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## Yoga: How We Serve Diverse Sexual and Gender Identity-based Cultures

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*This is an interview with Jacoby Ballard, who began teaching yoga in 2000, and has been teaching Queer and Trans Yoga and Yoga for all Genders since 2006 at both the [Third Root Community Health Center](#) and the New York City Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center ([LGBT](#)).*

**Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?**

It was the tension I felt between the benefits I received from the teachings of yoga, and the homophobia, sexism, and transphobia spoken by yoga teachers or present in yoga studios. I've seen successful outreach programs emerge for particular communities, and I wanted a space for my community -- one where gender queer, gender non-conforming, and transgender yogis are celebrated, welcomed, understood and in the yoga classroom.

What continues to motivate me is seeing my students establish regular yoga practices, taking refuge in it during times of family difficulty, healing from incidents of harassment and assault, and working through complicated dynamics in a small community. The practice offers wise teachings for both extreme difficulties and joys in our lives that I see my students benefit from every day.

**Is there a standout moment from your work with Queer and Trans Yoga at the New York City LGBT Center?**

Many moments stand out! One class had a full room of 17 students that included three disabled people, two seniors, two trans women, four trans men, and a majority of people of color. All of us are "queer" in one way or another. The class was talking back to me every time I put them into chair pose or a big hip opener, laughing, groaning, and more engaged with each other than any other class I teach. They celebrated each others' breakthroughs, and said "I hear ya!" at deep sighs or groans in the room.

**What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how, if at all, have those assumptions changed?**

I knew my own experience as a queer and transgendered person, and I'm deeply grounded in queer and trans communities. My sense of community and my allegiance and accountability to my community has grown. I think it's fertile teaching ground when we acquire training and skills, and return to our own communities. There is a different kind of openness and willingness to be vulnerable when we know that our teacher has been through something similar.

That said, I've learned a lot about my own community -- both our methods of resilience and vitality, and the ways that we internalize some of the hate in the world around us. I work to hold space for the difficulty, celebrate the resiliency, and make room for everything in between.

**What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio and what are the reasons for these differences?**

I do not use gendered language in any classes, which I hear in almost every other yoga class I attend. This means phrases like "this is a good pose for women..." or "if you are a man, lay your hands in your lap with the left hand on top of the right," or "men may find this pose easier than women because..." When such language is used in classes, I and others in my community feel left out, not acknowledged, dismissed. So I talk more specifically about the energetics that I think these comments are trying to address -- "If you are needing more vigor today, do X; if you are needing more tenderness, do Y."

Since we've all shared experiences of homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia, I speak to that in my classes. When we are practicing karuna (compassion) meditation I might ask my students to consider offering karuna to their harasser, the boss that just fired them for being queer, or their ex-lover. When we are folding forward, I might speak to bowing to our queer selves and all that that identity entails or brings forth. When we are in savasana (resting pose), trying to let go, I might speak of letting go of shame, of guilt, of shields that we may hold in our bodies, hearts, and minds.

**What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?**

The biggest challenges do not occur in the classroom, but in the larger yoga world: to gain respect and understanding for this work as a queer, transgendered yoga teacher. It is difficult for me and members of my community to access training that respects our experience, where we can feel safe to be out as transgendered or queer, and that I can financially access. People ask me, "Why do LGBT people need a separate space, a separate class -- isn't that exclusive?" My answer is that the class is needed now, given all the oppression within and beyond yoga in the U.S. Ultimately, I would love every yoga class to truly embrace all students, of every gender, ability, race, and age. That is not the case right now. Until we take on oppression and privilege and its dynamics in the yoga

classroom, trainings, and retreats, a class like mine is needed to provide the queer community with the life-saving tools and skills of yoga.

### **What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach the population that you work with?**

Look deep into your heart and ask yourself why do you want to teach queer people. Teach from that place of awe, joy, compassion, and love. Show up as yourself, and delve into your own fears of "not enoughness." Teach with vulnerability, honesty, trust, patience, and determination, and know that you have ample support.

### **What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of "service yoga" in America in the next decade?**

I'd like to see service yoga address systems of oppression and privilege, and have them be part of our trainings. I also want to break down the "us"/"them" divide. I want formerly incarcerated people to teach at programs training people how to teach in prisons. And I'd like to see more support for youth to take yoga teacher trainings, and then teach to their peers.

### **How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?**

Service to me is not only doing the work, but examining why I want to do this work, and what it has to do with my growth and learning.

This work has changed my practice; it allowed me to feel I'm not alone. My students showing up to class after class remind me that my work is important, my being is important. I feel community accountability to my practice.

### **What other organizations do you admire?**

[Generation Five](#), [Generative Somatics](#), [Kindred Southern Healing](#), the [Audre Lorde Project](#), [FIERCE](#), the [Living Room Project](#), the [Challenging Male Supremacy Project](#), [Off the Mat Into the World](#).

*Editor: Alice Trembour*

*Are you a yoga instructor giving back to underserved or un-served populations? Email [rschware@gmail.com](mailto:rschware@gmail.com) if you're interested in being interviewed for this series. Thank you for all you do in the name of service!*

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