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Healing Community Breath by Breath: A Conversation with Kerrie Trahan¹

Rebecca J. Kinney with Kerrie Trahan
Bowling Green State University
Yoganic Flow

Abstract

Kerrie Trahan is the founder of Yoganic Flow and Yoga House Detroit. In addition, Trahan holds a Master of Education in Community Health. In this conversation with Rebecca Kinney, Yoga House Detroit board member and associate professor of American and Ethnic Studies, Trahan reflects on how her experiences as a Black woman born and raised in Detroit informs her approach to breath, community, and yoga.

Keywords: Black women; Detroit; Inner City Yoga; Inner Peace; Yogis of Color

Rebecca Kinney: Kerrie, can you tell me how your yoga journey began?

Kerrie Trahan: When the YMCA in Detroit first opened in 2005, my dad was still around. He got a family membership at the gym when he noticed that all our family was tittering around that line of just being able to fit into our clothes. In college, I was very superficial and really cared about my hair being “pressed” and “put together.” I knew working out would make me sweat and cause my hair to be “messed up”. But I was still trying to be that “standard” Black beauty with long straight hair. I wasn’t into natural hair yet and it wasn’t stylish, or even socially acceptable, at that time. So when I read that yoga was just stretching, I didn’t think that I would ever sweat so I was like, “perfect, yoga is for me!” I began taking classes and I thought yoga was boring. I don’t remember anything about those yoga experiences other than I was completely unimpressed with the practice.

And then, the next year, my dad was killed. I was very stressed and felt like I couldn’t take it. I left Detroit and moved to South Korea.² South Korea is really where I found yoga to be tolerable and even beneficial. Over there I was not only trying to manage my grief, but also culture shock. It was really hard being in the southern part of South Korea where there were hardly any Black people. I would just be jogging and people would just stop in their tracks and stare at me, like “what is this?”

All these things were giving me serious anxiety and I was still pretty depressed over losing my dad so suddenly. I was Googling things like, “What can I do to get better? To deal with my depression, stress, anxiety?” And yoga kept popping up. I remember thinking, “No! Yoga was so boring, I don’t want to do yoga.” But there was a sauna that offered yoga near my apartment. I

would always see it. Eventually I decided to give it another shot. It was a completely different experience. Back then, I wasn't flexible and couldn't do most of the poses. Still, the teacher kept showing me how to breathe. I couldn't really understand her words because I don't know Korean language so I just would try to follow her physical cues to breathe in and breathe out. And ultimately, and eventually, I started to feel better. I kept going back. The practice itself began to slowly shift my mindset from this negative, embattled space to feeling more positive, free.

Rebecca Kinney: That's amazing. What do you think was the shift? Do you think it was dramatically different teachers, or were these two moments just so different, even though they were probably, what, a year or two apart?

Kerrie Trahan: Yeah, a few years apart. My needs were different the first time I practiced compared to when I began practicing in Korea. My need for something to impact me emotionally, spiritually, physically was heightened by the time I made it to Korea. When I started yoga at the YMCA, I was basically stress free, my life was easy, and so yoga wasn't, like, a need; it was like an activity, or a hobby.

But in Korea there was a point where I realized had to do something about how I was feeling. I was desperate for change and I remembered feeling much better in the past so I was like, I have to do the work to get better. I figured if I don't do something I may never go back to America. I might just be over here forever fighting for my mental health unless I literally make steps toward changing my life. I think I was just more open to giving it another try. Also, I was learning to let go of the American idea of instant gratification by observing how differently and healthy most Koreans lived. In Korea, I gave yoga time to actually work, whereas when I first took yoga, I wondered, 'Why is this not working? Why am I not relaxed? Why am I still stressed?' I wanted instant results! A year into the practice I realized that things take time. Things just might take time to impact you. Not all issues have the quick fix that most of us expect or desire.

Rebecca Kinney: It makes me think of the eight limbs of yoga. Your first experience with yoga was really *Asana* and then it became about the *Pranayama* and the *Yamas* and *Niyamas*.³ A lot of us know people, or used to be people, or maybe are still people, that lean into the things that can numb ourselves instead of leaning into all the things that could heal ourselves.

Kerrie Trahan: Oh my gosh, I numbed myself long enough to know that it is not the key for dealing with a broken heart or spirit.

I'm so glad you brought that up because that's exactly what happened. I had not lived with my parents consistently since I was 14 years old. At age 14, without parental guidance, I was depressed and suicidal. I made a lot of poor choices to deal with the parts of me that needed healing. My coping mechanisms were mostly marijuana and alcohol.

After practicing *asana* with regularity I discovered a new coping mechanism, *asana* and *pranayama* practice! Taking yoga classes felt better, both physically and mentally, than drinking Hennessy to loosen up and feel relief. Rather than numbing my emotional pain and stress with

alcohol and drugs, I was able to face it with mindfulness. Learning about the *Yamas* and the *Niyamas* definitely led me towards leaning into healthy ways to heal my heart and mind.



Figure 1 – Before Teaching a Class on the First Day of Summer to Celebrate International Yoga Day for Bumble at Trumbull and Porter-Detroit Downtown Ascend Hotel Collection (Photo Credit: Taryn Smith).

Rebecca Kinney: Thank you for sharing this part of your journey. It gives me a deeper sense of your mission for *Yoganic Flow*, which is “To Make Yoga Accessible in the Urban Community”, and the vision of the organization, “Inner Peace. Inner City Peace.” Can you talk about the journey from being introduced to yoga and seeing it as a tool, or as even a lifestyle philosophy, to then deciding to become a teacher who founded *Yoganic Flow*?

Kerrie Trahan: Initially, I didn’t notice the changes in my mood. It was the people in my life that noticed like my mom, my sisters, my cousins. They would notice me reacting in a different way than I had previously reacted. I was a pretty impatient person prior to leaving, and I’m still impatient sometimes, but especially then. If someone cut me off, I might curse someone out.

Now, I might honk the horn at most, but you give people grace on the road as you would in ordinary life: this is post-yoga Kerrie. And I was like, wow, maybe I am a little bit more calm and compassionate.

I think if more Detroiters were less reactive, more calm, and learned to take a deep breath, that deep breath might be the difference between someone living or dying, literally. You know, it's no secret that gun violence is pervasive in Detroit. I think this is because a lot of people in communities facing injustice, like Detroit, are stressed and/or hurt and angry, and on the verge of snapping like I was. You combine those sorts of negative emotions with substances, of course the outcome is not going to positive not only for that individual, but for the community. An individual's lack of inner peace produces heightened levels of anxiety and fear within a community. If people felt more peaceful inside, our communities would undoubtedly be more peaceful. Realizing the impact that yoga could have on the level of peace in a neighborhood compelled me to figure out a way to make yoga accessible to Detroiters so that I could share a helpful tool with my neighbors to cultivate inner peace.

Rebecca Kinney: You introduce this idea of “breath by breath” in every class. You offer as a gift that moment of stillness in between breaths. When you were thinking about that, did you always imagine that your home for yoga would be in Detroit or that you would be teaching in Detroit?

Kerrie Trahan: Definitely not. When I first started yoga, I did it to talk myself off the ledge. People used to call me “Crazy Kerrie” in high school because I would fight people, because I just did not care, I was triggered by so many things. I think this was PTSD, living in an area where I had to worry about my friends getting killed. The first time I saw someone get shot was on the lawn across the street from my grandmother's house when I was in elementary [school]. I remember seeing people get beat badly with fists, with bats, with roller skates too! I think it's because of all of the trauma that people living in poverty have experienced, or tend to experience comparatively, that manifests as anger and negativity. People go through a lot in Detroit: domestic and gun violence, housing and food insecurity, incarcerated and/or drug-addicted family members, living in housing with no water, lights, and pests. These things really impact how a person feels inside, how they think, and what they do.

I really never expected to be teaching yoga in Detroit, but seeing how yoga moved me from being this angry, reactive, person, I realized that it might have the potential to make other people more positive and, as a result, have a positive impact in our community. How can you be of service and help anyone, if you are an angry person, unable to help yourself?

That's why the breath by breath piece is so important. If people could just take a moment to connect with their breath, it's like that right there is what you have to live for. If we can help people forget for a moment what they don't have and focus on the gift we all have, helping people realize that this breath flowing within us is a gift, that is a game changer. Without this breath, you literally have no life, so you've got to appreciate it. The more and more we acknowledge each breath, the more and more we cultivate gratitude for it and look at it as a gift, we can understand that this is a gift we share with others. People in urban communities who have been told, directly or indirectly, that their lives have no value, need to understand that they have a valuable gift within – the

breath. The value is not in the things outside of you, it's within you. And we've got to stop connecting our value to just things, you know. Many in our community are so connected to things. We kill each other for *things*! You know? So, I want to get us out of that. Just to shift our attention away from the external and really know that our gifts are internal.

Honestly I really never expected to be teaching yoga in Detroit, but seeing how yoga moved me from being this angry, reactive, person, I realized that it might have the potential to make other people more positive and, as a result, have a positive impact in our community. How can you be of service and help anyone, if you are an angry person, unable to help yourself?

After I returned from Korea, I didn't feel fulfilled in the 9-5 life. So my friend and I were just brainstorming on a place where we could have yoga, meditation, healthy eating, and we came up with the name Yoganic Flow. And at the time, we didn't know exactly what it would be. Neither one of us had certifications but shortly after that time I started going to yoga again. And there was a sign on the door to be a yoga teacher, and I was like, wow, this is a sign! This is not just a sign, but *a* sign! I received my yoga teacher training certification shortly thereafter and my friend ended up moving to Florida but I just kept going from there. When I received my certification, I was like "great, now I can share this with others". This was in 2012. Now we're in 5 schools, 4 recreation centers, and in the summer we offer yoga in parks.

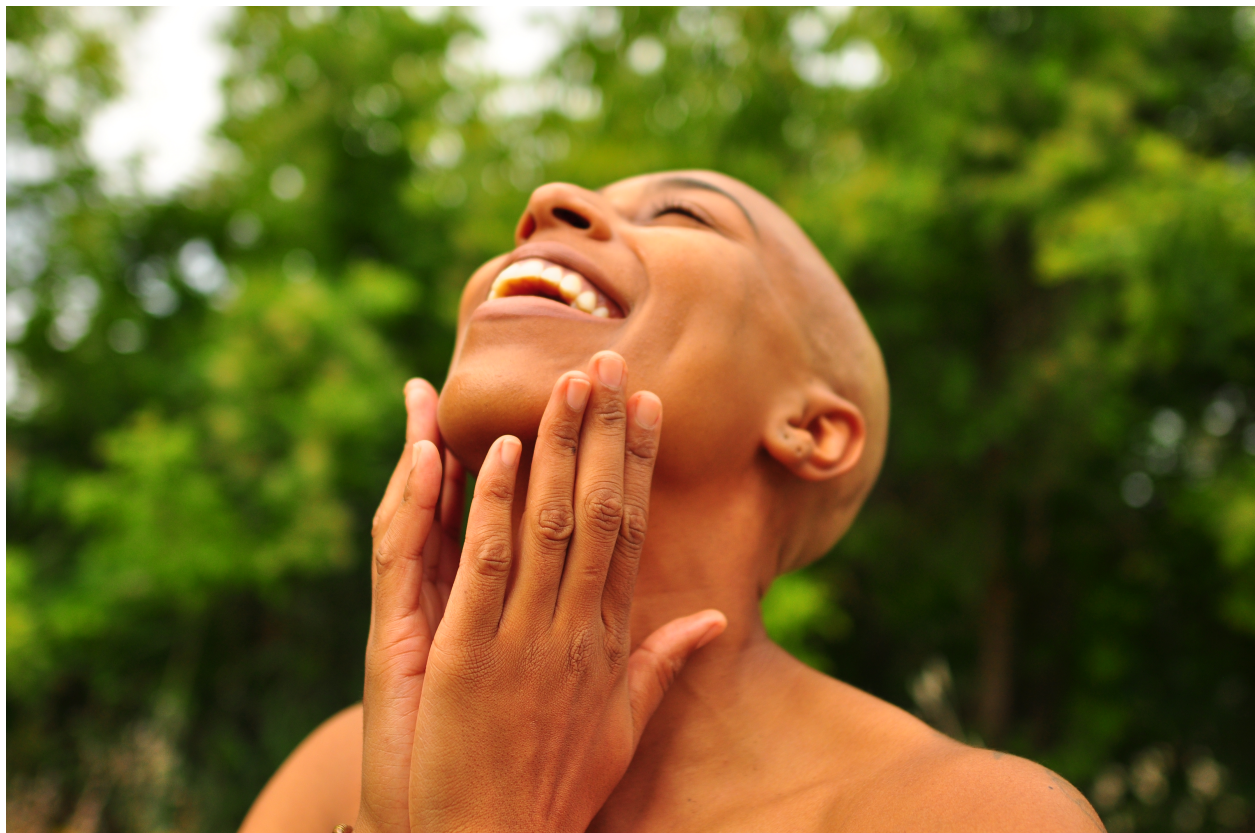


Figure 2 – After Going Bald, Practicing Detachment, *Vairagya* in a Random Field in Midtown Detroit (Photo Credit: James Charles Morrison).

Rebecca Kinney: Which is amazing. Still, what are the biggest barriers you face to getting people onto the mat for the first time?

Kerrie Trahan: A lot of people would say, “That’s for white girls.” When we first started in the community, a lot of people thought yoga *was not* for them. People would also say, “I’m too big for yoga.” This is one reason I’m really grateful to Dianne Bondy for not only being a woman of color doing yoga, but also as a woman who uses the hashtag #fatblackyogini. I think when you don’t see anybody looking like you doing that thing, you don’t think it’s for you or it’s available to you. That’s a barrier.

Also the cost. Typically, yoga classes are anywhere from \$15-\$20+ per class, so we started raising money to secure funding from non-profit partners to offer classes for free to remove that barrier. Still, people were like, “I don’t have a yoga mat, I don’t have yoga clothes, where do I even get these things from?” and “they don’t make yoga clothes in my size.” Yoga clothing and mats are another cost that many people living in low-income areas cannot take on.

Additionally, if we don’t have people in schools, people in parks, people in the recreation centers who understand the value of yoga, they’re not going to promote it or treat the program as they would say, the Wednesday night hustle class. They’re like, “Hustle class is so fun, you gotta come at 5. And I think yoga is Thursday.” You know, they’re not excited about it and don’t truly understand its value because it’s still somewhat “new” or “taboo” in the Midwest.

The final barrier that I’ll list, even though there are others, is this misunderstanding about yoga being a religion. We’ve gone into some spaces like schools where parents have been totally against it. Like, “I don’t want my kid praying to Buddha.” So I think there’s a lot of misconceptions about yoga that prevents Black people specifically, in a very religious city like Detroit, from trying or embracing yoga. But, the more popular it has become, the more open people are to trying our classes.

Rebecca Kinney: I also like thinking through this on the other side of the barrier. One of the things I love most about Yoganic Flow is at the end of every class, teachers say “we’re a community, introduce yourself to the people in your community.” What you’re doing is some really powerful community work, organizing work.

Kerrie Trahan: These classes are one way for us to build community. It’s so essential for Detroiters, really people in any inner city, to realize that we’re all connected. If people realize how connected we actually are, we care for each other more, we love each other more, we have more compassion for each other. We have people come together in Detroit for rallies, food

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events, and concerts. So why not have people get together to connect their mind and body, and connect with their neighbors?

I think that’s the main reason Yoganic Flow still exists in Detroit. I get to witness friendships, business partnerships, and even romantic relationships flourish from a community yoga class. So, no matter how uncomfortable or disheartening it is when people don’t embrace yoga as a tool for community health and

engagement, I won't stop raising awareness and consciousness in our community to care about more and to realize their inner qualities instead of focusing on our outer qualities so much.

Rebecca Kinney: Okay, switching gears a little bit. We've been talking around and about Detroit this whole conversation. Can you tell me a little bit about what Yoga House Detroit means to you and your vision for that project? And when you imagine a house for, of, and in Detroit, what does it look like, what does it feel like, and how does it exist, energetically?

Kerrie Trahan: Yoga House Detroit is a space that some of our teachers and friends are working to start up in an effort to bring nutrition, wellness, and mindfulness to food insecure neighborhoods. Specifically, I've been looking at District 2 because my heartstrings are attached to that space. That's one of the areas that's currently being revitalized but more importantly, that was my Granny's old neighborhood, the space I referred to where I saw a shooting. So I'm very familiar with the needs of that community. Many don't have adequate health care or access to mental health resources. You have a lot of people suffering, you have very high rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high cholesterol. And yoga has been shown to help deal with those things. Also, a lot of studios offer classes for able-bodied people. You're not going to see the people suffering most from cardiovascular disease, diabetes, or high cholesterol in those classes, they can't even accommodate them in those classes. And also kids. Kids in those communities are really stressed out too, they have no control over an environment where they might not be eating or where they might be exposed to violence or drugs. Our goal with Yoga House is to create a safe space for adults, but also for some of the most vulnerable people in our community like kids and seniors. Yoga House will have programming between May and September, nutrition and wellness workshops and classes for yoga, meditation, gardening, and cooking. These are things that are offered throughout the city, but that most people living in District 2 would typically have no access to because they can't afford it. We will bring all of these things under one roof to try and help eradicate some of the disparities, specifically in this neighborhood.

Rebecca Kinney: I think it's an important deeply local Detroit project. Whatever you think about the narrative of "2 Detroits," I think that the joke is that some key signs of gentrification look like a bike shop, a yoga studio and do they sell kombucha in the party store?⁴ Yoga studios are seen as part of the backdrop of white encroachment in this city. How are you thinking through that both personally as a born and raised Black Detroiter and also professionally in the space of Yoganic Flow and Yoga House Detroit?

Kerrie Trahan: Honestly, at times, it used to really frustrate me. For example, we were offering yoga at one park for years. And suddenly as downtown became more and more white, more and more Black people began to feel like it wasn't for them. So many things happened within that short 5 years of us being there and it impacted our class participation, including parking tickets went up from \$25 to \$45. People were like, "I can't deal with that!" So this particular non-profit, who basically fired nearly every person of color and replaced them with someone white, this same group replaced us with a white-owned yoga studio. And this sort of thing is frustrating, but that's why I do yoga. To meet these challenges off the mat, calmly, and with balance, and not be reactive. Was it frustrating? Absolutely. But am I going to let that stand in the way of us meeting

our mission? Absolutely not. That same week we were lucky to be called by Eastern Market⁵ to offer classes there.



Figure 3 – Teaching a Free Community Class at Charivari, the Annual Detroit House Music Festival Held on Detroit’s Riverfront (Photo Credit: Taryn Smith).

Yoga has taught me to stay positive. So basically, I do yoga to deal with oppression. That’s how I stay calm, that’s my self-care so I’m not always upset and angry by what I perceive is being done to me. I just do what I can do to potentially change this. Like we tell people in class: control what you can control and let everything else go. And the only thing you can control is how you’re breathing. Everything else you just got to let go of and keep doing the work, and try to stay positive. I think that a lot of the people that are coming to Detroit are not necessarily conscious about how they’re impacting the city. I think some of them actually come with good

intentions. They want to contribute to the revitalization, they want to get to know residents. And for those people, hey we're here, join us.

I think this is one way Yoganic Flow classes cultivate community: they bring the old Detroit and the new Detroit together. If you notice at Palmer Park, for example, there are some people that are far, far, far from impoverished. They live in Palmer Woods, they live in Sherwood Forest, they live across 8 mile, they have resources. But then you have people from Puritan and Fenkell who are on the other end of the spectrum. Our classes bring all of these people together. That right there can really impact Detroit positively, so maybe we won't end up like all these cities being gentrified where there is no communication between the old and the new who don't know anything about each other. This is one safe space where they can come together, and at least humanize each other. Even if we're in an area that's being gentrified, hey, I still want to be there because there's still going to be people who know us from day one that are going to come regardless of the new finished floor and roof on the spot. And there's still people, even if we're in the hood, that are lawyers or doctors in the city that are going to come into that space because they don't want to spend \$22 for yoga or they want to take classes from other women of color.

Rebecca Kinney: Most of the Yoganic Flow teachers are all people of color, mostly women of color. And all the Yoga House Detroit board members are also all women of color, and in both spaces, majority Black women. Did you intentionally build and hire in this way?

Kerrie Trahan: Honestly, it was not intentional, it turned out that way. Being in the yoga community in Detroit for about 7 years, I've met a ton of yogis: Black, white, Asian, Jewish. And I've made it very clear, all the things that we do, all the places we work, who we work with. But the people who currently work with us either reached out to me and said, "hey, this is great, I want to be a part of this". Or, I was around them enough and was like, "hey, would you like to teach some classes?" Because I knew their commitment to evolving Detroit physically, spiritually, and emotionally in some way or another.

Our teachers that have been with us the longest, Imani and Aaron, were both just so dedicated to the community and I was already working with them in some capacity at a kids yoga organization. And they were like, "we love this. Yes, we want to teach yoga in our neighborhoods!" I think that the reason we have these teachers is because those are the teachers that care about bringing it to this community.

Rebecca Kinney: You know, in most institutions, because we live in a primarily white world in the U.S., people will be like, "it's a pipeline problem", which is to say there aren't more people of color because there's no one in the pipeline. What I find so beautiful about Yoganic Flow is clearly there's not a pipeline problem. If you can have 8 teachers on staff, all of whom are people of color, the majority of whom are Black women, clearly there are Black women that are yoga teachers. But the majority of studios that I've gone to, across the country, have been primarily white teachers.

Kerrie Trahan: They barely consider us. It's challenging for us to get jobs in those spaces. Like when I first started my goal was to get a job at the studio I did my YTT at. And after we did our teacher training, it wasn't clear what we needed to do to get a job there. It was all kind of hearsay. I would get vague answers to my inquiries and I didn't know what the process was. And I don't know if that was intentional or not. But I know plenty of teachers who have graduated from trainings throughout Metro Detroit and literally did not know the next steps to get a position. People do hire you based on how you look in yoga. It's unfortunate, but it seems true.

A lot of people say that they want to make a difference in Detroit, but they are not talking about the underserved areas where there's a lot of crime. They end up teaching in midtown, the gentrified areas. But women of color have overwhelmingly signed up with us to teach yoga anywhere in Detroit, in places where yoga is truly, truly needed.

I think we have mostly women of color as teachers for a lot of reasons but because my own experience showed me that teaching opportunities for women of color RYT's are not as easy as just get your RYT and you can get hired. A lot of people say that they want to make a difference in Detroit, but they are not talking about the underserved areas where there's a lot of crime. They end up teaching in midtown, the gentrified areas. But women of color have overwhelmingly signed up with us to teach yoga anywhere in Detroit, in places where yoga is truly, truly needed.

Rebecca Kinney: That's beautiful. I kind of want to end there, but, is there anything else you want to add or that you wished I had asked about?

Kerrie Trahan: A yoga teacher I respect once said, "there's no such thing as diversity, we're all one." Well, yes and no. Yes, we all are one underneath this first layer. But this first layer gets people put in jail, shot, mistreated daily. I really think that the yoga community needs to consider what they can do to be inclusive and stop giving Black people the side-eye or completely ignoring them in yoga spaces. Maybe that means reading *The New Jim Crow* and/or giving their staff a diversity training. Maybe that's it, I don't know. But I do hope yogis start being real and stop discounting their own prejudice and bias. And do the inner work needed to truly look at all people in the same light. I just want all yogis to really practice Satya, this truthfulness about how they perceive others, themselves, and the world. Until then, we'll need to continue to be intentional about creating inclusive and accessible spaces for people of color to heal and grow.

Notes

¹ This interview took place on May 21, 2019 in Detroit's West Village neighborhood at Detroit Vegan Soul. The interview has been condensed for publication.

² Throughout this interview any references to Korea are to the Republic of Korea, which is commonly referred to as South Korea.

³ The *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* are considered the foundational text of yoga. In this text Patanjali defines yoga as having eight limbs, yama (restraints), niyama (observances), asana (postures), pranayama (breath), pratyahara (withdrawal of senses), dharana (focus), dhyana (meditation), samadhi (oneness).

⁴ Detroit name for bodega, corner store, convenience store.

⁵ Public market outdoor space just east of downtown.

Kerrie Trahan first tried yoga in 2005. When she moved to Yeosu, South Korea in 2006, she began to take yoga seriously. With regular practice she began healing from her father's tragic death. Instead of going to law school as planned, Trahan enrolled in yoga teacher training and became certified to teach. She also gained 500 hours of training in Colombia and India. In 2007, she founded Yoganic Flow. In 2018, Trahan earned a M.Ed. in Community Health from Wayne State University. She studied the effects of mindfulness on urban health. In 2019, Mindbody recognized Trahan for her commitment to making yoga accessible. Her full bio can be found at <http://yoganicflow.com/kerrie-trahan/> She can be found on Instagram at @KerrieTrahan @YoganicFlow on Instagram

Rebecca J. Kinney is an interdisciplinary teacher and scholar of race, place, and popular culture and an Associate Professor in the School of Cultural and Critical Studies at Bowling Green State University. She is a RYT-200 and a Yoga House Detroit board member. Dr. Kinney is the author of *Beautiful Wasteland: The Rise of Detroit as America's Postindustrial Frontier* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Her work has been published in *American Quarterly*, *Food, Culture & Society*, *Race & Class*, *Transformations*, and *Media Fields Journal*.