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Yoga During COVID-19: Perpetual Pandemics

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Like any capitalist machine, the Yoga Industrial Complex adapted to meet practitioners' needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in 2020, yogalebrities leaned heavily on streaming platforms to peddle their brands. Studios offered classes on Zoom to stay afloat. Sales of yoga gear skyrocketed as people tried to build a home practice. Analysts speculate that changes to the fitness/wellness/yoga industry may be permanent (Shaban 2021). Some looked to replicate their yoga studio experiences at home; others sought yoga for the first time to handle the never-ending, overlapping stressors in our midst.

There were at least three intersecting crises on our minds in the United States in 2021: the COVID-19 pandemic, extrajudicial anti-Black violence, and the escalation of far-right conservatism within politics. Outside the US, people were engaged in other emergencies such as the Farmer's Protests in India, the drought in Sudan, political upheaval in Afghanistan, the earthquake in Haiti, etc. The intersection of climate change, political neglect, neoliberal imperialism, and far-Right conservatism had devastating effects in 2021. While there was grief, fear, and anger, there were also glimmers of hope in mutual aid groups, protests against white supremacy, and even a brief sigh of relief at some election results. We wondered, what role does yoga play against this backdrop of heightened stress and disconnection? What does it mean to "just breathe" when the US state was literally on the neck of Black people such as George Floyd as it had been with Eric Garner years earlier? What breath was possible when afflicted by COVID-19, an illness that placed some on respirators? And, how could we take a deep exhale when we were holding our breath during the US election cycle? The intersecting crises forced us to consider what we needed from yoga. Was it the spiritual teachings? The community? The reliability of a set *asana* sequence or *japa* in a chaotic world?

2021 also brought hope in the form of COVID-19 vaccines; however, neocolonial capitalism led to resource hoarding and "vaccine apartheid," a phrase used to describe the global inequities of vaccine availability and distribution (Reuters 2021). India was hit particularly hard by COVID-19 in 2021 when hospitals and burial services could not keep pace. Previous *Race and Yoga* conference presenter Darshini Shah and others critiqued those who profit from the Yoga Industrial Complex for their silence and inaction on the humanitarian crisis. In response, [Race and Yoga drafted a public statement](#) that identified the crisis as "biological in nature, [but] entirely human in both its harm and consequences." Our post is still up and contains a link to a mutual aid Google document that has donation suggestions for the most marginalized in India.

Publishing During a Pandemic

The research is clear that women academics have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (Squazzoni et al., 2021). Women submitted fewer manuscripts to journals, and

women with children have been especially taxed (Fulweiler et al., 2021; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021), as have those who do eldercare. While women are under-represented as authors, they are over-represented in the review pipeline. Squazzoni et al. (2021) found that women took on *more* journal service than men during the first wave of the pandemic. Women are carrying the intellectual load of academia during this time. Given that women of color engage in higher rates of service in academia (Muhs et al., 2012) and have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 illness in the United States (Erickson 2020; Lindsey 2020), the brunt of COVID-19 on racialized women in academia has been nearly insurmountable for some. Like other scholarly outlets, *Race and Yoga* was affected by the pandemic. We received fewer submissions than in previous years, and it was harder to find peer reviewers for this issue. Since *Race and Yoga* is primarily driven by women who write, edit, and review for the journal, we recognized the need to be flexible by offering deadline extensions and a lot of patience to authors, reviewers, and ourselves. Under these circumstances, we are indebted to the authors and reviewers who worked on this issue.

Issue Overview

In the first personal narrative, “Desis on the Mat: Building BIPOC Community During Two Pandemics”, Farha Ternikar chronicles her journey from mainstream wellness chains like Pure Barre to local community practices like outdoor yoga for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). After the advice of a friend, Ternikar turned to *vinyasa* power yoga to manage the stressors of the 2016 US presidential election as a racialized college professor. While the physical movements were empowering, the culture of the studio was not. It was an ill-planned donation-based Black Lives Matter class in summer 2020 that left Ternikar wanting more from her teachers, which she found in K’s class – an outdoor, socially-distanced, ‘pay what you can’ yoga class that moved from the backyard to the park. K’s class fostered community, healing, and conversation amidst the stressors of the pandemic, politics, and anti-Black violence.

Teigha Mae VanHester’s personal narrative “The Tale of the Fat, Beautiful, Black Butterfly: My COVID-19 Chrysalis and the Disruptive Potential of Cultivating Yoga Practices Emerging from Black Feminist Thought” uses the metaphor of the chrysalis – a cocooned transitional growth period – to argue for prioritizing self-care in the face of COVID-19 and anti-Black racism. VanHester begins her piece by talking about anger. The last two years found VanHester overwhelmed by anger at the government’s pandemic response, ensuing isolation, and unreasonable workplace demands that did not yield to pandemic living. Rather than become consumed by anger, VanHester opted to be fueled by it (inspired by Audre Lorde’s call), and she turned to yoga to act as the catalytic converter. Yoga became a space of self-love, body-joy, and community. And it was through yoga, as well as plant-based living, that VanHester co-designed and delivered a program for her university called “Sustainability and the Soul,” which fused Black feminist community care politics, food, and yoga practice.

A desire to build a different world also fueled Farah Nousheen and Raquel Andrea González Madrigal, who contributed their personal narrative “Embodied Justice in Yoga for People of Color Sangha” to this issue. Nousheen and González Madrigal begin their piece by articulating the acute threat that racialized, Indigenous, LGBTQ, immigrant, and diasporic peoples felt after the 2016 US presidential election. Instead of relying on predominantly white healing spaces, Nousheen and González Madrigal convened Albuquerque’s first Yoga for People of Color Sangha, a “fractal” community that included activities such as meditation, critical

reading circles, guest speakers, and *asana*. Guided by the question “what do people of color need from yoga and meditation?”, Nousheen and González Madrigal demonstrate that practices can be driven by what each gathering needs, which changes from one moment to the next.

In her article “Black Mothering and Self-Care in the Age of COVID-19”, Cara Hagan offers seven case studies of Black mothers who did yoga for self-care during the twin crises of anti-Black racism and the COVID-19 pandemic. As Hagan points out, Black women face unique challenges at the intersections of maternal shame under patriarchy and care work expectations under white supremacy. Historically and presently, Black women do a lot to hold their families and communities together. Hagan learns that some of their Black women interviewees came to yoga when they hit their physical, mental, and emotional limits. Others had a pre-existing yoga practice that waned during the pandemic. Each of Hagan’s interviewees recognize the value of yoga, whether it is *asana*, meditation, or *pranayama*, to their ability to parent their children and show up for their communities.

We have watched Critical Yoga Studies take off in the last ten years. Up until recently, it was easy to pinpoint few monographs that kickstarted this emerging field. Today, several books come out each year and, in this issue, readers will find a book reviews of *Post-Lineage Yoga: From Guru to #MeToo* (2020) by Theodora Wildcroft (reviewed by Laurah E. Klepinger). Given the increase in publication of scholarly yoga books, we hope to include book reviews in next year’s issue too.

Journal Updates

For many years, co-founding editors Drs. Tria Blu Wakpa, Sabrina Strings, and I have talked about how to grow *Race and Yoga*. In 2021, some of our plans came to fruition as Tria and I co-hosted a virtual webinar “Yoga Counter Narratives and Caretaking” with panelists Sophia Ayesha Ansari, Acosia Red Elk, and Haley Laughter. Our goal was to facilitate conversation between South Asian and Native American yoga practitioners about the ways in which yoga is useful for community caretaking, which was especially powerful in the context of COVID-19 that wreaked havoc in India and Indian country (in the US) among other places. This webinar was generously supported by UC-Irvine. It was livestreamed on our Facebook page where it can still be viewed.

One of the greatest joys at *Race and Yoga* is how we have supported each other through career transitions. *Race and Yoga* began as a working group when Tria Blu Wakpa was a PhD student at UC-Berkeley. It grew to a conference when Sabrina Strings joined UC-Berkeley as a Postdoctoral Fellow. I attended the conference as a recent PhD who was adjunct teaching in Canada. Throughout the years, we’ve celebrated our hires into tenure track jobs (Strings at UC-Irvine, Blu Wakpa at UCLA, and me at New Jersey City University). Sabrina published her first monograph *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (NYU Press) to great acclaim in 2019. We are delighted to see how far the book travelled and how many podcasters, journalists, and scholars wanted Sabrina to speak to their audiences. Understandably, there were many competing demands on Sabrina’s time as she earned tenure and promotion and dreamed up innovative new projects. To be able to focus on new opportunities, Sabrina decided to step down as co-founding editor at *Race and Yoga* making this issue the last under Sabrina’s co-leadership. We wish her well in her future endeavors. Sabrina has written a final reflection on her on-ramp, off-ramp, and re-entry to yoga as a practitioner invested in social justice, anti-racist political work. Her reflection concludes this issue.

In 2020, Tria, Sabrina, and I talked about expanding *Race and Yoga* through adding an editorial board, which brings new intellectual energy to the journal. We are thrilled to announce that Dr. Sheena Sood and Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram joined the editorial board in 2021 and our next issue, 7.1 (2022), is informed by their insights and guidance. Additionally, we formally assigned Lauren Hatch Pokhrel the title of Social Media Coordinator, a role she has had for the last few years. Finally, we added Sammy Roth and Ali Kheradyar as editorial assistants to help round out the journal operations. Look for additional changes that reflect the new team's vision for *Race and Yoga* in early 2022.

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Jennifer Musial (she/her) is Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at New Jersey City University. She publishes in four fields; 1) reproductive justice, racialization, and gender-

based violence; 2) critical yoga studies; 3) women's and gender studies field formation; and 4) the scholarship of teaching and learning. Her work appears in *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, *Journal of Feminist Scholarship, Sexualities*, *Feminist Formations*, and *Feminist Studies*. She has forthcoming chapters in *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies Volume II*, *Carcerality Locally and Globally: Feminist Critiques of States of Violence*, and *Routledge Companion on Gender, Media and Violence*. Jennifer completed her 200hr Hatha yoga teacher training in 2010. She also completed teacher trainings in Yin Yoga, Prison Yoga, and Trauma Recovery. She is the managing editor for *Race and Yoga*.