

Black Women are Undeniable

Sabrina Strings

University of California, Irvine

Co-Founding Editor, Race and Yoga Journal

It has been our pleasure to deliver this special issue of *Race and Yoga*. “Sassin’ Through Sadhana,” curated by guest editors Rachel Panton and Stephanie Evans, brings into focus the views and experiences of Black women as yoga practitioners and teachers. We believe this work to be a valuable resource. Although there are numerous Black women who practice, they are often ignored, made invisible, and actively turned into outsiders in many mainstream conversations about yoga. They are, in short, not absent but *absent-ed*.

The purposeful absent-ing of Black women from yoga is perhaps best conjured in the 2014 *XO Jane* post “It Happened to Me.” In the article, a svelte white woman narrates with phantasmagorical horror her experience of disorientation upon seeing a fat Black woman doing yoga in her very presence. The article, since removed from the site and alternately proclaimed phony/phishing/fraudulent (though it seems to have been simply disavowed), achieves many things. First, it reminds the reader which bodies (slender, white, female) represent yoga publically, and therefore have the right to do yoga in public. Next, it imagines fatness as inert and physically disabling, and thus incapable of doing yoga-as-body-work, which is reserved for non-fat folk. Finally, it absents Black women from yoga communities, yoga spaces, the yoga practice. It does this specifically because Black women’s embodiment is deemed (always already) too visible, too rowdy a spectacle to be dealt with in a space reserved for the quiet contemplation of the *subtle* body.

“It Happened to Me” absented Black women, and it did so by reminding readers that Black women’s intense visibility within white heteropatriarchy makes us undeniable. We are impossible to ignore, despite white people’s best efforts at quiet contemplation and hope for a hard won, sweat-based, *personal* liberation in a space with few, or no, people of color.

Yes, we are an awesome sight indeed.

And while it was only one viral essay, it nevertheless represented our general absence. It brought to light the *blackout* in yoga.

* * *

“Sassing Through Sadhana” serves as a corrective on each of these points. It reminds us that Black women have a deep rich tradition of practicing and teaching yoga. For years, we have taught both inside and outside the confines of studio walls. We have practiced Kemeti, Hatha, Ashtanga, Kundalini, and many, many other forms of yoga. We have done so as people with

disabilities, as mothers, and as refugees from other religions; we are Sankofic carriers of other traditions into the practice.

We also want to acknowledge that countless other Black women have come before us and have inspired this work. The legendary Bobbe Norrise taught yoga in the Bay area for decades. She is commemorated in several publications, including the book *Modern Yogis*. The incomparable Dianne Bondy and incredible Jessamyn Stanley and Chelsea Jackson Roberts are trailblazers at the intersection of yoga and unapologetic Black woman-ness on social media too.

There are so many others, we cannot name them all. So instead of naming each and every one, we sought to amplify the often-marginalized voices of Black women from different walks of life. What we offer here is a sustained meditation on the beauty, power, importance, and radical *presence* of Black women in yoga.

We hope you enjoyed this issue.

Sabrina Strings is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at University of California, Irvine. Her research examines how the intersecting structures of race, class, and sex(uality) are inscribed on the body, which is then marshaled to validate social inequality. Her articles and essays are featured in diverse venues, including *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *The Feminist Wire*, and *Truth-Out Independent News Media*.

Sabrina is a 200hr CYT and practitioner who organizes a variety of dana-based yoga workshops. She is also a co-founding editor of *Race and Yoga*.