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## Leadership Lab: Jacoby Ballard on Power, Privilege and Practice

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BY **YJ EDITOR** | AUG 29, 2014



*In this four-part series, [YogaJournal.com](#) and [lululemon athletica](#) introduce the panelists and moderators participating in the [Practice of Leadership conversation](http://www2.yogajournal.com/leadership/) (<http://www2.yogajournal.com/leadership/>) on Friday, September 19th at [Yoga Journal LIVE! in Estes Park, CO](http://www.yjevents.com/ep/) (<http://www.yjevents.com/ep/>). Stay tuned for thoughtful—and thought-provoking—interviews with these trailblazing yogis, teachers and social justice activists.*

Jacoby Ballard is a yoga and Buddhism teacher who has been an activist, fundraiser, and organizer for social justice for over 15 years. He cofounded Brooklyn's [Third Root Community Health Center](http://thirdroot.org/) (<http://thirdroot.org/>), which offers yoga, massage, acupuncture and herbal medicine at sliding scale prices. There, he taught Queer and Trans Yoga, a class designed specifically for the LGBT community. Find out more at [jacobyballard.com](http://jacobyballard.com/) (<http://jacobyballard.com/>).

**YogaJournal.com:** What inspired you to create Third Root?

**Jacoby Ballard:** I had a mental 180 from being furious for years that the changes that I wanted to see in the world didn't exist—that the world is as full of injustice as it is—to understanding that the change that I want won't exist unless I create it. Yoga and other healing modalities were not offered in a way that resonated for me in New York. So

I had to construct it from the ground up and find collaborators who shared my vision of the clinic staff reflecting the neighborhood where over 11 languages are spoken. I wanted to teach yoga and work collaboratively with other healing modalities in a non-commercial, affordable setting where a diverse range of students and clients came together to practice, heal, and build community, and that didn't exist. I wanted social justice workers to slow down, take care of themselves, notice their own trauma; now Third Root has programs in non-profit offices, recovery centers, and foundations. I have wanted yogic and contemplative spaces to be more transgender-friendly, anti-racist, accessible both financially and in terms of disability, but they won't become that unless I do that work within those spaces and step up to my own dharma.

**YJ.com:** What informs your own teaching?

**JB:** Social justice movements such as the Black Panthers, Students for a Democratic Society, ACT UP, the work being led currently by transgender women of color, and also the depth of [yogic \(/category/yoga-101/philosophy/\)](#) and Buddhist teachings themselves. The teachings have never failed me and have been a refuge for me since I was 17, through so much difficulty and joy. I also had a profound experience when I trained at Kashi Atlanta Ashram in 2004 in their first YTT, where a majority of the students were LGBT people, and where the teachers related the practice to issues in the LGBT community. I felt really held, invited to investigate myself, and actually came out as trans through my 200-hour training. The teacher, Jaya Devi Bhagavati, was so gracious and gentle with me, and protective of me, even though she had never had a trans student before. I try to create that environment for my students, that people can really step into themselves and examine obstacles to love through the grace of being held by a skilled and loving teacher.

**YJ.com:** People often talk about the “yoga community.” What does that mean to you?

**JB:** I have long been frustrated with the term “yoga community,” because I think it's code language for specific race, class and gender markers that are inconvenient and painful to speak to directly. When the term is thrown around by the media and institutions that are assumed to represent all of us practicing, it's not referring to incarcerated people practicing. It's not referring to people on crutches or chair users. It's not referring to queer communities showing up in all kinds of outfits to practice at community centers. It is not referring to youth who practice in their sneakers and jeans and talk throughout class. It is not referring to those who work in social justice offices who spend their lunch break doing yoga. Those are yoga practitioners, yet that is not who is portrayed or given voice as “the yoga community.”

**YJ.com:** How would you change or re-define the term?

**JB:** What I would like to think of as the “yoga community” is those who truly live the teachings, practice the [yamas \(/article/teach/teaching-the-yamas-in-asana-class/\)](#) and [niyamas \(/article/teach/teaching-the-niyamas-in-asana-class/\)](#) all day every day and who are devoted to both their own and everyone else's liberation and kindness along the way. I see the [Yoga Service Council \(http://yogaservicecouncil.org/\)](http://yogaservicecouncil.org/) communities and [Off the Mat, Into the World \(http://www.offthematintotheworld.org/\)](http://www.offthematintotheworld.org/) communities practicing that, but it is not widespread.

**YJ.com:** What visible or invisible barriers work against diversity in the yoga world?

**JB:** If there is not a culture of justice and practices of alliance across communities within spaces that teach yoga, then certain communities will not show up. We will not (or do not) feel invited or welcomed. This involves everything from how changing rooms are organized to accommodate disabled people, survivors of sexual abuse, and trans people; whose images are used on the studio's website and materials; what is included or not on waivers; and awareness practices on behalf of the teacher to language their classes in such a way that they are in solidarity with marginalized practitioners in a room. Thus, in a typical yoga studio or training, fat people, people of color, queer and trans people, low-income people, undocumented people, disabled people, elders and youth are un- or under- represented.

**YJ.com:** What do you think needs to change?

**JB:** Yoga studios must conduct an overhaul of space management and policies in order to invite and welcome diverse communities—not just expect various communities to show up as things are and mold ourselves into that framework. Additionally, the cost of yoga in the U.S. is prohibitive to most of humanity (drop-in classes, workshops, [yoga teacher trainings \(/article/teach/surviving-teacher-training/\)](/article/teach/surviving-teacher-training/), [clothes worn for yoga \(/category/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/yoga-clothing/\)](/category/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/yoga-clothing/), [yoga mats \(/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/yoga-gear/test-mat-savvy-5-yoga-teachers-pick-favorite-mats-one-folds-size-napkin/\)](/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/yoga-gear/test-mat-savvy-5-yoga-teachers-pick-favorite-mats-one-folds-size-napkin/)), so only those who can afford it are transmitted the teachings. All communities deserve access to the best teachers at ideal times to practice, not just those who can pay high rates.

**YJ.com:** Why is yoga for specific communities important?

**JB:** The media around yoga consistently represents skinny, white women, and thus the compounded message to other communities over time is that “this is not a practice for you” or “people like you do not practice yoga.” My friend Leslie Booker, who teaches yoga to incarcerated youth, says that the damage of this representation is apparent every time she teaches, as she has to spend the first 20 minutes of every class convincing her students that this is a practice for them. I think that this is why yoga for specific communities is important in this moment—yoga for people of color, [yoga in Spanish \(/lifestyle/future-yoga-spanish/\)](/lifestyle/future-yoga-spanish/), fat yoga, queer and trans yoga—because that explicitly invites those communities to practice. From there, they may have the courage to attend other classes, once they feel that the practice is indeed for them and contributes positively to their lives. And yet so many studios resist these classes, calling them exclusive, perpetuating separation, or not acknowledging our oneness. We need to heal some of the wounds of oppression before we can turn back to the mainstream class and teachers—and in the meantime, those teachers and studios have work to do and skills to attain.

**YJ.com:** What does yoga miss when it lacks diversity?

**JB:** It misses a great portion of humanity and all the gifts and contributions that many communities bring to the larger whole. And it risks perpetuating prejudices and a sense of separation—without everyone in the room, how can we truly expand our hearts as wide as the whole world?

**YJ.com:** Paint a picture of an amazing yoga class:

**JB:** Students are welcomed into the room by administrators and teacher and invited to speak briefly on the daily theme. The teacher intuitively reads students’ bodies throughout the class, moving them toward their edge and into support, seamlessly. Students are invited to listen to themselves and conduct their practice toward balance.

**YJ:** Lightning round. Fill in the blanks:

**YJ:** Today, yoga\_\_\_\_\_.

**JB:** ...faces a choice between becoming commercialized and capitalized upon and embracing and nourishing all of humanity with these precious, ancient practices.

**YJ:** Tomorrow, yoga\_\_\_\_\_.

**JB:** ...should be the result of how we live and practice in this moment.

**YJ:** Yoga needs more \_\_\_\_

**JB:** heart

**YJ:** and less \_\_\_\_

**JB:** ego.

**YJ:** I encourage all yogis to\_\_\_\_\_.

**JB:** ...examine who you dehumanize, what is going on within you when you do so, and how you can address and heal that pain rather than perpetuate it and thus act from love rather than fear.