32
INCLUSIVE IDENTITIES
The lens of critical theory

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Introduction

Modern yoga would appear to be all-inclusive. From flow yoga to gentle yoga, power yoga, yin yoga, seniors’ yoga, children’s yoga, teen yoga, special needs yoga, prenatal yoga, postnatal yoga, baby yoga, chair yoga, workplace yoga, prison yoga, paddleboard yoga, yoga with goats, chocolate yoga, drunk yoga, disco yoga, meditation classes, kirtan and chanting – the list goes on, and the market seems to have created a space for every kind of body within the yoga classroom. However, the sheer prevalence and variety of yoga classes on offer to modern practitioners obscures the fact that there are social and logistical barriers to participating in yoga, such as class, race, gender, age and ability. Despite the aspirations of many yoga practitioners to be more inclusive, there are still many ways in which contemporary yoga reproduces exclusion and marginalisation. This chapter will examine several ways in which yoga classes have the potential to be empowering for non-mainstream identities, while also highlighting ways in which they may fail to do so. I will examine several disciplines that create discourses around yoga, and argue that critical theory is one register that has significant potential to represent yoga as inclusive and empowering. I will highlight the discipline of critical theory for its ability to describe and critique society, often questioning forms of authority and normative values. Following this, I will focus specifically on disability and gender as two areas of inclusion that yoga may address. To conclude, I will use a case study to illustrate how Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) could function as an inclusive practice within institutionalised settings, in this case within a preschool environment. This case study uses the example of children as a deliberate way of addressing how children’s identities, as minors, may form another kind of marginalisation, which multiplies exclusion when combined with identities such as disability or queerness.

In this chapter I claim that specific practices of yoga involve particular experiences, effects and understandings which are unique to the practice, context and individual. This means that although yoga and meditation practices may operate under similar labels, they vary widely in how they approach identity and inclusion. Understanding the nuance and specificity of individual classes is essential to understanding that not all yoga is created equal – and not all bodies may be understood as equal within it. While many yoga practitioners hope that yoga may be all-inclusive, non-mainstream identities are often alienated when faced with representations of yoga which focus on the white, middle-class, feminine, flexible,
slim, youthful, able body as an ideal yoga body (at least within the western world [Markula 2001]). However, some practices can combat these dominant representations and create classes where students feel included, and even celebrated for their differences, in productive and empowering ways.

In this chapter the concept of inclusivity is derived from, and is an extension of, ideas defined within a specific version of critical theory: critical disability studies. Critical disability studies as a discipline emerged out of critical theory and uses many similar techniques in applying philosophy to social experience. Critical disability theorists such as Kuppers have aimed to define inclusion through readdressing the social and environmental barriers that signal differences between bodies and prioritise ‘mainstream ... bodies and their need’ (2011: 4). The concept of inclusion proposed by Kuppers, and taken up here, understands difference as the norm, and approaches the pedagogy of yoga classes from that perspective. Kuppers bases this model on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the rhizome, in which internal and external experiences of difference ‘mix and merge’ and there is a refrain from juxtaposing ‘pain and pleasure or pride and shame’, making way for transformation and ‘a coming into being’ (2011: 95). This version of inclusivity offers new paths towards plurality, complexity and difference which resist normalisation and seek out new forms of empowerment. In the context of yoga these new forms of empowerment would take us beyond the binaries of normalisation that are so easy to slip into, such as good/bad, strong/weak, fit/unfit, flexible/stiff. It aims to ‘extend into new territory’ and perhaps even ‘productively critique’ the limitations of other concepts of difference (Shildrick 2012: 32).

Certain identities may feel more welcome in yoga classes than others. Recent surveys in Australia and the United States have shown that yoga practitioners in these countries are most often female, are on average around forty years old, are tertiary educated and have a greater likelihood of being white, non-Hispanic and Caucasian (Telles et al. 2017; Lewis 2008; Markula 2014; Ross et al. 2013). This is not necessarily the main demographic for yoga practitioners across the world (as a recent survey in India showed, where most practitioners were male [Telles et al. 2017]), but indicates how identity is often represented in western practices of MPY. For the purposes of this chapter I will focus on western practices and their representations of identity, as the issues of transnationality, race, class and ethnicity are dealt with elsewhere in this volume. I argue that MPY practices are often invested in ideals of social inclusion yet also maintain specific barriers and instances of exclusion. This is a similar perspective to that presented by Smith and Atencio (2017), who have found that MPY participants often believed that ‘exclusion and barriers to practise could be overcome by individual choice-making’; that is, people thought that they were excluded from yoga practices because they had not forced themselves to overcome the social, financial and logistical barriers that prevented them from participating (Telles et al. 2017: 1167). This demonstrates that yoga participants are often ‘invested in and reproduce ideals of individualism and meritocracy relative to normative neo-liberal yoga discourses’ (Telles et al. 2017: 1167). When people are alienated from yoga, the discursive formation surrounding the practice suggests that it is the fault of the individual for not including themselves, rather than being due to any lack of social inclusion practices within yoga. This is problematic because it removes the onus on MPY to position itself as more inclusive, and encourages the individual to see themselves as failing rather than the system failing them. Similar findings have been made in aerobics and other fitness settings that are invested in socially accepted values of self-government and self-regulation (Markula 1995; McLaren, Rock, and McElgunn 2012), indicating that yoga operates in this way as part of a broader health and wellbeing industry.
Yoga discourses and research methodologies

Yoga has been and is currently studied in a variety of registers and disciplines. Since the 1990s, one of the primary modes in which it has been studied is through the lens of clinical trials and medical efficacy. The disciplines of medicine, (neuro)biology, physiology, public health and allied health all produce specific forms of medical literatures about MPY. Each of these disciplines seeks to use yoga to make patients’ bodies measure as closely as possible to an imagined ‘normal’ body and/or to optimise its functioning and wellbeing (e.g. Ross et al. 2013; Pelt 2011; Powell et al. 2008; Jensen 2004). Medical literature on yoga creates a narrative of legitimacy around MPY by demonstrating quantifiable benefits and has been a major driving force in the increased popularity and acceptability of yoga practices. Medical literature has harnessed MPY as one of many physical activities that promotes “health” (as absence of illness) and has ‘become aligned with minimization of health risks, individualized healthy lifestyle, and self-care’ (Markula 2014: 146). Further, this literature perpetuates the notion that yoga is inherently healthy, and thus good for everyone’ (Smith and Atencio 2017: 1181). Medical literature also frames expectations of MPY – for example, that it reduces stress, increases physical fitness and treats mental illness. However, as I will explain below, medical literature also functions by coding and judging particular behaviours within yoga, so that some bodies and identities are deemed to be doing yoga ‘well’ while others are not – including some and excluding others.

When studied via medical disciplines, yoga is often (though not exclusively) researched using quantitative methods. This largely consists of researchers identifying and coding bodily markers that can indicate yoga’s measurable effects on the body, as understood in medical terms. One of the major advantages of this approach is its clarity: coding bodily markers within a numeric scale (where one end is ‘bad’ and the other ‘good’) distils information to present clear conclusions. However, the disadvantage is that in simplifying data in this way, there is a risk of misinterpretation or omission of the complexity and nuance of individuals’ practices. The only things that can be measured are those that are specifically sought, predicted and tested for – there is little room for exploration. This is particularly problematic within the context of yoga, which, like many embodied practices, is by its nature undelineated and sensual: the effects of the practice are most often felt rather than measured (even if a yoga practitioner has defined goals, such as relieving back pain or releasing stress). Coding and categorising an individual’s yoga practice forces the body to be representative, a sign of whatever is under scrutiny, such as emotional regulation, athletic performance or mental health. There must always be a process of selection, synthesis and categorisation.¹

Within these parameters quantitative research approaches have been productive in collecting certain types of information about yoga practices. However, it has also judged some individuals’ practices as less effective or less functional than others. The necessary by-product of quantifying bodies is that some bodies will measure up better than others. Further, since biomedicine is aligned with the (twenty-first century) state, as MPY has gained legitimacy within the medical profession, state institutions such as schools, hospitals, workplaces and prisons have had more opportunity to fund MPY as an increasingly accepted form ‘of health care [where] the division of labour’ is ‘formally underwritten by the state’ (Saks 2005: 2). In acknowledging this alignment of biopower and the state, it is important to remember that ‘[b]iopower and its various mechanisms’ are ‘productive, in the sense that disciplinary techniques make us who we are’ (Barcan 2008: 16). But it is also a mechanism through which the state exerts control over individuals and can include or exclude based on how well an individual is able to perform as a ‘normal’ (able, youthful, non-transgressive) body. This means that as yoga has been
institutionalised, it has become a mechanism through which the state controls individuals, even as it is a mechanism through which individuals produce themselves and develop identity – in often ‘pleasurable’ ways (Barcan 2008: 15).

Large-scale quantitative medical literature has the power to bring together multiple representations of individuals and gather a more complex picture of yoga's effect in their lives. For example, Slovacek, Tucker and Pantoja's (2013) comprehensive study integrated survey data from 405 child yoga students with exam results, attendance rates, fitness test scores and reports from teachers. They were able to synthesise an understanding of yoga's effect as it applied to many areas of children's lives: academic performance, physical fitness and behaviour. Much medical literature – including Slovacek, Tucker and Pantoja (2013) – asks whether yoga can produce optimised ‘normal’ individuals (emotionally regulated, academically or professionally successful, physically healthy), and values yoga only if it is successful in this. In comparison, qualitative approaches have the opportunity to ask more exploratory questions regarding what exactly MPY does, without assuming that producing optimised ‘normal’ individuals (or any other kinds of individual) will be beneficial or not. Qualitative approaches also often understand MPY as deeply emplaced and contextual; it is not assumed that any findings may be applied as broad generalisations to other yoga practices, though they may be suggestive or indicative and can be compared to similar studies in other contexts to demonstrate similarities and differences.

One set of approaches that relies on qualitative methodologies centres around critical theory. Critical theory approaches typically analyse yoga and the ways it is discussed in self-reflexive ways, often considering how identity and inclusion are employed and represented in yoga practices. Critical theory approaches to yoga have emerged out of the significant amount of work done in the humanities on yoga, particularly within the disciplines of Indian studies, history, religion, philosophy and, to a certain extent, sociology and cultural studies. In recent decades these disciplines have used yoga as an example of practices that have the potential to offer non-normative ways of understanding the body, knowledge, ritual and experience.

One of the earliest significant engagements with yoga from a philosophical perspective occurred in Marcel Mauss's paper ‘Techniques of the Body’ (1931). Mauss developed a theory of the body out of anthropological observations, and yoga appears briefly at the end of his essay as an exemplum of a body practice that unites education, culture, psychology and physical movement in a ‘socio-psycho-biological’ nexus (Mauss 1931: 475). Since then, philosophy of the twenty-first century has dynamically changed how yoga is approached as a topic of study. Philosophical approaches to yoga now often embrace its potential as an embodied practice to ‘integrate Eastern elements’ into a habitually western ‘manner of thinking’ (Irigaray 2008: 44–45). The obvious risk of these approaches is their potential for orientalism (as first described by Edward Said), romanticising eastern philosophy as non-dualist and embodied in comparison to western philosophy's dualism and preoccupation with the mind. Further, such approaches rarely engage with any significant detail in the content or context of MPY, and ‘yoga’ almost certainly has very different meanings for different philosophers. Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's phenomenological approach teeters on this edge as she specifically credits her own bodily practice with changing her thought processes; she claims that yoga provides her with ‘a greater liberty in the unfolding of my thinking’, where her ‘thoughts take place in a wider space’ (Irigaray 2008: 45). Irigaray is critical of ‘our [Western] tradition’ for its inattention to the body. She writes that western philosophy lacks ‘language capable of expressing our bodily and sensible experiences’ while claiming to ‘overcome bodily and gender dimensions’ (ibid., 50). Yoga offers Irigaray a non-dualistic way ‘to rethink the categories of subjectivity and objectivity’ that exists beyond ‘the masculine Western subject’ (41). Valuable as this philosophical analysis is, it does not address any of the sociocultural contexts or political import of yoga as a contemporary western
Inclusive identities

practice. Irigaray’s perception of yoga is limited by its lack of acknowledgement that MPY has been commercialised as ‘a Western fitness practice increasingly governed by the neoliberal rationale’ (Markula 2014: 143). MPY’s endorsement of an ‘individualised healthy lifestyle’ may encourage practitioners to look for self-empowerment within only specific, limited parameters, rather than extend beyond them (ibid., 146). There seems to be an increasing trend for both scholars and practitioners of MPY to try to resolve the ironies, contradictions and paradoxes at its heart. As Markula has put it, scholars are now asking whether it is ‘possible to change the discursive construction’ of fitness practices such as MPY, so that they ‘do not build docile bodies’ (2010: 66). The answer that seems to be emerging in this set of disciplines is yes, but determining whether a single body is produced as docile in any moment is rather complicated.

Despite the potential problems with Irigaray’s understanding of yoga, her approach is representative of a fundamental shift in the ways yoga is studied. In the twenty-first century, western ‘scholar-practitioners’ of yoga have conducted ‘rigorous academic reflection’ of MPY (Newcombe 2009: 2). No longer purely an object to be scrutinised, yoga also became an actively subjective mode of operating in and understanding the world. The mode has produced a significant body of additional research on yoga enthusiasts/practitioners/teachers (Atkinson 2010; Bost 2016; Buckingham and Degen 2012; Heyes 2007; Lea 2009; Smith 2007) and yoga classes (Augenstein 2013; McInnes 2015; Morgan 2012; Lewis 2008). Through this kind of rigorous reflection Suzanne Bost concluded that ‘[y]oga is intellectually thick’ and can be a critical lens that sees ‘corporal heterogeneity’ rather than embodied differences (2016: 191 and 193). Yet Markula identified a potential pitfall of this approach, in that yoga’s religious grounding demands to be ‘analyzed as a discursive construction and disciplinary production of its own’ before any kind of ‘problematization of the westernized production of identity and individualism can take place’ (2010: 68). Few scholars have undertaken this kind of comprehensive deconstruction of yoga, its traditions and contemporary practices, limiting the claims that can be made about MPY and its place in the modern world.

Accepting these limitations, there have been many scholars who have expanded upon the notion of MPY as more than an object of study, such as Cressida Heyes, who has approached yoga through a sharply socially oriented critique. Heyes argues that yoga provides ‘not just an alternative to contemporary Western gym culture and exercise regimens, but also models of self-care and self-development’ (2007: 128). Heyes’s version of MPY casts it as a potential antidote to the neoliberal imperative that Markula, and Heyes herself, have witnessed within MPY. For Heyes, MPY can constitute a ‘personal counterattack to the teleology of corporeal normalization’, but this potential is not fully realised by most practices ‘of yoga in the West, especially in its casual and attenuated forms’ that are ‘hardly separate from overtly normalizing pressures’ (ibid., 129). Heyes’s perception of MPY is significant because it suggests that there are ways of engaging in normalising practices that do not produce limitations upon the body. Heyes does not ‘prescribe yoga as the antidote to normalization’ but suggests that practitioners may undertake their ‘own yogic labor, without seeking to meet particular targets’ of normalised discipline (ibid., 129). Yoga could both enable and restrict, include and exclude, provide benefit and harm and produce conformity to normalization and alternatives to it.

The difference between critical theory and/or socially oriented philosophical approaches to yoga and other studies of yoga has tended to be their approach to relationality and the self. Medical and historical literatures on yoga do not take the researchers’ own experiential sensation of yoga as a significant starting point for research. There is little focus on the researchers’ own intervention into the social phenomenon of yoga. This includes interdisciplinary work between studies of religion, history and philosophy, such as Alter’s examination of hathayoga and sacrifice (2012). Other philosophical and phenomenological approaches can focus almost
entirely on the internal sensation of the researcher, in an auto-ethnographic mode similar to Irigaray’s work or that of McInnes (2015). Heyes’s socially oriented philosophy has much more in common with ethnographic accounts of yoga, such as that by Patricia Morgan, who has considered the embodied relationship between researcher and researched when analysing sensory learning and the nature of contemplation (2012). Of course this is a highly oversimplified categorisation, and there are many other commonalities and differences between approaches than can be mentioned here, but the salient point is that critical theory neither removes the researcher entirely nor focuses solely on the self as subject. Within these parameters, Heyes’s understanding of yoga as a process of and resistance to normalisation reveals that yoga has the potential to transform, while also subscribing to normative corporealisation. This means that MPY practices are often a complex mixture of accepting and including different identities while simultaneously attempting to normalise bodies (for example, cure or treat disability). These two goals can also be in competition with one another.

The disciplines of critical theory and socially oriented philosophy have intervened in studies of yoga with new methodologies, accessing new kinds of information about individuals’ embodied practices. Heyes has worked with other researchers to experiment with inserting this into institutional frameworks, teaching yoga at a tertiary level and publishing research based on the experience as a strategy against normalisation. However, she found that despite the intention of teachers, ‘students of yoga sometimes use[d] the physical practice against itself—perhaps as another opportunity for self-criticism or one-upmanship, or to entrench less-than-optimal physical and mental habits’ (Helberg et al. 2009: 265). For Helberg, Heyes and Rohel, squeezing yoga into the demands of tertiary education seemed to counter the edict (from contemporary ‘yogic philosophy’) that ‘one should accept one’s own capacities without constantly judging those capacities as deficient’ (ibid., 270). The ideological clash between the views of various forms of yoga, its teachers and the institutions in which they are housed (such as the modern university) is particularly pertinent when individuals are excluded from practice. For example, as I will discuss further in this chapter, for individuals with disabilities the notion of ‘deficiency’ is highly potent. Heyes’s approach and critical theory more generally ground yoga within social relations, revealing it to be an institutionalised, contextualised strategy that may or may not counteract normalisation, inclusion and exclusion, depending on its circumstances.

Studying MPY through the lens of critical theory has revealed the complex relationship that yoga has to normalisation. When a practice such as yoga produces normalisation, it excludes non-mainstream bodies and identities that are unable or unwilling to meet the terms of existing power relations. At a basic level, normalising practices exclude some bodies which are not deemed to be able, gendered or raced in normative ways. Practices that create alternatives to normalisation seek to include these non-mainstream identities. Yet the process of normalisation can also be more complex than this when we consider how MPY may intervene in individuals’ lives as care of the self. The discipline of normalisation happens through surveillance, and MPY is one of many fitness and wellbeing practices which encourages intense scrutinisation of the self. Cultural studies scholar Ruth Barcan has observed this in alternative therapies more generally, where both the internal and external self are subjected to vigorous surveillance, and ‘the vigilance of external bodies is supplemented to greater or lesser degree by self-monitoring, self “management,” self-surveillance’ (2008: 15). Indeed, it seems that many yoga practices provide practitioners with tools for coping with the stresses of everyday life, sustaining them in those stresses, rather than challenging them. Sarah Sharma found this in her research of yoga within office environments, where it operated as one of many ‘cultural technologies for capitalism to produce docile and productive bodies’ (2014: 84). This means that yoga can function as a way of ‘training and treating’ bodies ‘in order to develop a form of capitalistic endurance’, rather than
Inclusive identities

encouraging practitioners to scrutinise social structures such as class and gender, which empower and disempower in multifaceted ways (ibid., 100). However, when individuals engage in MPY as a practice of self-surveillance, this does not necessarily mean acceding to the ‘intensification of disciplinary power’; MPY’s mode of self-surveillance can be embraced as a way of developing new capacities and abilities and a powerful tool for care of the self, without producing docility (Heyes 2006: 127). In these instances, individuals can learn poses, breathing practices and mindfulness techniques as ways of ‘changing old patterns’ and producing ‘embodied effects’ that enable ‘acts of self-transformation’ (ibid., 128). This could also mean that yoga becomes more inclusive of different abilities and different kinds of bodies, as part of ‘an alternative picture in which increasing capabilities are closely tied’ to reformulations of power relations (ibid., 131). In contrast to purely normalising practices, MPY may offer rewards to those who do more than just cede to existing power relations – it may create alternatives and embrace new identities, even as it demands certain kinds of normalised movement or functioning of individual bodies.

Disability

Imagine a physically disabled boy who practices yoga with his peers at a mainstream school. The yoga class may both teach this child new ways of using his body, making him less dependent on his mobility aids and developing techniques of care of the self that provide further inclusion within mainstream institutional life, while simultaneously excluding him from certain poses or practices that mark him as different and unable to meet the demands of a normalised body. This example is a reasonably common occurrence in schools and serves to show how MPY can both be inclusive and exclusive, normalising and transforming all at once.

Disability is one form of identity that I focus on in this chapter in order to examine how inclusion and exclusion may operate in MPY classes. I use the term ‘disability’ in this chapter for want of a better term. ‘Disability’ denotes ways in which particular bodies are socially coded as less able than other bodies, without suggesting that all will be synonymous or equal, as there are marked differences between how each form of disability is socially coded on individual bodies and how they are physically experienced. As already mentioned, in this chapter I follow critical disability studies scholars, such as Julie Allan and Petra Kuppers, in how I use terms such as ‘inclusion’ and ‘disability’, with the understanding that many specific conditions are contentiously debated as constructions of biological and social discourse. However, Kuppers reminds us that the dominant way of viewing disability is ‘as culturally negative: defective, in need of accommodation, other-than-whole’ (Kuppers 2016: 93). Popular and medical discourses of MPY often view disabilities as diagnosable and potentially or partially treatable (Wong 2017a). Literature on yoga conducted with disabled individuals is almost exclusively limited to medical and popular registers. Within medical literature, clinical trials, like those with ‘normal’ individuals, test the efficacy of yoga in ‘treating’ disability and assume that normalisation is in their best interests (e.g. Jensen 2009; Hawkins et al. 2012; Shailaja et al. 2014; Steiner et al. 2013). Popular literature on yoga conducted with disabled populations largely includes how-to manuals, very similar to other popular books on yoga, which instruct specific exercises that the authors recommend for specific disabilities (Sumar 1998; Goldberg 2013; Williams and White 2010). This popular literature often highly values inclusivity and pays careful attention to how yoga may be adapted to suit different needs. Yet these two registers, medical and popular, are rarely in deep dialogue with one another: both medicalised versions of disability and practitioners’ approaches to it only refer in the vaguest sense to each other’s work. For example, while practitioners’ books on yoga with disabilities place enormous emphasis on which exercises to do and how to do them, clinical trials, such as that by Steiner et al. (2013), rarely give details of class content (as
Karen-Anne Wong

is true of the vast majority of research literature on MPY). Steiner et al. simply state that ‘yoga sessions were taught by certified yoga instructors experienced in yoga instruction’ and ‘25% of each session was spent on initial relaxation, 50% of each session on yoga exercises and group activities, and 25% of each session on closing visualization/meditation’ (2013: 817–818). There is an assumption that all yoga sessions, teachers and institutions will be the same or similar. This assumption is highly problematic because the broad range of yoga philosophies, brandings of yoga, individual teachers’ approaches and requirements of institutions means that each individual yoga practice approaches disability in its own way.

Very often, both medical and popular registers are directed at analysing and treating disability in children specifically, since children’s disabilities, more so than adults’, are understood as treatable and potentially ‘curable’ (that is, able to be eradicated to produce a normalised, less disabled body). As I have discussed elsewhere, children’s disabilities are also heavily loaded, since their diagnosis often burdens children, teachers and parents with the responsibility to ‘over- come’ and minimise deviation from ‘standard’ child development (Wong 2017a). More so than adults’, children’s disabilities have the pressure of temporality, as adults often hope that children will ‘correct’ as soon as possible, returning to the standardised trajectory of childhood growth.

Drawing on concepts of critical disability studies, I suggest that for yoga to be inclusive it must dispute representations of disability as lacking, and dominant ‘embedded assumptions that conceptualise disability as misfortune’ (Devlin and Pothier 2005: 2). That is, MPY needs to free itself of the imperative to cure or treat disability. Concepts of adequacy and competency need to be re-evaluated by critiquing the institutions and discourses that determine usefulness and efficacy, and we need to consider, in every yoga practice, who is ‘represented’, ‘who “sees” or “hears” whom, and how and why’ (Lesnik-Oberstein 2015: 3–4). Critical disability studies aims not to construct a universal theory, but to position disability as figuring an irreducible provocation to the normative desire (Shildrick 2012: 37). This points to one of greatest challenges for yoga practice: avoiding the presumption that disabled people have the desire to be normative and ‘impl[y]ing] judgements of good and bad, of what ought and what ought not to be’ (Watson 2012: 99). It is also potentially unsettling to ‘both sides of the putative divide between disabled and non-disabled’ since it re-imagines disability and its purpose in the lives of non-disabled people (Barnes 2012: 35). Yoga practices need to engage with the kinds of judgements that are made about disabled bodies and the notion of their agency. Individuals need to be given the opportunity and ‘individual capacity to challenge or alter those structures’ that construct a body as ‘disabled’ (Watson 2012: 100).

So far I have focused on disability as one form of identity that may be included or excluded, in multifarious ways, throughout MPY classes. In the next section I will examine gender. In connecting the two, I here briefly draw attention to the ways in which disability and gender intersect. All individuals are navigating gender and sexuality stereotypes, and those labelled ‘disabled’ are no exception. Yet disabled genders and sexualities are complicated because ‘[t]he disabled sexual body is, in many ways, oxymoronic’ (Beckman 2011: 90). Yet we could also think of yoga as an opportunity to complicate representations of both disability and gender, as part of a wider project of analysing and understanding difference. By exploring different ways of becoming masculine, feminine and disabled we can identify practices that demarcate particular bodies as on the outside, unable to conform to a normalised set of standards. Yoga could become a place for individuals to find equality, rather than an attempt to cure or care for nonconforming bodies. This would free some individuals from the ‘oppressive’ discussion, ‘profound disincentives and few rewards’ attached to identifying as disabled or gender transgressive (Garland-Thomson 1997: 347). In the current social climate, MPY classes may pressure individuals to choose between ‘coming out’ as disabled or attempting to ‘pass’. The pressure
may be applied as a student enrolls in a class and signs an indemnity form detailing medical disclosure and insurance policies, and may extend into the delineation of populations into classes labelled ‘general’, ‘accessible’ or ‘special needs’. Both the option to ‘come out’ and the option to ‘pass’ are problematic, since, like racial, gender and queer passing, the option of passing as non-disabled potentially serves up certain privileges alongside a sense of misrecognition and internal dissonance. ‘Coming out’ or identifying as disabled (if the disability is non-visible enough that this is an option) risks being reduced to stereotypes or having one’s body devalued or dismissed entirely. Since most disabilities are non-visible the choice may be ‘between passing and performing the dominant culture’s stereotypes of disability’ (ibid., 326).

This is parallel to the choice to ‘come out’ as gender transgressive – gender stereotypes are as heavily policed as concepts of ableism, by teachers, students and institutions of yoga alike. As in many fitness settings, MPY classes require a gender/disability transgressive person to navigate the expectations others place on them while in close, sweaty, physical proximity to their evocatively stretching, moving body. Further, the transgressive individual must usually make a choice to use either gendered/non-disabled change rooms or seek access to disabled bathrooms in order to secure privacy while changing. For this reason, it may be useful to think of both individuals’ disabilities and gender transgressions as forms of alternative embodiments – boldly enacted against dominant power structures that seek to disenfranchise them. The choice between passing and transgressing, however, carries with it a heavy neoliberal burden on the individual, which new concepts of inclusivity could help assuage by changing our social structures and environments so that individuals were not forced to choose between the two. As it is, yoga students sometimes cede to what Heyes calls ‘normalizing desires’, by choosing to pass as a normalised body and effectively ‘assuage the suffering’ of a transgressive body (Heyes 2007: 121). Meanwhile, individuals who perform alternative embodiments within MPY classes continue to defeat and diversify the ways we think about identity and inclusion.

Gender

MPY is highly feminised within the context of other fitness and wellbeing practices and within the context of historical representations of yoga. There is a dominant representation and perception of yoga that ‘one must have a flexible (white) feminine body to practise’ and that women’s bodies ‘are more suitable for yoga’ (Smith and Atencio 2017: 1178). This perception potentially excludes many individuals from participating in MPY classes. In western imaginations, yoga is understood as a relatively ‘gentle, recreational, feminised, pacifist, and non-competitive practice’, and all of these attributes could help assuage by changing our social structures and environments so that individuals were not forced to choose between the two. As it is, yoga students sometimes cede to what Heyes calls ‘normalizing desires’, by choosing to pass as a normalised body and effectively ‘assuage the suffering’ of a transgressive body (Heyes 2007: 121). Meanwhile, individuals who perform alternative embodiments within MPY classes continue to defeat and diversify the ways we think about identity and inclusion.

Inclusive identities

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Inclusive identities

One of the major criticisms levelled at MPY is that it emphasises the visual and reinforces mainstream imperatives to have or achieve the ‘right’ kind of body: youthful, slim and normatively beautiful. Particularly, MPY is problematic if it reinforces the dominance of a male gaze over predominantly female participants. Several MPY communities have attempted to combat this representation, such as The Yoga and Body Image Coalition, which aims to develop and promote yoga that is ‘accessible, body positive and reflects the full range of human diversity’ (Cummings 2016). Similarly, in 2017 and early 2018, the #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns in the entertainment and political industries spread to MPY, as fresh allegations of sexual abuse and harassment shed light on the gender imbalances that have structured MPY practices since
Karen-Anne Wong

(at least) the twentieth century (Taylor 2018). Perhaps most infamously, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois and Bikram Choudhury, the founders of Ashtanga and Bikram yoga respectively, have been accused of performing sexually inappropriate adjustments and treating women with condescension and even contempt, throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 2016 and 2017, there were seven separate lawsuits in the California courts against Bikram, alleging violation of women, including those under his tutelage and his former attorney, with ‘accusations ranging from racial discrimination to gay slurs to harassment to rape’ (Fagan 2018). In December 2017, Rachel Brathen collected more than 300 #MeToo stories which were anonymously submitted online by yogis around the world who related their experiences of abuse, harassment, misogyny and assault within MPY communities (Brathen 2017). Brathen, like The Yoga and Body Image Coalition, has been involved in calls for the MPY industry to confront the ways it has institutionalised patriarchy and maintained power imbalances between genders, most particularly between male teachers and female students, and created conditions in which such extensive abuse and harassment could take place. Undeniably, this must be one of the most important imperatives faced by the MPY industry today.

These instances of misconduct exist within a broader culture that determines how women think about themselves and their bodies. MPY communities, predominantly made up of women, function as spaces for women to come together (although they are not usually female-only spaces) and to shape their identities and imagined futures. Indeed, there is historical evidence that since coming to the West, yoga has played this important role in women’s lives (Newcombe 2007; Singleton 2010: 51). According to cultural theorist Catherine Driscoll, thoughts about identity and the future are at the crux of these kinds of cultures, where women ‘say who they are and want to be’ through a ‘set of stylistic choices’, such as, for example, choosing to attend yoga or buying and wearing yoga clothing (Driscoll 1999: 189). Yoga in this context is one of many things in broader consumer culture that women ‘can do, be, have and make’ (ibid.), which is ‘produced both for and about’ women and circulates popularly among them, even though both men and women are involved in producing and using yoga as a form of women’s culture (ibid., 114). In this understanding yoga teachers form one part of a ‘range of experts’ that help define yoga’s ‘contents and margins’, as part of women’s culture, among other experts such as ‘magazine writers and fashion designers’ (Driscoll 2014: 130). In the age of social media this is more instantaneous and visible than ever, as students follow and like particular teacher profiles, producing them as a kind of ‘object circulated’, in a way not dissimilar to how selfies of Kim Kardashian and Taylor Swift circulate (ibid., 130). Yoga classes, the teacher’s body and the attention given to students are all commodities that are traded throughout this feminised consumer culture.

This form of women’s culture is part of a broader consumer culture which operates within a heteronormative structure. Women are often self-conscious about their appearance in yoga classes and aware of being gazed upon, whether by men or other women. Even in MPY practices where students are encouraged to practise with their eyes closed (as is not uncommon), the choice to close one’s eyes is a choice to temporarily ignore the gaze or ‘turn it inwards’, accepting its very prevalence, rather than an elimination of the gaze and its power. As women gaze upon each other and are gazed upon, they perpetuate competitive homosociality – projecting sexualities onto their own and others’ bodies and producing embarrassment and vulnerability along with desire and transgression. Bodies cannot escape the gaze; dominant and alternative sexualities are visible (and whether those with alternative sexualities choose to pass or not, the representation they choose is still visible), and there is often little alternative to heteronormative competition between women. Susan Bordo has written of how women’s use of their bodies is affected by constant awareness of being gazed upon. Bordo writes that under the scrutiny
of the gaze an individual is ‘shamed’ by the ‘looseness’ of a ‘soft, bruised’ body (1999: 68–69). In some cases, such as that aimed for by The Yoga and Body Image Coalition, MPY may help women to challenge this perception, and find ways to ‘radiat[e] independence, toughness, emotional imperviousness’, a feeling of being ‘armoured’ by the body (ibid., 68–69). Yet as Bordo acknowledges, the difference between these two responses is often murky and muddled, as women oscillate between shame and defiance of those feelings. Further, the idea that women must be ‘hard’ in order to be allowed to be ‘soft’ perpetuates gender stereotypes, as women want ‘to obtain the feminine body’ and yet do so by ‘appreciating the masculine characteristics of physical strength and skill’ (Markula 2006: 29). Women not only practise yoga to reinvent and maintain their bodies as heteronormatively desirable; they also feel a feminist urge to defy the need to do so and seek to use MPY classes as an escape from the constant demands of being gazed upon. Yet, paradoxically, the gaze is often an embedded and important pedagogical tool in all MPY classes (whether self-surveillance or external surveillance). The teacher often gazes upon the student (even in self-practice) in order to develop learning. The student often also gazes upon the teacher as poses are demonstrated. The gaze searches, observes and judges, as it ‘also touches, dominates and controls’ (Synnott 1993: 227).

In this context, some critical theorists and MPY scholars have claimed that yoga has the potential to break free of the demands of a masculinised, patriarchal gaze and focus on somaesthetics as an alternative. Shusterman suggests that somaesthetics grants ‘the body more careful aesthetic attention not only as an object that externally displays beauty … but also as a subjectivity that perceives these qualities and that experiences attendant aesthetic pleasures somatically’ (2012: 6). Shusterman attempts to separate aesthetics out from the terrain of the visual, in order to grant it sensuality. If MPY were to function in this way, it must separate out ‘the reflective and cognitive dimensions of somaesthetics’, intimacy with one’s own bodily sensations and ‘meditative experiences of beautiful inner feelings’ (ibid., 11). Shusterman witnesses this in ‘Hatha Yoga’ when ‘somatic postures and movements’ penetrate ‘beneath skin surfaces and muscle fibre to realign our bones and better organise the neural pathways through which we move, feel, and think’ (ibid., 43). For Shusterman this means that yoga has both representational and experiential rewards because ‘there is a basic complementarity of representation and experience, outer and inner’ (ibid., 44).

Shusterman claims that MPY could realign visual and experiential perception, redefining ‘right and wrong’ bodies. Less based on conventional standards of physical beauty, ‘right and wrong’ within yoga could refer to alignment within poses, meaning that there are ‘beneficial’ and ‘unsafe’ ways of using the body. However, just as ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’ bodies are often associated with moral and ethical judgements (for example, that an overweight person might be seen as lazy or unmotivated), having a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ body within yoga could be laden with values, such as strong, weak, flexible, stiff, healthy, unhealthy, focused, distracted, experienced or beginner. Further, if a student is seen to be either normatively self-conscious, or self-aware, these qualities are also value-laden; as Karen Hanson has suggested, to be self-conscious is to be vain and lacking in self-esteem, to be self-aware is to be happier, more ‘grounded’ and mature (1993). Not least of those who observe a body in yoga is the teacher; as already mentioned, surveillance and self-surveillance are unavoidable in-built forms of objectification ever-present in most if not all MPY practices. Yet this form of objectification also possibly coexists with an invitation and encouragement to find alternative ways of gazing, working ‘to find an appropriate stance on the relation between the individual and social norms’ and ‘learn how to participate happily, deriving appropriate if ephemeral satisfactions’ from the body (ibid., 240). This is a decidedly feminist project, meditating the lived body as both an observed object and an influential subject. Yoga becomes a socially conditioned experience of interoception (‘all sensations of the viscera, that
Karen-Anne Wong

is internal organs’), exteroception (‘five senses open to the external world’) and proprioception (‘balance, position, and muscular tension’) (Leder 1990: 39). It builds upon ‘tactile perception’ and ‘kinesthetic’ and ‘sensational awareness’ to affect how individuals experience themselves, perhaps opening up new gender and other identities (Bermúdez et al. 1995: 176, 271).

Case study: yoga and queerness in institutionalised preschool education

At this point it will be useful to turn from an examination of what the potential of yoga could be and examine a brief, real-life example of how an MPY practice could reshape how particular identities could be included within institutions and pedagogical practice. This example focuses on a preschool environment in Sydney, Australia, where very young people are coming to terms with their sexualities in the twenty-first century, and being confronted with ‘[t]he future [a]s queerness’s domain’ (Muñoz 2009: 1). One of the most pertinent questions in the lives of these young people is whether ‘the future [can] stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction’ and how queerness could offer ‘futurity and hope’ (ibid., 49, 11). This case study is a small extract from a larger ethnographic research project on children’s yoga in Australia (Wong 2017b). I have deliberately used an example here that features children, since in most social structures today children’s identities are minoritised and marginalised in comparison to those of adults (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 4). In the twenty-first century, disabled, raced and queer children are often even more excluded and marginalised than disabled, raced and queer adults.

In September 2016, Roger, the director of a preschool at which I had taught children’s yoga for years, informed me that preschool policy had changed so that teachers were no longer allowed to praise children with the words ‘good boy’ or ‘good girl’ (or similarly gendered variations). Instead, teachers were encouraged to compliment children on the specific task at hand – in the case of yoga: ‘well done stretching’, ‘excellent balance’ or ‘you’re very strong today’. This change had been instigated by one of the students, Alex. Alex, who was four years old, had been assigned female sex at birth, but was not identifying as female. Alex wore ‘boy’ clothes, had predominantly male friends and played ‘boy’ games. The news that Alex was not identifying as female came as no surprise to any of the teachers or staff at the preschool (including myself). Alex was constructing a gendered identity that misaligned with what Robinson calls ‘socio-cultural narratives’ about what it meant to be an ‘authentic’ or ‘appropriate’ girl (Robinson 2013: 82). Alex’s parents had also begun to recognise this and were working to find ways to allow Alex to express a more reflective gender identity. However, Alex continued to have long hair and retained the same gendered name given at birth (I have deliberately used a non-gendered pseudonym; Alex’s real name is an identifiably ‘girl’ name). Alex’s teachers and parents were negotiating Alex’s gendered identity yet struggling with whether and how to distinguish childhood self-knowledge from adult identity (Meadow 2014: 58). They were not ready to commit to Alex’s chosen gender (by allowing a name change or haircut) and labouring to determine if gender is ever fluid or stable, unfinished or finished (ibid., 58). By December 2016, while still in preschool, Alex was preparing to transition to ‘big school’ and took to wearing ‘big school’s’ unisex uniform every day. This was not unusual; many children similarly wore their ‘big school’s’ uniforms (or older siblings’ uniforms) in term four of their last year at the preschool. Yet in Alex’s case the unisex uniform also provided freedom from gender dichotomy. Alex’s uniform was one of many ‘micro moments and experiments’ that provided ‘glimpses of freedom – proto possibilities that emerge as becomings’ and demonstrated Alex’s inventiveness in finding ways to ‘survive and momentarily transcend’ the hegemony of gender dichotomy (Renold and Invinson 2015: 252–253). Similarly, many of the children who did identify as girls found that wearing their school
uniforms (shorts) during yoga provided freedom, since they no longer were concerned about their skirts falling away when they were upside down, or revealing any part of their bodies. This is demonstrative of how even three- and four-year-olds were aware of the dominance of a heteronormative gaze in their yoga practices.

The preschool community, led by its director, Roger, were very supportive of Alex’s choices. This was important because labelling a child as transgender (rather than, in Alex’s case, a ‘tomboy’) potentially represented what Meadow sees as a ‘shift in social category’ and/or signified how other people understood Alex’s ‘history’ (Meadow 2014: 58). Roger was also an openly gay man, in a long-term monogamous relationship. Roger’s own gendered and sexual identity was important in this context, not just because he was the only man employed at the preschool, and in a position of power over women and children, but because in a social climate of ‘alert around children, because of their perceived vulnerability to sexual danger’, the figure of the gay man has become the epitome of ‘the homosexual as the sexual predator’ (Robinson 2008: 116, 127). The association of queer with paedophilic is historic, specific and persistent, as moral panics have repeatedly surrounded both male and female queer teachers and childcare workers in Australia (Riggs 2011: 245). Roger was highly aware of his own ethical responsibility to the children in his care, no doubt fuelled by ‘paranoia about falling victim to false allegations of inappropriate behaviour’ (Robinson 2008: 126). Yet Roger’s sensitivity to the subject of sexuality did not translate into an avoidance of the subject. Instead, he became more highly aware of how he could enable children to be active agents in the negotiation of their sexualities and develop critical literacies in their relationships.

During the same conversation in which he informed me of the change in ‘good girl/boy’ policy, Roger also told me that ‘one of our parents is also transitioning’ and emphasised the importance of supporting Alex’s, and other children’s and adults’, gender choices ‘because we could be saving their lives’. Roger was committed to establishing ethical and respectful relationships between adults and children and made this an integral part of the early education agenda at his preschool (Robinson 2013: 85). He acknowledged children’s active sexualities and encouraged both adults and children at the preschool to develop ‘sexual literacy’ (ibid., 85). He wanted to eliminate all active and passive forms of ‘stigma and abuse’ that could be attached to transgressing gender norms (ibid., 82). Yoga was part of this mammoth task, which Roger was trying to institutionalise, and was one of the many ways in which he imagined he could help children and adults to be more aware of their bodies and the language they used in ‘respectful, ethical, and competent’ and inclusive ways (ibid., 85).

For the children in this preschool yoga was a project of inclusion, one that embraced queer modernity. Yoga was not a wondrous unicorn, solving all anti-normative and/or liberatory problems for its participants. Yet it was a step, just one among many, that lifted adult and child participants out of the ways they thought and used their bodies and into new modes of being. It was able to hook into desires and needs that children already had for new forms of embodiments and new ways of doing queerness — for a new generation. Not all yogas with children, or all yogas in the twenty-first century, or all yogas in Australia, will be able to do this. It depends on the framing of the practice, within national and local settings, and the content of the practices themselves. Yet, as this case demonstrates, yoga can be a good place to start. As Heyes reminds us, body practices such as these are important ‘first step[s]’ toward creating grander queer projects and constitute ‘useful forms of counterattack against corporeal normalization’ (2007: 136). ‘Although setting out to change the body is risky’, and perhaps for no one more so than children, ‘there remain real possibilities for a life of greater embodied freedom’, and particularly in the twenty-first century, ‘for people of all genders and genders not yet imagined’ (ibid., 136). For young people like Alex, who needed embodied ways of addressing gender and sexuality, yoga
provided one avenue for exploring greater freedom, and did so in a way that allowed for sensory perception and conscious ways of relating between the self and other.

Conclusion

Individuals who participate in yoga today experience it as a complex mixture of discipline, freedom, pressure, comfort, normalisation, healing, limitation and learning. Like many practices and behaviours, yoga is embodied, surrounded by ethics, and a constant negotiation of power relationships. Sometimes MPY succeeds in ‘build[ing] docile bodies’ (Kennedy and Markula 2011: 64). At other times MPY challenges popular and dominant representations of identity and inclusion, questioning assumptions about what a body ‘should’ be able to do and how to achieve wellbeing. I have suggested that MPY has the potential to offer new ways of approaching difference, particularly for those with disabilities and non-heteronormative identities, as it can provide a space for exploring and embodying alternatives to dominant presumptions. Critical theory has provided one approach to yoga which has allowed for these kinds of conversations to become available, influencing discussion to move beyond the judgements and normalising pressures that continue to prevail. In this context, no two yogas are ever the same. The institutional environment of a class, its teacher and its participants are all major influencing factors on the kinds of ethics, pedagogies and philosophy that are employed within it. Further, it would be difficult to distil whether any particular moment in a classroom were wholly inclusive, empowering, dis-enabling or normalising for any given individual – every moment contains such a complex mixture of power structures that there are usually several ways of interpreting the kinds of subjectivities that are produced. Docility, engagement and non-compliance could all be ways of enacting different kinds of enabling and/or disenfranchised subjectivities at any one time depending on the context of the moment. For this reason, MPY practices, institutions and researchers must pay attention to the details and nuances of their practices and the thoughts of their participants – with the goal of consistently finding new and alternative ways to include all forms of identity.

Notes

1 It should be noted that in certain ways the same can be said for qualitative research, but a qualitative approach often allows space for information that exists beyond the limits of any researchers’ expectations, hypotheses and quantified measurements.

2 Other examples of scholar-practitioners’ engagements with yoga on global and local levels can be found in Alter (2012), Black (2016), Lewis (2008), Atkinson (2010), Smith (2007), Lea (2009) and Chapple (2016), among others.

Bibliography


Inclusive identities


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