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Reigniting *Race and Yoga*: An Open Issue “in the Wake” of Ongoing Crises

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Locating This Issue

After an extended editorial process, we are excited to share the seventh issue of *Race and Yoga*, which includes three peer-reviewed articles, one personal narrative, and three book reviews. The journey to publication for this issue has seen several delays as we have sought to live out the journal’s expressed, anti-oppressive values in practice. The previous issue highlighted the challenges of publishing during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not ended, as disability justice organizers repeatedly remind the public (Adler-Bolton 2023). *Race and Yoga*’s 6.1 issue also described how this pandemic was one of many, especially for Black, Indigenous, and people of color who disproportionately endure the ongoing pandemics of racism, (settler) colonialism, and imperialism, among other systems of domination. Amid this context, the production of this issue has occurred alongside the enduring crises of academic precarity within racial capitalism as well as genocides and their attendant struggles for liberation.

The crisis of academic precarity had a specific impact on the realization of this issue due to the press for our journal, the University of California, Berkeley’s eScholarship platform, and the location of *Race and Yoga*’s Editor-in-Chief Tria Blu Wakpa and editorial assistants Ali Kheradyar and me, Sammy Roth, who all work at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In Fall 2022, as graduate student workers, Kheradyar and I joined our colleagues to fight for fair wages and working conditions in the largest US higher education strike in history (Guzman-Lopez 2023). This strike included graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and other researchers represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union at all campuses within the University of California system. Like many, we are affected personally by the ways that academia overwhelmingly underpays and undervalues graduate student labor, which is integral to university operations (Hugo 2017). The timing of the strike impacted our publication timeline, with this issue originally slated to be released in December 2022. In solidarity with the strike, Blu Wakpa and *Race and Yoga*’s Managing Editor Jennifer Musial proposed delaying the issue until 2023, to which the entire editorial board unanimously agreed. We then decided to merge the pieces planned for the 2022 issue with new submissions from a Call for Papers in early 2023.

The final preparations for this issue have additionally taken place alongside the genocide of Palestinians by the state of Israel in a continuation of their Zionist, ethno-nationalist, settler colonial project.¹ As the guest editor, I reject the idea that this issue should be published with a “business as usual” orientation that might ignore this violent assault. Instead, I view it as a political and ethical responsibility to name this genocide, explicate its connections to the journal’s aims, and highlight how releasing issue 7.1 within this context impacts how it might be read. At *Race and Yoga* we have engaged in critical conversations about settler colonialism and

decolonization, especially in issue 3.1, and considered how yoga, as a flexible, embodied practice, can challenge and/or reinforce oppressive norms, including settler colonial norms, sometimes simultaneously. It is not surprising, then, that yoga has been mobilized for Zionist ends throughout the ongoing bombardment of Gaza, from images of people carrying both rifles and yoga mats to a viral video from a Bring Them Home campaign event in which women in Tel Aviv practiced asanas over posters of Israeli hostages (Yogis 4 Palestine 2023). While concern and care are warranted for every human and more-than-human life endangered and impacted by the occupation, including Israeli hostages, this video obfuscated historical and contemporary power relations that structurally give Israelis more power than Palestinians in the context of Israel's apartheid state (Amnesty International 2022). The event particularly concealed the violence and containment that Palestinians are made to endure, including being held hostage in Israeli prisons without being charged with a crime (Fayyad 2023).² In this way, the use of yoga in this context acts as a “settler move to innocence” consistent with long histories in which settlers have positioned themselves as victims within diverse colonial contexts (Tuck and Yang 2012, 9).³ *Race and Yoga's* editorial board member Sheena Sood has done extensive research on the “omwashing” in campaigns like this, which is a shared tactic across far-right military groups and religious movements including Hindutva, Zionism, and the US military to utilize yoga and mindfulness practices to further fascist and ethnonationalist projects (SOAS Centre Of Yoga Studies 2023). In making these connections, Sood invites us not only to fight against far-right tactics in our specific locales but also to consider how fascist forces are consolidating globally.

Such an internationalist scope has long been a part of Palestinian liberation struggles and is relatedly a core value of this journal in its aims to analyze and challenge the oppressive norms of interlocking social structures in yoga practices across the world. For example, Palestinian revolutionaries have stood in solidarity with Black liberation movements in the US for decades and vice versa. From the 1960s onward, Black Panthers visited Palestine and organized with the Palestine Liberation Organization (Awad 2021). Of late, Palestinians helped Black Lives Matter activists cope with teargassing during the Ferguson uprising in 2014 through communications on Twitter (Gorton 2014). Recently, growing support for a free Palestine, including through political education tactics on social media, has expanded conversations around the multiple genocides occurring globally that have garnered less international media attention such as those in Artsakh, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Manipur, to name only some (Kaishian 2023; Audu 2023; Ahmed and Salih 2023; Khan 2023).

Related to *Race and Yoga's* international orientation, previous writing in *Race and Yoga* has also examined how yoga can support holistic health and wellness that is connected to rather than detached from decolonial and other liberatory efforts (Blu Wakpa 2018; Sood 2018; Sood 2020; Ansari 2020). Presently, Yogis for Palestine offers one example of the ways that yoga practice can support collective liberation and particularly be mobilized in support of Palestinian life. Yogis for Palestine is a group of “yoga practitioners, studios, businesses, and organizations,” spearheaded by Sood and Aniqah Anwar, that have pledged to take action to support Palestinian liberation including contacting elected representatives, attending protests, educating themselves about the occupation, supporting Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against the Israeli state, and so on (Yogis for Palestine 2023). In their call to action, Yogis for Palestine asks, “In yoga, we are often invited to reflect on our interconnectedness as humanity, but what will it take for us to contemplate our complicity in the genocide of 2 million of our own human siblings in Gaza?” (Yogis for Palestine 2023). We might then extend this question to all our human siblings experiencing genocide, and ongoing structural oppressions like settler colonialism and white

supremacy, as well as more-than-human relatives, like the land, air, water, nonhuman animals, and cosmos, who are also harmed in the continued bombardment of Gaza and violence enacted within other necropolitical sites (Mbembe 2019).

Locating Myself and My Path to *Race & Yoga*

Outlining this context locates this issue temporally and presents the opportunity for me to locate myself in connection to this work. I am a cis white settler woman and mother whose research focuses on the intersections of white settler violence, popular performance, and technologies of circulation. I grew up and currently reside on overlapping Cherokee, Osage, Shawnee, Hopewell, and Adena land in what is now called Louisville, Kentucky. I was raised in a conservative Catholic home and found my way to liberatory politics and practices through my ongoing career in dance and academia, which has unsettled my worldview and challenged me to live differently. I approach liberation struggles from a position of solidarity, understanding that my socialization into whiteness, gender normativity, and settler identity has robbed me of my humanity in many ways including diminishing attention to our interconnectedness. In other words, this socialization harms me even as it provides privileges that can lead me to be complicit and/or a direct actor in the harm done to others, which is much more acute and urgent than the harm I experience in these cycles. I believe that dismantling oppressive norms in my communities, including the ways I perpetuate them personally, must remain an integral part of my lifelong journey. I turn often to Black feminist Fannie Lou Hamer's statement that, "Nobody's free until everybody's free," (Hamer 2011, 136) understanding that my liberation is bound up in these struggles even if I am deeply privileged and experience far less violence than my comrades.

The context of this issue is specifically important to me not only as a human being opposed to genocide but also given that I performed with, taught dance for, and managed an Israeli dance company from 2015-2018 before gaining a critical awareness of the occupation. Thus, beyond my complicity with the Zionist regime as a US citizen, whose tax dollars support Israeli military operations (Knutson 2023), I have also personally and professionally benefitted from its investments in dance as a form of cultural diplomacy (Avraham 2015). In recognizing the connections between settler violence in Turtle Island and Palestine and my own debts within this context, it is important to me to acknowledge how settlers can contribute to decolonial struggles by unpacking our privilege, learning histories that have often been excluded from our narratives and educations, having difficult conversations with our communities, and following the guidance of Indigenous peoples, especially those whose land we have occupied and capitalized upon, to fight alongside them for collective liberation.

Like my awareness of and commitment to liberatory struggles, I came to yoga through my work in dance and academia. I took my first yoga class as an undergraduate student at Ohio University, where it was presented to me as a wellness practice that could also provide a supplemental career for dancers. This initial introduction, then, already presented yoga within the capitalist framework that this journal has sought to challenge (Miller 2016; Manigault-Bryant 2016). Years later, before I had fully become aware of the power dynamics in which I was operating, I completed my 200-hour teacher training in New York City to do just that – supplement my income from dance projects. I quickly became disillusioned with this path as I was critiqued by studio managers and owners, and even fired from one job, for not focusing enough on "fitness" and teaching acrobatic asanas. Although I did not have the language for it at

that time, this example highlights exactly what I have learned through anti-racist organizing: that having a structurally normative identity, in this case being a thin, white woman teaching yoga within the US, will not wholly save you from any system of domination unless you adhere to the norms promoted by the power structure, herein the capitalist reduction of yoga to a virtuosic form of exercise.

Since gaining the critical lens to put language to these experiences and understand my complicity within the Western yoga industrial complex – and its attendant racism, fatphobia, classism, and so on – I have sought to unlearn appropriative habits and develop an accountable personal yoga practice in which I explicitly do not make money or even teach the form. My approach to accountability as a yoga practitioner aligns with many of the aims of this journal by centering South Asian and other voices of color and challenging oppressive norms within yoga industries in the US and internationally. It is from this perspective that I was grateful to join *Race and Yoga* as an editorial assistant in 2021 at the invitation of Blu Wakpa. I met Blu Wakpa in 2019 in her class titled *Dance, Colonization, and Confinement* in the department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA and have since supported her decolonial, community-engaged work with Native people as a graduate student researcher. Additionally, I have been grateful to receive her mentorship for my own scholarship and academic career. The invitation to write this introduction is both a continuation of this mentorship and my efforts to contribute to liberatory struggles from my positionality as a person with a largely dominant identity and with particular attention to my experiences with movement practices including dance and yoga.

This Issue “In the Wake”

Returning to this issue from the specificity of my location, I am reminded of Christina Sharpe’s book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* in which she describes white supremacy as a total climate in which Black people are made “to live in relation to this requirement for [their] death” (2016, 7). Within this climate, Sharpe offers the theoretical and practical framework of “wake work,” including creative practices, radical resistance, and critical consciousness, as a way of tending to Black death and insisting on Black life. She says, “As we go about wake work, we must think through containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity and the ways the manifold representations of blackness become the symbol, par excellence, for the less-than-human being condemned to death” (21). She goes on to ask as a Black woman discussing antiblack violence, “How might we stay in the wake with and as those whom the state positions to die ungrivable deaths and live lives meant to be unlivable?” (22). This turn to Black feminism and Sharpe’s prompts to consider “containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity” alongside grieving “ungrivable deaths” and tending to “lives meant to be unlivable” returns me to the current context of the assault on Gaza and the ways Black feminists like Audre Lorde and Angela Davis first introduced me to internationalist politics, including Palestinian struggles for liberation, as well as the globality of antiblackness (Lorde 1989; Davis 2016). I am particularly reminded of the ways that fascist regimes have historically turned to the violence enacted against Black people within the transatlantic slave trade and the genocide of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island as a blueprint for other genocidal campaigns, including that of the Holocaust (Ross 2018). We might consider then, as Sharpe invites us to do, how “wake work” is both particularly rooted in the experiences of Black people and can be mobilized in other contexts given that anti-oppressive struggles are interconnected, and antiblackness has been made foundational to the dehumanization of many non-Black communities (2016, 22).

I offer this reflection to signal the ways this issue might invite us to consider how yoga practices can act as a form of “wake work,” by fortifying Black people and others in the face of the total climate of white supremacy and its interlocking forms of domination like transphobia and heteropatriarchy including at yoga studios. The articles in this issue attend to these possibilities specifically and make urgent contributions to the field of critical yoga studies by centering Black and queer yoga practitioners. “‘You Are Your Best Thing’: The Barriers and Benefits of Yoga for Black Women,” written by Robin Oatis-Ballew, Allison Hotz, Tiyaana Chaney-Taylor, and Sarah Rose Elizabetta-Ragan, opens the issue. In it, the authors describe how yoga practice can support Black women’s health, which is often adversely affected by systemic racism and sexism. At the same time, the authors emphasize that there can be barriers to accessing yoga for Black women given that mainstream norms in US yoga communities are often exclusionary. In the next article, Chloe Diamond-Lenow offers an autoethnographic analysis of the yoga classes she teaches for queer practitioners in “Queer and Trans Yoga: Practices of Utopia in Hostile Times,” delineating how tender, trauma-informed pedagogies can “provide space for collective grief and embodied care” for LGBTQIA+ communities (13). They explicate how queering yoga spaces involves challenging cisnormative and heteropatriarchal customs within mainstream US yoga practices, and specifically discuss teaching self-care and community care, political consciousness, and coalition building, without overlooking how transphobia and homophobia intersect with white supremacy, (settler) colonialism, ableism, sizeism, and more. A third article in this issue by Tori Justin, “‘Roll Out My Mat and Take Up Space’: A Study of Black Women’s Resistance to Yoga’s White Normativity,” shares thematic similarities with “You Are Your Best Thing” by discussing the ways that yoga can both support Black women’s healing and expose them to harm in the context of yoga communities that center whiteness. Justin specifically analyzes ten in-depth, qualitative interviews with Black women yogis who describe their experiences with racism and physical activities including yoga in the US. Charting a trajectory of Black women practicing yoga from historical contexts to present day, she offers an overview of how white normativity came to be dominant within US yoga practices and describes how Black women utilize yoga to resist these racist norms inside and outside yoga spaces. All three articles make important contributions to the growing field of critical yoga studies by challenging white supremacist and cis heteropatriarchal norms in Western yoga spaces and scholarship without abandoning the liberatory possibilities that yoga practices can hold.

This issue’s personal narrative and book reviews continue to explore yoga practices within intersecting systems of oppression as a tool for self-care and social justice and offer compelling attention to communities of practice that are often overlooked in mainstream and scholarly discourses. Keeping the attention on antiblackness in yoga spaces and the potential for yoga to support healing from racialized trauma, a personal narrative by Brett Lesley Cumberbatch titled “Rediscovering Citta: Vignettes on Violence and Healing in Life and Commercial Yoga Spaces,” describes how he has drawn upon yoga to face the realities of racism and its impact on him as a Black man. Cumberbatch explains how, as a “nomad,” he traveled from studio to studio to cultivate a holistic sense of his embodiment through yoga and reclaim his breath.

The issue then turns to book reviews, which focus on two edited collections and one individually authored book that notably expand critical yoga studies with attention to intersectional power dynamics. The section begins with Ali Kheradyar’s review of Farah Godrej’s *Freedom Inside? Yoga and Meditation in the Carceral State*, which outlines how the

book offers a critical examination of the application of yoga practices in carceral settings. Kheradyar describes how the book makes key contributions to social justice discourses, abolitionist scholarship, and critical yoga studies by analyzing how prison yoga programs can overlook systemic power relations and reinscribe neoliberal narratives of individual responsibility and/or shift an incarcerated practitioner’s political consciousness to recognize and challenge structural oppression. Samantha Griggs offers a review of the collection *Practicing Yoga as Resistance: Voices of Color in Search of Freedom* edited by Cara Hagan. In it, she describes how the book’s essays critique the exclusionary dynamics that overwhelmingly structure Western yoga communities and practices. She also highlights how the essays simultaneously offer alternatives that foreground yoga’s liberatory possibilities when intentionally paired with social justice frameworks. In addition to detailing the structure and contents of the book, Griggs helpfully locates connections between the edited collection and *Race & Yoga* for readers who may be interested in ongoing conversations within critical yoga studies. Finally, in a book review on the *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*, Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram details the breadth of scholarship appearing in the Handbook’s thirty-four chapters. She emphasizes how the collection challenges Cartesian dualist norms that have emerged through Western bias in critical yoga studies, while charting new directions for scholarship in the field regarding philosophical and religious engagements with yoga in a variety of global contexts. From the articles to the personal narrative and the book reviews, this issue continues these ongoing conversations by importantly emphasizing how structurally marginalized practitioners have utilized yoga in innovative ways to support personal and collective healing even within oppressive environments. We hope you enjoy this issue and that it provides the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which our struggles for liberation are interdependent and require solidarity in order to create just futures for all.

Notes

¹ It is beyond the scope of this introduction to provide a historical overview of the Zionist movement and its occupation of Palestine for the last 75 years or to discuss the relationships of Zionism and anti-Zionism to antisemitism. However, I unequivocally state that anti-Zionism is *not* antisemitism, though antisemitic actors can certainly exploit anti-Zionist movements. In any case, attempts to position anti-Zionism as always already antisemitic are part of a racist campaign to dehumanize Palestinians and justify any violence enacted against them by silencing them and their supporters. For more information on the history of Zionism and the occupation, please see Rashid Khalidi’s *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (2020). For more on the relationships between Zionism, anti-Zionism, and antisemitism see Nira Yuval-Davis’s “Zionism, Antisemitism and the Struggle Against Racism” (2019).

² Undoubtedly, much historical and acute trauma has been activated for many Jewish people both inside and outside Israel due to the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, and rising antisemitism in its wake. Those grappling with this trauma are deserving of care and concern in their grief, which can be accessed through yoga practices. At the same time, it is crucial to consider the ways that emphasis for the healing and care of dominant groups – like Jewish people in Israel – is often prioritized over the healing and care of the marginalized – like Palestinians – within their local contexts. We must ask, as this issue does, who can access healing? Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and the diaspora are certainly experiencing acute and activated historical trauma alongside the rise of Islamophobia as well. Given the ways that the Israeli military has targeted Gazan hospitals and prevented medical supplies, along with food, water, fuel, and more from entering Gaza, it is very clear how care and healing is not only stratified in this context, but in many cases wholly denied to Palestinians (Alouf and Slow 2023).

³ It is also beyond the scope of this introduction to contribute to a debate about Jewish indigeneity to Israel/Palestine. It is worth noting, however, that Indigenous scholars and activists have identified how indigeneity is a political identity in relation to settler colonialism and that anyone can perpetuate colonial norms regardless of their

identity. For more on the debate about Jewish indigeneity see Solomon Brager's "When Settler Becomes Native: Examining the claim of Jewish indigeneity in the land of Israel" (2021) and Daniel Delgado, Robert Kirchner, Rebekah Erev, and Leora Cockrell's "On 'When Settler Becomes Native'" (2023). For more on indigeneity as a political identity see, UCLA Equity Diversity and Inclusion's, "Resources on Native American and Indigenous Affairs: Native American and Indigenous Peoples FAQs" (2022). For more on people perpetuating settler colonial norms regardless of identity see, Isla Emery-Whittington and Georgina Davis's "Rapua te kurahuna: An Occupational Perspective of Internalised Oppression" (2023) or Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" (2012).

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