

UC Berkeley

Race and Yoga

Title

Book Review: Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/69v695d9>

Journal

Race and Yoga, 1(1)

Author

Aubrecht, Jen

Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/R311033230

Copyright Information

Copyright 2016 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

***Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis.* Edited by Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. 356 pp. \$100.00.**

Jen Aubrecht
University of California, Riverside

In light of the recent election in the United States, it is more important than ever to engage with yoga as a tool for feminist social justice work. *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis* is a guide to using yoga as a tool for social change. The edited book also lays out how some yoga spaces have yet to achieve their full liberatory potential. Together, the chapters ask us to consider how yoga and yoga practice can reify social injustice. They also provide examples of how yoga practices can be – and in some cases already are – a tool for the liberation of individuals and communities.

The book is edited by Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts, and collects seventeen essays written by a diverse set of activist yogis, many of whom are people of color or who identify as queer; all of the authors identify as feminist or womanist. The book is structured in three sections, which take up topics of inclusion and exclusion, body image and beauty, and individual and collective liberation. Although some of the essays could benefit from a more nuanced (or less Patanjali-focused) view of the histories of yoga practices, the collection articulates a needed feminist and praxis-oriented perspective in the field of Critical Yoga Studies, which has mostly been focused on questions surrounding the history, commodification, and appropriation of yogic practices. The anthology asks readers to consider how feminist, womanist, and/or queer perspectives can be used to make yoga practice a more truly liberatory endeavor for all.

The first of the three sections, “Inclusion/Exclusion in Yoga Spaces”, asks readers to consider yoga studios as spaces of exclusion; it contains powerfully written womanist auto-ethnographies by Marcelle M. Haddix and Jillian Carter Ford who articulate their experiences as Black female yogis in often-exclusionary yoga spaces. Their essays address the exclusion they have frequently seen in yoga spaces and provide a clear articulation of precisely how exclusive yoga spaces can be harmful, which helps them clarify the stakes of the book as a whole. Roopa Kaushik-Brown’s essay, “Toward Yoga as Property”, takes up the increasing propertization of yoga, and contextualizes that argument within discourses of whiteness and Critical Race Theory. Her articulate and considerate essay proposes that practitioners must name and understand the obliterative effect that whiteness has had on yoga (Brown 2016, 81) in order to combat the ongoing extraction of yoga from the public commons. It, and other strong essays in the section, ask us, who is excluded from yoga spaces? And, what does exclusion cost individuals and the yoga community as a whole?

The second section, “The Intersection of Yoga, Body Image, and Standards of Beauty,” takes up questions around yoga bodies, yoga advertising, and yoga embodiment. Jennifer

Musial's essay on orthorexia and yoga links nicely to Sarah Schrank's exploration of nude yoga, as both question what modern yoga practices ask us to train our bodies/selves to do, and how that training can impact our lives. In particular, Musial links the push in many yoga communities to "refashion[n] the self into a vibrant, shiny, glowing, and pure (neoliberal) subject" to the use of yoga studios to gentrify many neighborhoods (Musial 2016, 148). Similarly, Schrank questions where the liberated yoga body ends and the sexualized yoga body begins. Their essays critique some of the unexamined motives behind mainstream yoga pedagogy, calling into question the assumptions around bodily cleansing, purity, and sexualization that often exist unquestioned in yoga communities.

The third section, "Yoga as Individual and Collective Liberation", expands the frame, working to question whether yoga can (or should) be used as a transformational tool for communities worldwide. Beth S. Catlett and Mary Bunn's essay "Yoga as Embodied Feminist Praxis: Trauma, Healing, and Community-Based Responses to Violence" questions how yoga can be a useful healing modality in violence-affected communities in New York City and Rwanda. They grapple with their own positionalities as privileged feminist women working through Ashtanga yoga as a healing modality, and propose that local leadership, community-oriented practice, and making program goals suit the needs of participants are necessary practices when using trauma-sensitive yoga as a tool for community healing. Similarly, Jacoby Ballard and Karishma Kripalani's essay, "Queering Yoga: An Ethic of Social Justice", critiques current training models that do not "include the development of facilitation skills that can honor as well as negotiate human difference and structural oppression" (Ballard and Kripalani 2016, 310). They propose that a queer ethic of care can be combined with the ethics of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, shared ownership, and a leveraging of privilege to co-create yoga spaces that are more accountable and resilient. They join editors Chelsea Jackson Roberts and Melanie Klein in grappling with how yoga can be used as "a tool to resist oppression and offer a framework for social change that is mindful, embodied, and viable" (Ballard and Kripalani 2016, 321).

In this volume, the authors carefully and meticulously question how yoga can be a tool for change, and critique problematic trends towards the exclusion of yoga practitioners who do not fit within narrow, stereotypical bounds. They treat yoga not as a panacea for all, but as a discipline with liberatory potential when practiced with attention to community and individual needs, complex yoga histories, and contemporary and past structures of oppression. It can be easy to position yoga as a straightforwardly useful tool for liberation, however, the essays in *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change* mostly avoid that pitfall, while also navigating the tension between embodied forms of knowledge and written scholarly work. The book claims space as an essential, albeit expensive, tool in yoga teacher-training pedagogy and in academia.

Jen Aubrecht is a PhD candidate in Critical Dance Studies at the University of California, Riverside, where she is completing a dissertation on the intersections of yoga and modern dance histories in the United States.