

## Sassin' Through Sadhana

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This project grew from my dissertation in 2012. During my research, I came across a book titled *Yogini: The Power of Women in Yoga* (2006). Out of the seventeen women who were featured with accompanying pictures, sixteen were of European descent and one was South Asian. There were no women of African descent represented. Then, as now, the literature on Black women holistic teachers and leaders, specifically yoga instructors, was thin at best. That day, I envisioned a similar project that featured African women, their stories, their faces, and their bodies.

Although, there is considerable contemporary research on white women yoga instructors, and some research on the effects of yoga on Black women's health, there is significantly less material on Black women yoga instructors. Given our physical and mental health crises in the United States, it is paramount that women who have transformed their lives and educated youth to adopt new ways of living and teaching are provided platforms. Doing so not only gives voice to the physical, spiritual, and mental development needs of Black women, but also honors our traditional ways of knowing and talks back to conventional and dominant voices. Most importantly, it fosters social change.

This volume, therefore, allows Black women instructors to voice themselves into relevancy by contributing to the scholarly discourse on Black women, health, and resistance to dominant culture. Sassin' or sassing is used to describe the ways in which a woman "talks back" verbally and otherwise with boldness and spirit. bell hooks (1989) identified Black feminism with "talking back" to an authority figure as though one is equal or as in "sass mouth," "giving sass" both terms that are used in Black vernacular (hooks, 1989, 5). This verbal insolence has roots in liberation theology in Black communities and, in some ways, these women are even talking back to traditional postcolonial spiritual, physical, and mental ways of being.

In their efforts to find holistic balance, many of the women in this volume share how their wellness and spiritual paths – their Sadhana – deviated from what their mothers or grandmothers practiced. Ancient Egyptian or Kemetic roots teach us that striving for physical balance is integral to achieving enlightenment (Afua 2001; Mitchem 2008). This ancient way of thinking is the central guiding principle of an African worldview of holism, which is the integration of physical, spiritual, emotional, and social to create healthy life conditions (Afua 2001; Aseka 2005; Mitchem 2008). These values maximized personal and community life through the principles of Maat, who, as a goddess, identifies truth, justice, beauty, and balance

(Afua 2000; Mitchem 2008). In fact, many of these instructors came to yoga through Kemetic yogic practices.



Figure 1 – Dr. Rachel Panton (Photo Credit: Adrian D. Freeman).

In turn, what these women found for themselves, they wanted to teach. In African religious ontology, the body is seen as a vehicle for spiritual consciousness, manifestation, and actualization of good in the community. In fact, the social justice work that has been produced by these women can be viewed as “emancipatory spirituality,” which cultivates a sense of wonder, mindfulness, and a collective vision for healing transformation for their communities and the world (Lerner 2000,165).

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Black women’s wellness has long been a personal interest of mine and I began to integrate wellness studies into my research by connecting intellectual history to mental health. As health activist Byllye Avery (2012) wrote, self-care is imperative and the foundation of health. My personal challenges with anxiety and stress management led me to look more closely at how Black women elders in history like Harriet Tubman (who lived into her 90s) and Anna Julia Cooper (105) survived personal, social, and structural violence in order to ultimately enjoy long, peaceful, and productive lives.

My own research on Black women’s memoirs and autobiography led me to contact Rachel and let her know how much I appreciated her dissertation work, which brought to light new narratives of wellness workers. As a scholar of intellectual history, I have a deep appreciation for the need to collect narratives and preserve stories. I invited her to write a chapter for a book I was co-editing *Black Women’s Mental Health: Balancing Strength and Vulnerability* (Evans, Bell, and Burton 2017). When she followed up with an invitation to co-edit the “Sassin’ Through Sadhana” collection, it was an absolute pleasure to do so. In the course of my studies, I identified almost 50 mentions of yoga in Black women’s historic memoirs from writer Ann Petry, who did yoga to recover from a back injury, to Sadie and Bessie Delaney, who started yoga at the age of 60 and continued well into their 100<sup>th</sup> years (Evans 2016). Having become aware of a rich history of Black women’s yoga practice, and contemporary instructors like Robbin Alston, who penned her book about yoga and surviving cancer, I absolutely looked forward to reading reflections of more instructors.

Each story in the Sassin’ collection offers a glimpse of how women were introduced to yoga and reveals a turning point – often trauma – that led them to commit to daily practice. The vignettes provide rich insight into how Black women relate to certain philosophical approaches and connect to their bodies through blending ideas and practice. Through a variety of traditions, experiences, and training, they are each able to share their stories and their passion for healing. Essentially, through learning to care for themselves, they are able to model and teach principles of self-care.

I first learned about yoga practice from my dance classes in junior high and high school, but did not take a class until graduate school when my stress levels skyrocketed. After decades of random, informal practice, and after 2016, which stressed me out personally, professionally, *and* politically, I committed to learning yoga in a formal setting. In a moment of clarity, on January 1, 2017 (after a very hard 2016), I dedicated myself to daily practice and, in spring, began a certification program. Yirser Ra Hotep, founder of yogaskills Kemeti Yoga (mentioned in several of the Sassin’ essays) and the classmates in my cohort offered me an opportunity to deepen my practice and to have better insight as I talk about my wellness research while also helping me build on my mindfulness meditation practice. Incorporation of yoga and meditation into my daily life has truly become a case of “physician heal thyself.” Sitting still and gently opening my body has satisfied my soul and given me wisdom, strength, and hope to move forward.



Figure 2 – Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans, youthSpark yoga (Photo Credit: Dr. Sharnell Myles)

Darlene Clark Hine, a Dean of Black women’s history, offered a summative analysis of Black women’s history: “Black women are survivors. They have developed values over almost four centuries that actually seem to work” (Hine and Thompson 1998). Studying Black women’s intellectual history has offered me a path toward inner peace. By studying narratives, I have learned that history can be a means of personal healing. “Sassin’ through Sadhana” intimately chronicles some challenges Black women have faced as we struggle to survive; these reflections also demonstrate how we make our struggles sustainable through self-care and commitment to daily practice. *A Luta Continua...* the struggle continues.

## References

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