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Decolonizing Yoga? and (Un)settling Social Justice

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What are our responsibilities not only to the Indigenous peoples whose lands we occupy, but also to the Indigenous peoples and people of color whose practices we benefit from?

This special cluster of *Race and Yoga* recognizes the need to (re)center Indigenous lands, practices, and peoples locally and globally in discussions of decolonization and yoga.

Settler colonial and/or dominant yoga discourses exclude peoples who are Indigenous to the partition of Turtle Island often referred to as the U.S. as well as the Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian diasporic peoples from whose ancestors and lands yoga broadly originated.¹

Whereas Native American/Indigenous, South Asian, and South Asian American studies have frequently overlooked embodied practices and the ways that movement means, academic fields that center the body, embodiment, and performance studies have often omitted Indigenous peoples and their contributions.

With the primary exception of Native American/Indigenous studies, fields often do not account for settler colonialism or Indigenous futurities.

In the U.S., discourses around “decolonizing yoga” frequently focus on globalization and likewise do not acknowledge settler colonialism or Native American sovereignties.

That is, these discourses often do not recognize the over 900 federally recognized and unrecognized tribes within the settler state boundaries are actually nations and/or that yoga is practiced on Indigenous lands that are not acknowledged as such.²

To introduce the four pieces in this issue that cohere around the theme of “Decolonizing Yoga and (Un)settling Social Justice”, I engage with and extend Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s influential article, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor” (2012).

I ask, how and why are settler colonial and/or yoga, and “decolonizing yoga” discourses, *eclipsing* – and in doing so, enacting violence on – Native American, Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian diasporic peoples and practices?

And what power and possibilities might Indigenous embodied practices hold with regard to decolonization?

This is a complex undertaking given that as Tuck and Yang write, “This tightly wound set of conditions and racialized, globalized relations exponentially complicates what is meant by decolonization, and by solidarity, against settler colonial forces” (2012).

In this introduction, I first provide a brief overview of the interlocking structures of settler colonialism and Orientalism, both of which uphold White supremacy (Smith 2016, 265).

Settler colonialism, which operates practically and symbolically (Wolfe 2006, 389), explicates the ways in which dominant discourses *eclipse* Native American peoples, not only to enhance settlers’, and in particular European Americans’, wealth and political power, but also to position them as the supposedly rightful inheritors/possessors/directors of Indigenous lands (Said 1979, xviii; Tuck and Yang 2012, 16).

In the settler colonial context, I prefer the word *eclipse* to the words *erase* or *invisibilize* because *eclipse* encapsulates the notion that a body (celestial, politic, or person, human or otherwise) is only temporarily obscured and thus may reemerge (Blu Wakpa 2017).

Eclipsing, however, does not/should not imply that the peoples, practices, or lands will reemerge unscathed.

I hypothesize that yoga’s popularity among European Americans is in part a case of misplaced “imperialist nostalgia” (Rosaldo 1989) since the practice foregrounds the interconnections among body, mind, and spirit, which European Americans have attempted to destroy through the assimilation of Native practices, but simultaneously long for.

In conversation with Edward Said as well as critical yoga studies scholarship (Aubrecht 2017; Kaushik-Brown 2016; Said 1978), I then suggest that *eclipsing* may function similarly with regard to the exclusion of Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian diasporic peoples from dominant yoga discourses by enhancing European American wealth and political power, but also, in some cases, positioning European Americans as the supposedly rightful inheritors/possessors/directors of yoga, given the practice’s association with Whiteness.

I discuss how yoga, as a fluid practice, can contradictorily assuage and exacerbate the violences that settler colonialism and/or the state inflicts.³

In part because of “settler moves to innocence” (Tuck and Yang 2012) that occur in regard to “decolonizing yoga” discourses, the violences settler colonialism inflicts on Indigenous peoples may not always be readily apparent.

Likewise, whether or not one can see an *eclipse* often relies on one’s location or “position” and whether or not they are observing the astronomical event (Blu Wakpa 2017).

People's positionalities (such as the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, age, and/or ability) may make *eclipsing* more apparent to them because of their lived experiences and/or embodied knowledges (Blu Wakpa 2017).

Ideally, critical yoga discourses illuminate the structural and material aspects of *eclipsing*, so that they become visible or more visible to people in positions in privilege.

Visibility, along with accountability, can be a catalyst for promoting social justice.⁴

Finally, I contend that the endurance and innovation of Indigenous embodied practices is critical to decolonization.

My hope is that this introduction and its arguments will offer some directions for future inquiry on under-researched topics at the intersection of yoga, settler colonialism, and decolonization.

Settler Colonialism and Orientalism

To understand race in the U.S., it is necessary to account for settler colonialism, whose aim is the settler acquisition of Native American lands, which requires the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and nations (Tuck and Yang 2012, 6).

Historically, settler colonialism has functioned to enhance European American wealth and political power.

The social construction of race upholds settler colonialism, which the differential racialization of European American, Native, and African American peoples reflects.

In the inherently patriarchal project of settler colonialism, European American males are the dominant and normative group, which renders other races and genders as deviant.

The “subtractive” racialization of Indigenous peoples, implemented in part through blood quantum, supports settler access to land (12).

The “expansive” racialization of African diasporic peoples, implemented through the “one drop rule,” supported slave owners’ wealth (12).

However, there is a caveat with regard to the racialization of African diasporic peoples and/or African Americans following U.S. slavery.

Wolfe writes, “On emancipation, Blacks became surplus to some requirements and, to that extent, more like Indians ... Today in the U.S., the blatant racial zoning of large cities and the penal system suggests that, once colonized people outlive their utility, settler societies can fall back on the repertoire of strategies (in this case, spatial sequestration) whereby they have also dealt with the native surplus” (2006, 404).

African slaves were also Indigenous peoples, in the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “ripped from their lands over several generations and shipped into slavery” (1999, 27).

In the U.S. context, this interlocking, threefold nexus of race creates the foundation for settler colonialism, what Tuck and Yang refer to as “an entangled triad structure of settler-native-slave” (2012, 1).

These forms of racialization are not relegated to the past or removed from yoga spaces, but have material consequences in the present and the practice, as Michele Tracy Berger’s “I Do Practice Yoga! Controlling Images and Recovering the Black Female Body in ‘Skinny White Girl’ Yoga Culture” clarifies (2018).

Analyzing Black women’s response to the infamous Jen Caron post, “It Happened to Me: There Are No Black People In My Yoga Classes And I’m Suddenly Feeling Uncomfortable With It,” Berger writes, “Caron’s post draws on longstanding tropes used to situate the Black female body, including otherness, monstrosity, deviance, and the idea that Black women take up ‘too much’ space” (32).

Berger’s piece underscores the powerful ways in which Black women who responded to Caron’s post challenge and defy dominant yoga discourses.

According to Tuck and Yang, the settler-native-slave framework also accounts for the fluid and contradictory racialization of other peoples of color in the U.S. – for example, those from South Asia.

The authors state, “[p]eople of color who enter/are brought into the settler colonial nation-state also enter the triad of relations between settler-native-slave. We are referring here to the colonial pathways that are usually described as ‘immigration’ and how the refugee/immigrant/migrant is invited to be a settler in some scenarios, given the appropriate investments in whiteness, or is made an illegal, criminal presence in other scenarios” (2012, 17).

Importantly, as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn emphasizes, because of their “very special political and cultural status in the realm of American identity and citizenship,” Native peoples are *not* people of color (2007, 86).

South Asia peoples, who arrived in the U.S. under different circumstances than African slaves, have also endured European colonization on South Asian lands.

As Roopa Singh, who identifies as an Indigenous/Malla scholar living in the diaspora and is the founder of South Asian American Perspectives on Yoga in America, delineates, “There is a pervasive misunderstanding and lack of understanding about the South Asian diasporic experience in relation to land . . . [T]his includes: lands we were brought to on slave ships for indentured servitude; lands we were coerced to as a result of economic disaster following [India’s] independence; lands of more freely chosen immigration; and so on, and in layers, so that lands can hold all of these South Asian diasporic experiences at once” (2018a).

Like settler colonialism, Orientalism also operates to uphold White privilege (Smith 2015).

Orientalism imposes a false binary between “the East” and “the West,” which (mis)represents “Eastern” peoples and practices as subordinate (Said 1978, 45-49).⁵

And yet, while simultaneously subjugating non-White peoples, settler colonial and Orientalist discourses may also uphold and/or adopt their practices, bringing these embodied modes in proximity to Whiteness.

This is called “cultural appropriation.”

Embodied Modes and The Stakes of Eclipsing

Although the settler acquisition of Indigenous lands is the aim of settler colonialism, this structure – practically and symbolically – operates contradictorily.

As Patrick Wolfe writes, “On the one hand, settler society required the practical elimination of the natives in order to establish itself on their territory. On the symbolic level, however, settler society subsequently sought to recuperate indigeneity in order to express its difference – and, accordingly, its independence –from the mother country” (Wolfe 2006, 389).

“On the symbolic level” (389), settler colonial discourses both *eclipse* Indigenous peoples and practices who threaten the authority/authenticity/exceptionalism of the U.S., but also invoke and/or appropriate them (or stereotypical ideas about them) to enhance non-Native wealth and political power and/or address national, capitalist, and/or individual crises (Huhndorf 2001, 162).⁶

In its “practical” attempt to annihilate Native peoples and nations, the settler state has constructed Indigenous peoples’ embodied modes as suspect, even criminal (Shea Murphy 2007, 23). These embodied forms have included: dance, martial arts, and languages, including North American Hand Talk or Indigenous sign language, the lingua franca prior to English of the partition of Turtle Island often referred to as the U.S.

This is because Indigenous ways of being and knowing undergird these embodied practices.

Indigenous ways of being and knowing also undergird Native sovereignties.

Susan Foster has stated that European colonization has created the need for the word “embodied” (Blu Wakpa 2017, ix).

This is because underlying European ways of knowing is the assumption of mind-body duality, whereas Indigenous epistemologies, also apparent in yoga, recognize the holistic connection among body, mind, and spirit.

In other words, the actions of all human persons are “embodied” as well as the actions of many nonhuman persons (such as nonhuman animals), but also, as I will later discuss, the water and the earth, the sky, and other celestial *bodies*.

Is it possible that yoga's popularity among European Americans is in part a case of misplaced "imperialist nostalgia" (Rosaldo 1989) since the practice foregrounds the interconnections among body, mind, and spirit, which European Americans have attempted to destroy through the assimilation of Native practices, but simultaneously long for?

As Renato Rosaldo writes, "Imperialist nostalgia ... revolves around a paradox: a person kills somebody and then mourns his or her victim. In more attenuated form, somebody deliberately alters a form of life and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention ... In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination" (1989, 108).

Whereas European Americans no longer have access to many Native embodied practices – and in particular, ceremonies – due in part to genocide and histories of appropriation, they do have access to yoga.

It is important not to conflate the vast cultural diversity among Indigenous North American and Indigenous South Asian embodied practices and epistemological understandings of body-mind-spirit.⁷

In the U.S. alone, there is extensive variation among the over 900 hundred federally-recognized and unrecognized tribal nations.

Instead, my focus is on how settler colonialism's "pose of 'innocent yearning[s]'" relates to Native embodied practices and yoga (108).

Interestingly, European colonization in India also constructed Indigenous South Asian embodied practices as suspect, even criminal.

As Susanna Barkataki rhetorically questions, "Did you know that Yoga and Ayurveda were banned in India under British rule and colonization?" (2015).

Barkataki writes, "The practices [Yoga and Ayurveda] millions of Westerns now turn to for alternative health and wellness therapies were intentionally eradicated from parts of India to the point that lineages were broken and thousand-year old traditions lost."

Although I am trying to tell this story in a Turtle Island context, histories hemorrhage, as do strategies of colonization and tactics of resistance.

In a post titled "Yoga and 'Orientalism'" (2007), which appeared on "Om Shanti: A Yoga Blog," the author, Eugene, who is identified only by his first name, notes the linkages in dominant discourses' treatment of "Indians" – that is, Native Americans and South Asian peoples – and their practices.

Eugene states, "Americans are great at creating historical and cultural myths. More than half of what we learned in grade school about our own country's storied past is either greatly

embellished or total fantasy. I worry that we are doing the same thing in our treatment of yoga. And I see a similar kind of thing happening in the Western popularization of, say, Native American culture, Sufism, and Kabbalah. We are starving for ‘spirituality’ in this country. Many of us have failed to have this need fulfilled by traditional Western religions, so we are turning to non-Western traditions that seem to offer something more and something different. My claim here is that in turning to non-Western religions, many people in American are engaging in a kind of Orientalism that bears all the marks of cultural elitism, racism, and, at times, anti-intellectualism.”

In this passage, Eugene attributes dominant society’s fascination with “Indian” cultures to Orientalism, but also the circulation of narratives that typecast and/or exclude Native peoples and the appropriation of Indigenous spiritual practices serve settler colonialism.

Is the “starving for ‘spirituality’” and the longing for “something more and something different” that the author describes, again, in some cases, a desire for a practice that foregrounds the holistic integration of body, mind, and spirit?

Wolfe contends that settler colonialism “destroys in order to replace.”

As I, and others have argued, settler discourses also omit in order to replace (Huhndorf 2001, 153).

Eclipsing is so prevalent in settler discourses that Indigenous peoples are even excluded from discussions about settler colonialism and decolonization.

As Mishuana Goeman, who is Tonawanda Band of Seneca, emphasizes, “At times decolonization is not even about us and most often neither is settler colonialism ... Often moves toward decolonization do not address Native epistemology or ontology about land, nor recognize the vast literatures written by Native scholars. That is settler colonialism becomes the analytic and Indigenous futurities are not part of the practice” (2018).

Yet, eclipsing is not only a settler strategy, but also a tactic that Indigenous peoples employ.

For instance, when the state prohibited them from enacting their embodied practices, Indigenous peoples and people of color took these practices underground.

These Indigenous and/or people of color practices may then reemerge when they are protected and/or legally sanctioned.

What is at stake in excluding from yoga discourses the Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian diasporic peoples, whose ancestors broadly originated the practice?

For example, in assessing the racial demographics represented in the August 2012 issue of *Yoga Journal*, Laura Plummer uncovers that “Indians [South Asian Americans] total 3.8%.”⁸

Additionally, Singh reveals that from 2015 to 2017, *Yoga Journal* did not include a single representation of a South Asian person on the cover, and the publication also marginalized South Asian peoples' perspectives in its articles (Schware 2017).

Singh states, "The magazine is generally based on South Asian cultural history and theological property, yet this knowledge is primarily 'authored,' 'embodied,' and modeled by Western [White] women" (Schware 2017).

It is worth noting that *Yoga Journal* is not recognized as a publication dedicated to portraying diverse peoples and perspectives, despite the ways that it represents itself.

For instance, on its website in 2018, *Yoga Journal* states, "For 40 years, *Yoga Journal* has been the #1 authority on yoga and the yoga lifestyle ... Always informative and inspiring, the magazine's welcoming, inclusive point of view puts every reader in front of the *world's best teachers*" (emphasis added).

Although in 2018, *Yoga Journal* may have had a more diverse representation of teachers than it did prior – perhaps in part as a response to critiques like Plummer and Singh's – given that the publication has frequently foregrounded European American teachers in past issues, one might assume that the "world's best [yoga] teachers" are White.

Is it possible that in the U.S., the presence of Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian diasporic practitioners and teachers threatens the authority/authenticity/exceptionalism of yoga practitioners and teachers in general, but European Americans in particular, given yoga's association with Whiteness?

Edward Said, writing about the (mis)perceptions of the "Middle East" in the U.S., underscores, "history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that 'our' East, 'our' Orient becomes 'ours' to possess and direct" (Said 1979, xviii).⁹

And what about "our" yoga?

Does the curated absence of Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian American diasporic practitioners and teachers in dominant yoga discourses position European Americans as the supposedly rightful inheritors/possessors/directors of yoga?

Singh's "yoga as property" framework – which reveals a dramatic increase in U.S. copyrights related to the practice since 2005 while in 2015 the South Asian American yoga teacher and Bikram founder Bikram Choudhury was denied copyright protection – supports this possibility (Kaushik-Brown 2016).

Similarly, Jennifer Aubrecht underscores, "In the context of dance and yoga, a central privilege of whiteness is the ability to acquire any object that a person with the legal and cultural status of 'white' enjoys and desires, such as yoga. Modern dance choreographers' ability to 'use and enjoy' yoga is directly related to rhetoric that positions the choreographer as an individual

genius, and to the logic of colonialism that positions their yogi interlocutors as non-agentive, effeminate culture bearers who do not necessarily fully understand the import of their own spiritual tradition” (2017, 12).

Notably, in this excerpt, Aubrecht highlights the (mis)representation of South Asian peoples, based on Orientalist logics more so than their absence.

Certainly not all yoga discourses/practices/styles in the U.S. exclude Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian diasporic practitioners and teachers.

Some yoga discourses/practices/styles may even center and honor Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian diasporic practitioners and teachers, both “ancestral and alive.”¹⁰

In this case, what politics underpin the *inclusion* of Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian diasporic practitioners and teachers in yoga discourses?

Yoga Healing/Yoga Violence

The ongoing violence of settler colonialism and White supremacy leave many wounds and voids, which yoga can assuage.

In “Yoga Brings You Back to Who You Are: A Conversation Featuring Haley Laughter,” Diné (Navajo) yoga instructor and Hozho Total Wellness founder, Haley Laughter explains that Native peoples may practice yoga to alleviate the ongoing violence of settler colonialism, strengthen their connection to their Indigenous cultures, and revitalize and innovate their Native practices (Blu Wakpa 2018).

Laughter also discusses how she includes Diné elements in her yoga teaching, such as her meditation that centers corn.

The writings in this issue also show that people around the world have employed yoga to alleviate stress and trauma that state violence inflicts on Indigenous and underrepresented groups.

In “Yoga, Social Justice, and Healing the Wounds of Violence in Colombia,” Natalia Quiñones, María Adelaida López, and Mayme Lefurgey discuss how Dunna, a not-for-profit organization, with its culturally relevant and responsive curricula, “challenges many aspects of the imperial and colonial norms within the modern yoga industry” (2018).

As a fluid practice, yoga may facilitate healing and inflict violence, sometimes simultaneously.

In Sheena Sood’s personal narrative, “Cultivating a Yogic Theology of Collective Healing: A Yogini’s Journey Disrupting White Supremacy, Hindu Fundamentalism, and Casteism,” the author writes, “Although I believe yoga philosophy – when rooted in a diversity of Indigenous philosophies – is grounded in living a life in tune with all beings’ liberation, yoga’s core

principles are misappropriated and commodified for agendas that exacerbate oppression” (2018, 12).

What is healing/liberating for one group may cause suffering/violence to another, which is why universalist paradigms must be contested.

When instructors in the U.S. include European American elements in their yoga teaching, they may not register to the majority of yoga practitioners as European American. This is because, again, European American is read as normative. Such is the power of Whiteness.

However, these European American elements and assumptions, some of which are also class-based, may also inadvertently cause violence.

For example, I quote at length from an email that Kate Mattingly wrote to me about a yoga class she took on Thanksgiving 2018,

The teacher began with an obligatory remark about ‘community’ and the holiday. Instantly I started thinking about the conversation you and I had the day before. The ‘yoga community’ is an often-cited phrase that seems to be defined through the people who can afford yoga classes, and afford to attend regularly – rarely is someone new to the studio considered part of the ‘community.’ There’s usually an ‘initiation’ process where the teacher asks their name and gives them some pointers or advice. People who don’t return are not ‘community members.’ In this way, practicing yoga depends on secular and consumerist devotion: a practitioner must acquire the income that allows for this ‘fitness’ and ‘community-building’ activity. The cost of a 10-class card at this studio is \$150 and a special class (the holiday class) is \$20 per person. The unifier here is the income level. There is no emotional or spiritual or even intellectual awareness in this ‘community,’ as was made blatantly clear last Thursday.

The cues from the teacher emphasized being ‘grateful’ and ‘thankful.’ These are hard intentions to foster when the day depends on the massacre of Indigenous peoples. There was no mention of how this holiday was created or on whose land we were practicing. The ‘community-building’ activities consisted of turning to the people around us and introducing ourselves to 3 people we ‘did not know.’ Thus the ‘yoga’ was a magnet for a select group of relatively well-off, fit people who had the luxury of spending 90 minutes in a studio where everyone was pretty similar in terms of age, ethnicity, class, politics, and ability. Yet exercises like ‘introduce yourself to someone you don’t know’ sublimate this homogeneity to an illusion of co-existence with difference and an illusion of curiosity about people different from us.

This homogeneity exacerbates the rhetoric of ‘community’ in such settings. It is hard to go into any yoga studio, in any city where I live, and not hear a teacher say ‘community.’ The word is bandied about in a way that suggests we are coming together as a collective, political change-making group. I believe the ‘community’ that is referred to in yoga studios is actually a group of people who are self-serving if not instrumentalized. The ‘community of yogis’ serves as fodder for photos to post on social media and in

advertisements, or to go on trips to Bali with, where they do little to attend to needs of the disenfranchised. A different kind of community is theorized in politics as without outcome or goal: ‘Jean-Luc Nancy’s assertion that ‘community is presuppositionless’ aligns community with this space of poetic language that can be experienced only in the singularity of an event (the event of reading or being together)’ [as cited in Hugill 2017, 12]. Meaning community is a gathering motivated intention, so it is therefore ephemeral and cannot be instrumentalized.¹¹

Mattingly’s critique underscores how the use of the word “community” in yoga contexts can create the illusion of diversity and inclusion among a relatively homogenous group of practitioners.

This may promote the (mis)perception that taking a yoga class in a studio setting equates to furthering social justice and perhaps even decolonization.

Because of yoga’s association with Whiteness in dominant discourses, it is possible to overlook how people of color can also perpetuate oppression alongside yoga.

These injustices can occur because of the vast diversity and complex, fluctuating power relations among people of color, including the intersections of systemic structures, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, age, and/or ability.

For example, Sood underscores, “[A]s damaging as the whitewashing of yoga feels to us, our solution to make yoga accessible by offering ‘people of color’ sessions may still promote harm. There is so much diversity within people of color communities; chanting mantras in Sanskrit may still inflict harm on Indigenous South Asian families who have experienced violence from Hindus” (2018, 19).

In regard to the possibilities for political organizing, Andrea Smith highlights Indigenous peoples and people of color may “presume that our communities have been impacted by white supremacy in the same way. Consequently, we often assume that all of our communities will share similar strategies for liberation. In fact, however, our strategies often run into conflict” (2016, 265).

This also applies to yoga; what is liberation or healing for one person/group does not equate to liberation or healing for all.

The obscuring of peoples from their lands and practices also serves settler colonialism.

Many Indigenous peoples have articulated the pain (and/or righteous anger) that they experience being othered on their own lands and having their cultural practices appropriated (Bennett-Begaye 2018; Keene 2014; Simpson 2014).

Likewise, many South Asian American yoga practitioners have articulated the pain (and/or righteous anger) that they experience in being othered in yoga spaces and having their cultural

practices appropriated (Barkataki 2015; Bedi 2013; South Asian American Perspectives on Yoga in America 2014).

Humor is another tactic of resistance and method of humanization for Native and South Asian peoples, which should not be overlooked, but is often marginalized in the fields of Indigenous and embodied studies (DeLoria 1969; Singh 2014).

“Decolonizing Yoga” as a Settler Move to Innocence

Even critical yoga discourses that purport to intervene in “yoga violence” can promote the project of settler colonialism, which again is inherently violent.

Defining decolonization as the “[b]reaking the settler colonial triad” and as such “incommensurable” (2012, 31), Tuck and Yang caution:

Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. The easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship, evidenced by the increasing number of calls to ‘decolonize our schools,’ or use ‘decolonizing methods,’ or ‘decolonize student thinking’ turns decolonization into a metaphor. As important as their goals may be, social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches that decenter settler perspectives have objectives that may be incommensurable with decolonization. Because settler colonialism is built upon an entangled triad structure of settler-native-slave, the decolonial desires of white, non-white, immigrant, postcolonial, and oppressed people, can similarly be entangled in resettlement, reoccupation, and reinhabitation that actually further settler colonialism. The metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or ‘settler moves to innocence’, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity (2012, 1).

Although Tuck and Yang do not explicitly discuss decolonization in relationship to the body or embodied practices, such as yoga, they do underscore that unlike Paulo Freire’s theorization of freedom, liberation does not adhere to mind-body dualism (Tuck and Yang 2012, 20).

Drawing on Audre Lorde’s poetry, Tuck and Yang write, “[i]mportantly, freedom is a possibility that is not just mentally generated; it is particular and felt” (20).

In critical embodied discourses – which have notably often excluded Native peoples and practices – “decolonizing the body” is a familiar phrase.

In yoga discourses – which have notably often excluded Native peoples and practices – “decolonizing yoga” is a familiar phrase.

In the U.S., “decolonizing yoga” narratives may – but do not always – highlight the absence or lack of Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian

diasporic portrayals and/or perspectives as well as the practice's appropriation and commodification, but these analytics rarely acknowledge Turtle Island as Indigenous lands.¹²

For instance, in 2014, Melissa Heather critiqued the popular blog *Decolonizing Yoga* founded in 2013 by Be Scofield – a “queer/trans writer, activist, Dr. King scholar and high level digital strategist who has worked with NYT Best Selling authors” (Decolonizing Yoga 2018) – for almost entirely overlooking settler colonialism.¹³

Decolonizing Yoga's omission of settler colonialism is an example of “colonial equivocation” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 17).

Tuck and Yang identify “colonial equivocation” as a “settler move to innocence” and expand “describing all struggles against imperialism as ‘decolonizing’ creates a convenient ambiguity between decolonization and social justice work, especially among people of color, queer people, and other groups minoritized by the settler nation-state” (17).

What are other “settler moves to innocence” that occur in yoga and yoga discourses (1)?

The Power and Possibility of Indigenous Embodied Practices

Alongside, and perhaps despite, Tuck and Yang's “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor”, people who are Indigenous to Turtle Island are navigating, negotiating, contesting, and reclaiming various ideas surrounding “decolonization” in complex and diverse ways that promote Native futurities, but do not obliterate settler colonialism's triad structure (Goeman 2013; Jacob 2013; Recollet 2016; Risling Baldy 2018; Wilson and Yellow Bird 2005).

I emphasize that Indigenous peoples employing the term “decolonization” is very different from non-Natives' co-optation of the word in ways that exclude Indigenous peoples and promote settler futurities, which is the focus of Tuck and Yang's article.

For instance, Laughter discussed that she uses the concept of “decolonization” in regard to her yoga practice – albeit guardedly: “I do at times, yes. With other Indigenous people, yes. Only when it's culturally appropriate because I do feel like we have been colonized in a lot of different ways, and coming back to the basics begins with us inside, and being proud of who we are and knowing our culture, and knowing these different aspects that make us who we are” (Blu Wakpa 2018).

Interestingly, for Laughter, yoga is away for her to engage more deeply with her own Diné culture.

Is this also the case for European Americans who practice yoga – and if not, why?

Furthermore, is it possible that when enacted by *Native practitioners* themselves, the concept of “decolonizing the body” and/or decolonizing embodied modes is not only metaphoric, but also actual?

And when enacted by *Native practitioners* themselves, are metaphors at times useful (Singh 2018a)?¹⁴ Liberatory?

Tuck and Yang specify that decolonization, though “incommensurable,” “brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (2012, 1).

The authors write, “[d]ecolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (35).

According to Wolfe and Native epistemologies, land and life are inextricably tied (Allen 1981; Wolfe 2006, 387).

I contend – and clarify – that Native land, life, and embodied practices are also inextricably tied, as embodied practices constitute life for many human and nonhuman persons.

Some Native American epistemologies conceptualize the land and sky as embodied, such as mother earth and father sky.

Yoga epistemologies also understand land, life, and embodied practices as interconnected.

As Singh shared,

The land is an ultimate yoga guru, or mother, at whose feet we learn of balance, strength, and freedom. Yogic methods persistently center earth based methods of achieving equanimity, such as rising with the sun, eating to live, and breathing with natural rhythms. Names of asana sequences such as *surya namaskar*, or ‘sun salutation,’ are not merely metaphors to the land. Yoga is present in the sun shining with nurturing yet formidable power; the mountains still but alive with change, and the tree that roots and rises (2018b).

Even Eurocentric understandings consider any accumulation of water – from an ocean to a puddle – as a *body* of water and any body outside of the earth’s atmosphere – including, the moon, sun, planets, and asteroids – as celestial *bodies*.

Therefore, the repatriation of Indigenous life for many human and nonhuman persons cannot occur without the repatriation of Native embodied practices.

Yoga is typically not understood as a Native embodied practice.

Yet, for Laughter, yoga is a way to access the Diné ways of knowing and being that settler colonialism has attempted to annihilate.

What does it mean to repatriate Native embodied practices?

What does it mean to repatriate yoga?

How might the repatriation of Native embodied practices and yoga be in conversation and conflict?

To ensure the ongoing existence and innovation of Native embodied practices, human and/or nonhuman, is to ensure Indigenous life and futurities.

But we cannot forget that decolonization requires the “repatriation but not reparation” of Indigenous land and the “relinquishing [of] settler futurity” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 30, 36).

My intention in making the point that Native embodied practices constitute life for many human and nonhuman persons is to emphasize the power and possibility of Native embodied practices, which are often overlooked.

And what of Indigenous, but non-Indigenous South Asian practitioners who use yoga to “decolonize”? How does this further complicate/contradict an understanding of decolonization?

And what of Indigenous South Asian, South Asian, South Asian American, and/or South Asian diasporic practitioners who use yoga to “decolonize” on lands where they reside as settlers/guests for a multitude of reasons? How does this further complicate an understanding of decolonization?

It is strange to try to pen a conclusion where a new world order should be.

Notes

¹ Fixing the origins of yoga – particularly given the importance of acknowledging Indigenous cultural diversity in South Asia – is a complex undertaking. However, Amara Miller writes, “In the case of precolonial yoga, we can trace the original grounding of the core root assemblage to South Asia, where the practice originated” (2019, 29).

² On its website in 2018, the National Congress of American Indians states there are currently 573 Native nations in the U.S. It is more challenging to find information on the number of federally unrecognized tribes within the settler state boundaries. In 2012, the United States Government Accountability Office found there were approximately 400 federally unrecognized tribes in the U.S. – although this number has likely shifted over time for a variety of reasons. The lack of information on federally unrecognized tribes makes it difficult to determine the total sum of tribes in the U.S. today; however, including federally unrecognized tribes in this number is important given that they are often overlooked – even in Native studies discourses.

³ The “Yoga Justice / Yoga Violence” theme of Race and Yoga Working Group’s 2016 Conference – coordinated by Drs. Sabrina Strings, Jennifer Musial, and Tria Blu Wakpa – highlighted the ways that yoga can contribute to conflicting aims.

⁴ An example of this is the Red Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which brought visibility to Indigenous peoples and issues and resulted in the U.S. government passing laws aimed at protecting Native peoples and practices. The concepts of “social justice” and “decolonization” should not be conflated (Tuck and Yang 2012, 17); however, both these ideas have also been theorized in various and even conflicting ways. Here, I build on Mishuana Goeman’s argument that “the first step of decolonization ... is accountability” (2018). Understanding that Indigenous peoples still exist in the present (counter to the way that they are often represented in dominant discourses) and continue to endure settler colonial violences is important to fostering accountability – particularly among non-Natives.

⁵ I use scare quotes here and later in the introduction to remind the reader that relational terms such as “the East” and “the West” are implicated in social structures and power dynamics and may reveal the position from which a person speaks or writes.

⁶ This also includes the appropriation of Indigenous identities by non-Natives.

⁷ I am appreciative of Susan Foster’s feedback that suggested I clarify this point.

⁸ Plummer also highlights that the August 2012 issue of the journal did not portray any “obviously Hispanic or Native American practitioners,” and “Black men and women together comprise a pitiful 2.5%. Of the 157 images, a

[B]lack male appears *only once*” (2012). However, Plummer’s analysis (2012) problematically relies on phenotype as indicative of someone’s race; this is perhaps particularly contentious in the Native American context, as Native peoples are often excluded from the U.S. cultural – and in particular, *contemporary* cultural – imaginary. And, tribal/national citizenship and/or community connection are understood as key criteria for determining whether a person is Native. Moreover, future research might uncover whether the exclusion of Black males in this *Yoga Journal* issue is an anomaly, and if not, contextualize this omission historically, politically, and within systems of power.

⁹ I use scare quotes again for the reasons I previously stated in the third reference.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Susan Foster and Jacqueline Shea Murphy for encouraging me to also discuss forms of yoga – such as Iyengar Yoga – in which South Asian teachers are prominent and respected. The phrase “ancestral and alive” is directly taken from Shea Murphy’s comments.

¹¹ Kate Mattingly included this citation in her email to me.

¹² In her study on the body positivity movement in yoga, Amara Miller finds that it is “much more common for South Asian practitioners to explicitly refer to decolonization as an essential feature of their yoga practices and body positive activism” than non-South Asian practitioners. This indicates how peoples’ positionalities may influence their politics and practices. However, Miller’s study does not center Native practitioners. Moreover, the politics surrounding claiming Native identity – and in particular, self-identification as opposed to tribal/national citizenship and/or community connection – are complex and often excluded from and/or misrepresented in settler colonial discourses, which can further skew such an analysis. Therefore, it is possible that like South Asian practitioners, Native practitioners – for example, Haley Laughter – tend to view decolonization as integral to their yoga practices.

¹³ In December 2018, *Decolonizing Yoga*’s Facebook page, Decolonizing Yoga, had over 16,000 followers. Also, in December 2018, a similarly titled Facebook page, Decolonizing Yogas – which likewise linked to the *Decolonizing Yoga* blog – had over 2,000 followers.

¹⁴ Thanks to Roopa Singh for offering a critique of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” which provided the foundation for posing this question. In a personal correspondence with me (2018a), Singh shared that this insight emerged from a discussion among women of color at a gathering she attended. Singh writes, “the piece [which again, is focused on non-Natives use of the term ‘decolonization’ in ways that promote settler futures and even exclude Indigenous peoples] does not allow for the cultural importance of metaphor, in terms of how our grandmothers may speak to us” (2018a).

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