

Yogic Ruptures: Changing Spaces

Sabrina Strings

University of California, Irvine

Co-Founding Editor, Race and Yoga Journal

In the West, yoga is synonymous with fitness franchises and svelte white women in spandex, contorting their bodies for the pleasure of a presumptive male audience. This issue of *Race and Yoga* explores how taking yoga out of its habitually commodified context wresting it from the hands of the self-anointed keepers of American culture changes conversations surrounding the practice. This collection of personal narratives, interviews, and empirical essays considers how yoga in unconventional spaces, that which is led, critiqued, enjoyed, and enlivened by women of color changes the experience, perceptions, and value system afforded to modern yoga.

Lakshmi Nair, with her personal narrative, “When Even Spirit Has No Place to Call Home: Cultural Appropriation, Microaggressions, and Structural Racism in the Yoga Workplace”, levels a powerful critique of white hegemony and the marginalization of Indian voices in yoga. In an essay that evokes the spirit of [Chiraag Bhakta’s 2013 exhibit “White People Doing Yoga”](#), Nair explores the many ways in which white practitioners and studio owners’ desire to “diversify” the practices is often code for the implied people of color co-sign that tokenism promises. Through the pain and frustration, Nair writes, of feeling “robbed of my spiritual tradition,” she makes it her mission to help herself and others heal from the traumas of racism proliferating within and outside the studio.

For some women of color, the racial healing and sense of wholeness afforded by the practice can be best achieved by opening their own studios. In “Healing Community Breath by Breath: A Conversation with Kerrie Trahan”, Professor Rebecca J. Kinney interviews Kerrie Trahan, the founder of Yoganic Flow and Yoga House Detroit. Together, they lead us through Trahan’s upbringing in Detroit, which led her to substance abuse and suicidal thoughts. Yoga, especially, “learning about the yamas and niyamas”, helped her on the road to recovery. Her studio, she explains, is a local marker and physical proof that the practice *is* for people of color.

Other women of color only felt truly seen when they left the studio and embraced the home-grown community of social media practitioners. In “Be Still, Be Present: Black Girl Yoga and Digital Counter-Spaces”, Shanice Jones Cameron explores how Black women (following the pioneering Jessamyn Stanley) have used Instagram to engage the practice. On Instagram, says Cameron, Black women yoga practitioners decenter their oppression, choosing instead to affirm their individuality and beauty. In re-routing the conversation to new terrain in this way, they successfully reframe the conversation about the magnificent capacities of Black women’s bodies and spirits.

Finally, in “Transforming Space? Spatial Implications of Yoga in Prisons and other Carceral Sites,” Mark Norman asks us to consider how and if yoga in new places is always a

revolutionary act. Complicating any facile claims that yoga made available to vulnerable and minoritized populations is necessarily intended for their benefit, Norman argues that the incorporation of yoga in carceral spaces often serves the administrative interests as much as those of the prisoners. In this way, yoga may be as much an “institutional display” of care as an opportunity for the incarcerated to find stillness.

We hope you enjoy 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*.