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## Race and Yoga

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## Rethinking Yoga: Meditations on the Work We Do

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### Introduction

*Race and Yoga* didn't begin as a journal. It began as a group largely comprised of people of color and yogis coming together to discuss their love of the practice, and their sense of disenfranchisement in the modern yoga community. Tria Blu Wakpa (then Andrews), a Ph.D. student in Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, founded the group in 2011. For two years, Tria held meetings in a small conference room in Barrows Hall on the Cal campus. She invited discussants who had been practitioners and lovers of yoga, but who had also been disillusioned by the racism, sexism, classism, size-ism, homophobia, and cultural appropriation that passed in modern yoga studios purporting to offer "safe spaces" to practice.

Tria met Jennifer Musial, a Women's Studies scholar, at the National Women's Studies Association conference in 2012. One year later, the two of them tossed around the idea of hosting a Race and Yoga conference. And yet, living at opposite ends of the United States with a shoestring budget allocated for the group, organizing a conference didn't seem feasible.

Moreover, two years into the group's existence, Race and Yoga had yet to cultivate a regular membership. As Tria was considering terminating the group, she received an email from Sabrina Strings. A fellow woman of color yoga practitioner, Sabrina was moving to Berkeley for a postdoctoral fellowship. Sabrina was thrilled about the prospect of having another group of intellectuals with whom she could not only vent about the current state of yoga, but also develop events that would illuminate the deeply problematic nature of modern commodified, fetishized yoga. With two locals to take care of details on the ground, Tria and Sabrina planned the first-ever Race and Yoga conference at the University of California, Berkeley in 2014.

Notice of the conference spread largely through word of mouth. That year, there were nearly 60 submissions for 12 panel slots. To encourage access and inclusivity, the organizers did not charge for tickets. The conference sold out online. In the conference space, some presenters abandoned the scripts they had created for their talks, so moved by the moment, that they chose instead just to testify. Others, both panelists and audience members, wept openly. For many, our conference was the first time that they had been given a space to describe the pain of being marginalized in the yoga community, a space that was purportedly for everyone. People spoke about others telling them that they were too fat to do yoga, or being asked, based on judgments about their body size, if it was their first class every time they went to a studio. People of color described putting their mats down in a studio, and having the white person next to them move

their mat to the other side of the room. They shared the challenges of being invisible and being hypervisible.

That first year, we were told again and again by conference goers that they felt like they had been part of something groundbreaking. Even one of the keynote speakers, Professor Evelyn Nakano Glenn, confessed that she had not expected much coming into an event organized by junior scholars. But, she had been impressed by the valuable intervention the conference made.

It was after that first conference that we decided we wanted to create this journal. We wanted a space to collect the incredible stories we'd heard, and the innovative research we'd seen. We hope it is clear, then, why we have put untold and unpaid hours into the creation of this journal, a labor of love. *Race and Yoga* journal was created to offer a space that expressed underrepresented experiences and embodied knowledges where none had previously existed. This is an effort to amplify the voices of those who had/would not been seen, had/could not been heard, because the incredible written work they were doing on yoga wasn't legible in mainstream journals in any discipline.

*Race and Yoga* is the first scholarly journal to examine issues surrounding the history, racialization, sex(ualization), and exclusivity of the mainstream yoga community. The papers published in the journal problematize mainstream narratives about yoga in North America. Such narratives have traditionally described how the practice promotes physical and spiritual wellbeing, while ignoring who has had access to the practice since its arrival in the West, and how it is often used in ways that reproduce inequality.

### Current Issue

The theme of this first issue of the journal is “Yoga (R)evolution? Interrogating Possibilities and Practices.” There are three articles on that theme herein. In addition, we included the reviews of two books: one that considers the inclusivity in modern yoga and the other its commodification.

The first article is titled “Eating the Other Yogi: Kathryn Budig, the Yoga Industrial Complex, and the Appropriation of Body Positivity.” In it, author Amara Miller examines the co-optation of the body positivity movement by yogalebrity Kathryn Budig. Budig has taken up the mantle of representing the movement, claiming to have been body shamed as a flexible, size 4, white woman. But, Miller shows that Budig's proximity to the mainstream ideal of a “yoga body” decontextualizes and depoliticizes the movement for inclusivity. In this way, Budig, per Miller, engages in the tactics described by bell hooks as “eating the Other,” or appropriating the language of oppression whilst enjoying the benefits of (slender) white femininity.

The second article is Shameem Black's “Flexible Indian Labor: Yoga, Information Technology Migration, and U.S. Technoculture.” Black claims that yoga is one of the more popular technological exports from India. And yet in the present moment, the bodies of *actual* Indian gurus fade from memory. This is mirrored in the invisibility of another group of Indians who contribute to U.S. technoculture: those who emigrated from India on H1B visas. Black skillfully argues that the technology afforded by both types of (hidden) Indian labor are transformed into a form of what Foucault called technê, allowing Westerners to reinvent themselves, as they search for happiness and perfection through (read: Orientalist) reliance on disembodied Indian innovations.

The third and final article in this volume is James Manigault-Bryant's “Yoga and the Metaphysics of Racial Capital.” Manigault-Bryant uses the method of auto-ethnography to

describe the experience of being a black man in a yoga teacher-training. Per the author, his experience reveals how yoga culture has been captured by the racial logic of capitalist production. He argues that various intersecting racial fetishes are mobilized to sell Americans a purportedly “authentic” yoga practice.

In addition to these three articles, we are also proud to include two book reviews, penned by Raechel Lutz and Jennifer Aubrecht, respectively: Andrea Jain’s *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (2015) and the edited collection *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis* by Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts (2016). Not only do we aim to publish innovative work on race and yoga, we also aspire to evaluate scholarship that is shaping the burgeoning field of critical yoga studies.

We would like to thank everyone who made this volume possible.

**Sabrina Strings** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine. Her research examines how race, gender, and class are inscribed on the body, such that the body itself can be marshaled to maintain social hierarchies. Her articles and essays are featured in venues including *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Yoga and Body Image II*, and *The Feminist Wire*. Her book, *Thin, White, and Saved: Fat Stigma and the Fear of the Big Black Body* is forthcoming with NYU Press. A 200hr certified yoga teacher, Sabrina teaches dana-based yoga in community centers and community clinics. She is a co-founding editor of *Race and Yoga*, and has co-organized workshops and conferences on spiritual justice throughout California.

**Tria Blu Wakpa** is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley and a graduate of the M.F.A. program in Creative Writing at San Diego State University. Her research interrogates the politics and practices of dance and embodiment historically and contemporarily in educational and carceral institutions for Native Americans. Her writing has recently appeared or is forthcoming in: *Dance Research Journal*, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, and *Yoga and Body Image II*. Tria has a strong commitment to creating projects at the convergence of theory and practice that bridge the academy and community. She is the founder of University of California, Berkeley’s Race and Yoga Working Group and a co-founder for the Race and Yoga Conference – both of which are attended by community members outside the academy – and the open-access *Race and Yoga* journal for which she also serves as a Co-editor-in-Chief.