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The Opaque Yogi: Yoga to the People, Embodied Practices and the Creation of Ethical Communities

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Rhetoric and English

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Within this article will be three stories. The first would typically be categorized in the genre of fable, while the other two would typically be categorized as a recounting of the self. However, both will be fictionalized, filtered through not only my rephrasing of someone else's spoken myth, but the mimetic rephrasing of a story that I had previously told and retold.

I'll begin with the myth, which was told to my Yoga Teacher Training class by Katite, an incredibly gifted yoga instructor who knows more about my physical anatomy than I ever will. The story is as follows: So, this farming peasant was working for his master. Every day he would fill two buckets full of water from a well at the bottom of a hill. He would then carry those full buckets, strapped over his shoulders, up the hill to reach the lands of his master. But every day, he would reach the top of the hill to find the bucket on his right side was completely empty. Thinking the cause was his own foolishness or physical weakness and not wanting to disappoint his master, the peasant strained himself every day afterwards attempting to keep the bucket full, to no avail. The peasant finally realized that the problem was a leak in his bucket. His master came one day to check up on him. Frustrated and fearing reprimand the peasant desperately expressed his predicament to the master. The master simply responded: "Do not worry. Try again. And the next time you walk the hill pay attention to your right side." Following the master's instructions, the peasant attempted to scale the hill fully watered again. This time though, he noticed the flowers growing on his right, while walking up the hill. And he noticed the lack of flowers to his right on his walk down the hill. A leaky bucket had brought beauty and new energy and life. An empty bucket had brought no change.

Judith Butler in *Giving An Account of Oneself* writes that "Critique isn't merely of a given social practice or a certain horizon of intelligibility within which practices and institutions appear, it also implies that I come into question for myself" [1, p. 23]. For a majority of the summer I have spent my time attempting to interweave, disconnect and deconstruct two educational systems

and two communities that I am a part of: the body and mind as formed by the ideology of the academic university institution and the body and mind as formed by the ideology of the donation-based, Vinyasa style yoga studio Yoga to the People (YTTP). My project, a discourse analysis and ethnographic study of YTTP, has me inhabiting the role of participant-observer. I used and critically analyzed the texts' language—in the form of class dialogues, lectures, materials from lectures, and websites—of the YTTP Teacher Training I was actually taking as a Teacher Training Student. I found this role required a haunted present body and mind: my movement was accompanied by an Other intangible body and mind hovering near, above and below the attempted body/mind I was trying to invoke in that particular moment. It was a continuous oscillation: being at once a present yoga teacher student and an academic researcher. Honestly, my primary intention for this experience has been to embark on a transitional journey of dynamic healing. This healing is happening through the community building practice of not merely a bodied technique, but an embodied discourse or language that speaks to and directs the cultivation of an intuitive, self-aware connection to the body and mind by honing in on the unique, varied anatomical and sensational structures that aid in the self-account of the individual or subject.

And now, the second story:

I feel awkward telling someone else's story... This is Layla. She was first trained in yoga 20 years ago. After losing her newborn child, she decided to quit her job and travel to India. While there she saw a sign for a yoga training program and knew in an instant that was where she was supposed to be. Although the program had already started, she didn't let herself become discouraged, running to the ashram and throwing herself immediately into the experience, having her head shaved with blades that caused her scalp to bleed.

The first statements I made to a group of 21 strangers—18 of whom were in my yoga teacher training program and 3 of whom were senior teachers—were upon initial thought not at all an account of myself. On our first Friday night session together, we were assigned partners and asked to share with that stranger what brought us to this training program and share something we would not usually tell a stranger. In layman's terminology we were asked to practice an "icebreaker," an exercise that attempts to quickly deconstruct socially formed and normalized boundaries between people and begin to establish a relationship of recognition. To make this community constructing exercise more nuanced, we were then asked to stand in the middle of the circle of bodies and share what the other person had said. My partner ended up being Layla,¹ a woman in her mid-forties who resembles a slightly crazy-eyed earth mother. I attempted to stand in front of a bunch of strangers and translate Layla's self-narrative into my own of her, but I found myself incredibly uncomfortable in this position of re-narrating the self-narration of someone else. How do I perform this? How

¹ Name changed.

was I supposed to elucidate through my language a facet of someone else's self-narrative? What responsibility did I have to her language, her body, her story? I felt I had no right to share Layla's pain over losing a child and attempted to justify my knowledge of this subject by sharing details of her experience in India, as if they could be my details or those of a close friend whose stories I knew intimately. It was essentially an exercise in crossing boundaries of personal language and subjecthood, which challenged us to adopt another into our speech.

YTTP philosophy perceives and portrays itself as diverging from previous Western yoga styles. It asks practitioners to practice a technique of poeisis [1, p. 17], or self-creation and cultivation that is grounded in intuition, self-awareness and personal choice, and does not adhere to the demands and granted wisdom of the teacher or guru, as in, for example, Iyengar yoga, which seeks the manifestation of physical perfection in perfect alignment, or Bikram yoga, which is a heated style of yoga sequence that is composed of 26 cumulative postures repeated twice. Teachers are anonymous at YTTP, as in their names are never posted; students come to a class based on what time works best for them and not because a certain teacher will or will not be teaching at that time.

A featured concept and phrase in YTTP classes is: "One breath, one movement. Your breath, your movement." In literal terms, this phrase tells the practitioners to move through the sequence of asanas at the pace of their own breath and is the basis for the Vinyasa style of practice, which induces flowing, fluid movement. Metaphorically though, this phrase is intended to open and expand the possibilities of what movement is, what poses can be and, more importantly for the ideology, what it means to be a subject. YTTP ideology purports the creation of an empowered subject through a safe, compassionate space of an embodied practice of freedom. Although it does stray from certain formulaic specificities of other *asana* based styles, YTTP is still ingrained in the social constructing processes through discourse of forming a specific type of embodied self-narrating subject that is highly responsible for themselves and the community around them. YTTP discourse preaches a lifestyle (ideology) of high proprioception—awareness of the self/body in space—which induces a type of therapeutic healing that is derived from choice. However, as Judith Butler explores in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, there are limits to self-awareness and self-care and there are limits to YTTP's democratic, accessible, liberating philosophy.

I began practicing yoga at YTTP during a period of psychological disability. I attribute much of my current mental health to the community of Yoga to the People and the work that I have done within that community upon my self and for this community. However, for the past 8 months, I have been struggling through chronic pains in my body. It began with a dislocated shoulder and then cascaded through and into every corner and recess of the body: torn rotary cuffs, torn psoas, knee joint pain, compression in the lower right spine, and a dull aching pain along the entire left side of my body. I learned new anatomical information about my body: that my hips are misaligned due to Scoliosis and that my elbows are hyper flexible making me vulnerable to hyperextension. I once felt betrayed by my mind, but I countered my previous psychological

imbalance with yoga, finding a new comfort, physical strength and faith in my body. Now I feel betrayed by not just my body, but at times, by yoga itself. Rather paradoxically, I feel completely in tune with the nuances of my body, while I simultaneously feel completely disconnected from what I thought my body was. I became, and have continued to be, critical of the accessible, democratic philosophy of YTTP. A donation-based system makes it possible for anyone to step through the door and onto a mat, but if that business model is to be successful, hundreds of transient bodies are needed. This influx of beings means that there is no time for the teacher to be hands-on in helping personalize someone's practice, or body story, which I believe led in part to some of the injuries I have encountered. Over the months I have built a community of "healers" around me, seeking an explanatory narrative of my body for what is wrong: doctors, acupuncturists, Qi Gong practitioners, physical therapists and a barrage of yoga teachers. I repeatedly narrated and mythologized my story, giving a clinging account of who I thought I was, who I was afraid I was turning into and who I thought I should be. In Judith Butler's words: I realized my opacity, to not only others, but to myself [1, p. 46].

Butler's *Giving an Account of Onself* uses a mosaic of theorists—from Adorno to Freud to Foucault to Caverero—to explore how a "theory of subject formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can serve a conception of ethics and, indeed responsibility" [1, p. 19]. In its basic form, Butler argues that although there is an "I", there is no "I" outside of social norms and relationships. The body and mind of the "I" can never narrate its origin or complete truth because it will always be in relation to things that are external to it: subject to historical processes and moments. Therefore, the subject is always opaque to itself. Our ability to be an "I" relies, in part, on being recognizable to and recognized by others. It is this binary relationary status from which ethics stems. Ethics, in this instance, means a "willingness to acknowledge the limits of [oneself]" [1, p. 42]. An ability to accept one's own inevitable ignorance of one's "essential" or "whole" self, allows room in Butler's words for a "humility" and "generosity" towards others: just as we will need to be forgiven for that which we did not fully know, we will have to reciprocate that forgiveness to others [1, p. 42]. Butler also writes, "Responsibility... is the making use of an unwilling susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other" [1, p. 91]. By acknowledging our blindness and the Other's blindness, we will learn to be compassionately analytical of and active in a given situation.

This mode of responsiveness is something YTTP theorizes as a consequence of developing greater self-awareness and intuition through the practice of yoga. As mentioned before, YTTP encourages its practitioners to make choices during their hour-long practice that are beneficial to their particular body, in this particular moment. To be responsive and not reactionary within an *asana*, is to maintain a steady, rhythmic breath while engaging in an interior dialogue which assesses the construction and the sensation of the pose. It is being able to ask oneself: How do I feel? Can this feel better, safer or more challenging in my body? Which of those options is most important to me in this present moment? This dialogic form transcends the internal self-relationship to the external rela-

tionship of teacher-practitioner. The structured sequential information a YTTP teacher delivers during a class is referred to as “Dialogue”—not a monologue—because teachers see themselves as responding to the individual, dynamically altering stories that each body brings to the mat on each day. “You do not know what someone is bringing with them to the mat,” is an oft-repeated phrase during the Teacher Training. Within this statement, I see the type of ethics Butler was acknowledging earlier. Each person brings with them each day a vulnerable, fragile and malleable narrative—a narrative that they use in an attempt to make themselves known to themselves and others on that particular day. It is a narrative, that as a teacher, as an external subject to those practicing bodies and minds, that is not my own, and must be respected. Yet, if I have acknowledged my own limitedness of self-knowledge, and recognized the limitedness of self-knowledge in others, I am obligated to be responsive to the demands and consequences of the stories that people attempt to tell of themselves: To mold my dialogue to their overexerting, harmfully twisting, bending and strengthening bodies. YTTP asks the teacher to provide a safe, compassionate space for bodies and minds to challenge and explore their limitations and to serve as a small facet of information. Through an embodied language that promotes healing and bodily protection and self-care, the teacher provides some knowledge beyond what is available to the practitioner. This responsible recognition of another body’s story, in turn opens the possibility that relationships and then communities can be formed.

In conclusion, my research has led me to perceive the rhetorical strategies used by YTTP to create subjects—practitioners and teacher trainers—within a Butlerian framework of responsibility, recognition and ethics. Narratives—language—become a healing act of kindness, even if they are not true, complete stories. The myth that I told at the beginning of this speech was told to me so as to quell and heal through fictional narrative any anxiety that I may have experienced over the chronic pain in the left side of my back. Katite told me, “The energy on your right side, the side that you do not notice as much is being used for something. Whether you know it or not.” She spoke an account, a dialogue to heal my story by giving me the possibility to transform the account I gave of myself. This is what I realize now that I was struggling with when I told Layla’s story: I felt a responsibility to narrate as compassionately, with as little injury as possible and from a position of healing. I wanted to give her the ability to change her fiction, her perception of the narrative of the self and open her to a world that she was limited from accessing.

References

- [1] Butler, Judith. *Giving An Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- [2] Yoga to the People. Teacher Training Material. Founder YTTP: Greg Gumnucio. www.yogatothepeople.com