

Teaching Women Their Place: Alignment in Yoga Postures as Rhetorical Strategy

Thursday 23 May 2024 10:15 (30 minutes)

This talk illuminates the complexity of generalizing and individualizing in Iyengar yoga alignment practices aimed at women. It examines the pedagogical strategies and rhetorical framing used to teach alignment in women-oriented Iyengar yoga classes. It first explores the dialectical tension between three pedagogical methods: (1) general postural instructions aimed at all bodies, (2) female-body specific instructions, and (3) individual adjustments made to particular female students' alignment. While general alignment instructions mean to be "universal", meaning sex or gender neutral, they fail since that they rely on gender essentialism, as do general and female-specific adjustments, that take into consideration sex and gender. While individual adjustments recognize diversity in women's embodied experiences, I argue that they also carry an authoritarian connotation, positioning teachers as the authority over women's experiences. Secondly, the talk explores the rhetorical framing, including word choice and metaphors, used in Iyengar yoga reveals competing discourses about women's body positioning: On the one hand, teachers emphasize empowerment through inner strength and self-knowledge, suggesting yoga can be liberating. On the other hand, instructions to keep certain body parts "lifted" or "spread" reveal remnants of problematic expectations for women to present their bodies in narrowly acceptable ways. This paper builds upon previous research studies gendered language and gender-specific movement socialization in body and movement related classes. The findings are drawn from an analysis of IY literature and 37 interviews with IY teachers and 4 Iyengar family members (2015-2017).

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Session Classification: Introspection