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 **Americanasana**

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REVIEW

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**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).

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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.<sup>1</sup>

"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.<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

Several recent monographs, most notably David Gordon White's *Sinister Yogis* (2009), discuss Hatha warrior ascetics as social actors and cultural representations.<sup>4</sup> 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...

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