

Review

Sinister Yogis—in the Eye of the Beholder. David Gordon White. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 376pp. ISBN: 978-0226895147 (pbk). \$25.

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Sinister Yogis is a magnificent book in every sense, but in particular as the word ‘magnificent’ invokes a philological orientation to etymology, and the correspondence therein to the way in which magnificence involves both an expansion of the size of a thing that is examined—as in magnify, in this case ‘the yogi’—and a more archaic sense in which adoration implicates a person’s body in the magnificence of god. *Sinister Yogis* is a magnificent book about the way in which yogis implicate themselves in the materiality of magnificence, are implicated in malfeasance—expanding and extending their bodies to take over other people’s bodies, among other things—and how, through the eye of the beholder, they transform reality, and otherwise magnify the size and shape of things that are perceived by the senses.

Underlying *Sinister Yogis* is a profound problem, taken up by David Gordon White in the final chapter of the book. Yoga has become a form of practice that has expanded to a point of global if not universal popularity, and practitioners claim authoritative knowledge about it based on all kinds of insight. Because yoga is a form of practice anchored in material experience, a fact that White takes to heart and keeps in focus, and because it can be interpreted as ancient, arcane, mysterious and inherently based on secrecy—and claims to knowing the secret—almost anyone can say that they know and embody the truth about it, and say that other articulations of the truth about it are completely false. The problem is that modern forms of practice—transcendental meditation, inmate rehabilitation and asana aerobics—have produced a highly problematic and wholly contrived distinction among spirit, consciousness, the body and the divine. If I may adapt a metaphor that is central to White’s thesis, *Sinister Yogis* is about the need to rein in these flights of imagination to the four quarters, and to firmly shut the barn door so that the horses that have gotten free can be harnessed back on to the chariot; a chariot of mind that has been expanded with knowledge through exposure to brilliant insight.

The central argument in *Sinister Yogis* is that yoga is as yogis do, and that it is profoundly important to understand the meaning of yoga in relation to how the practice of yoga is explained in the archaic, classical, medieval and modern literature. In many respects White’s analysis of the primary literature is not only comprehensive, erudite and relentlessly penetrating, it is also both refreshingly literal and critically

deconstructive. What I mean is that his analysis is based directly on an extremely close reading of what the texts say, by showing the internal logic of development and comparing textual sources to one another. It is not guided by ideological preconceptions or the sacred cows of received wisdom. In reading *Sinister Yogis* you will experience the finer pleasure of literary parsing, and come to fully appreciate the intellectual value of untangling words and their meanings to understanding embodied concepts like yoking, direct perceptual conjunction, the active nature of visualization and all of the various elements that bring the practice of yoga down to earth while highlighting the expansive vision of yogis.

If medieval theologians had not already appropriated—and their critics maligned—the metaphorical question of angles dancing on the heads of pins, the analogy would serve very well as an aphorism to counter that which says that the devil is in the details. To fully appreciate *Sinister Yogis* one must focus—writhing *yoginis* notwithstanding—on the angels as they dance; pin-point details are what animate White's argument that often runs contrary to post-Orientalists' perceptions of what yoga must be. Consequently a short review necessarily produces distortions and dissonance, so it is useful to start at the very beginning, by pointing out that the practice of yoga contains within itself both that which it is and its opposite—yoga is both union and conjunction, as well as disjunction, disengagement, and the disconnection of consciousness from the world at large (p. 38). Yoga is, in other words, both a 'torted' perception of otherness and a perception of tortured otherness.

Underlying the argument that yoga is what yogis do is a profoundly non-reductive form of materialist metaphysics in the logic of philosophical practice. Fundamentally yoga is soteriological, and yogis are intent on the embodiment of insight, as insight—and sight itself—involves perception of a reality that does not end with death and that extends to and through all things. In essence yoga, 'as a religious vocation, is the quest for...a union or identity [with a supreme being], including the power to enter into, to permeate, the creator's every creature' (p. 29). Significant as the body is to yoga, *asana* and *pranayama*, as they constitute the essence of practice these days, are post-modern red herrings in the scholarly search to reveal the mystery of yoga's metaphysical physicality. To make this point David White begins—after a short introductory chapter which presents the figure of the yogi in literature as a sinister shape-shifting, body-snatching trickster—with a wonderfully insightful and wry deconstruction of the idea that an ancient seal from Mohenjo-Daro depicts the proto-Lord Siva doing yoga. Suffice it to say that White literally strips the hoary significance of the image down to cross-legged essentials, and then runs with it across the length and breadth of the ancient world, concluding that the earliest language that describes yoga has nothing to do with sitting, much less meditating.

In its earliest articulation the practice of yoga draws on the language of horses, chariots and war to describe the way in which a person is literally 'hitched to his rig' in order to metaphorically pierce the disk of the sun, battle his way into the afterlife and become immortal. The logic of the metaphorical entailment harnesses the practice of yoga to the body as surely as yoga itself entails the action of yoking; yoking that is both literal in the sense that fear of death can be overcome by harnessing life to the act of dying, and mythologized in the ritual structure of sacrifice. As White puts it: 'Like the *yogayukta* chariot warriors who pierce the otherwise impermeable barrier of the sun, these epic yogis penetrate the impermeable barrier of other people's bodies, and in both cases, the media through which these penetrations occur are solar rays' (p. 68).

In the book's third chapter White shows how the paradigmatic structure of harnessing that enables yogis to pierce the sun and cross the threshold of space shaped an epistemology of philosophy linked to consciousness and knowledge. What is especially fascinating about this shift is the way in which a problem of knowing—which involves a shift in understanding from the idea of a journey across space and time to meditation on the absolute within—is defined by problems concerning the materiality of consciousness and sensory perception. One dimension of the problem is that the essence of the self is inherently identical to that which is universal; the other dimension is that 'yogis apprehend the sense objects directly, without refraction through the sense organs' (p. 90). As White traces it out, the shift from the pre-Vedic journey paradigm grounded in apotheosis and sacrifice to one that is oriented towards 'novel meditative techniques' remains grounded in the logic of perception and the transitive nature of perception as tangible and transactional.

The implications of this become clear in the book's fourth chapter, where the heart of the argument lies; and White inexorably draws the reader in to the radiant centre where 'the importance of true or accurate perception as the basis for valid cognition cannot be overestimated...' (p. 124). The practice of yoga is the means by which the mind can apprehend the self 'without the distorting interference of the sense perceptions' (p. 124). The key point here must be understood in terms of seeing true perception as a process of direct realism that involves the radiant extension of the self into the world through *tejas*—rays of light. Vision is not seeing things as a result of the light that is reflected from them into the eyes; visionary yogi perception is based on vision as a process whereby rays of light are emitted outward on to objects and then draw objects back into the eye itself. 'The repeated homologization...of the sun in the heavens to the human eye as well as to the luminous self or person in the heart appears to be the same as undergirds the upanishadic conceptualizations of the process of embodied ascent' (p. 154). As White points out, in this context perception is understood within the rubric of a transactional model of fluid substances, and, if not consumed by the idea of the spirit's total and final isolation from matter, what matters for omniscient yogis is penetration by means of perceptive exchanges.

As a representation of human religious thought, yogis stand in a profoundly important position relative to the idea of god, and the practice of yoga provides a key perspective on the nature of divinity as an expression of human interest. In essence, as White argues in the book's fifth chapter, yogi perception as an embodied act shapes the concept and character of an omniscient omnipresent god; but, I think, even more significant than this, it draws the idea of god back down to earth and magnifies divinity in the person of the yogi—sinister proclivities notwithstanding. White points out that it is an open question as to which came first, the yogi or god, but in any case what the intimate and fluid correspondence shows—at least to a sociologist of religion influenced by rereading Durkheim—is the highly problematic dualism that has produced a conception of god, several millennia old now, that has been disconnected from the immortal practices of everyday life, rituals and mythology being what they are. At the end of the fifth chapter White concludes that yogis become deified as their bodies expand and extend to become coterminous with the cosmos; 'a fully realized yogi is no longer a yogi but rather a god knowing the universe to be himself' (p. 195).

One can draw from the conclusion of the book's fifth chapter the further conclusion—by unsuspending doubt—that yogis are sinister because they have internalized and conflated a mythopoetic relationship in the human imagination

that normally keeps mortals and immortals at arms length and in a clearly hierarchical relationship, one to another. Especially if yoga in practice does not produce a cosmic synthesis one can see that when the idea of god, which is the formalization of *viyoga*, gets sucked into the body of the yogi it can either make the divine truly manifest or else unmask the whole fetishized business. That being said, in the final chapter White largely bypasses a discussion of medieval alchemy and hathayoga, which is covered in his equally wonder full *The Alchemical Body*, and takes the reader into the late pre-modern world of the Mughals and then into a consideration of the modern world of colonialism and its legacy.

In the book's sixth and final chapter White shows how the yogi has come to be the much maligned 'other' within South Asian society. From the vantage point of Mughal rulers yogis were powerful individuals capable of controlling other people in various ways—magically and militarily—and therefore considered, with political savvy, as a source of power and knowledge. One of the fascinating features of yoga in practice during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is the completely counter-intuitive fact that yogis—within the structure of ascetic fraternity orders—played a significant role as mercenary soldiers and power brokers in the struggle to control regional economies, trade and pilgrimage. Among other things this puts the issue of non-violence—along with iconic cross-legged meditation—firmly in its historical place. Accommodated within the gambit of pre-modern Sufi ecumenicalism, nineteenth-century yogis were 'overtaken by the brave new world of Rajput devotionalism and the *Pax Britannica*', and their 'power and influence quickly evaporated' (p. 243).

As the sun finally set, that which had been absorbed into the Empire during its radiant ascent came back down to earth. This finds expression in a range of modern and post-modern forms of practice that can best be characterized as embodiments of a magnificent sleight of hand whereby the secret authenticity of ancient Indian yoga is said to be rediscovered in Tibet, where it does not exist! As White puts it: '[T]he bedrock of the West's modern-day, billion dollar yoga industry, with its celebrity gurus...glossy journals, fashion accessories, trademarks, franchises and lawsuits, is Indian yoga, but a reinvented yoga that dates from no earlier than the 1930s' (p. 247).

Whereas *Sinister Yogis* traces out the profound transformations that characterize the practice of yoga over millennia, one may draw a general conclusion about what is involved and what is at stake from White's observation that 'the body, person or self, as constructed in South Asian ways of knowing is a highly permeable, open system, bristling with conduits through which it transacts with other bodies, persons or selves. So it is that the act of seeing involves an extension of the contours of one's body outward from the eye, via a ray of perception, to the object of perception, and that the shadow cast by an impure individual can physically alter the composition of the body of the person upon whom that shadow falls' (p. 252).

With a wink and nod to the fact that for the past millennium or more yogis in practice have come from the margins of society, one can appreciate the value of being sinister in the eye of a host of beholders.