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Embodied Justice in Yoga for People of Color Sangha

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We write this narrative as a historical document, as a political reflection on our social and spiritual justice work, and as a contribution to the intellectual interventions being made into the yoga, meditation, and Buddhist world in the West. As two women of color, members, organizers and intellectuals, we write this essay on the unceded and occupied ancestral lands and territories of the Pueblo/x, Diné, Jicarilla Apache peoples, which is known as the settler colonial and imperial US state of New Mexico, specifically the settler city of Albuquerque. Albuquerque is settled upon Tiwa land, particularly Isleta and Sandia Pueblo/xs. Moreover, we write from this place of belonging and responsibility to multiple racialized communities in our *sangha*. We write drawing upon Critical Race Theory, Women of Color Feminisms, Queer and Trans of Color Critique, Critical Indigenous Studies, and Critical Ethnic Studies. We write influenced by resistance movements of people of color from the 1960s such as the Black Panther Party, American Indian Movement, Asian American Movement, and Chicanx movements. We write holding fast to the wisdom of our ancestors, and radical intellectuals and activists like Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler, bell hooks, Grace Lee Boggs, and other scholars. We write looking to contemporary spiritual leaders who have made the connections between race and yoga/meditation such as Ruth King, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, Mushim Patricia Ikeda, and others. We write keeping in our hearts and minds South Asian women who teach and practice yoga with a critical lens, and write and organize in dissent to decolonize yoga in South Asia and in the diaspora. Lastly, we write from a heartfelt place of critical self-reflections that this grassroots work has given us while tending to the healing of our *sangha* and our own selves. Ashé/Axé.

Origins

to you.
my people. of color.
you are an altar of stars.
remember this.
always.
do not ever forget this.
– Nayyirah Waheed

Our gatherings were founded and rooted in the above sentiments for people of color. The 2016 election was a clear insinuation that white people with power, privilege, and hate had raised

their guns and we were in their crosshairs. Indigenous people, Black people, Muslims, Arab and people of the Middle East, Asian and Pacific Islanders, South Asian and Desi people, Latinx/Chicanx, immigrants, migrants, queer and trans people of color, and all of us who can be considered non-white were once again going to be subjected to unprecedented as well as familiar manifestations and assaults of racism, white supremacy, predatory capitalism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. There would be, and indeed there were, systemic, political, collective, and individualized attempts to literally kill us. Nonetheless, as political memories and histories of resistance against US racism and racial violence have demonstrated, people of color will resist and fight back with all we have got. The 2016 election presented an urgent need for spaces of healing, empowerment, and liberation for people of color.



Figure 1 – Farah and Raquel organizing for Yoga POC Sangha at Humble Coffee in Nob Hill, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Summer 2017 (Photo Credit: Raquel Andrea González Madrigal).

Predominantly white yoga studios and meditation centers have been incapable of serving people of color. In fact, these spaces have been bastions of colorblindness, post-racialism, and cultural appropriation; many people of color have felt invisibilized and unsafe in these spaces. Moreover, as an anti-racist South Asian woman of color, Farah herself needed yoga and meditation spaces for people of color to get through this impending horrible period ahead. If people of color need a space, then we must create it ourselves. We cannot expect white yoga practitioners, teachers, and studio owners to create a safe and empowering space for us as people of color. After all, yoga in the United States has been a product for white consumption, and not a modality for healing people of color from racism.

In Albuquerque, our first gathering for Yoga for People of Color Sangha took place on December 3, 2016 and was attended by a diverse group of people of color. We continued into 2017 with monthly gatherings calling them “Yoga for People of Color for Healing and Empowerment.” As we came together, more needs and ideas came forward as well as the need to meet more often. We added meditation and dharma talks, critical reading circles, nutrition and gardening, anxiety-relief workshops, day-long meditation retreats, specialized series, and more. Along the way, we transformed from individual gatherings to an identity of a *sangha*, a spiritual community.

Our *sangha* embodies what adrienne maree brown calls “fractals” in her book, *Emergent Strategies: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017). Fractals, for us, express the loose way community members freely come and go from the *sangha* without any judgement or expectation,

and the way they feel moved at times to offer and receive each other's gifts, talents, offerings, etc. for the time that they can without any obligation. From this openness in meeting each other, the *sangha* is like a movement of people, coming and going, understanding our limited capacities as people of color healing from our traumas. Additionally, our praxis of *dana* is our current exploratory evolution of finding financial survival alternatives to capitalism. Some of our members came in unsheltered but through community building were able to find homes and financial sustenance.

For us, the definition and essence of yoga goes well beyond *asana* because when we center people of color, yoga is not only defined as unity of mind, body, and spirit but also the unity of race and spirituality. In our *sangha*, to practice yoga for people of color has meant that, for example, we read texts like "Speaking Secrets: Living Chicana Theory" by Deena J. González (1998), while we rest with legs up the wall in *Viparita Karani*. At the same time, we also critically examine the historical and material conditions of Dalits worldwide, and ways in which Sanskritized Brahman-dominated yoga has excluded and impacted Dalits as well as Adivasi communities. Yoga, for us, is all these interrogations and integrations into the Self.

Yet, we consistently had to respond to complex, multi-layered, convoluted, insidious forms of racism. These incidents were painful and traumatic, and difficult to unpack. They were also ways for us to better understand whiteness as we were public about declaring that our gatherings were for self-identified people of color. We learned about internalized racism that is lodged in the minds and bodies of brown and Black folks, especially those who have invested and assimilated themselves into white yoga and meditation spaces. From these experiences, we asked ourselves: what were our take-aways in doing Yoga for People of Color Sangha? What did we accomplish in terms of anti-racism, serving people of color, and what did we learn about yoga for people of color? Several thoughts come to mind contemplating these questions.

Horizontal and Comparative Lens of Racism

In creating a yoga and meditation community that is specifically and exclusively focused on healing for people of color, we have been able to give all our attention to healing colonial, imperialist, capitalist, racial, gendered, and sexist traumas, individually, generationally, and ancestrally. We have the freedom to design our gatherings rather than use formulated classes taught at yoga studios or meditation centers. We were liberated from the white gaze and from responding to, performing for, and answering to white people. This has allowed us to deeply work on a horizontal and comparative understanding of racism, and "see" how race impacts us all differently. This supports a heartfelt and politicized solidarity across various minoritized groups, while unpacking our own internalized racism and healing together in a collective and coalitional way.

We established baseline practices for all of our community gatherings; we are intentional in using the word "gathering" rather than "a yoga class." We allow plenty of time to greet one another and foster community at the beginning of the gathering. We also do not lock the door right at the listed time because we know our members may have internal and external obstacles that may prevent them from getting to the studio. We also allow members to respectfully leave the circle in the middle of the practice. This freedom to arrive and leave as needed alleviates anxiety as well as accommodates schedules. Indigenous-identifying members bring their medicines and prayers to the circle. We have a white board hung up for any member to write names of relatives who may need prayers and dedications. We always practice in a circle rather

than one teacher being at the front and center with lined students facing that one teacher. We find the teacher-centric class structure to perpetuate hierarchical, heteropatriarchal, and individualistic norms that counter community healing. In a circle, we are able to witness one another's struggle and healing. A volunteer member opens each gathering in prayer focused on Indigenous land acknowledgments, sovereignty, presence, resilience, revitalization, and resurgence. At this time, the same member or another member affirms that our space is for infinite genders and sexualities, is body positive, and for all body capacities. We acknowledge the relatives listed on the white board. Then we proceed to different *sangha* members leading various parts of the practice that has been curated and organized collectively based on the needs of the community and current political events. For example, one yoga teacher may offer to lead the warm-up and cool down, while another offers to lead the core *asana* practice. Yet another may lead the meditation or restorative portion. After the practice, we pass food around the circle; this food is brought by members and varies every time depending on availability. The closing discussion is facilitated by another volunteer when we talk about insights or feelings that came up during the practice. We also allow time for announcements of protests, campaigns, and other vital information to act in solidarity with differently racialized groups.



Figure 2 – A celebration of our 3rd year anniversary at Bhava Yoga in Downtown, Albuquerque, New Mexico, December 2019 (Photo Credit: Farah Nousheen).

Each gathering is curated by tuning in to the needs of the community. For example, at times, we would design a yoga sequence to heal an individual member in need. In one memorable gathering, a queer-identifying Black elder woman who is a regular member of the *sangha* requested to work on emotionally being seen and respected by the community; she has limited mobility as well as often dealt with joint pain. We designed the gathering for her healing that centered her needs. The yoga was gentle movement focusing on releasing joint pain, along with an affirming guided meditation specifically addressing her identity as a queer Black woman elder. In the sharing afterwards, she acknowledged that she felt nurtured and supported, and happy to have a practice where she did not need to make a single modification. A younger Black

woman in the room stated that she was able to honor and respect Black elders with a deeper level of empathy after completing a practice that was designed for a different physical, political, and cultural experience than her own. Additionally, Latinx/Chicanx members confirmed and affirmed a deeper commitment to working towards ending anti-Black racism after physically and emotionally performing a practice that was designed for a Black body. Thus, we put into praxis women of color feminist theories and queer of color theories such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *theory in the flesh* (2015), Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's *intersectionality* (1991), including Critical Ethnic Studies methodologies like *relationality*.

Additionally, the pandemic has expanded our reach with gatherings held virtually. We have been able to meet with members who have relocated to other places and form new connections with people of color living in Florida, New York, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Washington, British Columbia (Canada), and the UK. For instance, a Black woman in the UK joined us at 12:30am her time on Zoom for two hours for our cannabis justice series that was held in Mountain Time. This series was co-organized by several *sangha* members to deconstruct the relationship between cannabis and people of color. During the five summer months in 2020 when our cannabis justice workshop took place, people of color from across the United States and beyond discussed cannabis without having to teach or deal with whiteness. We were able to, once again, employ a comparative lens on how racism is enacted from the criminalization and commodification of cannabis, examine pharmacology as well as therapies activating the endocannabinoid system with and without plant medicine. A South Asian medical doctor working on cannabis medical research expressed gratitude for engaging in the nuances that can only manifest in a people of color-exclusive critical space.

Accountable to History and Asia

We also learned that we are always critically connected and accountable to South, East, and Southeast Asia through our political and spiritual engagement with yoga and meditation as an Indigenous practice rooted in Asia. This awareness requires us to understand the simultaneity of Indigenous lands from transnational, relational, and comparative perspectives. From the occupied/settled, unceded territories of Turtle Island to the post-colonial settlements of imperial nation-states in Asia, it is necessary as a *sangha* for people of color invested in dismantling racism and US settler colonialism and imperialism to be critical of casteism, Hindu fundamentalism, global capitalism, and the ways in which yoga and meditation have been and are co-opted in Asia. We need to be critically mindful of India where British colonization and its post-colonial reality have institutionalized Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and casteism.

In 2020 in India, we witnessed severe government oppression and silencing along with people's resistance movements of migrants, farmers, laborers, and oppositions to racist citizenship laws. Thus, it is imperative we see ourselves critically connected to this part of the world especially by our engagement with yoga and meditation. This requires learning about and understanding the colonial and imperial histories of yoga and meditation in transit from India to the United States. As people of color practicing yoga and meditation, we are accountable to the struggles of minoritized groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and LGBTQ+ communities in India along with all of South, East, and Southeast Asia. Moreover, it becomes our political responsibility to be in solidarity with Asian Americans in the United States who feel the brunt of this cultural appropriation, exclusion, and racism from predominantly white yoga studios and

meditation centers. To not do this work, or to do this work without an intersectional lens, means people of color would replicate the same colonial and imperial co-optation and appropriation practices the way white people have.

Racial Epistemological Intervention

Lastly, we have to critically interrogate the colonial and imperial history of how yoga and meditation came into the West. As a collusion between gurus and opportunists of both the East and West, yoga in the West was envisioned as a capitalist product to be bought for and by white people. Yoga and meditation were created and economically packaged for the financially privileged white body. We argue that the practice of yoga and meditation in the West is inherently racist. The white body, which is centered in this vision of yoga, does not experience racism; this body is not lodged with impacts, stories, and experiences of victimhood nor resistance to generational racial trauma. When yoga was formulated for the West, those initiators asked, “what do Westerners need from yoga?” The term “Westerner” is unconsciously or consciously read as white, able-bodied, financially privileged, and racially dominant. In effect, this “Westerner” enacts intentional and unintentional racism onto people of color. “Westerners” exclude people of color from their businesses, educational institutions, health systems, political power, and more. We can conclude, then, that the “Westerner” centered for yoga consumption is a racist and capitalist (whether knowingly or unknowingly) as well as a settler playing “Indian” as Philip J. Deloria would say (1999). Thus, the “yoga” that has been formulated was designed to exclude people of color to empower white people for furthering capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism; because white dominant culture is rooted in capitalism, individualism, and productivity, yoga itself emphasizes fitness, business, and individual power.

In contrast, when we founded Yoga for People of Color Sangha, we continuously asked: “what do people of color need from yoga and meditation?” Here, the term “people of color” inherently refers to people who are the targets of white supremacy, and it inherently implies that we are in solidarity with one another against white supremacy. The question then becomes: how do we practice yoga to find relief from and to heal racialized generational trauma? Because people of color need community for healing, how do we create community in yoga and meditation? These questions make epistemological interventions into yoga. By taking overlapping racisms, colonialisms, and imperialisms into account, when people of color critically intervene in the practice of yoga and meditation, we realign and course correct the historical violent canon that yoga and meditation is.

Grassroots Organizing in a Virtual Pandemic World

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed all of our lives in a kaleidoscope of ways that we know too well layer upon accumulated traumas. In 2020, we witnessed ongoing and relentless anti-Black violence through the state-sanctioned murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, including the murder of a Black trans individual, Tony McDade. On April 11, 2021, during the trial and sentencing of Floyd’s killer, Derek Chauvin, who was found guilty, Daunte Wright was shot by a white female police officer in Minnesota. We witnessed the ongoing, historical violence of anti-Asian racism and misogyny against Asian Americans and Asian im/migrants, specifically women, their businesses, and their homes. From racial language like the “Chinese virus” to the March 16, 2021, white terrorist mass shooting in Georgia, anti-

Asian racism echoes the historic and ongoing legacy and un-civility of white supremacy and settler ideology.

As a *sangha* who understands this vexed history on Turtle Island, we find ourselves in a moment of fatigue, trauma, and uncertainty about our lives. There are multiple layers of fatigue; the main one being virtual fatigue. Since March 2020, Yoga People of Color Sangha has been gathering virtually on Zoom. Initially to respond to the crisis of isolation, we held gatherings on Zoom every day except Saturday. After some time, we moved to gathering four times per week and then eventually twice per week. Currently, we are gathering about twice per month. In thinking about why our virtual meetings dwindled, we realized that Zoom gatherings require more work and give less back and therefore it is an unequal equation. When we organized in-person gatherings, the labor of event organizing was quickly forgotten because the fruits of labor were fulfilling hugs, sounds of collective *ujjayi* breath, or soft snores from members who often would fall asleep, eating in a circle, catching up with friends and more. With Zoom meetings, we expend more while we receive less.



Figure 3 – On July 17, 2020, one of our members, nova (pictured top left), shared their MA thesis, “Imperial Myths, Abject Devotion: Mapping Affect in New Mexican Visual Art and Culture,” for our monthly Critical Reading Circle night on Zoom (Photo Credit: Raquel Andrea González Madrigal).

Still, we cherish the times that we are able to organize and come together once or twice per month. The gatherings are potent and well-attended. Recently, a queer Asian non-binary member requested a gathering to help with their feelings of isolation and grief from losing friends to COVID-19. As a response, we organized an Evening of Prayer on Zoom with a fluid structure to allow for whatever would come through. Once again, we had attendees across time zones; they arrived, left, and returned during the evening. Members made offerings which included a recorded guided meditation by Mushim Patricia Ikeda, mindful breath and gentle movement, a comprehensive prayer by a member of the Laguna Pueblo, Sufi dance music to honor the Muslim world during Ramadaan, and facilitation of recognizing each person on the call. While we could not physically be together, we experienced healing through the spiritual and political bond across lands and oceans.

The Future of Yoga and Meditation?

When we began forming this community, we were at the beginning of a horrific fatal election of a white supremacist administration. Now in 2021, we are at a significantly different historical moment. With the new liberal administration, there is an unsaid pressure for us to include white people in our programs, to provide lists for what white yoga practitioners can do to be more inclusive, to hold diversity workshops for white yoga practitioners, etc. We resist this dull constant pressure from the outside. Regardless of who is in power, we firmly know that racism is permanent and endemic as the late civil rights lawyer Derrick Bell has argued. We will continue to organize spaces for people of color for healing and empowerment. We will continue to ground ourselves in the question: what do people of color need from yoga and meditation?

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Farah Nousheen (she/her) is a community organizer, cultural worker, healing justice activist, and critical race theorist. As a non-traditional student, Farah completed her BA in Comparative History of Ideas (2009) at the University of Washington and MA in American Studies (2015) at the University of New Mexico. She is the academic advisor of interdisciplinary and social justice studies at the University of New Mexico (2014-present). As a working-class, immigrant, queer South Asian Muslim woman and mother, Farah has worked for the majority of her life to end systemic racism in educational institutions, activist communities, media arts, and spiritual spaces. In response to 9/11, Farah co-founded and is currently a board member of Tasveer (<https://www.tasveer.org> or @tasveerorg on Instagram) whose mission is to inspire social change

through thought-provoking South Asian films, art, and storytelling. Fifteen years later, in direct response to the November 2016 election, Farah founded Yoga for People of Color Sangha (<https://yogapocsangha.org> and @poc.yoga_meditation.nm on Instagram).

Raquel Andrea González Madrigal (she/her) recently accepted a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in American Studies at Vassar College beginning Fall 2021. Previously, she was a postdoctoral fellow of the Consortium for Faculty Diversity among Liberal Arts Colleges (2019-2021), and a visiting lecturer at Mount Holyoke College in the Department of Spanish, Latina/o and Latin American Studies. Her research investigates the US-Mexico border as a settler colonial/imperial structure, and im/migrant rights in relation to Indigenous decolonization. She completed her Doctoral (2019) and Master's (2012) degrees in American Studies at the University of New Mexico and Bachelor of Arts degrees in Ethnic Studies and Political Science from the University of California, Riverside (2009). More information about Raquel is at <https://raquelandream.squarespace.com>.