

AMERICANASANA

Jared Farmer

Mark Singleton. *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. viii + 262 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 (cloth); \$17.95 (paper).

Stefanie Syman. *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010. 390 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$28.00.

Robert Love. *The Great Oom: The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America.* New York: Viking, 2010. xii + 402 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$27.95.

A market survey commissioned by *Yoga Journal*—a glossy lifestyle magazine based in San Francisco, with separate editions published in China, Japan, Thailand, Australia, Russia, Germany, and Spain—estimated in 2008 that 15.8 million Americans (or 6.9 percent of U.S. adults) practiced postural yoga. Suppose that this population constituted a discrete religious group. If that were the case, the percentage of yogis would exceed the combined total of Hindus (.4 percent), Muslims (.6 percent), atheists (1.6 percent), Mormons (1.7 percent), and Jews (1.7 percent) in the U.S. The Americanization of modern yoga—a cultural creation that was already transnational—demands explanation.¹

“Yoga” derives from the Sanskrit verb “to yoke,” and may be literally translated as “union.” The word is confusing because of its homonymy: it can refer to a general philosophy of transcendental consciousness, or one or several specific spiritual disciplines, or both. As a philosophical tradition—one of the six “classical” schools (Darshanas) of South Asian philosophy—yoga encompasses various canonical texts, most importantly *Yoga Sutras* (350–450 C.E.), a collection of aphorisms attributed to Patañjali.² Depending on the time and place, the practice of yoga has taken Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain forms. Georg Feuerstein, in his popular encyclopedia *Yoga Tradition* (2001), imagines a “wheel of yoga” with six major spokes: Rāja (discipline of the mind); Jñāna (gnosis); Karma (duty); Bhakti (devotion); Mantra (recitation of numinous sounds); and Hatha (discipline of the body). These disciplines can be practiced separately or in combination. For example, Hare Krishnas focus on Bhakti and

Mantra. In contemporary India, Bhakti gurus command large followings. In contrast, most Americans who “practice yoga” practice an individualized and simplified version of the single physical discipline.

Hatha was fleshed out in medieval times by marginal male sectarian movements. Nāth Siddha *yogins* conjoined Tantra, Siddha alchemy, and yogic purifications in an attempt to achieve immortality. In subsequent centuries, militarized Shaivite *yogins* found irregular employment as mercenaries, spies, and power brokers. As of the nineteenth century, Hatha was the least important and least respectable of yogic disciplines. Traces of this attitude persist. The *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* relegates Hatha to the status of yoga “satellite.”³

Several recent monographs, most notably David Gordon White’s *Sinister Yogis* (2009), discuss Hatha warrior ascetics as social actors and cultural representations.⁴ Like Gypsies, fakirs, and Sufi dervishes—figures with whom they were often confused or conflated—*yogins* lived beyond the boundaries of Indian society. They functioned as bogeymen in South Asian fantasy and adventure literature (and in Bollywood, they remain stock villains). Voyeuristic European travel writers echoed these negative depictions: Hatha sectarians were weird, fanatical, licentious, ungovernable, dangerous. The stereotypical yogi performed paranormal feats like levitation and practiced sorcery like body possession. He had superhuman sexual powers because he never released his semen. He carried out extreme austerities and mortifications: walking around naked with elephant chains, standing on one leg for days, hanging upside down from trees, surviving live burial, eating food from bowls made of human skulls, fasting to the point of maceration, growing out hair and fingernails to incredible lengths. For Europeans, nothing symbolized Indian backwardness and Hindu perversion like a Hatha yogi lying on a bed of nails. For strategic and moral reasons, British officials did their best to round up and break up ascetic sects and ban their “self-tortures.” Some of these displaced outcasts ended up panhandling as yogic entertainers on the streets of British India and in sideshows along the Thames.

In reputation and in content, Hatha overlapped with Tantra, a South Asian medieval tradition that yoked transcendence to the body and bodily desire. In the antinomian world of Tantra, ritual transgression (including, in some cases, ritualized sexuality) could lead to liberation. Both Tantrists and Hatha yogis emphasized the “subtle body” (sometimes called the “energetic body”), a hybrid corporeal-metaphysical entity. Through esoteric techniques—ritual purifications followed by *pranayama* (restrained breathing), *asana* (posture work), and *mudra* (sealing off the subtle body)—Hatha yogis performed bodily alchemy. They drew *prana* (the breath of life) into the body’s central channel, thus awakening the serpent (*kundalini*) at the base of spine. As this serpent power uncoiled and moved upward, it purified the pranic channels (*nadis*)

and balanced their lunar and solar sides, pierced the six main *chakras*, and finally united with the divine in the seventh *chakra* at the crown of the head. The result was bodily immortality and supernatural power.

Kundalini is only vaguely familiar to most of the millions of Americans who stretch into Downward-Facing Dog pose on sticky mats in neighborhood gyms and studios. In its mainstream form, Hatha has been cleaned up and partially de-enchanted. The typical American yoga instructor says “namaste” and chants a perfunctory OM with her students, but does not teach tantric physiology. She is much more likely to give a testimonial about yoga’s beneficial effects on the medical body. How did this happen? How did Hatha become exoteric, respectable, and popular—especially among women? And how did one feminized, athleticized, para-secular version of one yogic discipline become synonymous with “yoga” in America?

Preliminary answers to these questions come from *Yoga Body*, *The Great Oom*, and *The Subtle Body*, three significant additions to the small but growing field of yoga studies.⁵ Mark Singleton, an academic, uses primary sources to analyze the transnational evolution of postural yoga from the 1890s through the 1930s. Robert Love and Stefanie Syman, both journalists, focus almost exclusively on the American scene, but in different ways.

All three authors accept the scholarly consensus that “modern yoga” began with Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the globetrotting Hindu reformer from Calcutta who spoke to great acclaim at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Vivekananda’s influential book *Raja-Yoga* (1896) paired some of his American lectures with his translation and commentary on *Yoga Sutras*. The swami presented Vedanta as the model for a universal monistic religion—a “science of the soul.” Borrowing liberally from Unitarianism and Theosophy, Vivekananda and his Vedanta Society emphasized the metaphysical and the devotional, not the physical. In concert with most Western-educated Indian elites, Vivekananda scorned Hatha, and with reason: Pantañjali provided little or no support for it. Although *Yoga Sutras* mentions *asana* as one of the (lesser) “eight limbs” of yoga, the text does not describe any poses. Vivekananda disparaged Hatha sectarians for narcissistically “clinging” to the body with “mere” physical exercises designed to fulfill base desires for perfect health and unsurpassed longevity. He downplayed the tantric background of his own guru. Despite privileging mind over body, the swami was no wimp. Like many anticolonial figures associated with the Bengali “Hindu Renaissance,” he used his mastery of English to assert the superiority of South Asian traditions even as he diluted them. As Joseph S. Alter writes in *Yoga in Modern India*, Vivekananda “revolutionized Hinduism by advocating a kind of no-nonsense, self-confident, muscular—and, therefore, masculinized—spiritualism.”⁶

For the purposes of Hindu nationalism, yoga had to be rescued from the opprobrium of Hatha *yogins*. Their masculinity was undisputed, but danger-

ous, even sinister; it called to mind the supposed decadence of medieval India. Like a good Victorian, Vivekananda expunged Hatha from Râja Yoga. Instead of immortality and supernaturalism, he stressed the goals of *samadhi* (higher consciousness) and *moksha* (spiritual liberation). Later figures such as Sri Yogendra and Swami Kuvalayananda mainstreamed yoga by medicalizing it, linking it to Western science, performing laboratory experiments, and rationally demonstrating that yogic disciplines could work as therapies for chronic diseases such as asthma.

Still other Indians tried to directly rehabilitate Hatha on the terms of Western physical culture. These underappreciated figures from the history of fitness are the main subjects of *Yoga Body*. Singleton ends his book where most histories of modern postural yoga begin: the gymnasia of Jaganmohan Palace in Mysore where instructor T. Krishnamacharya in the 1920s and 1930s codified the praxis that informs every yoga class in the world today. Without denying Krishnamacharya's seminal role, *Yoga Body* contextualizes him and dispels his aura of uniqueness and authenticity. Singleton asserts categorically that the primacy of *asana* is "a new phenomenon that has no parallel in premodern times" (p. 3). *Yoga Body* offers a radically secular and transnational interpretation of modern yoga, or, as Singleton prefers to call it, "Transnational Anglophone Yoga." In his analysis, posture practice owes more to English bodybuilding star Eugene Sandow than to Pantañjali.

In bibliographic fashion, Singleton guides the reader through seemingly every English-language fitness manual and periodical from the early twentieth century that influenced—or *might have* influenced—the curriculum at Mysore, the Menlo Park of modern yoga. He focuses on the South Asian reception of Muscular Christianity, Swedish (Ling) gymnastics, bodybuilding, and the YMCA. *Yoga Body* describes a process of creative cooptation. The Indian pioneers of postural yoga wanted to break free from the internalized colonial myth of Indian effeminacy and degeneracy. They selectively appropriated from European physical culture—and also American New Thought, with its psycho-physiological pedagogy of autosuggestion—and naturalized it as Hindu. After incorporating gymnastics into Hatha, they touted Hatha as the original gymnastics. Singleton claims that some patriotic Hindus even imagined yoga as a eugenic fast track to a better, stronger nation. Militant nationalists opened martial arts academies to train a new generation of strong, virile Hindu men—remade Hatha *yogins* who could act as freedom-fighting guerillas. Indians would turn gymnastics—an exercise method adopted by the British for military training—against the colonizers.

While Singleton performs the great service of exploding the world of postural yoga and clearing the way for many more studies of this creolized tradition, he doesn't provide a clear narrative and doesn't assign weights to his manifold causal factors. And it may be that, in his endeavor to exhaustively

catalog foreign influences, Singleton overlooks certain indigenous contexts. *Yoga Body* deserves controversy, which I mean as a sincere compliment.

Some of the evidence for *Yoga Body's* melting-pot theory is circumstantial; plenty is direct. For example, K. V. Iyer, the world-renowned bodybuilder from Bangalore, taught sun salutations along with dumbbell lifting. The equally renowned B. C. Ghosh promoted a method of "muscle control" that combined bodybuilding and Hatha. At Mysore, Krishnamacharya's studio was located next door to a Western-style gym that taught bodybuilding, gymnastics, and also yoga. Building on Norman Sjoman's *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace* (1996), Singleton argues that Krishnamacharya's innovative *vinyasa* (a repeated sequence of flowing movements and athletic jumping) was less about lineage than patronage. At the maharaja's bidding, Krishnamacharya choreographed a spectacular yoga routine for his young male students; the Hatha troupe functioned both as cultural ambassadors and circus-like entertainers.

This performative angle is important. In a chapter on media, Singleton makes the excellent point that Hatha, more than other yogic disciplines, requires illustration. Conversely, the ascendance of photographic culture conferred primacy to yogic disciplines that could be represented visually. *Asana* made good pictures. Before the camera, yoga texts illustrated the conceptual tantric body with abstruse drawings. In the age of photographic reproduction, the yoga body became less subtle, more naturalistic and empirical.

Like most Western scholars of yoga, Singleton is a practitioner—an Ashtangi by training—and he adopts a tone of respect even as he skewers sacred cows. *Yoga Body* is not, he insists, about imposture. It is about creativity. He presents Mysore yoga as a modern bricolage of secular influences sublimated into Pantanjali by Krishnamacharya and later sanctified as ancient tradition by his protégés. Singleton tempers his heresy with tangible enthusiasm for the source material in all its amusing detail; he celebrates the early twentieth century as a "singularly creative period" for yoga (p. 21). The Hinduization of Western physical culture that he describes in *Yoga Body* brings to mind Partha Chatterjee's work on colonial-inflected nationalism. Unfortunately, Singleton does not adequately situate his book in the context of postcolonial studies, gender theory, cultural theory, transnational history, imperial history, Indian history, or the histories of athletics, medicine, and religion.

Because of its restricted time frame, *Yoga Body* contains more material on Indians co-opting Western influences than the reverse. As of the 1920s, *asana* was not yet "export-ready" (p. 154). Singleton only nods to the post-1960s globalization of Mysore yoga guided by Krishnamacharya's son T. K. V. Desikachar, his brother-in-law B. K. S. Iyengar, and his third major protégé, K. Pattabhi Jois. However, in a chapter that detours from his main story, Singleton discusses a popular Anglo-American fitness trend from the early twentieth century called "harmonic gymnastics." Unlike the secular yoga in

Jaganmohan Palace, which consisted of acrobatic balances for men, harmonic gymnastics consisted of “spiritual stretching” and “relaxationism” for women. Para-Christian rather than neo-Vedantic, the movement nonetheless took on minor Indian trappings, including yogic breathing exercises and diagrams of *chakras*. Adapted from French Delsartism by Americans Genevieve Stebbins and later Cajzoran Ali, this quasi-spiritual form of expressive calisthenics spread to Britain in the 1930s and became popular thanks to the Women’s League of Health. Singleton speculates that exported Mysore yoga later grafted onto this established root. This would partly explain the imbalanced sex ratio seen today in British and American yoga studios.

The reception of yoga in the U.S. followed two general trajectories. The philosophy of yoga and the practice of yogic meditation entered American high culture in the mid-nineteenth century and acquired the sheen of respectability by virtue of association with American Brahmins like Emerson. Subsequently, various popular nondenominational metaphysical religious movements subsumed aspects of yogic philosophy. Posture practice, by contrast, encountered substantial resistance in the early twentieth century, despite receiving positive attention from William James in *The Energies of Men* (1907) as a potential cure for nervousness. Hatha was generally considered strange, cultish, and also sexually dangerous to women. In the second half of the century, these trajectories crossed: physical yoga grew increasingly mainstream, while meditational and devotional yoga contracted—after a spectacular but brief fluorescence—to the domain of sectarian movements led by gurus who frequently fell into sexual scandal.

The Subtle Body is the more vivid of two recent trade-market books—the other being Philip Goldberg’s wide-ranging *American Veda* (2010)—that narrate this complicated history. Stefanie Syman merits a wide readership, though her writing style was, for me, frustratingly inconstant, as if she couldn’t decide if she wanted to be a journalist, an academic historian, a creative nonfiction writer, or a cultural critic. The book contains many interpretive nuggets and patches of brilliant prose, yet it lacks a strong argument. It proceeds chronologically and biographically, privileging the most colorful stories.

Syman begins with obligatory vignettes about Transcendental flirtations with yoga philosophy. (Thoreau, in one of his letters, wrote the famously cryptic line, “To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogin.”)⁷ *The Subtle Body* then moves to its real starting point: Vivekananda’s American sojourn, 1893–96, which heralded a twenty-year period of transnational cross-fertilization between meditational Neo-Vedanta and American spiritual trends such as Mind Cure and Christian Science. Finding fertile soil in metaphysical hotspots such as Boston and Brooklyn, and benefiting from the patronage of two wealthy New England women, Vivekananda set up outposts of the Vedanta Society on both coasts. Numerous other disciples from the Ramakrishna Order

followed Vivekananda to the States, where they lectured to the spiritual intelligentsia and set up ashrams. Separately, Paramahansa Yogananda, founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship (and author of the widely read *Autobiography of a Yogi*), settled in Southern California in 1920. About the same time, Sri Yogendra came to New York to spread the gospel of medicalized yoga. The Oriental Exclusion Act foiled a planned return visit. From 1924 to 1965, an era of restrictive U.S. immigration policy, yoga in America evolved largely independent of Indians.

The seminal American figure in the exclusionary period was an outrageous character, Pierre Bernard (1876–1955), whose life story seems ready-made for a HBO mini-series. It includes bizarre love triangles, ménage à trois, tantric sex, Vanderbilt heiresses, private detectives, spies, circus elephants, baseball, and heavyweight boxing. Syman devotes her longest chapter to this only-in-America tale, and Robert Love his entire book. As pleasure reading, I highly recommend *The Great Oom*, although it becomes longwinded in its later chapters.

Love's narrative begins, improbably, in Lincoln, Nebraska, where the young teenager Perry Baker met an immigrant yogi named Sylvais Hamati and became his protégé. From Hamati, Baker-cum-Bernard learned Sanskrit, Tantra, and Hatha, including advanced *pranayama* techniques such as "Kali-mudra," the simulation of death by slowing one's breathing and heart rate to imperceptible levels. In 1898 Bernard performed this feat of "self-hypnosis" in San Francisco to an audience of doctors who used needles to pierce his earlobe, cheek, lip, and tongue to prove the occurrence of auto-anesthesia. In California, Bernard also organized the Tantrik Order (T.O.), a secret society complete with blood oaths, vows of silence, and seven degrees of knowledge. Amalgamating Tantra, Theosophy, and Rosicrucianism, Bernard minted his own esoteric traditions and initiated ingénues in tantric rituals. As Hugh Urban shows in *Magia Sexualis* (2006), Bernard and several counterparts in Europe began the process by which Western sex magic fused with Tantra and the equally unrelated *Kama Sutra* to become the "yoga of sex."

In 1909, after parting ways with Hamati, Bernard moved to Manhattan and began teaching Hatha techniques to clients from the theater world. His secret ritual life inevitably attracted the attention of the vice police, who raided his address the next year (the first of many times) and arrested him in his velvet T.O. high priest ceremonial robe. Congress had just passed the Mann Act, and the city district attorney hoped for a white-slavery show trial. The "Loving Guru" languished for over one hundred days in jail until the prosecution dropped its charges. Throughout his career, Bernard possessed a Houdini-like ability to elude the law, a prowess exceeded only by his knack for liberating stifled female socialites of their nervousness and inheritance. Many of the true-life events in *The Great Oom* read like soft-porn versions of Edith Wharton plots.

To escape the scrutiny of law enforcement and the yellow press, Bernard shifted his base of operation to Nyack, in the Hudson Valley, in 1918. There, with his wife and business partner, former Broadway dancer Blanche DeVries, Bernard created the Clarkstown Country Club (C.C.C.). Bankrolled by impressionable women from the Vanderbilt family, the club grew into a major success. Bernard rebuilt his reputation and invested in real estate, the chemical industry, banks, and stocks. He built a stadium for his minor league baseball team and produced air shows at his airport. As one local man told a reporter: "Nobody knows if he's got religion, but everybody knows he's got money" (p. 237).

Before the Great Depression drove the C.C.C. into decline, it boasted a glittering membership of Manhattan bluebloods, bohemians, celebrities, and high-profile artists such as Leopold Stokowski. The C.C.C. was something like a cross between an ashram and the Bohemian Grove: a summer camp for the idle rich who wanted to overcome addiction or boredom. Robert Love calls the place an "institutional bridge" between Brook Farm and Esalen, and a forerunner to rehab retreats and lifelong learning centers (p. 343). Dues-paying members practiced early morning Hatha, performed chores on the dairy farm, and attended afternoon music and dance classes that culminated in a season-ending professional-level circus. On summer evenings, Jazz Age vacationers gathered in the club auditorium to hear Pierre lecture on Indian philosophy—or, as Love nicely says, Veda and Tantra filtered through "an energetic Midwestern American" (p. 326). The "Guru of Nyack" (or "Dr. Bernard," as he preferred to be called) amassed a library of Sanskrit and Orientalist scholarship unsurpassed by any university in America. Although he never traveled abroad, he corresponded with Indian scholars and even financed a short-lived Vedic research center. As the years passed, Bernard deemphasized sex magic and Americanized his yoga even more. Like Walt Disney, he used the word "Imagineering" to describe his can-do approach to life and business.

Despite having so much sex with so many women, Bernard apparently produced no children. However, his extended family included an equally extraordinary yoga figure. His estranged nephew Theos Casimir Hamati Bernard (1908–47) earned global fame as the first Westerner to gain entry to the temples of Lhasa. This real-life *Indiana Jones* story is discussed by Love, detailed more fully by Douglas Veenhof in *White Lama* (2011), and covered exhaustively by Paul Hackett in *Theos Bernard, the White Lama* (2012). While in the limelight, Theos produced *Hatha Yoga* (1945), the first American sourcebook on the physical discipline.

Despite the former fame of the "White Lama" and the "Omnipotent Oom," the initial mainstreaming of yoga in America owes more to women, Syman argues. Blanche DeVries trained a cohort of teachers at her Hatha studio for women in Manhattan after separating from Pierre in the 1930s. Many of her students subsequently moved to Los Angeles, which became, after WWII, the

leading center for Hatha in America. The city's first postural studio belonged to another *sui generis* figure, Indra Devi (1899–2002). Latvian-born Devi traveled to India as an aspiring young dancer and actress, starred in early Bollywood films, married a Czech diplomat, met the raja of Mysore, and through him convinced Krishnamacharya to take her on in 1937 as his first Western and female student. Ten years later, Devi set up shop on Sunset Boulevard, where she feminized Mysore yoga and promoted it as a gentle, natural way to deter illness and delay aging. Devi introduced Hatha to Hollywood actresses such as Greta Garbo and Jennifer Jones. Gloria Swanson wrote the testimonial introduction to Devi's first yoga book, *Forever Young, Forever Healthy* (1953). For movie stars and housewives alike, Devi made posture practice accessible. She did not push Pantañjali, *pranayama*, or subtle physiology.

Devi's gynocentric yoga did not lead directly to today's yoga, notwithstanding the similarities. In the 1960s, as detailed by Syman, yoga in America convulsed and bifurcated, becoming either more mind- or more body-oriented. Indian swamis immigrated freely again, and many Western celebrities like the Beatles took the "hippie trail" to the subcontinent. The Transcendental Meditation (TM) taught by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi became a global phenomenon. TM instantly supplanted Kriya Yoga (the discipline taught by Yogananda, which included a modicum of Hatha) as the most common form of yoga in America. Meanwhile, building on the experimentations of Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts, the erstwhile professors Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert married psychedelic drugs to Hinduized yoga and created a new sacred science of *chakras*-cum-neurotransmitters. At Woodstock, before the rock 'n' roll, Swami Satchidananda guided audience members in a mantra chant and told the drug-addled crowd that they could get high with their minds. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (aka Hare Krishnas) recruited members from the same demographic. Simultaneously, in the opposite direction, Krishnamacharya's star student Iyengar promulgated a rigorous, anatomically precise method of Hatha, complete with custom props. He presented his bodily version of yoga as the fullest expression of Pantañjali. (On the mind-body spectrum, one can imagine Vivekananda on one end, Iyengar on the other, and Yogananda in the middle.) With help from Yehudi Menuhin, Iyengar became the great global popularizer of Mysore yoga. His authoritative *Light on Yoga* (1965) offered Westerners the first comprehensive how-to guide for postural practice, fully illustrated. Many Americans trained with Iyengar at his academy in Pune, and many more borrowed freely from his book to devise studio classes and instructional programs for daytime television.

In dramatic fashion, Syman portrays a tug of war in the 1970s and 1980s over the soul of American yoga—a contest between the denominational and the physical, between Hindu-inspired devotees and Iyengar-based exercisers. Both sides lost in the short term. TM peaked in the 1970s, then precipi-

tously declined; into that void came the meditational Siddha Yoga of Swami Muktananda. He, like many immigrant gurus of the period, was eventually disgraced by allegations of sexual impropriety (a topic explored more fully in Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes' *Gurus in America* [2005] and Lola Williamson's *Transcendent in America* [2010]). The new American Hatha avoided scandal, but its reputation suffered by dint of association. A fringe movement in the crowded world of fitness and self-help, it languished in relative obscurity in the "cultural wilderness," Syman says (p. 267). Hatha could not compete against aerobics, the dominant exercise trend of the 1980s.

In short, the vogue for postural yoga since the 1990s was not, despite its multiple antecedents, the inevitable culmination of linear growth. No one, Syman included, has fully explained its phenomenal resurgence. In her well-regarded book *A History of Modern Yoga*, Elizabeth De Michelis characterizes posture practice as "secularized healing ritual" perfectly suited for "largely secularized and developed multicultural, multifaith societies."⁸ In the United States, the consolidation of yoga coincided with the coming of age of the Boomers, a cohort that religious studies scholars have described as spiritually adventuresome.⁹ The yoga boom also tracks with the growth of "unchurched America" as discussed in Robert Fuller's *Spiritual, But Not Religious* (2001); the normalization of alternative medicine as analyzed in Mary Ruggie's *Marginal to Mainstream* (2004); and the flowering of media-based spiritual therapeutics for women examined in works such as Kathryn Lofton's *Oprah* (2011). Women's magazines and daytime TV have done much to promote yoga by profiling latter-day equivalents of Gloria Swanson (e.g., Ali MacGraw, Jane Fonda, Christy Turlington, Jennifer Anniston, Gwyneth Paltrow, Madonna) who have embraced Hatha for health, stress relief, spirituality, toned abs, postnatal slimming, or some combination of the above.

By 2000, yoga had become a fad, especially in urban neighborhoods with high concentrations of well-educated stay-at-home post-feminist mothers. By the estimate of survey takers, the population of yoga practitioners in America in the Bush Years was 85 percent white, 72 percent female, 71 percent college educated, and 27 percent postgraduate educated. Even as Americans as a whole grew dramatically more obese, this sub-population grew leaner and more flexible. Yoga is decidedly more Type A and white-collar than "New Age" movements like Neo-Paganism and Shamanism. Yoginis accord with the "bourgeois bohemians" described in David Brooks' *Bobos in Paradise* (2000) and with the demographic labeled by marketers as LOHAS ("lifestyles of health and sustainability"). The geographic distribution of yoga studios offers support for Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort* (2008), which argues that contemporary Americans have self-segregated into neighborhood-level Red State/Blue State enclaves based on lifestyle preferences. Claire Dederer's recent yoga memoir *Poser* (2010) profiles one such neighborhood, North Seattle, and its population of wealthy, well-adjusted white mothers who restively seek perfection in yogic repose.

As posture practice gained popularity, capitalists responded by creating and exploiting niche markets. Nike added a yoga line; Adidas began a “Play Yoga” campaign; Liz Claiborne acquired prAna; and the Healthy Living division of Active Interest Media bought out *Yoga Journal*. In 2008 American yogis spent \$5.7 billion on classes, retreats, equipment, apparel, and media. At the annual industry conference sponsored by *Yoga Journal*, vendors fill the convention hall with swag. Unlike prior metaphysical fads like Theosophy, mesmerism, and Swedenborgianism, physical yoga can be fully commodified. You can even take yoga cruises or groove out to jam bands at yoga festivals.

In free-market fashion, America offers a Hatha practice for every personality. If you want masochistic exertion mixed with sexualized sweatiness, you can go to the sauna-like heat of a Bikram studio, the franchise of Bikram Choudhury. For a challenging self-directed *vinyasa* regimen with a dose of Patañjali, you might take on the Ashtanga system developed by K. Pattabhi Jois. (Syman rightly credits Bikram and Ashtanga—two pedagogies that require mastery of undeviating series’ of asanas—for attracting more American men to yoga.) For an inspirational cardio workout, you can try any of the varieties of Power Yoga. For Sanskrit chanting, themed readings, and music with your sun salutations, there’s Jivamukti. If you prefer something playful and accessible that combines non-sexual tantrism and American-style positive thinking, Anusara might be your thing. For an explicitly spiritual posture practice that can become a community and a way of life, you could seek out White Lotus Yoga, Sivananda Yoga, or Kundalini Yoga. For a corporate-style wellness program, you could train in Kripalu Yoga. If you need psychic and emotional healing in addition to strength training, you might investigate Forrest Yoga. For slow-paced, anatomically precise physical therapy, you could try Iyengar, Yin Yoga, or Viniyoga.¹⁰

In addition to these established schools, each of which offers teacher-certification programs, there are countless iterations, including AIDS yoga, yoga for fertility, pre- and postnatal yoga, yoga for kids, yoga with dogs, aqua yoga, disco yoga, naked yoga, and laughter yoga, as well as trademarked niche brands like Slim Calm Sexy, Goddess Yoga, Yoga Booty Ballet, AntiGravity Yoga, AcroYoga, Revita-Yoga (to resist wrinkles), Yoga for Golfers, and Taxi Yoga (for people who spend their days driving). Some Christians practice Holy Yoga, PraiseMoves, Yoga Prayer, or Hail Mary and Rhythmic Breathing—despite condemnations from Cardinal Ratzinger (before he was Pope) and Southern Baptist clergymen. Reformed Jews are less exclusionary. Some synagogues even offer Shabbat Yoga. All in all, the late twentieth century rivaled the early twentieth century as a period of yogic reinvention, with America replacing India as the center of creativity. The virtues of posture practice became so widely accepted that the U.S. Army added yoga to the PTSD rehabilitation program at Walter Reed in 2006 and incorporated Hatha elements into the basic physical training requirements in 2011.

Is there a distinctively American approach to yoga? Catherine Albanese's *Republic of Mind and Spirit* argues that American metaphysicals created a "new and American yogic product": a Hatha praxis that treated the corporeal body as a spiritual vessel; a yoga philosophy that celebrated the body itself as the miracle of miracles. "Worship the body," instructed Pierre Bernard often. The American "enlightened body-self" was, Albanese says, different than the subtle body of Tantra, the mechanical body of the natural hygiene movement, or the manly body of physical culture. American yogis have consistently emphasized "the physical as route to the transcendent."¹¹ In yoga studios, American teachers constantly exhort students to "listen to" and "honor" their individual bodies. For Bernard, body-centric yoga included *navuli* (abdominal isolation) and self-enemas. Today, however, American body worship tends to exclude bodily functions; and yogis here shun some of the most common Indian yogic exercises—techniques like manually cleaning one's sinuses with wax-cord catheters and cleansing the nasal passages with a *jal neti* pot. Stefanie Syman detects a strong streak of Protestantism in contemporary American yoga, with its emphasis on working the body. This effortful yoga is, she says, paradoxical, both "an indulgence and a penance" (p. 291).

Compared to yoga in India, yoga in America—excluding outlying sectarian meditation groups—functions without formal gurus. Instead, a rotating lineup of novel yet interchangeable Hatha "rock stars" (disproportionately male in relation to the population of practitioners) competes for audience share. Compared to Britain, with its British Wheel of Yoga—a ruling body officially sanctioned by UK Sport—American yoga is decentralized, entrepreneurial, and non-hierarchical. Yoga schools offer teacher training but resist state-level attempts to regulate them as vocational schools with attendant paperwork, fees, and inspections.

In addition to commercialism and narcissism, perhaps the most characteristic feature of American yoga is its syncretism with other forms of popular therapeutics like massage, chiropractic, aromatherapy, and music therapy. As shown in Eva Moskowitz's *In Therapy We Trust* (2001), the United States has a deep popular tradition of the "therapeutic gospel." If you drew a Venn diagram, American postural yoga would fit into the overlapped space of at least five spheres: alternative spirituality, alternative medicine, physical therapy, physical fitness, and humanistic psychology.

In truth, the "American" in American yoga is regional and metropolitan. From the "Great Oom" to the present, the leading figures of American Hatha have gravitated to New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and, more recently, to college towns and hubs of outdoor recreation or alternative spirituality like Santa Fe and Boulder. Crossroads of theater, film, television, and fashion—with their resident beautiful people who pose for a living and who, like medieval *yogins*, desire immortality—double as yoga centers. For roughly

the last century, the regional culture of coastal California has venerated bodily beauty and fitness; an enterprising historian could no doubt find direct links between Muscle Beach at Santa Monica Pier and YogaWorks in Santa Monica. But the California influence runs more than skin-deep. As shown by Erik Davis' *The Visionary State* (2006) and Jeffrey Kripal's *Esalen* (2007), spiritual seekers in the great Pacific state have consistently been on the forefront of experimentation with Asian traditions. For example, in Santa Cruz County, 15 percent of adults in 2000 identified as having "Eastern religious adherence," while less than 4 percent identified as Asian.¹²

When one considers the history of yoga from the 1890s to the present, general trends become apparent: peripheral to central; local to global; male to (predominantly) female; spiritual to (mostly) secular; sectarian to universal; mendicant to consumerist; meditational to postural; intellectual to experiential; esoteric to accessible; from oral to hands-on teaching; from textual to photographic representations of poses; from contorted social pariahs to lithe social winners. Yoga has never been a stable entity; it can mean almost anything to almost anybody. Supremely adaptable, posture practice warrants use of an overused word: meme. Yoga now belongs to what Srinivas Aravamudan in *Guru English* (2006) calls the "global popular"—a postcolonial realm of religious cosmopolitanism.

Recently, the Hindu American Foundation announced a campaign to "Take Back Yoga" from the secular realm of fitness. In complementary fashion, India's National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources has cataloged hundreds of asanas in its Traditional Knowledge Digital Library in an attempt to deter intellectual property thieves like Calcutta-born, Beverly Hills-based Bikram Choudhury, who controversially copyrighted a sequence of twenty-six yoga poses with the U.S. Patent Office. Choudhury, who, like Pierre Bernard, hobnobs with celebrities and collects classic cars, sponsors the Yoga Asana Championship and hopes that Hatha will someday earn recognition as an Olympic sport. A macho, polarizing figure, Choudhury has earned the scorn of sincere Anglo-American Hatha yogis who claim to be teaching the unadulterated "Classical Yoga" of Pantanjali. However, if Mark Singleton is right, Choudhury, a former Indian weightlifting champion who leads his classes like boot camps, may be closer to the spirit of the original—that is to say, late imperial—Mysore practice than anyone else in America.

Jared Farmer, Department of History, Stony Brook University, is the author of *Trees in Paradise: A California History* (forthcoming, Norton).

1. Market survey results from http://www.yogajournal.com/advertise/press_releases/10/; affiliation numbers from The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic," February 2008, available

at <http://religions.pewforum.org>. See also Gurjeet S. Birdee et al., "Characteristics of Yoga Users: Results of a National Survey," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 23 (October 2008): 1653–58; and Robert B. Saper et al., "Prevalence and Patterns of Adult Yoga Use in the United States: Results of a National Survey," *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 10 (March/April 2004): 44–49.

2. See David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: A Biography* (forthcoming).
3. Gerald James Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya, eds., *Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation*, vol. 12 of *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (2008), 136.
4. See also David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body* (1996); William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (2006); and Frederick M. Smith, *The Self Possessed* (2006).
5. See Suzanne Newcombe, "The Development of Modern Yoga: Survey of the Field," *Religion Compass* 3 (2009): 986–1002; Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, eds., *Yoga in the Modern World* (2008); and David Gordon White, ed., *Yoga in Practice* (2012).
6. Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India* (2004), 26.
7. Walter Harding and Carl Bode, eds., *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau* (1958), 251.
8. Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004), 15–16.
9. See Dean R. Hoge et al., *Vanishing Boundaries* (1994); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven* (1998); Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (1993) and *Spiritual Marketplace* (1999).
10. See Mimi Swartz, "The Yoga Mogul," *New York Times Magazine*, July 25, 2010, for a profile of one of the leading contemporary yoga entrepreneurs (Anusara founder John Friend).
11. Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (2008), 347.
12. Wade Clark Roof and Mark Silk, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Region* (2005), 113.

Jared Farmer is a professor of history at Stony Brook University and the author of *Trees in Paradise: A California History*. Article. Lost LA. How Did L.A. Become a City of Palms? And Other Questions About California's Trees. Q&A with historian Jared Farmer, author of "Trees in Paradise: A California History." Active loading indicator. Subscribe to our newsletter. Jared Farmer. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. Jared Farmer (born 1974) is a history professor at Stony Brook University. He specializes in environmental history, landscape studies, and the American West. Farmer's book *On Zion's Mount* won the Francis Parkman Prize from the Society of American Historians. His book *Trees in Paradise* won the Ray Allen Billington Prize from the Organization of American Historians. In 2014 Farmer received the Hiett Prize from the Dallas Institute. © 2021 Jared Farmer. All Rights Reserved. Theme by Theme Trust.