

UC Berkeley

Race and Yoga

Title

Book Review: Practicing Yoga as Resistance: Voices of Color in Search of Freedom

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/57p9w1hd>

Journal

Race and Yoga, 7(1)

Author

Griggs, Samantha

Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/R37160849

Copyright Information

Copyright 2023 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

***Practicing Yoga as Resistance: Voices of Color in Search of Freedom.* Edited by Cara Hagan. London: Routledge, 2021. 338 pages. \$48.50**

Samantha Griggs
University of California, Riverside

Originally published in 2021, and released in paperback in 2023, *Practicing Yoga as Resistance: Voices of Color in Search of Freedom* is a diverse and interdisciplinary anthology that examines yoga in the West as a practice for our collective liberation from an intersectional feminist lens. Similar to *Race and Yoga*'s format, this anthology includes autoethnography, case studies, and empirical research for "a multifaceted embodied experience" of the exploration of "the complexities of race, gender, and social justice in Western yogic practice" (Hagan xxii). The text begins with a foreword by Yoga for All teacher Dianne Bondy, which highlights some common assumptions shared by the authors, namely that the mind-body practices and philosophies of yoga have the potential to be liberatory, but access to those practices is not universal, and mainstream yoga spaces in the West are sites of oppression for anyone who is not "White, young, thin, able-bodied, straight, and cis-gender" (xx). The authors in this collection, primarily women and queer people of color, resist and push back against the centering of whiteness in yoga, and share their experiences and research in this volume to create a resource for yoga teachers, activists, and educators of all backgrounds, especially those seeking solidarity and community in troubled times. The anthology includes eighteen chapters separated into three sections: "Invitations"; "Yoga, Self, and Community"; and "Yoga in Educational Spaces." The collection was artfully edited by dance studies scholar Cara Hagan, who previously published an article featured in *Race and Yoga* titled "Mothering and Self-Care While Black in the Age of COVID" (2021).

Part I, "Invitations", includes only two chapters, one by Hagan addressed to all readers and written in an epistolary style and a second written specifically for white readers by author and activist Jardana Peacock. In the first chapter, "Essential Questions for Inner and Outer Liberation," Hagan grounds the collection in her personal experience of wanting to step onto her mat, but finding herself unable to do so during the events surrounding the 2016 presidential election. Reflecting on this time she writes, "At the same time I found myself fretful about the direction and future of American society, I found myself disillusioned with the yoga community," a sentiment expressed by other people of color featured in the collection and only becoming more salient today (5). For Hagan to return to the mat, she says she "had to start digging" (6). Sharing the *Five Essential Questions* she distilled from her own inquiry, Hagan invites the reader into the yogic practice of *svadhyaya*, or self-study, and the hard work of "confronting inner resistance and our relationships to oppression" imagining what our collective liberation looks like, and exploring what place yoga may have in it (13).

In "Towards a White spiritual antiracism," Peacock shares how anti-racism work led them to question their yoga practice and the majority white spaces they found themselves in. Like Hagan, Peacock acknowledges that working towards our collective liberation is messy and

difficult work, especially for white folks accustomed to the privilege and safety of whiteness (21). I suggest other white women turn to Rumya S. Putchá's chapter "White hygiene, White womanhood, and wellness in the United States" and Stephanie D. Hicks's chapter "Incomplete: Impeding the settler colonial project through Yoga for Black Lives" for more clear examples and potent analyses of whiteness in yoga. In talking about white women's (lack of) participation in a Yoga for Black Lives class, Hicks writes, "usually the experiences that people of color have with White people, and in this case White women yogis, are experiences of White people taking up space, without contributing to it" (120-121). Peacock asks us to show up differently, stating "interconnection isn't an ideal that White people can realize without first doing the deep internal work of changing, reprogramming, and understanding whiteness and how it contributes to the violence of our world. When we understand this, then we begin to live into an antiracism which builds a different world in which our whiteness isn't violence but rather solidarity" (22).

In Part II: Yoga, Self, and Community, the ten chapters dive deeper into the experiences of people of color with Western yoga and the creative ways they have reclaimed or reimagined yoga in their communities. In a poetic way, the section opens with an autoethnographic piece from psychologist Dominique Malebranche, who shares her first experience with *asana* as a person of color to open a discussion about Western yoga as a disembodied practice disconnected from its original purpose of liberation. She turns to a "radical healing" framework and "reclamation of the embodied ethics of yoga" to guide us in how applying the *yamas* and *niyamas* in relationships can help us build healing justice communities (30). Following in this theme of community, chapter four by Amy Argenal and Monisha Bajaj details their experience as "two mothers of color with children of South Asian heritage" organizing "a family yoga class centering young people of color" with a South Asian teacher in 2016 (38). A great example of critical yoga studies reflection, this chapter also engages with two pieces from previous issues of *Race and Yoga*.

In chapter five, "The city of radical love: A Philly story of oppression, resistance, and healing," Sheena Sood and Mari Morales-Williams share their experience organizing and leading cost-free yoga in a "healing justice" framework at a community center in North Philadelphia. This chapter is exemplary because the authors boldly name the oppressive systems and history of state-sanctioned violence in the city as sources of generational trauma and justification for why cities like Philadelphia need healing practices like yoga. They devote most of the chapter to focusing on the legacy of healing work in the city, rather than their own intervention, showing the depth of their commitment to the community and "encourag(ing) other wellness practitioners to study the geo-political context of land and the people in which they serve, in order to more holistically cultivate community-building as part of the practice" (62). In the next chapters, clinical social worker Morgan Vanderpool similarly names the numerous systems of violence that people have survived and the biological impact of that trauma, and researcher Firdose Moonda critically evaluates two yoga interventions for migrant populations in the United Kingdom and their effectiveness for psychological well-being.

Another stand-out chapter is a stunning new piece of choreographic analysis by *Race and Yoga* co-founding editor and current Editor-in-Chief Tria Blu Wapka. In the essay titled "Hozho Yoga: Indigenous movements illuminating human and more-than-human interconnections," Blu Wapka beautifully analyzes the movements in two films featuring the yoga practice of Diné yoga instructor Haley Laughter. Part II also features a well-researched additional chapter by anthology editor Cara Hagan on the performance of gender in fitness and how we can look to yogic mythology "for expanded definitions of gender" outside the binary (168). This section ends by

returning to the topic of yoga for refugee communities from the unique perspective of a volunteer yoga instructor in a refugee camp in Greece. In this chapter, Sanaz Yaghmai explores her own liminality as an “insider-outsider” in the refugee camp, sharing the language of the participants but not their life experiences. She invites readers to pause throughout her essay “to notice the spaces ‘in between’ where we make meaning, in the liminal” (176). As the space between the past and the future, the liminal for Yaghmai is in the present moment, a blurry space where one can “honor the complexities of the human experience” (183).

Part III: Yoga in Educational Spaces shifts the focus from self and community to the places where we teach and learn; this section includes work from US primary and secondary school settings and university educators. This section contains a case study of a Freirean-inspired yoga intervention with high school students (Kimberly Nao), an overview of a series of yoga-related programs for pre-service teachers (Erin Adams, Sohyun An, Jillian Ford, and Sanjuana Rodriguez), and an essay on the possibilities of yoga and art programming to interrupt the school to prison pipeline (Suzana Plaisant McCalley). In chapter 16, Michele Tracey Berger shares a robust evaluation of a Kundalini yoga program for middle school girls, which I found particularly interesting because results are broken down by race for both the control and treatment group. While most girls had improved scores after the treatment, Asian girls had lower mindfulness scores after the intervention and higher scores in difficulty regulating emotion (262, 264). While the author suggests this may be due to external factors, other work in this volume inspires me to suggest this may be worthy of further exploration as Kundalini yoga as taught by Yogi Bhanan has been heavily criticized and Sikh mantras may not be culturally relevant to these Asian students. How might scores for Asian girls change with a South Asian teacher and a decolonized yoga practice as described in chapter four of this volume?

Furthermore, University-affiliated yoga studies scholars may be particularly interested in chapters 15 and 18 because they focus on the college teaching experience. In “Trials and tribulations: Ruminations of a community college yoga teacher,” Shyamala Moorthy reflects on almost a decade of experience teaching yoga *asana*, *pranayama*, and philosophy at West Los Angeles College. Moorthy includes her powerful illustrations inspired by student quotes; one particularly resonant image reads, “Is feeling this good illegal?” (245). The collection ends with the essay “Tending communities: Yoga as an integrative, collaborative, and transformative practice” by another author previously published in *Race and Yoga*, Narin Hassan. In this piece, Hassan grapples with breaking the barrier between her yoga teacher self and professor self. She discusses the possibilities that open when those roles are no longer held separate.

In a 2020 addendum to her essay, Hassan beautifully encapsulates why this volume is so important writing,

We can no longer think of our work as yoga practitioners as being a band-aid or cozy supplement to the work we do in classrooms, workspaces, and communities we inhabit — the pandemic, racial tensions in the United States and around the globe, political upheavals, and uncertain and vulnerable environmental and health situations have shown us that yoga is and must be integrated and prioritized to support and strengthen our own well-being and improve the various structures and communities that surround us (302-303).

This has only become more true in the years 2020-2023. While the text, like others from Routledge, had some noticeable copy-editing errors and omissions, these were minor issues in an otherwise outstanding collection. The text meets yoga scholars and practitioners at a critical

juncture for social justice and succeeds in its mission to “offer readers solidarity, along with knowledge and tools to imagine a more just existence in the world” (xxiv).

References

- Berger, Michele Tracey. 2018. “I Do Practice Yoga! Controlling Images and Recovering the Black Female Body in ‘Skinny White Girl’ Yoga Culture.” *Race and Yoga* 3, no. 1: 31-49. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3w04347q>
- Blu Wapka, Tria. 2018. “Yoga Brings You Back to Who You Are: A Conversation Featuring Haley Laughter.” *Race and Yoga* 3, no. 1: 1-11. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3dz8g5k8>
- Hagan, Cara. 2021. “Mothering and Self-Care While Black in the Age of COVID.” *Race and Yoga* 6, no.1: 25-40. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4ck6449q>
- Hassan, Narin. 2020. “Travelers, Translators, and Spiritual Mothers: Yoga, Gender, and Colonial Histories.” *Race and Yoga* 5, no.1: 24-41. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/93n9s2xg>
- Manigault-Bryant, James. 2016. “Yoga and the Metaphysics of Racial-Capital.” *Race and Yoga* 1, no.1: 40-52. https://escholarship.org/uc/crg_raceandyoga/1/1
- Sood, Sheena. 2018. “Cultivating a Yogic Theology of Collective Healing: A Yogini’s Journey Disrupting White Supremacy, Hindu Fundamentalism and Casteism.” *Race and Yoga* 3, no.1: 12-20. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/Own4p090>

Samantha Griggs (she/they) is a PhD student in the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of California, Riverside. Samantha also holds a MS. Ed in International Educational Development from the University of Pennsylvania and a BA in Educational Studies with Sociology and Anthropology from Swarthmore College.