

Yoga for the New Woman and the New Man: The Role of Pierre Bernard and Blanche DeVries in the Creation of Modern Postural Yoga

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Recent scholarship has produced a more detailed analysis of the history of yoga in America. Religion scholars as well as popular writers have begun to untangle how many Americans came see yoga as a secular exercise, divorced from its origins in Indian religion where it often served a soteriological function. This article contributes to this project by analyzing the success of Pierre Bernard, an early twentieth-century teacher of yoga. Bernard and his wife, Blanche DeVries, played an important role in transitioning postural yoga from its associations with sexual deviance, primitive religion, and white slavery to a health system popular among affluent American socialites and celebrities. It is argued that a key factor to the couple's success was a shift in gender roles under way in America at the turn of the century. As a cultural form that was totally outside the Western episteme, yoga's very otherness made it a resource for Americans seeking to construct new forms of gender identity. Bernard and DeVries's brand of yoga was distinct from the yoga promoted by either Hindu apologists or Western occultists. The couple presented yoga as practical, moral, and scientific while still preserving much of its novelty and mystique. They marketed yoga as a resource that could produce stronger, more vigorous men and graceful, independent women. Through this repurposing of yoga as a technology for constructing new forms of gender and identity, yoga in America acquired its associations with athleticism, physical beauty, and sexuality.

Such figures as Mircea Eliade and yoga scholar Georg Feuerstein have lamented the way that Americans have stripped yoga of its soteriological and metaphysical significance, reducing it to a fitness regimen. In 2010, the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) launched a national "Take Yoga Back" campaign. HAF board member Aseem

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Shukla published an article in the *Washington Post* entitled "The Theft of Yoga," claiming that yoga has become a six billion-dollar-a-year industry in the United States while Hinduism is still widely associated with polytheism and the caste system. In his foundational work, *Yoga Body*, yoga historian Mark Singleton argues that "yoga," as a modern postural practice, is a homonym rather than a synonym for the "yoga" of pre-Colonial Hindu tradition. However, Singleton's assessment of the situation is less value laden than that of the HAF. Rather than condemning modern postural yoga as a "misunderstanding," he regards it as a unique cultural tradition and sets out to explore its roots. *Yoga Body* frames modern postural yoga as the product of a dialogue between India and an international physical culture movement in the early twentieth century. Other influences including Western esotericism and Orientalist notions of Indian religion made popular through vaudeville also shaped this new conception of yoga. A key figure in this process (who is conspicuously absent in Singleton's magisterial work) is Pierre Bernard.¹

Bernard was an early twentieth-century proponent of yoga. He emerged from a milieu of Western occultists who played the part of Hindu yogi, and the New York papers frequently referred to him by the epithet "Oom the Omnipotent." However, by his death in 1955, he had established a considerable fortune teaching yoga to aristocrats at his exclusive country club. The newspapers that had once branded him a charlatan eventually presented him as a pillar of the community. He received accolades from scholars in both India and the United States. Apologists for Hinduism attempted to present yoga as a practice that was disembodied and introspective. By contrast, Bernard embraced postural yoga. Sometimes he presented it as a dangerous and esoteric practice, sometimes as wholesome and secular. However, he always emphasized that yoga was useful and pleasurable. Through this approach, he paved the way for modern postural yoga in America and advanced the international dialogue between yoga and physical culture. With Blanche DeVries, he stood precisely at the cultural intersection described by Singleton: he had friends among the Vedanta society as well as the physical culture movement and was equally comfortable in his local Masonic lodge as in vaudeville circles. Journalist Robert Love's extensively researched biography of Bernard credits him with reforming the American perception of yoga from a scandalous practice associated with idolatry and perverse sexuality into a wholesome system of fitness. Esotericism scholar Hugh Urban credits Bernard with giving Tantra a similar makeover, presenting it as a tantalizing antidote to Victorian oppression.²

Scholarship has only recently arrived at a more complete historical picture of Bernard's life, and the factors that led to his success remain largely unanalyzed.³ This article frames Bernard's success as the result of his ability to navigate two factors within American culture. The first factor was an implicit two-tiered model of religion that framed Hinduism and especially yoga in opposition to Protestant sensibilities. American discourse has fostered a cultural geography that frames a Protestant notion of "true religion," compatible with science and ethics, against "dangerous" modes of religion that are foreign, hierarchical, or embodied. The second factor was a shift in gender roles at the turn of the century. The period from 1890 to 1920 saw the rise of the "New Woman" who was financially independent, more willful, and more sexually autonomous. At the same time, middle-class men felt that the industrialized world was becoming overly feminized and sought to shore up their masculine identity through a variety of new cultural forms, including physical culture.⁴

Vivekananda and other Hindu apologists were well aware of this two-tiered model of religion and sought to frame Hinduism as "proper religion" by presenting it as philosophical and scientific rather than embodied or mystical. By contrast, Bernard played both sides of this cultural geography in his pitch for yoga. He frequently did present his teachings as scientific and moral, especially to law enforcement and the press. However, he also understood that yoga was appealing to certain Americans *because* it was seen as provocative and deviant. Rather than downplaying yoga's embodied aspects, Bernard turned them into a potential resource for the New Man and the New Woman. In doing so, Bernard and DeVries popularized notions of yoga as a technology for producing athletic, virile men and graceful, beautiful women.

After providing a brief biography of Bernard and DeVries, I will outline the two larger cultural factors that ultimately shaped Bernard's pitch for yoga: a two-tiered model of religion and changing ideas about gender at the turn of the century. Next, I will show how the two-tiered model of religion determined the ways through which yoga could be presented to the American public. Hindu apologists often presented a "Protestantized" version of yoga that was entirely disembodied. Alternatively, vaudeville entertainers frequently capitalized on the perception of postural yoga as exotic and salacious. Bernard did not cleave strictly to the path of either the apologists or the vaudeville exploitationists but, rather, wove back and forth between these approaches. In doing so, he discovered a way to offer an embodied form of yoga that retained its exotic appeal but did not alienate wealthy donors. Finally, I will demonstrate how yoga's

negative associations were repurposed for creating new constructions of femininity and masculinity and how this process has shaped the reception of yoga in America.

The Life of Pierre Bernard

Pierre Bernard went to great lengths to conceal his origins. He was not born with the name Pierre Bernard and used several aliases during his life. There is also disagreement as to where he came from before adopting his persona as a yoga master. Love, whose biography is the most authoritative, states that he was born in Leon, Iowa, as Perry Arnold Baker. Bernard often implied he had traveled to India, and some scholars find this plausible. However, it appears the main source of his knowledge of yoga came from a man named Sylvais Hamati, an immigrant of Syrian-Bengali heritage. The two met in Lincoln, Nebraska. Hamati may have worked as a circus performer before becoming what Love calls "an itinerant tutor" of Vedic philosophy. Bernard studied under Hamati three hours a day for eighteen years. Eventually, Bernard and Hamati took up residence in San Francisco, where Bernard met early proponents of Hinduism, including Swami Vivekananda and Swami Ram Tirath. With the help of his uncle, Dr. Clarence Baker, Bernard established a business using his yogaic training as a sort of complementary medicine.⁵

By 1898, Bernard had established a business called the San Francisco College for Suggestive Therapeutics. That year, he demonstrated the power of yoga by performing a stunt called the Kali Mudra, a self-induced trance that simulated death. Doctors were invited to probe and cut him in an attempt to elicit a response. Bernard's career as a pseudo-medical professional was halted in 1902 when he was arrested for practicing medicine illegally.⁶

In addition to his para-medical pursuits, Bernard also formed an esoteric group with Hamati, the Tantrik Order of America. The Tantrik Order attracted wealthy bohemians as well as aspiring actors and artists who sought training in Vedic philosophy, yoga, and Tantra. Bernard had plans to create an entire network of Tantrik lodges, but it is unclear if other branches were ever established. In 1906, he published the first and only volume of *Vira Sadhana: The International Journal of the Tantrik Order of America*. Bernard also created a group known as "The Bacchante Club." This appears to have been more recreational in orientation, and the club's parties attracted attention from the San Francisco police. Love cites an undercover police officer who found "men dressed in long black gowns sitting on the floor smoking Turkish water pipes, while girls danced before

them."⁷ In 1906, Bernard left San Francisco, probably due to unwanted scrutiny from authorities. He and several of his followers traveled to Seattle and then to New York.

By 1910, Bernard had set up a new Tantrik Order lodge on 74th Street in Manhattan. He continued to run both an esoteric order that emphasized Tantric initiation and an exoteric yoga studio with classes to promote health and vigor. Many of his New York yoga students were older men seeking restored vitality. Bernard had already learned that he could draw more students by having his young female followers teach the yoga classes, usually while wearing form-fitting outfits. One of these women was Gertrude Leo, who had first met Bernard in Seattle and followed him to New York.⁸ Leo was initiated into the Tantrik Order and began a romantic relationship with Bernard.

Leo later claimed that Bernard had asked her to be his "nautch girl." Nautch was a style of popular dance performed by women in Northern India under the Mughal Empire. Through the East India Company, the idea of "nautch girls" reached the West, where it became confused with Hindu *devadasis*, female dancers who perform religious dances in Hindu temples. By the late nineteenth century, the nautch girl had become an object of Orientalist fantasy, and vaudeville dancers in America were performing the nautch. The institution of nautch girls was also frequently cited as evidence of Hindu misogyny. In 1900, Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller produced a book entitled *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* that contained an account of nautch girls. Fuller describes nautch girls as sacred concubines, indoctrinated into their roles as children. However, Fuller concedes that nautch girls obtain a higher level of education than their peers. She writes, "It often happens that these dancing-girls are rich, beautiful, and very attractive, besides being witty and pleasant in conversation; and they are the only women that move freely in men's society in India."⁹ This concession demonstrates the dual nature of the stigmatized cultural other. These polemics against nautch girls simultaneously condemned Indian culture and presented Western women with a vision of an alternative lifestyle. When Leo agreed to become Bernard's nautch girl, she may have imagined that this would entail a sacrifice of autonomy but also a form of education and empowerment that her own culture would not be able to understand.

Tensions arose when Bernard began working with another woman named Zelia Hopp. Hopp suffered from ill health and Bernard, acting under the alias "Dr. Warren," offered to help restore her. This, too, led to a romantic relationship. Love reports that, for a time, Bernard persuaded both women to share his bed.¹⁰ However,

this was not to last. On May 2, 1910, Hopp, along with Leo's sister, Jennie Miller, led two detectives to Bernard's school, where he was arrested for abduction.

The trial of Pierre Bernard was covered not only by the New York papers but also by papers in San Francisco and Seattle, as well. Details from the trial provide a few clues as to what exactly Bernard was teaching his followers. A detective explained that Hopp taught them a "secret ring" that granted them access into Bernard's home. When asked about the circumstances of Bernard's arrest, the detective stated:

When we got upstairs we saw eight elderly men and five women in tights and bathing costumes. They were just exercising. They were tumbling on a mat, which had strange figures on it. The defendant was standing by a crystal ball and was clad in tights that came to his knees and a jersey on which were some queer figures. . . . It's a high-class place, your Honor. Fixed up swell.¹¹

It is not entirely clear if the scene described by the detective would have been recognizable by modern Americans as a yoga class. Some familiar elements of modern postural yoga are already present, such as tights and mats. However, the exercises are described as "tumbling" rather than stretches or contortions. Finally, there is the crystal ball, an element used by Western mediums to speak with the dead. In fact, it was rumored that, during World War I, Bernard made money as a medium using crystal balls and other devices. Bernard's clients would have already been familiar with Claude Alexander Conlin (1880–1954), "the Crystal Seer," who wore a turban and consulted a crystal ball during his vaudeville act—an act that was later parodied by Johnny Carson. The crystal ball suggests that Bernard's yoga classes combined the knowledge he gained from Hamati with Western elements, including spiritualism and vaudeville. Singleton argues that modern postural yoga came about through new developments in Indian yoga that were inspired by the physical culture movement and then blended with Western forms of "esoteric gymnastics" that had developed in the nineteenth century independently of yoga.¹² The scene described above appears to depict this process of blending Western forms of embodied esotericism with physical culture and Indian yoga.

Hopp and Leo alleged that Bernard had kept them in captivity using a combination of threats and hypnotic power. Leo also testified that Bernard had threatened to kill her and then gave her morphine to sedate her. After being revived, she was allegedly made

to sign an oath of silence in her own blood. Love notes that these charges played into a larger nativist fear of traffic in white slavery. In addition to the abduction charges, Hopp claimed that Bernard impersonated a physician for purposes of having sex with her.¹³

New York City had more than forty daily newspapers in 1910, and each sought to capitalize on the salacious details of Bernard's arrest. The headlines gave Bernard the epithet that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Leo and Hopp reported that Bernard often referred to himself as "the Great Om." By the afternoon after Bernard's arrest, papers described him as "Oom the Omnipotent." Om or Aum is a sacred syllable described in the Hindu Upanishads. It has a variety of meanings within Hindu tradition but is typically understood to embody and encapsulate the whole of reality. By the late nineteenth century, Om had already entered the vocabulary of Western esotericism.¹⁴

Prosecutors also went through Bernard's library and quoted some of the more explicitly sexual passages of *Vira Sadhana*. Significantly, Bernard responded by presenting his teachings as exercise rather than religion. He told a reporter from the *Evening Post*, "The whole scheme is physical culture, that's all."¹⁵ Bernard would continue to use this argument whenever his activities attracted unwanted attention from media and police.

Bail was initially set at \$15,000, and Bernard spent more than three months awaiting trial in a notoriously unpleasant New York City jail known as "The Tombs." In the end, the district attorney disqualified Leo as a witness when Bernard's lawyer threatened to bring in witnesses who disputed her honesty. Hopp and her family dropped all charges and fled the city's jurisdiction. With no witnesses, the case was dropped, and Bernard was freed.¹⁶

After being released from the Tombs, Bernard moved to Leonia, New Jersey. Before long, he made another attempt to establish a school for his teachings. This time, he sought to tone down his mystical persona and present himself in a more scholarly light. Operating under the alias Homer Stansbury Leeds, he opened a new institution with the respectable sounding name of the New York Sanskrit College. He hired faculty from India to teach Sanskrit, Vedic philosophy, Ayurvedic medicine, and Indian music.¹⁷

Bernard's switch from turbaned seer to para-academic might have succeeded were he not still under intense scrutiny by the media and police. The New York Sanskrit College was entangled in rumor almost immediately. The neighbors of the college spoke of night revels and claimed that they were kept awake by the ecstatic cries of women and "wild Oriental music." Bernard may have been hosting

Bacchante Club parties or the neighbors may simply have heard night classes in Indian music. According to the *New York Times*, district attorney Charles Whitman “intended to stop any attempt at a resumption of the ‘Hindu school’ game.” The last straw came when the State Board of Education sought to prosecute Bernard for running a “college” without a license or any formal academic degree.¹⁸ Police were sent to arrest him, but Bernard slipped away, returning to Leonia.

Back in Leonia, Bernard began a new romance with Dace Shannon Charlot. Charlot had come to New York after leaving an abusive, older husband. The details of the divorce had also been fodder for the papers, and she sought to parlay this attention into a career in vaudeville. She had already studied Oriental dance at the New York Sanskrit College. In fact, Bernard’s lawyer had also represented Charlot in her divorce. Following the divorce, she changed her name to Blanche DeVries. She and Bernard were kindred spirits and eventually married in 1918. In letters, the two refer to each other as Shiva and Shakti, the names of coupled Tantric deities. Together, the two became what Love calls “the nation’s premier occult power couple.”¹⁹

DeVries is normally credited with Bernard’s eventual success in finding a viable market for yoga as a health system. After meeting DeVries, Bernard never again set up businesses under aliases or fled police. Instead, he successfully opened several new yoga studios around New York aimed exclusively at women. The revelry of the Bacchante Club was done away with. The new yoga centers forbade drinking or smoking, with the exception of Bernard’s cigars.²⁰ One of these studios attracted the restless heiress Margaret Rutherford, daughter of Anne Vanderbilt. Rutherford became infatuated with Bernard, as did many of his female followers. However, it was DeVries who won the financial backing of Mrs. Vanderbilt.

In 1919, Mrs. Vanderbilt funded Bernard’s new enterprise, a facility called the Braeburn Country Club in Nyack, New York. The club became a haven for American yoga and a retreat for wealthy aristocrats. The people of Nyack knew of Bernard’s reputation and were initially eager to shut down the club. The Nyack police were asked to pressure Bernard to leave, but they refused to interfere, pointing out that Bernard was now a major taxpayer.²¹

In 1924, Bernard spent \$200,000 purchasing and developing an additional seventy-six acres for his estate, renaming it the Clarks-town Country Club. This investment ended any effort to drive him out. At the height of his career, Bernard owned real estate worth twelve million dollars. He reinvested his capital, becoming an important member of the local community and adopting an increasingly

legitimate persona. Bernard did, however, continue to make unusual investments, including a troupe of elephants as well as several other circus animals.²² Bernard also put on a circus in which his elephants did tricks and club members performed as acrobats. He may have learned circus skills while traveling with Hamati in his youth.

At the Clarkstown Country Club, Bernard moved yoga to a point that neatly straddled the two-tiered model of religion. Bernard's yoga was still exotic enough to attract wealthy students but mainstream enough to avoid scandal. The public perception of Bernard was that he had "turned in his turban for tweed," and the papers became increasingly friendly toward him. In 1922, the *New York Times* stated:

The "Omnipotent Oom" mixes in community affairs here under the modest name of Pierre A. Bernard. While Oom has generally been associated elsewhere with strange forms of worship, mysterious rites, sensational charges, the District Attorney, the Grand Jury and double pages in illustrated newspapers, he is known here simply as Mr. Bernard, one of the most active and patriotic townspeople of Nyack.

One article adds that Bernard had once been "known to his distaste as 'Oom the Omnipotent.'"²³

A Two-Tiered Model of Religion

Robert Orsi best describes how mainstream American discourse has implicitly defined "true religion":

True religion . . . is rational, respectful to persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher forms, mystical (as opposed to ritualistic), unmediated and agreeable to democracy (no hierarchy in gilded robes and fancy hats), monotheistic (no angels, saints, demons, ancestors), emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter. It is concerned with ideal essences not actual things, and especially not about presences in things.

This definition worked to exclude Hinduism, at least as many Americans understood it. In the nineteenth century, many Americans perceived Hinduism as a primitive religion, replete with idolatry and superstition, in which lecherous Brahmans were attended by harems of female devotees. Stephen Prothero has argued that such claims were an adaptation of an earlier Protestant stereotype about Catholic priests. Anti-Hindu literature also frequently compared Hinduism to

biblical descriptions of the worship of Moloch and Baal.²⁴ This suggests that American "Hinduphobia" had a heresiological basis rooted in both the Old Testament and Protestant ideas about ritual and hierarchy.

Furthermore, Orsi notes that ideas of religious difference have frequently overlapped with ethnic and racial otherness. Hindu-phobia was closely aligned with nativism and a concern over "the Turbaned Tornado," the Indian equivalent of "the Yellow Peril." While covering Bernard's trial for abduction, the *New York Times* reported surprise that the defendant appeared to be an American. Apparently, they had expected that a guru accused of abducting white women would be Asian. In the nineteenth century, immigrants from India arrived at the rate of only a few hundred a decade. Then, five thousand arrived in the first decade of the twentieth century. Many of these took jobs on the northern Pacific coast, which resulted in "Anti-Hindoo" riots.²⁵ Bernard was in Seattle in 1906 and likely encountered these riots. Anti-Asian sentiment culminated in the Immigrant Act of 1917, which excluded all immigration from Asian countries, with the exceptions of Japan and the Philippines.

However, there was another side to this two-tiered model of religion. Subordinating Asian religion and Asian people as inferior and primitive also imbued them with an exotic mystique that many Americans found appealing. The period from the mid-1880s to the Second World War saw the rise of "slumming," a practice in which middle-class whites would investigate socially marginalized urban neighborhoods in Chicago or New York in search of adventure. Slumming involved using the cultural other to construct one's own identity and to explore new ideas about gender and sexuality. Historian Chad Heap argues that slumming created spaces where middle class whites could "explore their sexual fantasies outside the social constraints of their own neighborhoods." Slumming and the emerging bohemian culture soon shaped the way that Asian cultures were interpreted and marketed to Americans. A stark example of this is the opium dens of New York's Chinatown. During the late 1880s and early 1890s, affluent white men and women would sometimes patronize opium dens alongside Chinese immigrants. However, by the mid-1890s, thousands of well-to-do whites were venturing into Chinatown in search of danger and excitement. This created a market for "fake opium joints," where Chinese men and white women (who were often their wives) would stage "scenes of iniquity" for paying spectators.²⁶ So the same cultural geography that stigmatized other cultures also granted middle-class whites the privilege of defining their own identities in

relation to the other, either eschewing it or experimenting with it. Bernard and DeVries were both masters of reconstructing their own identities, assuming new names and personas to suit their needs. Unlike Hindu apologists from India, they understood how to make the otherness of yoga appealing to Americans who were seeking to redefine themselves.

The New Woman and the New Man

The years leading up to the passage of the nineteenth amendment saw the rise of the so-called New Woman, who was “single, well-educated, independent, self-sufficient, and strong-willed.” The industrial revolution had made possible a new class of urban women who were working class and single. These wage-earning women constructed their ideas about femininity around the competence with which they performed their work, their desire to have fun, their resourcefulness, and their sexuality.²⁷

Enormous social anxiety focused on urban wage-earning women, who were frequently referred to as “women adrift.” Boarding house movements such as the Young Women’s Christian Association produced literature portraying these women as innocents in need of maternal protection. There were numerous romance novels that revolved around the perils of women adrift. These novels were usually written by women, and their sales peaked between 1880 and 1890 when more single women were leaving their parents to work in the cities. The heroines of these stories were typically helpless to support themselves in a dangerous urban environment and struggled to protect their sexual purity from cads and seducers until they could find a wealthy and honorable man to marry. Antiprostitution reformers produced tracts that cast working women as foolish and headstrong. Although innocent, their naïveté left them vulnerable to the corruption of urban life and liable to be seduced into prostitution and even white slavery.²⁸ All of this literature regarded the independence of wage-earning women from their families as a potential disaster and a threat to their sexual purity. Bernard’s trial for abduction in 1910 was essentially a mimesis of this literature. The papers immediately cast Bernard as the evil urban seducer and Leo and Hopp as innocent but helpless women adrift.

While stories of women adrift excited American readers, they did little to deter single women from seeking work in the cities. Soon, the daughters of the upper classes began to claim the same freedom as wage-earning women. Historian Mary Ryan describes both working-class and wealthy young women struggling to escape “the powerful

clutches of maternalism."²⁹ The revolt against maternalism involved not only financial independence but also the free participation in behaviors that Victorian culture specified as improper for young women, including movie theaters, dance halls, and fraternizing with single men. Some women embraced the very things that scandalized Protestant sensibilities, including sexualized Orientalist dances made popular by vaudeville performers such as Ruth St. Denis. Alma Hirsig provides an account of a sensual "Hindu dance" class offered in New York City in the first decade of the twentieth century. She notes that the women attending the class were primarily, but not exclusively, of the "bored and sensation seeking class."³⁰ Blanche DeVries was a vaudeville performer before meeting Bernard, and many of the pair's female students were aspiring dancers. Like dance, the practice of yoga became a way through which women could construct identities as autonomous and sexual beings.

Middle-class men were also undergoing a crisis of identity at the turn of the century. This was, in part, a response to the progress of women, who were becoming an increasing presence in the work place and in the political sphere. Men were also increasingly working for large companies and abandoning any hopes of owning their own business. More men were finding employment working desk jobs rather than performing manual labor. Finally, the American frontier was closed, which had long served to foster ideas about masculinity. For some men, a sense that the world had become overly civilized led to a glorification of "manly" traits such as competitiveness, aggressiveness, muscularity, and courage. Men also romanticized characteristics that had previously been considered undesirable, including "primitive savagery, violence, passion, and impulsiveness."³¹

This crisis of masculinity coincided with an increased interest in combat sports, such as boxing and wrestling, as well as team sports, such as baseball. There was also a renewed fascination with the cultural other. Cultures that had been maligned as primitive and uncivilized became a potential source of lost masculinity. This was the era of the adventure novel in which heroic white men contended with the forces of the uncivilized world. Historian Sylvia Hoffert argues that Tarzan—a white man raised by apes—perfectly embodied the ideal of the New Man. She writes, "Tarzan's appeal seems to have been that he was able to successfully combine the sensibilities of a white man with the violence and hedonism of a savage."³² The persona Bernard constructed for himself and offered his male students often resembled this sort of hybridized adventure hero, a white man tutored in the secrets of the cultural other.

Yoga and the Two-Tiered Model of Religion

To understand Bernard's success, it is first necessary to look at how yoga was perceived in the early twentieth century. The binary between Protestantism and the religious other determined how proponents of yoga could present their ideas. Apologists for Hinduism, including Swami Vivekananda and the Theosophical Society, presented a Protestantized form of Hinduism.³³ If yoga was discussed at all, it was only devotional or meditative, never embodied hatha yoga. Conversely, a variety of vaudeville performers and occultists embraced yoga's otherness and presented themselves as masters of secret and dangerous techniques. A key factor in the success experienced by Bernard and DeVries was their ability to play both sides of this dichotomy, carefully presenting yoga as wholesome at some times and exotic at others.

Protestantizing Yoga

To counter the profoundly negative claims about Hinduism, Hindu apologists sought to present their religion in terms that would appeal to Protestant sensibilities. They described Hinduism as devotional, moral, and scientific. In 1907, Baba Premanand Bharati, who founded the Krishna Samaj in New York City, explained, "If I have talked of Krishna and the Vedas of Hindu philosophy, it was only to illuminate the teachings of your own Christ, to present him before you in the light of the Vedas and the X-ray of our scientific philosophies."³⁴

This appeal to Protestant sensibilities often meant condemning yoga, particularly hatha yoga, as an inauthentic or degenerate form of Hindu tradition. Elizabeth de Michelis suggests that the first "yoga retreat" in America occurred in 1895 when Vivekananda led a few select students to Thousand Island Park. Vivekananda deliberately excluded any mention of hatha yoga, which he dismissed as "dangerous and unnecessary." This emphasis on yoga as philosophy or "applied psychology" served to align Hindu tradition with Western mind-body dualism. In addition to avoiding embodied religion, early apologists for yoga also appealed to the two-tiered model of religion by privileging spiritual goals of yoga over practical ones. Vivekananda explained that the goals of hatha yoga were long life and good health and, therefore, inferior to the transcendent and spiritual goals of rajah yoga. A number of Westerners endorsed this view, including Max Muller, who claimed that modern yoga had descended into "its purely practical and most degenerate form," and

Helena Blavatsky, who described the hatha yogi as a “common, ignorant sorcerer.” In 1909, the Theosophical Society banned even a discussion of yoga as part of its movement. Annie Besant, who was otherwise amenable to Indian thought, described the pro-yoga Theosophists as “animalistic.”³⁵

Yoga as the Exotic Other

America’s cultural geography not only served to subjugate other cultures as inferior but also transformed them into objects of fascination and horror onto which Westerners could project their own fantasies. The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago was a key example of this two-tiered model of culture. The very architecture of the exposition presented a tacit definition of civilization by contrasting “The White City,” which featured exhibits to Western technology, with the Midway Plaisance, which was originally intended to be a living exhibit of the “primitive” peoples of the world. Not only did the midway exhibits present non-Western cultures as other, but this otherness was also frequently sexualized. One exhibit was the “Persian palace of Eros,” where spectators could see a dancer known as “Little Egypt” perform “the hootchy-kootchy.” Reporters described this dance as a “suggestively lascivious contorting of the abdominal muscles” and “shockingly disgusting.” However, illustrator E. W. Kemble observed that “many men left the spectacle with noticeably unoutraged expressions.”³⁶ Much like the “nautch girl,” Little Egypt presented a sexual fantasy made all the more tantalizing because of its otherness. “Danse du Ventre” soon became a cultural craze in Chicago and New York City.

This dynamic in which the cultural other is simultaneously the object of disgust and fascination demonstrates Foucault’s insight that Victorian sexual repression actually obfuscated modes of sexual fascination and indulgence. Singleton notes that this dynamic was also at stake in the early Western reception of yoga.³⁷ While Vivekananda and the Theosophists were busy trying to locate Hinduism and yoga on the Protestant side of the two-tiered model of religion, many Westerners were fascinated by yoga precisely because of its associations with sexuality and secrecy, particularly members of the urban middle class in search of danger and excitement.

Just as the Persian Palace of Eros at the World’s Fair presented the cultural other as simultaneously alluring and revolting, vaudeville was a common outlet through which yoga was presented as the exotic other. Even seemingly “authentic” depictions of Indian yoga poses were actually filtered through a Western perspective.

Through colonialism, Protestant notions of “true religion” had already reached India, where yogis were frequently maligned and associated with black magic, perverse sexuality, and ritual impurity. Singleton cites European scholarship that frames yogis as dangerous charlatans in contradistinction to practitioners of “true yoga,” which was devotional and contemplative. Significantly, this split between the contemplative Brahmin and the deviant yogi caused some Indians to live down to colonialist expectations. The conditions of colonialism drove many ascetics from their traditional professions, such as the *Naga* caste of professional soldiers. Some of these individuals were forced to earn a living by performing in public where they played to colonial stereotypes of the mendicant yogi. Singleton describes Yogi Bava Lachman Dass, who gave a performance of forty-eight postures at London’s Westminster Aquarium in 1897. The performance was not authentic Indian asceticism but, rather, an appeal to British ideas of what asceticism ought to look like. Lachman Dass’s performance incorporated as much from vaudeville contortionist acts as from Asian asceticism. Photographs of Dass’s postures appeared in the illustrated journal *The Strand*. This was the first of many photographic depictions that confirmed Western stereotypes about yoga.³⁸ Bernard made a similar career move in San Francisco when he performed his Kali Mudra death trance. Like Dass, the event was photographed and the image of Bernard’s bloody and comatose body played into an understanding of yoga as exotic, exciting, and frightening. In his early career, as already noted, Bernard was also not above using such vaudeville tropes as turbans and crystal balls.

In addition to vaudeville, occultism offered a route through which yoga entered Western discourse. Many Western occultists “tried their hand” at yoga, including Aleister Crowley, whom several biographers have compared to Bernard. Some, such as William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), invented entire Hindu personas for themselves. Atkinson published books on oriental occultism under the name Yogi Ramacharaka, as well as Bhakta Vishita, Swami Panchadasi, and others. Bernard may have aspired to a similar career before meeting DeVries. On a court document asking his occupation, he wrote, “Teacher and publisher.” Sociologist Rodney Stark notes that immigration laws made it easier for Westerners like Atkinson and Bernard to play the role of Hindu gurus. Actual Indian proponents of Hinduism were extremely rare until the immigration reforms of 1965.³⁹

White occultists who dabbled in yoga were still targeted by a moral panic over Hinduism. Dr. William Latson was an early proponent of yoga; his career foreshadowed Bernard’s in many ways. He

had an office in New York where he would teach yoga and Oriental dancing to young women to restore their health and beauty. Blanche DeVries had been one of his students. In May 1911, Dr. Latson's body was found in his office with a bullet wound to the head, an apparent suicide. Soon afterward, a heartbroken female follower made her own attempt at suicide. This led the *Washington Post* to run the headline, "The Soul Destroying Poison of the East: The Tragic Flood of Broken Homes and Hearts, Disgrace, and Suicide that Follows the Broadening Stream of Morbidly Alluring Oriental 'Philosophies' into Our Country."⁴⁰ The story covered Latson's suicide and Bernard's abduction trial. For good measure, it also featured a photograph of the vaudeville dancer Ruth St. Denis clad in her Oriental garb, linking all of the stories together into a single entity of scandal, suicide, and Orientalism.

Like Dr. Latson, Bernard marketed yoga's associations with sexuality and secrecy. Syman notes that the early twentieth century was a period when Americans were joining secret and semisecret societies in large numbers. This included not only the Freemasons, of which Bernard later became a member, but numerous other esoteric groups as well. Bernard understood how to appeal to this market. Young bohemians may have been drawn to his Tantrik Order precisely because of its grades of initiation and its "blood oaths." Even after Bernard adopted a more respectable persona, he still maintained an air of secrecy. The humanist Charles Francis Potter was a visitor at the Clarkstown Country Club and once asked Bernard why he never contradicted the many rumors about what went on in his club. Bernard replied it was his policy never to give interviews.⁴¹ He may have understood that a few rumors are good for business.

It is significant that Bernard's name often appears alongside both Vivekananda and Aleister Crowley. All three of these men were negotiating the two-tiered model of religion using very different strategies. Vivekananda sought to reconcile "true yoga" with Protestant ideas of "true religion." Crowley, an iconoclast, embraced yoga and Tantra as alternatives to Protestant religious and sexual mores. Bernard, however, weaved a middle path between these strategies. After meeting Blanche DeVries, he showed a remarkable ability to tailor his teachings to his audience, presenting yoga as wholesome exercise at some times and dangerous and esoteric at others. By maintaining this balance, Bernard and DeVries were able to take the aspects of yoga that seemed most "other" and turn them into resources for Westerners seeking to define themselves as autonomous women and powerful men. In doing so, they helped to define a new tradition of modern postural yoga.

Yoga for the New Woman

While women formed the primary market for yoga lessons, women also wrote the most scathing indictments of yoga instructors, whom they portrayed as frauds and seducers. In 1911, the *Hampton Magazine* published an article by Mabel Potter Daggett entitled, "The Heathen Invasion: American Women Losing Fortunes and Reason Seeking the Eternal Youth Promised by the Swarthy Priests of the Far East." The article discusses Bernard's trial and Latson's suicide. Daggett declares, "Eve is eating the apple again. It is offered as a knowledge of the occult that shall solve the riddles of existence. . . . Incidentally there is offered also health and long life and the power to stay the ravages of time. Is it not enough to tempt the feminine mind from Paradise itself?" Daggett's tableau of Hinduism revolves around Western sexual fantasies of the nautch girl. She writes of Tantric rites, "Their essential feature is the adoration of a naked woman, the dancing Nautch girl who is trained for the embraces of the priests. . . . Thousands of girls, twelve thousand in South India alone, are dedicated as Nautch girls to the service of the temple priests in consecrated prostitution."⁴²

In 1914, Elizabeth Reed published *Hinduism in Europe and America*, which also warns of the dangers of modern Hindu gurus. The book describes the horror of a New York girl forced to sign an oath in her own blood—an obvious reference to Gertrude Leo. Reed writes, "Let the white woman beware of the hypnotic influence of the East—let her remember that when her Guru, or god-man, has once whispered his mystic syllables into her ear and she has sworn allegiance to him, she is forever helpless in his hands."⁴³ Both articles also mention Swami Vivekananda and describe a rumor that, upon returning to India, he compared American women to nautch girls.

In many ways, the warnings of Daggett and Reed resemble earlier discourse about women adrift. Like the various tracts and romance novels about heroines who foolishly venture into the city only to meet with seduction and disaster, Daggett and Reed portray female yoga students as innocents whose vanity leads to the loss of their freedom and sexual purity. As with the women adrift literature, such warnings appear to have served as entertainment more than actual deterrents. For women interested in yoga, the tableau of seduction and impropriety presented by Daggett and Reed may have only confirmed that yoga was a way to rebel against maternalism and to prove their autonomy.

Many women who studied yoga at the turn of the century, including Ida Craddock, Genevieve Stebbins, and Ruth St. Denis,

tended to be bohemians and iconoclasts who were claiming a new form of feminine identity. As a subjugated cultural form, yoga presented a number of resources for this project. First, yoga presented an alternative to Western social mores. Where members of mainstream Western society regarded postural yoga as salacious, some women saw a more enlightened approach to sexuality. Early female proponents of yoga and Oriental dance, including Ida Craddock and Ruth St. Denis, looked to India for a form of embodied spirituality that regarded female sexuality as sacred rather than abject. Second, some women appeared to be drawn to yoga precisely because of its associations with moral and physical danger, white slavery, and dominating gurus. Like the slummers who visited opium dens seeking an encounter with debauchery, some women regarded studying yoga as an opportunity to prove their independence and competence. Two women, Mary Doyle and Alma Hirsig, wrote memoirs in which they boasted of studying yoga under Bernard and escaping unscathed.⁴⁴ (Hirsig's memoir, *My Life in a Love Cult*, combines truth with obvious inventions. However, it offers an important insight into Bernard's appeal among bohemian women.) Bernard and DeVries seemed to understand these motivations and were able to use them to market yoga to women.

American women arrived at modern postural yoga through somewhat different cultural currents than men. Like its male counterpart, female postural yoga drew from physical culture and Western esotericism. However, for women, Oriental dance was a key component that served both to unite the other elements and to disseminate postural yoga to a mainstream audience. After the performance of Little Egypt at the Columbian Exhibition, a moral debate formed over *Danse du Ventre*. Many Americans found these performances exciting. Thomas Edison made *Danse du Ventre* the subject of two of his earliest moving pictures. Meanwhile, moral reformers, notably postal inspector Anthony Comstock, were horrified by these dances. However, a number of women began learning to perform dances inspired by Asian culture. For some, Oriental dancing was not only a chance to embrace their sexuality but also a spiritual endeavor. Ida Craddock is perhaps the greatest exemplar of this view of dance as sacralized sexuality. A contemporary of Bernard, Craddock was a sex reformer and briefly the pastor of her own "Church of Yoga." Although Craddock did little to popularize modern postural yoga, she produced literature defending *Danse du Ventre*. Just as Bernard spoke of the health benefits of yoga, Craddock argued that the sensual movements associated with exotic dance strengthened the dancer's muscles for marital relations. Like Bernard, she emphasized the idea of marriage

as a partnership and the importance of a woman's sexual pleasure. She also shared Bernard's view that the civilized world had become blind to the spiritual insights that could be gained through sexuality. In seeking to remedy this, she turned to ancient cultures. Craddock studied archaeological literature on "phallic sex worship" and argued that sex reform should draw on the insights of ancient cultures. Most important, Craddock practiced Oriental dance alone and regarded dancing, much like her practice of yoga, as a religious exercise.⁴⁵ Indeed, dance for Craddock was simultaneously a form of physical culture, a celebration of female sexuality, and a mystical experience. A similar understanding of Oriental dance was disseminated to urban women by such performers as Ruth St. Denis and ultimately shaped the way American women came to see postural yoga.

Genevieve Stebbins was a contemporary of Craddock with many of the same interests. She studied the Delsarte system, a form of physical culture, and was a member of an esoteric group known as the Church of Light. Stebbins combined esotericism, gymnastics, and yoga to produce a highly popular form of Delsartism. She also trained the famous vaudeville dancer Ruth St. Denis. St. Denis never actually studied Indian dance but combined Stebbins's Delsartism with her own imagination of another culture. Her performances in the first decade of the twentieth century lay at the center of a craze for Oriental dancing. Through dancers like St. Denis, many of the cultural currents of female postural yoga reached a mainstream audience. Also like Craddock, St. Denis found the sublime where others saw primitivism and lasciviousness. Choreographic inspiration came to her in 1904 when she saw a drugstore poster for Egyptian Deities cigarettes. It featured a bare-breasted Isis surrounded by columns and a lotus flower. St. Denis later wrote that when she saw this image, "My destiny as a dancer had sprung alive in that moment. I would become a rhythmic and impersonal instrument of spiritual revelation. . . . I have never before known such an inward shock of rapture." Like Craddock, St. Denis framed her dancing as a mystical endeavor. In her poem "White Jade," she wrote, "My own body is the living temple of all Gods. The God of Truth is in my upright spine. The God of Love is in the Heart's rhythmic beating. The God of Wisdom lives in my conceiving mind. . . . The God of Beauty is revealed in my harmonious body." Women were particularly drawn to St. Denis's performances, and many aspired to become dancers themselves.⁴⁶

This ideal of the Oriental dancer as a sort of glamorous sexual mystic, trained in the mysteries of the East, helps to explain why young women were drawn to Bernard and DeVries. When Gertrude Leo agreed to become Bernard's "nautch girl," she likely envisioned

something akin to what St. Denis describes in "White Jade." Alma Hirsig suggests that Bernard understood his female students' fantasies of being sensual celebrity mystics like St. Denis and that he worked to indulge these fantasies. She writes, "Little girls like to 'dress-up.' So do big girls. Oom, the Omnipotent, knows that. So he dresses them up. And when he does they believe they are actually the figure they represent."⁴⁷

It was Blanche DeVries who successfully channeled the popularity of Oriental dancing into a female market for yoga lessons. As an aspiring vaudeville performer herself, she understood even better than Bernard what drew women to Oriental dancing and yoga. DeVries and the female students she attracted formed the foundation of the empire Bernard eventually built. In 1914, she was put in charge of a yoga school for women on East 54th Street. Five years later, she opened an institute for teaching "Yoga Gymnosophy"—a name that conveys the blending of yoga with both physical culture and Western esotericism. DeVries continued to employ Oriental choreography at the Clarksville Country Club, where she devised dance performances with such names as "Buddhamas Festival," "Dance of the Five Senses," and "Birthday of Krishna."⁴⁸ These performances contributed to the blend of Eastern wisdom, sensuality, and mystique that attracted wealthy patrons to the club.

Hirsig's biography not only describes DeVries as a catalyst for Bernard's success but also presents DeVries as the true entrepreneur of yoga and Bernard as her pawn. Hirsig claims that both she and DeVries had been students of Dr. Latson. DeVries invited her to lunch in Leonia, New Jersey, where Bernard (whom she mentions was working as a barber at the time) first met DeVries. In Hirsig's account, it was DeVries who sought to use Hinduism to reform Western sexuality. Because she lacked male privilege, she molded Bernard into a guru to disseminate her teachings. Bernard possessed business acumen and a strong work ethic, but DeVries was the visionary. Hirsig writes, "She had not found any one to her taste to help carry out her ideas, though, until she met Bernard. And he *was* such malleable material, with no place to go but out. . . . It was at De Vrie's [*sic*] bidding that Bernard went about really learning about Hinduism." Some elements of this story are true: Bernard's relationship with DeVries did begin in Leonia. He may have even found work as a barber to make ends meet. However, Hirsig's narrative combines the abduction trial and the incident at the New York Sanskrit College into one event that occurred after Bernard met DeVries.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it is clearly not true that Bernard had no real knowledge of Hinduism before meeting his wife. What is significant about this story is that it praises

Bernard's teachings as empowering to women and female sexuality while shifting all of the credit for Bernard's movement to female leadership. Hirsig's revisionist narrative represents the consummation of yoga as a form of female empowerment.

In addition to women like Craddock and St. Denis who saw yoga and Oriental dance as a form of embodied mysticism, other women seemed drawn to yoga because it was seen as an illicit activity. As with the Persian palace of Eros and the New York opium dens, the fantasy of virtuous white women being seduced and turned into nautch girls was equally repulsive and fascinating. Some New York women began to boast of their encounters with Hindu gurus, especially Bernard. The ability to match wits with a seductive guru was a mark of agency and independence. In her biography, *Life Was Like That*, the *World* reporter Mary Doyle (also in print as Mary Evelyn Hitchcock) describes how she was sent to infiltrate the New York Sanskrit College. She writes that her mission was "to effect an introduction of that gentleman [Bernard] to certain officers of the law who at that time had a great desire to make his acquaintance; and at the same time to provide the *World* with a succulent news beat." Doyle's description of her time with Bernard is rather mundane:

The particular feature of Oom's enterprise, around which police suspicions centered was a secret society, supposedly devoted to the study of Oriental religion, known as the Tantrik Order. But when, after two weeks of utterly innocuous lessons in Sanskrit, I finally succeeded in getting myself accepted as a neophyte, and the initiation ceremonies were just about to begin, in fact at the very moment when things seemed to be on the point of getting interesting, at Boss Clarke's personal instigation the police came in by squads and platoons, "Omnipotent Oom" went down the fire-escape, and I saw him no more.⁵⁰

Doyle's account displays several of the virtues associated with the New Woman. She exhibits her value as an undercover reporter. It also demonstrates her calm and open-minded attitude toward Hinduism. Doyle does not describe the imminent initiation ceremonies as invoking scandal or dread in her but, rather, as "interesting."

Similarly, Anita Loos, a New York writer whose work is associated with the ethos of the New Woman, mentions "Oom the Omnipotent" in her comedic novel *But Gentleman Marry Brunettes*, published in 1927. Here, Oom is neither endorsed nor condemned. Instead, knowledge of Bernard's teachings is presented as part of the cosmopolitan New Yorker. The year 1927 was also when Alma Hirsig

published *My Life in a Love Cult: A Warning to All Young Girls* under the penname Marion Dockerill. This book describes the author's experimentation with several "love cults," including becoming the "queen bee" of Dr. Latson and the "high priestess of Oom" under Pierre Bernard. Hirsig also describes meeting Aleister Crowley, whom her sister later married. *My Life in a Love Cult* is the antithesis of romance novels about the plight of women adrift. Instead of escaping the horrors of urban living through marriage, the heroine escapes the drudgery of a loveless marriage into an exciting world of love cults. Hirsig boasts of how she was able to find sexual satisfaction outside of marriage and her ability to discern dangerous gurus from nondangerous ones. Despite the title, the book is not a "warning" at all. Instead, it glamorizes Hirsig's sexual adventures and intellectual independence. Female readers are encouraged to seek out fulfilling lovers and to become connoisseurs of new religious movements. This suggests that women who studied yoga at the turn of the century likely regarded themselves as independent and capable of mastering a potentially risky situation. By the time Bernard opened the country club in Nyack, he seems to have understood that his female students prided themselves in their ability to manage risks. He would often tell his female students, "Live dangerously, carefully."⁵¹

Taken together, the writings of Ida Craddock, Ruth St. Denis, Mary Doyle, and Alma Hirsig suggest that even the very negative associations that Americans had with postural yoga, such as salacious dancing and dangerous gurus, were actually potential resources for women seeking to construct new identities as independent and sexually autonomous beings. Bernard and DeVries capitalized on this dynamic to recruit highly devoted female yoga students. This presentation of yoga, which was disseminated widely through Bernard's network of wealthy patrons, set the stage for modern postural yoga and its associations with sensuality and female empowerment.

A study for the journal *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* claims that women who practice yoga experience higher levels of "embodiment" defined as "an awareness of an responsiveness to bodily sensation." The authors argue that embodiment derived from practicing yoga serves as a healthy alternative to self-objectification that fosters higher self-esteem. They even suggest that women who practice yoga may make more responsible sexual choices because they are more in tune with their own bodies' feelings and desires.⁵² The hypothesis of this study reflects a widely held belief in the West that yoga is a tool through which women may reclaim their sexuality from a culture that objectifies them and achieve greater independence.

Bernard and DeVries were among the first Americans to present postural yoga in this fashion.

Yoga for the New Man

Singleton places great emphasis on the emergence of modern postural yoga as the result of India's dialogical encounter with the worldwide physical culture movement. He notes that the world's first modern bodybuilding competition took place on August 1, 1893, the same day that Vivekananda first arrived on Western soil. Fueling the physical culture movement at the turn of the century was a crisis of masculinity brought about by economic and cultural changes. The fear that Western civilization had become overly civilized inspired American men to explore physical activities associated with the cultural other. A variety of Asian martial arts and weapons found their way into the physical culture movement. A number of physical culturists wrote books on jujitsu and Japanese physical training. Several of these titles were cataloged in Bernard's library. The "Indian scepter" was a type of club that had been used in physical culture since the nineteenth century.⁵³ Fueling this interest in other cultures was an idea of the New Man as a hybrid being, possessing both the intellect of civilized society and the primal vigor of ancient cultures. Bernard understood this and made manliness central to his pitch for yoga. He was also friends and neighbors with Benarr MacFadden, the famous proponent of physical culture. This relationship represents an important moment in the larger dialogue between yoga and physical culture outlined by Singleton.

Bernard's publication *Vira Sadhana* (1906) translates roughly into "the way of the hero." Just as Alma Hirsig described joining "love cults" as a sort of risky investment, in *Vira Sadhana* Bernard warns of the dangers of studying Tantra and emphasizes that only the bravest men are up to the challenge it presents. He describes the members of the Tantrik Order as "men of thought, ambition, courage, and aggression." He adds, "But mind this: Yoga cannot be trifled with unpunished. Before you enter this path weigh your forces carefully; consider well if you have faith, courage, and perseverance enough." Bernard made his appeal to the New Man even more explicit in a lecture in 1924 when he stated, "The simplest way to translate the word yoga is Evolution."⁵⁴ To continue moving forward, the New Man would first have to go back and learn the ancient secrets of India.

Just as DeVries helped Bernard market yoga to women, Benarr MacFadden influenced how Bernard marketed yoga to men. In 1928, an article about Bernard appeared in the *New Yorker*, stating,

"The Yogi's teaching was a pleasing mix of Couéism, Child's dietetics, first aid to the injured, mysticism, and Bernarr MacFadden." In Nyack, the two men were neighbors, and Bernard would always greet MacFadden with a low bow, extending his arms palms down. Singleton describes MacFadden as an important figure in the global dialogue between yoga and physical culture, noting that he had "an unparalleled vogue in India from the turn of the century." MacFadden's rhetoric of manliness likely appealed to Indian men for the same reason it appealed to American men. The gender anxieties experienced by American men at the turn of the century had a corollary in India. The British had promoted a "myth of Indian effeminacy" as a justification for colonialism, and some Indians had internalized this myth, leading to a crisis in masculinity.⁵⁵ Bernard had numerous contacts in India, and, by the time he founded the Nyack country club, he was respected by the Vedanta society and a number of Indian intellectuals. He was likely a medium through which MacFadden's writings came to influence Indian proponents of postural yoga.

It is also likely that the relationship between Bernard and MacFadden shaped American perceptions of Tantra. Hugh Urban cites Bernard's influence in the American conception of Tantra as the "exotic art of prolonging your passion play" rather than an ascetic discipline with soteriological significance. Love suggests that Bernard did engage in Tantric sexual rites, but only in secrecy with his initiated followers. MacFadden, however, wrote that "the perfect man should be able to maintain it [sexual intercourse] for an hour's duration." For MacFadden, this was not a religious discipline but a way of proving one's virility. Unlike Bernard, he was willing to teach this technique to anyone through his mail order instructional courses. The American Tantra described by Urban seems to combine MacFadden's teachings with Bernard's nomenclature. This is another example of Western physical culture becoming confused with Hindu thought in modern postural yoga.⁵⁶

Bernard's blend of yoga and physical culture also paved the way for yoga as a form of athletic training. At Nyack, Bernard celebrated the emphasis on sports associated with the New Man. He hosted boxing and wrestling matches and built a baseball diamond, which became a significant source of revenue. "Oom the Omnipotent" came to be a term used in athletic culture. By 1936, a sports writer for the *New York Times* described a boxer as "James 'Oom the Omnipotent' Braddock" because he could perform card tricks. In 1938, Bernard helped train heavyweight boxer Lou Nova for a match with Max Baer. Nova embodied the sort of man described in *Vira Sadhana*: Not only was he physically fit, but he also had the courage and

disposition required to be a professional boxer. This arrangement was largely an attempt by Nova's manager to create excitement for the fight. Charles Boswell reports that Bernard also trained Nova in *pranayama* to improve his endurance and *uddibardi* to make his stomach more resistant to punches. A *New York Times* article would later boast that Nova had learned a "dynamic stance" and "the cosmic punch" from Oom the Omnipotent. Nova also sparred with Bernard's elephants and had his photo taken shirtless alongside Bernard's chimpanzee, Mr. Jimmer.⁵⁷ It is not insignificant that a heavyweight boxer juxtaposed with an ape would have resembled Tarzan, the hybrid being that embodied the ideal of the New Man. The narrative that was pitched around Nova's training presented him as this hybrid being: a physically imposing white athlete trained in the mysteries of India.

Even though Nova's time with Bernard was primarily a publicity stunt, it was likely the first time yoga was used as a supplemental training for an American athlete. Using yoga to give an athlete an edge would have been appalling to Vivekananda or Max Muller. But by making this move, Bernard paved the way for an important aspect of modern postural yoga. Today, books with titles like *Yoga for Every Athlete* and *Real Men Do Yoga* teach postural yoga with minimal reference to Hinduism. Nova continued to practice yoga for the rest of his career and patented a device called the "Yogi Nova." His invention facilitated headstands and was sold in Saks Fifth Avenue and other high end stores. The Yogi Nova was among the first of many patents and merchandising endeavors associated with modern postural yoga.⁵⁸ This is another example of how Bernard's pitch for yoga as an antidote to an overly civilized Western society contributed to the culture of modern postural yoga.

Conclusions: Bernard and DeVries's Legacy

The Clarkstown Country Club became a major center for postural yoga with influence extending throughout the United States, Europe, and India. While Bernard and DeVries do not appear in less recent histories of American yoga, many twentieth-century proponents of postural yoga can be traced back to the Clarkstown Country Club. Love suggests that modern postural yoga, with an emphasis on health and beauty rather than soteriology, began in 1935 with a *Cosmopolitan* article entitled "Yoga for You." The article featured pictures of "sexy female models" and emphasized yoga's benefits for a healthy body and mind. It was syndicated and redistributed by hundreds of newspapers. Love points out that, in 1935, *Cosmopolitan* had just been acquired by William Randolph Hearst—a New York newspaper

magnate who had followed Bernard's activities ever since the abduction trial.⁵⁹

The influence of the Clarkstown Country Club also spread across the Atlantic. One of the club's most prominent members was Sir Paul Dukes, who went on to teach yoga throughout England, South Africa, and Australia. He also produced several books about yoga as well as films for the BBC. Bernard also had numerous Indian friends and contacts who continued to influence the course of modern yoga.⁶⁰

One such connection was Sri Deva Ram Sukul, founder of the Yoga Institute of America.⁶¹ Unlike Vivekananda, Sukul openly discussed hatha yoga and presented it in terms of physical culture. Sukul treated actress Mae West for stomach problems. West later became an open proponent of yoga herself. He also initiated Walt and Magana Baptiste, an American "yoga couple" that rose to prominence in the 1960s. Interestingly, the Baptistes employed the same division of labor as Bernard and DeVries. Walt aligned Sukul's yoga with bodybuilding while Magana aligned it with dance.⁶² This suggests that as modern postural yoga became gendered, it became more amenable to instruction by a male/female couple rather than a single guru.

The secret of Bernard and DeVries's success may have been their insight into the construction of identity. Each of them shed an old identity (Perry Baker and Dace Charlot, respectively) and created a totally new persona based around the practice of yoga. In turn, they modeled how Americans could use yoga for constructing their own new identities. They also provided a safe haven where influential men and women could experiment with this new technology of identity. By repurposing yoga in this way, Pierre Bernard and Blanche DeVries set the stage for modern postural yoga's drift away from Hindu tradition and into a more eclectic milieu of holistic health and self-improvement practices.

Notes

1. For scholars who object to the presentation of yoga as an exercise regimen, see Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 228, and George Feuerstein, "The Lost Teachings of Yoga," *Common Ground* (March 2003), http://www.commonground.ca/iss/0303140/lost_teachings_of_yoga.shtml, accessed March 14, 2012; for the position of the HAF, see Aseem Shukla, "The Theft of Yoga," the *Washington Post*, April 18, 2010, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/aseem_shukla/2010/04/nearly_twenty_million_people_in.html, accessed January 22, 2012; for Singleton's assessment, see Mark Singleton, *Yoga*

Body: The Origin of Modern Posture Practice (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20. Singleton does discuss Pierre Bernard's nephew, Theos Bernard, who traveled to Tibet and published several important works on yoga.

2. On Vivekananda's teachings about yoga, see Elizabeth de Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 121; Robert Love, *The Great Oom: The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America* (New York: Viking, 2010), 25; Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 116-18; Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 71; on Bernard and Tantra, see Hugh B. Urban, "The Omnipotent Oom: Tantra and Its Impact on Modern Western Esotericism," *Esoterica* 3 (2001): 218-59.

3. Bernard's significance has been discussed by scholars of American religious history such as Stephen Prothero, "Hinduphobia and Hinduphilia in U.S. Culture," in *The Stranger's Religion*, ed. Anna Lannstrom (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 13-37; J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 5th ed. (New York: Gale, 1996); and Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007). However, biographical details have been scarce and historians have disagreed over such facts as what state Bernard came from, his legal name, and whether he ever visited India. Scholarship was forced to be overly reliant on men's magazines and other journalistic accounts. In 2010, Robert Love produced *The Great Oom*, the most definitive biography of Bernard. This book draws heavily on archival resources at the Rockland County Historical Society and oral history conducted in Nyack, New York. In the same year, journalist Stefanie Syman published *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), a history of yoga in America that dedicates a chapter to Bernard. Syman had numerous interviews with Love, and her footnotes include sexual details of Bernard's practice that Love excluded from his own work. The labor of these journalists has finally provided religion scholars with details about Bernard's life. It is now possible to reassess Bernard's place in the larger history of modern postural yoga and, more important, how he was able to market yoga successfully to Americans.

4. For a discussion of the two-tiered model of religion and the problems this dichotomy presents to historians, see Leonard Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife," *Western Folklore* 54 (January 1995): 37-56; on American discourse about "true religion," see Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious*

Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 188. On changing gender identity between 1890 and 1920, see Sylvia Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America: Essays, Documents, and Articles* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), 283; and Mary P. Ryan, *Mysteries of Sex: Tracing Women and Men through American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 209–21.

5. On Bernard's various aliases, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 15. Love notes that Perry Baker took the surname "Bernard" from his stepfather. The French surname "Pierre" is more difficult to interpret. Syman (*The Subtle Body*, 84) suggests that the alias "Bernard" may have been meant to imply a relationship to Dr. Claude Bernard, a French physiologist known for experimental medicine. Pierre Bernard was also the middle name of the nineteenth-century French Orientalist painter, François Barry. On Bernard's original name, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 9. Paul Sann (*Fads, Follies, and Delusions of the American People: A Pictorial Story of Madnnesses, Crazes, and Crowd Phenomena* [New York, N.Y.: Bonanza, 1967], 9) claims that he was born with the name Peter Coon. Robert C. Fuller (*Spirituality in the Flesh: Bodily Sources of Religious Experience* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2008], 124) claims he came from California, not Iowa. For a scholar who believes Bernard likely did travel to India, see Fuller, *Spirituality in the Flesh*, 88; Syman (*The Subtle Body*, 313) found a reference to an Elias Hamati in Calcutta in the address book of Bernard's in-law, Viola Werthem Bernard; on Bernard's tutelage under Hamati and his connection to Clarence Baker, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 13–25.

6. A gory photograph of the Kali Mudra appears in Tantrik Order of America, *Vira Sadhana: The International Journal of the Tantrik Order of America* (1906). Bernard is not named in the caption. His ability to simulate death does, however, appear in a footnote in *Life at the Clarkstown Country Club* (Nyack: The Club, 1935). On Bernard's 1902 arrest, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 25–26.

7. Bernard apparently believed the cult of Bacchus came from India. The margins of *Vira Sadhana* are adorned with drawings of classical deities and captions naming their culture of origin, Greek, Roman, Etruscan, etc. One drawing depicts Bacchus holding a staff and states that he comes from India (Tantrik Order, *Vira Sadhana*, 49); for a description of the Bacchante Club, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 40.

8. "Gertrude Leo's Story as New York Paper Printed It," *Tacoma Times*, May 18, 1910, 6.

9. Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller, *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1900), 130.

10. Love, *The Great Oom*, 63.

11. "Omnipotent Oom' Held as Kidnapper," *New York Times*, May 4, 1910, 7.

12. Charles Boswell mentions that, during World War I, Bernard offered his services as a seer. He writes, "He lured to his sanctum the mothers, wives and sweethearts of service men, and at \$50 a head permitted them to 'see' and 'talk with' their loved ones at the front. To perform these miracles he used devices—trumpets, screens of clouded glass and reflected images from photographs." See Charles Boswell, "The Great Fuss and Fume over the Omnipotent Oom," *True: The Men's Magazine*, January 1965, available online <http://omnipotentoom.com/the-great-fuss-and-fume-over-the-omnipotent-oom>, accessed October 13, 2012. On the creation of modern postural yoga, see Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 5.

13. On Leo's accusations, see "'Nautch Girl Tells of Oom's Philosophy," *New York Times*, May 8, 1910, 20. A persistent claim about Bernard is that all of his initiates were required to sign contracts in their own blood. See Love, *The Great Oom*, 31, 44. Love suggests that Bernard's followers really did sign contracts in their own blood. The inside cover of *Vira Sadhana* does contain an illustration of a knife labeled "initiation" seemingly being dragged across a human hand. On the panic over white slavery, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 55. The two women's testimony also conformed to a familiar trope of "captivity narratives," which had been used to vilify Catholic priests and other religious outsiders during the nineteenth century. For a discussion of this literature, see Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 97–128. Concerning the full extent of the charges against Bernard, a copy of the prosecution file was obtained from the New York City District Attorney Record of Cases.

14. On New York newspapers, see Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 93; on the significance of Om, see "Om" in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, ed. Constance Jones and James D. Ryan (New York: Facts on File, 2007), 319–20. There are a number of clues as to the origin of the epithet "Oom the Omnipotent." The Tantrik Order's *Vira Sadhana* (5) contains a lengthy quotation speculating on the relationship of the god Shiva to Canaanite deities that is attributed to "O.M. Bernard." It is possible that the initials O.M. may have been another of Bernard's aliases; a lecture made by Hiram E. Butler to the Society for Esoteric Culture in 1887 proposes solving unemployment by building "a magnificent city to Om (the

Omnipotent).” The Society for Esoteric Culture had an interest in yoga and Hinduism. In 1891, the group relocated to California, where Bernard and Hamati would later arrive. See Hiram E. Butler, “The Ultimate to Which We Are Laboring,” *Esoteric: A Magazine of Advanced and Practical Esoteric Thought* 1 (July 1887–June 1888), 20.

15. Love, *The Great Oom*, 59.

16. “Oom the Self-Named Free,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1910, 2; Love, *The Great Oom*, 65–66.

17. Love, *The Great Oom*, 82–83.

18. On complaints about the New York Sanskrit College and charges by the State Board of Education, see “Night Revels Held in Sanskrit College,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1911, 22. On Charles Whitman, see Monica Randall, *Phantoms of the Hudson Valley* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1995), 82.

19. Love, *The Great Oom*, 89. Success put a strain on the couple’s marriage. In 1941, DeVries resigned from Bernard’s country club to pursue her own projects as a yoga instructor. See Love, *The Great Oom*, 304.

20. For journalists who credited DeVries with Bernard’s success, see Boswell, “The Great Fuss and Fume over the Omnipotent Oom,” and William Seabrook, *Witchcraft: Its Power in the World Today* (New York: Lancer Books, 1940), 318; on the new yoga studios, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 110.

21. William R. Hunt, *Body Love: The Amazing Career of Benarr MacFadden* (Bowling Green, Ky.: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989), 156.

22. On building the Clarkstown Country Club, see Hunt, *Body Love*, 156; on the end of efforts to drive Bernard out, see “Pierre Bernard, ‘Oom the Omnipotent,’ Promoter and Self-Styled Swami, Dies,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1955, 35; on Bernard’s twelve-million-dollar estate and circus animals, see Randall, *Phantoms of the Hudson Valley*, 81–83.

23. On journalists’ defense of Bernard, see “‘Omnipotent Oom’ Scents a Fraud,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1922, 3; on Bernard no longer being called “Oom,” see “‘Oom’ Named Bank Head,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1931, 33.

24. On the definition of “true religion,” see Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 188; on Hinduphobia and anti-Catholic prejudice, see Prothero, “Hinduphobia and Hinduphilia in U.S. Culture,” 18; on comparisons between Hinduism and the worship of Baal and Moloch, see “The Soul Destroying Poison of the East,” the *Washington Post*, May 28, 1911, 44;

Mabel Potter Daggett, "The Heathen Invasion," *Hampton Columbian Magazine*, October 1911, 409; and Fuller, *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*, 149.

25. On "the Turbaned Tornado" and anti-Hindoo riots, see J. Gordon Melton, "The Attitude of Americans toward Hinduism from 1883 to 1983 with Special Reference to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness," in *Krishna Consciousness in the West*, ed. David G. Bromley and Larry D. Shinn (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 81–82; on surprise that Bernard was white, see "Omnipotent Oom' Held as Kidnapper," 7.

26. On exploring sexuality through slumming, see Chad Heap, *Slumming* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3; on "fake opium joints," see *ibid.*, 34.

27. Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America*, 283.

28. For a discussion of literature on "women adrift," see Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 44–45.

29. Ryan, *Mysteries of Sex*, 208; on upper-class women claiming the freedom of wage-earning women, see Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America*, 295.

30. For Hirsig's account of Dr. Latson's dance class, see Marion Dockerill, *My Life in a Love Cult: A Warning to All Young Girls* (Dunellen, N.J.: Better Publishing Co., 1928), 65.

31. For a discussion of new ideas of masculinity among middle-class men at the turn of the century, see Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America*, 284–86, and Ryan, *Mysteries of Sex*, 221.

32. Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America*, 288. For a discussion of new trends in leisure associated with masculinity at the turn of the century, see *ibid.*

33. Love, *The Great Oom*, 25, 76; Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 71.

34. Melton, "The Attitude of Americans towards Hinduism," 85.

35. On the 1895 retreat to Thousand Island Park, see de Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 121; on Vivekananda and mind-body dualism, see Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 116–18; on Vivekananda's dismissal of hatha yoga, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 25, and Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 71; on Blavatsky, see Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 76–77; on Besant, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 76.

36. On the midway as an exhibition of primitive culture, see Chaim M. Rosenberg, *America at the Fair: Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 254–55. On Little Egypt, see John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 26.

37. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 154. See also Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 23.

38. On associations of yoga with impurity, see Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 35; on European scholarship concerning “true yoga,” see *ibid.*, 41; on Yogi Bava Lachman Dass, see *ibid.*, 56–57.

39. Singleton (*Yoga Body*, 66) suggests that Crowley’s knowledge of yoga may have actually been substantial. For a detailed comparison of Bernard and Crowley, see Urban, “The Omnipotent Oom.” On Atkinson, see Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 181; Bernard listed his occupation on Prosecution file, 1910, courtesy of New York City District Attorney Record of Cases. On the absence of Indian Hindus, see Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 110.

40. “The Soul Destroying Poison of the East,” 44. Alma Hirsig, in her book, *My Life in a Love Cult*, claims that she studied dance under Dr. Latson. Her description of Latson’s teachings defies credibility and describes a subterranean hall where she was made “queen” over masked devotees who engaged in erotic congress. See Dockerill, *My Life in a Love Cult*, 17–20.

41. On the popularity of secret societies, see Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 93. Bernard joined the Nyack Mason Lodge (Love, *The Great Oom*, 137). Interestingly, one of the photos in *Life at the Clarkstown Country Club* suggests a connection to Freemasonry. The caption reads, “Mat room for physical training,” and the photo depicts two “thrones” that have no legs but consist of large cushions set at floor level and connected to high, ornate backs. The thrones are on either side of a fireplace, and, above the fireplace, there is an alcove with a small Buddha placed in it. Written in the alcove are the words: “Know Dare Do Keep Silent” followed by the words:

Silence
Attention
Memory
Understanding
Amen

The aphorism, "Know Dare Do Keep Silent" comes from Western esotericism and can be found in the writings of Eliphaz Levi. This suggests that Bernard was combining these sources with his Tantric teachings. See Clarkstown Country Club, *Life at the Clarkstown Country Club*; on Bernard's conversation with Potter, see Seabrook, *Witchcraft*, 323.

42. On yoga and Eve, see Daggett, "The Heathen Invasion," 399–401; on Tantric rites, see *ibid.*, 408–11.

43. Elizabeth A. Reed, *Hinduism in Europe and America* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1914), 131.

44. Mary Doyle produced her memoir, *Life Was Like That* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936) under the penname Mary Hitchcock. Alma Hirsig's memoir, *My Life in a Love Cult*, was published under the name Marion Dockerill.

45. On the debate over Danse du Ventre, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Heaven's Bride: The Unprintable Life of Ida C. Craddock, American Mystic, Scholar, Sexologist, Martyr, and Madwoman* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 22–26; on dance and marital relations, Bernard and Craddock were both interested in developing the female reproductive muscles. In notes for a lecture given in 1928, Bernard wrote, "The sphincter muscles of the vaginal vault can be developed to such an extent that they can grip a broom handle and retain it against a full strength pull from an individual. . . . Yoginas have developed such strength and tone in their Vaginas. It would be impossible to picture any female troubles with such a tone." See Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 319; on Craddock's view of dance as religious exercise, see Schmidt, *Heaven's Bride*, 26.

46. On Stebbins study of yoga and interaction with St. Denis, see Singleton, *The Subtle Body*, 144; on St. Denis's lack of formal training in Indian dance, see Jane Desmond, "Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's 'Radha' of 1906," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17, no. 1 (1991): 32; on the significance of St. Denis to postural yoga, see Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 145; on St. Denis's decision to become a dancer, see Desmond, "Dancing Out the Difference," 38; White Jade is quoted in Desmond, "Dancing Out the Difference," 37; on women imitating St. Denis, see Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 107–8.

47. Dockerill, *My Life in a Love Cult*, 68.

48. On DeVries's vaudeville aspirations, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 88–89; on DeVries and yoga gymnosophy, see Syman, *The Subtle*

Body, 99; on DeVries's choreography at the Clarkstown Country Club, see *ibid.*, 104.

49. On Hirsig's account of DeVries inspiring Bernard's career, see Dockerill, *My Life in a Love Cult*, 66–67; on the possibility of Bernard working as a barber, see Nik Douglas, *Spiritual Sex: The Secrets of Tantra from the Ice Age to the New Millennium* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997), 191. Douglas claims that Bernard worked at various times as a barber, an acrobat, a salmon packer, and a fruit picker.

50. Hitchcock, *Life Was Like That*, 187–88.

51. On urban women discussing "Oom the Omnipotent," see Anita Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 233. On Hirsig's sister marrying Crowley, see Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt* (New York: MacMillan, 2000), 274; on Bernard's advice to "live dangerously," see Love, *The Great Oom*, 124.

52. Emily A. Impett, Jennifer J. Daubenmier, and Allegra L. Hirschman, "Minding the Body: Yoga, Embodiment, and Well-Being," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 3, no. 4 (December 2006): 39–48.

53. On the world's first bodybuilding competition, see Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 81; on physical culture and a crisis in masculinity at the turn of the century, see Ryan, *Mysteries of Sex*, 221, and Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America*, 287. The original catalog to Bernard's library at the Clarkstown Country Club can be viewed online at <http://www.omnipotentoom.com/library>, accessed March 15, 2012; on the Indian scepter, see Jan Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women, 1800-1870* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998), 97.

54. On the meaning of Vira Sadhana, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 37; on the character of men of the Tantrik Order, see Tantrik Order, *Vira Sadhana*, 90; on yoga requiring courage, see *ibid.*, 138; on yoga as evolution, see Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 106.

55. On the *New Yorker* article, see Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 111 (Émilie Coué was a French psychologist who produced popular books on self-improvement through auto-suggestion); on Bernard's relationship with MacFadden, see Hunt, *Body Love*, 157; on the significance of MacFadden, see Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 89; on the myth of Indian effeminacy, see *ibid.*, 95.

56. See Urban, "The Omnipotent Oom"; Love, *The Great Oom*, 36–37; and Harvey Green, *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport, and American Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 249.

57. On James Braddock, see John Kieran, "Take a Card, Please," *New York Times*, January 7, 1936, 28; on *pranayama* and *uddibardi*, see Boswell, "The Great Fuss and Fume over the Omnipotent Oom." (Pranayama, literally "extension of the breath," is a yogic breathing exercise. "Uddibarri" could refer to the yogic principle of uddiyana bandha, a yogic practice in which the stomach is drawn toward the spine. Alternatively, it could be a term of Japanese origin.) On Nova's training, see "He Doesn't Train on Booze and Butts: Red Smith," *New York Times*, May 17, 1973, 55; for an image of Nova with Mr. Jimmer, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 289.

58. On yoga and athleticism, see Aladar Kogler, *Yoga for Every Athlete: Secrets of an Olympic Coach* (New York: Jaico Publishing, 2000), and John Capouya, *Real Men Do Yoga: 21 Star Athletes Reveal Their Secrets for Strength, Flexibility, and Peak Performance* (New York: HCI, 2003); on the Yogi Nova, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 342. In 2005, the Indian government began documenting yogic postures and teaching techniques for a "Traditional Knowledge Digital Library." This project was initiated in response to yoga instructors who sought to "patent" yoga postures and receive royalties when others used them. See Devi K. Sangeetha, "Patenting Yoga: Who Gets the Asanas?" *Times of India*, October 9, 2005, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad-times/PATENTING-YOGAWho-gets-the-asanas/articleshow/1257559.cms>, accessed March 14, 2012.

59. On the *Cosmopolitan* article and Hearst, see Love, *The Great Oom*, 256–57.

60. On Dukes, see *ibid.*, 340; *Life at the Clarkstown Country Club* (125) references a separate publication listing all of the testimonials, titles, and honors that Bernard acquired in India.

61. At the University of Virginia Library, I discovered a copy of Sri Deva Ram Sukul's book, *Yoga and Self-Culture* (New York: Yoga Institute of America, 1943) (Copy 104). Inside was an inscription: "To Dr. Pierre Bernard, A Preceptor of the Master's Teachings with the Blessings of the Author. Sri Deva Ram Sukul. September 1943." After Bernard's death, DeVries sold many of his books. This copy had apparently been a gift to Bernard that found its way to Virginia.

62. On Mae West, see Jill Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 115; on the Baptistes' initiation by Sukul, see Magana Baptiste, "A Legacy of Yoga," available online at <http://www.shareguide.com/Baptiste.html>, accessed March 14, 2012; on the Baptistes' interest in bodybuilding and dance, see

Feuerstein, "The Lost Teachings of Yoga." Interestingly, Syman (*The Subtle Body*, 126) discusses Bernard's nephew, Theos Bernard, and his divorce from his wife Viola Werthem Bernard. Syman suggests that Theos had wanted Viola to play a role similar to that of DeVries as his female counterpart in leading a Tantric community.

ABSTRACT Pierre Bernard and his wife, Blanche DeVries, were among the earliest proponents of postural yoga in America. In 1924, they created the Clarkstown Country Club, where yoga was taught to affluent and influential clientele. The network created through this endeavor not only popularized yoga in the West but also advanced the reinvention of yoga as a science of health and well-being rather than as a religious practice.

This article suggests that the pair's success in marketing yoga coincided with a shift in gender roles underway at the turn of the century. Economic and cultural changes led to the rise of a "New Woman" who was not only more financially independent but also more socially and sexually autonomous. At the same time, a crisis of masculinity led to the rise of the "New Man" as men sought out new cultural forms through which to restore their sense of manhood. Bernard's success depended largely on his ability to capitalize on the perceived "otherness" of yoga, presenting it as a resource for Americans seeking to construct new forms of gender identity. Bernard borrowed from the physical culture movement and presented yoga as an antidote to the emasculating effects of modern society. DeVries taught a combination of yoga and sensual Orientalist dances that offered women a form of sexual autonomy and embodied empowerment. By utilizing these strategies, Bernard and DeVries helped lay important foundations for modern postural yoga and its associations with athleticism, physical beauty, and sexuality.

Keywords: yoga, physical culture, gender, Hinduism