Violence, Liberation, and *Freedom Inside*

ROBIN L. TURNER

FREEDOM INSIDE? YOGA AND MEDITATION IN THE CARCERAL STATE, by Farah Godrej, presents a textured and nuanced exploration of volunteer-led yoga and meditation programs inside jails and prisons. Based on her deeply reflective interpretive ethnographic research, Godrej develops a nondeterministic argument about both the meanings of prison yoga and meditation, and the effects of these practices on incarcerated participants and volunteer teachers. Yoga and meditation can be practices of freedom and pathways towards liberation, but freedom and liberation can be understood in many different ways. These freedom practices can be oriented towards accepting responsibility for one's actions, towards individual empowerment, or towards broader transformation. These varied orientations inculcate different perspectives on oneself and the world, as this book shows. Each of these insights point toward the fact that yoga and meditation program volunteer teachers and participants are doing political work.

I read *Freedom Inside* as a long-time yoga and meditation practitioner, an occasional yoga teacher, as a peace and conflict studies program director, and as a comparative politics teacher and scholar. I first practiced meditation with Black, Asian American, and Latinx people who were keenly aware of injustice and sought to direct the practice toward community building and collective liberation, as well as individual healing and transformation. My yoga teachers have included those with similar political orientations, and others with a more neoliberal and individualistic approach. These entry points have shaped my engagement with this text. Our roles, and "relationships shape not only *what* is seen (a question of access), but also *how* it is seen" as Timothy Pachirat writes of ethnography.[1] Godrej's important intervention led me to think more deeply

about the relationship between yoga, meditation, and violence; about Black liberal and radical perspectives on freedom; and about reflexivity and trustworthiness.

Yoga and Meditation as Violent Practices

Incarceration is violent, "patently unjust and unequal," as is the criminal injustice system to which it belongs.[2] Confining people constitutes structural violence; it causes harm and prevents people from realizing their potential.[3] Incarcerated people are often subject to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in jails and prisons. It is disturbing, but not particularly surprising, that jail and prison volunteer trainings frequently portray incarcerated people as "'bad people' who had done 'bad things'" and as violent people who deserve confinement.[4]

The dominant perception of yoga and meditation in the Global North as intrinsically peaceful renders the violence inherent in some of these pedagogical approaches far more counterintuitive. *Freedom Inside* shows how some volunteers have taught these practices in epistemically, psychologically, and physically violent ways. Epistemic violence surfaced in some teachers' depiction of their incarcerated students as different, inferior Others. "I would go crazy with them on a permanent basis. They don't have any self-control or regulation… They won't be quiet… most of them don't get it," one program leader said.[5] Knowing and relating to incarcerated adults as "childlike" and inherently flawed is violently and strikingly different from how most teachers approach their students outside, as the formerly incarcerated practitioner Emile De Weaver pointed out:

> 'Out here on the streets, no one is telling you in a yoga class, "*there's something wrong with you, we're gonna help you fix it*,"' says Emile. 'But… in a prison setting, [it becomes] "*something's wrong with you, yoga's gonna help you fix it*."'[6]

Godrej's participant-observation illustrates the potential psychological violence of meditation teachings. The well-intentioned Buddhist teacher she observed sought to change students' perspectives, focusing "on self-regulation and making better choices" because he believed "taking ownership is where empowerment lies."[7] In practice, this "taking ownership" meant responding to students' painful disclosures with teachings, with "negativity bias," and with a "Safe, Resourced, Connected" activity that invalidated a student's experiences.[8] Asking individuals who have been deprived of healthcare and who are subjected to physical violence to tell themselves, "right here, right now, the reality is that I'm safe," "I am resourced," and "I have what I need, even if it's not

perfect" is psychologically violent. Meditation and yoga practices have allowed many incarcerated people to navigate their confinement more skillfully and to access a degree of freedom inside, but these practices do not fully relieve the harms arising from the carceral system.

Yoga can be physically violent, especially but not solely through the long taken-for-granted use of physical adjustments. Recent public attention to sexualized adjustments, to teacher sexual violence, and to adjustment injuries has prompted a reconsideration of these practices, and changes in national prison yoga organization trainings. Yet Godrej encountered strong local volunteer resistance to having students "opt-in" to adjustment, or adopting trauma-informed pedagogies.[9] This was particularly disturbing since survivors of violence are overrepresented in the carceral system and are systematically deprived of bodily autonomy in prisons and jails.[10]

Epistemic, psychological, and physical violence are intertwined. Volunteers who see incarcerated people as bad/childlike are likely to emphasize individual responsibility, and to be comfortable touching without permission. I focus on violent volunteer teaching because these practices are so deeply harmful, not because that approach was most prevalent, or the dominant theme of the book. Put simply, meditation and yoga teaching should not inflict further violence on incarcerated people.

Thinking Freedom

In spite of this potential for violence, *Freedom Inside* shows that meditation and yoga have relieved suffering. These practices have helped incarcerated people to navigate their confinement more skillfully, to take internal refuge, and sometimes to free themselves. The book invites a consideration of political theories and practices of freedom that place Godrej's analysis and those of her collaborators and other (formerly) incarcerated thinkers in conversation with Black and Brown thinkers outside. *Freedom Inside* also resonates with the work my students encounter in a course I cocreated. In "Freedom and Movement in the Transatlantic World," students wrestle with different concepts of freedom articulated by the Black theorists Orlando Patterson, Tyler Stovall, Neil Roberts, and Angela Davis. Patterson's concept of *sovereignal freedom*, "the power to act as one pleases, regardless of the wishes of others," and Stovall's history of the racist conflation of freedom with whiteness show how some expressions of freedom are tethered to domination.[11] Roberts and Davis (whom Godrej engages) direct our attention to people's continual pursuit of freedom despite enslavement, incarceration, and other forms of oppression. Roberts defines freedom as marronage, "a flight from… necessity, bondage, and unfreedom towards the

sphere of positive activity and freedom" while Davis highlights emancipated people's exercise of their "newfound freedom" despite constraint.[12] These concepts provide a framework for discussing diverse transatlantic people's experiences of freedom or lack thereof.

These concepts may illuminate the complex, sometimes contradictory valence of meditation and yoga teachings detailed in *Freedom Inside*. White freedom is sustained and advanced through the subordination and exclusion of marginalized people in the carceral system. Violent yoga and meditation pedagogies could be read as attempts to exercise sovereignal freedom over these people. Concordant with white freedom, such practices are justified by some teachers' belief that "they are smarter, more powerful, or more morally deserving than other peoples."[13] Conversely, and perhaps concurrently, meditation and yoga can support incarcerated people's marronage, their intentional, self-directed movement towards freedom despite confinement. Increased dialogue among Farah Godrej, other yoga and meditation freedom theorists, and these thinkers could be immensely generative.

Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

I also read *Freedom Inside* from a methodological perspective as a Black feminist, interpretively-inclined comparative political scientist. Critical Black feminist and interpretive scholars reject the positivist pretense to a "view from nowhere," instead attending to our positionality, developing situated knowledge claims, and considering reflexivity in our assessment of others' scholarship. *Freedom Inside* is an exemplary work from this perspective. Godrej integrates reflexive consideration of her positionality throughout the main text, as well as in the methodological appendix. She thoughtfully addresses how her national origin, personal practice and study, and her status as an academic researcher "confer[ed] legitimacy and credibility," impacting her reception by gatekeepers, interlocutors, and research participants. Conscious of the asymmetric risks her project posed to incarcerated participants, Godrej details the ethically fraught decisions she made to secure IRB approval and prison access,[14] to determine the degree of participant and collaborator anonymity and volunteer program participation, and to share her work with participants before its finalization. These discussions contribute to the "trustworthiness" of the text and the argument developed within it.[15] *Freedom Inside* is an original and important contribution to scholarship on yoga and meditation, and on freedom and the carceral system.

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Notes

1. Timothy Sathapon Pachirat, "The *Political* in Political Ethnography," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009), 147.
2. Farah Godrej, *Freedom Inside? Yoga and Meditation in the Carceral State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 5.
3. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-191. https://doi.org/10.2307/422690; Paul Farmer, "An Anthropology of Structural Violence," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 3 (2004): 305-325.
4. Godrej, *Freedom Inside?*, 184.
5. Godrej, *Freedom Inside?*, 193.
6. Godrej, *Freedom Inside?*, 125.
7. Godrej, *Freedom Inside?*, 157, 161.
8. Godrej, *Freedom Inside?*, 162.
9. Godrej, *Freedom Inside?*, 193.
10. Godrej, *Freedom Inside?*, 73, 79-80, 320 footnote 68.
11. Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 4; Tyler Edward Stovall, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
12. Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 15; Angela Y. Davis, "The Meaning of Freedom," in *The Meaning of Freedom* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012), 139.
13. Stovall, *White Freedom*, 12.
14. Seeking Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for research with incarcerated people is fraught because it often empowers prison and jail officials to decide what constitutes ethical research. Godrej (p. 22) writes, "it was made clear that the very system I sought to study—a coercive system with (at best) dubious records on human rights—was considered the gatekeeper by university bodies that provided the stamp of "ethical" approval for research… The process of triangulating between prison and IRB officials revealed how the IRB-prison nexus limits the scope of what can be known and said about prisons."
15. Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*, Routledge series on Interpretive Methods, (New York: Routledge, 2012).

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