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Embodying Transnational Yoga: Eating, Singing, and Breathing in Transformation, by Christopher Jain Miller

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Embodying Transnational Yoga: Eating, Singing, and Breathing in Transformation. Christopher Jain Miller. Milton: Routledge, 2023. Pp. 164.

In *Embodying Transnational Yoga: Eating, Singing, and Breathing in Transformation*, Christopher Jain Miller examines the significance of food, music, and breathing practices within transnational yoga communities. To explore these themes, which Miller suggests are understudied within Yoga Studies, the book offers an ethnographic account of three communities: Gurani Anjali's Yoga Anand Ashram in Long Island, New York; Polestar Gardens, located on the Big Island of Hawaii, which follows the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda; and Swami Kuvalayananda's Kaivalyadhama Yoga Institute in Lonavala, Maharashtra. The book uses the phrase "transnational yoga communities" to emphasize the interconnected nature of the practice, showcasing the convergence of various ideas and practices in diverse global settings. By examining these communities, Miller illustrates that, in line with the prevailing cliché in popular yoga culture, "yoga is more than just the postures" (1).

Throughout the book, Miller emphasizes the importance of taking an approach that is simultaneously critical and sympathetic, and encourages future scholars to embrace a similar perspective. The text acknowledges potential objections that may arise to the sympathetic approach, especially given the increasing focus on guru abuse and legal allegations within contemporary yoga communities.¹

1. See: Amanda Lucia, "Guru Sex: Charisma, Proxemic Desire, and the Haptic Logics of the Guru-Disciple Relationship," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 4 (2018): 953–988; Geoffrey D. Falk, *Stripping the Gurus* (Toronto: Million Monkey Press, 2009); Burke E. Rochford, "Child Abuse," in *Hare Krishna Transformed*, 74–96 (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

While condemning sexual abuse, Miller draws attention to the British Empire's historical attempt to erase yogic asceticism as well as the ongoing two-way interaction between abusive gurus and the "objective and universal lens of Yoga Studies itself" (16). Miller thus highlights the field's historical ties to colonization, appropriation, and racism. The book firmly asserts and clearly demonstrates that "it is possible and necessary to study yoga in a way that is simultaneously critical and sympathetic" (153). Deploying interdisciplinary methods, the book showcases the potential of Yoga Studies to integrate insights from fields such as Indian Ocean Studies, Food Studies, Ethnomusicology, and Pollution Studies. Miller, in engaging with a diverse array of disciplines, underscores the value of the ethnographic method in exploring the multifaceted dimensions of transnational yoga communities.

The book is divided into three chapters, including a noteworthy preface, as well as an introduction and conclusion which outline the main intentions of the book. In the preface, Miller informs the reader of his connections with both the Polestar Gardens Yoga community and the Kaivalyadhama Yoga Institute. In doing so, Miller clearly states his bias as a yoga practitioner. This sincere and clearly situated statement of positionality creates the foreground upon which Miller researches and writes. In like manner, Miller encourages yoga practitioners and scholars alike to reflect on their own biases and situatedness.

Chapter 1 focuses on Gurani Anjali's Yoga Anand Ashram and the significance of food for that community. Miller highlights the significance of vegetarian food within the community, arguing that yoga foodways are religious identity markers that serve both as a proselytizing tool and as an aid for spiritual growth and discipleship amongst community members. Miller rightfully highlights the influence of other yoga community and vegetarian restaurants – such

as Sri Chinmoy's Annam Brahma restaurant and ISKCON's vegetarian cuisine – which also use food for proselytization. Chapter 2 shifts its focus to Hawaii where followers of Paramahansa Yogananda engage with devotional music through harmoniums and ukuleles. Miller offers a cohesive historical overview of the ukulele and harmonium, describing how these two musical instruments are unexpected accompaniments to contemporary *kīrtan* (devotional singing) practice.

Finally, Chapter 3 examines the perplexing irony of practicing *prāṇāyāma* (breath control), a practice aimed at self-purification, within the polluted air of India at the Kaivalyadhama Yoga Institute outside of Mumbai. Miller begins by acknowledging the privilege of being able to even complain about air pollution in India and the privilege of practicing *prāṇāyāma* altogether. He continues by offering a cohesive overview of both the practice of *prāṇāyāma* and the environmental challenges of air pollution at Kaivalyadhama and Mumbai more broadly. Perhaps most importantly, chapter three highlights the prevalence of neoliberal and biopolitical frameworks within contemporary Yoga Studies, which constitute an individualistic, self-responsible model in their analyses. Miller argues that these approaches lack analytical depth, and instead suggests a necropolitical perspective – which examines the “subjugation of life to the power of death”² – as a more suitable starting point for analyzing how yoga may promote the slow loss of life. This, Miller suggests, serves as a more “fitting interpretive framework” for the study of contemporary yoga cultures, especially in conceptualizing racism and classism within yoga-centred field sites. Miller uses the example of prison yoga, which has been largely

2. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 115, no. 1 (2003): 39.

examined through a neoliberal perspective, and questions whether it would be better understood “as a necropolitics designed for expendable populations” (145). In doing so, Miller highlights how by acknowledging the intersections of broader societal issues such as racism, classism, and sexism, a necropolitical framework “opens new pathways” for understanding transformative practices within yoga communities (145).

The book concludes by offering some suggestions for future studies of yoga: “Yoga and Parenting,” “Yoga and Social Justice,” and “Prison Yoga.” Miller highlights the significance of secondary scholarship related to the category of yoga and advocates for interdisciplinary perspectives that can enhance ethnographic understandings of transnational yoga communities.

Presented with creative chapter titles such as “Patanjali and Arjuna meet American Countercuisine,” “Ukuleles and the Unstruck Sounds at Polestar Gardens, Hawaii,” and “Internalizing the Sacrifice in a Sacrifice Zone,” this book offers an overview of respective field sites and themes. However, given its concise 164-page length and the ambitious goal of introducing and examining three distinct communities, along with the central themes of food, music, and breathing, the book does not provide a cohesive view of each topic. Every chapter, with its substantial content, could serve as the foundation for a comprehensive book of its own. Alternatively, the inclusion of three additional chapters, each focusing on one of the major themes of food, music, and breath, with the remaining chapters focusing on the specific field sites, might have enhanced the book’s depth and breadth. It is essential to note that this critique stems from a desire for more insight and thick description, as Miller’s book does succeed at critically and sympathetically examining transnational yoga communities.

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Embodying Transnational Yoga will prove highly beneficial for scholars examining transnational religious movements and serves as a source of encouragement and guidance for emerging scholars interested in Yoga Studies. Overall, the book provides a compelling account that will inform and inspire both scholars interested in the anthropology of religion and South Asian religions, as well as yoga practitioners interested in eating, singing, and breathing within transnational yoga communities.

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