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Introduction: South Asian Voices on Yoga

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When we were asked to be guest editors for the fifth issue of *Race and Yoga*, both of us were very excited for the opportunity to explore and spotlight South Asian voices in the field. South Asian perspectives have been incongruously deficient or tokenized in critical discourses on yoga in the West despite the fact that yoga is a living spiritual tradition that grew from thousands of years of South Asian cultural knowledge and philosophical thought. We believe that the frequent erasure of South Asian perspectives deprives the discipline of the rich conversations on yoga and power within our communities. Conversely, since its inaugural issue, *Race and Yoga* has featured South Asian voices, and this vital issue builds on and expands that ongoing work.

Before we offer a review of the writings featured in this issue, we would like to introduce ourselves to the readers and present our stakes in the conversations represented here within.

Lakshmi Nair

I am coming from the point of view of a South Asian yoga practitioner and educator. I have been teaching yoga in Denver, Colorado for fourteen years, and for the past six years, I have been offering a yoga teacher-training for Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color (BIPOC). I am a co-founder and member-owner of Satya Yoga Cooperative, the first BIPOC-owned and operated yoga co-op in the US. I contributed a personal narrative, “When Even Spirit Has No Place to Call Home: Cultural Appropriation, Microaggressions, and Structural Racism in the Yoga Workplace”, to *Race and Yoga* 4.1 (2019), and was invited to be a guest editor for this year’s special cluster. For me, yoga has been an integral part of my healing from the traumas of racism and patriarchy. Yoga has always been extremely personal and intimately tied to my experience as a woman of color in the US and as a South Asian woman. After years of trying and not fitting into the Western yoga landscape, I decided to create a space that felt healing-focused and authentic to me. However, undertaking this work required me to consider my own positionality within the South Asian context as a person with caste privilege. I have had to question my unfettered access to the traditions and practices that have been so liberating for me but have excluded so many of our own people. I like many of the authors in this issue have had to grapple with the inherent contradictions of looking for liberation in a spiritual tradition that has grown out of the cultural muck of the multiple oppressions that shape South Asian power structures.

Arushi Singh

I initially encountered yoga as a young adult in New Delhi, India, while recovering from a dance-related injury. In the last twelve years since this incident, yoga has consistently been a vital source of my physical and mental well-being. I am indebted to yoga for helping me cultivate a deep sense of self-preservation and self-reflexivity, which is in sharp contrast to the oppressive and patriarchal training I received as a classical Bharatanatyam dancer for two decades. Six years ago, I relocated to Los Angeles, California and so although I am a newcomer when it comes to engaging with the dynamics of yoga in the West, I, like many of the authors in this issue, have had a particularly disenchanting and frustrating experience navigating the escapist and hyper-commercialized yoga studio culture of Los Angeles. Ironically, I have caught myself holding my breath with anxiety due to the racialized and gendered microaggressions I have frequently experienced being the only South Asian person and woman of color in yoga classes, rather than allowing my breath to flow freely. Moreover, as a scholar and educator of South Asian culture and performance, I critically engage with and write about how physical and movement traditions in the subcontinent, such as dance and yoga, are shaped by and mobilize structures of colonialism, caste-based social hierarchies and exclusions, the discourses of nationalism and regionalism, as well as questions around performances of gender – several issues which are reflected in the writings of the authors in this issue.

About the Issue

When we embarked upon this project, we had no idea that 2020 would bring boundaries and borders between countries, identities, even interpersonal distance to the forefront of our collective consciousness while simultaneously blurring and fortifying them. As international borders closed and we all donned masks over our faces to protect ourselves from contagion, centuries of social injustice were unmasked. Lockdown measures could not keep people from pouring out into the streets in protest in both the US and India.

In the US, the brutal murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor showed us in no uncertain terms that the virus was not the biggest threat that some of our people face. Black breath can be stolen by the State, and the four walls of a home provides no safety for Black people. A virus which does not discriminate revealed the extent to which American society does as Black, Indigenous, and Latinx peoples continue to be infected and die at nearly three times the rate of White Americans due to systemic inequality (APM Research Lab 2020; CDC 2020).

On the other side of the world, in India, 2020 began with massive protests against the Islamophobic Citizenship Amendment Act, again highlighting the violence of institutionalized discrimination (Roy 2019; Sengupta 2020). Later in the year, protests erupted again over the Hathras Rape Case, which unveiled the ugliness of the millennia-old nexus of casteism and patriarchy that makes the Dalit woman the most vulnerable and expendable person in Indian society (Kumar 2020; Wankhede 2020).

The globalized field of yoga does not have clean hands in all of this. In the West, yoga studios and influencers, already reeling from the economic impact of the pandemic, are having to take a stand on Black Lives Matter and increasingly answer to accusations of cultural appropriation. While in India, yoga is emerging as a key political instrument for the Modi government to consolidate and advance a Hindu supremacist national agenda within and across Indian borders (Mazumdar 2018). At this time of extreme political upheaval and transformation

across these two hemispheres, it feels more urgent than ever to have a special issue examining South Asian perspectives on yoga.

The thought-provoking personal narratives and articles included in this issue illuminate yoga's imbrications in networks of white supremacy, caste-based violence, anti-Muslim bigotry, racialized capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. At the same time, authors explore and re-imagine the liberatory potential of yoga as a spiritual and healing modality. They highlight how yoga is based on and engenders the hybridity and fluidity of South Asian bodies, identities, and cultural-artistic practices.

We begin the issue with Sheena Sood's "Towards a Critical Embodiment of Decolonizing Yoga", in which she grapples with "the contradicting narratives of the *colonizer* and the *colonized* that are yoked within [her] ancestry" as a Desi American yoga practitioner belonging to an upper caste Hindu-Punjabi family. In recounting her family's syncretic cultural history, Sood provokes us to consider the appropriation of yoga and other folk practices from the South Asian subcontinent such as *Unani* medicine and *Ayurveda*, as a complex and layered process of power and domination. She exposes how yoga, on one hand, is embroiled in the structures of European and US settler-colonialism and white supremacy, and on the other hand, is vexed with class, caste and religious hierarchies perpetuated by Hindu Brahminical supremacy in the South Asian subcontinent and diaspora, which includes anti-poor, anti-Dalit, and Islamophobic social practices. What is particularly potent about Sheena's piece is that she offers us a "living checklist" for moving toward "embodying a decolonized yoga", which includes a series of guiding principles and actions that are grounded in resisting these histories of oppression.

Next, in "How Prince Taught Me Yoga", Megna Paula vividly describes her experience learning to play the guitar, prompted by the musical genius of Prince, and how it led her to realize and cultivate mind-body harmony in her yoga practice. Paula describes how returning to a "beginner's mind makes salient the process of *samyama* (a combination of *dharana* or concertation, *dhyana* or meditation, and *samadhi* or union) outlined in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. Sutra 3:33 states that through the process of *samyama* all things can be learned: *pratibhava sarvam*. The practice of mastering a new skill refreshed this teaching when *asana* practice had grown too easy and stale through years of experience.

In "Decolonizing Yoga: Restoring My Seat of Consciousness", Sophia Ayesha Ansari shares her process of harnessing yoga to address and recover from the intergenerational trauma of belonging to a subcontinent marred by the violence of British colonialism and the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. While Sood and Ansari have this history in common, the latter speaks from the perspective of a woman of mixed heritage, French/Spanish and Indian Sufi Muslim, raised in Wales, who grew up with a rich dose of Delhi Sufi-Vedic stories and traditions.

In her personal narrative, Ansari laments the sum of cultural erasures she has encountered while learning and practicing yoga in the contemporary UK: 1) the absence of people of South Asian heritage in teacher-training contexts; 2) the overlooking of South Asian modes of knowing and learning based on oral and experiential transmission and storytelling (such as kitchen-table learning); and, 3) the "horizontal racism" she experiences as an Indian-Muslim yoga practitioner in the South Asian community, which she believes parallels the increasing politicization of yoga by Indian nationalists in the diaspora and subcontinent who claim it as an exclusively "Hindu" practice by removing its Sufi-Islamic elements.

Extending this line of thinking, the authors of the last two pieces in this issue examine how yoga is reconfigured to uphold, justify and perpetuate the dynamics of colonialism and Hindu supremacy. In “Travelers, Translators, and Spiritual Mothers: Yoga, Gender, and Colonial Histories”, Narin Hassan focuses on the transnational development and circulation of yoga by focusing on the work of a group of Western women traveling to India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By examining popular colonial travel accounts, lectures, yoga manuals and biographical references penned by these women, Hassan offers a historical analysis of the authoritative role that Western, white (and white-passing) women have established as experts, producers, and consumers of yoga via commentaries and reconstructions of South Asian spaces, healing practices, bodily rituals, and spiritual activities.

In particular, Hassan attends to the paradoxes and erasures underlying these women’s “translations” of yoga and its locality. For instance, she notes that in their search for yoga’s “authenticity”, these women treat India as a site of “immersive spirituality and potential transformation” while at the same time holding in contempt or attempting to control and “reform” Indian embodiments, such as the figures of the *fakir* and the *yogi*. Hassan argues that the translation practices of these women reflect and advance colonial superiority and domination (especially their superimposition of respectability politics). These women rely on exploiting and fueling pre-existing social fissures along gender, class, caste and religious lines that are endemic to the subcontinent, including the oppressive Brahminical practice of untouchability, its vile rhetoric of Islamophobia, and conservative Hindu traditional norms and values surrounding gender and the family. Moreover, Hassan gestures towards how these colonial histories of white womanhood in yoga continue to dominate, inform, and define contemporary yoga discourses, practices of self-care, and concepts of Indian culture that globally circulate today.

Finally, in “Choreographing Tolerance: Narendra Modi, Hindu Nationalism, and International Yoga Day”, Anusha Lakshmi examines the contemporary role and significance of yoga within the discourse of (Hindu) tolerance propagated by the Indian government under the leadership of Narendra Modi. She situates Modi’s deployment of yoga for nationalist purposes as part of a longer history of yoga and somatic nationalism in India. Beginning with a choreographic analysis of the 2015 International Yoga Day spectacle led by Modi in the capital city of New Delhi, Lakshmi reflects on how the Indian Prime Minister capitalizes on yoga’s physical and ideological flexibility (and its associations with unity, harmony, well-being and one-ness) to showcase how he – and by extension his Hindu nationalist government – accommodates and tolerates other religions and faiths.

Lakshmi argues that Modi’s posturing of yoga as a secular practice is hypocritical to say the least, as it works to obscure the growing inflexibilities of his Hindu supremacist regime, including his government’s enactment of genocidal and settler-colonial policies and actions that violently marginalize and oppress Muslims in India and Indian-occupied Kashmir. Instead, Modi’s use of yoga to performatively enact political unity is primarily purposed towards maintaining his power and hegemony. Through a historicization of Modi’s anti-Muslim nationalist agenda over the years and a discursive analysis of the debates following International Yoga Day, Lakshmi vividly shows us the dangerous consequences of yoga as an instrument of *Hindutva*, a majoritarian political ideology that assumes the cultural hegemony of Hindu beliefs and practices in Indian society.

In putting together this issue, we felt affirmed and strengthened in our conviction that South Asian voices deeply enliven and enrich the global yoga discourse. We are pleased to note that all of the authors and peer reviewers for this issue are South Asian women, as are we as the

guest editors, which makes this issue an especially important contribution. We wish to express our sincerest gratitude to each one of them for gifting their time and expertise to this endeavor, which we hope will pave the way for more South Asian normativity in both the growing field of critical yoga studies and the Western yoga world. We hope you enjoy this issue!

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