

Charting the Early History of Modern Yoga Through Latin America and Iberia with the Works of Yogi Ramacharaka

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As scholarship on the history of modern yoga has grown and developed in recent decades, attention has been paid to both the development of yoga in the Anglophone world, often as a presumed default, and the development of yoga in individual nations, particularly throughout Europe. This paper suggests that the development of modern yoga can be understood from the vantage point of Latin America and Iberia just as well as it can be through Britain, the United States, and India. As its case study, it uses the thirteen books authored by the American lawyer William Walker Atkinson (1862-1932) as Yogi Ramacharaka.

In late-1903, the first works published under the pseudonym Yogi Ramacharaka almost immediately found their way into Latin America, and in only a few years, they started to be translated into Spanish and Portuguese through several key figures, and then distributed in mass quantities by several emerging metaphysical publishers and distributors in Argentina, Brazil, Spain, and the borderlands of the United States. Their popularity was enhanced by the particular interests of Theosophists and proponents of New Thought and occultism, and also general interest in physical culture and India. While their influence is difficult to quantify, it was still undeniable, and in ways both direct and indirect, they helped to position yoga in its current position of popularity in Latin America. The example of the Yogi Ramacharaka books in Latin America and Iberia not only supports already existent themes in the ongoing histories of early modern yoga such as transnational exchanges, networks such as the Theosophical society, and the influence of print, but also show that as a truly global phenomenon, a centering of the history of early modern yoga is as valid in Brazil or Argentina as anywhere else.

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