

## Writing from the Body: Yoga as a Method of Representation

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**Abstract:** *In this article we explore the possibility of using yoga to try to perform research. The author reflects on the fortified knowledge that she approaches through the practice of yoga, in order to give meaning to the collected data on women's spiritual group in the rural south. Specificity of this paper is that yoga is used not only as a means to organize and display data, but also a means to explore the boundaries between the roles of participant/observer and the yogi/researcher.*

**Key words:** *yoga, methods of presentation, somatic*

### Introduction

Although there has been sufficient literature addressing the utility of exploring one's subjectivity while doing qualitative inquiry, little scholarship has been done that focuses on knowledge that emanates from the body. The acceptance of autoethnography and personal narratives as legitimate forms of research has advanced the inclusion of non-cognitive knowledge, but it is still limiting. Despite these limitations, Peshkin (1988) includes some knowledge from within when he speaks about the processes of locating his subjectivity. He locates the "warm and cold spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings, the experiences [he] wanted more of or wanted to avoid and when [he] felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfill [his] research needs. In short, [he] had to monitor [himself] to sense how [he] was feeling" (p.18). What Peshkin is describing not an intellectual endeavor, but a sensory or emotional pursuit. Although there appears to be some interest to include alternative ways of knowing in research processes, somatics has not been summoned to do this work.

### Yoga and somatics

Somatics is an interdisciplinary outlook that has contributions from many fields, namely, medicine, spirituality, performance, art, therapy, and education. It also has much in common with phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and philosophy. Somatics represents a merging of fields, much like comparative studies, which incorporates religion, literature, anthropology, etc. Somatics is not only a body of knowledge, but an orientation and a way of life. Although somatics is most recognized by the writings of Thomas Hanna as an attempt to move beyond the dualistic assumptions placed on the body, doing somatics necessitates that one adhere to a practice of some kind. Although somatics can be found in almost anything, there are disciplines, like yoga and judo, that are inherently somatic. Hanna describes somatics as the "body as experienced from within" and all of its totality. Doing somatics means doing something that allows one to experience the self in its entirety.

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By shining light on the inner world of sensation, Hanna was able to educate individuals about their bodies and processes. Hanna was interested not only in awareness, but also in biological function and environment. Awareness, in Hanna's application, means bringing some "thing" into consciousness that was once unconscious. Change occurs as a result of this shift in consciousness. This type of awareness is what eventually rectified his patients' problems and it is this awareness that traditional healing modalities have ignored for decades.

Somatics involves more than just overcoming dualist thought; it overlaps with ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodologists examine the taken-for-granted assumptions in everyday life. They take a perspective that is consumed with the individual and how a person makes sense out of his/her world. Although this framework is typically applied to sociological or educational structures, it also applies to somatics. If researchers are consumed with the methods people use to make sense out their world, then it seems reasonable to conclude that this would also include making sense of bodily or sensory messages as well. The term "making sense" implies using all the senses, not just cognitive functions, to reach decisions and understanding about existence. This especially includes types of data like sensation and feeling. Employing a somatic perspective involves devising interpretations about the meaning of *all* sensory phenomena on *all* levels (emotional, intellectual, physical, subtle, spiritual, kinesthetic, etc.).

What essentially separates somatics from other theories, however, is that it is typically linked with a practice of some kind. Depending on the individual, practice can be any number of activities as long as it promotes the themes that move one toward unification. Somatics eventually becomes a lifestyle in that as a practice is cultivated, new lifestyle choices are made and old practices are abandoned. Many of the somatic arts and movement forms have been extracted from spiritual traditions centuries ago and were passed down from student to teacher. Because of this tradition, I am more inclined to label somatics as an orientation, rather than a philosophy or theory. If I were describing somatic theory in an abstract way without application, somatics could be reduced to just another philosophy. The difference between somatics and other philosophies is that the ideas that comprise somatic thought are acted upon and are thus embodied. Theories, on the other hand, can be adopted and abandoned when needed. Somatics, however, includes a way of being in the world that is difficult to abandon. Furthermore, theory is not particularly useful unless it has a successful application. In this light, somatics seems to thrive because it is always applied.

## **Research**

The application of my own somatic practice, yoga, surfaced while I was revisiting some data on women's spirituality. The project initially began as an assignment to understand the strategies involved while engaging in qualitative research. For roughly a year and a half, I immersed myself in the traditions, practices, and celebrations of a women's circle located in the rural South.

The group I was studying became more involved in my life after this experience, and there was a nebulous line between my role as participant and observer.

## **Results of the research**

Women seemed to be engaged in the spirituality circle in order to balance out the years of spiritual inequality found in traditional religious structures. The types of rituals they created allowed them to poise an individual's need for introspection with a collective need to celebrate. The healing components of rituals, like purging and symbolism, harmonized the negativity brought about by religion, society, and family life.

This research surfaced again while I was taking another qualitative course when the analogy that data is like clay to be reworked and shaped in different ways was presented to me (Richardson, 1997). One day we were given a coding exercise and we were instructed to label the contents of each line with a single word. This seemed a lot like an exercise in mindfulness meditation where one identifies the contents of the mind with a single word. In meditation, one simply witnesses through the eyes of the detached observer the sensations, thoughts, and feelings that reside within. The contemplator labels the contents of the body/mind appropriately, by identifying each sensation or urge as planning, judging, craving, wondering, etc.

The exercise was similar to meditation since we labeled the contents of the line just as we do the silent conversation we have in our heads. The practice of meditation demonstrates that it is difficult to let go of one's biases and opinions to review our internal data through the eyes of a detached observer. Nonetheless, this activity illuminated the various possibilities of using somatic practices/modalities in the effort of doing research. Somatics, as Peshkin says of subjectivity, is also like a garment that cannot be removed since it touches everything we do, including research. The somatic perspective values practice as much as theory, so welcoming the practice of yoga into my research was appealing. This process also highlighted the fact that my practice was affecting other aspects of my life—including my research.

All of these discoveries inspired me to use the practice of yoga as a method of representation. What follows is the framework of a yoga class to elaborate on the original finding of balance.

### **Centering**

Sitting in a comfortable, seated position. My sitting bones make contact with the earth and my spine lengthens so much that the crown of my head extends towards the sky. My awareness sinks inward.

Dwelling on connectedness. Realizing that all life is interconnected on many levels. I see that my emotional body is not separate from my physical body. And the spiritual is not separate from my physical body.

Exhaling. I consider what brings me back to the practice time and time again. I realize that it is symbolism, meaning, and growth. I remember a voice once saying that it wasn't until the rituals that I knew you could make it meaningful for yourself. Doing this ritual has moved me out of my fog.

I practice to change, to grow, to move beyond my limitations and habitual patterns. I clarify my intent to *search for meaningful spiritual growth*.

### **Asanas**

On my hands and knees, I curl my toes under and walk my hands back to my feet. Pressing my weight into my hands allows me to stand with soft knees, and now I am slumped over like a rag doll, slowly noticing the different muscle groups working to pull me to an upright position.

Planting the soles of my feet firmly into the earth, I ground myself. Hugging the muscles of the legs together, I engage my arms and inhale them up overhead. Now, I am standing tall and proud like a mountain.

This posture reminds me that *the earth constantly renews itself, as we do*. My feet instinctively melt into the soil and I imagine the sweat lodges. *With sweat lodges, we have the connection with the earth*. Nature provides all the elements required to craft a structure each year. We make offerings as we cut saplings and fashion an altar out of the moist clay. We dwell in the makeshift womb to return to a primal state, to find our edges, to cleanse, and to release.

Inhaling my arms overhead into *tadasana*, or mountain pose, images of the rituals and the smells around Starcrest return to me. I recall the flickering of the fires, the crunching sound of the leaves in the fall, and the smell of sweet grass in the summer. Cedar and sage fill the air. My mind meanders to thoughts of women of all ages that have impressed me as much as the Talkeentnan Mountains. I acknowledge my eagerness to return.

Beginning to shift my weight to one foot, I move into *vrkshasana*, or the tree. Trees change with each season just as women's bodies do. Young maidens blossom in spring and leaves turn color and wither when wise women become crones. My foot becomes rooted, and my arms are now lively branches extended towards the sky. I think of late spring and of the maypole ceremony to honor maidens. I remember that night when we danced in the woods to celebrate our fertility. We sang songs and planted seeds in the earth.

Taking an integrative breath in and out, I gently fold my torso downward so that my head opposes gravity. As my hands meet the floor, I lower my hips and then my knees. My hands walk away from my body a few inches and now I am resting on all fours.

My right leg takes a ridiculously large step forward from table position. My hips square off with the front of my space, and I lower my sitting bones downward towards the earth. Inhaling my arms overhead, I am now standing confidently in warrior I, or *virabhadrasana*.

Warrior I teaches us about strength and courage. I try to let go of conditioning or the *shoulds*, as my friend Sherri calls them . . . *it's unlearning everything that you've been taught. You get to a point where you are ready to be yourself, not what you were groomed to be.* Warrior I reminds me to stand on my own with confidence. I take a cleansing breath to drink the benefits of the posture.

Lunging forward from warrior, I straighten my right leg and place my right hand on the floor. Exhaling, the left foot floats off the ground and I attempt to stack my hips, one at a time, as my left arm reaches to the sky. The heart space opens as I struggle to keep steady in *ardha chandrasana*, or half moon.

Balancing postures show us if our lives are grounded or not. The days I have a hard time balancing are those when I question and doubt myself. Other things undermine my balance, like the mind fodder that is fed to us by the media. *That's the one thing I don't like about our culture—how it emphasizes the way that women should look through the media, the ads, the shows. In our society we are surrounded by inadequate requests put on women in advertising and the workplace.*

I create an intention to *try not to get caught up in the material world- in the unwanted content that comes out of television and magazines.* Sometimes, I lose my positioning and I resort back to the *shoulds* and what culture dictates. I find my balance sometimes on my own and sometimes when I am with my friends. The group helps get rid of some of that cultural *poison*.

Back in *tadasana*, I melt my chin deep into my chest. My shoulders round and my knees bend while my torso descends gracefully over my legs as if I were putting a sleeping child to bed. Gradually, my hands meet the floor and walk forward so that I am resting on my belly. Rolling over onto my back, I begin to press out through my heels. My shoulders round towards the earth, my heart is open, and my gaze is directed back to the past as I enter *matsyasana*, or the fish. Breathing.

Heart-opening postures remind us to approach all things with softness and compassion. I recall exposing my vulnerable side on several occasions to purge and to heal. I grew comfortable with sharing in my women's group since *everyone in the group gets to share experiences. Sharing is a big part of the circles. When women open up and share, you realize, hey, she's going through*

*some of the same stuff I was going through or she's had a totally different experience than me but I realize how valid and important her story is.*

Memories of stories shared – joyous, painful, comical, devastating, astonishing. Or is that samskara, the unprocessed energy blocks in the body? Letting go. Rolling over onto my side, again I am in table position. My head now rests in the earth between my hands and slowly my bottoms become my tops. All of my internal fluid nourishes my scalp, and my awareness remains with this flow as my body defies gravity. Everything is upside down. Being inverted allows me to witness the world from a different perspective.

Balancing in this posture, I hear a voice from the circle that once told me that *the balance is linked too far into the patriarchal. We don't need to do away with that....* Pressing back through my kidneys to even myself out, I am reminded of the yogic concept of bramacharya, or personal energy management. Everything in moderation, including moderation, is the idea behind this concept. Being at one extreme for too long is unhealthy and unbalanced. The prescription is to take the middle path. Just like Susan said, we just to need even it out a little. The longer I am inverted, the more I start to imagine turning everything into its opposite. From this position I see new perspectives. *I see how maybe the women's movement has gotten off its tracks a little bit. We needed to make progress in the corporate world, but we entered a male world.* What we should have done was make the world a little bit more effeminate. I struggle to maintain my balance.

Inversions can be hard on the body, so I take a leisurely rest by melting into garbasana, or child's pose. Placing my head below my heart, I stretch my arms overhead. In child's pose, I subtly acknowledge that the heart comes before the mind. I am reminded of motherhood and late summer. The idea of creativity also enters my interior landscape, as the child represents a woman's ultimate power to create. Being in this pose reminds me to honor the delicate child within.

Garbasana is about safety, and I think of the security the group provides since women feel safe with other women. *There are certain things that have come up that I wouldn't feel so comfortable addressing if men were around.* But now, I feel the acceptance a mother gives to her child, time and time again. The group held me like a child after my father's surgery.

Coming over onto my back, I place the soles of my feet near my buttocks. My shoulders round back as my heart opens once more. As I am pressing down through the shoulders and feet, my hips glide upward and my chest reaches towards the chin. I witness the random thoughts, feelings, and sensations that move through my core. Using the breath helps me go deeper into the posture. My edge comes up rather quickly, which tempts me to release. The ujjayi breath carries me through the edge and finally I release the posture. My body is flooded with energy and heat.

*Setu bandhasana* or the bridge, stirs the sexual energy of the second chakra. My thoughts shift to relationships with men and suddenly I am filled with rage and anger. Where is this coming from? Why do I feel this way? Suddenly, my thoughts revert back to degrading conversations and rotted relationships. My body tenses as I hear my friend's story echoing through my consciousness.

Reminding myself to soften and open, I continue to witness and begin to let go of tension. Placing each vertebra on the floor, one at a time, like pearls on the string of a necklace, gently I release the posture and experience the bliss of nothingness. As energy circulates through my entire being, I allow the heat to fade. Smiling to myself, I give thanks for finding the light in dreary places.

I rest now in *mrtasana* (lying relaxed on my back) with my legs extended and place my arms out to the side. Palms are breathing upward towards the ceiling. As my awareness shuts out external stimuli, I begin to notice a paradox—that even in stillness there is movement. Breath is flowing, blood is circulating and energy is moving about the body.

Holding onto tension produces disease and creates imbalances. Sometimes *I get real tense, so I have to do something with that energy cause it's not real beneficial for the next person.* I remind myself to relax and let go. Sometimes in relaxation, a release is found through tension. Gently, I begin to tighten various parts of my body, hold for a few cycles of breath and then release.

Tension is channeled through my feet . . . then my legs . . . and my hips . . . my abdomen . . . my chest . . . my arms . . . hands . . . and face. Slowly I collect any wandering ideas, fragmented thoughts, and afternoon plans and then release them as well, like rose petals to the wind. I simmer for one more moment on the connectedness of all things and how all opposites depend on each other—up needs down, day needs night, and tension needs release. I begin labeling all the contents of my mind in a detached manner until I find a balance between effort and surrender.

Dwelling in yoga nidra, or yogi sleep. Rolling over onto one side, I curl in a ball to rest and to ponder my period of relaxation. Gently, my body guides me back to a seated position and I notice how I feel more at ease, more balanced, and more at home in my body than I did prior to my session.

To acknowledge the time I spent nurturing my body, I end with a chant. Taking a breath in. *Aum.* I notice how the *Aum* resonates through my entire being before I bring my hands together over the heart.

## **Reflections**

Yoga became a method of representation by relying on asanas, or postures as a means of organizing data. I began by sifting through a new coding scheme (that included things like reasons that women participate in circles, the influence of nature, types of rituals, symbolism, relationships, the body, image, and culture). Then, I recoded these categories with appropriate asanas. While asanas can target specific chakras, I intended to utilize the symbolism of the postures. Some asanas, like mountain and tree, have an obvious connection with nature, which was used quite often in the women's circle. Other postures had to do with balance and new perspectives, which represented other themes from my material.

The possibilities for using this material were endless, but I wanted the style of the writing to flow like thoughts do during a yoga session for this qualitative analysis. The practitioner strives to reside in each moment with the sensations of the stretch and the rhythm of the breath; the sticky part, however, is that the mind's tendency is to wander. Traditional qualitative synopses can be somewhat formulaic in nature and my intention was to employ a more creative yet reflective approach to complement the essence of this story.

It was also a struggle to use the respondents' quotes appropriately. Although there were no respondents during this hypothetical yoga session, I felt a certain responsibility to cautiously balance my observations with their experience. Because I was a participant in this group, at times I felt that their words could have easily been my words. Towards the end of this project, my participant-observer role was blurred and I was clearly more of a participant than an observer. To show the distinction between my thoughts and theirs, I used italics to indicate when someone else was speaking. The path that eventually freed me from my habitual way of interpreting data was through journaling.

## Conclusion

One of my interests in yoga is to take the discipline off the mat. That is, how does yoga transcend into my life outside of the practice? How does my life affect my practice? What does my resistance in a posture mean? What happens when I work through the edges of a posture? The answers to all of these questions sometimes reveal how a person negotiates through life. The postures are merely reflections of what is happening in a person's life on any given day.

Through this act, I was able to observe my own motivations and attachments. Doing this allowed me to let go of some of the old issues surrounding this piece so I could move forward. Writing, which can be viewed as another way of meditating, provided a means to process just as the statistical analysis software programs SPSS or SAS do for quantitative inquirers. By simply witnessing my patterns, I allowed myself to open to flow and to new possibilities. The practice of yoga truly transcends the mat.

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