland & Morris, 1983). I realized that the ways I need to care for myself (even the ways I practice ahimsa, the yama of non-harming) are considered to be self-serving and a burden to others. I have needed to ask for help with certain household tasks for years. And in the experience of COVID-19 and post-COVID syndrome, I was actively trying to figure out what I could do, both physically and mentally, and where I needed to ask for help.

Through a queercrip approach to yoga and to health, I can see that such interdependencies are part of a lived life. The paradox of embracing a non-normative body and at times being frustrated, in pain, and despairing is a part of a complex, embodied experience (Wendell, 1993). And the shifting nature of the body is itself grounds for theory (Kafer, 2013). As I moved with and considered the healthy/unhealthy binary, I did so informed as well by the natural/unnatural binary. In my experience, the two are deeply intertwined.

### ***Resisting the Natural/Unnatural Binary***

In my embodied experience of the yoga practice, the healthy/unhealthy binary cannot be disentangled from the natural/unnatural binary. Throughout my experience of yoga teacher training, I felt the emergence of two interweaving and at times contradictory narratives: “It is your responsibility to be as healthy as possible,” and “Your body is perfect. Don’t change it.” These two narratives seem at first to be at odds. How can you make your body as healthy as possible without changing it? It seems that the demand to not change your body is brought up when anything is considered unnatural – don’t change your body if that means integrating technology or if it means changing the anatomy that we associate with gender. But do change your body if it means practicing yoga for balance, flexibility, or weight loss.

I find myself constantly navigating this normative discourse of a healthy, natural body – as well as the images and subjectivities it produces. In the normative discourses of yoga education, people seeking to change their gendered appearance or pursue physical or hormonal changes to align with their gender identity are often labeled as unnatural, as not loving themselves, or as not respecting their bodies because of their use of medication and/or surgery. On the website *Decolonizing Yoga*, yoga teacher Nick Kreiger (2013b) writes about his experience with this discourse, pointing out, “I’ve heard quite a few stories about yogis saying that if we trans people could just accept ourselves then we wouldn’t need to transition” (Section 5). Speaking of this supposed “naturalness” of gender, Butler (1988) states that “the authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness” (p. 522). In yoga education, we have become “entranced by our own fictions” of a natural body being a cisgender one. Similarly, the disabled or ill, who are positioned on the unhealthy side of the healthy/unhealthy binary, are then labeled as unnatural if

they seek medical treatment, take medication, or use assistive technologies. We are encouraged or pressured to use yoga, essential oils, or other “natural” interventions.

Blackman (2008) points out that in dominant discourses about health and nature, we tend to equate “natural” with “authentic” – someone living “naturally” is viewed as being true to themselves. Queer and disabled embodiment can challenge this notion and the way it creates hierarchies as cisgender and able bodies are placed over queer and disabled ones as more natural or more authentic. As someone whose gender identity shifts daily, I find that embracing my gender (and accepting myself) means accepting a fluidity of experience that does not fit neatly into a binary. Similarly, my experience of a disabled and technologically modified body is not an experience of being “unnatural.” Instead, it has made me more aware of the blurred boundary between self and other. In my asana practice, I am aware of the way that I interact with the yoga mat and other props, with the clothing I wear, with the room I practice in, and with other bodies in community. As queer and disabled embodiment breaks down and reveals the instabilities of the healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural binaries, we have an opportunity to open up possibilities that challenge the normative assumptions about bodies practicing yoga.

### **Embodied Possibilities**

Yoga is an embodied philosophy that I believe embraces the richness and complexity of an ever-changing lived experience. But so often, dominant discourses in yoga education tell us that a “yoga body” is a thin, white, able, cisgender, heterosexual one and that other bodies are unhealthy and unnatural and violate the purity of the yoga practice. We’re told that we’re “stuck in our story” when we reflect on our lived experiences, and we can experience yoga as a tool to constrain and make certain subjectivities not permissible. Ford (2016) reflects on her experience of this dominant discourse as a queer, black yoga teacher:

One tool of hegemony is to disavow the body as a site of knowledge. By separating one's knowing from one's being, dominant forces can better access oppressed people to internalize standards of morality, success, love, beauty, and so on that serve the interests of those in power. For queer, these and other standards often become central obstacles based on societal forces that mark queer as deviant. (p. 31)

Yoga teachers like Ford refuse to see their bodies and those of their students as deviant. Their experience, as well as my own, challenges the dominant discourses of health and purity. We resist the dominant discourse that seeks to normalize and constrain bodies and in doing so, create new possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga. As yoga teachers, we are part of the relations of power in the yoga community. Foucault (1977/1996) points out that within those relations of power, our work is to “struggle against the forms of power that transform [us] into its object and instrument” (p. 208). In this section, I consider the work of yoga teachers and practitioners who are struggling against these forms of power by seeking to create a more inclusive practice. These yoga teachers can help us to “queer” and “crip” our thinking, teaching, and practice of yoga and therefore offer new possibilities for bodies practicing yoga as well as for the practice itself.

### ***Transforming Yoga Spaces***

As I reflected on and analyzed my yoga teacher training experience, I found myself writing and reflecting often on the instruction to “be a pure vessel” of the yoga practice (Keach, 2003, p. 126). I thought about the narrative of yoga teacher training as transformative and the implication that this transformation would create a specific body – a “pure vessel.” The dominant discourses about the body in yoga education position individuals as in need of transformation. But yoga teachers and practitioners are challenging this narrative, asking instead how we can

transform the *spaces* where we teach and practice yoga to create a more inclusive practice for all bodies. Berila (2016) describes the way that “growing conversations on social media point to the ways that many yoga teachers teach to that stereotypical body, leading practices that are inaccessible to many people who do not fit that image” (p. 2). Yoga practitioners are sharing their experiences of being excluded by yoga instructors and are asking for a more inclusive practice, rather than seeking to change their own bodies to fit into the preexisting structure. And yoga teachers are responding by offering classes specifically designed as safe spaces for practitioners of color (Barkataki, 2015; Haddix, 2016) or the LGBTQ community (Danis, 2018). Others are training in and offering trauma-informed yoga classes (Catlett & Bunn, 2016). In a Foucauldian (1977/1966) approach, resistance is focused on changing the structures, institutions, and conditions rather than individuals. Yoga practitioners, through their social media demands for more inclusive classes, are practicing resistance. And yoga teachers are resisting dominant discourses through their curriculum and pedagogy.

Yoga instructors are also reconsidering the role of hands-on assists in the yoga practice, asking, “Does the yoga world seek to bring us into harmony with our bodies or to control them?” (Crow, 2020). In this analysis, I have analyzed my personal experience with hands-on assists and the way that I often feel like my body is being corrected, controlled, or judged, rather than assisted or supported. Control and judgment may not have been the intention of those teachers as they sought to support my practice; but as yoga teachers consider the impact of trauma on the body, we can further reflect on what we may be unintentionally communicating when we touch other bodies. The dominant approach to hands-on assists reinforces a binary of expert/novice, where the expert (the yoga teacher or teacher training instructor) is the authority on the bodies of practitioners. Within the dominant discourse, yoga teachers shape their subjectivities as experts

who know when the body of a yoga participant will be safer or can “go deeper” into a pose. Yoga practitioners and teachers are questioning and resisting this discourse through practices requiring that consent become a part of the process. Through their resistance, they also break down the expert/novice binary, pointing out that participants are the experts when it comes to their own bodies. An emerging discourse of consent in hands-on assists asks yoga teachers to shift our subjectivities, embracing the role of novice when it comes to the bodies of our students.

### *Queering and Crippling Yoga*

When we embrace queer and disabled embodiment as a site for theory and practice, we create yoga spaces that seek to include rather than constrain bodies. We also open up to a richer, more complex practice of yoga and allow yoga to guide our work of resisting dominant discourses. Krieger (2013a) reflects on his experience as a transgender yoga practitioner and teacher, writing about how “yoga held the promise of something radical, an unlearning, a remembering, a dismantling of all that we’d constructed about ourselves and our world” (para. 4). The philosophies of yoga can allow us to challenge and unlearn deeply ingrained narratives about bodies and embodiment.

In particular, I have been working with the balance of ahimsa (non-harming, one of the yamas) and tapas (discipline or fire, one of the niyamas) in my own practice of “queering” and “crippling” the way that I have been taught to think about bodies, embodiment, and yoga. Ahimsa may be translated as non-harming or non-violence (Patanjali, 1978/2012). It is the first of the moral principles or restraints. In my own practice, I have been working to ask myself which aspects of my practice cause harm to myself and others. I seek to find a practice that not only supports my own body but that also challenges the way yoga can be used to cause harm. Through this practice, I have come to see that the way I think and talk about my own body (for example,

through my frustration about my current struggles with balance) reflects where I have internalized dominant discourses about what bodies “should” be able to do. I have also been working with the *niyama* (or observance) of *tapas*. *Tapas* may be translated as austerity or discipline, though a more literal translation is “to burn” (Satchidananda, 1978/2012, p. 138). In reflecting on where I cause harm and in seeking a yoga practice that is not harmful to anyone, it is necessary to “stand in the fire” of discomfort. This dissertation process has been uncomfortable at many points, as I have remembered and worked with difficult situations I have encountered in the yoga community. I have also needed to confront where I am participating in maintaining dominant discourses in yoga education. And dissertation writing is itself a form of *tapas* as I undertake the process of plugging in, not knowing exactly what will emerge.

Queer and disabled embodiment also embraces the present moment in a way that can enrich our teaching and practice of yoga. In my navigation of pain and illness throughout this process, I have learned to move with what arises, as my embodiment is unpredictable and as each moment is different from the last. Krieger (2013a) also explores how:

Yoga is queer in its notion of time. To be truly present, even for a second, without past or future hovering, to connect into the cosmic oneness, is to subvert all that seems permanent, and the most formidable institution of false permanence is gender. (para. 13)

Yoga “queers” and “crips” our notions of time, asking us to think differently about permanence, predictability, and control. And the queer and disabled body in turn “queers” and “crips” yoga teaching and practice. As Kampman et.al. (2015) state, “Wisdom about the role of the body in people’s lives – its fragility, power, and ability within disability – is knowledge that perhaps one without severe injuries cannot quite reach” (p. 292). The queer and disabled body is not just one that we should “allow” into yoga spaces in order to be more inclusive; rather, we should embrace

this and all bodies as sites of wisdom. When yoga teachers acknowledge the embodied wisdom that students bring to the practice, they begin to step out of the role of expert. They challenge the dominant discourse of yoga as a measurable, controllable practice undertaken to shape bodies into a normalized ideal and instead encourage students to listen to and learn from their embodied experience in the present moment.

## **Conclusion**

As I conclude, I return to my research questions, considering how queer and disabled embodiment (my own and that of other writers and yoga practitioners) resists the dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education and how these resistances open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga.

### ***How do queer and disabled embodiment within the yoga practice resist the dominant discourses in yoga education?***

Foucault (1977/1966), reflecting on the process of resistance, states:

We strike and knock against the most solid obstacles; the system cracks at another point; we persist. It seems that we're winning, but then the institution is rebuilt; we must start again. It is a long struggle; it is repetitive and seemingly incoherent. But the system it opposes, as well as the power exercised through the system, supplies its unity. (p. 230)

Resistance is an ongoing process, as we are all embedded in the relations and structures of power. In Foucault's approach to resistance, we continuously resist dominant discourses through our daily embodied lives and practices, working to change structures and institutions rather than change our own bodies to fit existing structures. In the field of yoga education, queer and disabled embodiment resists dominant discourses of knowable, stable, measurable bodies completing a yoga practice with the intent of controlling and managing embodiment. Queer and

disabled yoga practitioners know what it is to live and move outside of easy binary definitions like masculine/feminine, healthy/unhealthy, and natural/unnatural. Our experience of continually becoming and of living in the “in-between” reveals the inherent instability of these binaries. As these binaries that shape the dominant way we teach and practice yoga break down, we open up possibilities in how we can think, teach, and practice yoga.

***How might these resistances open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga?***

When we challenge binary assumptions like healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural, we can create new possibilities not only for who is welcome to practice yoga, but for the practice itself. When we refuse to view embodiment as linear, predictable, and controllable, we embrace yoga’s philosophy of present-moment awareness. We seek out and create practice spaces that embrace an approach of non-harming and we embrace discomfort as we work to create those spaces. “Queering” and “cripping” yoga opens up the possibility to see yoga not as a means to control our bodies and to fit them into existing structures. Instead, we can view yoga as an act of resistance against those structures. Rather than trying to control our bodies by physically pushing them to their limits, we can practice not harming our bodies which can lead us to point out and challenge social structures that cause harm. Yoga teachers, too, in their resistance, seek to work with their students’ present embodied experiences, rather than attempting to use yoga to change students’ bodies into an ideal. They work from an ethic of non-harming, creating classes and practice spaces that are welcoming and accessible to all bodies. In doing so, they challenge the subjectivity of yoga teacher as expert, learning from their students and embracing discomfort.

In the next chapter, as I conclude my dissertation, I carry my embodied learning and my work of plugging in to some tentative offerings about how we can consider new possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga.

## Chapter 8

### Yoga as Union: Tentative Integrations

In my dissertation, I conducted a post-qualitative inquiry into the field of yoga education, thinking with poststructuralism and queercrip theory to reveal the power relations and dominant discourses that shape the image of a healthy, natural, gendered body performing a physical asana practice. As I conclude, I return to the concept of yoga as union that I introduced in the first chapter, seeking to weave together my analytic work and revisit what arose through my process of plugging in. I also offer tentative recommendations, acknowledging that there is still much analytic and embodied work to be done in considering how we can resist the dominant discourses in yoga education.

#### Significance and Implications: Returning to My Research Questions

Five analytic questions guided my post-qualitative inquiry. In this section, I revisit each of the questions in turn, weaving together what arose through my process of plugging in. I emphasize the significance and implications of my analysis throughout.

#### *How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of health and embodiment in yoga education?*

No individual or group “holds” the power in the yoga community (Foucault, 1977). Rather, power moves through a network of complex relations that together produce dominant discourses about the body, embodiment, and health in yoga education. One element of these power relations is the medical research into yoga’s effectiveness. In Chapters 3 and 4, I considered peer-reviewed medical research about one specific condition (chronic non-specific lower back pain), but researchers are examining yoga’s effectiveness for a wide variety of medical conditions. These studies contribute to the dominant discourses of health and

embodiment in yoga education. They produce researchers as those who have the authority to know what is best for the body, both the body of the individual participant and the body of the population. And they produce yoga practitioners who must comply with a program to “return” to health in a natural, cost-effective way.

These flows of power throughout medical research about yoga produce dominant discourses of measurability, control, individualism, and independence. Yoga becomes a manageable, predictable intervention that individuals can and should undertake in order to create healthy, manageable, non-burdensome bodies. As yoga is positioned as a natural intervention (often in contrast to, rather than in concert with, more traditional Western medical interventions), discourses of morality and purity become intertwined with those of measurability and control. The yoga practice becomes constrained to a predictable intervention undertaken to control embodiment and manage symptoms, placing the responsibility for health on a docile, self-monitoring population of yoga practitioners. Research into yoga’s effectiveness plays an important part in the relations of power, flowing into the way that yoga instructors are trained and the way they go on to teach their own yoga classes. Paradoxically, yoga is held up in a discourse of validity because of the medical research “proving” its effectiveness while simultaneously being contrasted with Western medical interventions in a discourse of purity.

Relations of power in the yoga education field are also influenced by the process through which yoga practitioners seek to become yoga teachers. Just as researchers don’t “hold” the power in the field of research into yoga’s effectiveness, no single organization “holds” the power in the field of yoga teacher training. In Chapters 5 and 6, I considered the complex relations of power that move through yoga teacher training programs. Yoga Alliance, the organization that credentials most yoga teacher training programs in the United States, is an important part of the

relations of power through the 200 Hour Core Curriculum and the relationships between Yoga Alliance, the studios offering training programs, and yoga teachers who may choose to register with Yoga Alliance. The relations of power surrounding Yoga Alliance and yoga teacher training programs produce dominant discourses of yoga as a physical practice and yoga teachers as “advanced” or expert practitioners, who are able to complete rigorous asana practice and to live according to a yogic lifestyle. Much like the dominant discourses within yoga research, in teacher training programs, yoga teachers often learn that yoga is an individual responsibility, as individuals learn to “be a pure vessel” of the yoga practice and are “rewarded” with good health (Keach, 2003, p. 126).

***How do these discourses create an image of a healthy, natural, gendered body in yoga education?***

This discourse of yoga as a healthy, natural intervention pervades yoga practice and teaching in the West, though it may be called by different names within different contexts. Where researchers speak about yoga as “effective,” many yoga teachers and products frame yoga as “healing.” Yoga teachers write books called *Healing our Backs with Yoga* (Schwartz, 2018), create YouTube videos called “Yoga to Heal Stress” (Mischler, 2019), and post articles called “Building a Strong Foundation for Cancer Healing” (Boucher, 2007). While these individual teachers may acknowledge that healing is an ongoing process or that embodiment cannot be completely controlled through yoga, the implication is still that yoga (defined as asana practice) has the power to completely “heal” the practitioner. And of course, that someone wants to be “healed,” which seems to be defined as being returned to “normal.” A body practicing yoga comes to be seen as healthy, pain-free, and independent, “using,” yoga to control their embodiment and to contribute to a healthy population. And yoga teachers become those who

have the ability to “heal” others through their knowledge of yoga asana and the “pure and healthy” yoga lifestyle.

The fact that yoga “heals” proves that it “works,” and therefore, that someone should practice it. “If these behaviors are healthy,” this dominant discourse asks, “Why *wouldn't* someone engage in them? Who *wouldn't* want to be healthy? Who *wouldn't* want to feel better?” The responsibility of achieving and maintaining health is placed securely on the individual, negating any reflection on the societal responsibility to provide access to healthcare, environmental safety, or regulations for safe workspaces. And yoga is the tool used to achieve a healthy, natural body rather than an approach that may lead practitioners to demand better treatment of people with disabilities, refuse binaries like healthy/unhealthy and normal/not-normal, or open up possibilities to live and think differently. Yoga as a complex philosophical approach, yoga as a collective experience, or yoga as a politically engaged or resistant practice are not included. Including any of these approaches to yoga would disrupt the dominant discourse of yoga as an individual healthy behavior that contributes to a productive population. Complex relations of power maintain yoga education as a way for practitioners to be “healed” of individual health concerns and to be “returned to normal.” These relations of power also maintain yoga teachers as those with expert status, who are able to heal themselves and others.

The dominant discourse of yoga as a healthy, natural intervention constrains both the bodies that can practice yoga and the practice of yoga itself. Only able, healthy, natural bodies are framed as “yoga bodies,” and the practice of yoga becomes a physical asana practice intended to regulate and manage our embodiment, increasing our productivity and decreasing our need to rely on others. Yoga teacher training regulations and programs operate within this dominant discourse, both shaping it and in turn being shaped by it. Yoga teacher training

curriculum standards center around the practice of asana, and yoga teacher training programs emphasize the role of yoga as a healthy, natural intervention to maintain a pure, strong, and productive body. These discourses contribute to the image of a yoga teacher as a specific type of body. When my classmates and I were taught “how to be people,” the implication was that we were to be certain types of people – white, thin, able-bodied practitioners who live in accordance with a biologically prescribed gender, are able to afford expensive yoga classes and organic food, and who do not need medications or surgery.

***How do the discursive norms of a pure and moral gendered body in yoga education produce the subjectivities of yoga teachers?***

Yoga teachers shape themselves and create their subjectivities according to the “truth” of the dominant discourses in yoga education (Foucault, 1981/2017). As yoga teachers complete their teacher training programs, they are exposed to the discourse of yoga as a healthy, natural intervention and the image of a “yoga body” as a thin, white, cisgender, heterosexual, able body “using” yoga to control and manage embodiment. Yoga teachers, then, step into subjectivities of those who have control over their own embodiment, maintaining a healthy, natural body, and being “qualified” to instruct others to do the same. They take on the subjectivities of advanced practitioner, healer, and expert.

Compliance with the norms of a healthy, gendered body requires yoga teachers to adopt certain observable and measurable behaviors that demonstrate their “advanced” form of yoga practice. Through their teacher training programs, yoga teachers create their subjectivities as advanced practitioners within a rigorous physical training. A yoga teacher becomes, above all, a practitioner with a “deepened practice” – one who is able to endure challenging asana for several hours each day.

Yoga teachers also take on the subjectivity of experts about the yoga practice and yoga lifestyle. In my yoga teacher training experience, the trainers positioned themselves as the ultimate experts as they took on the role of the “teacher of teachers.” Through that experience, my classmates and I observed yoga teachers as those who deeply understand the requirements of the yoga practice and lifestyle and who used their own lives as lessons about how to be a yoga teacher and practitioner. The yoga teacher as expert is qualified to comment upon the practice and lifestyle of others, especially those who are “less advanced.” The trainers observed and remarked upon nearly every aspect of our lives, asking whether we were eating organic food and avoiding coffee, questioning whether we needed the medications we were prescribed and the surgeries we had undergone, and commenting when anyone didn’t act in accordance with their view of a biologically determined gender. The subjectivity of expert involves the embracing of the normative discourses about bodies and health, and it also involves enforcing those norms and asking others to comply with them.

In embracing the subjectivities of advanced practitioner and expert, yoga teachers comply with norms about health and the role of yoga in maintaining health. The dominant discourse of yoga as valid, proven, and effective within scientific research is often expressed in the yoga community as a discourse of healing. Yoga teachers can then take on the subjectivity of healers. The yoga teacher as healer seeks to create classes and practices through which participants will be healed of pain, illness, and injury. Within this discourse, the participants do not heal themselves, and the yoga practice does not heal them. Rather, the yoga teacher has the expertise to heal participants through their advanced asana practice, knowledge of the “natural” lifestyle, and use of hands-on assists.

*How do queer and disabled embodiment within the yoga practice resist the dominant discourses in yoga education?*

In Chapter 7, I considered my own embodied experience of the yoga practice, along with those of other queer and disabled teachers and practitioners. I found that being queer and disabled, I often have the experience of “inhabiting a borderland between the acceptable and unacceptable” (Long, 2018, p. 82). Living in this “borderland,” being considered acceptable in some contexts and unacceptable in others, shows the inherent instability of easy categorizations and binaries such as masculine/feminine, healthy/unhealthy, and natural/unnatural. This embracing of embodiment as a fluid, non-linear, and at times contradictory experience challenges the dominant discourses about health and the body in yoga education. Research about yoga positions it as a definable, measurable, medical intervention used to create a productive and independent body. Queer and disabled embodiment challenges this discourse through the embodied knowledge of unstable, immeasurable bodies. Embracing interdependence, accepting our need to at times rely on others, and integrating the assistance of technology in our bodies challenges the binary of self/other and the narrative that our bodies are easily controllable through a yoga intervention.

Queer and disabled yoga instructors also challenge what it means to teach yoga. In the dominant discourses flowing through Yoga Alliance and yoga teacher training programs, yoga is a rigorous physical practice and yoga teachers are those who have the physical ability to complete that practice. And yoga teachers in these discourses are also self-monitoring bodies who use yoga to control their embodiment, living a “natural” lifestyle (one that is shaped around a specific biological definition of gender and does not include the medical interventions necessary to many people with disabilities). Being a queer and disabled yoga teacher resists these

discourses, opening up space for all bodies to practice yoga and opening up possibilities for the practice itself.

***How might these resistances open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga?***

Yoga teachers and practitioners who challenge binary assumptions like healthy/unhealthy and natural/unnatural are creating new possibilities not only for who is welcome to practice yoga, but for the practice itself. Yoga instructors who point out how the dominant way we practice yoga constrains and limits the bodies who can practice are seeking to create welcoming and safe yoga communities (Ballard & Kripalani, 2016; Moonaz, 2016). But we are also pointing out how the practice itself is constrained by binary oppositions like masculine/feminine, healthy/unhealthy, and natural/unnatural. In refusing to view embodiment as linear, predictable, and controllable, we embrace yoga's philosophy of present-moment awareness. When we "queer" and "crip" yoga, we open up the possibility to see yoga not as a means to control our bodies, to make them more productive, or to fit them into existing structures. Instead, we view yoga as an act of resistance against those structures and "think with" yoga about our complex and ever-changing embodiment.

**Contributions**

***Contributions to Inquiry***

As the study and practice of yoga becomes more popular, more Western qualitative and quantitative researchers are taking up yoga as a subject of inquiry. My study challenges normative research about yoga through a post-qualitative approach, and through thinking with the queer and disabled body. In Chapters 3 and 4, I considered scientific research into yoga, specifically concerning yoga as a treatment intervention. While I analyzed quantitative research for one specific medical diagnosis, researchers have considered the effectiveness of yoga for a

wide variety of physical and non-physical benefits. My analysis revealed many normative discourses about bodies and health in these studies, such as discourses of measurement, efficiency, validity, control, individualism, morality, purity, and independence. I discussed how these studies create and maintain relations of power that place researchers as authorities over the embodied experiences of participants, and that place participants as bodies that are in danger of not complying with a program that will decrease their burden on others.

Throughout my inquiry, I also considered the way that dominant discourses in yoga education contribute to an image of a “yoga body” – a thin, white, cisgender, heterosexual, able body performing challenging asana. Researchers studying the portrayal of yoga in the media have also explored the way that this body appears on Instagram (Hinz et.al., 2021; Lacasse et.al., 2019), *Yoga Journal* (Markula, 2014), women’s magazines, (Bhalla & Moscovitz, 2020), and advertisements (Blaine, 2016). While many researchers have found that this specific image of a “yoga body” is pervasive across platforms, they have not considered how this body influences and is influenced by the dominant discourses in yoga education or how yoga teachers shape their subjectivities in relation to this norm. Additionally, through their process of “collecting” data about bodies on Instagram or in *Yoga Journal*, these researchers reinforce the idea that there is a stable, knowable body that can be captured, measured, and quantified by researchers.

Through the process of plugging in to queercrip theory, my inquiry challenges the notion that the body can ever be fully understood, captured, or contained. This inquiry contributes to the work of yoga teachers, practitioners, and writers who are resisting the dominant discourses about race (Barkataki, 2015; Haddix, 2016), weight (Klein, 2012), gender identity (Ballard & Kripalani, 2016; Krieger, 2013b), and sexuality (Danis, 2018) in yoga education. Like these yoga teachers and scholars, I took up my own embodied experience as a queer and disabled yoga

teacher and practitioner as inquiry. This inquiry furthers this work through a post-qualitative approach of thinking with theory, embodiment, and an assemblage of texts to open up possibilities for thinking and practicing yoga.

My study also contributes to the field of post-qualitative inquiry. In resisting the notion of a stable, knowable subject and stable, knowable data, I have opened up possibilities to think differently about both yoga and inquiry. I embraced a complex assemblage of texts, including yoga teacher training curriculum, pedagogy, teaching materials, normative research about yoga, and coverage of yoga in the media. I also included in my analysis St. Pierre's (1997) concept of transgressive data and Denison and Markula's (2003) concept of movement data. The process of plugging all of these texts into poststructuralism and queercrip theory was not a pre-selected method; rather, I allowed myself to be open to the experience of inquiry.

### ***Contributions to Yoga Education***

As yoga teachers, we create our classes and teach our students within these discourses of healthy, natural, able, gendered bodies actively taking part in a manageable, measurable practice. I encourage individual yoga instructors to consider how we participate in maintaining these dominant discourses and how we may also resist them. As we plan and teach our classes, how are we centering a "normal" body? How can we challenge that approach by opening up the practice for all bodies? Within our yoga classes, we can examine and shift our language practices. For example, we can avoid drawing attention to gender based on our assumptions of our students' identities. We can describe and modify asana without comments such as "this pose is harder for guys." We can offer modifications to asana as a variety of options rather than saying, "if you *can*, do this pose, and if you *can't*, here's an alternative." Yoga studios and other organizations offering yoga classes can also consider whether their physical spaces are

accessible, whether their classes are open to all bodies (and their teachers trained to accommodate all bodies), and whether they are engaging in a ranking system by offering “levels” of yoga classes that treat bodies as knowable and categorizable.

Additionally, I hope that my analysis of the Yoga Alliance 200-Hour Core Curriculum and yoga teacher training programs will help those leading such programs to consider the role of teacher training in creating and maintaining dominant discourses about bodies, embodiment, and health in the yoga community. If yoga teacher training is almost entirely asana-focused, and if a majority of the training requires future yoga teachers to complete physically rigorous asana for hours a day, those teachers will learn that a practice of yoga is equivalent to practicing challenging postures and that the teaching of yoga is simply an advanced form of that practice. Instead, I recommend a focus on yoga education as *education* and programs centered around the teaching of all bodies. In the following section, I offer recommendations to Yoga Alliance for the improvement of the 200-Hour Core Curriculum for beginning yoga teachers. Following that, I deconstruct these recommendations and consider how the yoga community can challenge the dominance of Yoga Alliance in the field of yoga teacher training.

**Yoga Alliance.** Within the structure of the Yoga Alliance 200-Hour Core Curriculum, I recommend several changes to the curriculum and pedagogy. The current 200 required hours are broken into the following categories:

1. 75 hours of Techniques, Training, and Practice: Asana, pranayama and subtle body, meditation
2. 30 hours of Anatomy and Physiology (20 of which may be completed online):  
Anatomy, physiology, biomechanics

3. 30 hours of Yoga Humanities (20 of which may be completed online): History, philosophy, ethics
4. 50 hours of Professional Essentials: Teaching methodology, professional development, practice teaching practicum (Yoga Alliance, 2020e).

The remaining 15 hours are electives that must fall under one of the four categories listed above. Within this structure, I recommend a decrease in the amount of hours spent on Techniques, Training, and Practice, and an increase in hours spent on Professional Essentials. The current division of hours encourages the subjectivity of yoga teacher as advanced practitioner, implying that in order to become a yoga teacher, a trainee must simply perform many hours of asana. Instead, I recommend encouraging yoga teacher trainees to think of themselves as teachers and explore what that (perhaps new) subjectivity will mean for their practice. I also recommend an additional category of Trauma Informed Practice and Equity in Yoga. Yoga practitioners are pointing out that yoga teachers often teach only to one body, and teacher training programs are a crucial part of changing that discourse (Berila, 2016). Currently, Yoga Alliance has a Statement of Equity in Yoga, but that statement is not reflected in the curriculum for new yoga teachers (Yoga Alliance, 2020a). Instead of implying that equity is important or referring to trauma-informed practice and discussion of equity as “ethics” or “professional essentials,” Yoga Alliance should show a commitment to equity by explicitly devoting training hours to these topics. These discussions should be ongoing and an integral part of the yoga teacher training program and should include explicit conversations about race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and body size.

In addition to the changes to the curriculum, I also advocate a change in Yoga Alliance’s lead trainer requirement. Currently, 150 of the 200 hours in the program must be taught by one

lead trainer, who has registered with Yoga Alliance with a RYT-500 status (Yoga Alliance, 2020e). This lead trainer must have attended at least two Yoga Alliance approved teacher training programs and paid the application and annual fees to maintain their certification. In each program, future yoga teachers are only hearing one voice throughout a majority of their training (likely a thin, white, cisgender, able-bodied voice). This requirement centers the voices of those who have been able to afford multiple yoga teacher training programs and reinforces the subjectivity of yoga teacher as expert. Students in the teacher training program will learn that being a yoga teacher (especially an “advanced” yoga teacher who is able to train new teachers) means having expertise in everything associated with yoga, including asana, anatomy, history, and teaching methodologies. I recommend an elimination of this requirement to allow for a team teaching approach that allows students to hear more voices and that allows more space for diverse trainers within each teacher training program.

**Challenging Yoga Alliance.** In the previous section, I considered ways that the Yoga Alliance 200-Hour Core Curriculum can change in order to decrease focus on asana and increase focus on teaching, trauma-informed practice, and equity. My intention with those recommendations is to challenge the dominant discourses in yoga education that position yoga teachers as advanced practitioners and as experts in everything related to yoga. However, these recommendations still allow for the dominance of Yoga Alliance within the power relations of yoga education. They still assume that 200 Hours is the correct period of training and that individual lineages and programs should not challenge that assumption. In this section, I step back from the specific curriculum and consider ways to challenge the power relations surrounding Yoga Alliance and the way that those power relations limit who is able to pursue yoga teacher training.

Yoga teacher training programs in the United States are not currently regulated at the federal or state level, and registration with Yoga Alliance is not an official requirement. However, within the current structure of yoga education in the United States, registration with Yoga Alliance is the norm. Registration with Yoga Alliance is an expense for both the yoga studio offering the program as well as the yoga teachers who complete the program, limiting who can offer programs and who can participate in them. Structural changes are needed within the field of yoga education in order to make yoga teacher training more accessible to everyone. Individual yoga studios can offer scholarships in order to make programs more affordable. They can also offer cohorts in locations other than the yoga studio to make the programs more accessible and comfortable to all bodies. Additionally, I recommend offering yoga teacher training programs in educational spaces other than traditional yoga studios, which are often expensive and historically exclusive. For example, by offering a yoga teacher training program at a community college, students would be able to apply for financial aid.

### ***Contributions to Educational Leadership***

Historically, yoga classes have been offered in traditional “yoga spaces” such as yoga studios. But more and more, yoga, meditation, and other mindfulness practices are becoming a part of K-12 and higher education, as schools, districts, colleges, and universities implement mindfulness programs for students and employees. These programs offer opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to learn about and explore a mind-body practice such as yoga and to think with that mind-body practice about their teaching and learning.

It is important that as educational institutions adopt these programs, they don’t just embrace the dominant discourses of productivity and docility. As yoga programs become a part of education, those implementing such programs should ask themselves whether the goal is to

create docile bodies. For example, some researchers into yoga programs in elementary schools ask whether yoga can help to manage the “willful embodiment” of children, essentially making them more docile (Rashedi & Schonert-Reichl, 2019). As educators, we need to ask whether we are trying to create more docile students and more productive employees. We also need to consider whether we are placing the responsibility for health and well-being onto individual teachers and students (by encouraging them to comply with a mindfulness program), or whether we are open to creating an environment that itself supports mindfulness and contemplation.

### **Areas for Future Inquiry**

In my post-qualitative dissertation, I considered the dominant discourses about embodiment in yoga and specifically explored the way that queer and disabled embodiment can resist these discourses and open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of yoga. In many ways, this inquiry is only the beginning of the work that can be done to think with theory about yoga education. I encourage researchers seeking to study yoga and its effectiveness to consider whether they are using yoga in an attempt to create docile, productive workers. Are they suspicious of the lived experiences of others, especially of bodies in pain? Do they assume that there is such a thing as a “normal” body and life, and do they seek to “return” participants to that norm through yoga? Can they instead think with theory about these norms and how the practice of yoga can challenge them?

I also encourage yoga teachers and practitioners who encounter this research to ask ourselves whether the research that we’re citing constrains the bodies of yoga practitioners or the practice itself. Does it make yoga a definable, measurable intervention that can control the embodiment of others? How does such an assumption impact the lived experiences of yoga practitioners? In my dissertation, informed by my own embodied experience, I specifically

considered the dominant discourses of health, ability, gender, and sexuality. There are many additional opportunities for thinking with theory about the dominant discourses in yoga education surrounding colonialism, white supremacy, class, and capitalism.

### ***Yoga, Colonialism, and Cooptation***

Yoga has been a documented practice in the United States since 1893 (Hammond, 2007), and in that time, it has become a practice dominated by white practitioners. Researchers such as Markula (2014) have found that over time, publications like *Yoga Journal* focus less and less on the traditions and history of yoga in India. At the same time, they also focus increasingly on asana practice and the health benefits of asana practice, neglecting the other limbs of practice. I recommend future inquiry to look into this ongoing process of colonialism, examining how the practice of yoga continues to be removed from its history in India. Additionally, we need to consider how white yoga teachers and researchers like myself inquire about and even profit from this practice.

We can also consider how white yoga teachers, studios, and practitioners use symbols and elements of yoga's Indian heritage, often out of context. We can think with decolonizing theorists about the impacts of saying "om" and "namaste" without a deep consideration for their meanings or of painting a lotus flower on a yoga studio wall. And we can think with theory about the yoga clothing and equipment industry, which uses symbols or slogans that take spiritual and philosophical concepts out of context and put them on products for a profit (for example, a yoga mat with an illustration of the chakras or a t-shirt that says "Namaste in Bed").

Future research can ask how colonization produces and maintains relations of power in yoga education. Researchers can plug in the research about the portrayal of yoga as an increasingly white practice divorced from its philosophical roots with the work of decolonization

scholars and with the writing of Indian yoga teachers. Similarly, we can consider the dominant discourses of white supremacy in yoga education.

### ***Yoga and White Supremacy***

Researchers into the media portrayal of yoga – whether in *Yoga Journal*, in general-audience publications such as *Cosmo* or *Oprah Magazine*, or on Instagram – routinely find that the representations of yoga in these spaces are overwhelmingly white (Bhalla & Moscovitz, 2020; Hinz et.al., 2021; Lacasse et.al., 2019; Markula, 2014). And yoga teachers and practitioners of color are speaking of their experiences in the yoga community, revealing the ways that white yoga teachers and white-owned yoga studios create unsafe and unsupportive yoga classes (Barkataki, 2015; Ford, 2016; Haddix, 2016).

I recommend future research that thinks with theory to reveal relations of power and dominant discourses of a “yoga body” as a white body. We can inquire into the hidden code of whiteness and white supremacy in yoga teacher training programs, revealing how when yoga teachers are instructed to “be a pure vessel” of the yoga practice, the implication is that a “pure vessel” is a white one (Keach, 2003, p. 126). Future research can plug in theory surrounding biopower, as well as Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies, with research about the media and social media images of white “yoga bodies,” as well as the work of yoga teachers and practitioners of color who are creating safe spaces and who are using yoga philosophy in their anti-racist work.

### ***Yoga, Class, and Capitalism***

According to one estimate, yoga in the United States is currently a \$16 billion industry (Yoga Alliance, 2016a). This estimate includes the costs of “yoga classes, clothing, equipment, and accessories” that are often seen as necessary elements of the practice (para. 1). It does not

include the payment that yoga influencers receive on Instagram or the adjacent industries that yoga teachers and teacher training programs often informally recommend (such as essential oils and organic food). Yoga in this country is clearly tied up in capitalism, and a barrier to practice has been created for yoga practitioners to be able to afford a certain lifestyle in order to be seen as practicing correctly.

Alongside the rising cost of participating in a yoga practice, there is an increasing concern that it is impossible to earn a living as a yoga instructor. Goldberg (2015) explores this issue in her article, “The Brutal Economics of Being a Yoga Teacher.” And other writers worry that yoga teacher training programs, often costing thousands of dollars, do not adequately prepare students to teach yoga. Caputo’s (2017) article is titled, “What you don’t learn in YTT: How to Actually Teach People,” and Rizopoulos (2015) cautions students away from programs that say graduates will be ready to teach after completion. Many teacher training programs explicitly state that graduates are unlikely to make a living teaching yoga (Asheville Yoga Center, n.d.). In this context where yoga teacher training is an expensive investment and where programs caution students away from thinking they could teach yoga professionally, these programs can easily become sites for students from the middle and upper class to “deepen their practice” in an isolated, class-based environment.

My yoga teacher training experience contained many hidden expectations that students were from the upper and middle classes. We were constantly encouraged to eat organic food, travel, and take time away from work in nature, never considering that all of these instructions required a certain level of income. We did not learn to view our yoga practice as a site from which we could theorize about and resist capitalist oppression; in fact, we learned that the only thing a yoga practitioner needed to do was to “throw the ‘poverty mentality’ (there isn’t enough

money – I am too poor) out the door and trust in abundance” (Keach, 2003, p. 196). Such an approach blames individuals for their own poverty rather than examining systemic race and class based oppression. The relationship between yoga, class, and capitalism is an area for future inquiry to explore further. How do relations of power produce dominant discourses of class in yoga education? And how does the embodied experience of poverty resist these discourses? How can we open up possibilities for the teaching and practice of a yoga that resists capitalist oppression?

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have returned to the questions that guided my post-qualitative analysis, drawing together tentative integrations and suggestions for the future of yoga inquiry, teaching, and practice. My intent is not to provide any final answers about how yoga “should” be taught or practiced, but to raise questions about how yoga is currently taught and practiced in the United States. In my dissertation, I have considered a complex assemblage of texts and experiences related to the field of yoga education in the United States – quantitative research about yoga’s effectiveness, yoga-related media such as *Yoga Journal*, curriculum and regulatory standards of Yoga Alliance, yoga teacher training program materials, and the work of yoga teachers and practitioners who seek to challenge our current teaching and practice of yoga. I have also included embodied data that reflect my own experience of practicing yoga and of conducting this inquiry.

Plugging in all of these data with poststructuralism and with queercrip theory has revealed the way that power relations create dominant discourses of yoga practitioners as self-monitoring, docile, healthy, independent, predictable, gendered bodies and the yoga practice itself as a measurable, validated, and controllable intervention that can be used to actively shape

those bodies. And this plugging in has shown how queer and disabled embodiment can resist these discourses and open up possibilities for how we think about, teach, and practice yoga.

I came to this inquiry because of my personal experience with yoga teacher training. My process of becoming a yoga teacher was (and still is) deeply intertwined with the way I was received in the yoga community as a queer and disabled practitioner. When I began this inquiry, I did not know where it would lead; rather, I attempted to embrace discomfort and to flow with what arose, plugging my own experiences in with theory and data, and looking at the practice I love in a new way. This dissertation does not complete my process of inquiry. Instead, I seek to embrace the notion of a complex and never-ending process of thinking with theory, embodiment, and the yoga practice.

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## **Vita**

Laura Shears received a Bachelor of Arts in English and Mathematics, then began a career in higher education administration after receiving a Masters of Education at North Carolina State University. After four years serving in campus housing and crisis response, Laura moved to Asheville and became a faculty member in the Academic Related Instruction department at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College. As a faculty member, Laura was also involved with diversity and inclusion efforts on campus, including as the chair of SafeZone.

Laura began practicing yoga in 2015 after a series of three spinal surgeries and trained as a yoga instructor in 2017. Since that time, Laura has instructed yoga in a therapeutic setting at a spinal clinic and in a community college physical education department. Laura is interested in future opportunities to research, teach, and practice yoga and meditation and to work toward making those practices inclusive for all.