



WAWADIA: a prospectus

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for wide distribution

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“Matthew Remski’s WAWADIA research digs beneath the statistics of yoga injuries to examine the stories we tell ourselves about our bodies, perfection, inadequacy and freedom. We all know that repetitive strain or too much flexibility creates the conditions for injury. But what we haven’t brought to light yet are the consequences of the narratives we tell ourselves—how they set us up for physical trouble in practice and how they influence the way we go through life. This research will help you pay attention to the strange unconscious intentions that get all mixed up in a life-long practice, so you can clear out unhelpful motivations and follow through on what’s truly good for you.”

—**Michael Stone**, teacher, author

“With the WAWADIA project, Matthew Remski brings his unique and creative intellect to bear on the difficult question of why the extraordinary healing capacities of yoga are so commonly experienced in tandem with pain, injury, and even abuse. Delving fearlessly into the dark side of yoga in order to further brighten its light, this project promises to make a signal contribution to the evolution of contemporary practice.”

—**Carol Horton, Ph.D.**, author of *Yoga PhD*
and co-editor of *21st Century Yoga*

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W

November 1st, 2014

A

Dear global yoga community -

Welcome to the prospectus for the upcoming book *What Are We Actually Doing in Asana?* The subtitle is: *reports and meditations on desire, pain, injury, and healing in yoga.*

W

I'm releasing this document in support of the **crowdfunding campaign** that starts today. I aim to raise \$30,000 by November 30th to help publish this book by September 12th, 2016.

A

My subject is a practice that we all love and from which all of us have derived enormous, if not life-saving, benefit. I have to be tender with my findings, because they disclose the hitherto secret pains, confusions, educational inadequacies, and even pedagogical negligence that can sour yoga's promise. I hope that this prospectus serves as an act of faith and transparency: my aim is to elevate the discourse around yoga injury, and to do so with an open-source spirit. For me, this means collecting as many diverse stories as possible, inviting and remaining open to community feedback, and sharing background research freely throughout the process.

D

I

A

I would also like to issue two invitations. Firstly, if you feel as though you have a story of yoga injury to contribute to this research, please contact me at the address below. In your email, please describe your general circumstance, to the extent you are comfortable. All data is kept anonymous and redacted except by mutual agreement. I can't guarantee I'll be able to fit you into the interview schedule, but I will be continuing the interview process until September 1st, 2015.



Secondly, if you are a yoga practitioner and have professional writing, editing or publishing experience and would like to be a reader/commentator for the manuscript, please contact me with a line or two about your interest. I'll be looking for about thirty yoga-savvy volunteers willing to critically examine the manuscript beginning on November 1st, 2015, to render written feedback by February 1st, 2016.

Blessings on your home, your practice, and your community,

Matthew Remski
threadsofyoga@gmail.com
[WAWADIA resource page](#)

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mission statement

What Are We Actually Doing in Asana? is a sweeping inquiry into the sensations, meanings, and purposes of yoga practice today, from the ascetic to the aesthetic to the therapeutic, and from the personal, to the social, to the political.

It will mine testimony of desire, pain, injury and healing to discover how modern practitioners work to experience and embody their developmental ideals.

Using the injury and recovery stories of over a hundred interview subjects, this book will paint a lesser-seen portrait of a culture struggling to both understand and fulfill its healing promise, and a map for how it can intelligently evolve.

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working thesis

Over the past fifty years, modern postural yoga (MPY) has improved the lives of countless people worldwide. It has awakened millions to the intimacy of embodiment and deep breathing, and the realization that mindful movement can both heal and evolve the spirit.

But people are also injuring themselves—and getting injured by their teachers—in asana studios around the world. Hard data on rates of injury is non-existent. Anecdotally, it would appear that people are being injured at a higher rate than either yoga marketing or its spiritual pedigree would suggest.

These injuries occur for many interweaving reasons. Obvious factors include prior conditioning, poor education in biomechanics, overbearing instruction, sacrificial attitudes towards pain, and group pressures to fulfill presumably shared spiritual ideals.

More subtly, many people are first driven to asana by feelings of inadequacy or the memory of trauma. These experiences can motivate the desire for bodily reclamation and redemption, but they can also acidify practice with anxiety and impulsiveness. Asana is a crucible in which some attempt to forge new selves, and in the process, burn their bodies and minds.

The body of modern yoga is a body of longing, possibility, and revelation. But it's also a body of shame, confusion, and suffering. Injury can mark the place where these two bodies wrestle on the mat.

This dynamic is likely at play in any physical discipline through which a new self is sought—from ballet to Crossfit. But in asana culture the struggle is complicated by a diverse array of philosophical ideas and commitments. Whether ancient or modern, body-negative or body-positive, some ideas are communicated directly, while others are transferred through cultural osmosis.

The ideas that support asana form a double-edged sword. They can glorify injury as a necessary sacrifice to spiritual development—proof that the body is illusory, or subservient to the divine. Alternatively, they can help students recognize injury as an opportunity to change paths and self-perception.

Asana can injure. But it can also introduce us to the yoga of discovering what injury tells us about the world, and ourselves.

audience and intentions

My objective is for this book to both raise and normalize unspoken questions about the sensations and meanings of yoga practice. It will contain layers of interest for all kinds of students and teachers, at all levels of practice and experience.

Beginners who want to progress mindfully and sustainably will find a wealth of cautionary tales and healing stories from the front line.

Dedicated practitioners will resonate with the many descriptions of practice-patterns and injury my informants provide, and perhaps be able to name and explore some of their own internal frustrations, disappointments, and discoveries.

Teachers of not only yoga but of all conscious movement modalities will gain new insight into the highly subjective realm of students' sensation and pain, and the narrative frameworks they use to describe it.

My intention is that everyone who practices yoga with any seriousness will benefit from this book—specifically the **tens of thousands of teacher-trainees** every year around the globe—and be able to use it as a tool to inquire into the nature of their aspirations, sensations, efforts, and results.

Finally, **anyone interested in the problem of human embodiment** in a post-industrial, technologized and largely secularized world will be treated to the rich story of a culture working towards optimistic interconnection. In injury: sometimes failing. In healing: often succeeding.

This book will raise many questions about physical and emotional health and safety in asana practice. Concrete answers to these questions will take a long time, if they come at all. My interest and skill rests in pointing out possible directions for better inquiry. I am not a biomechanics specialist, nor a clinical psychologist, and so I cannot issue authoritative statements on what should or should not be done on a yoga mat. Nor would I want to: not everyone is pursuing “safe” or therapeutic goals through asana. Some people feel quickened through physical and even emotional risk.

My intention is to model the type of self-inquiry I believe will lead to more lucid understandings of practice, the flesh, the studio, and the relationships of learning and teaching. My ultimate hope is that this work may help prevent the worst kind of injury: the injury one cannot digest or understand; the injury that leaves one feeling broken and embittered. I also hope it will help those who teach become more aware of and humble before the beautiful tensions of this embodied journey, and to be clearer on where they need to learn more.

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book structure

The book will unfold over five sections:

1. Prologue: Iyengar's Dream

A glimpse into the tensions of a master.

2. Introductory Material: Posing the Questions

An overview of the subject and my approaches to it.

3. Reports and Meditations

Reports selected from 100+ practitioner interviews, interspersed with personal reflections and analysis. This will be the largest section of the book, presented in a rhythm of short vignettes. The reports will feel like an open forum, hosted by a moderator who is sympathetic to all voices.

4. The Body, and the Body Politic

An exploration of the broader sociopolitical meanings of injury in yoga, and how safe space in the studio and on the mat can model safe space in the broader culture.

5. How the Light Gets In

A celebration of those who are helping shift the practice of modern postural yoga into a better-educated and more self-reflective era.

a rough roadmap

1. Prologue: Iyengar's Dream

- » Victor Van Kooten recounts a haunting dream that B.K.S. Iyengar told him in Switzerland in 1973.

2. Introductory Material: Posing the Questions

- » Who are the “We” in WAWADIA?
- » What is modern postural yoga (MPY)? How does it regard the body? What does it teach about pleasure, pain, and relaxation?
- » How many different goals do people bring to practice?
- » How do practitioners generally benefit? How does MPY serve a largely disembodied and technologically numbed population?
- » How many people get injured in practice, and why do they get injured generally?
- » Are the therapeutic aspirations of MPY in conflict with its metaphysical history/ideals and educational standards?
- » The Straight and the Curved: Does asana seek to correct and perfect, or to accept, adapt, and celebrate?
- » Where does MPY sit on the art-science spectrum, how does it compile and utilize evidence, and how does it accept or resist educational input from the biomedical sphere?
- » What are the general educational standards for MPY instruction? Where might they fall short in physiological, psychological, social, and philosophical terms?
- » Notes on the method of this book: six interpretative lenses. (Phenomenology, Biology, Intersubjectivity, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Cross-Cultural Studies)

3. Reports and *Meditations**

- » Tracy Hodgeman seriously injured her shoulder in a practice culture that she claims rewarded her for over-reaching her capacities and sublimating her pain. But then that same practice community rallied around her to raise money for her surgery. She has tried to digest and understand her teacher's view on the injury. She claims he said that it was her responsibility alone, and neither the fault of the system nor his instruction.
 - *Faulty or dangerous biomechanics principles in MPY.*
 - *The elision between injury and “karma”.*
 - *Why do some people need other people to keep practicing as hard as they do?*
 - *Community can harm; community can heal.*
- » Shankara Darby adapted his asana approach after witnessing the harsh impacts of practice upon his parents and their colleagues, who were early Western students of Pattabhi Jois.
 - *Running in the family: guru and student, father and son.*

* This is a preliminary and partial list, presented in random order. Some of these stories may not be included in the final text. The interchange of report and *meditation* will be more fluid than a list can represent. Most reports will evoke multiple emergent themes.

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- » Rachael Blyth tells the story of how asana practice eventually helped her recover from disordered eating, but only after justifying and amplifying it with ideals of “purification”, commonly promoted within MPY.
 - *How yoga can both validate psychopathology, and treat it.*
 - *We can choose therapies that seem to mirror our imbalances, but perhaps also show us enough of ourselves to stimulate positive change.*
- » A religiously-oriented practitioner was encouraged to believe that his chronic lower back pain was a sign that he was approaching mystical insight into the nature of reality.
 - *What stories do we tell about pain in yoga, and how do they mesh or clash with the meanings of pain in biomedicine?*
 - *The connection between asana and ancient sacrifice.*
 - *How might the cognitive silencing of pain be similar to or mistaken for the cognitive silence of deep meditation?*
 - *The connections between ascetic practice and conscious pain modulation.*
- » Several stories about people who practice both yoga and extensive tattooing or other forms of body modification. Both pursuits can express the desire to reclaim the body from oppression through a ritual act. That act of reclamation can involve both invoking and taking control over a pain process in the context of an energetic transfer between teacher and student, or artist and subject.
 - *The neuroscience of consciously negotiating, tolerating, and reframing pain.*
 - *Using controlled pain to redeem trauma, awaken from numbness, and explore selfhood.*
 - *Can asana, like body modification, be a way of solving the problem that we do not give birth to ourselves?*
 - *How an experience of asana marks the body.*
- » Emily Jasenski tells of how she practiced and taught injured for more than a year without telling anyone, because she was the lead teacher for her small-town studio and needed to project the image of the health-positive practice in which she was invested.
 - *The cost of performing beauty and virtue.*
 - *What does yoga advertising conceal?*
 - *How can yoga amplify our social tendency to hide doubt, discomfort, and pain? Can looking for a “true self” generate a “false self”?*
- » An elite swimmer tells of how her Olympic-level training conditioned her to accept militaristic and invasive adjustments in class, leading to a serious hamstring injury.
 - *What conditions us to accept pain in practice?*
 - *Transference in the yoga studio.*
 - *“Adjustment”, or “invasion”?*
- » One student’s memories of regular physical abuse disguised as “adjustment” in a prominent West Coast studio.

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- *Authority structures in MPY. Who are we attracted to? Who do we trust? Why?*
- *When are adjustments physical acts of countertransference?*
- *Was there corporal punishment at the Mysore Palace?*
- » Nancy Cochren's story. (**See Excerpt #2**)
 - *Are we living to practice, or practicing for life? What happens when these impulses collide, and when practice is professionalized?*
 - *Yoga and the performances of femininity in neoliberal culture.*
 - *A yogic view of the body meets the clinical view of the body.*
- » Tiffany Rose, who has been diagnosed with PTSD, is working to create trauma-sensitive programming for her students, and finds that she has had to swim against a tide of misinformation, insensitivity, and prejudice in the yoga world.
 - *Connections and disconnects between yoga psychology and contemporary mental health disciplines.*
 - *If "mindfulness" is not always therapeutic, and "relaxation" is not always possible, MPY must expand its understanding of technique and outcomes.*
- » The experience of a yoga practitioner of Tamil ancestry, whose serious knee injuries in a European asana class, caused by invasive adjustments, took on mythic meaning for him, and propelled him into a deep period of self-inquiry that reconnected him with his roots.
 - *Mythology as a way of healing the body, and finding home in strange places and encounters.*
- » How asana feels in the bodies of several practitioners who do not find the mostly white and privileged spaces of modern postural yoga emotionally safe.
 - *MPY brands the bodies of some practitioners with the echoes of colonialism.*
 - *It haunts others with the fantasy of another time and place.*

4. The Body, and the Body Politic

- » How can MPY's encounter with the body and pain provide a map for social justice? Stories of practitioners who have transformed personal pain—including pain suffered on the mat and in studio culture—into empathetic action.

5. How the Light Gets In

- » A celebration of those who push MPY beyond the fading paradigms of faith, charismatic authority, and the transcendent and often self-harming view of the body as something that must be constantly improved.
- » A conclusion to shine light on the innovative pathways that are emerging as yogis heal from the injuries of MPY's adolescence.

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projected breakdown of crowdfunding goal (\$30K)*

Research assistant fees	\$10,000
Half-sabbatical income for 2 months (spread over April 2015 through August 2016)	\$4,000
Research travel expenses (North America, Europe, possibly India)	\$3,500
Design and typesetting	\$5,000
Editorial consultation.....	\$3,000
Legal	\$1,500
Proofing	\$1,000
E-book transfer and design	\$2,000
TOTAL	\$30,000

Research for this book is far-reaching and labour intensive. I need constant help with the management of the dozens of interviews I'm conducting every month. I need transcripts of the interviews produced quickly, so that follow-up meetings can be scheduled without losing narrative momentum. I'm also drawing on a wide range of theoretical knowledge and medical research to investigate the murky issues that inform the psychology and physiology of injuries.

Most of my interviews are conducted via Skype, but I am also travelling to visit several subjects in their homes or home studios, when it's important to understand more of the sociological contexts for their stories. I would also love to be able to visit Dr. Karendikar in Pune, India. He was the personal doctor for B.K.S. Iyengar, but then left the master to found his own clinically-based yoga therapy institute. He's in his 80s, and doesn't use Skype. I would also like to follow up with any of Mark Singleton's *Yoga Body* interview subjects in Pune who can speak about the pedagogical culture of the Mysore Palace.

* If the funding exceeds campaign goals, all budget items unrelated to design will likely increase by an equal percentage.

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production team

Jason Hirsch, research assistant

Jason Hirsch holds a degree in social science, focused on anthropology and philosophy. He has conducted research in community-based economics for the McGill University Canadian Mining in Latin America Research Collaborative, in socially-responsible research methods for the Ontario Ministry of Health, and in eco-social public health for the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation. His current research concerns cultural evolution and the systems of well-being that spur it.

Debra Black, journalism consultant

Debra is a twenty-plus-year veteran reporter at Canada's largest daily, *The Toronto Star*. Debra will be helping me with investigative protocol.

Carol Horton, editorial consultant

Carol Horton, Ph.D., is the author of *Yoga Ph.D.: Integrating the Life of the Mind and the Wisdom of the Body*, and co-editor of *21st Century Yoga: Culture, Politics, and Practice*. A popular writer and speaker, Carol offers lectures, workshops, and yoga teacher trainings on modern yoga history, contemporary yoga culture, and yoga service and outreach worldwide. She serves as a teacher and Board member with Yoga for Recovery, a Chicago nonprofit offering yoga to women in Cook County Jail, and as a program consultant to yoga service organizations. An ex-political science professor, Carol holds a doctorate from the University of Chicago, is the author of *Race and the Making of American Liberalism*, and has published numerous research reports on programs and policies affecting low-income children and families.

Anna Karkovska McGlew, editorial consultant

Anna is an editor, writer, and yoga teacher based in Washington, D.C. She is the current editor of the AG Bell Association's award-winning magazine, *Volta Voices*, and managing editor of its peer-reviewed journal, *The Volta Review*. She writes about yoga, anatomy, biomechanics, and movement on her blog, **FleshContext**. She practices and teaches yoga with the hope of creating space, promoting function, and facilitating a dynamic balance and connection within and without.

Laura Shaw, design and typesetting

Laura Shaw has worked on staff as a designer and art director for Random House in New York and Shambhala Publications in Boston. For the past fifteen years she's owned her own freelance design studio, producing books for publishers large and small. She has practiced yoga on and off for more than twenty-five years and Ashtanga for the past seven.

Laura Brady, e-book design

Laura is Canada's "eBook Ninja".

Roseanne Harvey, proofing, yoga culture consultant

Roseanne Harvey is a writer, editor, and yoga teacher based in Victoria, British Columbia. She is the former editor of *Ascent* magazine and the voice behind *It's All Yoga, Baby*, a celebrated blog about yoga and contemporary culture.

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draft excerpts

I've selected these four excerpts to give a sense of the range of this book, and the variety of its sources and voices.

1. Iyengar's Cremation. MPY is unfolding against the backdrop of mythic stories and cultural revolutions. The passing of B.K.S. Iyengar opens a poignant window onto an entire era.

2. Meeting Nancy Cochren. I'll be following Nancy as she recovers from cartilage tears in both hips, possibly sustained during her post-partum yoga practice. Her journey begins at the intersection of ancient philosophy, contemporary medicine, and the demands of family life, making it a quintessential MPY story.

3. My Left Hand: *I Am That*. This is a personal account of how my first asana experience triggered a memory of childhood pleasure and integration, which I pursued to the threshold of injury and beyond. The book will be sprinkled with several free-form reflections like this, especially as interview subjects recount stories that resonate with my own experience.

4. Six Lenses for Studying MPY: Phenomenology, Biology, Intersubjectivity, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Cross-Cultural Studies. This excerpt pulls back the curtain on the more academic tools I'll be using throughout this book. We all have perspectives. I try to have many, and to be as transparent as I can be about their strengths and weaknesses.

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draft excerpt #1

The Cremation of B.K.S. Iyengar

“All of these practices make us into a true human being,
because we are still not fit for the divine level.”

—B.K.S. Iyengar

On August 14th, 2014, the news flashed through the yoga world that Mr. Iyengar had been admitted to a private hospital in Pune following a three-week illness. He was accompanied by daughter Geeta, son Prashant, and their family physician. His blood pressure, regulated by decades of equanimity in standing postures, was dangerously low. His breathing, famous for demonstrations of control and retention, whistled shallow in his barrel chest. The doctors placed him on a ventilator for the first day, but he insisted it be removed. His heart, which had thumped faithfully through countless backbends, was feeble. His feet, which had stepped on the backs of devotees prostrated in child’s pose, which students gazed at for hours as he instructed the subtleties of ball-mound rooting and inner-arch-lifting, and which, in later years, devotees touched in worship, were now swollen with deoxygenated blood and pooling lymph.

By August 18th, the man who had introduced the principles of “kidney breathing” to the world of postural yoga was placed on dialysis, as his kidneys began to fail. On the 19th, doctors administered a nasogastral feeding tube. Reports of his earlier refusal to be hospitalized expanded, suggesting that most if not all of these interventions would have been unwelcome. The man who had enthusiastically worked to open dialogue between yoga and biomedicine was now firmly in the clinical grasp of the latter. It would seem that a precious goal of the experiential yogi—to be able to feel the approach of death unmediated and in solitude—was now lost to him. In his last hours, his lifelong passion for self-observation—for carefully monitoring the qualities of every twitch and pulse for the signs of grace or its absence—was occluded by the clinical gaze. If he’d been able to continue to listen to his heart, its fal-

tering thump would have been drowned out by the heart monitor that amplified it.

On August 20th at 3:15 am local time, Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar died. On social media, some refused to use the word “death”—insisting on “mahasamadhi”, which describes the ultimate absorption of a meditator.

Glowing tributes flooded the web, hailing the “Lion of Pune”, the supreme innovator, inspiration of millions. Hundreds described how *Light on Yoga* appeared in their lives at critical junctures, and changed their paths. They posted photos of their broken-spined copies, scribbled on on every page, held together by rubber bands. Senior students issued somber and tender memorials.

Amongst my several thousand yoga contacts on Facebook, only one dared to share an openly conflicted response. She wrote that she was grateful for his “keen eye and passion for precision,” but mindful of his “patriarchal, old-school guru” persona, known to “humiliate, bully, and shame his students.”

Another friend posted a possibly sardonic homage: a photograph of a female Lego figure stuck to a Lego baseplate in a hands-free headstand. The caption read: “Thanks, Guruji.”

I took it this way: Iyengar’s yoga seems to recall a child’s dream of perfect order and uniformity. As if a body—a woman’s body especially—unfolded its potential by being folded *just so*. As if a teacher is meant to provide a template in absolute symmetry with his idea of virtue, if not with the curves of the world. But there was also a touch of melancholy in the Lego image, glinting out through its sepia Instagram filter. It seemed to say: *Yoga has made children of us, in good ways and painful ways. Maybe we recaptured a sense of play and wonderment. Maybe we regressed into depending upon a new parental energy. Now that he is gone, we must grow up, and put away our toys.*

Notes and citations for all draft excerpts begin on page 43.

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The best mourning is complex, avoiding mystification and hagiography.

The Iyengar family brought the patriarch's body home, dressed it in ivory silks for the cremation rites, and laid it out on a simple bamboo mat. They draped it with garlands of flowers. I imagine they felt the silent questions of every mourner: Where did his movement go? Where is the prana he sculpted and nourished for seventy years? Where is the cellular intelligence he spoke of now? Does it just fall silent? Is it in the air around him? Has it become part of us?

Those more remote are left to wonder what this death, for all of its preparation, felt like. Was it different from any other death? Did his obsession with breathing yield some final flash of insight or consolation as it collapsed? Did he feel the skittish rise of udana vāyu dart through his spine with his last exhales? Was that sensation obstructed by the feeding tube? Did radiance slowly fill the space left by his retreating senses and mind? What did his yoga do for him in the end?

No one can know. Iyengar's body in death is as enigmatic as it was in life, as silent and strange as the millions of photographs he leaves behind. The most demonstrative yogi in modern history used this body to form shapes purported to be windows to a brighter internal reality. His brash display both allied him with a revisioned Hatha heritage and alienated him from the philosophical bent of other streams of yoga evangelism, like those initiated by Vivekananda and Aurobindo. With every extension, flexion, and rotation, he insisted that the material perfection of a form—or the actions towards a form, however subtle—was sacramental. To a rapidly disembodying world, he offered forms of the body in attitudes of sombre praise. Students the world over learned and mimicked those forms, and many now testify to transformation and healing. But their reports are marked by equal amounts of pleasure and suffering.

We can never grasp the internality of another person—even less, perhaps, one upon whom we project our wishes. We have the artifacts of Iyengar's flesh: his words on paper, his bombast on scratchy video, his fading echo in the spines, hips and shoulders of the thousands who studied with him in person. But no one can say for sure, without quoting Iyengar's grand self-reporting, how his yoga felt for

him. No one knows the ratio of bliss to pain in his body, how he managed the anxiety of that youthful dream he confided to Victor, and what dissatisfactions drove him to demand so much of his students. We cannot ask him: *Was it worth it?*

Had his life-long experimentalism not collided with the ancient rites of his family, Iyengar may well have donated this vacated body to science. No one would have been more interested in his autopsy than him. Was his marrow transformed by a lifetime of practice? Did he avoid the brain-tissue calcifications of other men his age? Did his arterial system remain plucky and plaque-free till the end? Were his lungs really as enormous as they seemed from the outside? Did he have the world's largest diaphragm?

But there can be no autopsy of the guru. We cannot dissect him, for this would reduce his body to the same substance as our own. We cannot find his myth within his corpse, for either it is departed, or we realize it was only ever in ourselves. The Iyengar family is both abiding tradition and protecting his devotees when they scramble to cremate him at the earliest possible moment.

Early on in the research for this book, I tried to parse one of Patabhi Jois' more provocative aphorisms in an article online. One slightly chafed reader suggested that I pick on Mr. Iyengar's words instead, because he was "still alive to set me straight." She was pointing out something I'd long felt in my own practice—that if I were ever to make it to Pune, all of the niggling questions about technique that his senior students seemed to disagree on would be resolved. I could ask him exactly what he meant by this instruction or that, as though it would help me understand my body or my life better. Well, he can't clarify anything now. Soon enough, we will have to stop asking what he meant, forced to turn to our peers for less certain answers. Arguments and insights into the great man's methods, dictates, gregariousness, warmth and tantrums will dissolve as his living memory dissipates.

The giants of the modernist age of yogic entrepreneurial globalization are now all departed, debilitated, or disgraced. Sivananda is gone, along with most of his disciples. Kripalvananda, who taught asana as the dance-like expression of spontaneous bliss, is gone. Muktananda and Swami Rama are gone, their magic and abuses leaving a trail of

the ecstatic wounded. Yogi Bhajan is gone, leaving his aphorisms blurring on millions of wet Yogi Tea teabag tags. Pattabhi Jois is gone. T.K.V. Desikachar, one of the last living links to the grandfather of modern postural yoga, T. Krishnamacharya, is reportedly suffering from dementia, and has been hidden away by his family, ostensibly to save face. In a completely different and ignominious fall, Bikram Choudhury is now facing charges of having raped several students.

With the exception of Jois (through this grandson Sharath), none of these evangelists has left a successor of note, and those who have presumed to succeed them—Amrit Desai, John Friend, and Kausthub Desikachar, among others—have all been quickly cut down to size, on the surface by their own ethical failings, but on a deeper level by a more skeptical culture that is less tolerant of idols, more seduced by irony than it is by charisma. The death of Iyengar marks another step towards the growing democratization of the yoga world—perhaps not in terms of who has commercial clout, but certainly in terms of who holds authority. When no one is left to tell us exactly what to do, can we finally say we are adults?

The death of a great man also erodes the Great Man Story, leaving space through which more hidden stories may emerge. I'm thinking of Vanda Scaravelli, ten years Iyengar's senior, one of his few female students who didn't seem intimidated by him, who would punch him playfully in the belly and tease him about his weight. She went on to teach a small cache of students, one at a time, who have all gone on to influence yoga for decades without grandiose institutes, certification programmes, or even websites. Scaravelli died in 1999 in Florence, where she lived and taught for over thirty years.

I'm also thinking of Dr. Karandikar. He was Iyengar's personal physician until he was reportedly worn down by the teacher's constant stream of verbal abuse. Karandikar left the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Institute to found Kabir Baug Sanstha just three kilometres away, across Pune's Mutha river.

Kabir Baug is a sprawling yoga therapy clinic and therapeutic college that serves thousands of mostly Indian clients and students every year. While Iyengar globally advanced the hypothesis of "yoga as therapy", Karandikar seems to have quietly proven it by staying at home and using a seamless blend of ancient and modern techniques. Most injured clients who come to Kabir Baug for asana instruction receive a spinal x-ray before they even begin. This clinic is unknown to the global yoga community, I think, because Karandikar's skill is not occluded by the projection of intuitive wizardry, but rather demystified through the medical technologies that have almost replaced divine vision. Karandikar has flown below the radar of Western fetish and orientalism, perhaps because his work is to show us that embodied insight is not the domain of a charmed few, but is democratically available to everyone.

Within twelve hours of his death, Iyengar's body was brought from his home to the Vaikunth crematorium by ambulance. It was laid in perfect savasana upon a pyre of sandal and rosewood. Prashant touched the flame to the kindling at 3 pm. There were only one hundred people in attendance—most of them Western students. The pujaris chanted Vedic hymns, perhaps including the oldest funeral verses of all: "I am because you have been. You will be because I am."

A certain vision might emerge through the white smoke. It rises in the hearts of those who he loved, strutted before, taught, harangued, slapped, kicked, injured, hugged, and healed. It might reflect how his soul now sees itself, if one believes in souls:

It is of a white-haired man, walking through clouds towards a simple gate. His leonine bearing is disrupted by his worried mood. Perhaps he wonders if he is standing tall enough, breathing deeply enough, if he is pliant enough in his spine to adequately bow to his forbears, his austere guru, and the earth itself. He puzzles over which asana to assume to ask forgiveness from those he burned with his zeal. He frets over whether he is finally fit to honour the thrilling and awful gift of being a body.

draft excerpt #2

Meeting Nancy Cochren

On the morning of June 19th, 2013, Nancy Cochren, aged 32, was 38 weeks pregnant, and teaching yoga at the studio in Hamilton Ontario where she'd worked for seven years. She felt strong and supple, and almost ready for the enormous change ahead. She remembers the sweet feeling of squatting in malasana, and the elation of side-lunges that morning.

In the afternoon, her obstetrician at St. Joseph's Hospital performed a stretch-and-sweep during her checkup, and accidentally broke her membrane. A gush of clear, sweet amnion splashed off the examination table and hit the floor. The doctor took her hand and said "You'll be having the baby now."

Without a hint of natural labour to prepare her, Nancy was whisked away to a prep room where an I.V. of the induction medication pitocin was waiting. She hadn't even packed a bag. No toothbrush or baby blankets. She called her partner Phil, who rushed to meet her while her family took care of the details.

She entered a whirlwind of emotions, interventions, waiting, wondering, day turning to night, and then day again, and excruciating pain. In the final pushing stage, she remembers being on her back with Phil and a nurse holding her thighs in deep flexion to give her more room to widen. Her flexibility, whether natural or conditioned by yoga, was a boon. "I looked down and saw the stirrups," she said, "and my legs were way above them in the air."

At 3:45pm on June 21st, Nancy gave birth to a baby girl. They named her Parker.

Through the blur of joy, tears, nursing, hunger, and medicated wooziness, Nancy remembers gingerly making her way to the hospital room toilet, wobbly, feeling that her entire pelvis was at sea. Was this normal? Was it the epidural wearing off? Would she always be so unstable? She didn't know, and there were more pressing concerns. Baby was a little underweight, and Nancy was bleeding more than the doctors were comfortable with. Mother and child were kept under observation for two days.

As it is for many new mothers, Nancy's rushed, chaotic, painful, joyful birthing was the climax of a journey of bodily reorganization and estrangement. "I hadn't felt as though I was in my body since before I was pregnant," she wrote to me by email. And it sounded her birth circumstances seemed to separate her from herself, making her feel as though she'd lost control.

I asked her during one of our phone interviews whether this general sense of raggedness helped to pull her back to her yoga mat, in the hope that she could perhaps reintegrate and ground. "Absolutely," she said. "My mind wasn't the balanced mind I knew. I thought, 'I'll use my body to bring me back to the mental peace that I recognize as mine.'" She hoped, as everyone who has been through transformation or trauma hopes, to quickly recover an older and better-known version of herself.

Nancy made plans to return to the mat as soon as she could—to dip back into the more familiar sensations of strength, ease, and autonomous presence that she had fallen in love with at the age of 19, when she first began to practice. When Parker was two weeks old, Nancy poured over the class schedule of her studio to choose the perfect time between naps and nursings to tuck the baby away with Phil, drive to the studio, and roll out her mat for a gentle Hatha class. Her friends and colleagues greeted her warmly, asked about Parker, told her how good she looked, and praised her strength and bravery in coming back to practice so quickly.

She expected to be tentative and sore, and she was. She experienced the common postpartum absence of core strength, and the strange new positions of her organs. At one point in that first class, she felt a little overwhelmed, and thought, "I'm just going to rest here in child's pose." But when she went to kneel and flex her hips, something felt wrong on the left side. She breathed deeply and settled in to begin the restorative work the pain was telling her she needed. This is where the next chapter of Nancy's journey begins.

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She committed to going to one class per week, and by August she was teaching again, though without demonstrating the postures. In daily life, she noticed the pinching in her left hip increase. But then it seemed to shift to the right side. Then back to the left. Then it was in both. In her personal practice, she approached the problem as she had been taught: to move towards—but not into—the pain, gently, prodding and compressing, trying to release it with breath and the spirit of relaxation.

This worked, somewhat. She felt wonderful right after practicing, every day. The pain would evaporate, and her hips were freely mobile. But over the hours following each practice, she would feel herself stiffen again. The pain would return, and she found herself counting the hours to the next time she could make it to the mat. Practice was a pain-killer—but was it addressing, exacerbating, or even causing her problem?

Often, Nancy would just brush the pain aside, even though it was new for her. “Physical practice had always come easily to me,” Nancy told me. “I thought that these new feelings must be part of that regular discomfort of practice that I’m always helping my newer students accept and work with. In my own body, I felt like I was just getting the rust off. I only expected that I was getting better, that I was working away from injury.

“I was thinking: ‘I have to prep and prime so that I can get back to Mysore again.’”

By the end of August, Nancy’s hip pain was severe and unrelenting on both sides, interrupting her sleep as much as nursing was. She treated herself with ice and Tylenol, and continued to hope the injury would heal through the movements of this practice that had always been so soothing and therapeutic for her. She couldn’t imagine getting through this bump in the road without asana, without the familiar comforts of length, engagement, and compression.

But she also reached out for help. She visited her osteopath, who seemed puzzled and concerned. He applied compression manipulations to Nancy’s hips, which felt really good, but the effects were short-term. Then she saw a chiropractor, who suspected bursitis. Through internet research she learned about and resonated with the descriptions of Pubic Symphysis Diastasis—the chronic, painful

separation of the pubic bones, and through her family doctor was referred to a physiotherapist specializing in pelvic health. The recommended exercises were only moderately helpful.

It seemed to her that the richest sensory indications that she was almost ready for full practice—or that perhaps she was even healing—came through deep extensions and rotations of her hip joints in lunging and pigeon postures. The movements were paradoxically uncomfortable and greatly relieving.

As an aside: understanding the neurological competition between pain and pain relief is something I’ll be exploring throughout this book. In part, it has to do with distraction. The nerve fibers that register pressure, for example, are different from those that register inflammatory responses. Activating the former can temporarily disable the latter. It is likely that Nancy, like any yogi inclined to move *towards* the source of pain to greet it, know it, and soothe it, was unconsciously using this distractive mechanism.

Finally, in October, her osteopath revealed his concern. He suggested that her hip cartilage on both sides—her labra—might be torn, and that the damage might have come from giving birth. He encouraged her to ask her family doctor for imaging tests.

The family doctor was puzzled, conservative rather than proactive, and frugally triaged Nancy through the less-expensive imaging tests, all booked months out, even though her own research convinced her that she needed Magnetic Resonance Arthrography, which is the only real technique that can verify labral tears. It’s basically an MRI with contrast dye injected into the joint to highlight abnormalities.

Fall gave way to winter. Parker bumbled over her first Christmas presents. Nancy’s pain ebbed and flowed as her mobility decreased. At times she had to stop, but as soon as the pain eased she would try again. “You know that thing women say: ‘I wanted my body back.’” Such a heavy cultural trope.

When spring arrived, she went for her x-rays and ultrasounds, which all came back all normal, aside from showing inconclusive swelling in the hip capsule. They were better than normal, in fact. The orthopedic specialists told Nancy that her hips looked “beautiful”, with “no abnormalities at all” that would constitute risk factors for labral tearing:

shallow hip sockets, asymmetries, or femoral necks with wide angles of inclination. The imaging showed no signs of arthritic damage at all. It gave Nancy the relieving impression that her years of practice had not made her vulnerable to her injuries. She campaigned for an MRA.

In March, Nancy's first set of arthrograms confirmed "uncomplicated bilateral anterior superior labral tears." They were exactly the same place on both sides, and exactly the same length. She had a meeting with an orthopedic surgeon on May 29th, and was put on a list for surgery, and told that the wait could be up to fourteen months. More recently, her physiatrist has administered cortisone injections to suppress the inflammatory response of the tissue damage. She's also received injections of a new medication called Monovisc, a viscoelastic solution of sodium hyaluronan that supplements a natural substance called hyaluronic acid. This acid, along with the protein lubricin, gives synovial fluid its slippery quality. The shots have been very helpful. On the phone, Nancy and I joke that Monovisc is like the Tin Man's oil can.

Meanwhile, Nancy has had to adjust to the reality of losing a treasured identity, and the depression that has followed. At 16, she'd started teaching martial arts, earning two black belts before a slipped disc in her neck forced her to withdraw. "I poured my entire focus into yoga after that" she says, "to fill the gap in my free time, and ego. I envisioned a 90-year-old me practicing with the same freedom I felt when yoga was new. All I had to do, I believed, was to keep moving." As with so many yoga practitioners, Nancy's faith in the practice made it difficult to accept that *immobility* was the healing modality she needed now. In a culture convinced that healing and hard work are inseparable, she has had to learn stillness, and non-attachment.

Unless an earlier opening comes up, Nancy will be having her first hip repaired in the summer of 2015. She'll have to be immobilized for up to six months before they attempt to repair the second hip. Her surgeon has told her it would be ill-advised to try to carry another pregnancy before both hips are repaired, and have proven stable.

"Am I on the wrong path?" Nancy wondered aloud. "Do I need to take up something hip-friendly, like painting? I shouldn't give up on this body, should I?" I had no answer for her, but I hoped for

her enthusiasm to return. "Constant questions," she says, "and lots of time to think."

Including, as it turns out, lots of time to re-design how she will continue with her yoga teaching career. For the last year or so, Nancy's been leading asana classes by voice alone. She's largely stopped demonstrating, and has sharply changed her attitude towards students going too far with effort in their postures. Her students are aware of her condition, and she's been transparent with them about her process. She's also figured out what actually does work for her therapeutically, at least for the moment. She's been practicing a lot of restorative yoga, finding the poses that bind her thighs together very comforting. She's training to be able to teach this form as well.

So how did both of the labra of Nancy Cochren's hips tear? We cannot know for sure. The arthrograms give doctors a clear view into the state of her labra in March, 2014, but can tell us nothing about how old the tears are, or how they got there. But we do have a number of possibilities to consider.

Labral tears from the stresses of childbirth definitely happen, although rates of occurrence are difficult to find. In one study of 43 women (Baker, 2010), three cases of labral tearing (7%) were strongly correlated to birthing stress. However, the sample was drawn from the regular client list of an orthopedic surgery clinic, and not controlled for age or other variables. It seems that no one has yet tracked how many birthing women generally sustain this injury, nor what the risk factors might be. As in: would a prenatal yoga career predispose a woman to labral vulnerability, or would it give her a more flexible, forgiving, and resilient hip joint? We don't know.

There has been one focused study (Brooks, 2012) done of ten women ranging in age from 23 to 36 years who are quite sure that birthing was the primary cause of their tears. Four of them reported the injury occurring during labour or birthing itself, describing distinct popping or twisting sensations as their femurs were flexed or rotated by their birthing partners to help widen or mobilize the birth canal. The study proposes that the most dangerous position is the simultaneous combination of flexion, adduction, and internal rotation.

Nancy's injury would not seem to fall into this category. She doesn't recall being manipulated into this hip position. Nor did she feel any particular hip

pain that she could distinguish from the pain of labour or birthing. *Her hip pain only started after she returned to practice.* It's possible that giving birth to Parker was the primary injury cause, but the evidence is inconclusive. What makes it unlikely in my personal, non-medical view, is that it isn't just one tear, but two. I haven't yet come across any cases in the medical literature that describe both hips being identically injured during childbirth. The similarity of her injuries would imply that the extreme range-of-motion manipulation associated with the injury was repeated with great precision on both sides. My thought is that the exact symmetry of the two injuries is more a reflection of Nancy's alignment precision, and how she brought herself with great care and attention into one pose after another, first on one side, and then on the other, in that early postpartum phase. Nancy has generously invited me to the next preparatory meeting with her surgeon, and I'll be asking him about this possibility.

Is it possible that the birthing exerted enough stress on Nancy's labra that they were less resistant to the flexions, extensions, and rotations of the asanas she returned to? Yes. Is it possible that she entered labour with the articular cartilage in her hips weakened by years by asana practice? Yes, although much of the imaging would deny this. Is it true that the biochemistry of post-partum women is flooded with the labour-catalyzing hormone relaxin—which softens the cartilage—for up to sixth months? Absolutely.

There are some things we can be surer of. Whether the injury preceded, occurred during, or followed Parker's birth, the beloved and pleasurable asana actions of flexing, adducting, externally or internally rotating, or applying traction or compression to the hips 1. *could not have improved her condition*, 2. *might have worsened it* (given that her general pain increased through the postpartum months), and also, 3. *paradoxically, relieved it*, albeit temporarily.

We also know that for Nancy, yoga nurtured an expectation of joint mobility and physical autonomy that the birth of Parker interrupted. We know that the asanas felt good enough to reinforce her well-conditioned belief that they were therapeutic, instead of merely analgesic with diminishing returns. And we know a little of the strong enticement to "try harder", with which women are especially bur-

dened. Nancy was praised and rewarded by her colleagues and students, held up as proof that childbirth is no obstacle for the woman who wants to do everything, and who actually must do everything if she wants to avoid disappointment and shame.

Even deeper than this gendered tension, perhaps, is our collective wish to perform changelessness in the face of life. We so desperately want to show our constancy, perhaps because we know we are never the same person from day to day.

Year by year, hundreds of thousands of women around the world who are committed to modern postural yoga are also negotiating childbirth, effectively bringing two forms of spiritual practice into contact. The lived reality of these practices collides with the social narratives of how they are supposed to be in the world, throwing off stories of pain, bravery and learning like so many sparks.

One final note for now. In our most recent interview, Nancy described the process of receiving the cortisone and Monovisc injections. She was awake for the procedure. The physiatrist froze both of her hips with a local anesthetic. She could move, but oddly, couldn't feel anything. The gurney was next to an x-ray apparatus that projected the image of her hip onto a screen. The doctor aimed the 5-inch long, 18-gauge needle towards her joint. She watched the needle pierce the skin and sink in. She turned to look at the x-ray screen along with the doctor. She watched him guide the needle tip to the round joint capsule, and nudge against it until it gave way with a small pop. The doctor depressed the plunger and the medication filled the capsule.

This is the weirdness of yoga meeting the hospital. The yogi can now see, but not feel, what she's trained so hard to visualize and feel. Her mindfulness to sensation is numbed, while the direct image is broadcast for her consideration, perhaps displacing that inner self she worked with and breathed through for years. A man in a white coat seems to have more access to the source of her pain than she does.

He is a strange new guru in modern postural yoga. He holds a needle, an x-ray gun, an ultrasound scanner and a clipboard in his many hands, a nonchalant deity with semi-sacred implements. He probes to the depths of the yogi's pelvis, so close to that line of chakras, documenting her being in ways the ancient seers could never have imagined.

draft excerpt #3

My Left Hand: *I Am That*

1979. I was playing right field in the final game of the biggest t-ball tournament a seven-year-old could imagine. The score was tied, the bases loaded, and the other team's star hitter stepped up and walloped the ball into the night sky above me. It hung there between the lights like the moon. Everything slowed down. In a dream, I drifted towards the warning track, and then reached over the fence with my gloved hand. The ball fell softly into the pocket. It hissed as it spun for a moment in the smooth leather my dad had softened with his shaving cream. I opened the mitt to confirm it was there, and to this day I can count every red stitch on that ball, every scratch and nick in its ivory calfskin. I can still feel the warm sting in my left palm.

It was a flashbulb moment of presence. I was in flight, utterly free of self-consciousness, all of my senses fully engaged. My body was full, extended, mingled with the summer night, yet also transparent, brimming with its own intention and spontaneous skill. I had remembered that raw existence of sensation and action that even seven-year-olds are beginning to forget.

Years later, I heard the story of the warrior Arjuna learning archery from his guru Drona. The target was a dead bird, spinning on a wheel overhead. Arjuna drew the bowstring and took aim. Drona asked him: "Do you see the arrowhead?" Arjuna replied, "No." "Do you see the bird?" "No." "Do you see the space between the arrow and the bird?" "No."

"What do you see, Arjuna?"

"I see *myself*."

"Then release the arrow!"

Arjuna's arrow threads the eye of the bird. Catching that baseball felt like that.

At the age of 30, I went to a yoga class in Manhattan, trying to pull myself out of depression. It was at Alan Finger's old place. The instructor was a woman my age who seemed charmed in a way that both irritated and attracted me. Like she had some pleasurable secret. Smiling, she said: "Today we'll try to see if we can join the small self to the larger self." The words jostled some memory of the Arjuna story,

but they didn't help my mood.

The postures in the class seemed simple, but they were extraordinarily difficult to do. And painful. I didn't think the pain was physically damaging, because I remember feeling buoyant and relaxed for days afterwards.

The pain seemed to come from an angry recognition. Like when you fight bitterly with a brother or lover about something essential, and then try to reconcile, perhaps prematurely, with an embrace. Or when you survive something with another person—like a car crash—and you grip them tightly, as if to prove that you're both still there. How many times, in some moment of crisis, did I squeeze my little brother hard around the neck, telling him I loved him through clenched teeth? He hugged me back fiercely, tears squeezing out of his eyes.

The sweat and pain in that yoga class was just like that. I was reconciling with a body that had survived my neglect and even abuse, a body that I also loved and depended upon, a body not quite ready to forgive me for my absence. My body reached back and gripped me in a catharsis of anguish and rage that completely dissipated when I lay myself down, trembling, into corpse pose. I disappeared into the earth.

When I came to, I rolled to my right side and opened my eyes. Sunlight poured onto my drenched mat. I found myself gazing at the palm of my left hand, the same hand that caught that ball. The same hand that plunked out base lines on the piano I used to play, and that now darts over the left side of this keyboard. But in that moment, my hand wasn't an instrument for me to use. It was me. Somewhere I'd heard the Upanishad refrain *I am that*, and it came to mind like a bell ringing. I had remembered something about my existence. *I am that. I have a hand. I am this hand.* Through the warmth in the palm of my hand, I had joined the small self, as the instructor had said, with something much larger. This shivering present body became continuous again with the shivering present world.

It's my pattern to get obsessed with anything

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that makes sense to me, or makes me feel smarter, or gives me a little relief. So it was with yoga. I wanted to learn as much as I could. I leapt into teaching—way too soon—so I could continue to learn, and finance more learning. My diet changed for the better, and along with it, my digestion. My mood regulation got more resilient. Libido and sleep improved. I seemed to be less socially anxious. I remember walking into rooms and realizing with quiet surprise *I'm standing up straight and breathing freely. How did this happen?*

But it wasn't enough. What I really wanted was to revisit that initial revelation, in which I'd felt like I'd seen myself clearly and simply. It never repeated itself. I'm not sure that you can practice to see yourself clearly. Maybe it happens when you relax the searching that amplifies all of your self-distortions.

After about five years, my efforts in practice began to injure me, although I didn't want to admit it. Neck pain, shoulder pain, lower back pain, a partial hamstring tear that nagged my every waking hour for over a year. I was humiliated, because I'd expected asana to provide a continual upwards curve of self-knowledge, and through self-knowledge, bodily release and mental freedom. I wondered what my lack of suppleness was telling me about my psyche. I blamed my technique, and tried to learn more, which of course led to overthinking and micro-managing every movement. I blamed my supposed new sensitivity to the technologized world. I made my schedule more austere, sought out more retreat time. I blamed caffeine, and cut it out entirely. I got very attached to the idea of being non-attached to the idea of being pain-free. I blamed myself for pushing, being greedy, and tried to back off in intensity. But slowly and deliberately doing the same movements that had hurt me, still hurt me. The weird part was that these movements that I was realizing were hurtful often brought pain relief first.

I told myself that now, finally, the real spiritual work was beginning, and it was dirty. I told myself that the asanas and the meditation had finally burrowed down to find the tangled mess of my soul. Exposed, this soul could now show its wound, its unworthiness, by speaking through physical pain. The ache in my hamstring was a message in a bottle, bobbing in the ocean of memory and identity. It gave me a mythic journey to consider. It made me real. This was a very powerful story.

It felt like the surface benefits of yoga had become normalized, and lost their shine. An older teacher I respected told me: "Yoga is a deconstruction of your whole personhood: who you think you are, and why you think you're here. It hurts. The hook is that it makes you feel good at first."

I looked around my community and saw that everybody was still suffering: injured, anxious, depressed, insomniac, amenorrheic, disordered in their eating, struggling in work or miserable in relationship. I turned the story I was telling myself onto them: yoga had brought us all to some existential edge at which we could feel not only how deeply wrecked we were, but we could understand and even consciously embody the suffering of the larger world. We had tuned in to reality in some fateful way. There was no cure for reality but to keep practicing.

I'll say more about this personal dynamic in the pages that follow. For today, I wonder how many of us become injured in yoga while trying to recapture the exact thing we cannot: a first revelation we had on the mat that reminded us of something else, so far gone. Can we confuse the discomfort of that revelation with the pain of trying to recreate it? Does it make sense to use a highly formalized structure of asanas to rebuild the spontaneous pleasure of childhood movements? In how many ways can it hurt to swim against the tide of time and fatigue?

There's another yoga moment featuring my left hand. As the pain of asana and the physical discomfort of meditation increased, I turned to philosophy and the Vedic arts. These were paths of self-inquiry that I could pursue in a posture that had comforted me from childhood: at my desk, surrounded by books. I dove into Ayurveda, Jyotish (East Indian Astrology), Vastu (Vedic spatial arrangement), and Hasta Samudrika (Vedic palmistry). This last subject felt particularly magical to me. It's a collection of very old ideas about how experience might write itself upon the body. My teacher was Hart deFouw, and under his grumpy kindness I learned a vast catalogue of bodily markings and their supposed meanings. But most of all I absorbed the idea that the body holds a story as old as myth and as tangled as a novel, and that yoga is often a process of reading.

In one of my first seminar days with him, Hart said: "The best light to view the hand in is direct sunlight. So on your lunchbreak, go outside and look at the palm of your hand in the sun. You can do this

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anytime you want. You might be amazed at what you see, and how it changes.”

An hour later, I stood at the corner of Toronto’s busiest intersection and looked at the palm of my left hand in the midday summer sun. I saw a blazing, fractal map of lines and webs nested within lines and webs. *Am I that?* I wondered. *Yes.*

As a child I had become self-aware through my left hand in a moment of pure action. At 30, I remembered that my hand was there, still holding that childhood night, and that my body, which was my hand, was still me, and that I could still move

and be happy in movement. At 38, I saw a story in the lines and glyphs of my skin. Perhaps all of the attention I’d paid to the asana instructions about the “movement of my skin” had left their mark, beside down-sloping lines of periodic depression, spikes of acute pain and elated discovery. The palm of my hand holds an unfinished story, which may or may not tell me who I am, but which drives me to look closely at the embodied experience of others, to see what is strange and what is familiar in our arcs of suffering and relief.

draft excerpt #4

Six Lenses for Studying MPY: Phenomenology, Biology, Intersubjectivity, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Cross-Cultural Studies

This project began as a record of injuries and injury contexts in the culture of modern postural yoga (MPY). Along the way, it has evolved into a broader meditation upon the body in our disembodied age: its timeless struggles and pains, the meanings of effort, pleasure, sacrifice, aloneness, merging, attachment, and non-attachment. It's a meditation on how we push and pull against our flesh, knowing somehow that this inner split we feel is not quite right. How we reach out beyond our skins, as if from a chrysalis. How we reach in to find sensation, or memories of sensations, revealing themselves along an infinite scale from the blissful to the abject.

In the process of this study, I've reached out for as much theoretical help as I can find, and tried to view the scene through as many lenses as possible. I'll describe some of these lenses here, briefly, to give a sense of what's going on behind the curtain, and the concerns that have driven my questioning technique in the interviewing process. All of these lenses have limitations, which means that I don't apply any of them exclusively or rigidly. I'm actually interested in their flaws as much as their strengths, because the flaws show me where more study and more humility are required. Each lens can only hold a part of the story about how we hurt and heal through yoga. The fuller stories, of course, are told by people, and I'll try to let those take centre stage.

My natural point of departure will be the **phenomenological view**. This is a commitment to examining, as far as is possible, the immediate sensory data available in any given experience, before applying any theory at all. My own fascination with asana began with feeling it in my flesh: the sweetness of movement and strength, the frustration and pain at the limit of movement and strength, the endless dialogue between voluntary and involuntary actions,

and the swell of my breath. I wouldn't be writing this book were it not for these quickening sensations. Asana was the field of mindfulness through which I rediscovered and then remapped myself after the disembodiment of an awkward adolescence and the numbness of depression.

When I ask myself "What am I actually doing in asana?", my attention seems to focus on the sound of that last word—*āsana*—which holds a cascade of internal and external textures that have poured through me, overtaken me, and proven my very existence to myself. When I say the word, I don't think of posture or forms or teaching or teachers or ideals or goals. I think of actions that invite feelings and feelings that invite actions. The context seems irrelevant: these actions/feelings can flow equally freely when I'm alone in my study, or in a packed class in which the very walls seem to vibrate and sweat. The phenomenological approach allows me to pay attention to what something *seems to be* for me, before I get distracted by the question of what it means to me or others—or worse, what it *should* mean.

It's an approach that's coherent with a theme that hums like a drone throughout the literature of Hatha Yoga: *concepts are a weak starting point for knowledge*. The *Hāthapradīpikā*, for example, sidelines all discussions of cosmology and ethics in favour of concentrating upon bodily realities: how to cook for your belly, how to clean your digestive organs, how to position your limbs and manipulate your breath to stimulate the most revelatory bodily responses. Some commentators go so far as to say that considerations of morality, for example, can further confuse the ambivalence of the alienated, non-present mind, and that there's no use in thinking about what the body should do before one clearly

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feels it as a site of mystic discovery, and is fully awake to its possibilities. The idea is that appropriate philosophy will naturally flow from a mind first tamed and then vitalized by the celebrating flesh. More on this in a bit.

But any study that stops at the phenomenological level wallows in the wish that experience can somehow be separated from meaning. As many recent commentators in yoga culture have pointed out, the meaning of every experience—especially those that seem to convince us of their universality—are always filtered through the pre-existing psycho-social constructs of the practitioners. Yogis the world over might be feeling similar bodily sensations in practice, but this commonality will in no way predict a shared story. The strength of the phenomenological method—to value feeling over meaning—is also its outer weakness. It forgets, purposefully, that the feelings generated depend on the environmental and social contexts that produce them. Its inner weakness is its focus on the irreducibly subjective. Phenomenology tells me what I think I feel myself to be *alone*, when what I really am is the complex product of *being with* other people. Further, phenomenology will only ever reflect my experience back to myself within the confines of my own private language. I may learn to share this language artfully, but those who hear and read me will have far more access to my literary affect than to “me.”

Another profound problem with this starting point—and one which I’ll examine closely in this book, because it relates directly to our assumptions about pain and injury—is that there are often strong differences between what we feel is happening within us and what is actually happening. People who have come close to dying of hypothermia report warm blissful sensations as they relaxed into the icy water. Soldiers feel surges of confidence and vigour immediately after sustaining life-threatening wounds. If they make it to the field hospital, they will often decline pain medication for the first several days. The pain of an anorectic’s hunger can flicker into mystical pleasure. Most cancer sufferers are completely unaware of even substantial malignancies, because cancer cells do not provoke inflammatory responses, and cause no pain at all until they accumulate to such a degree that they create internal mechanical pressures that tissue and organ

structures can no longer tolerate. All too often, our senses deceive us, even when our bodies are our focal points of mindful reflection. The best phenomenology can feel the body intimately, while utterly failing to know it.

This poses a sticky problem for the yoga practitioner, who is repeatedly told to “listen to the body” or “attune to the breath” in the hope of avoiding the stresses that lead to injury. But when we ask people to “listen to the body”, we just can’t know what they are hearing. We cannot say, “Here is the precise point at which a person’s effort and discomfort is turning into the pain of tissue damage.” And often, surprisingly, they can’t either. This means that all of the desired sensations evoked by asana can be pursued to the point of injury, while yielding many gifts along the way. Feeling open or extended or aligned is no guarantee of the health that most practitioners expect to come from practice.

This is where the nuts and bolts of the **biomechanical** and **neuroscientific** views come into play, to supplement the poetry of internal sensation with evidenced fact.

Let’s take the condition of “hypermobility” as an example. Subjective sensation alone will not tell a person that she’s hypermobile. She may discover it by comparing herself to other movers, or by visiting a kinesiologist who uses a clinical tool like the Beighton Scale, which measures the range of extension in key joints. If her hypermobility is the result of a genetic condition such as Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, neither her subjectivity nor physical examination alone will reveal this, unless she’s a microbiologist who can evaluate how she produces collagen for her joints.

To take a more generally applicable example, we cannot tell by sensation alone how our cartilage is managing the stress of daily life, let alone the pressures and twistings of asana. Articular cartilage is specifically evolved to evade nociception, or the perception of pain. A practitioner can fly through the strenuous sequences of Ashtanga Yoga for years, sustaining soft-tissue injuries from time to time that heal up well enough, while remaining completely unaware of the deterioration of their cartilage, until sudden and catastrophic pain erupts when it finally gives way, and bone meets bone with a sickening grind.

To date, most yoga education, because it has proceeded on phenomenological grounds, often bolstered by myopic spiritualism, has been woefully ignorant of the most basic facts surrounding the core actions of movement that many forms of practice demand. What is a safe range of motion, and how do we detect it in the individual? (Kinesiologists know. Most personal trainers know.) Do muscles actually lengthen via stretching? (Strangely, no.) Is steady breath really a foolproof method for maintaining safety in a pose? (Nope.) Is it actually healthful to do the exact same set of movements at the same time period every day? (Most sports medicine people agree that cross-training is essential for structural integrity.) What's the actual mechanism by which our tolerance for pain increases? (The philosophy of mindfulness can help, but we really have to understand neurology before approaching this question with integrity.)

You'll search yogic and Ayurvedic literature in vain for anything but poetic allusions to these questions, not to mention answers. Compared to what contemporary biomechanics and neuroscience has to offer, yoga seems ill-equipped to study itself. It must reach beyond the thrall of subjective reverie and its pre-biomedical heritage if it wants answers that can improve the safety and sustainability of practice.

As soon as the phenomenon of yoga practice becomes a conversation between teacher and student, one practitioner and others, or between yoga theory and other disciplines, we're using an **intersubjective view**. This is the commitment to understanding all thoughts and feelings as arising through relationship between self and other. The learning of subjective mindfulness widens immeasurably when we consider how even our capacity to be mindful has been modeled for us by others, how our sense of hidden internal reality is something that forms with the realization that the other person has an interiority that we can't access. The intersubjective lens widens away from the real estate of the body-alone-on-the-mat to take in the classroom of the studio and social life. In *Threads of Yoga* (2012), I summarized it this way:

“Intersubjectivity” is the philosophical and psychological acknowledgement that experience

and meaning are co-created through human relationship. It is an advancement from the “isolated mind” moods of earlier philosophies (Descartes), early psychologies (Freud), and most of Western science prior to quantum theory—all of which presume clear boundaries between the observer and the observed, the “I” and the “you”. Intersubjectivity posits that although we often feel separated from each other in private bubbles of meaning, our fundamental condition is one of togetherness and unconscious empathy, in which we intuit that the interior lives of those we are with are similar to our own, that the “you” I encounter is another “I” looking back at a “you”, who is myself.

The intersubjective sphere begins to account for how we learn from each other, from how we think of ourselves to how we move. It is the realm of parents and children, teachers and students, friends, enemies, and neutral players. It describes every mode of being as a being-with. In asana, it would focus on the fact that other than the few hardwired movement reflexes (startling, rooting, suckling) that we are born with, the vast majority of our movement knowledge comes from our capacity to mirror others, most likely through the primal functions of our mirror neurology. This means that no one learns the often unnatural and counter-intuitive shapes of asana without mimicking what one sees others do. This in turn means that the asanas we learn are not even our own until our interest in mirroring has been exhausted and we begin to create new forms, driven by more original stimuli. Before this happens, we have to acknowledge that asana practice is not private, personal, or purely subjective. Asana occurs between bodies that generate their subjectivity by sharing it.

Although I have a lot of reservations about it, I find that the **psychoanalytic view** can form a useful bridge between the internal sensations of asana and their intersubjective context. The psychoanalytic mode weaves a rich story of internal and internalized pressures that resonate loudly with the struggles my interview subjects present in their stories from the mat. The scope of its literature and practice is vast, and by turns pompous, myopic, and searingly insightful. Any study of yoga or mindfulness prac-

tice would be impoverished by ignoring it.

Of primary importance in the psychoanalytic consideration of asana is the idea that for as much as we long for “union” (with ourselves, with God, with a beloved), we are also terrified of the imagined effects of union upon the coherence of the selves we know. Every desire both conceals and reveals a fear. We want love, but we are not sure what it means or what we must sacrifice to have it.

Sigmund Freud may not have set a strong personal example for the modern yogic ideals of attunement, contentment, bodily awareness, geniality, and conceptual flexibility, but he did offer a crucial insight for all practitioners to consider. He critiqued the goal of mystical, “peak-experience” communion that is shared by most religious and yogic traditions as a longing to regress to an infantile state—for a “yoga” with the mother, prior to the stress of individuation. Today, he would likely say that yoga is fantasized—even hallucinated by the most neurotic adepts—as a state of oceanic interdependency in all aspects of our being, something that we unconsciously remember from the womb, and something to which we can never return, unless we concoct a metaphysical womb beyond the world that will someday receive us in unconditional warmth and love. This thought alone casts a poignant shadow over the yogic effort, while shedding light on how a kind of existential frustration might be a constant if hidden companion on our mats.

Strangely, the ascetic view of Patanjali’s time intersects with Freud’s cynicism about our happiest goals. In the *Yoga Sutras*, for example, there is no return to the oneness of the womb, or anything fulfilling in material life at all. Our best bet, it is said, is to seek for something beyond birth, contact, intimacy, change, and death. The entire thrust of this “classical” era of practice encourages the practitioner away from sensually immersive and unitary states, and to withdraw from action and social contact into a realm of perfectly isolated (*kaivalya*) observation. The text invokes a kind of “death drive”, to use Freud’s idea. Patanjali would suggest that the pleasure of psychosomatic integration—arguable the primary goal for most MPY practitioners—is an unstable answer to the sufferings of life, which can only be overcome by complete dissociation from everything we would know as being human. While we seem to feel in our

bodies that some kind of somatic integration is possible, the psychoanalytic view suggests another way of looking at the ‘enlightenment’ goal we seek. If it really is a fantasized mirage beyond the horizon, we might wonder if we’ve been chasing it off the cliff of personal injury.

At its best, psychoanalytic literature provides rich insight into the process of self-formation, both through and against the development of an independent body. It tracks the early childhood attachments, and strategies for self-soothing and the acceptable expression of desire. It is very concerned with how a sense of selfhood displaces, satisfies, or neutralizes bodily needs, and whether resentment or even enmity towards the body can evolve through this process. It offers multiple narratives for the origin of self and body images: the internal ideals and disappointments that mediate both solitary and social actions. What is yoga, if not the active adjustment or even manipulation of our self- and body-images?

Psychoanalytic insights into how early family structures influence the formation of the self now have widespread cultural currency. We know that how a child is cared for or neglected, how her space is invaded or respected, how she is made to feel guilty for existing, or like she’s the very centre of the universe—this is crucial history for understanding the kind of body and world she feels herself to occupy as an adult. If yoga is pursued by many today in an attempt to feel comfortable in their skins, well-regulated in relationship, mindful of their needs without feeling needy, interdependent as opposed to co-dependent—the broad findings of psychoanalysis can be very useful. But I’ll focus on just one of its threads here.

The British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott described how a child who realizes that the parental object (usually framed as the mother, although today the gender-role essentialism of this position is receiving justified critique) cannot fulfill her every need may choose to interpret those needs as unworthy or even shameful. To manage this shame, the child learns to repress her needs by creating a “false self”, who masters the performance of a cheerful, apparently self-sufficient persona, refusing to display any need that would inconvenience the neglectful parent.

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We know this person: nothing is ever wrong in her life. Even the wrong things are welcomed, divine challenges. Not only is it illegal for her to be publicly miserable, but she dedicates herself to evangelizing happiness to every dark corner that dares to remind her of what she's repressed.

Decades later, in her amazing work on the psychology of anorexia nervosa, Susie Orbach extended Winnicott's idea of the "false self" into the idea of a "false body". She suggests that as soon as the body reveals itself as needy, vulnerable, farting, menstruating, asymmetrical, or in pain, a sense of shame might overcome the person that can only be managed by fantasizing a body that must be incapable of producing these dark things. The false body is toxically vitalized by the anxious hope to please others through the performance of beauty and strength. The "truer" body—that vessel of aches and pains, fear and trembling, insomnia, frustrated urges and uncertain purpose—doesn't go away, of course. It is still the lived-in body, wearing the fantasy as a disguise.

Orbach writes:

[W]here the developing child has not had a chance to experience its physicality as good, wholesome and essentially all right, it has little chance to live in an authentically experienced body. A false body is then fashioned which conceals the feelings of discomfort and insecurity with regard to the hidden or undeveloped 'inner body'. The 'false body' is, like [Winnicott's] 'false self', precarious. It works as a defense against the unaccepted embryonic real body. Again, like the false self, it is malleable. In attempting to gain external acceptance, the "false body" is fluid and manipulable. The woman in the 'false body' becomes used to trying to reform it along approved-of lines. It does not provide the individual with a stable core but a physical plasticity expressing a complex of inner feelings.

It's all so yoga. Orbach uses the language of "inner body" and "embryonic real body" (and later, "real self") in opposition to the "false body". This would seem to mirror many metaphysical streams in yoga that locate the source of bodily suffering in

the repression or distortion of that subtler internal body that is closer to a real self. In many forms, yoga seems to be saying that the illusory physical form you identify with distracts you from the wounded energetic pattern that made it. Turn your attention to that wounded inner being, therefore. When you see what it actually is, it might dance freely.

Orbach suggests that in the person with anorexia this tangle of real and false bodies leads to tragically divisive behaviour:

She is caught in a tension. The separation from her embryonic self is at the same time an attempt at protecting it and an expression of her destructive impulse towards it. The push towards the latter comes out of conviction that the real self is bad, dangerous and poisonous. The real self has needs, and the mother's early failure to meet these needs are the proof of their 'illegitimacy' and 'the badness inside'. The needs are what send people away and the needs are the reason that the person is not adequately related to. But since she does indeed live in her body, the bad object encroaches insistently, she cannot be released from it. (Orbach, loc. 1732-1747)

Here's what I think: some people might be getting hurt in yoga because they are practicing in the bodies they fantasize about, instead of the bodies they actually have. Bodies they fantasize expressing a happiness that is not truly there. Bodies they fantasize as expansive when they actually feel like retreating, or expressive when they feel choked. What happens to the tissues when the mind presses them into the performance of a fictional suppleness and strength? Can the fantasized body push the real body, the inner body, too far, too fast?

A brief personal example: I had a chronic hamstring injury for over a year that came in part by working towards Hanumanasana. As I worked, I would often visualize Hanuman's heroic leap from the Himalayas to Lanka and fantasize about that flight, that buoyant freedom. The wonder and devotion I felt in my heart could at times overwhelm the pain in the back of my thigh. But at other times, the pain seemed to amplify my devotion. Whose body was I practicing with, and towards? Is Hanuman's

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body any different as a fantasy object than the body of objectified beauty?

What a tangle of matter and ghost, as Leonard Cohen sings.

The advice of Patanjali seems to warn exactly against working with bodily fantasies. The path of the Sutras proposes that the inner body of memory and habit emerging from socialization must be straightened out first through good ethics and interpersonal hygiene. The yamas and niyamas are directed at the subconscious patterns that generate a tense, distracted, and delusional gross self. Once these are pacified, the argument goes, the gross self of the body (a formerly “false body”, perhaps) can be repurposed through asana and breathwork towards a new type of interiority that goes beyond the psychosocial target of psychoanalysis, penetrating into the very heart of what it means to be a conscious subject.

But modern postural yoga really doesn't pay that much attention to Patanjali's developmental arc, in part because it is far more influenced by the argument put forward by the more impatient Hatha literature. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika, for example, presents the gross body as the first site of work and revelation. Without exploring the body first through asana we risk amplifying our internal splits by simply paying attention to them. In Saraswati's preface to Muktibhodananda's commentary on the HYP the Swami states:

Self-control and self-discipline should start with the body. That is much easier. Asana is discipline; pranayama is discipline; kumbhaka (retention of breath) is self-control Why do you fight with the mind first? You have no power to wrestle with the mind, yet you wrestle with it, thereby creating a pattern of animosity towards yourself. There are not two minds, there is one mind trying to split itself into two. One mind wants to break the discipline and the other mind wants to maintain the discipline. You can find this split in everybody. When this split becomes greater, then we call it schizophrenia. (1985, 6)

I agree with Saraswati in a general sense. But I don't think his position is adequate if we want to explore the question of what kind of internal

or external authority is disciplining the body, and according to what ideals, and whether the body we're practicing with is the one we actually have, or the one we want to have.

In many ways, psychoanalysis might be a fractured and greasy lens through which to view MPY. Firstly, its overt atheism—while perhaps a refreshing antidote to the metaphysical jargon that can predominate yoga discourse—will be discordant with the sentiments of many practitioners. Secondly, the claustrophobic thicket of psychoanalytic language does not seem harmonic with the expansive and celebratory sentiments of yogic aspirations. Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, and even Julia Kristeva, I imagine, would feel pretty uncomfortable at a kirtan.

Most importantly, using psychoanalytic principles to view the drives, desires, and frustrations of yoga presents a bitter political problem that isn't going away any time soon. The primarily western scholars who, with varying degrees of transparency, use it to investigate yoga and the Indian religious cultures that employ it have been viciously accused of perpetuating the legacy of colonialism in academic and clinical form by infantilizing, sexualizing, and pathologizing key teachers and the core tenets of practice. It's a cold war, with one side calling for academic freedom, and the other calling for an end to cultural appropriation and distortion. From a (self-serving) psychoanalytic perspective, the pulping of Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* over her secular analyses of class and gender realities in Indian spirituality, or the vitriol directed at Jeffrey Kripal over his suggestion that Ramakrishna might have been homosexual or pedophilic, are signs of a nationalistic ego-structure defending itself against the scandalous revelation of unconscious drives. From the perspective of both Hindutva defenders, and secular scholars who attack Doniger and Kripal's philology and sourcing, their work is just another way in which an empire dehumanizes its cultural and economic colony, stealing its stories to validate its own perverted and cynical view of humanity.

As much as I'm able, I would like to avoid this open wound by being clear that I'm *conservatively* using psychoanalytic concepts to investigate the motivations of global MPY practitioners of many cultures and denominations, including those who profess no denomination at all. I'm not applying it to

a heritage generally, but to the experience of individuals in a transnational movement. I also acknowledge that the concepts and biases of psychoanalysis may be anathema to Indian wisdom traditions in many ways. But there is one harmony: neither paradigm is scientific. Despite the pretensions of Freud to psychoanalytic “science”, and the scientific dreams of Swamis Vivekananda and Kuvalyananda, neither psychoanalysis nor yoga offer us the kinds of evidence that builds airplanes or proves the effectiveness of vaccines. The language of *ego*, *id*, *libido*, *thanatos* and *cathexis* is as elliptical as the language of *prana*, *nadi*, *chakra*, *ahamkara* and *atman*. Psychoanalysis offers a poetry of tensions and alienations to shadow yoga’s poetry of intermingling essences and potentials. I think each poetics can learn from the other.

Perhaps the most withering criticism leveled at psychoanalysis is that it both dramatizes and normalizes the privileged lives of those who can afford it. In the words of one commentator, it serves the dubious purpose of “making bourgeois lives seem fascinating”, largely by ignoring the material realities of social power. Here, (the) **feminist view(s)** can provide(s) a foundational critical analysis of power, inequality, objectification and overdetermination through which many other forms of critique flow.

The story of MPY is a story of re-embodiment as a response to industrialization and technologization. It’s a story of the development of a non-denominational global spirituality. It’s a story of the evolution of self-help movements predicated upon “holism”. It’s the story of resistance to biomedical hegemony and the clinical gaze.

But it is also a story of how women have largely taken the reigns of a globalized psycho-somatic and spiritual culture for themselves, to find new expressions of strength and bodily purpose. For this reason alone, MPY tells a feminist story. And of course, any subculture that consists of 80% women must be interpreted through a feminist lens.

Feminist theory provides sharp tools for investigating how yoga has been and still can provide resistance to caste structure, religious dogmatism, gender essentialism (and essentialism of all types), as well as oppressive interpretations of the body. Its modern usefulness is all the more poignant given that yoga emerges from the strongly patriarchal

culture of India, which was declared in 2012 by a panel of human rights experts to be one of the worst places in the world to be a woman. Feminism, like yoga, shows up whenever the dominant paradigm reveals its cruelty. Both can mount fierce challenges to hierarchies of oppression and how they are internalized by the individual psyche as habits of self-and-other violence. Feminism isn’t just about women. It’s about finding new sources of power in the body, in self-image, and in community, by challenging vertical power structures that for too long have tried to tell people who they are. “Visionary feminism,” as bell hooks writes, “is a wise and loving politics . . . [a] commitment to ending patriarchal domination of women and men, girls and boys.”

One of the many important contributions feminism has to offer the study of MPY is in tracking and encouraging the pedagogical shift from the patriarchal/authoritarian to the collective/communitarian. Through scandals and the righteous cynicism that follow, then older guru-based teaching paradigms are crumbling, giving way in fits and starts to community-based systems of horizontal learning. The obstruction of this trend by the vertical forces of consumerism and commodification is a further target of feminist analysis. Feminist critics are also very well-equipped to address the overlap between yoga optics and the commercial sexualization of women’s bodies. Without the lens of feminism, an examination of yoga culture and its impact on the psyches and tissues of not only women but all people rings hollow. Even the rich disagreements between various strands of feminism—such as the friction between second and third-wave activists over how and in what circumstances women’s sexuality can be a source of empowerment—are instructive, insofar as they show a level of passionate intergenerational debate that is largely absent in current yoga culture.

It’s also from feminist analysis that questions about normative modes of gender identity emerge. Every day, tens of millions of women throughout the world go to the mat to explore, reconcile with, revision and redefine the meanings and purposes of their bodies. As stereotypes of appearance, beauty and reproductive purpose are interrogated, the door opens for other embodiments of gendered or even genderless meaning. It has been the implicit and explicit feminist spaces of MPY, from Vanda Scar-

velli's home studio in Florence to Christi-an Slomka's Kula Annex in Toronto to Sri Louise's Underground Yoga Parlour for Self-Knowledge & Social Justice in Oakland to online forums like Be Scofield's Decolonizing Yoga that have opened yoga's doors to the populations it is perhaps best suited to serve—those who live and express through non-normative bodies, sexualities, identities, and politics.

The final lens is the broadest of all: the **cross-cultural studies view**. I won't attempt a synopsis here, but rather list some of the questions, in no particular order, that this lens can begin to address:

Is yoga a cultural heritage, or a global technology? Am I, as a white, western, privileged male, equipped to answer this question for anyone but myself? Do I need to be a Sanskrit scholar to properly engage with the history and philosophy of yoga?

Am I qualified to use a feminist lens to investigate yoga culture?

Does asana (still) have religious or esoteric meaning? Should it? Who has it been meant for, and who is using it now?

How does the guru principle translate across cultures without hideous distortions?

Should yoga instruction be professionalized and regulated, or does this destroy the intimacy at the heart of the learning process?

Is yoga scientific? Can it be medicalized? Can it be tested in a double-blind controlled study, with placebo? If we start calling it a placebo itself, do we degrade the beliefs of those who practice it with religious conviction?

How does the romance of Orientalism influence the drives of non-Indian practitioners?

What kind of devotion can a non-Indian practitioner develop towards Indian deities? What does that devotion feel like?

Are the ideals of medieval Hatha Yoga coherent with now-global ideals of therapeutic self-care?

Was the gymnasium environment at the Mysore Palace where Krishnamacharya began his public asana instruction anything like the modern yoga studio? Did it sanction corporal punishment, and has this influenced the adjustment techniques of MPY? Why did apparently none of the many people who were personally injured by Pattabhi Jois or B.K.S. Iyengar lodge formal complaints with the police of Mysore or Pune?

How does the fictionalization of MPY's "ancient" roots in the soil of a fetishized India fill an aching void at the heart of an ahistorical and homeless postmodernity?

◦

"The paths are many. The truth is one." What yoga luminary *hasn't* said this, or something like it? Vivekananda, Gandhi, Krishnamacharya, and every yoga teacher influenced by Vedanta—they've all said it. They're referencing the primordial Shiva, who is said to have taught 84,000 paths of yoga, all of which lead to liberation. I'd say that there are just as many interpretive strategies for looking at the impacts of yoga—whichever path is taken—on people's bodies and minds. But unlike Shiva's paths, these yogas of interpretation do not all lead to the same place, unless we understand "liberation" to mean the friction and pleasure of continuing conversation within a community struggling to articulate its goals, and to mature.

dramatis personae

on-record subjects

Here is an incomplete list of interview subjects who have agreed to be on-record for this project. Some of these people have distinct—and in a few cases, contentious—injury stories that require an investigative treatment. Many fit into the category of “expert witness” in a particular field of yoga discourse and practice. Some subjects I met through my own research outreach. Others approached me once they heard of the project, or were referred to me by friends in the online yoga network. I’m overwhelmed with the breadth and depth of these subjects’ stories and knowledge, and grateful for their generosity in sharing their time with me. While not all of their stories can be told directly in the book due to space restrictions, their influence will pervade every page.

Erika Abrahamian: Erika Abrahamian is an avid student of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga as an exploration of opposition, space, and flow. She runs the Mysore program at Breathe Los Gatos. I’ll be visiting Erika and speaking to her about how her individualized approach to yogic discipline has helped her redefine her sense of bodily presence and autonomy following a childhood disrupted by the Iran-Iraq war. I hope to find out how the negotiation of sensation in asana practice helped her to reframe her experience and understanding of discomfort and pain, and, at times, to erase its hold upon her body. She writes at <http://erikaabrahamian.blogspot.ca/>.

Joseph Alter: From the **Modern Yoga Research** site: “[Joseph] is a sociocultural anthropologist whose area of interest is South Asia. His research is in the field of medical anthropology on topics of physical fitness, public health, social psychology, and the relationship between health, culture, and politics broadly defined.” Alter’s *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Philosophy and Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) has been a crucial reference for me in understanding the early health-sciences context of MPY. I’ll be asking Professor Alter how the early efforts of yoga’s modernizers transformed the public face of Hatha yoga from mystical asceticism to the mass-marketable therapeutic commodity it is today. I’ll also be asking for his help in elucidating how the medieval discourse of Hatha yoga has been molded into bio-medical terms, and what it has gained and lost along the way.

Rachael Blyth: Rachael Blyth completed teacher training with Ana Forrest in 2014. Drawn to the healing aspects of Forrest Yoga through her own history of eating disorders and depression, Rachael is a keen advocate for the therapeutic applications of yoga. Our discussion began with the story of how yogic ideals of bodily purification at first sanctified and disguised her experience of anorexia. But then she described how the pain of hunger was slowly displaced by the focus of asana during a period of intense practice. While this transitional stage caused some injury, it also began to shift her inclination away from self-erasure and towards self-care.

Diane Bruni: Diane Bruni was the co-founder of Downward Dog Yoga Centre in Toronto and currently hosts the Breathing Space Yoga Television series while directing **80 Gladstone Yoga and Movement**. Diane **injured her hip** catastrophically following years of “hip-opening” work that her senior Ashtanga colleagues had suggested she undertake to correct chronic knee pain. As one of Canada’s best-loved yoga teachers, she has had to completely rebuild her practice, publicly reversing many of the Ashtanga ideals she preached for decades.

Amy Champ: Amy Champ is a Sivananda yoga teacher living in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. She recently earned her PhD in Performance Studies and Feminist Theory at UC Davis, and her dissertation manuscript is called *Inside Out: Women and Yoga in the United States*. The intersection of Yoga and Feminism is a root inspiration for

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the stories of bodily reclamation and resistance to patriarchal authority that punctuate this book.

Nancy Cochren: The practice of Ashtanga and flow styles of yoga have been a part of Nancy's life for over 14 years. She has been teaching for the last 10 years. She's also a Yoga Tune Up®, and YTU Therapy Ball teacher. Her story is [here](#).

Shankara Darby: There can be few people who more fully embody both the transcultural wanderlust of modern postural yoga in general, and the changing face of the Ashtanga system in particular. The day before his mother Joanne gave birth to Shankara in the Mysore medical clinic, she'd been practicing full Scorpion pose under the supervision of Pattabhi Jois. She may have been the first pregnant woman to ever be led through such rigorous postural sequences. Literally born out of Western zeal for Eastern attainments, and having carefully studied his parents' successes and excesses, Shankara has developed a more delicate and interdisciplinary approach to practice that incorporates studies in cross training and meditation all while maintaining what he describes as the purity and discipline of the Ashtanga tradition.

Michaelle Edwards: A practicing yogi since 1972 and a professional body worker, Michaelle operates Kauai Yoga School and has been teaching groups and privates for over two decades. In the wake of her own yoga injuries, she created **YogAlign**, a somatic system based on alignment of the entire body as a continuum. Michaelle encourages students and therapy clients to learn the natural curves and positions of the spine before considering the wisdom of applying stress to the less-natural, geometric forms of the asana vocabulary.

Ariel Glucklich: **Ariel** is a Professor of Theology at Georgetown University. Anyone interested in the intersections between physical pain, ritual activity, and spiritual narratives simply must read his 2001 book *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul*. I'll be interviewing him about the meaning of the emergence of therapeutic ideals/discourse in MPY, as a break from the historical asceticism of Hatha Yoga, how yogic and scientific epistemologies frame both experience and evidence, the place of

faith in yogic and scientific methods and discourse, and the status of the body as an interoceptive site for revelation versus an object of the clinical gaze.

Jody Greene: Jody began a Bikram yoga practice in 2000 to support both marathon running and Zen meditation practice, and moved on to Vinyasa flow in 2005. She's been teaching both meditation and asana since 2008, specializing in hands-on assisting and helping practitioners cultivate a home practice of yoga and sitting. During our first interview, Jody told me about learning to manage, through asana, a reduced perception of pain—perhaps a result of her many years of “extreme” sports or extended meditation retreats—through which she learned to deny evidence of injury in her own body. She also suffers from a condition that makes her tendons and ligaments so vulnerable that she has undergone multiple reparative surgeries. In our first interview she explained that one way she helps students avoid injury is to invite them to practice as if for that day they were living in the body of someone they loved dearly. I want to learn more about this for sure.

Tracy Hodgeman: **Tracy** has practiced yoga devotedly since 1993 and taught it since 1995. She began her studies in Iyengar Yoga, then Ashtanga Yoga Vinyasa, and after being sidelined with a torn rotator cuff injury in 2007, has since shifted into more gentle, therapeutic yoga. The injury occurred suddenly while practicing the Ashtanga third series. She claims that she was encouraged by her practice community to keep coming to practice, and that she was told by her primary teacher that her injury was neither his fault, the fault of the practice, but hers alone. Finally, a shala-mate who had medical training offered to pay for an MRI, which revealed a torn supraspinatus muscle. The surgeon assumed from the image that the injury had been sustained through a high-impact sports injury. I'll be investigating this story and attempting to interview all of the principles involved to render a well-rounded account.

Mike Hoolboom: For almost ten years **Mike** has been one of the many ad hoc artists-in-residence at Toronto's **Centre of Gravity**. His meticulous **notes** on dharma talks given by Michael Stone and others have archived the light and shadows of a sangha lurch-

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ing towards maturity. An astute political theorist, he caught my ear for this project with one remark: “Slavoj Zizek notes that capitalism requires flexible workers . . .” Mike’s uncanny glimpses of the larger cultural context for yoga culture led me to think about the consonance between the pressures of neoliberalism and the transcendental fantasies that lurk beneath contemporary spiritualities. **Our interview** may be included in the final book in its entirety.

Emily Jasenski: Emily started practicing and teaching yoga at her local YMCA in Greenville, Ohio in 2000. She trained in Columbus under Anusara and Ashtanga teacher Laurel Hodory. Emily opened **the first yoga studio in Greenville** (population: 13,000) in 2007, and has served as its primary teacher since then. When she developed chronic injuries from over practicing, she felt nonetheless compelled to continue performing the role of healthy and capable leader for her small community. I’ve visited her home and studio, and will be reporting on how she has arrived at a more balanced understanding of her skills and limitations, along with a more transparent attitude towards her students about the physical and emotional costs of striving.

Leslie Kaminoff: Leslie Kaminoff, co-author of the bestselling book *Yoga Anatomy*, is a yoga educator inspired by the tradition of T.K.V. Desikachar. He is an internationally recognized specialist with thirty five years’ experience in the fields of yoga, breath anatomy and bodywork. Leslie is the founder of **The Breathing Project**, where he teaches a unique year-long course in yoga anatomy which is also available online at <http://yogaanatomy.net/course/>. My interviews with Leslie have focused on two issues. Firstly, even though he has taught and treated thousands of injured practitioners and teachers, he’s a vigorous opponent to regulating the educational standards of the industry, because he feels that this would disrupt the learning relationship and infantilize students. I want to know about this view, especially as it seems that stronger regulatory oversight of the industry is inevitable. Secondly, Leslie recently made the bold move of disclosing the dementia of his teacher, T.K.V. Desikachar, which has been hidden by the Desikachar family for years, presumably to save face. I’m very interested in this call for existential honesty in the way we view our teachers.

Andrea de Keijzer: Andréa is a performance, video and photography artist living in Montreal. Her early training was in classical ballet, followed more recently with contemporary dance, axis syllabus and a few short encounters with yoga. Early in this process, I interviewed Andrea about the injuries she has sustained through her professional dance training and career, and about her outsider’s impressions of the movement vocabulary of MPY. She also had a lot to say about the performative and aesthetic anxiety of the dance world, and I found it deeply resonant with the problems faced by yoga practitioners overburdened by self-consciousness and the spectacle of postural attainment. **Our interview** may be included in the final book in its entirety.

Melanie Klein: Melanie Klein, M.A., is a writer, speaker and Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies. She is a contributing author to *21st Century Yoga: Culture, Politics and Practice* and is featured in *Conversations with Modern Yogis*. She is the co-editor of *Yoga and Body Image: 25 Personal Stories About Beauty, Bravery + Loving Your Body*, and co-founder of the Yoga and Body Image Coalition. Melanie’s work with Anna Guest-Jelley on how issues of body image are both addressed and exacerbated by the optics of yoga practice is a crucial contribution to the culture. In my blurb for their book, I wrote: “If, as Patanjali asserts, yoga is the task of enhancing our facility to witness, Klein and Guest-Jelley have assembled a profoundly yogic text. Not only for its spectrum of witnessing voices, but for its close examination of how we actually witness ourselves—with anxiety, accusation, shyness, forgiveness, or wonderment—first through the eyes of others, but slowly progressing towards a kind of inner vision.”

Victor Van Kooten: In 1973, **Victor** met B.K.S Iyengar in Gstaad, the Alpine ski village where Jiddhu Krishnamurti held his summer lecture series. Iyengar was the asana instructor for the annual gatherings. One day, while sipping hot chocolate in a café, Iyengar told Victor a dream so haunting I’ll be opening the book with it. I’ll then follow Victor through his story of sustaining a spinal injury at the hands of Iyengar in 1979, and how this moment changed the course of his learning and teaching. If I’m lucky I’ll be able to take a class with him.

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Emma Magenta: Emma grew up on a farm in Kansas and studied Anthropology at Bryn Mawr College. She has been practicing yoga since 1997 and teaching since 2001. In 2006, she founded South Mountain Yoga studio in South Orange, NJ. A tireless opponent of authoritarian and dogmatic teaching, Emma has a lot to share about how John Friend's "Universal Principles of Alignment" cast a one-size-fits-all spell over the Anusara community, promising perfect therapeutic solutions, but often delivering less. I'll be talking with her about what she's learned since the Anusara implosion.

James Mallinson. As the website for **Modern Yoga Research** has it: "James Mallinson's interest in yoga grew out of a fascination for India and Indian asceticism—he spent several years living with Indian ascetics and yogis, in particular Rāmānandī Tyāgīs." James is a bit of a shaman, really, as comfortable in the smoke of Kumbha Mela as he is in the libraries of Oxford—to the benefit of both cultures. I'm primarily interested in what he has to say about the differences between how Hatha yoga is taught by the modern day sadhus with whom he has cultivated relationships over two decades, and the marketers of modern postural yoga. He'll be referring some of my questions directly to his guru.

Jill Miller: Creator of **Yoga Tune Up®**, and author of *The Roll Model* (available 11/4/2014), Jill writes: "I began studying yoga from books, videos and magazines at age 12 and then continued to study with masters in many lineages before finally meeting my mentor. At age 30, I discovered, through pain and injury, that my practice was doing more harm than good. This led to rigorous studies of anatomy and biomechanics where my practice matured and I remain empowered through being a student of what I teach." The YTU community she's built throughout North America is rapidly changing the biomechanics vocabulary of therapeutic yoga.

Jules Mitchell: Jules Mitchell was always a curious yoga teacher who wanted more kinesiology education than the average teacher trainings or workshop provided. She enrolled in a Master's Degree program in Exercise Science with the goal of bringing a biomechanics education to the yoga community. Her research is questioning many of the unspo-

ken biases of yoga instruction. She contacted me shortly after I started this project with an email that said: "My argument is that the yoga community is dangerously obsessed with tissue distention. My research is building a case for the benefits of a controlled and appropriate tensile force but not on maximum distention. I am redefining how we should interpret the word 'stretch'." I've been hooked on everything she's had to say since. She runs a fantastic blog here: <http://www.julesmitchell.com/blog/>.

Neil Pearson: Neil is a physical therapist, yoga therapist, and Clinical Assistant Professor at UBC. He works exclusively with people with chronic pain, while integrating pain science and pain care into the curriculum of numerous yoga therapists training programs. Neil is working to rectify the fact that there is virtually no discussion within yoga education—even yoga therapy education—about the neurology and biology of pain. In addition to invigorating this discourse, he also teaches a four-point interoceptive approach to asana that he believes gives practitioners tools for measuring the sensations of their practice against their goals and their vulnerability to injury.

Chelsea Roff: Chelsea is the Founder and Director of **Eat Breathe Thrive**, a non-profit that helps individuals fully recover from disordered eating and negative body image. A contributing author to *21st Century Yoga: Culture, Politics and Practice*, her article on how she used yoga and other therapies to recover from disordered eating brought international acclaim. Chelsea's work is inspiring a legion of women to use the mindfulness techniques of yoga and meditation to come to a reasonable understanding of nutrition and body image. Her present work, including a breakthrough feature in *Yoga Journal*, highlights the uneasy connections between yoga, purification ideals, and disordered eating.

Tiffany Rose: Tiffany has focused her teaching passion on Yoga for PTSD. She's a faculty member for South Okanagan Yoga Academy, where she offers her Trauma Sensitive Yoga Training. She writes at unguru.ca. I've been fascinated with Tiffany's process since we started talking almost a year ago. As a trauma survivor with extensive experience with both conventional and alternative therapeutic

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approaches, she's a brave and adventurous exemplar of the principle of teaching what one needs to learn and feel.

Mark Singleton: From **Modern Yoga Research:** "Singleton's monograph *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010) is based on his Ph.D thesis, and charts the development of modern modes of postural yoga practice from c.1875 to c.1940. Other publications include thirteen entries on 'Modern Yoga' for *Routledge's Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (2009); a guest-edited yoga issue of the journal *Asian Medicine: "Tradition and Modernity"* (2007); and two co-edited books, *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* (2008) and *Gurus of Modern Yoga* (2013). He is currently working with James Mallinson on a sourcebook of yoga texts from the Indian traditions entitled *Roots of Yoga*. It's hard to overestimate the value of Mark's yoga research so far. I'll be asking him about the pedagogical scene of early MPY, and the cross-cultural exchange of physical practices.

Roopa Singh: Roopa's work with *South Asian American Perspectives on Yoga in America* (**SAAPYA**) has been vital to the developing discussion of cultural appropriation in global yoga. I'll be speaking with her about her personal experience of asana and asana education in the South Asian diaspora.

Stuart Sovatsky, PhD: Degreed in Religion (Princeton) and Psychology (CIIS). Stuart has literally been "moved by" shaktipat yoga in the Kripalvanand-Pasupata lineage since 1972. A licensed therapist for 30 years, first choice to codirect the Ram Dass Prison Ashram, a renowned kirtanist selected to chant over the dying chair of Unaligned Nations of the World, J. Drnovsec, he produced a 40-country World Family Congress 2008 in India, with keynotes by BKS Iyengar, S.S. Ravi Shankar and R. Thurman who, along with Ken Wilber and Georg/Brenda Feuerstein, endorsed his recent book, **Advanced Spiritual Intimacy**. I'm fascinated by Stuart's critique of MPY as the "Apollonian over-sculpting" asana practice that, now, should give-way to more spontaneous "charismatic-devotional" expressions of prana-kundalini energy.

John Stirk: Nearing 70, **John** is a tribal elder in the ragtag clan this book is bringing together. A lecturer in Bio-Mechanics and Practical Osteopathy at London's College of Osteopaths, he's also been teaching yoga for almost forty years, inspired by his close studies with Vanda Scaravelli, B.K.S. Iyengar, and his early collaborations with the late Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing. I met him in London, where he lit me up with musings on evolution and creativity in MPY.

David Gordon White: David was mentored by the pre-eminent Mircea Eliade, and received his Ph.D. from the Divinity School at the University of Chicago in 1988. He also studied Hinduism at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, France, between 1977-1980 and 1985-1986. A specialist of South Asian religions, he is the J. F. Rohny Professor of Comparative Religions at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he has been teaching since 1996. His **writing** has been instrumental in uncovering hidden strands of yoga culture and yogic meaning in India and beyond. I'll be asking him about the reconstruction/rebranding of "yogi" from sinister rebel to beneficent guide or therapist, the place and evolution of asana demonstration for instructing students vs. performance of *siddhis*, and historical attitudes towards discomfort, pain, injury, in the context of *tapas*.

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answering some early objections

So far, I've received overwhelmingly positive response to this initiative. But there have been some strong objections that I take seriously, and would like to respond to.

1. This project will scare people away from yoga.

This is possible, but unlikely. Most readers of this book will be stakeholders in the culture who may not agree with all of my findings, but will be nonetheless eager to engage the issues that I raise. In the end, a call for greater honesty and sensitivity in how we approach the mat as students and teachers will actually be an encouragement to the richness of practice. I also think that the culture is strong enough to withstand robust examination and critique that digs beneath the advertising.

2. Injuries in yoga don't make sense. If it hurts you, it's not yoga.

This is useless pap, and cruel to boot, often deployed to either minimize or dismiss injury stories, or to blame the victim. It attacks the integrity and intelligence of so many people who have practiced in good faith. The resounding fact is that there are many, many yoga practitioners who have been injured by working with mindfulness, according to the instructions they've received from sources they believe to be reputable. Not only that: there are many streams of yoga that acknowledge pain as a necessary and even desirable mechanism of practice.

3. William Broad tried to debunk yoga, and that's what you're trying to do.

I realize that Broad's work in *The Science of Yoga* casts a shadow upon my own—but no. Broad mainly wanted to review the scientific literature concerning the health claims made since the days of Swami Kuvalyananda (1883–1966) and others. He did a solid job with this, in my opinion. My only real overlap with his work is in the broad themes of this history: how Hatha was ordained “therapeutic” through the complex interactions of scientization and anti-colonial politics.

One criticism leveled at Broad's work is that it failed to cross-reference yoga-related injuries with other categories of injury, and so made the former appear inflated. For me, there's no question that yoga injuries are fewer in number than tennis or jogging injuries. But this is not the point. I'm focused on promises and expectations. No one plays tennis or gets into gymnastics or modern dance lured by the promise of therapeutic benefit. Yet this is the golden carrot of yoga promotion, from Krishnamacharya through Sivananda and beyond. My project investigates the gaps between the promise and the reality, along with all of the psychological and sociological baggage that contribute to injury. So my scope is quite different from Broad's.

4. You're out to backstab particular lineages and teachers, and cause people to lose faith in their practice.

I'll address the second part first. I absolutely want to challenge some usages of faith in yoga. While it's true that faith may be an essential part of whatever placebo effect yoga may have, it also can distort our relationships to knowledge, authority, and even the voices of our bodies in pain. I think the most mature relationship to faith is existential, i.e., that it is reasonable and good to have faith that working patiently and intelligently at any developmental process will yield good results, and is in fact its own good result. This would be opposed to faith that a given practice or teacher has answers we cannot understand and therefore should not question. The faithful attitude gets people into trouble when they use it not as a support to a generally positive attitude, but to pretend to know what's absolutely true or best for them or others.

As for the rest: I try to be an equal-opportunity analyst and critic. What may appear to look biased from the outset comes from the simple fact that

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there are dominant forms and teachers in MPY, and one really can't avoid naming them when speaking about how and where people get injured. In my blogging support for this project so far, I have implicitly criticized the **Anusara, Ashtanga, and Iyengar**, systems, which together represent a large swath of global asana-intensive yoga practice. The injury stories emerging from these systems also reveal psychologies that are problematic, and I'll be contrasting these with lineages—or more often, *the methods of former teachers within these very systems* that have now gone independent—that seem to be more protective of bodily health.

These magnets for critique beg a deeper question. Why have these forms of practice become dominant? Why have we, as a culture, preferred methodologies in which injury seems to be a regular casualty of therapeutic ideals? Through their popularity alone, these lineages serve as a window into collective desires and motivations. What they espouse becomes a mirror for what many seem to be seeking from yoga.

In all cases I will avoid the black-and-white position that suggests that if teachers and lineages are not all good, they must be all bad. We learn and grow through a mixture of positive and negative influences.

5. Your interview subjects are self-selected for injury. Where are all the good stories?

This is a valid concern. I did not initiate the project with a randomized sample, but with a particular call for stories of injury. The premise that many people are getting injured in yoga practice and we're not talking about it enough has been my starting point, and forms a definite bias.

My initial impulse was to follow up on the seven years of anecdotal evidence that I'd accumulated over the course of my career as a yoga teacher, community organizer, and Ayurvedic therapist in Toronto. (I recount the fuller version of this story on the **WAWADIA resource page**.) It had seemed to me that injuries were common, yet rarely discussed openly, especially when they involved teacher-student interactions, or pain resulting from postures claimed to be therapeutic, such as headstand and shoulderstand.

The wish to understand injury contexts was the driving impetus behind this project, and my findings will reflect that interest. I do hope, however, that the reader will be able to look through the concentration on injury to glean general lessons about the confusing pathways of embodied self-inquiry, and how innovative we can be when we engage it fully. My study cannot claim to be definitive of the culture or representative of all of its practitioners. All of my analysis will be mindful of this fact.

And actually, there are many good stories. Virtually all of my interview subjects have turned their pain—whether caused by overexertion, poor instruction, invasive adjustments or even ambivalence to pain itself—into sources of self-inquiry and sometimes community activism. Many have gone on to create more balanced and thoughtful forms of practice for themselves and their students. In the process, they are slowly transforming the face of MPY. Our current fascinations with biomechanics, trauma recovery, non-violent communication, and anti-authoritarianism all arise, in my view, from this maturation process.

While the starting question of my book might be: “Why do so many injure themselves doing a reputedly ‘therapeutic’ practice?”, the ending question is becoming: “How does yoga deepen and develop through injury recovery?” Perhaps this question widens in the end to an existential horizon: “How do we learn from and give meaning to pain, in both asana and in life?”

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testimonials

“Matthew Remski brings to the surface what others have thought about but not dared to crack open, discussing tough topics from the heart with grace and dignity, and creating a safe haven for those who have been injured to share their stories. Through the WAWADIA project, yogis from all walks of life have felt free enough to come out of the dark corners of their studios, shalas and/or places of shame to discuss their experiences. Remski has catalyzed a global “reframe”, obliging us to think and ask intelligent questions about asana before unconsciously bending into shapes that may later break us down. As a yoga and movement educator, I can think of no greater and more worthy gift than this book and the paradigm shift it will establish, with respect to the “what and why’s” of asana.

—**Trina Altman**, ERYT 500, Yoga Tune Up® Teacher Trainer, Pilates and Movement educator

“Matthew Remski is one of the yoga world’s most astute, thought-provoking, eloquent writers, and his upcoming work on asana-related injury will no doubt be groundbreaking. Matthew has a unique ability to inquire and engage with interviewees with curiosity, compassion, and razor-edged discernment. The fruits of his efforts will be a tremendous service to the yoga community.”

—Chelsea Roff, Founder and Director of **Eat Breathe Thrive**

“As usual, Matthew Remski blazes the trail into asking important questions that many would rather sweep under the mat. I am confident the WAWADIA project will be well-researched and beautifully written, with an intelligent eye toward an honest and illuminating examination of asana, injuries, and the shadow of authoritarian teachers and approaches. This is how to move the evolving yoga experiment forward. Support this book!”

—**Julian Walker**, Awakened Heart, Embodied Mind teacher trainer, founder:Yoga Teacher Grad School.

“Yoga as we know it in the West has changed how millions of people exercise their bodies, release stress, and enter into altered states of consciousness where deep healing can take place. But wherever there is light, there is dark. For many lovers of yoga this dark period can be filled with layers of sadness and disillusionment. Matthew had the courage to ask people to speak about the dark side of yoga—and speak they did. They came in droves to tell their stories to ears that would listen. The stories are shocking revelations of the state of yoga in the west today.”

—**Diane Bruni**, co-founder of Downward Dog Yoga Center, host of Breathing Space Yoga Television series and owner of 80 Gladstone Yoga and Movement.

“Matthew Remski is one the most forward-thinking teachers and articulate writers on where yoga in the West needs to go. He deserves all the support you feel moved to provide for his WAWADIA project.”

—**Stuart Sovatsky**, PhD

“Simply by posing the question, “What are we actually doing in asana?” Matthew Remski has unveiled a myriad of elephants in the yoga room. Thus far it has yielded incredibly rich questions and insights. I always look forward to reading every WAWADIA Project update, and anxiously await the final book. I have no doubt that it will be regarded as a foundational text on yoga asana for many years to come.”

—Brooke Thomas, founder, **Liberated Body**.

“Matthew Remski brings an intelligent and nuanced voice to the most important conversations facing modern yoga. His academic rigor and heartfelt inquiry are providing invaluable data and insight regarding the evolution of yoga into mainstream culture and the pressing issues that practitioners and professionals are grappling with. Anyone who wants to be truly informed about what is going on

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with yoga today needs to read what Matthew is writing.”

—**J. Brown**, owner/director at
Abhyasa Yoga, Brooklyn

“Matthew boldly leads the community in a long overdue conversation that shines a light on the vague understanding of what yoga asana is and what its benefits are. His research provides the most comprehensive, honest, and revealing discourse on the subject to date.”

—**Jules Mitchell**, MS (Her groundbreaking thesis on the science of stretching will be published soon.)

“For too long we’ve accepted ideas about how and why we practice without necessarily inquiring into the relevance or wisdom of the practice itself. People who experience injury in yoga have sometimes slunk off, never to come back, or to feel ashamed and blame themselves. Very few people ask ‘Is it the way that we’re practicing?’ Now, thanks to Matthew’s research and the articles he’s been publishing over this year, people are starting to inquire. I’ve been asking these questions of myself and it’s made my yoga practice stronger and wiser. Matthew’s proposed book will no doubt become a foundational research text for 21st century yoga.”

—Kara-Leah Grant, publisher of
The Yoga Lunchbox, author of *Forty Days of Yoga*
and *The No-More-Excuses Guide to Yoga*.

“Matthew Remski is one of the clear, level-headed voices of the modern yoga movement. He asks interesting questions, and then seeks to find real answers, willingly pursuing an idea to ends that might be difficult. After all, the truth is not always what we would like it to be. As a writer, he has a delicate, refined style that embraces complexity in a way that brings it to light. I always find his articles compelling, and am always pulled to read to the end. Any book that he brings into the world will only serve to elevate the knowledge of all who love yoga.

—**Erica Mather**, Forrest Guardian Teacher

“Matthew Remski stands out as one of the premiere voices in the yoga community. His work allows us to dive deep below the surface thereby learning and growing. And this is all done with grace, empathy and humility. Remski is an important scholar as well as a thoughtful yogi and, as such, is an intricate key in shaping yoga culture in meaningful and authentic ways.”

—**Melanie Klein**, M.A.

“I am excited to be part of a conversation that makes space for the more difficult, complicated, and scary parts of practicing yoga in North America. I think it is important to note that this conversation doesn’t cancel out all of the beautiful, healing and transformational gifts of practicing yoga, but rather it inspires the whole endeavour to become more honest. I imagine when we can be more real that is when we will find the most nourishing ways to integrate these practices into our lives.”

—**Christi-an Slomka**

“Matthew Remski’s work on “What Are We Actually Doing In Asana?” (WAWADIA) has the potential to catalyze a much-needed change in the way we conceive of, practice, and instruct yoga in the 21st century. Currently, the field of modern postural yoga has been subsumed by the self-improvement paradigm that we are all engaged in to a degree in our daily lives, and this perfectionist model is leading to pain and suffering.

Matthew’s work has engendered a reflective, recalibrating mood in the field as well as some push-back, the latter being reasonably expected given the cognitive dissonance that his findings are causing. The WAWADIA project is important to support if we want yoga to fulfill its promise of balance, function and health.

When I think of Matthew and his work, I think of that rare combination of clarity and passion without sensationalism; I think of leadership as defined by David Foster Wallace: “A real leader can somehow get us to do certain things that deep down we think are good and want to be able to do but usually can’t get ourselves to do on our own.” WAWADIA is that project that we all want to do, but we can’t get ourselves to do on our own. Matthew Remski is doing it.

—**Anna Karkovska McGlew**

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notes for draft excerpts

“The Cremation of B.K.S. Iyengar”

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Epigram: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4t2OLXi2xvY&feature=youtu.be>, time cue 5:08.

On August 14th, 2014 . . . Source: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/Yoga-guru-in-hospital-stable/articleshow/40218765.cms>. Other details come from the 8/13 edition of Indian Express: <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/yogacharya-b-k-s-iyengar-admitted-to-hospital/>.

By August 18th . . . Source: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Yoga-guru-BKS-Iyengars-condition-worsens/articleshow/40424031.cms>. The irony of Iyengar’s hospitalization wasn’t lost on the global community. On 8/19, Leslie Kaminoff posted the following to his Facebook wall: “Is this the way for “the Lion of Pune” to spend his last days on earth? He has lived an incredibly full and productive life for 96 years, and has nothing left to prove - except apparently to his followers, who make absurd declarations like: ‘...Everything is in control and as we all know Our Dear Guruji is a LION hearted man, he can come out of any storm . . .’ As if Iyengar were some kind of immortal being not subject to the laws of the physical universe. I wish the people around this man would let him die with the dignity he deserves.”

On August 20th at 3:15 am local time: Source: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Yoga-guru-BKS-Iyengar-passes-away/articleshow/40462779.cms>.

Amongst my several thousand yoga contacts on Facebook . . . Denise Benitez, Facebook status update from 8/19/2014, 7 pm PST: *BKS Iyengar, the great progenitor of yoga in the West, has died at the age of 96. As one of the minions who trained in and taught Iyengar yoga in the 70’s and 80’s, I am grateful to him for his keen eye and passion for precision and order. I learned so much from Iyengar*

teachers, and all of it changed my body and my life for the better. Probably none of us would be doing yoga without his influence, or at least not the way we do yoga now. I am immensely grateful for his presence on the planet. And yet, my “relationship” with him was complex. I never met him personally, but I saw him in action at Iyengar conferences, and he humiliated, shamed and bullied his students and teachers, mostly women. He was highly patriarchal and was an old school “guru” who expected his word to be obeyed without question. In the 80’s, one of his senior male teachers was inappropriately touching women in classes. I was one of those women. When this was told to Iyengar, he said that all of the women who had reported this were lying. So on the occasion of his death, I am left with an unsettling mix of emotions -- the passing of an era, the jewel of yoga that he brought forward, his narcissism and ferocity, the fact that he had been homeless, sickly and lost as a boy, and that yoga saved him, as it has saved so many of us. All I can do is wish his spirit well, with all my heart. May his soul rest at ease.

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Those more remote are left to wonder . . . *Udana vāyu* is the upward-moving “wind” of yogic physiology, said to be the material mechanism by which the atman is ejected from the flesh at death. The radiance of death is common trope in Tantric literature. Most famously elucidated in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, popularized by Sogyal Rinpoche in the 1990s.

Early on in the research for this book . . . <http://matthewremski.com/wordpress/wawadia-update-10-lazy-people-cant-practice-thoughts-on-a-yoga-meme/>

No one can know . . . Both Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo were antagonistic, to differing degrees, to the physical heritage of Hatha yoga. “Sacramental”: In my early Catholic education, a sacrament was defined as “an outward sign of an inward grace.” This formulation goes back to St.

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Augustine early catechism, later formalized at the Council of Trent in the mid 16th century.

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With the exception of Jois . . . Note: many conversations with “older shala” students of Jois from the 70s and 80s, reveal the common opinion that Sharath does not command the same grandeur as his grandfather, who many considered to be a shaktipat guru.

The death of a “great man” . . . About Vanda joshing Iyengar: this anecdote comes from Sandra Sabatini via interview.

“Six Lenses for Studying MPY”

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This project began . . . “Modern Postural Yoga” is one of the divisions of contemporary practice delineated by Elizabeth de Michelis (2004). Dominated by the techniques of B.K.S. Iyengar and Pattabhis Jois, it is evolute of the “Modern Psychosomatic Yoga”, taught by Swamis Kuvalyananda and Sivananda, among others, and distinct from the “Modern Meditational Yoga” that is the legacy of Sri Chinnoy and the TM subculture. De Michelis contends that MPY has become a globalized “healing ritual of secular religion.” (252-260)

My natural point of departure . . . “Phenomenology” (the “study of that which appears”) is a philosophical movement dating back to the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and carried forward by Martin Heidegger and the existentialists. Broadly speaking, it attempts to limit metaphysical speculation to accurately record the facts of consciousness. Sokolowski (2000) provides a good primer, but my favourite writer in the field is the charmed Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961).

It’s an approach that’s coherent . . . The main commentary I have in mind regarding the usefulness of morality at the outset of practice is in Saraswati’s preface to Muktibhodananda’s commentary on the HYP (1985): “Self-control and self-discipline should start with the body. That is much easier. Asana is discipline; pranayama is discipline; kumbhaka (retention of breath) is self-control . . . Why do

I’m also thinking of Dr. Karandikar . . . This report comes from an interview with David McAmmond, one of the few Western students to study extensively at Kabir Baug Sanstha: <http://www.kabir-baug.com/>.

Within twelve hours of his death . . . [file://localhost/Source/ http://igiri.org/bks-iyengar-cremated-amid-vedic-chants-2.](file://localhost/Source/http://igiri.org/bks-iyengar-cremated-amid-vedic-chants-2.)

you fight with the mind first? You have no power to wrestle with the mind, yet you wrestle with it, thereby creating a pattern of animosity towards yourself. There are not two minds, there is one mind trying to split itself into two. One mind wants to break the discipline and the other mind wants to maintain the discipline. You can find this split in everybody. When this split becomes greater, then we call it schizophrenia.” (6)

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But any study that stops at the phenomenological level . . . Be Scofield has led the popular charge here in asserting no necessary connection between yoga practices and social meanings and outcomes. Her response to me over my naïve attempts to connect mindfulness practices to some kind of natural progressive politics is really good: <http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2012/11/22/the-limitations-of-empathy-a-response-to-matthew-remski/>.

Another profound problem with this starting point . . . Reports of the strangely pain-free wounded soldiers—which permanently complicated Descartes’ vision of the nervous system as a simple mechanical relay—come from the field notes of Harry K. Beecher who treated Allied troops returning from the Anzio Beachhead during the winter of 1943-44. The data and its implications are soundly analyzed by Wall (2002, 3), who also presents a wrenching account of the pain of cancer: “Cancer pain is worse than useless. It provides absolutely no pro-

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tective signal because the disease is far advanced before it starts. Once started, it announces the obvious and, if it goes untreated, it simply adds to the miseries of impending death. Worse, untreated pain accelerates death.” (87) Orbach (1986) is very good on the ambivalence of the anorectic’s pain.

This poses a sticky problem . . . My personal essay on the experience of deep vein thrombosis might be helpful here: <http://matthewremski.com/word-press/wawadia-update-8-notes-on-my-hospital-ization/>.

This is where the nuts and bolts . . . Jess Glenny has been indispensable in helping me understand the subtleties of the label “hypermobility”. <http://movingprayer.wordpress.com/>.

To date, most yoga education . . . Paul Grilley’s usage of actual human bones in his presentations of anatomy for yoga instruction have been central to opening the pedagogy to medical epistemology, especially with regard to range-of-motion issues: <http://www.paulgrilley.com/bone-photo-gallery>. Gil Hedley’s dissection labs are currently attracting flocks of yoga teachers and therapists: <http://www.gilhedley.com/gabout.php>. Jules Mitchell’s forthcoming book on the science of stretching will be a game changer. Neil Pearson (2007) is a leading pain researcher for the global yoga community.

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As soon as the phenomenon of yoga practice . . . Intersubjectivity is a core topic within the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic literatures. Practical resources of benefit to yoga practitioners and teachers who realize that teaching and learning are mutually influential exchanges that should change teachers as much as learners would include Stern (2004) and Buirski and Haglund (2001). The quote from Remski (2012) is from pages 14-15.

The intersubjective sphere begins . . . The work of D.W. Winnicott (1964, 1965, 1971) is very helpful for understanding mirror-type learning within the dyad of baby and mother. Stein (2007) and Iacoboni (2009) are helpful introductory sources to the mysteries of mirror neurology.

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Sigmund Freud may not have set a strong personal example . . . Freud’s views on religion are voluminous and well-scattered. Look for his most sustained infantilization of the mystical experience in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1961) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1967).

Strangely, the ascetic view . . . Edwin Bryant’s (2009) description of the Yoga Sutras driving towards “isolation” is pretty conclusive: “Yoga can thus mean that which joins, that is, unties one with the Absolute Truth, and while this translation of the term is popularly found . . . it is best avoided in the context of the Yoga Sutras, since . . . the goal of yoga is not to join, but the opposite: to unjoin, that is, to disconnect purusa from prakriti.” (5)

Psychoanalytic insights . . . The literature here is vast, but a great starting point is Kaplan’s *Oneness and Separateness* (1978). Bollas’ *Being a Character* (2013) is also very useful.

The British psychoanalyst . . . Winnicott’s clearest presentation of this idea comes in “Ego distortion in terms of true and false self”, a gem-like 1960 article that was later folded into the 1965 collection. Orbach’s *Hunger Strike* (1986) is a tour de force that should be required reading for yoga teachers who want a solid feminist understanding of the perils of self-help culture and purification fetishes.

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Most importantly, using psychoanalytic principles . . . The subject of cultural appropriation and distortion in global yoga is a tinderbox of passion and polemic. Be Scofield’s Decolonizing Yoga website is a good resource: <http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/>. Roopa Singh’s work with SAAPYA is excellent: <http://saapya.wordpress.com/>. Doniger’s *The Hindus* (2009) was targeted by Hindutva radicals in 2010, leading to Penguin India agreeing to withdraw all unsold copies and have them destroyed. Her main offense has been to portray Indian spiritual culture as diverse, erotically charged, at times militaristic, and at times transgressive. Jeffrey Kripal’s *Kali’s Child* (1995) was initially lauded by western academia, and then viciously attacked by

some Indian scholars and religious leaders who claim Kripal is misinterpreting his Bengali source texts, pathologizing Tantra, and misapplying psychoanalytic principles. Some of the most robust rebuttals to these and other scholars have come from Rajiv Malhotra (2011, 2014). His essay “Wendy’s Child Syndrome” is a fascinating read: <http://rajivmalhotra.com/library/articles/risa-lila-1-wendys-child-syndrome/>.

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Perhaps the most withering criticism leveled at psychoanalysis . . . MacKenzie Wark, in *The Beach Beneath the Street*, criticizes another institution of self-care that can become myopic with individualism: “If there is one abiding purpose to psychoanalysis, it is to make bourgeois lives seem fascinating, at least to those who live them.” (Verso, 2012, p.93).

Feminist theory provides sharp tools . . .

“panel of human rights activists”: <http://in.reducers.com/article/2012/06/13/g20-women-idINDEE85C00420120613>. “Visionary feminism . . .” is from hooks’ *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000).

One of the many important contributions feminism has to offer the study of MPY . . . For this, there’s nothing better than hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and *Teaching Community* (2003). For a feminist understanding of yoga, body image, and sexualization, Klein and Guest-Jelley (2014) provide a breakthrough effort in the field.

It’s also from feminist analysis . . . Vanda Scara-velli’s textual legacy is a lovely book called *Waking the Spine*, but her unwritten legacy lives on in the bodies of her surviving personal students—mostly women who she worked with one-on-one in an environment that they all describe as being personable, intimate, stress-free, and empowering. Christi-an Slomka can be found at <http://www.lakesofdevotion.ca/>. Sri Louise works here: http://undergroundyogaparLOUR.com/?page_id=14.

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The final lens is . . . These questions are hinted at or tackled head on in the work of Singleton (2008, 2010, 2013), Sjoman (1996), White (2009, 2012, 2014), Kramer and Alstad (1993), Stern and Donahaye (2013), Sovatsky (2013), de Michelis (2005), Kadetsky (2014), Horton (2012, 2012), Farhi (2006), Alter (2004), Malhotra (2011, 2014), Roopa Singh (SAAPYA).

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