

Equity & Racism

By Amina Naru, Lakshmi Nair, Colin Lieu, Dr. Terry Harris, and Michelle Cassandra Johnson

RACE AND YOGA

White supremacy has affected every part of wellness, including the ability of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to access the healing and liberating practice of Yoga. To enter into a conversation about the intersection of race and lack of access to Yoga requires us to understand the history of race, cultural appropriation of Yoga, and who is positioned in culture to be well. Yoga, like any other institution in the U.S., replicates norms of white supremacy by centering whiteness in the image of who a Yoga practitioner is, who is resourced enough to rent/buy and manage Yoga studios, and what is prioritized in the classroom (which is often is a spiritual bypass about the current cultural context and political climate).

While whiteness is positioned to have access to practices that are healing and liberating, we know many BIPOC are suffering with disproportionate rates of hypertension, heart disease, racial trauma, and the impacts of being made invisible by culture. When we leave race out of a conversation about Yoga, we reinforce the idea that some are meant to suffer while others are meant to be healed and liberated. A focus on race allows us to deepen our understanding of the intersection of capitalism and the industry of Yoga, and to consider how we can truly move beyond inclusion and instead create a liberatory space where the folks most marginalized based on race can practice self-determination and create conditions for themselves to thrive.

The following are some terms to be defined, specifically in relation to Yoga:

- Whiteness
- White Supremacy
- White fragility
- Appropriation
- BIPOC

Racial Stress/Trauma

- Reparations

RACE-BASED ISSUES IN YOGA

According to RT Carter in “Racism and Psychological and Emotional Injury: Recognizing and Assessing Race-Based Traumatic Stress” (The Counseling Psychologist, 2007), racial discriminatory experiences may be perceived as a threat to the integrity and safety of the affected individual. Thus, everyday racism is an experience unique to people of color, and over time this builds up to traumatic stress—race-based traumatic stress. If Yoga is a healing practice, to what extent are Yoga classes specifically equipped to meet the needs of the specific stress people of color face? A Yoga teacher who curates a class for office workers experiencing wrist and back pain will likely evoke a different experience from a Yoga teacher who tailors a class to address microaggressions in the workplace.

Yoga teachers often ask students to set an intention for the class. It’s logical then to interrogate the intent of Yoga classes and Yoga content.

The following are race-based issues in Yoga to consider:

- Health disparities due to racial stress and trauma.
- BIPOC lack of access to healing practices such as Yoga. Who is wellness for?
- In Yoga circles, there is spiritual bypass about the current cultural/political climate and how it disproportionately affects the lives and wellbeing of BIPOC.
- Microaggressions that make BIPOC feel unwelcome and triggered in Yoga spaces.
- Structural racism in the Yoga workplace.
- Representation in educational materials and representation in teaching staff.
- Educating communities of color about Yoga. What misconceptions or disconnects are there around Yoga in communities of color?

Representation

The following are issues to consider when thinking about the importance of representation:

- White supremacy

- History of Race
- Cultural appropriation of Yoga

Even if people of color are able to overcome the insensitivities around the narrow representation of who does and leads Yoga, feeling comfortable entering and existing in a Yoga space is another hurdle. Microaggressions in these spaces can include:

- The proliferation and promotion of clothing at an exclusive price point.
- The availability of skincare and haircare products only suitable for white people.
- Culturally insensitive cues that do not take into account diverse bodies, intersectionality, and trauma.
- Lack of representation in Yoga marketing and sales imagery.

Through the lens of ahimsa (non-harm), it's clear the practices of some Yoga professionals and businesses are causing harm to people of color. Those in power carry the responsibility to undo such harm by proactively engaging in communities of color, recruiting and elevating teachers of color, and educating communities of color about the real benefits of Yoga that have so far only been told through a mostly white lens. For many young people, their experience with Yoga and mindfulness is unique because it's likely free. Funding continues to grow for pre-kindergarten and offering mindfulness in schools is becoming a global trend. So, when it comes to young people, the focus as it relates to race needs to be on representation more so than on access.

Teacher-student race/ethnicity matching has a detectable impact on test scores, academic perceptions and attitudes, attendance and suspensions, gifted and talented referrals, and educational attainment. While it's hard to get an accurate understanding of the racial makeup of Yoga instructors for kids, one can make assumptions around who are likely to become Yoga instructors based on the demographics of Yoga classes in major cities, that is, of the adults who are practicing Yoga and likely to become Yoga instructors. According to a 2012 Yoga Journal study, about one in every 15 Americans practices Yoga and more than four-fifths of them are white. So, this side of this racial representation discussion appears to be grounded in reality.

Did the chicken or egg come first? Does the business machine behind the Yoga industry need to do a better job at marketing wellness to allow people of color to see themselves in its messages? Or do people of color need to carry the burden of creating an upswing in participation and navigate an industry that seemingly does not welcome them?

Treating people of color as an afterthought in marketing and communications starts at an early age. As of January 2020, of the top 10 Amazon bestselling books for children's exercise and fitness, seven are Yoga and mindfulness related. Of those seven books, five feature illustrations of children on the cover and just one includes a child of color. Notably, when a child of color is featured, they are more likely to appear as an addition to the main character and are less likely to be the character the book cover centers on.

New York City is now considering investing \$50 million into a program to ensure every New York City public school has its own wellness coordinator. The conversation now needs to turn to who these coordinators will be. How can we empower and invest in people to become the Yoga teachers that serve within their community?

One of our presenters on this topic, Colin Lieu, has launched a different kind of Yoga Alliance Registered Children's Yoga School. As the Founding Health and Wellness Lead Teacher at Creo College Prep (a new, independent charter middle school in the South Bronx), Colin's vision is to use his classes as a platform to train his students in a 95-hour Children's Yoga Teacher certification. This way, graduates will leave school and be immediately qualified and employable to teach Kids' Yoga at summer camps and after-school programs in their communities. They will become the relatable Yoga role models future generations deserve.

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD? HERE ARE SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER:

- Self-determination: What does that look like? How is it different from inclusion?
- Reframing Yoga as connected to ways in which people are already taking care of their wellbeing.
- Increasing access by making Yoga economically and geographically accessible (we still live in an era in which race is major determinant in economic opportunity, and in wellness and geographic demographics).
- Affinity spaces are necessary for healing racial trauma.
- Stopping spiritual bypassing (making space more inclusive).
- Decentering whiteness (representation).
- Increasing representation in educational materials.
- Training more BIPOC teachers.
- View decentering and de-normalizing whiteness as an essential aspect of spiritual oneness. What is the white studio space losing by not questioning and upholding homogeneity?

EQUITY

Equity assumes that all of us start in a different space and we need different resources to thrive. Equity suggests a reallocation of resources with an awareness that our own personal and ancestral histories affect our ability to thrive.

The following are issues to consider when addressing what the barriers are to equity in Yoga:

- Accessibility includes economic accessibility, geographic accessibility, and cultural accessibility.

- Economic accessibility includes affordability of classes and inequity of resource distribution.
- Geographic accessibility includes the location of the classes and their proximity to public transportation.
- Cultural accessibility includes representation, fictive kinship, childcare, perception of Yoga, and broken trust.

The following are issues to consider when addressing why these barriers exist:

- Yoga is seen as a luxury commodity rather than as an issue of public health or as a spiritual tradition.
- There is an inequity of resources in society due to capitalism grown from colonialism.
- Yoga is seen as an individual activity vs. a community activity.
- Religious barriers exist.
- Yoga is seen as a white woman’s activity.

Many Yoga teachers who are representative of the dominant culture ask how they can create more inclusive spaces. That’s an important question. Another question to ask is: How can I leverage my privilege to resource a community that has traditionally been excluded from the healing nature/practice of Yoga? Equity isn’t about a savior complex or inviting people to assimilate into whiteness; instead, it is about being in solidarity and backing solidarity with financial resources to support those most marginalized by dominant culture.

In “What Are Health Disparities and Health Equity? We Need to Be Clear” (Annual Review of Public Health, 21 April 2006), University of California San Francisco’s Paula Braveman wrote, “Health equity means social justice in health (i.e., no one is denied the possibility to be healthy for belonging to a group that has historically been economically/socially disadvantaged).” In “Defining equity in health,” (Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health, Volume 57, Issue 4), she stated: “In operational terms, and for the purposes of measurement, equity in health can be defined as the absence of disparities in health (and in its key social determinants) that are systematically associated with social advantage/ disadvantage.”

The obvious ways to address this absence of disparities are to offer spaces for Yoga that can help sustain this and to provide Yoga instructors who live in and understand the communities they serve. Even with the addition of these tangible physical needs, communities that have historically been excluded from the Yoga and the wellness movement deserve more. So opening new Yoga studios or expecting already resource-strapped Yoga instructors to set up donation-based Yoga classes is not enough and is not sustainable.

Social determinants of health, such as poverty, food security, homelessness, and education levels, can prevent certain populations from achieving the same level of health as other populations. In order to successfully bring Yoga to communities of color and low-income

communities, the groundwork needs to be done to regain the trust that has been broken. A concerted effort needs to be made to close the education around what Yoga is and its benefits.

Finally, through the lens of “cultural competence in health coaching” taken from Duke University a Yoga initiative entering into non-white spaces needs to maintain high expectations. Even though it appears that the Yoga movement has excluded communities of color, it cannot be assumed that:

- These communities necessarily are in a dire need of Yoga.
- The health of community members is any worse than their white counterparts.
- There isn’t already an initiative attempting to address this need (for example, swimming centers, martial arts clubs, and sports team trainings may already be doing this work despite not offering a formal Yoga class).

- Community members are not capable of becoming the Yoga instructors themselves.

AFFINITY GROUPS AND SPACES FOR HEALING

Given that BIPOC and white folks have different work to do regarding white supremacy and racism, it can be useful to engage affinity spaces for practice and healing. According to James Paul Gee, who coined the term, an affinity space is “a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals.” (from Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling, 2004). Affinity spaces are used to strategize in response to the harm white supremacy produces and inflicts, to share about internalized white supremacy and internalized racial oppression, and to heal what dominant culture doesn’t allow to be whole.

The following are issues to consider when addressing how to correct these imbalances or to create liberatory spaces and liberation from oppressive structures:

- Ask how can I leverage my privilege to benefit those who are most marginalized?
- Yoga studios could sponsor classes in communities of color.
- Donation-based classes can be offered by studios with resources.
- Hire BIPOC teachers and sponsor BIPOC teacher trainings.
- BIPOC teachers cannot be treated the same as white teachers. For example, the donation-based model is often unsustainable for BIPOC teachers.
- Offer support with resources and not necessarily presence. Don’t step in front of BIPOC who could do this work. Support leaders from within communities and allow BIPOC to take the lead.
- Donate pay to a teacher and maybe supplies so, for example, people don’t have to travel

- to a neighborhood that isn't theirs for a free or donation-based POC class but instead can find Yoga in their own community spaces, increasing comfort.
- Educate communities about how Yoga is a practice of people of color. It is an indigenous practice, with similarities to indigenous practices from around the world.
- Create affinity spaces for healing. This necessary for equity.

SUSTAINABILITY

As we know, it is almost impossible to make a living teaching Yoga. The industry is based on an inequitable and unsustainable model. Sustainability is affected by conflicts between values and capitalism, such as keeping my doors open vs. honoring the practice and building relationships with folks who have been marginalized by the industry of Yoga.

There is a conflict between donation-based and sliding-scale models based on wanting to make classes economically accessible for all and creating a sustainable living for Yoga teachers, in particular for teachers of color or otherwise already disenfranchised teachers.

The donation model is unsustainable for teachers if their income is dependent upon donations. It also reinforces the model that teachers come from a population that perhaps is teaching Yoga as a hobby but has other means of sustaining themselves (often white women). This is the same model as the teaching profession in general. Often donation classes don't sustain teachers because they burn out or, when they have to choose between paid work and volunteering, paid work often wins out when needs need to be met.

Because none of the current models seem to be working, this is very hard to propose solutions for. So, let's all consider the following:

What are the benefits of the donation-based model?

- Removes Yoga from the exploitative capitalist system that has corrupted it.

What are the problems with the donation-based model?

- Communities need to be educated in the traditional model (the black church/ traditional Yoga model that one who provides spiritual care for the community needs to be taken care of by community).
- Teachers cannot count on Yoga as a source of income and must sustain themselves elsewhere. Donated time is often limited, especially for teachers of color who may already expend a lot of vital energy trying to sustain themselves in an exploitative system in which they are highly disadvantaged. And less teaching time for individual teachers requires that there be more trained teachers to fill the gaps.
- Lack of respect for teacher's time and knowledge.
- Some donation-based classes at Yoga studios donate funds to a nonprofit that has

nothing to do with Yoga and does not benefit the teacher.

What are the benefits of the sliding-scale model?

- Makes people more aware of equity.

What are the problems with the sliding-scale model?

- The problem with the sliding-scale model is in the way that it intersects with geographical accessibility. Because many neighborhoods in the US are segregated and most Yoga studios are located in resourced communities, sliding scales may not significantly impact diversity.

What are the benefits of the cooperative model?

- Pooling resources for marketing, space rental, grant applications, and continuing education.
- Can allow community participants to become members for a low monthly subscription rate.

What are the problems with the cooperative mode?

- Slower processes.

How do we make Yoga sustainable for disadvantaged communities?

- Liberated systems, including affinity spaces, accessibility, and representation.
- Concurrent Kids Yoga classes or daycare, or making spaces family friendly.
- Making sure that income for teachers is not dependent on participant contributions.
- Reframing Yoga in relation to community.

How do we make Yoga sustainable for teachers from disadvantaged communities?

- Community-care model.
- Re-education.
- Partnerships with hospitals, DOE, government agencies.
- Reparations: Yoga Alliance should give grants to POC who are teaching in their communities and for training.
- Creative solutions: Taking Yoga out of the studio, sustainable contribution models, sponsorships, passive income.

DEFINITIONS OF SOME BASIC CONCEPTS AND TERMINOLOGY

Privilege

Privilege is the societal benefits bestowed upon people socially, politically, and economically. Privilege can be based on race, class, age, ability level, mental health status, gender identity, and sex.

Dominant Culture

Dominant culture is a system that inherently believes some people are superior and others are inferior. This system of dominance and inferiority is based on various identities, e.g., race, gender, gender identity and expression, age, physical or mental capabilities, and sexual orientation. Dominant culture creates “norms,” thus deeming who is “normal.” When one is seen as normal based on their identities, this gives them closer proximity to power. Therefore, dominant culture functions as a gatekeeper by deciding who has access to power and, furthermore, access to move with ease as they navigate their life.

Intersectionality

This term was coined by Kimberlie Crenshaw and the topic was first spoken about by Sojourner Truth. Intersectionality asks us to consider all the identities we embody, both the ones assigned privilege and the ones experiencing oppression due to culture’s construction of identities, and the value or lack of value it places on them. Intersectionality asks us to look at the intersection of our identities to better understand how we navigate the world and how we work across lines of difference. For example, I am a black, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual woman.



Having been steeped in the stories and philosophy of yoga and Ayurveda from a young age, Lakshmi formally studied yoga at Vivekananda Yoga Kendra and Kaivalyadhama Ashram in India in 2002. She also attended 4 years of graduate study in South Asian Studies at UC Berkeley, where she studied Sanskrit, Tamil, and contemporary South Asian literature. She has been teaching yoga in Denver since 2005, focusing primarily on gentle, prenatal, Trauma Sensitive Yoga and teacher training. She has taught trauma sensitive yoga for Center for Trauma and Resilience and currently teaches at 3 Little Birds Counseling in Littleton and was a lead instructor for Littleton Yoga Center’s 200 hour teacher training program, as well as an adjunct instructor for various 300 hour teacher training programs in the Denver metro area. In 2014, Lakshmi started Satya Yoga Immersion for People of Color, the country’s first and perhaps only yoga immersion and teacher training programs exclusively for people of color. Since 2014, Satya Yoga Immersion has grown into Satya Yoga Cooperative, the first POC owned and operated co-op on the country. In 2016, Lakshmi was a panelist at the 3rd annual Race and Yoga Conference at Mills College in Oakland, California. She writes about her experiences as a South Asian American yoga teacher and about her journey to POC yoga in the Yoga and Body Coalition’s new book Yoga Rising: 30 Empowering Stories from Yoga Renegades for Every Body, edited by Melanie Klein, available via Llewelyn Worldwide. She was a guest expert in season 2 of Susanna Barkataki’s Honor Dont Appropriate Yoga Summit and will be guest-editing the 2020 issue of Race and Yoga, an e-scholarship journal, along with Arushi Singh.



Amina Naru, is the co-founder of Retreat to Spirit, owner of Posh Yoga LLC in Wilmington, De and immediate past co executive director of national non-profit Yoga Service Council. Her professional expertise is in the field of yoga service for communities, juvenile detention centers and adult prisons since 2013. Amina served three terms as secretary for the YSC Board of Directors and is a contributing author to the books Best Practices for Yoga with Veterans (YSC/Omega, 2016) and Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System (YSC/Omega, 2017). She has served as the project manager for Yoga and Resilience: Empowering Practices for Survivors of Sexual Trauma (YSC/Omega) published by Handspring May 2020. She was also the project manager for Best Practices for Yoga with People in Addictions and Recovery. Amina has been featured in Yoga Journal, Yoga Therapy Today and on the J. Brown and Yoga Alliance podcasts. She served as Executive Director of the nonprofit Empowered Community and is the first black woman to implement curriculum-based yoga and mindfulness programs for juvenile detention centers in the state of Delaware.



Colin is a nurturer who works with young people to help them better connect with themselves and block out the noise in order to realize their full potential. Colin founded Multitasking Yogi in 2017 as a platform to bring the tools of mindfulness and self-care to vastly diverse spaces and populations: teaching in public schools; leading educator professional development workshops; servicing community events; self-publishing the picture book “Phoenix’s First: An Introduction to Mindful Breathing”; and presenting at conferences. No matter what we are juggling, there is a Multitasking Yogi in all of us and his launch of Multitasking Yogi School (MY School) is an innovative way to nurture the next generation of wellness leaders. High school juniors and seniors already taking Colin’s classes have the opportunity to be placed on a specialized and supplementary mentorship and support track to complete a 95-hr Registered Children’s Yoga Teacher certification (certified by Yoga Alliance). This ensures wellness grows from a grassroots level and empowers young people to graduate high school and immediately have access to employment opportunities and help spread the important message of mindfulness and self-care in their communities.



Michelle C. Johnson is an author, yoga teacher, social justice activist, licensed clinical social worker and Dismantling Racism trainer. She approaches her life and work from a place of empowerment, embodiment and integration. With a deep understanding of trauma and the impact that it has on the mind, body, spirit and heart, much of her work focuses on helping people better understand how power and privilege operate in their life. She explores how privilege, power and oppression affects the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and energy body. Michelle is the creator of Skill in Action, a 200hr teacher training program focused on the intersection of yoga and social justice.



Dr. Terry Harris is a transformative educational leader, specializing in educational equity and justice, racial trauma, emotional liberation, restorative justice, and healing practices in public education. As a yoga and mindfulness practitioner, Dr. Harris seeks ways to explore the intersectionality between ancient healing practices and our current educational systems to help young people and adults to “BE on Purpose.” Dr. Harris, is the cofounder of THE COLLECTIVE STL, a vibrant group of Black yoga and wellness instructors, fully committed to improving the health and wellbeing of Black communities in St. Louis. Our non profit studio intentionally create a healthy and safe experience catered to Black people by offering compassionate wisdom that helps heal the mind, body, and spirit through techniques of yoga, mindfulness, and culturally relevant self care strategies. Our approach is to offer donation based yoga classes, mindfulness trainings and self care workshops to the community.