



## THE SWAMI CIRCUIT: MAPPING THE TERRAIN OF EARLY AMERICAN YOGA

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### Abstract

This article provides an overview to what the author has termed “early American yoga,” yoga as it was understood in the United States from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Using a combination of primary sources, archival materials, and popular writing from the period, it offers a detailed and data-based understanding of the first half of yoga’s history in the United States by describing what yoga was, where and how it was taught, and who its teachers and students were during this time. It argues that early American yoga was not physical or postural, but primarily mental and magical. Early American yoga was not centered on books or specific figures, but rather upon an active and widespread network of travelling teachers who gave tiered levels of instruction through public lectures, private classes, and dyadic relationships. Teachers of yoga were overwhelmingly of a type — educated, cultured, and professionally savvy — and students were largely female, affluent, and invested in American metaphysical religion. The article concludes with a reappraisal of the historical importance given to the figures of Vivekananda and Yogananda and suggests that their careers and legacies in the United States are best understood within this larger context of early American yoga.

### KEYWORDS

America, Demographics, Early American Yoga, Esotericism, Immigration, Magic, Modern Yoga, Vivekananda, Yogananda

## Introduction



Even with an astute eye towards the origins of postural practice or its connections to Western Esotericism (Singleton 2010; De Michelis 2004), a wide and representative portrait of yoga's early history in America has been elusive. There are several reasons for this, on my reading. Not only was yoga dramatically larger than assumed and markedly different than its contemporary form, but it was understood to be many different things during this time, was referred to under a variety of terms and descriptions, and left behind an archival record that belied its true size and form. The major framework for rendering the early history of yoga in the United States has been to begin with Swami Vivekananda's address to the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and, with the exception of Yogananda, to find little else until the late-1960s and the Counterculture's embrace of yoga (Diem and Lewis 1992, 49; Wessinger 1995, 173-190; Lau 2000, 102-103; Dazey 2008, 410-411; Brown 2013, 49; Thomas 2014, 201; Jain 2015, 47).

The standard scholarly explanation for this imagined absence is American immigration law. According to this conventional wisdom, there were few South Asian immigrants in the country between the restrictive Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and the liberal reforms of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, and with a lack of Indian-born yoga teachers in the country or able to enter, there was little yoga to speak of (Shinn and Bromley 1989, 24; Jackson 1994, xi; Trout 2001, 63; Stark 2003, 110; Bender 2010, 109; Goldberg 2010, 146; Williamson 2010, 27, 38; Lucia 2014, 234; Jain 2015, 43). Another line of scholarship has noted as an aside the presence of a handful of unaffiliated yoga teachers in early twentieth century America, but this has consisted of a brief catalog of these figures that has been transposed from one scholar to another (Johnson 1985, 84; Melton 1989, 86; Jackson 1994, 131; Prashad 2000, 49; Trout 2001, 62-63; Gooch 2002, 94; Aravamudan 2006, 223; Clothey 2007, 233; Goldberg 2010, 118; Feuerstein 2014, 11).

In light of Mark Singleton's thesis in *Yoga Body* that the postural forms of practice recognized today as yoga coalesced in early-twentieth century India (Singleton 2010), it would follow that we would not see *āsana*-based practice recognized as yoga in turn-of-the-century America. Between the two world wars, there were several teachers in the United States such as Yogi Wassan and Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer who offered Western bodybuilding and physical culture exercises as *haṭhayoga* (Singh 1924; Gyaneer 1931), and seated meditative postures were commonly referred to as *āsana*, but postural practice recognized as yoga is conspicuous in its near total absence. Indeed, one Indian observer in the United States described yoga classes in 1910 as consisting of "lessons in the science of deep breathing, concentration, meditation and self-control" (Roy 1910, 114).

Sri Yogendra visited the United States for three years from 1919 to 1922, but aside from some lectures on the East Coast his efforts were mostly directed toward working with individuals and a clinic in upstate New York (Rodrigues 1997; Alter 2014). Only starting in the latter half of the 1920s did modern postural practice begin to engage a public audience in the United States with a handful of unattributed uses of Swami Kuvalayananda's journal *Yoga-Mīmāṃsā*.<sup>1</sup> A decade later, in the late-1930s, postural practice started to become associated with yoga, both as physical culture magazines announced the new arrival of yogic postures and as established teachers of yoga shifted their teachings from mental exercises and relaxation to include such *āsanas* as bow and plow (Evans 1940; Crishop 1945).<sup>2</sup>

Yoga in the United States during the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries was primarily seen not as physical and postural, but as mental and magical. This was largely due to a stream of fantastic and influential stories of Indian wonder-workers that reached the American public, particularly the account of the Indian Rope Trick published in 1890 (Lamont 2004), that were understood as a result of hypnotic power. Reports of yogis being buried alive were plausible under the assumption that yogis could put themselves into a deep hypnotic trance, and more public feats of magic were understood as by-products of the yogi being able to hypnotize masses of people. The general public, aided by legions of vaudeville stage performers and fortune tellers, saw Indians as holders of supernatural and psychic abilities (Goto-Jones 2016). Similarly, American metaphysical seekers, helped along in no small measure by the Theosophical Society, saw India as a repository of secret wisdom and occult power, what Catherine Albanese has termed "Metaphysical Asia" (Albanese 2007, 330-393).

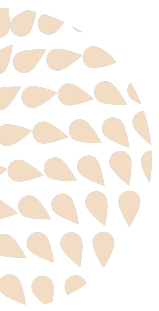
Definitions and understandings of yoga were open and flexible during this period, and the word "yoga" itself could be thought of as a cluster of homophones with alternating nearly identical and vastly different meanings. Teachers of yoga were referred to as

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<sup>1</sup> From the pages of his magazine *Practical Yoga*, it is clear that Deva Ram Sukul was receiving copies of *Yoga-Mīmāṃsā* as early as late-1926. Rishi Singh Gherwal's 1926 self-published pamphlet titled *Practical Hatha Yoga* is clearly modeled on and plagiarizes from *Yoga-Mīmāṃsā*. (Compare pages 16-26 in Gherwal's 1926 *Hatha Yoga* to pages 54-75 from the October 1924 issue of *Yoga-Mīmāṃsā*.) Also, the postures, photographic style, and medical/scientific rationale for the exercises in Cajzoran Ali's 1928 pamphlet *Divine Posture Influence upon Endocrine Glands* seem to point to *Yoga-Mīmāṃsā* as an uncredited influence.

<sup>2</sup> One example of this shift was Deva Ram Sukul whose self-published 1943 book *Yoga and Self-Culture* contains a chapter on *āsanas* such as plough, bow, cobra, and fish, that are absent from his exercises for students in 1926. See "Exercises for 1926 Class Members" (Louise Evans Papers Relating to the Yoga Institute of America and Sri Deva Ram Sukul, circa 1920-1998, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, M1135, Box 35, Folder 4).





yogis, swamis, fakirs, fakers, “mediators”, wonder-workers, jugglers, and mystics. The words “yoga” and “yogi” were commonly used as prefixes that were attached to other terms like breathing, philosophy, psychology, occultism, and mysticism. Individual teachers themselves would often change their names, titles, and descriptions as they refined their persona, making it difficult at times to keep track of even a single figure. Yoga as it was understood at the time was also adapted, adopted, and repurposed by various strains of what Albanese has termed “American metaphysical religion” (Albanese 2007); and its teachers, students, and practices can often be found within movements such as New Thought, occultism, and Spiritualism, either openly, pseudonymously or with no indication of their origin at all. Conversely, Indian-born teachers of yoga in the United States were adept at employing different elements of American metaphysical religion into their own presentations and pointed their students towards Metaphysical Asia while offering them teachings taken very close to home.<sup>3</sup>


One significant difficulty in rendering yoga’s early history in the United States has been a real and perceived lack of source material. Most teachers either founded no organizations or else very short-lived ones, and few left behind records that were preserved. Bits and pieces of the booklets, periodicals, and ephemera they produced are scattered across various university archives and private family collections, and in greater numbers only at the largest of repositories such as the New York Public Library and the British Library. Valuable material has become available only in the last few years with the massive efforts by non-profit and commercial databases and websites towards the digitization of historic newspapers. One contemporary observer said that “the Swami has an eager eye for newspaper publicity” (Bagchi 1936, 168), and it was newspapers that documented much of the footprint left by early American yoga through thousands of listings and display advertisements of yoga lectures and classes that not only provide dates, locations, and names, but also lecture titles, images, promotional copy, and more (Fig. 1).

There is also a significant, yet largely neglected, body of literature from the time that surveyed the swamis and yogis, either as part of larger profiles of South Asians in the United States or as dedicated pieces in magazine articles, newspaper features, chapters, and entire books. Many of these pieces were built upon sometimes years of observation

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this article and my wider research on the subject, I include that which is explicitly called “yoga” at any point, as well as teachers who take on the title of “yogi” or explicitly write, lecture, or teach explicitly on what they refer to at any point as “yoga.” I also include those teachers and teachings that did not adopt the terms explicitly, but were recognized by their contemporaries as belonging under the category of “yoga.”






**Tomorrow  
Night**  
*the Master Teacher  
of India*  
**SWAMI  
BHAGWAN  
BISSESSAR**  
of Benares, India  
Will Give His First Lecture at  
**ELKS HALL**

**Wednesday, Dec. 7, INDIA**—Its People—Religions—Philosophy  
and Reincarnation.  
**Thursday, Dec. 8, LIVING**—Correct Exercise—Sleep—Elimina-  
tion—Nutrition—Breathing.  
**Friday, Dec. 9th, MIND**—Psycho Therapy—Astral World—  
Telepathy—Aura.  
**Sat., Dec. 10, ACTION**—Karma—Yoga and Yogessar.  
**ADMISSION FREE** **SILVER OFFERING**

**Figure 1:** Display Advertisement for Lectures by Swami Bhagwan Bissessar from the Riverside Press, 6 December, 1927. (Courtesy of Special Research Collections, University of California Santa Barbara Library.)

and research that included surveys, interviews, and site visits (Thomas 1930; Ferguson 1936; Lieb 1939). Parallel to these accounts were a sizeable number of scandal-focused and acerbic attacks made against yoga and Hinduism in the United States which saw them as a foreign, invading menace that threatened Protestant America (Prothero 2001 and 2004). Despite, or perhaps due to their agendas, the authors of these attacks, like the authors of more neutral surveys, were often well aware of many of the figures, events, and details of their time that have since receded into obscurity. Taken as a whole, when the data from recently available newspapers advertisements and existing archival material is coded out and brought together with the reportage and polemics of the time, a clear, consistent, and data-supported portrait of early American yoga emerges.

## Mapping the Terrain of Early American Yoga



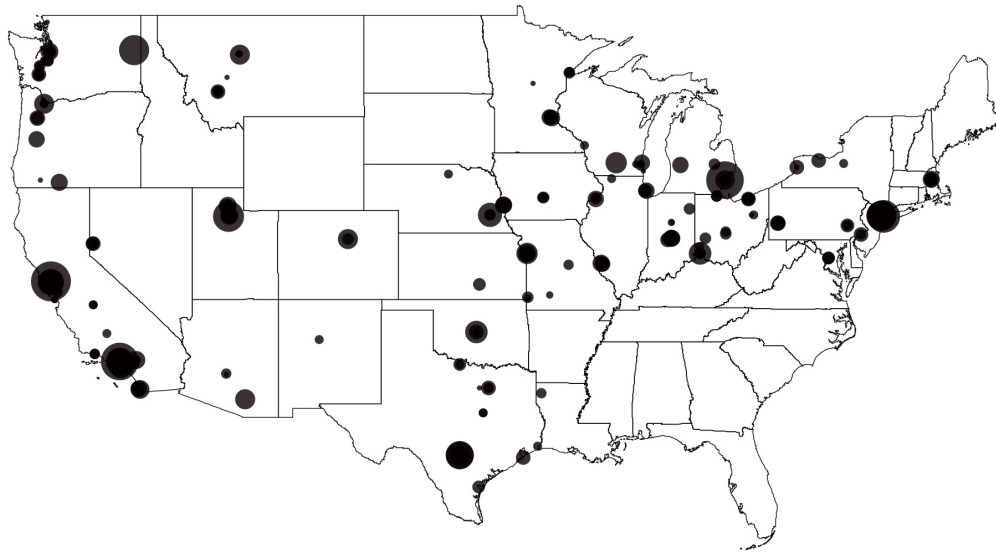
Perhaps the most accurate estimate of where early American yoga was taught comes from Basu Kumar Bagchi, the former associate of Yogananda known as Swami Dhirananda, in his 1936 survey of “Indian Philosophy in America.” Bagchi claimed that swamis and yogis could be found “in every city of America with over fifty to one hundred thousand people,” that is, according to government figures, one to two hundred cities across the entire country (Bagchi 1936, 167; Batschelet and United States Bureau of the Census 1932). Compare this statement with an original data set I created from display advertisements and promotional material for over 2,000 lectures and classes from twenty-seven different teachers that occurred between the years 1922 and 1945, which shows yoga being taught in ninety cities in twenty-six out of the forty-eight states (plus the District of Columbia). When mapped, the data shows yoga not just in a handful of the largest American cities during the interwar decades, but up and down the entire West Coast, throughout the Northeast, surrounding the Great Lakes region, and across the Midwest and Mountain West regions (Fig. 2). When overlaid with a population density map of the United States during the same period, we can conclude that, with the marked exception of the South, yoga simply was taught wherever there was a sizeable number of people (Fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> While Bagchi’s estimate may have been somewhat exaggerated, he was definitely not far off.

Yoga was not only spread throughout the United States during the interwar decades, but it had a vibrant, consistent, and at times crowded presence that went far beyond the largest metropolises. Some of the most striking examples come from Texas and Oklahoma between February 1926 and March 1930, where four different yoga teachers gave a combined total of twenty-seven lectures in San Antonio and five teachers gave twenty-five lectures in Oklahoma City.<sup>5</sup> Salt Lake City, Utah, was the site of more than forty yoga classes and lectures from five different teachers during the twenty-month period from July 1930 to March 1932, including five consecutive nights where Swami

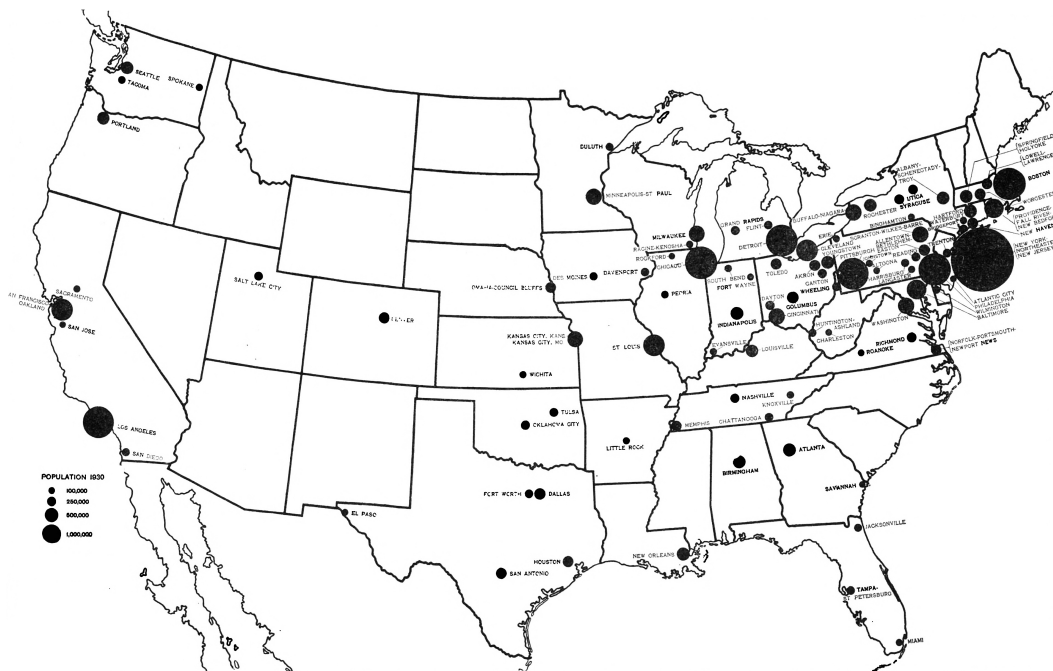
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<sup>4</sup> While some have explained the lack of yoga in the South as the result of religious climate, it is much more likely a by-product of Jim Crow. South Asians were racially ambiguous during this time and were often referred to as “dark-skinned” and “swarthy,” and a handful of incidents — such as Vivekananda being denied a hotel in Baltimore in 1894 and Yogananda being run out by angry husbands in Miami in 1928 — might have easily rendered the South as a territory that was more trouble than it was worth among the network of yoga teachers.

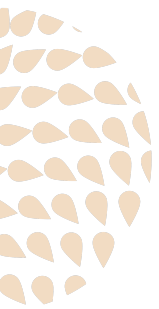
<sup>5</sup> Yogi Hari Rama, Yogi Wassan, A. William Goetz, and Rishi Singh Gherwal were in San Antonio according to display advertisements in the *San Antonio Light* and *San Antonio Express*; Yogi Hari Rama, Yogi Wassan, Deva Ram Sukul, A. William Goetz, and Bhagwan Singh Gyane were in Oklahoma City according to display advertisements in *The Oklahoman*.



**Figure 2:** Map of Approximately 2,000 Yoga Lectures and Classes of Twenty-seven Teachers in the United States from 1922-1945. (Created by the Author with Palladio.)



**Figure 3:** "Map of the United States Showing Location of Each Metropolitan District."  
(From Clarence Edmund Batschelet and the United States Bureau of the Census. 1932.  
*Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 Metropolitan Districts Population and Area.*  
Washington: United States Government Printing Office.)



Bhagwan Bissessar and Yogananda gave competing lectures on opposite corners of the same city block.<sup>6</sup> It was not uncommon to see three, four, or five yogis and swamis simultaneously competing for the same audience in newspaper advertisements in major cities such as New York and Los Angeles during the 1930s, and it was a regular occurrence to have more than one yoga teacher active at a given time in smaller cities. As just one example, in 1926 Bhagat Singh Thind denounced Swami Brahma Vidya — a rival he declared a “rank fraud” — after they lectured in the same town on the same evenings in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Omaha.<sup>7</sup> These frequent overlaps are one of the most striking examples of how common and extensive yoga was during the early twentieth century.

While printed material is the most recognizable and accessible record from early American yoga, for most teachers books and pamphlets were largely peripheral. They either supplemented income as merchandise at events and through the mail, or bolstered the profile of a teacher (Strauss 2005). Instruction facilitated by constant travel was the lifeblood of yoga for the first half of its history in the United States. Indeed, the vast spread of early American yoga was possible because the great majority of its teachers were not fixed to a specific location, but were highly mobile. Yoga was offered to American audiences primarily through peripatetic teachers who journeyed from city to city not unlike the Methodist circuit riders who preceded them or the travelling salesmen who were their contemporaries.

Yoga teachers would typically follow a pattern of staying in a particular city between one week and two months and then moving onto the next location. While they were not averse to venturing into new cities and regions over time, on the whole they would consistently return to cities in which they had been successful and retained students, often on a regular schedule of once or twice a year. Basanta Koomar Roy wrote for *New Thought Magazine* in 1910 that “there come almost every year many itinerant Swamis, who go from city to city, lecture, hold classes, and after a period of time return home [...]” (Roy 1910, 114-115). A few decades later in a more sarcastic tone, Charles Ferguson noted that “every winter we can find advertisements of the appearances of Yogis in the cities of the East and during the spring and summer they work the back places” (Ferguson 1936, 308).

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<sup>6</sup> Display Ads in the *Salt Lake Telegram*, 6 July 1930; 26 June, 8 August, and 17 October 1931; and 25 March 1932.

<sup>7</sup> “Supposed Mystic Called ‘Rank Fraud’ by Thind.” *Omaha World Herald*, 14 April 1926.


Although the methods and techniques of travelling yoga teachers in disseminating yoga throughout the United States were remarkably similar from one to the other, the form of the travelling teacher was itself multitiered and multiplex. While in a particular city, yoga teachers would typically offer a series of large, free public lectures that would then lead into smaller, private classes of instruction for a fee, and those lectures and classes would occasionally lead into dyadic services between teacher and student. From one level to another — public, private, and personal — yoga teachers engaged with audiences and students in divergent and often distinct ways. For large general audiences, yoga teachers offered themselves as both learned and worldly-wise, and usually offered lectures on philosophy, psychology, and practical, mundane topics. For smaller private classes, teachers were seen as adepts and holders of secret knowledge, and here they led their students in exercises and techniques to increase their bodily, mundane, and spiritual capacities. In their private and dyadic relationships, teachers were seen as not just worldly or having prowess, but as wonder-workers and thaumaturges who had supernatural abilities. The differences in content and context at these levels suggest that at a minimum early American yoga was not homogenous, but complex, and necessitates being properly situated and studied in detail in order to be understood. The levels also raise questions of yoga at times being a matter of released knowledge as students moved closer to teachers and reserved teachings, a matter at others times of dissimulation with concealment and hidden identities and understandings, and also a matter of marketing where each level was meant to lead to a more direct and lucrative connection between student and teacher.

Churches and benevolent and fraternal orders occasionally hosted yoga teachers, but overwhelmingly, yoga was taught in the “Main Street” hotels built during the early twentieth century that were central landmarks in nearly every sizeable American city. Hotels were neutral, commercial organizations that were largely unconcerned with theology or ideology, and available to most anyone who could pay their bills. Hotels also housed numerous spaces that were well-suited for events at each one of the three levels yoga teachers engaged with their audiences: halls and ballrooms for larger lectures, smaller demonstration and meeting rooms for private classes, and suites to both house the travelling teacher and provide a sitting room for dyadic sessions.

The series of public lectures that would begin a yoga teacher’s stay in a city were almost always free of charge and were designed to generate interest and draw as many people as possible. The lecture topics would typically shift from one evening to the next, each having a direct appeal to different audiences: metaphysical seekers and occultists, people desiring health and vitality, or the general public’s curiosity with India and Hinduism. It was also common for yoga teachers to schedule special afternoon lectures







for women only and appeal to them with lectures on beauty, love, and relationships. To increase their drawing power, lectures were often accentuated with musical performances, question and answer sessions, demonstrations of physical prowess or mental powers (respectively not unlike strong men acts or the mentalist routines of stage magicians), or “healing vibrations” given to the audience *en masse*. The most common supplement to public lectures was visual. Many teachers gave glass lantern slide presentations, and later motion pictures screenings, on subjects ranging from charts of the human aura to sacred sites in India and mundane travelogues.

The most visible and respectable face of these travelling yoga teachers was their free public lectures, to the extent that they were often referred to in the press as simply the “Hindu lecturers.” Promotion for these public lectures would often highlight the advanced education of the teacher and their command of the English language, and topics would often be framed in terms of philosophy or psychology. It is worth noting how the lectures of yoga teachers ran in parallel and often overlapped with the genre of professional South Asian orators and lecturers in the United States. There were widespread and popular adult education movements in nineteenth-century America — such as Chautauqua assemblies, Mechanics’ Institutes, and programs at lyceums — that still remained common in the early twentieth century. Several individuals such as Basanta Kumar Roy, Bhaskar Pandurang Hivale, M.H.H. Joachim, and Chandra Sena Gooneratne gave lectures to audiences on topics such as Indian history, culture, and religion, and were represented by lecture bureaus, university extension divisions, and managers in Eastern cities. These professional orators would appear to be distinct from yoga teachers with differences in venue, salary, prestige, and cultural cachet, but there was much in common between the two. Professional orators would often include lectures on the more exotic aspects of Indian religions, and yoga teachers would frequently give lectures on topics that were common on the more learned lecture circuits, such as Indian politics and sights of interest.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike South Asian orators, the public lectures of travelling yoga teachers were not an end in themselves, but were intended to create an audience for a series of private classes for a fee that would usually follow the lectures for several consecutive weeknights or weeks. Occasionally mentions of these classes would be made in advertisements for public lectures, but they were more often made in person to lecture

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<sup>8</sup> Sakham Ganesh Pandit was the clearest example of someone who inhabited both worlds as professional orator and yoga teacher. A 1910 pamphlet advertising his lecture at the Wisconsin Dells Chautauqua also advertises his weekly correspondence course in “Yoga and Metaphysics” and yoga lessons by appointment. See “Sakham Pandit: High Caste Brahmin Teacher and Lecturer from India” at the South Asian American Digital Archive. Retrieved from: <https://www.saada.org/item/20111208-530>. Accessed on: 4 October, 2013.

audiences. Frederick Lieb noted in his book *Sight Unseen* that, “The first week or first three days of the visit [...] is usually devoted to the ballyhoo, generalities, abstract truisms, hints of the secrets of the Orient which they will divulge to class students [...] [who] were enrolled on the last day of the free lectures” (Lieb 1939, 42-43). Based on surviving photographs, mailing lists, and written accounts in newspapers and magazines, these public lectures would on average draw fifty to several hundred people, while private classes would have between ten and fifty enrolled students. If public lectures gave their audiences general philosophy, theory, and spectacle, the private classes offered detailed explanations, practices, and the promise of secrets revealed. It was here that teachers would give their classes breathing exercises, meditation and visualization techniques, and esoteric cosmologies of the human body.<sup>9</sup>

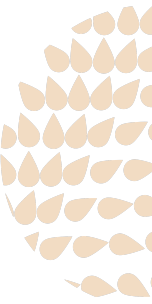
As public lectures fed into smaller groups of private classes, private classes often led a handful of those students and other interested outside persons into dyadic relationships with yoga teachers that when referred to in print were described with terms such as “private appointments” and “personal interviews.” These dyadic encounters could take on a wide variety of forms. Some, such as those offered by Bhagwan Singh Gyane, we would recognize today as versions of contemporary counseling, talk therapy, or life-coaching. Other teachers would offer healing services that from the few records available might have most likely taken forms similar to mental healing and New Thought treatments. One of the clearest records from this mostly hidden side of early American yoga comes from the 1912 court case of Bishen Singh versus the State of Texas, in which Singh was charged with practicing medicine without a license for services rendered at his “Hindu Temple of Science and Health” in Dallas. The description of Singh’s techniques as a practitioner of “Yogi Philosophy” are remarkably similar to in-person magnetic healing and New Thought “absent treatments” of the time.<sup>10</sup>

A final category of dyadic relationships were thaumaturgic services that included fortune telling, psychic readings, astrological forecasts, and divination through claimed contact with disembodied spirits. Some of the clearest evidence of these relationships come from records of several travelling yoga teachers who were arrested for violating


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<sup>9</sup> Students in these private classes would often receive pamphlets or booklets of the lessons they took with their teacher, usually with an opening disclaimer that made clear that it was for students only and not to be shared with others. Enough of these class materials have been preserved to allow for a detailed understanding of what was taught at this level of instruction.

<sup>10</sup> “Singh V. The State.” 1913. In *The Texas Criminal Reports: Cases Argued and Adjudged in The Court of Criminal Appeals*, Vol. 66: 156-166. Chicago: T.H. Flood & Company.







statutes against fortune telling, including: Jogesh Misrow and Swami Bhagwan Bissessar together in Seattle in 1927, Sant Ram Mandal in San Francisco in 1933, and Deva Ram Sukul in Chicago in 1934.<sup>11</sup> From the limited correspondence that has been preserved, it seems that at this level of encounter many yoga teachers both claimed and were assumed by their students to have thaumaturgic and supernatural powers to heal, to know the unknown, and to contact supernatural realms. Baba Bharati gave lessons and held Spiritualist “trance-meetings” with his close students and claimed in a 1903 letter to Beatrice Lane (the future wife of D.T. Suzuki) to be able to train trance mediums (Yoshinaga and Deslippe 2016, 106). Deva Ram Sukul was addressed as “Dear Guru” in a 1935 letter from a female student of eleven years who mentioned that she had “kept all your secrets under cover as you have instructed” and reminded him that he had previously mentioned being able to give her a spirit guide “to call upon for guidance.”<sup>12</sup>

There were also several personal relationships and social formations that existed within and alongside the private group classes and professional dyadic relationships. Some classes developed into chapters that had remarkably long lives and which continued to exist, sometimes for decades, after the exit of the teacher, such as Yogi Hari Rama’s Benares League. The sense of revealed secrets within a private group class often gave students a sense of being special and select that was furthered along by their teacher. Yogi Wassan’s classes wore a special robe of seven colors that he described as “the Flag of the Rajah Yoga System,” claimed to help them develop an auric “inner robe” and connect them to their teacher.<sup>13</sup> Several teachers would give initiations and transfer spiritual power to students and members of their private classes, including Bhagat Singh Thind, Deva Ram Sukul, and Hazrat Ali. There were often activities that were reserved for a select few among a teacher’s inner circle of dedicated students, such as the aforementioned Spiritualistic trance-meetings held by Baba Bharati after his arrival in New York.

Members of a yoga teacher’s inner circle would sometimes enter forms of official and unofficial monasticism and dedicate themselves to the teacher’s mission or organization. There were also the few students who were crucial parts of a teacher’s operation, such as the affluent patrons of teachers and those who served as local

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<sup>11</sup> See “Cult Leaders Are Taken in Raids.” *San Antonio Light*, 17 July 1927; “Hindu Philosopher Jailed as Vagrant.” *Oakland Tribune*, 24 March 1933; “Warrant Issued in Feud of Seer and Seer’s Foe.” *Chicago Tribune*, 16 February 1934.

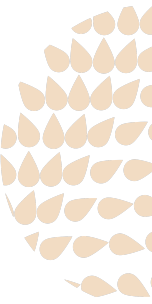
<sup>12</sup> Letter from Mrs. M. MacDowell to Deva Ram Sukul, 11 January 1935 (Louise Evans Papers, M1135, Box 12).


<sup>13</sup> Referenced in Yogi Wassan’s privately printed and undated *Rajah Yoga Book*, page 5. Collection of the Author.

administrators, organizers, and bookkeepers for the teacher's activities in a particular location. Finally, it is worth considering the relationships that developed within reading audiences of books and mail order lessons during this time. While they could not know of one another like groups who attended in-person classes, many people were profoundly influenced by printed matter, and yogic books and monthly lessons were often written in a direct, personal style to mimic a personal relationship.

Numerous works published in the early-twentieth century, both in India and America, gave readers surveys of the swamis and yoga teachers in the United States. Some would include "the swamis and yogis" as a category in pieces on South Asian immigrants in America (Sing 1908; Mukerji 1908; Dayal 1911; Fieldbrave 1934; Bagchi 1936). Other pieces were dedicated to the swamis and yogis and written for a curious general public, Christians concerned about an influx of Asian and heretical beliefs, or intrigued metaphysical audiences (Ellinwood 1901; Roy 1910; Thomas 1930; Sorabji 1932; Ferguson 1936; Bomar 1937; Lieb 1939). Often the authors of these surveys would make divisions among them. On one side there were those that they saw as legitimate, cultured, and well-intentioned teachers that were part of well-known organizations (usually including the Vedanta Society), published books, and gave lectures. On the other side were the imposters who were seen as opportunists looking to make money from American naivety and fascination with the mystical and supernatural. The largest estimate of these surveys came from the missionary Theodore Fieldbrave who in an accounting of "East Indians in North America" for *The Missionary Review of the World* in 1934 estimated that there were "about 25 or 30" Hindu Swamis and Yogis (Fieldbrave 1934, 291), but even the largest accounts of the yogis and swamis in America still vastly underestimated their numbers and had difficulty accounting for those outside immediately recognized institutions.

Swami Vivekananda and his heirs in the Vedanta Society produced the earliest and most long-running influx of teachers from India starting in the late-nineteenth century. By 1933, the Vedanta Society of Chicago listed over twenty: eleven who went to the United States and had either died or returned to India, and ten others who were active in American centers at the time of publication (Vedanta Society 1933, 63). There were numerous teachers beyond Vivekananda's Vedanta Society in the United States between the turn of the century and the First World War. In 1902, the Krishna devotee Premananda Baba Bharati arrived in New York and Swami Ram Tirtha, a Punjabi teacher of Vedanta, arrived on the West Coast. During his visits, Bharati acquired dozens of dedicated students, published a book titled *Sree Krishna Lord of Love*, edited the magazines *Light of India* and *East-West*, and founded the first American Krishna temple in Los Angeles (Carney 1998). Tirtha lectured in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and





Minneapolis, and founded a society to help sponsor Indian students to American universities (Rinehardt 1999; Dobe 2015). In 1906, A.K. Mozumdar founded the Society of Christian Yoga in Spokane, Washington, Sakharam Ganesh Pandit began teaching yoga to Chicago audiences, first under the auspices of the Theosophical Society and later of his own “School of Applied Philosophy and Oriental Psychology,” and the scandal-plagued Sri Agamya Guru Paramahansa, alternately known as “The Tiger Mahatma,” arrived in New York City.

The high-water mark for teachers of yoga in early-twentieth century America was the period between the two world wars. The largest category were the independent teachers who travelled during the interwar decades including: Yacki Raizizun, Swami Omkar, Ramchandra Dhondurao Shelke (Yogi Ramchandra), Sant Ram Mandal, Rishi Krishnananda, Raimohan Dutta, Jogesh Misrow, Pundit Acharya, Swami Bhagwan Bissessar, Nand Kavi, and Maneck Anklessaria. Yogananda, who arrived in the United States in 1920, relied on a revolving group of affiliates dubbed by the *Los Angeles Times* as a “bank of swamis” that helped to represent and maintain his Yogoda and later Self-Realization Fellowship organizations and centers across the country for the first few decades after his arrival.<sup>14</sup> These early affiliates, who all eventually disavowed Yogananda or left his organizations to work independently, included: Sri Das, Yogi Khagen, Deva Ram Sukul, Sri Nerode, and Swami Dhirananda. There were also at least eight noteworthy Punjabi Sikh yoga teachers: Wassan Singh, Bhagwan Singh Gyanee, Rishi Singh Gherwal, Bhagat Singh Thind, Sadhu Balwant Singh Gherwal, Pritam Singh Gill, Hari Singh, and lastly, Mohan Singh, who toured the country as Yogi Hari Rama (Deslippe 2016). Finally, there were the teachers who arrived between the Second World War and the mid-sixties and taught a more posture-based practice while remaining more fixed to specific cities, such as Sachin Majumdar and Swami Kailashananda (also known as Yogi Gupta), who were both based out of New York City.

The question of how many yoga teachers were active during this time is deceptively simple, and the answer depends on how one defines yoga and what one considers to be legitimate. Indian-born teachers of yoga ordained and deputized scores of their America-born students to teach in their place and represent them. Yogi Hari Rama, who toured across the United States in a single three-and-a-half-year loop, created the Benares League of America to exist in his absence and authorized thirteen of his American students to lead it and teach his techniques of Super Yoga Science. Many Americans, particularly in the realms of the occult and New Thought, felt unencumbered by their lack of Indian *bona fides*, and wrote, lectured, and taught

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<sup>14</sup> “Swamis Accuse Each Other in Legal Battle.” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 May 1935: 30.

extensively on their concepts of yoga. They not only appealed to the same audiences served by Indian-born teachers, but there was also no clear boundary separating the two. Joseph Alter described the American author William Walker Atkinson, who wrote over a dozen popular books on yoga under the pseudonym Yogi Ramacharaka, as “the most notable” of the “pretenders of various sorts” during this time, but also admitted that “there is little that clearly distinguished [Indian-born Shri] Yogendra’s writing from the likes of Atkinson” (Alter 2014, 68). In fact, there was so little to distinguish the pseudonymous writings of Atkinson that Yogendra’s Indian-born contemporaries in the United States sold and even personally inscribed copies of his Yogi Ramacharaka books to their own students, and several more presented the Ramacharaka exercises as ancient yogic wisdom or their own teachings.<sup>15</sup>


The example of Shri Yogendra allows for another awkward juxtaposition between the yoga deemed true and authentic and performative stage magic. Early in his sojourn to the United States, Yogendra gave several performances of yogic power to educated, medical audiences in New York that consisted of such feats as stopping his watch, emitting light from his fingers, and controlling the organs and involuntarily functions of his body (Rodrigues 1997, 96–97). He was far from alone. Through the first half of yoga’s history in the United States there were similar performances that were often indistinguishable from acts done by magicians in theatres and on vaudeville stages. A few decades before Yogendra, the American Pierre Bernard who was later known as “The Omnipotent Oom,” made a debut of his claimed yogic power in 1898 to a similar audience in San Francisco by entering an anesthetic trance state he called “Kali Mudra,” stopping his heartbeat, and having his body skewered with needles.<sup>16</sup> Three decades after Yogendra’s performances, an Indian magician named Yogi Rao came to the United States, established his yogic credentials by eating glass, nails, and poison, and rapidly acquired a cache of wealthy and famous students in Hollywood (Deslippe 2015). Many

<sup>15</sup> Sant Ram Mandal signed a copy of an edition of the Bhagavad Gita edited by Atkinson as Yogi Ramacharaka in May of 1936. A series of invoices from the Yogi Publication Society held in the Louise Evans Papers shows Deva Ram Sukul to have purchased over 740 copies of Yogi Ramacharaka titles at wholesale from 1947–1954. The title of Atkinson’s first book as Yogi Ramacharaka, *The Hindu-Yogi Science of Breath* can be found in the titles of lectures given by Rishi Singh Gherwal and Yogi Khagen, and exercises from the Yogi Ramacharaka books can be found reproduced in published works by A.P. Mukerji and Swami Bhagwan Bissessar.

<sup>16</sup> Despite the credulous accounting of Bernard’s biographer Robert Love (2010, 19–21), the technique of “stopping one’s heart” is well known to stage magicians and is accomplished by placing balled-up fabric under the right armpit and cutting off circulation to the right arm, where the pulse is slightly weaker than the left arm under normal circumstances, and photos of the fully-clothed Bernard in Kali Mudra show the medical observers to be taking his pulse from his right wrist.



yoga teachers did not perform magical acts themselves, but cited them as evidence of yogic power to their students and reading audiences.



There were also vast numbers of other kinds of magicians — fortune tellers, Spiritualists, palm readers, clairvoyants, psychics, and crystal ball-gazers — who took on the guise and titles of Hindu wonder-workers. They appear in the classified advertisements in newspapers through the early twentieth century, and by the dozen in several major cities such as Chicago. The swami as fortune teller was by far the dominant perception Americans held of yogis and Hindu holy men, and the image of the turbaned crystal gazer can be found throughout cinema, cartoons, pulp fiction, advertisements, and material culture well through the middle of the century. Dovetailing with this perception, African American folk magic, or Hoodoo, was presented in no small part as East Indian magic for several decades in the wake of the Great Migration in storefront churches, candle shops, and mail order businesses in several Northern urban centers (Deslippe 2014). The fortune-telling swamis and yogis vastly outnumbered their more respectable counterparts and created the dominant public perception that they had to operate within and often struggle against. More intriguingly, upon close scrutiny, many of the more respectable teachers of yoga who openly gave learned lectures and published books to the public, engaged in the same disreputable and magical practices of their counterparts when ministering to small, private groups of their students.

### **Turbaned Profits and the Profession of Yogic Faith**

There was a great diversity of religious affiliations among Indian-born teachers of early American yoga that makes clear that it was not simply a set of transplanted Hindu ideas and practices. In addition to the large number of Sikh yoga teachers, there was the Christian A.K. Mozumdar, the Zoroastrian Maneck Anklessaria, Buddhists such as Dayananda Priyadarsi and Jayaputra H. Grairo, the Jain Virchand R. Gandhi, and several Muslim teachers such as Hazrat Ismet Ali. More important were the numerous commonalities among them, to the extent that they could be thought of as a type. Nearly to a person, they were well-educated, middle-class to affluent, familiar with the West, proficient if not fluent in English, and came to the United States from the band across northern India — from the Punjab through Delhi and into Bengal — with the

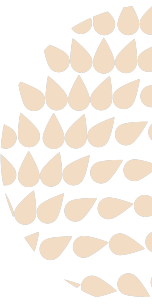
strongest imprint of the colonial British presence.<sup>17</sup> As one article from 1901 noted of the “Indian Swamis” present at the time (and accurately foretold of those to come), “They have all received an English education, and speak the language perfectly; they have lived under English laws and institutions” (Ellinwood 1901, 102). A later survey for *The Modern Review* of India lumped swamis, “itinerant teachers of Indian philosophy,” and fortune tellers under the category of “Educated Indians in America” (Sing 1908, 313 and 311).

A cultured, learned background was not just a prerequisite to carry out the lecturing, writing, and organizational work of a yoga teacher in the United States, but also to engage with the middle-class students and affluent patrons that comprised their base of support. As much as they carried the mystique of Metaphysical Asia, Indian-born yoga teachers also needed a familiarity with everything from the Bible and medical science to American popular culture and daily life as points of comparison and entry for their teaching. The backgrounds of various teachers also help to explain their particular teaching styles and outputs within the flexible definitions of yoga at the time. The steady written output during Baba Bharati’s time in America (a book, a novel, and a magazine) and Bhagat Singh Thind’s pattern of giving scores of lectures in each city he stayed in make sense in light of Bharati’s past as a journalist and editor in India, and Thind’s claimed doctorate in philosophy from the University of California at Berkeley. Both Bhagwan Singh Gyanee and Yogi Wassan were products of Northern Indian wrestling culture, and so it follows that there would be a strong, physical element within their yogic teachings, including calisthenics and body-building exercises (Alter 1992; Johnston 2014, 47).<sup>18</sup>


It was not only common for teachers to use their secular pasts in India in the service of teaching yoga once in the United States, but also for many South Asian immigrants to switch from secular to spiritual employment once in the United States. Sant Ram Mandal transitioned from a graduate degree in mathematics from UC Berkeley in 1922,

<sup>17</sup> In light of this, and what appear to be a complete absence of translators for Indian-born yoga teachers in the United States during this time, the distinction Mark Singleton made of “Anglophone yoga” seems even more significant. English was not just the medium of modern yoga texts and instruction, but was a critical dividing line between those who left to teach yoga outside of India and those who stayed within India. Many, including Cornelia Sorabji (1932), saw such division with the English language, casting doubt on the cosmopolitan teachers in “Further England” and contrasting them with the “truly holy Hindu spiritual leaders” who “do not cross the waters, and do not speak the English language.”

<sup>18</sup> Yogi Wassan led a clinic on “the holds of the Hindu wrestlers” for the wrestling team at the University of Nebraska in 1939 and “matched his wrestling skill with much younger opponents.” See “Hindu, Over 70, Has Remarkable Strength.” *Lincoln Star*, 6 February 1939.







to several decades as a travelling yoga teacher and lecturer, eventually settling in New York City as an acclaimed fortune teller. Upon his death in 1962, he was eulogized by *The New York Times* as “Broadway’s Hindu Astrologer.” Basudeb Bhattacharya, better known as Pundit Acharya, had a capricious life in America that began with a spell as Ruth St. Dennis’ dance partner and included work as a poet and playwright, lecturer, publisher of *Yogas* magazine and books on *prāṇāyāma*, and seller of women’s beauty products. Two men who arrived separately in the United States as commercial agents to sell tea to Americans — Jayaputra H. Grairo and Deva Ram Sukul — reinvented themselves as yoga teachers, the former as an occasional lecturer to branches of the Theosophical Society and revealer “of the Yoga Mysteries” to general audiences, and the latter for several decades as the head of his Yoga Institute of America.<sup>19</sup> Two members of the Ghadar Party — Sukumar Chatterji and Bhagwan Singh Gyanee — turned to the teaching of yoga after a wave of arrests and a massive trial in 1917 derailed their efforts towards overthrowing British rule in India (Hackett 2012, 49-51; Deslippe 2016). Yogi Wassan had been in the Pacific Northwest working as a laborer in lumber mills for nearly fifteen years before he began to travel and offer audiences “the secret key of yoga philosophy.”<sup>20</sup>

While many South Asian immigrants made long-term shifts from secular to spiritual occupations, others became yoga teachers as more of a type of temporary employment, and they assumed the role for only a few years or even a few months. Ramchandra Dhondurao Shelke, who immigrated to the United States from Kolhapur, Maharashtra, in 1914 to study at the University of Pittsburgh and worked as an electrical engineer, recast himself as “Yogi Ramchandra of Himalaya Mountains, India” for about three years during the beginning of the Great Depression and toured the Midwest as a lecturer, healer, astrologer, and metaphysician. Around the same time, Raimohan Dutt who came to the University of California at Berkeley in 1908 and wrote on Asian politics for the magazine *The Arena*, tied a turban, put on robes, and toured the Pacific Northwest as a swami from 1928 to 1931, offering classes and lectures on “Secrets Never Before Revealed” and “Super-Psychology.” Swami Bhagwan Bissessar worked as a travelling lecturer and teacher during the late-twenties and early-thirties only to take a decade off, and then travel again for several years after the Second World War with much of the same material under the name Mahasiddha Satchitananda.

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<sup>19</sup> See Display Ad. *Saint Louis Post Dispatch*, 16 January 1927.

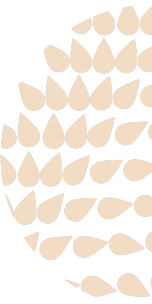
<sup>20</sup> See Display Ad. *The Oregon Daily Journal*, 27 March 1921.



While conventional scholarly wisdom sees a lack of yoga in early-twentieth century America, suggesting that restrictive immigration policies kept South Asian yoga teachers out of the country, there was a wealth of South Asian immigrants turned yoga teachers precisely because laws and policies kept them in. In the wake of Bhagat Singh Thind's 1923 case for citizenship in front of the Supreme Court, where it was ruled that Indians were not white and therefore not eligible for American citizenship, a wave of denaturalization efforts among South Asians ensued. Immigrants from India had to renounce their previous loyalties as British subjects to become naturalized Americans, and denaturalization made them "men without a country," without any citizenship and unable to enter any country if they left the United States. Others that were involved in the Ghadar Party and radical politics feared imprisonment or worse if they returned to India. South Asians in the United States were not only ineligible for citizenship, but a host of laws and informal prejudices left many of them underemployed and unable to buy land or own property.

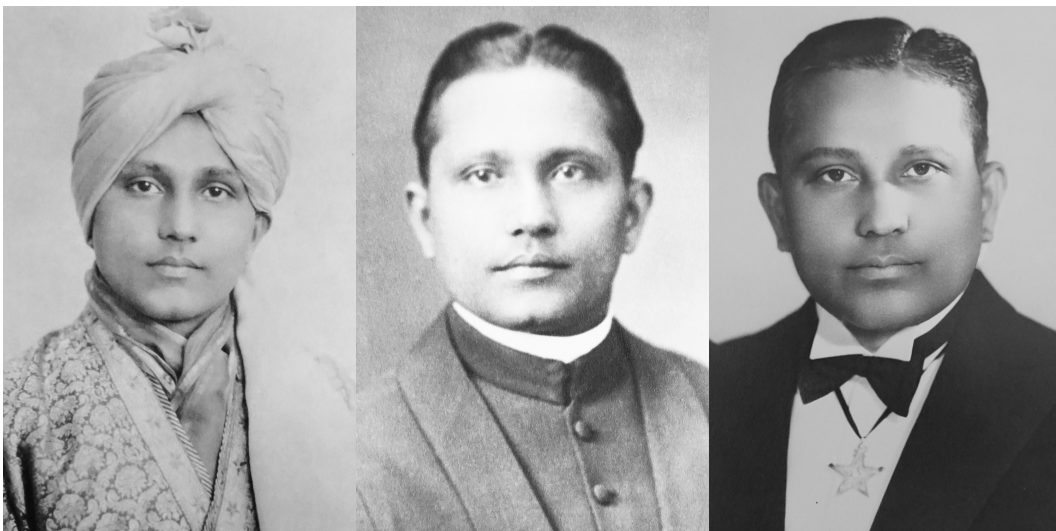
With very few South Asians in the country and numerous fantastic tales of Hindu wonder-workers, it was possible for educated South Asian immigrants to adopt the career of a yogi, swami, or supernatural wonder-worker. Many Americans assumed that anyone from India that they met had occult powers or was a mystical adept, and a recurring motif in the memoirs of Indian immigrants was falling into the role of a Spiritualist medium, swami, or fortune teller through happenstance (Mukerji 1923, 283-297; Shridharani 1941, 88-108). The peripatetic nature of teaching meant that a prospective yoga teacher did not need much material to operate, only a handful of lectures and private lessons that could be reused on fresh audiences in each new city who as a rule knew far less of India than the speaker. The move to this new livelihood often took little more than an outfit and nerve. B.K. Bagchi's 1936 survey of teachers in the United States for the *Indian Modern Review* synthesized the reality of "vulgarized" philosophy for profit by saying, "Privately some of the lesser Yogis and teachers — especially those who have passed the stage of fooling themselves — are perfectly frank about it. But they say, 'What can we do? Americans have shut off all sources of income from us beyond the level of unskilled labor — and even that is often inaccessible — because we are foreigners. We have to live!'" (Bagchi 1936, 169).

While it is unclear exactly how much money most yoga teachers made, the fact that dozens of yoga teachers continued their profession for decades makes it clear that it was a viable career for many of them. Theodore Fieldbrave simply described the majority of swamis and yogis during the interwar decades as engaging in "this profession for what they can get out of it" (Fieldbrave 1934, 293), and there is an abundance of evidence that shows yoga teachers to be professionals who consciously



marketed themselves with savvy. There is, of course, nothing new about people earning a living from religious or spiritual work, and R. Laurence Moore has noted well that there was a long and deep history in the United States of religious organizations “establish[ing] themselves in the forms of commercial culture” (Moore 1994, 5), but the profession of yoga undercuts notions of strongly held spiritual mission on the part of the bulk of teachers. It also marks the type of profound changes that the guru-student relationship underwent in modernity and outside of India (Singleton and Goldberg 2014, 1-14). The marketing of yoga during this time further shows how dependent teachers were on their students, and how strong was their need to make themselves appealing and recognizable to their audiences, despite portraying themselves and being seen by others as figures of power and holders of secret wisdom.

The form of the travelling yoga teacher was itself a repeated act of promotion and marketing, as public lectures were given and advertised to draw large crowds from which paying students could be procured. Yogis and swamis published testimonials, used posed photographic portraits in advertisements, and wore striking outfits in lectures and classes that were well-noted by observers. When the careers of individual teachers are traced, we see them steadily refining their images over time, and in some cases, specifically to different audiences (Fig. 4). They changed their names, added titles and degrees, shifted their places of origin, and adjusted the claims they made about their practices. From the few cases where their papers were preserved in an institutional archive or an informal, familial collection, it is clear that yoga teachers



**Figure 4:** Portraits of Deva Ram Sukul as Hindu Yogi, Vedanta-Style Swami, and Western Occultist, Circa 1926. (Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.)

held onto the books, pamphlets, and advertisements of their peers, and that they diligently took notice of what their competitors were doing. There is abundant evidence that they took similar notice of metaphysical practices in America such as New Thought. The poaching of such practices by Indian-born yoga teachers was so pronounced that many observers hesitated to call the yoga offered in America Indian, such as Wendell Thomas and Cornelia Sorabji, who respectively offered that, “To a large extent, Hinduism in America is American Hinduism,” and “these swamis enter Hinduism via America. They tell Americans what they would like to hear” (Thomas 1930, 245; Sorabji 1932, 370).

The numerous similarities between yoga teachers in their models of teaching and travelling, the presentation and content of their instruction, and even their choices of venue were not coincidental. If the teaching of yoga was a profession, then the teachers of yoga could collectively be considered at times as a type of professional network or guild. Letters, candid photographs, and inscribed copies of books all point to a web of personal connections between Indian-born yoga teachers in America. They would often assist one another, as when Deva Ram Sukul and Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer exchanged their respective mailing lists from at least five different cities in 1934 and passed along information about the audiences and markets in other locations.<sup>21</sup> Deva Ram Sukul also seems to have traded mailing lists with Bhagat Singh Thind — which would make sense of Thind’s comment to Frederick Lieb about his fellow “Hindu lecturers” that “we exchange addresses and things like that” (Lieb 1939, 41) — and towards the end of his life Thind literally handed his manual of breathing exercises over to his friend Sadhu Balwant Singh Grewal so that he could teach in his place. Occasionally teachers would hold joint events, like when Rishi Singh Gherwal and Bhagat Singh Thind lectured together at a dinner for Gherwal’s students in Chicago, or when Deva Ram Sukul presided over a joint dinner with his students and the local members of the Yogoda Society in Cincinnati.<sup>22</sup>


In the absence of personal ties and a spirit of mutual benefit, yoga teachers were often in competition with one another for the same audiences and pools of students. In display advertisements, magazines, and promotional pamphlets, many teachers would

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<sup>21</sup> See Letter from Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer to Deva Ram Sukul, 2 October 1934 (Louise Evans Papers, M1135, Box 23); and Letter from Deva Ram Sukul to Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer, October 1934 (Louise Evans Papers, M1135, Box 23).

<sup>22</sup> “Splendid Chicago Group.” *India’s Message*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (July and August 1931): 18; Letter from Maitre d’Hotel of the Hotel Gibson to Students of Deva Ram Sukul, dated 12 February 1931 (Louise Evans Papers, M1135, Box 21, Folder 4-1).





compare their classes and teachings to their competition and reprint testimonials from students attesting to their superiority. Movement of students from one teacher to another was common, and from published and archival material, as well as the public profiles of a few famous and notable students, we have evidence of such shifting allegiances.<sup>23</sup> It was also not uncommon for teachers to pilfer another's material as their own, and there are some graphics and practices that can be seen passing through three or four different teachers. The exemplar of the rough and tumble nature of early American yoga's competitive side was Yogi Hari Rama who in his brief career respectively stole the writing, exercises, and graphics of Swami Ram Tirtha, Yogananda, and Yogi Wassan. After Yogi Hari Rama disappeared, there were requitals with Yogananda, Yogi Wassan, and Rishi Singh Gherwal, with each making attempts to court and win over his former students.<sup>24</sup> Teachers were in a very real and practical sense selling themselves, and their students were both a market and also their customers.

As the popularity of yoga in the United States has surged in the last fifteen years, numerous surveys have been conducted by researchers and periodicals such as *Yoga Journal* creating a detailed portrait of contemporary yoga practitioners, based on tens of thousands of surveys and direct interviews.<sup>25</sup> At first glance, it would appear that reconstructing a comparable portrait of early American yoga's audiences from almost a century ago would be a difficult task, but through a combination of primary sources, archival materials, and reportage, a clear and consistent picture can emerge. This article uses a second set of original data I have compiled from records of forty-nine events in thirty-one cities led by six different teachers — Bhagat Singh Thind, Deva Ram Sukul, Bhagwan Singh Gyane, Yogi Wassan, Sri Nerode, and Yogananda — over a

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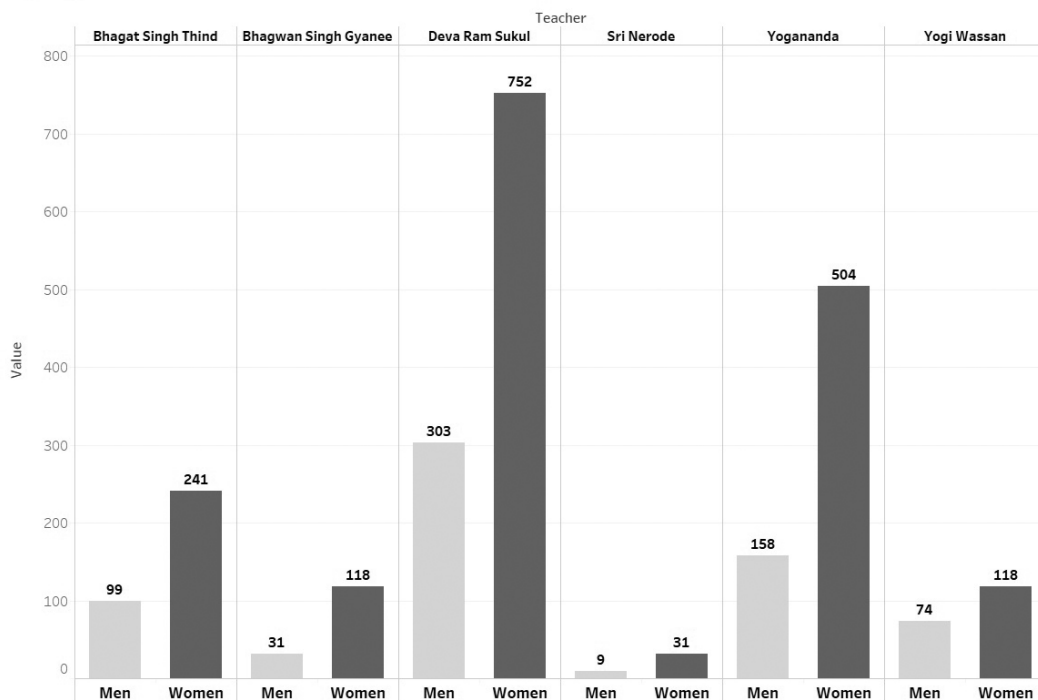
<sup>23</sup> As one example, from directories and mailing lists there are records of several students who helped to run Yogananda's Yogoda centers in 1933 in Cleveland, Minneapolis, and Pittsburgh taking classes with Deva Ram Sukul several years later.

<sup>24</sup> For Yogananda, see "Noted Musicians Delight Audience." *East-West Magazine*, Vol. 4, Issue 1 (January 1929); For Yogi Wassan, see Display Ad. *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), 13 September 1941; For Rishi Singh Gherwal, see Promotional Pamphlet for Classes for July 1930 (Louise Evans Papers, M1135, Box 38); "Students Enthusiastic." *India's Message*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (May and June 1931): 24; "Former President of Benares League." *India's Message*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (July 1932): 20-21.

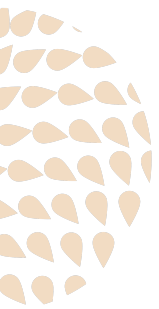
<sup>25</sup> See *Yoga Journal's* media kits for the years 2013-2016 and their "Yoga in America" market studies for the years 2008, 2012, and 2016.

fourteen-year period from 1924 to 1938 that include a total of over 2,400 attendees.<sup>26</sup> The clearest records we have of early American yoga students are from private classes through two types of quantifiable sources that both allow for a precise tally of attendees: written records in archives such as mailing lists, class registers, and letters of appreciation signed by groups of students following the visit of a teacher, and group photographs that yoga teachers took with their students for documentary and promotional purposes. While not comprehensive or a conclusively representative sample, these visual and written records are large and robust, and like the data on the location of yoga classes, can be paired with other evidence to make some well-supported claims (Fig. 5).

**Figure 5:**  
Graph of  
Approximately  
2,400 Attendees  
at Forty-nine  
Yoga Lectures  
and Classes Led  
by Six Different  
Teachers from  
1924-1938.  
(Created by  
Author with  
Tableau Public.)



<sup>26</sup> For Bhagat Singh Thind, materials include a photograph from a lecture (care of Thind's family) and a mailing list (Louise Evans Papers, M1135, Box 20); For Deva Ram Sukul, materials include mailing lists and receipts for 24 events, and letters of appreciation from nine different classes (Louise Evans Papers, M1135, Boxes 2, 18, 20, 29, 30); For Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer, materials include photographs from two classes (SAADA); For Yogi Wassan, materials include photographs of six classes (*Hindu System of Health Development*, *Saroda System*, and care of the Dallas Public Library); For Sri Nerode, materials include letter of appreciation from students in Houston (care of Nerode's family); For Yogananda, materials include photographs from five different events (*East-West Magazine* and from branches of the Self-Realization Fellowship).



One of the strongest conclusions to be drawn from this data is the extent to which yoga students were overwhelmingly female.<sup>27</sup> Across locations, dates, and various teachers, women outnumbered men by a regular and consistent ratio of three-to-one.<sup>28</sup> These findings are supported by the observations of journalists and authors who attended classes as background research. In a chapter on the “Hindu Lecturers” for his book *Sight Unseen*, Frank Leib said “three-quarters of the audience” for the typical class of a yogi or swami “is made up of women” (Leib 1939, 43). Wendell Thomas’ book *Hinduism Invades America* similarly found through questionnaires, interviews, and attendance at events, that women outnumbered men three to one in both of his main case studies, the Vedanta Society and Yogananda’s Yogoda Society (Thomas 1930, 173).

Larger public lectures were more heterogeneously mixed, not just in terms of gender, but also in sympathies. Thomas also observed a less dramatic two-to-one ratio of women to men at larger events, a finding echoed by Charles Ferguson, who noted with surprise in his *Confusion of Tongues* that at a public lecture by Yogi Wassan in 1927 the audience was “rather well divided between men and women” (Ferguson 1936, 309). It would be simplistic to describe the audiences of large public lectures as a single unified consensus that affirmed the speaker and their teachings simply through their attendance. As David Walker has noted with regard to performances of Spiritualism in the late-nineteenth century, it is more realistic to see a diverse array of motivations bringing general audiences to the large public lectures of swamis and yoga teachers in the early-twentieth century (Walker 2013).

There is evidence that many of the attendees at a large and public yogic lecture saw these events as a curious spectacle or an evening’s entertainment. Throughout the 1920s, yoga teachers like Swami Omkar and Rishi Singh Gherwal had their lectures and classes listed in newspapers alongside advertisements such as vaudeville shows, movies, plays, and dances.<sup>29</sup> Some teachers apparently needed little more promotion than to be

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<sup>27</sup> And teachers of yoga were even more overwhelmingly male. While there were several female yoga teachers of note prior to the arrival of Indra Devi in 1947, the vast majority of teachers who taught professionally, travelled for long periods of time, and had large numbers of centers and students, were male. This makes sense considering the connection between South Asian migration and denaturalization and the teaching of yoga as a profession in the United States, and how that immigration was almost entirely closed off to women.

<sup>28</sup> One of the only comparable sources published in this period is a 1936 census of religious organizations conducted by the United States Department of Commerce that included self-reports from nine Vedanta centers, which showed that of 528 reporting members, 70% were female.

<sup>29</sup> See “Founder of Indian Mission Talks Here.” *Reading Times* (Pennsylvania), 26 January 1929; Display Ad. *Lincoln Evening Journal* (Nebraska), 24 November 1927.



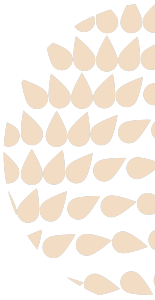
announced under the generic title of “Hindoo Yogi.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, one could trace the movement of yoga from the margins of American religious understanding towards its center through the placement of advertisements for yogis and swamis through the interwar decades: first from the entertainment section, then to the miscellaneous end of church notices, to finally becoming a category of their own in several major metropolitan areas. Some attendees saw a lecture as a place to critically examine something they were skeptical of, or an opportunity to validate and possibly express their prejudices and doubts. Ferguson noted an undercurrent of tension at a public lecture by Yogi Wassan in the late-1920s with “young intellectuals [...] anxious to be hostile” in the crowd, and a writer for the *New Yorker* who attended an introductory talk by Yogi Hari Rama observed the presence of the yogi’s hired security at the event, “adjusting windows and keeping an eye out for persons not of a sympathetic attitude” (Ferguson 1936, 309; Unknown 1928, 19).

The number of attendees at public lectures dropped considerably when a swami or yogi shifted towards a subsequent series of private classes. Several hundred people in a large hotel ballroom became several dozen people in a smaller demonstration room. The simplest filter between public lectures and private classes was the unspoken matter of cost. While the price of a series of private yoga classes was rarely published, research for this article has uncovered records for eight different class series during a several-year period in the late-1920s that suggest each class or evening in a series was approximately five dollars, or based on the average per income in America at the time, roughly the equivalent of the average American’s wages for a day. While books on yoga were comparatively inexpensive and financially democratic, to study directly with a teacher was costly, and those that did so were either affluent or dedicated enough to enroll at a significant financial sacrifice. This trend only strengthened when private classes turned into dyadic relationships, which from the limited records available were almost exclusively female.

It was within these private classes of instruction and occasional dyadic relationships that we approach a more homogenous and like-minded audience: more female, more affluent, and more committed to metaphysical beliefs. Clear divisions of dress during the period and the use of gendered titles make gender the most easily identifiable trait in available records, but traces of race and class can be seen in the sea of white faces in photographs and the frequent appearance of professional titles of Doctor and Esquire in mailing lists and class ledgers. This was true in a survey of religious organizations in

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<sup>30</sup> See Yogi Wassan as “Hindoo Yogi” in display ads from *Oregon Daily Journal* (Portland) from March to June 1921.





New York, where one writer described the audience at a meeting of the Vedanta Society led by Swami Nikhilananda as “predominantly white... and prosperous looking” (Bomar 1937, 137).

There were numerous and diverse attacks on yoga in the United States during the early-twentieth century, and they almost always held a similar understanding of who yoga students typically were. Humorous and mocking pieces used yoga to make fun of the perceived naivety of idle, society women, such as the pseudonymous column for *Life* magazine written by “Swami Baa Baa” in 1912, and a 1928 magazine piece article joked, “Follow these swamis an’ yogis [...] an’ you’ll find yourself at once in the very heart an’ center of the leisure class” (Uncle Henry [pseud.] 1928, 26). Sharper polemics against yoga portrayed South Asian yoga teachers alternately as Svengalis or con artists and saw them as a threat to the sanity, sanctity, and finances of white American women. The enormously influential 1911 piece “The Heathen Invasion” by Mabel Potter Daggett warned of American women losing their “fortunes and reason” at the hands of the “swarthy priests of the far East” who had penetrated American society “from Lake Shore Drive to Fifth Avenue and the Back Bay” (Daggett 1911, 399 and 400).

These attacks spoke to another deeper, counterintuitive truth that is also supported by archival data: despite the marginal position of South Asians in the United States during this time, yoga teachers counted some of the wealthiest, most famous, and most powerful Americans as their students, devotees, and patrons. Deva Ram Sukul counted among his students and those seeking his counsel the actress Mae West, Percy Rockefeller, Conrad Hilton, the president of the Hilton hotel chain, and the wife of Igor Sikorsky, the man who created the first working helicopter.<sup>31</sup> In a matter of only a few months in Los Angeles, Yogi Rao was able to count several movie stars and Doris Duke and Barbara Hutton, literally two of the richest women in world, as his devoted students (Deslippe 2015).

## Conclusion and Epilogue

Data from existing archival sources aligns with the body of reportage and provides a solid and evidence-supported model for the first half of yoga’s history in the United States — from the end of the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century — that challenges many scholarly assumptions of a limited, and empty yogic landscape. Early American

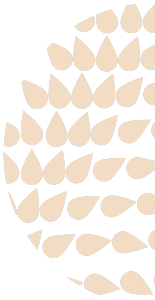
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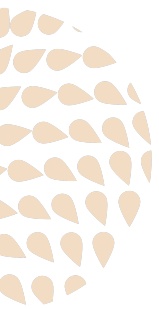
<sup>31</sup> See Postcard from Mae West in Louise Evans Papers (M1135 Box 9, Folder 7); Letter from Conrad Hilton (M1135, Box 15, Folder 6); Letter to Percy Rockefeller (M1135, Box 31, Folder 5); and Receipt from Mrs. Igor Sikorsky (M1135, Box 29, Folder 4).

yoga was a vibrant and often crowded world in which largely mental and magical forms of yoga were offered to an American public by teachers who travelled throughout the country giving tiered instruction through public lectures, private classes, and personal services. Indian-born teachers were largely not mystical missionaries, nor were they kept out of the country, as much as they were educated and urbane persons who often opportunistically became travelling yoga teachers as immigration laws and policy rendered them immobile and without opportunities. Teachers knew one another personally or at a distance, and either openly shared or covertly stole teaching materials, students, and other resources as they marketed themselves to American metaphysical audiences as a livelihood and profession.

While this model of yoga and type of teacher dominated the first half of yoga's history in the United States, historical accountings of it have often been fixed on select individuals and recognizable organizations, methods, and output. It is worth questioning to what degree scholarship on modern yoga has been dependent, perhaps unconsciously, on notions of authenticity that are tied to romantic assumptions about race, religious descent, geographic origins, and artificially neat distinctions between East and West. There has yet to be an adequate reckoning of who and what existed outside of this model during this time: American-born teachers of yoga, forms of thaumaturgic or wonder-working yoga, the numerous levels of secrecy and dissimulation, the complex and multi-faceted identities of teachers, and those who deliberately and disingenuously took on the guise of a yogi or swami for material gain. In his work on the history of Vedanta in the United States, Carl T. Jackson suggested that in order to understand why some Hindu teachers succeeded in America and others failed, it is necessary to deemphasize ideas of individual charisma and move towards a focus on structures and organization (Jackson 1994). I suggest that yoga's early history in the United States becomes more legible through a model that attends to a detailed understanding of individual yoga teachers and students, places them within the larger social contexts in which they operated, and holds a wide understanding of what can be considered yoga.

While religion and religious movements cannot be reduced to discrete entities and quantifiable data, the data that exists on the first half of yoga's history in the United States further enjoins a reconsideration of how this history could be emplotted and understood. As stated in the introduction, the figures of Swami Vivekananda and Yogananda are the two most commonly used figures — often the only figures in brief accounts — used to narrate this early history, but this historiographical significance is not reflected in a comparable presence during the same time. The figures for membership in the Vedanta Society for the first four decades after Swami





Vivekananda's arrival are miniscule. Census figures from 1916 and 1926 show that more Americans were killed by lightning strikes than were members of the Vedanta Society in a given year during that time.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the Vedanta Society and Yogananda's nascent organizational structures were smaller, often dramatically so, than many of their travelling yogic contemporaries. In early 1927, Deva Ram Sukul had centers in fourteen cities, while Yogananda had eight centers in seven cities.<sup>33</sup> In 1933, the Benares League of America had forty-six centers in the United States, almost double the combined total of Vedanta's ten and Yogananda's fourteen centers.<sup>34</sup>

There are several possible explanations for this inversion, i.e. that figures such as Vivekananda and Yogananda are common referents in histories of early modern yoga in America while we see very little of the likes of Yogi Hari Rama and Deva Ram Sukul. The most practical may be the interrelated matters of archives, preservation, and organization. Vivekananda and Yogananda created organizations that lasted far beyond their founders, and generated a wealth of material from lectures, periodicals, books, and correspondence, which has been widely disseminated and preserved. In contrast, few of the travelling yoga teachers created organizations that lasted, and relatively few of their materials have been preserved in archives. Further, there is the matter of relevance. Groups like the Benares League and the Yoga Institute of America, both long-extinct and forgotten, offered radically different types of yoga than the current popular forms of postural practice. As for Vivekananda, he was the heir to a kind of tertiary myth-making, where his time in America helped create his legendary status in India, which in part helped to place him within the history of American yoga over the last several decades. Likewise, for those who knew the India-oriented spiritual seeker milieu in which, as Lola Williamson (2010, 138) astutely noted, Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* was almost universally read, it would have been obvious to include him in that same history. Their spreading and enduring fame may have overshadowed, perhaps unjustly, some of their colleagues.

<sup>32</sup> 1916 saw 190 Vedanta Society members and 337 lightning strike fatalities, 1926 respectively saw 200 and 364. Figures from Veysey, Laurence R. 1978. *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Communities in Twentieth Century America*, 212. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; and Lopez, Raul E. and Ronald L. Holle. 1997. "Changes in the Number of Lightning Deaths in the United States during the Twentieth Century." *Journal of Climate*, 11 (August 1998): 2071.

<sup>33</sup> See "Yoga Nawajivan Centers." *Practical Yoga*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 1927): 19; "Directory of Yogoda Sat-Sanga Centers." *East West*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (May 1927): 27.

<sup>34</sup> See Vedanta Society of Chicago's *Hinduism Comes to America*: 63; "Directory of Yogoda Sat-Sanga Centers." *East-West*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (January 1933): 30; and "Do You Know." Pamphlet for A. William Goetz and the Benares League of America, circa 1932 (collection of the Author).

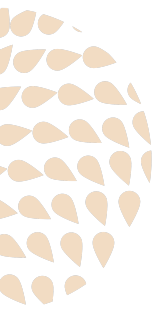
One of the biggest points of emplotment in the history of modern yoga is Swami Vivekananda's opening lecture at the World's Parliament of Religion in 1893, commonly imagined as being both enthusiastically received by an enraptured audience and singular to the event, which then situates him and his speech as a unique, historical watershed moment and an opening stanza for yoga in America. But only a few pages away from the textual source of the well-worn accounting of Vivekananda addressing the "sisters and brothers of America" to "a peal of applause that lasted for several minutes" is the mention of the now-forgotten Chinese representative of Confucianism, Pung Kwang Yu, who similarly received an "outburst of applause [that] continued for several minutes," and there was also an accounting of Vivekananda's final lecture in which "very little approval was shown to some of the sentiments expressed" (Barrows 1893, 101, 115, and 171). Vivekananda shared the stage in Chicago with Virchand R. Gandhi, who also wrote and lectured on yoga (and was described by the *Buffalo Courier* as being "of all Eastern scholars [...] listened to with the greatest interest and attention"), as well as with Protap Chunder Mozoomdar of the Brahmo Samaj, who a decade earlier in 1883 lectured on "Yoga and Bhakti" in Cambridge, Massachusetts on his first tour of the United States.<sup>35</sup>

While it is possible to mark Mozoomdar's lecture as a more exact beginning of yoga in America — an Indian on American soil explicitly lecturing on the topic — it would also be simplistic. Just as understandings of yoga or catalogues of yoga teachers are fraught and dependent on definitions and terms, so is the assigning of authenticity or primacy. Vivekananda did not arrive to teach yoga *deus ex machina* to American audiences, but arrived in an America that already had numerous ideas of what yoga and yogis were that had been circulating for decades through everything from performances of stage magic to missionary accounts. As suggested by a biographer of Swami Paramananda, it may also be simplistic to equate the Vedanta Society in America with Vivekananda, who in his writings admits to being uninterested and incapable of administration, with Swami Abhedananda being the one responsible for organizing the Vedanta Society in America and securing its longevity (Levinsky 1984, 84-86).

One surprising first that may be attributed to Vivekananda is that of earliest teacher of postural forms of yoga in the United States. Mark Singleton has argued that Vivekananda was opposed to *haṭhayoga*, including *āsana* practice, based upon statements found in his *Rāja Yoga* (1896) and a talk he gave in San Francisco in 1900 (Singleton 2010: 70-75), but a nearly-full page article in the 27 March, 1898 issue of the

<sup>35</sup> Referenced in Mullick, Sunrit. 2010. *The First Hindu Mission to America: The Pioneering Visits of Protap Chunder Mozoomdar*, 231. New Delhi: Northern Book Centre.





*New York Herald* titled “Balm of the Orient is Bliss-Inspiring Yoga” suggests that some of Vivekananda’s students were in fact being taught yoga postures. One of his earliest and closest students, Leon Landsberg (by then renamed “Swami Kripananda”) demonstrated several poses for the *Herald* reporter, wrote a small supplementary piece, and was clearly the major source for the unnamed reporter. The article explicitly states that Swami Vivekananda taught yogic *āsanas* to his students: “He instructed them in the preliminary steps. He explained to them various strange postures which they must assume [...]” and “Mayurasana, Padmasana, Viparitakarani, Paschimasana, Kukkutasana, Gomukhasana” as well as “gazing at the tip of the nose” are all represented in the accompanying caricatural illustrations. It is important to note that, seemingly, the 1898 *Herald* images are the earliest visual evidence we have of westerners practicing postural and meditative forms of yoga (Fig. 6).

The postures and practices shown in the images and discussed in the two *Herald* articles seem indeed to be primarily *haṭha*-inspired. And in fact we know that in late-December of 1895, while working on the *Rāja Yoga* lectures which would eventually be turned into the homonymous book, Vivekananda wrote to his Theosophist collaborator E.T. Sturdy and requested “the originals” of a series of texts including the “*Hatha-Yoga-Pradipikā* and *Shiva-Samhitā*” (Vivekananda 1992 [1895], 361). A passage written in 1900 by the American occultist Ida Craddock provides further evidence of the Swami’s active diffusion of *haṭhayoga* teachings: “I have been shown a book which (Vivekananda) was said to have circulated privately among his more advanced disciples in Chicago [...] It is called *The Esoteric Science and Philosophy of the Tantras, Shiva Samhita*.”<sup>36</sup> This passage also confirms the existence of different levels of teachings. Tiered instruction would seem to have been a feature of not just the travelling yoga teachers of the interwar decades, but a part of yoga in America from the outset, and perhaps was a common necessity of teachers who, without widespread institutional or societal support, were dependent to a large degree on the desires and expectations of their patrons and students.

A 1991 article in *Yoga Journal* reflected on Yogananda as “an exceptionally whole and forceful personality with apparently none of the flaws that have involved other Eastern gurus in scandal or ignominy when they encountered the classic temptations of the West” (Miller 1991, 60). But from a host of records including newspaper articles, court documents, and correspondence between British intelligence officers in the United States, it seems clear that the “whole personality” was incredibly aware of his business, his celebrity, and the desires and expectations of his audiences. Yogananda seems to

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<sup>36</sup> Referenced in Schmidt, Leigh Eric. 2010. *Heaven’s Bride: The Unprintable Life of Ida C. Craddock, American Mystic, Scholar, Sexologist, Martyr and Madwoman*, 126. New York: Basic Books.



Figure 6:  
Article from the  
New York Herald,  
27 March, 1898.

NEW YORK HERALD, SUNDAY, MARCH 27, 1898.

FIFTH SECTION.

## IF YOU WANT TO BE A YOGI AND HAVE HEAVENLY DREAMS, STUDY THESE POSTURES.

These Sketches Were Drawn from Postures Assumed by the Swami Kripananda for the Benefit of HINDOO READERS, and Illustrate an Occult Fad That Has Many Secret Disciples in New York City.



ASSUMING THE MAYURASANA POSTURE

## INVENTS MACHINES AS WELL AS MELODIES.

Versatile Josef Hofmann.

Made a Bicycle, an Automobile and a Pair of Folding Skates.



PASCHIMASANA

## BALM OF THE ORIENT

—IS—

## BLISS-INSPIRING YOGA.

—What a Swami Says of It.—

## New York's Fashionables Now Attain Perfect Happiness by Becoming Amateur Contortionists.

BUT THAT IS ONLY A PART OF IT.

Yoga is the latest diversion of New York society. It is scarcely a diversion either. Rather should it be termed a religion. Yoga comes from the Orient, and it suggests all sorts of mystic and religious ideas. It is the outcome of a long and arduous path, and this state one must go through the most ridiculous performance ever attempted by man or woman. A Swami treats of it in a manner which cannot fail to interest you.



YOGA is taken too seriously by its adherents to be spoken of in so flippant a manner. It is a religion, and it is the religion of Hindoo temples, centuries old. It is perfect peace. It makes you forget all your troubles and sorrows. It is a religion of everything that is lovely and charming, and it is not a pipe dream. It is not a pipe dream. It is not a pipe dream. It is not a pipe dream.

## THE DADHARANA POSTURE

A YOGI IN THE DADHARANA POSTURE



THE DADHARANA POSTURE

## KUKKUTASANA



KUKKUTASANA

## VIPARITAKARANI



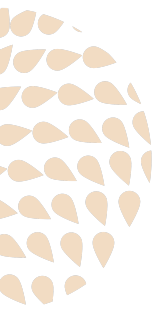
VIPARITAKARANI

## ATTEMPTING THE GONUKHASANA



ATTEMPTING THE GONUKHASANA

only developments or steps in the regulation of the body, and by means of the Pranayama, the breath is held, and the body is kept in a state of equilibrium. It is not a pipe dream. It is not a pipe dream. It is not a pipe dream. It is not a pipe dream.



have employed not only the usual methods of his less remembered, peripatetic contemporaries — display advertisements, musical performances, demonstrations — for his lectures and speaking engagements during his first years in the United States, but to have done so with a much larger and well-honed organizational and promotional apparatus that included management, a press agent, significant financial backers, and celebrity testimonials.

After embarking on his first national lecture tour, Yogananda became enmeshed in a series of financial disputes with supporters and backers. In late-1925, a man named Cornelius Conway, who claimed to have entered into an agreement with Yogananda to serve as his business manager for a year, filed suit to claim his portion of the nearly \$200,000 the swami made.<sup>37</sup> A few months later a woman named Emma Mitchell filed suit against Yogananda claiming she deeded a property to him for a school that he never intended to found, only wanting the property title itself.<sup>38</sup> The incident with Mitchell seems to be the reason that two of Yogananda's employees, Mr. and Mrs. Scott, left him and told a member of the British consulate that Yogananda was regarded by them as “more or less of a swindler (*sic*) and as misleading women.”<sup>39</sup> As Yogananda's organization grew, he brought in associates from India to help run centers around the country, what the *Los Angeles Times* referred to as his “bank of swamis.”<sup>40</sup> In time, these partnerships dissolved, some in acrimonious splits as with his early financial backers. One partner, Swami Dhirananda, sued Yogananda for \$8,000 to make up for a promissory note and accused Yogananda of living in violation of his teachings.<sup>41</sup> A few years later in 1939, Sri Nerode sued Yogananda for violating a partnership that he had verbally agreed upon earlier, and accused Yogananda of using contributions to the organization for himself, having illicit relationships with younger female followers, and “preach[ing] one way of life and liv[ing] directly opposite.”<sup>42</sup>

During this period, Yogananda used feats of stage magic to draw crowds to public lectures and establish the credibility of yogic powers. Unlike many of his

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<sup>37</sup> “Contempt Order in \$35,000 Court Fight Bares Split in Oakland Cult.” *Oakland Tribune*, 7 July 1925.

<sup>38</sup> “Indian Seer in Civil Suit.” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 October 1925.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Godfrey A. Fisher to Angus Fletcher dated 20 April 1926. From Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) Files-16: Personal Files, 1916-1949, L/P&J/12/358; File 447 (1928): 9.

<sup>40</sup> “Swamis Accuse Each Other in Legal Battle.” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 May 1935: 30.

<sup>41</sup> See *ibid.*

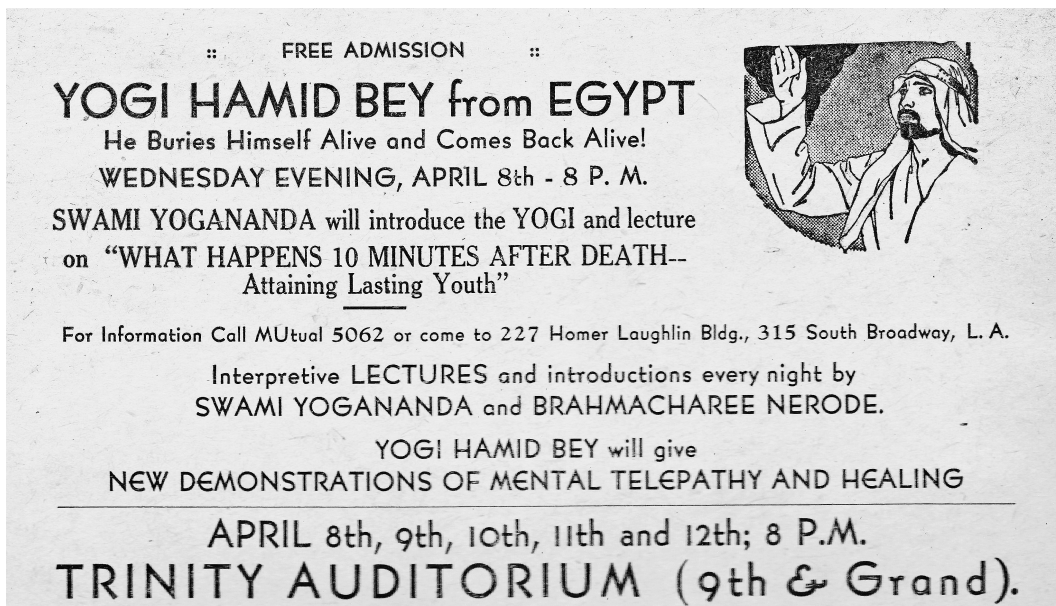
<sup>42</sup> Los Angeles Superior Court Case No. 445,883: page 3.



contemporaries, Yogananda did so by proxy through a parallel bank of magicians who performed alongside him, were introduced by him, or performed under the auspices of his Self-Realization Fellowship for years. One of them was Polish-born Mieszko Roman Maszerski, who as Roman Ostoja scraped by as a magician and psychic until he connected with Yogananda in 1933 and performed “yogi demonstrations” such as being buried alive until he left to form his own Institute of Infinite Science.<sup>43</sup> Another magician was Yogi Hamid Bey who was highly praised by Yogananda as a master yogi, and at one point was the honorary vice president of the Self-Realization Fellowship until he left and formed his Coptic Fellowship in 1937 (Fig. 7). Although Bey claimed to have received mystic instruction and initiation as a child in Egypt, official documents and private photographs give ample evidence that he was born in Italy as Naldino Bombacci before departing for the United States in 1926.<sup>44</sup>




**Figure 7:**  
Promotional  
Postcard for Yogi  
Hamid Bey and  
Yogananda in  
Los Angeles,  
April 1931.  
(Collection of the  
Author.)



<sup>43</sup> From accounts written by Upton Sinclair and publicity photographs, Ostoja’s repertoire of mentalist stage magic included displays of mind-reading, hypnosis (including hypnotizing animals), and lying down on a bed of nails. In a letter from Upton Sinclair to J.B. Rhine dated 30 July 1932, Sinclair detailed Ostoja’s poverty and said “[he] is out of a job, and I do not know how he is living [...]” (J.B. Rhine Collection at Duke).

<sup>44</sup> Many of these documents, such as a marriage certificate and naturalization papers showing national origin and name change, were part of Bonham’s Auction No. 2419 “Spiritualism - Coptic Fellowship of America.” Personal photos labelled “Nada Bey Bombacci” and “Hamid Bey Bombacci” are in the personal collection of Anil Nerode.



Yogananda, of course, was not defined by these events and associations, but rather by his massively successful *Autobiography of a Yogi*, first published in 1946. The *Autobiography* fixed the lens through which to view and understand Yogananda, and sold millions of copies due to its ability to portray a magical and miraculous India while speaking to its American audience in a relatable voice. In his preface to the *Autobiography*, W.Y. Evans-Wentz said its value derived from it being “one of the few books in English about the wise men of India which have been written, not by a journalist or foreigner, but by one of their own race and training — in short, a book about yogis by a yogi.” But allegedly the strongest hand in creating the *Autobiography* was not Yogananda’s, but that of an American journalist and poet named James Warnack, who assembled it from notes and “sheaths of short stories” provided by Yogananda upon his return from India for what was initially intended to be a biography of his teacher Sri Yukteswar, but became an autobiography after the latter’s death. Warnack was not only able to cover the gaps in Yogananda’s English, but could weave the material into a whole and “make it poetic and coherent.”<sup>45</sup>

Warnack was ideally suited for the task. He was a devoted student of Yogananda — calling him “my blessed Teacher [...] who is leading me Home” in an article for Yogananda’s *East-West* magazine in November of 1929 — and contributed over a dozen pieces of poetry and prose to *East-West* over about six years. This overlapped with his columns on religion for the *Los Angeles Times* that often included the added moniker “The Foothill Philosopher,” but Warnack seemed to keep a divide between these two worlds, never airing his sympathies for Yogananda and his associates even when he wrote about them in a 1932 piece for the *Los Angeles Times* on “Who Are The Swamis?”, or a piece on his own beliefs for the paper two decades later.<sup>46</sup> Los Angeles during this time was thought of by aspirants and critics alike as the epicenter of new and marginal religious forms in the United States, and so Warnack would have been an ideal choice for crafting the *Autobiography*, since as the church editor for the *Los Angeles Times* he was someone who could be assumed to be exceptionally familiar with the mindset of American metaphysical seekers of the time. If American seekers could hear the narrative of the *Autobiography* so clearly, it may be a result of it being recounted to them by one of their own.

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<sup>45</sup> Anil Nerode, the son of Yogananda’s onetime associate Sri Nerode, grew up in Yogananda’s Mount Washington headquarters and as a child was an eye-witness to Warnack’s crafting of the book in his living room. Anil Nerode described the process of the *Autobiography*’s creation to the author in several phone, in-person, and online interviews on 17 February 2014, 7 September 2014, and 25 August 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Warnack, James M. “Who Are The Swamis?” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 December 1932: 19; Thrapp, Dan L. “Foothill Philosopher Expounds His Own Faith.” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 November 1952: A6.

Ultimately, *The Autobiography of a Yogi* is as much an emblem of Yogananda as it is an emblem of the larger currents within early American yoga: the combined product of carefully crafted public images, behind-the-scene arrangements, the need of audiences to be entertained, the draw of magical displays of yogic power, and the ideas of American metaphysical seekers being given back to them in the frame of ancient, Indian wisdom. Similarly, if the reality of Vivekananda's years in America cannot be tidily matched to the mythic status he assumed in time, he was doubtlessly a pioneer whose innovations — attire, public presentation, patronage, combining of Eastern and Western esoteric discourses, the use of both lectures and lessons, adapting to his audiences — were a massive influence on and a deployable model for the yoga teachers who followed him over the next few decades, in the interwar decades, and up to our day.

Catherine Albanese has suggested that at the turn of the century, yoga in America was marked with evidence of “the contact of cultures and their transformation,” and that rather than simple distinctions between East and West, there were already sophisticated combinative forms of “East-West met West” and of “West... already textually in touch with a series of Asian sources” at work (Albanese 2005, 66). Beyond contact and transformation, the United States served as a distinct and uniquely fruitful site for the dissemination of nascent and diverse forms of yoga through the unintended consequences of its immigration and naturalization policy, its large and eager pool of metaphysical seekers, and the example and network of mobile teachers who created the world of early American yoga and travelled across the country on the swami circuit.

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2018 • Volume 1

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