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Semiotic Labors of Personalization:

Enacting the modern subject in an American yoga school

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of

the requirements for the Masters of Arts

in Anthropology

by

Alessandra Laurer Rosen

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Semiotic Labors of Personalization:

Enacting the modern subject in an American yoga school

by

Alessandra Laurer Rosen

Masters of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Erin Debenport, Co-Chair

Professor Paul Kroskrity, Co-Chair

Mysore Ashtanga yoga is a South Asian postcolonial practice recognized for its universal spiritual and physical health benefits, yet exclusively sought out and accessed by the middle and upper classes. This paper charts the work that a yoga school in the U.S undertakes in response to this apparent contradiction. Drawing on a Peircean semiotic framework, it argues that this work hinges on a *semiotic labor of personalization*, wherein students are taught to privilege real-time instantiations of an otherwise standardized form, and to use such signs of difference as a means to represent their self-singularity. By teaching students to recognize themselves in a generic form, the school seeks to enable universal access to an otherwise exclusionary institution, and to enact accompanying liberal ideals of self. Far from universal and straightforward as practitioners imagine, however, access and inclusion are ever-shifting targets, the result of a scalar work. Introducing yoga schools as sites of ideological work where late modern assumptions of self, body, and material form are put into concerted practice, the paper situates this school's project of reform within the contradictions immanent to a globalizing modernity.

The thesis of Alessandra Laurer Rosen has been approved.

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Most importantly, I thank practitioners at the shala, "Padma" especially, for their collaboration at a time of great upheaval and uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

On a weekday morning in early April of 2020, I join students at a *yoga shala* (yoga school) in Los Angeles for daily practice of Mysore Ashtanga yoga. A genre of the transnational spiritual-health commodity of *hātha yoga* (Alter 2004; De Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005), Mysore Ashtanga yoga is said to be distinguished by its so-called “rigid” form and “traditional” mode of transmission, often thought to be rooted in a primordial Indian past, prior to contact with the West. Through the faithful replication of a specific *asana* (postural) series prescribed by an authorized Ashtanga teacher, practitioners stake claims to membership within an institutional world that emanates from the governing *yoga shala* of authentication in Mysore, India. The onset of the novel coronavirus, however, has posed a disruption to the norms of this practice: like all others in its transnational horizon, this Los Angeles-based yoga school has shifted daily practice to a new context. Rather than meet in the *yoga shala*, students join one another for Ashtanga practice through a Zoom conference meeting.

On this morning, practitioners are invited to reconvene in the final minutes of the meeting by their teacher, Padma, who shares her thoughts on how this shift has affected her own practice: “I couldn’t get through the postures today without stopping every few minutes to take a rest, so I decided to do something a little unusual.” Students’ faces register their expressions of curiosity, and Padma reveals, “I decided to experiment with a 10-minute headstand.” Aligning a set of mutually reinforcing oppositions between the material postures and the immaterial mind, outer world and inward self, Padma explains that the reason she extended this posture was to test her mental capacity. What level of physical discomfort was her mind capable of withstanding if she extended her headstand from five to ten minutes? She proposes that students view their *asana* practice as a controlled “experiment” to navigate the extraordinary event framing their present:

“for all we know,” she says, “we may find ourselves in quarantine for twice the time we had originally thought.”

I was intrigued by this analogy, and how it seemed to mobilize the present moment toward a theory of distinction, while recalling a familiar discourse surrounding yoga’s value in the West as a modality of inner spiritual and outer bodily discipline. As part of efforts to present a universally accessible Hinduism on the world’s stage in the late nineteenth century, yoga was reformulated from an ascetic practice of renunciation into an inward spiritual and physical health science that could at once complement and counteract the materialist society of the so-called “modern” West (c.f. Alter 2004). Once recast as an abstract set of postures, or typified asana series, yoga could take on global scope. Its objective material form allowed it a public presence for consumption, while its spiritual essence promised to transcend secular reality and the problems of institutionalized religion. Through her experiment, Padma was demonstrating a particular semiotic ideology that reconfigures the generic Ashtanga asana series with respect to an inward spiritual self. Rather than a standardized form to perfect, she seemed to suggest to her students that the Ashtanga yoga postures could be a flexible material, customizable to the practitioner’s singularities and needs.

What were the semiotic logics of this stance toward material form? What sort of human subject did this ideology presume? How were the conditions of the present rendering this semiotic ideology an existential truth for practitioners? More importantly, what sort of social and political work did this stance generate for practitioners at this school?

In the year following the start of my fieldwork in the early days of Los Angeles’ safe-at-home orders, I began to recognize that this semiotic ideology was generating a theory of social differentiation that binds practitioners at this site. Precisely because of her openness toward

difference and distrust of standardization, at Padma's shala, I was continuously told, anybody can practice Ashtanga yoga. Here, all practitioners-- regardless of differences in ability, gender, race and class -- are provided equal treatment and access. If the Mysore shala required that students submit their agency to an external authority, Padma's shala taught students to look inward and find their self-authority. In short, where the governing shala was exclusionary, the shala was inclusionary. Where the former preserved a misguided faith in authority—a relic of the past—Padma's shala was teaching students to know themselves: the “true,” “universal” essence of yoga as refracted through the unique particularities of each individual practitioner.

Though universalizing in its claims, I argue in this paper that this discourse of inclusion and access is neither straightforward nor universal, as many practitioners imagine, but fundamentally perspectival, and only the result of a careful semiotic labor. Indeed, at this site, access is just as much about establishing, as it is about challenging institutional boundaries, through contrast and differentiation (c.f Debenport 2010; 2012). Analyzing interviews and ethnographic material collected in the year following the release of safer-at-home orders in March of 2020, I trace a modernizing program at this yoga school that takes as its object of reform two seemingly contradictory shifts in this genre's recent past: the global popularization and expansion, and exclusion and stratification, of Ashtanga yoga. I demonstrate that this program hinges on what I term a *semiotic labor of personalization*.¹ Rather than privilege the genre's typified form, students at the shala are taught to recognize the irreducible singularity of real-time events of practice, and to use such signs of difference as a means toward realizing their self-singularity. In a further step, the standardized form of the postures is dematerialized and naturalized: it comes to stand in an iconic relationship (Gal and Irvine 2000) – one of likeness and similarity – to the unique shape of the bodies that animate it. By teaching students to shape a

generic form to their bodies, the shala seeks to materialize a diverse body of Ashtanga practitioners and enact accompanying liberal ideals, of self-autonomy, inclusivity, and empowerment, in self-conscious contrast to how they imagine the governing shala in Mysore, India.

Rather than bracket the indeterminate context that framed my research, this paper treats change and crisis as optics through which to trace the salient forms of attention, contestation, and controversies binding this site to other yoga shalas dispersed across time and space. I take inspiration from scholars who have argued that “friction,” contestation and rupture—rather than evidence of disconnection—are generative of transnational linkages (Clarke 2007; Daswani 2013; Tsing 2005; Zigon 2018). Using the experiment that Padma demonstrated for practitioners one morning in early April as an invitation to trace the work of crisis in generating a much more widespread discourse of distinction at this site, I track how the school’s abrupt transition to a “new” platform triggered a heightened self-conscious reflexivity amongst some practitioners upon a set of institutional norms with which the shala had positioned itself in self-conscious contrast prior. In this way, crisis itself generates a theory of institutional modernization: it becomes a means of taking up a position and forging a response to “traditional” and “exclusionary” Others further removed in time and space (Carr and Lempert 2016; Duranti 2010). Rather than locate the cause for this clash in essentialized differences-- between genders, “East” and “West,” “tradition” and “modernity” (though these are, undoubtedly, some of the terms through which my participants understand and imagine one another)—I situate this school’s program of reform within a larger history of movements to universalize yoga. In so doing, I show that the work of materializing inclusion at this site—inasmuch as it is a response-- is not outside of, but intrinsic to the contradictions of a globalizing modernity. Indeed, this thesis

introduces yoga schools as sites of ideological work (Gal and Irvine 2019), where late modern assumptions of self, agency and materiality are put into concerted practice.

This thesis is organized as follows: first, I offer a semiotic framework for theorizing the contradictions that underwrite the shala's program, reviewing the modernist assumptions that underscore an ideology of semiotic form at this site. Next, I present an historically informed sketch of the institutional world in which this Los Angeles based yoga school is situated, paying close attention to salient debates, controversies and shifts in which the school finds itself configured. Turning to this paper's ethnographic case, the section following discusses how Padma's shala is positioned as a direct response to two seemingly contradictory modernizing processes in Ashtanga yoga's social history: its worldwide expansion, and exclusion and stratification. The paper then transitions to the context of crisis that framed my research. Focusing on conversations with three practitioners with strikingly different experiences and imaginaries of membership at the shala, Ana, Sergine and Chase, I attend to the ways in which the very same semiotic ideology—though intended to *efface* typification in the name of universal access and recognition—did not necessarily materialize as planned. That is, while all were given the gift of inclusion at the shala, some found that their bodies were more or less fit for access than others. My intervention is not to critique the shala for failing to prevent typification and exclusion; instead, my closing discussion uses the contradictions of practitioners' stories as an invitation to theorize the ambivalences intrinsic to a globalizing modernity.

SEMIOTIC FORM, TYPIFICATION, MODERNITY

How can Ashtanga yoga aspire to “universal” scale and spatiotemporal scope, yet remain ideally inward and individualized to the practitioner? A source of continued contradiction and

debate, in this essay I conceptualize the tensions this question generates for my interlocutors through a Peircean semiotic of tokens, or real-time singular instantiations and types, or conventionalized abstractions. From a Peircean framework, signs have to be embodied in some materiality-- some real-time experience, or singular “existing event in the sensuous world” (Gal and Irvine 2019:94), to be existentially perceivable. Yet a sign’s materialization in real-time instances is only intelligible—or recognized as “the same” across time and space—by virtue of its regimentation by some conventionalized semiotic type (Keane 2003; Nakassis 2013:401). In this manner, while yoga is sensuously felt in real-time events of practice, it requires some degree of conventionalization to be intelligible “as” a token of a particular yoga pose or lineage. It is the bridging of irreducible difference and singularity under a governing type that creates the conditions for Ashtanga yoga’s circulation and its capacity for spatiotemporal extension. At various points throughout this essay I refer to such conventionalization and typification as yoga’s “semiotic form” (see Keane 2007; Wilf 2012a). As I show, semiotic form is the source of much anxiety for practitioners of Ashtanga yoga: on the one hand, it can seem to threaten the inward spiritual agency of the practitioner, generating a desire to overcome typification for an authentic singular experience (Eisenlohr 2009); on the other, it is the very medium through which a practitioner’s singularity is manifest and recognized.

To be sure, semiotic form is not necessarily a problem; it only becomes so given particular political projects, interests, background knowledge and assumptions that guide its construal -- in short, given particular semiotic ideologies (Keane 2003). I follow scholars who conceive of ideologies as neither totalizing nor pejorative, nor signaling some “false-consciousness,” (Kroskrity 2000; Gal and Irvine 2019) but as historically contingent, positioned “assumptions about what signs are and how they should function” (Keane 2003:419). In

particular, I am concerned with modernist assumptions of self, agency and authenticity that (re)fix tokens of Ashtanga yoga practice relative to its typified form. I depart from an understanding of modernity as a discrete context, event or historical period, and rather explore modernity as an ideological *project* that assumes particular conceptions of agency, self, and materiality (Asad 2003; Chakrabarty 2000; Gupta 1998; Keane 2007; Mahmood 2005).

Much has been written on modernist assumptions of self and materiality. Bruno Latour has famously argued that modernity relies upon projects to “purify” nature from culture, despite their intrinsic mediation (1993). Webb Keane traces connections between the modernist imperative for purification with Protestant ideologies that extricate the sign from the material world, according agency, freedom and moral truth to an interiorized self. Drawing on his ethnographic work in Sumba, Indonesia, he demonstrates that Protestant missionaries were at pains to abolish object-like mediators, such as bodily practices, fetishism and words, defined as opposed to an inward spiritual authenticity. As Keane shows, the Protestant ideology of semiotic form underwrites a specific understanding of modernity that hinges on a “moral narrative” for progressive self-realization (Keane 2007:22) from the constraints of “tradition,” and authority (Bauman and Briggs 2003).

Keane’s work has opened an avenue to theorize the interconnections of theological, liberal, and progressive thought (Eisenlohr 2009; Lempert 2012; Wilf 2012). We can see traces of the semiotic ideology he examines in liberal-democratic assumptions that human agency is necessarily opposed to external norms (Asad 2003), ideas that have been shown to inform contemporary feminist and progressive ideals of self-autonomy, sovereignty and empowerment (Inoue 2007; Mahmood 2005). They also surface in Romantic ideas of “self-expression” (Taylor 1989; Wilf 2012; 2015), underwritten by metaphors of depth, purity, and inwardness; and in the

abstract, disembodied rational self of the public sphere (Warner 2002). Moreover, the referentialist language ideology (Carr 2010; Silverstein 1979; 1996), pervasive across Euro-American institutional contexts, that stipulates that words primarily reflect or denote a subject's pre-existing internal thoughts, is underwritten by parallel assumptions of semiosis as representative rather than constitutive of the world.

Crucially, these semiotic ideologies have important consequences for the inevitable dimension of typification that I flagged at the start of this thesis: insofar as semiotic types render forms open to repetition and circulation across contexts, they can appear opposed to the modern subject's authenticity and individual agency. By provisionally bridging singularity into a recognizable, conventionalized form, typification can thus render signs autonomous from the individual (Eisenlohr 2009:279). Indeed, shared across many narratives of modernity is a concern with the problematic alienating and universalizing effects of typification associated with modernist processes.² For example, Max Weber bemoaned the curtailment of freedom and agency brought about by modernity's bureaucratization and rationalization, that reduced individuals into mere "cogs in the machine" (1992:182). Karl Marx theorized that the rise of capitalism resulted in the laborer's alienation from his means of production, and by extension, from an immediate, sensuous connection with the natural world (1978: 87-89). Finally, Walter Benjamin warned of the implications of "mass" industrial production and modern life, arguing that the developed world brought with it a normalized "shock" resulting in a condition of sensory "anesthesia" (1969; Buck Morss 1992).

As Eitan Wilf (2015) and William Mazzarella (2004) have discussed, these concerns express the same thesis that Western modernity "was, above all, a matter of the diffusion of universalizing processes and categories" (Mazzarella as cited in Wilf 2015:5). In this sense,

given certain circumstances and ideologies, typification can be the cause for moral and political anxiety, appearing external to the individual despite being a vehicle for meaning-making and communication (Keane 2007:14). While I take typification and mediation as “necessary condition[s] of social life” (Eisenlohr 2009: 277), in this paper I am interested in the modernist projects that render such processes both a necessity and obstacle to social actors’ projects of self-making. As I shall demonstrate, these aforementioned modernist ideologies lead to contradictory desires on the part of Ashtanga practitioners at a yoga school in the U.S. On the one hand, practitioners seek to faithfully replicate Ashtanga yoga’s semiotic form in the name of authentication and distinction, and on the other, they attempt to overcome typification for fear of generic replication and anonymization.

Of course, such contradictory imperatives do not come from nowhere, but rather arise in and through institutional, historical and political debates that frame this school. In what follows, I outline the institutional context in which an American Ashtanga yoga school is situated, paying close attention to salient shifts, and controversies that bind this site to others across time and space. While Ashtanga yoga shalas are globally diffuse, for the purpose of analytical simplification, I treat this transnational linkage primarily as if it had just two sides—basing my discussion upon my fieldwork with Ashtanga practitioners in the U.S who orient themselves in contrast to the governing shala in Mysore, India. My interest in this investigation is neither with sorting between what is “original” and what is “new,” nor is it with tracing Ashtanga yoga’s progressive “Westernization,” two popular approaches to the study of yoga (Alter 2004; De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010). Rather, I shall argue that yoga has never been outside of—but is rather endemic to-- globalizing modernity. Therefore, I am more interested in attending to how the assumptions of self, agency and authenticity I have reviewed above reflexively shape

movements to categorize and materialize the “modern” relative to the “non-modern.” Such an approach reminds us that the pragmatics of modernity is not opposed to “tradition,” but rather requires a co-constitutive counter-modern other in order to materialize (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Chakrabarty 2000; Hall 2019; Reyes 2017).

YOGA IN/AS GLOBALIZING MODERNITY

I use the term *yoga*, a topic of considerable scholarly scrutiny (Alter 2004; De Michelis 2004; Jain 2015; Singleton 2010; White 2012), not to denote a stable tradition, but rather to refer to a heterogeneous array of South Asian practices, genealogies, and philosophies that have variously been rendered with the label. Far from a “pure” and “unchanging millennia-old lineage of... theory and practice” (Godrej 2017:776), historians agree that yoga was plural and doctrinally diverse in both interpretation and practice, with fluid boundaries between Hindu, Jainist and Buddhist, Islamic traditions of renunciation (White 2012; Alter 2004). *Hātha yoga*, the physical practice of bodily postures that has become synonymous with yoga in the present, was a heterodox development of the tantric South Asian tradition that focused on the embrace, rather than denial of bodily pleasure (Alter 2004). Much less a pure original artifact of India, its popularization in the West was the result of the combined labor of Indian intellectuals and European Orientalist scholars who were intent on fashioning a universal, scientific Hinduism in response to Christian missionary presence in British India (Singleton 2010; van der Veer 2013). In speaking of this modernizing project, I do not mean to imply any sense of internal unification. While some elite modernizers, most notably the Hindu reformer Swami Vivekananda, sought to purify yoga of its ascetic and tantric bodily traces deeming *hātha yoga* unspiritual and a detriment to spiritual and moral growth (Godrej 2017; Strauss 2004), other reformers drew

heavily on European moralities of health, fitness and an emerging language of “muscular Christianity” in the invention of postural systems of practice (Singleton 2010). It is this latter modernizing strand in which Mysore Ashtanga yoga was embedded.

That is, to speak of Mysore Ashtanga yoga is to name but one genre in a booming market for numerous adaptations of transnational *hātha yoga* exported to the West by various Indian gurus in the mid-twentieth century (Goldberg and Singleton 2014; Strauss 2005). Known for its self-conscious alignment with European biomedicine and physical fitness, the invention of Ashtanga yoga was part and parcel of a universalizing project focused on the construction of an “Eastern” science that bridged mind and body. In creating a standardized *asana* (postural) practice, Indian reformer T. Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) and his student K. Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009) allegedly sought to create a program suitable for “all” individuals, regardless of religious affiliation, occupation, or health status (Sidnell 2017). Yet the universal subject addressed by these reformers was exclusively the European male. Countering a prevailing eugenicist myth of Indian “effeminacy” (Alter 2004; Singleton 2010:95), the invention and transnational spread of Ashtanga yoga took as its object of aspiration the male European body, and its object of reform, the male Indian body.

Jois established his governing headquarters in Mysore, India in 1948. Making frequent trips to the U.S that dovetailed with the opening of migration from India and take-off of counterculture in the 1960s, he was a leading agent in consolidating India as a global center and tourist destination for spirituality and esotericism (De Michelis 2004; van der Veer 2013). Presently, authorized Ashtanga teachers and shalas span the U.S, Europe, South America, and Asia. To obtain a teacher’s certification, practitioners are required to make bi-annual trips to the headquarters in Mysore to study under the current lineage holder, Sharath Jois.

By now it should be clear that the project of modernizing yoga was neither opposed to semiotic typification nor “tradition,” but in fact hinged upon the invention and construction of a publicly accessible form that could be replicable across spatiotemporal contexts. Inextricably intertwined with a narrative of the West’s modernist disenchantment, yoga emerged as “a unifying sign of the Indian nation” (van der Veer 2013:174) for the precise purpose of fashioning a global India.

To this day, the form and practice of Mysore Ashtanga yoga revolves around the faithful replication of the standardized asana series in the authorized context of a shala and in the presence of a certified Ashtanga teacher. In addition to its typified postural sequence, the genre is distinguished by its mode of transmission, which is founded upon the guru-disciple relationship (Sanskrit *parampara*). Only by surrendering oneself completely to the lineage holder – or to a teacher authorized by him – is a student granted access to the postural series. This faithful allegiance is diagrammed in the series’ cumulative structure, which consists of six sequences of postures, each roughly one hour in length. Students learn new poses to add to their morning practice only when they have mastered the postural sequence which their teacher has prescribed them. It is not uncommon for a teacher to deploy linguistic commands, or to apply physical force and verbal reprimand in correcting the form of a student’s posture.

Such pedagogical techniques that have as their goal the moral discipline of students have made Ashtanga yoga difficult to square with “modern” secular ideals. The more esoteric aim of daily Ashtanga practice is self-effacement –or *samadhi* (Sidnell 2017:16): through the repeated honing and perfection of a postural sequence, the practitioner works to transcend the illusions of mere sensory experience and self-identity. As Jack Sidnell has noted, the current lineage holder - - recognizing that visiting practitioners are not ascetics but “householders” –seeks to recast this

teaching as on par with “modern” life by teaching students in Mysore to aim for the “temporary” experience of self-effacement “through the de-individuating, de-agentivizing effects of fitting one’s bodily movement...to a predetermined template” (Sidnell 2017:16). Sidnell’s observations suggest that visiting practitioners in Mysore are socialized into a semiotic ideology that takes the standardized form of the Ashtanga series as an anonymizing material through which to *transcend* individuality by incorporating the body into a generic “type” (see also Eisenlhoer 2018). Here semiotic typification mediates the transcendence of identity and material difference.

During my research with Ashtanga practitioners in the United States, I found that the semiotic form of Ashtanga yoga was intricately connected to interrelated imaginaries of authenticity, access, and institutional distinction. For example, I was regularly told that Mysore Ashtanga yoga was the most physically advanced and “traditional” lineage of yoga in the West, requiring an extreme self-discipline, flexibility and strength, and obedience to authority. In this manner, form mediated ideologies of South Asian authenticity and pastness. This discursive typification of the postures is a common way of distinguishing Mysore Ashtanga from other “types” of yoga, and Ashtanga practitioners from other “types” of yoga practitioners. That is, as a standardized form, the Ashtanga series takes on various orders of indexicality (Silverstein 2003), reflexively constituting the practitioner as a particular “kind” of yoga adherent-- and further, a particular “kind” of body, thereby reproducing class “distinction” (Bourdieu 1977).

Such discourses of differentiation have become increasingly prevalent since the “yoga boom” of the late twentieth century that saw a proliferation of yogas amongst the middle-classes in rural and urban areas of North America (Godrej 2017: 776; Jain 2015). The spread of yoga in public “secular” spaces such as gyms, and accompanying rise of digital media in the early twenty-first century further disseminated Ashtanga yoga to contexts in which it was previously

absent. With the “mass” popularization of the genre, Ashtanga practitioners are concerned to distinguish their lineage from other yogas from which it shares resemblance, and from practitioners who merely “aspire” to membership (through say, display of its associated commodity tokens or performance of the postures in non-ritually efficacious contexts).

Even if access to the genre has, or rather is *perceived to have* increased with these shifts, for most, the question of membership remains uncertain. While Mysore Ashtanga yoga was primarily made up of male adherents who claimed direct contact with the lineage holder in Mysore, the circulation of Ashtanga yoga through print magazines in the late 20th century and more recently, social media platforms in the twenty-first, brought a new audience of women with the competence to recognize though not necessarily perform the genre. The reality is that not all can leave behind family and work obligations to study under the lineage holder in Mysore. Moreover, the very competence to perform the postures presumes an entry-level background knowledge and history of socialization in activities that enable a “flexible” embodied disposition (Bourdieu 1979). As Pierre Bourdieu has theorized (1979), even people’s embodied dispositions, while they may appear as innate and “natural,” are themselves structuring structures, not outside of class but learned through particular social institutions. With its high annual fees and advanced physical practice, the genre remains circumscribed to a practitioner of a certain socio-economic and gender mobility.

A recent public controversy internal to the Ashtanga lineage has mobilized struggles over the ideal body linked to the organization, and efforts to reform the guru-disciple relationship and its associated pedagogical techniques of corporal discipline. On the heels of the global feminist #MeToo movement in 2016, photographic footage was released of Pattabhi Jois deploying physical adjustments to visiting Western female students in the Mysore shala. In popular media,

the footage was cited as evidence of Jois' sexual predation (Dillon, 2019; Griswold 2019). Yet it also raised concerns about the “anachronism” of Ashtanga yoga's mode of transmission with secular and mainstream feminist values of universal rights, agency, and self-ownership (Priest 2018). For leaders and practitioners internal to the lineage, the scandal has triggered concerns of Ashtanga yoga's exclusivity and inability to fully “modernize”—the practice's failure to presume a student's rights and autonomy. Conversely, it has been conjured by many as proof of the inauthentic intentions of the genre's founders Krishnamacharya and Jois, intentions that betray the universal spiritual essence of yoga.

It is in this highly controversial context that a yoga school in Los Angeles positions and finds itself positioned. As we shall see, one response to such modernizing processes and controversies seeks to increase access to Ashtanga yoga by teaching students to privilege the singularity of real-time instantiations of Ashtanga practice (tokens), over its idealized abstracted form (types). Such semiotic transformations seek to materialize democratic-liberal assumptions of personhood, while also preserving the spiritual personalization of the practice in contrast to the generic replication and reproduction of semiotic form.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING: PERSONALIZATION OF TYPIIFICATION

I made my first visit to The Shala³ in late December of 2019 with the intention of introducing myself to Padma before beginning practice. Interested in how contestations over spiritual authority and authenticity affect yoga practitioners' relationships to competing centers of dissemination in India, I had become particularly fascinated by the ways in which Ashtanga yoga, over other genres and popular styles in the booming yoga market, was enfolded in these debates. Accordingly, I set my sights on obtaining practical knowledge in the genre, hopeful that

the process of acquiring competence would yield important ethnographic insights for future research (see Jones 2011). Yet the extraordinarily high membership fees of surrounding yoga schools in Los Angeles posed an obstacle to my pursuit.

It was the shala's alternative model of exchange that prompted my visit that evening in December, and ultimately, permitted my access. Operating through a "trust-economy," it relies upon monthly contributions set at the discretion and choice of each member, rather than monthly fees or membership contracts. Padma has garnered a following in the booming Los Angeles yoga market as a vocal critic of the exclusivity of contemporary yoga. However, she intentionally keeps her shala relatively secluded from media and commercial networks. Her school thus responds to circulating discourses of access and privacy in what might appear as contradictory ways: seeking to enable greater inclusion within Ashtanga yoga while self-consciously rejecting the genre's growing popularization.

Entering the shala for the first time that evening in December, I was overwhelmed by a warmth generated by the heat of practitioners' bodies. Greeting me was a short hallway of cubbies with members' minimal belongings, and a cloth hanging from clips on the wall to partition a corner of the space for changing rooms. I noted the absence of a membership desk, a staple of commercial yoga studios where students and potential customers sign up before class, purchase apparel or class packs. A bench to my right held a basket with holiday gifts—suggested "donations" and goods for the homeless of Los Angeles. To the left were the doors into the shala practice room, where I could hear what sounded like an ocean – the unmistakable sound of practitioners' *ujjayi* breath (initiated from the back of the throat). Women of various ethnicities and races streamed from the doors, their yoga mats in hand, softly chatting with one another. As it turned out, Padma was not at the shala that day. She was on holiday vacation with her family,

and the group had been practicing in her absence. A middle-aged Asian American woman, in charge of opening and closing the shala while she was away, explained to me that Padma would return after the New Year. She invited me to join the group in practice beforehand.

The interior space of the shala and diverse body of female members materialized Padma's comparatively "egalitarian," "inclusive" and "nonmaterialist" stance toward Ashtanga yoga's distribution. This proved to be of tremendous significance for practitioners I interviewed, who sought out the shala for an "authentic" spiritual experience that was untarnished by Ashtanga yoga's "elitist," "authoritative," and "exclusionary" terms for membership. Especially for the women in my study, Padma's identity as one of the sole Indian American yoga teachers in the U.S, and authorized Ashtanga yoga teacher at that, was an important factor in deciding to pursue membership. Self-consciously aware of the recent public controversy within the Ashtanga lineage, members were invested in what they perceived as Padma's inclusive, "feminine," and flexible stance toward authority and her promise to enable greater representation in the Jois organization. Though the majority of practitioners were middle to upper-class, they were confident that their monthly contributions were enabling access for others of lesser means. The stakes for membership *here*, members reasoned, did not hinge upon "material differences" in income, "status," bodily ability, race or gender, but stemmed from an inward authenticity and spirituality that exceeded market logics.

Most importantly for practitioners, and in stark contrast to my initial assumptions about the genre's norms, access to membership and knowledge in the Ashtanga series at the shala did not depend upon the quality of one's performance—that is, on the shape of one's body. Padma explained this to me herself shortly following the transition online in early April of 2020:

Excerpt 1: "How we teach at the shala"

01 P: I think a hallmark of sort of
02 of how we teach at the shala
03 Is not to require aesthetic perfection
04 At all
05 To move on in the series or whatever
06 Because to me that just um
07 Reinforces external validation
08 And we're trying to move away from that
09 In our practice
10 Not looking outside of ourselves to feel validated
11 But feeling whole in and of ourselves

Padma differentiates her pedagogy by re-orienting the goal of practice, not toward the external validation of a teacher or perfection of the postures (03) but rather toward a sense of internal wholeness of self (12). Requiring that her students attain aesthetic mastery in the postures entails their unhealthy reliance on “external validation” (08)—an effect that would explicitly undermine what she frames as the goal of practice—a spiritual inwardness of self (05-06). Padma’s illustration thus assumes that external authority, emblemized in the typified form of the postures, is a negative imposition to the student’s inward experience and autonomy. Rather than “display” the typified form of the postures, students are to find the depth and range of their experience through their felt orientation to a pose. My concern is with how this theory of transmission positions the shala relative to competing centers of authority. As Padma explained that evening, her theory was constructed in self-conscious contrast to a set of norms linked to the governing shala in Mysore:

Excerpt 2: "Mainstream Ashtanga"

11 [Referring to the governing shala] There are a lot of rules um
12 A lot of like
13 Having to achieve certain things
14 Before you can learn certain other things
15 And I think some of the consequence of that is that
16 Mainstream Ashtanga seems to cater to

17 a specific phenotype
18 Like a specific kind of body
19 And also a specific kind of socioeconomic status
20 Um and that's never really sat well with me
21 Which is one of the reasons that we, we do the
22 We run the shala the way that we do
23 Yeah I would characterize Mainstream Ashtanga
24 With a bit of a rigidity you know?
25 Around the sequence
26 Um but it's? it's kind of
27 It's odd! I find it so odd!
28 Because actually Ashtanga
29 The way that Ashtanga is taught
30 It is a? it's taught to be a self-practice and so
31 Um really as teachers I think
32 What we should be teaching the students is
33 Autonomy
34 And actually
35 The ownership over one's own practice
36 To eventually
37 Be able to do it on their own

Padma describes the authorized model of Ashtanga transmission, assigning it a cluster of signs that stand in co-constitutive contrast with her shala: strict “rules” (11), specific criteria for progression in the sequence (13-14), class privilege, and an ideal-typified body—presumably male (17-18). By noting that students have to “achieve certain things” (13), Padma was referring to her claim that students are required to demonstrate a degree of aesthetic mastery of each posture to their teacher before they are granted permission to move forward in the postural series. Because of this, she reasons, the conventional model of transmission erases the unevenness of bodily ability. Indeed, offering a classic Bourdieusian critique, Padma suggests that only a select few—a class objectified in a certain habitus (1979)—can afford to access “Mainstream Ashtanga.” Positioned as a self-conscious response to a crisis of equity and access, the program of her shala rejects “rigidity” and privileges a “flexibility” toward the sequence, according a

value to the unique form of the student's body and their autonomy of self. Padma appeals to the individualized and non-synchronous form of Mysore Ashtanga transmission ("the way that Ashtanga is taught"), to authenticate the contrasting model of transmission at her site. Precisely because the genre is individualized rather than group-led, teachers "*should*" be enabling students' autonomy, rather than acting as an external source of authority. Granting students "ownership" over their practice (line 35), she implies, would entail ownership over their bodies.

I could not help but note some of the contradictions of this stance. Similar to the dilemmas that Protestants faced in their efforts to display inward sincerity (Keane 2007), there is an inevitability to the postures' typification: shala practitioners cannot entirely dematerialize the body. Even as Padma backgrounds the aesthetic form of the postures, as a teacher, she must inevitably evaluate the form of her students' practice to determine when they are ready for a more advanced pose. I therefore began to realize the extent to which materializing inclusion was far from straightforward, but a semiotic feat that relied upon a selective backgrounding of typification. While at least theoretically, differences in the shape and ability of bodies were not to matter in a students' claims to membership and access at the shala, I was left wondering the extent to which they did. In the following section, I trace how the persistence of the body's materiality entered into some practitioners' reflections upon crisis and change. More specifically, we shall see that personalization – though intended to enable access and efface typification – does not act uniformly upon bodies. In fitting the form of the postures to their own bodies, students find that access is a property some possess to a greater degree than others.

INSTITUTIONAL CRISES, RUPTURE, REFLEXIVITY

My conversation with Padma that evening in early April was not the first in which I was presented with an explicit theory of institutional differentiation. Looking back, I can see that this had to do with my ethnographic attention to institutional change. When safer-at-home orders were released in Los Angeles in March of 2020, the shala temporarily closed its doors and offered daily practice through a Zoom conference meeting between 8 and 10 AM each morning. As members reckoned with the implications of the pandemic for access to the ritual site of daily Ashtanga practice, I reckoned with its effects for access to my “field-site.”⁴ Set to conduct research on the transnational exchange of Ashtanga yoga in Northern India closer to – albeit still removed from – its global “center” of transmission in Mysore, the pandemic foreclosed possibilities for travel and yoga practice itself, effectively calling into question the very terms of my object of inquiry. Using my own access as practitioner at the shala as a way in to “ethnographic access,” in this period, I made the decision to turn the lens to a group “closer to home” (Visweswaran 1997). Rather than bracket the ongoing shifts to practice, I trained my eye precisely on how change was being interpreted by practitioners. I focused on what such processes of interpretation in the present revealed about the salient institutional debates within which practitioners were configured prior.

Though we are used to thinking of temporality in terms of continuity between past and present, anthropologists have underscored the importance of attending to moments and practices of abrupt discontinuity in enabling claims to absolute newness and transformation (Clarke 2007; Daswani 2013; Robbins 2007). As events that impinge upon and unravel the “normal,” crises may trigger a heightened self-conscious reflexivity on habits past, propelling explicit deliberation and justification in the present (Bourdieu 1977; Povinelli 2011; Throop and Duranti 2015; Zigon 2007). As Joel Robbins has noted, it is precisely the sense that rupture and crisis happen *to* rather

than *in* time that allows a sense of irreducible transformation (2007:12). While I am interested in the phenomenal contours of change and rupture, I am also interested in considering its performativity—that is, with what crisis “does” (Seale-Feldman 2020). It is worth noting that the very notion that rupture can be an opportunity for self-growth underscores certain liberal narratives of self (Dunn 2014; Keane 2007). In this sense, crisis itself can be constitutive of a modernist stance, invoking an imperative for self-transformation.

As I found, the shala’s abrupt closure and shift to a quintessentially “new” digital platform was categorized by practitioners in temporal terms as a break with a ‘traditional’ past. Reconfiguring the genre’s spatiotemporal reach both locally and globally, Zoom opened the possibility for practitioners in different time zones to attend practice sessions hosted at shalas from which they would have previously been excluded. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the present shift instigated explicit commentary from members upon the “truth” of the shala’s self-consciously accessible and inclusive program of reform, triggering a theory of institutional differentiation – and modernization -- parallel to the sort that Padma articulated to me above. Yet not all of this work of differentiation was overt. Instead for some practitioners, such shifts appeared as seemingly self-evident transitions in the body and self—the effects of an external event upon the body—rather than a product of Padma’s labor of socialization. By tracing the coalescence of indexical signs across the following narratives (Wortham and Reyes 2015), however, a stable axis of differentiation emerges (Gal and Irvine 2019), one strikingly parallel to the axis narrated by Padma herself, that practitioners use to sort between contrasting typifications of voice, body, and form.

Fitting in by not fitting

My conversations with two women of varying claims to membership at the shala, Ana and Sergine, serve to illustrate this discursive process of institutional differentiation. Self-conscious that they deviated from the ideal-typical body Padma assigned to “Mainstream Ashtanga” (Excerpt 2), both women sought out the shala precisely for its promises for inclusion, diversity and representation. If this was to imply any sense of uniformity, however, my conversations with the two women suggested otherwise: where Ana used the semiotic ideology at the shala to authenticate her gendered body within the shala, Sergine worried that embracing the shala’s program would undo her claims to membership in its authorizing institution precisely because of her body’s divergence from the norm. Consider first how Ana theorized the present. As she explained to me one afternoon during an interview in early April, the present shift was enforcing her to abandon a moral norm of “progress” and aesthetic perfection:

Excerpt 3:

01 Yeah I feel it’s like a huge learning of being okay
02 With how the practice is and just loving it
03 The way it is
04 And like not always trying
05 Like forgetting about the idea of being right
06 You know learning
07 Learning and enjoying practice not because you
08 You are doing things right
09 But because of practice
10 AR: *And if you had the adjustments in the shala*
11 *How would that be different?*
12 Because I feel you connect with another joy
13 With a joy of like
14 I’m accomplishing it!
15 I’m getting better at it!
16 I’m moving forward
17 Uh yeah so there’s like this feeling of
18 Success or improvement!

Reflecting upon the shift of Mysore practice from the shala and to its digital host, Ana reproduces fractions of conventionalized registers of transmission linked to different institutional

sites of Mysore Ashtanga transmission: Padma’s shala (01-09), and the lineage holder in Mysore—or “Mainstream Ashtanga” (12-18). Similar to Padma’s reflections, these models diverge in their construals of the ground of the semiotic form of the asana and its object: in one model, the asana practice is a means to examine and accept how the singularity of the moment effects oneself (01-09). In assessing “how the practice is” (01-02) one observes how the practice changes with shifts in the body. In the second, virtue is linked to aesthetic improvement and gradual perfection of asana—that is, to one’s subjectivation to institutional norms of Mysore Ashtanga yoga practice and mastery of semiotic form. Ana suggests that the present moment was serving to illustrate where the true authority of practice resided: not in the external form to be evaluated by a Mysore teacher, but rather within herself, as materialized in her body’s incrementally transforming possibilities and skills.

With the progression of our conversations, I learned that the contrasting registers of transmission that Ana labelled above were intricately linked to her imaginaries of gender empowerment, autonomy, and inclusion. Before her membership at the shala, she explained, she was invested in making her body like those of her surrounding male practitioners; now, however, she was embracing her essential feminine self. Reflecting upon the form of her practice one week with the shift to Zoom, she differentiated present from past in a genre of rupture and transformation by setting up an internal dialogue of clashing voices (Bakhtin 1981):

Excerpt 4:

01 Also my practice has become more permeable
02 To what’s happening to me in terms of
03 Okay I’ll hear the voice of like
04 “Oh today you were a little bit lazy
05 You didn’t do the whole thing” and
06 But I know that’s like
07 Okay I’ll listen to this but then I’ll have to let it go
08 And it’s okay
09 It’s okay I don’t always need to always

- 10 Do the same thing
11 I don't need to always
12 Be strong and flexible and like
13 When I'm on my period
14 I can rest

This excerpt of our conversation was part of a longer narrative in which Ana assigned divergent institutional models of transmission contrasting Bakhtinian voices, or socially locatable positions (Agha 2005; Bakhtin 1981) to differentiate between a masculine and feminine “type” of Ashtanga practitioner. Above, Ana speaks through the masculine voice, admonishing herself for not finishing the entire sequence (05). As she appeals to the present time of quarantine, she shifts registers to a feminine voice to represent her experience of practice. Linking it to the register of transmission conventionally assigned to Padma’s institutional site, the feminine voice allows for variation in the postures, taking her body as the true sign of authority- that is, as a causal indexical sign that dictates the form of her practice. Here Ana was referencing Padma’s encouragement that female students take off from practicing the asana sequence during their menstruation. Prior to her membership at Padma’s shala, Ana had insisted upon practicing the standardized Ashtanga sequence, taking her menstruation as a sign that her participation in Mysore rooms was not equal to her surrounding male practitioners. Ana distances herself from the “flexible” and “strong” body that Padma assigned to the governing shala’s theory of transmission (Excerpt 2). She assimilates the slowness of the present into a lesson and narrative of self-growth. Now during quarantine, she told me, she was learning to embrace her menstruation as a sign of her “natural” feminine essence.

In striking contrast to Ana, who distanced herself from the ideal body linked to the authorizing shala, Sergine was concerned that her body’s divergence would prevent her legitimation in the authorizing institution. Identifying herself as a Black queer woman with a

disability, she expressed her frustration with the sparse women of color in Ashtanga yoga. One week when we met in early May, she shared that the prolonged immobility of quarantine had exacerbated the severity of her back pain, a chronic effect of her spina bifida condition. As a solution, Padma encouraged her to modify the sequence, suggesting that she take postures out as needed. In following Padma’s instructions, Sergine realized the extent to which they clashed with the institutional norms of Mysore practice with which she was accustomed:

Excerpt 5:

01 I think that there is a lot of pressure to
02 Do the poses and
03 Work towards like some sort of mastery of it?
04 And I’ve even thought about like
06 And just like bear with me
07 Because I’m kind of like thinking out loud here
08 But like I’ve even thought about how
09 What does mastery of a posture
10 Look like for me

As a certified Ashtanga teacher, Sergine characterizes the ethic of practice with which she is accustomed as being solely focused upon the “mastery” of the asana practice, or on perfecting some standardized type (02-03). As she shifts to the interactional present, she reconfigures signs to voice a model of transmission in Padma’s shala. Rather than aiming to shape her body according to an ideal type of the postures, she wonders what the postures would look like for her—in the particular shape of her body (09-10). In this sense, she reverses the ground between the standardized form of the postural series and her body, shaping the former to the latter. While Sergine favored this approach, she wondered, if she used the constraints and possibilities particular to her body to dictate the shape of the generic practice, would her practice still “count” as Ashtanga yoga?

Excerpt 6:

20 I want to do the practice and give the practice
21 The respect that I think it deserves?
22 But I also?
23 Like wanna be kind to my body?
24 And I wonder?
25 Like for example
26 When I was practicing this weekend
27 And I took some of the postures out
29 Well does—
30 Can I say I practiced my primary series?
31 You know if I took certain?
32 You know what I mean
33 Like can I say it?
34 Or do I just say I took a regular vinyasa class? So
35 I still consider myself an Ashtanga practitioner
36 But now I'm like?
37 Am I like? Towing the line?

Sergine was concerned that being “kind to her body” (23) and fulfilling the institutional norms of Mysore practice (20-21) were potentially incommensurable projects. Shaping the generic form of the postures to her body meant taking out several postures in the series that exacerbated her back pain. Indeed, the management of types and tokens in Ashtanga yoga is not simply a matter of reproducing the exact form of single postures, but in replicating their contiguous placement in sequence. Sergine thus wondered if the deletion of certain postures would sufficiently adequate the form of yoga she was trying to replicate and the accompanying institution that she sought membership within. Examining her prior week of practice through quarantine, Sergine construed its surface form as just sufficient enough. Her uncertainty in the interactional event of telling conveyed what I understood to be an anxiety that the form of her practice—when shaped toward her body in pain and not according to an ideal image— would performatively change the very thing she was attempting to replicate. Doing so would dissolve the genre’s distinction from other types in a market for yoga—and by extension, her own distinction as a particular kind of yoga practitioner.

Through my conversations with Ana and Sergine, I began to realize the extent to which the shala's accessible program could be experienced in strikingly divergent ways. While Ana claimed authentication in the shala by denaturalizing the male able-bodied habitus linked to its authorizing institution, Sergine worried that doing so would not grant her access to the governing shala in Mysore. Inclusion therefore did not act uniformly on bodies: as Ana's optimism and Sergine's doubts demonstrate, its effects were shaped by discourses of gender, as well as the asymmetries of practitioners' aspirations for membership in the Jois organization.

Not fitting by fitting in

What of those members whose bodies "fit" Ashtanga yoga's ideal subject? Chase, a white male middle-aged practitioner, theorized the crisis as confirmation of his decision to leave the shala some months prior. Speaking to me from his childhood home in Ohio where he had fled shortly after the release of safer-at-home orders in Los Angeles in March, he emphasized his excitement about the democratizing potential of the digital platform (Hirschkind et al 2010). With the shift to Zoom, Ashtanga teachers were allowing students from surrounding shalas to study with them online. While Chase was actively exploring other shalas, in reflecting upon Padma's counter-positioning in the transnational network of Ashtanga yoga, he admitted that the shift was potentially spreading the truth of her inclusive approach:

Excerpt 7:

01 I don't think like [Padma has been]
02 Explicitly ostracized from the wider Ashtanga world
03 But definitely she was an outlier in that
04 But I think now? Especiallly since
05 The coronavirus
06 I think now many teachers are starting to see
07 That way
08 I think that it's probably changing in some sense
09 That - That this?
10 You know this uh

- 11 You have to do the postures in a certain way?
12 It's antiquated!
13 That's like a problem
14 A: *so why do you think because of coronavirus?*
15 C: Because the teachers have been
16 Just de-platformed
17 You know? (laughter)
18 They don't have the power!

Chase assigns Padma to the periphery of the “Ashtanga world” (02-03) but appeals to specific shifts brought about by the present to demonstrate how her program is in fact the true and “modernized” version of the model of transmission associated with the center of Mysore Ashtanga transmission. When I asked Chase why he attributed this to the pandemic, he specified that Zoom was flattening the hierarchical participation format of Ashtanga practice, preventing teachers from enacting authority through individualized attention and corporal discipline. Voicing a quintessential liberal critique (see Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005), he suggests that the “power” of teachers is a negative imposition to the student’s agency and freedom. The problem that concerned him was the criteria for progressing in the postural series. From his vantage point, the requirement that students achieve aesthetic perfection in the generic form of the series presupposed a relationship of power that impeded the autonomy of the student. He also saw it as a central gatekeeping device for Mysore Ashtanga yoga membership, itself a sign of an anachronistic tradition incompatible with the present.

As it turned out, precisely the program unique to Padma’s shala had motivated Chase to end his membership in her space. Without the gatekeeping practices of the “traditional” model, he found himself learning the postures at a much faster rate. Naturally endowed with the very “strong” and “flexible” body that Ana self-consciously distanced herself from, Chase had nothing to prevent him from accessing the entire sequence. Accordingly, he learned the entirety of the first three postural series in just a few months. With the progressive addition of postures to

the linear sequence, he soon found that his daily practice had ballooned to over three hours and thereby lost its spiritual meaning:

Excerpt 8:

12 I was tired of it!
13 Kinda!
14 I was, I wasn't tired of it
15 But I was um
16 I needed more
17 Than just this physical stuff
18 I really did!
19 I needed more than just asana.

As he explains above, in being granted open access to the postural series at Padma's shala, Chase found himself exhausted of the physical body. He voices a lack of spiritual fulfillment: a sense that he has been seduced by the sheer matter of the postures (17) in absence of the "true" spiritual end of practice. As Chase detailed, his long work hours made it such that the spatiotemporal expansion of his daily practice—and physical body – cut into the time he could devote to the "social" and "recreational" domains of his life. Uneasily blurring the boundary between "leisure" and "religion," he could no longer fix his Ashtanga practice into secular capitalist domains. The shift to Zoom, then, justified Chase's decision to end his membership at the shala while proving the essential truth of the program that distinguished it. Using the time at home to develop a consistent practice without reliance upon a shala, he assured me that he was now "searching for access to something beyond the asana."

Admittedly, I squirmed through my interview with Chase. Well-read in feminist and postcolonial criticism that has noted the ways that the labor of women of color in the U.S, especially that of South Asian women, is devalued as "bodily" rather than "skilled" (Glenn 1992; Kang 2010; Mankekar and Gupta 2017), I assumed that I was witnessing the very logics at the shala being mobilized to devalue the semiotic work – the skill – required of Padma to enable

access and personalization. By writing off Padma's teaching as "merely physical" in contrast to the inward spiritual truth of yoga practice, Chase inadvertently reproduced racializing discourses of women of color as "naturally suited" for service work (Glenn 1992), justifying the vast difference in price and value between Padma and surrounding white male Ashtanga teachers. Indeed, his search for access "beyond" the postures reproduced familiar Orientalizing ontologies of depth and purity that "penetrate" into India's past (see Chakrabarty 2000; Gupta 1998). In contrast to the women above whose bodies compromised their claims to universal, unlimited access in the postural series, Chase's body had enabled him full access to the series. Yet for precisely this reason, he perceived that the shala was preventing his access to the true "spiritual" essence of yoga. He left the shala in search of another teacher who could balance out the mind/body opposition.

DISCUSSION: ASYMMETRIES OF ACCESS, LABORS OF PERSONALIZATION

In the conversations reviewed herein, practitioners reflexively mobilize signs of an exceptional present toward a theory of institutional distinction and reform. Registering on the body as pain (Sergine), as slowness (Ana), and as distance from the ritual shala space and authority (Chase), the shift of the present seems to demand – to necessitate from the outside – an innovation to the constraints of "tradition." The press of circumstance propels a critique of exclusionary norms that prevent the sort of flexibility, innovation and adaptation required to survive the uncertain present. Note then that the reflections of practitioners—while they appear as self-evident assessments of the body-- are not simply individual evaluations. In fact, the voice that Ana is learning not to listen to and the sense of pressure that Sergine feels to master the postures are fractions of an institutionally authorized register of transmission.

The semiotic clash here is experienced as a struggle between how best to treat the relationship of tokens and types, of real-time instantiations of Ashtanga yoga practice, and its abstract typified form. Though practitioners reproduce “the same” standardized sequence, at Padma’s shala, they learn to pick out differences that inhere in their real-time experience and partial replication. In a further step, the postures are downshifted, or *iconized* (Gal and Irvine 2000) and made to stand in a relationship of likeness to the singular shape of a practitioner’s body.⁵ As Padma explained to me, hers was a self-conscious emphasis upon difference and singularity, forged as a response to the exclusionary center of Ashtanga transmission in Mysore (Excerpt 2). It is a pivot of the token-type dialectic that privileges a practitioner’s inward singularity over the standardized form that mediates it.

To be sure, semiotic typification is not necessarily a moral problem; it is only such given historically specific assumptions and political projects that configure and regiment signs. This semiotic logic surely hinges upon late modern assumptions of agency and self as inward, autonomous and expressive (Asad 2003; Giddens 1991; Taylor 1989; Wilf 2012a). Webb Keane has underscored the centrality of this ideal self in what he terms a “moral narrative of modernity” (2007:55) emblemized in the individual’s capacity for self-awareness, agency, and freedom from external control and coercion—political, religious, and social. Keane draws attention to this narrative’s ideologies that take “the properties of... things as threats to the true understanding of agency” (2007:53). In conceiving of modernity as a moral narrative, Keane highlights the fact that modernity’s foundational notions of progress hinge not only on ideas about economic prosperity or technological improvement, but also, crucially, on assumptions about freedom and self-mastery (2007:6). According to this narrative, if in the past Ashtanga yoga was ruled by illegitimate gurus and characterized by a “rigid” form and hierarchical structure, as it becomes

modern, it flexibly adapts to the true human agency and autonomy of practitioners. By dematerializing the standardized form of the postural series, practitioners learn to recognize their self-singularity and authority, and to exert agency over the determinism of “tradition.”

Efforts to efface the standardized form of the Ashtanga series are nonetheless deeply contradictory, as these conversations reveal. On the one hand, students seek out membership in the shala precisely for Padma’s expertise in the generic form that she works to personalize. As Sergine perceived, shaping the Ashtanga yoga series to her own body’s constraints and particularities could jeopardize her claims to membership in the Jois institution. There was no guarantee that Padma’s legitimization of difference would translate to the governing yoga shala, where competence in the generic postural series is the primary grounds for institutional membership and authentication. Personalization and its intended inclusive effects therefore did not act uniformly on bodies. Rather, practitioners’ claims to inclusion and access were differentiated by asymmetries in bodily ability, and intersecting axes of difference. Some bodies were more set up for access and inclusion in the postural series than others.

The scalar dynamics of this program might direct us the ambivalences of a globalizing modernity as they have played out in the history of yoga and as they are replayed in this school. If modernizing projects hinge upon progressive mastery and worldly expansion, they may induce a counter-desire to preserve the value of what has been made publicly accessible (Wilce 2009:11). Ashtanga yoga’s typification and growing popularization can appear to alienate the self, leading to a loss of agency and spiritual authenticity (Buck-Morss 1992; Mazzarella 2004; Wilf 2012). Indeed, as its sphere of circulation expands, so too do the range of bodies linked to Ashtanga yoga’s dissemination, generating a desire to preserve the genre’s distinction in contrast to other “types” in a growing market for transnational yoga (Strauss 2005; Jain 2015).

This ambivalence was communicated to me in various ways in my conversations with Padma. As she illustrated, to match students' bodies to the asana's standard form was to potentially disrupt the very purpose of practice by surrendering their inward spirit to matter. By focusing the student's attention upon an external set of standardizing norms, postural practice risked becoming dependent upon the attention and legitimation of an external authority. Against the temptation of commercialization, she was adamant that her school remain relatively secluded from the public so as not to fall prey to the "demoralizing" effects of money and capital. Yet Ashtanga yoga's standardization is precisely what grants it a spatiotemporal extension and a public presence—an ontological coherence—that is the basic condition for the genre to be recognized and accessed by others.

Padma was constantly at work thinking about how her teaching would be accessed and understood by those in her shala and beyond – what her transmission of yoga would do and produce for the bodies seeking her expertise. After all, the shala was her primary source of income. Run solely on member contributions as opposed to annual membership fees, she was beholden to regular donors – and moreover, responsible for ensuring their willingness to contribute. In extolling the value of autonomy, Padma was certainly in part teaching students to teach themselves. However, she was also engendering a relational obligation that would ensure her students' faithful return. Far from opposed to the material and economic, personalization was bound up in diverse social fields and power relations, including race, gender, and transnational capital.⁶ It bears noting that, as these practitioners evaluated their own inclusion in the shala, they were inadvertently construing the shala's positioning—and (relative) inclusion—in the Jois lineage, and in the national location of the U.S.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have traced the semiotic logics that underwrite a modernizing program of reform at a Los Angeles based school for Mysore Ashtanga yoga, one that understands and theorizes its work as hinging upon opening up the bounds of an otherwise elitist institution. My method of tracing this semiotic program has been somewhat unconventional. Rather than bracket the indeterminate context framing my research, I made change itself an explicit optic through which to understand the salient patterns of attention and ideologies that configure practitioners at this site. As I have demonstrated, it is impossible to understand the responses of practitioners to the shifts of the present without first understanding the world and accompanying debates in which they were already engaged.

Now looking back, it seems inevitable that the shala's shift to a quintessentially "new" medium of practice would trigger a heightened reflexive commentary on the school's project of reform. Reconfiguring possibilities for access and inclusion, both "locally" and "globally", while also preventing many of Ashtanga yoga's constitutive norms of participation and socialization, the shift to zoom itself appeared to illustrate the truth of the shala's accessible and inclusive program of reform prior. The crisis – or rather, reflection upon it -- became an opportunity to enact and explicitly articulate the "true" modern roots of Ashtanga practice. For myself as ethnographer, it showed the transnational scope of the world of my informants—it was not just *the* shala that closed, but *shalas* globally dispersed in Ashtanga yoga's transnational circuit. Even in a dyadic interactive context such as the interview, my interlocutors were in fact anticipating and addressing practitioners further removed in time and space (cf. Duranti 2010; Carr and Lempert 2016). Rather than seek to perfectly replicate the standardized form of the postural series, now was a time to put into concerted practice a "flexible" and innovative stance toward

the postures- in Peircean terms, to privilege the singularity of tokens over the idealized type that mediated—and authorized --daily practice. While appearing a self-evident truth of the crisis, I have drawn attention to the *labors of personalization* required to materialize these logics. When postures are taken as natural signs of bodies and selves, it is easy to overlook the histories and work behind their transmission. Yet all of this takes time, energy and resources.

Indeed, efforts to privilege singularity over typification are deeply contradictory, as this paper's analysis reveals. As critics of modernist semiotic ideologies have discussed in great detail (Keane 2007; Latour 1993; Wilf 2012a), while practitioners aim for an unmediated, inward experience, they cannot escape the genre's standard form precisely because it is the grounds through which their singularity is manifest and recognized. Against universalizing discourses of access and inclusion in which they were self-consciously invested, the divergent perspectives of shala members Ana, Sergine and Chase, demonstrate its fundamentally scalar nature. Depending upon the scale and horizon of a practitioner's claims to inclusion in Ashtanga yoga, on where and how they anchor tokens relative to types (cf. Gal 2005), the very same "accessible" stance toward semiotic form can afford one practitioner's claims to inclusion while excluding another. To put it in simpler terms, though all were given the gift of access, not all practitioners experienced it the same way. Some bodies were more set up for access in the series than others, and some worried that their own access would undo the very ontological definition of the governing institution in which they sought membership. By virtue of axes of difference that materialize in the body and shape asymmetries of ability and competence, personalization did not act uniformly on practitioners. Nor did it guarantee inclusion in the Jois organization.

My project in this paper has not been to bemoan the shala's failure to prevent exclusion or typification. Rather, my interest has been with what such a moralizing stance toward semiotic

form can tell us about the political projects and attendant assumptions of self that frame and circulate through this site. Rather than a singular ethnographic case or context, the shala is part of a much larger history of reformist projects to universalize and modernize yoga, projects toward which students are oriented and to which they respond, albeit with varying degrees of awareness. In situating Padma's program of reform within this larger history, I have insisted that the work of materializing inclusion at this site—inasmuch as it is a response-- is not outside of the tensions and politics of a globalizing modernity.

Some of these tensions are explicitly nationalist in nature. Ideologies of Ashtanga yoga's "correct" semiotic form enter into a resurging Hindu religious nationalism in India (c.f. Lakshmi 2020), emblemized in recent debates over who has the rights and authority to "own" and "take back" yoga from the West.⁷ These were conversations that Padma considered herself to be a part, if not intimately addressed, because of her location as an Indian American yoga teacher in the United States. As she explained to me, her imperative for self-authenticity was constructed in contrast to just such a nationalist politics of ownership. Attesting to yoga's capacity for spatiotemporal extension, in an interview she noted, "what is most important to me is that you practice authentically and that you stay true what yoga means to *you*. Because yoga is universal: no one owns yoga."

NOTES

¹ For ethnographically rich and original applications of the concept of “semiotic labor,” see Carlan (2021) and Carr (2010).

² For an incisive review of these modernist discourses, and the assumptions of individual sensory alienation upon which they are based, see Wilf (2015) and Marks (1999).

³ To protect the privacy of informants, all names, including institutional identification, have been provided pseudonyms.

⁴ Here I follow scholars who have criticized the assumptions that field-sites are coherent, bounded objects of inquiry (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Mankekar 2015), and the accompanying ideas that such an ideology presumes about the distance and alterity of our subjects of study. Those of us working “closer to home,” however, cannot merely presume automatic membership or affiliation within our communities, as Kamala Visweswaran (1997) has incisively argued, but are rather tasked with unpacking how familiarity and belonging are continuously made and remade.

⁵ In later publications, Gal and Irvine have reformulated this semiotic process to “rhematization” (2019), building further upon the work of Charles Peirce. I prefer “iconization” in this paper for its relative simplicity.

⁵ It is crucial to note that, as a South Asian run business, the shala is not outside of dynamics of race, labor and capital. Moreover, orientalist discourses that position the “East” in an inferior, or fetishized, position relative to the “West,” profoundly shaped some of Padma’s encounters with her students and clientele, who perceived her to be naturally “open,” “loose” and “flexible.” In insisting upon the naturalness of these qualities, many students inadvertently reproduced racializing discourses of women as “naturally suited” for service work (Glenn 1992), justifying the vast difference in price and value between Padma and surrounding white male Ashtanga teachers by erasing the skill and work of personalization. My conversations with Chase underscored that the scalar play of difference-in-sameness –multi-culturalism’s founding logic – could be easily pivoted to evaluate the positioning of Padma as a racialized laboring subject, and yoga, more generally, in the United States’ national landscape.

⁶ See Basu (2014). <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/01/who-owns-yoga/384350/>

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