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To cite this article: Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä, Lotta Leiwo, Hannu Linkola & Jenni Rinne (19 Oct 2023): The spiritual forest: an ethnographic exploration of Finnish forest yoga and the forest landscape, Landscape Research, DOI: [10.1080/01426397.2023.2268550](https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2023.2268550)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2023.2268550>



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Published online: 19 Oct 2023.



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The spiritual forest: an ethnographic exploration of Finnish forest yoga and the forest landscape

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the Finnish forest yoga phenomenon, which incorporates contemporary spiritual discourses on nature, landscape, 'the self' and gender. We scrutinise ethnographic fieldwork materials, autoethnographic writings and other materials related to forest yoga. By using the methods of collaborative ethnography, we assert that forest yoga practices partially question and fragment, and partially reconstruct, previous forest-related discourses, practices and imageries in Finland. This results in new interpretations of forest landscapes, in which the local, global and national scales are intertwined and mediated through the body and the experiences of the yogi in the forest space. In these processes, the forest becomes gendered as a feminine and 'safe' space for the female body, but it is also experienced as a place for negotiating metaphorical and physical 'roots'. Thus, previous national discourses on forests as 'sacred places of Finns' are brought forth, but also reinterpreted in the transnational spiritual frame.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative ethnography; Finland; embodied space; forest; spirituality; yoga

Introduction

Boreal forests and their representations have been, and still are, central in the visual and discursive production of Finnishness and Northern-ness (Häyrynen, 2008; Printsman et al., 2019: pp. 192–194). In Finland, forests are often interpreted in public as a resource base for the forestry sector, or, lately, as contradictory pieces in the global game of emissions trading (Kotilainen & Rytteri, 2011; Ridanpää, 2022). However, as recent studies suggest, increasing urbanisation, fragmenting spiritual identities, imagery from popular culture, peoples' growing awareness of the climate crisis and ecological catastrophes, and even mobility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, have emphasised the role of local forests as sources for individual well-being, on the one hand, and places for creating ecologically driven connectedness with nature, on the other (e.g., Fagerholm, Eilola, & Arki, 2021; Meriläinen & Lehtinen, 2022; Thurfjell, 2020). For the most part, these kinds of practices are politically progressive, middle class and white (Mäkelä and Linkola, forthcoming; see also Breunig, 2022; Lynch, 2007).

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We concentrate on these spiritually charged interpretations of forest landscapes through analysing the Finnish forest yoga phenomenon. Forest yoga is a branch of modern commercial yoga that was developed in Finland and which is based on *āsanas* (yoga postures) and meditation.¹ We ask: (1) What kinds of interpretations of the forest arise within the spiritual context of forest yoga?, (2) How is the forest landscape experienced in forest yoga practice? and (3) What is the relationship between these experiences and the conventional interpretations of Finnish forest landscapes?

Our approach stems from the fields of folklore, landscape studies, ethnology and comparative religious studies. We also utilise the method of collaborative ethnography by bringing the thoughts of researchers together with the voice of a Finnish forest yoga teacher (Author 2, Lotta Leiwo), who has participated in writing this article. Based on our ethnographic analysis, we argue that globally popular, progressively spiritual trends—from which forest yoga stems—question and fragment, but also reconstruct, previous forest-related discourses, practices and imageries in Finland. This results in new interpretations of the forest, in which the local, global and national scales are intertwined and mediated through the body and the emotions of the yogi in the forest space. In these processes, the forest becomes gendered in a novel way, as it functions as a ‘safe space’ for the female body, but it is also a place for negotiating metaphorical and physical ‘roots’. The processes are multiscalar and trans-local: even a small urban forested area can become ‘a spiritual forest’ that trans-locally amalgamates national landscape imageries, globally popular spiritual discourses and bodily experiences.

The study provides new information about how the forest landscape is experienced and represented in Northern Europe in contexts that are not primarily related to the fields of forestry, ecology, planning, land use or biology, but to multifold, and often vague, spiritual identity formation. Furthermore, it provides a window into the ways in which people have perceived natural environments during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Europe, in a world that is shaken by ecological crises.

Spirituality and the forest landscape

Spirituality is a vague concept that refers to a movement incorporating spiritual ideas, trends and experiences in modern societies. It is often separated from ‘religiousness’—especially by the people who describe themselves as ‘spiritual’. Contemporary spiritual movements (such as meditation, yoga, goddess spirituality etc.) generally underline the individual subjective experience and non-institutional world views and practices (e.g., Sheldrake, 2013). In the progressively focused new spiritualities, ‘nature’ (often understood in progressive spiritual discourses as the opposite to human culture) is considered a great source for spirituality, and many spiritually and nature-focused individuals also aim to act against global crises such as climate change or biodiversity loss (Lynch, 2007). In Finland, many of the individuals who identify themselves as spiritual are middle class, white, middle-aged, well-educated women (e.g., Poutiainen, 2019). We discuss the forest yoga phenomenon in Finland as a part of progressive spiritual flows, as the discourses about it emphasise the well-being of the ‘self’ and sacralise nature by centring the forest as a healing and ‘sacred space for Finns’ (Jokiniva, 2018, p. 60).

Even though modern yoga is often considered secular and even non-spiritual in many commercial yoga spaces in Finland (e.g., Broo, Moberg, Utriainen, & Ramstedt, 2015), the forest yoga phenomenon can be linked to contemporary spiritual movements rather easily, as it openly refers to yogic texts such as the *Bhagavadgita*; freely mixes Indian yogic heritage with Finnic traditions, such as *Kalevala*-metric oral poetry; attracts mostly youngish urban women; and concentrates on the well-being of the individual’s mind and body (Mäkelä, 2023). The forest yoga practice was developed by the Finnish yoga teacher Mia Jokiniva; she published the book *Metsäjooga* (‘Forest Yoga’) in 2018. However, forest yoga is not a registered trademark, and is

thus offered in various forms throughout Finland, for instance at popular tourist attractions such as national parks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, outdoor activities in nearby forests increased in Finland (Fagerholm, Eilola & Arki, 2021). Phenomena such as forest yoga benefitted from the increased use of nearby forests during mobility restrictions, as it is practised outdoors.

Forest yoga is commonly marketed as a general outdoor yoga practice suitable for everybody. This is common in commercial modern yoga contexts, which often tend to blur or de-emphasise, or only select 'suitable' parts of, yoga's Indian Hindu background. Instead, commercial modern yoga highlights the aspects of well-being and physical exercise (e.g., Newcombe, 2009). However, by vaguely referring to the yogic Hindu tradition, the global modern yoga scene commonly understands 'nature' as a 'therapeutic' place that is sacred and 'pure', even though the physical environment is not located in India. The 'therapeutic-ness' of nature may even function and be present in a symbolic way through pictures, architecture or sounds in urban yoga studios (Hoyez, 2007). It is worth noting that the aspects of white colonialism and racism are continuously present in Western yoga practices; commercial yoga studios or classes have often been described as 'white spaces' (e.g., Bucar, 2022; Putcha, 2020). Similarly, doing yoga for recreation and wellness in a forest in largely white, and—from the Indian perspective—very distant Finland, is an appropriative practice that is, at least occasionally, acknowledged in the Finnish yoga field (e.g., Leiwo, 2021a). This complex colonial shadow is present in the spiritual forest, even though the yoga practices are often described as 'healing' and 'therapeutic'.

In Finland, the generalised idea of forest as a 'sacred' place for Finns not only has spiritual or New Age resonances: since the nineteenth century and the period of national romanticism, the fields of art and literature have nurtured the idea of sacredness of forests in relation to national meaning-making (e.g., Lassila, 2011). Different kinds of representations of forests have been central to the canonical national landscape imagery of Finland; in this imagery, Finland has been represented—most often from the bird's eye view—as a land of forests and lakes that makes its living from forestry, but which is also a rural, pastoral idyll (e.g., Häyrynen, 2008; Lukkarinen & Waenerberg, 2004). These representations often depict an imagined 'average' Finland, which almost becomes a 'non-place' that simultaneously exists everywhere and nowhere. With regard to forest yoga, nationally charged imagery is present, for instance, in Mia Jokiniva's *Metsäjooga*, which includes bird's-eye-view photographs of forest-lake scenery (Jokiniva, 2018, pp. 64–65; 210–211) and rural field landscapes (Jokiniva, 2018, p. 227), in addition to close-up pictures of forests.

In our analysis, we recognise these representational trends. However, in order to overcome the gap between the representations of landscape and the more-than-representational landscape (e.g., Harvey, 2015; Waterton, 2018), we concentrate on the verbalised bodily experiences that yoga postures, movement of the body and the forest space provoke. We thus suggest that the affective and bodily dimensions of landscape are inherently intertwined with representations, while taking embodied meaning-making and knowledge production seriously. This aligns with the views of human geographers, who argue that the sensory experience of landscape needs to be analysed in order to look at the meaning-making process of landscape and other human environments (e.g., Edensor, 2012). This is where ethnographic methodology becomes useful: by discussing the gendered bodily experiences of the forest yogi and the experience of 'connectedness' and 'unity' with 'roots' in the forest space, we are able to intertwine the embodied individual experience with societal discussions on gender, national landscape and spirituality.

Data and methods

The materials used in this article consist of two in-depth interviews conducted in May 2021 by Mäkelä (interviewer) and Leiwo (interviewee), as well as the autoethnographic vignettes produced by Leiwo. The first interview was conducted in Mölylä, the urban nature reserve location

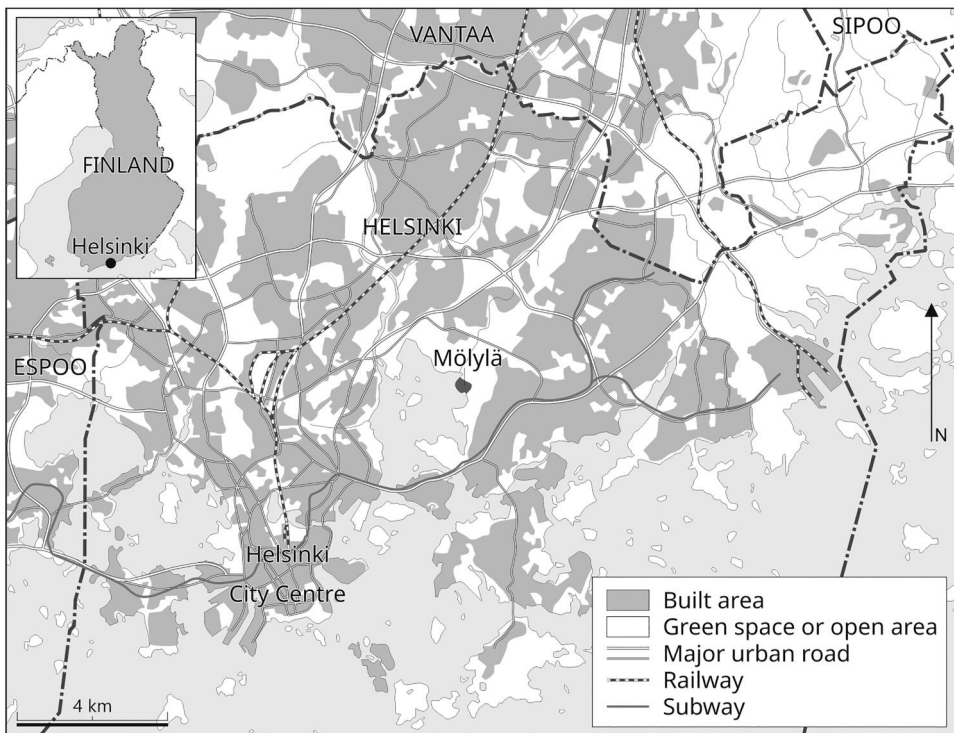


Figure 1. Map of Helsinki. © Hannu Linkola. All rights reserved.

chosen by Leiwo, on 14 May 2021, and the second remotely on 27 May 2021 (Leiwo, 2021a, 2021b; Figure 1). In addition, the ethnographic materials include fieldwork and associated diary material related to the remote forest yoga classes led by Leiwo in May 2020. Furthermore, Mia Jokiniiva's *Metsäjooga* book is included in the materials.

Leiwo is a Finnish professional yoga teacher who has taught yoga classes for eight years. During the last five years, she has also held forest yoga courses in Helsinki (see Figure 2; about green space in Helsinki, see Figure 1). In addition, she is an MA and has studied folklore and comparative religious studies at the University of Helsinki.

For this article, Leiwo acted as a cultural expert and co-author, while the first author, Mäkelä, acted as a researcher, observer and student of forest yoga. Linkola and Rinne participated in the examination of the materials, as well as in the creation and production of the theoretical background and the analysis of landscape and spirituality. The roles and tasks of the participants are presented in the following table (Table 1).

The ethnographic approach is understood in this article as an imaginative and creative process that captures lived experience as entangled with the embodied, emotional and discursive sphere of society (Culhane, 2017). In the production of the materials, as well as the analysis, we have applied the method of collaborative autoethnography (e.g., Chang, 2008). The research method adheres to the autoethnographic orientation, in which the material is partly generated autoethnographically, but is analysed ethnographically and interpreted culturally (Chang, 2008, p. 48). We understand autoethnography as the examination of personal experiences and the 'voice' within a culture in order to produce an ethnographic analysis of the cultural context and implications of forest yoga (Chang, 2008). As a part of this process, we have included Leiwo's autoethnographic vignettes in the research article text. Vignettes are, according to Creese et al. (2017, p. 204), 'strategic points to produce personal accounts which could later be interrogated to reflect on how individuals engaged in the presentation of 'self' in the research process'. The



Figure 2. Lotta Leiwo guiding a meditation in the Mölylä forest in Helsinki, Finland. © Mikko Itälähti. All rights reserved.

Table 1. The roles of each researcher in the field and in the research process.

| Research process roles and tasks | Mäkelä | Leiwo | Linkola | Rinne |
|--|--------|-------|---------|-------|
| Forest yoga teacher | | x | | |
| PhD | x | | x | x |
| Fieldwork in Mölylä | x | x | | |
| Remote fieldwork | x | x | | |
| Participation in forest yoga classes | x | x | | |
| Production of autoethnographic vignettes | | x | | |
| Non-formal, non-recorded collaborative discussions together on the subject | x | x | x | x |
| Analysis of the materials | x | x | x | x |
| Writing of the article | x | x | x | x |

inclusion of vignettes is an ethical choice: it gives all authors the opportunity to be ‘at home’ in the field of research, as everybody has had the space to write and express ideas as part of the research article, but, at the same time, the individual presentations are retrospectively interrogated together. This adds a dialogic layer to the article in which the roles of a listener, interpreter and reader intertwine.²

For Leiwo, the location of the first interview in the local forest, Mölylä (Figure 1), served as a physical and mental landscape for remembering and reflecting, as the autoethnographic vignettes were produced by returning into the forest space. As our research focuses on bodily experiences in the spiritual forest, the autoethnographic vignettes—as well as the other parts of the analysis chapters—concentrate on verbalising the embodied experiences that the yoga postures, movement of the body and the spiritual forest space provoke. Following the anthropologist and geographer Setha Low (2017), we understand the spiritual forest as an embodied space that ‘integrates body/space/culture and connects microanalyses of individual bodies and place-making to macro-analyses of social, economic and political forces’ (Low, 2017, p. 94.) In the analysis of the materials, we have thus concentrated on the perceptual experiences of the embodied

space and examined how the body moves, sees, hears, touches, feels and remembers in the material spiritual forest. Furthermore, we also examine how gender is expressed (Low, 2017, pp. 94–118.) By emphatically and critically reflecting these embodied experiences in relation to theoretical literature on spirituality, landscape and the forest space, we offer a perspective on meaning-making that reaches beyond the individual.

The unifying forest: roots, tradition and the ecosystem

Vignette 1 (Leiwo): I strongly feel that only the Northern forest is the most natural and right environment for me. Everywhere in nature I feel a sense of awe and gratitude. In the forest, on the one hand, I realise how small and insignificant my existence is—and on the other hand, I realise how even the smallest plants and organisms have a role to play in this world. The fact that I can lean on a fir tree that has stood in the same place for 120 years brings me a sense of humility.

I interpret the trees, stones, stumps and landscapes I see in the forest space as a folklorist, but also through embodied experiences. I know that my family roots have grown from these Northern forests for centuries. For me, the forest and nature are a tangible link to my ancestors and cultural heritage. The forest landscape represents continuity, unlike the rapidly changing urban environment.

Time seems to slow down in the forest. It is possible to pause. And when you pause, it is possible to sense, feel and experience more. Only then, even a mud puddle can be amazing. Respect for the forest stems from its grandeur and the power of nature, compared to which the human is small. At the same time, I have a concern for the forest's future: climate change, biodiversity loss, overconsumption.

For me, the forest is a source of well-being and liberation, but also a mirror through which I see myself as part of a historical and cultural continuum, as part of which I hope to contribute to building a more sustainable 'use' of forests. At the same time, the forest is a humanised partner in the production of welfare services, a landscape in which I lead forest yoga groups. By linking the cultural heritage drawn from one's 'own roots' to the forest landscape, I hope to respect and increase a sense of protection for the surrounding nature.

Mäkelä, Linkola, Rinne: The practices of forest yoga bring together a progressive, spiritual way of sacralising nature, worries about climate change and biodiversity loss, and also the idea of an innate connection between the forest landscape and the human. This ideal of 'homeland', which comprises a specific and naturalised connection between people and space (see Wylie, 2016), persistently inhabits the discourses on relationships between Finnishness and forests (see Mäkelä and Linkola, forthcoming), even though 'homeland thinking' is sooner connected to modern mobility and absence than physical rooting (Wylie, 2016). However, the idea of innateness connects the progressive and feminist spiritual discourses of forest yoga to historical nationalist thinking on Finnishness. Through these ideals, forest yoga participates in creating experiences of belonging at the national scale. The belonging, in this case, is not particularly location related: even though Leiwo's yogic experiences are physically located in an urban space in Helsinki, the spiritual forest reaches beyond the urban, and the experiences of belonging related to an imagined, idealised and trans-local forest can be encountered almost anywhere in Finland. For instance, in Leiwo's remote forest yoga class in 2020, the forest could be experienced even in one's backyard—as long as there were trees (see Mäkelä, 2023, pp. 134, 146).

The trans-local experience of belonging becomes manifested, for instance, through the 'root metaphor': the spiritual forest is constructed as a material, visual and discursive place that provides access to different kinds of pasts and to metaphoric and physical 'roots', which Leiwo reflects in the vignette above (see also Figure 3). The past is interpreted at the national and individual scales as well as at the level of the ecosystem. The root metaphor is a widely known biblical image in many linguistic areas, and it originally refers to the family tree of Adam and Eve (e.g., Bouquet, 1996). According to art historians Lukkarinen and Waenerberg (2004, p. 31), national symbolism related to tree roots and nature has been familiar to Finnish art and literature for a long time, and the symbolism also extends to the context of forest yoga.



Figure 3. Roots. © Mikko Itälähti. All rights reserved.

At the same time, ‘roots’ are interpreted as personal: the forest space enables a connection to the yogi’s ‘ancestors’ and simultaneously emphasises a feeling of belonging in relation to the forest. At this point, the interpretations and practices of forest yoga come closer to more mainstream understandings of forests, in which the forest represents a nostalgic, slightly backward place of recreation for an urban Finn. However, the emphasis on the relationship between genealogy and the forest seems to be a wider Northern European phenomenon among yogis. For instance, the Swedish Instagram influencer @yoga_girl—who has two million followers and who is considered one of the most important social media fitness influencers—puts forward similar ideas: “Pine resin, spruce needles and blueberry shrubs are in the fabric of my DNA. [...] Right here, in this now, in these woods—I know I belong” (@yoga_girl, 7 May 2021). For Leiwo, the forest space is a concrete link to her ancestors, but @yoga_girl reaches beyond: for her, the forest and its materiality are a part of the building materials of her own body. The unification of DNA and a geographic location has become more and more popular, as easily accessible DNA tests have become tools for demonstrating ethnic and/or national belonging and its ‘authentic’ origin. This applies to both human bodies as well as animals or plants (e.g., Immonen, 2023). However, in the case of modern yoga, talk about DNA is related to the spiritual movement’s emphasis on unity between the self and nature.

As Leiwo states above, the forest space provides a link to more generic roots as well, to the forested ‘archaic’ past and traditions, often understood as deeply Finnish. According to the folklorist Pertti Anttonen (2005, p. 43), the equating of tradition and roots is common in modern reflexive discourse on the past. In this modernist discourse, traditions/roots are regarded as enduring, long lasting and crystallised, contra to the modern experience of ephemerality, momentariness and busyness. The root metaphor thus underlines the spatio-temporal continuities and experiences of belonging, which are justified by referring to genealogies and family histories, as well as other things related to the past. Consequently, change or the expectation of it is regarded as a possible threat, the loss of something continual and timeless (Anttonen, 2005). The forest space of forest yoga is manifested as a place of traditions/roots that represents stability, continuity and archaic forest-human relationships. Leiwo and the book *Metsäjooga* create these manifestations by referring to the national epic *Kalevala*, ‘Kalevalaic’ traditions, oral poetry and forest-related folk beliefs (see Mäkelä, 2023).

In the case of forest yoga, the references to a non-specific distant past make the relationship with the forest ‘deeper’ and more ‘authentic’. This is typical for other contemporary spiritual

movements as well: for instance, the Estonian neo-pagan *Maausk* movement often represents forests or natural heritage sites as places for creating emotional and material connections to ancestors, spirits and other supernatural beings (Rinne, 2021). The emotional potentials at the sites are guided by established, shared and repetitive affective patterns through which the norms of the society are built and reproduced (Rinne, 2021). Forest yoga shares the affective pattern of neo-pagan movements, in which the sacralised forest space produces an emotional experience of being united with ancestors and traditions. Similar to neo-pagan practices, this pattern is caused by personal meaning-making and expectations, but also by certain cultural histories and their reinterpretations (Rinne, 2021). In the case of forest yoga, the experience of unity is enabled by earlier Finnish representations of the forest and their connections to the performance of Finnishness and tradition, and bygone generations. Furthermore, the materiality of the forest maintains connections to earlier, nationally charged representations of the forest, for instance through tree roots.

The references to ‘ancient’ tradition bring the temporal depth of the vague distant past to the forest space, but this does not overpower the forest’s present. For Leiwo, the physical tree roots of the forest ecosystem are important: she feels anxious about climate change, biodiversity loss and over-consumption. Forest yoga combines discourses on heritage, the forest landscape and environmental anxiety, and the roots of tradition merge with the biological roots of the ecosystem. Being in the spiritual forest space creates a connection to individual and traditional roots, but also to trees, forest organisms and the soil. These connections are interpreted from the angle of the national or even the mythical, but at the same time, the new discourses and imageries about climate change reshape the practices of being in the forest.

The forest as a bodily experience: femininity and the spiritual forest

Vignette 2 (Leiwo): As a woman, I feel like a prisoner of the city. Just as a walker is expected to walk on the sidewalk instead of the driveway, a woman is expected to meet certain expectations, follow norms and rules when expressing her femininity. For me, the forest represents a space where I am free to express my femininity, and my embodiment, as I choose. I enjoy the fact that my body can move freely in the forest space without predefined routes. The forest also does not have the same expectations of my appearance as the city. In the forest, practicality overcomes norms. The forest accepts the dirt under my nails and the expression of my gender identity as such.

My social bubble is filled with aesthetically beautiful forest images celebrating femininity and cyclical (feminine) life, or the congruence of the female body and the cycles of nature, in which young women dressed in skin-tight yoga clothes pose in challenging yoga āsanās. My own social media posts represent this kind of forest yoga imagery as well, although I try to approach this ‘norm’ critically. It seems that the forest functions as a space of empowerment for white, able-bodied and slim women in the same way that mainstream feminised yoga has already done. These visual expressions exclude a more diverse gender, but also a more embodied and ethnically diverse forest imagery. Thus the practice of forest yoga in Finland can be seen as an exclusive and individualistic personal revolution of a white middle-aged woman.

Mäkelä, Linkola, Rinne: The bodily experiences related to forest yoga practice are mostly experiences of the female body, as Leiwo notes above. Even though forest yoga practice is marketed as an exercise suitable for everyone, most of the participants and people producing forest yoga images and imageries on, for example, social media, are women. The ideal image of a woman and the female body in modern yoga has been broadly discussed in yoga studies, and many yoga scholars propose that these ideals and images are strongly tied to consumer culture, neo-liberal values of individualism and entrepreneurship, and the Western beauty standards that produce slim and muscular body ideals (Kern, 2012; Poutiainen, 2019; Webb et al., 2017). The bodily practices related to yoga have had a central role in creating and forming urban identities and urban spaces during the last few decades: for instance, the locations of yoga studios and even the wearing of yoga pants in the street seem to produce gentrified practices among urban consumers (Kern, 2012).

The discourse about forest yoga and the experience of the female body in the forest space is greatly influenced by feminist discussions and body politics such as the #MeToo movement, which was often brought forth in the interviews and in the text of Leiwo above. In the manner of progressive spirituality, Leiwo, as well as the texts of the *Metsäjooga* book, emphasise emancipatory positionings through which more liberating and empowering experiences are aspired to by women and other intersectional groups. The body in the forest space is often interpreted in trans- and post-national frameworks as a community of global (spiritual) women. This is intriguing in relation to the masculine skew of previous Finnish forest-related imageries and practices: the connection between the female body and the forest space have not been as strong as the masculine performances of, for example, hunters or burn-beaters (Topelius, [1875] 1981), the tenacious forest soldiers of the world wars (Jokinen, 2019) or working-class lumberjacks (Pöysä, 1997), let alone the male-dominated forestry sector, with its governance- and economy-based rationales (e.g., Kotilainen & Rytteri, 2011). Furthermore, even Finnic oral poetry and folklore produce an image of a society in which the forest was the domain of men, even though it affected the women working mostly within the family circle (Tarkka, 1998). The presence of a female body in the forest must be thus interpreted through other influences—for example, feminist New Age movements (e.g., Salomonsen, 2002) and the alluring idea of female cyclicality. These are counterpoints to the historical nothingness and absence as regards the female body and the forest.

As Leiwo illustrates, the (female) body moves differently in the forest space than in other spaces. According to Leiwo, the forest space is more permissible than, for example, other spaces for exercise:

Lotta Leiwo: The liberation of the body ... that somehow you can come here as you are. This is of course very typical yoga and well-being jargon, and very exclusive too. But somehow it might be easier to be here in nature than go to the gym. You can always come here even though your fat gut wiggles and jiggles, yet still. [...] I'd sooner be here than go to the gym (Leiwo, 2021a).

In the quotation above, the forest space is constructed as a 'body positive' place, body positivity being a discourse that refers to feminist ways of categorising spaces. Indeed, fat studies demonstrate that swimming pools, gyms or other public spaces for exercise may be places where fat (female) bodies are stigmatised (Harjunen, 2019). In our interview and in the texts of Leiwo, the forest is constructed as the opposite of such stigmatisation, and the forest space enables free and emancipated movement for the body and to be 'as you are'. The forest is thus represented as a 'safer space' that is understood as an ideal environment free of bias, discrimination and harassment, especially in progressive discussions (see, e.g., Wikipedia, 2022).

Furthermore, Leiwo categorises the forest yoga phenomenon as 'relatable for women' and, at the same time, the forest space itself is described as 'feminine': 'The femininity of the forest has been emphasised, and it is perhaps easier to relate to [forest yoga], even though I would not like to think in a stereotypical way, but it is perhaps easier for a woman to relate to forest or nature yoga than some gun yoga that reputedly exists [laughter]' (Leiwo, 2021a). The emphasis on the femininity of the forest and nature links forest yoga to transnational flows of spiritual discourse. Even though the Cartesian dualism with regard to woman and nature has been criticised and challenged repeatedly (e.g., Nightingale, 2006), many Western spiritual and New Age movements have built on the idea of the femininity of nature to point out the alleged particularity and even superiority of women over men (Salomonsen, 2002, p. 222).

During the twenty-first century, these discourses have been popular, for instance among followers of 'goddess spirituality', which stems from the Wicca movement (Pesonen & Utriainen, 2014). For example, Leiwo's mention of cyclicality at the beginning of this chapter is an intriguing example of the leaking of radical feminist discourses of goddess spirituality into the urban Helsinki forest space, even though the 'superiority' of the female sex is not centred. In spiritual movements, the idea of cyclicality links the female body to the cycles of nature, such as the

phases of the moon. The menstruating body is regarded as sacred, and it is thought to be connected to classical elements such as earth and water (Salomonsen, 2002, pp. 222–240). The urban forest landscape thus becomes a stage for reinterpreting the female body in relation to the forest space's own cycles, such as the changing of the seasons. The bodies of female yogis, interpreted as embodying cyclicality, exist in strong opposition to imageries of forest soldiers or burn-beaters or the forest machines of the forestry sector—even the implicit mentioning of menstrual fluid is enough to bring a new voice into normative forest practices and imageries in Finland.

It can thus be stated that if the forest space itself is regarded as 'feminine' and 'cyclic', then the female body moving in that space is 'at home' in forest yoga practices. Even though Finnish nature has been depicted in historical discourses and imageries as feminine, virginal and untouched, the taming, owning and cultivating of it has been seen as a masculine task, and nature (often understood as an opposite to culture) has been perceived as favourable for masculine bodies (e.g., Sireni, 2009). The practices of forest yoga challenge this by bringing forth the affective experience of 'being oneself' in the forest space, on the one hand, and by using spiritual, feminist and transnational discourses on gender, nature and space, on the other.

Concluding remarks

Spiritual forest yoga practices and discourses simultaneously re-circulate and re-form earlier Finnish forest imageries and ways of being in the forest. They utilise several stratified temporal layers and frames associated with the forest landscape: the distant mythic past of oral poetry and 'roots', the modern national interpretations of Finnishness and its relation to forest(ry), and the neoliberal period of the 'post-postmodern' individual, combining and intertwining these layers seamlessly. These practices thus contribute to forming an idealised image of a spiritual forest that can be trans-locally and corporeally experienced in rural and urban settings, even though the historical national forest imageries and discourses used may be location-specific and rooted, for instance, in regional administrative landscape politics.

As we have shown in this article, the spiritual and bodily experiences of doing yoga and being in the forest are shaped by discussions on transnational feminist and spiritual understandings of space, the female body and the past. These frames challenge previous Finnish forest imageries, which have mainly been interpreted through the masculine. However, the question of whether these new frames really are able to question the politics of the forest landscape remains—as, for instance, Linkola (2015) notes, current administrative landscape politics in Finland are strongly based on the ideals and geographical traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The permanence and stickiness of these imageries and traditions are not easily questioned, particularly from the direction of feminine spiritual trends, which may often be considered in society to be 'irrelevant' or 'trivial'. However, we suggest that because spirituality is a growing phenomenon in secularised Finland, especially among younger generations and across social media, the influence of it on forest landscapes may be strong in the future.

As an embodied space, the spiritual forest consists of interactions between bodies, movements, feelings and the materialities of the forest, as well as sensory experiences, individual and collective memories, forest-related images, and discourses and the interpretations of them. The autoethnographic vignettes included in this article are verbalisations of such intersecting assemblages, and the analysis of them and other materials show how the yogi's individual experiences in the spiritual forest intermingle with larger societal forces. This is negotiated in the field of forest yoga, as well: even though Leiwo talks about 'personal revolution' (see Vignette 2) and the experiences of the self, the aspiration of the yogi is to create wider social change, such as action against climate change and biodiversity loss (see Vignette 1).

The spiritual forest of forest yoga is a display window of 2020s younger generations' progressive understandings and imaginings of what forest spaces could be in relation to the body, gender, femininity and ideals of spiritual belonging. In Finland, these imaginings can be exclusive in their ubiquitous whiteness and—in the case of forest yoga—appropriative implications, but they seem to aspire to challenge the ideal of modern, extremely rationalised and masculine forest space. Being in and moving the body in the small Mölylä urban forest in Helsinki, the location of our fieldwork, enables this small-scale resistance, as the space itself represents the 'other' in the urban landscape (Leiwo, 2021a; see also Ugglä and Olausson, 2013). Simultaneously, Mölylä becomes a space into which all other forests and the histories, imaginaries and collective memories related to them are amalgamated. It can thus be stated that the spiritual forest comes to life at the intersection of the experiencer's body, the materiality of the forest (such as roots), and the changing national and transnational historical-societal discourses that shape the individual-forest relationship.

Notes

1. Modern yoga is a hybrid phenomenon that is based on reinterpretations of Hindu tradition. Contemporary Western yoga styles often put emphasis on physical exercise and fitness, and it appeals to many practitioners because of the aspects of well-being, evidence-based results and non-institutional spirituality (Newcombe, 2009; Singleton, 2013). In Finland, as well as other parts of the Northern Europe, yoga was known already at the beginning of the twentieth century among esoteric movements. Since the 1990s, different kinds of yoga styles have been marketed to consumers, and these styles often underline physical exercise, urban lifestyle and commerciality (Broo, 2012).
2. For clarity, each author's sections are separated in this article by their surname in the text of the analysis so that they stand out clearly to the reader. Leiwo's autoethnographic vignettes are italicised. The photographs published with the article were taken after the writing process and designed with the photographer to support the content of the text.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Kone Foundation and the Kalevala Society and was written as a part of the projects *Materiality, Verbal Art, Mythic Knowledge and the Lived Environment* (PI: Frog) and *Folklore in the Forest. Neo-Sincere Interpretations on Forests and Traditions in 21st Century Finland* (PI: Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä).

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