

Anya P. Foxen. *Inhaling Spirit: Harmonialism, Orientalism, and the Western Roots of Modern Yoga*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. ix + 322 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-008273-4. \$92 / £64.

In *Inhaling Spirit: Harmonialism, Orientalism, and the Western Roots of Modern Yoga*, Anya Foxen aspires to uncover hidden Western traditions of spiritual breath-movement practices that preceded and coincided with the evolution of modern postural yoga (MPY). Foxen's "harmonial" thesis builds on yoga scholar Mark Singleton's assertion that aesthetic physical culture practices of European and American women in the late nineteenth century, which he coined "harmonial gymnastics," influenced MPY developments.¹ Building on this premise, Foxen suggests that "non-lineage-based" or "non-devotional" American gym yoga of today is "only slightly genealogically related to Indian yogic traditions" (2), but more intimately derived from nineteenth-century "Euro-American harmonial physical culture practices" (40) and the early twentieth-century American Orientalist dance fad.

In augmenting Singleton's argument, Foxen constructs an analytical framework for harmonialism which is used throughout the text as a comparative background to "MPY." According to Foxen, the theoretical tenets for harmonialism are: 1) the belief in one reality in which the physical and spiritual are interconnected; 2) the idea that humans are connected with the cosmos through an intermediary principle such as "*pneuma*," "ether," or "spirit"; and 3) the idea that there are practical methods that we can utilize to bring the "human, cosmos, and the divine into alignment or harmony" (23). Thus, the emblematic title of the work — *Inhaling Spirit* — points at Foxen's concept of harmonialism, i.e., "spirit," which is (imagined to be) "inhaled" during breath-movement practices. Foxen's adoption of the term "harmonialism" is

1. Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 154-73.

admittedly investigated in “broad strokes,” as a way of “mapping the shape of ancient thought . . . into a scattered lineage of family resemblances” (66). Given that it touches upon numerous influences and various movement practices to build the core of Foxen’s micro-historical analysis, it is not surprising that some of these descriptions of lineages and the resulting interpretations are somewhat daring and overstated. In her reading of MPY through the lens of harmonialism, it is additionally troubling that Foxen largely neglects important sources of modern yoga and its South Asian roots.

In the first two chapters, Foxen imagines a harmonial heritage by tracing a history of interrelated ideas. She traverses a fascinating spectrum of “harmonial” (i.e., metaphysical) thought from ancient Greek concepts of the cosmic body, theurgy of Iamblichus to Medieval Platonism, and natural magic in the Renaissance. Following this Foxen segues into eighteenth-century mesmerism, the mystical revelations of Emanuel Swedenborg, and nineteenth-century Spiritualism and New Thought, thereby focusing on the contributions of Andrew Jackson Davis and Warren Felt Evans (who is mistakenly called “Walter”). Foxen’s exploration of Evans’s concepts of spiritualized breath connects the New Thought movement to physical culture as seen in her next chapters.

Regarding Davis, it should be noted that harmonialism is a term based on Davis’s “Harmonial Philosophy.”² The twentieth-century religious scholar Sydney Ahlstrom created the umbrella term “harmonialism” or “harmonial religion” to denote mid nineteenth-century spiritualist and occult movements, of which Davis was a leading figure. Ahlstrom’s generalized terminology was then acquired by yoga scholars³ and Foxen follows by arguing that Ahlstrom’s “original” use of the harmonial term meant a “spiritual union or rapport with the cosmos” (146). More precisely, Davis’s cosmic rapport included the belief in

2. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Harmonial Philosophy: A Compendium and Digest of the Works of Andrew Jackson Davis* (Chicago: Advanced Thought Pub., 1917).

3. Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (London/New York: Continuum, 2004).

the immortality of the transcendent soul, astral projection, intergalactic travel, and trance communications with “peoples of other planets.” Foxen omits this background for harmonialism as a term and its use within yoga scholarship — which is notable in light of her overall emphasis on “family resemblances” (66).

In chapters three and four, Foxen draws from the scholarship of numerous historians to give an overview of physical culture developments from the Renaissance to nineteenth-century Swedish Ling gymnastics, before narrowing in on American Delsartism. Here again, she significantly expands upon Singleton’s research connecting Pehr H. Ling, François Delsarte, and specifically Genevieve Stebbins to the growth of MPY. Foxen explores American Delsartism as a form of theurgy, described as “a theory of aesthetics governing bodily movement, [that] in its highest form, becomes a sort of body language for the soul” with every movement as a form of communication (131). One note: throughout the book Foxen uses the misspelling “Delsarteism” instead of Delsartism. Additionally, within the text Foxen often summarizes and synthesizes insights from experts’ in-depth archival research and allocates their names to endnotes. As one example, she introduces biographical information about Stebbins (159) without properly crediting the dance historian Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter who is widely recognized for having unearthed Stebbins’s work.

Having distinguished Delsarte’s work in Paris from American advancements based on his theories, Foxen notes that by the early 1890’s Delsartism had become a “full-blown spiritualized practice encompassing breath and movement” (157). Foxen’s analysis revolving around women in the physical culture movement as part of the deep breathing discourse is well-arranged and her overview of the integral role women played in the broader Delsarte movement proves to be enlightening. However, Foxen complicates a portion of American Delsarte history by asserting Delsarte’s sole American student Steele MacKaye added exercises “drawn from Ling’s system” (136). This claim contradicts scholarship on Stebbins and historical evidence that credited her for being the first Delsartist

to have integrated Ling's movement exercises within her innovative physical culture system, known as Harmonic Gymnastics.⁴

At the end of chapter four, Foxen investigates "Oriental dance" in the early choreography of Ruth St. Denis and challenges the idea that St. Denis appropriated Indian Nautch dance or yoga, seeing as she described her own work as not trying to "reproduce any Oriental ritual or actual dance" (177). Although her choreography *was* imitative of Nautch dance, even if it was performed "semi-accurately" or her mudras were not done "very well" (285), Foxen accurately describes the creation of St. Denis's early work as a mixed repertoire of dance influences. Foxen argues that while St. Denis's Orientalist fantasy performance of an Indian goddess was indeed problematic, with her use of brown face and staging Indian men as props, she argues that St. Denis's creativity should ultimately be "interpreted against a backdrop of classically inspired harmonial idealizations of all dance" (178), where embodied spirituality and "expression become transcendence and authenticity" (265).

In chapter five, Foxen explores individuals who "tied their authority to the mystique of the Orient" (196) as seen, for example, through the medium Helena P. Blavatsky, the work of Pierre Bernard, and New Thought author William Walker Atkinson. She then turns to investigate the Oriental dance fad (206-21) through such figures as one of St. Denis's students Marguerite Agniel, a model and dancer, to argue that "the present form of postural yoga in the United States demonstrates one undeniable fact: it is the dancing girl's yoga gone mainstream" (190). However, what direct influence Agniel had – or even the "second generation of dancing girls" including Indra Devi and Swami Sivananda Radha discussed in

4. Nancy L. C Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism* (Westport/London: Greenwood Press, 1999); Kelly Jean Mullan, "Harmonic Gymnastics: A Genealogy of Ideas," *Currents: Journal of Body-Mind Centering Association* (2016): 16-28; Kelly Jean Mullan, "European Antecedents to Somatic Practices," in *Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action*, edited by Martha Eddy, 71-82 (Bristol: Intellect Press, 2016); Kelly Mullan, "Somatic Herstories: Tracing Elsa Gindler's Educational Antecedents Hade Kallmeyer and Genevieve Stebbins," *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* 9, no. 2 (2017): 159-178.

chapter six — on future yogis remains unanswered. Neither is Oriental dance in and of itself described in terms of what it was these women were actually doing, other than saying it “relied on a set of movements that were believed to derive from the devotional forms of an unspecified Oriental culture” (209). Despite its inconclusiveness regarding what impact these women might have had, Foxen’s queries and biographical studies of these women are interesting.

Chapter six deals with South Asian modern yoga pioneers like Swami Vivekananda and Shri Yogendra and the “harmonial” publications of Stebbins. Foxen appropriately clarifies earlier scholarly misunderstandings that tended to confuse Stebbins’s breathing practices with the appropriation of yogic breath control (151, 230, 236, 241–43). Another concept that she rightly traces to Stebbins, but also to exponents of New Thought and Spiritualism, is the body as a “human battery” that could be “recharged” through breathing techniques and other psycho-physical practices, which are indeed reiterated throughout early twentieth-century modern yoga manuals (99–100, 162, 245–46). For Stebbins, as well as pioneers of modern yoga, the solar plexus became *the* locus to absorb “magnetic healing” and the equally restorative effects of breath-movement practices, constituting another useful investigation which Foxen then develops into the themes of chapter six (122–23, 170–71, 234). In treating several yoga pioneers in light of harmonialism, Foxen assesses Yogendra’s adoption of certain ideas and practices described by Stebbins in her influential *Dynamic Breathing and Harmonic Gymnastics* (1892) and she should be credited for uncovering these connections (240–44). In this discussion, the portions that treat yoga as “yoga” (and not harmonialism) are, however, relatively small. It is surprising that what was “yoga” for Yogendra, becomes “harmonialism” in Foxen’s analysis. This probably reflects the (at times admitted) hyperbolicism of her argument (231–35, 238, 259), including the statement that “we should not be calling some of the practices we see in the West today ‘yoga’” (263).

Exemplifying a strategy in her book, Foxen attempts to turn upside-down the indeed overwhelming presence that yoga holds in contemporary popular

culture. She wants to uncover an oversimplifying universalism that would tend to see “yoga” in any form of postural practice that involves breath and/or subtle body schemes, and makes clear that things are more complex (10, 62, 162, 258). Foxen reverses that argument and instead holds that the ubiquitous practice is harmonialism (which is Foxen’s quest for a more complex theory). The Epilogue to the book enforces this claim. In negotiating various approaches to studying yoga in the Epilogue, the author states that it is not desirable to understand yoga as a “pure,” unchanged, and monolithic practice, a view that would, as a result, tend to focus solely on its premodern sources (258–59, 264). It remains nevertheless problematic to largely decontextualize the Euro-American developments from the South Asian roots of yoga, or to place the latter mainly on the appropriating side as in chapter six. In negotiating an essentialist view of yoga and Foxen’s own construction of a universalist harmonial tradition, the book sometimes fails to purport a balanced argument.

It is commendable that Foxen endeavoured the colossal task of producing this book, which certainly seems likely to yield much debate considering its breadth and provocative propositions. Moreover, the validity of harmonialism as a theoretical and ontological framework is up for debate. While the history of Euro-American women’s engagement in Western forms of spiritualized physical culture is fascinating and certainly an under-researched area, the assertive claim that various practices from American Delsartism to “Oriental” dance became the yoga we find in fitness centers and studios today is not entirely tenable. It would require additional intensive historical study and methodical movement analysis of exercises with a narrower focus tracing the transmission of practices through educators and students to argue this point with such conviction. It could be said that this is not even exactly the point she is trying to make overall despite her brazen statements. It seems, rather, that Foxen is trying to unveil a narrative for Euro-American spiritualized movement practices that originated prior to postural yoga systems coming to the West, and that this history should

not be diminished. This, in and of itself, is certainly true as numerous physical culture historians have evidenced, and Foxen is one of the few scholars to have attempted to merge metaphysical history with physical culture, dance, and yoga studies. Foxen therefore sets a precedent for future research – which would indeed need a more thorough and deep engagement investigating questionable connections, similarities, and differences between concepts and actual practices within these fields – that could further contribute to understanding the development of modern postural yoga in North America. Foxen’s text perhaps could be considered as a light shining the way, even if as she says, her clusters of candles might produce a “flattering illusion” (261) for alternative origin stories of American yoga.

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