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Desis on the Mat: Building BIPOC Community During Two Pandemics

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Background

What is an anti-racist space in the wellness world during the two pandemics of COVID-19 and racism?

The current politics of yoga are complicated by national anti-racist protests, accusations of cultural appropriation, and global and neo-colonial structures. As Patrick McCartney expands in his work, American consumers engage in “spiritual bypassing” when it comes to yoga when they take what they want from the practice such as meditation, physical postures, and self-help without reflecting on the politics of yoga (McCartney 2019). The past year has heightened awareness of both anti-Black racism and decolonizing the academy. Under the pandemic, predominantly white, middle-class yoga spaces were disrupted by calls from Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and social justice instructors to engage in anti-racism work and decolonizing yoga in wellness spaces (Black 2020; Wijeyakumar 2020). So often, whiteness is centered in yoga, as evidenced by yoga advertising and publications. In 2019, high-profile yoga practitioners of color such as Tejal Patel, Jesal Parikh, and Sheena Sood raised issues around white supremacy and decolonizing yoga in wellness spaces on social media via blogs, Instagram, and Twitter. By decentering whiteness and the United States in the national and global conversations on yoga, we can begin to decolonize yoga by addressing settler colonialism, cultural appropriation or globalization, and white supremacy in wellness spaces (Black 2020; Blu Wakpa 2018).

This personal narrative is part of a memoir I am writing about how I, as a middle-class Muslim Indian immigrant woman, navigate wellness spaces. I hope to use this moment to interrogate my own middle-class privilege in yoga spaces contextualized within the overall white, western, middle-class yoga culture, which is an overlapping subculture of the wellness industry that includes diet, Pure Barre, and even Athleisure (Tolentino 2019). I came to yoga four years ago as a feminist sociologist bringing my Muslim Indian American heritage and an intersectional and transnational lens. I began to practice yoga as a response to the presidential election of 2016. Pivotal experiences that shaped my yoga journey included the Donald Trump presidency, the protests around the murder of George Floyd, and most recently COVID-19.

I had been an active Pure Barre member for two years prior to the 2016 election, but once Trump was elected, I began to question that environment. I remember being in the Pure Barre studio the day after the election. When I looked around me, I noticed that I was in a room full of women who all appeared white, thin, and upper-class. Furthermore, the Pure Barre studio

was shaped by ableism, sizeism, and heterosexist norms. For instance, around Valentine’s Day, they had a “bring on the men” program. They did not provide physical modifications for workouts. It was rare to see an average or larger sized woman there. Women dressed in hyper-feminine and revealing workout outfits such as sports bras with matching Lululemon leggings.

Soon after the election, a progressive white friend suggested a new hot yoga studio. I needed new ways to manage stress, so in late 2016, I took my first yoga class and quickly became hooked on Baptiste-style *Vinyasa* yoga. This yoga franchise is stripped of much of the Eastern spirituality, terminology, and chanting typical of other yoga forms in the United States. I was initially attracted to the studio, and the new age feel of the space. There were all white-passing instructors, but there was often one or two other BIPOC women in the class. It felt like a safer space than the Pure Barre studio without the pressure to adhere to dominant gendered and classed norms though it also became problematic.

Yoga was helpful in a way that Barre wasn’t while I was coping with anxiety related to national politics and work. In an undergraduate course I taught, I was harassed by a white male student, who, inspired by the Trump presidency, was sexist, racist, and homophobic. During the months of hearings and legal depositions around that case, I attended additional yoga classes to help manage stress and I immersed myself in the movement of *Vinyasa*. It was not the spiritual message of yoga that helped me most initially, but the basic physical postures of Warrior Two or Downward Dog that proved I could overcome challenges, and that I was stronger than I realized.

Exactly one year after the harassment case in 2018, I was hospitalized for excruciating pain. A growth from my endometriosis was blocking my intestine and doctors could not remove it laparoscopically. I underwent invasive abdominal surgery, was hospitalized for two weeks, and



Figure 1 — Farha in Full Wheel at the Park Soon After Her One Year Anniversary After Surgery (Photo Credit: Shakeela Freeman).

placed on medical leave for six months. I returned to work after five months in February 2019, and I slowly returned to *Vinyasa* yoga. After two months of a yoga basics class, I finally made it through a heated power yoga class and could do full wheel again. I returned to the *Vinyasa* yoga studio feeling stronger than ever. From Spring 2018 to April 2020, I attended yoga class at least three times a week. Though I became critical of this franchise, I did see value in the space that I perceived as safer than Pure Barre for a practice.

During this period, I became increasingly aware of the composition of the class, props such as incense, blocks and blankets, and items for sale in the boutique, which ranged from smoothies and juices to athleisure from the company Spiritual Gangster. Curious, I called the home studio in Rochester, NY to ask how they selected props and the music they played. I wanted to understand why Hindi or Sanskrit melodies or chants were used, and if they held any meaning to the studio owners or instructors. I was never given satisfactory answers, but I was told by the owner in Rochester that music was the instructor's decision. Each instructor chose her own music; some picked Eastern music and others used English-based popular easy listening. When I inquired about statues of Buddha and Ganesh in the studio, I was told that was common in American yoga studios. More importantly, I asked the manager about the connections to India and if they were aware of the current political climate there. Most instructors had no idea what I was talking about, nor were they particularly interested. As a liberal Muslim Indian American who teaches sociology and intersectional feminism, these issues continued to trouble me.

What I didn't realize when I joined the yoga studio is how whiteness, cultural appropriation, and colonizing culture still pervades these neoliberal spaces. Several encounters made me question if I belonged. There was the white female student who suggested that I, a South Asian American with family in India, visit India for a yoga retreat. Why did she feel qualified to advise me? Was this tokenism packaged and marketed as Eastern spirituality and authenticity? And of course, all the instructors were white. For \$25 for a drop-in class, shouldn't I feel safe and comfortable in my own skin?

Self-Reflection and Yoga During COVID-19

Most recently, during the pandemic in summer 2020, I was moved to make changes in how I practice yoga after an outdoor yoga benefit class for Black Lives Matter (BLM). In July I attended a donation-based class advertised as a fundraiser for Black Lives Matter by the yoga studio where I was a member. The class took place at a park in an affluent suburb north of the city. When I arrived, I counted at least 100 people. I didn't see any BIPOC instructors (the instructor that day was an Italian American white woman) and only one visible racialized practitioner stood in the crowd. I wondered why a class benefiting BLM included so few BIPOC yoga students. I was already skeptical of the affluent location and then I became uncomfortable by the demographics of this homogenous white middle-class group. However, it was a beautiful summer day and my first chance to practice yoga in community since the pandemic had begun.

The class was a typical *Vinyasa* flow class, an hour long, led by a young thin white female instructor. At the beginning of class, she announced that this was a donation-based class, and proceeds would support BLM. At the end of class, she thanked everyone for coming, but there was no push for donation nor any effort to raise awareness of BLM or to discuss the political moment so soon after the murder of George Floyd. I couldn't help but think that the owner of the studio had missed an opportunity to discuss anti-racism, the national climate, or inclusion at her studio, in particular, or in the yoga industry in general.

When class ended, I went up to donate \$20, and made a point of introducing myself to the fifty-something year old owner and her daughter, who seemed more open to having a discussion. I had taken many classes with them both and I had always been pretty friendly with the owner's daughter at the studio. I asked the daughter who her contact was at BLM youth and mentioned that I recently attended two of their local protests. She admitted to having no contact, sharing that they had emailed BLM youth and not heard back. How then would this be a donation-based class? I texted two of my former students who were active BLM members. I ended up connecting the studio to these students who were active in BLM and BLM youth by texting the owner's daughter their information. However, I am still waiting to find out if the donation was ever made as promised.

Since the donation-based BLM yoga class, I continued to search for an inclusive yoga space as a middle-class Indian American woman. Ideally, an inclusive yoga space for me is an anti-racist space that decenters whiteness, is accessible, and has an awareness of both local and transnational politics, especially in India where yoga originated. The pandemic seemed like the perfect context for resetting my own wellness and fitness routines by being more mindful of issues around accessibility and racial diversity.



Figure 2 – K Creates Community During COVID-19 Through BIPOC Outdoor Yoga (Photo Credit: Shakeela Freeman).

My next class was a free backyard yoga practice led by a Black yoga instructor. I met this instructor at the South Side community wellness center, and she is also faculty at the local research university. After taking a few classes with her last summer, I appreciated her style of teaching and the inclusive space she cultivated by offering modifications frequently and working to maintain an affordable and geographically accessible yoga practice for BIPOC community

members. We had informal conversations about the centering of whiteness in both the local yoga studios and teacher training. She had been the only Black student in her teacher training (Haddix 2016). She was hosting this particular yoga class in her backyard as a trial run for social distancing and outdoor teaching. I arrived soon before the 9:00am class began. There were 8 BIPOC people in the class. Seven were women and one was a man. The class was a slow flow, but perfect after being quarantined for over three months. After class, I told the instructor how much I enjoyed the class especially because it was such a diverse group. I mentioned to her that the previous week I had been to a donation-based class at my other yoga studio. She was also concerned about that class after seeing it advertised online as a benefit for BLM hosted in the suburbs, and she sent the studio owner a firm email but had heard nothing in return.

I was determined to question all the studios that I interacted with to learn about what each was doing to support anti-racist progress. In the meantime, I learned through the teacher of that session that another Black woman I knew from her class, K, was starting to teach. It turned out that K was ready to teach but didn't have access to private outdoor space or a studio in mid-July. I offered my backyard and suggested creating a space for BIPOC women to practice. We spoke on the phone about how I viewed yoga as a practice for healing or wellness in an anti-racist space, and how I would be happy to help her build community. K set up a sliding scale for the attendees of \$5-20. We hoped community members might pay \$5-10 and university faculty and middle class-practitioners would pay \$15-20, but she ended up creating an online PayPal with a 'pay what you can' feature. The class was advertised on K's Facebook page and Instagram stories as a 'pay what you can' BIPOC-inclusive yoga class.

For the first class in my backyard, eight women showed up including one Korean-Japanese American woman, one Black woman, one Latinx woman, two Pakistani American women, an Indian woman, myself, and the Black instructor. Simply being in the presence of such a diverse group of BIPOC women felt like a source of liberation. K started class with a very short intention of good health, taught a 50-minute class, and ended with a brief mention of gratitude. Creating a more welcoming space was not just about representation but also about changing who has access, where, and how. This felt like a start in terms of having a diverse class that was more affordable and convenient for city residents.

The second class was two weeks later, and it ended up being just me, an African American woman, and her son. It was still a beautiful practice to be under the trees outdoors with BIPOC community. August 7th was the third BIPOC outdoor class. We had eight students in the yard, and this time we had five Black students and three Asian American students. It was the most diverse yoga space I had ever been in. In addition, K continued to start every class with breathing exercises, and shared a curated music playlist that was entirely Black musicians. It's a minor detail but in other spaces where I practiced yoga, including the upstate yoga franchise, the music had been predominantly new age, Eastern, or white folk music. I also hoped the sliding, 'pay what you can' scale was working for the instructor. I continued to try to give her decision-making power in when, where, and how she wanted to grow the practice.

As I finished writing this article in the winter of 2020, we've held three months of outdoor BIPOC yoga up until November 2020. The yoga class moved to a park on the Southside after October because more than eight people began showing up in the fall and we were adhering to COVID-19 precautions. The park was also closer to the instructor's home (K doesn't always have access to a car). In addition, though my backyard was in the city and not the suburbs, I live in a city neighborhood that is partially gentrified. The city itself is more than 30% African

American and my neighborhood reflects the university's diversity and not the overall racial or economic diversity of the city.



Figure 3 – Another Outdoor Class During COVID-19 with K (Photo Credit: Shakeela Freeman).

Organically, loose ties formed around K's yoga class. After the 2020 presidential election she advertised a sliding-scale yoga class to mark Trump's loss with the BIPOC community. She brought donuts, orange juice, and champagne to the class as the drinks and snacks represented celebration to her and the BIPOC group she had helped develop. The class started with an intention of gratitude and breathwork. The playlist included "All the Stars" by SZA and "Lovely Day" by Bill Withers. There were nine students that day and everyone stayed afterwards to talk and reflect on the political climate. Something more powerful in the form of community had formed by the presidential election. The instructor shared anecdotes of racism at her most recent daytime job. Another Black woman shared that she was harassed by a supervisor. In this yoga space, BIPOC folks spoke freely about microaggressions, politics, and the racial climate. This

simple public park had become a space of reflection, community, and liberation beginning with the two pandemics and ending with the contentious 2020 election. Through yoga practice, conversations, and breathwork, K created a space that gave everyone permission to just be themselves.

Over the winter of 2020, K continued to advertise on Instagram and Facebook. She currently offers online classes and small group indoor classes as the seasons have changed. What she was able to help create in these fraught times is an inclusive yoga space with a sense of community in a small city in upstate New York. During a time of crisis and chaos, something emerged that included people of all sizes as well as those that identified as LGBTQ and BIPOC. Without any props, idols, or uniform of sorts, K created a space of affirmation where there was no judgement based on race, sexuality, size, or class. The current shift in racial consciousness spearheaded by BLM resulting from the trauma of Black Americans is a model we can use to rethink anti-racism, cultural appropriation, and the decolonization of wellness spaces. It is in the small spaces such as in a backyard or local park during a pandemic where marginalized groups found some solidarity and alliances. This is where this work really begins ...

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