This space is dark, humid, and peaceful. Polished hardwood floors have been packed mat to mat with those seeking assorted reliefs. It’s one refuge from the city’s reliable turbulence, which has now been reduced to a dim chatter outside the window, opaque with condensation from our collective exertion. I realize that, although muted by the studio walls, I can hear the noise clearer now. In moments like these I’m reminded that the effort of finding presence is a subtle bed upon which to lie—not always comfortable or memorable but ultimately prepared for the weight of your body and its story.

Like most contemporary yoga studios, I can tell that the creation of a safer space is a priority here. Poses are fine-tuned, teachers are well acquainted with physiology and various contraindications. They offer considerate adaptations for all levels of practice and body types. They remind us not to push ourselves too far and often share tips for self-care, sometimes laced with philosophy, mythology, or the teacher’s personal insights. The baseboards are lined with fire-safe LED candle replicants, an emulation of flame that accentuates how, in a Western context,
safety often blurs with liability. So today, I find myself here, in an eclectic healing environment that could be any urban yoga studio.

The instructor is leading the class through guided meditation about the way energy, information, and matter move through tangible entrances to the body. She shares that this practice should help us foster intention around what we “take in” and what we “give out.” Floating around the room, her voice falls gently on our stillness as we rest in savasana: “… there are nine or ten anatomical gates … like doors swinging on hinges. These doors can be well oiled or not.” Her voice melodic and catching. “This is where the inside becomes outside and the outside in … there are two eyes, two ears … two nostrils … one mouth, one anus …” She takes a pregnant pause before naming the genitals. I know her words are genuine, yet they suddenly feel unduly sanguine, so sweet my tongue turns sticky and I am overly aware of it in my mouth. My panic vibrates with anticipation of what she is about to do—my muscles tense, mind dissociates, breathing shallows, and time slows while speeding up. When she arrives at the final openings, she explains that men have one doorway whereas women have two.

For most cisgender\textsuperscript{14} people, this final gendered bodily statement may seem obvious, unremarkable, or even progressive in its lack of corporeal shame and a decentering of males as the default.\textsuperscript{15} However, for people whose gender has changed from the one they were assigned at birth (such as those who are transgender,\textsuperscript{16} two-spirit, non-binary, or agender) or for intersex people, this simple equation of gender to genital configuration may not only be inaccurate (not all women have vaginas, for example) but also quite harmful. And particularly within the vulnerability and unguardedness that can be elicited by a somatic heal-

\textsuperscript{14} “Cisgender” means those who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.
\textsuperscript{15} The assertion that some people have ten gates is actually a subversion of the traditional way of conceptualizing the entrances to the body, which would default to the masculine and assert that everyone has only nine openings.
\textsuperscript{16} Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I use transgender and trans as umbrella terms, which encompass but are not limited to identifications including two-spirit, non-binary, transsexual, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, MTF, FTM, transwoman, transman, bi-gendered, and agender. It should be noted that not all those listed under this umbrella may identify as “transgender.”
ing practice like yoga, such an oversight could even, in itself, be experienced as acutely traumatizing.

This recounting is only one segment of a vast collection of episodes that have occurred during my many years of practice at yoga studios. As a transgender person, I am aware that entering any cisgender-dominated space surely means a confrontation with systemic transphobia. And to be clear I’m not talking about the kind of transphobia that manifests by active exclusion, like an obvious expression of hatred or violence—prejudiced attributes from which most liberal thinkers exempt themselves.

Rather, the transphobia I encounter in most healing venues is subtler and more consistent, a collection of normalized, often well-meaning behaviors, which could also be called microaggressions. These are harmful conventions made invisible through being so commonplace. And since they slip under the radar, they are easily reproduced or explained away. Some additional examples that are yoga-specific include binary gender bathrooms, registration forms, and change areas; cueing that reduces men’s and women’s bodies to physical stereotypes or draws on gendered bodily assumptions; the uncritical use of gendered yoga philosophy; a major shortage of transgender representation in students and teachers; and a general lack of understanding regarding how to create a safer space for transgender students, such as proper pronoun use.

Because these systemic issues and behaviors are denied, I am often left carrying the weight of a painful nonrecognition. This nonrecognition stretches beyond my own personal experiences of transphobia to every moment I see that one of my trans peers may be unintentionally cast outside a therapeutic space or may avoid them altogether for fear of such an encounter. It is not only that cisgender people have difficulty envisioning what it means to create an authentic environment that includes transgender yoga practitioners. Beyond inclusion, yoga classes and therapies will only successfully facilitate healing for marginalized communities when they de-privilege cisgender people—as well as

17. The specific details of this event have been altered for anonymity and are based upon several overlapping experiences of transphobia at yoga studios. They do not refer to any particular individual or business.
white, straight, able-bodied, middle-class, thin settlers—as the accepted norm.

The following chapter moves to discuss how creating a trauma-informed yoga space requires knowledge and understanding of the “everydayness” of this systemic oppression. I will underscore the ways that somatic therapy can effectively address many trans-specific psychological and physical difficulties—difficulties that are often ignored or left untreated from medical doctors and in mainstream health care. However, yoga can only truly be a healing tool for transgender populations if the larger yoga community actively addresses the centering of privileged identities and the covert exclusion of marginalized people. I therefore end by discussing a new vision for trauma-informed practice, one which offers practical solutions for challenging transphobia in studios and teaching.

Everyday Trauma

Author and psychotherapist Mark Epstein discusses the quotidian nature of trauma, explaining that, especially in our contemporary world, it is difficult to live without being exposed to an event that overtakes our protective mental, spiritual, or physical faculties.18 The traumatic moment is simply one which we cannot metabolize. It is an event so overwhelming to our senses that the body struggles to work through it, and in this way, we do not come to fully know what exactly has transpired. It leaves traces of unthought thoughts, subliminal evidence in the ever-present folds of our history. In this way traumatic memories get stored like etchings under the skin, their rough edges often rousing symptoms like some of those I experienced during the “bodily gates” meditation: hyperarousal, dissociative numbing, negative self-image, and somatization.19

Marginalized people are those populations who are sidelined and face oppression based upon their identity, appearance, or social difference. For these communities, the “everydayness” of trauma can take

19. A somatization can be defined as a physical manifestation of psychological distress. This physical symptom may not have a clear organic cause, disappearing only when the underlying psychological issue has been addressed.
on an additional dimension: it holds the distinctive impact of power relations, inflicted by hierarchies that consistently place one group of people above another. For those who are transgender, this materializes in a wide range of potentially injurious occurrences from childhood throughout adult life.

Transgender youth often confront misgendering and nonacceptance at the hands of their primary caregivers, in school, or from peer groups. They may be denied appropriate health care, have their gender identity policed, or have restrictions placed on lifesaving interventions like hormonal therapy. Throughout life, transgender people face continued gatekeeping around health care, the loss or denial of work simply because they are trans, medical pathologization or fetishization, and continued possible rejection from family, friends, or romantic interests. They subsequently encounter disproportionately higher rates of houselessness, mental health struggles like depression, and suicidal ideation. Along with the ever-prevalent de-validation of their personhood, many trans people must vigilantly navigate daily risks of physical and emotional violence. This is especially true for those who have additional marginalizations, such as those who are BIPOC (black, indigenous, people of color), sex workers, and those with disabilities.

I am a white, queer, transgender man who grew up rural, and as such, there are many aspects of these experiences of harm that I know intimately, while others I have managed to evade through my own privilege and through luck. But regardless of each transgender person’s navigation of the unique shape that everyday oppression takes, like most forms of psychological trauma, it often leaves a mark that resides both in the mind and the body.

In any moment that I sense the likelihood for (even well-intentioned) transphobia, like a mistaken pronoun or a probing question about identity, my body jumps into full action. The sympathetic nervous system triggers a cascade of effects to keep me safe—numbing me from ignorant words, preparing for a fight, or initiating my capacity to escape. For a lot of people who are dealing with the symptomatology of PTSD or complex trauma, the body remembers and repeatedly protects against the harmful event, even when there is no present risk. However, for
those who are subject to a social world that systemically excludes them, objectifies, tokenizes, disbelieves their identity, or even actively hopes for their extinction, often the real threat has not fully passed.

Transgender Healing

There is much compelling writing emerging on the power that yoga and meditation can have to help trauma survivors heal by directly addressing what many other therapeutic modalities miss. David Emerson, who founded the Trauma Sensitive Yoga program for the Trauma Center Justice Resource Institute in Massachusetts, elaborates that as an embodied practice, trauma-sensitive yoga functions on multiple interlocking levels. Through a combination of breath, movement, and mindfulness, survivors may use yoga to reconnect to their internal lives, re-instil bodily ownership, facilitate self-acceptance, generate hope for a future, and develop self-soothing skills. Through the emphasis of choice, patience, and interception, these students are potentially able to build new neural pathways through a non-judgmental experience of internal states.

As a person who has faced multiple forms of traumatic injury—including complex childhood trauma, sexual assault, and recurring violence from sexism, homophobia, and transphobia—I have consistently returned to yoga as a form of emotional and spiritual therapy. Granted, for a lot of my life I didn’t consciously apprehend what yoga was doing for my mental health. I just found myself recurrently gravitating back to the practice despite serious qualms about the lack of queer and transgender teachers or about the largely unaddressed racism, cultural appropriation, and ableism occurring in Western yoga contexts. Although I often didn’t feel entirely safe, reflected, or like the larger yoga community cared to be accountable for the broader social harms they were

20. David Emerson & Elizabeth Hopper, Overcoming Trauma through Yoga: Reclaiming the Body (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2011), 92-284. This type of trauma-sensitive yoga is a therapeutic intervention and should be differentiated from the type of yoga practiced at the typical studio. That said, many of the techniques and insights garnered from clinical work with those with PTSD and C-PTSD can be used to facilitate a safer, trauma-informed space for clients from a variety of backgrounds.
causing, a part of me knew that through yoga I could touch a kernel of recovery that I wasn’t able to find elsewhere.

Many marginalized people therefore practice yoga specifically because it can help manage both psychological and physical stress that is identity specific. For example, transgender people may have an acute feeling of being disconnected from their bodies, whether from gender dysphoria or everyday traumatic experiences. Others have taken up behaviors related to their gender expression or safety, like hiding or exaggerating parts of the body, that can have a mix of positive and negative physical outcomes. Additionally, because of the binary-gender nature of most sports and activities (teams, changerooms), transgender people often have restricted access to the kinship and networks that surround physical recreation.

Before I was able to access surgery, I spent many years wearing a tight compression garment, popularly known as a chest binder. Beyond being an exciting and important tool for my gender expression, this notoriously uncomfortable nylon sleeve not only caused me to chronically tense forward but also severely restricted my breathing—so much so that even in the rare occasion that I was not binding, shallow breath became my involuntary standard. This physicality was so engrained that even after my surgery, for a long time I shouldered the layered, embodied map of years spent fighting for access to the services that allowed me to live.

So like many of those who have histories of trauma, as a matter of psychological survival, I creatively learned how to disconnect from my body on multiple levels. At its simplest, yoga helped me to recognize this separation while also inviting the option of other forms of breath and bodily acceptance. I certainly discovered that my chest could be reopened with asana after its years of collapse, including very practical breathing techniques for regulation and grounding. But perhaps more importantly, over time the practice has taught me unique ways to

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21. To be clear, although transgender people do have overlapping experiences, there is no uniform transgender life, especially considering a globalized context. Not all transgender people identify with the experience of what is currently called “gender dysphoria,” for example.
release all the associated judgments, so I could truly reclaim this formidable history as my own.

As a somatic practice of mind-body awareness, yoga can provide an unparalleled venue for holistic therapeutic healing. It can help transgender practitioners notice relationships between their physical and emotional lives, build new ways of thinking about their body (related to gender or not), fortify self-worth, and facilitate a novel sense of external and internal agency. By stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system in a community-based setting, transgender people who do studio yoga may be able to relax an otherwise unwavering hypervigilance while simultaneously inviting beneficial motion, strength, and flexibility. Yet clearly, these possibilities will only materialize if trans people do not risk re-traumatization by the very spaces that offer refuge.

A New Vision for Trauma-Informed Practice

At their most optimistic, when instructors discuss trauma and yoga, the ultimate focus falls upon how pursuing asana, meditation, and pranayama can support survivors on their reparative path. A trauma-informed lens goes one step further, facilitating this journey by taking into consideration techniques that avoid unintentionally triggering their students. For example, teachers may cultivate agency through anti-authoritative language when cueing. This includes the avoidance of commands, instead inviting students to try particular movements “if you’d like” or “when you’re ready.”22 The use of consent cards has been another way that some studios are trying to shift from a culture of non-consensual touch and adjustments.23

Yet, as I have been emphasizing throughout this chapter, developments in trauma-informed yoga have largely failed to mindfully navigate each practitioner’s identity and social-political location. I have focused on transgender people’s lives; however, all people with a marginalized identity face potential harm through a confrontation with systemic op-

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22. Emerson, Trauma-Sensitive Yoga in Therapy, 9.
pression. For example, yoga in the West is enmeshed with histories of colonization and racism.\textsuperscript{24} One manifestation of this dynamic is that many yoga studios are run and staffed by majority white people, and the popular image of the contemporary yogi is a white, thin, middle class, cisgender woman. The dominance of Eurocentric whiteness and the violence of cultural appropriation could also be experienced as triggering or re-traumatizing.

Whether in clinical or studio-based work, those who teach yoga will only effectively provide therapeutic interventions if the dynamics of everyday oppression are thoroughly taken into consideration. I believe that if practitioners wish to be comprehensively trauma informed, studios and instructors must first address the impact of invisibilized systems of marginalization like transphobia, and second, they must honor how each person’s various intersecting identities can inform their healing, their suffering, and their specific risks of physical or psychological injury during a class.

This larger vision would include transgender-competent yoga classes that address the persistent centering of cisgender people. If I were to dream aloud, I would imagine that all yoga environments (including any forms and websites) transformed to be de-gendered and explicitly welcoming of trans folks, where people can change clothes, shower, and pee safely without fear. Yoga teachers and staff would be thoroughly educated on transgender people’s identities and specific needs so they feel like confident, non-defensive allies, who are aware of potential for misgendering, the prevalent use of reductive gender stereotypes, and the complexities of systemic transphobia. Studios would also be well equipped with a non-symbolic commitment to trans inclusivity, including publicly available anti-oppression or equity policies that reflect those aims and promote wider advocacy.

Beyond preparing studios to be anti-oppressive, however, another necessary strategy to support folks with marginalized identities is to provide real, tangible space for their voices and experiences. If we are working within a setting that has persistently excluded transgender people, it will take time and effort to transform and rebuild trust. And a lot of this trust can only be established when those with privilege step aside while actively propping up the voices of those who have been silenced.

One way to go about this re-centering is through free or subsidized “queer and trans” yoga classes led by queer and trans identified people, like those I offer in Toronto, Ontario. These identity-based classes shift power hierarchies by putting marginalized people in paid leadership positions, allowing them to co-envision a future, and facilitate their community’s healing. When queer and trans people come together to breathe and move, the simplicity of being seen, recognized, and reflected can hold tremendous potential for self-expansion. In a social context where many of us still struggle to survive or thrive, it can be most powerful to be in a healing process collectively—no matter how that healing looks—be it falling apart, growing, disconnecting, reconciling, sweating it out, exploding in laughter, or opening a new gateway.

The systemic issues that transgender people face, whether in yoga studios or other social institutions, cannot be undone by wishing it to be so. It will take people who are willing to be accountable and humble, who are willing to move aside for others, to learn, and to facilitate a new vision for who belongs in a yoga community.

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25. Another way that power dynamics appear is through the expectation that marginalized people provide these classes or educate those with privilege to be “better allies” through underpaid/unpaid labor.
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