

Black Girl Yoga

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Tracey Coretta and Yoga

I was born and raised in Trinidad and Tobago. It's a small country consisting of two islands situated in the Lower Antilles of the West Indies. I moved to New Jersey when I was eleven years old. Now a thirty-year-old Afro-Caribbean American woman, I am a self-identified womanist yogini. Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in the lived experiences of everyday people (Maparyan 2006). How did an Afro-Caribbean American woman with my background come to practice and teach yoga? I was raised by women who placed a strong emphasis on their spiritual walk. Yoga allowed me the opportunity to integrate their spiritual teachings into a practice that made sense for me.

No one in my family had ever practiced or talked about yoga. My mother was fiercely Christian. So was my grandmother. While living with my grandmother in Tobago, I discovered her deep disdain for non-Christian based spirituality. It was during Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. There was a large celebration hosted by the Ramkisoons family. Their celebration was open to anyone who lived on Store Bay Local Road in Bon Accord, Tobago. The Ramkisoons lived on a large plot of land right where the paved road ended and a winding gravel path (leading to Kilgwin beach) began.

There were little clay diyas beautifully arranged around their yard. Each one was filled with oil and lit with a small cotton wick. It was a divine sight. I was so overwhelmed by the beautiful arrangement; I took one diya home with me to play with. My grandmother found it the next day and scolded me for bringing it home. She insisted that evil spirits were transported via the little clay lamp to our home. These spirits were now roaming about our yard. Exploration of spiritual practices that did not fit the confines of her Nazarene church was forbidden.

My grandmother's "sutras" were bible verses. The words of Jesus, her one and only god, were permanently inscribed on her heart. The closest I'd come to practicing yoga was the focused attention I'd place on my favorite bible verses when I was five. I often recited bible verses over and over again to myself like a mantra. I passed over each word like mala beads. John 3:16 was my favorite bible verse. I recited it reverently, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." It was my favorite verse because it reminded me that I was loved. I recited it reverently like a traditional Hindu mantra given to students learning how to meditate.

By age twenty I was enrolled as a junior at Ursinus College, a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. My grandmother passed away in Tobago a year before. She developed Alzheimer's disease and could not recognize her grandchildren when my sister and I finally returned home. I was open to trying yoga because I had become disillusioned with Christianity. I couldn't reconcile the factual inaccuracies and inconsistencies in much of the sermons I'd heard. I also found that despite attending several different churches, I could not find the specific tools I

needed to develop spiritually. I knew that I wanted to grow my connection to God. I also knew that I needed something different than what I'd been exposed to as a child. Like so many other students who attend a small liberal arts college, my understanding of the world was evolving. My spiritual needs evolved too.

My first *vinyasa* yoga class was at a small fitness studio in New Jersey. I was on summer break from college. A high school friend invited me to attend. She kept raving about the teacher so my sister Tricia and I decided to go together. It was an intimate class of no more than six or seven women. I sat rather uncomfortably in a wide legged forward fold. The instructor walked over to me and applied some pressure to my lower back. I melted into the pose and then sank deeper still into an *asana* I once thought was physically impossible for my body. After class, my mind and body felt connected. I remember feeling like a slow, rippling body of water. I knew yoga was important to my well-being.

Over the course of five years my yoga practice deepened. I studied health education texts written by Queen Afua. She was the first African-American female holistic practitioner and spiritual teacher I'd ever encountered. She explicitly describes meditation, stretching, and deep breathing as a way to develop good health. She expanded my understanding of what a yoga teacher looks like. I incorporated mindful eating and meditation into my life. Yoga extended beyond movements on a mat. It became a lifestyle rooted in wellness.

Yoga and Womanism

Womanists believe in equality for all. Womanism envisions self-change at the center of social change. Yoga compliments a womanist worldview because spirituality and healing (a core value of womanism) are also central to the practice of yoga. Yoga can work as a form of activism with extraordinary implications for improving the commonweal of our global community.

I identify as a womanist because I believe that everyone deserves to be well and live well. I'm particularly drawn to topics concerning health equity. My life's work is to inspire everyone to engage in creative acts of agency regarding personal health. Teaching yoga is an integral part of this work. Yoga is an effective health education tool with the capacity to improve lives.

I am also a self-identified health futurist and creative wellness advocate. I am constantly searching for innovative, engaging, and sustainable health improvement tools to share with others. So naturally, womanist methodologies underpin my health activist work. In Dr. Layli Maparyan's book *The Womanist Idea*, she writes,

Insofar as thought forms and the energies of feeling underlie all human phenomena...it stands to reason that this dimension of existence is the optimal locus of social change intervention ...Tracing the origins of social and environmental problems back to their roots in terms of human thought and feeling leads to the opportunity to rework the ground-level platforms of human experience. Thus, the proverbial 'changing of hearts and minds' is the basic womanist modus operandi. Changed hearts and minds then create and sustain different physical, material, institutional, and ecological structures (Maparyan 2012, 51-52).

Social change, including health justice issues, begins with individuals. Health is significantly affected by an individual's behavior. Yoga has the capacity to change hearts and minds; it has the capacity to change behavior. So, it stands to reason that yoga can be utilized as an effective tool to improve an individual's health status. It can transform one's thoughts and actions. My womanist worldview allows me to envision my yoga teaching as one micro-level solution to macro-level community health problems.



Figure 1 – Tracey Ferdinand (Photo Credit: Aaron Ricketts).

Children and Yoga

I parallel parked next to the entrance of the Philadelphia Free Library's Widener branch on West Lehigh Avenue. A grey knit scarf was wrapped snugly around my neck. Collecting my bones, I braced myself then stepped outside my car. A sharp, frost-bitten wind scuttling through the North Philadelphia street I was standing on hit my face. I'd lived in several North American cities for over twenty years but my island girl sensibilities still felt insulted by cold air.

I walked through the North Philadelphia Free library's metal detectors and headed straight to the children's section. I was excited about teaching kids yoga in that particular space. I wanted to bring attention to the importance of teaching yoga and mindfulness to children who may not have an opportunity to be exposed to it. I was also interested in highlighting the significance of health education at an early age. It is important to create inclusive environments for all kids. Teaching children about the benefits of practicing yoga would positively impact their understanding of their role in maintaining their own well-being.

In 2015, after attending The National Kids Yoga Conference held in Washington, DC I was inspired to teach kids yoga in underserved areas. Before then, I volunteered at a non-profit in West Philly called The Ahimsa House. The students who regularly attended my weekly *vinyasa* classes at The Ahimsa House were young, white women. I wanted to have an impact on a broader range of students who were traditionally underexposed to yoga's benefits. Three years prior to The National Kids Yoga Conference, I graduated from Clark Atlanta University with a degree in Africana Women's Studies. While enrolled in their graduate program, I often grappled with questions centered on Black women's health. I developed a

womanist consciousness at Clark Atlanta University. It deepened while enrolled in a Womanism course taught by Dr. Layli Maparyan. Her texts *The Womanist Reader* and *The Womanist Idea* explored activists who used yoga and other spiritual modalities to engender positive changes in their community.

The National Kids Yoga Conference encouraged me to include the health status of underserved Black children in my Philadelphia community. Did these children have full access to free or low-cost yoga classes? What percentage of city dwelling Black children were taught yoga by people of color? My research and volunteer work evolved to meet these areas of inquiry.

I knew that representation was extremely important to the overall well-being of Black communities. Black yoga teachers like Faith Hunter, Lauren Ash, Jessamyn Stanley, and Leslie Salmon have personally inspired me. Their spiritual walk and community work provided me with the confidence to teach in Philadelphia. I consider yoga teachers to be healers in a highly creative capacity. Increasing the number of Black yoga teachers to serve as community healers required introducing yoga and mindfulness to Black children at an early age. They needed to see men and women of color teaching yoga so that they could be inspired to do the same. They needed to see these possibilities so that one day they would elevate the practice to meet the ever-evolving health needs of Black communities.

North Philadelphia and Yoga

I decided to teach a *vinyasa* yoga class at the Philadelphia Free Library's Widener branch since it was located in North Philadelphia. Forty-four percent of Philadelphia's population is African-American (United States Census Bureau 2016). Although that number is slowly decreasing, a large percentage of Philadelphia's Black community still call North Philadelphia their home. With a median household income of merely \$26,728, it's not surprising that many of Philadelphia's Black children are under-exposed to enriching activities such as yoga classes (The Urban League Philadelphia 2004, 16). Often parents don't have the disposable income or the time required to supplement activities offered in free public youth facilities or programs.

There are major shifts occurring across the country regarding the implementation of mindfulness programs. More and more youth programs are being developed to teach young children yoga and mindfulness. However, a lot more work is needed before yoga becomes accessible to children across various racial, economic, and social backgrounds. I knew that Mieka (the children's librarian at the North Philadelphia Widener branch) would be receptive to offering a new and exciting yoga program for kids. She was committed to health education. We agreed to meet up at the library so I could see the space where I'd be teaching.

Mieka's desk was located in the children's section. She sat chatting with a woman curled up on a love seat next to her desk when I arrived. Mieka smiled when she saw me. We hugged and she introduced me to the woman sitting next to her. I joined in on their conversation. They were discussing their health habits and the things they were determined to change in the New Year. Gathering together and exploring health improvement strategies as a united community is important to encouraging Black people to pursue health and wellness goals.

On the day I taught the kids yoga class, I walked into the library's children section and greeted a very excited group of boys and girls ranging in age from eight to twelve years. They were seated at a wooden table and buzzing with energy. I quickly jumped into action. Gathering them up, I gave each student a brightly colored yoga mat. I instructed them to arrange their mats in a big

circle, “Big like the sun! And make sure you have enough room to spread your arms out like this.” I spread my arms out wide and wiggled my fingers.

Once we were all seated in a circle I explained that yoga required you to pay attention to your breathing while moving in and out of different poses. I tried to keep it simple without losing the core focus on self-awareness and being mindful of their thoughts and feelings. We worked on a few poses like cat and cow pose, mountain pose, triangle pose, tree pose, warrior one and warrior two pose. I counted out loud, slowly so they could inhale and exhale in focused attention while stretching in and out of each pose. I allowed a few eager volunteers to demonstrate a pose and count out loud. I wanted them to feel empowered and comfortable with the idea of practicing yoga. Their energy was exhilarating. I found that my quirky personality fit perfectly with the kids. After class one of the older students thanked me. She said she wanted to teach yoga too. I felt honored to have planted that seed.

Black Girl Yoga

After teaching kids at the Widener Free Library, my commitment to children’s health education solidified. I began teaching weekly yoga classes at The Ann L. Lingelbach Elementary School in North Philadelphia. I worked as a “health coach” for a public health and social action organization called the Grassroots Community Foundation. Founded by Dr. Janice Johnson Dias, GrassROOTS Community Foundation’s “mission is to create a world where all girls grow up to be healthy women” (GrassROOTS Community Foundation 2017). I taught fifth grade girls yoga every Tuesday right after school ended.

Teaching fifth grade girls yoga every week has been the most challenging yet rewarding experience of my yoga teaching career thus far. I was responsible for cultivating the emotional, mental, and physical health of ten year olds. At times they were restless, distracted, and disruptive. Other times they were reflective, excited, and receptive. Either way, I tried my best to consistently demonstrate loving kindness in both my words and actions. I wanted each girl to leave my class knowing that they were in control of their own well-being.

I often started my class by gathering up the girls into a seated circle. Usually ten to twelve students attended the weekly three-hour long class. We went around the circle giving every girl a chance to debrief their school day. Many of the girls liked talking about their interactions with friends, their class work, or teachers they didn’t particularly like. I often challenged them to think critically about how their words and actions helped or hurt their school day. We then recited the following affirmation in unison, “I am a daughter of Africa. I practice Maat, Truth, Order, Balance and Reciprocity. Like the sankofa bird I look to my past so I can be my best today and every day. Asé.” The affirmation was created by the non-profit. The organization requested that the girls recite the affirmation before every class. I enjoyed saying it with them out loud because it encouraged me to be mindful of those specific practices in my daily life as well.

With each class I tried to incorporate one of the practices into the day’s lesson. For example, one day I stressed the importance of self-care and explained how it related to creating balance in their lives. On the first day of our yoga class, I explained that practicing yoga would help them pay more attention to their emotions. Every opportunity I got, I reminded them that their emotions affected their actions and their actions affected their lives both positively and negatively. I told them that being aware of their thoughts and emotions was like having their own super power. My classes were rooted in a womanist philosophy because I was extremely careful to remind the girls about the importance of being mindful of their thoughts and feelings. If a girl

spoke to another in an unkind way I turned it into a teachable moment about the importance of love and sisterhood. I wanted them to understand the value of a womanist consciousness which engenders a strong sense of community. If a girl walked in with snacks that were filled with too much sugar I turned it into a teachable moment about the importance of self-care and healthy eating. I encouraged them to read food labels so they could make the connection between mindfulness and mindful eating.

We learned the *asanas* of Sun Salutation A. We breathed and stretched into difficult poses. We meditated and talked about our experiences noticing our thoughts through giggles and laughter. I encouraged them to take turns leading Sun Salutation A. I encouraged them to breathe slowly, speak confidently, and pay attention to the needs of their sisters.



Figure 2 - Tracey Ferdinand (Photo Credit: Tracey Ferdinand).

Cultivating community through yoga teaching is an exciting endeavor. Working towards eradicating the health disparities of women of color in Philadelphia through teaching womanist yoga classes is both a thrilling and daunting endeavor. I am grateful for the opportunity to share a safe space with Black girls to begin thinking critically about various dimensions of their health. I don't know what long-term effects, if any, my yoga classes will have on each little girl I taught in the Spring of 2017. I do know, however, that the experience renewed my commitment to this work.

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Tracey Ferdinand wants to live in a world where mango trees are plentiful, kindness is fashionable, and yoga classes are accessible to all. She holds a B.A. in English from Ursinus College and an M.A. in Africana Women's Studies from Clark Atlanta University. She's also a vinyasa yoga teacher. Visit her at www.TraceyCoretta.com