

Queer and Trans Yoga: Practices of Utopia in Hostile Times

Chloe Diamond-Lenow
State University of New York, Oneonta

Abstract

This article theorizes queer and trans yoga as a practice of queer utopia and embodied resistance to systems of subordination at a time of increased attacks on queer and trans life, rights, and freedom. While there is a growing robust literature that critiques the racialized gendered and colonialist formations of yoga in the West, few engagements beyond a few mainstream and scholarly monographs explore queer and trans yoga. This research contributes to this gap in developing an account of queer and trans yoga through autoethnography and testimony. It particularly emphasizes the potentials for cultivating pleasure in individual and collective terms through this queered practice.

Keywords: Embodiment; Pleasure; Queer; Transgender; Utopia; Yoga

Introduction

On November 21, 2022, one day after the mass shooting at Club Q, an LGBTQ Club in Colorado Springs, I taught a free restorative yoga class for my local queer and trans community. I also taught a similar class after the June 2016 mass shooting on Latinx night at PULSE, an LGBTQ club in Orlando, Florida. In both instances, there was a heaviness for queer and trans people and an urgency to create collective spaces for mourning and healing as queer/trans life and joy was under attack. The sessions were my attempt as a queer yoga teacher to provide space for my community for collective grief and embodied care. The mass shootings targeted at queer and trans communities and spaces of joy and embodied pleasure are hypervisible examples of how queer and trans people have felt our very existence in public spaces under attack.

These sporadic acts committed by individuals are part of a larger assemblage of anti-trans and anti-queer state, structural, ideological, and interpersonal violence that queer and trans folks navigate daily. This violence also emerges from cisnormative and heteropatriarchal structures, practices, and policies, which are also subtended by racial capitalism, settler colonialism, white supremacy, and ableism. There is an increasing attack on queer and trans rights in private and public life, in places like public bathrooms and sports, within educational curricula, and in relation to gender affirming care.¹ These anti-queer and anti-trans maneuvers live variously in our bodies, hearts, and minds. In these times, how do we resist them and make space for queer/trans pleasure? And how, in these contexts, can queer and trans yoga offer space for embodied resistance, for queer world-building?

Towards My Femme-inist Account of Queer and Trans Yoga

My research for this article is grounded in femme-inist autoethnography. I draw on my experience as a queer fat non-binary white Jewish femme settler yoga student and teacher to explore the limits and potentials for queer and trans yoga. I situate myself as “fat” in an explicit reclamation of the pejorative term in alignment with body liberationist frameworks that understand fatphobia as an extension of anti-Blackness and racism (Senyonga and Luna 2021; Strings 2019).

Queerness across this article, and in everyday use, has multiple meanings: an identity and community, a critique of stable identity and the boundary between ab/normal, and a mode of knowing and being. Though initially used as a pejorative term to refer to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, “queer” has been reclaimed as an affirming term in activism and scholarship. Colloquially, the term refers to anyone who is not straight. For queer theorists and many activists, “queer” is more than an identity, it is a political stance that challenges heteronormativity and opens up to antinormative ways of living (Sullivan 2003).

Queerness does not always imply radical investments. It can also serve in the interest of and reproduce racial capitalism as well as white supremacist and heteronormative structures (Reddy 2021, 172). Queer is always already a racialized term centering whiteness (Johnson 2010). Queer theorists and scholars center whiteness when they present queerness through terms of false unifying inclusion, reproduce politicized approaches that lack radical critique and action, and ignore the specificities of power and intersectionality (Anzaldúa 2009, 2; Cohen 1997). Queer, however, when deployed in its transformational terms, can invite coalitional ways of thinking and enacting, ones that map rhizomatic interconnections between anti-racism, feminism, and queer liberation (Cohen 1997). In such contexts, as Chandan Reddy (2021) writes, “constructed from genealogies of Black radical, women of color, and varied Third World feminisms, queer ... is a contingent formation and construct, actively linking gender and sexual insubordinations and deviance to racial capitalist and heteropatriarchal orders” (2008).

In this essay, I reflect on my experiences teaching queer and trans yoga in various places in the United States with a focus on how the practice can offer healing in different ways amidst the cultural backdrop we navigate. I engage in this work using autoethnography, a “queer method” that provides space for the “telling stories of subjugated knowledges – stories of pleasure, gratification and intimacy”, as well as pain and struggle, to attune to the micro and macro-politics of affective and embodied experience of these classes (Holman and Adams 2010, 96). My analysis also addresses testimony from participants about these yoga classes. Participants shared these testimonies with me after classes and in personal communication. I include their words and identity descriptions with their informed consent.

I begin my analysis by situating my research in relation to the racialized and gendered politics of yoga in the United States. I then discuss how I navigate these politics in my teaching through centering a decolonial trauma-informed approach attuned to queerness, tenderness, and reflexivity in relation to my own positionality as a queer white teacher. I discuss how in teaching in the current anti-trans and anti-queer political climate, I follow Becky Thompson’s (2017) “pedagogy of tenderness,” a feminist trauma-informed approach oriented to embodied healing and collective liberation. I explore how, through this work, I seek to create spaces for healing and pleasure in individual and communal terms. I also evaluate the limits and potentials of queer/trans yoga. Several questions guide my analysis: how can queer and trans joy and pleasure emerge from yoga? What are the politics of such practices as resistant opportunities, given that

mainstream yoga in the West is embedded in white supremacist, sizeist, and cisnormative ideals and culture? I ask these questions within the current contexts of increasing anti-trans legislation, continued state racism, and imperialist and settler colonial violence on a global scale. In these times, how does queer and trans yoga open space for resistance in terms of self and community care?

The Colonial Racial Gendered Politics of Yoga

Yoga has a deep colonial history rooted in a complex web of racialized sexism, Hindu nationalism, neocolonialism, and racial capitalism. In its current manifestation in the United States, much of yoga culture aligns with a kind of postfeminist sensibility. Postfeminism is a framework in which neoliberal ideology distorts and appropriates feminist rhetoric and principles. Under these terms, feminism becomes an individualist position about white women's empowerment, rather than an intersectional and structural critique of racial capitalism and cisheteropatriarchy (Gill 2016). Within this postfeminist context, yoga is presented as a root to empowerment for the modern (white) woman, such that liberation is encoded as individualist self-care instead of community care and collective liberation (Putchá 2020). Practicing and teaching yoga in the United States is also connected to the geopolitics of a growing global far Right, connected, for example, to India's conservative Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who also sought to capitalize on Western fascination with yoga and further mobilize it and export it to the West as part of a broader technique of Indian Hindu nationalism (Lakshmi 2020).

In addition to the influence of Indian Hindu nationalism on Western yoga, cis- and heteronormativity circulate through Western yoga spaces. Yoga is often taught in cisnormative and heteronormative ways, often through gendered cueing from teachers who use binary language like "men" and "women" to refer to students or assumed body structures, rhetorics about masculine versus feminine energy, and heteronormative stories about Indian deities (Ballard 2022). Many yoga communities are often also steeped in cultures of misogyny and sexual abuse (Black 2020).

Much recent critical research around yoga brings attention to how yoga often centers white middle- and upper-class women and reproduces imperial and settler colonial relationships of racial capitalism (Hassan 2020; Manigault-Bryant 2016; Putchá 2020). In addition, some recent scholarship analyzes how Black women, people of color, indigenous Native Americans, and South Asian peoples have found tools of resistance within yoga (Hagan 2021; Sood 2020; Ternikar 2021; Blu Wakpa 2018).

Less attention has been given to the ways in which these racialized formations of yoga are also often practiced in cisnormative and heteronormative ways not to mention how queer and trans people have used yoga for individual and community healing. There is some popular writing on the topic for a general audience, including, for example, Nick Krieger's (2014) writing for *Decolonizing Yoga* and Jacoby Ballard's (2022) *A Queer Dharma: Yoga and Meditations for Liberation*. There has been, however, little academic work on the topic to date, though there are a few great chapters in Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts' (2016) *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis*, including chapters by Jillian Carter Ford, who reflects on her experience as a Black queer woman in white and heteronormative studio spaces, Kimberly Dark, who reflects on her experiences as a fat queer yoga teacher, and a conversation between Jacoby Ballard and Karishma Kripalan about the possibilities of queering yoga for social justice (2016).

Despite the dearth of academic writing on the topic, there are many practitioners, teachers, and organizations who offer queer and trans yoga, and who inspire my own approach to teaching. These include organizations like The Trans Yoga Project, as well as individual teachers like Puja Singh Titchkosky, a queer, non-binary trans Indian-Canadian yoga teacher based in Los Angeles (Titchkosky, n.d.), Jacoby Ballard, a white transmasculine Buddhist yoga teacher who founded Third Root Community Health Center in Brooklyn, NY (Ballard 2022, 257), and Jessamyn Stanley, a fat Black queer woman who founded Underbelly Yoga (Stanley, n.d.).

Queer and Trans Yoga in Practice

I started teaching queer and trans yoga in 2013 in Santa Barbara, California, while I was a graduate student pursuing a PhD in Feminist Studies. I had recently received my 200-hour certification and was excited to begin teaching. Throughout my teacher training, as I started to think about how and for whom I wanted to teach, I became interested in designing and offering a specific class for queer and trans people. Santa Barbara has one of the highest percentages of yoga studios per capita in the United States, and yet, most of these classes and studios cater to the wealthier, often white, and cisgender population. There was not a lot of body diversity in terms of size, race, and ability in the public classes I attended. I would invite my friends, mostly queer and trans people, to my public classes, but they did not feel comfortable going to these traditional studios. I hoped to create a more inclusive space through which I could share what, to me, were the deep pleasures of yoga.

I started offering a weekly yoga class at the beach called “Queerga.” I called the class “Queerga” to represent it as queer in two ways: a class for queer people and a “queering” of a yoga in terms of space and approach. Classes were primarily composed of queer and trans graduate students. Initially, I offered the class as either free or donation-based with donations going to my friend’s fund for gender confirmation surgery. I taught the class less regularly over time as I took on more paid teaching and worked to complete my PhD. While I enjoyed hosting the class, consistently organizing it became too much work. Upon reflection, this class was a kind of mutual aid offering before I had the words to name it as such. But, as the sole organizer, and as a poorly paid graduate student, I found my time pulled by the opportunity for more paid work. This also illuminates the challenges of sustaining these kinds of spaces and practices.

Ten years later, I am offering regular queer and trans yoga classes again with more financial stability from paid opportunities to guide these classes and with a tenure-track position as an Assistant Professor in Women’s and Gender Studies. I teach online yoga for a virtual gym called the Queer Gym (Queer Gym n.d.). I started teaching for the gym in December 2021. The gym’s online format appealed to me as I taught public yoga classes online throughout the pandemic, but those online options dwindled after studios returned to in-person classes when stay-at-home orders were dropped. I was initially hired to teach a more active vinyasa style yoga class for the gym, though I proposed to do a restorative class as well since I saw only active classes available for students but no recovery classes. I thought a class with an explicit focus on rest and nourishment would be an important addition to the regular class offerings and would support the gym’s queer and trans members in finding space for self-care and restorative movement. I usually have between 20-60 students in each virtual class. Many of the participants in the class are trans and non-binary, about half are women, and only a handful are cismen. This aligns with the membership of the gym, where 36% of the members of the gym are non-binary,

30% are trans, and the rest are cisgender. Of those who identify in terms of binary gender, 50% are women and 14% are men (Queer Gym, n.d.).

I began my in-person queer/trans yoga class in June 2022 as a special event for Pride. I held the class at the local studio where I teach public classes in Oneonta, New York. At that point, I was teaching a weekly virtual class for the Queer Gym and wanted to bring this opportunity to my local community, where I had recently moved to start a new job. The initial class was well-attended and there was overwhelming enthusiasm from participants to continue the class. I have since offered the class monthly at my local yoga studio, Yoga People. The class is free for participants and is organized in collaboration with, and through financial support from, the Gender Wellness Center, a local health clinic that offers gender affirming care. Where I live, in a small rural town, there are few opportunities for queer and trans community building. The class has been powerful in providing a space to gather and has also been important for my own sense of community in a new place.

The monthly class is generally well-attended with between 5-20 participants joining each time. The composition of the class changes monthly. At times, the participants in the classes have been predominantly white, and at others, there is about an equal number of white people and people of color, which is notable in a town where 81.3% of the population is white (Data USA 2021). Regular participants in the class include queer ciswomen, transmasculine people, non-binary people, some transwomen, and occasionally cis gay men. While generally queer public spaces center cis gay men, it is probable that both gendered associations of yoga and my own social group, which consists mostly of queer women, and transmasculine as well as non-binary folks, many of whom join the classes, impacts the attendance.

Teaching Tenderly: Trauma-Informed Yin and Restorative Yoga

I named the queer and trans restorative and yin yoga classes that I teach “Tender Gender Yoga” to represent a grounding in tenderness rooted in my own feminist, anti-racist, queer/trans affirming, trauma-informed approach that invites individual and collective tenderness for queer and trans people.

Yin and restorative yoga are slower styles of yoga focused on stretching and meditation. Yin yoga involves holding gentle stretching poses from between one to five minutes, often with the assistance of yoga props, like blocks, blankets, a yoga strap, and the wall. This type of yoga targets the body’s fascia, ligaments, and connective tissue to focus on deep healing. Restorative yoga, like yin, is a slow yoga practice. Where yin offers gentle stretching to the body, restorative yoga focuses on complete relaxation and release in the body – its goal is not to stretch the body so much as to relax, disengage the muscles, and regulate the nervous system. Like yin, this practice is often supported using yoga props. Both practices offer tools for nervous system down-regulation, especially as they stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, the part of the involuntary nervous system that supports rest and recovery (Parker 2020, 71). In so doing, they help balance the autonomic nervous system, the part of the nervous system responsible for involuntary movements of the body and its organs – sweating, heart rate, blood pressure – the places affect is lived, felt, and expressed in the body. Yin and restorative yoga are especially potent when taught through a trauma-informed framework. Trauma-informed yoga understands that trauma lives in the body, not just in the mind, and eschews a false Cartesian mind/body dichotomy (Thompson 2017).

A decolonial feminist and queer/trans affirming approach to trauma also understands trauma in complex ways; here, trauma is not just a singular traumatic event such as sexual assault, violence etc., but also that which is held in the mind-body-heart in response to systems of power we live within and negotiate daily. Racialized trauma mediated by histories of white supremacy lives in the bodies of white people and people of color such that we all must metabolize its effects differently (Menakem 2017). This racialized trauma is part of the interlocking way power works. As women of color feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga (2015) argue, white supremacist heteropatriarchy is structural, corporeal, and affective, and requires a response grounded in “theory in the flesh,” a framework “where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (23). In my classes, I seek to guide myself and my students to understand this “theory in the flesh,” such that I ask that we all bring in whatever we are carrying with us from the outside world into our practice, not to “leave it all outside” as often teachers prompt students to do. I ask students to feel how they hold the impacts of various systems of power, privilege, and subordination in their bodies.

Part of my work of “theory in the flesh” requires grappling with the ways in which white supremacy functions in my own positionality as a white yoga teacher in predominantly white spaces. Teaching from a trauma-informed decolonial position requires me to actively challenge white supremacy in my teaching by naming anti-Blackness, xenophobia, Islamophobia, settler colonialism, and other iterations of racism. At times this can be uncomfortable for myself and my students who benefit from these systems, especially when this work makes us reflect on the privileges that are often invisible to us and the ways in which they function in our lives. This is a kind of productive discomfort required to do the deep inner work yoga encourages.

While I seek to name these workings of subordinating power, my intention is not to provoke guilt, but instead to help myself and my students digest the experiences we all navigate so that we can heal and be more tender with ourselves and communities. This is important because, as Sara Ahmed (2004) argues, “feeling bad about racism or white privilege can function as a form of self-centeredness, which returns the white subject ‘back into’ itself, as the one whose feelings matter” (32). Under these terms, guilt often functions as “the performance rather than undoing of whiteness. Guilt certainly works as a ‘block’ to hearing the claims of others in a re-turning to the white self” (32). Instead of provoking guilt, my goal is to hold space for my students and myself to digest discomfort, fear, anger – and whatever else it is we need to feel and metabolize in our bodies – as we see ourselves as interconnected to structures and each other.

As I mentioned earlier, my teaching aligns with Thompson’s (2017) intersectional feminist trauma-informed “pedagogy of tenderness.” Thompson defines this approach as “an embodied way of being that allows us to listen deeply to each other, to consider perspectives that we might have thought way outside our own worldviews.” She continues “tenderness makes room for emotion; offers a witness for experiences people have buried or left unspoken; welcomes silence, breath, and movement; and sees justice as key to our survival” (1). I think with Thompson in understanding “tenderness” as an approach to embodiment, touch, intimacy, and community oriented towards individual and collective liberation. As Thompson writes,

While colonialism, militarism, racism, and patriarchy remain structural impediments to tenderness, as teachers we find ourselves digging deep, knowing that, as Angela Davis has written, ‘without deep, abiding practices of self-care, there can be no radical social transformation’ (15).

An intersectional feminist trauma-informed approach to yin and restorative yoga for queer and trans communities can offer this kind of tenderness in praxis. These styles of yoga invite deep introspection as they require practitioners to notice where their body holds tension and where they are relaxed as well as how they are holding feelings, thoughts, and experiences in their bodies. In a neoliberal capitalist culture that emphasizes production, work, and disembodiment over rest and a slower queerer time, these practices call practitioners towards a sense of stillness and embodiment. They invite practitioners to stop, pause, breathe, feel, and listen inward when so much from outside systems of power reproduce harm and violence that gets held affectively, psychically, physically, and communally.

Teaching and Practicing Queerly: A Path of Pleasure and Embodiment

Considering the violence that queer and trans people navigate, finding spaces and places of pleasure that are trauma-informed is an important decolonial tactic. A queer and trans approach to trauma-informed yoga emphasizes affirming cues that guide students not only away from gender dysphoria, but toward “gender euphoria,” a sense of feeling affirmed and celebrated in one’s gendered embodiment (Dale 2022). To integrate this in my classes, I incorporate trans and queer affirming language and cues. Every Tender Gender yoga class starts with a pronoun share and a question of the day. My language caters to specific needs of gender diverse folks, for example, “for those who bind, this stretch is useful for expanding the fascia in your chest and side” or “if you are recovering from top surgery, try this modification so you don’t have to lift your arms.” I also use community centered cues that call us in collectively as a group, like “together we breathe into our queer trans hearts and community, together we breathe out and share this energy with each other.”

I never use binary gender descriptions grounded in assumptions about sexually dimorphic bodies or gendered habits that I’ve heard in other classes such as “men, who usually are tighter than women, ...,” “ladies, if you’ve been wearing heels this will feel good,” or “women, you might have less access because of your breasts.” Instead, I use gender neutral language to describe body parts, and call myself into the cues where appropriate. For example, in demonstrating shoelace, a pose in which practitioners lie on their bellies and cross their arms under their chest, I say, “if you are like me, and you have more flesh at your chest, you might find a block supportive under your head.”

Students in my classes reflect that they feel supported by these techniques. A white non-binary participant from my online classes shared that practicing in community and with an instructor who taught in this way helped them connect to themselves and the class more effectively,

As a non-binary person who was assigned female at birth, having yoga instructors constantly waxing on about the feminine and the masculine (energies, balances, etc.), ‘women’s cycles,’ telling narratives that start with ‘as women we...’ makes me feel like I don’t belong in that class, or in my own body. It’s effectively telling me how I am supposed to experience yoga, and as that’s not my experience, it’s invalidating and disconnects me from the class, my mat, and myself. Having a queer-identified yoga instructor ... allows my mind to stay present and feel a connection with others in the class.

A fat Black queer femme also reflected on the ways in which participating in these virtual classes provided her with a sense of embodied freedom,

Joining your class gives me the security to be queer and free in my body. You bring deeper intention to the heart and help me tend to my physical pain. I also appreciate your body for being like mine and modeling self love in a safe queer environment means a lot and speaks to your wisdom and mindfulness to all bodies.

In my own experiences as a fat person, I am constantly aware of the size of my body in yogic spaces. Like this student, I find affirmation in teaching my virtual Tender Gender yoga class where I have many fat-identified students. Just as I use gender-affirming cues, I use fat-affirming cues such as naming the ways in which many of us have bellies and other fleshy parts of our bodies that we need to move as we practice.

This affirming approach to teaching all bodies opens space for students to participate in yoga where they may previously have felt unwelcome. A regular participant in my online classes, a Latinx transman, recently shared with our class that the session was the first time he felt comfortable practicing topless after he had top surgery. He also later told me that he had tried yoga before but did not enjoy it, and that it wasn't until he took my Tender Gender yoga class that he found deep healing in yoga. He shared in writing,

I ... wanted to thank you for teaching tender gender yoga class at the gym. I had done a bit of yoga before ever coming out, and my body, mind, and heart did *not* have the same responses to the practices that I now have had taking your class. In fact, I really did not enjoy yoga before. You are the reason I have created this new, so much. Healthier relationship with myself both physical and spiritual; it started with tender gender and now it is one of the most important practices—in combination with breathwork—I have ever adopted into my daily life. It's changed my outlook on life, on others, on myself, just everything has changed. I feel brand new. You are such an important person in my transition journey, and I wanted you to know how much taking your class has impacted me for the better.

Receiving these words meant so much to me as a teacher. Having a student reflect back how my teaching affirmed him in ways he had not yet experienced in yoga, and that he has taken practices from our sessions into his daily life is one of the greatest gifts a teacher can receive. This feedback is affirming for me in knowing the space I create resonates with others. I am also struck by how this student says the practices helped him with his own worldview, understanding of himself, and those around him.

Yin and restorative yoga offer powerful practices of introspection through movement and stillness – they help practitioners trace their breath, thoughts, and embodied sensations, but remind practitioners to not judge what they find. Within these approaches to *āsana* (postures), yoga principles like *svādhyāya* (self-study) encourage practitioners to identify repeated patterns of thoughts, to discern what values, ideas, etc. are their own, and which come from outside forces. While I am critical of the liberal fantasy that we are all-knowing and self-authoring subjects who can connect to some “authentic self” outside of the discourses and ideologies that produce us, I do think these practices of introspection are important. They help practitioners disinterpellate ourselves from the injurious hailings of systems of power (Althusser 1971; Sedgwick 2003) and to not just *think about*, but to *feel* power and to understand how these systems live in our bodies, muscles, tissues, and cells so that we can *feel* our way towards freedom.

As the above testimonies from my students show, yoga can be a site for queer and trans people to reclaim the embodied, affective, and the sensorial, which racial capitalism and

heteropatriarchy discourage, discount, and undermine in their emphasis on disembodiment and alienation. These forces tell us to disavow and sublimate our own bodies, affects, and visceral needs – our body’s pains and pleasures (achy joints, tight neck and shoulders, pain in the low back) – the ways we feel power in our bodies. These practices bring us tenderly back to ourselves.

As a practice that builds community, invites embodied healing, and introspection, queer and trans yoga can be a form of what queer activist adrienne maree brown (2019, 13) calls “pleasure activism.” For brown, pleasure activism makes pleasure political and focuses on individual and collective pleasure, particularly for the most marginalized, as a source of resistance and possibility.

There is a long lineage of queer theorists who locate pleasure as foundational within queer tactics of resistance. Philosopher Michel Foucault (1990) famously remarked that “The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” (157). Part of Foucault’s critique suggests that a queer tactic of resistance to what he calls “the deployment of sexuality,” with its emphasis on normalization, can emerge from sites of embodied pleasure. Queer theorist Ladelle McWhorter (1999) follows this line of thinking from Foucault, arguing that “we’ve got to find ways to live our bodies as who we are, to intensify our experiences of bodiliness and to think from our bodies, if we are going to push back against the narrow confines of the normalizing powers that construct our freedom” (185).

This emphasis on embodied pleasure also resonates with what Black lesbian feminist poet warrior Audre Lorde (1984) refers to as “the erotic.” The erotic, for Lorde, is the sense of deep pleasure and joy that, in her words, “we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of” (56). Lorde’s “erotic” calls for affective and somatic knowledge grounded in an “internal sense of satisfaction” (57). She writes that “the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (58). Participant reflections on experiences in queer and trans yoga classes echo this kind of erotic knowledge and mind-body-heart connection.

The “Queer” in Queer Yoga

Queerness is about paths to building alternative formations, intimacies, and ways of being. Queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) describe this in their framing of the “queer world” as a “space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies” (558). Queerness, then, is a formation of community, invitation for coalition, and opportunity for doing otherwise, an orientation to queer world building and futurity. It is a political stance resistant to the interweaving of heteropatriarchy, cisnormativity, and racial capitalism.

These ways of thinking about queerness are central to how I teach. I bring queer texts, authors, and ideas to my queer and trans yoga classes. Doing so ensures that the classes are not only queer because of their composition, but also because of the approach I take to teaching the class as one explicitly for uplifting and celebrating queer and trans bodies, histories, futures, epistemologies, and tactics.

I often interweave queer epistemologies and theories with yoga philosophy as part of my approach to teaching these classes. While I always theme my classes around a particular concept or quote, I try in Tender Gender yoga to either: 1) offer a concept from yoga philosophy as it can apply to the current political/cultural moment we find ourselves in, or 2) offer a concept or quote from a queer scholar or activist and explain its connection to a principle in yoga philosophy.

For example, in one theme I use for class, I encourage participants to consider the ways we all make poetry and art in our own unique embodiments and expressions. To frame the class, I read two quotes, one by white queer theorist, Michel Foucault and one by white Jewish trans activist and theorist Leslie Feinberg. I start with Feinberg's proposition that "gender is the poetry each of us makes out of the language we are taught" (Feinberg 1999, 10) and then link it to Foucault's (1997) argument that "from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" (262).

I connect these provocations about gender, subjectivity, and art to the concept of *svādhyāya* (self-study) to encourage participants to consider how they choose to create art and poetry with their body and their gender, and how they can use our class time to explore and create themselves in community with their movements, breath, and introspection. This helps ground the class in queer and trans epistemologies alongside yoga philosophy. This exploration of gender is not only for trans students, but for all of us to consider how we inhabit, experience, negotiate, and create ourselves – echoing one of the key contributions of queer theory – that the self is never achieved, but always in process. This is something that I not only ask my students to consider, but also myself. Through introspection, I continuously ask who "I" am as I teach and practice. As I guide my students, I also query, what is my gender? How do I perform it? Inhabit it? Betray it?

Another theme that I use is self and community care by grounding the class in Audre Lorde's (2017) oft-cited reflection that "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation. And that is an act of political warfare" (130). Before we begin practice, I ask participants to reflect on how they can commit to one tangible practice of self-care and one tangible practice of community care over the week. I then lead participants through a meditation focused on *ahimsā* (non-harming) and *mokṣa* (liberation). Cognizant of the ways in which this quote from Lorde has been heavily circulated in an often-white postfeminist context that frames self-care in neoliberal feminist frameworks where it becomes a depoliticized form of self-soothing, I take the time to contextualize Lorde's words at her time of writing by describing her experience as a queer Black woman living with, and dying from, cancer and struggling to have her doctors take her medical condition and self-knowledge seriously. I then ask my students to reflect on how taking the time to practice yin and restorative yoga in community, to find time for collective exhales, stillness, and embodied tenderness, is part of their political work of queer and trans resistance.

The Limits and Potentials of Queer and Trans Yoga: Reflexivity, Accountability, Coalition, and Utopia

Considering the violence that queer and trans people navigate individually, collectively, and structurally, finding places and spaces of pleasure is an important queer decolonial tactic. In the queer path to pleasure, to the erotic, to a sense of wholeness, queer/trans yoga can be a method of cultivating queer and trans practices of utopia. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2009) writes on queer utopia as "an insistence on something else, something better, something

dawning” (189). For Muñoz, pleasure is a key path to such utopias. He writes, “we must strive ... to think and feel a then and there ... we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (185). In spaces of being and breathing together, tenderly, perhaps we can engage in this kind of utopic queer worlding.

It feels so important to be able to gather physically together and engage in a collective practice of rest. To pause and be in stillness next to another person, to hear their breath, their sighs of release, allows for a collective affective experience in which we can sense each other and heal together. The online classes are also important for those who might not otherwise be out to those around them, but who feel comfortable arriving online in a space of anonymity, and to be seen by other queer and trans people. They are also safer places for those who are immunocompromised. They allow participants to join in ways that feel supportive for them in their own homes. In my virtual Tender Gender classes, those who choose to have their cameras on (about 30-50% of participants given the day) invite us into their homes with the mess and marks of the mundane quotidian parts of life. For some, the space offers them an important way to be seen and affirmed. In class recently, a transfeminine showed everyone her sports bra after deciding to dress in more gender affirming clothing as she had seen others do. Likewise, those who practice with cameras off enter the class on their own terms and participate in the Zoom chat. At a time when our bodies are under surveillance, there is incredible power to being able to show up in community together without having to think of any external gaze.

While I believe queer and trans yoga can provide radical possibilities for individual and collective healing, I also don’t want to overstate its liberatory potential. These classes can also reproduce cisnormativity, white supremacy, sizeism, and coloniality, ableism, and other interlocking systems as they function within racial capitalism.

Whether in-person or online, these community spaces are particularly impactful when they are practiced with accountability and informed by practices of mutual aid. Trans activist and scholar Dean Spade (2020) defines mutual aid as a collective effort to support community needs that are not being met by existing structures and practices. The question of the economies of these classes is a big one: for yoga teachers, there are often multiple conditions of precarious employment in the gig economy, and for participants, yoga studios and fitness centers often charge a high price, queer or not, for a class/membership. How do we continue to build these classes in ways that make them accessible for folks, and ensure that the teacher is paid well for their labor as many yoga teachers have precarious employment, often classified as independent contractors, and do not have the labor protections or benefits of employees?

Beyond concerns about the economies of these classes under racial capitalism, it is also important to understand the neocolonial and racialized politics of these classes. Yoga as a tool for healing, especially for white people in the West, is reproductive of the neocolonial dynamics of what Rumya S. Putcha (2020) calls “somatic orientalism,” a form of Orientalism that “encourages certain kinds of emotional, psychological, and spatialized attachments to a range of sensory experiences (e.g. sight, sound, taste, smell, touch) from formerly colonized areas and their cultural-religious practices and markets these as ‘wellness’ activities, which can function as healing elixirs for the ills of Western life” (2).

This kind of somatic orientalism is particularly relevant in relation to the moves of whiteness and white supremacy to which I must attend as a white teacher speaking from my own positionality. Queer theorist Robyn Wiegman (1999) argues that white racial formation operates through a “split in the white subject-between disaffiliation from white supremacist practices and disavowal of the ongoing reformation of white power and one’s benefit from it” such that white

people seek to understand ourselves as operating outside of the structures of white supremacy while also ignoring the ongoing ways in which we perpetuate and benefit from white supremacy (120). So here, I want to acknowledge that it is seductive for me to argue that I can challenge white supremacy by naming it at times during my classes, but doing so would also mean I miss the very real ways it continues to function despite, and indeed, as part of, this naming. Challenging these functions of whiteness requires the kind of introspective reflexivity that yoga supports. Under these terms, as Sara Ahmed argues, it is important to remember that, the task for white subjects [is] to stay implicated in what they critique [and] in turning towards their role and responsibility in these histories of racism, as histories of this present, to turn away from themselves, and towards others. This ‘double turn’ is not sufficient, but it clears some ground, upon which the work of exposing racism might provide the conditions for another kind of work (2004, 59).

Following Ahmed, I recognize it is important to name myself in that which I critique. I have perpetuated white supremacy in my own teaching, even as I seek to dismantle it. For example, during a yoga class I led in November 2022 on the Trans Day of Remembrance, I wanted to hold space to honor the legacies of trans of color activists and called in dedications to Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. A trans student of color commented after class that it was triggering for them to engage in the meditation because they often hear white people name people of color, and particularly transwomen of color, only when they are already dead and being mourned. This student’s comment was an important reminder to me that they felt my whiteness in my class in ways that, combined with my guidance, did not let them grieve in ways they needed. Though I intended to challenge the economies of mourning under cis- heteropatriarchal white supremacy that often erase the deaths of people of color, particularly transwomen, I did not fully reflect on how it can be triggering to hear about death and violence against trans people of color, particularly for a person of color when coming from a white person.

There is space in my research for me to bring more focus to the voices and experiences of all students in my classes, and particularly for students of color. Their experiences are generally unavailable to me for analysis because of my primary use of autoethnography for research for this article. In my future research, I plan to conduct in-depth interviews with my students. For students in my classes, I wonder what the experience of having a white yoga teacher name anti-Black state violence and histories of US settler colonialism feels like? How does it impact students differently based on individual positionality and structural relations, particularly for students of color? Who do I hold space for when I make these statements? Who do I make uncomfortable? What do I make visible? What remains unspoken? Invisible?

These are anti-racist feminist questions for my “pedagogy of tenderness” (Thompson 2017) in the yoga studio and in the Women’s and Gender Studies classroom. Anti-racist, feminist, and queer/trans stories matter – how they are told, who hears them, and what trajectories they provide for imagining otherwise (Hemmings 2011). I have, for example, in this article primarily cited scholars who are queer, trans, of color, and women. This citational practice is intentional and political. It forefronts subjugated voices, methods, critique, and ways of knowing. This is one way, for example, I practice and model *ahimsā* (non-harming) outside of the yoga studio. My work as a yoga teacher seeps queerly into my work as a professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and vice versa. Each is stronger for this. My mentorship of students in Women’s and Gender Studies is also central to my work creating anti-racist, feminist, and queer/trans affirming spaces beyond the yoga studio.

It is my continued hope that teaching from a perspective grounded in coalitional frameworks oriented towards feminist, queer and anti-racist commitments and through frameworks of the *yamas*, *niyamas*, and mutual aid provide the tools to sit in the messiness of power as well as our own implications within it. This approach offers ways to hold ourselves, and each other accountable, rooted in the histories we inherit but open to the futures we can build. These classes I teach are held within spaces and institutions, the yoga studio and the university, that are embedded in white supremacist settler colonial heteropatriarchal structures. Importantly, the queer potential of classes in these contexts is also in the very approach to *queering* as a transformational political stance in Cathy Cohen's (1997) terms that together challenges the interlocking systems of heteropatriarchy, cisnormativity, and racial capitalism.

This queer transformational approach guided my teaching, for example, during a November 2023 online Tender Gender class. During our regular pre-class check-in, a student shared "my heart hurts because of Palestine." As an anti-Zionist Jew, I welcomed the space to respond and expressed my own anger about the Israeli state violence in Gaza and against Palestinians and grief at the scale of violence. I decided to lead that day's practice through a focus on *ahimsā* (non-harming) and *satya* (truthfulness) to emphasize the importance of giving ourselves space to feel and then to mobilize to action and speak truth to power against this violence. I hoped that this provided an embodied space for collective grief, anger, and mourning – a way to feel together as resistance to maneuvers of "pinkwashing." Pinkwashing is a strategy that deflects attention from the violence of settler colonialism and occupation through the false presentation of Israel as a place of queer liberation and Palestine as a place of queer repression (Puar and Mikdashi 2012). In this way, I sought to hold queer space grounded in queer coalitional and intersectional ethics. This may have made some students uncomfortable as I cannot presume to know everyone's politics in the class. But this is, as I discussed earlier, the productive discomfort that a queer liberatory ethic encourages. This teaching aligns with the October 17, 2023 "Call to Action in Solidarity with Palestine" from Yogis for Palestine (2023). They urge yoga teachers to practice decolonial yoga by speaking up about violence against Palestinians. As they write,

Yoga as a path to liberation requires being in solidarity with oppressed people around the world, particularly with the people of Palestine at this moment. We invoke the essence of our yogic values and call on yoga practitioners to refuse to breathe in the colonial propaganda that conceals a genocidal reality. Instead, may we breathe in and activate solidarity for all oppressed people's struggles for freedom, dignity, and self-determination.

Decolonization requires active work. To decolonize, we must resist systems of subordination and create spaces for resistant joy and pleasure. In this work, there is no pure place from which to resist cisnormative, heteropatriarchal white supremacy. I think it is naïve to imagine a pure space from which to practice. We can't escape the world racial capitalism has created, but we can cultivate practices of freedom within it. If, as McWhorter, following Foucault, proposes, "freedom only exists in and as events, practices, or exercises" (1999, 182), then perhaps it is in moments of embodied movement or stillness, in shared sighs, in these queered configurations of practices shaped by colonial and white supremacist cissexist logics, that we find resistance and possibilities for creating otherwise and towards more liberatory futures.

For Muñoz, "the future is queerness' domain" (2009, 1). He asks his readers to think about the futures that queer ways of being and doing open for us all. As part of this, he encourages imagining individual and collective queer utopias, drawing on Oscar Wilde's

provocation that “A map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth glancing at” (1). So, in this article, I hoped to map a future for queer and trans yoga as practices of utopia in times that can feel dystopic. In this way, I conceive of queer and trans yoga as queer not only because of the bodies present who participate, but also because of the way the practice invites in introspection, tenderness, collectivity. It is queer in ways of doing otherwise, in teaching yoga outside of hegemonic heteropatriarchal and cisnormative contexts of white supremacy.

Notes

¹ In mid-2023, there were already 541 anti-trans bills introduced in 49 states since January 2023, and 52 have already been signed into law. In January 2023, there were only two states – Florida and Arizona – with bans on gender-affirming care for trans youth (Paris 2023). Just 3 months later in April 2023, there were 13 states with either full or partial bans on this care (Paris 2023). States with full or partial bans on gender affirming care for minors as of April 15, 2023 include: Idaho, Utah, Arizona, South Dakota, Iowa, Missouri, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, West Virginia, Georgia, and Florida (Paris 2023). This is a significant increase compared to 2022 when 26 bills passed and 174 introduced, and 2021 when 18 bills passed, and 144 were introduced in 37 states. These bills extend broader attacks on queer and trans public life and scholarship, for example, Florida’s infamous FL HB 1557 “Don’t Say Gay or Trans” bill, which prohibits freedom of expression for LGBTQ students and teachers, and among other things “prohibits classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels” (HB 1557).

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2004. “Declarations of Whiteness: The Nonperformativity of Antiracism.” *borderlands ejournal* 3, no. 2.
- Althusser, Louis. 1971. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, 127-187. New York: Monthly Review.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2009. “To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, Escritora y Chicana.” In *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, edited by AnaLouise Keating, 163-175. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria and Cherrie Moraga. 2015. “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh.” In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 17-19. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Ballard, Jacoby. 2022. *A Queer Dharma: Yoga and Meditations for Liberation*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Ballard, Jacoby and Karishma Kripalan. 2016. “Queering Yoga: An Ethic of Social Justice.” In *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis*, edited by Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts, 293-320. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. 1998. “Sex in Public.” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2: 547-66.
- Black, Shameem. 2020. “Yoga, Sexual Violation and Discourse: Reconfigured Hegemonies and Feminist Voices.” *Australian Feminist Studies* 35, no. 105: 277-292.
- Blu Wakpa, Tria. 2018. “Decolonizing Yoga? and (Un)settling Social Justice.” *Race and Yoga* 3, no. 1: i-xix. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8nz498zt>
- brown, adrienne maree. 2019. *Pleasure Activism*. Chico, CA: AK Press.
- Carter Ford, Jillian. 2016. “I’m Feelin’ It: Embodied Spiritual Activism as a Vehicle for my Black Queer Liberation.” In *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis*, edited by Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea

- Jackson Roberts, 29-40. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Cohen, Cathy. 1997. "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 3: 437-465.
- Dale, Laura Kate, ed. 2022. *Gender Euphoria*. London: Unbound.
- Dark, Kimberly. 2016. "Fat Pedagogy in the Yoga Class." In *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis*, edited by Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts, 193-204. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Data USA. 2021. "Oneonta, NY." Accessed December 12, 2023.
<https://datausa.io/profile/geo/oneonta-ny>.
- Feinberg, Leslie. 1999. *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1997. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press.
- . 1990. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Reissue edition. New York: Vintage.
- Florida Parental Rights in Education Act, HB1557. 2022. Available at:
<https://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Bills/billsdetail.aspx?BillId=76545>
- Gill, Rosalind. 2016. "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times." *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 4: 610-630.
- Hagan, Cara, ed. 2021. *Practicing Yoga as Resistance: Voices of Color in Search of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- 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>
- Hemmings, Clare. 2011. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Johnson, E. Patrick. 2001. "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1: 1-25.
- Jones, Stacy Holman & Tony E. Adams. 2010. "Autoethnography Is a Queer Method." In *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, edited by Catherine J. Nash and Kath Browne, 1st ed., 195-214. London: Routledge.
- Krieger, Nick. 2014. "Why Trans and Queer Yoga?" *Decolonizing Yoga*, August 24. Accessed June 1, 2018.
- Lakshmi, Anusha. 2020. "Choreographing Tolerance: Narendra Modi, Hindu Nationalism, and International Yoga Day." *Race and Yoga* 5, no. 1: 42-57.
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4vz5j2cq>
- Lorde, Audre. 2017. *A Burst of Light and Other Essays*. Long Island: Ixia Press.
- . 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Manigault-Bryant, James Arthur. 2016. "Yoga and the Metaphysics of Racial Capital." *Race and Yoga* 1, no. 1: 40-52. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9n70536b>
- McWhorter, Ladelle. 1999. *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Menakem, Resmaa. 2017. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Parker, Gail. 2020. *Restorative Yoga for Ethnic and Race-Based Stress and Trauma*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Paris, Francesca. 2023. "Bans on Transition Care for Young People Spread Across U.S." *New York Times*. April 15. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/15/upshot/bans-transgender-teenagers.html>
- Puar, Jasbir and Maya Mikdashi. 2012. "Pinkwatching and Pinkwashing: Interpenetration and its Discontents." *Jadaliyya*. August 9. Available at <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26818>.
- Putcha, Rumya S. 2020. "After *Eat, Pray, Love*: Tourism, Orientalism and Cartographies of Salvation." *Tourist Studies* 20: 1-17.
- Queer Gym, The. 2023. "Queer Gym." Accessed December 1, 2023. <https://www.thequeergym.com>.
- Reddy, Chandan. 2021. "Queer." In *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, edited by The Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, 207-213. New York: New York University Press.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching Feeling, Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Senyonga, Mary and Caleb Luna. 2021. "'If I'm Shinin', Everybody Gonna Shine': Centering Black Fat Women and Femmes within Body and Fat Positivity." *Fat Studies* 10, no. 3: 268-282.
- Sood, Sheena. 2020. "Towards a Critical Embodiment of Decolonizing Yoga." *Race and Yoga* 5, no. 1: 1-12. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9bx1x7wc>
- Spade, Dean. 2020. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next)*. New York: Verso Press.
- Stanley, Jessamyn. n.d. "About." Accessed December 1, 2023. <https://jessamynstanley.com/about/>.
- Strings, Sabrina. 2019. *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*. New York: New York University Press.
- Sullivan, Nikki. 2003. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. Edinburgh: University Press.
- Ternikar, Farha. 2021. "Desis on the Mat: Building BIPOC Community During Two Pandemics." *Race and Yoga* 6, no. 1: 1-8. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8br0w83r>
- Thompson, Becky. 2017. *Teaching with Tenderness: Toward an Embodied Practice*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Titchkosky, Puja Singh, n.d. "Puja Singh Titchkosky." Accessed December 1, 2023. <http://www.mxpujasingh.com/about>.
- Wiegman, Robyn. 1999. "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity." *boundary 2* 26, no. 3: 115-150.
- Yogis for Palestine. 2023. "Yogis Call for an End to Genocide in Gaza." October 17. Available at: <https://www.yogis4palestine.com>

Chloe Diamond-Lenow (she/they) is an Assistant Professor in Women's and Gender Studies at SUNY Oneonta. She is also an E-RYT 200 and RYT-500 and has been teaching yoga, including queer and trans yoga, since 2013. Her research has been published in *The Journal for Intercultural Studies* and *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Affect*.