RUMYA S. PUTCHA

Orientalism and Wellness in the United States

ABSTRACT This article explores how consumer practices tether Orientalism to wellness. Relying on ethnographic research, the author uncovers how racialization and racialized expressions of gender are produced by and through performative and discursive practices of wellness. Such practices, which are also sometimes described as mindfulness techniques, encourage participants to understand wellness as a state of mind wherein if a person mirrors the behavior or speech of what qualifies as wellness, then they will also become well themselves. Drawing on methods from critical consumer studies as well as critical race feminist theory, the author argues that contemporary wellness practices expose somatic, rather than literary, forms of Orientalism.

KEYWORDS Orientalism, wellness, race, beauty, femininity

> Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world resources. Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being.
>
> —Edward Said, *Orientalism*

Introduction

In May 2021, as Seattle slowly began to reopen after months of mandatory lockdown, an unassuming curbside display on Amazon's campus announced a new partnership between Amazon and the wellness brand rē•spin. The sign alerted passersby to a store, known as an Amazon pop-up, which in the month of May would be promoting rē•spin products designed by Halle Berry, who is perhaps best known as the only African American actress to win an Academy Award for best actress.

At the store, I was greeted by an earnest Amazon employee and the faint sound of the 2018 alternative-indie track "Trampoline" by the US-based trio Shaed playing in the background. The space was designed to convey a spa-like experience. For example, on entering the store, one encountered a white leather couch surrounded by bamboo trees, inviting shoppers to sit down and feel as if they were in a lush, tropical rainforest. To promote the pop-up on social media channels, a screenshot of Berry's Instagram page had been printed out and framed,

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FIGURE 1. Stills from rē•spin featuring Amazon Halo band promotional video. In the top image, actress Halle Berry performs a yoga pose in front of the ocean; in the bottom image, she meditates while burning/inhaling incense.

encouraging visitors to follow her online for more wellness tips. Across from the framed screenshot, a television screen played a promotional video on loop. The video, which was playing with the sound off, offered a window to understand Berry's role in promoting the wellness paraphernalia on sale throughout the small store (fig. 1).[1] The video interpolates slow-motion shots of Berry, whose skin and hair appear to have been lightened for the purposes of the campaign. In the video, Berry is seen burning incense, practicing yoga, laughing, cooking vegetarian food with cilantro and mint leaves, and meditating. Taken as a whole, the video seemed to suggest that Berry led a happy life—that she was content and that it was her way of living that brought her contentment.

Sitting on the luxurious white couch, in my own personal faux rainforest, I searched for the promotional video online and readily found it. Though inaudible in the space of the pop-up, the backing track for the video conveyed a related sensory appeal. The musical accompaniment to the video relied on well-known sonic markers commonly sourced in spas or other retail-relaxation environments, particularly New Age or world music featuring exotic instruments like the pan pipe, the sarangi, or gamelan.[2]

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In this article, I explore how consumer practices, like the ones Berry promotes, tether Orientalism to wellness. In turn, I uncover how racialization and racialized expressions of gender are produced by and through performative and discursive practices of wellness.[3] Such practices, which are also sometimes described as mindfulness techniques, encourage participants to understand wellness as a state of mind wherein if a person mirrors the behavior or speech of what qualifies as wellness, then they will also become well themselves. Drawing on methods from critical consumer studies[4] as well as critical race feminist theory,[5] I argue that contemporary wellness practices rely on entrenched settler colonial–capitalist logics. These logics expose somatic, rather than literary, forms of Orientalism. Somatic Orientalism captures sensorial experiences (i.e., taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight) that extend from and at times feed the discursive and consumptive.[6] In the rē•spin advertisement, for example, somatic Orientalism is reflected in and represented by Berry's sensory props—the smell of burning incense, the tropical flavors of cilantro or mint, or the sound of an exotic instrument. Simply put, somatic Orientalism allows consumers to believe that if they consume and adopt the bodily practices of colonized peoples, then they will be restored to a natural, primordial state of good health—the kind of health that modern and Euro-American cultures lack.

Over the last decade, research on wellness trends has demonstrated that economically privileged women both in the United States and elsewhere participate in the consumer behavior of an elitist womanhood through Orientalist escapism and virtue-signaling, most notably in contemporary settings like social media.[7] Building on these studies, one can see a discursive and consumptive formation of "wellness" emerging—a compassionate capitalism—which positions wellness as more than bodily health and agility, as, that is, a consumer behavior that includes rather than precludes emotional well-being. Following this recognition, I interrogate how wellness cultures, particularly the "branded fitness" versions that Berry promotes, rely on Orientalist practices of capitalism and consumption.[8] Drawing on ethnographic and archival work on commercial wellness industries and related consumer spaces, I expose the consumer imperatives of health that Berry reflects alongside the racialized and gendered definitions of wellness and beauty.[9] Within this frame, I not only examine how and why wellness cultures today rely on Orientalist tropes, but also argue that, as Berry's case makes clear, such cultures reproduce colonial-capitalist logics that flatten and universalize in order to extract, perform, and sell.

Orientalism, Wellness, and Influence(rs)

Berry is not the first actress-turned-lifestyle-influencer in the United States to promote the Orientalist, consumerist, and beauty-centered idea of health that wellness industries typify. As soon as celebrity product endorsements and print

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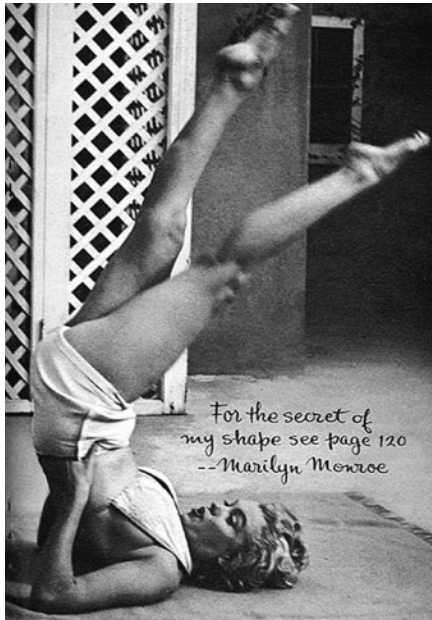

FIGURE 2. Marilyn Monroe promoting yoga, *Pageant Magazine*, September 1952.

media existed, so did a steady stream of wealthy women—celebrities—whose bodies and therefore whose lifestyles and routines inspired the masses. One of the earliest celebrities to endorse yoga-for-wellness, for example, was Norma Jeane Mortenson, better known as Marilyn Monroe, who is said to have credited yoga for her much-admired physique (see fig. 2). Monroe's hypervisibility as an icon of American feminine beauty allowed her to position herself as a proto-fitness influencer. Beginning in the late 1940s, Monroe began performing yoga poses, usually dressed in a bathing suit or minimal clothing, as part of her marketing strategy. These images were generally paired with language that encouraged other women who wanted to look like her to also take up yoga, follow her dietary or other lifestyle habits, including dressing like she did to "feel" healthy.

The earliest examples of aspirationally fit women's bodies emerged well before Monroe, though, in the early twentieth century, when the influence of film culture and modern dance elevated dancing female bodies from the entertainment realms of vaudeville and burlesque. No longer base and bawdy, modern dance in colonial-cosmopolitan spaces like New York, London, and Paris was now performed as art by white women like Ruth St. Denis and Louise Brooks—and in many cases it was an art built on racist and Orientalist themes, often involving dancers who appeared in black- or brownface.[10]

Contemporary wellness cultures, like the kind Berry is promoting, operate as extensions of a somatic Orientalism that one can trace from at least the beginning of the twentieth century in spaces like modern dance. To be sure, dancer-actresses

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FIGURE 3. On the left, Ruth St. Denis in *Yogi* (1908); on the right, in *Incense* (1916). Courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections.

of this era were also among the first to suggest that racialized sounds and smells could and should be represented visually through costuming and other forms of Orientalist spectacle—an idea that dancers like Ruth St. Denis highlighted through their choreography and set design (see fig. 3). Socialites-turned-dancers, like Ruth St. Denis, whose careers often overlapped with or extended to film work in Hollywood, also participated as brand spokeswomen, establishing an assemblage that connected white women of means to consumerism and consumerism to Orientalist notions of beauty and womanhood (see fig. 4).

In the product endorsements in figure 4, for example, St. Denis's costume and the set design position her as an Indian woman, a tactic she deployed with frequency in her career.[11] In both cases, she is promoting a product that relies on ideas of exoticism or otherness, whether through taste or sight. Moreover, the products she is promoting are meant to encourage target consumers, arguably other white women or aspirationally white women (like the ones framing St. Denis in the left-hand part of fig. 4), to adopt otherness in order to feel desirable. The kind of promotional authority St. Denis wielded in the early twentieth century was and arguably still is the power of celebrity influence that made it possible for Jane Fonda to sell her lifestyle in the 1970s to 1980s, Suzanne Somers in the 1990s, and Gwyneth Paltrow in the early 2010s. In each of these eras, such women performed wellness—that is to say, their bodies reflected a state of good health, desirability, and signs of feminine beauty. In each case, the fact that these women were white, though often unacknowledged in discourses of racialization that position whiteness as unmarked, must be seen as essential to their success and influence. In other words, there is a long Orientalist history of white racialization behind the construction of women's health and wellness. This history stretches from early dancer-actress-beauty icons like Ruth St. Denis to the insta-yogis, like Berry, we see today.

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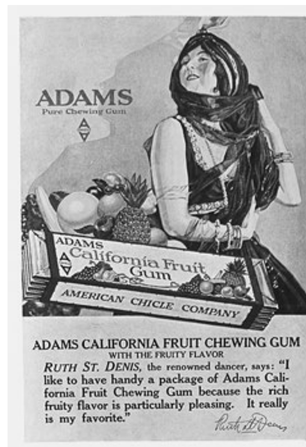

FIGURE 4. Early twentieth-century product endorsements by Orientalist dancer-actress Ruth St. Denis.

However, Berry's case complicates the trend because Berry is not a white woman. Throughout her career, Berry has represented herself as an African American woman. Thus, Berry's participation in and representation of an Orientalist consumer culture that caters to and constructs white womanhood suggest a new twist to performances of both whiteness and womanhood in the U.S. context. Arguably, it is not only Berry's ability to adopt the bodily practices and beauty ideals of whiteness, but also her wealth and social mobility—a facet of her celebrity status—which makes it possible to position herself as a wellness influencer.

In this regard, recent forms of wellness consumerism are both cause and result of Orientalist forms of racialization that are specific to the US context. It is by now a truism that the 2006 best-selling self-help novel/travel diary by Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, popularized a brand of white feminism for US women that has since come to shape notions of beauty, wellness, and consumer practices. Joining a larger body of work set in the Global South in the post-9/11 era, the memoir particularly valorized yoga, but also alternative forms of medicine and wellness, as a means by which women, with the financial means to travel the world at leisure for months at a time, could "find themselves" as well as claim their sexuality outside of the confines of marriage. Feminist scholars like Shefali Chandra have noted the consumptive logics at the heart of such engagements: "Skillfully navigating between twentieth-century imperial history, the rise of the War on Terror, and a barely contained obsession with Hindu female sexuality . . . [texts like Gilbert's are] driven by the conviction that India, and Indian women, will heal the mind and body of the white woman. India enables the American woman to cure herself."[12] *Eat, Pray, Love* launched a new version of the consumption-leads-to-wellness ideology, repackaging an old Orientalist tale of travel and leisure as the secret to good health.

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Performative Wellness and Aspirational Whiteness

Since the advent of Instagram celebrity/influencer culture, this is the logic of leisure-wellness that underscores the steady onslaught of Instagram posts under the tags #wellness, like the ones on Berry's feed and under the brand name rē•spin. Whereas in the case of someone like Ruth St. Denis, costuming and spectacle were the primary mechanism by which such logics were signaled, or in Monroe's case, through acrobatic or contortionist poses, in Berry's case this appeal is achieved through the body itself. In each case, it is possible to see performative forms of wellness and the kinds of white racialization it signals as versions of what Michel Foucault once theorized as a "technology of the self, which permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[13] In other words, in Berry's case we can now see that the material qualities of Orientalist wellness have become both racialized and internalized—that they are no longer about what one wears or how one trains one's body to look, but about how one feels or desires to feel. Indeed, how else to explain the aspirational language of selfhood (i.e., connect, give, eternal, etc.) alongside images of Berry—with digitally lightened skin and hair—that are prominent across rē•spin's brand advertisements (see figs. 5 and 1).

Ideas of wellness as something that can be bought or sold, adopted or discarded, exposes the nefarious logics of US imperialism and its narcissistic impulses. Furthermore, when aligned with women's issues, claims to feminism tend to moralize health and wellness activities, including dietary habits. This mechanism, by which women are taught to see their health as a consumer outcome, in turn feeds the self-centered and neoliberal rhetoric of "my best interest at any cost." Instagram and its influencers clearly capitalize on the aspirational aspects of wellness cultures by selling the idea that listening to specific music or eating certain foods not only improves wellness in an externalized and observable manner, but also, paradoxically, offer followers and consumers a sense of individuality. For example, a common phrase I have heard over the years in my ethnographic work among those who participate in commercial wellness industries is that such somatic and Orientalist tools have helped them "find themselves" and "accept" their bodies. However, this is the same fitness culture that has borne witness to unprecedented rates of eating disorders, including a new diagnosis known as "orthorexia nervosa"—an obsession with eating healthy or "clean." Despite the rhetoric of self-love and acceptance, wellness cultures like the ones Berry promotes appear to be engendering new and dangerous forms of conceit and controlling tendencies.

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FIGURE 5. Still from rē•spin Halo pop-up in Seattle, WA. May 2021. Photo by author.

Conclusion

What today might appear to an untrained eye as an ambient example of influencer culture, otherwise marketed by Berry as a wellness must-have, is intimately tethered to a larger story of how race and gender are performed in everyday life in the US context. Through such performances, whiteness *as* wellness is reinscribed. In turn, Berry's Orientalist performance of wellness, allows her, as an icon of Black identity and success in the United States, to represent the other because her way of doing so confirms that the other also wants to be white. Put another way, despite her racial identification as an African American woman in the United States of America, Berry's influencer role allows her to adopt otherness in order to shore up whiteness and the desire for whiteness. Ultimately, such forms of compassionate capitalism reveal extractive logics and reinscribe white identification and assimilation as a goal.

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Notes

1 For example, in a pop-up store one can purchase yoga blocks, booty bands, speed jump ropes, waist trainers, and other exercise tools, including Amazon's version of a fitness tracker, a Halo band.
2 Barendregt, "Tropical Spa Cultures," 162. See also Kassabian, "Would You Like Some World Music?" 219.
3 Here I am referring in part to Judith Butler's theory of performativity—the idea that white gender identity is socially constructed and affirmed through speech and other repetitive forms of communication. Butler draws in part on John L. Austin's theory of "performative utterances." See Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 5. Performativity refers specifically to actions, which not only represent an idea or identity, but also actualize it.
4 Chin, *My Life with Things*, 194–95; Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, 5–6.
5 hooks, "Oppositional Gaze"; Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, xi.
6 See Putcha, "After *Eat, Pray, Love*," 456–60.
7 Birdee et al., "Characteristics of Yoga Users," 1655; Park, Braun, and Siegel, "Who Practices Yoga?," 463; Annavarapu, "Consuming Wellness," 420.
8 Powers and Greenwell, "Branded Fitness," 524.
9 See Aizura, "Where Health and Beauty Meet."
10 Putcha, "White Hygiene," 112.
11 Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 67–82.
12 Chandra, "'India Will Change You Forever,'" 488.
13 Foucault, *Technologies of Self*, 18.

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