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Even Spirit Has No Place to Call Home: Cultural Appropriation, Microaggressions, and Structural Racism in the Yoga Workplace

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I have been asked “Is Lakshmi your real name?” more than once in yoga settings.

I have been tempted to answer, “yes, but my spiritual name is Brittney” but I never had the guts. I am named for my paternal grandmother, who was an Ayurvedic physician. Lakshmi is about as common a South Indian name as Mary or Maria. It is hardly exotic and is quite generic really. But it does have a lot of ancestral significance to me, and so I resent the assumption that it is not my real name for its ridiculousness but also because it strips me of my history and my identity. It’s an odd echo of how so many people of color have been stripped of their ancestral identities by being forced to adopt Anglo names ... different yet similar.

I am an Indian-American yoga teacher, who teaches in Denver, Colorado. I have been teaching yoga for the past 14 years. Working as an Indian-American yoga teacher has been deeply challenging on so many levels. Yoga has been a spiritual anchor for me, a root that tethers me to this Earth from a specific cultural location. To find that often there is no place for me in what is supposed to be the spiritual tradition of my ancestors has often left me feeling adrift. Initially I began my yoga teaching career trying to teach in the mainstream yoga world in Denver. As an Indian-American, I felt racism through ubiquitous cultural appropriation and microaggressions, which were subtle enough to confuse me for a while but became off-putting enough for me to decide to limit my participation in that world.

Here I outline some examples of the cultural appropriations and microaggressions I have experienced in the world of yoga studio culture. I happen to be an artist and so I do henna, which people assume I learned from family tradition or some such, but actually it is has just been a useful application of my artistic skills. Doing henna has been a convenient source of extra income at times. As a yoga teacher, we often have to have multiple streams of income to survive. One time I was doing henna for a group of white yoga teachers who were going to do a “yoga fashion show.” This was very early on in my career. I didn’t yet have the accumulated malaise of cultural appropriation that I do now, so I took the opportunity to be paid. One of the women was talking to the others about her time in India. She talked about how couldn’t find clothes in India that fit her “guns” (biceps) because “people in India don’t do yoga.” She said this with a very confident air of authority because, after all, she had been to India. They all nodded in assent. All of them ignored me, while I literally was at their feet, in the very servile position of decorating their bodies.



Figure 1 – Green Pottu Selfie on a day when my love of how a pottu can so beautifully and subtly accent an outfit, give my face symmetry and tejas, and make me feel connected to my roots overpowers my fear of the stares and judgments from the outside world (Photo Credit: Lakshmi Nair).

I prefer to wear *salwar kurta* (drawstring pants and a tunic) to practice because it is loose and comfortable and made of natural breathable fibers. I don't feel comfortable in tight, synthetic Western yoga wear. One time after class, a woman said to me, "I love your outfit! Even though Indian women are so oppressed, they have really amazing fashion sense." It's interesting to me that white women can wear *bindis*, and it's considered as a marker of the cool yoga zeitgeist of this moment, but if I wear a *bindi*, it's a marker of my oppression (but still cute).

I attended a *kirtan* at a studio where a popular *kirtan* singer erupted in a fake Indian "Apu" accent for laughs, and it worked. The singer was staring straight at me while he did it. It was grossly uncomfortable.

Additionally, I taught modules for a yoga teacher training where the students were asked to work in teams and create a skit as a final project. One of the groups decided to do a skit about the Hindu gods at the unemployment office because, "No one believes in them anymore." I chimed in with, "Well, except for the almost one billion Hindus on the planet", I was met with blank stares. Yep, you know your superpower of invisibility is on point when a billion of you go unnoticed!

Finally, after many years, I decided to raise the issue of cultural appropriation in one of the yoga teacher trainings where I taught. I mentioned how I had recently seen a flyer for an upcoming yoga event with a Ganesha on it taped to the inside of a bathroom stall. I invited students to think about how this might make a person of Indian/Hindu descent feel in that space. One of the students became very indignant and told me, "You can't tell me how to feel about that

image. If people are offended, that is their problem.” Okay, and if I were to make American flag toilet paper? I’ll be sure to tell the guy who shoots me that it’s his problem if he’s offended when I haunt him in his dreams.

These examples of microaggressions and cultural appropriation led me to gradually pull myself back from participating in these environments, but it was when I then tried to get work in yoga projects that were trying to do good and trying to address issues of accessibility that I experienced true structural racism. I have two experiences with organizations led by white women that were offering yoga in public schools, predominantly urban schools with mostly kids of color. The first was with an organization based in Boulder, a predominantly white city that is obsessed with yoga. This organization offered yoga in urban schools mostly in Denver. I started volunteering with them and was the only non-white person among their paid staff and volunteers. I was grateful for the opportunity to be teaching mostly kids of color, and it bothered me that kids of color had no teachers of color teaching them yoga so I thought they should at least have me. I decided to apply for a paid teaching position.



Figure 2 – Sunrise Son Salutations (not sun ... in honor of one of our own’s loss) at Red Rocks (Photo Credit: Akiima Price).

At their annual fundraiser, I formed a team and raised some money for them. The fundraiser involved a 108 Sun Salutations event, which was led by a number of local yoga teachers. In the middle, one of the leading yoga teachers started her set with, “My white suburban teenage sons’ biggest ambition in life is to be Black.” She went on to describe how they want to wear “grills on their teeth” and listen to “gangster rap.” Later, she pointed out a young man she saw walking “shirtless” and “with grills on his teeth” calling attention to how

confidently and joyously he was strutting down the street, declaring we should all be so carefree and full of life. I was in the middle of the room, and besides my few Indian friends, I was the only non-white person in the room. I didn't feel comfortable reacting at that moment, so I did what we often do, I just kept going. But that night, I bolted up from my sleep thinking about it. I decided to write the woman to let her know that her words were offensive. We had a nasty email exchange driven by her intense white fragility. She accused me of trying to "lynch" a white lady and claimed that I would be hard-pressed to find anyone who had done more for civil rights in Denver than her. She told me her African American friends say that "a child of India" isn't Black and has no right to speak for them.

A few weeks later, the volunteer coordinator of the organization asked for a meeting, giving me the impression it was a job interview. We met at a cafe, and she let me talk about my experience with yoga and teaching and working in communities of color in the Bay Area. She then proceeded to tell me that the woman I had the e-mail exchange with is close friends with an influential member of their board and that the board had decided that I was not a good representative of their organization. She fired me from my volunteer position.

The white yoga instructor who got me fired wasn't satisfied. She kept going, calling the owner of the new yoga studio where I taught to tell her that I'm a "dangerous narcissist" and that they should "watch out" for me. She also described me on her personal blog as "behaving like a terrorist from the Islamic state of Syria." On her yoga advice column, she has made comments like, "I may look small and white, but I have been told I have the soul of large Black woman." She's posted a "Duck Lives Matter" meme. In spite of her hateful behavior, her cultural appropriation of yoga, her violence against brown and Black women, she's making a great living teaching yoga and authoring yoga books.

Five years later, I ventured to work for a different organization that provides yoga programs to public schools. It, too, was run by a white woman. I had been referring students from my people of color yoga teacher training to her organization because they offered decent pay and needed teachers of color to work with kids of color. As I was going through their training, I discovered that they had fired one of my former students, a queer Black woman, on the day that she was being evicted from her home. I decided to ask some questions.

The flood of white tears that resulted from my questioning propelled me to quit before I was fired. I was told that I was attacking her. I was told that in previous lives we have all been oppressor and oppressed. I wrote an email letting them know that I was withdrawing myself from the training and received an email saying, "The palpable tension between us wouldn't be good for the kids and the kids are my number one priority" literally within seconds of hitting send. In both of these situations, I, as an Indian-American woman, was barred from paid yoga employment, not for being brown, but for questioning what felt to me like anti-Blackness. I was told in both cases that as an Indian I had no right to question their integrity when it comes to race.

Finally, and perhaps the most disappointing experience, came from the one studio where I felt somewhat at home. I had taught for this studio's 200 hour teaching training for several years and eventually became the lead instructor for it. For two years, I was teaching 60% of the training, while another teacher was teaching 40% of it, and we used my syllabus. Then suddenly, I was told that the other teacher (a white male) decided to go back to the old syllabus. Instead of being asked what I thought of the change, I was informed with, "You don't care, do you?" I didn't have time to really register my feelings so I responded with a rote, "No, that's fine." But I did care a lot. In fact, I designed my syllabus with great care because as a person of South Asian

descent, it really matters to me how people learn about and understand yoga. But I kept telling myself, “maybe I’m having too much ego about this ... just let it go.” But then I found that along with changing to the old syllabus, my hours were significantly cut, and I was relegated to the secondary position without any real explanation as to why. This really hurt because the owner of the studio was a friend, and she knew that I was going through a transition in my relationship and was not receiving support. Now, I was basically a single mother on a yoga teacher’s income. Cutting my hours was cutting my income at a time when I was struggling. I was never given an explanation, so I was left to question whether my teaching was found unsatisfactory even though several of my past students have made it a point to tell me how much my teaching had impacted their lives. I am left to speculate, and the only thing I can glean is that the white male yoga teacher felt uncomfortable with my style of teaching yoga because I welcomed emotional release in class and focused less on physical cueing and more on personal transformation. I don’t understand how it happened that he was allowed to take it over from me without any discussion. It made me feel very disrespected and belittled, like I was cut down to size.



Figure 3 – Satya Yoga Immersion Post-Practice Group Selfie (Photo Credit: Shayla Monteiro).

These experiences led me to question whether there was any place for me in yoga. As an Indian-American, I felt robbed of my spiritual tradition, which made me feel existentially depressed for quite some time. I began to have health issues that I felt were due to suppressed anger and grief. Eventually, getting through those traumas led to greater purpose and a path to healing for me. They prompted me to take matters into my own hands and start my own teacher training for people of color because we all need to see ourselves represented and we all need

teachers who can relate to us culturally. I devised a syllabus that centers around how people of color can heal from the trauma of racism using the tools, methodologies, and philosophies of yoga. After five years, graduates of my teacher training and I have formed Satya Yoga Cooperative, the first people of color-owned and operated yoga cooperative in the country. I deliberately chose to go the cooperative route to liberate myself and all of our members from being at the whim of a yoga world that is largely modeled in the image of the neo-colonial economic paradigm that was built upon our exclusion, oppression, and the extraction of our cultural and material resources as people of color. If racism in yoga made me sick, then yoga was still the cure for the disease. If there is no seat at the table for me, then I still have the seat of my own body. I can make my own seat anywhere. I can choose with whom I sit. I can choose to sit in authenticity.

Lakshmi Nair is the founder and member-owner of Satya Yoga Cooperative, the first People of Color-owned and operated yoga cooperative in the United States. She studied yoga at Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana in Bangalore, India and Kaivalyadhama Ashram in Lonavla, India.