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Journal

Race and Yoga, 8(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/R38163528

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**Weaving Threads of Collective Liberation:
Cross-Cultural Healing Among Indigenous and South Asian Women in the Indigenous
Yoga Collective**

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative journey of the Indigenous Yoga Collective (IYC) as a case study integrating a decolonial healing praxis through yoga with Indigenous and South Asian women. The IYC emerged from the First Nations Women's Yoga Initiative (FNWYI), an 80-hour trauma-informed yoga training designed to foster community connection, cultural reclamation, and collective healing for First Nations peoples. Rooted in a culturally responsive framework, the IYC addresses the shared traumas of colonial oppression while promoting the reconnection of body, mind, spirit, and land. The IYC exemplifies individual and collective healing while fostering cross-cultural solidarity. By centering South Asian voices and Indigenous traditions, the collective provides a model for decolonial wellness frameworks that resist cultural commodification and build reciprocal relationships. Moving forward, the IYC seeks to deepen its impact by co-creating inclusive, accessible programs that honor the rich spiritual traditions of yoga and Indigenous practices while addressing systemic and intergenerational trauma.

Keywords: Colonial Trauma; Culturally Responsive Framework; Cultural Reclamation; Decolonial Healing; Community Healing

**Reclaiming Cultural Identity and Challenging Colonial Narratives through the Indigenous
Yoga Collective**

The Indigenous Yoga Collective (IYC) represents a unique approach to community building and healing that centers Indigenous women engaging yoga as a reconnection methodology to cultural and spiritual reclamation. This article outlines the co-creation of the IYC, emphasizing its culturally responsive framework designed to empower First Nations¹ women of the Pacific Northwest while building solidarity with South Asian women living in the diaspora who are practitioners and lineage-holders of yoga. In this piece, I draw connections between Indigenous and South Asian healing communities, weaving together our traditions and interconnected liberation. Using the IYC as a case study, I underscore the transformative potential of yoga, which offers a holistic healing approach that aligns and compliments Indigenous knowledge systems. Drawing on my dissertation research where I conducted interviews with Indigenous and South Asian yoga practitioners, I highlight the need to adapt normative approaches to trauma-informed yoga when fostering community building, cultural sharing, and collective healing among people of culture (POC), a phrase adapted by trauma

therapist Resmaa Menakem who specifically uses the term ‘bodies of culture’ to represent all human bodies not considered white to counter the upholding of the white-body as the norm and the otherizing of everyone else (Menakem 2023). For Menakem, the use of *bodies of culture* is intentional and he expresses the limitations to the term *body* as perpetuating the disintegration of body-mind-spirit, however, I draw on the noun *people* of culture to center the enduring and rich legacies of collectivist cultures that have been preserved by Black and brown people whose cultures have evolved and adapted amidst colonial harms.

In this article, I posit three key questions: 1) How does the Indigenous Yoga Collective (IYC) leverage the spiritual and cultural practices of both Indigenous and South Asian communities to center well-being?; 2) In what ways does the IYC challenge Western commodification and appropriation of yoga, and how do these challenges create opportunities for cultural reclamation and resistance?; and 3) What are the impacts and challenges of cross-cultural, trauma-informed yoga communities like the IYC on collective well-being? How can they serve as models for broader decolonial wellness initiatives? Before answering these questions, I provide background information on the collaborative creation of the IYC and outline a conceptual model for how we developed a culturally responsive framework. First, I am going to discuss aspects of collective trauma shared by the IYC members to lay the groundwork for decolonial wellness and cultural reclamation through yoga, then I will share the collective prayer, vision, and growth process of the IYC.

Background – The Evolution of the Indigenous Yoga Collective

I am Kwakwaka’wakw, a member and elected leader of the ‘Nan̓gis First Nation, with maternal roots in the Kwagu’ł and Haxwa’mis Nations and Ashkenazi Jewish lineage on my paternal side. Kwakwaka’wakw refers to the “the people who speak Kwakwala,” collectively 18 tribes on Northern Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland of British Columbia. While my yoga practice began in my adolescence in a predominantly Western, studio-based setting in Vancouver led by white teachers, it became a vital tool for processing grief and trauma despite the absence of South Asian instructors or cultural representation. Over time, my yoga practice deepened my connection to my Kwakwaka’wakw culture, inspiring my doctoral research to create community wellness spaces for First Nations women that integrate language learning and trauma healing.

My doctoral research unfolded over three phases: 1) the creation of the First Nations Women’s Yoga Initiative (FNWYI) curriculum framework; 2) the implementation of the FNWYI program for the cohort(s) of Kwakwaka’wakw and First Nations learners; and, 3) the evaluation of the program and visioning of next steps in collaboration with the advisory circle. The FNWYI was created through a collaboration with Yoga Outreach Society and guided by First Nations advisors, South Asian, and settler wellness practitioners. Developed during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), the FNWYI offered a virtual 80-hour trauma-informed training program for First Nations women, weaving Kwakwaka’wakw worldviews with yogic practices. Two cohorts of 40 participants engaged in this culturally-adapted curriculum, fostering body-based healing practices that respect yoga’s origins while affirming Indigenous wellness pathways.

FIRST NATIONS WOMEN'S YOGA INITIATIVE

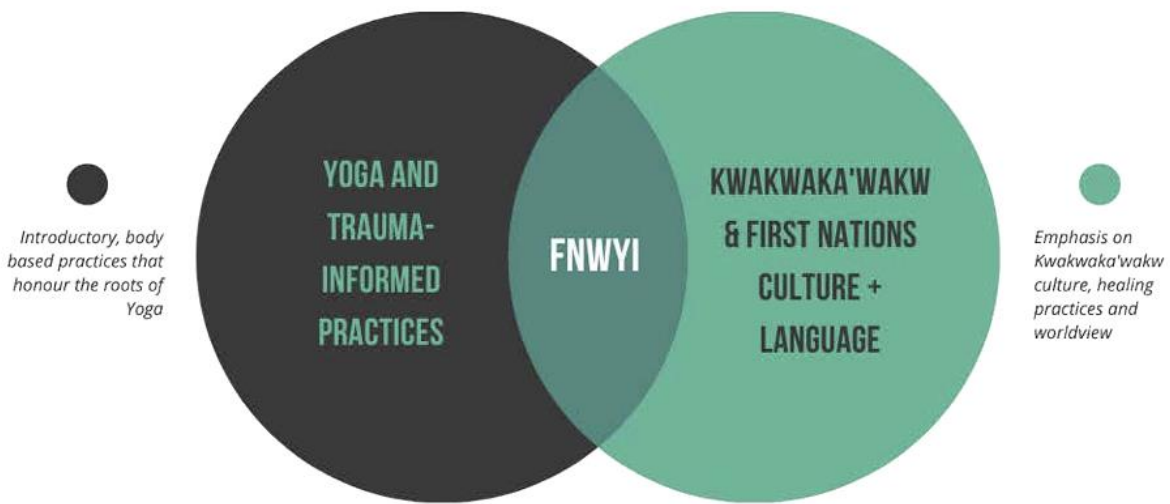


Figure 1 – First Nations Womens’s Yoga Initiative Core Focus

Following the completion of the Yoga Outreach grant cycle and my doctoral writing, I experienced burnout and took time to pause, reflect on my values, and realign my vision for community care. During this period, supported by the sisterhood formed through the FNWYI, the Indigenous Yoga Collective (IYC) was conceptualized. After nearly two years of FNWYI virtual connections, we held a land-based, in-person gathering to exchange and learn culture, language, history, yoga, and embodiment practices on Kwakwaka’wakw territories. Our goal



Figure 2 – FNWYI Advisory Circle Land-Based Gathering Participants in Hada, Bond Sound (July 2022) (Photo Credit: Mikael Willie).

was to create an advisory circle to guide the IYC. Since 2022, the IYC has been guided by the relational planning processes of an advisory circle comprising FNWYI learners and faculty. Together, we envisioned an Indigenous-led collective grounded in cultural integrity and respect for yoga's lineage holders. In the IYC, we believe that yoga, when rooted in relationality and a connection to the land, provides critical pathways for cultural survival and healing in the face of colonization and its ongoing impacts.

To document our journey and capture interviews,² we filmed elements of our gathering, which were showcased in the short documentary film *Braiding Knowledge through Breath, Language, and Movement* (Barudin 2023a). The film visually tells the story of the FNWYI and IYC, showcasing the integration of yoga and Indigenous healing practices. From September 2022 to March 2023, virtual planning meetings facilitated follow-up dialogue for the IYC's development, culminating in the premiere of the short documentary to an audience of 60, including family, friends, and community members.



Figure 3 – IYC Members at the Braiding Knowledge Film Screening and Panel Discussion (Vancouver, BC). *LtR:* Jessica Barudin, Nicole Marcia, Emmy Chahal, Vina Brown, Harmeet Kaur, and Wendy Simon (Photo credit: Julia Kidd).

The IYC aims to understand and heal historical, intergenerational, and colonial trauma, as well as model Indigenized approaches to and respite from stress, grief, and pain.

The historical, institutional, and structural events of colonization impact people of culture differently as the temporal and land-based, spatial and contextual factors are different; however, the lived experiences of the collective members shape their approach to practicing and sharing yoga as a means of placemaking, place-keeping, reclaiming cultural identity and spiritual practices while they resist/endure colonialism amidst ongoing challenges of cultural erasure. This

is achieved through yogic practices (including *asana*, meditation, *pranayama*, *svadhyaya*), ceremony, prayer, song, language learning, community connection, and deep rest within a culturally respectful context for cathartic relief (Barudin 2023b; Yellow Horse Brave Heart 1999).

The IYC integrates yoga as a core ancestral healing practice, described by collaborator-interviewee Emmy Chahal as a “reconnection methodology,” alongside other contemplative and embodied traditions. Rooted in ancestral knowledge, the IYC challenges the superficial presentation of yoga in the West, offering a decolonial model of wellness driven by community needs. Its co-creation process identifies shared values, emphasizing community-centered or Nation-specific approaches and culturally relevant curricula. By incorporating local knowledge keepers and culturally tailored supports, the IYC fosters belonging and mutual respect. Centering Kwakwaka’wakw epistemology and the Pacific Northwest interconnections ensures that practices resonate deeply with learners without pan-Indigenizing or generalizing Indigenous knowledge. Community building, emotional support, and creating safe and brave spaces are key pillars, reinforcing the connection between healing practices and collective well-being.

The integration of trauma-informed yoga practices for Indigenous women within the IYC has offered valuable insights in reframing yoga training. Reflecting on the inaccessibility of mainstream yoga studios – due to costs, urban locations, and consumer-driven models – the IYC emphasizes a decolonized approach. Offering free or donation-based virtual classes and intentional community care on the land, the IYC moves beyond Western interpretations of yoga. While acknowledging the limitations of current trauma-informed yoga practices, the collective seeks to develop programs within a healing justice framework that bridges personal healing and systemic oppression. This radical healing requires deep trust, supportive relationships, and prioritizing *sadhana* (spiritual practice) alongside ongoing reflection and collaboration. This approach fosters deeper connections between yoga, individual healing, and collective social consciousness.

The IYC models collective care and shared leadership, prioritizing accessible and affordable programs by partnering with Indigenous-led organizations like Rooted Resiliency, a non-profit organization founded by Vina Brown and Anna Leigh Brady committed to holistic wellness and cultural preservation, while valuing facilitator and participant contributions. Balancing professional, caregiving, and community roles, IYC members focus on building slowly with care to avoid burnout and colonial harm. Addressing cultural differences and trauma, the collective emphasizes mindfulness, compassion, and centering Indigenous women’s voices alongside collaboration with South Asian supports. The IYC is guided by key commitments: respecting the cultural origins of yogic and Indigenous teachings, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility, adapting practices to local contexts and protocols, fostering collaborative leadership, and implementing trauma-informed, healing-centered approaches that prioritize empowerment and cultural strengths.

Co-founding the IYC has been a journey of unlearning, humility, and reflection on spirituality, privilege, and mentorship. Research has provided a space to navigate these dynamics, though hegemonic academic and organizational norms sometimes challenge the grassroots essence of this work. As a Kwakwaka’wakw researcher grounded in my community and territory, this project follows a spirit-based inquiry (McIvor 2010) involving active participation in the social, cultural, political, economic, environmental, and spiritual fabric of my community. Rather than merely building relationships with research participants, I stand with my community, strengthening kinship networks (TallBear 2016). The co-creation of the FNWYI and

IYC has produced a dynamic, interdependent web of knowledge and narratives of transformation and reclamation that has enriched both me and those connected to this work.

Conceptualizing a Culturally Responsive Framework

I adapted Margaret Kovach’s *Nehiyaw Kiskeyihtamowin* (Plains Cree knowledge) conceptual framework (Kovach 2021) and Colette Pelletier’s Culturally Responsive Framework (Pelletier 2020) to create a visual model for the FNWYI/IYC. This model emphasizes the collaborative integration of Indigenous philosophies, beliefs, health practices, and values with yogic philosophy and practices, while addressing the colonial sociopolitical realities we navigate today. The full methodology provides a layering to develop a Kwakwaka’wakw research paradigm, which draws from Patricia Rosborough’s *Kangextola* (sewn on top) methodology (2012), a Kwakwaka’wakw pedagogical language reclamation framework based on the metaphorical creation of a button blanket, the ceremonial regalia of the Kwakwaka’wakw. Additionally, the incorporation of Marie Hunt’s *K’waxalikala* (tree of life) methodology (2014) illustrates both the central teachings of the Kwakwaka’wakw and the cross-cultural learning and connections in the sharing of wisdom between yogic and Kwakwaka’wakw and First Nations knowledge by embedding the eight-limb philosophical system of Patañjali on the tree of life. As Chip Hartranft (2003) describes in the translation of the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali, “all branches of the yoga tradition radiate from a tree whose meditative roots drank in that well for thousands of years before being mapped by Pata[ñ]jali” (2). The conceptualized button blanket represents a coming together to co-create a metaphysical robe of power and knowledge, one that is worn to protect and strengthen the body, mind, and spirit of the individual.

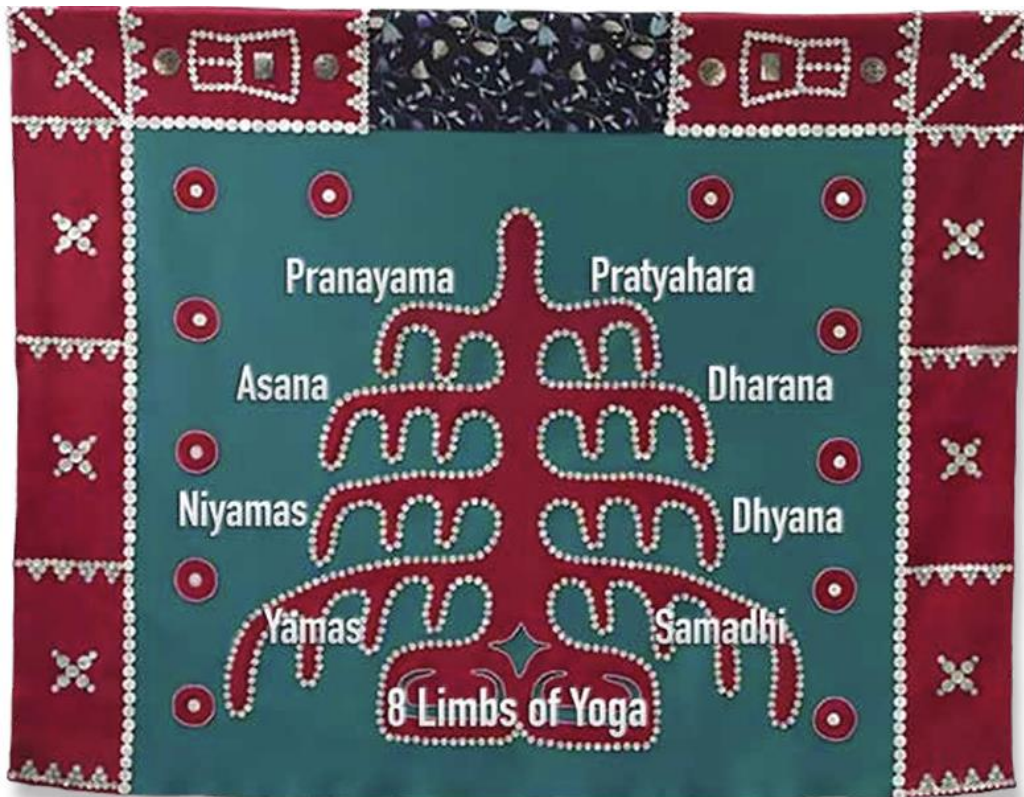


Figure 4 – *Kangextola* (Sewn on Top) Tree of Life Cross-Cultural and Decolonial Framework (Barudin 2023a)

The Tree of Life regalia reflects our communal and connective process rooted in kinship, ancestral ties, and relationships with more-than-human beings, traditionally and contemporarily shaped by colonial materials and technologies like wool and sewing machines. It serves as a methodology, carefully stitching together Indigenous and South Asian perspectives through meaningful relationships and a deep respect for cultures and traditions (see also Barudin 2023a).

My hope is to inspire Indigenous yoga teachers, researchers, and organizers to embrace collaborative leadership and shared vision. The IYC advisory circle remains fluid, incorporating diverse perspectives while upholding decolonizing principles to ensure culturally rooted and community-centered development. Now that I have explained the co-creation of the IYC, I will now explain how the IYC leverages spiritual and cultural practices for well-being, challenges commodification and appropriation to facilitate reclamation and resistance for decolonizing wellness.

Colonial Trauma

Colonial trauma is a cumulative and intersectional process of systemic and institutional violence aimed at erasing cultural norms, behaviors, and practices; over time this creates complex trauma experienced by targeted groups (Barudin 2023b; Barkataki 2020). There is a collective trauma shared by people of culture – racialized and/or ethnic groups –, which the IYC addresses primarily Indigenous and South Asian shared experiences of endured oppression, disruption or loss of identity and culture, dispossession from land, and various traumatic experiences that are cumulative, chronic, complex, and persistent. This collective trauma originates from colonialism, which is not an isolated individual experience but an interconnected constellation of events permeating physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, ancestral, and earth consciousness and traverses into systemic barriers, institutional violence, and oppressive practices embedded in society (Ortega-Williams et al. 2021).

For Indigenous peoples, trauma is alive, far reaching, and entangled in a web of ongoing socio-political inequities that wreak havoc on Indigenous bodies, homes, communities, languages, lands, and waters (Methot 2019). Disturbing ontologies and lands on a global level manifests as intergenerational, historical, and complex trauma. The dispossession from traditional territories fractures opportunities to observe, experience, evolve, and learn from the natural world, diminishing the capacity to transmit knowledge to younger generations, and creating a fragmented cycle in cosmology, spirituality, traditional law, governance, education, and socialization (Simpson 2004).

Similarly, the imposition of settler colonialism in India has disrupted the transmission of Indigenous philosophical thought and practices through the extraction of cultural, material, intellectual, and natural wealth (Sood 2018). Yoga is a complex, nuanced, and evolving philosophical system rooted in lineages and science originating in the Indus Valley). The practices of yoga aim to cultivate mental steadiness and the realization of Self through steadfast dedication to values, observances, and practices. Over millennia, the many lineages of yoga have developed amidst cultural, societal, colonial and political influences (Easwaran 2011). The transmission of yogic knowledge and yoga's journey to the West is layered with colonial trauma, leading to a collective disconnection of yoga practice from its philosophical roots in North America (Barkataki 2020). The legacy of British colonial rule has left enduring scars, manifesting for many as a disruption in language, traditions, and an erosion to a collective sense of identity.

Bridging Yoga, Ancestral, and Contemporary Practices for Well-Being

Both Indigenous and South Asian communities have faced systemic violence, cultural erasure, oppression, and ongoing marginalization. They also share common ground and devotion for their enduring spiritual practices, which include gratitude, prayer, storytelling, chanting and singing, meditation, purification, physical postures and movement to name a few. While there are vast differences in content and context, Indigenous knowledge systems of Turtle Island share significant parallels with indigenous yogic knowledge, such as a reverence for the interconnectedness of the natural world and celestial elements, a spiritual means of gaining knowledge, and an understanding that this knowledge is sacred, interconnected, and holistic (Sharma 2016). Indigenous peoples worldwide have developed and refined sophisticated methods of cultivating mindful attention to the heart and mind to dissolve trauma and suffering through arduous, committed practices (Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird 2012). Integrated movement, contemplative practices, and spiritual ceremonies have been and will continue to be integral to Indigenous ways of being and wellness (Barudin 2023a). The transmission of yogic and ancestral knowledge from Indigenous cultures represents a diverse body of science passed down through experiential learning and oral tradition, fostering steadfast dedication, service, discipline, and commitment to values and observances to promote the unity of mind, body, and spirit (Easwaran 2011).

Many Indigenous practitioners and learners draw upon the practices of yoga to promote well-being while mitigating health disparities and the deleterious effects of the ongoing colonialism. Blended approaches to modern postural yoga led by Indigenous practitioners are gaining popularity with a notable rise in Indigenous-led yoga activities, virtual and mobile studios, and organizations (Barudin 2023b). Tria Blu Wakpa observes acts of resistance through yoga when it connects the practitioner to their ancestral lands; she observes Indigenous peoples draw upon the tradition of yoga as a catalyst for *survivance*, which carries the potential to enhance their “Indigenous kinetic connection” (2021, 136) and identities. Blu Wakpa documents emerging parallels between yoga and tribal-specific epistemologies; for instance, she writes about Hózhó Yoga, founded by Haley Laughter, a Diné woman and yoga teacher who explores the intersection of yoga and Diné (Navajo) culture and philosophies (2018; 2021). Other narratives and case studies also demonstrate the positive physical, emotional, intellectual, and social outcomes of yoga with Indigenous youth and further comparisons have been made across other mind-body interventions for Indigenous children and youth (Le and Gobert 2015; Le and Proulx 2015). My interviews with FNWYI and IYC collaborators reveals how members integrate yoga and ancestral Indigenous practices to heal from colonial trauma, fostering cultural continuity as a form of reclamation.

Emmy Chahal is an ancestral yoga teacher, cultural educator, and FNWYI and IYC member. She highlights her responsibilities as a South Asian woman in the diaspora on First Nations lands using yogic teachings to address shared colonial harms and promote individual and collective healing. Chahal says,

I am an uninvited guest and as a South Asian person who was formerly colonized, displaced, and as a settler on these lands, it is very important for me to build understanding, solidarity, and reciprocity with Indigenous communities. I have a responsibility to uplift and support Indigenous communities in whatever ways I can. I recognize the violent history of colonialism and ongoing legacy of genocide and racism in these territories and actively seek to not replicate the harms of the past. I have also

been harmed by European imperialism (in different and similar ways) and hope to build bridges of solidarity, strength, friendship, generosity, and community.

Vina Brown shares the parallel knowledge systems and knowledge transference she observed through practicing yoga and being immersed in her cultural practices and (re)learning language. Brown is a Hailzavq and Nuu Chah Nulth scholar, artist, and yoga teacher who consulted on the FNWYI curriculum and facilitated a module connecting Yoga, Ceremony, and the Land. She offers,

Yoga is an earth-based practice and it is scientific, just the same as our Indigenous science. Our ancestors had science through hundreds of generations of observation, where they would observe and feel and share with family through language. This parallel in knowledge creation is similar in the observation, repetition, experiential nature, connection to the elements, and the transference of knowledge. For example, understanding ‘*prana*’ and how that same life force dwells in our sacred ceremonies, languages, territories, elders, children, and all the ways we connect to our own medicines and the emotions and sensations many of us may feel from traditional dancing (in the Big House) and speaking our languages are parallel to how we experience the benefits of practicing yoga – for instance, how one word can have so many meanings in our languages and *Sanskrit*.

For these IYC members, exploring the parallels between Indigenous and South Asian cultural and spiritual practices offered a rich foundation for developing shared values and solidarity for healing colonial trauma.

Colonial Legacies, Cultural Appropriation, and the Reclamation of the Spiritual Roots of Yoga

In the West, the popularization and commodification of yoga continues rapidly without recognition of yoga’s deep roots in South Asian religious and spiritual traditions (Batacharya 2018). Driven by global and corporate markets, compounded by capitalism, racism, classism, sexism, and ableism, yoga is deconstructed, diluted, and commodified from its South Asian roots to placate a Western audience (Gandhi and Wolff 2021). Critical discourse from South Asian lineage holders, particularly South Asian communities living in the diaspora, highlight how Western yoga spaces and industry creates exclusion, erasure, exploitation, cultural appropriation, othering, and microaggressions (Bagga 2022). Demographically speaking, yoga practitioners in the US are predominantly white, educated, adult females in good health by self-report (Proulx et al. 2018). Cultural and spiritual appropriation coupled with monetization of ancestral practices in the wellness industry creates perpetual harms and challenges for South Asian yoga practitioners, such as a profound embodied sense of invisibilization (Chahal, Emmy. 2023. Personal communication with the author, June 2023), as they navigate spaces that prioritize Westernized aesthetics of yoga (Batacharya 2018). Ultimately, the misinterpretations of yoga as solely a spiritual or physical discipline that can be universally adopted ignores the historical and ongoing oppression, colonialism, and the cultural heritage of South Asia that yoga endured and evolved from.

IYC members talk about resisting the commodification and appropriation of yoga by Western wellness industries while highlighting the importance of practicing yoga in ways that honor its South Asian roots. Brown poignantly reflects, “Yoga at its source is anticolonial; it is an antidote to colonization in its purest form” while Chahal critiques the capitalist wellness

industry's attempts at "reconciliation and diversity" while often excluding people of color. She emphasizes a hope for the IYC's active resistance to the appropriation of yoga by centering BIPOC voices and returning the practice to its cultural origins. Chahal says,

The stress and exhaustion of existing as a South Asian woman within capitalist and white settler/colonial structures that are heavily dominated by the influence of white yoga culture requires constant unlearning. It has been difficult to witness other POC spaces that replicate and reinforce white ideology around commodification and elitism in the wellness space which can cause a sense of scarcity, division, and competition for POC to receive financial support. While these attempts from big corporations at reconciliation and diversity are helpful and sometimes necessary, can we stay focused on service and community while also being financially viable? The systems we exist within require us to play by their rules sometimes and this feels like an ongoing form of power imbalance. POC are the ones that determine the boundaries of how our culture and sacred teachings are shared with others and the redirection of energy toward our communities instead of searching for belonging within the mainstream wellness has felt liberating. The IYC is hopeful in the ways that it re-centers POC as lineage holders of our own culture, sharing with our own communities first, instead of trying to 'win the graces' of the mainstream yoga industry.

Brown highlights the importance of being true to one's own roots and culture, which is developed through integrating the teachings of yoga and is in parallel with one's connection to their own culture. Brown contends,

It is important to embrace cultural humility and respect in practicing and teaching yoga by teaching from your worldview and being open about where you're at, respect and honor yoga and study yogic philosophy to learn the roots of yoga, listen to [South Asian] practitioners, identify where you see parallels because these parallels enable you to teach with integrity. Find your connection to the practice that honors the roots of yoga and that honors your connection to your roots on the land.

These sentiments have been a guiding component of our teaching approach and core message to the FNWYI learners, which is modelled in practice and in our relationships.

Discomfort, Challenges, and Growth within the IYC

IYC members reflect on their role in cross-cultural learning and some of the nuances in unlearning normative standards of trauma-informed yoga (TIY), yoga education, and biases that stem from race, class, and gender. My collaborator-interviewees demonstrate deep reflection on what it means to strengthen cross-cultural solidarity between Indigenous and South Asian women and healing relationships to self and others in community containers like the IYC. In my role, I observed the challenges settler women face in spaces centered on Indigenous women and South Asian voices, where community knowledge is privileged. Racial tensions and personal dynamics surfaced within the IYC, as our diverse lived experiences reflect internalized colonial harms like racism, sexism, ableism, and classism. While I am mindful of my own journey of learning and unlearning, my role has been to guide the vision and foster unity within the collective. However, I recognize that achieving cohesion isn't always possible, nor is it always my work to do. As an example, Nicole Marcia, an Italian woman with Ashkenazi Jewish roots, is a trauma-informed yoga therapist and counselor who co-led the FNWYI from 2020-2023 and supported its development and implementation discussed her challenges of taking on a

mentorship role in the FNWYI and IYC circle. Marcia describes the FNWYI as a “heart-centered program,” something she was not always comfortable in as she was cognizant of her identity in the Indigenous-centered space. Marcia reflects,

There was something very interesting about being in a facilitator role and feeling like on the outside to some extent. So that was a lot to hold. And then as you know, many times came up where I was, like, I don’t know what I’m doing here, like, I’m not sure if this is, you know, the right place for me to be, if I should really be in this in this space ... you know, as a white woman talking about trauma was sort of like, ‘Who the fuck am I? What have I got to share with this group, like in terms of both lived experience and cultural depth of like, cultural understanding and, and healing resources.’

While confronting her whiteness in the First Nations space, Marcia’s self-awareness demonstrates a sense of cultural humility and recognition of the importance of BIPOC healing spaces. She acknowledges, “...I would really love it if this program continued to move further and further into the hands of Indigenous women and community ... I’d like to see more involvement of more South Asian teachers ... my intention for the future is to keep being able to step back and step back and step back and clear space for other people to step forward.” In comparison, Brown reflects on how deepening her experience and learning with yoga helped her to understand cultural integrity and reclamation from a rooted place, while she acknowledged some instances where she has potentially appropriated yoga in the past. She says,

Since I have started my yoga practice, I’m mindful of ways I may have unintentionally appropriated yoga in the past before I began my journey of learning about the roots of yoga. Yoga belongs to someone’s culture. It is a spiritual practice that belongs to a specific group of people. In our coastal cultures we are always taught to learn our history, our origin stories, and acknowledge where the stories and teachings come from. The ceremonies, songs, and dances are a responsibility, and they are proprietary, meaning that we must be bestowed the right to share or be initiated into societies and practices. We all come from different places, we are all at different stages of connection and reclamation. Not all of us First Nations learners have the same cultural connectedness.

Likewise, Chahal reflects on how her engagement in the FNWYI and with other Indigenous women has opened her to the importance of reclamation of ancestral knowledge and healing practices,

To work with Indigenous women of this land, and to share the wisdom of my ancestors. It really touches me in a deep place, and it brings up a lot of emotion. The pain that we’re living with this intergenerational trauma of cultures trying to be erased and holding on to our values and our culture, and whatever that may be for us. That has had a transformational effect on my life to witness Indigenous women reclaiming their own practices and to share the practices of my ancestors and deepen my relationship to my ancestors simultaneously. It is about standing in solidarity together. It’s about going to the root of healing so that we don’t pass on these traumas to future generations.

A Collective Vision and Prayer

IYC members have hopes, dreams, and visions for the well-being of Indigenous and South Asian communities. For me, this work is deeply rooted in sisterhood and community, offering connection in moments where trauma has left me feeling isolated. The women I’ve encountered through this journey have inspired, uplifted, and celebrated me, while also guiding

me through difficult conversations and the complexities of navigating decolonial healing spaces. My vision is to continue co-creating spaces of unity where we heal from trauma, celebrate ourselves, and awaken to speak our languages, sing our songs, move our bodies, and connect with the divine in its many forms. Harmeet Kaur, FNWYI student support lead and IYC educator, and advisory circle member, shares this vision. Kaur is a guardian of ancient yogic traditions who combines therapeutic and empowering practices. She shares her hopes for weaving Indigenous teachings with South Asian representation. She highlights the opportunity to co-create powerful spaces rooted in reclaiming ancestral teachings and reconnecting to language, “I would love to see ... the ways of Indigenous teachings weaving together with South Asian representation ... Just the power and being in community together really inspired me in seeing what’s possible when we choose to be in community with each other.” The IYC not only offers a community for individual well-being but also a support system for colonial resistance and cultural reclamation.

Conclusion: The Indigenous Yoga Collective as a Model for Cross-Cultural Healing

The narratives of IYC members highlight the transformative power of trauma-informed yoga through collaborations between Indigenous and South Asian partners. The IYC journey fostered healing and reconnection, empowering members to reclaim their cultural and spiritual roots. Members emphasize that ethical engagement, cultural humility, and respect for both yoga and Indigenous traditions help mitigate cultural appropriation and dilution. Grassroots initiatives like the IYC offer authentic, heart-centered community care and a decolonial healing framework, resisting colonial harms and cultural commodification in yoga education. By centering and respecting South Asian voices and teachers while integrating Indigenous lands, languages, and cultures, the IYC promotes reciprocal relationship building. South Asian women have found collective liberation through shared healing practices with Indigenous counterparts (Nousheen and Madrigal 2021), while Indigenous learners have deepened their understanding of yoga’s roots and reframed their practices in ways that honor both yoga’s history and their own cultural knowledge. These findings highlight unique opportunities for cross-cultural learning and mutual growth.

The creation and evolution of the Indigenous Yoga Collective (IYC) from the FNWYI represents a meaningful cross-cultural collaboration aimed at addressing community care and healing from the shared traumas of colonial oppression. Bringing together First Nations women of the Pacific Northwest Coast and South Asian women in the diaspora, the IYC emphasizes reconnection and harmonization of body, mind, spirit, and land. Through place-based reclamation and cultural sensitivity, the collective fosters community connectedness, heals historical and intergenerational traumas, and provides spaces for language learning and cultural reclamation. The IYC serves as a powerful model for how yoga can support healing, community building, and the reclamation of cultural and spiritual practices as a means of resisting colonial oppression and promoting collective liberation.

IYC Future Directions and Areas to Nurture

Moving forward, the IYC aims to continue developing and refining culturally-rooted, trauma-informed yoga programs that are inclusive and accessible for the members. Strengthening



Figure 5 – Land-Based Gathering with FNWYI Advisory Circle in Musgamagw Dzawada’enuxw Territory (June 2022) (Photo credit: Mikael Willie).

reciprocal relationships between Indigenous and South Asian communities, and expanding the reach and impact of these programs, are key goals. The collective’s vision is to create a thriving empowered community where cultural reclamation and spiritual growth are nurtured, and where sustainable community-led initiatives can flourish. With the continued development of the advisory circle, we will determine direction and ethos for fundraising and whether community-led research is an avenue that members wish to pursue in the continued development of culturally-rooted trauma-informed yoga programs. The members of the advisory circle and the collective alongside South Asian knowledge keepers and practitioners of yoga bring a wealth of knowledge in areas such as community organizing, cultural practices, language revitalization, and trauma healing, which enriches the collective’s initiatives and mission to support and promote the (re)connection and reclamation of embodied, spiritual, and wellness. By dismantling colonial legacies through embodied and contemplative practice, we aim to build community and solidarity.

Notes

¹ First Nations is a term used to describe Indigenous peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Métis nor Inuit. There are more than 630 First Nations communities in Canada. Indigenous is a term used to encompass a variety of Aboriginal groups. It is most frequently used in an international, transnational, or global context.

² Semi-structured interviews were captured in addition to group circle sharing that took place during our land-based gathering hosted in July 2022. Consent for participation and inclusion of written and verbal responses was obtained in line with Concordia University’s ethics guidelines.

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Acknowledgements

I respectfully acknowledge with deep gratitude the contributions to the IYC from Nicole Marcia, Harmeet Kaur, Vina Brown, and Emmy Chahal.

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