EMBODYING TRANSNATIONAL YOGA

EATING, SINGING, AND BREATHING IN TRANSFORMATION

Christopher Jain Miller

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Eating, Singing, and Breathing in Transformation

Christopher Jain Miller

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Preface

I am a cis-gendered man of Filipino, European, and American descent who was raised in a lower middle-class family in Los Angeles, California. Some would say I am "able-bodied," though the story I will relate to you here intimates that such a stark categorization would erase some of the more deeply personal experiences that led me to yoga, and, eventually, to write this book.

Perhaps I should begin by telling you that my late grandmother, Felice Esteban, born and raised in the Philippines, met my late grandfather, Theodore Miller, while he served in the United States Army during World War II. After the war and a short stint in my grandfather's hometown in Pennsylvania, my grandmother and grandfather moved to Culver City, California, where they remained for the rest of their lives. While I was growing up amidst the alienating disenchantment of the increasingly neoliberal 1980s and 1990s in America, my devotedly Catholic grandmother had fortunately brought with her tales of the supernatural from the Philippines. In addition to the delicious Filipino food she cooked, I recall how much I enjoyed sitting on the couch in my grandparents' living room as a child as she lovingly (and sometimes mischievously) conveyed to me the very real world of ghosts and spirits that she had inhabited in the Philippines, and which she had brought with her to the United States in a form of entangled Catholicism. And while I was sometimes frightened by her occasional story-telling mischief, I also found that her stories introduced shades of experiential variation to our young Catholic lives and imaginations in a world that was otherwise continually demystified, rigid, and disenchanted.

My Catholic elementary school principal and third-grade teacher, Flor Lelis, was also from the Philippines. She augmented my grandmother's enchantment with her own stories of the supernatural in the classroom. In addition to that of Mrs. Lelis, my grandmother's influence would live on, even after she passed away from complications due to pneumonia when I was 16 years old. Grandma died after years of working in difficult, unsafe labor conditions in the textile industry in Los Angeles where she inhaled micro-particles from the fabric she worked with as she hand-tailored clothing for Hollywood's rich and famous.

Though more conservative Catholics in Southern California may have found the superstitious and supernatural world my grandmother and principal inhabited and shared with me problematic, I found its messy nature immensely interesting and very real in its own right. And as I finished high school and went to college, I rediscovered my passion for the spiritual and religious while taking courses in New Testament, Catholic Theology, and Indian Philosophy. The rigid Catholic tradition I was raised in suddenly became much more fluid, fractured, interesting, and diverse than I could ever imagine, and it made much more sense that my Catholic grandmother from the Philippines practiced a different kind of tradition than the one I was raised with outside of her (and Mrs. Lelis's) influence.

Like every human being, I have had many ups and downs and twists and turns in life. My work on the California wildfires in my early twenties presents one particularly dramatic and yet formative event that eventually led me to study and practice yoga. In order to pay the bills in my early twenties after graduating from college, I worked for a logistical company that supported the many firefighters and California inmates who fought the seasonal wildfires in Northern California. I did not realize it until much later, but the challenging context in which we were toiling together daily – which included, among other things, endless work hours, intense physical labor, mental stress, frequent injuries, days without sleep, brutal heat, persistent dehydration, hunger, and the never-ending threat of danger from the fires themselves – would leave their mark on me. So much so that in their traumatic wake I was compelled, like so many others, to search for some solace in mind and body to heal the psychological stress as well as my increasing chronic back pain that resulted from scoliosis. And thus my journey into yoga would begin in my late twenties, where I began to find fragments of the peace I had since been searching for as well as a worldview that seemed to align with the ecological worldview I had developed as a surfer who found solace in the Pacific Ocean almost every day.

This book is very much a reflection upon the systems of yoga into which I have voluntarily implicated my own mind and body. In my ongoing search for peace, I completed a two-year teacher training in yoga in 2012–2013 under the direction of Christopher Chapple at the Hill Street Yoga and Meditation Center in Santa Monica, California, while also completing post-baccalaureate studies in religious studies at California State University Long Beach and, soon thereafter, a masters degree in Comparative Theology with significant support from Tracy Tiemeier and Christopher Chapple wherein I explored the intersection of yoga and surf culture in India. With their encouragement, I eventually explored South Asian religions more closely, made my way into the complexity of yoga and Jain traditions including study at the International School for Jain Studies, and finally, after years of supporting myself as a certified public accountant and yoga studio production manager, received a PhD in the Study of Religion under the direction of my PhD advisor Smriti Srinivas at the University of California, Davis in 2018. During my PhD research, I had the

great opportunity to live in an intentional spiritual community based on the yoga teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda on the Big Island of Hawaii, as well as at a yoga therapy center known as Kaivalyadhama just outside of Mumbai in Lonavala, Maharashtra.

For all the support and encouragement I have received from my yoga teachers and academic mentors, my appreciation for yoga and Jain ways of knowing continues to grow. Most recently in early 2021, at the invitation of Mahesh Wadher, President of the Federation of Jain Associations of North America (JAINA), I changed my middle name to "Jain." My newfound commitment to the Jain way of life, along with my longstanding yoga practice, complements the sociological, ethnographic approach in this book. I can say I now occupy a new religious identity that constitutes my lifetime commitment to the legitimacy of fluid, porous religious boundaries as well as to the manifold tensions and opportunities these kinds of identities present for critical academic study and the betterment of society.

I continue to work with the Jain community as JAINA's first non-Indian, non-Jain committee chair member, with its Academic Liaison Committee, and, most recently, as the Vice President of Academic Affairs and Professor of Jain and Yoga Studies at Arihanta Institute where we offer online, graduate-level academic study for those interested in studying Jain and yogic traditions. Invoking the Jain principle of multi-perspectivalism (*anekāntavāda*), I would like to acknowledge that the perspective I share in this book is but one of the countless, innumerable, limited views amidst an ocean of possible limited perspectives. I therefore ask for your forgiveness for any harm or offense that it inadvertently causes you. Micchāmi Dukkaḍaṃ.

Christopher Jain Miller,
Zürich

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Arihanta Institute, and particularly during the most challenging of times in my life, this book would not have come to completion.

Alongside Arihanta Institute, I am also immensely grateful to my other two academic homes at Claremont School of Theology (CST) and the University of Zürich (UZH). At Claremont School of Theology I extend much gratitude to former president Jeffrey Kuan, current president Bishop Grant Hagiya, Dean of the Faculty Andrew Dreitcer, Associate Dean Yuki Schwartz, Professor Venu Mehta, Board Member Nitin Shah, and Senior Director of Admissions Max Wedel and his admissions team. You all creatively demonstrate the power and potential of progressive, online graduate education and have been an absolute joy to work with as we have collaborated to create our joint online Engaged Jain Studies Masters Degree track. At UZH, I am particularly thankful to Professor Nicolas Martin, Inge Ammering, Tancredi Padova, and my other colleagues at the Asien-Orient-Institut. The collegiality, generosity, and scholarly resources you have shared with me have made the process of researching this book and other research projects streamlined, efficient, and enjoyable.

Writing a book is never done in isolation, and for their feedback, encouragement, and ongoing support I thank all of my other academic colleagues who have, in one way or another, had their hands in my work. Thank you to Amanda Lucia, Anya Foxen, Christa Kuberry, and Jonathan Dickstein for providing extensive and detailed feedback after careful reading of initial drafts of this book. My appreciation also to Joseph Alter for his feedback and encouragement, as well as his own approach to the critical ethnographic and social-historical study of yoga to which this book is deeply indebted. Thank you to Flagg Miller for his early encouragement and resourcefulness during graduate school, many of whose original bibliographic recommendations are cited in this book. And thank you to the anonymous peer reviewer who I will likely never know, but who provided vital feedback on the first draft of this book. I am also indebted to McComas Taylor's online Sanskrit program at Australian National University, which was a lifeline during graduate school to gain crucial knowledge and translation skills in Sanskrit that helped me make my way through all of the yoga texts I encountered during my fieldwork.

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For those who I did not explicitly mention here, know that I did not forget you on purpose and deeply appreciate you.

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Note on Transliteration and Names

Sanskrit terms including diacritical marks appear in italics and inside parentheses after the English translation of each word is provided. In selected cases, when doing so is more conducive to the general style of the sentence, the italicized Sanskrit with diacritical marks appears first, followed by the English translation in parenthesis. When common Sanskrit terms are repeated (e.g. "*āsana*," "*prāṇāyāma*"), they often appear with diacritical marks and in italics without parentheses and without repeating the English translation. Sanskrit book titles are rendered in italics with diacritical marks, as are philosophical schools of thought (e.g. "*Yoga-Sūtra*," "*Sāṃkhya-Yoga*").

Some Sanskrit words used commonly in English (e.g. "tantra," "yoga," "mantra") are not italicized and are generally written without diacritical marks unless they form part of a Sanskrit compound.

Informant names, institutional names, and spiritual organizations are rendered without diacritical marks, as are, in most cases, names of songs and chants (e.g. "Gayatri Mantra"). In almost all cases, especially where confidentiality is important, names used in the following chapters are pseudonyms or simply listed as "anonymous."

In quotations of written works, the author's use or disuse of italics and/or diacritical marks in Sanskrit words is maintained. In quotations of interviews, diacritical marks are used for Sanskrit terms for consistency throughout.

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Introduction

Engaged Alchemies: New Approaches to the Study of Contemporary Yoga

> I have studied the Sanscrit [sic] texts of Yoga… I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body which we have not studied, but which were perfectly studied by China and India, even in remote periods. This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think that there are necessarily biological means of entering into 'communication with God'.
>
> Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body" (Mauss 1973 [1935]: 86–87)[1]

This book is a culmination of the past 15 years during which I practiced, studied, and was employed by yoga teachers, businesses, and traditions in the United States, India, Europe, and other global locations. Based on my training as a critical scholar and a practitioner of yoga traditions, I show how we can expand the definition of contemporary yoga practices for research beyond posture (*āsana*) alone.[2] Postural yoga occupies a central place in the field of Modern Yoga Studies despite the cliché heard in popular yoga culture all over the world which asserts that "yoga is more than just the postures." As an ethnographer, I have taken this cliché seriously. What do practitioners mean by "more than just the postures" or by hashtags like "#thisisyoga" or "#thisisyogatoo"? From a methodological and analytical perspective, how might we most effectively study these other practices? What might they tell us about the history, cultures, and contemporary practices of transnational yoga?

To answer these questions, I focus on three understudied categories of contemporary yoga cultures, including *food*, *music*, and *breathing* practices as understood and performed within three transnational yoga communities: Gurani Anjali's Yoga Anand Ashram on Long Island, New York; Polestar Gardens, an intentional yoga community following the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda on the Big Island of Hawaii; and Swami Kuvalayananda's Kaivalyadhama Yoga Institute in Lonavala, Maharashtra. I show how the dietary, musical, and breathing practices of three Indian yoga gurus are transformed in their encounters with novel cultural influences, while these disseminators of contemporary yoga and their successors simultaneously implicate their students' bodies into their soteriological yoga systems and in doing so, reshape the broader cultural spaces in which they operate.

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The material practices of eating, playing music, and breathing found in the transnational yoga cultures that I studied constitute portable and transposable forms of *engaged alchemy* that have been extensively deployed by contemporary disseminators of yoga (cf. Csordas 2009: 4; cf. Lucas 2013: 166). Borrowing from Tsing's notion of "engaged universals" (Tsing 2005: 8), I use the term *engaged alchemy* to specifically refer to the ways by which transnational disseminators of yoga have adapted dietary practices, music, and breathing techniques within contemporaneous worlds of yoga practice with the intention of producing site-specific instantiations of what they considered to be transformative yoga practice (cf. Augé 1999; Srinivas et al. 2020: 5, 13). Engaging critical insights from the fields of Indian Ocean Studies, Food Studies, Ethnomusicology, and Pollution Studies, I depict how yoga's foodways, musical practices, and breathing techniques have traveled beyond the Indian Ocean rim to become re-rooted, altered, and embodied in ways that reflect specific social concerns, contexts, and spiritual aspirations.

One of the first books I read that inspired the current project was Sumit Sarkar's *Writing Social History* (Sarkar 1997). Writing about the transformation of Ramakrishna's tantric system as it encountered Victorian norms during India's colonial encounters with the British, Sarkar helped me rethink the way we might interpret not only Ramakrishna's teachings, but also those of most other contemporary Indian disseminators of yoga. As Sarkar shows, during the late nineteenth century, Ramakrishna (1836–1886) modified the tantric underpinnings of the yoga practices he disseminated to his middle-class devotees. For instance, though trained in the practices of left-handed tantra (*vāmācāra*) early in his life, he tailored these practices to meet the needs of his colonized *bhadralok*[3] audiences in Bengal by disseminating a right-handed (*dakṣiṇācāra*) approach in their stead (ibid.: 321). Sarkar writes,

> *Coitus reservatus*, the key element in such ritualized sex, could be replaced… in more respectable forms of Tantrism by the mystic union of Shakti and Siva within one's own body through rousing the *kundalini*, or by the sublimation of sex into the childlike love for the mother-goddess.
>
> (ibid.)

According to Sarkar, Ramakrishna's internalization of tantra's transformative practices in such a manner,

> …clearly points towards a contemporary transition. Tantric traditions were being made more respectable through excisions, and at times sought to be suppressed altogether, in bhadralok circles as stricter ideas about gentility developed in the shadow of 'Victorian' norms in the late nineteenth century.
>
> (ibid.: 323)

Working within this Victorian "shadow," but also drawing from a preexisting ascetic "*bhakti* sensibility" that was already reshaping yoga and tantra in early

modern North India (Burchett 2019: 169), Ramakrishna's teachings marked a new and critical historical juncture for tantric and yogic practice worldwide. His teachings made "Shakti worship much more respectable and widespread among western-educated middle-class groups" (Sarkar 1997: 334) and would go on to transform the yoga teachings of his influential successors in India and beyond.[4]

Even as the influences of India's Victorian colonizers were reshaping Indian culture in such a manner,[5] so too was the colonial imperium being remade in the image of the colonized. Van der Veer suggests this is true specifically with regard to Ramakrishna's famous successor, Swami Vivekananda, whose influence "impacted a great variety of Western spiritual movements" (van der Veer 2001: 74). While scholars of yoga recognize Vivekananda's rhetorical skill at absorbing other world religions and spiritual traditions including Christianity and Western esotericism into his wider and more accommodating Advaita Vedānta (cf. De Michelis 2005; Albanese 2007; Jain 2015), in this book I explore how he and other disseminators of yoga inflected these Western traditions with transformative yogic logics. In doing so, I suggest that in addition to the yoga texts and linguistic and verbal discourse espoused by yoga's contemporary disseminators, we must turn to the language of the body itself as an accompanying source of ethnographic and historical data.

What Is Yoga?

Several of my colleagues in the field of Yoga Studies have summarized the available evidence regarding yoga's origins and rich history in ways that I will not repeat in the present project (cf. Samuel 2008; Mallinson and Singleton 2017; Newcombe and O'Brien-Kop 2021; Foxen and Kuberry 2021; Sarbacker 2021). My approach augments these studies, inspiring a reconsideration of how we study transnational yoga both ethnographically and historically. I follow the proposition of these scholarly works that yoga is not a monolith (cf. White 2012: 2; Jain 2015: xviii), but rather a multi-dimensional, protean, and ever-changing set of cultural theories and somatic practices, the precise origins of which, though South Asian and developed amidst Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, Sufi, and other influences, are ultimately unknown.

I use the term "yoga" to highlight what yoga gurus and disseminators considered to constitute yoga, which they drew from various texts[6] (cf. von Ostrowski 2022) and practice lineages. I only use the term "modern yoga" throughout this book to situate my work within the field that is known as "Modern Yoga Studies" (cf. De Michelis 2005: 7). Otherwise, I prefer to use the terms "contemporary yoga" or "transnational yoga" to indicate that I am studying yoga traditions that have emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries at the confluence of manifold social and historical flows, frictions, and cultural ideas while acknowledging that the followers of the traditions I study do not necessarily subscribe to Eurocentric conceptions of time, progress, and teleology (cf. Hauser 2013: 16).

Postural yoga practice (*āsana*) has, and continues to receive, focused attention in Modern Yoga Studies (cf. Sjoman and Kṛṣṇarāja 1996; De Michelis 1995, 2005; Singleton 2010; Foxen 2017). At each of my field sites, posture was indeed, to varying degrees, a subordinate and yet integral component of yoga practice. Though I move beyond postural yoga, my object of study is what Singleton refers to as "transnational anglophone yoga," which he distinguishes from "modern yoga" to emphasize the cross-border flows and exchanges that have been "*transmitted in a dialogical relationship between India and the West through the medium of English*" (Singleton 2010: 10; emphasis in original). I follow Singleton here, although my data is not limited to textual and linguistic English discourse alone (ibid.). Additionally, I consider contemporary forms of "soteriological yoga" (Jain 2015: 49–56) and "contemporary yoga philosophy" (von Ostrowski Forthcoming: 1) along with the "repertoire"(s) (Srinivas 2014: 270) of practices within these yoga systems used to achieve embodied transformation.

Though I am sensitive to community voices, I do not debate whether particular forms of yoga are authentic/inauthentic, traditional/modern, good/bad, or right/wrong (cf. Lucia 2020: 69–98; Jain 2015: 102–215). Thinking within these (colonial) binaries restricts our ability to see the multi-layered complexity of contemporary yoga cultures and what their practices are purported to achieve. Some yoga purists may find it "inauthentic," for example, that the *kīrtan* (Sanskrit: *kīrtana*) community that I spent time with in Hawaii has incorporated the ukulele into their meditative ensemble (the subject of Chapter 2). However, once one accepts that yoga cultures have always been changing, the question of whether the addition of the ukulele is "authentic" or "inauthentic" becomes far less interesting than the rich social history that allowed the instrument to enter the ensemble in the first place.

Debating yoga's authenticity would also actually constitute colonizing yoga and supporting certain nationalist, gendered, classist/casteist, and capitalist sentiments. I am very much in favor of what has been called the "decolonization" of yoga, even though many of the leaders in this decolonizing movement continue to reinforce (often unwittingly) colonial binaries in their discourse, activism, and teachings. In this regard, a secondary intention of this book is to help my yoga students, yoga teachers, and those in the decolonizing movement to unravel unacknowledged colonial mental impressions (*saṃskāra*) to which they have become habituated through their study of Orientalist yoga scholarship. My hope is that this book will create a new space for them to continue to appreciate, with a critical eye, the yoga traditions to which they belong.

Modern Yoga Studies

Many influential studies of contemporary yoga – including those considering Ramakrishna and Vivekananda – often emphasize the ways by which Western culture almost unilaterally influenced and domesticated the thought and praxis of contemporary Indian disseminators of yoga. While scholars of modern

yoga have undoubtedly recognized a process of bilateral exchange, their research has nevertheless emphasized the ways Western culture – whether in the form of physical culture, harmonialism, gymnastics, dance, esotericism, New Thought, health, or science – has reshaped and domesticated the category of yoga (cf. De Michelis 2005; Albanese 2007; Singleton 2010; Foxen 2020).[7] Following van der Veer, however, I "reject the common assumption – sometimes hidden, sometimes explicit – that the metropole is the center of cultural production, while the periphery only develops derivative, imitative culture" (van der Veer 2001: 3).

In this book, I approach the study of yoga by considering cultural influences on both centripetal *and* centrifugal terms including the flows of yogic influence from India into Western cultures at the level of embodied practice. What I seek to elucidate – and what is at stake here – are potentially occluded "Indian visions of what is possible in the field of human experience" (Alter 2004: 74–75) embedded within contemporaneous worlds of quotidian transnational yoga practice, and which, if we look closely enough, emerge as alternative yoga modernities (Weiss 2019). I present evidence that will encourage us to revisit questions such as, for example, whether or not Ramakrishna's teachings were merely subject to "deodorizing" and "sanitizing" within the constraints of Victorian morality (Urban 2003: 135, 164). Or perhaps, in addition to his student Vivekananda's absorption of the ideological influences of Western esotericism (De Michelis 2005), as well as the Theosophical Society's domestication of his and other Asian teachings (Albanese 2007: 344, 346, 352), what Vivekananda's specific contributions were toward the reshaping of Western spiritual movements. And finally, we can also reexamine postural yoga and try to understand if it is primarily a product of the influence of physical culture and harmonial gymnastics, among other Western influences (Singleton 2010), or perhaps in certain instances part of a wider, more holistic soteriological system.[8]

I draw inspiration from some important scholarly works in the field of Modern Yoga Studies that have demonstrated the reciprocal influences that have taken place during yoga's ongoing and recent historical development. Alter's groundbreaking *Yoga in Modern India* (Alter 2004) demonstrates how "a critical analysis of Yoga's history will show that it is a product of the colonial era" even as yoga can simultaneously "be shown to 'chip away' at the edifice of empire" when we consider the yoga body's situatedness between yoga philosophy and colonial science (ibid.: 26). For example, as Alter demonstrates, Swami Kuvalayanda appropriated the methods and tools of colonial scientific materialism to translate his own yogic vision for humanity into an empirically comprehensible message that eventually "enabled yoga to colonize the West" (ibid.: 106).[9]

In a more recent and equally insightful chapter in *Selling Yoga* that considers transnational yoga outside of India, Jain highlights how Acharya Mahaprajna's *prekṣā dhyāna* (perception meditation) system disseminated by the Jain Terāpanth order adapted many of the popular physical practices found in

transnational, modern postural yoga that are not distinctly Jain into its own yoga system in order to attract adherents. Jain also demonstrates how teachers of *prekṣā dhyāna* still maintained many of the transformative ethical, subtle body, and meditation practices Mahaprajna had gleaned from Jain texts and other yoga sources when he created his eclectic system (Jain 2015: 56–65). Even more recently, Foxen convincingly demonstrated how yoga guru Paramahansa Yogananda, whose initial stages of *kriyā-yoga* were clearly a product of his study of Western physical culture and New Thought, still maintained an underlying commitment to implicating his devotees' bodies into the energetics of "*Haṭha* yoga par excellence" (Foxen 2017: 17).

Each of these works point not only to the entangled nature of contemporary yoga culture, but also, more importantly, to the ingenuity of its many teachers to disseminate what they held to be embodied, soteriological yogic truths and experiences, even amidst the influences of their new cultural settings. In this book, I expand upon their insights and draw the field of Modern Yoga Studies into largely unchartered methodological and analytical territory through the ethnographic study of yoga.

Studying Transnational Yoga Cultures

De Michelis suggested long ago that the field of Modern Yoga Studies move into new territory by combining Indological and more nuanced anthropological research methods (De Michelis 2008). Similarly, Newcombe acknowledged that, "The way in which local communities interpret and change modern, transnationalised yoga movements is an area which is only beginning to be considered in modern yoga studies…" (Newcombe 2009: 997). A number of studies have answered these calls, demonstrating the analytical power of contextualizing yoga discourse and philosophy within particular contexts of neoliberal capitalism, health, race, gender, criminal justice, harmonialism, nationalism, and other related categories using well-developed ethnographic and historical methods (Hauser 2013; Jain 2015, 2020; Bevilacqua 2018; Neumann 2019; Lucia 2020; Foxen 2020; Shaw and Kayatz 2021; von Ostrowski 2022; Godrej 2022). My ethnographic study of transnational yoga communities is intended to contribute to this emerging critical ethnographic and historical field.

Botanical Metaphors, Frictions, and Mobilities

Scholars of Modern Yoga Studies have proposed a number of botanical metaphors to attempt to illustrate how forms of contemporary yoga have emerged. Early on, De Michelis described "Modern Yoga" as "the youngest branch of the tree of yoga" which "evolved mainly through the interaction of *Western individuals interested in Indian religions* and a number of more or less *Westernized Indians* over the past 150 years" (De Michelis 2005: 2; emphasis added). This tree metaphor is useful in so far as it suggests that Indian forms of yoga

change as they encounter other dominant cultural ideologies and material realities, and yet somehow retain their distinctness as "yoga." De Michelis's research nevertheless predominantly examines how yoga absorbs Western cultural ideologies (cf. Madaio 2017, 5). Writing with regard to Vivekananda, for example, De Michelis claims that, "It was on the basis of the teachings that he was quickly absorbing from his Western cultic entourage that he was to evolve his (occultistic) understanding of (Neo-)Vedanta" (ibid.: 113). Considering van der Veer's two-way "interactional perspective"[10] on history (van der Veer 2001: 8), I turn De Michelis's approach around to instead consider how *Indian individuals interested in Western religions* actually *Indianized Westerners* in ways that have been almost entirely overlooked.

Alter has used the phrase "transnational conjuncture" (Alter 2000: 82) to describe the point where similar ideas or practices from different cultures meet and are absorbed into the cultural categories and broader logics of their corresponding disseminators (cf. Hauser 2018: 519). Along these same lines, more recent botanical metaphors proposed by other scholars of modern yoga which suggest bilateral *and* multilateral cultural connections are more compelling than De Michelis's tree metaphor, which itself seems to suggest unidirectional growth. Consider, for example, Foxen's use of the term to describe the fusion of Western harmonial and Indian yoga cultures, "inosculation," or "the place where two trees, each with their own ancient root system, have entwined so intimately that they have become one" (Foxen 2020: 5). Following this line of thought, Foxen has argued that a significant amount of what is considered "yoga" within transnational postural yoga communities today is actually more genealogically related to Western harmonial traditions, New Thought, and physical culture. For example, Foxen writes,

> …many white women (for they are overwhelmingly white, and overwhelmingly women) practicing "yoga" in the United States today are actually engaged in something that is only slightly genealogically related to Indian yogic traditions… there is a Western history of practice here that was overwritten by the imported language of yoga, thereby becoming invisible.
>
> (ibid.: 2)

While embracing the bilateral exchanges between Western and Indian cultures, Foxen is still primarily focused on telling the story of a Western history of transmission.

The tree and inosculation metaphors, both of which assume the existence of discrete cultures, methodologically fit into what Hauser has characterized as a "model of linear diffusion" (Hauser 2018: 511). In addition to this linear model for the study of modern yoga, Hauser also characterizes the methods that constitute a "model of global diffusion" which emphasize "*interlinked systems of relations*" (ibid.: 512) and acknowledge "several coexisting and partly blurred transnational yoga cultures as part of a joint yoga world" (ibid.: 513). Strauss

and Hoyez subscribed to such a global diffusion model in their studies of transnational Sivananda yoga (Strauss 2005) and therapeutic yoga landscapes (Hoyez 2007). Kuberry and Foxen have more recently engaged the botanical metaphor of "rhizomes" to similarly capture the complexity and messiness of transnational yoga's ongoing transformations and developments globally (Schwind [Kuberry] 2015; Foxen and Kuberry 2021; cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21). "In a rhizome," they write, "there's no center or core… there is no single definition of yoga, and there is no single yoga tradition, only a web of interconnected nodes" (Foxen and Kuberry 2021: 9). As a result of this rhizomatic growth process, transnational forms of yoga are in substance, "the product of some ingenious grafting and splicing with other ideas and practices that look similar but have different cultural roots" (ibid.: 9). Hauser has similarly invoked the multi-rooted banyan tree to describe the complexity of transnational yoga, which, "absorbed by other plants may, in fact, be the product of multiple distant origins" (Hauser 2013: 11). The botanical metaphors that Hauser, Kuberry, and Foxen propose closely resemble the notion of entanglements, which Bender used to describe how yoga culture is intimately entangled with metaphysical and secular beliefs, practices, and discourses in contemporary Cambridge, Massachusetts (Bender 2010: 24, 90–118). Similarly, Altglas calls our attention to the ways by which an individual's yogic bricolage is always intimately situated within wider social and political contexts outside of which their yoga practice cannot be understood (Altglas 2014).

Though I find all of these metaphors to be useful analytical tools, I add another important metaphor here, "frictions," which has not yet been meaningfully engaged in existing yoga scholarship. Tsing's invocation of the term "friction" (Tsing 2005: 1) helps us understand how the novel cultural constraints yoga disseminators have faced actually became generative forces for contemporary yoga culture. "Cultures are," as Tsing writes, "continually co-produced in the interaction I call 'friction': the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (ibid.: 4). Tsing is primarily concerned with the ways by which mobile universals encounter friction and, consequently, are transformed as they travel across different cultural spaces in Indonesia. As homogenizing universals – be they science, neoliberal ideology, or in our case yoga – meet resistance within specific contexts, they become "engaged universals" and, consequently, lose their totalizing influence. According to Tsing,

> Engaged universals travel across difference and are charged and changed by their travels. Through friction, universals become practically effective. Yet they can never fulfill their promises of universality. Even in transcending localities, they don't take over the world. They are limited by the practical necessity of mobilizing adherents. Engaged universals must convince us to pay attention to them. All universals are engaged when considered as practical projects accomplished in a heterogeneous world. (ibid.: 8)

Using Tsing's notion of "engaged universals," I describe the result of the frictions between clashing cultural forces – yogic and otherwise – as *engaged alchemies*, which on the one hand reflect very particular social contexts but also, on the other hand, indicate practitioners' very human urge to transform and transcend these contexts according to yogic universalisms. I use "alchemy" here in its broadest sense and in accordance with its basic definition: "a power or process that changes or transforms something in a mysterious or impressive way."[11] I also draw from a South Asian perspective since the subtle body logics of some yoga systems are understood to enable transformative experiences of embodied alchemy (White 1996; Alter 2005).[12]

At each of my field sites, there were geographical, institutional, and social forces that enabled or constrained the multi-directional movement of people, yoga practices, and their ideas. In this regard, the "mobilities" paradigm is also helpful for conceptualizing engaged alchemies, as it requires us to pay attention to the mobility (and immobility) of people, materials, practices, and other interrelated phenomena throughout global society (Sheller and Urry 2006).[13] The frictions and mobilities paradigms also have a close analogue in the field of Religious Studies: Tweed invokes the terms "crossing" and "dwelling" (Tweed 2006: 24) as well as "confluences" and "flows" (ibid.: 59) to account for the fluid, protean nature of religious practices which also find momentary grounding in particular places.[14] For Tweed, the religious practitioner's *body* is central in the process of crossing and dwelling.[15]

Thus while I conducted standard methods of ethnography including conducting formal and informal interviews, recording lectures and talks, as well as collecting pamphlets, books, and other publications at each of my field sites, I also took into consideration the non-discursive language of the body itself through participation in, and observation of, the dietary, musical, and breathing practices I encountered therein. When ethnographic data collection is otherwise limited to abstract speech and human representational language, the non-linguistic language of the body is marginalized or altogether neglected.[16] This methodology, focusing on both discursive and non-discursive evidence, provided two important insights.

The *first insight* was that the practicing yoga bodies I encountered in the field clearly reflected influences from their wider social contexts. This should come as no surprise, since Mauss famously showed long ago that bodily techniques, whether they relate to everyday tasks such as sitting, bathing, or eating, or instead to specialized pursuits such as athletic activities, are not natural but learned according to a particular cultural logic (Mauss 1973 [1935]). As Bourdieu and Foucault later showed, all bodily practices and resultant dispositions are continually reproduced and, in some cases, coercively reinforced upon individuals to maintain and demonstrate a particular cultural logic through the body itself (Bourdieu 1990; Foucault 1990, 1995).

Sometimes, however, embodied cultural logics can challenge hegemonic discourses and paradigms (Douglas 1996 [1970]; 2001 [1975]; De Certeau 1984).[17] In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that the body, particularly in

colonial and post-colonial worlds in India, has always been a site of contestation (c.f. Arnold 1993; Alter 2000). As the epigraph to this chapter indicates, Mauss even conjectured long ago in his famous article (without reference to any specific evidence) that yoga instructs biological techniques for "communication with God" (Mauss 1973 [1935]: 86). Thus the *second insight* I gleaned from the yoga bodies I encountered was how they were clearly harnessing available bodily practices from their local social contexts to produce embodied transformation according to alternative, and allegedly universal, yoga cultural logics gleaned from yoga texts, gurus, and spiritual teachers.

It is beyond the scope (or my ability) of this book to precisely assess how the practices I encountered in my field sites – yogic diet, music, and breathing – affected practitioners' biological systems. I do, however, suggest, following von Ostrowski, that any long-lasting alterations to one's bodily practice undertaken according to a particular yoga system will produce measurable biological effects (von Ostrowski Forthcoming, 7; see also von Ostrowski 2022).[18] Whether these effects lead to "communication with God," however, is up to the interpretations of both my informants and the gurus who undertake the techniques meant to induce them. In each chapter I describe the heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981: 291) gurus and yoga practitioners themselves used to convey the full soteriological potential of their bodily techniques.[19]

The ways yoga practitioners at my field sites ate, sang, and breathed conveyed important messages regarding their self-understanding of class distinctions, political commitments, racial identities, internalized gender roles, neoliberal aspirations, and much more. At the same time, however, my informants' commitments to these somatic practices also expressed their sincere urges to transcend the worlds that these analytical categories plainly demonstrated they were entangled within – what yoga systems would generally refer to as *saṃsāra*. My immersion in these engaged alchemies at each field site implicated my own scholar-practitioner body into often contradictory epistemes that we can broadly conceive of as "academic" and "yogic." Grappling with the frictions produced between these two ways of knowing has produced the book before you.

Embodying Transnational Yoga

Eating, Singing, and Breathing in Transformation

With limited exception (cf. Wilke and Moebus 2011; Jacobs 2017; Jacobs 2019; Foxen 2020), the lack of detailed attention given to the somatic practices of food, music, and breathing within contemporary transnational yoga communities is surprising, especially due to the fact that when one opens popular yoga texts, spends time in yoga ashrams, or undertakes comprehensive yoga training around the world, three of the primary practical imperatives one often encounters are the necessity to modify one's eating and drinking habits, to re-learn how to breathe, and to engage in various forms of musical or sacred sound

practices.[20] I first encountered these categories of yoga practice as they were established at Yoga Anand Ashram (YAA) in Amityville, New York, during my early graduate studies while concurrently attending a two-year yoga teacher training at the Hill Street Yoga and Meditation Center in Santa Monica, California. Hill Street was a non-profit institution founded by Christopher Chapple, a former long-time student at YAA. Here in 2011, for the first time, I was collectively exposed to vegetarianism, breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), and the practice of music and mantra practice in yoga. Because YAA's yoga lineage came from Gurani Anjali, who had moved to New York from Kolkata, I eventually wondered what practices in particular had traveled with her from Kolkata and had taken root in Long Island and then Los Angeles and how these practices were modified as they entered each new location. I had suddenly noticed, for example, that I was seeking vegetarian food at the Santa Monica farmer's market every Sunday after our yoga training with my classmate and friend Karthik. The wider Santa Monica health food culture in which we were undertaking our training was no doubt conducive to practicing the embodied dietary ideology into which I had implicated my own body. Furthermore, as I encountered dietary, musical, and breathing practices in other transnational yoga communities during my intermittent travels to India and time spent working in Hawaii, I often wondered what was "universal" about these practices, given their specificity and unique adaptations within both locations.

During my subsequent field work, I followed these three primary categories of somatic yoga practice – food, music, and breathing – through three individual field sites. The methodology I use in this book thus adopts a transnational, multi-sited (Marcus 1995) approach that has also been used by other ethnographers and anthropologists of transnational yoga to "follow the practice" (Strauss 2005: 93; cf. Jain 2015). Nevertheless, due to the limitations of space, I have chosen in this book to focus on one category for each field site in each chapter. Though unique in expression, what each of these field sites share is the birthing of novel and context-bound forms of engaged alchemy as mobile yoga practice and ideology produce frictions with prevailing countercultural (Chapter 1), tropical (Chapter 2), and necropolitical (Chapter 3) influences.[21]

First, we will meet a female Indian guru, Gurani Anjali, who makes an abrupt move from Bengal to an increasingly urbanizing Long Island, New York in the 1950s. Anjali's foodways reflect those found in many transnational yoga settings wherein dietary modifications usually framed as "*sāttvik*" (pure, true, light; Sanskrit: *sāttvika*) are disseminated alongside other lifestyle reforms, including abstinence from sex, drugs, smoking, and other activities in order to achieve soteriological goals. By engaging scholarship from the field of Food Studies, we will see how Anjali and her yoga ashram community's foodways reflected the predominant American countercuisine ethos but at the same time harnessed this ethos to achieve the goals of Anjali's universal yoga system.

Alongside the preliminary practice of yogic diet, breath control (*prāṇāyāma*) and/or some form of music or sacred sound (*kīrtan/bhajan/mantra*) are frequently deployed in transnational yoga communities as well. Thus in the

chapter that follows, we will meet a global network of mobile, middle-class *kriyā-yoga* practitioners in Hawaii, observing how their musical *kīrtan* practice has adapted the ukulele alongside the harmonium into the community ensemble in order to accomplish their guru's universal meditative practice of listening for an internal, unstruck sound. The fields of Ethnomusicology, Historical Musicology, Organology, and allied fields of musicological inquiry help us trace the complicated social histories of the ukulele and harmonium that make this meditative ensemble possible.

Finally, with regard to breathing exercises, we will encounter middle-class city dwellers from Mumbai performing purifying and liberating yogic breath techniques (*prāṇāyāma*) to treat their asthma and other air-pollution-related ailments. They do so at a century-old yoga institute amidst India's polluted air, a consequence of neoliberal capitalism's uneven development dynamics in the Global South. Critical insights from the field of Pollution Studies will help us understand how this tragic, post-colonial situation has emerged.

Taken together, my three field sites in New York, Hawaii, and Maharashtra redraw a multilayered, multi-directional web of relationality between the Indian Ocean and other regions, underscoring centripetal and centrifugal influences that are now operating globally. Instead of beginning in India as most studies of yoga typically do, this book begins on Long Island, moves to Hawaii, and finally *ends* in India. This reverse flow of field sites, not typical in studies of yoga, helps me tell a different story of a globalized, transnational yoga and the ways by which yoga's influence has traveled and rooted itself in other regions beyond that of the Indian Ocean, uniting with the Atlantic and Pacific. Beginning my study outside of India also allows me to show how, "Spaces can be transposed onto others through naming and narration, remembering and sensation" and how "city/home/exile/return are moral projects manifested through embodiment and practice" (Srinivas 2022: 8–9). Ending in India then allows us to see how other global influences encounter friction as they intersect with yogic ideology in South Asia today.

Worlding the Indian Ocean

My engagement with the field of Indian Ocean Studies and the publication of *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds* (Srinivas et al. 2020) has significantly influenced the multi-sited approach in this book, compelling me to join the call to rethink the spatial and disciplinary boundaries of the Indian Ocean.[22] Rather than understand the Indian Ocean merely as a geographical and spatial frame of reference, my ethnographic fieldwork intellectually reconfigures the Indian Ocean, "as a space for conceptual/theoretical relationality." In addition to mobilities, "place, placemaking, and quotidian practices" and "new networks of memory and maps in lived experiences" are also explored in this book (ibid.: 13–17). In a decolonial spirit, I do so "without necessarily privileging the West" (ibid.: 12).

Referring to the Indian Ocean's flexible spheres of influence as a "hundred horizons, if not a horizonless infinity" (Bose 2006: 34), Bose once described the Indian Ocean as an "interregional arena" that "was – and, in many ways, continues to be – characterized by specialized flows of capital and labor, skills and services, *ideas and culture*" (ibid.: 3; emphasis added). As Vink has since observed, the Indian Ocean's horizons and boundaries are spatially layered, fuzzy, fluctuating, and not necessarily limited by geographical constraints (Vink 2007: 52–53). It has therefore become imperative, as Vink writes, "…for 'the new thalassology' to disentangle the complex strand of spatial categorizations and explore the permeable inner and outer boundaries of the Indian Ocean world(s)" (ibid.: 60). There is indeed a long history of relationality across the Indian Ocean region (cf. Amrith 2013: 26) that extends outside the ocean's traditional geographic limits. As Prestholdt observes, the boundaries of the Indian Ocean are porous and "remarkably pliant," allowing the Indian Ocean to shape "an ever-increasing number of societies along other shores" *beyond* the ocean's rim (Prestholdt 2020, 25, 28). And, as many scholars have clearly demonstrated, the ocean's influences reach past littoral environments alone and into the hinterlands (cf. Chaudhuri 1985; Ghosh 1993; Samarawickrema 2020; Meek 2020; Srinivas 2022).[23] Considering the Indian Ocean's extra-regional and extra-littoral influences helps us see past nationalist and state-inspired geographical imaginaries and to understand the worlding of Indian Ocean imaginaries globally.

One useful way to consider the extent of the Indian Ocean's boundaries and spheres of influence is to observe human relations facilitated through highly portable transnational religious networks (Prestholdt 2020: 26; Ranganath 2020: 181; Srinivas 2022: 7). How have, for example, "'alternative modernities,' those formations of modernity that have taken shape in an archive of deep and layered existing social and intellectual traditions" made their way into other oceanic worlds in the form of "Religious Universalisms" and "New Textual Circuits" (Hofmeyr 2007: 13, 20–25; cf. Kaur 2023)? Before reaching into other oceanic regions such as those of Europe and the United States, for instance, South Asian yoga texts were already circulating in Southeast Asia (Acri 2021; White 2014: 165). By the late nineteenth century, South Asian texts were also traveling upon preestablished communication routes connecting land and sea between South Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. These ideas traveled along a network that extended from the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal, through Mediterranean Europe and eventually across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States via ship travel and the Transatlantic Cable, finally making their way to the Pacific Ocean along the Union Pacific Railroad (Davis 2015: 72–114). These multiple transoceanic routes of yoga connected the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Atlantic Ocean, and Pacific Ocean regions and in doing so were already pushing the Indian Ocean's influence far beyond its traditional geographical limits.

Alongside portable transnational religious networks and texts, Indian Ocean influences have also entered into other geographic regions in the form

of portable religious *bodily practices*. With regard to dietary practices and the alimentary tract specifically, Meek writes that, "… Indian Ocean worlds exists [sic] as much – and even perhaps more so – through the practices and bodies worlding them than as a physical space whose boundaries could be drawn on a map" (Meek 2020: 199). With the alimentary tract in mind, the field of Food Studies has taken the interdisciplinary methods of Indian Ocean scholars seriously in order to study the distribution of Indian Ocean foodways in the region, thereby, "rescuing taste from the nation," among other things (Leong-Salobir et al. 2016). As Indian Ocean food scholars have repeatedly shown, inter-Asian culinary flows and dietary practices have transcended the borders of nation-states to facilitate the production of Indian Ocean worlds elsewhere (Leong-Salobir et al. 2016: 10–11; cf. Ray 2013; Ray 2015; Hoogervorst 2018: 519; cf. Hoogervorst 2022).[24] Chapter 1 of this book takes this important insight about as far as it will go by showing how Indian Ocean foodways have reached the counterculture in Long Island, New York.

In addition to diet, other bodily practices involving music, instruments, and musicological influences have spread throughout the Indian Ocean. For this reason, scholars in the field of Ethnomusicology have taken an interest in Indian Ocean Studies, citing the limits of Ethnomusicology's area studies paradigm and the vast opportunities an "Indian Ocean ethnomusicology" would open for understanding the transnational distribution of Indian Ocean music (Byl and Sykes 2020: 398; Sykes and Byl 2023). One ethnomusicological opportunity Chapter 2 of this book capitalizes upon is Byl and Syke's suggestion to bring "Western and Eastern Indian Oceanists in music studies" into conversation with one another while balancing between a "scoped-out inventory" and an "intimate ethnography" of musical cultures (ibid.: 402, 409).[25] Because, "Generally speaking the bounds of music lie outside the walls of the archives," I follow "essential clues which indicate the translation between continents and cultures" in musical practice and ensemble creation (Jayasuriya 2008: 136). In doing so I look beyond relationships between communities and nation states alone (Bose 2006: 7), but also far beyond the traditional limits of the Indian Ocean rim as I take us to Hawaii for sacred yoga music in the form of *kīrtan*.

Finally, in addition to eating and singing, everyone must breathe. And yet the polluted air of the Indian Ocean region is making breathing an increasingly dangerous bodily practice, especially when yoga and physical activity are involved. Of particular concern to the Indian Ocean region is a visible atmospheric phenomenon known as (not without controversy, cf. Bhojvaid 2021) the "Asian Brown Cloud,"[26] a seasonal air pollution event that hovers over the Indian Ocean that will continue to have long-lasting adverse effects on the natural environment, the climate, and human health (Ramanathan et al. 2002: 947, 955).[27]

The Asian Brown Cloud became such a concern at the turn of the twenty-first century that Europe, India, and the United States collectively conducted what was known as the "Indian Ocean Experiment" (ibid.: 947). As one highly influential and international scientific study concluded on the subject,

"Unless international control measures are taken, air pollution in the Northern Hemisphere will continue to grow into a global plume across the developed and the developing world" (Lelieveld et al. 2001: 1035). The Asian Brown Cloud and air pollution in the Indian Ocean region are thus global issues in the age of the Anthropocene. Like yoga, the pollution extends significant influence from the Indian Ocean and beyond. And yet, as we will see in Chapter 3, the cloud is a product of the frictions between neoliberal ideology and nationalist economic aspirations as they encounter alternative South Asian ways of knowing the body and its relationship to its environment.

The transnational cultural influences that the chapters in this book trace demonstrate how useful the Indian Ocean can be as an analytical category (cf. Chaudhuri 1985), but also show how we can conceive of *one* global ocean given the vast global connections that bind the world's oceans together today. Indeed, tracing Indian Ocean yogic influence into distant oceanic worlds in the Atlantic and Pacific and then seeing how neoliberal, necropolitical, and nationalist ideas have found ground in the Indian Ocean make it more appropriate to conceive of the world as having one ocean tied together by a plurality of cultural influences. These entangled cultural influences still nonetheless demand – perhaps even more so as this book will show – careful scholarly attention. Such attention reveals how by embodying transnational yoga one embodies manifold contemporaneous cultural and regional influences, but nevertheless in doing so simultaneously worlds the Indian Ocean globally.

Distinct Gurus, Distinct Ways of Knowing

Rather than focusing upon popular gurus or "hyper gurus" (Copeman and Ikegame 2012) of modern yoga (cf. Singleton and Goldberg 2014), each of my field sites was, and continues to be, administered by lesser-known personalities in the yoga world. First, Gurani Anjali (Chapter 1) belongs to the group of "second wave" gurus (Forsthoefel and Humes 2005: 4), who influenced countercultural Americans following the lifting of restrictive immigration legislation in the United States in the 1960s. Next, Polestar Gardens' (Chapter 2) founders are part of a third generation of "homegrown" yoga teachers who grew up on American soil (Gleig and Williamson 2013: 2). Finally, Swami Kuvalayananda (Chapter 3) belongs to the generation of first wave gurus who disseminated yoga outward from India. Though Kaivalyadhama was founded by the somewhat familiar Swami Kuvalayananda (1883–1966) (cf. Alter 2004) and Polestar Gardens traces its origins to the more well-known Swami Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) via Swami Kriyananda's (1926–2013) Ananda Village (est. 1968), both of these communities are currently operated by individuals most readers and scholars have probably never heard of. Yoga Anand Ashram's Gurani Anjali (1935–2001), a little-known and yet truly visionary female yoga teacher, has also remained off the radar for most scholars and yoga practitioners.

Introduction

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Patanjali and Arjuna meet American Countercuisine

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