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Bending and binding: What builds and bounds the Ashtanga yoga community

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Bending and Binding:
What Builds and Bounds the Ashtanga Yoga Community

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the Faculty of the Undergraduate
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by Rosealie Pearl Lynch
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Introduction

My entry into the global Ashtanga yoga community took shape the summer of 2014 when I embarked on a journey into a world of unfamiliar people and social practices to conduct fieldwork in Mysore, India. I went to Mysore to study Ashtanga yoga at the world’s leading institute, both as a practitioner and as an anthropologist interested in understanding what, and who, brings this transnational community of practitioners together:

A crowd of a hundred people or more stands in the middle of an asphalt road outside a gated compound in Gokulum 3rd Stage, Mysore, India. I look at the sea of strangers sporting a variety of apparel from sweatpants and jeans to glimmering Indian-style garb (such as the saree and salwar kameez for women or the kurta and lungi for men). I stand somewhat awkwardly by myself, sporting my newly-tailored aquamarine and bejeweled salwar that I hoped would help me fit in, because I can’t seem to find any of the friendly faces I’d met so far on my trip. Hearing people speaking different languages around me and warmly greeting past acquaintances, I silently reflect on my self-consciousness about my membership in this community. I only arrived in India for the first time less than two weeks prior to this moment, and only started practicing Ashtanga yoga a few weeks before that. I have so little experience compared to many of the people in this crowd who have been devoted to the discipline and their guru, Pattabhi Jois, for years or possibly even decades. It is he who they wait outside the gates of the Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KPIAYI) to honor in a special celebration.

A ceremony about which I know very few details in advance is to take place inside KPIAYI’s “main shala,” (main “yoga house”) where countless Ashtanga practitioners have studied with Pattabhi Jois and his grandson, Sharath Jois, who took over the institute’s directorship after his passing. It is July 12, 2014 and the Mysore Ashtanga community through KPIAYI is hosting a celebration for Guru Purnima: an Indian festival that honors teachers, or “gurus,” as they are often referred to in Sanskrit. As I came to learn, this holiday coincides with the lunar-calendar birthday of Pattabhi Jois, also known affectionately by his students as “Guruji” (the “ji” at the end carries added respect). Many practitioners who adhere to the tradition of Pattabhi Jois’ Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga teachings happen to be in Mysore already at this time of year, studying Jois’ system at KPIAYI where both his daughter and grandson continue to teach it. They were invited to come together on this day to celebrate the life and legacy of their beloved Guruji and honor the lineage of the tradition they hold so dear.
Inside KPJAYI’s "main shala" in Mysore, India, where a blur of students join to honor Pattabhi Jois on the occasion of Guru Purnima, July 12, 2014. The orange-painted wall displays several portraits of Pattabhi Jois, his parents, his teacher Krishnamacharya and others who precede him in the Ashtanga Yoga lineage, and his descendants who continue to carry out the tradition at KPJAYI today. Source: Photo by author.

Once inside, I wait in line to approach a wall of images of Pattabhi Jois, his family members, and the teachers who precede him in the traditional lineage structure, where I carefully place the small bundle of orange flowers for which I paid 60 rupees to a woman vending on the side of the street. Fortunately, someone tipped me off that this act of respect was customary for these events, and I was able to anxiously watch the people in line before me to see where they placed their flowers on this altar-like set up. Somehow everyone there managed to situate themselves in a cozy spot on the floor, lotus-style (in a cross-legged position), to view the formal proceedings that took place next. I watched and listened to a man in an all-white lungi perform a Pooja, a Vedic ritual conducted in Sanskrit, at what seemed like record-breaking speed. I heard several men, including KPJAYI’s director and Pattabhi Jois’ grandson, Sharath, give speeches to honor Guruji. A short Indian man who introduced himself as a long-term student and friend of Pattabhi Jois offered the following to express his gratitude to Guruji for the legacy he created:

Although Guruji has globalized yoga, he has transferred it the same, without any dilution. . . He had read yoga texts from the very ancient books, and the same he has taught many people, and he has transformed the lives of millions of people around the world. . . the same legacy has been carried by his great grandson Sharath Jois, his daughter Saraswathi Jois in transmitting this knowledge. . . this
ancient tradition, ancient knowledge, which is a very powerful contribution of India to humanity at large.

Each of the speakers stressed the central role Guruji played in the forming of this global community and described his contributions with overwhelming deference. It seemed I had found my answer: Guruji’s legacy, carried out by his progeny to this day, was without question the glue that binds this global community together. Following these speeches, there were some musical performances—one guitar-accompanied song dedicated to the loving bond between Guruji and his students and an ensemble of musicians who played in a traditional Indian style. Then we were dismissed to “snacks”—vegetarian Indian cuisine served outside the studio on the patio, where practitioners socialized for quite some time before heading home (Fieldnotes, July 12, 2014).

It was a privilege to be able to take part in this special occasion on my first trip to Mysore, India to conduct field research on the global Ashtanga yoga community. KPJAYI’s 2014 Guru Purnima celebration was one of the few occasions in my two years researching this tradition when I was physically surrounded by more than a few dozen Ashtanga yoga practitioners at the same time. Many of the hundred-something Ashtanga yoga practitioners present held very important roles in the overall community I aimed to study: they included direct descendants in the Pattabhi Jois lineage to which the community pays homage, highly esteemed teachers with decades of experience in the tradition, students who had spent much of their lives straddling homes in Mysore and abroad as they frequently returned to study with their teachers, and other students from countries around the world who chose to follow their yoga teachers from back home to Mysore (a first-time trip for some) because they were so dedicated to deepening and illuminating their practice. Despite their differences in background, rank and experience, they all held in common a commitment to the Ashtanga tradition as laid out by the founder they recognized on Guru Purnima (as well as on many other days of the year), Sri K. Pattabhi Jois.

Differentiating itself from other yoga traditions, the Ashtanga yoga tradition emphasizes that so-called “postural yoga” (the Sanskrit term is asana) is but one of the “eight-limbs” of practice. Within asana there are six consecutive series of sequenced yoga postures (sometimes
referred to as ‘poses’) that a practitioner works through at his or her own pace, ideally under the supervision of an experienced teacher. The order in which a practitioner takes on each of these series and the individual asanas therein is generally uniform no matter where a person learns the practice, thanks to the centralized network of Ashtanga teachers who have studied at KPJAYI and are authorized by the institution to disseminate this information. After decades of Ashtanga yoga’s increasing popularity worldwide, there are now over six hundred individuals in the international network of authorized Ashtanga teachers, many of whom own, direct, or teach at yoga studios modeled after the Mysore-style Ashtanga tradition across Europe, Asia, Central and South America, North America, Africa, Australia and New Zealand (KPJAYI 2009).

What I failed to realize early on in my research of the global Ashtanga community, however, was how much disparity there often is between the curated Ashtanga experience at KPJAYI and the everyday experiences of Ashtanga teachers and practitioners in other pockets of the community. In writing this thesis I give voice to and examine the varied ways that Ashtanga practitioners’ experiences—as relayed in their personal narratives—reflect and contest this dominant depiction of what it means to practice Ashtanga yoga. The Guru Purnima celebration I witnessed, for instance, could not have been a further departure from the Ashtanga experience of a home practitioner in northwestern Virginia (where I conducted much of the ethnographic research that informs my work). Attention to localized, lived experiences of Ashtanga practitioners can offer new and nuanced understandings of this practice and the way people incorporate it as an important part of their quotidian lives.
Figure 2 Chart illustrating first half of the primary series (many similar charts exist). Note the Sanskrit names for each asana. Also note the inclusion of Pattabhi Jois’ most famous aphorisms. Source: The Salutation Station [Reproduced from Ashtanga Yoga Canada], [n.d.].

Ashtanga yoga is practiced throughout the world in various communities and contexts, with several features of the tradition lending it global applicability. In addition to the set sequencing which is often visually represented in chart form (see figure 2), Ashtanga yoga
instruction also follows a linguistic consistency: the community refers to each *asana* by its Sanskrit name and teachers (even in Mysore) typically give other instructions in English (as it is one of the most universally accessible languages for a highly international student body). The Ashtanga tradition (as embodied in its community of practitioners) thus brings with it a strong sense of a shared culture. This tradition of ‘modern postural yoga’ (De Michelis 2004) places more demands on practitioners than the mere physical demands of working through difficult *asanas*. The Ashtanga community is structured and interacts in ways that deeply impress upon individual practitioners, involving forces that push and pull them to conform to the community’s expectations.

This thesis is an examination of how Ashtanga practitioners engage one another over issues of authority and community boundaries as they define and defend their commitment to the shared tradition. Over four chapters, I will trace the following: 1) how community dynamics are structured by a filtering of authority from KPJAYI and its affirmed lineage through the chain of teachers and practitioners who collectively form an imagined community; 2) how the boundaries of the Ashtanga community and definitions of its commonly-held tradition are contested and negotiated by community members; 3) how the relationships between Ashtanga students and their teachers play a central role in individuals’ cultivation of a personal commitment to practice; and 4) how practitioners rely on a practice community—simultaneously real and imagined—to sustain their practice over time, and the implications for ‘home practitioners’ who often practice without supervision of a teacher. In each chapter, I draw on practitioners’ practice narratives to analyze the relationship of an individual practitioner to her community and the importance of membership in the community. By participating in the community’s negotiations about authority and tradition, practitioners demonstrate their reliance on feelings of belonging to the larger
community. The negotiations I discuss reveal practitioners’ attempts to make room for their personal experiences in a collective narrative about what it means to practice Ashtanga yoga—to stitch together seemingly disparate perspectives into a cohesive whole that accommodates all practitioners and validates their membership in the larger community.

**The Practice**

*Darkness still lingers in the sky outside my window when my alarm clock rings. It’s 5:25 A.M. on a Monday morning in late September. I rub the sleep out of my eyes on the short drive to a familiar yoga studio downtown, and shiver in the cool morning air as I make my way up the stairs to the first in a week-long series of Mysore-style Ashtanga yoga classes.*

*I enter through the fogged glass doors into a steamy room filled with bodies twisted in various configurations. There is silence, save for the heavy, measured, and rhythmic breathing of the 10 or so Ashtanga practitioners intensely focused on whichever posture they happen to be working on (for they do not practice in unison). Some students are standing at attention with hands folded in front of their chest (samastitihi), others are flowing between low push-up position (chatturunga) and upward-facing dog (urdva danurasana), and still some are further along in Ashtanga’s set sequence of poses, working through lunge-like positions in the second set of sun salutations (surya namaskara B).*

*I spot the teacher, Suzanne, gliding back and forth across the room, getting on her knees up close to her students, placing her hands on their already glistening bodies, and whispering words of advice to them. She doesn’t seem to notice my entrance. I claim one of the few empty spots towards the back of the room, roll out my mat, bring my feet together at the front of it, put two hands together in a prayer-like position, and tune into my breath. I know what I have to do next. I have memorized the sequence (sort of), but that does not make the task before me any easier. I sigh, and lift my hands over my head. ‘Ekam, inhale, Surya Namaskara A,’ the count resounds in my head, as I remember all the times I’d done this with other teachers in the past.*

*I lose track of how many sun salutations I’ve done when Suzanne’s interaction with another student catches the corner of my eye. ‘Dristhi,’ I remind myself—and attempt to focus my gaze on the designated place for each asana as I flow through four more sun salutations before moving onto the ‘standing sequence’ of asanas that really demand my attention because of their challenge (Fieldnotes, September 21, 2015).*

This is a window into the everyday practice of Ashtanga yoga. Practitioners around the world rise early, roll out their mats, and arrange their bodies into the same positions, a process that may be unbearably painful, exertive, pleasant, or boring, depending on the day. These
practitioners tend to call themselves ‘Ashtangis,’ an identifier that combines the common term ‘yogi,’ or yoga practitioner, with their tradition of choice, “Ashtanga.” The tradition dictates that no matter how far along in their practice—whether they have been practicing for a few days or a few decades, all Ashtangis are to begin and end their daily practice in the same way, with the same set of asanas. Like a “sandwich,” as a teacher once tried to explain to me, the asanas in the middle change depending upon a student’s personal progress in the series. However, these asanas on the menu vary very little from day to day; at most, a student attempts one or two additional asanas to tack onto their middle sequence at a time, once a teacher determines they are ready for the next challenge. They might practice this same set for days, weeks, months, or years, before a teacher ‘gives’ or teaches them a new asana. Ashtanga yoga practice is thus marked by great repetition, as the Ashtangi goes through the same sequence of asanas, some remarkably easy, some unthinkably hard, day in and day out.

Its other notable feature is the constancy of challenge, often in terms of physical rigor. All Ashtangis can tell you about those couple of asanas in their practice that give them a hard time. Doing Ashtanga is like “a badge of honor,” notes one woman I interviewed, because of how challenging it is. Others discuss the “circus poses” or the “Cirque du Soleil” people of the Ashtanga community, which respectively require or display unthinkably impressive physical ability. This is not to say that all Ashtangis are of peak athletic condition. The Ashtanga community is composed of individuals of all ages, shapes, and sizes, from children to out-of-shape middle-aged men, young-bodied college students to pregnant women, professional dancers and marathon runners to academics who claim to have never been athletic, high-level management men and women of the business world to retired secretaries, and finally, novice practitioners to career yoga teachers. While the sequence of Ashtanga practice is relatively set
and its rigorous level of physicality hard to deny, Ashtangis of all skill levels can participate because the tradition is laid out so that individuals practice only as much of the sequence and at a pace that is realistically achievable for them. Practitioners start slowly, with the barebones or ‘sandwich-ends’ of the practice, and incrementally add on asanas to the middle of their everyday practice as seen fit, either by the supervising teacher, or, (for those who practice at home without the guidance of a teacher), according to their own confidence in their ability.

In this way, physical practice or asana unfolds. However, many teachers and practitioners emphasize that asana barely scratches the surface of everything involved in practicing Ashtanga yoga, and that the tradition involves a multi-dimensional discipline following an eight-limbed path to Samadhi, the highest state of consciousness attainable in popular yogic philosophy. “Ashtau” is “eight” in Sanskrit, and “Ashtanga yoga” means the ‘eight limbs of yoga’ as outlined in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, although not explicitly named as such. Teachers in the KPJAYI tradition affirm that their asana practice fits into the eight-limbed path proposed in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Estimates of the date of this Sanskrit text range from 5,000 B.C.E. to 300 A.D. and even adherents admit that the Patanjali, to whom they attribute this famous text, may not have been a single historical person (Vonne 2013, xii). Nevertheless, many yogis hold this text in high regard as the first systematization of the central teachings of yogic philosophy, which outlines a path or process toward enlightenment. The eight ‘limbs’ or steps on this prescribed path are: Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi (see figure 3). According to Sharath’s 2010 Foreword in a recent reprint of his grandfather’s Ashtanga yoga practice manual, Yoga Mala (2010), the first two limbs Yama and Niyama are ethical observances related to “how we conduct ourselves with the world in a kind and aware manner, and how we abide by our own code of morality” (Jois 2002, xiii). Many
consider them prerequisites to serious study of Ashtanga yoga, to be followed by *asana* practice, *pranayama* (control of the breath, or *prana*) and the following four limbs, which involve increasing stages of sensory withdrawal, the focusing of the mind, and meditation. The main instructional focus of Pattabhi Jois (Guruji) and the teachers that follow him is on *asana* practice, which is often emphasized as a useful starting point (after *yama* and *niyama*) for a yogi pursuing all eight limbs because of the discipline training it offers and the health benefits a practitioner may reap. Ashtangis often also praise *asana* practice for how it facilitates mindfulness (which is useful in all ensuing limbs) due to how it positions practitioners to confront and pay greater attention to their embodied experiences.

![Diagram of the Eight Limbs of Yoga](image)

*Figure 3 Diagram illustrating the Eight Limbs of Yoga. Yama or Self-restraints include non-injury, truthfulness, non-theft, spiritual conduct, and non-greed. Niyama or ethical practices include purity, contentment, austerity, self-study, and dedication. Source: Shaktianda Yoga, 2016.*
The approach to *asana* in Ashtanga Yoga as taught by K. Pattabhi Jois follows a consistent system of three components, called the “Trishtana.” According to KPJAYI’s website as of April 4, 2016, “Tristhana” refers to three places of attention or action: posture (*asana*), breathing system (*pranayama*), and looking place (*dristhi*). There is a specific form the body must take for each *asana* in a sequence, as seen in *asana* charts or described in detail in Pattabhi Jois’ *Yoga Mala* (2010) and other instructional manuals. The *asanas* are strung together in a *Vinyasa* sequence, meaning that practitioners flow through each sequence in rhythm with their breath, pairing each *asana* with one breath and transitioning from one to another according to their inhalations and exhalations. There is also a designated “looking place,” or *dristhi*, for each *asana*. Practitioners are tasked with focusing their eye gaze on a particular point (often down at their nose, navel, or feet) while practicing an *asana* to avoid visual distractions from other practitioners in the room and to ‘silence’ the mind from wandering thoughts. Along with other rigorous elements of the Ashtanga system, these expectations of practice create a body of shared experiences for practitioners as they move, breathe, and even look in asynchronous uniformity.

The Ashtanga community described in this thesis is a fairly young one. Sri K. Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009), also known as Guruji, is the tradition’s founder and propagator of the lineage following the teachings of his guru, Shri T. Krishnamacharya. In his 2010 Foreword to a reprint of the *Yoga Mala*, well-known practitioner and scholar of Ashtanga yoga, Eddie Stern, provides some historical context for the tradition. As he explains, Pattabhi Jois founded the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute at his home in 1948 (his institute was later renamed in his honor as the Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, or KPJAYI, after his passing when his grandson, Sharath Jois, succeeded his role as the institute’s director). In the mid-1960s, a Belgian scholar of Sanskrit named André van Lysbeth was the first Westerner to study *asana* with Jois. Lysbeth
wrote several books on yoga, which first introduced Europeans to Jois’ teachings and motivated them to travel to India to also study with him. It was not until 1973 that the first Americans traveled to India to study Ashtanga yoga under Jois’ guidance. Thus, this particular global community of practitioners has only been in existence for around 50 years, and is rapidly growing as more people are introduced to the practice through acquaintances, online channels of discourse, or the vast body of published works practitioners have written.

Two of Pattabhi Jois’ kin continue to teach Ashtanga yoga in Mysore, India. His daughter, Saraswathi Jois, has been practicing Ashtanga yoga since age 10 and has been teaching for 45 years according to KPJAYI’s website from April 4, 2016. She currently runs a satellite shala just a few blocks from KPJAYI’s “main shala” in Mysore. A strong woman of 75 years, Saraswathi impressed me with the ease with which she managed a Mysore room of 30-50 practitioners at any given time when I spent a month studying in her shala during my trip to Mysore. Sharath Rangaswamy Jois, son of Saraswathi and grandson of Pattabhi Jois, succeeded the directorship of his grandfather’s institute in 2009. KPJAYI’s website states that his formal study of yoga began at 19, and Sharath was a close assistant to Pattabhi Jois in his final years of teaching. Practitioners who travel to Mysore have the opportunity to opt whether to practice in the “main shala” with Sharath (though it is notably difficult, with long wait times and uncertainty of application acceptance due to high demand), or the auxiliary shala where Saraswathi teaches a somewhat smaller volume of students at any given time. However, only Sharath holds the authority to “authorize” a student to teach the tradition on his or her own. This issue of authorization figures importantly in my analysis of the community to follow, as it relates to negotiations of authority and the maintenance of the ‘received’ Ashtanga tradition.
The word “yoga” can be traced back to the Sanskrit root, yug, meaning “to join,” or “yoke,” meaning to bind together or to concentrate (Garfinkel and Schumacher, 2000). Thus, scholars and practitioners alike point to the concept of “union” as its meaning, often as the union of the practitioner with his or her breath, body, or with the divine. Scholars of Philosophy and Religion have often analyzed yoga and yogic principles in the context of Hinduism and Hindu thought, with notably less attention to *hatha yoga* (the practice of yoga following physical techniques, as might be most familiar to Western audiences) until more recently, since its surge in global popularity in the pursuit of improved health and wellbeing. The physical method(s) of *hatha yoga* only account for a part of the way that “yoga” is described and interpreted in Hindu scripture like the *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhāgavad Gīta* (in the *Mahābhārata*), as well as other literature concerning yoga more specifically, like the *Pātañjala yogasūtra*. For instance, the *Bhāgavad Gīta* describes “various kinds of yoga” (Dorter 2012, 307) including *karma yoga* (the yoga of action, sometimes called service), *jñāna yoga* (the yoga of knowledge), *bhakti yoga* (the yoga of devotion), and *dhyana yoga* (“the yoga of meditation”) (Dorter 2012, 314). While in the past, many scholars of Eastern religion and philosophy have examined the meaning of “yoga” and the way it is described and/or prescribed in Indian literature as different pathways to divine realization, they are now placing more attention on the relationship between *hatha yoga*, (the tradition which modern postural practice in the world’s gyms, yoga studios, and media most closely resembles), and its relationship to Hindu religious doctrine and practice.

For example, James Mallinson (2014) takes interest in how *hatha yoga* is an “extra-Vedic soteriological method” appropriated from Śaivism (a Hindu sect of Śiva worship) without the metaphysical baggage one might expect. This, he explains, is because its non-dual Śaiva
influences were paired with the non-dual _advaita_ Vedāntic teachings that were on the rise when the _hathayoga_ corpus of literature was being compiled. Svātmārāma, the yogi credited with formulating the system by authoring the _Haṭhayogapradīpikā_, avoided using detailed descriptions of philosophical teachings such as doctrine, as well as obvious references to sectarian symbols, thus, creating space in the _hathayoga_ system for its (nevertheless contested) claim to universalism. This research figures into contemporary concerns over both cultural authenticity and religious freedom and their relation to yoga, seen for instance in public debates over whether the entrance of instruction on yoga _asana_ and meditation amount to “teaching religion” in schools.

Today, it is clear that yoga practice transcends national, ethnic and religious lines, although yoga’s Indian and Hindu origins is not infrequently questioned and problematized in popular culture. The growing popularity of yoga on an international scale has opened up yoga practice to scholarship in many disciplines beyond philosophy and religious studies alone. For one, the medical community has produced numerous studies on the measurable physical and mental effects of yoga practice (e.g., a systematic review of randomized controlled trials on the effectiveness of yoga exercises on headaches (Kim 2015)). This research seems to generally support yoga practice (both _haṭhayoga_ and meditation) as part of a healthy lifestyle, which the popular media in turn reports, further fueling interest in these practices. As more members of affluent societies take interest in yoga—for fitness, health, or otherwise—there is a growing market for yoga classes and products resulting in a commodification of the practice which many practitioners have criticized (e.g., Schutz 2013) and which scholars have begun to examine (e.g., Fis, 2009); this has also led to the rise of the production of therapeutic landscapes that involve yoga (Hoyez 2007) and yoga tourism to India and elsewhere (Lalonde 2012; Maddox 2014).
Ashtanga yoga has not been immune to these developments. Indeed, tourism (and related commodification of cultural experience) plays a very important role in the shaping of its international community. In the tradition’s global beginnings, travel to Mysore and studying under Pattabhi Jois was about the only means of learning the practice. Nowadays, there is still a heavy stream of foreign visitors seeking Ashtanga study in Mysore, but the expanded network of teachers means there are dozens more destinations one might travel where well-known and respected teachers can be found. Scholars Burger (2006), Maddox (2014), and Singleton (2010) shed the most illumination on these issues by concentrating on the role that connections to Mysore and India more broadly play in the overall Ashtanga experience, community, and tradition.

Burger (2006) compares Ashtanga yoga to the Weberian notion of ‘salvation goods’ tied to a globalized religious market, determining that students pursuing Ashtanga study in Mysore are not buying a ‘product’ so much as going on a pilgrimage that promises the experience of self-transformation (89). This pilgrimage is a marketing strategy for resident Indians of Mysore (90), however, the Ashtangis travelling to Mysore are not paying for salvation, only instruction on the long path to it. Thus, Burger admits his “religious market approach” to understanding the global Ashtanga network, derived from Weber, is “not entirely satisfying” (91). Burger’s use of the ‘pilgrimage’ analogy is one frequently used in earnest by Ashtanga practitioners travelling to Mysore, although it is important to acknowledge that people travel to Mysore to study Ashtanga for different reasons which may not always constitute a ‘pilgrimage’ in the terms he uses. Some may only go once, to better understand their practice’s roots, or for a sense of adventure, while others go on repeat journeys, year after year, to pay homage to their ‘teacher,’ shift their focus almost exclusively on yoga for a while, or take their practice to the next level.
Maddox (2014) picks up on Burger’s interest in the ‘pilgrimage’ current of the Ashtanga community. She is critical of “post-colonial” attitudes of Western Astangis who travel to India with the expectation that their yoga practice there will be more ‘authentic’ because it is closer to “the source,” or that India would be deeply timeless and materially poor because of its spiritual roots (2014, 172). She writes, “Yoga tourism in Mysore can be considered imperialist in nature, as the Ashtanga practice, framed as pure and authentic in the minds of Westerners, becomes a commodity to be consumed and the KPJAYI becomes an entity to be conquered” (2014, 338). While my research has revealed that travel to KPJAYI can serve an important milestone for many Ashtangi’s crafted personal narratives of their practice, what Maddox misses in her analysis of how this event serves as an “entity to be conquered” is how Ashtangis also approach their study in India in hopes that the practice conquers them. It is the hope of “self-transformation” that Berger identifies as central to travel to India for Ashtanga practice. Maddox’s observations about “post-colonial” attitudes are present in the everyday practices and conversations of the Ashtanga community, but I see a need for a deeper understanding of the way practitioners negotiate their trust in the tradition, their level of dedication, which in turn shapes the expectation for self-transformation driving the annual migration to Mysore, India.

Mark Singleton’s work has offered the most piercing research into Ashtanga yoga’s history, specifically, Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice (2010). This book deals heavily with the history of T. Krishnamacharya’s lineage, who was guru to K. Pattabhi Jois. Thus, Singleton’s scholarship is in direct interlocution with the Ashtanga community, which points to this history as its very foundation. Yoga Body argues that modern postural yoga did not arise in India as a sui-generis product of evolving Indian spiritual traditions, but rather, was molded in important ways by India’s contact with the West in the nineteenth century.
Through historical analysis, Singleton suggests that modern styles of postural yoga, such as Ashtanga, were largely influenced by a Western-focus on health and adopted from Western styles of exercise (Singleton 2010;10). He proposes the need for “critical awareness of the unreliability of truth claims” made by schools like Ashtanga about their ancient, spiritual origins, in order to understand what modern postural yoga is today (2010;14). These claims come as controversial to the Ashtanga community because of its emphasis on “parampara,” a notion of the direct, unbroken transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil, following the tradition laid forth by Patanjali.

Ostensibly, this parampara is what threads the global community together, with its shared system, shared series, shared sequencing for asana practice. Parampara is meant to function so that it maintains the tradition, prevents its alteration. Parampara is morally enforced and enforcing, relying on the idea that every teacher before you upheld an ethical obligation to loyally replicate the Ashtanga method as he or she learned it—and that method is both sacred (rooted in ancient tradition of spiritual liberation) and scientifically valid (for it has produced real results in thousands of students before you). Singleton’s claims posit that T. Krishnamacharya altered the teachings passed down to him by his guru, Yogeshwara Ramamohana Brahmachari: a lineage understood to be firmly rooted in the Pātañjala tradition (of the Pātañjala yogasūtra, a systematization of yoga/yogic psychology often read by practitioners today with modern commentary to make it intelligible) and based on a no longer existing five-thousand-year-old text, the Yoga Kurunta (Singleton 2010;184). Singleton writes, “Krishnamarcharya’s sublimation of twentieth-century gymnastic forms into the Pātañjala tradition is less an indication of a historically traceable “classical” āsana lineage than of the modern project of grafting gymnastic or aerobic āsana practice onto the Yogasūtras, and the
creation of a new tradition” (186). Singleton’s analysis threatens the Ashtanga ‘establishment’ (although some Ashtangis do not contest his findings), as it challenges the authority of Guruji’s claims to a yoga tradition with complex (and unadulterated) ties to traditional and pre-colonial Hindu spirituality, healing, and astrology.

Singleton’s work has had important ramifications on the Ashtanga community; Ashtangis are still processing its effects with their continual negotiations over the perceived rigidity and reliability of the “received” tradition. For the purposes of my ethnographic analysis, his emphasis on “correcting” textual history obscures the degree to which historical narratives (regardless of veracity) are always central to the construction and maintenance of an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006). I do not attempt to contest his findings here, although they have been partially challenged by scholars of Sanskrit such as Mallinson (2011) regarding philological evidence of pre-modern yoga practice. Leaving claims to unbroken lineage un-interrogated, I am most interested in how practitioners draw on these claims to emplot, or position themselves, within this imagined global community.

My research probes the distribution of and negotiation over authority in the imagined community of Ashtanga practitioners as individuals attempt to insert themselves into this community’s structure and history by casting other members into their practice narratives and engaging one another in both physical and digital sites of community. Lea, Philo, and Cadman’s (2016) “geography of authority” approach offers a useful framework for considering how Ashtanga teaching and practice shape commitment in the life of an Ashtangi. They classify yoga generally-speaking as a ‘spirituality of life,’—a term borrowed by Heelas, to contrast ‘life-as-religion’—in which primary moral authority derives from the practitioner instead of a divine source or intermediary authority figure (cited in Lea et. al. 2016, 72). Resisting this binary and
drawing on Foucaultian notions of power as multi-directional, their study investigates how an Ashtanga teacher’s “exertion of authority meshes (and sometimes conflicts with) the ‘experiential authority’” of his or her student (Lea et. al. 2016; 70). Rather than a model that argues that external forms of authority can only restrict individual freedom or otherwise be rejected, they illustrate how it is possible for power to be “co-produced” between student and teacher, thereby assisting a student in the cultivation of self-authority (72, 81).

My analysis—especially in Chapter 3 on student-teacher relationships—draws on Leo et. al. in terms of how they describe Ashtanga teachers and students co-producing this power/authority. I rely on their consideration of external authority versus internal authority to trace how students formulate trust in their teachers and/or the overall Ashtanga tradition, building their long-term commitment. While the historical narrative and cultural experience curated by KPJAYI may play a significant role in the public image of the Ashtanga yoga tradition, it is the primary experience of the practitioners and the relationships they form with other members of the community that form the core basis of their commitment to practice. In this thesis, I draw out these principal elements of the Ashtanga experience by centering practitioner’s narratives within a broader discussion about what binds this community together.

Research Methodology

This thesis is grounded in in-depth, semi-structured interviews (typically lasting an hour each) completed with 10 Ashtanga practitioners in Virginia, USA. They had varying levels of experience practicing the Ashtanga system; some had only practiced (sporadically) for a few months, others had practiced and taught in the tradition for a few decades. All had at one point

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1 This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of James Madison University, protocol No. 16-0176
practiced under the supervision of a teacher, either in a yoga studio in the U.S., or at the Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute in Mysore, India, or both. These interviews generally focused on the areas of their practice history, teacher-student relationship, challenges in the practice, their connection to the broader Ashtanga community, and benefits they observed through practice. I conducted these interviews between the months of November 2015 and January 2016, which I audio-recorded and transcribed to incorporate into this thesis. The research participants I interviewed included five practitioners who were strictly students and five who were teacher-practitioners (meaning they taught Ashtanga but were simultaneously the student of another teacher, as is the norm in the tradition). I used a convenience and snowball sampling method, soliciting interviews with teachers and classmates I had encountered in local Ashtanga classes.

Having practiced Ashtanga yoga alongside or under the supervision of my research participants on multiple occasions for the majority of my interviewees, I draw on participant observation to place their narrated experiences in the context of their practice or teaching methods. This familiarity with my primary research participants allowed me to better understand the student-teacher relationships that they sustained because, in many cases, I knew both teacher and student and was able to observe their interactions. Positioned as I was alongside many of them within the Ashtanga community, I shared a rapport with my research participants that enriched their personal narratives with certain kinds of sensitive data, about their insecurities, disappointments, and more, that they might not have disclosed otherwise.

As part of this participant observation research, I attended Ashtanga classes, Mysore-style Ashtanga classes and workshops at three locations in Virginia. Two of those locations were yoga studios including Ashtanga Yoga Charlottesville (AYC) in Charlottesville, VA and The
Center in Harrisonburg, VA. The third location was at James Madison University, also in Harrisonburg, VA where a series of free Ashtanga yoga classes were offered through the Office of Student Activities and Involvement. Beyond the element of convenience, studying Ashtanga yoga in Virginia (where I attend university) is also significant because it is a state with the fourth largest number of Ashtanga teachers authorized by the head of the lineage, after those states one would expect to rank highest where yoga is most abundant: California (51), New York (38), Florida (16), Virginia (8), and before Colorado (7) and Hawaii (6) (KPJAYI 2009).

While the narratives of Virginia-based Ashtanga practitioners forms the central focus of my work, my analysis builds upon ethnographic data from six weeks of field research conducted in Mysore, India where the center of the global Ashtanga community is based. During my stay in Mysore, I practiced Ashtanga yoga six days a week at the Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KPJAYI)—home to the yoga teachers Sharath Jois, who is currently head of the Ashtanga lineage, and his mother, Saraswathi. I was a student of Saraswathi and befriended several of my fellow classmates, who offered me entry into the cultural world of the Ashtanga community in Mysore. Studying Ashtanga yoga on a Mysore trip was not limited to asana practice, I realized, and joined many of my classmates in pursuing additional learning opportunities related to the tradition, offered in and around KPJAYI by other experts on yoga. These included supplemental classes on yogic philosophy, Sanskrit chanting of important yogic texts, and reading and writing the Sanskrit script. In my downtime from learning, I ate, shopped, traveled and toured cultural sites with fellow Ashtangis. Thus during my six week stay, I remained connected to the always-shifting community of visiting Ashtangis in Mysore, and came to understand the role that study in Mysore can play in practitioners’ narratives about their commitment to the tradition.
In addition to relying on data gathered first-hand through interviews and participant observation, this thesis draws from public narratives Ashtangis constantly produce concerning Ashtanga practice in dialogue with one another in online venues. There are countless websites, blogs, Youtube channels, Facebook groups, and Instagram accounts generated by Ashtanga practitioners and dedicated to sharing, discussing and analyzing the tradition. While I only directly reference a mere fraction of all the Ashtangi-generated digital media I have gathered over the past two years, my use of these resources is intended to frame the accounts of my research participants in the context of the broader Ashtanga community.

Cast of Characters

Jennifer was the only teacher-practitioner I interviewed who was authorized by KPJAYI to teach the tradition. She has been practicing Ashtanga yoga for nearly 20 years. Jennifer owns and directs an Ashtanga yoga shala in Virginia called Ashtanga Yoga Charlottesville (AYC) and was teacher to many of the participants I interviewed. While she teaches many of the classes offered at AYC, she also employs 8 other teachers (7 of which offer Ashtanga-based asana courses, while the last teacher facilitates meditation courses). Two of the practitioners I interviewed, Patty and Carroll Ann, were among the teachers who work at AYC for Jennifer. While teachers in their own right, it was common for them to still practice Ashtanga under the direction of Jennifer in some the Mysore-style classes she held at her shala, as her policy was that all the teachers who worked there were responsible for maintaining a regular “dedicated” practice that could inform their teaching. Jennifer was the first to teach me the beginning of the

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2 The names I use to describe my research participants in this Cast of Characters section and throughout the entirety of my thesis includes a mix of pseudonyms and my research participants’ real names. When I obtained consent from each of my participants to interview them about their practice, I also offered the opportunity to select whether they consented to being represented by their real name or preferred to be represented with a pseudonym. Many of my research participants were delighted to share their stories and wished not to withhold their identities. I found this to be the case for teachers especially, who already have a public image related to their Ashtanga yoga practice.
primary series in Ashtanga, before I ventured to Mysore, India to practice for a month with Saraswathi in the summer of 2014.

Patty is a teacher-practitioner who works at Jennifer’s shala, AYC (though this is not her only position as a yoga instructor). She was first introduced to Ashtanga yoga about 5 years ago, and now as a teacher, mainly works with beginner practitioners in introductory classes. She practices with Jennifer and several other teachers who teach various classes at the shala. She never traveled to Mysore to study Ashtanga there nor had any interest in making the trip, citing her confidence in both the regular teachers she has access to at her local shala and the many visiting teachers who host workshops close to her home to teach her everything she needs to know about the tradition.

Carroll Ann is the second teacher-practitioner I interviewed who works for Jennifer at AYC. She first began practicing Ashtanga yoga under the direction of Jennifer in 2012 but soon began routine trips to Mysore, India to study Ashtanga yoga under Saraswathi. Now, both women serve as her teachers, as well as some of Carroll Ann’s fellow teachers at AYC who assist her from time to time whenever she attends classes they hold. She and her husband Liam are raising 4 children—all of whom have accompanied her on Mysore trips and who have experience practicing in the Ashtanga tradition. Carroll Ann helped first acquaint me with the practice and prepped me for my solo trip abroad to India for my research.

Liam is married to Carroll Ann and also studies Ashtanga yoga under both Jennifer and Saraswathi. He has been practicing Ashtanga yoga for almost 3 years. He has not spent quite as much time in Mysore, India but returns on most vacation opportunities to spend time there with
his family. He and his wife now rent a home in Mysore year-round, and sub-lease it during the six-or-so months the family remains in the United States.

Beverly is a practitioner with around 6 years of experience practicing at AYC. She has some experience with other styles of yoga but prefers Ashtanga for its physical rigor. Beverly has dealt with several injuries in her pursuit of Ashtanga practice which have led to major disruptions to her practice. She recently suspended her regular practice of Ashtanga yoga in favor of an alternative fitness routine, although still returns to the practice from time to time and considers the possibility of resuming it with more frequency in the future.

Taylor is a teacher-practitioner who spent several years teaching yoga in Harrisonburg, VA and began an Ashtanga community in the city by offering introductory workshops and classes at a studio that otherwise never offered them. He mainly cultivated a home practice for almost 3 years while commuting several hours to Charlottesville up to three times a week to study with his teacher there. He also attempted to seek out touring workshops with other teachers who were part of the Ashtanga lineage, who had practiced under Pattabhi Jois, Sharath, or other highly esteemed teachers with many years of experience. For close to a year, he taught regular Ashtanga yoga classes at a studio and a weekly class, free of charge, at my university. I studied on-and-off with Taylor quite a bit over the course of my research, until he moved to Boston in the summer of 2015, leaving the nascent Ashtanga community he had built without a teacher.

Alex is a long-term yoga practitioner who had already been taking yoga classes for over a year with Taylor before he began teaching her the Ashtanga sequence. She was initially hesitant to practice Ashtanga but trusted her already-steady relationship with her teacher and took it up, to find she enjoyed the challenge involved. Alex developed a dedicated practice under Taylor’s
guidance until he moved out of town. She now practices some at home, and some in Charlottesville at AYC, where Jennifer, Carroll Ann and Patty teach and where Liam and Beverly (used to) study.

Kacey is another practitioner who learned Ashtanga yoga from Taylor and quickly became devoted to the tradition. She practiced with him for over a year while he offered classes locally, and worked with Alex to coordinate the practitioner-led Ashtanga Yoga Club of Harrisonburg in the absence of a teacher after he moved to Boston. With her practice community no longer in place, she has strongly relied on media circulating through the online Ashtanga community to maintain her feelings of connectedness to the tradition and has sought out learning experiences through touring workshops offered by experienced teachers while she waits to establish a new relationship with a regular teacher.

Suzanne is a teacher-practitioner with over 20 years of experience in the Ashtanga tradition. With prior experience as a competitive gymnast a “heptathlete in college,” she “always had a practice” of some sort and felt Ashtanga suited her well once she found it in 1995. She has studied Ashtanga with numerous “senior” teachers and has worked closely with one teacher in particular, David Garrigues, for about a decade. She runs her own Mysore studio out of her home in North Carolina and visited Harrisonburg for a 5-day Mysore-style Ashtanga workshop at the request of Alex and Kacey when they were trying to bolster the local Ashtanga community after Taylor left town. I attended this workshop and received caring attention from Suzanne as she attempted to correct some habitual patterns I had developed after practicing in the absence of a teacher for so many months.
Chapter 1: Dynamics of the Ashtanga Yoga Community

Ashtanga yoga practitioners often differentiate their tradition from other schools of yoga for being quieter, more individualized or personalized, and for its fast-paced sequencing, among other features. These demarcations are evidence of the boundary-work (Lamont 2001) carried out by the Ashtanga yoga community to establish a collective identity as distinct from the general yoga-practicing population. In a similar vein, my interest in this chapter is to introduce the use of symbolic boundaries by the Ashtanga community to establish a social order—like Durkheim’s moral order (1965)—that regulates, structures, and organizes internal community relations. Central to this consideration is the way that authority is distributed throughout the community and the ways that different members of the community attempt to acknowledge and assert that authority in their practice narratives in order to situate themselves within the fabric of their shared community. Although taking up Ashtanga practice relies heavily on the efforts of an individual, the maintenance of that practice often depends upon membership in the community of Ashtanga practitioners. That community is both physical and imagined, and not without contestation about who and what belongs therein—which will be my continued focus in the following chapter.

One of the challenges to studying and theorizing yoga *asana* practice ethnographically is the fact that it is undertaken by the individual as a highly private and personal endeavor; however, focusing on the ways that practitioners narrate about their practice and their relationship to the Ashtanga community offers a means of navigating around this difficulty to access the shared cultural logics and experiences of practitioners. Attention to practitioner narratives enables the social researcher to investigate the cultural dynamics at play in the Ashtanga yoga experience, both on and off the mat. In the interviews I conducted with 10
Ashtanga yoga practitioners, I witnessed the work practitioners undertook to make sense of their personal experiences by constantly drawing fellow practitioners and familiar teachers into their narratives. They would cast these others into their personal narratives to explain how they were like or unlike them, or to demonstrate where their allegiances lay (especially in regards to different teachers of the tradition). This common act illustrates how despite the way practice is individualized, to practice Ashtanga yoga is nevertheless a collective activity. Ashtanga practice is collaboratively defined and defended by the community, and the practitioner accesses and engages with this strong, dynamic community through various channels: in-person, on-line, at-home, and abroad. Through these channels, members negotiate the structure and boundaries of the Ashtanga community and actively attempt to understand their place within that community.

Ashtanga practitioners often engage in this boundary-work (sometimes with great awareness and intention, other times less so) whether through subtle speech patterns, critical blog posts, or longer works that provide a commentary of the community’s dynamics and values. Though this kind of relational activity is less apparent during their time on the mat—when practitioners are tasked with focusing on their breath and bodily movements, and little else—those who invest in learning more about and getting more deeply involved in the community face the (potential) challenge of conforming to the normative ethics and commonly-held beliefs of the general body of Ashtangis. Even if there is, in fact, little consensus in the beliefs and practices across its members, the distribution of power and social dynamics of the Ashtanga community leave the impression that there is a consensus, to which the individual practitioner must conform in order to belong.
Authority Structure: Defining Community through Traditional Lineage

Contributing to this effect is the dominant power structure of the community, the center of which is situated in Mysore, India with far-reaching appendages across the globe. Many members acknowledge the authority of Sharath Jois, director of KPJAYI following his grandfather K. Pattabhi Jois, to sustain Ashtanga’s traditions as the heir of the lineage. While still showing devotion and loyalty to Pattabhi Jois in gratitude for the system he taught them, these members now turn to his grandson for guidance in their practice, answers to their questions, and management of the community’s continued development and growth. In this role, much of the responsibility falls on Sharath to arbitrate apparent inconsistencies of the tradition and other community conflicts. He plays a major role in setting Ashtanga orthodoxy (prevailing attitudes and beliefs) and orthopraxy (prevailing conventions of practice).

This occurs through “Conferences” that take place routinely at KPJAYI with whichever students are concurrently studying with him in Mysore. During these conferences, students sit attentively facing him on a stage as he addresses tensions that students experience in practice like pain, fear, and injury and sets expectations on where, when, and how to practice by drawing on authoritative texts like the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (Satchidananda 2013) and framing his positions with stories about what his grandfather, Pattabhi Jois, used to say and do. He also delineates an official version of the Ashtanga tradition by defining (mostly reaffirming, with notable controversial exceptions when practitioners have found his position to contradict an earlier stance taken by Pattabhi Jois) the asana sequence and proper etiquette with which to approach practice. The media with which the Ashtanga community disseminates his teachings include transcribed Conference notes, videos, and print publications such as Sharath’s book Aṣṭāṅga Yoga Anuṣṭhāna (2014), in which he walks the reader through the Ashtanga primary
series with photographs of him in each asana to illustrate how they are done. These teachings then get filtered through—and further negotiated within—the global network of authorized Ashtanga teachers, who are responsible for ‘carrying out the lineage’ by transmitting the knowledge they gained to their students.

Thousands of students practice with Sharath each year, either at KPJAYI or during his summer tour of the U.S. At the same time, many dedicated Ashtanga practitioners may never find (or desire to seek out) the opportunity, instead satisfied to study the tradition from teachers who pass on the tradition they learned from their teachers, in a lineage or family tree that eventually traces back to its avowed roots in Mysore—to Sri K. Pattabhi Jois. KPJAYI (which Sharath directs) asserts the authority to regulate who gains membership in this family tree by keeping strict records of all the teachers who have been awarded authorization or certification to teach through its official channels; as a measure against competing programs that also offer Ashtanga yoga teacher training, it proclaims the singular authority to approve teachers who may then teach the Ashtanga method “as taught by Shri K. Pattabhi Jois and R. Sharath.” “Teachers listed on any other website,” meaning who have received additional trainings or certifications from institutes outside the jurisdiction of KPJAYI, “will be removed from [its] list,” the website further warns. In an attempt to maintain unchallenged authority over “ashtanga yoga in its traditional form,” the lineage based in Mysore (and the rest of the community, based on its lead) engages in boundary-making not just to define what constitutes the Ashtanga community but also to set the bounds between groups of allegedly disparate allegiances.

1 Sharath offers classes in Mysore at KPJAYI for 7 months out of the year (at least for 2015-2016), with a 2-month period reserved for an exclusive authorized or certified “teachers” course, and the remaining 5 months open to general—although not “beginner,” defined as having less than 2 months of experience—practitioners. For the summer months of May and June, he plans to travel to the U.S. to tour various yoga studios and offer classes there, thereby reaching a student base who may not get the opportunity to travel to India to study with him. KPJAYI, accessed March 10, 2016, kpjayi.org.
Experiencing Community: Studying Ashtanga at its “source”

While there are no KPJAYI-ordained mandates for the general practitioner to travel to Mysore to study Ashtanga there at the so-called “source” (it is only required of their teachers, in order to become authorized in the system), it is nonetheless a widely and increasingly popular trip for many practitioners to make. It is so popular, in fact, that KPJAYI enforces strict policies for eligibility to practice (a minimum of 1 month session, maximum of 3 month session, minimum of 6 months in between each session, etc.) to be able to accommodate “the increasing number of students” (KPJAYI 2009). During certain times of the year, visiting Ashtangis have to deal with overcrowding in the practice room and long wait times just to get a spot to put down their mats. Berger (2006) compares the way Ashtangis flock to Mysore to study Ashtanga there to a “pilgrimage”— a term many members of the Ashtanga community embrace when they describe their journeys to practice “at the source” of the tradition with the Jois family. The kinds of authoritative claims made by KPJAYI and which are reproduced by teachers who propagate the system work to establish a social order that overlays the community with incentive to go to Mysore. To study at KPJAYI is to align oneself with the traditional lineage and benefit from the distinction this offers as a shared value in the community. Furthermore, travel to Mysore for prolonged studies at KPJAYI is a declaration of one’s dedication to the tradition—that he or she would spend so much and be away for so long (making a serious investment in their Ashtanga practice)—according to these cultural logics.

One of my research participants, Carroll Ann, highlights the important place studying in Mysore occupies in her practice narrative. She had been studying Ashtanga under an authorized teacher, Jennifer, for several months when she decided her family’s upcoming trip to India would have to also include one month spent in Mysore because it was “where Ashtanga comes from.”
This first trip took place from January-June 2013, for a total of six months. While they originally only intended to spend one month in Mysore, devoting the rest of their stay to traveling in other parts of India, they spent a total of three months there because they could not get enough of the southern city in Karnataka. When I interviewed her in 2015, she had already been on five return trips to Mysore and was planning her sixth (in the span of just 2 ½ years). She bubbled with affection for the locale: “Mysore is where my heart lives. Mysore is home. I mean, since my very first trip there, it’s been home.” She attributed this sense of homecoming to the fellow Ashtangis she met while studying there, who shared and validated her sense of dedication to the practice. This experience left a lasting impression on her and her entire family who accompanied her on the trip, making them eager to book their next flights soon after they returned home:

We loved everything. We loved the idea that all these people from all over the planet had gathered together for the practice. That was what drew us. So we had this common craziness to leave our lives, and spend all this money, get on a plane and take our family to India, and practice on dirty, gnarly carpets with little bumps everywhere, and, you know . . . all the stuff that you deal with in Mysore, like get[ting] the runs, and not know where you’re going to stay, and deal[ing] with huge roaches. So we were just looking around and we were like “God, these people are from everywhere! And they’ve all done what we’re doing. And some of them are here for three months, and four months.” And so the level of devotion was just stunning, and we felt like, “wow, we’ve found our people.”

A “common craziness” is what she describes constituting her sense of connection to the Ashtangis she met synchronously studying with her in Mysore. That is, she admits it seems ‘crazy’ or irrational to take off work, disrupt (one’s family and) one’s life and normal routine for a costly trip to spend months at a time studying yoga in a foreign country, when travel there poses a great deal of inconveniences (“the runs,” the “roaches,” etc.)

Indeed, the majority of research participants I interviewed had never been to Mysore, with some citing the obstacles of time, financial resources, and family/social obligations. Others,
including both teachers and students, expressed a lack of certainty that studying there at KPJAYI would add much value or depth to their practice. Although the power dynamics that act upon the Ashtanga community—with the emphasis on traditional lineage and teaching authority—can produce an incentive to visit Mysore, not all members of the community feel this effect. Patty, another student of Jennifer’s who also teaches some yoga classes in the Ashtanga method at Ashtanga Yoga Charlottesville (AYC) reported that “going to India is just not something that I want to do” and “I feel very confident in their [her local teachers’] abilities to transmit the things that they’ve learned there in Mysore.” but noted how she might be more inclined given different circumstances: “I think if I didn’t have connections with teachers here, if there wasn’t a community of really senior teachers here in Charlottesville, then maybe I would feel the need to connect with people who go there.”

Interestingly, Carroll Ann and Patty have a shared practice community at AYC, benefiting from the same group of “senior” teachers, including Jennifer and other teachers she employs who have made multiple Mysore journeys to inform their teaching methods. Yet, these practitioners present very different attitudes about the value of making a trip to Mysore for themselves. With Mysore experience—and its associations with one’s allegiance to the tradition—as a key feature in the territory of negotiated boundaries for the Ashtanga community, both women find themselves having to address this issue in a tactful way to navigate around this symbolic boundary of identity. Carroll Ann acknowledges that the extraordinary amount of time and money she has invested in traveling to Mysore may come across as absurd, but she justifies her choices by demonstrating an overflowing love for the place and the people with whom she forms community bonds while staying there: Mysore is her “home,” and her fellow Ashtangis, her “people.” Her intimate connections and feeling of belonging add a layer of meaning to her
travels that make them worth it. By contrast, Patty justifies her decision not to travel to Mysore by explaining that her needs for a sense of a strong practice community are already met in Charlottesville. She defers to the community’s traditional authority structure and affirms her trust in the teaching methods it prescribes in her explanation that she has confidence in her teachers’ “abilities to transmit the things they’ve learned” from the central authorities in Mysore. She thereby asserts not only her confidence in her teachers to teach her well, but by implication, she also claims to trust in Sharath’s judgment to appoint competent teachers as well as the overarching lineage system constituted by the principle of parampara (direct transmission of knowledge from teacher to student).

This example shows how even on the highly localized level, members of a community—in this case, sharing the same yoga studio and teacher, Jennifer, who, according to her description on AYC’s website as of March 6, 2016, has made “6 pilgrimages to Mysore” herself—can draw from the same cultural resources and commonly-held values to arrive at different experiences of their community. Collectively, practitioners define this community by constructing, sharing, and altering their practice narratives and thereby contribute to its dynamic development. On the larger scale, practitioners undertake these same activities to define and defend what counts as and coheres with the Ashtanga tradition, which in terms shapes the boundaries of the global Ashtanga community.

**The “Imagined Community” of Ashtangis**

Carroll Ann’s homecoming experience on her first trip to Mysore rested on her ability to creatively cast the other practitioners she met in a narrative in which they shared fundamental values and experiences so strong they could override other perceived differences. Mysore felt
like her home-away-from-home because although it was (in actuality) full of strangers, those strangers seemed familiar as she imagined that they collectively valued and came together to cultivate the qualities of self-discipline and devotion (to the practice, its principles, and its people). Benedict Anderson’s theory of the “imagined community” (2006), while originally employed to describe the rise in nationalism, is a useful framework for understanding how Ashtanga practitioners attempt to situate themselves within this broader network of Ashtangis. I employ Anderson’s theory because it helps me describe how Ashtangis are bound together by a sense of sympathy, shared experience, and respect for the legacy of their predecessors, much like how citizens of a nation are bound together by their patriotism. In this regard, his theory applies to the international community of Ashtanga practitioners. While not strictly a political body like a nation, the “imagined” Ashtanga community exhibits activities that could be classified as political, aimed at legislating and policing its members. On the other hand, the Ashtanga community does not neatly conform to Anderson’s concept of the nation-state as it is distributed across various pockets of the globe, rather than contained within a bounded, continuous body of land. Although not so easily map-able, there are somewhat traceable geographic and demographic accountings of the community. I choose to describe the international body of practitioners as an “imagined community” because of the way it evokes strong sentiments of attachment for practitioners and provides them with a sense of shared identity. They feel a sense of belonging to a constellation of fellow practitioners, the majority of whom they will never meet; their connection to this community is, thus, in many ways “imagined” but nonetheless produces significant impacts on their personal experiences with Ashtanga practice.

In Mysore—if the entire Ashtanga community were to be a nation, Mysore, India would likely be its capital—Carroll Ann experienced the confluence of two dimensions of the Ashtanga
community: the intimate feeling of community connectedness, as she was accompanied by her teacher from back home and her family who practiced alongside her, and making close, new friends besides; and the exciting feeling of being at the epicenter of the global Ashtanga community, with high energy sustained by the ever-changing body of visiting students and their enthusiasm for the practice.

The ability for an Ashtangi to feel a part of the international Ashtanga community rests upon imagining that she shares significantly similar experiences with her “fellow” practitioners around the world. Anderson writes how, “this new synchronic novelty could arise historically only when substantial groups of people were in a position to think of themselves as living lives parallel to those of other substantial groups of people—if never meeting, yet certainly proceeding along the same trajectory” (Anderson 2006, 188). While their lived experience could never offer verification of the totality of this imagined commonality, practitioners are led to accept the notion of this shared identity not just based on the meaningful social connections they forge with practitioners they meet, but also because of its roots in a persuasive historical narrative, strongly shaped by media. Anderson demonstrated how the conception of “simultaneity,” of a “homogenous, empty time” in which members of an imagined community share the same experiences across time and space is enabled through print media, such as the novel or newspaper (Anderson 2006, 24-25).

Instead of newspapers, the Ashtanga community depends upon the online circulation of information through blogs and other forms of social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Periscope). The practitioners who generate this Ashtanga-focused media do so because they recognize the shared interests they have with thousands of other practitioners around the world, and that they have an audience with which to share their experiences. With their shared
investment in the practice and eagerness to grasp a deeper understanding of the Ashtanga tradition, its history, and its central contributors, practitioners who exchange these media actively draw each other into the imagined community of Ashtangis. The more media they produce, the wider net they cast for attracting new members of their imagined community as their experiences described in blogs, podcasts, and articles resonate with those of their audience. In this way they forge fictive relationships with one another in “empty time,” casting one another in their imagined drama of the collective Ashtanga experience, doling out roles based on whose practice, beliefs, and experience are similar and dissimilar to theirs. As Anderson argued that the newspaper “quite naturally, and even apolitically, created an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellowreaders, to whom these ships, brides, bishops, and prices belonged,” (Anderson 2006, 62) so, too, does the online media shared between Ashtangis create an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers, to whom commonly referenced people, places, and postures belong.

With each practitioner who participates in this online imagined community about to lay claim to his or her stake in it, its structure and organization is far from rigid or fixed in time. Online social media has had somewhat of a democratizing effect on the way authority is distributed throughout the international community, as practitioners old and new are able to write blog posts or responses that speak to the way they think Ashtanga yoga practice is and ought to be. Kacey, a practitioner I interviewed who (in the absence of a practice community close-to-home) described herself as “knee deep” in the online Ashtanga community, dubbed it as the “new arm of the lineage.” This comment suggests that it has made the Ashtanga tradition more accessible and more persuasive to a wider audience than ever before. At the same time, this plentiful presence of online Ashtanga insight detracts from the allure and exclusive authority that
the lineage holders at KPJAYI attempt to assert. Previously, a person had to travel to Mysore or seek out one of the few authorized teachers in their area to learn the sequence and pursue practice. Now, a search for “Ashtanga Yoga” on Google generates about 556,000 results. Of these are countless websites for yoga studios advertising Ashtanga classes they offer, as well as instructional manuals, videos, asana charts and podcasts, documentaries, articles, and entire blogs that explore what it means to practice Ashtanga. Each of the “symbol-makers” (Mead 1945, 399) who produce this media add to the ongoing negotiation and characterization of Ashtanga as a kind of tradition, Ashtangis are a kind of people, and their shared place in society.
Chapter 2: Contestations in an Imagined Community

Ashtangis’ shared social identity is not constituted merely by the fact that they arrange their bodies into similar positions on a regular basis (although this has a part to play in their collective narrative, especially in how they distinguish themselves from practitioners of other yoga styles). Rather, it is constituted by the fact that they share a common sense of self-discipline and devotion to the overall tradition that motivates them to return to it day after day, despite the inconvenience or discomfort it may produce in their lives. Similar to the sentiments that bind citizens together in allegiance to their nation, Ashtangis’ loyalty to the Ashtanga tradition serve as their passport to enter into and belong in this global community. Ashtangi-ness, like “nation-ness,” “commands a profound emotional legitimacy” (Anderson 2006, 4). Given the strong emotions that belonging in this community can produce, practitioners demonstrate concern over the public image and inclusiveness of the tradition both in their personal narratives and in their interactions with other community members. Collectively, they contest and negotiate the boundaries of their imagined community.

The focus of this chapter is on some of the specific ways in which various members contest the imagined Ashtanga community as they attempt to make room for their experiences in the collective narrative of Ashtanga practice. My first consideration will be tensions over the community’s contested lineage structure in defining teacher qualifications, a matter relating to questions of kinship, which has long been the object of anthropological examination. Next, I will trace the different attitudes practitioners express regarding the Ashtanga tradition’s perceived rigidity, and how they claim to resolve these tensions. By studying perceived margins of the Ashtanga community, I aim to illustrate how practitioners engage one another and employ
contested symbolic boundaries in their personal narratives to position themselves within their
community.

The most common site of these contests is on the symbolic boundary that distinguishes
teachers who form part of the lineage according to KPJAYI—for teaching the so-called
traditional form of the “ashtanga yoga method as taught by Shri K. Pattabhi Jois and R. Sharath”
(KPJAYI 2009)—and those beyond the bounds of this avowed lineage. A common interpretive
stance for practitioners to take in making sense of this issue is that KPJAYI does not (and
cannot) attempt to assert that anyone teaching without its seal of approval is not teaching
Ashtanga—only that these teachers are teaching outside the preferred authority structure. Sharath
himself repeatedly admits that no one can ‘own’ yoga, as he did when I heard him speak on the
matter during the Guru Purnima celebration held in 2014 at the KPJAYI shala, which also fell on
the would-be birthday of “Guruji”:

My grandfather always used to say, ‘yoga doesn't belong to one person, it is universal. It
doesn't belong to only one person... it's not one man's property, it belongs to everyone. It's like the sun. You cannot hold onto the sun. You cannot copyright the sun, right?
(Transcribed audio recording, July 12, 2014).

The current KPJAYI policies align with this stance because they do not prevent teacher-
practitioners from teaching Ashtanga yoga without authorization or certification (although they
leave an open question about whether this might be the preferred outcome); they only attempt to
legislate that a teacher may not benefit from aligning him- or herself with the prestige of their
institution by claiming to teach the method ‘according to’ the Jois lineage without their explicit
approval.

KPJAYI’s official policies are not the only pressures that act on the community for
teachers to adhere to the lineage system. Authorized or certified teachers and general
practitioners also engage in this boundary-work because they, too, have vested stakes in the social order. While boundary disputes are less pronounced in cases where someone is merely offering instruction without authorization (many teachers, including the majority of those I interviewed, were in this position), tensions and negotiations surface most often regarding the matter of Ashtanga teacher trainings offering certifications that are outside the jurisdiction of KPJAYI. Earlier in 2016, a KPJAYI-Certified teacher (who gained approval directly from Pattabhi Jois) named Mark Robberds had this to say to the Facebook community regarding teachers who offer non-KPJAYI endorsed Ashtanga teacher trainings: “Call it something else – Hatha, Vinyasa, Power, or clarify that you are teaching Patanjali’s Ashtanga Yoga Philosophy, but don’t mislead people by calling it an Ashtanga Yoga Teacher Training” (cited in Hall 2016). Another practitioner who runs a website called Ashtanga Dispatch ran an article with a gimmicky title “Mysore Teacher Training Begins here . . .” only to criticize the Ashtanga teacher training rush: “anyone selling a program that promises to make you worthy of running a Mysore room is full of pure and unadulterated crap” (Mulqueen 2013).

This issue of non-affiliated Ashtanga teacher trainings is so controversial because for some members, this perceived disruption of the lineage system is synonymous with a threat to the quality of teaching and to the integrity of the tradition. Even in the cases of an unlisted teacher (regardless of whether he or she offers to certify new teachers) the implied consequence (affirmed by some, but not all of practitioners) is that such teachers are not showing the devotion and loyalty they owe to the tradition’s founder, Pattabhi Jois, without whom their experience and enjoyment of the practice would not be possible. This position is iteratively suggested and contested by Ashtangis interacting through online channels (primarily on Facebook and in response to more formal blog posts) as they attempt to define and defend their stakes in the
imagined Ashtanga community. Many point to passing away of Pattabhi Jois in 2009 as a destabilizing moment in the community. Dealing with the loss of their leader and the transfer of authority to his grandson, a segment of the community who had been ‘grandfathered’ in during Guruji’s time showed resistance to changes in the teacher approval process and other new policies by KPJAYI under Sharath’s direction. While this turning point in the community’s history provides important context for practitioner-led contestations surrounding teacher authority, it is not simply a matter of breaking down the community into two camps: those of ‘old’ (pre-2009) and ‘new’ (post-2009) practitioners. Practitioners assert a wide array of positions on this matter and draw from various experiences and sources of authority (e.g., durational, textual, relational) to defend their stance on, and stake in, this symbolic boundary.

Practitioners who invoke devotion to the lineage in making claims about the importance of KPJAYI-authorization attempt to place this imagined boundary—between Ashtanga’s ‘traditional’ form and other teaching methods— to affirm the value of their achievements: they cultivated a committed, disciplined practice; invested time, money, and hardship into their practice; and dutifully followed protocol to properly ‘earn’ the honor of authorization. On the other hand, practitioners who raise criticisms about this exclusionary definition (i.e., symbolic boundary) of a proper and/or ‘traditional’ Ashtanga teacher recognize that there are multiple channels through which a practitioner can cultivate and demonstrate a committed, disciplined practice fit for a teacher. Furthermore, these practitioners defend their position by invoking

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4 Anthony Hall—a practitioner who has compiled extensive research on the history of the Ashtanga tradition— reveals that prior to 2007, the predecessor institute to KPJAYI (Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute, or AYRI) took a different approach to compiling a list of endorsed teachers. This allowed for “senior teachers” (a category which took into account such factors as years of practice, teacher, certifications, published works on Ashtanga, and general standing in the Ashtanga community) to make a referral for students they had worked closely with—regardless of whether they had studied in Mysore—to be listed. Hall, Anthony. 2016. “Ashtanga Authorization 1980 to present.” *Ashtanga Vinyasa Krama Yoga Research...at Home*, March 10. Accessed February 11, 2016.  
notions of how the tradition was first established by Pattabhi Jois, and claim that more recent developments in the authorization system threaten the tradition’s foundations. Specifically, they raise concerns about the accessibility and sustainability of the tradition. With overcrowding at KPJAYI and mounting fees to study there on top of other expenses involved in prolonged travel to India, many practitioners have voiced concerns about the price one has to pay to earn authorization and questioned the fairness of the system (e.g., Schmid 2014; Hall 2016). On either side of these arguments, practitioners mobilize to shape community expectations in line with their perspectives because membership in the imagined community is such an important part of their experience with the practice. Amidst this clamor over orthodoxy, individual practitioners have to sort out what is at stake and important for the maintenance of their own personal practice.

**Emplotment: A Teacher’s Attempts to “Write” Herself into the Shared Narrative**

When the Ashtanga community—or, at least, a segment of it—lashes out on practitioners for breaking from received orthopraxy, they equate respect for the practice with respect for the lineage, suggesting both are necessary in order to participate as an authentic and valued member in the community. Suzanne, one of my research participants who teaches Ashtanga yoga to a small group of dedicated practitioners from her home and occasionally in travelling workshops, identifies as a teacher who has grappled with this exclusionary force of the Ashtanga community. Her practice narrative was largely driven by her attempts to position herself as a respected teacher, despite not having been to Mysore, nor had any plans to go (and thus was not “authorized” by teach the “ashtanga yoga method as taught by Shri K. Pattabhi Jois and R. Sharath”). Suzanne’s story illustrates how individual members may, quite explicitly and intentionally, strive to emplot themselves in a shared narrative to make community dynamics
more amenable to them. I rely on the concept of ‘emplotment’ here as Cheryl Mattingly (1994) employs it to discuss therapeutic ‘emplotment,’—or the creation and negotiation of a shared narrative—in clinical interactions between a clinician and patient.

Suzanne has been practicing Ashtanga yoga for over 20 years (nearly the longest of all the practitioners I interviewed). She cites financial troubles as the primary reason why she opted not to make the trip to India early on in her Ashtanga career; instead she maintained her practice among a practice group of 5 women and relied on rare workshops and remote consultations with a certified teacher of the practice who was one of Pattabhi Jois’ earliest American students—Annie Pace—whom Suzanne called an “incredible rockstar,” though she says she did not know it at the time. Suzanne self-identifies as one of the many “Children of the Burnt Seeds” in the Ashtanga family. She discusses this view in her a blog post (Faulkner 2013), explaining that “to be a burnt seed is to be fully evolved, it is to not need another go around” (having burnt through all his or her karma, according to Hindu philosophy). The “Burnt Seeds” she refers to in her phrase are the highly-esteemed Ashtanga teachers such as the one under whom she has spent two decades years studying, who were certified or authorized to teach by Guruji, but who are not authorized to authorize new teachers on their own.

She contends that these “Burnt seeds” are unfairly passed over in the KPJAYI-sanctioned lineage, when they have just as much experience, expertise, and authority over the tradition as Sharath, because they had been practicing with Pattabhi Jois since the ‘70s and ‘80s. In an attempt to address what she feels to be a dominant current of disapproval throughout the community, she writes, “We, the Children of the Burnt Seeds are an important part of the ashtanga lineage. I am trying to write us back into the living tradition of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga as taught by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois” (Faulkner 2013). As the lineage is currently worked out, argues
Suzanne, it omits very important links in the chain of transmission. Her attempts to emplot the “children of the burnt seeds” in their rightful place in the lineage is not only on her behalf; she draws all the teachers and practitioners who figure in her imagined community—with whom she has shared practice spaces, learned and imparted knowledge—into her redemptive narrative. They have made invaluable contributions to the community. They have dutifully upheld the teachings passed down to them from Pattabhi Jois. And yet, the way authority is distributed throughout the community confers less status on them than Suzanne claims they deserve.

She advocates for a more dynamic conception of the lineage: although in the current system Sharath honors new teachers each year, for her, it is not “living” in the same way that it ought to be. She would revise the current narrative by acknowledging a multi-branched family tree in which each student whom Pattabhi Jois gave his blessing to teach—each of the “Burnt Seeds”—is held in the same esteem as Sharath, with the same privilege of authorizing new teachers to carry on the tradition. Through her explicit attempts to (re)-emplot herself and her peers into Ashtanga history, she acknowledges the tension-filled experience she has as a teacher who—by dominant power dynamics at play—the community may view as unfit for her role. Like the authorized Ashtanga teachers who criticize non-KPJAYI-endorsed teacher training programs because they want full recognition for the investments they have made to achieve their status, Suzanne is also compelled to defend her standing within the community for the amount of attention, dedication, discipline and devotion she has brought to her 20-year-long practice.

What Suzanne’s story reveals is the complexity of the Ashtanga community; that, although it may be possible to identify a dominant authoritative narrative that structures the community, there are also competing narratives authored by individuals at varying levels of authority and that hold water for different segments of the community. Playing an important role
in the messy “politics of Ashtanga” in which other practitioners I interviewed admitted they had little interest in involving themselves, Suzanne laments:

I feel a little sad about the whole Sharath thing, where you know, some students of Sharath say that I’m being, or that people in my position are being—because of rank or of love of teacher[s] who are not Sharath—disrespectful of the whole Ashtanga system. And, you know, that to me, is like burning each other at the stake.

Suzanne, like many reformers, attempts to clarify that her fight for a more inclusive and multi-tiered lineage is born out of a place of deep love for the Ashtanga system, not a place of contempt for its tradition. Her practice narrative is sutured together by her expression of devotion to Ashtanga, both in terms of the practice and the community: “it’s in mah bones. . . And I would at least like to be in our family tree.”

**Bending the Rules (or Bending: the Rules)**

The “politics of Ashtanga” are fueled by practitioner-initiated discourse concerning the boundaries of the Ashtanga tradition, defining where the “tradition” is dutifully replicated and where it breaks down, as well as determining which transgressions are permissible and which ones go too far. While individual practitioners are likely to generate their own interpretations of the tradition they receive or create slightly modified rules they then set out to follow, the criteria they adopt are often filtered through negotiations that take place in the broader community.

David Garrigues—Suzanne’s teacher and a well-known teacher tracing back to the days of Pattabhi Jois—addresses the concerns practitioners have in terms of ‘walking the line’ between following the received tradition to a T and taking ownership over one’s yogic path. Through the circulations of his teachings on social media he weighs in to the kinds of iterant concerns Ashtangis negotiate, such as whether your eye gaze should be on your nose or your “third eye” in one asana, whether you should take one breath or five in another asana, or whether it is
acceptable to eat before practice or if you must wait until after practice. In an email bulletin distributed by *David Garrigues Yoga* for October 2015, he offered the following insight: “There is an art to walking the line and finding a consciousness or voice that allows you to strike the proper delicate balance.”

In the same email bulletin, Garrigues praises the benefits of inheriting a tradition that is already laid out, explaining how “you walk a collective path, learn from the teacher, gain support from friendships, and you are reinforced by the knowledge that you are not alone. Others have successfully walked this path before you.” At the same time, for the sake of sustaining one’s practice over the long term—especially given how physically, emotionally, and logistically challenging that can be—he gives practitioners license to bend the rules from time to time in the interest of self-exploration, or as he calls it, personal “research”:

I suggest that, in the long run, allowing yourself this freedom can help you to sustain your commitment to the lineage. Because giving yourself the green light to make your own decisions, without shame and guilt, will help you to be more spontaneously loyal and naturally dedicated.

His message—and the apparent need for it (he crafted it by request of practitioners)—centers on the great tensions Ashtangis face between conforming to commonly-held expectations for practice and defining a personally comfortable level of commitment to the tradition. What his message amounts to is an admission that the rigidity of the Ashtanga tradition—and the community in its defense—can be overwhelming and even perhaps oppressive at times.

This view resonates with Patty, a woman who first began practicing Ashtanga in her mid-50s and now teaches the ropes to beginner practitioners at AYC. In our interview, she framed her practice narrative by revealing something about her self-asserted identity that traces back even to her academic nursing career: she has been somewhat of a lifelong “rebel.” She compares herself to Chuck Miller, a famous certified Ashtanga teacher whose workshop she attended, the
main takeaway of which was “challenge and question.” She reports that she is willing to adhere to traditional rules and regulations to a certain point, but then reflects, “it’s like, ‘where’s the line?’ Like, that’s not the point of what we’re trying to do.” She offered a view that adhering to some rules can be helpful for the practitioner’s pursuit of “becoming an enlightened being”—for her, the point of yoga—while others may distract from that purpose. When I participated one of her afternoon “Introduction to Ashtanga Yoga” classes, I was surprised by the way her instruction seemed to stray from any other Ashtanga class I had taken. Drawing from her background in other styles of yoga, she offered a slow-paced class that was heavily focused on anatomical alignment (meaning she spent a lot of time instructing us on how to isolate and manipulate particular muscles to more easily and safely inhabit each asana). By the end of the hour-and-a-half-long class, we had only practiced a handful of asanas in the primary series (it was for beginners, after all), and if I remember correctly, the order we followed did not perfectly mirror the sequence with which I had become familiar.

I wondered to myself how other members of the Ashtanga community might respond to her instructional style. The order and duration of each asana, the type of instruction teachers offer (is it catered to the individual? Is it more hands-on? Is it alignment-sensitive?): these are the kinds of concerns that Ashtangis consider as they collectively attempt to define the boundaries of the practice they hold in common, close to their hearts. Liam, one of the practitioners I interviewed, self-identified as an “Ashtanga snob” while letting out a chuckle. At the same time, he spoke very highly of Patty, one of the teachers at the studio he frequents five or six days a week, and admitted with a grin that he wanted to ‘be like her’ when he is her age. Being an “Ashtanga snob” (meaning he has less appreciation for other styles of yoga) was something Liam
identified as a “narrow-mindedness” that Ashtanga helped him realize was one of his “faults of character.”

Liam’s wife Carroll Ann, who also teaches at the same studio, uses the term “fundamentalist” to mark different members of the community with a similar meaning to the “Ashtanga snob:” “I’m not a fundamentalist in terms of my own practice,” she asserts while explaining, “I’ll still go to Vinyasa classes [an alternative form of yoga, although with similarities to Ashtanga] from time-to-time.” She employs the term repeatedly as if it is a characteristic to avoid. For instance, when describing another teacher she knows and who she deems inadequate for the role, she lists being “a fundamentalist” among other “character defects,” including being “a gossip,” being “competitive,” and talking “badly about other teachers.” Fundamentalism, or to be a fundamentalist, thus functions as a pejorative term in the Ashtanga community. Ashtangis experience a pressure to defend the tradition and their allegiance to it against such characterizations, and often accomplish this by either proclaiming that they are not fundamentalist in their approach to practice, or that there is an inherent value in being something of a fundamentalist, in terms of expressing loyalty to the dictates of their tradition. Carroll Ann compared her devotion to the tradition—with all its structure and seeming rigidity, to the benefits of being in a committed marriage:

The rigor, the structure, the discipline [inherent in her Ashtanga practice] is like the skeleton that I build my life around, and I’m so grateful for it. And so, some people look at us and say “oh my god, they’re fundamentalists, they’re scared to do anything else, duhduhduhduhduhuh,” but to me that’s like saying, you know, I’m married to an amazing man, and I’m going to be faithful for him for the rest of my life, and every day I’m going to kiss him in the morning, and kiss him goodnight, and make him a meal, and make sure his clothes are clean. I mean, there are certain disciplines that we do that are so beneficial, and so life-giving.

Carroll Ann acknowledges that the Asthanga tradition—with its “rigor,” “structure,” and “discipline” (in other words, its rules) can give its adherents the appearance of being
fundamentalists to an outside audience. She rejects this characterization of her community, because even though she identifies certain Ashtangis as exhibiting this undesirable trait, she attempts to place a demarcation between Ashtanga’s fundamentalists and Ashtanga’s faithful adherents. To be a fundamentalist is to be “narrow-minded” and to be oppressed by a seemingly arbitrary set of rules and expectations, she seems to imply, while to be a faithful Ashtanga practitioner is no more oppressive than being faithful in a marriage: it is a choice that may present added obligations, but that also offers contentment and security.

As seen in the above examples of how Ashtangis interpret authority in the context of lineage and navigate following the “rules,” allegiance to the tradition is performed, contested, and negotiated by this community in a variety of ways. While the imagined Ashtanga community is bound together by strong emotions and loyalties, it is by no means monolithic. While emploting themselves in the collective narrative, practitioners must balance between two communities: their intimate practice community and the imagined global community of practitioners. Having a practice community—and especially an intimate relationship with a teacher—equips practitioners with the social capital (Putnam 1995) required to not only assert their identities within the larger collective, but also (in critical ways) to sustain their practice over the long-term.
Chapter 3: Student-Teacher Relationships in the Ashtanga Community

The previous chapter examined the role of community in an Ashtangi’s personal practice. It especially focused on the relationships between an individual and the broader Ashtanga community in terms of how the latter reinforced one’s commitment to Ashtanga practice, even as it induced tensions for the individual practitioner (for instance, because of the community’s high expectations or feelings of exclusion). Now, I turn my attention to the role that student-teacher relationships play in Ashtangis’ practice narratives, and how despite the tensions that can arise from a practitioner’s need to accept or submit to the authority of her teacher, Ashtangis strongly rely on this central relationship as part of an intimate practice community to sustain their commitment to the practice.

Leo, Philo, and Caldman (2016) have analyzed the instructional methodologies of Ashtanga yoga from a ‘geography of authority’ approach, tracing how the authority enacted on students by an Ashtanga teacher enmeshes and sometimes conflicts with the student’s inner or experiential authority (70)—that is, the expertise they possess over oneself, one’s body and physical capabilities. The data I collected in my research illustrates several key examples of how Ashtangis experience and respond to the tensions they encounter on the mat between these internal and external sources of authority. These tensions figure in important ways in Ashtangi’s practice narratives, especially as they narrate how, why, and on what terms they develop a commitment to their Ashtanga yoga practice. Leo et. al. ultimately arrive at the conclusion that despite the apparent centrality of the community’s traditional authority structure, Ashtanga practice relies on a distributed authority model in which power is “co-produced” between student and teacher, thereby assisting a student in the cultivation of “self-authority” (72, 81). Leo
et. al. define this “self-authority” as “what [practitioners] know, expect and command from themselves, on the basis of countless prior experiences, encounters, interactions, times and spaces” (2). Thus, self-authority gained and articulated through practice is strongly tied to practitioners’ ability to exercise self-discipline, in how they set standards for practice that they “expect and command from themselves,” (and in turn, their relationships with their teachers).

*Defining and Negotiating the Teacher’s Authority*

Student-teacher relationships figured importantly in every practice narrative I elicited through interviews with my research participants. This is to be as expected, as the Ashtanga tradition greatly emphasizes the importance of practicing under the guidance of an experienced teacher (indeed, emphasis on this relationship is one of the primary ways that the Ashtanga community attempts to position its tradition as unique from other styles or systems of yoga commonly practiced today). KPJAYI offers a firm position on this matter, as evident on its website:

The bonding of teacher and student is a tradition reaching back many thousands of years in India, and is the foundation of a rich, spiritual heritage. The teacher can make his students steady – he can make them firm where they waver. He is like a father or mother who corrects each step in his student’s spiritual practice.

Seen here, the nature of this relationship is not supposed to merely be one that facilitates instruction (in terms of the mere transfer of knowledge). The student-teacher relationship is understood as a spiritual relationship and has an intimacy comparable to familial ties between a “father or mother” and child, thus pointing back to the connections between the traditional lineage structure and a kinship-like concern over the community’s shared family tree. The teacher “corrects” the student, much like the common role of an instructor to a pupil, but s/he also provides significant support to make the student “steady” and “firm.” The physical
dimension of this support is explicit (teachers help their students from falling over in difficult balancing poses), but emotional and spiritual support also applies. This official depiction of the student-teacher relationship establishes the teacher in a position of significant authority over his or her students. Like a parent, the teacher is supposed to have a great deal of responsibility for the student’s learning process (and overall wellbeing) and correct him or her at “each step” they take.

This parental role of the teacher is enacted and reenacted in student-teacher relationships between KPJAYI-teachers (Sharath, Saraswathi, and of course, the late Guruji) and practitioners who study with them in Mysore. During the Guru Purnima celebration I attended, for instance, several practitioners performed their part in this relationship by prostrating before Sharath and touching his feet (Fieldnotes, July 12, 2014)—a customary way to treat parents, teachers, and other elders in India to show them humble respect. This gesture is a symbolic act of submission and gratitude, also echoed in the opening invocation (a Sanksrit chant) that it is customary for Ashtangis to memorize and recite before practice each day. In this “opening prayer” (KPJAYI 2009) practitioners begin by reciting the following (in Sanskrit, although I offer an English translation from KPJAYI’s website):

I bow to the lotus feet of the Gurus
The awakening happiness of one’s own Self revealed.

The Sanskrit mantra also closes with the statement “to Patanjali, I salute.” The implication is that through practicing the “traditional” Ashtanga yoga method established by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, Ashtangis access a long line of Gurus tracing back to Patanjali (the alleged author of the Yoga Sutras, which the yoga community acknowledges as an ancient and foundational literary exposition of yogic philosophy). In this chain of Gurus which can be traced back to antiquity, each successive Guru is said to have “lotus feet”—a term signifying spiritual enlightenment—to
which practitioners (figuratively) bow before beginning each morning’s practice. On his blog, an authorized Ashtanga teacher based in Charlottesville writes, “the chant acknowledges and expresses gratitude to all the people who have passed yoga on for thousands of years so we can practice it today” (Bultman, n.d.) Without this group of forerunners (in which Pattabhi Jois and his kin figure significantly), the Ashtangis of today would not have the ability to practice the system and reap its benefits; Ashtangis thus owe these previous teachers great respect for their enduring contributions.

This gratitude is owed to all teachers in the chain of transmission, but the highest honor is reserved for those teachers who have the closest connections to the “direct lineage”—including Guruji, his kin, and in some cases, teachers who were Guruji’s earliest students (and thus, with the most years of experience in the practice). It is in these relationships that Ashtangis are most likely to embody the ideal of the parent-child relationship put forth by KPJAYI. Some practitioners draw on the idea of having a familial connection with their Mysore-based teachers quite explicitly. Deniz, a practitioner I befriended in Mysore during my fieldwork there in 2014, posted a photograph of her with Saraswathi to her Facebook profile on September 9, 2015. The caption read: “Happy Birthday dear Mother! I respect your intelligence, knowledge, and sacrifice. I adore your beauty and compassion. You are a wonderful guide and a great example to all young women. God Bless You!” (Secallus, 2015). When practitioners cast teachers in these familial roles, it not only signifies respect but also suggests something about the way teachers make their students feel.

During our interview, Kacey also alluded to kinship relations when describing her experiences practicing with Tim Miller, a highly esteemed teacher in the Ashtanga community because he was an early student of Pattabhi Jois:
Tim feels like he’s your grandpa. There’s something about sitting in Tim Miller’s presence that makes you feel immediately comfortable. And like “everything is ok”… I think he’s got a little bit of Guruji in him. I think if anybody is like Guruji it’s probably Tim Miller…I know that Tim’s a good teacher because he provides a presence for you to step into . . . and creates that energy and creates that space, and holds that space, so that you can come in, and step into that and feel safe. And I think that if a teacher can do that, that’s a big deal.

She casts this teacher as a “grandpa” and draws a connection between him and Guruji (whom she never met), suggesting that Guruji was likely to also have Tim’s way of providing a “presence,” “energy,” and “space” that makes students feel safe. The significance of this familial term is that it echoes the security and protection that a child receives from his or her parents or other kin. Practitioners are more likely to use these familial names to refer to direct members of the Jois lineage or highly experienced teachers like Tim who have fewer degrees of separation from the lineage (i.e., to Guruji) than other teachers. Father, Mother, or even Grandpa connote deep respect and invest these teachers with a sense of exceptional wisdom; the six-hundred-something other authorized teachers in this community are not on quite the same standing as these high-ranking teachers. The teachers I interviewed differ from them in a significant way—that they all have teachers with whom they actively continue to study. Sharath, Saraswathi and Tim may still practice, but they are in the unique position that they have few options for teachers who rank higher than them. Other teachers with steady teachers of their own—whether in the shala where they teach, or in Mysore where they visit on an annual basis to “be a student again” (as Jennifer explained)—have reason to temper the way they embody this kind of authoritative role.

The teacher-practitioners that I interviewed expressed a deep feeling of responsibility they have to their students, but were notably less willing to assert that they possessed greater authority than their students in relation to the Ashtanga tradition. Their hesitation to claim greater authority indicates a departure from the idealized parent-child or elder-child relationship,
illustrating how individuals internalize expectations of social roles within existing daily life contexts. Jennifer, a KPJAYI-authorized teacher—who owns and operates an Ashtanga studio and who has been practicing Ashtanga for 18 years since 1997—framed her role as “I am not an authority in practice, I am a seeker and a student primarily (emphasis added) who happens to have been doing this practice longer than my students so [I] may have beneficial insight to share with them.” What she appears to imply is that she has more embodied experience than her students, which qualifies her to teach them, but that this does not necessarily translate into greater “authority.” Carroll Ann, who teaches (as well as practices) at Jennifer’s studio, puts it this way: “there’s no expert in a Mysore room. There’s just a bunch of students and a bunch of teachers. We’re all students, and we all have a teacher somewhere.” Attempting to differentiate her position as an Ashtanga teacher from that of an ultimate authority figure on the Ashtanga practice, she reveals “I don’t feel worthy of being in that position.” She goes on to explain how “there’s this reciprocity and humility in an Ashtanga Mysore setting” unparalleled in almost any other yoga learning environment because it is one of the few traditions where a student is likely to have practiced alongside her teacher while he does his own practice. As students watch their teachers navigate through the challenges they face during practice, watching them “fall and screw up or cry or laugh or bust out” (as Carroll Ann puts it), the teachers’ weaknesses are exposed, making them seem more real. Moreover, it reinforces the sentiment Jennifer expressed, that she is “primarily” a student and only offers “insight” to her students she has gained through more years of experience.

Students and teachers reciprocate the learning experience for one another as teachers (at least according to Jennifer) are “learning and researching all the time” to better accommodate their students’ practices and specific needs. Rather than blindly follow their teacher’s instruction,
Jennifer explains that she hopes her students adopt an “exploratory attitude toward the practice” and develop a self-directed learning approach. In other words, she hopes that through practice under her supervision, her students will gain embodied experiences that lend them the authority to practice on their own terms and with fewer interventions from her. Before this becomes possible, however, students tend to rely on their teachers not just to learn the mechanics of the Ashtanga sequence (where they should look, where their leg is supposed to go, etc.), but also to develop a committed approach to practice despite the challenges it presents.

*The Role of a Teacher in Cultivating Commitment*

While teachers expressed a nuanced and contingent authority stance, many of my research participants explained how they had to trust in and submit to the authority of their teachers when first starting out the practice in order to withstand the pain, fear, or weariness it impressed on them and fight the urge to give up due to any other reservations they held. Liam reports that when he first began practicing Ashtanga with Jennifer over two years, she made him promise commitment in advance, so that he was positioned to persevere in the face of anticipated self-doubt: “if you’re going to do this,” she said, according to his retelling, “I want you to commit for a month, [and] I want you to commit for at least three days a week” of practice for the duration of that month. He agreed to this initial commitment, and embarked on his first day of practice. It was a good thing he made that promise to stick with it, considering those early experiences were not very pleasant:

I remember it very vividly. I thought I was going to die! [erupts in laughter]. And I’m going “Oh my god, I’m like 5 sun salutations through, and I’m sweat[ing]—and I haven’t had breakfast because they said I couldn’t have breakfast. . .I used to wake up and the first thing I used to do was eat breakfast, so the idea of not eating, and my blood sugar is plummeting, and I think it’s about a million degrees in there, and there’s sweat pouring off me, and I’m doing another sun salutation! And, I just did sun salutations that day, and when she said “Ok that’s good for today” I went “Oh thank god.”
Many practitioners report their surprise at how challenging and excruciating their introduction to the Ashtanga tradition can be. Liam was no stranger to yoga (he had previous practiced other styles, such as Integral Yoga), but the rigor demanded by Ashtanga yoga was something else altogether. Unlike commonly held perceptions of yoga practice making a person feel peaceful and relaxed, practicing Ashtanga for the first time made him feel as though he was going to “die.” The promise he made to Jennifer helped him ultimately cultivate a committed practice because he could not back out after those early experiences and he was able to, thus, build up his self-authority; despite unsteady feelings that may persist throughout his Ashtanga practice, he has accumulated enough experiences of making it through the day’s practice—i.e., not dying—that enables him to “expect and command” (Leo et. al. 2016, 2) a repeated performance.

Carroll Ann had a similarly negative response to her early encounters with Ashtanga yoga. She began steady Ashtanga practice in the Mysore-style with great reluctance. She had it in her mind to teach prenatal yoga at Jennifer’s Ashtanga studio—which she considered the “best,” most “elite” yoga studio in town—a studio dedicated to the Ashtanga tradition—but Jennifer only agreed to hire her on the condition that she would “understand Ashtanga yoga” first. Carroll Ann began regularly attending the morning “Mysore” classes in the hope that Jennifer would eventually hire her. She reports the following of those beginning Mysore classes: “I hated it so much. Like sooo much, because it was just a complete experience of failure every single week. . . Oh it was awful.” She lamented the physical pain she experienced, such as in her knee, and the emotional frustration of trying to commit the entire series she was learning (which also involves knowing the Sanskrit names for each asana) to memory. Yet, she persevered through her pain and misery because of her commitment to impress this teacher.
Fortunately, she stopped hating it—although she admits it took her still longer to start liking it—after several months when she began observing results. For instance, she discovered she was finally able to do a backbend. She was also able to “bind,” or catch her toe in half-lotus. The act of “binding” is a common element in many asanas in the Ashtanga system that requires a fair degree of flexibility—a breakthrough she describes as “a miracle, like I thought the heavens were going to open and the angels were going to sing, you know? I couldn’t believe I was actually, like, catching, in half-lotus, because I couldn’t. It was really, really slow. So I was like, ‘hey, you know, this is actually like, doing something to my body. It’s working.’”

She also reported experiencing other positive changes: “I had a very tight mind. I was very controlling, a little OCD. . .had a hard time relaxing, couldn’t sit still, [and] I had a lot of anxiety. And I felt that stuff starting to loosen up.” These mental improvements were what she had first hoped starting a yoga practice almost 10 years earlier could address, but she never saw such progress until she began practicing Ashtanga yoga. What originally started as a begrudging commitment she made to appease an external authority figure soon became a personal commitment constituted via her experiential authority. As her practice unfolded under the guidance of Jennifer, the studio owner (who she now works for, although teaching Ashtanga instead of prenatal yoga), she saw strides in what she could “know, expect, and command” of herself (Leo et. al. 2016, 2).

Her practice narrative, as well as Liam’s highlighted above, demonstrate how important the role of a teacher as an authority figure can be in shaping a practitioner’s initial and foundational commitments to the tradition. Working closely with a teacher helps students stay motivated to practice regularly because they have someone to answer to if they decide to skip. It also helps them face their fears on the mat because even though the practice may have seemingly
insurmountable demands, they are in the care of a teacher who has lived through the same challenges they face and whom they trust to serve as their guide.

**Trust and “Surrender”: Submitting to one’s Teacher**

For some practitioners, facing their fears meant attempting that really intimidating *asana* that they never thought they could conceivably manage without the physical support of a teacher. For other practitioners, facing their fears meant trusting their teacher enough to willingly accept certain types of hands-on “adjustments” to help get them into challenging *asanas*. Alex, one practitioner with a bad shoulder injury in her past stressed how much time passed before her relationship with her teacher developed enough to trust him with it. Eventually, her firm “yeaaah, you don’t touch that shoulder, because I’m worried that you’re going to break it” stance softened as she observed his commitment to his students in terms of the “mutual respect” he developed with them, his “compassion,” and his endless “willing to experiment” and “research” to determine the best instructional methods for his students.

The Ashtanga community has a term or concept to describe the type of vulnerability that the practice demands of its students: Surrender. When I asked Kacey the meaning behind this concept so often discussed in the tradition, she offered an illustration from her previous forays in various martial arts:

So I used to study Jiu Jitzu and Taekwondo in another lifetime [she laughs]. And at one point our Sensai said to us, ‘if I tell you to put your arm here [she gestures], and step this way, it’s not because I’m trying to control you. It’s because putting your hand here and stepping this way is the difference between you getting punched and you not getting punched. How long have you been doing this? You have to trust me, because I’m trying to give you, I’m trying to teach you the tools that will prevent yourself from being injured, and you don’t know more than I do. You putting your hand someplace else is saying that you know more than me.’ And when he said that I was like ‘Ohhhhhh,’ and, and that resonated with me and from that day on I respected that.
So part of the equation is trust, as illustrated above—trust in the expertise and good intentions of one’s teacher. However, when I pushed the matter further, she offered the following: “I mean, it’s different for everybody, but it means the same thing. It’s just gonna show up differently for different people. It means giving up something, and I can’t say what everyone has to give up . . . control . . . is a blanket term I would probably feel comfortable using. . . yeah, you have to give up control.” A step further than trust alone, to surrender—either to a teacher, or as its commonly put in the community, to ‘the method’—is to submit oneself to an external source of authority and forgo one’s power to exert one’s will.

While the notion of surrender as commonly used in discussions of warfare may seem to suggest personal defeat and acquiescence to external domination, Ashtangis choose to forgo control as an act of individual agency. They make this decision to submit to an external source of authority as an act of collaboration with their teachers, rather than because of oppressive power dynamics between teacher and student. Through the progress they make over time working with their teachers, Ashtangis cultivate self-authority (Leo et. al. 2016, 81). This budding self-authority enables them to exercise greater self-discipline in the practice as the benefits one can gain through wholehearted surrender are slowly revealed. Not all of the practitioners I interviewed placed a strong emphasis on this notion of “surrender” to one’s teacher; those who did talk about surrender were mainly focused on describing their experiences as students rather than teachers, and tended to present themselves as extremely devoted and committed to the tradition (notably because of the benefits they cite it offering them). Carroll Ann, for instance, praises “child-like obedience” for the way it transformed her relationship to her practice:

I am aware that there is great benefit in doing what I am told. So this is the only area of my life where I’m obedient, and . . . you know, I’m pretty independent, and I like to do things my own way . . . but in this area, I’ve realized through my experience that doing exactly what I’m told, just having simple, child-like, obedience, is extremely beneficial.
She admitted that in the past, rather than simply and dutifully follow the received tradition and the directions of her teacher, she often made a lot of exceptions for herself, made trade-offs and tried to switch the prescribed practice schedule around to suit her convenience and preferences:

It wasn’t wrong, but I just wasn’t experiencing a lot of benefit. I mean, I was experiencing some benefit, but my mind was just getting very tired, and the effort it took to make those decisions every day was exhausting. So, I think about a year ago, I changed my relationship to the practice and I thought, “well, what would happen Carroll Ann if you shocked yourself and everybody who knows you, and you just did what you’re told. You just obeyed a teacher, and just experimented with that life, for a year or so.”

The results? With relief she reports, “my mind is no longer a battle field.” Her practice narrative presents a possible resolution—although hard for most to negotiate—to the tensions practitioners face as a result of clashing sources of authority between themselves and their teachers. Surrender is scary for the individual, because it threatens the loss of one’s sense of self, but Carroll Ann reports that her decision to experiment with surrender offered her much to gain: relief from the fighting against the demands of the practice, and greater benefits from her practice once she stopped making excuses and gave it her all.

Unfortunately, this kind of surrender may not produce the same kinds of benefits that Carroll Ann experienced for every practitioner. The practice narrative below illustrates how one practitioner’s attempts to fully “dedicate” herself to the tradition and submit to the expectations of her teacher ultimately produced a destabilizing, rather than reinforcing, effect on her practice.

**Trusting oneself versus Trusting one’s teacher: A Case Study**

Beverly, no stranger to physical training, first began practicing Ashtanga yoga in 2001 when looking for an “athletic form of yoga” that could offer her greater physical flexibility. Originally splitting her time between Ashtanga yoga and Iyengar, another yoga tradition that is
generally regarded as more slow-paced and alignment-focused, she soon decided to put all her energy into the Ashtanga tradition because she felt as though it was like “a badge of honor to do Ashtanga because it’s very difficult,” and she was eager to face the challenge. She practiced at a local Ashtanga yoga studio about three days a week for six years. The teacher she studied under had nearly two decades of experience with the practice and was authorized to teach by KPJAYI.

Eventually, Beverly decided her practice routine was “too much” to keep up with due to “logistical reasons”: it was occupying a great deal of time in her morning schedules, and added nearly an hour of driving time onto her days when she already dealt with over an hour long commute to work each way. To further justify her reasons for quitting the practice, she added:

Now the idea with Ashtanga yoga of course, is that I shouldn’t need to spend money and go to a studio. I should be able to practice at home. That’s the whole point, to have your own practice! But, my history with any form of exercise is that apparently I MUST pay money, and I MUST leave my house, or else it’s not going to happen.

While the Ashtanga system theoretically allows for a highly self-directed practice routine that can be carried on without constant instruction from a supervising teacher, Beverly recognized—based on her self-authority or knowledge of herself and her capabilities—that she had little hope of maintaining the self-discipline required for a home practice. Attending classes she had paid for and practicing with a teacher kept her feeling accountable to her commitment. Nevertheless, she decided to stop practicing yoga for reasons already mentioned and turned to a different fitness routine that was more convenient for her: boot camp-type classes offered near her house that she has stuck with for several years.

Years later, she was drawn to give yoga another try after deciding she “needed more flexibility, once again” not just “in [her] body” as before, but more broadly, “in [her] life.” As she says, she needed “a change in routine,” so she returned to the Ashtanga studio and practiced
for about three weeks straight—until she injured herself. She assumes partial responsibility for how she strained her lower back, noting that her “desire to move forward in the practice,” to make progress (and perhaps to make up for so many missed years), may have caused her to overextend herself against her better judgement. At the same time, she narrates how she thinks “part” of the problem was her teacher, who she describes as having a “tendency to look at” her petite frame and high-energy attitude and “make assumptions” about what she was capable of doing. “I am not flexible,” Beverly attested, “at all.” Years of running and weight training made her quite inflexible, she explained, but her teacher, who Beverly “adore[s]” and who she seems to think meant well simply “pushed” her too far, resulting in a painful injury that destabilized her rediscovered commitment to the Ashtanga tradition. This scenario, Beverly noted, contributed to her “drop out for good.”

And yet, when her back was feeling better after a few months, she attempted to “dedicate” herself to the tradition once again. She resumed a daily practice, only to reinjure herself “in a number of ways,” including damage to her knee from sitting in padmasana, or lotus-pose, a known culprit for injuring the knees of Ashtangis when not practiced cautiously. Following unfortunate, repeat injuries, Beverly realized she could no longer justify continuing the practice, despite all it represented for her: improved flexibility, the thrill of challenge, “slowing down,” and the “uber-yogi experience.” She stopped practicing Ashtanga and is back to the boot camp classes, but mentioned that the circumstances that made her quit produced a “real sadness” for her, to the point that she was visibly upset while narrating them several months later.

“It’s hard for me to think that I’ve let it go, altogether,” revealed Beverly, who landed in a subjunctive place discussing her future hopes and possibilities of resuming practice: if she had
more time, if a studio opened up closer to her home, if she stepped down from her current position that carries so much responsibility, if she could find another teacher who was more “sympathetic to [her] limitations”—then she could see herself happily pick up the practice again. With tears in her eyes, she woefully admitted how “it’s hard in some ways not to be disappointed in oneself for not being able to pull back and say ‘hey, I can’t do that, I’m not doing that.’” What complicates her feelings—what produces real tensions in her practice narrative—is the fact that she liked her teacher so much; she “really really (emphasis added) liked her; she “adore[d] her,” and thought she was a “beautiful teacher” and person. However, that person who she trusted and shared an intimate relationship with “pushed” Beverly “in ways that she shouldn’t have allowed,” because her expectations were in conflict with what Beverly knew she was personally capable of as an expert over her body (listening to her “experiential authority” to borrow a concept from Leo et. al.).

**The Stakes of Surrender**

Serious injury is one of the major possibilities (some would say eventualities) of Ashtanga practice that raise the stakes when it comes to the collaborative relationship between student and teacher. On one hand, students must trust their teachers to make safe judgments about what their capable of doing, because they are unfamiliar with the practice and often have little experiential authority of their own to reference. They move on to the next *asana* in a series when their teacher deems them ready, and the role of the teacher is to “push” her students so they may deepen their practice, make breakthroughs, and discover knew abilities, while the students’ role is to accept these challenges on the basis of a trusting relationship. On the other hand, teachers face the challenge of imagining the unseen limitations of a student when the entire basis for their experiential authority is through their own forms of embodiment. There are limits to the
translatability of this kind of specific embodied, experiential knowledge when considering two different bodies with disparate capabilities in terms of strength, range of motion, wear-resistance, and so on.

“Teaching always arises out of experience,” Jennifer told me, stating how it is crucial for a teacher to have a consistent, dedicated practice because that is what “informs” their teaching. However, she also admitted that to have a good practice or even to be authorized to teach at KPJAYI does not make someone a “fantastic teacher” on its own. The teacher needs to be able to intuit the needs of a student through careful observation of that student’s practice coupled with reflection on her “experiential knowledge” gained through years of practice (a firm understanding of anatomy helps, as well). Describing the challenges she has experienced in teaching, Carroll Ann ran me through a hypothetical mental dialogue when dealing with this “dangerous” aspect of the role:

[You think] “OK, does this need a modification? Does this need to be done just the way it ought to be done? Is this person able to do this today, and they don’t know it, but you know it? OK, do I push or do I back off? Are they going to hurt themselves? Do I need—[etc.]” I mean, you’re constantly judging another person’s ability, and that is a really dangerous thing, because sometimes you’re wrong, sometimes you’re right, you know?

This “judging” of another person’s ability is an unavoidable feature of the Ashtanga teaching methodology, making a close relationship between teacher and student all the more vital to facilitate a safe and effective learning process. Mutual trust is a crucial ingredient in the relationship, but this can only be cultivated slowly over time as they navigate through the complex ways Ashtanga yoga facilitates a co-production of power.

When that trust to help and not harm is compromised, a student’s practice can fall apart by way of injury, as seen in Beverly’s practice narrative. Even still, Beverly expressed the hope of one day reestablishing a committed Ashtanga practice because her experiences with the
tradition have had such a powerful physical and emotional hold on her, for which her affectionate relationship with her teacher played a significant part. Knowing that in order to commit to anything she “MUST pay money” and leave the house, cultivating a home practice would not be a viable option for Beverly; if she were to start over again, she would likely need to find a new teacher who can give her the necessary support to practice Ashtanga yoga in a safe and enriching way. These practitioner’s narratives reveal that intimate relationships with their teachers—while causing them to feel challenged and vulnerable—offer invaluable reinforcement to their practice and facilitate the advancement not just of their progress in the practice, but to their sense of budding self-authority.
Chapter 4: The Precarious Position of the Home Practitioner

The community’s emphasis on student-teacher relationships places one segment of the community in a particularly precarious position: home practitioners. Home practitioners are individuals who practice Ashtanga yoga without routine supervision by a teacher; they do what Ashtangis often refer to as “self-practice” in the sense that it is largely self-guided and often takes place in one’s home. Home practitioners do not reap the same benefits that a close practice community can offer to the maintenance of one’s practice. They do not have a teacher to assist in the day-to-day cultivation of self-discipline or to offer a helping hand in challenging asanas. The community frequently discusses the particular circumstances of ‘home practitioners’ because of their placement nearer to the margins of the commonly conceptualized Ashtanga experience.

Close ties with a community of fellow practitioners can strongly reinforce a practitioner’s commitment to the practice (recall Carroll Ann’s affection for the community she found in Mysore). It can be very encouraging to feel this sense of solidarity—the sense that practitioners are bound together by common experiences, by feeling the same emotions and overcoming the same struggles as the people practicing next to, around, before and after them in a studio. The ability to have a close connection with an Ashtanga teacher also plays a pronounced role in sustaining an individual’s practice. This belief echoed throughout the practitioners’ narratives that I elicited through interviews.

Liam and Carroll Ann have built what they call a “Bhakti Shed” (Bhakti in Sanskrit is usually translated to “devotion”) in their backyard: inside is a polished yoga practice space with an upstairs loft area designed for sitting meditation; Carroll Ann occasionally offers yoga lessons there. Despite this, Liam reports that “I’d rather drive [and pay a membership fee!] to practice in
a room with other people than stay at home and practice.” The form that Ashtanga yoga takes, with self-initiated practice following a memorized sequence of asanas, makes for a practice that—at least theoretically—should be easy to conduct by oneself. Regardless, many practitioners prefer to seek out a studio that can supply a teacher and practice community, maintaining that it makes their practice easier to sustain.

On this topic of home practice’s difficulty, Liam related a brief story of an Ashtanga friend who was like “a six day a week person” before taking on a new job that utterly disrupted her practice schedule and left her with no choice but to practice at home, often late at nights. She was eventually able to adjust to the new practice pattern, which prompted him to offer, with slight hesitation:

I think that if I had [to]—if I moved, and I had to do a home practice, I could probably make it work, uhm—or I’d have to make it work . . . I don’t know how far I’d travel to a class. You know, I don’t know. I think, I could imagine traveling, you know, if I lived in Harrisonburg, I could imagine traveling [the hour commute back-and-forth], making some excuse to go in once a week maybe.

His hesitation reveals that home practice would be a last resort, an undesirable way to maintain his practice over the long-term. Kacey offered a similar view about the difficulty of practicing without a teacher:

I think home practice, I think the people who practice at home every day who are hours away from the nearest shala are the golden egg. Like I think they are the goose that laid the golden egg, because they have bhakti that I don’t have yet. They have a dedication to this practice that I haven’t experienced yet, not in the way that they do, at least.

Her use of the ‘golden egg’ analogy implies that home practitioners are some of the most valuable members of the Ashtanga community because of the extraordinarily high dedication they must have to in order to maintain their practice with so little external support. She had even more to say on the symbolic capital of these community members:
I admire people who have that kind of practice, and I couldn’t even tell you why. I just know that they have something special, you know, that I haven’t tapped into as of yet. And it’s a devotion and it’s a dedication, and it’s a level of commitment and stubbornness that is, it’s just so, it’s so admirable.

Kacey’s admiration of home practitioners emplots these community members in an esteemed place within the community. Home practitioners are at the margins of—yet not marginalized by—the imagined Ashtanga community because their experiences do not conform as closely to the narrative that so many other Ashtangis embrace: namely, the centrality and supportive presence of their teacher in their daily practice.

**Practicing Alone and the ‘Need’ for a Guru**

One woman I met during my stay in Mysore, Barbara, identified as a home practitioner and struck me as one of the most devoted practitioners I have met to date. Living in Upstate New York, regular practice with an Ashtanga teacher in a studio was not a viable option for her. Instead, she explained how for the last ten years she maintained a home practice, would save up her money throughout each year, and would make an annual Mysore trip to study with her teachers during her summer vacations as a school teacher. She expressed deep love for her teachers, both Sharath and Saraswathi (she practiced with whomever she had the opportunity during her month-long stays). While home in New York, she still attempted to maintain her connection to the tradition and her beloved teachers. One strategy she used to sustain her commitment back home was to practice to audio-recordings of “Led” classes in the voice of Pattabhi Jois himself. The Led class format involves a teacher ‘counting’ the pace of practice and directing the students to transition through the asana sequence by calling out the Sanskrit names for each in succession. In this way, the voice of her “guru” would fill her spare bedroom and help her literally stay up-to-speed with other practitioners in the imagined Ashtanga community.
Online forums like Facebook serve as a primary vehicle for practitioners in Barbara’s position to actually interact with members of their imagined community. For instance, there is a Facebook group called the “Ashtanga Home Practitioners Network” (of which Barbara is a member). With over 2,600 members, this network consists of posts asking specific questions to fellow practitioners or else offering advice and inspiration to sustain one’s home practice. One of the page’s administrators includes the following in a welcome post:

Although we are lone in our practice, facing our own struggles, this group was created in an effort to form some community among those of us who sometimes long for the synergy of a collective even though we are all existing in our own present space and time. Hopefully, this will become a support group for those of us on our respective solo journeys, but still a way to share your experiences with like minded folk as if we were all in class together.

As Ashtangis deal with their “own struggles,” they seek out membership in a collective that can offer reinforcement for their commitment to the practice. Individuals within this yoga community as well as outside observers acknowledge how Ashtanga yoga is hard, and that facing that perceived challenge necessitates the creation of a “support group” for at least some of the members to sustain a regular practice. This social media group is an attempt to redress this absence of an intimate learning community by substituting a remote (or imagined) one.

I return to Kacey, who referred to the rich online Ashtanga community as “the new arm of the lineage” but did not embrace it as an incontestably positive development for the tradition:

I think it’s awesome, but I also think we lose a little something, in that, as well. And so, I think that I’m fortunate because I had a year of practice with a teacher, and so now I feel... I feel like I trust myself enough to know what I’m looking for. I know my practice enough, I’ve had the experience with a teacher. These things, for somebody starting Ashtanga new, you know, yeah, I really believe that you need a guru. You need a guru. You need to be under the advice of someone under a guru [laughs]. You need a teacher.

She furthermore contends that it could be physically “dangerous” for a completely novice practitioner to start their practice from home, using resources like practice videos and
instructional manual available online. “[I]f somebody who’s really bendy sees Advanced A and is like “Oooh I’ll do that” it’s like ‘Ah!’” she continued in a feigned expression of panic, as if to imply that the bendy but inexperienced practitioner would be asking for injury. For this reason she maintains that “you need a guru.” Here, we see her efforts to engage in a sort of community boundary-making: while most home practitioners are “so admirable” (as she expressed in her narrative excerpt above), they run the risk of endangering themselves (and the tradition). By consequence of this distinction, these inexperienced or misguided practitioners do not represent the Ashtanga community well because they do not adhere to the tradition to a satisfactory extent.

As Kacey spoke about the need for a teacher, she was playing out the kinds boundary-concerned negotiations in which her community so often engages. This is seen mostly clearly in her use of self-initiated self-repair: she revises her initial position “you need a guru” to the clarified position, “you need to be under the advice of someone under a guru.” The latter statement reveals an awareness of the debates surrounding who and what qualifies an Ashtanga teacher (as discussed in Chapter 2). It reflects notions of the Ashtanga community’s social order. “Guru,” while simply meaning teacher in a certain sense, invokes sentiments of spiritual authority that are usually only applied to members of the Jois family or very senior teachers of the tradition. Kacey offers that it is acceptable to have several degrees of separation from oneself and a “guru” in this sense through her repair—this still counts, so long as through a “teacher” (in a more ordinary sense) a practitioner maintains some traceable tie to the lineage structure. This example illustrates how the high degree of reflexivity that community members engage in through contested narratives in digital spaces can reflect back into the way that practitioners perform their Ashtangi-ness in real-time.
The Importance of a Teacher: A Disrupted Practice Community

Kacey, Alex, and (to a lesser extent) I were fellow members of a budding Ashtanga community in Harrisonburg, VA. Our teacher Taylor was a recent college graduate whose lively comportment and somewhat sarcastic attitude matched his age, while he nonetheless appeared to be years beyond his early 20s in terms of his command over asana and teaching methodology. He was responsible for introducing both Kacey and Alex to Ashtanga yoga. At the time, both students already had a trusting relationship with him because they had been attending other classes of his for around a year (e.g., Power Yoga). They formed a small but strong practice group that frequented some of his very first Ashtanga instruction offerings.

Of these experiences studying with Taylor, Alex (who teaches at his alma mater and has several years on him) remarks:

He was so clear about his commitment, to his teaching, to his practice. . .and it was pretty incredible to watch this young guy be this teacher. I watched him be able to take, to take and take and take, and to give, and to work with different people in different ways.

Emphasizing her surprise at this reversal of roles (as she is usually the teacher in the room), Alex summed up her enthusiasm for Taylor's teaching style as follows: “I was majoring in Taylor.” She initially held reservations against practicing Ashtanga (she had heard both Liam and Taylor talk about their practices before giving it a try) but Taylor managed to “convince” her that the practice could offer her something of value. Kacey had similar ways of expressing the give and take that Taylor brought to their student-teacher relationship:

Taylor as my first teacher was a great person to introduce me to Ashtanga yoga, and he was my teacher, capital “T,” and he was the one who could talk to me about things, he was the one to always encourage me to go past asana, and deeper, and. . .but also was compassionate and understanding—as much as a 23 year old young man could be of a 36 year old mother of a toddler. And so I would come in in the morning tired after my toddler wouldn’t sleep that night and he’d tell me to “try harder” and I’d want to kick him [we both chuckle].
Despite the moments when she resented his expectations to “try harder” when she felt the exhaustion of being in a stage of life quite distinct from his, Kacey contends that his encouragement and support was much-needed for her to build a “deeper” practice. His compassion and understanding laid the foundations for a particularly intimate relationship marked by an emotionally-constituted kind of possession: Taylor was not just a teacher to Kacey, but her “capital ‘T’” Teacher; the Teacher to whom she owed her newfound dedication to Ashtanga yoga practice. Both Alex and Kacey cultivated committed Ashtanga practices under Taylor’s guidance, supplementing the instruction he offered three times a week with occasional home practice. The Ashtanga community grew and waned, and I missed more of Taylor’s classes than I would like to admit (blaming school work, costs, and whatever else I could). They managed to sustain their practices with greater consistency.

Then, the teacher whom they relied upon so heavily to not just oversee but carefully “build” their practice announced he would be leaving town in May, Boston-bound. The community he had built up in his three short years of teaching began lamenting their loss before he had even departed. A “Saying Goodbye to Taylor” email bulletin sent out on May 26, 2015 from his studio, The Center, read:

He brought Power Yoga and then Ashtanga to the studio, infusing his classes with his dynamic, enthusiastic, and direct teaching. Students could find themselves laughing as they were encouraged to take chances on their mats. After pushing themselves to find their edge, students were sometimes lucky enough to be soothed in savasana with his guitar and singing. He was a coach, a cheerleader, and friend to many.

His moving out of town put his Ashtanga students in a particularly precarious position for maintaining their budding practices. He was the only Ashtanga teacher in Harrisonburg. He was the only Ashtanga teacher within a 60-mile radius (with the next nearest teacher(s) an hour away

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in Charlottesville). Unsure of what other options available to them, Kacey and Alex collaboratively established an Ashtanga practitioners network for the city and attempted to recruit people to join in their experiment to build an Ashtanga community in the absence of a teacher. On practice days, they would gather at the same location Taylor had once taught them, and over the span of a few hours, practitioners were welcome to come and go to do “self-practice” in a collective practice space.

Alex and Kacey set up these arrangements given their understanding that maintaining their practices after Taylor left would be a lot easier than attempting to practice in isolation. Alex explained how she felt the practice experience was “totally different . . . practicing in my spare bedroom.” When I asked Kacey to describe the difference between home practice and collective practice, she answered:

Energy. Other people’s energy. Other people’s breath. Uhm, other people’s intention. But the energy. . . other people’s energy in the room is what I think is the fundamental difference. Because there’s nothing better than walking into the room of other people breathing, Ashtangis, of people practicing, and you walking in and rolling out your mat and just like jumping into the ocean. There’s nothing better than that. I love walking into full Mysore rooms.

Alex expressed a similar understanding of what sets home and group practice apart by explaining “there’s that shared energy, when it’s a healthy community, and that sort of compassion. You know, even just like, the other people breathing around you” produces an effect. (Likewise, Liam describes the “energy” in a Mysore room in Mysore with 50 people who are “psyched to be there” studying with Saraswathi). Their responses index the common community belief that practitioners rely on other practitioners—either in their physical or imagined network—to reinforce their dedication to the practice. “Other people’s energy” has the ability to (re)invigorate an individual’s practice and defend against phases of doubt or disinterest which might otherwise lead to dropping the practice. Kacey and Alex explained to me that this effect was diminished,
however, because they were not walking into a “full” Mysore room. Their practitioner network had low membership, shared practice sessions were poorly attended, and mounting difficulty with logistics and communication led them to abandon the experiment after about four months.

Kacey and Alex were two of my four interviewees who, at the time of interview, were no longer maintaining the consistent practice routines they once had (which generally ranged somewhere between three and six days a week). Kacey described the period in between Taylor’s move and the dissolution of the practice network as “part of my practice that was really challenging because not only did I lose my teacher, but I also lost my practice (emphasis added) shortly after” to an injury of her C5-C6 nerves; this injury occurred after just two days of practicing without supervision, which disrupted her practice for several months to follow, during which time she would often struggle to do a single asana, never mind a rigorous, roughly 90-minute long practice. She eventually recovered this injury and was able to reclaim her practice from home (with the local practitioner’s network no longer in existence), but faced a new obstacle to practicing her normal Ashtanga routine when I interviewed her: her first-trimester pregnancy, which zapped her energy and made her turn to other strategies to maintain her connections to the tradition besides rigorous asana practice. Now, she remarks, she routinely reads literature on the Ashtanga tradition and yogic philosophy to continue her studies off the mat, and keeps up with the online networks of blogs, podcasts, and so forth to remain engaged in her imagined Ashtanga community. When I asked her how often she reads about Ashtanga through these avenues, she offered a readily certain response: “Every day. Uhm, eeeeeeverrrry day. Yep. Every day. It’s part, it’s part of the practice for me now.”

Alex also has remained current on the dynamics of this digitally-mediated Ashtanga community since her local community has fallen apart, but struggled for some time to reclaim
her practice or at least reestablish its regularity. The challenges she faced included dealing with the loss of a teacher for whom she really cared, followed by the disappointment of their teacher-less practitioner network experiment failing, and that home practice (in the absence of other immediate options) was not easy for her to sustain. In her practice narrative, she related how this last difficulty was a destabilizing force on the consistent practice she hoped for:

So I’ve always done better practicing when I go out than practicing home. I’ve never been able to—I’ve dabbled with home practice at different times. There was one time when I was exclusively practicing at home and I was able to get that to work, but it’s hard to make space at home for practice.

It’s harder for me to set up that structure, time, and practice . . . just, I know it takes work, and this time of the year, this semester, it’s the last thing in the world I want to do. . .you know? and I’m like “God, I need to set an hour aside, or 2 hours, and so partially I think it’s just a question of just doing it, and prioritizing it,” and then part of it is just the larger ambivalence of like “am I going to work with a teacher or not?”

She reflects a narrative offered throughout a significant portion of the larger community that without the presence of a teacher to oversee one’s practice, “it’s harder . . . to set up that structure” required to sustain a self-practice at home. As mentioned above, Alex was not maintaining a consistent practice at the time of our interview. I asked her if she could envision a point in time when she would drop her Ashtanga practice all together, and she responded, “I can—like I see how easy it is not to practice [erupts in laughter]! And yet it’s not easy, because I’m very conscious of it every day. . .” She later reiterated this point: “I guess it’s like it’s a weird thing where I’m like, ‘I do this thing. I don’t do this thing, but I think about this thing all the time.’” Her commitments to following the goings-on of the online Ashtanga community during her period of not practicing reflected this hesitancy in totally abandoning the tradition.

These women who once formed a shared practice community worked out distinct resolutions to the dissolution of their community and the consequent disruption of their practices. They found ways to navigate around their barriers to practice because of their prevailing
commitments to the tradition—an allegiance that was the result of the positive experiences they had when a part of a physical learning community. Waiting out the draining first trimester of her pregnancy, Kacey authored a re-conceptualized definition of practice that she could maintain by immersing herself in the community’s online resources. Meanwhile, she feels a “hunger for” an experienced teacher to guide her “lifelong practice” that she maintains will show up when the time is right. Alex, who more strongly defined her love of Ashtanga to the physical dimensions of asana practice and the growth that it offers, expressed her desire to once again have a “consistent practice” in the future and to have “a relationship with a teacher that supports this practice.” She is now successfully pursuing these goals by traveling to Charlottesville approximately once a week to participate in Jennifer’s Mysore-style classes at AYC and supplementing this instruction with less structured forays in home practice.

Their similar narratives illustrate how the inherent challenges in Ashtanga yoga practice can be more pronounced for home practitioners and how students of Ashtanga who no longer have the “luxury” of a nearby teacher (as Liam expressed it) yearn for and seek out novel ways to maintain a connection to an Ashtanga community, whether physical or imagined. Paired with the broader Ashtanga community’s emphasis on the ‘need’ for a teacher, their experiences reveal the complicated ways that individuals interact and enmesh with the Ashtanga community in their construction of personal practice narratives, and how these narratives, in turn, act upon their ability to maintain a committed practice.
Conclusion

The experiences of the practitioners featured in my analysis above cannot be understood in isolation from one another; their modes of narrative—both public (i.e., online) and private (i.e., elicited through interview)—reveal that Ashtangis largely come to understand their practice experiences—and indeed, their identities—in relation to other Ashtangis who populate their community. The Ashtangis I interviewed and encountered in my fieldwork are very self-aware of the community of which they were a part, and of the ways they internalized and reproduced common phrases or experiences—as it were, the way they performed “Ashtangi-ness” off the mat. They laughed as they heard themselves narrating elements of an oh-so-common Ashtangi experience, like when Liam reported he thought he was “going to die” his first time practicing, when Alex declared how “easy” it is not to keep up her practice, and when Kacey echoed the taken-for-granted official recommendation about the “need” for a “guru.” They also cited the community’s “social facts” (Durkheim 1982) or unspoken “rules” to explain their individual experiences in contrast to perceived community norms; recall Patty’s self-asserted identity as a rule-breaker, Carroll Ann’s distinction between ‘fundamentalism’ in a pejorative sense and her style of commitment, or Suzanne’s efforts to counteract the community’s exclusionary tendencies. Ashtanga practitioners engage one another to create an impressively self-reflexive community. On their mats, Ashtangis quietly bend their bodies in accordance with the dictates of the Ashtanga tradition. Off their mats, their practice-related self-examinations and negotiations bend back on that tradition as they actively situate themselves within and navigate through the broader Ashtanga community (simultaneously physical and imagined).
In part, we may be able to attribute the high level of social reflexivity in this community to the practice they hold in common. Each day of asana practice offers the opportunity for practitioners to mindfully examine themselves. When describing his perceptions of the overall Ashtanga community, Liam said:

They typically tend to be very reflective people, uh, in a way that, somebody who runs is not necessarily. Or, I think, no, I think everybody’s reflective, but, Ashtanga elicits that, it puts you into positions, literally into positions where you really have to reflect on “what the hell is happening to me? And why am I feeling this?” Yeah, and that to me is, going back to why I started, it’s good for me, at this stage of my life, to be able to process the things that I think about.

As Jennifer explained, “in the practice of Ashtanga yoga, we learn to observe ourselves, our reactions, our likes and dislikes.” This practice of self-observation can then transfer over to a thoughtful awareness of the broader community and each practitioner’s place within it, allowing him or her to critically engage in the shared thought-world of practitioners and work to shape and reshape it through the narratives they produce—in both collaboration and contestation with one another. A common process to the construction and maintenance of any community, this dynamic process of collaborative meaning-making extends further back in the nascent Ashtanga community’s history than, but has been significantly aided by, the introduction of online fora for its discursive practices.

Digital communication—as practitioners post pictures and videos of themselves performing asanas on Facebook to solicit feedback from their peers, and teachers offer streamable instruction through platforms like Periscope (an app that lets you “broadcast live video to the world”—has helped bring together this globally dispersed “imagined community” and make it more real for practitioners. Ashtangis may not be able to make physical connections with fellow practitioners across the world, but they can nevertheless have meaningful, digitally-
mediated, exchanges with others through social media. Bloggers can garner a transnational following of practitioners and teachers can touch students’ lives through instructional media that reaches into their homes despite a world’s distance between them. The sustaining power of these digital connections are especially important for home practitioners, but they are not the only group of students who depend on this broader level of community in the construction of personal practice narratives. Ashtangis turn to these shared places of meaning-making to understand, narrate, and perform their identities in concert with the constellation of shared symbols among the overall community.

What fuels much of the debate found within the Ashtanga community is the question of what counts as part of the tradition. Practitioners engage one another as they attempt to distinguish which practices and positions work to preserve the tradition laid out by Pattabhi Jois and which practices and positions are a departure from and run the risk of undermining that tradition. Central to these debates is the problematic conception of a tradition like Ashtanga as a system of beliefs, practices, and relationships that endure unchanged over time. The narrative upheld by the Jois lineage of KPJAYI perpetuates this idea to some extent by its emphasis on parampara as the direct, unbroken transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil. Recall the speaker in Mysore during the Guru Purnima celebration who asserted that “although Guruji has globalized yoga, he has transferred it the same, without any dilution” (Fieldnotes, July 12, 2014). The notions of “direct”-ness, “unbroken”-ness and the absence of “dilution” present a view of the ‘traditional’ Ashtanga yoga method “as taught by Shri K. Pattabhi Jois and R. Sharath” (KPJAYI 2009) as a static system of teachings.
With the vast number of teachers who have been tasked with transmitting the tradition in various sociocultural settings over the past half century, it seems unlikely that the tradition could have possibly remain unchanged in the minutiae of its many rules and regulations—and indeed we know from the routineness of tradition-related controversy in the community that is has not. Scholars of hathayoga and many practitioners alike have resisted this conception of a static Ashtanga yoga tradition in favor of a more nuanced understanding of how some elements of the tradition endure even as it goes through various transformations in reaching different social, cultural, and historical contexts. This view of the adaptability of tradition does not need to be at odds with the community’s priority of “direct, unbroken transmission of knowledge.” In our educational institutions (i.e., primary, secondary, and higher education classrooms), we recognize that the same knowledge can be passed down from teacher to student through a variety of instructional approaches and still offer something of similar value. So, too, in our Mysore-style Ashtanga rooms, there is a recognition that teachers can (and sometimes *must*) employ an array of instructional approaches—and standards for what counts as “tradition”—to offer a diverse group of students the same kind of Ashtanga “knowledge.” How teachers transmit the tradition to their students will slightly change based on their instructional intentions, their previous experiences and expertise, their students’ ability levels and their needs, among other practical concerns.

Thus, the rules and regulations of the system—which apply to Ashtangis both on and off the mat—are sometimes modified without utterly abandoning the tradition. The language used by the community to describe Ashtanga practice varies with important implications to the meaning and nature of this tradition. Many refer to it as a “method” or “science” which offers a methodology that *works* as long as you follow the “rules” (I will address the matter of what
practitioners believe it can accomplish below). Others commonly describe it as a “system” which holds similar meaning to “method” and “science” in terms of having a logical ordering, but with a couple noteworthy differences. Calling Ashtanga yoga a “system” suggests that it is comprised of several different elements that work in concert with one another, that it features important interconnections between these elements which require some degree of balance to sustain the internal structure. This means that as long as the system is kept in balance, the individual elements can be manipulated in certain directions without the entire system falling apart or changing to its core. In other words, it has the flexibility for practitioners to bend some of the so-called “rules” of the tradition without it completely breaking down. It is possible for particular pieces—beliefs or aspects of tradition’s orthopraxy—to fall away from the system while it still retains the “knowledge” at its core. It is that knowledge, comprised of the various elements of the tradition working in concert, that practitioners believe contains direct, unbroken, undiluted, undiminished power.

My research participants revealed that a significant basis for their commitment to the practice—and what consequently binds them together in a simultaneously proximate and imagined community—stems from belief in the powerful effects it can have in their lives. Pattabhi Jois largely built this community because of his lifelong commitment to teach Ashtanga yoga to a large body of international students, but it is bound together by much more than the Jois lineage alone. The narratives I collected point to some of the reasons my research participants practice Ashtanga. Taylor succinctly explained how:

When I practice, I tend to be more: patient, tolerant, humble, humorous, forgiving, calm, dedicated, devoted, positive, focused, aware. When I don’t practice, or before my practice became a fixture in my life, I am and was less of all those things.

Upon reflecting on what kept her returning to her mat, his student Kacey explained:
I think I had faith in the system, and I think the spiritual aspect of it really called to me, as well. That’s something that I’ve been looking for in my life, I would say for a good 10 years. A spiritual—like a home. And I felt like I found it in this practice on my mat. I felt like I got closer to God with every practice. And so, right around January I said “well if this is that for me as well, then I owe it to myself to do this everyday.” And you know, it helped me be a better mom, with a 2 year old, you know? My patience was tested, like, a lot. And I could tell when I didn’t practice. When I had a toddler in a tantrum on a day that I didn’t practice I wasn’t as awesome as I was on a day that I did practice. And I started to notice that when I would skip days, so then I said “well, yeah, maybe it is a decision, but also maybe it is a necessity as well.” It became more of an “OK, I need to do this.”

Alex, another student of Taylor’s, also noted how she can “feel” the various ways practicing Ashtanga improves her life:

It makes my life better… this thing helps my life. . . I mean, this thing helps my body feel better… also [offers] that meditation, that deep sort of focus, of peace, and also the repetition, like that really works. . . My life is better when I do Ashtanga, it really is, I mean I feel it in my teaching, I feel it in my ability to maintain the equilibrium throughout the day.

Carroll Ann noted a similar stabilizing effect from her practice:

Other parts of my life that I was fighting to get under control, like going to bed at a certain time, waking up at a certain time, eating good food, and brushing my teeth, and all these other—those things have just come as a result of the structure that I think the practice has given my life. So without any effort, the other parts of my life have started to create more wholesome rhythms, you know. More life-giving rhythms. And my mind doesn’t obsess about stupid things as much, and when bad things happen, I get over them more quickly. I mean there’s all kinds of fringe benefits, you know? . . . Like, not directly related to the practice, but the related to the environment, the mental and physical and spiritual environment that I’ve created for myself with practice. It’s like it’s build this home that the rest of me can live in.

According to Suzanne, Ashtanga yoga can not only offer general life improvements but can also serve as a tool for recovering from difficult and traumatic experiences:

There would be no way to talk about my life without talking about Ashtanga. I just posted a blog about how it’s just in my bones, and my bones were pretty, pretty, hurt, you know? I have this thing I call the Ashtanga yoga clipboard—the imaginary [clipboard] but in my mind, anyone who’s been—and I don’t know if this really holds true, you
know, but if you’re going to take on 5, 6 days a week, a really rigorous, really mentally demanding and not to mention physically demanding practice, it’s because like, going to the “Y” and getting on the exercise machine just isn’t enough. And so, for a lot of us, there may be some alcoholism, or former drug addiction, or molestation, or, you know, you name the list of things that make it so [that] there are some ditches, some holes in your personality, perhaps. Ashtanga is a great way to dig them up and fill them in.

Liam said he came to it at a time during his ‘40s when he was going through a lot of physical and emotional changes and was looking for a sense of “meaning in life.” “I wasn’t there to stretch and exercise,” he said, but to develop a “Sadhana” (spiritual practice or discipline). He elaborated on the reasons for his commitment to the Ashtanga tradition as follows:

There’s a whole set of philosophies that go with it, that you don’t have to engage but you can, and so for me, I just relish that stuff. And what they said is true—like, you just come. If you just practice, you will learn to do it. And, it’s not to do with your mind, or you might say “oh I’m not strong enough to do that,” but if you practice on a regular basis you will be able to do it. And I saw evidence of that. And that kind of, that revealed a great deal to me about myself. And especially the way we might limit ourselves. So, I learned a lot about myself and the way I make choices, and the way I decide that I can do things or cannot do things.

Practitioners express a wide range of reasons for studying Ashtanga yoga, but many of the narratives they offer suggest the redemptive value of the practice. Whether it is recovering from alcoholism, practicing “patience” to be a better mom or teacher, or breaking past other perceived personal limitations, this practice offers a means of self-directed growth. Several practitioners explain how they “saw” or felt “evidence” of this powerful aspect of the practice; others, like Kacey, explicitly mention that they have “faith in the system,” that it works on you in powerful ways once you surrender to it. In the past two years that I have been conducting this research, I have been constantly perplexed by how to classify and describe this practice. One research participant, Patty, noted how it certainly has the “trappings of religion,” while others were less willing to classify it as such. What has become apparent to me now is that the question
of whether Ashtanga yoga counts as a “religion”—or whether it counts as a “science” or even simply an “exercise”—distracts from the issue of how practitioners construct their own narratives to answer this complicated question. They work out these narratives according to their personal values and aims, but at the same time, they heavily rely on the shared meaning they generate with other members of the community.

This global community of Ashtanga practitioners is an imagined community, built around a shared tradition that plays a powerful role in practitioners’ lives. The practice brings its adherents together through shared values, hardship, relationships, and other experiences. At the same time, negotiations over tradition and authority can have the opposite effect, potentially splintering the community. At this moment its splintering apart does not yet seem imminent; instead, the reoccurring rise and resolution of potentially splintering issues points to the power of the community’s symbolic identification with the Ashtanga system and its various components. In an important way that shows the somewhat uneasy fit of Benedict Anderson’s theory of the “imagined community” of a nation-state, this community of Ashtanga practitioners is not an inherited community; it is a chosen community. Practitioners elect to join this community—they choose to “surrender” to the “system” of Ashtanga yoga as an act of individual agency—and choose to maintain their practice and their membership in the community because of the meaningful relationships they cultivate and the power they witness it producing in their lives.

Coda: Personal Reflections on the Practice and this Research Project

Although my experiences with the Ashtanga tradition have been unconventional, simultaneously balancing roles as a practitioner and anthropologist, I also recognize this powerful pull of Ashtanga yoga. The practice has been far from a routine part of my life, but I
too, feel the potential of its transformative power that I could reap, if only I could allow myself

to fully commit—or to surrender—to the daily discipline. I also feel deeply embedded in this

community of practitioners. I have practiced with them, laughed with them, studied with them,

and learned a great many things from them over the past two years. Sustaining such intimate

relationships with many of my research participants, it has been a challenge for me to analyze

them as objects and speak on their behalf. Each person I interviewed had such a remarkable story

about the struggles, disappointments, successes, and transformations they experienced through

this practice, and I had the utmost respect for the self-discipline and passion they brought to such

a rigorous pursuit. I focus on practitioner’s narratives in this thesis because I recognized that

these were stories that needed to be told. As for me, I know that my narrative with Ashtanga

yoga does not end here—I have a lot more to discover about myself through practice and about

this community as a whole.
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