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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72k7t20v>

Journal

Race and Yoga, 7(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/R37160837

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Rediscovering Citta: Vignettes on Violence and Healing in Life and Commercial Yoga Spaces

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I have spent most of my life fighting for breath. It is hard to connect and fall in love with breath, the very life force of a person's being, when you are busy every moment of every day fighting for it. When you are this structurally vulnerable, healing is near impossible because you are constantly bombarded by violence. I am a large built six-foot Black man who spent the first three and a half decades of his life disconnected and disembodied. I felt purposely separated from myself. Numb for the sake of survival, sober, but inebriated with disassociation just to make it through the day. This is an intentional and well-calibrated consequence of structural racism. I obviously did not know this as a child. Maybe I knew deep down inside, however like many young Black men I could not adequately put words to the emotional location of my experience. One thing I remember being confident enough to affirm (I was around the age of five), I did not feel "well" and things around me did not feel "sincere."

Structural racism and colonialism never intended for me to explore the possibility of healing from the daily reality of racial violence. As a forty-year-old Black man, doctoral student, and yoga practitioner, my existence in yoga and academic spaces challenges exclusionary norms that organize both spaces and contribute to detrimental health outcomes. My pain and torment is a purposeful physical and psychological determinant of colonialism. Structurally, people in positions of privilege benefit from me not being well or embodied. This is a noble truth that many do not want to admit. Yoga gave me the space and breath to recognize this hard fact and accept its impact on me. Many of the medical elements I suffered from were a consequence of this: my high blood pressure, my hypertension, my fluctuating weight gain, my anxiety, and inability to cope and cooperate with hyper stressful situations. Structural racism was killing me, and yoga gave me the space to find air and dislocate from the slow suffocation my situation was causing, the situation being me being Black and just existing, not truly living.

Yoga has provided me with the space to intentionally experience connection to self. Yoga has changed me and given me a chance to heal and find my smile and my full embodiment through breath and acceptance of *satya* (truth). The most difficult part of my yoga healing journey was accepting the hard and noble truth that I was truly damaged and wounded by racism. This acceptance allowed me to truly begin my path to healing and embodiment. I came to this affirmation in January of 2021 when I began keeping a reflective journal as part of the data collection process for my doctoral program on my personal racial trauma and yoga practice at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. I maintained a daily reflexive journal (750 pages) on my yoga practice, racial trauma, and meditational journey for just over two years. Throughout that time, I gained a greater insight into my wounded self. Moving from Texas to Canada for my doctoral studies gave me time to reflect and sit with my past and pain. Keeping an autoethnographic journal for two years straight without missing a day gives you more time to

have to accept all parts of yourself. Furthermore, it always felt or seemed like no one cared about my particular opinion or pain and no one wanted to provide me with a truthful or adequate explanation on why I felt this way. My journaling practice helped me to find these explanations through my own inner knowing.

I reside at the intersection of wellness and harm in perpetuity. I live every day with the fear that my breath could be taken from me. I am not alone in this experience. This fear is structurally purposeful. I believe many Black men live every day disconnected and disembodied from their life force because of this fear. Multiple police beatings and random car stops aside, yoga literally saved my life. I am not being hyperbolic. Yoga saved my life.

Within this paper I delineate what it means to be a Black man on a healing journey while navigating yogic/healing/wellness spaces and highlight connections to my experiences within the academy in North America. I view my very presence as a bridge between the two environments. I write for those like me who have lost their conscious voice under the colonial pillars of structural racism. I desire to have a sense of control and play the largest role in my healing journey. I desire to be the compass and the primary user of the compass in reclaiming my consciousness. Reconnecting to my breath has been a vital part of my healing journey. In finding my “embodiment”, I hope my work allows others with bodies like mine to find knowledge and joy, absent of the pain and struggle that I endured, and reconnect with their breath and life force. I want to promote a deeper healing and conscious connection to *citta*, which means the mindset and practice to process consciousness, clearly and mentally, to me. Structural racism forced me to become numb, to operate and exist; it robbed me of the ability to truly feel what and who I am. The fear and pain that comes with this journey was too much for me until I discovered my yoga practice. My reflection is structured as a series of vignettes that outline some of the violence and healing I experienced, as well as insights I have come to, through my yoga practice. I foreground how hard it is to heal in a society in which racism against Black men is pervasive. At the same time, getting into a yoga space, especially a commercial one for me, was an awkward and non-linear journey. While my entry into yoga almost ruined the possibilities of healing for me, I ultimately show how yoga saved my life.

One day during a meditation I had a vision and affirmation about my breath. The affirmation came after listening to B.K.S Iyengar. It was probably an audio book, most likely *Light on Life: The Yoga Journey to Wholeness, Inner Peace, and Ultimate Freedom* (Iyengar, Evans, and Abrams 2005), and a collection of notes from my journal. I realized, and I am paraphrasing, the first relationship you have in life is with breath and the last relationship you have in life is with breath. You come into this world seeking it from the womb, and when you leave this world you are divorced from it. The next day while driving I remembered something that I worked hard to bury deep inside of me.

I remembered being five years old and a twelve year old white boy tried to drown me in a lake at a summer camp. I remember fighting for my life and seeing the woman lifeguard making out with a young man on the dock about 20 feet away. I remembered trying to scream, trying to fight. I remembered it was not until I hit the boy in the nose and then I was able to get two good screams out that she stopped kissing on the dock and jumped into the water and saved me. Obviously, I survived. However, many of my racial experiences in the world felt like that moment. Sometimes I wonder if this experience is symbolic of structural racism: Black men in



Figure 1 – Me as a Five Year Old Realizing Racism is Real (Photo Credit: Enid Howell, 1998).

Canada and the United States are being drowned by structural racism every day and people are just off doing their own thing. All the while still getting the credit and social capital that comes along with being a part of the “caring and making things better” team. In my opinion, at times when it really matters, actual good work and meaningful aid and merit appear to be structurally rewarded and recognized but matter less than just showing up and appearing to be present for what occurs and passes for progress.

I want to have this conversation, but in my experience there are so few men practicing yoga and completing a PhD, it feels like something that will never occur in my lifetime.

Burying pain and disassociating became a normative activity so I could deal with racial trauma. When I was nineteen (2002) and in my first year at Trinity College at the University of Toronto, a professor offered to take me to yoga so I could heal and reach a deeper consciousness. However, it was not until 2018, when I had severe knee and hip injuries, that yoga became part of my physical recovery and my true confrontation with racial trauma and its role in my life began.

My first time visiting a yoga studio, I spent three hours in the parking lot. When I finally got the courage to go inside, I bought a monthly intro pass and told the person working at the front desk, “I’ll be back tomorrow.” This was my way of ensuring that I would commit to staying on course with this journey. I then went home and watched a lot of videos and tried to prepare myself for that first practice. I did not tell anyone what I was doing, and I did not ask for

help. In retrospect, this was my ego harming me. I was attached to the notion that I need to be in control of everything, which gives me a false feeling of security and acceptance.

When I returned to the studio the next day and I tried to check in, the young lady at the front desk told me that I already checked in. I told her that was impossible. I just showed up. She told me, “No! Brett Lesley Cumberbatch is already arrived.” It was at that moment a slender white man in his twenties with a lot of hair gel stood up and then admitted that he checked in under my name; he was on a Tinder date and he figured it was okay to use my name because he did not want to pay. I was in so much pain from my knee and hip injuries and so nervous that I let this gigantic red flag go. Why would the instructor and front desk worker just assume a tall white man would be named Brett Lesley Cumberbatch? I later found that is common practice to show your ID on your first visit and they did not have him do so. As a Black man I am frequently asked to show my ID to prove my name.

Within a year of being in that studio, I was the victim of four racist incidents in the changing room and a bunch of other personal violations. However, I gained some valuable lessons from my time at that studio. Some of these valuable lessons came from people I met at the studio. First, I met an instructor, she was a Jewish woman in her forties from Boston and completed her yoga training in Montreal. She told me about some safer studios I could visit and advised me not to connect my healing journey to any one studio. Second, I met the individual who encouraged me to take a yoga teacher training course and start taking my practice into my own hands. She was born in Germany and spent her time between Texas, Mexico, and Winnipeg. Both of these events were pivotal in my healing journey.

Every Black man I have met with an advanced degree has told me a white person has told them the following words publicly in a room of people when discussing racial issues, “maybe what you meant to say was...” In almost every higher education facility I attended, it feels like white people view racism as a ritual Black people need to endure as a rite of passage if they want to “belong.” And if the Black body stands up for themselves, they have buried their career at the same time. Sometimes I feel like white people have overly accepted that racist things just happen. Sometimes I feel like Black people just accept harmful things occur and they should just move on and forget. There are times I feel like white people think that racism is a form of hazing and that Black men “must go through it” to become tougher or be equal. I believe sometimes they view racism as a heightened and socially acceptable form of bullying and initiation. When I tell my Black female colleagues that yoga alleviated my anxiety and trauma, they immediately ask if they should bring a white friend the first couple of times to avoid the usual systemic bullying and hazing they experience in places like higher education institutions.

Sometimes I feel like commercial yoga spaces run more like high schools or facilities of education than wellness spaces. They can be cliquish, gossipy, some instructors at times feel a sense of over authority and demonstrate in it their cues and admonish students during practice. There have been times where I was the only person of color in the room during the practice and the instructor called me out by name and told me in front of everyone that I could do better in a tone that I deemed stern and disappointing whereas I have seen that instructor act with compassion and care in their tone with the other students in the room. And other times some studios and some instructors let you know who the shining ideal students are and what you should all aim for. Obviously, this is harmful and I believe it robs one of the joy, bliss, and

agency yoga can bring into your life. When I read literature on bullying and hazing like that from Jay Johnson (2004), I do not feel like I am paranoid or delusional or that out of touch. I feel validated.

Sometimes in certain yoga spaces I feel like instructors want to make things tougher and harder on me so that I can prove that I deserve to belong or stay in “their” yoga space. I am not against being motivated. I am not against being pushed. I am not against resistance and having to go beyond my threshold to better myself. But I have found there is a nuance and difference between encouragement and motivation and control and ego. I have found there is a nuance and difference between bullying and control versus clarity, consciousness, and mindfulness. I have found there is nuance and difference between attachment and following indiscriminately. One you make and one is made for you without you knowing but being led to believe you did. Without these distinctions some commercial yogic spaces have been awful for my healing journey, at times causing more trauma and exposing me to microaggressions on an ephemeral and psychic level I was not aware could occur. This is one of those experiences that is difficult to articulate. The best I can say is on one side there is clarity, consciousness, mindfulness, and attachment – you have agency – and on the other side there is bullying, control, and indiscriminate following – there is the illusion of agency – when in reality choices are made for you without your input.



Figure 2 – This is True Yoga to Me. Me After Practice, Uninterrupted, Deep in Joy (Photo Credit: Brett Cumberbatch, 2021).

For me, “True Yoga” is full connection with my total embodiment and self. However, one of the affirmations I achieved in order to get to this state was that commercial yoga spaces almost destroyed my healing journey. One of the most dangerous statements I have ever heard occurred at the beginning of a yoga practice where the stated intention was healing. The instructor said, “Yoga can do all of your healing for you.” This is a fallacy: “True Yoga”, as I see it, is a mechanism by which you can place yourself into a state of consciousness and embodiment to find healing. Yoga and yogic spaces cannot do all the healing for you. That’s just advertising and commerce talking!

I am in a space now where I have found healing and clarity in my own practice: every trauma, every embodiment of pain, and I am not afraid to confront it. For me no aggression has ever been micro, they have all been existential. They have all racially connected to each other, like a string theory of pain, or a chain linked fence with other portions added to it every day. Before connecting with my embodiment this manifestation of myself was deleterious to my soul.

Ian Whicher, in his work *Integrity of the Yoga Darśana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga* (1998), tells us that we need breath to smile, we need breath to find equanimity and gain greater consciousness. Structural racism deprives Black men and Black boys of their ability to find joy, their ability to smile, and their courage down the road to locate it and heal. I have never found a “safe space” where this can occur. I no longer look for safe spaces. If I have to be told I am safe I am going to assume I am not.

For my own healing journey, I am a nomad. I am no longer attached to any one studio. I do not have one membership, I have three. I never attend the same commercial space in Winnipeg more than two days in a row. I flow in between studios and spaces to keep the sanctity and benefits of my practice. I have found in the yoga world for me it is better to be “Brett from nowhere” than “Brett who belongs.” I have found safety and healing in this approach. Oddly enough this form of *aparigraha* (non-attachment) has been of great service to me.



Figure 3 – Me Being my Best “Yoga Nomad” (Photo Credit: Brett Cumberbatch, 2023).

Colonization invades healing spaces. I am very mindful when this is occurring and how it can impact me. Georg Feuerstein in his work *The Path of Yoga: An Essential Guide to Its Principals and Practices* (2011) informs us that modern yoga and modern yoga spaces often take on the goals and images of the people who run and fund them.

I am not comfortable playing racial safety roulette. In other words, I no longer lie to myself or convince myself everything is “alright” when I feel like something is not good and not of service to me. I no longer talk myself into bad ideas, such as over drinking or distracting myself with other people’s problems. I have learned the difference between denial and the benefit of the doubt, and this extends beyond my yoga practice. In my world the difference between the two is I have to think and be one with myself into giving someone the benefit of the doubt. When I am in denial, I run from this process, I run from this noble truth. This extends into my practice of life and who I am and who I need to be as a Black man and scholar. I no longer look at an attack in a changing room, like those I experienced at the first yoga studio I attended,



Figure 4 – Me Finding my Smile. Racism is Still Very Real and Traumatic to Me (Photo Credit: Brett Cumberbatch, 2020).

as a one-off occurrence of racism in the space. I no longer look at someone calling me a “Nigger” as a slip of the tongue. I no longer allow my ego to believe I did everything wrong. I have learned acceptance and that sometimes things happen to me and those things are hurtful and racist.

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), in *Between the World and Me*, gave a voice to my personal Black male ephemeral and psychic pain. Malcom X (1992) introduced me to hard truths about what it means to be a Black man in North America and how to recognize the pain. My yoga practice has given me the chance to heal on my terms and with my truth. Yoga practice has given me hard realizations that I have to force myself to confront in order to heal and be a clearer and better version of myself: *svādhyāya* (self-study).

Yoga provides me with a pathway to healing; it does not solve all my problems. Healing is hard for me. I have a lot of fears and traumas. Yoga taught me that there is a fine dance in stepping out of your comfort zone and not stepping into conformity. Finding the space that allows you to find a better you requires clarity, but the road and journey is anything but clear.

Locating clarity and consciousness in your breath and practice is like finding your grounding and not holding your breath. No one can lead you to healing. I had to accept the hard truth that I am in charge of my practice and my healing. My yoga practice has given me the chance to heal on my terms and with my truths. My breath is no one else’s breath. Yoga saved my life. Yoga has changed me. Yoga has given me a chance to heal and find my smile.

I feel more joy, *Ishvara Pranidhana* (surrender), than I do pain, and that is a big step for me in healing as Black man. On some level, I believe at its simplest that is what some of my ancestors wanted for us down the road when they were at their worst.

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