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YOGA IN LATIN AMERICA

A critical overview

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Introduction

This chapter seeks to offer a comprehensive overview of the history and present state of important yogic trends in Latin America, including not only physical methods but also meditative approaches. It draws on the idea that yoga is a perfect example of a ‘transnational flow of ideas about spirituality, health, and well-being’ (Hauser 2013: 6). This flow evidently transcends linguistic worlds and frontiers and is itself subjected to cultural translation in particular regional and cultural worlds.

To begin with, it is worth noticing that the Hispanosphere comprises a vast cultural world, made up of more than twenty countries in Latin America, plus Puerto Rico, Spain, Equatorial Guinea and Western Sahara, all of which amounts to more than 500 million speakers. It would be virtually impossible to cover all of these regions in one general article. It would also be misleading to believe that there has been one single, uniform trajectory of yoga in this vast region. As in the case of France (Ceccomori 2001: 10), for example, there have been a number of pioneers who introduced yoga in Latin America, sometimes in almost complete isolation, sometimes within esoteric circles that were strong in specific regions. For this reason, this chapter will predominantly derive information from one exemplary case (the Mexican one), so as to shed light on what sort of agents and features have occurred in the history of yoga in this geo-cultural world. Nevertheless, the chapter will also try to offer a more general balance of the wide presence of yoga and some meditation groups in different Latin American locations. This overview does not attempt to cover cases of Spanish-speaking countries beyond the American continent.

There is one crucial process that we need to recognise so as to assess the history of yoga in the Latin American context. A major difference between the ways in which Asian or ‘Oriental’ cultures were incorporated in Europe or North America and in Latin America in general is concomitant with the existence or absence of a tradition of orientalist research (a topic I have no space to pursue in this chapter). Obviously, many of the contemporary schools and centres for yoga practice and teaching in Mexico and elsewhere are intimately tied to centres located primarily in the United States and, secondarily, in nations such as the United Kingdom. This is the case for many Ashtanga, Vinyasa and hatha-based yoga studios; this is also evidently the case of, for example, Bikram Yoga or Shadow Yoga. Also, a constant flow of practitioners partakes of the so-called yoga tourism and pays systematic visits to India in order to continue their training.
or simply to ‘be in touch’ with spiritual India and the so-called original, pure yoga. The two most popular destinations by far are Mysore and Rishikesh.

Understandings of ‘yoga’

The term yoga implies a wide range of meanings, both in the present and in the past. We should bear in mind that yoga is understood and presented in different ways ‘depending on the requirements of particular social or physical locations’ (Newcombe 2018: 569). Thus, yoga can at the same time be deemed religious or secular, depending on specific contexts. By paying attention to its different expressions and the various ways in which practitioners resort to it worldwide, ‘yoga’ can denote a certain set of physical techniques oriented to improve wellbeing and health or a rigorous discipline of meditative methods directed toward spiritual growth and inner contentment. Also noteworthy is the fact that due to its wide polysemic possibilities, yoga can imply various things in different places, while at the same it can only mean specific things associated with a so-called ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ yoga (Newcombe 2018: 552, 563–567).

To a large extent, yoga in Latin America responds to a generalised image of hatha yoga, that is, a ‘gentle, recreational, feminized, pacifist, and non-competitive practice [that] reflects discursive strands rather than any inherent and/or elemental features of yoga’ (Hauser 2013: 5). This partly represents the ‘ecumenical possibilities’ of yoga that Gerald Larson has pointed out (in Alter 2004: 9). Joseph Alter further notes that technically yoga ‘is not a religious system’; moreover, ‘in a very important sense, Yoga is a step beyond religion in terms of soteriological conceptualization’ (Alter 2004: 13). Also, some specialists observe that contrary to more ‘traditional’ understandings of yoga, modern yoga expressions entail public performance and demonstrations (Newcombe 2018: 556). All these approaches and understandings have been present in Latin America, but yoga has not always been a blunt copy of developments elsewhere. There have been interesting chapters and agents in the framing of yoga in this huge territory. They comprise a field to be studied more properly; in this chapter I will offer introductory vignettes to some of these issues

Here, as elsewhere, the role of Patañjali’s Yogasūtra has been a bedrock for the yoga community at large. Although it is eminently a philosophical – and introspective – work, the yoga community has taken the Yogasūtra to be a foundational text for contemporary hatha yoga too, a more physical form of yoga and rather less inquisitive in nature. In part, the misperception derives from Swami Vivekananda’s stance on both hathayoga and what he termed rājayoga in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an issue that has been discussed by some scholars (e.g. De Michels 2005; Alter 2004; Singleton 2010). Even though the Haṭhapradīpikā and the Gherāṇḍasamhitā are sometimes also invoked and read, they lack the authorial status of Patañjali’s work in most Latin American yoga centres. Alongside Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedanta philosophy, the Theosophists provided a strong interpretive framework for yoga in French language sources. In the early twentieth century, France still was a major cultural influence in the Mexican intelligentsia. Therefore, it is unsurprising that many cultural and intellectual items (including yoga and Indian ideas) entered the culture from French sources. No doubt, here methodologies from global history can prove very useful to probe into this sort of cultural transference across regions.

It is also worth noting that – almost since its inception in countries such as Mexico, Brazil or Venezuela – yoga has been paired with meditation and spiritual yearnings. For this reason, it has not been uncommon to encounter offers of yoga and Buddhist meditations in the same contexts. Indeed, the general public (those not practising) would identify Buddhism mainly with meditation and would not so easily discern a difference between meditation and yoga.
But even among sympathisers, to practise yoga would inherently imply a form of meditation; within the postural variants, then, yoga would be understood as a sort of *motional meditation*, so to speak. Different forms of meditation became increasingly popular in the region after the so-called Buddhist boom that took place in the United States from the 1960s onwards. The Vipassana methods became available in a number of large cities, sometimes also establishing ad hoc places for retreat outside of the cities. An example of this phenomenon extending into Latin America is the DhammaVihara, a Theravada monastery located within a forest in Veracruz State on the southeast Mexican coast. Established in 1999, the DhammaVihara was led by Burmese monk U Silananda until his death and is now run by Bhikku Nandisena, a former Argentinian ordained by U Silananda in the United States in 1991. The Vihara offers general courses on Buddhist tenets, as well as retreats – for either individuals or groups of people – destined to enhance meditation.

Yoga has been variously understood in Latin America as a philosophy, a belief, a practice, a religious path and a health-improving technique (Muñoz 2018). In a preliminary, cursory survey that I launched in January 2019, respondents had to answer this question, among others: *In a few words, how would you describe ‘yoga’?* Out of sixty-nine answers, I highlight the following ones:

- ‘A complete method, with multiple variants, intended to achieve mental stability and based on a philosophical system.’
- ‘Yoga is both integral health and a lifestyle.’
- ‘Practice entails union with oneself, [and] our immediate environment at different levels – physical, energetic, mental, empathic, and including the spiritual.’
- ‘Pretzel-shaped union.’
- ‘It is a tool for life; it helps raise awareness of physical, emotional, and sometimes also psychological conditions.’
- ‘One gram of practice is worth more than tons of theory.’
- ‘An ancestral discipline that, by means of psycho-physical techniques and self-enquiry methods, leads us to self-realisation.’
- ‘I would describe it as a meditative tradition. I would highlight that it aids the realisation of the human being.’
- ‘Yoga is the art of uniting mind, body, and emotions by means of breath, movement, and meditation. It is not just about subjected the body to postures. It’s about the body being able to find a way to feel good.’
- ‘It is a state of health and balance.’
- ‘Education of peace, resilience, love.’
- ‘It is a method for human and transpersonal development.’

Respondents belong to nine different Latin American nationalities. Physical practices, inner and mental welfare and the notion of union are central in most of the answers. They also summon ideas of transcendent improvement and efficient ways to deal with anxiety, stress and grief. Indeed, many sympathisers would claim that yoga comprises a refined set of techniques for the betterment of the individual, through both perfection of physical movements and the improvement of health. Thus, it is very common to find venues and gyms that offer sessions of physical fitness systems as well as some style of yoga. It is not surprising, then, that there is an increasing offer of ‘restorative yoga’ and yoga for pregnant women. More often than not, therefore, adherence to one of the various yoga forms entails the adoption of a healthy, nonviolent diet and the alleged cultivation of ethical behaviour: lifestyle and ethical choices are closely associated with an ‘ideal’ yoga practitioner.
Not wholly separated from this, yoga also summons ideas of mind-calming methods and the procurement of inner wellbeing. Usually this yoga mentality draws near some sort of religious self-identification, mainly Hindu-oriented, but there are important Buddhist- and Sikh-related positions too (Kundalini Yoga, for example). This greatly depends on the actual practitioner or studio that ‘teaches’ yoga, and on what type of yoga it is. Hence, it is common to find workspaces where yoga is advertised along with meditation, mindfulness and even Kabbalah. For this reason, notions such as ‘spirituality’, ‘transcendental’, ‘purity’ and the like are usually invoked in yogic circles. This presumed religiosity is of a very peculiar nature, for it can constantly negotiate with secular demands from the modern, urban world, the setting where most yoga centres are located in Latin America.

A very significant contribution in the general and early understanding of yoga in the region was Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1960). This book has circulated widely in Latin America; one of the first translations into Spanish dates from 1951, about five years after the original publication in English. Apart from Yogananda’s own words, it is also important to pay attention to the phrasings of the translator, as most readers will receive both discourses while reading the volume. In the very first chapter, footnote 2 explains a yogi as ‘Someone who practices yoga (union), ancient Indian science about meditation on God’ (Yogananda 1960: 19). There are three key elements in Yogananda’s gloss: (1) It conceived yoga as a ‘science’, something that is somehow on a par with Theosophical and Spiritualist attempts to reshape and explain their own methods to the modern audience; (2) Yoga is meditation, that is to say that it does not involve physical work; (3) The meditative process has God as a goal, which is a comfortable tactic to make the Christian public accept this yogic message.

One could object that these are the translator’s words and not Yogananda’s, but Cuarón’s translation was authorised by the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF). Likewise, Kriya Yoga is explained as a ‘yogic technique by means of which sensory turmoil is silenced, granting man a greater and enhanced sense of identification with cosmic consciousness’ (Yogananda 1960: 24). This is in consonance with the guru’s own exposition, which comes in chapter 26, where Yogananda also conceives of Kriya Yoga as a science, one that enables the yogi to get rid of *karma*, the law of causation (Yogananda 1960: 209). The ‘scientific method’, so to speak, is expounded as a psycho-physiological technique that decarbonises the blood and draws in an input of fresh oxygen. This process brings rejuvenation, purification and awareness. According to Yogananda, the god Krishna, the poet Kabir, Jesus Christ, the prophet Elijah and apostles John and Paul all mastered and transmitted this technique (Yogananda 1960: 209–10). SRF sympathisers would embrace such understandings of yoga.

Regardless of the yoga trend they adhere to, practitioners usually style themselves as ‘yogis’, especially those engaged in postural forms. More often than not, these so-called (postural) yogis have not received any initiation from a guru, much less undertaken vows of renunciation. A significant identity-formation process takes place here, and it should be adequately scrutinised. Some basic notions to take into account are: (1) modern yogis in Latin America are urban-based; (2) they may or may not formally belong to a religious path or affiliation; (3) they all still participate in social interaction as social individuals (i.e. they are not *sādhus* or renunciates); (4) most of them observe dietary customs, such as vegetarianism; and (5) they sponsor, at least nominally, the tenets of nonviolence towards both human beings and animals. The aforementioned traits make it possible that, despite being instructors and not religious mendicants, leaders or sages, they can still see themselves as yogis. In other words: by performing a physical practice (usually that of *asana*) and upholding some ethical tenets, they locate themselves within a discipline or path of yoga. Also, more often than not, sympathisers with some form of yoga do not consider the study of yogic scriptures, Hindu lore or Sanskrit language a necessary requirement for success.
Out of idealistic notions, modern yogis in Latin America imagine themselves in an idyllic scenario that summons the mysterious halo and beatitude of India. This mysteriousness is fuelled in part by an inherited orientalist imagery (Asia as a fountain of ancient wisdom), itself nourished by Christian ideas of spatial sacrality. This does account for a sense of wellness. And, interestingly enough, this sense is a fascinating enactment of religious feeling within a secular space, as most urban places and cities in the contemporary world pretend to be secular, non-confessional and progressive. Curiously, this liberality leads to an open-mindedness that allows for accommodation of religious imagery and ideas in both the public and private metropolitan spheres.

Evidently, the centres and studios of postural yoga cannot be deemed equivalent to churches or temples. Yet, there is an internal dynamic that recalls how some religious congregations work, especially due to the pious, spiritual aura that permeates such spaces. Notice that most Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga sessions habitually begin with the recitation of the salutatory stanzas to Patañjali. This is done in an entirely devout way, an atmosphere that is enhanced because the stanzas are composed in the Sanskrit language. The bulk of the practitioners have no knowledge of Sanskrit utterances, so the recitation of an alien, 'enchanted' language adds to the numinous environment; it consecrates the space, so to speak, before the actual physical practice begins. An enchanted aura is not present in all yoga spaces, of course; the contemporary world accommodates the religious and the secular without necessarily ruling out the ‘spiritual’. As elsewhere, in Latin America there are different, apparently opposing views, especially within urban spaces. Yet, as Suzanne Newcombe argues, these views are in constant interplay. Drawing from the spatial analysis developed by Kim Knott, she concludes that although some positions, or actors, in yoga may present themselves as antagonistic to other actors, close analysis can show that both positions are created through relationship with the other, and many positions also depend on relationships which are much less antagonistic.

(Newcombe 2018: 562)

Forerunners and diffusors

In the case of Mexico, there are four significant moments in the early phases of yoga reception: (1) 1887–1913, when Francisco I. Madero made recurrent – if oblique – references to Indian philosophy; (2) 1900, when the infamous Aleister Crowley visited Mexico and became immersed in yoga; (3) 1920–1945, when, just after the end of the Mexican Revolution, José Vasconcelos became a major agent in modernisation and education campaigns nationwide; and (4) 1929, when Paramahansa Yogananda visited Mexico for a few months. These moments are by no means the most influential ones, or the only ones; nor do they necessarily suggest a chronological development, but they are noteworthy and illustrative of key processes at the turn of the century.

In this brief outline it is possible to pay heed to the influence of two political and intellectual Mexican figures, on the one hand, and two sporadic, unrelated episodes of two prominent foreign figures visiting the country, on the other. Each of these four cases bears distinct features, but it is significant that they more or less coincided in time. The reasons why that happened were probably a response to issues of global networks through which cultural and ideological artefacts travelled far and wide. Other actors were also active at more or less the same time in other places of the continent. There was no single channel for the transmission of ideas or practices, but rather a multifaceted network from the very onset. There are two paradigmatic
cases, but these are by no means unique. De la Ferrière, discussed below, is one. A second case is
Krishnamacharya’s disciple Indra Devi, who there is no room to discuss here. After long periods
in Russia and the United States, she eventually moved to Latin America: first to Mexico in
1961, and finally settling in Argentina, where she died in 2002. She inaugurated a strong tradi-
tion of yoga practice which continues to this day (Goldberg 2015).

The first case alluded to in the beginning of this section is an unforeseen episode in the
introduction of Indian ideas to Mexican soil. Francisco I. Madero (1873–1913) was a defender
democracy and, therefore, a key promoter of the Mexican Revolution. Madero’s political
career was centred on social justice and democratic values, and he is justly remembered as one
of the chief architects of anti-reelectionist politics in Mexico. Madero opposed the regime of
Porfirio Díaz, who ruled over a period of thirty-one years, from 1876 to 1880 and from 1884
to 1911. Díaz was understandably viewed by some liberals as a dictator that had to be deposed.
Madero played a major role in this mission, and this, in turn, ignited the Revolution. To this day,
Madero is considered one of the most relevant political figures in Mexican history and is still
invoked by some politicians as an example of virtue and honesty. Yet, Madero has also caused
amazement and discomfort among some scholars due to his sympathies with Spiritualism. After
a long stay in France in the 1880s, he became an ardent follower of Allan Kardec’s ideas and
began to practise Spiritualism.

It is interesting to note that Madero’s political career was not divorced from his spiritualist
leaning; on the contrary, he usually derived decisiveness from his conversations with spirits and
from his readings of the Bhagavadgītā. In fact, he even authored a commentary on the Hindu text.
The edition of the Gītā that Madero used was printed in Barcelona in 1896, a translation into
Spanish done by Theosophist Roviralta Borrell. Yet, Madero’s sympathy for Indian ideas was not
limited to the Gītā; he referred time and again to Indian philosophy and ethics. In his Spiritualist
Handbook (1910), for example, he claims that the theories of Spiritualism have been proved by
the ‘philosophies from Hindustan’ as well as by astronomers. Madero’s apparent eclecticism was,
during this period, a fairly common attempt to understand the edges of human knowledge
and advancement, e.g. identifying and negotiating between the belief in spirits and reliance on
matter, between ‘Eastern’ philosophies and Christian values, between religious feelings and trust
on scientific advancements, and between occultism and human improvement. In other words,
neither the scientist nor the occultist ‘believe[d] in miracles but in natural laws, yet expand[ed]
the scope of the latter, for there are hidden laws liable to be uncovered by imaginative reason’
(Chaves 2008: 110). Some thirty-five years earlier, in 1875, Madame Blavatsky had founded the
Theosophical Society, one of the most notorious enterprises in this line. Although not in accord
with Theosophical tenets, Spiritualism somehow partook of similar trends, as also did some
other organisations and groups. In the case of Madero, human improvement implied ethical
conduct, and this in turn conveyed correct political action.

In this sense, some prominent characters from magic and occultist milieus moved widely, not
only travelling from Europe and/or the United States (the ‘West’) to Asian countries, but also
to some destinations in Latin America (both cultural regions shaping an ambiguous epistemo-
logical ‘East’). Thus, in 1900 the infamous magician Aleister Crowley went to Mexico, a visit
he recorded in his autobiographical writings. Tellingly, he compares the strength and beauty of
the Mexican landscape to some places in India. Also noteworthy is the fact that it was precisely
while in Mexico that Crowley took an earnest interest in yoga through acquaintance with
Oskar Eckenstein, a fellow mountaineer with whom Crowley was to travel and climb some
Mexican peaks. It appears that because of this episode, he decided to go to Ceylon between
1901 and 1902 in order to further enhance his knowledge of yoga, as well as different aspects of
both Hinduism and Buddhism (Urban 2006: 116).
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Information is very scanty, and it is not at all clear whether Crowley or Eckenstein had any followers or sympathisers who may have kept up a yogic practice in Mexico. However, Crowley projected his yogic practice at the time onto what was for him an idyllic, enchanted setting. In other words it was both a romantic and an orientalist experience, exoticising both an Indian methodology and a Latin American territory, permeated with pre-Hispanic culture.

Crowley’s visit has to be read along Madame Blavatsky’s, who allegedly also visited Mexico and Honduras between 1851 and 1852, that is, some twenty-five years before the foundation of the Society. It is in her rather obscure biography (penned by Theosophist collaborator A. P. Sinnett) that she claims to have visited Mexico and Central America, after having been to Canada and the United States. However, the actual details about her supposed visit to Mexico are not reliable; there are hardly any records of her impressions of the Mexican landscape and context. It is somewhat suspicious that she did not provide faithful records, especially taking into account that both Crowley and Yogananda did, and quite effusively for that matter. Why, then, should she have tried to claim such a travel? Blavatsky did mention Mexican ancient civilisations, especially in her Isis Unveiled (1877) and The Secret Doctrine (1888). These two books were written more than twenty and thirty years, respectively, after her supposed travel to Mexico. Here, Blavatsky equates Aztec and Mayan cultures with the civilisation of ancient Egypt and Indian culture, by means of the affinities and resemblance she finds in the pyramids and the Ellora caves (Chaves 2008: 116). We should note that these are not the accounts of a tourist, but the notions of an occultist, conceived at a distance. In other words, it was the mythical Mexico that she was fantasising about, in very much the same way that she exotised the ‘Orient’ (she also made travels to Greece, Lebanon, India, Sri Lanka and Tibet, among other destinations). Maybe it was an effect of this romanticisation that different personages were attracted to Mexico and other Latin American destinations: ‘During the last quarter of the nineteenth century esoteric ideas became so widespread in educated circles both East and West that historians of religion can hardly avoid coming across one or another of their manifestations’ (De Michelis 2005: 67). In this sense, it is historically interesting that almost simultaneously with Crowley, around 1899 and 1900 Katherine Augusta Westcott Tingley arrived in Latin America from the United States, with the specific purpose of teaching Raja Yoga in the light of Theosophy and Freemasonry (Simões 2018). Tingley was a disciple of Blavatsky, so she may have felt attracted to this region in part because of Blavatsky’s romantic visions of Pre–Hispanic cultures in the Americas. Tingley’s main base was in Havana, Cuba. Unfortunately, there is almost no critical work on this interesting figure.

There was another noteworthy figure, whose activities focused in the southernmost parts of the American continent: Léo Alvarez Costet de Mascheville, a French man who went to Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil between 1924 and 1947 (Simões 2018). This latter year also marked the arrival of another key figure in yoga dissemination in the region: Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière, who I discuss below. Costet de Mascheville took the initiate name of Swami Servananda and followed the tenets of the ‘Independent Group of Esoteric Studies’, dedicated to Kabbalah, astrology, occultism and Buddhism. Most probably, Costet’s main stronghold was in Rio de Janeiro. It is worth mentioning that among Costet’s fervent followers was General Caio Miranda, who displayed great efforts in promoting yoga in Brazil. Yet, the diffusion of yoga was rather slow and discreet, and in lusophone Latin America and neighbouring countries it was also undertaken by Cesar Della Rosa, an Italian–born Francophile who popularised Indian religiosity in South America. Allegedly, this entrepreneur founded the first International Federation of Yoga in 1936–1941, with seats in France, Uruguay and Argentina. These two characters have received no substantive attention from scholars to date, but attest to a very interesting link between French and Latin American intellectuals.

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At roughly the same time, in 1929, the illustrious Paramahansa Yogananda payed a visit to Mexico. This event is of utmost significance since it was one of the first visits of an Indian guru to Latin America. In some senses, his stay reproduced some of the features of Crowley’s trip, especially because of the huge impact that the Mexican landscape made on the Indian yogi. Like Crowley, Yogananda not only stayed in Mexico City, but also wrote eulogically about mountains, uplands and lakes elsewhere. At some point, Yogananda even compared some hills to Kashmir and other places in India. Unlike Crowley, however, Yogananda gave some private and public lectures, the content of which are yet to be found in the historical record. His visit was recorded in Mexican newspapers, and he was even welcomed by the then president, Emilio Portes Gil. Despite being a holiday, Yogananda’s was an official visit of sorts. It coincided with the establishment of Mexican branches of his Self-Realization Fellowship, founded less than ten years earlier and with a base in Los Angeles, California. Through this organisation, Yogananda set himself up to teach and spread the principles of his Yogoda (a term that implied harmony, union and human improvement through a sense of self-realisation) and Kriya Yoga (a set of techniques of respiration and mantras meant to awaken the individual’s spiritual development). The Mexican branch is still functioning. It constantly offers meditation retreats and visits to Lake Chapala in Jalisco state, a freshwater lake for which Yogananda wrote a heartfelt praise in verse. Yogananda’s visit somehow paved the path for the incursions that would later take place.

Readers can imagine that there have been many other actors in this history. They cannot all be accounted for in such an introductory overview as this. Brief sketches of more figures can be found in Simões 2015, but detailed and thorough studies on individual actors are still needed. A notable exception is Siegel 2014, a detailed and well-documented critical biography of Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière, discussed below.

**Typologies 1: yoga, meditation and bodywork**

As in many other parts of the globe, the history of yoga in the Hispanosphere is concomitant with the history of meditation currents. An important number of these place a strong emphasis on devotion. In significant ways, faith through veneration and devotion towards a deity or master are enactments of discipline, one of the many meanings of ‘yoga’. We will take a brief look at some key examples in Latin America. I have discussed the main understandings of yoga above. Let me here reiterate that ‘yoga’ can signify various things, even if we were to only deal with physical forms; trying to pin it down to one single conception would be misleading and equivocal. As Singleton (2010: 15) has aptly put it: ‘A more valid and helpful way of thinking beyond such unproductive positions might be to consider the term yoga as it refers to modern postural practices as a homonym, and not a synonym, of the ‘yoga’ associated with the philosophical system of Patañjali and the other theoretical versions. Yet, we should not lose sight of the fact that for many practitioners both yogas converge and, sometimes, are even equivalents.

Traditionally, Latin America has been conceived as a predominantly Catholic region. However, at least since the 1990s there has been an ongoing change from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism and, more recently, to Pentecostal denominations, where Evangelical activity has been very intense, especially in Central America and Brazil (De la Torre 2018: 161–162). Few countries in the region have specific and efficient tools to measure religious change; hence, it is difficult to gauge the accurate numbers of followers of religions other than Roman Catholicism. One phenomenon that seems to take place is the overlap of faith and observation, whereby despite recognising oneself as a Catholic, a person can still resort to beliefs or practices from other religious systems (usually, meditation and yoga are epistemologically placed within non-Christian religious systems in Latin America). Combinations of religious
identity and praxis can also involve Spiritualism, New Age ideas and indigenous beliefs, among others. This hybrid practice is recognised as ‘mutant’ or ‘non-exclusive religious’ (De la Torre 2018: 166). Like Buddhism itself, yoga in Latin America shares with other originally Asian religions in the region (International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Daoism, Siddha Yoga and so forth) the fact that it is primarily undertaken by converts. The participation from Asian immigrants is comparatively small. In Argentina, for example, Buddhism is practised by some 5,000 Asian migrants or descendants, in contrast to the 35,000 Argentinian converts (Carini Catón 2018: 42). Many among them could have participated in different Asian methods, from Reiki through martial arts to yoga (Carini Catón 2018: 44).

Probably the most notable group is that of the Hare Krishnas, more properly known as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or ISKCON. In Latin America, more often than not, the Hare Krishnas do not undertake physical forms of yoga, but rather endorse a devout course of action through life. For them, this approach entails an ethical discipline that they call yoga, a discipline decidedly based on the Bhagavadgītā, the famous Hindu text. This is one of the most cherished texts for this society, alongside the Bhagavatapurāṇa and the writings of Srila Prabhupada, who founded the ISKCON in New York in 1966. Prabhupada visited Mexico in 1972 and established a long-lasting footing there and in other parts of Latin America. From the Bhagavadgītā, the Hare Krishnas especially endorse the path of love and devotion (bhaktiyoga) towards God, whose real, universal form is Krishna. Devotion to Krishna is exclusivistic. Thus, the ISKCON is unmistakably a monotheistic religious group; it cannot be combined with participation in another religious denomination. It also places a strong emphasis on a vegetarian diet and on abstinence from drugs, alcohol consumption and pre-marital sex. Although it claims to follow the philosophical tenets of Bengali Vaishnavism, its practice is mainly devotional, preferring chanting and congregational sharing to the study of Sanskrit and Hindu scriptures. The followers have a clear penchant for proselytism, and they tend to pay visits to different public spaces so as to draw attention and generate followers. ISKCON’s success in Latin America is evidenced by the many branches and temples it has established in a wide number of countries, such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Surinam, Uruguay and Venezuela. In some cases, former followers, to ensure the continuity of the society’s activity, have donated facilities and houses for temples.

Another school of devotional yoga that has been successful in some Latin American countries is Siddha Yoga, the group that evolved around the teachings of Swami Muktananda, originally from Karnataka and later based in Maharashtra. He allegedly received initiation from his guru Bhagavan Nityananda in 1947. After mystical experiences and gathering followers, he launched a missionary journey between 1970 and 1980; this activity led him to the United States, where he formally founded the group in 1975. His activities outside India were centred on the ‘Intensives’, i.e. massive initiatory gatherings–cum–rituals. In 1982, Muktananda chose Swami Chivilasananda, popularly known as Gurumayi, as his successor. She is currently running the Siddha Yoga Dham Associates, or SYDA Foundation. Directed toward developing spirituality in human beings, Siddha Yoga does not demand full renunciation, but the gaining of ever-increasing awareness of the innate human perfection. The adept is thus called a ‘perfect’ (siddha) being. In 1975, Muktananda visited Mexico and founded the Centro de Siddha Yoga de la Ciudad de México (Cross 2018); this centre was established just a few months after the first US centre. The Mexico City ashram is still operating and has a somewhat diminished, but loyal, cohort of followers. Probably the more stable SYDA centres in the region are those in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela. They partake of meditation, chanting (especially of the Guru-gītā and mantra recitation (notably the oṃ nāmaḥ śivaya). Besides the meditation centres,
in some countries (such as Mexico) there are also Casa de Estudios (‘Study Residence’, also known as Home Study), with a view to reinforcing the practice of sādhanā, partly through the propagation of interest and study in the Sanskrit language and the Trika philosophy associated to Kashmirian philosopher Abhinavagupta (tenth to eleventh century).

Buddhism has played an important role in spreading meditation. It has also been an appealing item for both sympathisers and academia (albeit in smaller numbers). The presence of Zen and Vipassana groups is notable. Especially significant is the presence of insight and mindfulness meditation, which may very well exemplify general understandings of meditation, Buddhism, Hinduism and yoga. In Latin America, both academic and practical Buddhism is a transplant of North American Buddhism, but it is also received through the filter of exoticist expectations (Gómez Rodríguez 2019: 17). This not only implies Latin American imaginings of ‘ancient’, ‘mysterious’ Asia, but also the notion that meditation is the key element in all Buddhist schools, something that cannot be proved by factual and textual evidence in Asia throughout history (Gómez Rodríguez 2019: 21–22). Mindfulness in North America bloomed in particular between the 1960s and the 1990s, after a long and interesting history of development, translation and adaptation, until it also became a favourite topic in psychotherapy. This accounts for the pervasive influence of what we may well call ‘Anglophone Buddhism’.

Despite this huge influence, there are some Zen/Chan groups in Latin America which aspire to have connections with and transmission from Asian teachers (usually, but not exclusively, Japanese). In the particular case of Mexico, Ezer May May has identified two conjunctions that mark the trajectory of Buddhism: namely, international policies from the nineteenth century, and ecumenical policies from the twentieth (May May 2015). The first is reflected in migrations from China and Japan in 1875 and 1897, respectively, especially in Northern Mexico. Nevertheless, the immigrant impact of Buddhism in Mexico – as in Argentina, and probably in most countries in the region – was rather weak, an issue that lies beyond the scope of this article. The second ‘conjunction’ depended on a comparative and pragmatist approach. It was partly fuelled (at least in Mexico and Central America) by rationalism, Theosophy, universalism and a dialogical relationship between Buddhism and Christianity. In recent decades, Buddhism has been further popularised by Tibetan Buddhism. The 14th Dalai Lama has paid visits to Mexico, where the Casa Tibet has been operating relentlessly since 1989, more or less. It has become a renowned place for meditation and prayer, and is probably more visible in the media than other Buddhist centres or groups.

Meditation in the region was also boosted by the Transcendental meditation movement founded by Mahesh Prasad Varma, aka Maharishi, in 1955 in Madras. Twenty years later after its foundation, the Maharishi foundation established centres in different locations in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Mexico and Uruguay (De Oliveira 2015: 1–2), but also paid regular visits to Cuba. Personal development is underpinned through breath control, which is expected to activate inner energies.

Even though some forms of devotional and meditational yoga can be found all over the region, without a doubt it is the more physical forms that prove to be all-pervading nowadays. They have become more popular and are fast growing. The most conventional schools of postural yoga are well established in most Latin American places, as well as some of the newer forms. From a cursory view, it becomes clear that the most popular forms of yoga are hatha yoga, Vinyasa, Iyengar, Ashtanga, Kundalini and Bikram. There are other forms that have gained popularity more recently, namely Anusara, Aeroyoga and Naamyoga, all of which have been non-Indian developments and which often involve Kabbalistic symbolism or terminology, as is the specific case of Naamyoga. These are recognisable asana-based manifestations of yoga.

A common phenomenon is the opening of yoga studios bearing the word ‘yoga’ in their name (X yoga, N yoga …). Quite often there is an overlapping of the name with a yoga style,
and the name of the head of said studio. Without a doubt, yoga has become a brand-enhancing label; it definitely helps to boost the impact of a given style or studio. Even when a person has developed a completely different methodology that bears little connection with recognisable forms of yoga (however difficult and disputable this can be), using the label ‘yoga’ makes the set of techniques derive both epistemological and commercial benefit (‘Laughter’ or ‘Beer yoga’, for example). By calling it ‘yoga’, it is set apart from other practices that are more clearly and undeniably circumscribed in the field of sports, fitness and athletics, including trending ones such as pilates or zumba.

Typologies 2: Latin American yoga

It is no surprise that many yoga trends in Latin America largely continue North American and British schools, or ‘Anglophone yoga’, a phenomenon labelled in such fashion by some specialists (e.g. Singleton 2010: 9–10; Beatrix Hauser 2013; see also Newcombe and Deslippe, Chapter 24 in this volume). At the same time, apart from regional divergences, there are some more or less detectable traits in Spanish-speaking countries and Brazil, a Portuguese-speaking country. This means that some important actors were influential on either side of the linguistic divide, but usually not simultaneously in both until more recently. Simões (2015) formulates a five-phase scheme to account for the implantation of yoga in Latin America, partly inspired by De Micheli’s typologies expounded in her seminal work (2005). According to Simões, the phases are: (1) Mystic-esoteric yoga; (2) Latin American journey to India; (3) Indian yoga settlements in Latin America; (4) Seeking of identity and singularity in Latin American countries; and (5) Strain between ‘traditional’ and ‘hybrid’ yoga. Although the scheme is helpful, I am not sure it can provide us with precise insight into the developments and intricacies of the history of Latin American yoga, partly because it presupposes a chronological development, as though in the first phases there was a single understanding of yoga. I do not think that is the case, as is hinted in the earlier section on ‘Forerunners and diffusors’. Nonetheless, the scheme may well be used as a reference point for further research.

As elsewhere, most yoga trends in Latin America are not directly linked to traditional yogas in South Asia, but are more or less dependent on North American or European developments. The most obvious exceptions are the Iyengar Yoga and Jois’s Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga lineages, which systematically receive visitors with a view to extend formative processes and issue official certifications for the practice and instruction of these yogas. One possible phenomenon, still to be further examined, is the alleged fact that Latin American yoga was somewhat isolated for about eighty years (c.1900–1980) and remained a spirituality without any legitimation from an Indian figure or group (Simões 2018). In countries such as Argentina, the inception and acceptance of yoga and meditation has had to negotiate with more established religions, notably Christianity. Yoga and meditation also benefited from New Age discourse:

The different price options and ways of practicing it, the appropriation and acceptance among Catholics and physicians, the idea of exercising the body in a delicate way, and the possibility of enjoying its benefits not having to adopt a new lifestyle mark it as a preferential option.

(Saizar 2015: 1)

Roberto Simões speculates that the lack of continuity and homogeneity may have been a result of a linguistic barrier, with the Spanish and Portuguese languages preventing Indian gurus (usually more at ease with English) from possible and frequent visits to the Latin American
continent (Simões 2015: 3) Therefore, the introduction of yoga was undertaken by non-Asians first: people who could handle the two main languages in the region. Understandably, there were some people in Spain and France that could do so (and, to a lesser degree, but due to political and economic interests, in the United States as well). However, it is worth remembering that Paramahansa Yogananda visited Mexico at a rather early stage. This and other visits suggest that some countries in Latin America were seen as promising and potential places to ‘spread the word of yoga’, as it were.

The introduction of physical yoga in the region owes a great deal to the notorious Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière, a French self-styled spiritual leader and philosopher. He claimed to have encountered a Dalai Lama who appointed him as a bodhisattva and entrusted him with the mission of becoming a ‘messiah’ of the New Age not in the Old World, but in the New one, specifically the Americas (Gutiérrez Zuñiga 2015: 2). This new era, the Age of Aquarius, allegedly began on 21 March 1948, when he was already in Latin America. De la Ferrière had various interests, among them parapsychology, metaphysics, theology and esotericism. He emphatically promoted vegetarianism, peace-preaching, psycho-physical gymnastics and abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and drugs (Siegel 2014: 344). He planned to found a great non-sectarian congregation, for which purpose he went first to the United States in 1947. However, he soon left for Guatemala and then arrived in Venezuela a year later to found the Gran Fraternidad Universal, or GFU (Great Universal Brotherhood). To this end, the GFU established ashrams so as to encourage both ‘exoteric movement’ and ‘esoteric elevation’ (Gutiérrez Zuñiga 2015: 2). The success of the GFU has been explained as the result of its presence in cultural events and not just within the inner precincts of the group, thus strengthening a strong process of synthesis and fostering a growing interest in the ideas and practices promoted by the GFU (Gutiérrez Zuñiga 2015: 2–3).

A prolific writer, De la Ferrière authored many books on religion and his own views on Freemasonry, Buddhism and other traditions. He was especially famous for his *Yug, yoga, yoghismo* (1969), his personal take on the yoga path and psychology. In fact, he called himself ‘Mahatma Chandra Bala’, the pen-name he used to author this volume. Like De la Ferrière himself, most elders in GFU are known as maestres (masters) and dress all in white. Critical and reliable information about De la Ferrière’s study of yoga, Indian philosophy and other fields is rather scanty; even De la Ferrière’s wife did not seem to have any recollection of her husband’s alleged intense study of Indian traditions (Siegel 2014: 39, 280, 287). This did not prevent him from becoming a successful forerunner in Latin America. As with Tingley, Costet de Mascheville and Della Rosa, De la Ferrière’s yoga was of an esoteric type, yet in most GFU branches there has been a constant and increasing offer of other forms of yoga, such as hatha or prenatal yoga.

The GFU was very successful and soon established roots in other countries, significantly Mexico and Costa Rica, where Nicaraguan Adaluz de Lake spread De la Ferrière’s ideas as well as yoga practice. Many followers also authored sundry books, such as the Venezuelan José Rafael Estrada, who wrote *Enseñanzas de la Nueva Era* (*Teachings of the New Age*), where he spoke on behalf of the fraternity among all Latin American peoples, itself the axis of the New Age of Aquarius. The book deals with yoga, meditation, kung-fu, breath control, gymnastics and nutrition (Siegel 2014: 262). Another publication, by Antonio Renato Henriques, explains some key concepts from Vedic cosmology, the caste system and classical Indian philosophy, as well as yoga and psychoanalysis. It also provides some information on Brazilian yoga schools (Siegel 2014: 266). Despite the fact that the GFU has managed to thrive in the region, it has also experienced various schisms, mainly emanating from Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela (Siegel 2014; Gutiérrez Zuñiga 2015).

As in other regions of the globe, yoga is present in both independent and semi-corporate contexts. There are a vast number of instructors and practitioners not easy to include in a census.
There are also some organisations and/or associations that seek to represent and account for the diverse varieties of yoga within regional boundaries. Although there are representations of transnational corporations and/or branches (Iyengar Yoga, Yoga Alliance, Bikram Yoga, etc.) in most Latin American cities, there are also regional associations, such as the International Association of Yoga and Yogism, the Mexican Federation of Yoga, the Mexican Institute of Yoga, the Argentinian Yoga Association, the Argentinian Federation of Yoga, the Latin American Union of Yoga, the Venezuelan Association of Yoga, AsoYoga-Costa Rican Association of Yoga Teachers and the Colombian Association of Yoga. As can be deduced from this list, there is at least one national yoga association for each country. Also, there is vast array of places that offer retreats for yoga training. Many of these places of retreat are located in touristic and idyllic scenarios, most notably on appealing beaches or in well-preserved forests.

In an ongoing survey, I collected some basic statistics worth mentioning. So far, sixty-nine people have responded to the survey: forty-seven females and twenty-seven males. Forty-three of the respondents are from Mexico; the remaining twenty-six are resident in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Nicaragua, Peru and Venezuela. The survey attempted to identify the most practised forms of yoga; respondents had to choose from twenty-one options, including an ‘Other’ option. Many respondents adhered to more than one form of yoga. According to the responses, the most practised varieties are: Hatha Yoga (62.3%), Vinyasa (39.1%), Iyengar (36.2%) and Ashtanga (34.7%). Power Yoga and Kundalini Yoga tied for fifth place (11.5%), well below the other four varieties. Acroyoga, Aeroyoga, Anusara, Bikram, ISKCON’s bhaktiyoga, Jivamukti, Kripalu, Shadow, Siddha Yoga and Yogananda’s Yogoda were each reflected in a very small number of adherents (7.2% or less). However, these figures may change as data is collected from a larger number of people. It will be helpful to mention some data in order to supplement my current statistics. According to Saizar (2015: 2), Hatha yoga is the most widespread form of yoga in Argentina, although it remains unclear whether she makes a distinction between Ashtanga, hatha and other postural modalities. May May states that the Buddhist population in Mexico is predominantly female and middle-class, presumably because the practice ‘enables them to modulate their economic life’ (2015: 1, 4).

Concluding remarks

When dealing with yoga and yoga-related systems in Latin America, it must be stressed that they reflect modern forms and transmissions. It is not possible to claim that they are continuous with or equal to the methods and soteriologies practised in South Asia 500 or 1,000 years ago (Muñoz 2018). In general, we can observe that modern yoga ‘seeks its legitimacy as spiritual path under the aegis of scientific rationality and new religious movements in the West’ (Simões 2015: 1). As in the rest of the world, yoga and meditation systems are modern expressions. All of them were developed or mediated by western agents, interested in Indian religions from around the mid-nineteenth century and mainly situated in urban contexts (De Michelis 2005: 2). If there is one successful globalised cultural item, it is indeed yoga. As Beatrix Hauser writes:

If one considers globalization in terms of cultural flows rather than economic markets, yoga provides rich source materials for understanding the process of knowledge transfer – preached, exported, translated, appropriated, touted, assimilated, and modified at various stages along its world-wide journey.

(Hauser 2013: 2)
Adrián Muñoz

The forms of yoga and meditation that we encounter in Latin America nowadays are the product of a rich combination of factors. It has been impossible to summarise them all in this text, but suffice it to say that this mixture involves a blend of aspirations, ideals, idealisations, projections, misrepresentations and adaptations. It is especially noteworthy that the Latin American expressions of yoga and meditation are largely, yet not exclusively, an inheritance of the developments in North America and Europe. As a result of this influence, many varieties of these systems greatly emphasise the refinement of bodily postures. Additionally, there are a great number of centres and styles that prescribe meditation and ethical behaviour above other aspects. Finally, there are some schools that foreground devotion; Patañjali is usually venerated and, in like manner, both classic and modern gurus are revered. Their role as guides in different yogic paths is understood as essential.

Nevertheless, the European and North American influence has not ruled out regional innovations, such as syncretic forms of yoga, meditation and pre-Hispanic purificatory rituals in places such as Mexico, Brazil or Peru. New Age thought has been an undeniable agent in spreading mediational and yogic ideas in the region. This has been far more than just an inheritance from the Anglophone world after the second half of the twentieth century. On the contrary, a great number of Theosophists, Freemasons, Rosicrucians, Spiritualists and the like have come to countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Cuba and Mexico since the nineteenth century with a view to implementing the realisation of a New Age promise for the betterment of the world in the New World; this was later reinforced by the counter-cultural movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2018: 425). The New Age sensibility has then allowed for a revaluation of indigenous practices. Popular traditions and Latin American ethnicities have become special hybrid entities for New Age movements, while at the same time offering a fresh, promising environment for a global spirituality (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2018: 466). To aptly sketch this map of transcultural flow will require much archival research and field work. Yet, it is hoped that this critical overview has offered a compact prospect of the history and modern developments of yoga and meditation in the region. Indeed, there is a broad scope for future research and investigation into the Latin American avatars of yoga – do they reinforce, negate or complement other stories of yoga in the modern world?

Notes
1 In general, I use lower case for generic modes of yoga and uppercase for branded forms.
2 My translation. I am quoting from an Argentinian edition.
3 However, it is worth noting that the primarily meditation-focused tradition of Siddha Yoga is also visible in Mexico (although now clearly less popular than postural yoga). These practitioners also refer to themselves as ‘yogis’ after undertaking a formal initiation from an authorised guru of their tradition.
4 The Mexican revolution was a major armed struggle that spanned more than a decade (roughly, 1910–1920). It brought about significant changes in politics, culture, economy and education.

Bibliography
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