Taking Yoga Off our Mat: Approaching Montreal's Yoga Culture With a Critical Lens.

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Abstract

Yoga has evolved into a 'booming' phenomenon, particularly in North America where over thirty million individuals are known to practice, making it a $27 billion industry. The modern form of yoga, as practiced in North America, has drifted away from its traditional roots in order to accommodate the needs, lifestyles, and cultural norms of North Americans. Traditionally, the main reason for practicing yoga is to attain "enlightenment," a way to discontinue the cycle of reincarnation. Modern yoga is now practiced for a diversity of reasons including stress reduction, mental wellness, fitness and weight loss, and in different settings such as prisons, schools, community centres, churches, shopping malls, parks, hospitals and corporate sectors. Although there has been quite a wide range of literature focusing on the philosophy and benefits of yoga, little academic attention focuses on critical reflection of the ways in which the yoga culture has become inaccessible to those who do not fit the dominant and stereotypical image of yoga: thin, flexible, white and wealthy. Data indicates that the dominant narrative in Montreal's yoga culture speaks to a small fraction of society and fails to represent the vibrant diversity in our city. With the use of critical autoethnography, critical ethnography, participatory photography and semi-structured interviews, I document how the intersection of race, class and body type impacts individual and collective yoga practices of seven yoga teachers and practitioners in Montreal. These individuals' shared testimonies and photographs provide a critical lens to understanding modern yoga culture and provides a more diverse and informed standpoint of yoga practitioners in Montreal.

Résumé

Le yoga est devenu un phénomène en plein essor particulièrement en Amérique du Nord où plus 30 millions d'individus pratiquent le yoga, ce qui en fait un secteur de 27 milliards de dollars de chiffre d'affaires. Le yoga, tel que pratiqué en Amérique du Nord s'est éloigné quelque peu de ses origines traditionnelles afin d'accommoder les besoins et modes de vie des nord-américains. Traditionnellement, la principale raison de pratiquer le yoga est d'atteindre l'illumination qui est un moyen d'interrompre le cycle des réincarnations. De nos jours, le yoga est pratiqué pour de multiples raisons, notamment la réduction du stress, la recherche du bien-être mental et la perte de poids dans différents contextes tels que les prisons, écoles, centres communautaires, églises, centres commerciaux, parcs, hôpitaux et entreprises. Bien qu'il y ait eu une littérature abondante se concentrant sur la philosophie et les bienfaits du yoga, il y a eu peu de réflexion critique sur la façon dont le yoga est devenu inaccessible à ceux qui ne correspondent pas à l'image dominante et stéréotypée du yoga : mince avec un corps souple, caucasienne et riche. Mes conclusions démontrent que l'image dominante du yoga à Montréal s'adresse à une petite fraction de la société et ne parvient pas à représenter la diversité de notre ville. Grâce à l'utilisation de l'auto-ethnographie, de l'ethnographie, de la photographie participative et d'entrevues semi-structurées, j'analyse comment l'interaction entre les races, classes sociales et types de corps peuvent avoir un impact sur les pratiques de yoga individuels et collectifs de sept professeurs de yoga et de praticiens à Montréal. Les témoignages et photographies partagées par ces participants apportent un regard critique sur le yoga moderne et un point de vue plus diversifié et informé des praticiens du yoga à Montréal.

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Prologue

At the onset of my MA program in Education and Society, I had intended to inquire into the place of the Nubian history and heritage in Egypt's educational institutions. However, due to the fact that I needed to spend time in Canada to obtain my permanent residency status, I quickly realized that going to Egypt for long periods of time would not be possible just yet. Instead I decided to focus on yoga as a topic in my present geographical location and use it as an opportunity to learn more about Montreal, which was still a relatively new city for me. Coming back from working as an educator in community organizations to the academic world after a few years absence made me realize how important it was to talk about health in an environment where the mind seemed to often be disassociated from the body, where self-care was often neglected. I had also been quite critical of the yoga culture in Montreal for the past few years and decided that I would do my best to contribute to the ongoing discussion on yoga and accessibility, rather than merely talking about issues of social justice in yoga with my circle of friends.

In my early 20s, I embarked on a journey to India to begin a yoga teacher training in Rishikesh, regarded by the West as the unofficial world capital of yoga or also known as "Yoga's Disneyland" (Strauss, 2005). Rishikesh is a small town with about 100,000 inhabitants and located in the Northern part of India. While I was there, I met all sorts of people: young Israeli men who were coming to relax and do drugs after serving the army, groups of Brazilians following a Shaman, young North American hippies looking for a spiritual adventure, people coming to take a break from life-transitions or people who truly believed that their voyage to India would make them enlightened. The town of Rishikesh first became popular in the late 1960s when The Beatles spent months in an ashram with their spiritual master, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, learning about transcendental meditation and writing their album "The White Album" (Pilon, 2014). When I walked over to the "Beatles's ashram" in Rishikesh, I discovered that it was empty and covered with graffiti. I later found out that these acts of vandalism were a visual protest against accusations of monetary fraud

and sexual harassment leveled against the Maharishi. Although I had travelled to other parts of India prior to coming to Rishikesh, upon my arrival there I was confronted with the growing commodification of yoga. There were flocks of Westerners going to India to embark on a spiritual journey or to get their teacher certification (for a much cheaper rate than in North America) and then returning to their countries either to teach or open a studio.

To my surprise, many yoga teacher trainings only lasted one month and the audience attracted to these trainings were a majority non-Indian individuals. Because I felt that the teacher certification was a big business created exclusively to serve tourism, I changed my plans and decided to cancel my search for a yoga teacher training. I took this time to read books about alternative medicine, take care of my body, practice yoga, meditate and give myself some rest after accompanying my mother to hospitals for the past few years.

The time I spent in India was very healing on many levels. I am to this day very grateful for the time I spent there, and for the many wonderful people I met. My time there gave me the discipline to practice yoga and meditation consistently for two years. The return to academia made me realize that during this time, although I had felt a growing sense of confusion because of the fact that all the tourists were white and were living in their bubble, I was on a personal healing journey and did not yet make many links between personal liberation and communal liberation. However, the environment around me made me fully aware that I was another Westerner making a spiritual voyage to India and that this identity was problematic in many ways. I was also aware of the over-romanticization of India that took place amongst the circles of Western spiritual travellers. Sarah Strauss (2005) explains that "yoga has become a way to sell the packaged essence of India to tourists both Indian and foreign" (p. 137). She adds that "when Westerners come to India to learn about a yoga that is now partly a response to, and an appropriation of, Western reductions of yoga, the very reflexivity of the authenticity here can lead to vertigo" (p. 111). Although I stayed in one place for many months, I felt quite disturbed by the fact that there was a significant disconnect between the foreign and local communities, considering the fact that tourists walked around wearing bindis, saris, using Sanskrit words such as "Namaste" to greet each other, and talking

about enlightenment while drinking mango lassis. Although I am not claiming that all foreigners travelling to India are disconnected from the local communities, the fast-food spirituality mentality amongst Westerners in India felt extremely superficial and restricted. I do not want to judge people's personal experiences, nor think that I can assume why these individuals go to India. What mostly surprised me in my many encounters with the yoga communities, whether in India or in Montreal, was the lack of critical thinking, community engagement and political consciousness. I felt as if practicing yoga was a way of replacing any type of activism or civic participation. Some of the popular sayings in the yoga world such as "be the change you wish to see in the world," "visualize prosperity," "the universe may conspire in your favour" often leads to an emphasis on hyper-individualism and may constrict one's ability to extend their inner transformation outwards. Can we truly bring about social change in our societies if we are so preoccupied with changing ourselves that we forget to share the benefits of our yoga practice with those around us? I believe that a spiritual practice such as yoga, coupled with a pragmatic drive to transform all existing political, economic and social inequalities can bring about sustainable and lasting social change.

In no way do I seek to entirely discount the importance and merits of yoga studios or of the yoga culture through my thesis inquiry. Nor do I seek to make any judgments or assumptions about people's individual practices, as I deeply believe in the mental and physical benefits of yoga. In fact, it is because I feel such deep gratitude for what my yoga practice has brought me and because I believe in the potential of yoga communities to bring about social change that I wish to contribute to an ongoing critical analysis of mainstream yoga studios and of the yoga culture as a whole.

Chapter One: Introduction

Personal narrative: Contextualizing my inquiry

I begin this chapter by discussing how and why I began researching the topic of yoga. As a researcher, I establish my own social location and life story to contextualize my inquiry. My mother was an avid practitioner of yoga and first introduced me to yoga at the age of fourteen when we left Uganda to move to France because she was diagnosed with cancer. As I write this introduction, I realize it has been six years since she passed away. My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer a month after we were taken hostage by a group of Interhamwe Hutu Rebels in the Impenetrable Forest bordering Uganda and Rwanda.

Map 1: *Map of Bwindi Impenetrable Park* (Retrieved from http://www.africannaturalheritage.org/bwindi-impenetrable-national-park-uganda/).

After her diagnosis, she committed herself to a daily yoga practice in order to balance the negative effects of her chemotherapy treatments and to make more time to listen to her body. I watched my mother use yoga as a healing tool for her battle against cancer and I firmly believe that her practice and her deep care for her body is what allowed her to live with the disease for 10 years. Her friends, family and doctors often called her "a living miracle." I would curiously watch her practice daily in a little corner of our apartment. Even though I did not always understand what she was doing, I admired her strong dedication to self-care and the discipline she had when it came to practicing yoga.

My discovery of yoga came at a very important time in my life. It was a time when I was going through all the changes of adolescence, living through the difficulties of an unstable home environment, and recovering from and witnessing a series of traumatic experiences. Trauma led me to experience some very uncomfortable physical sensations, which turned my body into a space of fear, constantly activating the fight or flight response. Nevertheless, I excelled in school and extra-curricular activities, and befriended some lovely, honest and supportive friends. I always had a vibrant social life.

Shortly after we were released as hostages, my mother sat me down to teach me the importance of critical thinking. During this time, many people around us kept telling us to leave Uganda to go to a "safer" country. They could not fathom why my mother decided to stay instead of going back to France. My mother explained to me that there was a historical and political context to this attack that could not be ignored. She told me that this attack was a result of tensions within Rwanda that had been aggravated by colonial powers such as Belgium, France, Britain and the US. She wanted me to understand that, rather than subscribing to the pervasive "Africa is dangerous" narrative, I should be aware of the global actions that forced countries like Rwanda into it's current circumstances.

I remember my mother dropping me off to my yoga class every week, the feeling of safety I experienced with my yoga teacher, the comfort that I developed with my own body, and the amount of stress I left behind after each practice. These were some of the first times after the attack that I experienced my body as a completely safe and welcoming place. Eventually, my

body became my home, the only safe place I felt I could go to in the midst of turmoil, a place of safety and infinite space. Yoga also allowed me to succeed in my studies and craft the tools to face life's challenges. I was drawn to yoga because I learned to breathe deeply, to exhale the tension in my shoulders, and to gently feel the oxygen all the way down in my belly. My teacher would only make me do three or four postures during our individual sessions, but I remember that the slowness and deepness of the practice brought me to a place of stillness and silence. It was partly thanks to this practice that I was able to find strength and cultivate positive thinking in the face of adversity. My mother's ineffective hospital treatments discouraged me about the Western medical system. I was beginning to lose faith in medical specialists since they never seemed to look for the root of her sickness and this led my mother to look for alternative remedies and practice yoga. However, when her tumour reached her brain, the doctors pushed her to do a radiotherapy treatment that was extremely destructive to her body and her health began to deteriorate from that moment. The whole experience of witnessing my mother's sickness for so long during my youth was a blessing, because it inspired me to nurture my own body, to be aware of the many flaws of the Western medical system, and to seek alternative health practices.

I arrived in Montreal in 2006 to begin my undergraduate studies. I became involved in activism and social justice, working in community centres with refugees and immigrants. As I became aware of the personal, systemic inequalities and struggles faced by refugees and immigrants in Canada, such as barriers to family reunification, unemployment and discrimination, I realized that the image of "multiculturalism" as represented in Canadian policy was extremely flawed. During this time, I was introduced to a wonderful 84-year-old yoga teacher (who is now 90 years old!), Dr. Madan Bali, with whom I completed my yoga teacher's training in 2010 after returning from my trip from India. He teaches a form of hatha yoga, which he calls the "Bali Method," aimed particularly for people with psychosomatic disorders such as anxiety, asthma, hypertension, insomnia and other chronic issues. Since my training, I have had the privilege to teach in daycares, community centres and yoga studios. My practice of the "Bali Method" allowed me to cultivate a deeper connection with my body. My personal yoga practice allows me to breathe into the parts of my body where I feel frozen and to learn to accept and love

myself just the way I am. I have been able to come into deeper contact with my emotions and my spirituality as a Muslim. Many of the values I have learned through yoga such as acceptance, non-violence, and self-study reflect those that I have also learned through my Muslim faith. I define yoga as a practice to counter the fast-paced modern life, and an instrument to nurture my mind and body in a respectful and holistic manner.

Although I cannot deny the countless benefits and gifts I have received from my yoga practice, I have always felt like I was living a contradiction. Despite my personal commitment to yoga, I experienced a certain frustration with the way in which the modern mainstream yoga has been culturally appropriated and marketed to mainly wealthy, white, able-bodied and thin women. The fact that modern yoga is an activity that can be sold and advertised as an individual "self-help" activity reflects the individualistic tendencies of the Western world, where health is pursued as a solitary rather than collective goal. The discomfort I felt was something I would usually put to the side, but eventually the inconsistency within the culture was too strong for me to stay as active in it as I had been. As I started my graduate studies, I began to engage in more and more discussions with other yoga practitioners who expressed similar sentiments. We would agree that practicing yoga is a fundamental part of our lives, yet it has remained quite a solitary experience, and our need to cultivate a diverse and supportive community were never met in a yoga studio. The capitalist model of consumption has unfortunately transformed much of the yoga culture into a lifestyle which lacks coherence and community and "that is bankrupted by its exclusive consumer classism" (Remski, 2012, p. 110).

I am also an active member of the Naqshbandi Sufi community in Montreal. The Sufi centre was founded in Montreal in 1989, by Shaykh Nazim, a prominent Turkish-Cypriot Sufi Shaykh, former leader of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order, before he passed away this past year. The Naqshbandi-Haqqani order is a spiritual order within Sunni Islam that traces its spiritual lineage to the prophet Muhammad. The way of this Sufi order "consists of working under a guide through practices of Divine remembrance, meditation, and service to others" ("Naqshbandi," n.d.). The Sufi centre is located in Montreal's Mile End neighborhood. It is an intergenerational community centre that brings together Muslims from different parts of the world and from

different social locations to share a communal space of Islamic spirituality and for *dhikr* (the remembrance of God). Much of my inspiration for pursuing this research comes from the values I have learnt from Sufism, such as *shukr* (thankfulness), *salam* (peace), *zakat* (redistribution of wealth), *tawhid* (unity) and *sahaba* (fraternity). My life experiences in this community have played a major role in making me realize that building a community is not just about practicing yoga in the same studio. Rather, building community is about standing up for each other's rights, grieving deaths, celebrating births, redistributing wealth, and sharing food. Most yoga teachers and practitioners I interviewed in Montreal confirmed that they felt a sense of loneliness in their yoga practice and that their respective yoga studios were not the places where they sought to fulfill their need of cultivating a supportive community. In this highly individualistic culture, should yoga communities, yoga studios and yoga festivals not seek to create and cultivate a sense of solidarity across cultures and social locations? Unfortunately, if we look closely at the marketing of yoga in North America, it is evident that yoga studios usually create an environment that marginalizes people of colour, those with bigger bodies and those coming from low socio-economic classes (Lawrence, 2013).

As somebody who has benefited on mental, physical, emotional and spiritual levels from my yoga practice, I recognize the various historical contexts of these teachings. Most importantly, I recognize that these teachings are not new and that they have healed individuals for thousands of years. As a yoga teacher, I also acknowledge that there are many things I do not know about the history of the yoga practice. Thus, I have done my best to try to capture and give justice to the long and ancient lineage of yoga in this research.

Although the modern yoga practice in North America mostly takes place in yoga studios, it is also practiced in community-based centres, people's homes, prisons, schools, shopping malls, health centres and hospitals. Despite the fact that several of the participants I interviewed either teach and/or practice in their homes, in community centres and/or health care institutions, they have all had a significant interaction with yoga studios and it is those studios and the politics of these studios that they have found problematic. Although it is impossible to generalize what characterizes a yoga studio, my interviews, research, and personal practice have led me to note

that many yoga studios situated within North America are a reflection of neoliberalism and a reflection of the commercialization of yoga that tend to efface social relations of power and to promote a certain level of political apathy (Horton, 2012). Although some yoga studios may teach select aspects of the yoga philosophy during yoga classes, or even practice chanting and meditation, for the most part it is the physical practice that is emphasized in mainstream North American yoga studios (Strauss, 2005).

Yoga and health

Being a yoga practitioner and/or teacher in North America is more often than not equated with being healthy. To be healthy means to be balanced, to have equal parts of physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being. Strauss (2005) explains that "moderation in all things is the best way to achieve this balance. Without health one lacks the basic equipment required for self-reliance; one cannot make choices independent of the desires and abilities of others" (p.71). Yoga has played a transformative role in many people's lives, whether it be in terms of stress-reduction, healing physical ailments, living with chronic illnesses, dealing with trauma and improving day to day relationships (Chaoul & Cohen, 2010). Yoga is considered to be one of the modalities of "holistic healing" which signifies

> …healing of the *whole* person…in holistic health the curative and preventive aspects are combined so that the same techniques are used for healing as well as for preventing new disease and maintaining good health….health, defined holistically, is that state of being in which a person's body, mind and spirit are in tune with the natural and social environments, as well as with the cosmos (Mattson, 1977, p. 1).

In her PhD thesis *Life in a Body: Counter Hegemonic Understandings of Violence, Oppression, Healing and Embodiment among South Asian Women,* Batacharya (2010) references Shadrakant Shah's (1998) citation of the 1948 World Health Organization definition of health as "A complete state of physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of illness" (Shah, 1998, p. 2). Shah (1998) adds that

> Determinants of health are more than biological. Health, therefore, involves more than just bodily integrity; it encompasses social and political concerns and the relationship of

> individuals to the environment in which they live. From this perspective, health is not just the responsibility of the traditional "health care" sector, but of all sectors, institutions and organizations that may influence the well-being of individuals and communities (Shah, 1998, p. 2).

Thus, if taking the above definition as the definition of health in the context of this inquiry, it can be argued that yoga studios as well as the yoga culture are also responsible for their member's health, especially because these spaces are major proponents of holistic health and wellbeing. As Batacharya (2010) explains, in any field of knowledge production, "health promotion and public health research and policy are subject to social relations of power" (p. 37).

In the past few decades, yoga has been praised by North Americans for its mental and physical health benefits. Many studies have shown yoga's positive effects on stress-related diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, depression, anxiety and mood swings (Iyengar, 2001). A recent study published in the Indian Journal of Community Medicine reveals yoga's positive effects on stress-related diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, asthma, depression, anxiety, and mood swings (Taneja, 2004). The practice has also been extremely beneficial to individuals recovering from trauma (Thompson, 2014). Iyengar (2001) attributes these benefits to the fact that the regular practice of postures "....relax the body and mind, allowing both to recover from fatigue or weakness and the stresses of daily life. Asanas (postures) also boost metabolism, lymphatic circulation, and hormonal secretions, and bring about a chemical balance in the body" (p. 17).

In literal terms, the word 'yoga' comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning 'to yoke.' It also means union. Yoga is one of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy. According to Iyengar (2001), the path of yoga was "collated, coordinated and systematized by Patanjali in his classical work, the Yoga Sutras, which consists of 185 terse aphorisms" (p. 19). Patanjali's Yoga Sutras dates back to the period 200 BC to AD 200 and "is considered to be the master text for "classical" yoga" (Strauss, 2005, p. 3). In this text, Patanjali proposes eight steps to be followed on the path of yoga: yama (abstentions), niyama (ethical observances), Āsana (postures), prāṇāyāma (breath extension), pratyāhāra (sensory withdrawal), dhāraṇā (concentration),

dhyāna (meditation), samādhi (meditative absorption) (Iyengar, 2001).

For the purpose of this study, I am particularly interested in and inspired by the tenet of non-violence (ahimsa) in the abstentions (yamas) and in the tenet of self-study (svādhyāya) in the ethical observances (niyamas). Iyengar (1966) defines ahimsa as a concept that is more "…than a negative command not to kill, for it has a wider positive meaning, love. This love embraces all creation for we are all children of the same Father- the Lord" (p. 14). This principle also calls yoga practitioners to practice justice, recognizing that all creatures have the same right to live. Non-violence also means wanting for our brothers and sisters what we want for ourselves.
Iyengar (1966) defines self-study (svādhyāya) as a form of education that sparks awareness of the relationships an individual has with himself and with those around him. I am particularly interested in these tenets because I truly believe that striving for non-violence means striving to dismantle oppressive forces such as classism, racism, and sizeism. Understanding our role in either diminishing or perpetuating these negative forces comes with self-inquiry. These two precepts guide my inquiry because they are helpful in explicating the potential of the yoga practice to promote a sense of activism and justice.

Research questions

My personal insight coupled with the experience of seven yoga teachers and practitioners in Montreal are positioned as an entry point for this critical pedagogy analysis. In my inquiry, I aim to interrogate these three questions:

1. Are the different forms of oppression in our society reflected in Montreal's yoga culture?
2. What do seven yoga teachers and practitioners think about the current demographic of yoga teachers and practitioners in yoga studios? Do they think there is an equal representation of race, culture, body-type and socio-economic background in the yoga communities?
3. What do they believe are the largest hurdles impeding the development of accessible, socially and politically responsible yoga communities in Montreal? And what concrete steps can be taken to cultivate healthier, more inclusive and diverse yoga communities?

Definition of Terms

Before proceeding, I will briefly outline some key terminology employed in my research. **Yoga** is a term that has come to have multiple meanings in North America. It is a physical practice, a spiritual practice, a culture, a community, and a way of life. In North America, the word yoga is most often associated with the physical aspect of the practice, although this is only a small percentage of the yoga philosophy. In his book *Yoga Body: The origins of Modern Practice*, Mark Singleton (2010) argues that "the Indian tradition shows no evidence for the kind of posture-based practices that dominate transnational Anglophone yoga today" (p. 25). It is almost impossible to give one singular definition of modern yoga, however I think that it is important that as a critical autoethnographer I define what yoga means to me. I experience the yoga practice as a way of stilling the mind and allowing the body to regenerate and nourish itself. When I went on my trip to India, I approached yoga as a spiritual practice. Now I also use yoga as a tool to be in harmony with myself, which in turn allows me to contribute to society in meaningful ways. In the data analysis chapter, I will also be exploring what the word yoga means to the participants I interviewed.

Mainstream yoga studios refers to spaces which sell yoga and/or meditation classes, self-help tools, yoga teacher's trainings, yoga attire, "exotic" Indian objects, new age spirituality books and self-discovery adventures to tropical paradises (Remski, 2012).

Yoga space is a term I use to refer to a physical space where yoga is offered and practiced. This can be in a park, a public area, a hospital, or a community centre.

Modern postural yoga refers to "the leading transnational form of yoga and focuses on *asana* (postures) and *pranayama* (yogic breathing) and usually occurs in a sessional or classroom environment" (Graham, 2012, p. 6). The term yoga as it is used and practiced in North America today usually refers to modern postural yoga. There are a variety of types of yoga offered, from partner yoga to hip-hop yoga, but for the purpose of this inquiry, I am focusing on *hot yoga, ashtanga yoga,* and *hatha yoga*. *Hot yoga* is a style of yoga that is practiced in a hot room. *Ashtanga yoga* means eight limbs of yoga in Sasnkrit, and refers to Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga. *Ashtanga yoga* is a form of yoga that was popularized in the 1940s by yoga teacher K.

Pattabhi Jois. It is a vigorous and intensive style of practice. *Hatha yoga* is derived from the sanskrit word *ha,* meaning sun, and *tha,* meaning moon, and refers to the physical aspect of yoga.

Community-based yoga studios are studios that serve multiple purposes that integrate other activities other than yoga classes. For example, they may have soup kitchens, family programming, a community garden, workshops around social justice issues, etc. Community-based yoga studios also have sliding-scale fees for those who may not have the means to afford a yoga class or any other activity.

Personal Narratives are a powerful form of resistance because they are a pathway for individuals to counter the dominant discourse that imposes norm of who can fit within the structures of the yoga culture. Attarian (2003) describes personal narratives as "reflexive and interpretive tools to explore the historicity of self and its actions, and to reflect on constructions of identity and agency" (p. 23). Thus, through personal narratives, individuals can make sense of their experiences and shape their social realities.

Commodification in the context of yoga is defined by De Michelis (2008) as "the proliferation of 'yoga goods' and media; the growth of commercially run yoga studios and retreats; the registration (carried out or attempted) of yoga patents, trade marks and copyrights" (p. 25). In recent years, the registration and certification of yoga instructors has also become one of the main markers of commodification in the modern yoga culture (Graham, 2012).

Agency is a term I use to indicate the capacity of humans to determine their lives in an environment of unequal social relations. Drawing on Ratcliffe (2004), I also understand agency as "meaningful social action of an individual or collective nature" (p. 7).

Power, privilege and oppression are vital terms that need to be understood in the context of this inquiry, especially because they are often invisible in society and in the yoga culture. I chose to group these three terms together because in order to resist systems of oppression, we must also acknowledge issues of power and privilege. Privilege and power are closely related since privilege is a dynamic whereby certain identities, whether racial or social, have power over others, leading to the creation of social hierarchies (Razack, 1998). Thus, individual voices or groups that do not fit within the dominant norm are marginalized and silenced. Systems of

oppression are an integral part of North American society and culture that have been shaped over time in specific political, economic and social contexts (Dei, 2005). These systems are manifested in political, educational and cultural sectors of society (Razack, 1998). Critical race theorist Razack (1998) argues that each one of us "is implicated in systems of oppression that profoundly structure our understanding of one another" (Razack, 1998, p.10). In the context of this study, recognizing oppression means confronting systems of power and privilege on an ongoing basis within the yoga culture.

Diversity is a term I use throughout my inquiry to explicate the importance of fostering yoga spaces where power relations and internalized oppression are recognized in the process of learning about each other's differences (Dei, 2005, p. 141).

Inclusive yoga studio, space or culture refers is a place where the experiences of racism, classism, sexism and abilism are recognized, condemned and eradicated. Drawing on Henry et al. (2000), I define the creation of an inclusive yoga culture as concrete actions whereby yoga studios, yoga spaces and yoga publications respond to the needs and concerns of *all* bodies and voices at the intersection of race, class, ability, sexual orientation and body-size, on and off the yoga mat.

Purpose of my inquiry

Through the use of critical autoethnography and ethnography, this study explores the ways in which systemic oppressions are reflected in Montreal's yoga culture. I begin this exploration from the standpoint of my own experience and that of yoga teachers and practitioners in Montreal. Through a critical pedagogy framework, this thesis attempts to outline the disjuncture between practitioner's personal practice and the culture surrounding their practice. My hope is to contribute to a more grounded and diverse perspective of yoga teachers and/or practitioners in Montreal who are often erased or silenced in the mainstream marketing of yoga. By grounded I refer to a more accurate and fair representation of yoga teachers and practitioners. Along with my own lived experiences, I aim to examine the perceptions of seven yoga teachers, practitioners and/or studio owners regarding the culture of yoga in Montreal. I want to be clear that although participants share experiences about their personal practice, I focus on the *culture* of yoga in Montreal, rather than an analysis of individual practices. In defining the modern yoga

culture, I draw on Horton (2012) who explains that this culture is "a modern invention with ancient roots, a fitness fad with spiritual sustenance, a $6 billion 'industry' with non-material values" (Horton, 2012, p. 2). Usually, this culture consists of yoga practitioners who are North American or Western European and "whose interests lie mostly in self-help books and asana instruction" (Remski, 2012, p.113). Modern yoga culture exists as "a consumer product, purveyed in commercial spaces with high overheads that necessitate competition between studios, lineages, and teachers" (Remski, 2012, p. 123). Participants attest to experiencing tremendous benefits from their yoga practice, but do not always necessarily feel supported by an inclusive and coherent culture. The individuals' testimonies address issues of accessibility and diversity in Montreal's yoga studios. I hope that these personal narratives may not only provide a critical lens to the yoga culture in Montreal, but also challenge racism, capitalism, ableism, sizeism and privilege within this culture. I believe that the yoga practice has a great potential for fostering social engagement that can enrich cross-cultural relationships and community building. It is also my hope that this inquiry can give examples of how oppression can be countered and how community and solidarity can be cultivated in spaces where racism, classism and ableism are often unexamined. When discussing issues of accessibility and systemic oppressions in the yoga culture, I also refer to the dominant image of yoga practitioners as marketed by yoga studios, journals and festivals.

To counter the dominant images and narratives that accompany them, I examine the stories of two yoga practitioners and five yoga teachers to honour their diversity, struggles and solidarity. Considering the current demographic within mainstream yoga studios in Montreal, I challenge racism, classism and unrealistic beauty standards, but also aim to broaden the horizons and perspectives on what it means to be a yoga practitioner and/or teacher in Montreal in 2014. My intention is also to contribute to knowledge that is meaningful beyond academia and to develop solidarity across differences through critical thinking and dialogue. One of the ways that I attempt to make this knowledge more accessible is by drawing on critical autoethnography, which allows me to write using a personal voice, and moving away from the scientific traditional forms of academic writing (Foley, 2002).

I am convinced that both critical thinking and dialogue within yoga communities can inspire the necessary actions to reduce systemic oppressions that exist within that culture. I understand critical thinking as a tool that allows individuals to develop the autonomy to prevent knowledge imposition and as a means to critique "the validity of forms of knowledge and social structures" (Mejia, 2004, p. 64). Moreover, critical thinking is a tool to dismantle and challenge oppressive practices (Razack, 1998). When discussing the need to reinvent teaching practices, hooks explains that dialogue is an essential step for individuals "to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing and a host of other differences (hooks, 1994, p. 130).

In my inquiry, I aim to explore how critical pedagogy and yoga intersect and support each other. I hope that my inquiry is valuable to the learning community as a whole and particularly to yoga studios in Montreal. My research at the local level can inspire teachers to integrate diversity and anti-racist trainings as well as discuss ethical responsibilities in teacher training programs. Racism, classism and other forms of oppression are global realities (hooks, 2003). I believe we all have a responsibility to counter these oppressions in one form or another. Since yoga has become so widespread, I believe all yoga teachers and practitioners need to consider questions about how yoga can improve our relation to one another and create more equitable learning communities. For example, what are yoga teacher's responsibilities towards their students? Can yoga be used as a tool to dismantle systemic oppressions to bring about critical thinking, political and social healing and engagement? If so, how?

I also believe that a critical analysis of the yoga culture in Montreal can eventually break down barriers between and among practitioners from diverse social locations and also make space for those who do not conform to the dominant and stereotypical image of North American yoga: thin, white and flexible (Murphy, 2014). To accomplish these aims, I use tools of autoethnographic and ethnographic research such as semi-structured interviews, participatory photography and a reflective journal to explore issues surrounding yoga, healing, diversity and accessibility. The personal narratives of the participants I interviewed can contribute to countering the dominant narratives within the yoga culture and equalizing the power imbalance

within the various Montreal yoga communities.

Situating modern yoga in North America

> "And today, largely thanks to modern advertising, cross-legged yoga postures have become powerful and universally recognized signifiers of relaxation, self-control, self-cultivation, a balanced lifestyle, good health, fitness, and spiritual urban cool." (Singleton, 2010, p. 25)

The more time I have spent reading literature, blogs, essays and articles on modern yoga throughout the course of my research, the more I have asked myself: what is yoga exactly? Is it exercise? A way of life? Is it sacred? Is it a business? Can it be copyrighted? Commodified? My process of reflection has resulted in confusion in how to situate modern yoga, but has also brought about a realization that there is no general consensus around the meaning of modern yoga and the practice cannot be homogenized. Because the practice of yoga is such an experiential activity, it cannot be accurately described with the use of words. Thus, it is much easier to define the yoga culture. There is no general consensus around the meaning of modern yoga as it is an evolving and manifold practice, with a multiplicity of definitions and interpretations, "rather than of a single yoga that we would seek to define and circumscribe" (Singleton &Byrne, 2008, p. 5). In this section I provide a working definition of modern yoga, and I attempt to map out modern yoga in North America as it exists today. I acknowledge the fact that I am not able to discuss the entirety of modern yoga as it exists today. Nevertheless, I believe that the information I provide can be sufficient to help the reader in better understanding the modern evolution of yoga.

In her book *A History of modern yoga*, Elizabeth De Michelis (2005) defines modern yoga as:

> a technical term to refer to certain types of yoga that evolved mainly through the interaction of Western individuals interested in Indian religions and a number of more or less Westernized Indians over the last 150 years. It may therefore be defined as the graft of a Western branch onto the Indian tree of yoga. Most of the yoga currently practiced and taught in the West, as well as some contemporary Indian yoga, falls into this category. Being only one and a half centuries old, it may well be the youngest

> branch of the tree of yoga, and it seems to be the only one to have stretched across the oceans to continents other than Asia. The definition 'modern' seems precise enough to describe its age (it emerged in modern times) and geographico/cultural spread (it is preeminently found in developed countries and urban milieus world-wide). (p. 2)

Newcombe (2009) adds that the use of the word 'modern' indicates that modern yoga is "significantly more privatized, commodified and medicalized than pre-modern manifestations of yoga" (p. 988). The popularity of yoga amongst Western cultures (Europe and the Americas) can be attributed to the fact that yoga promised both medical well-being based on scientific facts, along with the fact that an emphasis was mostly placed on the 'spiritual' rather than religious aspect of yoga, which allowed many individuals to use yoga "as a supplement to existing religious affiliations" (Newcombe, 2009, p. 988). The growing interest in yoga and New Age movements in general can also be attributed to the fact that traditional religious beliefs were not as appealing to Western industrialized societies, who became increasingly interested in inner spirituality and self-reflection (Rindfleish, 2006).

The arrival of yoga in North America also means that the practice has woven itself "into the powerful currents of materialism, instrumentalism, and consumerism that dominate North American culture…" (Horton, 2012, p. ix). Several yoga purists argue that modern yoga is not yoga because of the ways it has incorporated North American values such as celebration of body-image, consumerism, a focus on the physical rewards, and stimulation of the practice (Walker, 2012). A purist would argue that yoga "is about transcending attachments, stilling the mind, withdrawing the senses from the world around us, and attaining to a deeply personal realization of God beyond the manifest realm with all of its snares and illusions" (Walker, 2012, p. 7). Finally, a yoga purist would also argue that the yoga practice must be guided by an accomplished Guru (teacher), "who has mastered not only the physical practice, but also the deeper spiritual essence of enlightened liberation from ignorance and ego" (Walker, 2012, p. 7). Whereas teachers such as Vivekananda explained that the goal of yoga was to attain self-realization, it is impossible to group all manifestations of modern yoga into one single goal.

It is worth noting that the relevant literature concerning modern yoga in North America

comes mostly from Western scholars and there is very little academic literature on modern yoga from non-Western authors. I do not wish to make a generalization on why this lack of scholarship is the case, but drawing on Rose (1992), one could argue that Eurocentric forms of knowledge are generally presumed to be superior than all other ways of knowing, whereas South Asian literature and voices are overlooked. Drawing on the cultural appropriation of Native American spirituality in North America, Rose (1992) refers to the marginalization of Native American voices on Native American spirituality as "the matrix of contemporary Eurocentric domination," (p.406) whereby "non-Indians hold the view that they know more about Indians than do Indians themselves" (p.406). Similarly, it can be argued that non-South Asians may inherently believe that they know more about yoga than South Asians do. This phenomenon does not mean that there has been absolutely no discussion around these topics coming from people of colour, because I know from my own experiences that people of colour do have these discussions. However, they happen mostly in non-formal learning contexts, such as online, on blogs, and in workshops. Roopa Singh founded the network for South Asian American Perspectives on Yoga in America (SAAPYA) in 2013 with the goal of restoring yoga's South Asian heritage. The network currently exists as an online platform, but SAAPYA also facilitates workshops, civic events and panels across the United States to address race, access, commodification and cultural appropriation in the North American yoga industry. By amplifying South Asian voices in yoga, SAAPYA's mandate is to

> provide South Asian led cultural awareness workshops, trainings, and panels to increase best practices around integration of South Asian cultural production and theology in yoga studios, yoga publications, and yoga accreditation bodies. Key goals of SAAPYA are to revise the perception that yoga is an exclusive practice; to intervene in a largely segregated yoga environment; to ensure that yoga remains a resource for all bodies, all races, all classes and identities. Integration at SAAPYA is a practice of sharing stories, including journalism and academic narratives focused on transparency in the yoga industry in America. At heart, SAAPYA is about sustaining yoga through the core value of integration at all levels, from within the body to within the civic sphere (Singh, n.d.,

para. 1).

Singh explains that by featuring silenced voices and fueling "strategic discussion towards a more integrated society" (Singh, 2014, para.8), SAAPYA attempts to counter the post-colonial whitewashing of yoga by creating avenues for the South Asian diaspora to share their thoughts regarding the yoga practice and its evolution in North America (Singh, 2014).

Modern yoga is in constant evolution and there has been a growing number of informal learning initiatives which are highly critical of the current mainstream yoga culture. There is hope for a more politically, ethically and socially conscious yoga culture if initiatives such as SAAPYA continue and are brought to the forefront of the dominant discourse.

The Marketing of Yoga in Montreal

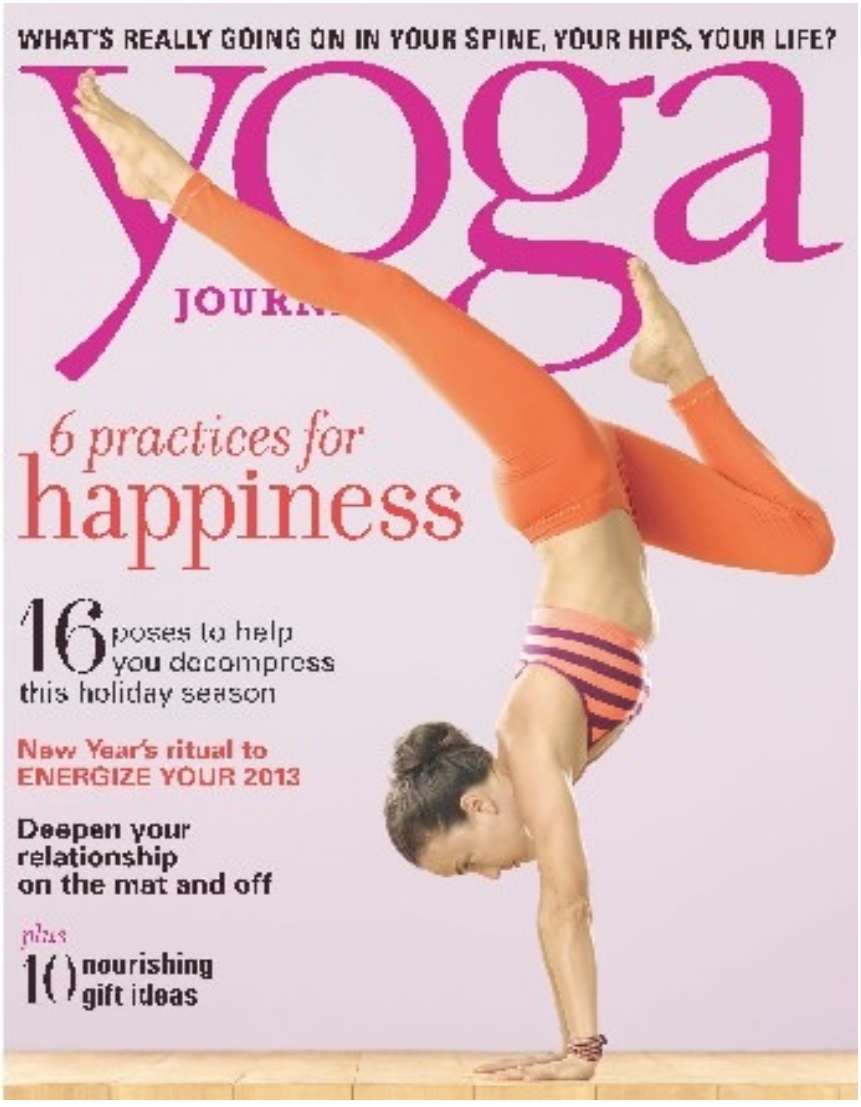
The marketing of yoga in Montreal is also indicative of the lack of representation of people of color, people with different abilities and body sizes (Lawrence, 2013). To support this argument, I include photos I retrieved from two of Montreal's most popular and mainstream yoga studios, Moksha Yoga and Bikram Yoga. The following images demonstrate that the yoga body is being advertised as White, slim and flexible. I recognize that not all yoga studios in Montreal necessarily engage with perpetuating this dominant ideal of what women's bodies should look like. However, I choose to show the following images because they come from popular mainstream yoga studios. Although I have no statistics to support my claim, my online research of yoga studios has confirmed that these types of images are displayed on most yoga studio websites.

Photograph 1. *Yoga at Wanderlust yoga studio* (Retrieved from http://montreal.wanderlustyoga.com/en/classes/acroyoga/)

Photograph 2. *Bikram yoga Montreal* (Retrieved from

https://www.facebook.com/bikramyogamontreal.bym)

Similarly, the marketing of yoga in the United States is geared towards the attainment of beauty, rather than for the attainment of physical, spiritual and mental health (Klein, 2012). This element reflects the dominant North American cultural standards of beauty that permeate almost all aspects of society (Klein, 2012). If one takes the time to flip through the multitude of yoga magazines or the yoga photographs exposed on studio websites, it is clear that the visual yoga culture mirrors the dominant culture in terms of beauty standards and very little diversity is found in terms of size, age, physical abilities and race (Klein, 2012).



Photograph 3. *Big photo: Tiffany Cruikshank on the cover of Yoga Journal* (Roth, 2012).

This imposed ideal for what a "yoga body" should look like is a clear reflection of the many–*isms,* whether it be racism, ableim, ageism, or sizeism ,that permeate other sectors of North American society. Some yoga teachers believe that images similar to the one shown on the *Yoga Journal* cover may actually inspire individuals to practice. For example, Kathryn Budig, an avid defender of modeling yoga postures wearing just "yoga socks," argues that her intention is "to inspire and show the beauty of a body that practices regular yoga to get people back on their mats" (Boccio, 2012, p. 48). What Budig seems to be saying here is that the means used to advertise the yoga practice are ways to celebrate the body. Thus, "celebrating the body", a concept commonly talked about in contemporary yoga culture. Which "body" is being celebrated? If we truly want to celebrate the human body, should we not celebrate *all* bodies, regardless of age, shape, size and colour? In his piece *Questioning the Body Beautiful*, Boccio (2012) asks if it is surprising that "90 percent of all junior and senior high school girls are on a diet, while only 15 percent of these girls are actually overweight? Or that 90 percent of American women report disliking their bodies?" (p. 49). Given the toxic messages women and girls receive daily from media outlets, these statistics are unfortunately quite predictable.

There is also a significant economic factor that pushes yoga studios and advertisements to sell the physical practice of yoga as a practice equated with looking good. After all, if it were not for the media-anointed standards of "the body beautiful" (Boccio, 2012, p. 49), yoga studios, corporations and their investors would probably not be selling as many yoga classes or yoga accessories such as mats, towels, clothing and water bottles.

Melanie Klein (2012), a yoga teacher, activist and co-editor of the forthcoming book *Yoga and Body Image: 25 Stories About Beauty, Bravery and Loving Your Body*, who came to yoga with the aim to overcome longstanding body image issues she had battled with since a teenager, explains that

> the community that had previously provided me with self-acceptance began to increasingly reflect the mainstream culture from which I sought solace…The relentless focus on weight loss and the advertisement of diet pills has no place in yoga. It runs counter to cultivating the unique quality of the practice that fosters healthy minds and

> bodies, which is what yoga is about. It changes the quality of yoga and detracts from yoga's true power to transform from within. Without that certain quality of mind, it's not yoga. Yoga becomes reduced to just another form of working out, a means to an end. Yoga is more than just a pretty face and slim body in a designer yoga outfit (Klein, 2012, p. 42).

Similar to the paradox between the yoga practice and the yoga culture, the marketing of "the body beautiful" and the modern yoga culture's promise for increased well-being and inner peace is a paradox. Many practitioners come to yoga to escape the dominant conceptions of physical attractiveness, but are then in a space that spreads the exact same toxic messages. How can individuals be expected to cultivate a healthy relationship with their bodies in this type of environment? Klein (2012) argues that "It's unfortunate – yoga practice and yoga culture are not the same thing" (p. 42). Boccio (2012) explicates that "contemporary yoga culture is marked by a widespread refusal to "see" troubling issues generated by cultural standards- thin, toned, light- skinned, conventionally pretty young women with gymnastic-like skills in particular" (p.47), which in turn makes makes contemporary yoga "a willing accomplice" (Boccio, 2012, p. 50) of the capitalist model of consumerism.

Navigating this inquiry: Chapter summaries

Although most of the academic literature surrounding yoga involves physical health, mental health and weight loss, there is an emerging body of research presenting the Western transformation of yoga on political, societal, cultural and economic levels. In particular, Mark Singleton, Carol Horton, and Sarah Strauss – who identify as Yoga Scholars – inform alot of the literature on modern yoga presented in this inquiry. In my thesis, I draw primarily upon American and Canadian literature.

I have divided this thesis into five chapters. Chapter one situated my inquiry and personal journey into yoga.

In chapter two, I discuss the theoretical framework and background of my inquiry. I use critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework to confront the yoga culture's dominant narrative of health, wellness and the notion of yoga community as a monolithic concept.

In chapter three, I present the *Methodology and Methods*, discuss the research context, and describe my role and positioning as a researcher. I provide background information about each participant, discuss the ethical issues, and present my tools of inquiry.

In chapter four, *Data and Analysis*, I present the results determined through my analysis of interviews with yoga teachers and/or practitioners, as well as with the photographs some of these participants produced. I discuss four key themes: *(*1) Yoga as a tool for holistic health, (2) Health as beauty: The yoga body; (3) Yoga culture: A site for colour-blindness and the reproduction of White privilege; and (4) Corporate consumerism as a barrier to inclusive communities.

In chapter five*, Reflective Understandings,* I present an overview of the key themes that emerged throughout the inquiry. I also take the opportunity to discuss the limitations, implications and suggest future directions for further inquiries.

In the next chapter, *Theoretical Framework and Background of Inquiry,* I discuss my theoretical framework of critical pedagogy and draw upon the relevant literature in order to depict the development of modern yoga in North America.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Background of Inquiry

> When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two- that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other. (hooks, 1994, p. 61)

Theories shape the ways we view, make meaning of, and walk through the world. Any effort at social change requires that theory be put into practice. Throughout the course of my inquiry, I came across several theories that changed the way I perceived the yoga culture in North America. Paulo Freire (2007), bell hooks (1994) and Giroux's (2012) work around critical pedagogy resonates deeply with me and encourages me to look at the yoga culture with a more critical lens. This pedagogy also allowed me to see more clearly the existing seeds of domination within the yoga culture, while at the same time offering ways to challenge them "through resistance, critique and social action" (Darder et al, 2003, p. 14). In this chapter, I present my theoretical framework for this inquiry and also critically examine the relevant literature around the development of modern yoga. I focus on the four following main themes when examining the relevant literature: *(1) Canada: A post-racial society? (2) The project of British colonialism in India and its contribution to modern yoga in North America; (3) Yoga is a political act: Building inclusive communities in a capitalist society; (4) Spiritual materialism: The new age legacy.*

Deconstructing and re-constructing the culture of modern yoga through critical pedagogy

> "Without an understanding of how responses to subordinate groups are socially organized to sustain existing power arrangements, we cannot hope either to communicate across social hierarchies or to work to eliminate them"(Razack, 1998, p. 8).

There are a number of theories which could be used to analyze the culture of yoga. I choose critical pedagogy as my frame of analysis, as I believe this theory encourages us to critically reflect on the world, as well as on what Paulo Freire referred to as our "vocation"- "to be truly humanized social (cultural) agents in the world" (Darder et al, 2003, p. 11). I believe that such a theoretical approach can bring about a deeper analysis of the ways social hierarchies circulate within the yoga culture, whether in the marketing and commodification of yoga, or in the teaching and learning

dynamic between yoga teachers and students.

Before continuing onto the next part of this chapter, I offer a definition of critical pedagogy. Henry Giroux (2012) asserts that Paulo Freire is one of the most important educators of the twentieth century and defines critical pedagogy as

> An educational movement guided by both passion and principle to help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, empower the imagination, connect knowledge and truth to power, and learn how to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for agency, justice and democracy (p. 116).

The main goal of critical pedagogy is to use education and critical thinking as an emancipatory tool in order to transform oppressive forces in society. Because of its potential to become a project of both individual and social transformation (Giroux, 2012), I draw on critical pedagogy to guide my inquiry and answer my research questions.

Critical pedagogy encourages individuals who are disenfranchised from political, economic and social possibilities to recognize and identify unequal social stratifications in society based on race, class and gender (Freire, 2007). Freire (2007) is an advocate for critical pedagogy's potential to help us develop critical consciousness and advocate for the rights of the oppressed. Freire (2007) explains that only the oppressed can understand the need for liberation because they are the ones who are victims of a perpetual unjust status quo. Therefore, the use of critical pedagogy has the potential to bring about freedom and enlarge the scope of human possibilities. In this way, oppressive institutions and social relations can be transformed into just ones, and social critique can eventually lead to social change (Giroux, 2012). The project of critical pedagogy begins with:

> Recognizing the political forces and relations of power at work in educational contexts and how these forces must be confronted…Central to such a pedagogy is the relationship between authority and power, teaching and the struggle over agency, and social responsibility and its relationship to broader public issues (Giroux, 2012, p. 121)

Razack (1998), a critical race theorist, argues that relations between dominant and subordinate groups cannot be unmarked without history and social context. In fact,

understanding social relations of power is key in any attempt to dismantle unjust relations of power. Drawing on Henry et al. (2000), I use the term power relations to stress the importance of recognizing the impact of economic, social and political inequalities between groups in society (p.38). This, critical pedagogy is useful in attempting to explicate the reasons why the mainstream yoga culture in Montreal is largely associated with white, privileged, and able-bodied individuals. In order to bring forth any meaningful and sustainable change within Montreal's yoga communities and culture, individuals need to think critically and challenge their environments by having reflective dialogues amongst themselves about the ways in which these elements perpetuate systemic inequalities. There are many ways in which people live their yoga, whether it is through cultivating healthy relationships or being aware of one's ecological choices (Remski, 2012). These ways go beyond physical postures and have the potential to translate into activism, generosity, self-awareness, environmental awareness and awareness of others. By capturing the oral and photographic testimonies of five yoga teachers and two yoga practitioners from diverse backgrounds that intersect with culture, race, and social location, I aim to demonstrate that the marketing of North America's yoga culture primarily caters to affluent, and able-bodied white women (Lawrence, 2013).

There are two concepts that make up the crux of critical pedagogy; dialogue and praxis. Dialogue is used as a form of educational strategy "that centres on the development of critical social consciousness, or what Freire termed "conscientização*" (*Dander et al, 2003, p. 15). Freire (2007) defines critical social consciousness as the process of "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35). He believes that it is through dialogue that the concept of critical social consciousness can come to life. Freire (2007) explains that dialogue is "an existential necessity" (p. 88), a time when practitioners reflect on "the world that is to be transformed and humanized..." (p. 89). Dialogue requires that formal learning spaces are used as a means to encourage reflection and action. bell hooks, a prominent scholar in critical pedagogy and author of *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003), addresses the importance of praxis and its role in "creating critical educational arenas which dismantle and build community across racial, ethnic, gender, class and national lines"

(hooks, 2003, p. 22). Her analysis of Freire's critical pedagogy is extremely useful in terms of thinking about the yoga culture and yoga communities. In the same way that critical pedagogy advocates for the importance of critical social consciousness, one of the tenets of the yoga philosophy, svādhyāya calls for the necessity to engage in self-reflection (Iyengar, 2001). Svādhyāya also points to the importance of approaching one's daily life with a sense of awareness and consciousness (Iyengar, 2001). Consciousness is a word commonly used in the yoga practice and yoga culture, but in that particular context, consciousness is often dissociated from an awareness of social realities, the ways we are affected by them, and our contribution in shaping these realities (Scofield, 2012). The practice of yoga can and should be about more than one's physical practice on the mat. The current belief amongst mainstream yoga practitioners that the practices of yoga and meditation bring about a more peaceful world erases the potential for critical self-reflection and radical social change (Scofield, 2012).

As a researcher using critical pedagogy to guide my inquiry, I approach my work and inquiry with the understanding that personal relationships are informed by unbalanced power relations and that society functions on problematic social divisions, including but not limited to, race, gender, disability, class and immigration status (Dei, 2005). These societal power relations exist in large institutions such as universities, but also in yoga studios, where they may be unexamined and hidden since the conversation around power, privilege and social inequalities is often pushed aside and replaced with individual goals of physical and mental wellbeing and spiritual transcendence, which may not in any way result in any form of ethical or political consciousness. Scofield (2012) argues that, "spiritual practice alone is inadequate to inform people about the pressing social challenges of the day" (p. 135). He continues to say that:

> Marshal Rosenberg warns that privatized, mind/body centered methods such as yoga or meditation may lead people to be so calm and accepting and loving that they tolerate dangerous structures. While some spiritual practices may be viewed as subversive or radical because they provide an alternative to the fast-paced nature of the dominant culture, it's important to understand that they can also be consciously or unconsciously used to support the status quo. Engaging in meditation or yoga is no guarantee of

> distancing oneself from the values, morals or institutions that shape the surrounding society (p. 135).

Scofield's argument begs the question: does cultivating inner states of peace on a yoga mat automatically bring about social justice in society or inspire practitioners to challenge the status quo? Is yoga politically subversive? A critical pedagogical framework assumes that without personal and collective critical reflection, individuals cannot be aware of the privileges they may hold, and how this could in fact contribute to abusive and unjust behaviours (hooks, 2003). The integration of the practice of yoga into the U.S. military to address Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or to increase concentration proves the point that yoga is not always politically subversive and is in fact being practiced by individuals who do not seem to critically reflect on the larger damaging systems to which they belong or, more importantly, change their destructive military behaviours (Scofield, 2012, p. 139).

Like any theory, critical pedagogy has its shortfalls. Critical race scholars such as Ellsworth (1989), Crenshaw (1995), Razack (1998) and Ladson-Billings (1989) critique the liberal and neo- liberal discourses embedded within critical pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1989) argues that the shortcomings of critical pedagogy are that it "creates and perpetuates repressive myths" (p. 128) because of its inability to adequately address the question of race due to its emphasis on social inequalities as they exist class and culture (Ladson-Billings, 1989). Additionally, critical pedagogy has also been criticized for its assumption that rhetorical positioning can lead to positive educational outcomes (Dillabough, 2002). Scholars such as Crenshaw (1995) advocate for critical race theory because of its capacity to bring about radical change. She explains that the main pursuits of critical race scholars are "to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of colour have been created and maintained in America" (p. xiii) and more importantly to change "...the vexed bond between law and racial power" (p. xiii). Theoretical knowledge does not necessarily lead to action or political engagement. Several feminist scholars and working-class educators have accused critical pedagogues of using inaccessible theoretical language that "ultimately functioned to create a new form of oppression, rather than to liberate those who historically had found themselves at

the margins of classical intellectual discourse" (Darder et al, 2003, p. 17).

Canada: A Post-Racial Society?

The analysis of Montreal's yoga culture would be incomplete without an analysis of literature on racism in Canada as it is useful in thinking about the ways in which the yoga world mirrors the racism in Canada's society. Henry et al. (2010) define racism as:

> a system in which one group of people exercises power over another group on the basis of skin colour; an implicit or explicit set of beliefs, erroneous assumptions, and actions based on an ideology of the inherent superiority of one racial group over another, and evident in organizational or institutional structures and programs as well as in individual thought or behavior patterns (p.409).

Canada is often celebrated as an anti-racist and multicultural state. This myth that Canadian society is a uniquely tolerant society free of racism is a narrative that has permeated all sectors of Canadian society, including the yoga culture (Nelson, 2004). Nelson (2004) argues that the idea of a racism-free Canada is detrimental to the experiences, stories, and feelings of Indigenous communities and racialized individuals. As Austin (2013) demonstrates throughout his book "Fear of a Black Nation," it is necessary to lift the fog obscuring Canadian racism. Austin (2013) draws on the historic Congress of Black writers, organized in 1968 at McGill University by the West Indian students of McGill, Sir George Williams universities, and members of the city's Black community as the "wake-up call for Whites in Canada who had become comfortably self-satisfied as they read and watched accounts of racial discrimination in the United States, secure in their belief that *those* problems did not exist in Canada" (p.26). Furthermore Charmaine Nelson (2004) argues that the racism faced by racialized and indigenous individuals is often faced with denial by White Canadians. In her book "Racism, Eh? A Critical Interdisciplinary Anthology of Race and Racism in Canada," Nelson (2004) draws from a survey conducted in 1993 to outline this state of denial:

> 72% of Canadians believe that different ethnic and racial groups should try to adapt to Canadian society; the majority of Canadians believe that there is less or a "lot less" racism in Canada than in the United States, 68% of Canadians agree or strongly agree

that “one of the best things about Canada is our acceptance of people from all races and backgrounds” (p.2).

Although the majority of Canadians may view themselves as accepting and tolerant, a study conducted in Montreal in 2012 by the *Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse* indicates that racialized immigrants experience the highest rates of unemployment in Quebec (Eid, 2012, p.7).. Between 2001 and 2006, 20.8% of racialized immigrants faced unemployment in comparison to 17% for non-racialized immigrants and 3% for non-immigrants (Eid, 2012, p.9). The statistics around access to employment in Quebec clearly demonstrates that discrimination of racialized individuals is a daily reality. Despite the evidence of this study, racial inequality in Canada continues to be silenced (Nelson, 2004). Although similar statistics do not exist within the yoga culture, several yoga teachers and practitioners recognize the role of the yoga industry's tendency to marginalize the experience of racialized (Lawrence, 2013). A survey conducted in 1998 in the United States by medical doctors on nationwide use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) (Champ, 2014). The survey participants were divided into two categories: White (76.6%) and Non-White (23.4%) (IAYT 2006). According to Champ (2014), the fact that this survey grouped all non-White individuals into one category demonstrates that “detailed categories of race or ethnicity do not seem important enough to report.” A more recent national health survey carried out in 2008 demonstrated that in the United States, 85% of yoga practitioners are white and 6% are African American (Birdee et al., 2008, p. 1655). Although there is very little data on the current racial demographics of yoga practitioners in North America, the evidence of racial exclusion within this culture is easy to identify. As Lawrence (2013) argues, the yoga industry’s “racial narrowness-if not outright exclusivity- is plain to see” (para.2). This exclusion is seen either through the absence of people of colour, people of lower socio-economic classes, and people with full figured bodies in yoga studios, yoga magazines, advertisements, or even through incidents where the appropriation of Black culture is normalized and used as a marketing tool (Lawrence, 2013). Lawrence (2013) describes this phenomenon clearly when he recalls the incident that took place at the Power of Om Yoga Studio in Santa Barbara, when the studio decided to hold a “Ghetto Fabulous Yoga Class.” Throughout the course of my own

experience navigating yoga spaces, studios and yoga related events in Montreal, I have always wondered why a place of learning would be so devoid of people of color and reflect only a small percentage of society. Why do so many individuals feel a sense of discomfort in these spaces? Are the yoga studios in Montreal promoting individualism by promoting individual health and wellbeing? What ethical guidelines are in place for teachers and studios to follow?

The legacy of British colonialism in India and its contribution to modern yoga

> Americans have a very short historical memory. Most don't know about a lot about the history of yoga, except vaguely that it came from India. When you say 'yoga,' many people just flash on this image of a white, thin beautiful woman in some pretzel-like pose. But now there's a backlash. People feel oppressed by the image; it's become so ubiquitous (Horton cited in Walton, 2014, para. 7).

Similar to Horton's (2014) statement, my experience in Montreal's yoga circles has shown me that amongst the majority of yoga practitioners, there is very little detailed contextualized and historical knowledge surrounding yoga. Most yoga practitioners are familiar with the famous yoga teachers and gurus, such as "Patanjali," "Sivananda," and "Iyengar," but know little about the forces of British colonialism in India and its influence on modern yoga. The dominant narrative in modern yoga culture is that yoga is a 5,000 year old practice originating in the Indian subcontinent of the Indus Valley, designed to bring balance and health to the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of the individual through the use of postures, meditation and breathing. Academic texts around yoga history are quite heterogenous and often contradictory. Although I do not aim to analyze the history and origins of yoga in detail, as this could be a whole inquiry in itself, I offer the reader a brief overview of the history of yoga, its link to British colonialism in India, and the ways in which orientalism developed into the growth of modern yoga in the Western world.

In order to understand colonialism, I draw on Smith (1993), who defines colonialism as a process that facilitated the imperial expansion of European powers "…by ensuring that there was European control, which necessarily meant securing and subjugating the indigenous populations" (p. 21). She describes imperialism as "…a mode through which the new states of

Europe could expand their economies, through which new ideas and discoveries could be made and harnessed, and through which Europeans could develop their sense of Europeanness" (p. 22). The concepts of colonialism and imperialism have an important role in explicating the arrival of yoga in North America and ultimately determine the various facets of the contemporary yoga culture.

In order to have an appreciative understanding of yoga's arrival to North America, it is indispensible to consider the legacy of British colonialism in India, as this was " central to the story of yoga's modern development. The British had been a strong presence in India since the mid-1600s, achieving partial rule in 1757 and political domination in 1858" (Horton, 2013, p. 22). Therefore, the Westernization of yoga is not a recent phenomenon. It is evident that the presence of British imperial powers in India since the mid-1600s transformed the way yoga is practiced contemporarily. Taking a more critical stance on the history and culture of modern yoga can provide evidence that yoga is in fact a hybrid product of colonial and post-colonial globalization (Singleton, 2010).

In 1858, after French dominance in India dissipated, the expansion of British power in India became significant. At the onset of Great Britain's imperialist cultural project, India was regarded as its largest and most important colony (Cohn, 1996). All of the European colonizing forces used similar tactics in order to gain control of their colonies, and amongst these tactics were the use of racist and orientalist narratives that played a big role in justifying Great Britain's presence in India. Those narratives created "a social, cultural, political and religious hierarchy with European Christians on top, and Indian 'heathens' at the bottom" (Heather, n.d.). Horton (2013) explains that as a colonial and imperial power, the British proclaimed

> the superiority of Western civilization while denouncing the barbarism of India. The ruling colonial mentality was rooted in such self-serving oppositions as the enlightened truth of Christianity versus the false idolatry of Hinduism, the light of Western reason versus the darkness of Indian superstition, and the dynamism of Western thought versus the stagnation of Indian tradition (p. 56).

The project of British imperialism was not just about raw materials and resources, but also

included the colonization of knowledge that the British used to reconstruct and transform knowledge of "cultural forms in society" (Dirks, 1996, p. 3). In his book, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Cohn explains that, "the cultural effects of colonialism have too often been ignored or displaced into the inevitable logic of modernization and world capitalism…" (Cohn, 1996, p. 3). Smith (1999) adds that in the context of imperialism, "…the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices" (Smith, 1999, p. 3). When imperial powers discovered indigenous forms of knowledge, "they were regarded a 'new discoveries' by Western science. These discoveries were commodified as property belonging to the cultural archive and body of knowledge of the West" (Smith, 1993, p. 61).

The modern yoga practice was brought from India to North America by a series of Indian and Western yoga teachers during the 1800s, however Swami Vivekananda is historically known by yogic and academic circles as the one who lay down "the philosophical groundwork for modern yoga, as well as generating a seminal wave of interest in it, both in India and the US" (Horton, 2013, p. 57). Vivekananda was an upper-caste, English speaking and charismatic lecturer who is known for being the first yoga teacher to leave India to go to America to spread the physical, philosophical and spiritual teachings of yoga in the West. He felt that although America was a place of material and technological abundance, it was spiritually impoverished. (Newcombe, 2009, p. 988). Vivekananda made an appearance at the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions in Chicago. This appearance remains a historical and significant moment for the development of 'modern yoga', and turned Vivekananda into an ideological leader and "a major authority on Indian religions." His public appearance in Chicago reinforced the idea of India as "the idealized spiritual centre" and "he had simplified Vedanta thought to a few teachings that were accessible and irresistible to Westerners, foremost being that "all souls are potentially divine" (Newcombe, 2009, p. 988). His prescription for life was simple and perfectly American: "work and worship"(Bardach, 2011). Vivekandanda's foundational text *Raja Yoga* was based on Patañjali'sastanga yoga (eight limbs of yoga) and provides guidelines to be followed as part of the yogic path (De Michelis, 2008). De Michelis explains that this book "represents

Vivekananda's attempt to understand and interpret the Classical Yoga of Patanjali and a selection of *hatha yoga* teachings on the basis of the beliefs that he shared with his cultic milieu followers" (p. 150). Today, Vivekananda remains a popular and revered figure in the West and is known as "the Father" of modern yoga and Indian nationalism..."(Horton, 2013, p. 56).

Several Western orientalist scholars became interested in 'researching' Eastern spiritual practices and "worked alongside upper caste Indian intelligentsia in developing analyses and accounts of Hinduism and yoga" (Graham, 2012, p. 53).

That well-known Westerners, such as Henry Thoreau, also happened to self-identify as yoga practitioners contributed to Modern yoga's expansion both in India and in North America (De Michelis, 2005). Until that time period, yoga had always been perceived as part of the exotic and other culture, "a phenomenon observed, studied and reported about in third person…" (De Michelis, 2005, p. 3), and not as a practice Westerners felt they could be a part of (De Michelis, 2005). In fact, Newcombe (2009) argues that in "the British colonial imagination, yogis (practitioners of yoga) were first associated with 'immoral' Tantrics, 'Thuggee' gangs and militant wandering ascetics" (Newcombe, 2009, p. 988). It was thanks to teachers such as Swami Vivekananda that yoga was positively perceived in the West, and he was the first Indian whose texts and lectures were read in English worldwide (Newcombe, 2009).

Although it is common to hear contemporary yoga teachers and practitioners talk about ancient and traditional forms of yoga in their yoga classes, yoga teachers such as Mark Singleton argue that the way we practice yoga today is radically different from how it was practiced in India 5,000 years ago (Singleton, 2010). Singleton and Byrne (2008) explain that

> …In its dissemination in the Western world, yoga has undergone radical transformation in response to the differing worldviews, logical predispositions, and aspirations of modern audiences. Such new kinds of "export yoga," it also seems evident, were the result of a reframing of practices and belief frameworks within India itself over the last century-and-a-half, in response to encounters with modernity and the West. Modern, popular yogas in and out of India bear the clear traces of this dialectic exchange (p. 4).

Horton explains that the Western view where Patanjali, who wrote the foundational text of the 'Yoga Sutras', is the main founder of yoga is actually a false assumption that needs to be questioned. She explains that although that the 'Sutras' are "the most iconic text in yoga today" (Horton, 2012, p.22), the ways in which yoga is practiced and understood in North America are increasingly moving away from Patanjali's philosophies (Horton, 2012).

Another major contribution to yoga's popularity took place in the 1990's, as a result of the "medicalization" of yoga, meaning that its scientific benefits in terms of health was approved and validated from Western medical establishments (De Michelis, 2008). In many of the North American yoga communities, there is a general consensus that yoga is 5,000 years old. However, the history of yoga is much more complex than what is usually understood in the mainstream yoga culture.

Yoga IS a political act: Building inclusive communities in capitalist driven yoga studios

> There are real structural challenges to yoga community: the commercial model, the transient population of students, the collusion of vacation and retreat, practice sequences as commercial products, and asana as a therapeutic that plateaus in its effectiveness at the three-year mark for most practitioners. (Remski, 2012, p. 115)

It is impossible to discuss the evolution of modern yoga without discussing its relation to capitalism. Similarly to Remski (2012), I have always questioned the notion of yoga community, or at least I have always felt that the way most commercial yoga studios were structured and run could not possibly provide a sense of community to its members in the ways that I myself understand or experience community on a daily basis. In the yoga context, it has become a nebulous world that is thrown around repeatedly and so we can easily lose its meaning. Over the years, I have looked around for definitions to understand what certain yoga studios mean by cultivating community, but never found an answer. What I know is that in most yoga studios, festivals and workshops I've attended, I've never really felt part of the yoga community. Maybe I wasn't open to being a part of it. I'm not sure. I acknowledge that there are many ways to imagine and experience community, and once again this largely depends on one's experiences and social locations in the world.

As a Muslim-identified woman who is part of a Sufi community in Montreal, my definition of community is inextricably linked to social justice and consciousness. I conceive and experience community as a structure where poor and rich, young and old, African, Arab and Quebecois come together in the name of Divine remembrance and service to others. Members within the community take turns to cook in order to ensure that food is always provided when the community comes together for prayer, or any other event. Individuals greet each other as they come in and out and always check up on each other and each other's families. If a community member's relative passes away, all members come together to bring food to the family of the deceased and bring any kind of financial support if needed, even if they have never met the deceased. The same goes for marriage, birth, divorce and any other type of major life transition. Of course, this community is far from perfect: electricity bills are not always paid on time, there have been weeks where nobody has cooked food. However, there is a certain financial balance that is created through each member's contribution to that community. It is definitely not a place where community leaders can make any sort of financial profit, but throughout the years and despite financial instability, the community continues to exist, to grow, and to share with its members. What drives the specific functioning is Islam, and it is the precepts of Islam around *sadaqa* (generosity).

There is also a very important tenet in Islam that I believe allows this type of mosque to be sustained financially: *zakat*. *Zakat* is the third pillar of Islam and the term's literal definition is a type of "growth, extension and purification" (Mohammad, 1991) that acts as a process of taxation and redistribution. The goal of *zaka*t is to bring about distributional equity within communities. Wealthier community members are expected to contribute more and this contribution is used as resource redistribution for the poor. As the Prophet Muhammad once said, "the best charity is that which is practiced by a wealthy person. And start giving first to your dependents" (Bukhārī, n.d., para. 24). It is in light of these teachings that I try to direct the actions of my daily life. My experience of community since my arrival in Montreal comes from this little Sufi centre, which is why I often question what commercial yoga studios mean when on their websites they use terms such as "providing community" or "acting as a conscious

community."

As I mentioned in chapter one, yoga is taught in a variety of places, and the practice does not limit itself to yoga studios. However, for the purpose of this inquiry, I am specifically focusing on the culture and politics of yoga studios. I believe that a yoga studio or any other place where yoga is taught is a space where knowledge is transmitted, in the sense that a teacher is usually giving knowledge to a large group of students. This knowledge can be purely based around physiological concepts, but can also include knowledge around yoga philosophy and yogic texts considered sacred. Many critical theorists argue that all forms of education are political. When discussing Freire's critical pedagogy, Shor (1993) argues that politics exists in the ways teacher-student relationship are constructed, and the ways in which the syllabus is developed. Who does it include and who does it leave out? Who choses the content of the class? He says that:

> 'Education is politics' suggests that the entire school experience has political qualities and consequences…Underlying Freire's definition of education as politics is a critique of domination and a commitment to challenge inequality and injustice. From a democratic point of view, Freire sees society controlled by an élite which imposes its culture and values as the standard. (Shor, 1993, p. 27)

Giroux (2012) argues that culture and politics inform each other and that "Freire recognized that it was through the complex production of experience within multilayered registers of power and culture that people recognized, narrated, and transformed their place in the world" (p. 122). Yoga studios are now deeply embedded in North American culture and represent the commercial expression of the practice of yoga. In most mainstream yoga studios, yoga teachers and studios are providers and yoga practitioners have become consumers, serving a larger corporate interest (Remski, 2012). The model for yoga in North America as it is practiced in many yoga studios is a model of consumption that follows the path of capitalism (Graham, 2012). How can we build inclusive communities in spaces where cultural appropriation prevails and where the utilized marketing tools exclude a large portion of the population? Can practicing in a space that is filled with cultural appropriation and excludes such

a large portion of the population truly benefit the body, mind and soul? Can we reach a state of freedom and enlightenment by buying an unlimited monthly yoga pass and being ignorant of the injustices and oppression that exist in the world? I believe that the first step in building inclusive communities which 'act consciously,' there must be dialogue amongst studio owners, practitioners and teachers around issues such as cultural appropriation, sizeism, racism, ageism and classism.

The mainstream form of yoga has become a commodity (De Michelis, 2008). Marx defines commodity "as an object with a use-value and an exchange-value, which may not be equivalent, embedded in relations of production and consumption" (Graham, 2012, p. 6). I use the following definition as my foundation in understanding how yoga has become embedded in a process of production and consumption. In her inquiry on commodification of modern yoga, Graham (2012) explains that yoga had always been part of a process of production and consumption, whether it was "militarized *Hatha* yogins who controlled trade routes in Northern India from the fifteenth century until the early nineteenth and yogic renouncers begging alms while practicing ascetic poses were a common presence in public spaces" (Graham, 2012, p. 7). Thus, the focus should be on the degree of commodification of the yoga practice, which De Michelis (2008) describes as "…an unprecedented phenomena that did not and could not happen in the same way in pre modern contexts" (p. 25). Here she is referring to forms of commodification "characteristic of global capitalism and postmodern consumer societies" (De Michelis, 2008, p. 25). This commodification includes "the proliferation of 'yoga goods' and media; the growth of commercially run yoga activities such as yoga studios and retreats; the registration (carried out or attempted) of yoga patents, trade marks, and copyrights" (De Michelis, 2008, p. 25). There is also the business of yoga teacher trainings, which most yoga studios rely on to pay their rent, and yoga clothing, which is more often than not marketed by the famous Canadian brand Lululemon. In most cases modern yoga has become a market-based spiritual enterprise that often serves to reinforce dominant and destructive societal structures. In *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1987), Shor & Freire said:

This is a great discovery, education is politics! When a teacher discovers that he or she is

> a politician, too, the teacher has to ask, what kind of politics am I doing in the classroom? That is, in favor of whom am I being a teacher?...The teacher works in favor of something and against something. Because of that she or he will have another great question, How to be consistent in my teaching practice with my political choice? I cannot proclaim my liberating dream and in the next day be authoritarian in my relationships with the students. (p. 46)

Should yoga be perceived by its adepts as separate from politics and social responsibility, and used as a way to retreat from those elements? I do not believe so. Although adepts of yoga will often adhere to the philosophy that practicing detachment is more important that practicing judgment, this belief can lead to an understanding that yoga is separate from politics, when in fact it can be used as a tool to engage and better comprehend the realities of our world. When talking about education, and the social responsibility that comes with it, Giroux (2012) argues that:

> Responsibility should not entail a retreat from politics but a serious embrace of what it means to both think and act politics as part of a democratic project in which pedagogy becomes a primary consideration for enabling the formative culture and agents that make democratization possible (p. 121).

Given the climate of hyper-individualism and materialism present within the yoga culture, it is clear that yoga studios would need some significant structural changes to bring about any sort of inclusivity. I don't think I can define or impose my vision of community on others, but I don't believe inclusive and diverse communities can be fostered if profit is at the forefront of every yoga studio's agenda.

The era of spiritual materialism: The new age legacy

> It appals us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations (Linda Smith, 1999, p. 1).

Since the origins of yoga can be traced back to India, it is considered to be a form of

indigenous knowledge (Batacharya, 2010). What is clear is that yoga is now a big part of the *New Age* spiritual movement and, since its arrival in North America, North Americans are likely to have taken over the direction of yoga, transforming it into what I have referred to throughout the inquiry as "modern yoga." If we are to look at *New Age* spirituality, it is impossible to disregard the power relations inherent in that movement, since this movement was built by assimilating other cultures and is largely constructed by Euro-centric ways of being (Batacharya, 2010). The term *New Age* is used to refer to a movement that emerged in the 1980s. Aldred (2000) offers the following definition, explaining that:

> Its adherents ascribe to an eclectic amalgam of beliefs and practices, often hybridized from various cultures. New Agers tend to focus on what they refer to as personal transformation and spiritual growth. Many of them envision a literal New Age, which is described as a period of massive change in the future when people will live in harmony ,with nature and each other. Only in this New Age will they realize the full extent of human potential, including spiritual growth, the development of psychic abilities, and optimum physical health through alternative healing (p. 330).

The *New Age* movement is not a tight-knit and cohesive movement directed by organized leaders or with a set of precepts, but instead is a term that applies "to a heterogenous collection of philosophies and practices" (Aldred, 2000, p. 330). These philosophies and practices include, but are not limited to: shamanism, goddess worship, Eastern religions, crystals, angel worship, Native American spirituality, extraterrestrials and channeling spirit beings (Aldred, 2000). Furthermore, Aldred argues that the New Age movement is primarily a consumerist movement since the majority of its members "participate primarily through the purchase of texts and products targeted for the New Age market" (Adler, 2000, p. 331).

The trajectory of New Age knowledge production provides an important example of how Western cultural dominance, appropriations and reinterpretations of Indigenous epistemologies are rarely acknowledged or critically reflected upon (Batacharya, 2010). Because of the fact that New Age movements borrow so many of their bodies of knowledge from Indigenous traditions, it is relevant to draw the link between New Age knowledge production and cultural

appropriation. Cultural appropriation is a term that has been understood and discussed by Indigenous scholars as "forms of violence integral to racism and colonialism" (Batacharya, 2010, p.91). For example, Kadi (1996) defines cultural appropriation as follows:

> Culture includes any and all aspects of a community that provide its life force, including art, music, spirituality, food, philosophy and history. To "appropriate" means taking possession of specific aspects of someone else's culture in unethical, oppressive ways (p. 116).

I agree with Dei et al. (2000), who write:

> This body of knowledge is diverse and complex given the histories, cultures, and lived realities of people….Indigenous knowledges are emerging again in the present day as a response to the growing awareness that the world's subordinated peoples and their values have been marginalized – *that their past and present experiences have been flooded out* by the rise in influence of Western industrial capital. (p. 6)

A similarity can be drawn between yoga and the North American new age commercialization of Native American spiritual practices, which demonstrates that the world's various spiritual traditions are now public property that can be used for financial profit. These cultural appropriations often have larger societal implications that are at times erased in the name of a "higher purpose." For example, practices such as yoga tend to circulate unequally, and although the wellbeing of body, mind and spirit are encouraged, social relations are often neglected. According to Rindfleish (2005), "Together with increasing secularization, consumerism and the needs of the market have become dominant ideologies in Western culture" (p. 344). The new age spirituality movements are often reflections of knowledge being colonized and re-appropriated. In the case of yoga, this creates a diluted version of yoga that may be offensive to those who strictly adhere to the practice as a way of life and look to the teachings as sacred elements in their lives. As I have browsed through several North American yoga studio websites and magazines, I have come to the realization that many of the narratives do not seem to acknowledge yoga's complex historical trajectory.

In this chapter I presented the major tenets of critical pedagogy that is the foundational theory for my inquiry. I demonstrated the ways in which this theory is helpful in analyzing the yoga culture and yoga communities. I examined the major scholarly literature related to my inquiry. In Chapter 3, I discuss critical autoethnography and critical ethnography as methodologies and present the different frameworks I used to pursue this research.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

I begin this methodology and methods chapter by describing my use of critical autoethnography critical ethnography, and the research context of this inquiry. I explore how autoethnography, critical ethnography, narrative analysis and participatory photography can bring about an ethical and reflexive inquiry into questions of diversity and accessibility in Montreal's yoga culture. As I explained in the introductory chapter of this research, I aim to document how the intersection of race, class and body type impacts the individual and collective yoga practice of seven yoga teachers and/or practitioners in Montreal. My aim of collecting and presenting these qualitative semi-structured interviews and photographs is to counter the marketed image of yoga by providing a more diverse standpoint of yoga practitioners in Montreal. I then discuss my role and positioning as a researcher. I introduce the participants and discuss the ethical considerations of this inquiry. I end this chapter by describing my methods, data-collection and analysis throughout the course of this inquiry. The excerpts below are an example of my semi-structured interviews with participants.

Sarah: *Do you feel implicated in one of Montreal's yoga communities?*

Rhonda: *So the first thing I think should say that this whole notion of yoga communities is still really sounding awkward to me. Because if you've told me what do you envision the yoga community to be, I would think it was a space, with a whole bunch of people living together, in a certain space, not necessarily in the same house but in a certain way, that their lives were guided by the philosophy of yoga. I dont imagine a yoga community as just something that exists in the broader context of all this craziness. It's weird but in my head every time you say it, I keep thinking ah I wish I knew where this yoga community she keeps talking about [is], it sounds like an awesome place! Maybe it's just some kind of crazy, exhaustive ideal I have in my head of what it would be. But for me it's such a whole lifestyle that when I think about a community, a yoga community, somehow, I think of it as separate from the way that I usually go day to day. It's hard to imagine the kind of experience that I have of academia and running around and doing all the things I do at the same time thinking of myself as in a yoga community.*

Roseanne: *Yes, I co-founded an organization called Yoga Community Montreal (YOCOMO), which has a grand vision, which admittedly we don't always live up to. It has a lofty vision. But the reality, in terms of connecting communities, giving people a voice, being supportive and stuff doesn't always happen but our main project is organizing an annual yoga festival, which serves to provide a weekend to ideally unite the different communities, and sub-communities, and styles, studios, lineages and teachers in Montreal on neutral ground for one weekend of practice and celebration. I think a lot about community, and particularly around that project, because it's still very young, there's only been two editions of the festival, and YOCOMO as an entity has only been around for three years, and we're not quite serving our grandiose lofty vision, mainly because of logistical reasons, and trying to understand the communities that are happening here. Part of the reason why I was involved in starting that project was because I didn't know what was happening in Montreal, I was blogging on 'It's All Yoga Baby', and I was writing about stuff that was happening all over the place, but I didn't know what was happening in my city. I had the Anusara community that I practiced with and I appreciated their vision of community, but I found it very insular, and it's very white and very middle-class, and I didn't always relate to people in my classes, and with the other practitioners. It's very homogenous. But I was drawn to the practice. So that was my community, so things felt very fragmented. I went to a yoga festival in Toronto in 2010 and it was amazing, it was not-commercial, organized by a team of passionate practitioners. I did a blog post about it, and people said, let's do the same thing in Montreal. I'm not really a starter or a person who's a maker, I'm more of a writer and observer. So the mission of YOCOMO and of the festival was to understand what's happening in the city, because there had not been any gathering of practitioners from different communities. My perspective was that things tended to be almost cliquey. And there was also a huge language division. The French studios were in one place and the English studios in another. So the YOCOMO project was inspired by curiosity and wanting to know.*

Elena: *No, it doesn't matter, I'm not looking for community. Not here, maybe in India but not here. I met a lot of people in vipassana (a meditation practice) and that environment is*

different. I do feel that I belong to vipassana much more than to the yoga world.

These excerpts from the interviews I conducted indicate that each participant embraces a different perception and definition of the concept of "yoga community." Roseanne seems to be the most involved in Montreal's yoga communities, whereas Elena does not feel she can satisfy her need for community in the yoga world and Rhonda questions the meaning of a "yoga community." Her yoga experience whether in gyms or in mainstream yoga studios seems to be conflictual with her definition of community. Her excerpt suggests that yoga can either be an individual or a communal experience depending on whether individuals can relate to the yoga culture or to those around them. Each interview took a different conversational course. For example, Rhonda's utterances led us to discuss in more detail the actual meaning of a "yoga community," which then led me to reflect more thoroughly on the definition of community from a critical standpoint of social change. What exactly do people mean when using the term "yoga community?" As a researcher who sees the world through a critical lens, I believe that a community that promotes physical, spiritual and mental wellbeing should provide a support system to each of its members. I believe that a community should also engage in a movement to bridge social divisions such as race, class and body image, especially if these divisions exist within that particular yoga culture. Rhonda's statement about yoga communities relates to the fact that her experience of the commercial yoga model cannot possibly give her a sense of belonging to a tight-knit community. She explains that the mainstream yoga studio models have an industry feel to them and therefore there is a lack of contact between students, as well as between teachers and students.

How can discussions for social change take place in such a context? Undeniably, there are also many yoga studios that do not adopt an industry-based model, and where critical and progressive conversations can and do take place. Drawing on Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy, bell hooks explains that one way to build community in the context of the classroom is "to recognize the value of each individual voice" (hooks, 1994, p. 40). Can this type of community building take place in the context of a North American consumer culture, where the focus in mainstream yoga studios is mostly on the body-beautiful and therapeutic culture?
In thinking about community in the yoga context, I would like to draw on DeFilippis et al.'s

(2010) definition of community as described in their book *Contesting Community*:

> the places of daily life in which people are housed, fed, care for each other, and raise children. They are the sites of daily convenience shopping, and the other activities that sustain us. However, these activities are not carried out by an abstract community but through a complex interaction of state services, community-based nonprofit organizations, private sector companies, and voluntary and informal processes. The forces that shape these activities often come from outside the community, either with state policies and related services or through the private market. The interaction of the external forces and the basic needs that are provided locally is the central tension that makes community a place in which interests and power are shaped, and in which important social, economic, and political conflicts occur. In a basic way, communities are the sites where people are prepared and supported to enter into the wider marketplace of capitalism in whatever class position they find themselves. Marxists refer to this as social reproduction, and communities are the sites of conflict around these issues and the tensions they create. (p. 16).

When talking about yoga communities, it is necessary to also discuss the wider marketplace of capitalism in which they exist. After all, more and more yoga studios are adopting capitalist business model or are becoming franchises, which more often than not value individual over communal wellbeing, and consumerism over ethics (Horton, 2012).

When I began my master's program at McGill, yoga became essential to counter the fast-paced and demanding environment of academia, which I had been away from for more than two years. Through academia, I was exposed to critical thinking and encouraged to be aware of the ways in which my own identities and social location affect the manner in which I view the world, politics and those around me. These two worlds may seem contradictory, but I have come to realize that they complete each other. They may seem contradictory in the sense that yoga philosophy encourages one to move away from a locations "thinking" mind in order to become a silent witness of the world. On the other hand, academia encourages individuals to use their minds, to reflect on theories, and to have the knowledge to critically understand the self and others and to be engaged in society.

Data collection process and data sources

During the data collection process, I had the opportunity to participate in two yoga workshops in Montreal yoga studios and in one online course. The first workshop in August 2013 was held at a small yoga studio in St. Henri and entitled "Sacred Justice." The second workshop entitled "Embodying Community," was held in a popular yoga studio in the Mile End and presented by a Toronto-based yoga teacher named Matthew Remski. The five month online course in which I participated is entitled "Beyond Duality: Yoga and Social Justice."

As a teacher, I had the opportunity to teach 16 workshops in a high school for teenage mothers and two classes a week in a small local yoga studio located at the heart of downtown Montreal. Due to financial difficulties, the latter had to close down in March 2014. My experience as a yoga teacher and practitioner informed my research as I kept a journal of my experiences and observations in these spaces.

Critical autoethnography: Situating myself within the yoga culture

> The experiences in your life, both past and present, and who you are as a unique individual, will lead you to certain questions about the world and certain problems related to why things are the way they are. It is important to honor your own personal history and the knowledge you have accumulated up to this point, as well as the intuition of instincts that draw you toward a particular direction, question, problem or topic-understanding that you may not always know exactly why or how you are being drawn in that direction (Madison, 2012, p.21).

Critical autoethnography is a 21st century research methodology used by researchers as a tool of self-reflection to examine the researcher's personal experience and the ways in which the latter informs wider cultural, political and social meanings and understandings (Ellis, 2004). Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography in this way:

> "Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationships to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: first they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they

look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition" (p.38).

Critical autoethnography is a process whereby researchers are invested in the politics of positionality in order to "acknowledge the inevitable privileges they experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for their subjective lenses through reflexivity" (Boylorn et al, 2013, p.15). The results produced in this inquiry stem from my own experiences and personal encounters within Montreal's yoga culture. These experiences are relevant in order to further examine what Ellis and Bochner (2000) call "self-other interactions" (p.740). This research process allowed me to create connections between my own life story and the socio-cultural context of Montreal's yoga culture. I used my lived experiences as a framework from which to approach my research process and my understanding of how oppressions are reproduced in the context of yoga. Although I recognize that this inquiry is viewed from my lens and is thus inherently biased, it allows me to draw on what Church (1995) calls my "inner knowing" (p.3), a set of knowledge that is particularly important in a culture where very little research has been produced that can support my observations and experiences. This process has essential to understanding the environment of yoga and asserting my place within it. The use of critical autoethnography validates my presence in Montreal's yoga world while also giving me the opportunity to "write myself into my own work as a major character"(Church, 1995, p.3). Furthermore, I consider that writing about myself is not an act of self-indulgence, but rather a way to bring up issues and discussions that are relevant to other individuals involved in the yoga culture (Church, 1995, p.5). The use of critical autoethnography as a methodology also allows me to uncover historical, contextual and social relations of domination and promote marginalized voices in Montreal's yoga world.

Reflexivity

To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people. This objectivist position is as ingenuous as that of subjectivism, which postulates people without a world. World and

human beings do now exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction (Freire, 1976, p. 50).

As indicated by Freire, due to my roles as a researcher, yoga practitioner and certified yoga teacher, it is impossible to separate myself from my research and to assume the position of being an objective and neutral observer. As Gillian Rose (2012) explains

> Reflexivity is a crucial aspect of work that participates in the so-called cultural turn. There, reflexivity is an attempt to resist the universalizing claims of academic knowledge and to insist that academic knowledge, like all other knowledges, is situated and partial. Reflexivity is thus about the position of the critic, about the effects that position has on the knowledge that the critic produces, about the relation between the critic and the people or materials they deal with, and about the social effects of the critic's work (p. 183).

My life experiences and political opinions, both past and present, have shaped my worldview and have led me to ask certain questions about the world. For example, I do not believe in the concept of neutrality and I believe that one needs to engage in collective action in order to work towards more equality in our world. I believe that the remnants of colonization and white imperialism are still very much present in Quebec, where society is still divided by colour, ethnicity and social class (Henry & al, 2000). Whether in the classroom, the workplace or in arts and cultural organizations "... racial inequality continues to affect the lives of people of colour in Canada" (Henry et al., 2000, p.2). Thus, although most yoga studios may claim to be proponents of healthy and peaceful living and that this is the experience of many practitioners, studios can also become a source of pain or conflict because of the fact that they are shaped by a plethora of invisible forces (Murphy, 2014). Addressing reflexivity, Madison (2005) explains that:

> It is important to honour your own personal history and the knowledge you have accumulated up to this point, as well as the intuition or instincts that draw you toward a particular direction, question, problem or topic. (p. 19)

As a critical autoethnographer and a critical ethnographer, it is necessary that I acknowledge the geographical, historical, social, cultural and economic contexts in which I have been located in the past and the present. The fact that I am a middle-class, university educated yoga teacher and

practitioner puts me in a position of privilege, because this location has allowed me to have access to alternative modes of health such as yoga, to take several yoga classes and attend yoga-related events. Thus, I recognize that I also have a role in constructing the contemporary yoga culture. My positions along gender, race, age, and class shape the assumptions and approach that I bring to this inquiry. I believe that to adopt a position of neutrality would be in contradiction with my research aims and epistemological beliefs. As Maguire (2007) notes,

> A reflexive methodology assumes a presupposition of subjectivity as an essential, unavoidable core attribute of human inquiry and emphasizes the constructive, dialectical and historical nature of social science research. Thus, reflecting on methodology and methods provokes new thinking about how in a postmodern world, we - as subjects, objects, authors and narrators - need to confront issues of identity and representation, explore more expansive ways and create new forms in which we construct our research texts. We are not third person, nameless, ahistorical, one-dimensional subjects or acultural beings, researching from a position of nowhere (p. 8)

The fact that I have been able to travel to India, do a yoga teacher training in Montreal, have physical access to yoga studios and that I am able to be talking on panels about yoga during a yoga festival already puts me in a position of power when it comes to my socio-economic status. My experience as a person of colour who is highly critical of the yoga culture's lack of diversity helps me identify with some of my participants who share similar sentiments, but also had a major influence on my framing of my research questions and interview questions. I approached this inquiry with a critical outlook on the yoga culture at large, and the visual representations of the 'yoga body.' Because I believe that we all contribute to building the yoga culture influenced how I pose certain interview questions and my research process. However, being aware of my own biases and prejudices is not the only way to follow a reflexive path. Pillow (2003) explains that another method for reflexivity in the research process is through:

> developing reciprocity with research subjects- hearing, listening, and equalizing the research relationship- doing research "with" instead of "on." In this way, reflexivity is also used to deconstruct the author's authority in the research and/or writing process. Interest in this

> practice has led to "multivocal" texts and explorations of attempts to let the data, the subjects, speak for themselves (p. 179).

My own biases toward the yoga culture led me to engage with diverse members of the yoga communities with an understanding that in order to transform communities, we need to foster spaces that allow people to feel safe in being vulnerable. Through this type of space, much strength is galvanized by sharing stories.

As an interviewer, I felt a deep sense of responsibility towards my participants which is why I chose to engage with a small number of participants. I chose to allocate time to interviews as opposed to a sheer number of interviews, and ensuring that participant's narratives are as much conveyed in their own words (by carefully transcribing their responses to questions, but also in constantly checking in with them through the editing process to ensure I had the permission to use the narratives used in this inquiry). This collaborative process allowed me to conduct research "with" my participants instead of "on" them. I transcribed my interviews by carefully listening to each one and writing the full transcript out with the use of my computer. If there were certain unclear words, I would listen to the interview once again and if those segments were still unclear, I contacted the participant to ask for further clarification. The act of transcribing allowed me to become more aware of certain terms, words and recurring themes that I had not noticed during the actual interviews. The process of transcribing the interviews was also an opportunity for me to notice the interconnection between certain participants. However, what I failed to do during the process of transcribing was to deeply reflect upon the production of the transcript itself. Mishler (1997) explains that in research on discourse, the decisions concerning how to produce a transcript- what we include as relevant features of speech and how we arrange and display the text- are among the many decisions we make in the course of doing our work. All of them reflect theoretical assumptions about relations between language and meaning, and between method and theory, and are consequential for what we report as findings as well as how we interpret and generalize from those findings (p. 277). I recognize that due to my lack of attention to certain details, such as detailed notation systems can be problematic when I am reporting and interpreting my findings. I also realize that my treatment of a transcription as a technical procedure is a shortcoming

especially due to the fact that as a critical ethnographer, I am encouraging individual's agency and this may not be completely achieved due to a misrepresentation of discourse on my part.

As I explained previously, my own biases, power and privileges must be accounted for and have a role in shaping the direction of this inquiry. Madison (2005) adds that:

> Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects. A concern for positionality is sometimes understood as "reflexive ethnography:" it is a turning back on ourselves (Davis, 1998). When we turn back, we are accountable for our own research paradigms, our own positions of authority, and our own moral responsibility relative to representation and interpretation. We are beginning to ask ourselves, what are we going to do with the research and who ultimately will benefit? Who gives us the authority to make claims about where we have been? How will our work make a difference in people's lives? (p. 8).

Both my roles as an academic and yoga teacher/practitioner are equally important, since my insider knowledge of the yoga communities allows me to reflect on my own experiences in a culture with which I am familiar. My outsider identity as an academic encourages me to link critical theories to this culture and attempt to actively engage in dialogue with its members. As a yoga practitioner for the past seven years, and as a yoga teacher for the past three years, I have learned to become more in touch with my feelings, my emotions, my connection to the divine and to reinforce my connections to those around me. I have also learned to care for my body, and to use breathing as a grounding force in times of difficulties and in times of anxiety. Most importantly, I use my yoga practice as a reminder to stay present. I have felt both comfort and discomfort in my roles as an academic and yoga teacher/practitioner, and have come to realize that I am a part but also separate from academia and the yoga culture. As Enos (2011) contends,

> I do not feel marginalized in that I never feel completely out of the centre of power in either arena; rather there are times of comfort and times of discomfort. Perhaps I am on the edge of the centre… (p. 84).

Yoga has taught me the art of fostering the mind-body connection, a state in which the mind

and the body are interrelated and considered to feed each other. I believe that the practice of yoga and the actual space of yoga is a valuable location to engage in dialogue around things such as gender, race, class, accessibility, diversity, privilege and social change since two of the cornerstones in yoga are about self-inquiry and thorough respect of all living beings. Similar to Carol Horton, a Chicago-based yoga teacher, I believe that as yoga practitioners, we should "embrace yoga as a means of engaging with, rather than retreating from, the complexities and problems of the contemporary world"(Horton, 2012, p. ii). I believe in creating learning spaces that build community across racial, ethnic, gender, class and national lines (hooks, 2003).

As I explained at the start of this thesis, my interest in conducting this inquiry emerged out of the disjuncture I felt in being part of Montreal's yoga culture, whether in my role as a practitioner or in my role as a teacher. And indeed I am not researching from a position of neutrality. As a person who is privileged in many ways as a partly European, middle class, graduate student, I am concerned with how my theoretical underpinnings inform the ways in which I view Montreal's yoga culture, how I position myself in it and the ways in which this position shapes my data analysis. England (1994) argues that in the context of ethnographic research, the researcher must reflect on ways to include "other" voices without "colonizing them in a manner that reinforces patterns of domination" (England, 1994, p. 81).

Before, during and after each interview, I engaged in a process of self-reflection to do my best to avoid making assumptions about my participants and their experiences. Nevertheless, these beliefs did arise before some of my interviews. For example, because Rhonda is so involved in different activist circles in Montreal and in the black community, I had assumed that she would be one of the most outspoken participants on the lack of diversity in yoga studios. However, she seemed most disturbed by the capitalist aspects of yoga studios and the fact that the marketing of yoga does not reflect the realities she observed inside the studios.

Smith (1999) discusses the integrity of researchers in the research process. This is a very important part of reflexivity as it is necessary to ask questions such as "Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up?" (Smith, 1999, p. 10) It is my hope that my research will benefit Montreal's yoga

communities as well as individuals who resist the dominant ideals of the current yoga culture.

Using critical ethnography as a methodology for societal change

> "Critical ethnographers celebrate their normative and political position as a means of invoking social consciousness and societal change." (Thomas, 1993, p. 4)

The work of D.Soyini Madison (2005) and Jim Thomas (1993) on critical ethnography informed my methodological practice throughout the course of my inquiry. I felt that their ideas would be the most suited approach to my methodological practice since critical ethnography uses knowledge as a means for social change (Thomas, 1993). As Thomas says, "Critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose" (Thomas, 1993, p.4). My own inquiry deals with social change and critical thinking in Montreal's yoga culture. I believe that the use of critical ethnography is a valuable methodology in bringing about an ethical, critical and reflexive inquiry on the topic of yoga and critical thinking. Madison (2005) refers to other critical ethnographers such as Caspercken, Denzin, and Thomas to define critical ethnography. She explains that critical ethnography

> begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice with a particular lived domain...The critical ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control.

Therefore, the critical ethnographer resists domestication and moves from "what is" to "what could be" (Madison, 2005, p. 5).

As a qualitative researcher, critical methodology has provided me a critical lens when thinking about yoga culture and yoga communities in Montreal. Through this lens, I have been able to think about power and privilege more deeply and witness how these concepts shape social relations in yoga studios. In most societies, social relations cannot be separated from capitalist consumption and it is evident that certain groups are privileged over others (Carspecken, 1996). The idea of understanding social relations through capitalist consumption is an important element in the context of yoga, since consumption is at the crux of the yoga practice in North America, and

the idea of capital is often negated since it is camouflaged under the "feel good" elements of yoga. Critical ethnography digs deeper than the new age aspirations of finding peace of mind through consuming yoga, and identifies the privileges and inequalities inherent in Montreal's yoga communities and how these are also reflected in society at large. This particular research methodology expands the horizons for choice by questioning the dominant culture and also "deepens and sharpens ethical commitments by forcing us to develop and act upon value commitments in the context of political agendas" (Thomas, 1993, p. 2).

Instead of inquiring about 'other cultures' and speaking for 'other' people as in conventional ethnography, critical ethnography prioritizes "authority of the subject's voice" (Thomas, 1993, p. 4) with the goal of giving each individual a sense of agency.

Participatory research methods: The case of photography

I chose to use participatory photography as a tool in my methodological process as I have always been convinced that photographs have the possibility of capturing thoughts, opinions and/or feelings that cannot always be expressed through the use of words. Gotschi et al (2009) define participatory photography as a methodology that:

> emphasizes the active role of participants in the generation and interpretation of photos and understands it as a research method that hands over the cameras to people in order to inform a research project and stimulate self-reflection and interactions with others (p. 293).

Through this particular method, participants are able to exercise their sense of agency to determine how they wish to be represented practicing yoga in a way that reflects their beliefs, values and opinions. Throughout this inquiry, I demonstrate that modern yoga is now an integral part of popular North American culture that has a variety of meanings to different people. For some, the practice is associated with social justice, whereas for others it is solely an individual practice that is about wellness and/or healing.

The goal of asking each participant to send me a photograph of themselves practicing yoga in a way that was meaningful to them was so that participants were able to choose how they wish to be represented practicing yoga in a context where the advertising market of yoga in North America often lacks to represent people of colour, those with bigger bodies and those from lower socio-

economic classes (Lawrence, 2013).

Gaining access and recruitment

I recruited participants by sending out an email (Appendix 1) to the various yoga networks in Montreal, and by posting my invitation letter on yoga-related Facebook groups. All of the participants who contacted me were very enthusiastic to participate and felt that the themes of my inquiry were extremely relevant to the contemporary yoga culture in Montreal. Due to my involvement in Montreal's yoga scene, I was already familiar with most of the participants, however I had never thoroughly discussed issues of accessibility and diversity as it relates to the yoga culture with any of them.

During a period of five months, from December 2013 to April 2014, I collected all data by the means of individual, semi-structured, audio-recorded, and face-to-face interviews with seven individuals. I interviewed a diversity of individuals at the intersections of race, social class, body type, and age. My intention was to include a multitude of voices, opinions and perspectives on the yoga culture in Montreal. I interviewed participants either in cafes, yoga studios, or in the comfort of their own residences.

Participants and their contexts

The seven participants who volunteered to participate in this inquiry all practice and teach modern postural forms of yoga at different yoga studios across different neighborhoods in Montreal, including the Plateau, the Mile End, Downtown, Verdun, and St.Henri. Because the goal of this inquiry is to obtain a more authentic and diverse perspective of yoga, I provide a brief portrait of each participant in Table 1, with their names, gender, age, cultural backgrounds and their relationship to yoga (teacher, practitioner or teacher and practitioner).

Table 1: Portraits of participants

Name	Gender	Age	Ethno-Cultural Background	Relationship to Yoga
Roseanne	Female	38	White Anglo- Canadian born in British Columbia and moved to Montreal in 2006	Yoga teacher and practitioner
Dr.Bali	Male	90	Born and raised in India, but moved to Canada in 1969	Yoga studio owner, teacher and practitioner
Rachel	Female	40	African-American born and raised in Ithaca, New York and moved to Montreal in 2004.	Yoga practitioner
Elena	Female	36	Black woman, born in Honduras, and adopted by Quebecois parents and raised in Quebec	Yoga teacher and practitioner
Tara	Female	31	Anglo-Quebecer with Greek origins	Yoga teacher and practitioner
Rhonda	Female	48	Biracial Black Anglo-Quebecois born in the United States and raised in Montreal	Yoga practitioner
Brian	Male	35	White Anglo-Quebecois, born and raised in Montreal	Yoga teacher and practitioner

Five of the participants are female and two are male. Their age-range is between 31 years old and 90 years old. Although I did not intend to interview a majority of females, the majority of yoga practitioners who approached me after I initiated recruitment were women. Due to time

constraints, and due to the fact that I prioritized more in depth conversations with the participants, I was not able to interview all 12 individuals who contacted me. I decided to interview these seven individuals for a number of reasons:

1) They have considerable experiential and historical knowledge of yoga
2) They are committed yoga practitioners and/or teachers
3) They are committed on a personal and professional level to issues of diversity and accessibility
4) They are familiar with the various yoga communities in Montreal
5) Their social locations and identities provide more diverse and grounded standpoints of the yoga culture in Montreal
6) They have all practiced and/or taught in different contexts (gyms, hospitals, schools, studios, community centres) and in different neighborhoods in Montreal.

All participants practice a form of modern postural yoga and modern meditational yoga such as hot yoga, hatha yoga, Ashtanga, and mindfulness meditation. Roseanne, Brian, Dr.Bali, Elena, and Tara are certified yoga teachers teaching either at yoga studios, schools, hospitals, and/or community centres. Dr.Bali owns a yoga studio in the heart of downtown Montreal and Rachel and Rhonda are yoga practitioners and academics, who are both actively engaged in community work and activism. Rhonda is also involved in a wide array of activist work such as the Quebec student strike in 2012 and empowering Montreal's Black community.

Roseanne

Roseanne is a 38-year-old woman, born in British Columbia, who moved to Montreal in 2006. She identifies as a white woman of working class descent. She began practicing yoga in 1995 as a form of stress relief during her university years and has since continued to practice consistently. She took her initial yoga teacher training at Yasodhara Ashram, located in South- Eastern BC, a place she considers to be her spiritual home. She feels particularly interested in the therapeutic benefits of yoga and has recently taken a yoga therapy training in Montreal. Roseanne has also been running a very popular blog called "It's all Yoga, Baby" since 2009, which is recognized as

being a prominent voice in the North American yoga community, Roseanne uses the blog as a platform to critique contemporary yoga culture, and make links between yoga, the body and popular culture. She recently co-edited (with Carol Horton) the book *21st Century Yoga: Culture, Politics & Practice* and is a co-founder and co-director of Yoga Festival Montreal. The annual festival attempts to bring together the different communities, sub- communities, and styles, studios, lineages and teachers in Montreal on neutral ground for one weekend of practice and celebration. Roseanne usually practices yoga at home or at a studio close to her home, although she is always curious to discover yoga classes and initiatives across the city. She also has been teaching a weekly free class for the past seven years, in a community centre located in the mile-end. This class is never advertised, because she feels intimidated by the commercial aspect of yoga and prefers to engage with yoga "on the margins."

Elena

Elena is a 36-year-old yoga teacher, massage therapist and social worker who is a member of the professional order of social workers and marriage and family therapists in Quebec. She was born in Honduras and was adopted at a very young age by a Quebecois family and raised in Quebec. She has lived in Montreal for the past 13 years and feels a very strong link with her community in Honduras. She started her own therapy practice in 2011 that combines cognitive-behavioural techniques to yoga philosophy to promote better stress management. She has worked as an individual counselor but also as a group counselor in community centres, schools, mostly with underserved and immigrant communities in Montreal. She began practicing yoga in 2001 at the Sivananda yoga studio in Montreal. She has pursued several yoga teacher trainings both in Montreal and in Los Angeles. She usually stays away from commercial yoga studios, as she does not feel comfortable with that model. She feels very connected to the therapeutic aspects of the yoga practice as well as the yoga philosophy and attempts to follow it as a way of life. Her yoga became particularly important to her during her contract with an international organization in Guatemala. During this time, she experienced a lot of anxiety as she discovered that the organization was destroying indigenous communities rather than helping them. She explained that it was during this time that yoga saved her life. She recently travelled to India to further her

knowledge with regards to yoga and to also learn more about Ayurveda, a system of Hindu traditional medicine.

Tara

Tara is a 31-year-old Anglo-Quebecer who was born and raised in Montreal. She discovered her first yoga class in Hong-Kong where she went to live for six months after graduating from university in Montreal. She explains that from the first day she practiced, *"It was like true love. I really felt it was something that I wanted to do for the rest of my life, and I don't know, I guess I really wanted to teach it from the first day that I started practicing"* (22/12/2013). She continued her regular practice once she returned to Montreal and took her first teacher's training in 2009 in a well-known yoga studio. She pursued a second teacher's training in restorative yoga and for the past 3 years has been teaching yoga for round bodies at a small yoga studio in St. Henri. She describes this studio as a very *"unpretentious place, and most of the students there wear their regular clothes. There is hardly anybody wearing lululemon and stuff like that. And it's amazing because my students are so dynamic, I've got all body types, English and French speakers, old and young people*"(22/12/2013). She is an advocate for making yoga more accessible particularly to individuals with round bodies, and wants to be part of bringing forth the body positive movements within the yoga culture.

Dr.Bali

Dr.Madan Bali is a 90-year-old studio owner, yoga teacher and yoga practitioner who was born and raised in Punjab, a state located in the Northwestern part of India. He explains that yoga was part of his school curriculum and in India "yoga was a part of the culture. It was available in the schools; a lot of visitors, yogis would come demonstrate methods, so I was very drawn to it automatically." He decided to immigrate to Montreal in his 40s, in 1969, and founded the Yoga Bliss research centre in which he currently teaches and offers workshops as well as teacher's training certifications twice a year. His studio is not commercial in any way. There is no reception, nor is there any 'yoga gear' on sale. Instead of using yoga models on his website, Dr.Bali is the face of his studio. Dr. Bali is a Vedanta scholar with a Doctorate in Complementary Medicine and has successfully introduced yoga at several colleges and school boards as part of the curriculum, as well

as in hospitals, corporations, and community centres. He has developed a yoga method as a complimentary form of therapy in treating psychosomatic disorders. He is a firm believer that yoga is a prescription for human wellness and that all humans have the potential to tap into the body's intelligence in order to heal themselves.

Rachel

Rachel is a 40-year-old African-American woman who was born and raised in Ithaca, New York and who has lived in Montreal for the past ten years. She began practicing yoga as a first year graduate student at Cornell University, in upstate New York in 1998. The classes were held in a small church and she felt humbled by her yoga practice in a way that she had never felt for any other form of exercise. Over the years, her yoga practice has now evolved as a spiritual practice connected to her mental and physical wellbeing. She is currently a single-mother of three children, a PhD candidate and founder of an alternative daycare. She describes her yoga practice as *"essential to my mental wellbeing. My practice has become holistic and essential for the past 15 years"*(26/01/2014). She has been practicing in the same mainstream yoga studio since her arrival in Montreal, and although she thoroughly enjoys the practice in that particular studio because of its physical intensity, she does not feel she can relate to the exclusive culture surrounding her in that particular studio. She is highly critical of the yoga culture in general and feels that there is a lack of community, accountability and diversity. She feels that as a person of colour, she has learnt to navigate a white space such as a yoga studio, just as she has learned to navigate academic spaces throughout her life.

Rhonda

Rhonda is a 48-year-old bi-racial black Canadian woman, a parent, educator and artist who has worked in social services, community organizations, education and labour organizing. She is also a PhD Candidate in Education at McGill University pursuing research informed by non-hierarchical Black feminisms and institutional ethnography to examine social relations between Black people and the university. She began practicing yoga 12 years ago as a way to manage stress and anxiety, following the death of her mother. She continues to use yoga as a method of self- care and as a way to maintain control of her physical and mental health. She has practiced yoga in gyms,

non-corporate yoga studios and in corporate yoga studios. Her yoga practice is a key tool for managing her health while she navigates through academic and activist spaces. She is highly critical of the marketing strategies of the yoga culture as she does not feel they represent the realities within yoga studios. For example, she has seen many people of colour, and individuals with bigger bodies in the studio where she practices. She believes this reality is not reflected in any of the websites, posters and advertisements used for yoga studios.

Brian

Brian is a 35-year-old yoga teacher and practitioner. He has been practicing yoga in Montreal for nine years and teaching in studios across the city for seven years. He was born and raised in Montreal and first began yoga when he quit smoking at the age of 25 years old. He had had a long battle with Good Pasture's syndrome since he was a teenager that led him to have to do chemotherapy. This process him forced him to make significant lifestyle changes. It was at this time that he tried a yoga class, and decided a year later that he wanted to teach. He is certified with 600 hours of teacher trainings and teaches a fusion of styles. His practice is deeply linked to his physical well-being and used as a tool to recover from the trauma he experienced when he was sick. He believes that the yoga practice should be more accessible to people of all races, social-classes and sexual orientation. He is very aware of his own social location, as a white, homosexual, and socio-economically privileged male, and is sensitive to how this location affects the world around him.

Because the central goal of mainstream yoga studios is to provide yoga classes, and the discussions taking place within studios are often centered around the yoga philosophy and self-transformation, it is rare that teachers, practitioners and/or studio owners have the opportunity to discuss issues of accessibility and diversity. These factors may explain why there is a significant amount of unexamined privilege in the yoga culture.

Methods

My primary methods are semi-structured interviews, photographs taken by the participants and journal entries. I believe that themes such as yoga, diversity and culture cannot be quantified and are much more relevant when analyzed qualitatively. Indeed, personal narratives in the form of

words or photographs can be a powerful way to bring about transformation and social change, because as I explained in chapter one participant's personal narratives have the power to 'flip the script' on dominant forms of knowledge. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell Hooks (1994) says:

> Stories help us to connect to a world beyond the self. In telling our stories we make connections with other stories. Journeying to countries where we may not speak the native tongue, most of us communicate by creating a story, one we may tell without words. We may show by gesture what we mean. What becomes evident is that in the global community life is sustained by stories. A powerful way we connect with a diverse world is by listening to the different stories we are told. These stories are a way of knowing. Therefore they contain both power and the art of possibility. We need more stories (p. 9).

Similar to hooks (1994), I believe that my participant's personal narratives have the power to bring about a more accurate and grounded understanding of the yoga practice in Montreal.

Although I do not discuss the role of yoga teachers in this thesis, I think it is an important point to consider, since yoga teachers are also co-creators of the yoga culture. When I asked Brian what he thought about the role of yoga teachers towards their students, Brian explained that as a teacher the most important thing is to never assume why students are there. He shared an incident that one of his friends went through in order to illustrate his point:

> *So no matter why they're in the room, I can't assume why. I'll give you an example: My friend who has metal rods in her back from her scoliosis – she was in a yoga class in Ottawa and the yoga teacher, who's a really wonderful teacher, decided to ask the class, why are you here? And people said things like: "I want to find peace", "balance out my chakras…" "I wanna find my calling…" They all said beautiful things, and my friend said, "so that I can walk." And the teacher said, "look a little deeper…" My friend responded "No seriously dude, so I can walk…" And the teacher said, well where is it coming from? The teacher was egging her on to be more esoteric about it and ironically she had the most authentic response, in my opinion. "I'm here so I can walk." Why isn't that good enough?* (22/01/2014).

Semi-structured interviews

The interviews with the participants indicate that there is not one singular definition of yoga and that the yoga practice has a variety of meanings for different people, especially in North America. Yoga has been adapted, transformed, honoured, but also culturally appropriated. Thus it is necessary to critically reflect on yoga's reincarnation in North American culture, and to also think about the benefits yoga can bring to our society as a whole, its potential for fostering self-care as well as communal care.

In addition to my own observations and involvement in the yoga culture, the interviews are my main data source. Each interview lasted from one-and-a-half to two hours, depending on the participant's availability. All interviews were audio-recorded, with permission from the participants, as indicated in the consent form. I conducted the interviews either at public coffee shops, in yoga studios, or in the comfort of participant's homes. I gave each participant a consent form (Appendix 2) prior to the interview, and I made sure to address any point that was unclear. I also made sure to clarify that they did not have to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering. English was used for all interviews, except with Elena, who speaks English but preferred to use French towards the end of the interview. The interviews consisted of 20 questions (Appendix 3), which were grouped into four different themes: (1) Yoga and Individual Identity, (2) Yoga and Personal Healing (3) Montreal's Yoga Communities and (4) Yoga and Social Change. Although I did use these sets of questions as a guiding tool, I also posed other questions emerging from the dialogue with each individual as a way to encourage free-flowing dialogue. I often shared my own personal experiences and examples in yoga studios or yoga-related events in Montreal in order to create a rapport with the participants. For example, because Brian has facilitated many workshops around yoga and ethics, and as indicated in the exchange below, a part of the interview was dedicated to him explaining the importance of discussing ethics in yoga spaces.

> Sarah: *Do you think the discussion around ethics in yoga studios is important? Is it a discussion that takes place in yoga studios?*
>
> Brian: *I think it's very important, however most teacher training models don't have it. I've been invited as a consultant for a new teacher's training that is coming up to teach ethics*

for the upcoming winter session. Most places don't at all though. They'll go over certain things like: "make sure you bring contra-indications to the postures," alignment, to make sure people feel safe in a posture. Generally it's about the posture. In terms of how somebody is teaching the class: "are we speaking accessibly when we use certain words? Are we speaking to just one type of person in the room? Are we generalizing? For example in terms of gender, I've heard teachers say: "All right ladies, it's Valentine's day, bring your boyfriends!" By doing this, you are making huge assumptions about the women in the room. What if someone is not straight? Or doesn't observe the marketing of Valentine's day? It also alienates the men in the room. The marketing of yoga needs to be discussed in terms of ethics, making sure Yoga Journal covers more than white skinny people. There is ethics around that too, making sure marketing is racially diverse. When it comes to physical correction, asking for consent to modify students, checking in to see do you mind if I help you here? When you know certain students, you can bypass that boundary because you know they enjoy certain modifications. But if someone is there for the first time, always checking in that they don't mind the modifications. Also, it's important to think about teaching in terms of counseling, and countertransference that comes up in psychology. Am I teaching the class based on what I need or is it what the student needs? One time, a teacher announced to the class that she broke up with her boyfriend so she was feeling really down, and she said "today will be a passive, restorative class," but that's not what the students came for. So it crosses some boundaries when a teacher makes it about themselves rather than about the benefit of the students. Or when teachers assume what you need due to their bias. When a teacher wants you to change because it would make them feel better and more comfortable. That is unethical, or wanting students to change for your own benefit, a teacher is there to serve and to guide, and it's important to cater the class around their needs too. What do students need? The teacher should not be at the centre. Another example: once I walked into a studio, and a teacher had an apple with toothpicks stuck in it on the reception desk. I asked the teacher if this was to prevent the apple from rolling off the table. He's like "no, no, it's because one of my students is in a lot of pain right now so

I'm practicing a form of voodoo." And I thought, is this yoga first of all? And did you get the student's consent if she wanted voodoo practiced on her even though if to you it's a positive thing? It was just creepy. That is dangerous and completely unethical (22/01/2014).

This excerpt from Brian reveals that the discussion of ethics amongst yoga teachers entails reflecting upon the responsibilities of yoga teachers, which go far beyond teaching physical postures. Whether an individual chooses to teach yoga for physical, mental or spiritual development, it is very much their duty to cultivate an environment that fosters safety, respect, inclusivity and growth for all students (Campbell, 2003).

Interviews have the possibility of producing knowledge. A semi-structured interview is an interview "with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale&Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3). The interviews also allowed for a relationship of trust to be built between the participants and myself. I spent time talking with them and attempting to make them feel comfortable before and after each interview, and I really felt that each participant was keen to share their opinions, knowing that I would respect their privacy and confidentiality. Seidman (1998) explains that "the purpose of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience…It requires that we interviewers keep our egos in check. It requires that we realize we are not the centre of the world. It demands that our actions as interviewers indicate that others' stories are important" (p. 9). During some of the interviews, I caught myself wanting to share my own experiences of the yoga culture each time a participant mentioned a situation that I could relate to. While I transcribed the interviews, I noticed that I had moments where I was really listening to the participant, however there were moments where I felt I was perhaps talking too much. This is not because I feel that their stories are not valuable, on the contrary it is because their stories are of extreme worth and not often heard.

Participatory photography as a visual methodology

The aim of participatory research is to involve participants in research as agents of change so as to place the silenced voices at the centre and challenge the status-quo. I used this

methodology in addition to interviews to explore if this would be useful to participants in terms of explaining the meaning of their yoga practice in ways that could not be verbalized or articulated.

I invited each participant to send me a photo of themselves practicing yoga in a meaningful way a month following the interview. Five of the participants participated in the photography project, however two of them preferred not to participate either for personal reasons or because, as Elena stated, "*my yoga practice cannot be represented in a photo*" (28/01/2014). Although one participant apologized several times for not sending me a photo, I was sure to remind her that the point of participatory photography was to give participants a sense of agency, rather than make anybody feel that this was an obligation. I also realize that although participatory photography seeks to broaden the visual representation of yoga, it can also feel quite limiting for certain individuals to try to represent one's yoga practice through a photograph. I also did emphasize to each participant that the representation of yoga in their photograph did not have to be limited to a physical posture and could instead be any object, imagery or word that represented yoga.

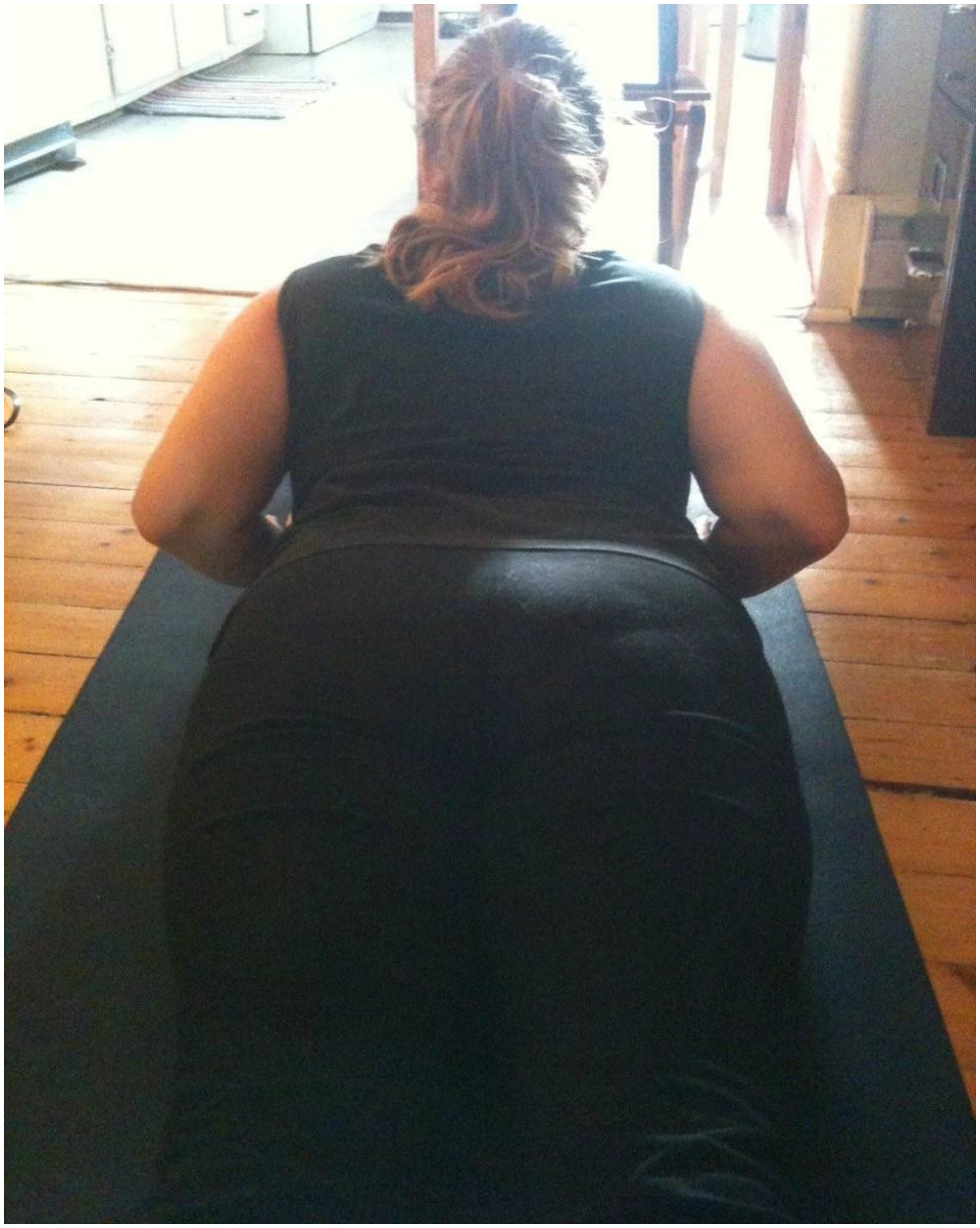
The forces of stereotyping and misrepresentation in the yoga world are very significant in the marketing of yoga in Montreal. The large majority of yoga related images work to reinforce the invisibility of and marginalize a large sector of individuals. Because yoga has become such a visual culture, seeking to sell "he body beautiful, the use of participatory photography in my inquiry is necessary for two reasons. First, photography can be a powerful way to make this research accessible beyond academia, so that theoretical knowledge about issues of diversity and accessibility becomes accessible and relevant to the average person in society (Guillemin and Drew, 2010). Secondly, due to the fact that the visual culture of yoga lacks representation of the racial, age and body diversity in Montreal, the use of participatory photography may allow yoga practitioners/teachers to create alternatives to these mainstream images, and to represent themselves in a way that counters stereotypical images of what yoga practitioners and/or teachers look like.

Because participants are able to take a photo on their own terms, they are given an active role in the inquiry and able to decide on their own terms how they wished to be represented. The photos presented in the analysis convey a more diverse and accurate standpoint of yoga

teachers/practitioners in Montreal. Guillemin and Drew (2010) explain that participant-generated visual methodologies "can foster a sense of participation" (p. 3) and also facilitate self-representation allows for excluded voices to be heard and for unseen bodies to be seen.

The photo and text below was sent to me by Roseanne, and addresses the issue of the yoga body. As she explains, this photograph attempts to deconstruct the myth of the yoga body. She chose to take a photo of her shadow body, or the parts of her body, which she willfully ignores. This is an excerpt of her caption:

> *My intention with the project was to unpack the idea of the "yoga body" and challenge what it really means. Instead of taking iPhone photos of myself in perfectly executed yoga poses, I snapped awkward angle shots of myself in completely ordinary poses (cobra, bridge, savasana). My reasoning: if I'm going to embrace the idea of a "yoga body," then shouldn't I acknowledge all of its forms? Beyond the arm balances and lithe muscles? The human body is beautiful, but not from every angle. I consciously chose the "worst" angles, in an attempt to challenge the popular notion of yoga selfies. If a well-rounded yoga practice involves getting to know our shadow side, shouldn't we also get to know our shadow body? If I'm going to talk the talk about diversity in yoga's visual culture, I should be ready to step up with my own body, my own regular, imperfect, healthy, strong "yoga body." My "shadow body" is the parts of my body that I don't look, the parts I will to ignore. Cellulite, rolls, lumps and bumps. I think we all have this "shadow body," even the bikini beach body backbend beauties that we see all over Instagram. I can't say that it was easy, and I had fears that my lumpy butt would end up as a horrible meme. But it was oddly empowering to confront my "shadow body" and subvert dominant ideas of what entails a yoga body* (19/02/2014).



Photograph 4. *Untitled* (19/02/2014), with permission from the photographer, Roseanne.

The ways in which participants choose to represent themselves demonstrates an experience in which they have faced personal and/or social difficulties. These experiences are linked to either fat-shaming, disability, age or loss.

Reflective journal

My role as a critical autoethnographer inspired me to keep a reflective journal throughout the course of my research for two reasons. The first reason is that while I was conducting the interview, I

would jot down certain ideas that I wanted to further elaborate on. I also used this journal to write about my experience as a yoga student, yoga teacher and as a participant in the two yoga festivals I attended. Below is an example from my reflective journal:

> *I was feeling very excited about this panel, but once again I found myself in a space with such little cultural diversity. The amount of white people wearing bindis is making me uncomfortable. I don't know why, but it just is. It's not that they are not nice people, but I just wish we could talk about cultural appropriation or that there was some kind of recognition for the lineage of yogic teachings. And maybe they've thought about it, what do I know? I also wonder why there are hardly any South Asian people? Once again, I am reminded that just the mere fact of being able to attend a yoga festival on a Saturday evening to talk about yoga, is a privilege. But this is probably a good thing, as these types of conversations need to be discussed with the socio-economically, physically and racially privileged. If we always preach to the choir, then can we bring about any change? It is with those who have never even thought about their own privileges that such issues need to be discussed. Being in this space reminds me that there are individuals who unconsciously silence racism, classism and ableism through wishful thinking, believing that by meditating they are making the world a better place. It makes me feel that they think they 'are above it all…' above race, above class… I spoke with one brown girl who told me that even though her friends always told her that yoga was white, she never noticed it until after we discussed the lack of diversity in the yoga culture during the panel. She realized she was often the only woman of colour in yoga spaces. I was also able to speak with some studio owners, teachers and practitioners during the festival and was happily surprised with the level of critical thinking they demonstrated as well as their consciousness around their own social location, and it felt refreshing! I think this is the first step in unpacking the daily effects of white privilege. I take the physical practice of yoga as an opportunity to step out of my comfort zone. So for example, I sometimes try postures that make me feel really uncomfortable. If I am able to do this physically, I don't see why I should not have to do it with my mind? I ALWAYS hear yoga practitioners talking about the importance of "stepping out of one's comfort zone" physically and emotionally. So can these practitioners*

also broaden their horizons on race, inclusivity and diversity? Do they realize they are creators of a dominant culture and that to shake the status quo within that culture, they absolutely need to step out of their comfort zones? (02/06/2013)

I wrote this entry after taking participating in a panel during the month of June 2013, as part of a Yoga Festival Montreal free panel entitled "Yoga, Accessibility & Inclusivity: A Community Conversation" with two yoga teachers and one studio owner. It was one of the rare times where I witnessed members of the yoga communities come together to discuss issues of accessibility and inclusivity. The several meetings leading up to the actual event made me even more aware of the complexities of owning a yoga studio, having to pay rent, having to pay teachers while at the same time being able to live and eat. Although we only had two meetings prior to the event, we were all bringing something unique to the panel due to the diversity of our backgrounds and experiences. About 40 to 50 people attended the panel and although there was not much time to engage in a thorough discussion, most people in the panel participated.

Ethical approval

I received a certificate of ethical acceptability of research involving humans from McGill University on December 18th, 2013. The REB-II reviewed and approved this project by full board review in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Participants and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

I provided each participant with a consent form prior to each interview, and I made sure to orally review the consent form with each participant, in case anything was not clear. I informed each participant about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, and assured them that there would be no risks entailed. All participants were given a hard copy of the consent forms. I also provided participants with opportunities to refuse to answer any questions or take any photographs that made them feel uncomfortable. Participants all volunteered to participate in the interviews and were reminded that they had the possibility to withdraw from the research at any time. I stayed in contact with participants when I needed to elaborate on certain

points and also sent them a copy of my thesis inquiry before submission, so that they could change or remove any information about themselves they did not wish to be in my text. I also respected the confidentiality of the participants who wished to remain anonymous and reviewed all visual data to ensure that none of its information could be harmful to themselves and/or others.

In this chapter, I presented the methodologies I used for this inquiry: critical autoethnography, critical ethnography and participatory research. I selected semi-structured interviews, a reflective journal and participatory photography as my tools of inquiry. I reflected on my own positionality and the ethical concerns related to this inquiry. I am professionally and personally committed to creating a space for diversity, accessibility and for individual agency in yoga studios and yoga communities. In the next chapter, I will present my research findings and present the different themes that I identified as being the most relevant.

Chapter Four: Findings

In this chapter, I discuss the identified data from the interviews I conducted with two yoga practitioners and five yoga teachers during the course of my research. The interview questions I asked participants revolved around four main themes: (1) their individual relationship to the yoga practice, (2) their use of the yoga practice for holistic health, (3) their perceptions with regards to Montreal's yoga communities, and (4) their thoughts on the potential of yoga for social change.

The analysis in this chapter draws upon the information produced through my personal observations and through interviews where individuals shared their experiences of being yoga practitioners, teachers and/or studio owners. I also drew analysis from photos that participants captured of themselves practicing yoga in a way that felt meaningful to them. As mentioned in the methodology and methods chapter, not all participants felt comfortable sending photos of themselves, or did not feel that their yoga practice could be captured in a photograph.

I explore the challenges of talking about privilege and systematic inequalities in predominantly white spaces such as yoga studios through participants' stories about their experiences, as well as testimonies of the yoga culture's inequalities. Part of my reflexivity process as a researcher is to recognize that the data presented is not neutral and is largely shaped by my social location. Bell (2003) reminds us that these "stories are a bridge between individual experience and systemic social patterns. Thus, their analysis can be a potential tool for developing a more critical consciousness about social relations in our society" (cited in Terleski, 2014, p .63). I believe that the yoga practice can become an ally for social change if members within yoga communities are willing to engage in critical self-reflection.

In this chapter, I present the major themes that emerged through my interviews with seven participants in relation to my research questions.

Before beginning the analysis of the data I collected, I examined the photos sent by participants and read over the transcribed interviews several times in order to identify the key themes I discuss in this chapter. The four key major themes I identified are:

1. Yoga as a tool for holistic health
2. Health as beauty: The yoga body
3. Yoga culture: A site for colour-blindness and the reproduction of White privilege
4. Corporate consumerism as a barrier to inclusive communities

Yoga as a tool for holistic health

> *Yoga is a prescription for human wellness. Our bodies produce their own endorphins, growth hormones, and antidepressants. I teach yoga in a way that guides people to awaken their own body's inner pharmacies and supply the right amount of medicine and nutrition to the right places at the right times. We have the finest medical diagnostic technologies and treatments, we spend billions of dollars in research, and we have copious amounts of information about health. Despite this, millions of people still suffer from psychosomatic and degenerative disorders, and the numbers are increasing every day. Chronic diseases are also rising at alarming rates. This is where yoga can help. That's the beauty of yoga, it offers a holistic approach. It's not like when you go to a psychologist, then you go to the gym for physical exercise, for a mental issue you go to another specialist and for spirituality, you go to another guru. It's all intertwined, integrated together. In Western medicine, there is no sense of self-sufficiency, the sense that I have the power to heal myself. And that's what yoga provides. My body is so well equipped and is the most sophisticated technology which is automated. When we go to deep sleep, do we have to do anything? Everything is being done for us at every moment* (Dr.Bali, 09/01/2014).

I began each interview by asking participants why they started practicing and/or teaching yoga, and why their practice was important to them. All participants discussed yoga as a resource for addressing mental, physical, emotional and/or spiritual health. Whether participants use yoga as a complement to their own religious traditions or as a form of spiritual practice, clearly the practice of yoga has helped many of them regain control over their health, cope with traumatic experiences, or deal with serious physical illnesses.

Since its beginnings, the contemporary yoga practice has been hailed for its benefits

regarding mental and physical health and is often used as a complementary method to bio-medical therapies (Strauss, 2005). In North America, schools, daycares, corporate sectors and the military are integrating the postural and meditative aspects of yoga as a way to bring about relaxation, stress-relief, concentration and to reduce violence (Horton, 2013). Rhonda explains that yoga gave her a new definition of health, which she has now come to understand as balance and has helped her manage both her physical and mental health:

> *When I can't sleep or when I have a nightmare or when I have anxiety at bedtime it's one of the times where I'm really using yoga, especially the corpse pose. And like the way that you practice that pose as a way of understanding how to lie still and to resist the fidgeting and to accept the thoughts coming to your head but also allow them to leave and put them to later. Those exercises come to me a lot in bed 'cause I'm lying there and sometimes I would be… I think if it weren't for the strategies I have from yoga I would be inclined to get up, to fidget, to move around, to start thinking about how I'm planning my day tomorrow or something. But I feel that yoga has helped me to find the discipline, to stay in bed and relax. So right away that's the first thing, but in general in moments of stress the breathing is huge. It's one of the biggest things for me. But there's a physical way also that I underestimated until I stopped doing yoga for a while and realized that, the ways in which practicing yoga open my body and like shift the way I carry my body is something that I actually wasn't as aware of and then I stopped for a while and I could really feel like the way that my body starts to feel tense and I don't feel as healthy and I don't feel like my body is working as well as it usually does. So it's a combination of mental health and physical health and the mental health is the thing that drives it for me but the physical is really important also* (02/04/2014).

The discussion around yoga's contribution to health is prevalent in a variety of books, and in a number of academic research studies. However, there is little attention to the ways in which health is also determined by social relations of power. Who gets to be healthy and access alternative modalities of health such as yoga? I consider how the postural and meditative aspects

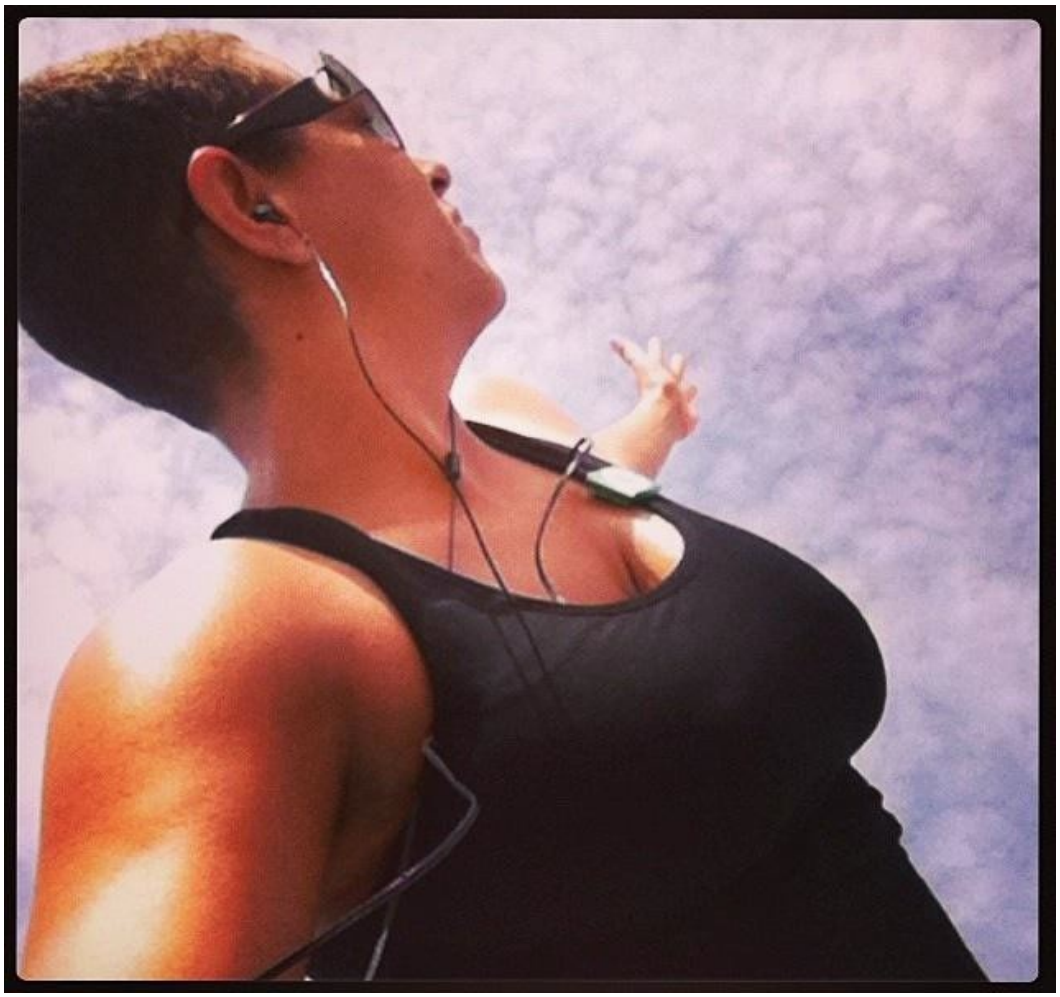
of yoga have been a form of support for the participants I interviewed, because I am confident that yoga practice improves physical and mental health.

As I have mentioned in chapter one, the word yoga is defined in most scholarly texts as "to yoke." In the course of my inquiry, I see that the word can point to a variety of interpretations. Yoga is often related to a form of self-care, which acts as a therapy in terms of difficult life experiences. Rhonda's understanding and experience of yoga is directly related to self-care and relaxation and she explains that to her yoga means "*self love and care. It means breath and focus and being present. It means strength and quiet and acceptance*" (02/04/2014). She adds that

> *the primary function of yoga is relaxation and to get out of my head. I have a tendency to have a lot of compulsive thinking and the yoga is a space where at a certain point I stop thinking. Working out in other ways, like more aerobic kind of fast ways are also ways for me to stop me thinking so much. But the pace of it is different, like it's not that meditative kind of introspective space…. So I tend to appreciate both for different reasons. But the yoga is really important, like I need that—both getting out of my head but also kind of getting centered, being in touch with myself and kind of feeling meditative is really... Yeah that's what it does for me for sure*. (02/04/14)

Similarly, Rachel describes her yoga practice as being absolutely essential to her physical and mental well-being. She uses this practice as her worship space, a place where she finds her deepest connection to God. As a single parent, her yoga practice acts as a tool for finding a sense of balance with her children. However, she explains that in order for her practice to have these benefits, she also needs to be "*eating right and sleeping right"* (26/01/2014). She says that *the lighter I feel physically, the better my practice is and the more I feel connected to God. The more I feel really vibrant in my body, the more capable I am. But it's not just being in a lighter body, it's also being in a body that eats really clean. So my practice has become holistic and essential for the past 15 years. It's interesting because I can't practice every day, I don't know that I would need to practice every day. I would very much like to practice twice a day, because it just*

feels so good. But my practice is related to the balance that I have with my children, making sure that their needs are met, that the school's needs are met, that my business needs are met. And I know it's because I'm sharp and I'm clear after I practice yoga and there's not all these other things running through my headspace. That practice has supported me, it's why I go back to that studio, otherwise, there would be medication... There would be anti- depressants (26/01/2014). The photograph Rachel sent me is a testament of her use of yoga as a tool for her mental well-being, and in this case for addressing the trauma related to her little brother's death.



Photograph 5. *Beach Vinyasa* (19/06/2014), with permission from the photographer, Rachel.

> *This is Melbourne Beach, on the very spot where my baby brother collapsed and died three years ago. I ran to this spot right after he died, and again a year later, and again a year later. This is my fourth, standing on the sand, looking out to the ocean, breathing him*

in, around, out, as with every hard thing that has come through me in the last 15 years of my practice. I still prefer the simplest of asanas after all this time. Those that shake me awake when my breath collapses or when I can no longer hear the ocean inside me. Those that fill me up with the most profound gratitude for this arm, this leg, a hip that opens up a teeny tiny bit more, an outer arch that presses more deeply into the earth. Trikonasana. (19/06/2014)

Brian's yoga practice is what enabled him to get out of his wheelchair. After being diagnosed with Good Pasture's syndrome and told by doctors he would lead a normal life but may never be able to run or be very active, he decided to quit smoking at 25 after a second relapse, eat healthy and practice yoga. He says

in my first attack at age 19, I had lost my hair years earlier due to chemotherapy, I weighed 99 pounds at 6 foot 2…I do yoga because now I can move and I celebrate that! Someone once asked me why I practice yoga. And I said "if I can do my own groceries and walk up my own flight of stairs when I'm 90, then yoga has done its job!" If I can be happy in my body, autonomous, and be social and happy in my environment when I'm 90, I think that's genius. Call it a western approach to the practice, this is what is means for me and that's why I practice. (22/01/2014)

Roseanne practices the meditative, postural, chanting and karma (service) aspects of yoga. She explains that the practice of yoga not only allows her to strengthen her presence in the world, but to also deal with the daily stresses of work and money,

My stress these days is more related to work and money… what I'm doing with my life. It's different than when I was 19, which at the time seems super stressful. It's a whole different reality. I think I feel stressed about American politics, climate change. I feel affected by the climate of the world we live in. There's an emotional response and that is taxing on my system for sure. I don't have any concrete examples, but it's definitely one of the tools I use to deal with the stress of life (16/02/2014).

Similarly, Dr. Bali explains that the rapid pace of modern Western life has overwhelmed the human system with stress and because stress levels have become so high, individuals

develop a variety of physical and mental illnesses. Thus, yoga provides us with the opportunity to deal with the stresses of modern life. As Klein (2012) says, ”relaxation and stress-reduction are not given a lot of attention in our culture. We’re urged to do, we’re applauded for pushing past our boundaries, and we’re made to feel guilty if we loosen our grip on the reins of life” (p. 37).

Photograph 6. *Untitled* (18/06/2014), with permission from the photographer.

Dr.Bali has been teaching for over 40 years and worked in hospitals with cancer patients and with individuals using yoga for dealing with chronic health conditions. At the ripe age of 90, Dr.Bali is a prime example of yoga's many health benefits. He firmly believes that our body has the capacity to heal itself if we are able to tap into our inner pharmacy. Through yoga, individuals may awaken the body's intelligence to reach optimal health. He

asserts that the yoga practice also allows individuals

> *to improve our own inner strength and create more resources, so that our system is able to handle the stress much more efficiently than completely avoid it. Yoga allows us to create new perceptions, new interpretations. We can awaken our brain power, the creative powers of the mind. And that's one of the most profound experiences of yoga… that you begin to feel this magical sense, that there is a miracle taking place in our life from moment to moment. So even in the midst of all the negative stuff that we go through, when these positive experiences come, they become more prevalent and then the negative feelings will go in the back burner. But eventually, we have to desensitize those memories also, if they are there, they will keep resurfacing from time to time. We have to purge them out, and that's the premise of yoga: "Chitam- Vritti-Nirodum": suspension of the mental chatter, calming the mind, and in silence the experiences that come are healing for the body* (09/01/2014).

Dr. Bali was drawn to yoga in his early school years while in India, as yoga was part of the culture and was practiced in schools as a form of health regimen.

> *I started off in my young years, in my school years. And in India, yoga was a part of the culture. It was available in the schools, a lot of visitors, yogis would come demonstrate methods, so I was very drawn to it automatically* (09/01/2014)

Although it is clear that yoga can be extremely beneficial for holistic health and as a supplement to bio-medical medicine, the question arises about who has access to these services. If scientific studies have proven over and over again that yoga is so beneficial, then why is the practice marketed to such a small fraction of the population? (Murphy, 2014).

Health as beauty: The yoga body

> *I think those teachers who can do all the postures and are really strong but also really tiny and really flexible are the yoga ideal. And then I think everybody else kind of struggles with the reality of their real life body. Not everybody else, 'cause I guess there are people who fit that ideal but I think a lot of us are just there with their normal bodies and selves and ideas about what we're there for. We are battling in our socialization of*

> *that ideal. Because for me, especially at my age I don't look at that instructor and think "I wish I was her." It's not that kind of a reaction. But it's still hard sometimes to not want to do the postures just in my body*. (Rhonda, 02/04/2014)

Rhonda's statement illustrates that in the yoga culture, the ideal of a "yoga body" is equated with one's thinness and flexibility. Having taught in a community centre for teenage mothers for the last few years, I am aware of the damages that this visual representation causes. Each time I met with a new group of girls, I always spent the first part of the class explaining to them that yoga is not just for skinny and flexible bodies. Magazines such as *Yoga Journal* often advertise weight loss and dieting pills (Graham, 2012). Not only has a thin, flexible, and white body become the dominant standard of beauty, but it has also become a significant indicator of health in the modern yoga culture (Klein, 2012). According to the visual images featured on the covers of magazines such as the *Yoga Journal*, being skinny is an indicator of health. However Rhonda, who had previously understood health in this way, came to a drastically different realization when she began the practice of yoga. In fact, she came to the understanding that balance is an indicator of health, "*I came through yoga to understand health as balance…right. So having experienced a time of imbalance in my health you know… even though I was skinny I was imbalanced. And so to understand the internal balance as being the goal versus the external appearance, right*?" (02/04/2014)

The yoga culture's visual representation points to the issue of power imbalance in discourse, a notion advanced by Foucault (1972). He argues that, "Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (p. 73). In the case of yoga, it is evident that Eurocentric notions of beauty control the presentation and distribution of yoga-related images. Teacher trainings are filled with information about the effects of stress on the body, the benefits of yoga for blood circulation and respiration to name a few. However, there is very little information regarding posture adjustments for individuals with bigger bodies or those with different physical abilities. There are many studies on the benefits of yoga for healing with physical ailments, but not enough discussion on how the mainstream yoga culture's fixation on the mythical body beautiful is

destructive to many bodies that may not fit this dominant norm. Traditionally, the physical and mental practice of yoga aimed to break one's identification with both mind and body. However, contemporary yoga has done quite the contrary and, as Boccio (2012) explains, "there is a strong focus on attaining idealized, and even more "challenging" or "advanced" postures- and the concomitant pride that comes from doing so" (p.51). In fact, the number of injuries among yoga practitioners has never been so high, either due to students being bullied into postures by teachers, classes beings too crowded, and thus inhibiting teachers to pay attention to all students or simply because practitioners do not respect the limits of their own bodies (Broad, 2012).

Most participants of this study discussed accessibility in terms of body-size, and pointed out the fact that the stereotypical and dominant "yoga body" works to represent the values of the dominant culture, instead of representing the reality of what many yoga practitioners look like. Most participants critique the quest for the "body beautiful"; as they feel it creates alienation and takes practitioners away from important aspects of yoga such as personal growth, transformation, and peace of mind. For example, Tara, who teaches a round bodies yoga class in a small community studio in St.Henri, discussed the fact that when she began practicing yoga in a well-known mainstream yoga studio in Montreal, she did not feel that the practice was accessible to her body type:

> *Even in my own experience there have been times where most of my instructors are svelte and they can put their legs behind their heads, pop up into handstands without any difficulty. So the practice hasn't always been as accessible as it could have been to me.* (22/12/2013)

As a yoga teacher, she now feels that she has the responsibility to foster a studio culture that celebrates and includes all bodies, races and social classes.

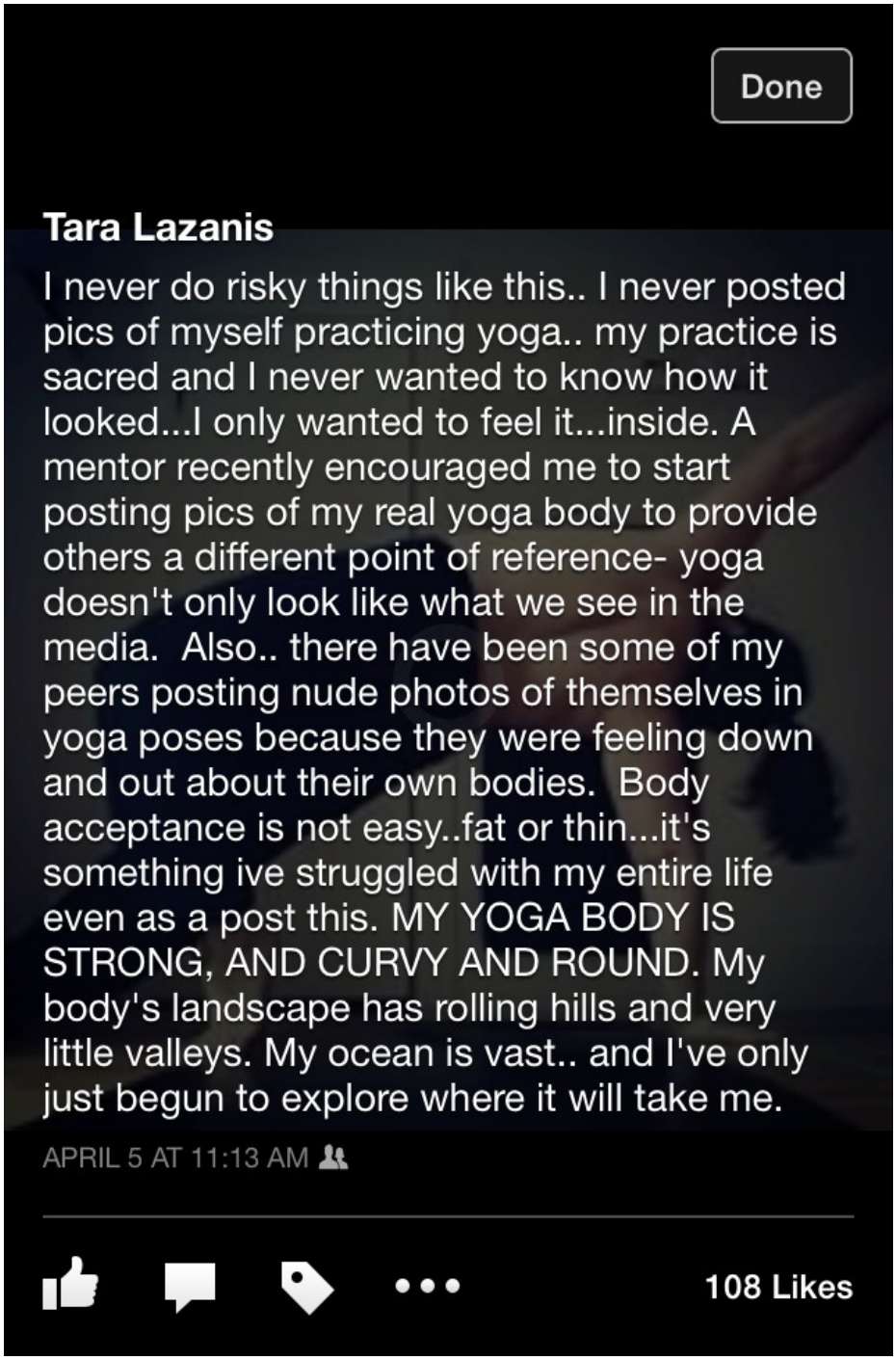
> *My role as a teacher is really important to me because I really feel that I'm… that yoga needs to be more accessible to a wider population and I feel that because I'm not like the regular yoga teacher in terms of what I look like, I break the mold of what yoga is and what it is heading towards. There's a really big body positive movements that's starting up and you know it's gaining more and more momentum and I really feel like*

that yoga for round bodies are curvy yoga or however you want to call it, really helps bring that out by making it more accessible to round people, to black people, to gay people… So it kind of breaks that mold of yoga and the yoga body and all that culture that goes with it. (22/12/2013)

Tara strongly feels that if yoga studios are to be more accessible, they need to create marketing tools that cater to all types of bodies. When I asked her if she had suggestions to make yoga studios more accessible, she answered

I think the change needs to happen in terms of advertising. I've seen some studios in the States in Portland that had different types of people and different types of bodies in their advertising. I think that yoga studios also need to reflect on the types of teachers they hire. I don't want to say that everything is because of the way I look. But I really felt that in [one of the studios] I used to go to, I didn't fit their mold of what a teacher should look like. (22/12/2013)

She sent me a photograph and text that she also posted on social media tools (Facebook and Instagram) with the goal of providing "*others a different point of reference…"* in terms of defining the "yoga body". As she says "*…yoga doesn't only look like what we see in the media*" (22/12/2013).

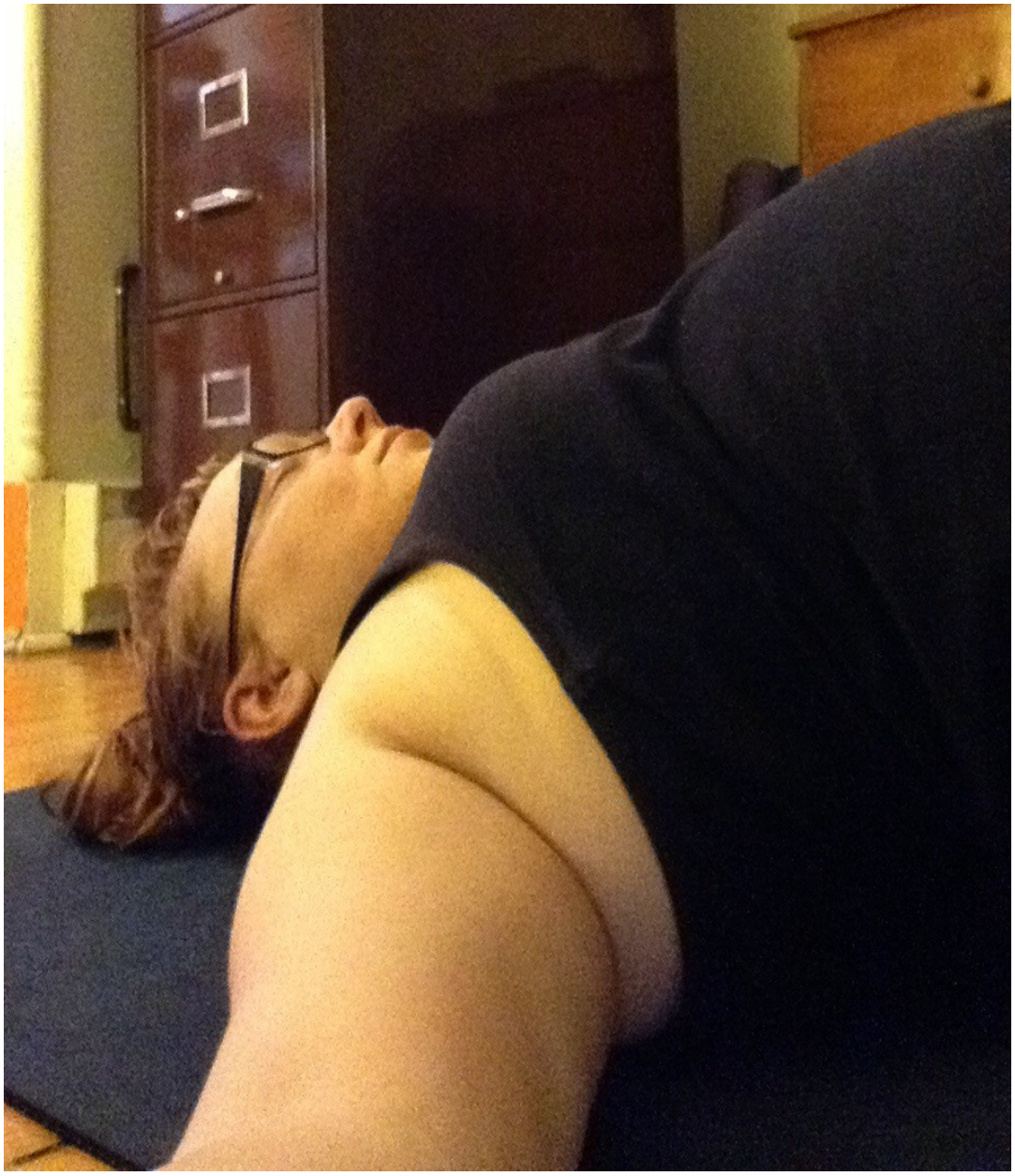


Photograph 7. *Untitled* (05/04/2014). with permission from the photographer, Tara.

Roseanne also took part in a similar exercise in order to subvert the narrative around the notion of the "yoga body." She decided to follow a 21-day Yoga Body program started by Sadie Nardini, a popular American yoga teacher. The following excerpt is one she wrote for her blog, and which she also shared with me as part of this inquiry:

> *Nardini and I define "yoga body" differently. Sadie Nardini's definition: "A yoga body is freedom, freedom to be who you know you're meant to be, deep inside. It's 100-proof you, distilled to your essence on all levels, rocking your mind- bod-spirit-freakin'-entire-life to a miraculous, turbo-boosted new level. Yeah, that good." My definition: "a social construct attributed to practitioners of yoga asana; a body that is most often white, slender, toned, flexible, able and heterosexual; frequently clad in bright-coloured spandex and assuming near-impossible arm balance poses."As part of the project, I took selfies during or after my yoga practice, to document my "progress." But instead of taking iPhone photos of myself in perfectly executed yoga poses, I snapped awkward angle shots of myself in completely ordinary poses (cobra, bridge, savasana).*

The photograph Roseanne sent me depicts a part of her body she calls her shadow body and seeks to demonstrate that the yoga body is indeed a myth or as she says "*…a yoga body is simply a body that does yoga, no matter how flawed or lumpy it may be.*" (19/02/2014)



Photograph 8. *The Shadow Body* (19/02/2014), with permission from the photographer, Roseanne.

The photographs and excerpts presented in this section indicate that practicing a regular yoga routine will not necessarily bring about the toned, thin and flexible yoga body that is so often portrayed in a variety of media outlets. This false sense of advertising mirrors the capitalist and profit-making culture that yoga has become embedded in. Yoga scholars such as Melanie Klein argue that the body-centric orientation of yoga enables both yoga studios and corporations to market more classes and to make more profits from all sorts of yoga gear. Since she has lived in Montreal, Rachel has practiced in the same mainstream yoga studio located at the heart of the

Plateau. When I asked her about what the yoga practice in her mainstream studio looked like, she responded by saying

> "*I can tell you a lot about what it doesn't look like. It does not involve a skinny young white girl in front of the classroom telling me to "OM" with her or saying "namaste" to me and wearing $200 worth of lululemon clothes. It also does not involve her guiding me through a practice telling me how to live my higher life, when she's 18, 20 or 21 years old. Unfortunately, that is the prototype that is dominant in so many yoga spaces right now. That shit is hard. That's part of the reason why I keep my eyes closed, I can't look at these girls… So what I find is that a yoga body class would have to target bigger bodies, more diverse bodies, and more brown bodies. It also means putting a big body in front of that classroom to guide it…*" (16/01/2014)

That several of my participants commented on the lack of diverse bodies in yoga studios highlights that there has been a cultural conditioning of what women's bodies should look like and that the alienation of those who do not fit the dominant norm in terms of body image is real. This cultural conditioning is sadly often unexamined and leads to the creation of skewed advertising strategies, showing bodies, images and ideals that are far from reality. Thus, it is essential to make a clear distinction between the physical benefits of the yoga practice and the ways in which marketing strategies have used physical benefits such as weight loss to advocate what yoga practitioners should yearn for in their yoga routine. The discussion of what the "yoga body" means must also be approached with a critical lens. More importantly, these distorted media driven messages also give the impression that being thin, able-bodied and white is the sole indicator of being healthy (Klein, 2012). Melanie Klein (2012) describes the relationship between the growing popularity of yoga and the creation of the "yoga body" phenomenon:

> I came to understand that the sacred space of a yoga practice and the rapidly expanding yoga industry weren't necessarily related. As yoga grew in popularity and was absorbed into mainstream culture, it began to reflect many of its toxic values and norms. I found the heart of yoga to be in serious contradiction to the messages perpetuated as the branding and commercialization of yoga exploded (Klein, 2012, p. 28).

Although she found nothing but contradictions between her personal yoga practice and the commercialization of the yoga culture, the practice itself gave her the tools to live the teachings that "…feminist sociology had taught me" (p.32). She says, "It is one thing to intellectualize self-love and acceptance. It's another to embody and practice it, especially after spending decades learning, practicing, and perfecting self-loathing" (Klein, 2012, p. 32). In the midst of the flood of homogenous images of *yogis,* it is imperative to subvert these stereotypical images that deny and naturalize difference so that yoga practitioners with non-white bodies, those with bigger bodies, and those with different abilities who seek safe spaces of well-being and health may be recognized and celebrated in the very places where they seek healing.

Yoga culture: A site for colour-blindness and the reproduction of white privilege

> *We were about 40 or 50 people in the room. I did not see much diversity in the crowd, except for 4 or 5 brown people, two of whom were my friends whom I had invited to come attend the talk. But after all what was I expecting? Who is available to come to a yoga-related event on a Saturday evening in the Plateau? Probably not working class single mothers. Because the event was free, I thought this would perhaps generate more cultural diversity, since we were all there to discuss accessibility, but once again I found myself in a yoga space largely dominated by white individuals. It was my turn to talk and I discussed my academic research briefly, pointing to the fact that I feel there is a great deal of invisible racism and privilege in the yoga culture. Following my presentation, and once all other panelists had finished speaking, the audience was invited to join in the conversation. At one point, a white man who was perhaps in his late 30s raised his hand and said "But the point of yoga is to unite, to come together as one. I don't see colour, I just see people."*(03/06/2013)

My journal entry outlines one of the many times that I encountered a rhetoric of colourblindness, particularly in yoga spaces whenever issues of race and racism are discussed. I have often heard yoga teachers and practitioners express that thinking about differences is antithetical to the philosophies of yoga that seek to unite us. It is precisely these statements that made me realize the level of disconnect between self-transformation, health, well-being and

social justice. These types of statements always made me feel that my process of critical thinking with regards to race and racism was "un-yogic" or that I was making a big deal out of something that really did not warrant this much attention. I was told on several occasions that I should place more importance on our commonalities rather than our differences, since race is not that much of an issue. But why not find unity and respect while celebrating each other's differences? Can't we share a common humanity and also be different? We may share a common humanity, but we are not all the same. We have different skin colours; we have difference financial means, we think differently, we act differently, and we have different life experiences.

I recently stumbled upon a blog post on *It's All Yoga Baby* addressing the issue of race in North America's yoga culture. What struck me more than anything were the comments below the post. Why was I surprised? After all, such comments were regular occurrences. The post was about an article that was recently published entitled "On Yoga's 'Race Problem': Has The Practice Become Too White?" Many commentators argued that this type of conversation should not be taking place in a yoga space and that it would be better to stay a bit longer in *savasana* (lying down corpse pose) rather than think about race and racism. Here is one the comments that exemplifies the rhetoric of colour-blindness and unexamined white privilege that inadvertently silences our voices within the dominant white culture:

> ya'll need to stay in shavasana a little more and clear the clutter out... think of more productive posts.. who the HECK cares what RACE you are when practicing yoga-or ANY PRACTICE of any kind (sport activity, etc) . Anyone who practices yoga and has any opinion on race interfering with yoga clearly isn't 'in yoga'… ridiculous… (Maxwell, 2014)

Given that the narrative in many of the yoga studios I have gone to centres around messages of unity, peace, love and oneness, the discourse often reinforces virtues of 'colour- blindness.' Frankenberg (1993) argues that "the appeal of colour-blind ideology is rooted in the desire to avoid being or appearing racist, based on the assumption that 'seeing racism means being racist.' Colour-blindness also provides a way to evade very real issues of discrimination and

unequal power, and thus denies the need to actually address the racism that exists in our society" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 147). It is no surprise that yoga studios reproduce various forms of racism, since they operate in a society beget with institutional racisms. To this date, I have not heard of any anti-racist trainings in Montreal's yoga teacher training programs and I attribute this to a failure to acknowledge the realities of institutional and societal racism. Statements such as 'I don't see colour, I just see people' demonstrate the realities of "unacknowledged white privilege" (Bell, 2003, p. 16). Citing Frankenberg (2003), Slocum (2007) explains that whiteness "is a location of structural advantage and involves cultural practices that have come to be understood as normal (Slocum, 2007, p. 523). McIntosh defines white privilege as "…an invisible package of unearned assets…an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurance, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, emergency gear and blank checks" (McIntosh, 1995, p. 77).

Although the participants I interviewed did not necessarily use the term "colour-blindness," they all spoke to the fact that conversations around racism and white privilege in the yoga culture were often overlooked. Elena explains that, through her business, she has the opportunity to teach a diversity of individuals, particularly immigrants, and that she is usually the only black person anytime she attends classes, workshops or trainings. Rhonda states that in her experience, the type of person most frequently represented by and within yoga studios is "*a petite, young twenty-something-or-whatever-year-old white woman*." Rachel adds that since the studio where she practices has become very oriented towards *yoga for charity*, she has become very suspicious of the ways in which white privilege operates in that space,

> *I'm very suspicious, because first of all it's a white space and I'm already suspicious of the white saviour complex that functions in that studio. I think that many yoga spaces really encapsulate that weird "white saviour complex." I often hear teachers say "come and practice yoga with me, and give me $50 and we'll send it to Haiti," so I don't think the studio has done a good job of doing good work in Montreal or anywhere else in the world*. (16/01/2014)

Scholars such as Sullivan (2006) contend that the unconscious habits of white privilege are in

some respects more destructive than the explicit racism of white supremacy because they are not detected. "…Colour blindness erases the privilege that whiteness has brought" (Guthman, 2008, p. 391), and permits individuals to feel that their social locations do not negatively impact systems of inequality. Similarly to agro-food scholarship and practice, "concerns about race and whiteness are notable for their absence" in yoga culture, "suggesting there is more work to be done" (Guthman, 2008, p. 390). What is certain is that when practitioners such as Rachel contend that "*everything that circles my yoga mat feels oppressive*," it is clear that the impacts of white privilege are still thoroughly felt by people of colour. During our interview, Rachel recounted a time when she brought her cell phone into the yoga class, and, as she did not know how to put it on silent since it was her first time having a phone, and the cell phone went off during class. While Rachel was in the locker room getting undressed, the teacher came to her and spoke to her in a way that made Rachel feel assaulted,

> *She followed me into the locker room, [where I had] my towel wrapped around me, telling me "I need to talk to you for a minute, you brought a cell phone in class and were not doing what I was asking you to do."* (16/01/2014)

After recounting this incident, Rachel explained to me that she firmly believes that if teachers were trained with anti-racist values and taught to use non-violent communication, these types of incidents would not take place. She says,

> *When you are committed to the sharing of that language, and embodiment of those principles, you would never have a teacher who talks to a customer like that. Ever. Ever! And if you have hard core anti-racist training in place, that white girl might understand that that black girl might blacken her eye in the locker room, because it's already a hostile environment for black girls to be in. So if you need to call out someone black, hopefully you have a bit of sensitivity about approaching that person who already feels oppressed in that space.* (16/01/2014)

Brian, who identifies as a white gay male, explains that he once taught a series of yoga classes in a community centre in Little Burgundy, a neighbourhood with a dominantly black population. To his surprise, there were never any people of colour in the room.

No people of colour ever came to my class…Not that that is the only important thing, but I wondered why were there no people of colour in my class when next door in the basketball court, or pool, it was full of non-white people. Is it yoga that unattracts racial minorities or is it how it's marketed that unattracts racial minorities? I realise that me just being me, I play into it indirectly. I'm aware of it, which is why I'm an advocate that we need more teachers that represent different abilities, ages, races, so it's not just white skinny people that teach the practice all the time. So as an interim solution, I would say that the segregated "brown girls" yoga classes at the Kula Annex studio in Toronto are helpful. Does it really help to have segregated classes? Yes it does, because it does bring up the dialogue of "how come that doesn't include me?" Because the default is that non- whites are already a minority in Western yoga and already excluded and now the tables turn and indirectly shifts a balance. Everyone is still welcome of course so why would this offend white people? It brings people together and offers space. Like round body yoga, it offers a class where people can learn modifications and build a practice with skills that are tailored to discovering asana within their body and ability so they are armed for regular classes after (22/01/2014).

Brian demonstrates a deep sense of awareness with regards to his own social location in the world and recognizes that it is necessary to actively challenge all forms of privilege, particularly racism. His narrative indicates that he advocates for the importance of shifting the dominant group's privilege as a way to dismantle the racist conditioning and colour-blind stance many individuals adopt. Similarly, Roseanne also acknowledges that fact that there "*isn't a lot of diversity in most of the studios I've experienced personally in terms of race and body-type.*"(16/02/2014) Although Roseanne still seems relatively unsure of how to deal with her own privilege, she recognizes her own social location and how this affects the power structures and social relations both in studios and in the yoga culture. She explains that:

> *I'm a white person of working-class descent so I do have a lot of privilege. And my work lately has been negotiating that privilege and understanding it. It's such a weird thing with privilege… Wanting to do good without trying to negate it. And yoga has become a lens for that too because there's a lot of unexamined privilege in the yoga world. That's*

been one of the really interesting things in working with yoga at an intellectual level. Understanding myself, admitting, being aware of my own privilege and understanding systems of oppression that inform my privilege. Are you supposed to feel grateful or guilty for privilege? In many of the online communities I am a part of, I see a lot of guilt around privilege. I feel guilt too… I'm a white educated woman, and that's one of the things I'm trying to understand lately. How do I negotiate that? Not abuse it or flaunt it, and take that position in a way that serves people. And it can be awkward at times, it can be…It's really a place of being able to listen and not insert my opinion. That's why I find SAAPYA's (South Asian American Perspectives on Yoga in America) work really eye- opening, and liberating, and I would like to see more voices coming up in their community, because it's part of my learning process and it's humbling (16/02/2014).

Rachel deeply appreciates the physical intensity and mental benefits of the yoga practice in the studio where she practices. However, throughout our interview she expressed her dissatisfaction with the studio itself and often used the word oppression. When I asked her if the studio felt oppressive to her, she answered:

I'm going to say yes… For me, however, anytime as a big-bodied brown woman, with all my real bodyparts walks through a space that is dominantly composed of young white girls, in $200 worth of lululemon gear, where there are mirrors, and with a teacher before me who does not have anything to verbally offer to me, that feels oppressive. That space feels oppressive. So all these other things that are circling my mat feel oppressive. But on my mat, I don't feel oppressed. (16/01/2014)

Rachel is not the only one who speaks of her experience in a yoga studio in this way. Similarly, Elena explains that she is always one of the only black women anytime she finds herself in a yoga class or in any yoga related event. This is the case both in Montreal or in her birth place Honduras, where yoga is viewed as a practice of the *gringo* (white person). She attributes the lack of diversity in Montreal's yoga culture to the fact that "*most of the yoga centres are in Mile End, the Plateau, downtown, in the West Island…where white people are*." (25/02/2014) She is concerned that teacher training programs fail to include knowledge around physical

adjustments according to race and body types. For example, while she was in a class for a teacher training program in Montreal, she asked the teacher a question about adjusting black people's coccyx, since she knows for a fact that most black people's coccyx are higher and so cannot always be adjusted the same way as a non-black body. The teacher's answer was "*yoga is colour blind, and everyone is different, it's not a matter of being black or white*." (25/02/2014) Following this discussion, Elena knew that although the training she was receiving was extremely rich in terms of the physiological and physical aspect of yoga, she would not be able to experience a practice adaptable and accessible to individuals with black bodies.

The participants' comments around issues of race and racism in the yoga culture reflect the realities discussed in the relevant literature with regards to privilege and colour blindness. Although I acknowledge that the evidence presented in this inquiry is not representative of the whole yoga culture or of all yoga studios, the racial oppressions in yoga studios are far-reaching and unfortunately dismiss non-dominant voices and communities.

Corporate consumerism as a barrier to inclusive communities

> Inevitably, yoga was absorbed by the larger mainstream culture, studios popped up like Starbucks coffee houses, and an endless array of yoga apparel filled their lobbies. In many ways, yoga became more about how you looked in your colour-coordinated outfit than the practice itself. Slowly, yoga became filtered through and reflected the dominant consciousness, a consciousness informed by corporate consumerism aimed at maximizing profit by any means necessary. (Klein, 2012, p. 40)

Although the yoga philosophy rejects the motivational structure upon which consumerism is predicated, yoga has become multi-million-dollar industry (Horton, 2012, p. viii). Studies have shown that in the United States, the average yoga practitioner's annual income is in the upper income bracket, with an annual income of $75,000 or more (Glass, 2004). Almost all participants agree that the corporate aspect of yoga has been detrimental to the creation of anti- racist, inclusive, and politically conscious yoga communities within the yoga culture. Thus, capitalism is the lens and context through which racism, ageism, classism,

sizeism, and ableism need to be observed.

Unfortunately, there are no statistics around the demographics of yoga in Canada, but by looking through yoga studios' websites, it is easy to identify that the average cost for a yoga class in Montreal is about $17, an unlimited yearly membership starts at $1200, a teacher training about $3000, a yoga mat is $20, and Lululemon yoga pants cost an average of $80, if not more. There are more and more "community classes" being offered in studios at the rate of $5, and although these classes may accommodate certain people, some practitioners argue that these classes are usually very crowded and that the teachers are usually still in training, which can take away from the quality of the class. Studio owners often have to pay between $10,000-$15,000 monthly rent, which is why teacher training programs are more and more recurrent, as they are their main source of income. Furthermore, yoga teachers are paid an average of $50 per class, and have no medical insurance or paid holidays. As Rachel explains,

> *You pay your teacher say $50 a class, but if you have 60 people in that class, you've made $800 as a studio, yet you are only paying your teacher $50! On top of that, the teacher is a contractor, so as a studio owner, you're not even paying taxes on that person. These are not employees, you have one or two employees who work the desk, but these other ten people who make millions for you every year, are contract workers with no benefits, right? That feels wrong to me.* (16/01/2014)

Although my goal is not to analyse the working conditions of yoga teachers, it is an important point to consider, since they are the ones who make it possible for yoga studios to obtain the income they are receiving.

Remski (2012) argues that modern yoga culture has been dominated by corporate consumerism, which in turn inhibits any possibility for the creation of community. He says that, "There are real structural challenges to yoga community: the commercial model, the transient population of students, the collusion of vacation and retreat, practice sequences as commercial products…" (p. 115). I would also argue that these structural challenges further inhibit the creation of inclusive and politically responsible yoga communities in Montreal. In this regard, Rhonda identifies neoliberal capitalism as being the biggest hurdle to the formation of tight-knit

and inclusive communities:

> *The rush, the unending demand for production and immediate results, the perception of everything as commodity, the compulsion to consume, the individual competitiveness, the dominance of corporations, ...In my mind it's just all antithetical to the principles of yoga. How can we call ourselves yoga practitioners if our yoga practice amounts to trying to squeeze in time to run to a studio between work and more work?! I think that we have to try really hard to not only practice yoga in the studio, but to think critically about what it means to practice yoga in our daily lives given this social-political context…There is also a certain sameness among studios, in terms of aesthetics and target "customers." For me this is why it's hard to think of most studios as "yoga communities."* (02/04/2014)

Rachel also argues that if yoga studios are to be committed to anti-racist practices, then "*the yoga studio model should not be a corporate one*" (16/01/2014). Rhonda says that if studios are to be committed to fostering diverse and inclusive communities, then this kind of transformation

> *not only doesn't have a trendy yoga shop in the foyer of the studio, for example, but also has some sort of explicit position explaining why, challenging people not to buy into (literally and figuratively) the yoga consumer industry and to think honestly about what and how they really need in order to practice, rather than how they want to look while they're practicing. I think that this kind of space is identified more as a community space than a business, although that doesn't mean that it has to be free to participate. Maybe it means that there is a price for people who can afford it, but can be free for those who need for it to be. I think that a yoga studio committed to this kind of vision doesn't try to have things both ways- so rather than catering to the obsessive yoga practitioner who has all the latest trendy gear and rushes in and rushes out, it offers an environment that challenges this type of practitioner to slow down, become more introspective, question her choices etc. (*02/04/2014)

Thus, the way modern yoga is being marketed inspires individuals to consume rather than to question the capitalist model of consumerism (Boccio, 2012). The rampant individualism in

North American society has largely been embraced by the yoga culture, prioritizing personal achievement over civic participation. I do not believe that such a climate can possibly inspire yoga practitioners to stop and reflect upon the system they are embedded in.

In the next chapter, *Reflective Understandings,* I present an overview of the key themes that emerged throughout the inquiry. I also use this chapter as an opportunity to discuss the limitations, implications and future possible directions for this inquiry.

Chapter Five: Reflective Understandings

Thinking and Writing about Yoga in Critical and Innovative Ways

As I contemplate the stories told my by inquiry's participants, I am reminded of Nelson Mandela's (1995) quote "for to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others" (p. 751). I stumbled upon this quote in my last year of high school while I was reading his autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*. The precepts of yoga inspire us to become free from the mental conditionings that cause pain and suffering to our physical, mental and spiritual realms, so that we may be in touch with our highest potential. Yoga also invites us to develop self-compassion and compassion towards all living beings (Iyengar, 2001). My personal encounter with yoga has convinced me of its potential for personal transformation and my inquiry shows that all participants continue to use yoga for self-transformation whether it is at a mental, physical or spiritual level. Their personal narratives also illustrate that personal transformation is not solely an individual process that takes place in isolation of the larger systems of power in which we exist. On the contrary, yoga can be a tool to engage with the unjust realities of the world and challenge corporations, studios, teachers, practitioners and the media to critically reflect on their roles in perpetuating systems of oppression be it racism, sexism, able-ism, size-ism, heterosexism or classism.

I began this research because of my love for yoga, and my passion for holistic health and social justice. I return to yoga to find my home in my body, in my breath and in every moment. I also do my best to live in a way that is intentional, conscious of how my choices and actions impact others. I advocate for social justice because I firmly believe that all beings have a right to equitable treatment, equal human rights and a fair allocation of resources. Thus, this inquiry began from my personal quest of wanting to be able to practice in yoga spaces where diversity can be celebrated and where individuals take the opportunity to broaden their understanding of consciousness to include the need to also be aware of systemic inequities, power and privilege and the ways in which these inequities are manifested in yoga studios, yoga communities and yoga culture.

This inquiry also came about because of my desire to unveil contradictions in the yoga culture

as a whole and to re-imagine ways that promoting health could also promote all forms of social justice. My use of critical pedagogy as a theoretical lens is useful in illustrating that the barriers working against diversity in the yoga culture are often silenced, unexamined and invisible. My main research question guiding my inquiry was, "are the different forms of oppression in our society reflected in Montreal's yoga culture?" Through the interviews I conducted, it is clear that although the yoga culture may seek to promote health, wellness, and community building, these services and benefits are marketed to a very small privileged portion of the population. The oppressive racial, economic and visual conditioning of our greater society, whether intentional or not, manifests in our yoga studios. Generally, yoga is an expensive practice, with very little representation of bigger bodies, disabled bodies and people of colour (Murphy, 2014). This representation is skewed and does not always represent the reality of what takes place within different yoga spaces. If health is promoted within a culture, then it is necessary that *all* individuals, regardless of race, age, body size and ability have access to these healthy options. Institutionalized systems of domination (racism, ableism, classism, ageism and sizeism) resonate deeply within the yoga culture and there is work to be done in terms of bridging the gap between self-transformation and social change.

Although yoga studios may be a place of rest and refuge for some, there are many silent voices for whom these spaces are a place of marginalization, violence and anxiety. It seems that one of the biggest challenges to creating more inclusive yoga studios is the denial and invisibility of systemic oppressions within the yoga culture because the tendency in the culture is to flatten real social, cultural, religious or racial differences in the name of concepts such as "oneness." But how can a person of colour possibly heal the consequences of racism if racism is not recognized, acknowledged or even discussed within the culture where this person is seeking refuge, safety and healing?

As Harvey (2012) observes, "It's important for yoga culture to hold space for deepening dialogue and discussion" (p. 184). Thus, dialogue and discussion should not only revolve around the benefits and shortfalls of the modern yoga practice, but on ways to dismantle the barriers that keep the yoga practice out of reach to so many people. The dismantling of these barriers requires

self-reflexive yoga communities who are not afraid to regularly question themselves and to ask themselves the “hard” questions that require a certain level of critical thinking. Applying critical thinking in a yoga studio would be to question whether encouraging practitioners to "quiet the mind" can necessarily inspire them to adopt ethical behaviour. As Scofield (2012) argues,

> An expansive feeling of joy, love, or emotional freedom doesn’t equate with any particular political position. Right-wing Republicans and left-wing Democrats can benefit equally from yoga or meditation. Feeling more happy or carefree may inspire random acts of kindness, but it won’t change someone’s beliefs to reflect any particular political perspective. While a liberal yoga practitioner may say that their practice inspired them to volunteer for a feminist organization, a conservative one may be moved to work for a pro-life group. If the urge to serve people arises from some newly gained insight on the mat, it will be shaped by the context of the individual’s preconceived notions. If there’s some radical shift in deeply held beliefs, it’s just as likely that an ardent pro-lifer would become pro-choice as the opposite (p. 135).

Indeed, through the process of self-reflection, the yoga practice has the potential to bring about a radical shift about one's deeply held beliefs towards oneself. However, this shift does not mean that an individual's inner feeling of peace will lead him to take action against the injustice regarding Michael Brown's recent shooting in Ferguson or any other injustice. This is why through dialogue, critical thinking and education, the yoga culture must address its members' deeply held beliefs around race, class, ability and body-image that contribute to ongoing oppressions and systemic inequalities.

I find that the yoga culture as a whole is conditioned to believe that self-transformation will automatically lead to social justice. This type of skewed belief needs to be addressed so that as members, we are able to shape the culture in a direction where toxic beliefs and behaviours are not accommodated. The premise of critical consciousness is to encourage teachers, students, and studio owners to explore their own biases, but to also have a deep understanding of social issues. This inquiry served as a platform for expression, and gave the participants an opportunity to voice their opinions regarding Montreal's yoga culture. Their personal narratives do not in

any way represent the full experience of yoga teachers and practitioners in Montreal, however they point to issues that need to be addressed within that culture.

Challenges of this inquiry

As I explained at the onset of this thesis inquiry, there is no statistical data regarding the culture of yoga in Montreal. Furthermore, there is very little if any scholarly literature that discusses modern yoga and social justice specifically. Most literature relating to the modern yoga culture is written by yoga scholars, who are mainly white individuals, and so although there is discussion around the commodification of the yoga culture, and issues of body- image, there is very little discussion around race. This element was a challenge in building the structure to my inquiry, since most of the literature I have drawn on with regards to systemic oppressions is not directly related to yoga, but instead coming from literature on food politics, where the discussion around race and racism is much more prevalent. There are however several yoga bloggers, who greatly contribute to the discussion around yoga culture and social justice issues, but in the context of writing an academic inquiry, I did not place these blogs at the center of my inquiry.

Another significant challenge I encountered was an ethical challenge at the onset of my inquiry. It took two months of back and forths of emails and revisions for a member in the Ethics Review Board to approve my application for the REB II Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans. When my supervisor, Dr.Mary Maguire, followed up with the chair of the Ethics Review Board, my application was finally approved. The board questioned the validity of my inquiry because of the fact that I chose to interview a small amount of participants. However, as I explain in chapter three of this inquiry, I prioritized allocating more time to each individual interview, rather than having more participants and having less thorough conversations. Furthermore, the reviewers felt that my research questions were too biased in denouncing the existence of systemic oppressions in the yoga culture which could in turn make the participants feel that their personal views are being threatened or that they are being accused of being part of this systematic oppression. I did not necessarily have the same sentiment, since I asked participants questions to try to understand if the different forms of

oppressions in our society were mirrored in Montreal's yoga studios. I never intended to force any of my opinions onto my participants, and the interview transcriptions in this inquiry demonstrate that participants such as Dr.Bali did not feel obliged to heavily criticise the yoga culture. In fact, he did not speak much about systemic oppressions.

Limitations and future research

A limitation to this inquiry, along with having to make it manageable for MA thesis research, is that I did not interview studio owners from mainstream yoga studios, such as Bikram Yoga studio or Moksha Yoga studio. Their perspectives could have shed light on their understandings of concepts such as consciousness, union and community and perhaps may have explained why their understandings of these terms may not encourage discussion and action around social justice issues. Another limitation to this inquiry is that I did not expand on successful community groups such as SAAPYA, based in Brooklyn or Grassroots Yoga Populaire, based in Montreal who actively contribute to the opposition, resistance and transformation of the modern yoga culture by holding discussions and working with an anti-oppressive lens.

As I mentioned at the onset of this thesis inquiry, I do not attempt to generalize my findings or claim that these findings are applicable to all of modern yoga culture or to all yoga practitioners. The words in this inquiry do not in any way represent the absolute truth, but rather are an invitation to dialogue and action. It is my hope that this study will be expanded either by myself or other yoga practitioners as there are many issues that still remain to be explored.

For further examination, I propose conducting research in the United States, where the discussion around race and yoga is much more prevalent. Comparisons could be drawn between Canada and the United States and Montreal's yoga culture could perhaps inspire themselves from initiatives that actively seek to present a more diverse account of yoga practitioners while at the same time working to make yoga more accessible. There are initiatives such as Chelsea Loves Yoga started by yoga scholar, Chelsea Jackson, in Atlanta, Georgia. Chelsea Loves Yoga is a blog that aims to offer an online platform to put to the front teachers and practitioners of colour. Another initiative is Yoga to the People, a yoga studio in New York City that offers yoga

at affordable prices and attempts to have a diversity of instructors so that yoga can be made available to as many people as possible. These initiatives are good examples of communities of resilience who actively work to counter the status-quo.

Another suggestion for further research would be to conduct an inquiry on how individuals at the intersection of race, class, body size and physical ability use the yoga practice as a way to heal from systemic oppressions. Our bodies hold trauma, but they also hold tremendous wisdom to be able to heal the trauma encountered. Scientific evidence has proven that yoga has the capacity to decrease the effects of trauma (Thompson, 2014). Such testimonies could bring to light the ways systems of oppression affect individuals and could also give examples of how these oppressions are countered.

Lastly, considering that there are more than 100,000 yoga teachers globally, it is necessary to discuss the role of yoga teachers in shaping the yoga culture and the ways in which they take part in mobilizing against oppressive elements in their yoga studios. This research could be conducted with the use of online yoga teacher's blogs that have grown tremendously in the past years.

The yoga culture is not the only culture of "wellness" where systemic inequities are pervasive. This inquiry can contribute to social, activist and food politics movements, as well as spiritual groups and environmental organizations who wish to bridge the gap between personal transformation, social justice and social change.

Revisiting theory

As I explained in chapter three of this inquiry, I chose to approach my analysis of the yoga culture with the lens of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy provided me with a tool to understand and critique the ways that the modern yoga culture reproduces current social inequalities. For the sake of self-reflexivity, I think it is necessary that I outline the ways in which the use of this theory falls short in the context of my inquiry. Many of the “founding fathers” of critical pedagogy, whether Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, or Henry Giroux are all white males. This is problematic in my inquiry since my findings demonstrate that colour- blindness and the lack of discussion around race and racial issues is a significant problem in Montreal’s yoga

culture. In response to Ellsworth's (1989) article bringing to light the "repressive myths" of critical pedagogy, critical race theorist Ladson-Billings (1997) argues that critical pedagogy also contributes to social marginalization because of "its failure to address adequately the question of race" (p. 127). Critical pedagogues such as Henry Giroux have been very vocal at unmasking and denouncing unequal power relations, however they tend to silence issues of race, given that North American countries such as the United States and Canada are heavily dominated by racism to this day. Thus, in revisiting my theoretical lens, I would argue that in addition to critical pedagogy, the work of critical race theorists such as Razack, Crenshaw, Ladson-Billings and Ellsworth need to inform the analysis of Montreal's yoga culture so that the racism that has permeated institutional and social realities is recognized.

Expanding our understanding of union

> How can we begin to imagine new stories, ones that move beyond the divisions that shape our lives toward a society where the pains inflicted on some of our citizens and enabled by the adopted blindness of others, are once and for all acknowledged, mourned, atoned for and healed? Might we then imagine the kind of story that recognizes and celebrates our diversity while embracing our common humanity (Bell, 2010, p. 24).

In thinking about the celebration of our common humanity, I would like to return to the expansion of our understanding of union. And in order to do so, I must return to the definition of yoga that I provided at the onset of my inquiry. The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj,* "meaning to bind, join, attach and yoke, to direct and concentrate one's attention on, to use and apply. It also means union or communion" (Iyengar, 2001, p.19). I consider it important to reflect critically on the word union as it is presented in the yoga philosophy, as this can be a first step to reflecting on concrete steps to cultivate more accessible, socially and politically responsible yoga communities. I do believe that there is an underlying unity between all people, but this unity must not be mistaken for 'sameness.' The goal of attaining union needs to also include coming to grips with our world's realities of racism, classism and able-ism, instead of becoming individuals who use practices such as yoga to avoid painful feelings

and the difficult realities of social issues. Should the goal of attaining union be done in a self-serving manner or can it also be used to build as a tool for solidarity where we come to the realization that if we do not recognize one's positionality as well as the political realities of the world we live in and the ways in which they affect those around us, then there can be no union.

Cultivating solidarity is a powerful method to understand and honour the fundamental sense of union yoga teaches us, while at the same time acknowledging the differences in our lived experiences. As Brian explained during our interview,

> *We're not all one. I think a lot of things were lost in translation…like in terms of how we interpret Sanskrit texts…And so we live through our western filters, and it's a very catholic form of karma, what goes around comes around attitude, or 'we're all one happy family.' And I'm like, are we? If not everyone can come into this room, are we all one? Are we all the same? And why is it such a bad thing not to agree with that? That we are not the same, and celebrate differences! That is a form of union from a different angle.* (22/1/2014)

Inclusivity needs to be at the core of knowledge transmission, community building and physical settings of yoga spaces. The last part of my interviews with participants consisted of asking them if they had concrete solutions to making yoga spaces more diverse and accessible. Along with their perspectives, I would also like to offer possible ways of how a yoga space can be shaped differently. These include using inclusive and accessible language, including gender-neutral bathrooms, creating opportunities for more teachers of colour, ending the fat-shaming marketing strategies, including anti-racist and non-violent communication trainings in teacher's training courses and offering sliding-scale prices for yoga classes, precisely because we have different needs and we are different. Raising one's consciousness on a spiritual level does not equate with raising one's political or ethical consciousness. Social transformation can only come about if we raise our awareness of the political realities in which we live and if everybody's presence in a room is acknowledged and valued (hooks, 1994). I also wish to clarify that raising consciousness does not imply embarking on a missionary quest to convert those who we feel are in need of yoga to start practicing yoga.

When I asked Dr.Bali about his thoughts on diversity in Montreal's yoga culture, I was perplexed by his answer for some time. Dr.Bali is my yoga teacher and I continue to go to his studio for my practice because I feel that his studio is accessible to all body sizes, races, ages and classes. Having been his student and having worked closely with him for the past six years, I am convinced that he "walks the talk" and brings wisdom to the yoga practice. I know that he applies tenets of the yoga philosophy as best as he can and aims to make yoga accessible to as many people as possible. He answered my question by saying,

> *We are not the same at the external level. The difference is with the external preoccupations, social differences, when we're dealing with jobs, and relationships, but the inner journey takes us to a sacred space. In this space, the differences will melt away. So it's not something you do, it's something that will happen as a part of your own experience. But even in differences, like in a garden, where there are many shades, many colours, many forms, it is important to focus on the beauty of all these different elements.* (09/01/2014)

Similar to Dr.Bali's words, I do believe that through different practices of meditation, we are able to reach a sacred space within ourselves where any sense of separation with all living things is dissolved. Notwithstanding Dr.Bali's words, it is important that yoga spaces keep the goal of interconnectedness in mind, while also addressing the realities of inequality in this world. Applying the yogic concept of *ahimsa* or non-violence means we should not hide behind colour-blindness, because differences do exist. Is it credible, in 2014, to advocate for wellness and the raising of consciousness if we do not recognize and strive to dismantle the institutionalized oppression that exists in our world? I do not believe so. These goals of wellness and consciousness cannot be reached if we do not minimize the forces of the power structures that act as barriers to wellness and health to such a large sector of the population.

Final reflections

After conducting this inquiry, I feel hopeful about certain elements of Montreal's yoga culture. Although I doubt that mainstream yoga studios will give up their models of consumer capitalism, I am hopeful about the possibility of creating new marketing strategies that are more

inclusive and reflective of everyday yoga practitioners. I am certain that even though certain mainstream yoga studios may not be willing to engage in conversations around issues of social justice, Montreal has several strong activist communities who are devoted to both individual and communal liberation. After all, collectives such as GrassRoots Yoga Populaire are already working to create alternative, non-commercial, anti-oppressive and affordable environments where a diverse range of students can come practice.

I do not believe that creating these alternative spaces of practice is the only solution. I think that dialogue between individuals who consciously or unconsciously make the yoga culture so exclusive and those who feel excluded needs to happen. The data presented in my research's findings indicates that all teachers who train to become yoga teachers should also be trained to understand issues of social justice and diversity. I think the paradox of modern yoga culture will forever exist. Yoga in North America may forever be enriching and give individuals meaning, but also very empty and devoid of it. Yoga may contribute to spiritual awakening, but also contribute to the inflation of egos. Hyper-commercialized, individualistic, racially and economically exclusive yoga studios will continue to coexist alongside yoga studios that seek to promote holistic health for much more than just a small fraction of humanity. And this is because modern yoga is practiced for such a wide variety of reasons.

Throughout the process of my research, I found my own personal yoga practice has deepened and my vision of spirituality has broadened. Although I do still practice yoga as a way to manage my own stress, calm my mind and reconnect with my own body, I also use my practice as a form of spiritual awakening. I understand spiritual awakening as an awakening to the effects of my daily actions, and sensitivity to a world beyond "me." My spiritual awakening requires taking care of myself but also taking action to bring more balance to a world filled with environmental, ecological, social, physical and psychological imbalance. The ongoing project of dismantling concentrations of power from the hands of a dominant culture must and can take place not only in our schools, politics, communities but also in our yoga studios. Yoga is a practice that encourages us to be accountable for our beliefs, choices and actions on and off the mat. We can only be able to create safer spaces for those who wish to practice if we

acknowledge the existing inequality and injustice in the same spaces we so freely speak of unity and oneness. The personal fulfillment and nourishment gained from yoga becomes even richer as we learn to also extend these benefits to our local and global communities.

Appendix 1: Recruitment Email

Dear xxx,

I am an MA graduate student at McGill University, in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education, conducting a inquiry entitled: "Taking Yoga off our Mat: Approaching Montreal's Yoga Culture with a Critical Lens." As a yoga teacher and practitioner, I plan to conduct an inquiry on how the intersections of race, class and body type impact the individual and collective yoga practices of yoga teachers and practitioners in Montreal as a way to emphasize the importance of accessibility and diversity within the Montreal yoga communities. My supervisor is Dr. Mary Maguire.

I would like to invite you to participate in this inquiry, which will involve me interviewing you for a period of 1:30-2:00 hours about your own yoga experiences as they relate to your personal identity and life experiences as well as your perspective of the yoga communities in Montreal The interview can take place at a time and location that is convenient for you.

I would also like to invite you to send me a photo of yourself practicing yoga in a way that is meaningful to you. You will have a month after the interview to submit your photo to me. The goal of this photography project is to broaden the visual representations of those practicing yoga. The participatory photography projects will then be displayed in an on-line gallery, which will be shared with yoga studios, communities and organizations across North America. The aim of the online gallery is to represent how the intersections of race, class and body type impact the individual and collective yoga practices of yoga teachers and practitioners in Montreal.

I hope that your participation in this inquiry through the interviews and with the use of photography can enable you to deepen your thoughts and reflections about your personal yoga practice and your perspective on the yoga communities in Montreal.

I will provide you with a confidentiality form at our first meeting where you can chose if you

would prefer to use a pseudonym for the publications and reports that emerge from this inquiry.

I do not foresee any potential risks or discomfort to you as a result of participating in this inquiry. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to and can stop the interview and participatory photography project at any time, You will always have the right to withdraw from the inquiry at any time without consequence. Please feel free to contact me via email sarah.mostafa-kamel@mail.mcgill.ca or by phone 514-562-9627 if you would like more information on the inquiry and/or if you would like to set a time for an interview. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Mary Maguire via email at mary.maguire@mcgill.ca.

Many thanks,

Sarah Mostafa-Kamel

Appendix 2: Statement of Informed Consent to Participate in Research

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of the inquiry: Taking Yoga off our Mat: Approaching Montreal's Yoga Culture with a Critical Lens.

Interviewer/Researcher: Sarah Mostafa-Kamel, graduate student in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education (McGill University) in collaboration with her supervisor, Dr.Mary Maguire, Montreal.

The purpose of this research is to collect testimonies of participants' personal yoga experiences, practices and their perspectives of the yoga communities in Montreal. I am particularly interested in the intersections of race, class, body type, and the practice of yoga. There are no right or wrong answers. The purpose of this research is to collect your honest opinions about the current practice of yoga in Montreal.

The information gathered as a result of individual and group interviews will be conveyed in a manner that respects each participant (see options on direct quotation below). Your name will not be identified without your permission.

Your Participation:

Your participation in this inquiry will consist of an interview lasting approximately one hour and a half to two hours as well as taking a photo of yourself practicing yoga in any way that is meaningful to you. During the interviews, you will be asked a series of questions about your personal yoga experiences, practices and perspectives of the yoga communities in Montreal. You may pass on any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. At any time you may notify the researcher that you would like to stop the interview and your participation in the inquiry.

There is no penalty for discontinuing participation. Your participation in this inquiry is voluntary and no penalty or disadvantage will accrue to you for non-participation, nor any benefit for participation.

Confidentiality:

When a recording is made:

- that additional copies of my interview tape may be made for back-up purposes.
- that the original tape and all copies of it will be accessible only to Sarah Mostafa-Kamel and will be kept in a password protected computer or USB key.

Permission to Quote:

- I may wish to quote your words directly in the thesis resulting from our discussion. With regards to being quoted, please check yes or no for each of the following statements:

YES NO	I wish to review the notes / recordings/photographs collected during my interview.
YES NO	I agree that the researcher may publish documents that contain quotations by me under the following conditions (checking YES to any of the below means that you grant copyright permission to the researcher for the purpose of publication)
YES NO	I agree to be quoted directly (my name is used).
YES NO	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published (I remain anonymous).
YES NO	I agree that the researcher may publish my photograph in her thesis project and in an online gallery available to the general public.

Thank you for taking part in this research project. If you have any questions about this inquiry, please contact Sarah Mostafa-Kamel via e-mail at sarah.mostafa-kamel@mail.mcgill.ca or by phone at 514-562-9627. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Mary Maguire via email at mary.maguire@mcgill.ca or by phone at 514-398- 2183. If you have any questions regarding your rights and welfare as a participant, please contact McGill Ethics Officer Lynda McNeil at 514-398-6193 or at lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

Many thanks,

Sarah Mostafa-Kamel

By signing below I acknowledge that I agree to participate in the inquiry. I am aware that I can discontinue my participation in the inquiry at any time without consequence.

Signature_____Date_____

Appendix 2: Participant Informed Consent Form

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT TO TAKE PHOTOGRAPH

Project Description

Title of the inquiry: Taking Yoga off our Mat: Approaching Montreal's Yoga Culture with a Critical Lens.

Interviewer/Researcher: Sarah Mostafa-Kamel (McGill University) in collaboration with her supervisor, Dr.Mary Maguire, Montreal.

The purpose of this research is to collect testimonies of participants' personal yoga experiences, practices and their perspectives of the yoga communities in Montreal.

The information gathered as a result of the participatory photography project will be conveyed in a manner that respects each participant. Names of participants will not be attached to the photographs without their permission.

Your Participation:

Your participation in this inquiry will consist of you taking a photo of yourself practicing yoga in any way that is meaningful to you. You will have a month after the interview to submit your

photo to me. The goal of this photography project is to broaden the visual representations of those practicing yoga. The participatory photography projects will then be displayed in an on- line gallery, which will be shared with yoga studios, communities and organizations who use anti-oppressive frameworks across North America. The aim of the online gallery is to represent how the intersections of race, class and body type impact the individual and collective yoga practices of 7 yoga teachers and practitioners in Montreal.

At any time you may notify the researcher that you would like to stop your participation in the inquiry. There is no penalty for discontinuing participation. Your participation in this inquiry is voluntary and no penalty or disadvantage will accrue to you for non-participation, nor any benefit for participation.

Confidentiality

When photographs are taken:

- that my photograph may be included in Sarah Mostafa-Kamel's thesis document.
- that my photograph will be identified with my name.
- that the original photograph and it's copy will be accessible only to

  Sarah Mostafa-Kamel and her supervisor, Dr.Mary Magure, and will be kept in a password protected computer or USB key.
- that copies of the photograph may be accessible on an on-line gallery and visible to the general public.
- that my photograph may be presented during academic conference presentations.

  Thank you for taking part in this research project. If you have any questions about this inquiry, please contact Sarah Mostafa-Kamel via e-mail at sarah.mostafa-kamel@mail.mcgill.ca or by phone at 514-562-9627. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Mary Maguire via email at mary.maguire@mcgill.ca or by phone at

514-398- 2183. If you have any questions regarding your rights and welfare as a participant, please contact McGill Ethics Officer Lynda McNeil at 514-398-6193 or at lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

Many thanks,

Sarah Mostafa-Kamel

By signing below I acknowledge that I agree to participate in the inquiry. I am aware that I can discontinue my participation in the inquiry at any time without consequence.

Signature_____Date_____

Appendix 3: Interview Guiding Questions and Topics

Yoga and Individual Identity

1. How long have you been practicing yoga?

2. What inspired you to first practice yoga?

3. In which ways is your yoga practice important to you?

4. How do you live your yoga?

5. Does yoga help you express your identity? If so, how?

6. What inspires you to practice yoga? What do you feel is your role as a yoga student?

7. What inspires you to teach yoga? What do you feel is your responsibility as a yoga teacher?

8. What do you learn about yourself through yoga?

9. What do you learn about the world through yoga?

Yoga and Healing

1.Do you feel that your yoga practice has strengthened your self-confidence?

2.Has your yoga practiced helped you deal with stress or difficult moments? If so, how?

3.Has yoga helped you deal with trauma as it relates to familial difficulties, sexism, racism, homophobia or classism? If so, how?

4. Does your yoga practice allow you to reclaim your health?

Montreal's Yoga Culture and Communities

1.Are you involved in one of Montreal's yoga communities? If so, how?

2.Do you feel lonely in your yoga practice? If so, how?

3.Do you feel that you belong in one of Montreal's yoga communities?

4.What do you like about Montreal's yoga communities?

5. Is there anything you dislike about Montreal's yoga communities?

6. What factors determine whether you will practice at a yoga studio?

7. What would you define as an « authentic » yoga practice?

8. Have you ever decided not to go to a particular yoga class or studio? If so, why?

9. Do you find that yoga in Montreal fosters community?

Yoga and Social Change

1. Do you find that Montreal's yoga community is diverse? In which ways?

2. Do you find that Montreal's community is exclusive? In which ways?

3. What concrete steps do you think can be taken to create inclusive yoga communities?

4.Do you speak about different forms of oppression in yoga spaces or in yoga communities you are a part of?

5.Do you think yoga has the potential to bring people from different walks of life together, to transgress cultural, racial, religious, socio-economical boundaries?

6. Have you blended your yoga practice with your activism/ how have you incorporated your yoga practice into your activism or vice versa?

7.What is your opinion in terms of cultural appropriation as it relates to yoga?

8.What is the yoga studio's role in the community?

9. Do you think inner transformation brings about social transformation?

10. Do you think the yoga practice positive contribution to building equitable, healthy and sustainable communities?

11. What are the obstacles to making yoga accessible?

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