

Review Essay

Searching for the Forest among the Trees

A Review of Four Recent Books in Yoga Studies

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Inhaling Spirit: Harmonialism, Orientalism, and the Western Roots of Modern Yoga. By Anya P. Foxen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 326 pages. \$99.00 hardcover; ebook available.

Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality. By Andrea R. Jain. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 224 pages. \$99.00 hardcover; \$24.95 softcover; ebook available.

Post-Lineage Yoga: From Guru to #MeToo. By Theodora Wildcroft. Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2020. 270 pages. \$100.00 hardcover; \$35.00 softcover; ebook available.

Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies. Edited by Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop. New York: Routledge, 2021. 564 pages. \$270.00 hardcover.

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Scholars working in yoga studies tend to employ tree metaphors. Following Elizabeth De Michelis, who described modern postural yoga as “the graft of a Western branch on to the Indian tree of yoga,” silvan imagery predominates.¹ Thematically and theoretically, yoga studies is also flourishing from seeds planted by the work of De Michelis and also of Mark Singleton.² Establishing modern postural yoga as a modified form of “esoteric gymnastics” rather than a direct continuation of premodern Indian *hatha yoga* has directed the next generation of yoga studies scholars to spend much time and effort trying to understand and explain where modern yoga originated and just what it really is.³ Undoubtedly, this is a concern shared by many practitioners of modern postural yoga, whose concerns with authenticity and tradition mirror the scholarly interest in it. The works under review here by Andrea R. Jain, Anya P. Foxen, Theodora Wildcroft, and Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O’Brien-Kop offer a convincing rebuttal to claims of a perennial or universal tradition of “Yoga.” What they tell us is that there is no such thing as pure yoga.

Plenty of fascinating questions remain for further research, however. Modern postural yoga is dominated, even defined, by its major lineages. Often named after their guru founders—Iyengar, Sivananda, Satyananda—the major lineages dictate and sometimes patent the forms, terms, training, and transmission of modern postural yoga. The guru model has raised questions of power and abuse, especially in recent years with the emergence of the #MeToo movement. The popularity of a physical practice rooted in Indian history, philosophy, and religion also brings up issues of colonialism, appropriation, and orientalism. Complicating these issues is the Hindu nationalist reappropriation in India itself. The latest work in yoga studies guides us through these complex and interlocking strands, searching to define an object of study that remains elusive.

In *Inhaling Spirit*, Anya P. Foxen explicitly picks up where Singleton left off in *Yoga Body*, exploring where these forms of stretching that we now call yoga came from. Describing the importance of what she calls the harmonial tradition, a specific instantiation of Western Esotericism found in nineteenth- and twentieth-century dance and Delsartean fitness culture (a system of calisthenics patterned on the philosophy of French teacher and singer, François Delsarte), Foxen offers a revision of De Michelis’ branch metaphor. Modern yoga is not a branch, but an “inoscultation”—the natural process through which two separate plants grow together.⁴ Western harmonial gymnastics and Indian yoga are two trees with their own root systems that have become so profoundly intertwined as to become one. By digging deeply into the history of the western tree, Foxen presents an analysis so distanced from what most would commonly think of as yoga that she freely admits that the first few chapters are not really about yoga.

Foxen takes pains to make clear that she is not claiming white American women invented yoga. Rather she makes the case that what is called yoga now in America has its own history, one that is connected to, but not solely dependent on, Indian premodern yoga. She hits at the weak points of modern postural yoga—its inherent elitism and white supremacy, validating a certain form of white able-bodied femininity. Making a case that this checkered past comes from the racist performances of “oriental dance,” *Inhaling Spirit* is an expansion and elongation of the history introduced in Foxen’s first book, *Biography of a Yogi*, which focused on Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952), one of the Indian yoga practitioners who came to the west and helped reframe harmonial breathing exercises as “yoga.”⁵ Foxen complicates modern postural yoga through a refreshingly light and versatile definition of yoga as “a spiritualized breath-movement practice.”⁶ This definition allows her to reach deep into the history of Western Esotericism to ideas of pneuma, spirit, and soul, and to concepts of correspondences that became sympathy that became animal magnetism that became vibration. Much of what is called yoga in early twentieth-century sources is not in fact yoga, she argues. And much of what is now called modern postural yoga has vanishingly little to do with what was called yoga in premodern India. The result is a lively history, although perhaps a little wan in its too few and loosely stated conclusions. The final comparison to hooping is nevertheless intriguing, because places where yoga is overflowing, such as festivals and spiritual communities, also teem with hooping and belly dance. Foxen’s history makes sense of why and what these practices have in common.

While Foxen makes the case that transnational yoga traditions are still local, with their own particular histories, Andrea R. Jain in *Peace Love Yoga* takes aim at the totalizing system of neoliberal capitalism underlying transnational yoga. If Foxen is describing an inoculation of two ancient root systems, Jain reveals how that complex tree is cut down into identical logs, then packaged and sold as firewood. Her archive consists of the texts of what she calls “neoliberal spirituality,” such as expensive athleisure lines, for example the problematically named Spiritual Gangster, that encourage us to “namaste all day.” Refreshingly, Jain dispenses with what she calls the “verificationist” agenda dominating yoga studies that implies that the scholar’s role is to determine which is, and which is not, real yoga.⁷ Rather, in acerbic analysis, she undercuts the “conscious capitalism” of the transnational yoga industry, dismissing this rhetoric as gestures towards subversion of capitalist principles while simultaneously reinforcing and upholding them through a form of neoliberal governance.

So far, so Foucauldian. Yet Jain’s most insightful contribution in this work, which follows closely from her *Selling Yoga*,⁸ is when she analyzes the entanglement of transnational yoga with neoliberal feminism in the

United States and Hindu nationalism in India. How yoga can support these seemingly disparate, but in the final analysis connected, political formations is through its utilization as a technique of governmentality that burdens the individual citizen with self-optimization. With individual citizens taking on their own health and wellness regimes, the state frees up space for further oppression of minorities. Yoga practitioners can thus give a tip of their hats to caring about this oppression through consumption practices while maintaining and ensuring its continuation.

Theodora Wildcroft's *Post-Lineage Yoga* seems in many ways to be a direct rejoinder to Jain. Criticizing existing yoga studies for focusing on the most superficial practitioners who go to popular studios that teach primarily lineage yoga, the yoga teachers that Wildcroft studies do not wear Spiritual Gangster sweatshirts and it is hard to imagine them finding much meaning in slogans. What she labels "post-lineage yoga" is practiced from teacher to student, outside of the main lineages, developing a new shared repertoire that is personalized and democratized. The position of the guru is heavily critiqued, and many of her interlocutors moved out of modern postural yoga after traumatic injuries or abuse, sometimes at the hands of those canonized by the major lineages. The idea of yoga being something that can be patented, as some major lineages have, or turned into a tool of nationalism, is explicitly against the aims of post-lineage yoga. This latest growth of the yoga tree is "rhizomatic . . . diverse, heterogeneous, and multiply connective."⁹

Foxen and Jain's works sketch a shared discourse, both focusing primarily on the United States, locating yoga within a globalized spirituality, engaging with issues of race, class, and gender, and dwelling on questions of authenticity and consumerism. *Post-Lineage Yoga* feels different, in the same way that a personalized yin yoga one-on-one class with a trusted teacher feels different from a hot yoga studio class. It examines yoga teachers in the United Kingdom, utilizing qualitative social science methodology and a novel system of notation to depict *asana* sequences, and casts a fascinating look at the organization of small-scale community-driven festivals. It is also different in ways that are less positive. It is Wildcroft's first book, an evolution of her doctoral thesis, and at times that is evident in the prose or the clunky use of sociological theory of "subcultures" or in the naïve claims about an "innovative" methodology that seems remarkably similar to participant-observation ethnography. Despite these caveats, it is an outstanding work that moves yoga studies in fresh directions neglected by her more experienced academic counterparts.

When considering *The Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies* edited by Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop, we must leave the image of a singular yoga tree behind, because this volume is the whole forest. Spanning five discrete sections, thirty-four chapters, and more than five hundred pages, this work is comprehensive. It

incorporates the varied historical constructions of yoga in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Daoism, Sikhism, and Jainism. There is a section on the multiplicity of disciplinary framings through which yoga can be studied, including contributions from cognitive and medical scientists, as well as scholar-practitioners, theologically positioned scholars of their respective traditions, and a blend of social sciences and humanities scholarship. A chapter on decolonizing yoga is supplemented by a further section that puts that call into action by surveying yoga in places that have been heretofore excluded from yoga studies, such as Korea, Latin America, and Tibet. It engulfs the perspectives that Jain and Foxen bring to their work. Indeed, there is a chapter on neoliberal yoga by Jain and a chapter on yoga in modern esoteric traditions that covers much of the same ground as Foxen's *Inhaling Spirit*. The editors bring together an admirable breadth and depth of knowledge on yoga, and for that alone, this is an essential resource for anyone interested in yoga studies.

The singular innovation of this weighty tome is to include yoga and meditation together. The rationale behind this is sound: in many traditions, separating what is called yoga from what is called meditation is not straightforward, and doing so perhaps even does violence to the categorization. The volume arose from interdisciplinary collaborations, funded by the European Research Council, to bring together scholarship to reveal points of convergence between yoga and meditation. Yet there are limitations. It is clearly weighted toward yoga, as the editors admit in the introduction, and it is possible that bringing yoga and meditation studies together has led to this eclipse of the latter by the former. Meditation as a concept is far more diffuse, there are many separate meditative traditions that have little to do with one another, and it lacks the common roots in South Asia that yoga has. Since there is no single, perennial tradition of yoga, one wonders whether lumping meditation in as well to this already overabundant dynamism does not simply multiply the confusion as to what it is that is being studied in yoga studies and why.

Perhaps, though, the point of these new studies is to leave all this nail-biting anxiety about "what is yoga" firmly in the past. There are many different things that people call yoga, or have historically called yoga, and how these things are related is fascinating without further justification through reference to authenticity. What I was left wondering was how is this different from culture or tradition in general? To put it another way, the questions of authenticity and tradition, of race/class/gender, of power and abuse, are not unique to yoga. If any reasonably aged, transnational, several-times-over revived practice is studied as intently as yoga has been, the same questions will emerge. So why study yoga? The studies considered here do much to flesh out the textual history and cultural specificity and transnational transmission of the

practices. Perhaps what yoga studies needs next is a more rigorous engagement with theory. Then we will be able to say why it is that scholars should pay attention to this specific tree because of what it tells us about the woods in general.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Elizabeth De Michelis, *History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 2.
- ² Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- ³ Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 5.
- ⁴ Anya P. Foxen, *Inhaling Spirit: Harmonialism, Orientalism, and the Western Roots of Modern Yoga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 5.
- ⁵ Anya P. Foxen, *Biography of a Yogi: Paramahansa and the Origins of Modern Yoga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- ⁶ Foxen, *Inhaling Spirit*, 11.
- ⁷ Andrea R. Jain, *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 65.
- ⁸ Andrea R. Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ⁹ Theodora Wildcroft, *Post-Lineage Yoga: From Guru to #MeToo* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2020), 203.