

The History of Yoga and the Impact of Colonization in the United States

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Yoga describes a living, breathing practice rooted in a system of liberation that contains two, main, lateral rhizomes: power and spiritual connection. The rhizomes of power and spirituality intersect with harmful, complex systems of imperial and European-settler colonization that originated in India and then transplanted to the United States. Through a decolonial and feminist lens, the rhizomes can be traced back to examine how these systems have morphed from a spiritual and philosophical practice to a health focus, a science-based practice, and a lifestyle.

Introduction

In 2013, I experienced a compilation of life-changing, traumatic events that led me to a month-long yoga teacher training program in Costa Rica. In order to stay relevant in the field of fitness and wellness, I decided to add the discipline of yoga to my resume. I avoided yoga because my observations led me to believe that as an inflexible, large-bodied, queer, Indigenous-Latinx woman, I did not fit in with other yoga instructors or practitioners. However, the need to financially support myself provided me with the motivation to invest time and finances in pursuit of the title: Master Yoga Teacher.

During the month-long program, I quickly learned that yoga included much more than physical poses (asana). I experienced transformation and liberation in my body, mind, and spirit. Be that as it may, my experience in the program reinforced my previous assumptions of yoga as a homogenous practice for slender, able-bodied, white, financially privileged, women; a space I could participate in, but a community in which I did not belong.

The purpose and desire for me to dive deep into the history of yoga results from my awakening to the truths of my participation and perpetuation of the harmful systems of oppression embedded within the yoga community in the United States. Since becoming a yoga

teacher, I dreamed of creating a yoga teacher training program to liberate marginalized peoples. In order to ethically do this, I deconstructed every aspect I was taught about the history and lifestyle of yoga. The journey to create a yoga teacher training program rooted in liberation and social justice led me to many inquiries ranging from a) doubting whether or not I had a “right” to teach yoga as a non-Indian; b) questioning how a program could be responsibly created amidst a practice that inherently contains systems of white supremacy, capitalism, misogyny, and ableism; and c) hoping that a yoga teacher training program *could* be reimagined as a practice rooted in liberation and social justice through a decolonized, queer, and feminist lens.

Methodology

In order to construct a yoga teacher training program rooted in liberation and social justice, a need exists to analyze and critique the systems in which I was educated, especially those presented to me by my mentors (white, slender, affluent women). For centuries, white, male scholars narrated yoga’s history and justified the appropriation of yoga with the argument that Indian nationalists did it first (Singleton, 2010). Many books and training programs (Singleton, 2010) perpetuated the narrative that “evolving” yoga was an acceptable practice. I believe the only way to create a yoga teacher training program that honors yoga is by using decolonial and feminist lens. Together, these lenses provide Indigenous critiques rooted in liberation (Smith, 2013)

Additionally, I sought guidance from Indian scholars, Susanna Barkataki and Shreena Gandhi, who provided Indigenous Knowledge and academic resources for this paper. In addition, I worked with Amara Miller’s yoga scholarship in relation to colonization and the knowledge production of women, values of femininity, and the roles of gender in society (Miller, 2019). By

using a feminist lens, I also seek to understand where and how yoga grew from a male dominant practice in India to a white, female dominant practice in the US.

History of Yoga as a Rhizome

In the ancient language of Sanskrit, yoga means “to yoke” or “to connect”. Like culture, the system of yoga is always moving and reshaping. The reshaping of culture is intrinsically woven with power similar to a rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) fashion the metaphor of rhizome in *Assemblage Theory* by supporting the idea that the transformation of yoga over the centuries can be imagined as such:

A rhizome, or the creeping rootstalk of a plant, spreads horizontally and can send out new shoots upward. The rhizome has no fixed bounds or conceptual limits and is based on the idea of multi-directionality and diversity. . . . When parts of the rhizome break off, they can survive on their own, meandering and re-forming or uniting with others, but always along lines that trace back”. The metaphor of the rhizome also allows for a recognition of power, since we can consider the way such plants can be cultivated across time, their growth patterns encouraged or inhibited in unique ways, and how different positionalities might present actors with more or fewer opportunities to engage in this cultivation process (Miller, 2019, p. 28).

The illustration below offers a visual of how the rhizome of yoga moved throughout time and nature:

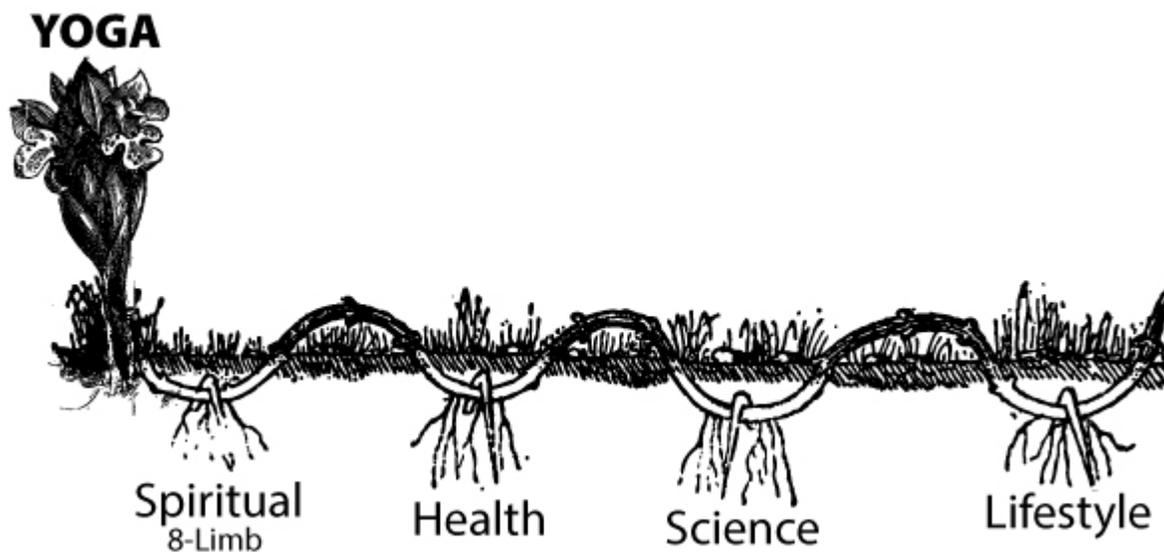


Figure 1. Payan Hazelwood (2020). *Yoga Rhizome*. [Illustration].

These early systems of yoga were heterogeneous and included meditation, rituals, and philosophies rooted in “enlightenment, liberation, and isolation from the world of suffering” (Miller, 2019). Scholars traced the spiritual and philosophical system of yoga to the sixth and fifth centuries BCE through textual documentation formed by Buddhists, Jain, and Ajivika practitioners who rejected the Brahmanical orthodoxy (Bronkhorst, 2007; Miller, 2019). The Brahmanical orthodoxy denoted

The highest Universal Principle, the Ultimate Reality in the universe. In major schools of Hindu philosophy, it is the material, efficient, formal and final cause of all that exists. It is the pervasive, infinite, eternal truth and bliss which does not change, yet is the cause of

all changes. Brahman as a metaphysical concept is the single binding unity behind diversity in all that exists in the universe. (Lochtefeld, 2002, p. 122)

“A Brahman was a god of the earth. The earth actually belonged to the Brahmins” (Ingalls, 1958). A Brahman is the highest level of the Varna caste system of India (Hinduism). Brahmins are priests, landowners, scholars, and teachers. Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) is an example of one who rejected the Brahmanical orthodoxy to seek answers outside of Hinduism. Evidence between 200 BCE and 300 BCE suggested yogic practices were “ultimately developing into what we might recognize today as modern forms of Hinduism” (Miller, 2019). The term “Hindu” or “Hinduism” are imposed labels that “have changed across time and in response to colonialism” (Lorenzen, 1999 as cited by Miller, 2019)

Brahma and the origins of caste

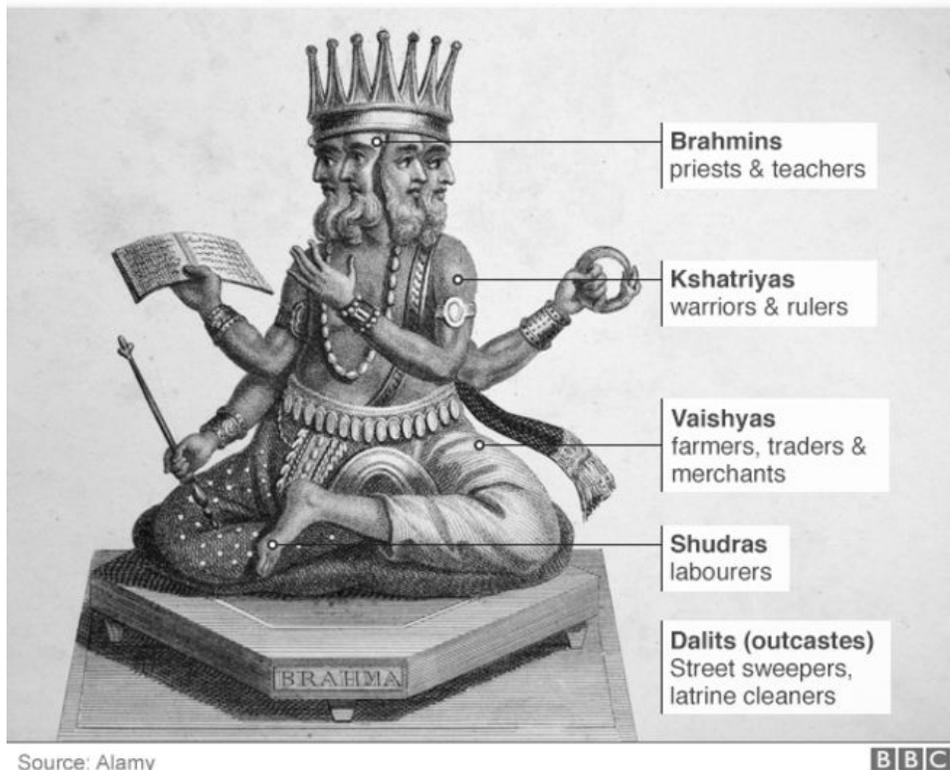


Figure 2. Alamy. (n.d.) *Brahma and the origins of caste* [Image]. BBC.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616>.

The *Bhagavad Gita* (c. 500 to 200 BCE) is a sacred text influenced by Hindus, Buddhist, and Jains (Gandhi, 2009). According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, to gain liberation through yoga, “...one must practice by living an ethical life, making ethical decisions and following one’s path.” The *Bhagavad Gita* did not refer to physical postures (Gandhi, 2009).

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (c. 250 to 500 CE) is a sacred text heavily influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita*. This text contained the first yoga postures, and it described an eight-fold path system of yoga as:

1. Yamas - *moral principles*
2. Niyamas - *observances*
3. Asana - *physical postures* (not the same as asana in modern day yoga)
4. Pranayama - *breath control*
5. Pratyahara - *withdrawal of senses*
6. Dharana - *concentration*
7. Dhyana - *meditation*
8. Samadhi - *pure contemplation*

During the 1600s, colonization began to influence and infiltrate yoga. The British East India Company (BEIC) was formed for the purpose of trade with South Asia. As the company gained power, it acquired land and influence with Indian elites that led to the imposition of British Victorian values and paved the way of pushing yoga to the margins of society. Victorian values ignited the shift in the beliefs, traditions, morals, and ethics relating to gender, sexuality, and family relationships in India (Miller, 2019). Many of the Hindu practices (including yoga) began to be viewed by upper caste elites as polluting society. Indian elitist views reinforced the

divide within the caste system: Brahmins at the top, Dalits (Untouchables) at the bottom (Miller, 2019).

During the 1700s, Hindu sanyasi yogis and Indian Muslims rebelled against the seemingly unstoppable power and influence of the British East India Trading Company. Sannyasis practiced yoga postures for physical strength as means to fight their opponent. In response to the many uprisings of 1773, sannyasis were criminalized. A Sannyasi is a religious ascetic who practiced yoga asana and was revered as a precolonial warrior influence. Post-colonization, sannyasis were considered Dalits ("Untouchables") and defined as "lunatics or magicians with paranormal powers,

Making it an offense to wander naked or to carry a weapon. As the scope of colonial police powers expanded, hatha yogis were "increasingly demilitarized and forced to settle in cities and villages," where, unable to make a living soldiering, many were forced to resort to yogic showmanship and postural spectacles as a means of survival. Under colonialism, postural yogic practices rooted in Tantric and hatha traditions increasingly became associated with panhandling entertainers, who were portrayed by the press and colonial rulers as representative of the eccentric and extreme end of "uncivilized" South Asian spiritualities. Ironically, such extreme ascetic performances were in many ways a direct result of socioeconomic impoverishment caused by the British (Miller, 2019, p. 39).

In 1858, Britain passed the 1858 Government of India Act and transferred control of the colonial government from the East India Company directly to Queen Victoria, creating the British Raj (Miller, 2019). The Raj gave power to upper caste elites to enforce the imperial colonization and stabilization of racist, misogynist, ableist, and capitalist systems that,

ultimately, led to the criminalization of yogic practices all together. The new, colonized, societal infrastructure was the foundation in which education, economy, and religion were built upon. The foundations provided the power needed to further oppress the people of India until their independence of 1947. The influence of internal and external colonization in India attempted to eradicate and/or influence (Bellenoit, 2017):

- language
- food
- Indigenous knowledge (ritual, tradition, history)
- body agency
- feminine autonomy (body, mind, spirit)
- gender variance
- land ownership
- natural resources
- wealth
- power

The Colonization: The Transplantation of Yoga to the US

Through the lens of orientalism, the rising science of eugenics, and the disillusionment with religion and government, yoga was reimagined as a mystical, exotic, philosophical practice. Said defines Orientalism as,

A way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous.” (Said, 1978, p. 3)

In 1785, the Bhagavad Gita was translated into English by an East India Company employee, and then given to Ralph Waldo Emerson (read in 1845) and Henry David Thoreau (a leading transcendentalist and eugenics supporter). Emerson and Thoreau were two central figures of the New Religious Movement (NRM) of Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism is an idealistic philosophical and social movement which developed in New England around 1836 in reaction to rationalism. Influenced by romanticism, Platonism, and Kantian philosophy, it taught that divinity pervades all nature and humanity, and its members held progressive views on feminism and communal living (Lexico, 2020).

Emerson said, “Asia was feminine and spiritual, while the ‘west’ was masculine and material” (Schueller, 2001). Thoreau wrote of his yoga practice throughout his career with deep appreciation for his interpreted idealism of Hinduism. In 1875, an additional NRM was founded by affluent, eccentric, Euro-American’s Theosophical Society, and by 1882, the society established a center for the British Empire in India. The Theosophical Society was transnational and largely based on ideas from Indian texts that found a home in the US and India (Melton, G. 1995, as cited in Miller 2019).

Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Yogananda (1893-1952) are two Indigenous gurus who inadvertently helped associate yoga with esoteric American religious practices, the occult, and mysticism (Gandhi, 2009). In 1893, Vivekananda emerged as a star at the World’s Parliament of Religions conference, where he attracted attention for his message of “mutual acculturation and influence” for India and the US. The media referred to him as a “handsome Oriental” wearing orange robes (Miller, 2019). Syman writes about Vivekananda,

He ended up lecturing throughout the United States, raising funds for numerous projects within India to alleviate poverty (which had been exacerbated by colonialism) and to

“restore India’s virility” (Syman, 2010, as cited in Miller, 2019, p. 52).

Yogananda also appealed to the NRM audience by making “yoga more amenable to the liberal Protestant set by continuing the missionary standard set by Vivekananda – that yoga could supplement other religious (Christian) practices (Gandhi, 2019). Yogananda was invited by the Unitarians to speak at the Boston Science of Religious Conference in 1920 where he gained a following that allowed him to open the Self-Realization Fellowship centers that continue to thrive worldwide.

Annie Besant (1847-1933), English socialist, feminist, and supporter of Indian independence became the president of the Theosophical Society in 1907. Besant adopted, Indian-born, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) and his brother, against his father’s wishes in 1909 to “rescue him from deplorable circumstances” (Miller, 2019). Besant believed Krishnamurti was a reincarnation of Lord Maitreya (a Theosophical spiritual entity with past lives that included Jesus). Besant and the Theosophical Society groomed Krishnamurti to fulfill his destiny as a “World Teacher” in the US (Miller, 2019). Krishnamurti severed ties with the Theosophical Society in 1933 and remained in the US as a guru and yoga influencer among the elite in Ojai Valley, California. The Theosophical Society wrote about Krishnamurti’s adoption and education,

“Take these two boys out of an orthodox [Hindu] environment, change their diet, teach them physical exercise and Western methods of bathing”. Part of the boys’ new education included yoga instruction, as understood by their Theosophist tutors, who often incorporated elements of occultism indiscriminately as part of “ancient” Eastern traditions.

The boys’ father must be made to realise that his sons no longer belonged to him

but to the world; that it must be conveyed to him “clearly and unmistakably” not to interfere in any way with regard to their food or to any other detail of their lives; for the next few years it was the Master’s wish that they be “kept entirely apart from other boys and should associate only with those who were under Theosophical influence” (Lutyens, 1975; Miller, 2019)

While the US and the crown dabbled in the NRM, Indian nationalists gained power in preparation for independence. Nationalists included middle-class Indian men who possessed education from colonial universities and used yoga postures (asana) as a way to counter the colonizer's depiction of Indian men as weak and feminine (Miller, 2019). The physical practice of yoga for health, strength and male virility (similar to the sanyasis of the 1700s) was the second rhizome created from the original root of yoga. Krishnamacharya is one of the major Indian influencers who shifted yoga from a philosophical, meditative, and breath-focused practice to a health and science focus called *Vinyasa Yoga*. Krishnamacharya was known for his performative demonstrations of physical yoga for the entertainment of British politicians.

Parallel to the nationalist rising in India and the NRM in the US, several other movements and historical events helped shape the rhizome of yoga viewed as a science and lifestyle such as:

- First wave feminist movement (1850 - 1940)
- End of Indian Wars (1890s)
- The establishment of power rooted in racist systems that created policies directed toward Indigenous and newly freed slaves in the United States (1600s - present day)

As the First Wave Feminist Movement began to bloom in the US, the teachings of yoga that promoted liberation to the body and mind became increasingly appealing to Euro-settler women who rejected the imposed and oppressive Victorian values. Euro-settler American men feminized non-white men as way to assert power and gain wealth; therefore, the practice of yoga did not appeal to white American men until much later. Sadly, American audience created a dichotomy in which they viewed yoga as repulsive and attractive. For example, wealthy, eccentric women could afford the social backlash of consorting with an exotic Indian guru. Husbands became concerned that their wives' newfound liberation was due to the "spells" and influence of the occult guru. Subsequently, many Indian gurus faced ostracization and were arrested for their services during this time and media coverage preyed on the dichotomy of repulsion and attraction (Image 1, The Washington Post, 1912). Therefore, feminism and racism paved the foundation for a homogenized system of yoga in the US over the next century (Gandhi, 2019).

the science of yoga appealed to privileged Americans who were eager to spend their money on something that could help them achieve the socially constructed ideal body with science. Gandhi writes,

The emerging popularity of science over irrational mythology was the perfect linguistic vehicle in which to ground yoga; it was but one method of translating yoga into understandable terms for the American public, and it also helped to translate the religion out of yoga (Gandhi, 2019, p. 94).

In 1911, the US Immigration Commissions “identified South Asians as the least desirable race of the immigrants thus far admitted to the United States” (Lee, 2015). In fact, United States Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924 prohibited Asian-Pacific people from the US. The enforcement of these laws resulted in the deportation of many Indian gurus to India, which forced them to practice in the hands of Euro-Americans. Furthermore, the Great Depression, World War II, and India’s liberation from the crown rule, contributed to the decline of yoga and stagnation in the US until the 1960s.

The 1965 New Immigration Act permitted professional Asian immigrants back into the US. During this time, the majority of immigrants originated from India and were middle-class and educated within the systems of colonization. New Indo-Americans brought an unfamiliar version of Hinduism and yoga to the US that included food, rituals, and other “ethnic” practices. The remnants of yoga still existed in the US, but these did not include spaces that were readily open for Indo-Americans.

Feminism, Hippies, and the Commodification of Yoga

The “Father of Modern Yoga”, Krishnamacharya (1888-1989), was an Indian nationalist and major influencer who cultivated the health and science rhizome of yoga that drew worldly

attention for the athleticism and discipline aspect of Krishnamacharya's system of postures.

Krishnamacharya mentored three main figures (Iyengar, Jois, and Devi) who heavily influenced the culture of yoga in the US as a lifestyle rhizome.

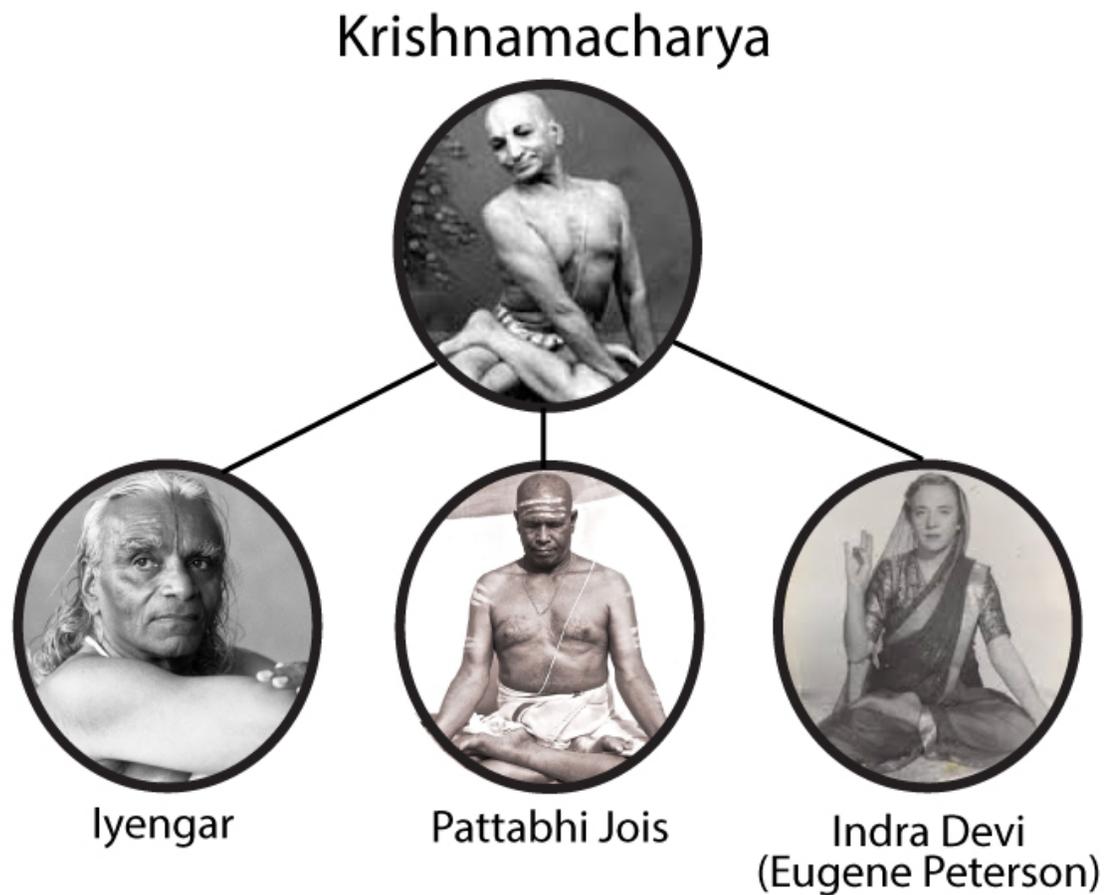


Figure 4. Payan Hazelwood. (2020). Google. (n.d.) [Image created with graphics found on Google of Krishnamacharya, Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, Indra Devi].

Iyengar (1918-2014) was Krishnamacharya's brother-in-law and top pupil who was sent to demonstrate and teach on behalf of Krishnamacharya. However, Iyengar suffered physical abuse at the hands of his brother-in-law and stated,

“Guruji had a frightful personality. He would hit us hard on our backs as if with iron rods. We were unable to forget the severity of his actions for a long time” (Goldberg, 2014, para. 8).

Iyengar set out on his own and built upon what he had learned with a system of yoga that stressed the physicality of yoga with the use of props and assistance (Gandhi, 2009, p. 39). This provided a “safer” physical practice of yoga that was more accessible to a wider range of people. In 1956, Iyengar brought his style of yoga to the US, which remains one of the most popular yoga teacher training programs today. In addition to his contribution to a “safer” style of yoga, Iyengar was one of the first to create products “needed” in order to practice his style of yoga.

Iyengar introduced props into the modern practice of yoga to allow all practitioners access to the benefits of the postures regardless of physical condition, age, or length of study. Props help all practitioners (including the most advanced) gain sensitivity to the use of effort and receive the deep benefits of postures held over significant time periods. Props include sticky mats, blankets, belts, blocks, benches, wall ropes, sandbags, chairs, and other objects that help students experience the various yoga poses (Iyengar NYC, as cited in Gandhi, 2009, p. 118).

Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009) helped make “yoga trendier in the US” with his physically-challenging style of yoga called Ashtanga. Celebrities such as Madonna, Gweneth Paltrow and Sting helped popularize Ashtanga to the masses (Gandhi, 2019, p. 119). For example,

Historically, super cut arms weren’t exactly perceived as feminine, and women avoided getting their upper bodies too toned. Then, Madonna, with her chiseled biceps and defined shoulders, created a new standard of sexy. Everyone wanted their body to look

like Madonna's. In 1998, Madonna went on Oprah and announced that she was done with the gym and had become a convert to yoga (Nagy, 2014, par. 12).

Russian-American, Eugenie Peterson (1899-2002), brought yoga to women in the US. She got her start in India as a film star with the stage name Indra Devi. Her guru, Krishnamacharya, refused to teach women yoga, as he thought the practice was too strenuous for a feminine body. However, Peterson was persistent and rich, so Krishnamacharya designed a gentler form of his Vinyasa flow for her to learn and teach. Elizabeth Arden (Canadian-American businesswoman who built the empire-brand, Elizabeth Arden) was also a student of Devi's which helped increase her popularity with Hollywood elites because she focused on the effects of yoga such as youth and beauty (Gandhi, 2009, p. 110). Ironically, Devi did not promote the spiritual aspects of yoga, even though her stage name suggested otherwise.

In addition to Krishnamacharya's lineage, another important figure from India gained popularity with female audiences. Indo-American influencer, Richard Hittleman, returned to the US from India in 1950. With the help of his Hollywood elite following, Hittleman gained media attention and instant fame with his nationally syndicated television show, *Yoga for Health*. His teaching appealed to the stay-at-home housewife with his "mystical vision" of yoga and promise of a youthful looks and fit body; thus, bringing yoga into the domestic sphere. Hittleman writes,

"Housework and all that it entails may not be fun, but it is important and must be accomplished with a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction." Hittleman acknowledges that this is not always easy, thus he suggests to "(1) Stretch often during your housework; (2) Make it a rule to always move with poise and balance regardless of how mundane you may think your activities are" (Hittleman as cited in Gandhi, 2009, p. 105).

While Hittleman and Devi targeted U.S. women for attaining the ideal female body, the Second Wave Feminist Movement began to gain momentum. During this movement, white, Euro-American women demanded equality in the workplace and autonomy of their bodies. The two polarizing forces of liberation and oppression were tugging on the roles of women in the public and domestic spheres by way of the media, literature and advertising of beauty products, and services that perpetuated the ideal feminine look.

It is also important to note that the group targeted by the various newspaper articles on yoga and some of the yogis of this period (especially Hittleman and Devi) wrote to women about how yoga could help maintain their figure, looks, youth, flexibility and housework. Unless this was a concern and societal stress for women, Devi, Hittleman and the lifestyles sections of various newspapers would not have targeted women as specifically as they did (Gandhi, 2009, p. 128).

In addition to the Second Wave Feminist Movement, the revolution and movements of the 1960s created a counterculture of people known as *hippies*. Hippies were known for their advocacy for civil rights, free-love, experimental drug use, and activism against the Vietnam War. “Hippies were a majority white, middle-class group of young people with the undeniable luxury of being able to ‘drop out’” (Maldonado, 2018). The hippie movement allowed for the creation of two new offshoots of the yoga rhizome that exponentially grew due to Yogi Bhajan and Swami Satchidananda. Their contributions were twofold: (1) drug rehabilitation; and (2) Kundalini Yoga (a combination of Tantra and hatha yoga).

Kundalini Yoga helped shift the practice of yoga into a communal space that especially appealed to hippies. Healthy, Happy, Hold Organization (3HO) founded in 1969 was one of many ashrams that were founded during this time as a refuge for folks seeking an

alternative lifestyle. Swami Sivananda (student of Swami Satchidananda) opened the Woodstock Festival in 1969. Gandhi writes,

Yogi Bhajan referred to his brand of yoga as Kundalini Yoga, which “is a science by which the subconscious mind is cleared of the doubts and fears that hinder relationships from reaching the essence of higher consciousness: that spiritual presence in the soul of all humans and in all creatures.”

In the early years of 3HO, teachers would pan out and teach Kundalini Yoga seminars at colleges and community centers; the cost for individuals was \$54 and \$90 for married couples. Like many other American yoga movements, this one was also presented as interfaith (Gandhi, 2009, p. 40).

The combination of targeting women and hippies created yoga as a lifestyle that commodified and redefined yoga as a practice that excluded groups of people based on race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, physical ability, sexual orientation, and gender.

Previous feminist research demonstrated that in the context of North America and the United Kingdom, but also in Japan, fitness was often promoted as a means for the perfect, thin, toned, and young feminine body shape. Research demonstrated that there was a conflation of physical attractiveness with health.

The thin looking body was celebrated as the healthy body, and thus health was determined invariably by the looks of the body. Not only physical health but happiness was connected to the images of the healthy looking, thin bodies that smiled from the magazine pages, fitness publications, and digital video disks. For example, when beaming celebrity yoga devotees marketed yoga as a means for a slimmer body and long,

toned muscles in women's magazines, the yoga practice combined contentment and the fit body (Markula, 2013)

In 1973, the first yoga teacher training programs were marketing to answer the market share demands of yoga classes and retreats. The Yoga Journal magazine was launched in 1975 and still thrives today. For over thirty years, the covers of the most successful yoga magazine featured mostly white, slender, flexible women (Image 3, Webb et. al., 2017).

J.B. Webb et al. / Body Image 22 (2017) 129–135



Figure 5. Webb, J. B., Vinoski, E. R. (2017). *Body Image* 22. [Image collection].

<https://doi-org.prescottcollege.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.07.001>

In January of 2019, Yoga Journal featured its first large-bodied, black, queer woman on the cover, which found the magazine in the deep end of controversy. The controversy was in response to a dual cover distribution where only certain markets received the cover of the black model and the other market received a cover of a white, slender woman. Readers expressed outrage and demanded that Yoga Journal apologize for the dual distribution and educate their leadership on their collective role in perpetuating white supremacy in the yoga community. Yoga Journal responded, but their reputation was damaged in the process (Eichenseher, 2019). Yoga Journal editor responds,

We are committed to doing better and more, and to reaching out and understanding the ways in which systemic oppression plays out at Yoga Journal and every institution in this country. As we listen, absorb, and figure out how, we are bound to make mistakes, such as the unclear way in which we rolled out our recent issue.

Thank you again for speaking up, sharing your feedback, and engaging with us.

Constructive engagement is how we will learn and grow. We will do the work to find clear, mindful ways to move forward. This may take time, but we are fully committed (Eichenseher, 2019).



Figure 6. (2019). *Yoga Journal* covers [Photograph].

<https://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/january-cover-response>

In 2018, the Good Body reported that 36 million U.S. people practiced yoga, and between 2012 and 2016, the number of yoga practitioners grew by 50% (Good Body, 2018).

Additionally, during this period, Americans spent \$16 billion on the yoga industry (Good Body,

2018). However, this report did not include the race, ethnicity, or nationality of practitioners. In 2015, Clarke, et. al. reported that the main demographic of yoga practitioners included predominantly white, college-educated, females, young to middle-aged adults with higher socioeconomic status (2015). Statistical data supports the homogenous mainstream representation in the modern mythos of magazines, film, literature, advertising, and social media which then reinforces a white supremacist structure in yoga (Markula, 2014).

Today, American women spend billions of dollars on \$20 yoga classes, \$100 yoga pants, \$150 yoga mats that feed into the need for the lifestyle rhizome of yoga. In addition to the products sold, yoga influencers continually create franchise yoga studios and teacher training programs that cost \$2k to \$10k. In order to keep yoga trendy and maintain consumer interest, new styles of yoga are continuously reimaged to meet the demands of the consumer. Newer styles include goat yoga, rage yoga, hot yoga, aerial yoga to name a few.

Power and abuse accompany the billions of dollars up for grabs in the yoga market share. For example, Choudhury Bikram unsuccessfully attempted to trademark his “unique” 26-pose sequence of yoga and Bikram targeted fit, young women into his training program, which cost between \$12k - \$16K. The Netflix documentary, *Bikram: Yogi, Guru, Predator* explored the allegations of abuse, rape, and sexual harassment that the women he lured into his training programs allegedly endured. In 2016, Bikram’s former legal advisor was awarded \$6.4 million from her allegations of sexual harassment. Bikram fled the US and claimed bankruptcy, but the combination of sexual abuse allegations and bankruptcy did not stop people from flocking to his training programs in Mexico (Hatch, 2019).

Conclusion

During the course of the semester, I sought the knowledge and guidance of two Indo-American scholars: Susanna Barkarkataki and Shreena Gandhi. Conversations with these practitioners regarded my responsibility as a yoga teacher to not perpetuate the harmful and oppressive systems embedded in US versions of yoga. We all agreed that the remedy to the commodification and appropriation of yoga was not to advocate for eliminating the practice of yoga as a social justice movement; rather, the benefits of yoga were undeniable, and the liberation aspect was too important to humans to discard all together.

My future plan as a yoga teacher trainer and with the mentorship of Barkataki and Gandhi, I will create training programs to dismantle the systems of yoga that integrate with the lifestyle of yoga. The training programs will focus on the decolonization of yoga teacher training programs as well as developing continuing education curricula for current yoga teachers. The foundation of my curriculum will be built upon liberation and social justice movements and the curricula will honor the roots of yoga. Through this process, I will serve as an activist who creates a diverse, equitable, and inclusive yoga practice that will reach the margins of the current culture of yoga. I cannot change the history of yoga, but I can help shape the future of yoga in a way that liberates the body, mind, and spirit.

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