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Race & Yoga

Towards a Critical Embodiment of Decolonizing Yoga

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As a South Asian (or Desi) American yoga practitioner and descendant from an upper-caste Hindu-Punjabi family, I have witnessed the simultaneous erasure and commodified appropriation of my ancestral spiritual traditions by European and US-based settler colonial, white supremacist cultures. In an effort to reclaim healing practices for personal and community healing, I have sought guidance in decolonizing my ancestors' spiritual traditions. However, this journey has not been a one-way voyage of merely seeing my ancestors as perpetual victims of colonial misappropriation. It has also meant seeing my ancestors as perpetrators of oppressive harm and awakening to the realization that in order for these healing traditions to be purposed toward embodied freedom for all of humanity and Mother Earth, they must be wholly decolonized from the interlocking logics of settler colonialism, racialized slavery and Orientalism (Smith 2012), as well as from the structures that uphold Hindutva and Brahmanical supremacist ideologies. To attain true spiritual enlightenment as a yogi, I see it as my *dharma* (or duty) to: contemplate the contradicting narratives of the *colonizer* and *colonized* that are yoked within my ancestry; correct the misrepresentation of Desis as eternal victims of colonial brutality; and, purpose my spiritual practice toward politicized action against state and structural violence.

Our Ancestral Healing Medicines Cross 'Borders'

"The way of the sword doesn't belong to any one nation. Knowledge of the arts belong to us all" (*Avatar: The Last Airbender* 2007).

My family is not big on oral history, but a few years ago, my eldest uncle told me a story about my great-grandfather (his grandfather) that left me questioning the often established narratives of race and ethnicity that are commonly ascribed to ancient healing traditions. Nobath Rai Sood, my great-grandfather, or *Bade Papaji*, was born in the late 1800s to a Hindu Punjabi family in the village of Morinda (present-day India) during the British occupation of South Asia. Early in his life, Bade Papaji did not have steady work, but desperately wanted to learn a trade. He knew of a respected Muslim healer (known as a *hakim*) who lived in Morinda and practiced Unani medicine – an antiquated wisdom tradition often referred to as Arabian or Islamic medicine.[1] One day, Bade Papaji asked the *hakim* if he would teach the practice of Unani medicine to him. The *hakim* agreed, and soon, Bade Papaji embarked on the lifelong journey of apprenticing as an Unani practitioner. A few years later, Bade Papaji opened his own Unani medicine shop, in Morinda: *Gopal Dawakhana*. He trained his first son, Madhan Gopal Sood, (also my grandfather or *Papaji*) in the Unani tradition. *Gopal Dawakhana* operated as a family

business for multiple generations in Morinda as my uncles and father went on to receive training in this medicinal practice.

Morinda is fewer than 250 kilometers from the contemporary geo-political border between India and Pakistan. However, this barrier has not always existed. On August 14th, 1947, the South Asian region saw a decades-long freedom struggle against the British colonizers finally amount to independence. In the same breath – at the "midnight hour" transition to August 15th – the formerly colonized people saw the lands of South Asia partitioned, or split, into separate nation-states: (East and West) Pakistan and India. From the moment these nations gained independence from the British, this partitioned "line demarcating territory," governance and rigid alliance to "homogenized statist nationalisms" has underscored how stories of religion, culture, and ethnicity are shared, practiced, and passed down across generations (Walia 2013, 7-8).

Prior to and during the period of European colonialism in South Asia (mid-1800s to 1947), there was no India; nor was there a Pakistan. Bade Papaji was raised in a Punjab that was home to Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, Parsis, and Indigenous tribes who organized across their differences to resist and survive British colonialism. Although these groups lived amongst each other before the socio-political construction of the Indian and Pakistani border, their existence was not one of pure harmony. *Prior* to, and *during*, European colonization, these groups experienced religious conflict and abided by the *caste system* – a Hindu-based religious structure of oppression that assigns people social positions and notions of "spiritual purity" at birth – to uphold brutal hierarchies (Equality Labs 2018). They used *Brahmanical patriarchy*, a supremacist structure and ideology that privileges Brahmin caste families, particularly men, through practices and rituals to codify violence and discrimination against lower caste, Dalit and Adivasi communities (Yengde 2018; 2019).[2]

When a colonial border was imposed in the region, it changed more than just the cartography of the maps. The region of Punjab was literally ripped apart by a socially constructed border drawn by the British. Pakistan was created as an Islamic nation for Muslims who sought safety from religious persecution after living in a Hindu dominant society; India was founded, in theory, as a secular nation for multiple religious groups. Yet, the popular claims of India as a secular state were overshadowed by the Hindutva (or Hindu nationalist) groups determined to construct a nation centered around Hindu values and teachings (Vanaik 2017). The 1947 Partition that split the South Asian region into separate nation-states catapulted various ethnic and religious groups into chaotic violence, displacing between twelve to fifteen million people over a four year period (Walia 2013). Partition exacerbated the oppressive hierarchies that preceded European colonialism, factionalized diverse communities, and erased the bonds that survived British colonial brutalities.

Today, there are two Punjabs, one in India and one in Pakistan. Morinda is located in a part of Punjab that was incorporated into India because of its majority Hindu and Sikh populations. Meanwhile, cities like Lahore went to Pakistan because of its majority Muslim population. Millions of Muslims were forced to flee parts of the newly created India for safety in Pakistan, and millions of Hindus, like my maternal grandparents, were forced to flee cities like Lahore for safety in India. In the years after the 1947 Partition, villages and cities in India, like Morinda, became predominantly inhabited by Hindus and Sikhs, and towns in Pakistan became homes for Muslims.

Figure 1 – Maternal grandparents, Nanaji and Naniji, who were both born in Lahore (present-day Pakistan) prior to 1947 Partition. Similar to Muslims who were living in present-day India prior to 1947, after British colonizers ended the century-long occupation of the South Asian region, Sheena's Nanaji and Naniji fled Lahore for refuge in India (Photo Credit: Unknown).

One of the migrants who was forced to flee Morinda for safety in Pakistan was the *hakim* under whom my Bade Papaji studied Unani medicine, a healer whose generous legacy and relationship to my family was unknown to me until four years ago. I find it remarkable that I have yet to meet a family member who recalls this *hakim*'s name. Although the shop has since closed and Unani medicine is rarely practiced as a healing tradition across the subcontinent, I often wonder what my family's trajectory would have been were it not for this *hakim* who, during an era of British colonial occupation, chose to share the ancient tradition of "Islamic medicine" with my Bade Papaji, a Hindu man. May his legacy as a healer, who dared to cross religious boundaries to share his ancestral medicine tradition, endure.

As a child, rather than hearing about the ways that Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and other religious groups collectivized ancestral and cultural practices like Unani medicine, yoga and Ayurveda across differences, I was largely indoctrinated with narratives about how fundamentally different Indians and Pakistanis, or Hindus and Muslims, are from each other (culturally, spiritually, ethically, etc.). Since these nations first came into formation, the relationship between India and Pakistan has been characterized by cultural dissonance, war, and imminent conflict. Hence, I recall extended family members routinely reinforcing Islamophobic ideologies by issuing insulting remarks and epithets toward Muslims. I learned about South Asian culture, Indian politics, and my ancestral history, in ways that normalized contemporary nation-state borders and essentialized notions of India as a "Hindu" nation. For example, although my maternal grandparents were born in present-day Lahore, I was never taught to

identify as *Pakistani* as well as *Indian*. The violence of the border is apparent in the ways it taught me to sever myself from belonging to my full ancestral lineage.

Now, I imagine many of you are wondering why I am sharing this story about my grandfather's training in Islamic medicine in an essay about decolonizing yoga. After all, Unani medicine is not yoga. And yoga is not Unani medicine. Although we cannot draw broad conclusions from my Bade Papaji's story, it is apparent that the transmission of cultural practices amongst people in South Asia prior to the 1947 Partition occurred more fluidly than I was led to believe. Cultural traditions are often taught to us as belonging to only one ethnic or religious community, and as rigidly fixed in time, but the reality is that the narratives surrounding these traditions have always shifted boundaries according to social and historical context, and political power. Although many artistic and folk practices like Unani medicine, yoga, and Ayurveda are routinely and mistakenly whitewashed by Western pop culture, the reactionary attempt to define yoga as a philosophy and practice that belongs to India and Hinduism, even by South Asian and South Asian American people, is equally, if not more, dangerous.

Bade Papaji's story illustrates the degree to which the formation of the nation-state has factionalized differently racialized, ethnic, and religious groups from being able to recall how holistic Indigenous traditions were once more openly exchanged across boundaries. Rather than honor the mind, body, and spirit as one – or teach us about the interconnectedness of humanity, colonial projects have convinced the mind that we are our nationality. These post-colonial borders and nationalist agendas prevent us from learning about how our ancestral medicines were communally shared across communities, emphasizing the notion that we are to choose one identity. If these modern barriers inhibit us from learning about our shared histories, how else might they keep us from embodied visions of decolonial liberation?

South Asia is a vast region that is home to a number of Indigenous cultures. Today, the violence between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Dalits endures under a Hindu nationalist and caste supremacist social structure. Brahmins and Hindu fundamentalists circulate fabricated narratives claiming that yoga's roots can be traced back to "ancient India." Bade Papaji's story challenges me to consider the historical blending of cultures and to interrogate why interpretations of "ancient India" are only told through a Hindu nationalist and Brahmanical supremacist lens. His narrative pushes me to ask what other cultures also contributed to the evolution of *yoga*, historically and in its current iterations. Was yoga born to a static, monolithic Hindu culture, or was it born, as anti-casteist Bahujan activist Prachi Patankar (2014) claims, to a diversity of Indigenous and ancestral cultures that inhabited the South Asian region? On a related note, to what degree did ancient African civilizations influence the evolution of yoga's culture? *This essay is motivated by my conviction that although dominant Hindu supremacist cultures root yoga's history in rigid ethnonationalist narratives, yoga's universal truths around breath, embodiment, and spiritual enlightenment cannot be contained by organized religious markers or post-colonial borders that seek to cage and partition its liberatory purpose*. I believe we can dig beyond the dominant narratives that erase Indigenous Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi communities from the knowledge systems and healing medicines that their ancestors codified, and that upper-caste Hindus appropriated and weaponized for their own benefit.

Nobath Rai Sood's daughter-in-law was my grandmother Biji. Biji was the first person to teach me Sanskrit through chanting, pranayama (breathing techniques), and prayer. In a 2018 essay, I write that the mantras Biji taught me were crucial to my personal and spiritual growth as a South Asian American growing up in the predominantly white suburbs near Atlanta, Georgia (Sood 2018). As much as I appreciate Biji's teachings, I also see the gaps in her teaching of

Sanskrit chants. As a descendant of upper caste Hindus, Biji was never raised to question the history of Sanskrit as an oppressive language that Brahmins violently punished Dalits for even uttering (Addanki 2019). Like many Hindus of my generation, she never taught me how embedded casteism and ethnonationalism are in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy or about the ways that our caste community of Kshatriyas enabled Brahmin oppressors to continue tyrannizing lower caste communities.

Figure 2 – Paternal Relatives from Morinda and descendants of Nobath Rai Sood, at a family gathering in the US in 1992. Sheena is surrounded by her Biji (paternal grandmother), parents, siblings, uncles, and aunty (Photo Credit: Unknown).

The truth is that woven into many of our family legacies are narratives of the *colonizer* and the *colonized*. It is up to us to take these inherited legacies and use them as tools to awaken to deeper ancestral truths, rather than bypass them. In order to heal and transform ancestral legacies of oppressive harm, we must be committed to awakening to the multiplicity of these truths. There was once a time when I was unwilling to acknowledge the Brahmanical patriarchal and Hindutva layers of yoga's antiquated past. I wanted to believe there was an ancient and pre-modern yoga that was flawless and untainted and inherently liberatory. Part of me still wants to subscribe to such a romanticized narrative because it is easier to declare myself a victim of white supremacy than it is to confront my legacy as a perpetrator of harm. However, by refusing to recognize that yoga carries its own legacy of violent and oppressive brutality, I am robbing myself, and all those whom I share this embodied Indigenous tradition with, an opportunity to evolve into the highest and most liberated version of ourselves.

Learning these otherwise marginalized histories has forced me to confront my own networks of privilege, including my family's positionality as a non-Brahmin oppressor caste (Kshatriya). Religious and spiritual teachings within my ancestral traditions have been

supplanted with rituals and celebrations that continue to remain oppressive and dehumanizing to Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi communities, and threatening to the lives of Muslims around the globe (Hossain and Soundararajan 2020). These stories also push me to contemplate my family's positionality within upper class South Asian American immigrants whose migration, citizenship, and wealth are inextricably linked to South Asia's legacy of caste-based violence, and to the US's legacy of anti-Black racism and Indigenous erasure. And finally, they have pushed me toward struggles that seek to abolish caste hierarchies and address the Islamophobic policies that pervade the US, Indian, and global foreign policies. It is these interrogations that steer me toward a decolonized spirituality.

Colonialism as a Layered Structure

> I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out … I'm talking about millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life—from life, from the dance, from wisdom (Césaire 2001, 43).

In his historic *Discourse on Colonialism* essay describing the brutal, systemic destruction of colonized societies via racial capitalism and colonialism, Césaire imparts an eloquent vision of *anticoloniality* that taps into the imaginations and potential of what Indigenous life, religious practices, and their wisdom could have offered humanity across time. He makes clear that *colonization* is a process of conquest and genocide where one group of settlers imposes a colony on one or more Indigenous community's land with the intent of taking power, land, and resources. Beyond being physically, culturally and economically violent, Césaire argues that colonialism is also an act of psychological, mental, and spiritual warfare (2001). European colonizers often eradicated, or as Blu Wakpa argues "eclipsed" and "temporarily obscured" (2018, ii), Indigenous cultural traditions around the globe: we can see contemporary evidence of this in parts of South America where Indigenous Incan civilizations once flourished, along the coast of western Africa where Yoruba informed people's faith traditions, in South Asia where Tantric, Vedic, and tribal knowledge guided cultural norms and practices, across an array of native cultures in present-day North and Central America, and in many more Indigenous societies across the globe. As we continue to witness the destructive impact that US and European-led imperialist discourse and neo-colonial policies have on formerly and presently colonized societies, Césaire's poetic dialect continues to inspire present-day decolonial and racial justice movements.

The historic anti-colonial movements that erupted throughout the 20th century continue to galvanize present-day struggles for social justice, particularly in the yoga world where South Asians, South Asian Americans, and people of the Desi diaspora are initiating campaigns to "decolonize yoga." As important as these campaigns are in challenging the commodified misappropriation of yoga by neoliberal and white supremacist interests, my concern is that they also run the risk of glorifying and mythologizing our pre-colonial pasts. Many of these campaigns are ahistorical and more decolonial in rhetoric than in practice. For example, popularly embedded in modern campaigns to reclaim yoga are the assumptions that the pre-colonial practices and antiquated rituals are authentic, liberatory, and inherently pure. I have participated in many panels and group chats where practitioners who use the rhetoric of

"decolonizing" assert yoga to be a 5,000-year-old medicine or spiritual tradition belonging to ancient India or South Asia. While elements of contemporary hatha yoga practices have been influenced by a diverse array of Indigenous wisdom, similar to Andrea Jain (Jain 2014), I am skeptical of movements that insinuate the spiritual tradition of yoga to be rooted in an essentialized "ancient Indian" lineage. In a way, these campaigns run the risk of validating the Hindu nationalist assertions that that representatives of the Indian state deploy in depicting yoga as an "invaluable gift of [India's] ancient tradition" (United Nations General Assembly resolution 69/131 2014). Undeniably, South Asians have been robbed of "extraordinary possibilities" through the experience of British and European colonizers ravaging and exploiting their lands, people, and spiritual, religious, and cultural traditions. Still, the framework *decoloniality* does not imply a shift to *pre-coloniality,* for *pre-colonial is not synonymous* with *anti-colonial*. When existing campaigns fail to recognize that South Asians also cultivated and perpetuated their own systems of oppression prior to European colonialism, via Brahmanical patriarchy, Hindu nationalism, and Islamophobia, they also perpetuate a form of colonial erasure and spiritual bypass. While the devastating and enduring impact of US and European colonization on our material and spiritual realities is certainly catastrophic and ongoing, the notion that *decolonizing yoga* ought to imply a robotic return to the old ways is also a limiting and harmful assumption. By making *multicultural inclusion*, *representation*, and *diversity* the core objectives, existing campaigns to "decolonize" and "honor" yoga's roots offer identity-based solutions that fall short of anti-authoritarian, holistic liberation. By rooting yoga and South Asian people in a pre-colonial, romanticized past, these movements fall short of actually reckoning with their own internal systems of domination that must be dismantled to achieve true decoloniality.

I understand *decolonization* to be a process of Indigenous cultures reclaiming self-determination and rights over their lands, governments, and regimes. I understand it to be a long-term process of Indigenous communities divesting and healing from the cultural, spiritual, linguistic, and psychological damage that endures due to colonial structures. Harsha Walia explains that "decolonization is a framework that offers a positive and prefigurative vision … reflect[ing] the society we wish to live in … Decolonization grounds us in an understanding that we have already inherited generations of evolving wisdom about living freely and communally while stewarding the Earth from anticolonial communing practices, anticapitalist workers' cooperatives, and antioppressive communities of care, and in particular matriarchal Indigenous traditions" (Walia 2013, 11). Walia also offers that, "[d]ecolonization demands the valuing of Indigenous sovereignty in its material, psychological, epistemological, and spiritual forms" (2013, 11). Walia's text implies that, while in some instances, decolonization can mean reclaiming Indigenous practices, or "re-Indigenizing communities",[3] it can also mean not glorifying the past and reimagining a future that yearns to be built.

I believe that as much as yoga has historically and contemporarily been weaponized, it also carries liberatory potential (Sood 2020). In order to disrupt present-day iterations of yoga as a globally commodified and colonized tradition, existing decolonial campaigns must resist the urge to continue using yoga as a tool of "spiritual bypass" (Masters 2010; Wellwood 2000). Instead, we must use yoga as a tool to reckon with the brutal violence that has been, and continues to be, committed by our ancestors and networks in the name of yoga and Hinduism. This requires that we develop critical analyses of the oppressive hierarchies that have dominated South Asian culture and that we be able to hold multiple, contradictory truths from our lineages. The trauma and violence of Brahmanical patriarchy, Hinduism, white supremacy, colonialism,

and capitalism lives in and is carried through our genes. I argue that the colonization of yoga is evident not simply in the white supremacist leadership that dominates its circulation, but also in the ways it is packaged as a tool for neoliberal capitalism and ethnonational militarism by people and institutions of across the racial and global spectrum (Sood 2019). For instance, yoga and mindfulness programs are routinely used in military and policing programs across the globe, by Israeli Defense Force soldiers in occupied Palestine, US law enforcement police officers who brutalize Black and Latinx bodies, and in the Indian Armed Forces in occupied Kashmir (Steinberg 2015; "HOME | Coptoyoga" n.d.; Covai Post Network 2018; "Masada Sunrise Yoga, Ein Gedi Oasis, and Dead Sea Wellness Experience Tour – Tourist Israel" n.d.). If we truly hope to decolonize yoga, we have to reach beyond flattened identity-based critiques of who is represented in yoga and challenge the structures of state violence that perpetuate its colonization. Practitioners must use breath and embodied movement to contemplate the ethical stakes regarding the embeddedness of militarism, caste, and Dalit oppression in some of the very yogic texts and teachings that are lauded and studied in present-day yoga trainings. Taking a critical approach to studying and reflecting on our ancestral legacies can help us tap into an embodied and imaginative spirituality that is truly liberatory for everyone.

Figure 3 & 4 – "Sheena purposes yoga for collective liberation by practicing in community. In these images, Sheena is pictured leading a yoga session at Philly Anarchist Black Cross's annual Running Down the Walls 5K fundraiser in September 2020, and facilitating a one-on-one chair yoga session with long-time MOVE member and revolutionary, Ramona Africa, during her journey to recover from cancer" (June 2019) (Photo Credit: Philly Anarchist Black Cross Team Member and Sandra Joy).

Decolonizing Yoga

A couple years ago, I started curating "Decolonizing Yoga" workshops for yoga studio teacher training programs and online social justice organizing forums. I could no longer dismiss the realization that, as Desis, we were not going deep enough in our criticisms of race and representation in the yoga industries. We were failing to challenge the casteist and ethnonationalist layers of this spiritual tradition.

I curated these spaces because I want us to develop moral frameworks for our spiritual traditions that can heal and evolve us as individuals and as a human species to live more harmoniously with each other and our sacred planet. I want us to think about the colonization of yoga as a layered process that does not begin with Europeans and white supremacy; it is also one that has been layered with class, caste, and religious hierarchies like Hindu supremacy and Islamophobia. We need to continue to get honest about the diasporic fantasies of yoga's

antiquated past so that we can dream into the future. I am ready to pour my radical imagination into birthing a liberatory and abolitionist framework for yoga.

The following is an evolving, living checklist that I often share with yoga practitioners and participants in these workshops. The list is not exhaustive; it is a working document that I use to keep me accountable to embody the liberatory yoga philosophy that I long for in this world. It challenges me to recognize where and when ego shows up in my mind and body and practice. I use it to evolve toward my highest self and to contemplate what it means to make spiritual liberation a reality for all of us. My sincere hope is that some of these principles resonate with you – wherever you are with your practice of yoga – and that you are able to wrestle with the implication of these affirmations in your life, relationships, daily practices, and political actions.

Consider reading these principles in the most embodied way available to you – perhaps slowly at your altar, in a sacred space, with a group of close comrades, or in a yoga class. If you can, pause in between reading each principle, and take a deep breath on the interims. Allow yourself to notice where you feel each word and syllable landing, where discomfort arises, and where freedom expands as you peruse the list. These sacred breaths are the first intentions toward embodying a decolonized yoga.

1. *A decolonized yoga* pays homage to the land upon which one is practicing and to the Indigenous caretakers and tribes who have been and are being murdered and displaced by colonial structures (Blu Wakpa 2018)
2. *A decolonized yoga* examines yoga's ancestral lineage through a critical lens;
3. *A decolonized yoga* honors the Indigenous and heterogeneous cultures around the globe, including in ancient African civilizations, that have contributed to yoga's evolution and preservation;
4. *A decolonized yoga* recognizes yoga as broadly originated by Indigenous South Asian cultures but refuses to essentialize its history through ethno-nationalistic frameworks;
5. *A decolonized yoga* critically engages with classical Indian and Hindu philosophical texts instead of accepting them as inherently just and liberatory;
6. *A decolonized yoga* disrupts dominant cultural narratives of yoga (via colonial, religious ethnonationalist, and Brahmanical casteist power structures);
7. *A decolonized yoga* reckons with embedded caste, Islamophobic, and ethnonationalist ideologies and violence in yoga spaces and resists the tendency to use yoga as a tool of spiritual bypass;
8. *A decolonized* disputes whitewashed explanations about and appropriations of yoga culture/history;
9. *A decolonized yoga* understands the experiences of poverty, suffering, and oppression in the world to be generated by structures of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, casteism, neocolonialism, and imperialism, and contemplates how to eliminate suffering in the world by that aim to dismantle exploitative economic and social systems;
10. *A decolonized yoga* honors the interconnectedness of humanity, all living beings, and nature, on and off the mat, through the relationships we facilitate and movements and communities with which we align ourselves;

11. *A decolonized yoga* recognizes and names the harm perpetuated in the name of Sanskrit across time, and critically considers whether to use language, Sanskrit chants, clothing, and rituals that are not part of a cultural lineage that one's ancestors are rooted in;[4]
12. *A decolonized yoga* disrupts the competitive and commodified packaging of yoga;
13. *A decolonized yoga* challenges how yoga is weaponized in modern institutions (e.g., yoga programs for cops and militaries) and in popular culture;
14. *A decolonized yoga* uses yoga/meditation to actively cultivate compassion, loving-kindness, balance, and joy for self and others;
15. *A decolonized yoga* works toward justice and liberation for all living beings;
16. *A decolonized yoga* centers marginal bodies, voices, and groups – particularly Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) folks – in accessing healing and the healer within;
17. *A decolonized yoga* shares yoga in democratic and non-hierarchical ways;
18. *A decolonized yoga* works toward liberation, evolution, and transformation internally and externally (within self and society);
19. *A decolonized yoga* recognizes yoga and our body, breath and spirit as a gift from the universe greater than any nation, religion, ethnic or social group;
20. *A decolonized yoga* recognizes nature, the core elements of earth, water, air, and fire, and Mother Earth as the greatest all-time Guru of spiritual liberation.

Simply reading these bulleted points will not manifest a "decolonized yoga." Committing to the work requires that we embody the discomfort of the *colonizer* and *colonized* within ourselves. It is a process that asks us to sit in stillness to contemplate and interrogate the colonizer within our minds, our everyday interactions, and our patterns of thinking and being in the world. Decolonization is a transformative process that requires patience and a willingness to detach ourselves from feeling a sense of ownership over a practice that is more universal and heterogeneous than it is monolithic and culturally fixed in space and time. Decolonization is a process that requires that we educate ourselves and remain willing to unlearn everything we think we know about yoga's ancient history. This includes contemplating how the supposedly "ethical" codes of yoga (*yamas*, *niyamas*, *karma*, *dharma* etc.), often uncritically taught in yoga teacher trainings certified by the Yoga Alliance, are embedded with caste supremacist values that are used to justify social, economic, and racial inequality.

I am indebted to the work and voices of South Asian comrades and friends, particularly the Muslim, Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan Desis who have been marginalized by colonial structures, Hindu supremacy, and Brahmanical casteism and, on numerous occasions, bravely shared stories of how yoga has been weaponized by Hinduism and of how Sanskrit has been violently weaponized against lower caste communities. Their courage challenges me to contemplate the harm my ancestors and I have inflicted through depicting this tradition as inherently peaceful. Ultimately, if we wish to move toward a critical embodiment of decolonizing yoga, we must be committed to making Indigenous spiritual traditions and their infinite wisdom about the mind, body, and spirit accessible to people from marginalized communities. Our commitment must also challenge the hierarchies in spiritual traditions and work toward empowering the most marginalized people to trust the healer and healing wisdoms within themselves and their ancestral lineages in purposing yoga toward collective liberation. For

none of us truly own these healing medicines. The spiritual wisdom and knowledge of our Indigenous ancestors belongs to us all.

Notes

[1] Unani Medicine is a system of alternative medicine that is commonly practiced in the Middle East and South Asia, including in India. This traditional form of herbal, animal and mineral-based medicine is said to have originated in Ancient Greece, and is based on the teachings of Arabian, Greek and Persian physicians, such as Hippocrates, Galen, Al-Zahrawi and more. The herbal remedies, dietary rituals, and therapies used in Unani medicine are designed for both preventive and treatment purposes.

[2] *Dalit* refers to caste-oppressed communities, and *Adivasi* is a term that refers to Indigenous people of South Asia (Equality Labs 2018).

[3] This concept is one that I heard from an Indigenous community leader and healer, Giselle Dias, in a workshop on abolitionism and healing at the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA) 2017, held at the University of Massachusetts (Dartmouth) campus in Dartmouth, MA.

[4] For white co-conspirators, this means that if your ancestors are not connected to a South Asian culture/tradition, you need to reconsider using Sanskrit. And if you are of South Asian lineage, this does not necessarily mean you have a *carte blanche* to use Sanskrit at your will. For upper caste South Asians, it is important that we reckon with and feel the discomfort of knowing how these "sacred hymns" perpetuate harm. It is important that we listen to the voices of those who share that hearing Sanskrit brings deep pain and oppressive realities to people from other communities.

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