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Embodied Pedagogies for Transformation: Bringing Yoga Strategies into College Classrooms

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We argue that incorporating a yogic pedagogical approach in college classrooms, specifically classrooms that cover issues of race, gender, sexuality, and violence, allows an instructor and thus their students to focus on embodiment and specifically how our bodies hold physical and psychological wounds of oppression while creating new methods to understand oppression more deeply. We suggest that incorporating body awareness practices like yoga into the classroom can promote both personal healing and a deeper understanding of systemic oppression by demonstrating the connections between the two. Body-based pedagogy allows students to think critically, mindfully, holistically, and creatively about responding to injustice while envisioning and enacting a healed worldview.

The deep connection between personal liberation and social transformation is increasingly clear. It is embodied.

– Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens,
and Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma*

Like many other Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) instructors, we have noticed a profound shift in the immediacy of our subject matter since the increase in conservatism, culminating in the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. While our work has always included discussions of "difficult" subject matters (race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, with specific topics ranging from whiteness, gender roles, media

representation, sexual assault, reproductive justice, and incarceration), the recent socio-political climate gives increased urgency to the importance of supporting our students in additional ways, while simultaneously encouraging them to become more aware of social justice issues. Our experiences teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in WGS at a diverse public institution with a legacy of whiteness encourage us to think critically about how students experience the social justice topics with which we engage (Stallings, 2015). We propose embracing embodied practices, in this case yoga, in the classroom. Because the challenges of engaging with social justice issues in a socio-political climate rife with oppressive language is not specific to WGS teachers, we believe that the approaches and practices we share in the following pages can be useful to other educators in other fields.

I (Audrey) began teaching WGS as a graduate student and as such, my teaching followed a perhaps common trajectory of beginning from a place of frustration about the multitude of injustices that exist. I felt it was my role as an instructor to impress upon my students that they, too, must become frustrated about the existence of these injustices. I approached teaching often as an argument-based exercise: I must present convincing evidence to students that all people are not, indeed, equal, and I found myself presenting the most inflammatory statistics around racism, sexual assault, and criminal justice in order to support this perspective. Showing films that narrativized oppression was one of my most frequently used strategies. During a film screening on sexual assault, I began to question my method as I looked out to a room of mostly young women who expressed not surprise, but familiarity with the stories presented in the film. I felt even more immediacy in my approach as I witnessed social media movements like #metoo and activism that came out of Black Lives Matter, because I began to consider the ways that students are inundated with stories about injustice-based trauma many times throughout their day. I realized, and this realization continues to evolve, that teaching without attention to the trauma that many, if not most, students already experience, is not only unhelpful but potentially harmful. I embarked on a 200-hour yoga teacher training immediately followed by an intensive workshop on yoga for trauma healing and began to use my experience

as a yoga instructor to modify my approach to teaching social justice topics from an embodied and trauma-informed lens.

Like Audrey, I (AnaLouise) also used an argument-based pedagogy when I began teaching English, composition, and (especially) women's and gender studies. I, too, was concerned with social injustice and believed that the most effective way to assist students in recognizing socio-cultural disparities was by offering them all sorts of statistics, critiques, and examples. However, after several years I realized that this approach was too limited and lead to unwanted consequences such as the following: some students became increasingly combative, reacting in knee-jerk oppositional ways; other students shut down entirely; and still others found it "safer" to avoid my courses altogether. To address these and related limitations, I developed an invitational pedagogy and post-oppositional classroom techniques (Keating, 2007; Keating, 2013). Although this invitational post-oppositional approach has been more effective, I did not consider the importance of developing a pedagogy that acknowledges and attempts to address the ways trauma and stress can show up in our bodies during class readings and discussions until I began teaching yin yoga at a local studio.

A yoga-inspired pedagogical approach allows an instructor and thus their students to focus on embodiment and specifically how our bodies hold physical and psychological wounds of oppression while creating additional methods to understand oppression more deeply. Incorporating body awareness practices like yoga into the classroom can promote both personal healing and a deeper understanding of systemic oppression by demonstrating the connections between the two. Body-based pedagogy allows students to think critically, mindfully, holistically, and creatively about responding to injustice while envisioning and enacting a healed worldview—beginning with the self and moving outward.

To use yoga as a framework for teaching with consideration to trauma and intersectional social justice theories, we pair yoga practice with discussions of cultural appropriation of yoga in our classes. By so doing, we deepen students' understanding of the various forms colonialism and commodification can take while complicating their understanding of yoga. We begin with a brief overview of yoga that exposes students to

multiple definitions of the word “yoga” in Sanskrit (White, 2011, p. 2), its various appearances in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain writings (White, 2011, p. 4), its philosophical contributions, the gymnastic movement of the nineteenth century, and its commodification in the United States, where it is now a multi-billion-dollar industry. We do not present ourselves as having authority over yoga—as practitioners or instructors; nor do we want our students to assume that they now “understand” yoga. Instead, we focus on what yoga has taught us about embodiment, and we focus on its contributions as a therapeutic practice. We thus share yoga as a form of healing while acknowledging that the yoga we practice is far removed from Eastern yogic traditions. Although yoga has roots in Eastern tradition, the many iterations of yoga practiced in the West are distant from this history, as the practice has continued to change through multiple power-laden, often oppressive traditions. Moreover, by incorporating discussions of yoga’s complex history of appropriation, innovation, and transformation into classroom discussions, we simultaneously teach students how to recognize and forgo the exploitative use of non-Western knowledge. We present yoga as a potentially healing practice that encourages body awareness through inclusive spirituality and relational self-reflection.

As we introduce yoga-related concepts into our teaching, we emphasize that yoga is not a religious practice. In part, we do so in order to prevent students (especially those raised in traditional Judeo-Christian religious families) from viewing yoga as a religion and automatically rejecting it on those (mistaken) grounds. We explain that we view yoga not as a religious practice, but rather as a spiritual way of being that helps us connect our individual experiences to the needs of the community. We emphasize that yoga does not impose a belief system on practitioners but instead meets people where they are. TKV Desikachar, the founder of the Mysore branch of yoga and the son and student of T. Krishnamacharya (1999) (often referred to as “the father of modern yoga”), makes a similar point:

Yoga does not require a particular belief system and, if we already have one, it is not challenged by yoga. Everyone can begin, and the point at which we start is

very personal and individual, depending on where we are at the time. Why do we set out on this journey at all? Because we sense that we do not always do what might be best for ourselves or others. Because we notice that we often do not recognize the things around us and in us clearly enough. (loc. 1786)

As Desikachar suggests, yoga offers an approach to increased awareness—both of ourselves and of our surroundings. This increased awareness can facilitate more thoughtful responses to everyday situations. A 90-minute, 30-minute, or even 10-minute yoga practice can help us to look inside ourselves and understand our emotions without reaction or judgment. As we'll explain below, from this place of recognition, we can see how we hold trauma in the body and react unthinkingly when this buried, embodied trauma is triggered. As we applied yin yoga in our classrooms, we explored this kind of mindful inward practice.

We focus on yin yoga because we believe that this approach offers a particularly useful entry into embodiment. A gentle yoga practice that draws on Taoist thought and Chinese Medicine as well as Vedic traditional yogic philosophy, yin yoga employs fewer, primarily seated or reclined poses, which are held for longer periods of time. Unlike the more commonly practiced vinyasa yoga, which focuses primarily on the muscles, yin invites the muscles to be still and addresses the tendons, ligaments, and, especially, the fascia—the connective tissue that is ubiquitous throughout the body, holding organs, blood vessels, nerves, ligaments, tendons, and so on together. Previously dismissed as insignificant packing tissue, fascia has only recently come to scientists' attention. This web-like structure functions as a "communication system," a sensory organ that changes, grows, and responds to the external environment. By calling attention to our connective tissue, yin yoga can enhance body awareness. When we practice yin, we look inward and pay close attention to specific points in our bodies, noting the small energetic shifts as we twist and in other ways apply pressure to the fascia. Thus, with proper instruction, a yin yoga practice can facilitate embodied thinking—literally, thinking within and through the body.

We introduced yin yoga into our classrooms with specific attention to body awareness, stilling of the mind, and links between personal and community wellness. At the undergraduate level, the assignment required students to practice two guided, one-hour yin sessions. They could attend a face-to-face class, or they could practice on their own by following a video we created specifically for them. In both the video and the on-campus sessions, we led students through an opening meditation, a series of six five-minute seated poses, and a closing meditation. At the beginning meditation, we invited students to set a personal and community intention. This instruction was designed to ask students to think about and enact the connections between personal and communal wellness. In the graduate class, we incorporated yin yoga into regular sessions, often beginning class with meditation or a few yin yoga poses. During each pose we used specific verbal cues designed to encourage students to be present in their bodies. For instance, we taught half-pigeon pose, which involves bending one knee at the front of the body, leaving the other leg long behind the body, and resting on the front of the hips. In this pose, we instructed students to notice the way their hips felt with the weight of the body pressing them open, the way each leg felt, one bent and one straight, and the sensations they experienced in the parts of the body connected to the ground. After each pose, we invited students to lay flat on the ground in order to notice the sensations in their body. The poses and counter-poses focused specifically on embodiment. Toward the end of the yoga session, we led students through a visual-based meditation and asked them to picture sending healing energy created, and for most students felt during their yoga poses, into the collective community. After the yoga practice, students reflected on their experiences, including any thoughts or emotions that came up during the practice.

Introducing yoga into the classroom can give students additional tools that might assist them to heal from the traumas of social injustice, recognize their role in the suffering of others, and explore how their wellness is connected to that of their communities. Yoga, like spirituality more generally, allowed students to focus on their mind, body, and spirit, in relation to collective wellness. Unlike most classroom activities, which

typically privilege reason, logic, and rational thought (useful for critical thinking and other forms of analysis), the yoga unit invited students to explore their emotions and think holistically about injustices. Thus, in the next sections we explore how yin yoga can address embodied trauma—an important part of discussing social injustice—as well as how this embodiment can help students develop knowledge alternative to dominant systems of power in order to see themselves as part of an interconnected community. Throughout the next sections, we explore these ideas using both research from scholars, particularly scholars of Womanist Spiritual Activism, and student responses to the yoga unit described above.

EMBODIMENT AND WORKING THROUGH TRAUMA

Prior to incorporating yoga into our WGS classes, we typically framed discussions of inequality by focusing on the existence of oppression, with information designed to demonstrate that we do not live in an egalitarian society. We might spend time giving statistics about racism or showing advertisements that illustrate some of the many forms rape culture can take, in order to prove to students that inequality still exists. This approach seems to speak directly to the most privileged students—those who may not experience multiple overlapping forms of identity-based discrimination in their daily lives. This approach also ignores—and, in some cases, further traumatizes—those students cognizant of inequality, in part because they experience the everyday trauma of oppression. By bringing yoga’s body-based practices into the classroom, we shape discussions of oppression differently; we simultaneously address healing and the experiential nature of oppression and discrimination. WGS instructors must acknowledge the complex level of trauma students may have, which often includes daily micro and macro aggressions based on race, gender, sexual identity, and/or class, in order to have more productive and healing discussions of these traumas. Introducing embodied practices helps students recognize this trauma, and then respond to the world around them with more clarity and understanding.

As social-justice educators who teach courses that include trauma-inducing topics, we should do our best to understand the basics of trauma in order to avoid further traumatizing our students and also center

our discussions from a healing perspective. As psychologists David Hartman and Diane Zimberoff (2006) note, trauma occurs in the body and is thus held in the body:

The body carries memories of trauma and abuse in the form of sensations specific to the site of invasive trauma. In the same way, the body or body parts carry dissociation, disconnection from feeling, numbness, withdrawal, or hyperactivity. Either way, whether dissociated or not, somatic memory, frozen in place, determines subsequent traumatic stress response: one's shadow behavior is embodied at the time of the overwhelming trauma. (p. 104)

In short, because the body stores unexpressed, unexamined trauma, our reactions to external events can be shaped by or based on this trauma. As Hartman and Zimberoff (2006) explain, "practices that ask a person who has experienced trauma to be present and aware of their body can help them to take ownership of their bodies as well as separate past trauma from the present" (p. 75). By practicing full body presence, a person who has experienced trauma may be able to somatically and intellectually separate past trauma from present reactions. Without awareness of past trauma's impact, a person may respond to present situations in reactionary ways that are driven by the past trauma; typically, such reactions are physically detrimental and cannot address the current situation. Beth Berila writes that trauma from oppression, unlike trauma that may occur only once, happens often, even multiple times in a single day. Berila, who focuses specifically on queer students, argues that many internalize heteronormative oppression (2016, p. 7). Internalized oppression, however, does not only affect queer students. Students of color may internalize messages about their race and/or immigration status, and women students of any color may internalize messages about their gender. Further, when messages from peers and media are rooted in sexism, racism, and homophobia, it's difficult to escape the role these messages play in students' identity formation. Because oppression trauma, which is held in our bodies, "is a daily part of their lived experience, [students] may or

may not understand that that is what it is" (2016, p. 8). In other words, students may experience daily life with embodied trauma, yet be unaware that this trauma affects their overall health and well-being. By doing practices that help students notice and release these trauma stores, they begin healing from daily and more sporadic, yet no less impactful, trauma.

Yoga can work within the body to break down stored trauma. A hip-stretching sequence does not just open the hips physically, but can also assist a practitioner's awareness into their actual feelings and how they respond to injustice. Suzanne Scurlock-Durana, a craniosacral therapist, explains that holding trauma in the body can affect our ability to navigate daily situations. She writes, "It is our *present-moment sensory experience* that provides the foundational data to the prefrontal area of our brain for the wisest decision-making possible. Without conscious *sensory* connection to the present, we are forced to orient to the past" (2017, p. 34, her italics). In other words, without body awareness connecting us to present sensations, our reactions to present stimuli will be based on previous traumatic memories. If students feel uncomfortable during a discussion because of their past memories, they may be unable to clearly understand present injustice or simply to connect empathetically to other peoples' experiences. Yoga, as Becky Thompson writes, can directly affect the nervous system, changing our body's stress response (2014, p. 18). Zabie Yamasaki, a yoga teacher specializing in trauma yoga, writes, "During trauma, the nervous system becomes very reactive in order to respond to a real or perceived threat [...] Trauma can push us into a state of hyperarousal where we may have increased sensations, flooded emotional reactivity, hypervigilance, flashbacks. Etc. [...] The key to healing is balancing the nervous system" (2017, Instagram post). For Yamasaki, embodiment and healing are intricately connected. Since trauma can have dangerous impacts on the body that a person may be unaware of, the practice of being in the body with intentional awareness can help someone recognize and then work through this trauma, which can lead to increased body awareness and comfort. This increased comfort within the body can make it easier for students to engage in conversation without reactivity based on perceived threat.

Because it asks a practitioner to notice their bodily sensations and tap into the energy moving throughout their bodies, yin yoga offers an especially helpful body-awareness practice. The style of yin yoga that we led followed four main steps: (1) move into and explore a pose, (2) settle into stillness, (3) gently come out of the pose, and (4) sit or lie still (either on the stomach or back). In this final step, students are instructed to turn their attention within, scan their bodies, and observe any little energetic movements created by the pose. These movements may be felt as tingling, pulsing, warmth, buzzing, or other sensations. Noticing these movements within the body is a type of present body awareness that can lead to what Hartman and Zimberoff call *indwelling*. As Hartman and Zimberoff explain,

Our unconscious thoughts, feelings, and beliefs exist in the subtle body, and to the extent they remain unconscious they manifest as physical structure and physical symptoms. Thus, the unconscious feelings and beliefs are *embodied*. *Indwelling* is the process of embodiment of the higher energies, making the soma conscious. (2006, p. 109)

In other words, methods that instruct a practitioner to go inward and notice the movement of subtle body energy invite awareness of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that manifest in the body. These embodied practices can be particularly helpful to unlock stored trauma and shift engrained consciousness. These observations can produce new knowledge about the self and relationships with others. By asking students to look within and focus their attention on their physical body and subtle energy body, we can draw their attention to how their bodies are sites and storehouses of social injustice trauma. From this point, students may be able to have a better understanding of social injustice on a broader, systematic scale.

Yin yoga's embodied awareness goes beyond the physiological/neurobiological to encompass a metaphysical aspect as well. As we, the authors, practice yin yoga more often, we notice intense energetic movement within the body during a practice, which we attribute to the release of energy that connects the physiological body to the subtle

body—an idea understood in terms of chakras or meridians in yogic theory (Maxwell, 2009, p. 809). Many yoga scholars and scholars of Eastern medicine generally acknowledge that the chakras are located within the central nervous system (Feuerstein, 2011, p. 2006). Neurobiologist Richard Maxwell explains, “As a yoga practitioner becomes more adept, subtler systems using gap junctions could be activated, changing energetic states in groups of cells, including opening connections between different compartments within the glial syncytium [cells in the brain that have been linked to psychiatric disorders]. Yogic practices could also stimulate increases in the number of gap junction connections” (2009, p. 816). In other words, yogic practices can help cells of the physical body make connections with those brain cells that control thoughts. We understand embodiment through this connection of body/mind. Hartman and Zimmeroff explain,

The condition of being embodied is an experience of a medium that exists between one’s material body and mind. Thus, our unconscious thoughts, feelings, and beliefs exist in the subtle body, and to the extent they remain unconscious they manifest as physical structure and physical symptoms. Thus, the unconscious feelings and beliefs are *embodied*. (2006, pp. 109-110)

This stored energy is often linked to stored emotions.

In the undergraduate course, we saw the beneficial effects of body awareness in students after just one 60-minute yoga practice. These benefits came in the form of students’ ability to calm their minds while simultaneously working through physical pain and stiffness. We attribute these effects to the theory that emotions are stored in the body and that by paying attention to the body, we can release them. As Bija Bennett writes in *Emotional Yoga*, “[Y]oga is the art of linking all parts of yourself—your body, your thoughts, your awareness, and your emotions” (2002, loc. 268). As we connect our minds to our bodies through yoga by paying careful attention to energetic shifts, we can become more aware of what we are feeling and respond consciously. To respond consciously is, as Bennet claims, to find a balanced response rather than a reaction

based on physical symptoms stored in the body. Bennett continues, "When you allow yourself to feel, you let the part of you that desires reach out and make contact with yourself. Yoga teaches you how to do this through a step-by-step process of observation. First, you learn how to be aware of the 'felt sense' of your body. Then you learn how to recognize and balance what you feel" (2002, loc. 484). One student participant wrote that she found an easement of her Tourette's symptoms through practicing this type of slow yin yoga. She wrote that she struggled at first to focus on her body because she experienced anxiety set off before the session, but as the practice progressed, she began to loosen, and she was able to find focus. She wrote, "Throughout the exercise, my symptoms of Tourette's lessened and eventually left my body. I felt no urge to twitch or contort." The student attributes this lessening to her ability to work through stress, since she claimed she last experienced symptom relief when she was on vacation and not under stress. Perhaps her body was able to become its own therapist as she experienced a stillness in her mind and turned her awareness toward her body specifically. Another student wrote that, "You become more aware of a certain part of your body and you focus on sending energy to that part... I realized that we play a vital part in our bodies' healing process." Through paying careful attention to her internal embodiment, this student became more aware of her ability to intentionally impact the somatic messages throughout the body.

Practicing stillness within the body is a particular characteristic of yin yoga that we find especially helpful since stillness allows participants to bring clarity to our ways of thinking by minimizing distraction. Bernie Clark claims that these three are related. He writes, "To still the mind, the breath must be calm. To calm the breath, the body must be still" (1999, p. 38). This stillness of body, mind, and breath facilitates inner awareness. Clark continues, "We rarely see who or what we are because so many thoughts and distractions prevent us from seeing clearly what is really there. This vision of our true nature is possible only when the clouds of thoughts have drifted away; stillness of the mind is required for this clarity" (1999, p. 38). Student participants wrote that they were able to find this stillness of mind, if only in fleeting moments, from their first one-

hour yin yoga practice. One student wrote that she experienced “a very specific mental state. Not really peaceful, that seems a little generic, but calm.” This calm mental state, we would argue, is an excellent starting point for discussions of social injustice, and it can also help students manage their stress while balancing schoolwork with personal life. Thus, a yoga practice that incorporates stillness can be a form of self-care for students, as they retrain their minds to experience themselves from the inside, rather than from outside influences that may include racial and gender negative stereotypes or characteristics. This inner stillness can even help students see their self-worth outside of their productivity, an association which can lead to chronic stress.

However, practicing this embodied stillness can be challenging—especially for those who have experienced multiple forms of trauma. In graduate courses where we’ve introduced yin yoga, we have used additional strategies to address this challenge. Rather than invite students to do the type of four-part yin yoga practice described above, we focused primarily on the breath, using the breath as a bridge into body awareness; we offer strategies that can assist with the movement into stillness or, if stillness itself is triggering, into self-reflection on movement itself. These strategies ranged from inviting students simply to sit in their chairs (including wheel chairs), place one or two hands on the belly, and observe the breath and the breath’s impact on the body; to inviting students to take their attention to another place in their bodies (their choice) and simply observe; to giving students an object (e.g., a small tumbled stone) to hold and turn in their hands during simple breath work. We began each week’s seminar with this directed breathing; students were invited to participate but were not forced to do so. After about a month of this gentle practice, and at the students’ request, we introduced seated poses—neck rolls, arm stretches, and hand yoga, using the same four-part structure described above. We offered poses that, we felt, could address the types of tension and discomfort students often experience, simply by virtue of the fact that as students they spend a lot of time hunched over books and electronics as they spend hour reading and writing. Students, some who didn’t like sitting still at first, expressed appreciation for having space to slow down and practice presence. Furthermore, these

embodied practices led our graduate students to engage in deeper discussions about the impact of academia—as a generally disembodied lifestyle—on their bodies and overall health and well-being.

Invitational language and a spirit of collaboration became key to bringing yin yoga into the classroom. We were careful—though not always successful—to present embodied practices as an opportunity to approach the classroom learning experience from a new perspective—rather than to make these practices coercive and potentially triggering. When inviting students to do a body scan, for example, we allowed students to start with their toes, their belly, or their head. We also used reassuring language about the challenge of these practices and emphasized that we did not expect students to do them perfectly. We also regularly sought feedback from students about their experiences. If a student expressed discomfort with the practice because of past trauma, we collectively adjusted our body awareness work by locking the door and keeping the lights on.

This collaborative process also helped us to clarify our goals and intentions for bringing embodied practices into our teaching. Practicing embodied awareness, for example, gave us opportunity to incorporate discussions of trauma into our lesson plans and approach conversations about oppression from a healing-focused lens. Students expressed appreciation for these embodied practices, informing us that the practices helped them realize past trauma that they hadn't previously considered. They later expressed their desire to seek treatment for their trauma.

Practicing body awareness is one benefit of a yoga practice, especially the style of yin yoga, which incorporates several minutes of stillness into each pose. During yoga practices, we invited students to use these moments of stillness to observe the sensations in their bodies. This intentional instruction was meant to help students connect their minds with bodies. Donna Farhi claims that “[w]hen we practice asanas from an interior perspective, we bring our minds back into the body. Instead of directing the body as a separate entity, we relocate our minds within our body and begin to listen to the nonverbal, non-mental information contained within the soma. As we give our full attention to every breath, movement, and the subtlest of sensations, the body becomes mindful,

and the mind becomes embodied" (2003, pp. 85-86). A student participant was able to connect with this goal, writing "my body was connected to my mind." Body awareness gives the body an opportunity to communicate with the conscious mind, drawing our attention to specific parts of the body; this attention stimulates the body's subtle energy and facilitates healing and rejuvenation. One student participant felt this connection between body, mind, and spirit, writing, "my body as a whole was speaking to me and telling me where I needed to target. As my soul goes, it was thanking me for taking the time to focus on myself, it felt as if I was growing from the inside. Together I felt that my body, mind, and soul were all connected."

MOVING BEYOND DOMINANT KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

This increased body awareness can also assist students to think outside of the dominant educational system and more fully understand power structures. Specifically, hegemonic power systems privilege dis-embodied practices. By assuming falsely that knowledge is dis-embodied and universal, students buy into unjust systems of power. If knowledge was understood as embodied, and thus more experiential, students could perhaps begin to dismantle the holds of dominant power structures in their consciousness. As Wilcox explains, "The key to dismantling such a [dominant] system is to develop alternative models of knowledge production that challenge the interconnected dualisms and hierarchies (mind/body, male/female, white/other), and that recognize the body's capacity to know" (2009, p. 106). Riyad A. Shahjahan makes a similar point: "Bringing awareness to our bodies help[s] us acknowledge and dismantle hegemonic knowledge systems that privilege the mind. Re-connecting to our bodies provides us a different locus of articulation for our theories and experiences" (2014, p. 489). An instructor could, for example, encourage a class to focus on their bodies through a body awareness meditation and then discuss their differing experiences. This exercise could lead to a discussion of how bodies are further sites of knowledge production, impacting their understanding of the external world. By expanding their definitions of knowledge and putting these more expansive definitions into dialogue with mainstream definitions

(that typically disregard embodied knowledge and multiple ways of knowing), students can acquire additional insights into the power dynamics causing institutionalized social injustice. Because these power balances have historically relied on the oppression of specific bodies, recognizing that we experience the world through embodiment (how our bodies are perceived and experience the world and how our mind understands these experiences), can help students work through and dismantle these dominant power structures. Presence and embodiment, then, is a tool to help students understand their own trauma while also connecting to a larger community.

Since discussions of social injustice are often rife with tension, using embodied practices can also offer a useful tool for creating more harmonious classroom discussions that allow space for careful self-reflection and differing opinions. Instructing students to focus on their bodies invites them to concentrate on present sensations and then use these sensations as a point of self-reflection. By focusing on body awareness to draw students' attention to how their bodies are sites of stress, instructors can help students understand these body responses that difficult conversations can trigger. This understanding enables students to self-reflect, rather than to react in knee-jerk, unthinking ways. As they become aware of their body's sensations, students can calm their breathing and their stress response that leads to reactivity during difficult discussions.

Asking students to first calm their thoughts and become aware of their body through focusing on their breath in meditation or a gentle yoga practice could be a way to begin a class discussion about privilege where students may respond with emotions like shame, which can lead to reactivity in a classroom discussion. This practice has been especially useful in our WGS graduate courses, where debates can become particularly passionate as students bring their varying perspectives, beliefs, and desires for social change into the discussion. Prior to introducing yin yoga into the classrooms, we'd have sessions where an important discussion would shift into personal narratives or heated debates about what might seem like a tangential topic, as some statement made by one student would trigger what might seem like an inexplicable response in one or more others. When we began class with some type of brief body

awareness exercise, students typically approached contentious topics less reactively. When heated debates occurred, we could slow things down even further and invite students to pause, root themselves back in their bodies, take a few minutes to record their reactions and thoughts (through a brief writing activity), and then reconvene the discussion.

EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

These types of embodied practices can help students come to a deeper understanding of oppression because they can feel the effects of oppression in their bodies and understand how bodily experiences affect their interactions with others. When students begin to understand the experiences of oppression, they may be able to both heal their own wounds and consider their role in the oppression of others. By understanding this interconnectedness and their own role in an interconnected community, students may begin to act in ways that support those around them. In other words, by seeing their actions as always affecting their larger communities, students can, we hope, act in ways that work toward wellness both for themselves and for others. Gloria Anzaldúa described this perspective and its benefits as radical interconnectedness. Anzaldúa offers her fullest discussion of this radical interconnectedness in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, where she posits a metaphysics of radical interconnectedness—or what she describes as “the deep common ground and interwoven kinship among all things and people” (2015, p. 149) as the framework for her politics of spirit, or what she calls “spiritual activism.” Indeed, Anzaldúa defines spirituality itself as an onto-epistemology based on deep recognition of our radical interconnectedness with all parts of the universe. She writes, “Spirituality is a different kind and way of knowing. It aims to expand perception; to become conscious, even in sleep; to become aware of the interconnections between all things by attaining a grand perspective” (2015, p. 38). According to Anzaldúa, then, becoming conscious and aware of our deep interconnections can lead to a transformed way of knowing, an epistemology that includes the big picture, “a grand perspective.” Instead of concerning ourselves exclusively with our individual experiences, when we adopt this grand perspective we

expand our ways of thinking to investigate and appreciate how we interact with a community of others, including humans, nonhuman animals, plants, things, the land, the stars, and the entire cosmos. This expansive perspective encourages us to shift between our own wellness and the wellness of the entire universe, because they are always intricately interconnected. We can begin to understand that our own wellness must be achieved in unison with the healing of the universe. Understanding radical interconnectedness, then, involves changing our ontological perspective, moving from self-enclosed individualism toward a much more relational worldview that embraces and acts on the interconnectedness between self and other. Once we deeply realize these interconnections, we can begin to work on individual and collective universal healing simultaneously. Paying attention to the energy in our bodies is one route to understanding how energy connects us with the entire universe.

Embodied practices like yoga may help students to understand the differences between self-care as a selfish pursuit and self-care as an important aspect to raise the collective wellness. In short, selfish self-care involves practices that may temporarily comfort an individual, yet the practice may contribute to the exploitation of another person or an entire group of people. These practices of selfish or temporary self-care do not lead to a state of wellness, or the sustainable healing of the entire interconnected universe. As Williams, Owens, and Syedullah explain, exploitative practices do not actually increase wellness for anyone: “Our inability as a nation to honor the theft of these lands [from Indigenous peoples] and the building of wealth, power, and privilege on the countless backs and graves of Black people is our most significant obstacle to being at peace with ourselves, thus with the world” (2016, p. xxiv). Social justice will not be achieved through selfish self-care, and as we try to point out to our students, selfish self-care is impossible because of our interconnectedness with others. So-called self-care practices that rely on exploitative labor practices at salons, for example, maintain the status quo of oppression.

Thus, we believe that self-care must always be pursued in connection with regard to the wellness of the entire interconnected universe—an ethics of collective wellness. Layli Maparyan defines collective wellness

as “commonweal” and describes it as “the optimization of well-being for all members of a community” (2012, p. 45). Quoting Alice Walker, Maparyan explains the interplay between self-care and collective wellness: “a womanist is ‘committed to survival and wholeness of entire people... [and] not a separatist, except periodically, for health’” (2012, p. 45). It’s important to note that “womanist” and “woman” are not synonymous. Womanism, as Maparyan and we define it, does not refer or apply exclusively to women, but rather, it refers, potentially, to all human beings, regardless of gender. A womanist, then, can be someone who does not identify as a woman. Our Womanist Spiritual Activism students were not exclusively women, either, and we made clear to our students that womanist methods could be embraced by all genders. Although individual healing, we taught, is important for each student, we practiced yoga with the philosophy that personal and community healing are reliant upon each other. Yoga as a self-care practice that does not contend with the complexities of global oppression also does not follow the ethics of collective wellness. Yoga as selfish self-care can be seen in the form of spiritual bypassing—or the unwillingness of yoga practitioners to examine how they contribute to injustice in the name of “good vibes only.” Through readings and lectures on yoga, we encouraged students to discuss the ways in which their own wellness contributed to their communities’ wellness. One way in which we made this connection between personal and community care was pairing individual embodied practices like body scan meditation and yin yoga with resonance practices. Resonance practices we introduced included deep listening activities as well as creative assignments that asked students to speak to characters and authors in assigned readings or simply speak resonant phrases such as “I feel you.” After guiding students to notice their body sensations, to become familiar with how their bodies experience oppression and privilege, they were able to listen more openly to their classmates as well as empathize with discussions of oppression, including global oppression.

The ability to connect personal and collective transformation is an important aspect of an embodied yogic practice. Since embodiment allows a person to slow down and notice the energetic changes in their body, they may also be able to notice how this subtle energy links them

to other people, the environment, and beyond. While the inner work of healing embodied trauma—and furthermore finding vitality—through yoga is an important practice, we also found gentle yin yoga to be a useful tool to ask students to connect to their entire communities. During our yin yoga practice, we asked students to set both a personal intention and a community intention. And at the end of each practice, we encouraged them to consider how their own healing benefits those around them as well as people and things they don't know by completing a reflection exercise with the following prompt: "How is personal healing connected to community healing?" One student wrote that at the end of the practice, during an ending meditation, she could feel "positive energy which I share with the people around me." While it's tempting to dismiss claims of "positive energy" as New-Age psychobabble or wishful thinking, interpreted in a womanist framework, the building/spreading of positive energy can actually have practical impacts. In a womanist metaphysics, everything has a vibration and this vibration can be consciously shifted through thoughts. As Maparyan explains, "[T]he principles of vibration can be used to make social and ecological change" (2012, p. 122). By spending an hour changing the frequency of her thoughts toward more positive energy, this student was able to notice an increase in her vibrational frequency (what she calls "positive energy") and then spread that energy by sharing it with those around her.

A person who does yoga is not just transforming their physical body; by focusing the mind on our own body, our own patterns of thinking, our connections to the outside world, we can reevaluate our role in the interconnected world. This entire process of self-reflection then provides an impetus to make changes as necessary. Jillian Ford Carter makes a similar claim, writing,

Yoga practice and womanist thought help create portals to other ways of knowing, which are essential tools for contradicting embodied oppression. We develop a consciousness about the value of our inner truths by learning to turn inward. Embodied self-awareness allows us to step outside powerful hegemonic systems that, along with normative prescriptions, include se-

ductive methods to make us believe that the status quo is impermeable. (2016, p. 31)

Like Carter, we believe that turning inward through body awareness is an essential part of addressing oppression in the outer world. Many yoga scholars make a similar point, emphasizing that yoga's extension of compassion to the outer world is required, not optional. Horton claims that yoga will allow us to focus on social justice as a necessity. She writes, "We recognize that humanity collectively faces intertwined social, political, economic, and environmental crises. And we embrace yoga as a means of engaging with, rather than retreating from, the complexities and problems of the contemporary world" (2016, p. ix). Practicing yoga from a place of interconnectedness and collective wellness means that we must engage with the outside world. Stone makes a similar claim:

Yoga teaches us that as we open to our lives, we open to suffering and pain—not just our own, but the suffering of all beings. Yes, we heal internally; yes, we find more ease in our lives; yes, we are less stressed. But the paradox of practice is that although we feel more free internally, we also become more sensitive to the pain of others. And from there, we begin to take action. If we don't take action, the yoga process is incomplete. (2016, p. 155)

To Stone, to completely practice yoga means to grapple with collective healing—how our healing is always linked to the healing of our community. This could include contending with how we contribute to oppression and marginalization through our actions.

On a micro-scale, participating in yoga can help students to cultivate better relationships. This can benefit classroom interpersonal interactions, as well as the impact that students have on their friends and family. Several students wrote in their wellness activity that they weren't as frustrated with their family and friends after using yoga as a stress-reliever. One student wrote that "First your body will thank you for taking the time to focus your energy and let it heal your pain. Your mind and soul will be at ease, you will have a clear head and open spirit." From this calm mind and open spirit, this student said he was able to "share with others" his feelings of calm.

CONCLUSION

Such concentration and vision can be developed through embodied practices like yoga with social justice as a specific goal. For example, we can invite students to move beyond resignation to social injustices by asking them to use their hour practice to focus on inner healing and then send healing energy out. Claims that “This is the way things are and you can’t change it” can be replaced using creativity to imagine what a healed world could look like while in yogic meditation. This view of a healed world and an impetus to act in ways that support a more healed world come from recognizing interconnections. Instead of resigning to social injustice, they can be inspired to enact social change because they can see the value in simply starting from within and sharing social justice work through everyday action, even using their yoga practice to calm and de-stress and in turn be kinder to those around them. Students, then, do not need to come up with a big idea for social change, but the work they do every day to shift even small actions can have a big impact. As Anzaldúa asserts, “When one person steps into *conocimiento*, the whole of humanity witnesses that step and eventually steps into consciousness” (2015, p. 155). In unison, this work to come into deep awareness of our interconnections can help us to imagine, embody, and enact a world based on collective well-being—a future where everyone can be whole.

Yoga offers an opportunity to come into deep awareness about injustices and our roles in both perpetuating and healing these injustices. The physical (and even the spiritual) practice of yoga is not enough to work toward a healed world. It is up to the yoga practitioner to expand their work on their mats to the outside world. Yoga, though, can help us know where to start.

Teaching WGS has become increasingly complicated as we enter into a new political and social reality. Yet including embodied practices in the classroom can be a useful tool to help students both heal from the everyday trauma of social injustice and work toward collective wellness. Although we focus on yoga in this article, these goals can be achieved through other embodied practices like meditation or Qi Gong. Embodied practices challenge hegemonic views of knowledge to help students understand the reality of social injustice through interconnection. This understanding of interconnection can help students work toward collective

wellness because they are able to recognize their role in both oppression and their ability to contribute to a healed future. Yoga gives students the space to envision and enact this liberated world.

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