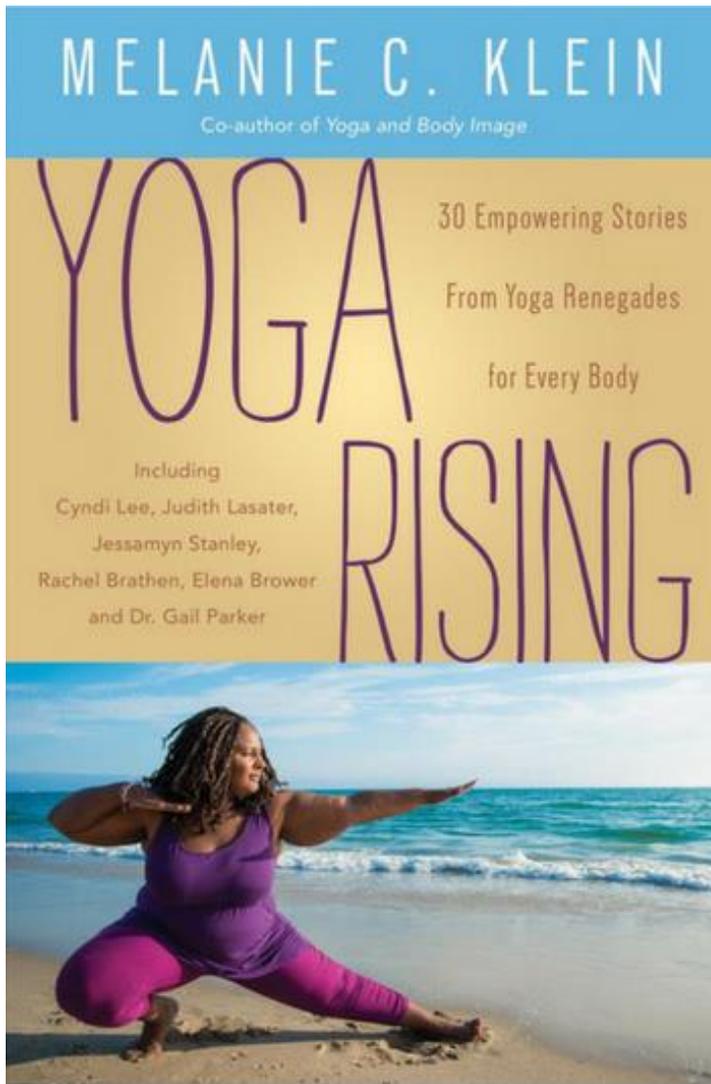


Yoga Rising Discussion Guide



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Introduction

In the book, *“Yoga Rising: 30 Empowering Stories from Yoga Renegades for Every Body,”* Melanie Klein brings together a diverse group of writers to share their voices and experiences related to the complexity of issues that expand beyond the first book, [“Yoga and Body Image: 25 Personal Stories about Beauty, Bravery, and Loving Your Body”](#) . These important and powerful books have become the basis for the Yoga & Body Image Coalition’s mission and activism around the world. We are proud to provide this guide as a starting point for your group’s insightful and informed discussions around the book’s essays and main themes. On the following pages, you’ll find information on how to create and facilitate an effective discussion group, questions relevant to each individual essay, and thematic conversation points for higher-level discussions. Thank you for joining the conversation about yoga and body image and the myriad of related issues.

We hope you’ll share your experiences with us at @ybicoalition on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). In addition, we are available for questions and conversation at ybicoalition@gmail.com.

In solidarity,

Yoga & Body Image Coalition

Creating an Effective Group

Accessibility – Please ensure your discussion group is accessible in every way - from the location to the physical space to the meditation and movement.

Creating Community – Begin the group with introductions, asking participants to say their name and preferred gender pronoun. – Some of these discussion questions may be more effective if participants journal about them first, then discuss. Some of the questions will result in more productive discussions if there is a level of openness and trust in the room. Journaling or starting the session with participants talking in pairs can help develop that dynamic.

Physical Space – We like to host the discussion groups in local yoga studios, but they can be hosted anywhere, including people’s homes. Please do be mindful of accessibility for people of various abilities. – Arrange the discussion area in a circle to foster a more welcoming dialogue. – Have chairs available. For more authentic inclusion, try not to have just one person in a chair or on the floor.

Opening & Closing – Guide an opening grounding meditation and make introductions and/or a brief ice breaker so participants can get to know each other. At the end, guide a closing meditation with or without movement or lead a full yoga practice. – If you choose to include guided movements or a full practice at the end of the discussion, be sure the types of movement and breath are accessible to everyone. – If you choose to have a full yoga practice after the discussion, advertise that clearly, including the class level. Please ensure the class is accessible to everyone.

Inclusive Discussion – Consider setting ground rules and intentions. Help participants create the environment they want. Suggestions such as “no talking over one another” and “using I statements rather than generalizations” can be useful. – It is helpful to have a facilitator to keep the discussion on track and to be mindful of time. This person should have

questions prepared, but create spaces for participants to ask their own questions. Let them shape the discussion as much as possible. – Conversations flow more smoothly with some structure. Structure can come in a variety of ways. You may want to discuss one essay in-depth and then move on to the next one. Or, discuss multiple essays based on themes. Choose what you think will work best for your group.

Price – We typically do charge for the discussion series to cover the cost of the space, the discussion manual, and a small honorarium for the facilitators, with 10% of the proceeds going back to the Yoga and Body Image Coalition. We highly suggest making work-for-trade and scholarship opportunities available.

Shared Conversation If you find that the same couple of people are talking or dominating the conversation, while some people remain silent, try to create spaces for others to talk. There are several ways to do so: – If the group is large - maybe 10 or more people - divide into smaller groups or pairs. – Invite participants to journal first, then give them the option to share what they journaled. – Set ground rules together before the discussion starts, one of which can be mindfulness about taking up space in the discussion. Once that ground rule has been established, the facilitator can refer back to it as needed. – Use phrases like, “Is there anyone who hasn’t spoken yet who would like to say something about this essay?” – The facilitator can start a “low-risk” go-around, in which each person says one idea or point that interested him/her/zir about the essay. These ideas can provide the basis for a rich discussion.

Vulnerability – Some of the topics can hit very close to home for people. Depending on how real and authentic they become, people may become very raw and emotional. That’s OK. It’s part of the process. – It is vital to create as safe a space as possible to hold these emotions with respect and honor. If a moment becomes emotional, the facilitator can help shape the openness with which people respond. The facilitator does NOT need to jump in and try to “fix” anything, but a simple breathing exercise or expression of compassion can go a long way. The facilitator might also want to check in with anyone who has expressed deep vulnerability or become emotional during the discussion and just make sure they are OK. – Depending on the topic of various essays, you may want to have contact information available for local eating disorder treatment centers, LGBTQIA Centers, and other

community resources on hand. Place them near the door so participants can help themselves.

If some of the language and terminology is unfamiliar to you, here are some definitions: <http://www.suffolk.edu/campuslife/27883.php>

Trigger warnings: Many of these essays describe struggles with illnesses, oppression, and trauma. Please be sensitive about these issues and aware that since so many of them affect people personally, discussions about them can be triggering.

Self-Reflection and Sitting with Discomfort: Yoga teaches us how to sit with discomfort. What have you learned on your mat about how you respond when you are uncomfortable? Do you get defensive? Angry? Shut down? Run? What happens in your body, your mind, your emotions, your heart? Breathe into that. Draw on yogic and mindfulness practices to sit with some of that discomfort, to witness it with curiosity. What can you learn from it? What happens if you remain open and listen? Can you make a commitment to do so as you read the essays in this book?

In her introduction to the collection, Melanie Klein writes, “Inevitably, these stories will push us out of our comfort zone and challenge our own beliefs and experiences. Can we breathe, listen, and absorb without rushing to challenge the author’s experience or truth? Can we honor and respect their truth without feeling like their experience undercuts or invalidates our own? Can we recognize each person’s process as uniquely their own, often situated at different points in the progression of healing? Is it possible that our own process is bolstered by theirs, even if we can’t recognize it as such in the moment we may be confronted?” Can you make a commitment to engage these questions openly as you work your way through this book? You might even start any discussion group you have with these questions and a list of group commitments that can help you productively work with the responses that arise while reading and discussing the issues in this book.

Please also be aware that when we are having discussions about oppression and social justice issues, particularly when people have different identities and differing levels of power, privilege, and oppression, open sharing can

perpetuate the harm and challenges around oppression. For instance, if someone is coming from a place of daily lived experiences of being the target of oppression, while someone else comes from a privileged position and is not aware of their privilege, the “sharing” of the latte person as they “discover” oppression can perpetuate harm. A skilled facilitator can help mitigate some of those issues.

“Foreword,” Dianne Bondy

1. Browse through a few yoga websites or magazines of your choice. Who is represented? Who is absent? (Think along the lines of racial, gender, age, class, sexual, national, and dis/ability identities). Note that your responses to these questions will likely vary based on whether you choose to focus on mainstream yoga sites or ones that are intentionally trying to create a different model of representation.
2. Bondy writes that our stories matter. Note that your story is critical, and so is everyone else’s. As you read this collection of essays, note the areas where your story overlaps with those of the writers and where it diverges. Reflect on WHY the stories diverge. How can the yoga world(s) make space for the rich diversity of stories? What has to change in order for people from marginalized groups to be more included, to be able to shape their practice on their own terms? How can we connect while maintaining the richness of all our differences?
3. What are the relationships between our personal stories and larger cultural or societal stories? Do we see our personal stories accurately represented in those larger cultural stories?
4. What are some ways you can be a yoga renegade? (Come back to this question as you read the stories in this anthology. Add ideas whenever you are inspired to do so!)

“Introduction,” Melanie Klein

1. Klein writes, “Spouting affirmations of body positivity and ‘self-love’ can fall flat when they aren’t supported with the depth and breadth of inquiry required to not only encourage individuals to cultivate an inner paradigm shift but also create large scale cultural change” (11). Why are affirmations not enough? What shifts have you seen around yoga, body image, and social justice in the past several years? What impact have those shifts had on both internal, individual levels and larger cultural patterns? What shifts do you still want to see?
2. What does the famous feminist slogan, “the personal is political” mean? How does it take shape in the context of yoga, body image, and social justice?
3. Klein writes that “the dominant ‘yoga culture’ often mirrors and exacerbates the cacophony of toxic messaging disseminated by the culture at large” (2)? What are some examples?
4. Klein writes that too often, “‘diversity’ is slipped in here and there and the rest of what we see is ‘business as usual.’ Until diverse representation is a norm, meaning it becomes the established and unquestioned standard, the conversation and our work is not complete. Because what is desired is the possibility for everyone and every body to have access to the practice, benefit from its results, and cultivate self-acceptance and, possibly, full-blown self-love” (4). Explore the insights here.
5. Klein writes that as conversations around yoga, body image, and social justice deepen, “Spiritual practice and social justice are no longer seen as unrelated or counterintuitive” (3). How and why might they need to be integrated?
6. Klein says (and the essays in this collection illustrate) that “storytelling is a revolutionary act.” How? Klein says that “There is power in storytelling proclaiming our truth, especially as the culture engine continues to grind out misrepresentations and tired stereotypes” (4). Where does your story fit in to the tapestry woven by the essays in this anthology? Weave your own story in, bringing your voice to the table.

“Rediscover, Reconnect, and Repair: A Lifelong Commitment,” Lisa Diers

1. Diers writes that “EveryBODY has a story to tell.” Set the timer for 15 minutes. What is the story your body would tell? Don’t edit, just write whatever arises. Then sit and meditate for a few minutes, focusing on your breath and on heart-centered compassion. Now reflect on what you wrote. What insights do you notice? What surprises you? What might we need to “reconnect to, rediscover, and repair” so that we can “know peace”? (27)
2. Pay attention for a few days in your life to the messages about the ideal body or bodies in general. What messages are you receiving every day? Where do they appear? What are the effects of those messages (and on whom)?
3. Diers writes, “But with these thoughts, I try to “Catch it. Challenge it and change it. I can see the emotion with my wise mind and have a conscious choice of action, reaction, or non-reaction. My practice has most definitely taught me that. It has taught me how to separate myself from my emotions. To notice where my mind goes when I become uncomfortable in my body or otherwise, and to know that I do not have to react to those emotions” (30). Observe your thoughts about your body and self worth for a day or two. Try practicing the process Diers suggests. What do you notice?
4. Diers lists the lessons she has learned on her yoga mat. What would you list as your lessons? What has your yoga practice taught you about listening to and honoring your body?

“Perfectionism and My Pathway to Yoga,” Pia Guerrero

1. What messages did you get about eating and the body as a child? How did they affect you? Do you still hear them in your life today?
2. Does perfectionism show up in your life? How?

3. How can yoga be a path to healing from perfectionism? How can it intensify it?
4. What are some ways we can cultivate acceptance and compassion in our lives and in our communities?
5. Choose a passage from the essay and discuss how it resonates with you or how your own experience might be different. Explore why your experience might be similar or different. (Note: This can be done with any of the essays).

“A Recovered Perfectionist,” Robyn Baker

1. Do you struggle with perfectionism? If so, how was it reinforced or countered by your family, educational system, media and other elements of the environment around you?
2. How, in Baker’s story, did perfectionism (and the environmental support of it) contribute to her experience of anorexia?
3. Discuss Baker’s point that her exercise routine was her “obsessively gripping onto an illusion of something that would make living tolerable and give my existence meaning: the “perfect” body” (47). What does that tell us about the danger and deeper meaning of the drive for a “perfect” body?
4. Baker goes on to write, “I desperately wanted out. But I knew what it would cost me to leave; it meant abandoning all I had worked for, including my level of success as a personal trainer and Pilates instructor, a feeling of absolute certainty that my life would be intolerable, and that I would lose everything that gave me a sense of not only control but also importance and meaning” (47). What does this tell us about what she was actually longing for? As a culture in which many people struggle with similar longings and destructive patterns, what do we need to learn from these insights in order to transform these harmful cultural pressures?
5. If you are a yoga teacher, what might you learn from Baker’s response (when she was in treatment the second time) to the cue to be present in her body? How does this reaction (and some of the others shared in this section) reflect the ways that cues can land on people differently

based on their lived experience? How can we shift our cues accordingly to be more sensitive to these varied experiences?

“Saying Good-Bye to the Inner Critic,” Melissa Mercedes

1. Where/how do we learn that certain body types are the “ideal”? What is that ideal? Has that ideal affected you or those around you? How?
2. Who does that body ideal/beauty ideal exclude? How is that shaped by racism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, cisgendernormativity, and so on?
3. How did yoga and meditation help Mercedes heal from the negative self worth and the damaging psychological and physical effects of these harmful cultural messages? What were the specific gifts of mindfulness that helped her unlearn the harmful messages of the inner critic (57-58)? Have yoga and/or meditation helped you heal? How and from what?
4. Mercedes writes, “My spiritual practice shed light on the many ways in which I became entangled with the misconceptions of what my body should look like, primarily dictated by societal norms” (60). Discuss the insights in this point.

“Kriya Yoga-Living Yoga,” Jivana Heyman

1. What is the relationship between homophobia and self-hatred, as described in this essay? Why would anger be a logical reaction?
2. How can tapas, svadhyaya and ishwara pranidhana help us navigate the suffering that is caused by being marginalized and “Othered” in society?
3. What did Heyman’s relationship with his best friend Kurt reveal to him about non-attachment?

4. Heyman describes how his teenage daughter is affected by harmful media messages. What cultural messages (of any kind?) harm you? Those around you? What are some empowering counter-messages we can work with to begin to lessen their power?
5. If you are a parent, do you struggle with any of the types of issues that Heyman describes? Explore them and how yoga philosophy and practice might offer a different approach—or at least an opportunity for self-study.

“On Living Bold and Discovering Your Power,” Jenny Copeland

1. Copeland writes of searching and running. What might you be searching for (if anything)? What might you be running from (if anything)?
2. How do many women look outside themselves for validation? What (and who) teaches them to do that? What does that deny about their own worth and voice? How can our yoga practice help us navigate all those challenges?
3. Explore the implications of Copeland’s point, “Only when I was able to let go, to surrender, was I finally able to arrive” (57).
4. Copeland writes of her privileged identities, “I took this persona on and accepted my privilege without question. I lived my life small and quiet, never speaking up, in spite of the fire growing inside of me for so long. In doing so, I harmed others with my silence and inaction. I have witnessed injustice and said nothing. I have been a racist, harming in my ignorance. I never realized the power I had to hurt others. By not speaking up, I allowed myself to become part of the problem” (58). Discuss how not speaking up, not interrogating and interrupting privilege, harms people. Are their forms of privilege you might need to question and challenge in your own life? How might you do so?
5. Copeland writes, “Yoga helped me access my power, to appreciate my complexity, and to see the value of these things not just for myself but

- others as well” (59) Does this experience resonate with you? Why or why not?
6. Explore these questions: “How would the stories of our time change if we were able to see yoga, see those around us, and even see ourselves as whole beings rather than bits and pieces? Imagine the possibilities if we let go of this reductionistic perspective of living that neglects the ultimate complexity and beauty of all beings, moving away from seeing characteristics and labels? What if we were able to see more than the outer shell of a person or being, and were instead able to appreciate the person, their experiences, and the greater culture this all exists within to create each unique being?” (59)

“Finding the Right Fit: A Journey to Self-Acceptance,” Tiina Veer

1. Veer writes that when she started practicing yoga, “assumptions about yoga being ‘all-embracing’ were quickly dismantled” (67). Have you ever felt or witnessed similar issues in the yoga world? Explain.
2. Veer goes on to write, “Many yoga texts say ‘yoga is a mirror to the Self.’ I came to realize that yoga is actually a mirror for anything it reflects—including our culture” (68). Explore some ways that shows up and how it excludes various groups of people.
3. How did Estonian culture help Veer maintain a relatively healthy body image despite rampant cultural pressures to be thin and able-bodied? Are there any values or practices in your own ethnic roots that have offered you similar support?
4. How did weight stigma affect the medical care Veer received? (It’s important to note how cultural standards pervade even those fields in which we expect “experts” to be free from those ideologies.) Veer writes that, “much of what we think we know about weight and health is not actually evidence-based, and rests teeteringly above an abyss of weight stigma” (73). Explore how the diet industry and weight standards send problematic and dishonest messages. How have those messages affected your life? The lives of those around you?

5. Discuss Veer's invitation to "encourage teachers to examine their own internalized weight stigma (almost impossible not to have in our size-obsessed culture), so they can do their best not to repeat stereotypes and micro-aggressions in class that larger-bodied people have to endure in almost every aspect of daily life. There is also self-healing that comes with ridding ourselves of internalized weight stigma—what do you think fuels our collective body-preoccupation, leading to a litany of problems not the least of which being life-threatening eating disorders" (74). How might you, and your local yoga community, engage in this process?

"Sparkle Girl," Beth Berila

1. Do you think you've been affected by any of the cultural sexist messages that surround us? Have any of them shaped how you define your worth? Whose approval you desire? How?
2. Berila defines the process of internalized oppression. What toxic messages about your identity group(s) have you internalized from the wider culture (if any)? How do they show up for you? What affect have they had on you?
3. What role did feminism play in the process of empowerment for Berila? Have you had a connection to social justice or feminism that has provided similar support?
4. Berila writes, "While I advocated for feminist empowerment, the ability to see power and oppression too often morphed into yet another way to beat myself up. Rather than accepting mistakes in unlearning privilege as a part of the process, these missteps convinced me that I was an awful feminist" (79). If you are engaged in social justice work, have you felt similar modes of judgment? In what ways is this accountability helpful? In what ways is it harmful (to yourself, to your community, to your social change work?)
5. Berila writes, "The result was profound feminist strength that was consistently undermined by invalidating self-talk" and offers the internal external monologues a voice (80). If you were to give voice to your internal and external monologues, what would they say? In what tone of voice? How do they make you feel? Later in the essay, she

- offers a more compassionate, integrated dialogue. What would yours sound and look like?
6. Berila writes, “Through of my yoga practice, I have reflected very carefully on which parts of those inner monologues are socialized privilege that I have to unlearn and which parts are internalized oppression that I also have to unlearn. The line between the two is not always clear. But here is what I do know. While there is often some deep wisdom in these inner monologues, that insight is drowned out by the harsh shaming. What distinguishes the two is tone and effect: wisdom opens up possibility and resonates as truth in my gut. Internalized oppression demoralizes and demeans”(81). Explore the insights here. How do your wisdom, privilege, and internalized oppression show up?

“The Expert Within,” Kimber Simpkins

1. Simpkins writes that she “hated being caught up in the duality of good/bad, healthy/unhealthy, worthy/unworthy” (89). How did this duality emerge in her eating disorder (even participate in the eating disorder)? How else do these dualities show up in our culture?
2. Simpkins writes, “What if I radically embraced the possibility that my body knew what to feed itself, knew what belonged on its plate, in its mouth, and in its belly? What if I rejected the ideas of “good” and “bad” food and instead let my body find its way to moderation and enjoyment? Perhaps out of all the experts in the world, I’d been ignoring the one I should have been listening to all along: my own body”(89). Explore the insights here. How can yoga practice help in this process?
3. Simpkins offers the tenets: “listen, trust, respond, feel.” How can these principles be useful in your life? Where might you draw on them? (90). How might they be important steps in social justice work (beyond the personal)?
4. What are some of the dangers of listening to “experts” over your own inner wisdom, your inner expert?

5. Simpkins introduces the term orthorexia (91). What is it? Do you see it at work in the yoga world?
6. Simpkins writes that, “yoga can be used to heal or to harm ourselves” (92). What are some ways it can heal? Harm? How might we enhance the former while decreasing the latter? If you are a yoga teacher, have you said any of the comments Simpkins describes? How might we lessen those harmful cues?

“Evolving Addiction,” Elena Brower

1. Talk about the paradox of addiction that Brower describes: “It made me feel important, it gave me the illusion of freedom, and it felt like I had control” (98). How did a similar paradox play out on her eating disorder?
2. What are some ways the seat of the teacher can offer new perspectives?
3. Brower describes being divided in herself. Are there any ways you feel divided? What are the impacts of that division? On you? On your loved ones and your community?
4. Brower issues an invitation: “Will we spend the rest of our lives blaming those who put us down and made us feel small, or will we amplify the moment in which we chose otherwise? Will I remember each day from here on out the freedom I found in my own eyes when I reached across time and quit it all, to devise a better way for myself?” (102). Explore your own responses to these questions. What might it look like if you—if we—accepted this invitation? Are there social factors that put some of this out of our individual control (like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia)? If so, then how might we create the collective conditions to enable this invitation?

“Rebirth and Reconnection: My Journey with Cancer,” Dana Byerlee

1. Byerlee writes that “cancer has been a catalyst for rebirth and reconnection to the deepest, most sacred parts of life. It’s demolished so many of the paradigms, archetypes, and cultural expectations I unwittingly bought in to, and forever broke open my heart which for years had been so closed” (105). Explore the insights here—and how they showed up in her journey.
2. What kinds of body issues did Byerlee experience while suffering from and healing from cancer?
3. How did yoga practice help Byerlee navigate her journey with cancer?
4. Byerlee writes, “Contained in every moment, even the most heart-breaking and frightening, there lives a whole paradoxical kaleidoscope of every emotion and feeling, vast and expansive with a vibrant sweetness at the core” (112). Explore this perspective in your own life. What would look like to take on this perspective?

“Dragons and Other Demons,” Jodi Strock

1. Strock talks about both the tendency to disassociate and to “tend and befriend” as a way of surviving trauma. Discuss how both affect the body.
2. How did exercise become a coping mechanism that backfired?
3. Explore the insights in Strock’s note that in her yoga practice, “My interest was peaked by a quiet knowing that the greatest challenge was not manipulating my body into any inversion, arm balance or pretzel pose but to sit with the discomfort” (119). How can yoga help us sit with discomfort? What can be gained by doing so, both on and off the mat? (Note that discomfort is not the same as trauma.)
4. In coming to terms with the bodily responses that helped her survive the trauma of her rape, Strock writes, “it is those responses that kept me safe. There is a wisdom and will to survive that reaches beyond our consciousness. I am grateful to that part of my being. This is one of the many ways in which I have come to have a deeper trust and

respect for my body and mind. It is as if there is a wise being inside of us all that has our best interest in mind and works toward that even when our conscious mind is not aware. I feel a deep peace when I remember that this is always here inside of me” (120). Explore the insights in this passage.

“Take Up Space and Be Seen,” Gwen Soffer

1. Soffer opens her essay with the question, “How often have we convinced ourselves that we need to be smaller and take up less space?” How would you answer it? Where do you think you learned that, if you have? If the question doesn't resonate with you, talk about your experience of taking up space.
2. What would it look like to fully inhabit your body, “this body, the one I live in today, with bold and unapologetic compassion”? What would have to change, both in your internal self and in the wider society (think not just about beauty and body image, but also racism, heterosexism, cisgender normativity, ableism, and so on)? If you already do that, how does that help you show up?
3. How did striving for the “yoga body” hide a struggle with depression for Soffer?
4. Soffer writes, “The path to self-acceptance was not about learning to love my body but more about learning to love myself so that I could show up in the world for real” (132). How do those insights resonate or (not resonate) for you?
5. Soffer goes on to write, “Yoga became a practice of being with myself no matter what my outer shell looked like and no matter what I was struggling with. It became a practice without judgment that was liberating in a way that I had not experienced before. We are taught from a very young age that we only deserve to feel free in our bodies if we look a certain way. We are taught that if we do not fit the model of beauty that we should be ashamed about our body and that we don't deserve to be seen” (132). Where do those messages come from? Have you experienced something similar? How did Soffer begin to unlearn those messages? How have you (if you have been affected by them)?

6. Soffer writes, “It strikes me that if we don’t believe we are enough in our first home, our bodies, how will we move completely into our own power in our lives?” How does that statement resonate with you? How does this process feel different than “pretending to be big”? (134)

“Learning to Love the Whole,” Jacoby Ballard

1. Is there anything standing in the way of you loving your body? Being grateful to your body? If so, what is it and where does it come from? (You might even consider writing your own stories in your own invitations, echoing the process Ballard shares with us in this essay.)
2. What is the relationship between abuse, normative assumptions about bodies, and oppression, on the one hand, and the disassociation and self-harm Ballard describes, on the other? In other words, in Ballard’s story, how does the disassociation and self-harm stem, in part, from enduring oppression?
3. What are some ways transfolk experience structural regulation and oppression in their lives (from the medical industrial complex, insurance agency, peers from dominant/normative identities, and so on)?
4. What are some factors in your own life that prevent you from being whole? What are some ways you could reclaim wholeness? Talk about Ballard’s point that “in turning toward my whole self...I can relate to so many others who have either been through similar pain, or any kind of disassociation or self-harm, or suffering in general” (143).

“Instagram, Yoga, and Learning to Love My Big, Black Body,” Jessamyn Stanley

1. Look at the beauty ideals and icons in celebrity culture these days. What ideals do they establish (what are the beauty standards they both reflect and perpetuate)? How are those ideas racialized? Linked to narrow ideals of body size?

2. What impact did all of that have on Stanley's self worth early in life, according to the essay? What impact have those ideals had on your sense of self-worth? How can online media help change some of that?
3. Though in its ideal form, yoga "transcends any particular body type," in reality body size, body image, and racial power dynamics (among other factors) infuse the contemporary mainstream yoga world. How? Talk about some ways the yoga world perpetuates these limiting ideals and therefore creates exclusions.
4. What might help you release any self-doubt you may have? What might you find when you do release it? How does (or doesn't) your yoga practice help you engage in a "respectful internal dialogue" and unlearn harmful messages?
5. In talking about the photographs of her practice that she has posted on Instagram, Stanley writes, "I steadily began complimenting myself for the physical strength and flexibility exhibited by my body, instead of denigrating it for not resembling pictures in magazines" (150). Try doing that for yourself for the next week (or the next 30 days). What do you notice?

"Whose Yoga Is It Anyway? An Indian American's Adventures in YogaLand," Lakshmi Nair

1. How does Nair describe her relationship to her yoga practice as being deeply linked to her relationship to her culture and cultural identity? What does yoga and yoga practice mean to her?
2. How does the contemporary mainstream Western yoga world run counter to what she learned yoga is? (Think of things like commercialism, the "ideal yoga body," the privileging of asana over other forms, the role or absence of spirituality, and so on)?
3. She writes, "Yoga is one of the most beautiful aspects of my heritage, yet we have been thrust into yoga's ancient past and totally left out of yoga's present" (156). Part of that is through cultural appropriation. Look around the yoga spaces you frequent, the representation of yoga in media that you see. Where/how do you see cultural appropriation at work? What does the marginalization of South Asian communities

from the mainstream U.S. yoga world mean, in the context of Nair's discussion?

4. Reflect on the different examples Nair gives about Yoga's racism and its affects on South Asian communities. Explore the deep implications of this quote: "For me, as a South Asian feminist yogabyasi, to be able to come to a place of true authenticity in my relationship to yoga, it's essential for me to examine all the historical complexities and to attempt to untangle the deeply interwoven threads of patriarchy and casteism. But when everything about yoga is mystified, potentially negative aspects are rendered invisible, or worse, made sacrosanct" (157-158).
5. Why, then, were safe spaces for women of color and people of color so necessary? In particular, discuss Nair's point that, "I could relate to the discomfiting space my students land in when they attempt to connect with their bodies in a homogenous yoga culture which renders their bodies invisible and yet hyper visible at the same time. I understood the futility of trying to unravel chronic embedded trauma in a space that is triggering. But here in this safe space, we could reclaim our bodies. We could let down our defenses and give the parasympathetic nervous system its turn to do the restorative and healing work that is so needed and too often eclipsed in a society in which are bodies and being aren't valued" (159).
6. Oppression creates ongoing trauma. How has your own experience of trauma (including, but not limited to racial trauma, intergenerational trauma, sexual trauma, and so on) affected your own sense of safety and well being. (Note here that deeply exploring this question may require professional support; it certainly requires a relatively safe space, and not all discussion groups provide that).
7. Too often, discussions of social justice and injustice are considered "politicizing" in many yoga spaces. But since these issues are the lived, daily experiences of marginalized groups, it is critical to address them: they are always, already present. Discuss Nair's point that, "enlightenment means seeing what is, even if it isn't pretty;" and "talking about the negative is what has been positive" (160).
8. Honestly and authentically grapple with the challenges Nair poses: "Like the parable of the blind friends and the elephant, how much depth and richness of understanding is an insular and homogenous

yoga community missing out on? How can this be shifted toward genuine inclusivity that feels safe for all? How can the larger yoga community extend its tremendous resources to support and protect yoga for people of color in this heated climate?” (161)

“The Rapunzel Game,” Sabrina Strings

1. Strings writes, “Amy was an African-American woman with a perm and a bourgeois manner. I had diagnosed Amy with people of colorblindness. This a condition in which people of color—often black—embrace the America-is-colorblind discourse. They subsequently refuse to see other people of color—often black—and avoid interactions with them in an ironic and assimilationist attempt to pretend as if there is, indeed, nothing to be seen. Of course underlying this behavior is the fear that someone will see them and recognize that they are, in fact, black.” (163-164). There are several significant ideas in this paragraph; unpack and discuss all of them: What is color blindness? Why is it a problem? What is “people of colorblindness”? What is the danger of people of color buying into the myth of colorblindness? (Please reflect carefully on your own racial identity and whether you are granted or denied privilege as you respond to this question). How do you see either of these concepts/practices at work in your community? Your own life?
2. What is the “Rapunzel game” in this story and how was it racialized? Notice your own reaction to reading that portion of the essay. Did you immediately recognize what was going on, even identify with it? How did that make you feel? Did you read along, wondering what the problem with the “hair game” was? Why do you think you didn't immediately recognize it? How did that make you feel? Explore whatever feelings arise for you with compassion and honesty, holding yourself with kindness if your own pain around being othered arises, and leaning into your discomfort if you realize you might have done similar things in the past.
3. How did the teacher suggest a guideline that was embedded in racialized assumptions, thereby perpetuating othering and exclusions in the space? What was the impact on Strings? What is the historical

- context of this kind of practice (and why is it important to recognize that contemporary, seemingly “taken-for-granted” practices are often deeply embedded in harmful historical contexts that actually give them meaning?)
4. How else do you see these sorts of racialized assumptions and exclusions operating (inadvertently or advertently) in yoga and meditation spaces? How can we unlearn, interrupt, and transform them to create more inclusive spaces?
 5. Strings writes, “Mimi would undoubtedly have claimed to be concerned about social justice. All the while, she was blissfully unaware of how her actions in the studio participated in a system of sorting rooted in slavery.” What are some ways we, whoever we are, and no matter how committed to social justice, might be participating in similar exclusions? What are some ways we can begin to interrupt that complicity? Strings goes on to write that the “hair game” “reveals itself not as an example of white privilege, but an example of white supremacy” (168). Examine the difference between the two and how it is at work here (and in some of the other examples you came up with).
 6. Strings describes another exchange around hair, this time with a multiracial woman who claimed, “She told me, in no uncertain terms, ‘I think hair is race and gender neutral.’” Strings notes that “Whether or not something is racially biased is not based on a straw poll of the available people of color. It is rooted in the historical and ongoing fact of domination. Short or long hair may have different meanings in different contexts, in other cultures. But in this country, we cannot conveniently sidestep the historical and current meaning attached to straight, long (and often blond) hair” (169). Why is it important to bring historical context of macroaggressions and the daily onslaught of microaggressions to bear on understanding the impact of practices on marginalized groups?

“So We Can Breathe,” Chanelle John

1. How did mainstream beauty standards contribute to John’s experience of body dysmorphia and disordered eating? How was that process racialized?
2. Why were yoga spaces often inaccessible and unwelcoming for John? Have you ever felt similarly excluded?
3. What was the effect on John and on Black communities as the country witnessed the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and so many others? How does that violence targeting Black communities create deep vulnerability? Talk about the feelings and thoughts John describes she had as she related to the class she taught at the library.
4. How does historical and ongoing institutionalized racism create both trauma and health issues for Black communities (and other communities of color)? Discuss the many insights in this quote: “The ramifications of absorbing beauty norms, the burden of defying racist tropes, and the struggle of surviving in a society based on capitalism and white supremacy burdens the mental and physical health of the black community” (176).
5. How can yoga help meet those challenges, even help heal them? What needs to change in the yoga world, according to John, in order for yoga to access that potential? Why is it so important to have yoga classes specifically for people of color and to have teachers of color?

“Yoga and the Pre-Baby Body,” Suzannah Neufeld

1. Neufeld writes about her experience with her body after the birth of her child. Explore how the medical industry shamed her; have you had similar experiences? Reflect on this question she posts: “Worse, I felt ashamed of being ashamed—as a body image activist and feminist, what does it mean when you suddenly feel bad about your body?” (185).

2. How does our yoga practice change as our body changes? What are the gifts in that process? (Note: our bodies can change in a variety of ways: pregnancy, age, dis/ability, illness, and among other ways).
3. How are yoga teachers susceptible to both the objectification and projection of their students' expectations of their bodies? How might this translate into self-objectification? How can yoga practice and philosophy work to counter that tendency? How is this a particular risk for new mothers, according to Neufeld?
4. What are some ways yoga teachers can either perpetuate body-shaming or help resist it by what and how they teach? (Think about your own practice and what you do or don't like; think about how you cue or teach yoga, if you are a teacher. If the latter, seek out teacher trainings that address different body sizes, instead of teaching to the stereotypical "yoga body" as the norm).
5. What's the difference between "love your body" and "love what your body looks like"? Does one show up in your life more? Does one feel more empowering to you? Explore.

"Never the Perfect Body," Dana A. Smith

1. Smith writes, "I could feel the shifts in my ability to feel safe in my own skin" (194). Why did this hyper body consciousness and lack of safety develop for Smith? Have you ever felt unsafe in your own skin? Reflect on that process (keeping in mind your own well-being and seeking out professional support if necessary).
2. Smith describes emotional eating in college. Why did that begin? What does she mean when she says her weight gain was a "badge of honor" (105)? Smith taps into an important theme throughout the book here: many of our writers describe beginning to "fit in" to cultural expectations in ways that are ultimately deeply unhealthy for them. Explore that theme.
3. When she visited home from college, she describes her family calling her fat and being concerned about her weight gain—not at all the validation she had been expecting and wanting. Smith writes, "Instead of loving the transformation, I started to view my body through the

filter made of the montage of comments about my new physique. My new curves went from being soft and beautiful to something that needed to be changed—immediately. I fell out of love with my body. I no longer wanted to be that person in the mirror. I didn't know who I should be, who I wanted to be" (196). Explore the insights here:

1. In the midst of a deeply healthy cycle of not eating, Smith describes getting to a point that catalyzes her return to health. She writes, "I needed out as badly as I needed to breathe. I needed freedom from the entrapment. I had to take ownership. I needed to nourish myself: mind, body and soul" (197). How did her inner wisdom catalyze that shift?
2. Why did Smith start Yes! Yoga Has Curves? What was she countering in the mainstream yoga world? Check out her book and notice the beauty in all the images.
3. Smith writes, "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that yoga isn't perfection; it's a practice—one that can take you from the lens of "otherness" into presence" (199). Explore these insights—and whether/how they've operated in your own yoga practice.

"How I (Didn't) Get a Yoga Body in 21 Days," Roseanne Harvey

1. Harvey notes that Sardini was well-known for using "body-shaming" language in her work. Where else do you see body-shaming language in the yoga world? What is the impact of that language?
2. What is the dominant/mainstream perception of the "yoga body"? Sardini's definition? Harvey's? What would your definition be?
3. What were some of the surprises Harvey experienced while participating in the challenge?
4. Harvey describes talking photos of the "shadow body," writing that, "After all, if I was going to embrace the idea of a 'yoga body,'

then shouldn't I acknowledge all of its forms?" (206). What would happen if, as a culture, we did that more?

5. Though Harvey was pleasantly surprised by the "21 Day Challenge," she also, ultimately offers a critique of any such self-development course. She writes, "I'm never sure of how to walk the line between accepting who I am, resisting a sort of discouraged complacency (i.e. I'll never be able to change, so why bother?), and desiring to change the things I can change" (208). How might we navigate that paradox?

"Privilege Makes the World Go 'Round," Lauren Eckstrom

1. Eckstrom talks of feeling a disconnect between her internal life and her external appearance. Have you felt a disconnect between the two (even if it manifests differently than for Eckstrom?) If so, what has been the impact of that disconnect?
2. Eckstrom writes that the most challenging responses to the bio image for the article she wrote came from women. Explore why that might be. How has patriarchy conditioned and encouraged women to pit themselves against each other in ways that both perpetuate and uphold patriarchy?
3. Eckstrom writes, "My question is, can we do the same? Can we hold each other by the hand, stand in solidarity and refuse to be picked apart piece by piece, refuse to play into systems that break us down into body parts?" (215) What would have to happen to forge these alliances? How do we need to confront not only our own conditioning but also the power dynamics between us in order to forge these alliances?

“Focusing on Ability in Dis-Ability of Yoga,” Elizabeth Wojtowicz

1. Amidst all her struggles with shyness and anxiety growing up, Wojtowicz also describes an inner wisdom, a hint that there was something else: “somewhere deep down I knew that these experiences would not define me or what I could or could not do forever. Despite my sense of isolation, disconnection, pangs of occasional jealousy and rejection, I knew that these experiences would serve as the catalyst of who I would eventually become, who I am today and who I am becoming. And that pearl of realization fueled me” (220-221). Have you felt a similar whisper of deep wisdom? How has it motivated or shaped you?
2. Wojtowicz writes, “I wanted to learn to embrace my disability and the way my body looked and worked, from an integrated, wholehearted perspective” (221). How did yoga help her do that?
3. What does balance mean for Wojtowicz and how has yoga helped her cultivate it?
4. She writes, “I have come to realize that the connection and the feeling of connection is what helped me to accept and appreciate my abilities and capabilities” (223). How have yoga and connection helped Wojtowicz honor what she does have and what she can do?
5. Wojtowicz issues a call to action: “Activism for our collective, collaborative consciousness, and collaborative connection” (225). What might this look like for you and your yoga community? Brainstorm ways to create change and cultivate this conscious connection.

“Finding Refuge on the Yoga Mat: How Modern Practitioners Need to Say No to our Culture and Yes to Ourselves,” Judith Lasater

1. How has yoga practice and yoga culture changed since Lasater started practicing yoga, according to the essay? What do those changes tell us about mainstream yoga in the U.S.?

2. What are some ways that the principle of ahimsa is upheld—and not upheld—in contemporary U.S. yoga culture?
3. How did Yoga Journal begin to (unwittingly) perpetuate many of the problems described in this anthology? In what ways is it still doing so? In what ways is it changing? What can we each do to influence the changes we want to see, in both yoga media and yoga culture?
4. Explore the insights Lasater offers here: “It was then that I realized that I had become part of the problem: I had internalized the normative body image of the yoga world, simply using it to replace my old one. I was unconsciously confusing discipline and control” (235).
5. Lasater writes, “Paradoxically, I wonder if we are using our yoga practice as a way to avoid the state of yoga? Are we using our yoga practice as just another distraction from our own unhappiness, in the same way a child uses a new toy? So our yoga practice begins to serve two unconscious processes: we can use it to feel good about our body and ourselves, and we can almost simultaneously use yoga practice to punish ourselves when we feel we have not lived up to our ideals” (236). Discuss the insights here.
6. What happens if we think of the yamas and niyamas as descriptions, not prescriptions?

#Selfie@Sixty,” Cyndi Lee

1. What can the Buddhist concept of impermanence offer our understanding of the aging process?
2. Explore the insights in Lee’s statement that, “Perhaps it's not the practice that is defeating me but rather my fixed notion of how a ‘real yogi’ practices” (244).
3. Examine Lee’s experiences with yoga magazines and photographs as she got older. “They wanted my wisdom, my mind, my teachings. They even wanted my story about how I let my hair go gray but they didn’t want to see a picture of it. I got the message that my body was not aspirational” (249). What might we do to change this culture in mainstream Western yoga media?
4. Explore the different perspectives on yoga as a business. Lee offers some ways of thinking about it—discuss those and others.

5. Lee closes her essay with an aspiration. What would yours be?

“Combating Weapons of Mass Perfection,” Sarit Z Rogers

1. What might it look like to “give space” to suffering? How might a yoga practice help with that? Why might social change efforts need that?
2. Why is perfectionism, the allure of being perfect, so dangerous? How did Rogers’ experience with modeling confirm that?
3. How has photography helped Rogers’ find her voice? How does her artistic vision counter a culture of perfectionism?
4. Rogers writes that when she photographs someone, she realizes she needs to take this approach: “I see you. I hear you. I respect you. Without that, there is no trust, there is no connection, and there is no photograph, and there is no yoga” (260). Explore the insights here. Why might this also be an important approach to social justice work? What does it take to build this kind of trust?
5. Rogers writes, “Without the shadow, there is no light, and without light, there is no shadow” (263). What does this sentence bring up for you? What might it mean for social justice work?
6. How can both photography and yoga be a partnership? What gifts and possibilities arise when we create/invite that partnership?

“Yoga Girl: Living Authentically in the Social Media World, An Interview with Rachel Brathen,” Melanie Klein

1. Klein writes that a “toxic relationship with food and self as an intergenerational inheritance” (267). Discuss this insight. Has it been true in your family at all?
2. What code words are used in your community for not enough, not beautiful, etc? How do they make you feel?

3. Brathen describes her relationship with body image, and the difference between what she remembers and what she wrote in her diary at the time. What stands out to you about her story? Klein writes, “It sounds like you were rebelling against the insecurities you’d inherited. Often, though, this doesn’t happen until much later in life. But here you were, a teen rejecting the norm and, unknowingly, serving as a role model to an alternate experience for your friends and peers, one that doesn’t bow down to the scale or the beauty standard of the day” (268). What does this journey look like in your own life or those around you?
4. What did meditation and yoga offer Brathen? What insights did she discover when she became still? What insights do you discover when you become still?
5. What “dysfunctional narratives” might you need to rewrite? How might you begin to do so? What dysfunctional narratives might we need to reframe as a culture? Klein writes, “Culture is created and we can re-create it” (272). How might we begin to do so?
6. Brathen says, “I’m a regular human being, digitally unaltered, and I can still find happiness in the face of my humanity and not-so-perfect body and not-so-perfect life. Because yoga helps me to deal with the struggles. That’s where my happiness springs from, not the fantasy” (273-274). Explore the insights here. How can we bring this practice into Western yoga culture more fully?

“From Body Issues to Bodyful,” Pranidhi Varshney

1. Varshney writes, “The moment I surrendered to daily practice was the moment I began to heal” (276). Discuss the insights here. Have you have a similar (or a different) experience? Why was surrender necessary?
2. Why is stillness so critical and powerful? Why does Varshney choose the term “bodyful”?
3. Vershney writes, “When practiced with ill intent, however, it [yoga] can exacerbate existing imbalances and destroy the practitioner’s well

- being” (277). What does it mean to practice with “ill intent”? How do we know if we are doing this? If we see it in the yoga culture around us?
4. She goes on to write, “Instead of practice being a space for intimate inquiry into one’s own insecurities, it becomes a space for using external validation to put a band-aid on the pain of those insecurities. Asana then becomes part of the disease instead of the medicine, and the practice of yoga gets reduced to nothing but pretty postures done by pretty people” (278). Explore the insights here:
 1. Varshney writes, “In what ways has yoga healed you? Do you remember the sparks of self-knowledge and self-love that happened on the way and inspired you to keep coming back? Are your voices in alignment with the answers to these questions and do they invite others to dive deeply into yoga’s heart?” (279) How would you answer these questions? What does it look like for teaching to be a service?
 2. She poses the questions, “What can I do to keep the essence of yoga alive? How can I make this practice accessible to more people so that the circle of yoga continues to grow in richness? Am I maintaining authenticity and humility as I practice, teach, and promote?” How would you answer these questions? How did Varshney enact her principles in the design and daily operation of her yoga space? What are some other ways yoga studios, teachers, and classes could better practice the ideals of yoga in the way they operate?
 3. What is Varshney’s take on these questions: “What is appropriate and what is appropriation? What is community-building and what is exploitative?” (281)

“Finding My Yoga Home,” Zubin Shroff

1. Shroff opens the essay by describing his own introduction to yoga. He writes, “For me, yoga was my connection to family, whether in India or England; it was something done at home by ordinary

Indian men and women with a vast array of body types. There were no special yoga mats or clothes and, as my family are not Hindu, no association with Hanuman or Ganesh or Siva” (284). What do these insights reveal about the contemporary North American yoga world?

2. Shroff writes, “the rise of this particular form that was North American yoga was just another unrealistic way India and Indian-ness were exoticised and disembodied from the actual country and from my own experiences” (285). Explore the insights here. How do you see them at work in the yoga culture around you?
3. Shroff goes on to write, “My life in New York was a hybrid, contemporary one with artists, academic and activists from Brazil, India, Iraq and the UK, all learning with North American’s hyphenated and inclusive identities: Asian-American, African-American, LGBTQ, Jewish New Yorkers, all rooted in disparate traditions, creating a new hybrid one. In many ways my own practice of yoga mirrored this—rooted in history, in family, it helped me connect with the here and now, absorbing new experiences and gaining new insight. I realized that if I were to connect with a yoga community, it would have to look the hybrid evolving one I lived in” (286). How did hybridity affect his relationship yoga? In what ways was he alienated from Western yogic culture and the “growing Hindu religious expressions” of yoga in India?
4. Shroff writes, “I felt the vibrant and complex idea that is South Asian being stripped away and replaced with an exotic and ancient Indian simulacrum used to make one feel spiritual and universal and bypass any understanding or engagement with the real world we live in” (287). Explore the insights here and how spiritual bypassing, cultural appropriation, and racism show up and are perpetuated in the Western yoga world.
5. Deeply and honestly explore the questions Shroff poses: “Is the aim of a safe space to protect us from facing our fears and misunderstandings or does it serve us better as a place where we are able to sit together and explore our own discomfort and responsibility—a space for honesty and for transformation? If

making a space that is safe for us contributes to a lack of safety for our neighbors is this really practicing yoga?" (288).

“Lessons Learned, Lessons Taught,” Dr. Gail Parker

1. Parker describes living in an abusive marriage. What were the various social conditions that kept her (and many others) in abusive relationships? She describes the moment when she realized she had some power to make different choices, writing, “In a moment of profound awareness, I had taken personal responsibility for my own sense of well-being. In an instant I had changed on a deep, fundamental level” (293). Have you ever had moments in your life where something just shifted—and what happened as a result?
2. What happened when Parker started sharing her story of the abusive relationship?
3. Why is it so important/powerful to tell the story, according to Parker? Are there any parts of your story you haven't told yet? Why? Even if you don't tell them publicly, can you tell them to yourself? Someone who is trustworthy? Be sure to review the advice Parker gives about how to safely tell our stories on page 298.
4. Parker writes, “Find your strength. Claim your power. Stand tall. Stand proud. Love yourself. Find your voice. Tell your story. Change the world” (298) Meditate on that for a while. Post it somewhere you can see it everyday. What changes happen when you align with/practice this advice?

“Conclusion: Moving Forward,” Melanie Klein

1. Klein writes, “I hope that you are exposed to newfound and unfamiliar truths with a sense of respect and gratitude for the writers sharing opinions and experiences that differ from yours, thereby expanding your awareness and perspective” (304). What truths have you

- discovered in reading this book? In discussing it with others? How have they expanded your awareness and perspective?
2. Where have you seen facets of your own story reflected throughout this anthology? How did it feel to connect with the stories in that way? What elements of your story were not reflected? How can we continue to expand our yoga world and the diversity of conversations as we move forward?
 3. Klein writes, “It’s our job to do the work, feed the flame, and live the practice. That’s when and where we become agents of change” (304). What are some ways you can both live the practice and become agents of change?
 4. What issue did you read about in this book that you would like to educate yourself more about? How will you do so?
 5. What are some specific ways you can “harness your power” and create change in your community? What are you willing to commit to doing in the next month?