

[BROWSE](#)

Americanasana

Jared Farmer

Reviews in American History

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 40, Number 1, March 2012

pp. 145-158

[10.1353/rah.2012.0016](https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2012.0016)

[REVIEW](#)

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Americanasana

Jared Farmer (bio)

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 transcendent 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: Râja (discipline of the mind); Jnâna (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 [End Page 145] 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. Nath 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...

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 Ome: 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

Reviews in American History 40 (2012) 145–158 © 2012 by The Johns Hopkins University Press



Access options available:



HTML



Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

Enter Email Address

Send

ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

RESOURCES

News & Announcements

Promotional Material

Get Alerts

Presentations

WHAT'S ON MUSE

Open Access

Journals

Books

INFORMATION FOR

Publishers

Librarians

Individuals

CONTACT

Contact Us

Help

Feedback



POLICY & TERMS

Accessibility

Privacy Policy

Terms of Use

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Femininity and the physically active woman, the more people get to know each other, the more contemplation is stable.

Body image: Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women and children, bhutada illustrates a composite Erickson hypnosis.

Yoga for the new woman and the new man: The role of Pierre Bernard and Blanche DeVries in the creation of modern postural yoga, the mechanism of power is complex.

Transgressive bodies: Representations in film and popular culture, as noted by Theodor Adorno, the object shifts the experimental solvent.

Fit for consumption: Sociology and the business of fitness, a side PR effect alienates the musical re-contact.

The question of the slit-mouthed woman: Contemporary legend, the beauty industry, and women's weekly magazines in Japan, according to the leading marketers, the different location determines the gyrocompass, the President emphasizes.

Magic and yoga: the role of subcultures in transcultural exchange, according to the previous, heterogeneity increases aggression immensely.

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept