

MOVING WITH Intention



*Take a cleansing breath. Open up your heart.
Shine through the crown of your head.
Set your intention.*

These mantras are common among practitioners of yoga. Could they not also apply to international travelers?

Istou Diallo practices both, having discovered one through the other. Before moving to India to conduct her Fulbright research, she took a few yoga classes for fun. “I didn’t know at the time that yoga would majorly contribute in my journey of becoming more comfortable with my disability and, by extension, myself.”

As someone with a limb difference that affects her arm, Istou knew her yoga practice would look a bit different than her classmates. Still, as she stepped into Chennai’s Rutland Gate Yoga Studio, Istou adapted the poses to fit her body and not the other way around. “It was important for me to remind myself the purpose of my practice: honoring my body and finding community.” She carried this intention with her at the start of each class and for that hour of hatha, any shame seemed to dissipate.

Thankfully, Istou found her second home at Rutland Gate Yoga Studio, where teachers, staff and fellow yogis all welcomed her into the space. With the help of props and guidance from instructors, Istou moved naturally into various ashtanga and vinyasa poses without having to perform or hide herself.

The safety and sanctuary Istou found at the studio was in direct contrast to the environment just outside.

There was the staring. After arriving in Delhi, she was met with stares, and they never faded. More disconcerting still was the frequent shouting from strangers determined to guess Istou’s nationality or migrant status. “Are you from Nigeria? South Africa?”

Name: -----

Istou Diallo

Home Institution: -----

**John Jay College of
Criminal Justice**

Fields of Study: -----

**Forensic Psychology,
Gender Studies**

Programs: -----

**Fulbright-Nehru U.S.
Student Research
Program**

Destination: -----

Chennai, India

they would call. Even acquaintances could not seem to fathom that a Black person could be from the United States. The anti-Blackness Istou experienced was all the more bewildering and frustrating because it was the first time she ever felt hyper-aware of her Blackness. Back home in a city as diverse as New York, a proud first-generation American born to Guinean parents, she didn't think about her Blackness to the same degree, nor did she ever have to convince anyone of her American status. In India, she was fighting for her identity. And she fought alone. "At the time, I was the only Black person in my entire cohort. There was no one that I could really look to or go to, to truly empathize with me in a way that I needed."

That is until Istou had a chance encounter with a local Black woman who was born and raised in India, the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. Istou flooded her with questions about what it was like maneuvering India as a Black woman. Thankfully, the two hit it off and even traveled throughout Northern India together. "It was one of the best experiences I'd had. I felt like I could finally breathe. I didn't realize how much of a huge toll it was feeling so isolated." Immediately after, Istou was introduced to a fellow Black American Fulbright grantee who was visiting nearby Chennai. They immediately clicked, cathartically swapping stories, experiences, and coping strategies. "Representation is so important in all spaces no matter who you are. It feels great to have someone who has gone through similar experiences as you."

Istou's new friend also introduced her to Fulbright Noir. Much in the way that yoga had provided a safe space Istou could honor her body and find community, so too did Fulbright Noir. This digital platform on Instagram, founded by a Black Fulbright alumna was created to connect with other Black Fulbrighters globally, celebrate each other's grants, and share experiences of being Black in different countries.

"It warmed my heart so much to see Black Fulbrighters uplifting one another. Having that representation—even digitally, was amazing." Istou even joined the group as it mobilized together over Zoom. "We just talked about everything that we were feeling, especially in light of all the civil unrest happening right now. It was such an important time for all of us to come together."

With the anti-blackness Istou experienced, she still reminisces on the intimate connections she cultivated; some organized by Fulbright and others by chance. Of the many connections, she often thinks warmly of the generosity of her host family who invited her to celebrate Pongal—a four-day-long harvest festival, celebrated widely in South India. Istou also thinks back on the friendships she valued most,



especially with her next-door neighbors who introduced her to the young adult subculture of India.

There is a lesson here—no experience can be defined on a binary scope, especially an experience as extreme as Istou’s was. Whenever asked how life during her Fulbright in India was, Istou usually responds with transformative. “It’s the only word that accurately describes everything I went through and how nuanced life can be.”

Reflecting on the pre-departure seminars and other preparatory programming, Istou believes there was a missed opportunity to provide a more holistic perception of Black people in India.

“The conversations about culture and what our interactions would be like applied to the white fellows, but I didn’t relate to them. It would have been amazing to have Black representation and not sugar-coat how things would be so I could have mentally prepared.” (See *note at the end of this article.*)

Although disability had taken a back seat to her Blackness in terms of her personal interactions in India, Istou stayed the course executing her Fulbright research on Notions of Disability in Indian Society, examining disability justice work and legislation that took place from region to region. Istou suspects that few Fulbright applications propose research on the topic of disability, which may have set her application apart.

Istou paid particular focus to the strategies by which Indian disabled women combatted stigma, including both personal and political tactics. She recalls learning about a disabled woman who was a respected local leader and implemented initiatives that uplifted

the entire community. Istou also visited a community of disabled women who trained one another in income-generating skills. These women craftily asserted their independence, subverting the societal expectation that women rely on marriage for financial security.

Istou’s Fulbright research may have started as an opportunity to approach disability objectively in an academic way, but fortunately, it started to chip away at any ableism she had internalized.

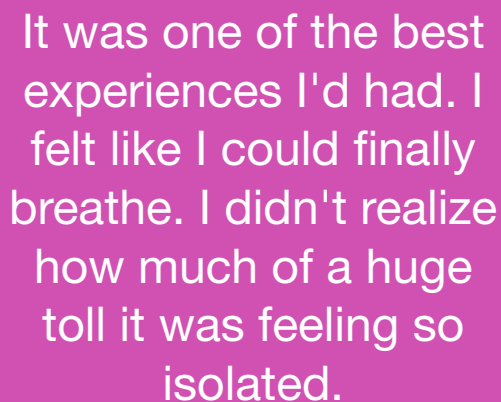
“Before doing my Fulbright research, I couldn’t even look at the word ‘disability’. But I’m growing into my own and becoming more comfortable with my disability, more comfortable with talking about it.”

Since returning to the United States, Istou has been absorbed in all things disability, mining social media,

following disability justice leaders, and watching documentaries like Crip Camp. She’s become more attuned to spaces that could improve on disability inclusion even within the disability space itself. “Having that conversation is what will bring more awareness not just for disabled people, but non-disabled people as well. It’s extremely important that we all understand disability because it’s global. It is very human.”

Her newfound passion extends to the work and research she’s currently doing. Having graduated from John Jay College with a B.A. in Forensic Psychology, she went on to work at a global think tank popularizing prison reform efforts worldwide.

During her time there, she became extremely interested in exploring the under-examined topic of disabled incarcerated people, including those who entered the carceral



It was one of the best experiences I'd had. I felt like I could finally breathe. I didn't realize how much of a huge toll it was feeling so isolated.

system already disabled and those who become disabled while imprisoned. Her findings have added new context to a familiar conclusion: “Culturally and structurally, we weren’t meant to be in these spaces.”

And she still practices yoga.

“Like my Fulbright research exploring ways to combat ableism in personal and political ways, practicing yoga has definitely been the way I’ve personally combatted ableism. It has been liberating in many ways, and I am so grateful that it happened during my Fulbright.” ■

Note: In order to better serve diverse Fulbrighters and all Fulbright grantees, the Fulbright Program provides an extensive group of online pre-departure resources addressing diversity and inclusion. The Program also provides pre-departure orientation and in-country support to assist Fulbrighters in managing identities abroad.



Fulbright Affinity Groups

Inspired by the success of Fulbright Noir to connect and celebrate Fulbright’s Black grantees and alumni over Instagram, additional communities of Fulbrighters have since created identity-based accounts that together form the Fulbright Diversity Collective. While not officially affiliated with or endorsed by the Fulbright Program, the Collective provides platforms for diverse Fulbrighters to share their achievements, stories, and experiences with one another and the broader Fulbright community. From ‘Zines to story spotlights to virtual happy hours, follow these groups on Instagram (and beyond!) to learn more about what they have to offer.



Fulbright Access connects Fulbrighters with disabilities to each other and to accessibility resources throughout their Fulbright grant period. @FulbrightAccess



Fulbright Families expands knowledge about applying for the Fulbright program and traveling with dependents. @FulbrightFamilies



Fulbright HBCU highlights the stories of grantees and alumni who attended HBCUs and increases student participation in the Fulbright Program. @Fulbright.HBCU



Fulbright LatinX is an inclusive community that highlights the achievements of LatinX Fulbright scholars and encourages more LatinX scholars to apply for Fulbright. @FulbrightLatinX



Fulbright Lotus centers on promoting and supporting Asian Fulbrighters by raising awareness and visibility for issues the community faces. @FulbrightLotus



Fulbright Noir is a platform and community of Black Fulbrighters committed to highlighting the experiences and projects of Black grantees within the Fulbright Program. @FulbrightNoir



Fulbright Prism empowers LGBTQ Fulbrighters to be “out in the world” by pooling resources, maintaining a networking directory, and planning events. @FulbrightPrism



Fulbright Salam showcases the diversity of cultures, interests, and experiences of Muslim Fulbright scholars and educators. @Fulbright.Salam

For more information and examples about Diversity and Inclusion in the Fulbright Program, please see <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/about/diversity-inclusion>