Review

The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography, by David G. White. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. xvii + 273 pp., \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-691-14377-4 (hb).

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In a digestible 236 pages, historian of religion David White offers readers an elegant, erudite, and highly entertaining history of one of India's most famous and misunderstood Sanskrit classics, the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali. However, unlike other religious classics featured in Princeton Press' excellent 'Lives of Great Religious Books' series—including texts such as the *Book of Genesis*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*—White contends that the *Yogasūtra* is better understood as a 'comeback classic' (p. xvi), and that the story of its reception history is one of rise, fall, and latter day resurrection, rather than simply a timeless classic.

This book serves as a follow-up to the author's 'triptych' of monographs on the subjects of medieval Indian alchemy and Siddha traditions, transgressive tantric sex, and tales of 'sinister' power-seeking yogi, respectively, each of which, in their own ways, sought to challenge dominant scholarly and popular narratives regarding the history of Yoga (philosophy) and yogis' (practice)—and White is careful to differentiate between the two. White's biography of the *Yogasūtra* seeks to do the same, through a wide-ranging history that questions preconceived notions regarding the 'classical' status of the *Yogasūtra* in premodern India, and likewise, its more recent sacred status as the primary scriptural authority for modern postural yoga.

White takes readers on a *tour de force* of yoga and Indological history: outlining interpretative challenges of the text (ch. 1); probing the 'chicken and egg question' regarding the antiquity of Yoga and Sāṅkhya (ch. 2); the cosmopolitan rise of the *Yogasūtra* through its earliest translations in the form of al-Biruni's eleventh-century Arabic translation (ch. 8), and a tenth-century Old Javanese Śaiva recension (ch. 9); the complete neglect of Patañjali and the *Yogasūtra* proper in the Epics and Purāṇas in favor of Vedic authorities on yoga such as Hiranyagarbha, Yājñavalkya, and Kapila (ch. 2); the apparent dearth of *Yogasūtra* manuscripts and the collapse of Yoga as a living philosophical

tradition in India (ch. 3); the rise of the British East India Company and the 're-discovery' of the *Yogasūtra* by Henry Thomas Colebrooke (ch. 3); early European yoga debates of G. W. F. Hegel and the German Romantics (ch. 4); the overlooked and erudite first complete English translation of the *Yogasūtra* by Rajendralal Mitra in 1883 (ch. 5); the wild appropriation and influence of Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society (ch. 6); the eminent Swami Vivekananda, whose influential *Raja Yoga* (1896) repackaged the *Yogasūtra* through a mix of Neo-Vedānta and Western spiritualism (ch. 7); scholarly debates surrounding the role of Īśvara, the 'Lord', in Yoga (ch. 10); the rise of yoga scholarship in the academy via James Woods, Mircea Eliade, and others (chs. 11–12); the conflicting hagiographies of Tirumalai Krishnamacarya, the brilliant twentieth-century yoga revivalist of Mysore, whose influence on modern postural yoga is second-to-none (ch. 13); and finally, to recent debates over the authorship and title of the *Yogasūtra* (or the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*), with a final nod to the imbrication of Yoga and politics through the rise of India's yoga televangelist-turned-statesman Baba Ram Dev (ch. 14).

White's major argument that binds this rich historical narrative is first delivered in the preface and woven throughout the book. White contends that after its inception around the fourth or fifth century CE, the *Yogasūtra* witnessed its greatest 'heyday' during the seventh through twelfth centuries (p. xvi)—the period when major Sanskrit commentaries were written, when it was translated into Arabic and Old Javanese—and that after this 'five-hundred-year period of great notoriety', the *Yogasūtra* fell 'into oblivion ... for the better part of seven hundred years' (p. xvi). By the sixteenth century, Yoga had witnessed its 'virtual extinction' as a 'viable philosophical system' (p. 6), and for 'several hundred years prior to its discovery' by Colebrooke in the 1800s, the *Yogasūtra* had been a 'lost tradition' (p. 16), only to be 'miraculously rehabilitated' by Vivekananda at the end of the nineteenth century, after which the *Yogasūtra* was reinvented and elevated in modernity 'to a status it never knew' (p. xvi).

White lays out the primary evidence for his thesis of decline in Chapter 3, where he provides two kinds of metrics. The first, is anecdotal evidence from nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian and European scholars who failed to find living *paṇḍits* in India who were knowledgeable and trained in the *Yogasūtra*. Here, White asserts the compelling claim that aside from King Bhoja's eleventh-century *Rājamārtanḍa*, none of the other Sanskrit *Yogasūtra* commentaries can claim to represent a Yoga (or Sāṅkhya-Yoga) point of view, and that '[a]t bottom, there never was, properly speaking, a "Yoga School" of philosophy' (p. 75). Indeed, most of the later Sanskrit commentaries were penned by Vedāntins of various stripes. His second metric, however, is more problematic, and is perhaps, the major weakness of the book. Here, White engages in a quantitative assessment of 50 Sanskrit manuscripts catalogues from India, Europe, and North America, seeking to take inventory of extant *Yogasūtra* manuscripts. White concludes that out of the 'some twenty thousand

manuscripts listed in these catalogs' (p. 78), only 1.27% are of the *Yogasūtra* or its commentaries, while the vast majority are manuscripts of texts belonging to the various schools of Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Vedānta. From this figure, White concludes that 'after the late sixteenth century virtually no one was copying the *Yoga Sutra* because no one was commissioning *Yoga Sutra* manuscripts ... because no one was interested in reading the *Yoga Sutra*' (p. 79). While White's manuscript data might confirm that the other Indian *darśanas* of Nyāya, Vedānta, and so on, were more popular than Yoga (or at least produced more writing) among Indian Sanskrit intellectuals—and moreover, that the *Yogasūtra* was not the only (or even the most important) Yogaśāstra in pre-modern India—to claim that no one was copying or interested in reading the text in the early modern period is a blunt overstatement. One need only look at Kaivalyadhama's *Descriptive Catalogue of Yoga Manuscripts* (2005), which contains information on 2,874 yoga manuscripts—several hundred of which are devoted to the *Yogasūtra* and its commentaries, dating from the late sixteenth through twentieth centuries.

White's 'comeback classic' narrative, and claim that from the sixteenth century onwards nearly all of India was a 'Yoga desert' (p. 52), is further underwritten by White's own admission of a 'Yoga revival' in south India during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries (pp. 6, 38, 111, 203). Although White appears to dismiss these later Yoga exegetes due to their Vedāntic-inflections, collapsing the metaphysical dualism of Sāṅkhya-Yoga, White himself has effectively demonstrated how the history of *Yogasūtra* interpretation has always been one of change, adaptation, and theological negotiation. It is not clear to this reader why White so quickly dismisses the learned and intellectual activity surrounding the *Yogasūtra* during the early modern period as any different. Commentaries by the Advaitin Nārāyanatīrtha (fl. 1600–1690)—who composed no less than three—the grammarian Nāgeśabhaṭṭa (fl. 1670–1750) who composed two, the Vedāntic ascetic Sadāśiva Brahmendra (c. eighteenth century), Anantadeva Paṇḍita (c. nineteenth century), and numerous others (see Larson and Bhattacharya's *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies Vol. 12*, 2011) attest to the continued canonical status the *Yogasūtra* held in Sanskrit intellectual circles in pre- and colonial India.

This is not to take away from White's excellent observations regarding the resurgence of interest in the *Yogasūtra* in the modern period, and the fascinating ways in which the Indian and western 'culture brokers' of yoga such as Krishnamacarya and his disciples have uniquely made Patañjali the founding father of modern postural yoga, when his text was anything but that. With a cautious eye for grand historical narratives, this thought-provoking book should be required reading for scholars of yoga, South Asian intellectual and religious history, and for the millions of connoisseurs of modern transnational yoga.