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## **Meditations On Modern America: The Ambiguous Worldview of Transcendental Meditation, 1967-1979**

Grant William Wong

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Meditations on Modern America  
The Ambiguous Worldview of Transcendental Meditation, 1967-1979

By

Grant William Wong

Bachelor of Arts (International Honours)  
The College of William & Mary and the University of St Andrews, 2021

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Accepted by:

Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, Director of Thesis

Christine Caldwell Ames, Reader

Cheryl Addy, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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## Dedication

For my parents, William and Beauty Wong, for supporting me through everything.

## Acknowledgements

“Work hard, be kind, and amazing things will happen.” This Conan O’Brien quote—my personal mantra, so to speak—has sustained me through the years as I continue to learn that there’s always more *to learn*. The following thesis is but my latest step towards figuring out what the past was all about. Of course, I haven’t gone at it alone. Writing history may be a solitary affair, but because of my family, my friends, my mentors, and my colleagues, it has never felt that way.

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McGovern, Nicole Dressler, Jay Watkins, Milinda Banerjee, Konrad Lawson, and Josh Tychonievich for their steadfast guidance in all of my academic endeavors. I am grateful too to all of my mentors and seniors here at USC. Thanks go to Patricia Sullivan, Mark Smith, Woody Holton, Adam Schor, Madeline Steiner, Jillian Hinderliter, Andrew Walgren, Carlie Todd, and Ali Bethlenfalvy for unfailingly supporting me as I've figured out what it means to be a Ph.D. student.

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## Abstract

Transcendental Meditation [TM], a form of silent mantra meditation pioneered by the Indian holy man Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1957, took the United States by storm as over two million Americans learned its meditative technique between 1968 and 1978. At once a spiritual movement and a lifestyle, TM was a countercultural movement that went mainstream. I argue that TM was appealing because of its ambiguity and consequent malleability, as its teachings and practice came to reflect the aspirations and anxieties of its followers. By tracing their varying interpretations of the practice across periodicals, movement literature, memoirs, and contemporary scholarship, I interrogate how Americans made sense of TM and, in turn, illustrate how they intellectually and culturally reckoned with the turbulence of their times.

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## Chapter 1: Meditations on Modern America: The Ambiguous Worldview of Transcendental Meditation, 1967-1979

*Changing the arc of history was the goal of Transcendental Meditation: using the full potential of the mind to create a better person and ultimately a better world, where the Earth would shine not with the fires of war but the light of humanity.*

– Mike Love, member of the Beach Boys and Transcendental Meditator<sup>1</sup>

It all began in India. In 1957, the enigmatic holy man Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917-2008) inaugurated the Spiritual Regeneration Movement to enlighten the world through the practice of Transcendental Meditation [TM].<sup>2</sup> Unlike his fellow Hindu acolytes of the Advaita Vedanta tradition, who viewed the act of spiritual contemplation as the exclusive province of men trained in the faith's traditions, Maharishi imagined "transcendental deep meditation" as "not only possible but easy for everyone."<sup>3</sup> TM's accessibility set it apart from other meditative practices and manifested in its technique, which was straightforward and consistent. According to Maharishi, by silently meditating for twenty minutes twice a day—mentally repeating a Sanskrit mantra and allowing the mind to drift freely—anyone could achieve "a transcendental state of Being": a connection with "the unmanifested reality of all that exists, lives, or is... the source of all thinking, of all

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Love and James Hirsch, *Good Vibrations: My Life as a Beach Boy* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2016), 180.

<sup>2</sup> "Mahesh" is the Maharishi's given name. "Maharishi" is a title that roughly translates to "greatest sage," and "Yogi," too is a title, denoting "spiritual teacher." While Maharishi received spiritual training from his teacher Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, better known as Guru Dev, these titles were self-bestowed. As a *kasayth*, a member of an educated clerical caste, it was acceptable for Maharishi to have them. In contrast, the title of "guru" is relegated to males of the *Brahmin* caste. Maharishi himself never claimed to be a "guru," crediting Saraswati as the progenitor of TM. Cynthia Ann Humes, "Maharishi Mahesh Yogi: Beyond the TM Technique" in *Gurus in America*, eds. Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2005), 60-61.

<sup>3</sup> Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Transcendental Meditation* (New York: New American Library, 1963), 54. This text is a reprint of *Science of Being and Art of Living*, the founding text of TM. See Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010), 82-93 and Humes, "Maharishi Mahesh Yogi" for further details on how TM both originated and differed from orthodox Hindu practice and belief.

existing creation.”<sup>4</sup> This would enable “man to use his full potential and to make full use of his surroundings and of the almighty power of nature” and make it possible to “live life in eternal freedom, while still accomplishing the maximum in the material field.”<sup>5</sup> It was enlightenment made easy.

Such ideals would be particularly attractive in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s, as many Americans saw themselves as living in an age of crisis.<sup>6</sup> The tumult of the 1968 Democratic National Convention laid bare the political divides wrought by the Vietnam War, the rise of the counterculture, and the decline of modern liberalism. With the passing of the decade, the Watergate scandal proved no less chilling, and the shock waves it sent through the decade were coupled with the economic woes of deindustrialization, stagflation, and the energy crisis. Even President Jimmy Carter admitted that “a crisis of confidence” threatened “to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.”<sup>7</sup> It was in this fragmenting United States that TM flourished, alongside the spiritualities of the New Age and evangelical Christianity. “We are now—in the Me Decade—seeing the upward roll (and not yet the crest, by any means) of the third great religious wave in American history, one that historians will very likely term the Third Great Awakening,” proclaimed Tom Wolfe in his famous 1976 *New York*

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<sup>4</sup> Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Transcendental Meditation*, 21-22, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Transcendental Meditation*, 57.

<sup>6</sup> See Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2001), Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2010), and Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010) for holistic assessments of the decade as a time of great upheaval and anxiety across politics, culture, and society.

<sup>7</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Energy and the National Goals - A Crisis of Confidence” (speech, Washington, D.C., July 15, 1979), *American Rhetoric*, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jimmycartercrisisofconfidence.htm>.

magazine essay.<sup>8</sup> But although TM, with its Hindu roots and alternative appeal, found its greatest popularity within this “Third Great Awakening,” many of its followers never conceived of it as a religion, or even as countercultural.

For TM was a movement all its own, self-defined and dedicated to its spread above all else. Unlike the spiritualities of the New Age, it rejected the blending of alternative beliefs and embraced the American sociopolitical status quo to avoid controversy. Furthermore, Maharishi, particularly in the 1970s, often presented TM not as a religion, but as a secular technique fully compatible with Christianity and other major faiths. Spreading slowly but steadily through the 1960s, by 1968, TM, alongside other Eastern spiritualities for which it was the vanguard, were prominent enough for *Time* magazine to declare the year “The Year of the Guru.”<sup>9</sup> By the 1970s, TM was everywhere. Talk shows from *The Tonight Show* to *The Today Show* to *The Merv Griffin Show* interviewed Maharishi. By 1974, there were 205 “World Plan Centers” located across the US offering courses in TM and its theory, the Science of Creative Intelligence [SCI], to all those interested in meditation.<sup>10</sup> According to *The New York Times*, TM was “1975’s biggest cultural whirlwind.”<sup>11</sup> The same year, *The TM Book: How to Enjoy the Rest of Your Life* peaked at number two on *The New York Times* Best Seller List and remained there for six months.<sup>12</sup> Overall, between 1968 and 1978, over *two million*

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York*, August 23, 1976, <https://nymag.com/news/features/45938/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Howard, “Year of the Guru,” *Time*, February 9, 1968.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Forem, *Transcendental Meditation: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Science of Creative Intelligence* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974), 249-251. Forem also notes twenty World Plan centers in Canada and the teaching of TM in 41 different countries across North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. Also mentioned are Puerto Rico and the “West Indies.”

<sup>11</sup> “New and Noteworthy,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 1975.

<sup>12</sup> Denise Denniston and Peter McWilliams, *The TM Book: How to Enjoy the Rest of Your Life* (Allen Park, MI: Versemonger Press, 1975). Denniston was mistakenly credited as “Denise” in the book’s credits. Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation – How Indian*

Americans learned to practice TM.<sup>13</sup> Celebrities, business leaders, and scientists alike subscribed to Maharishi's promises of self-fulfillment and global harmony, and brought white middle-class America with them into their teacher's embrace.

Examining how TM was imagined and practiced in the US in the 1960s and 1970s reveals that its intellectual ambiguities made it meaningful to its practitioners. TM, as a whole, had a coherent belief system rooted in Hindu tradition, but many of its followers did not comprehend or subscribe to it in full. As Maharishi and his acolytes taught TM, they often did so while portraying it as a secular technique. Its resultant lack of definition and malleability made it accessible and popular as its practice adopted the disparate meanings its practitioners assigned it. By the late 1970s, this divergence was such that while some saw TM as a purely secular de-stressing technique, others relocated to Fairfield, Iowa to study at Maharishi International University [MIU] to awaken supernatural powers through their meditation.<sup>14</sup> And these groups belonged to the same movement. TM could be everything to everyone. This was most apparent when Maharishi argued that simply practicing meditation was a cure-all to the world's problems. Racism, poverty, crime, unemployment: there was no social ill that meditation could not solve. It is telling that TM's spread began slowing in 1976—its ambiguity was increasingly defined by Maharishi's direction of the movement and anti-TM criticism—

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*Spirituality Changed the West* (New York, NY: Harmony Books, 2010), 167. Goldberg writes from an insider perspective as a former teacher within the TM movement.

<sup>13</sup> Dana Sawyer and Cynthia Humes, *The Transcendental Meditation Movement* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 4.

<sup>14</sup> The starkness of this divide is best expressed by the dual existences of Robert B. Kory, *The Transcendental Meditation Program for Business People* (New York, NY: AMACOM, 1976) and Claire Hoffman, *Greetings from Utopia Park: Surviving a Transcendent Childhood* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001). The first is a movement book argues for secular TM practice as a means to boost workplace productivity, while the latter is a memoir that describes the fraught childhood of its author, who was raised to practice TM in a community devoted to the movement in Fairfield, Iowa.

then declined even more sharply with the decision of *Malnak v. Yogi* in 1977, a US District Court of New Jersey case that legally defined TM as a religion to prohibit its teaching in public schools.<sup>15</sup> During the movement's rise from 1968 to the end of 1975, TM's many meanings reflected its followers' aspirations and anxieties, and thus provide us with insights into how Americans lived through and imagined the 1960s and 1970s. Its intellectual ambiguity was the keystone of its spread and practice: it was appealing to so many not in spite of it, but because of it.

Despite TM's prominence in this period—as noted by Cynthia Ann Humes and Dana Sawyer, “no American sect of an Asian religion or branch of what is commonly called the New Age has ever been as successful as the TM movement”—it has received little attention from historians.<sup>16</sup> It has mostly been examined by sociologists and religious studies scholars, who relate its teachings to its Hindu roots, assess how it adheres to and confounds categories including “cult,” “New Age,” “New Religious Movement” and especially “religion,” and examine its relationship to the authority of scientific research.<sup>17</sup> Studies including Humes and Sawyer's holistic assessments of the movement and its fragmentation, Lola Williamson's *Transcendent in America*, and Philip Goldberg's popular history *American Veda* situate these inquiries within the context of its

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<sup>15</sup> Goldberg, *American Veda*, 169; Candy Gunther Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion?* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 39-44.

<sup>16</sup> Sawyer and Humes, *The Transcendental Meditation Movement*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> See Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1970), William Sims Bainbridge and Daniel H. Jackson, “The Rise and Decline of Transcendental Meditation” in Bryan Wilson, ed., *The Social Impact of New Religious Movements* (New York, NY: Rose of Sharon Press, 1981), Michael York, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), and Scott Lowe, “Transcendental Meditation, Vedic Science and Science,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 14, no. 4 (May 2011): 54-76 for important studies of this type. For a more recent assessment of TM as it pertains to sociology and religious studies, see Sawyer and Humes, *The Transcendental Meditation Movement*, 1-4.

spread in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Stefanie Symon's *The Subtle Body* and Joseph Weber's *Transcendental Meditation in America*, journalistic accounts of TM, respectively connect the movement to the history of yoga and assess its development among its core following in Fairfield, Iowa.<sup>19</sup>

But these studies, important as they are for understanding how TM's structure and spiritual doctrine, do not address in detail neither how TM's appeal was based in its ambiguity, nor how this ambiguity was molded by its practitioners to fit their intellectual and cultural needs. A historical approach thus offers rich new insights into how TM's multivalent meanings—or lack thereof—made it so compelling to Americans at the individual level. Examining it in relation to the wider historiography of the 1970s broadens our understanding of the decade and of TM, conceptualized here as a disparate movement defined only by its central conviction that its members could better themselves and the world through Maharishi's brand of meditation. Daniel T. Rodgers argues in *Age of Fracture* that “conceptions of human nature that in the post-World War II era had been thick with context, social circumstance, institutions, and history gave way to conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire.”<sup>20</sup> TM operated within this framework, proffering its followers an individual-centered worldview that displaced prior collectivist modes of American thought. However, that the movement became as popular as it did by deriving its legitimacy from normative institutions of mass culture, news media, education, business, and science suggests that a collective ethos

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<sup>18</sup> Sawyer and Humes, *The Transcendental Meditation Movement*; Humes, “Maharishi Mahesh Yogi”; Williamson, *Transcendent in America*; Goldberg, *American Veda*.

<sup>19</sup> Stefanie Symon, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010); Joseph Weber, *Transcendental Meditation in America: How a New Age Movement Remade a Small Town in Iowa* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

continued to hold some degree of influence over the American public. Examining TM's teachings in theory and in practice demonstrates that countercultural modes of thought do not inherently oppose the status quo, echoing the thesis of Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Though TM was countercultural to the extent that it critiqued how modern American society left people stressed, disillusioned, and unfulfilled—what one movement book termed “The Crisis of Modern Life”—in practice it upheld the status quo on issues as wide-ranging as race, capitalism, and the Vietnam War, just as the counterculture rejected conformity but embraced consumerism.<sup>21</sup> Maharishi deliberately steered the movement away from contentious politics for the sake of the movement's public image. Furthermore, as TM resembled a consumer brand for how it sold its meditative practice and philosophical worldview, it can also be understood as a lifestyle, as this is exactly how many of its adherents viewed it. Here I take inspiration from Sam Binkley's *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s*. Just like how the lifestyle publications Binkley analyzes sought to “erect new guidelines and shape new objects of moral devotion to fill the vacuum left by the disintegration of the old,” TM represented a way of living that allowed people to find meaning and solace amid the fragmentation of the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> And as TM represented to its practitioners a new way of existing in the world, it promised them that they could change it, if only for themselves.

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Harold H. Bloomfield, Michael Peter Cain, and Dennis T. Jaffe, *TM: Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress* (New York, NY: Delacorte Press, 1975), 1-13.

<sup>22</sup> Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 31.

I examine the history of TM in the United States from a thematic perspective, tracing the movement's rise and fall by analyzing its multivalent meanings. By analyzing periodicals, movement literature, memoirs, and contemporary scholarship to understand how people made sense of TM, I illustrate how Americans in the late 1960s and 1970s intellectually and culturally reckoned with the turbulence of their times. While categorizing the movement is crucial to understanding its spiritual context, this is not my concern, as many of its followers did not even conceive of it as a religion. I am most interested in TM as a product of its particular temporal moment. First and foremost, the movement was attractive for its ability to help its practitioners make meaning of modern life and take the time to breathe and think. As such, it is perhaps no surprise that celebrities and college students were some of its earliest and most dedicated devotees. It was also appealing for the simplicity of its worldview, as TM required neither revolution nor drugs to change the world, only twice-daily meditation. Though these aspects of the movement were initially cast in spiritual terms, Maharishi and his followers marketed it to the American mainstream in the 1970s by teaching TM as a secular de-stressing technique, backed by scientific research and claims that it boosted workplace productivity. Because of this, to many of the movement's followers, TM was simply a lifestyle. Lastly, I detail how TM thrived by its avoidance of definition as "religion," a charade that finally ended in 1977 amid its slowing spread and legal definition as religion in *Malnak v. Yogi*. The movement would retain its utopian vision and promises of self-improvement but lost the adaptability that allowed for its initial mass spread and appeal.

From the very beginnings of its spread in the US, TM was a highly adaptable practice. Though through the 1950s and 1960s Maharishi was more transparent regarding



its religious nature, it nonetheless appealed to those eager to explore alternative worldviews and spiritualities. Much of TM's initial spread can be credited to Maharishi himself, who was as able a networker and media personality as he was a spiritual mentor. Following a disappointing campaign to spread TM in India, he embarked on a world tour to preach his practice, first visiting the US in 1959.<sup>23</sup> The movement's initial base in the US was made up of spiritually inclined people in Southern California and expanded as Maharishi focused on building his reputation among celebrities and college students.<sup>24</sup> He deliberately courted celebrities to bring them into the movement's fold, and in turn, they brought TM the media attention it needed to appeal to the mainstream in the 1970s. It was Maharishi's tutelage of the Beatles, Mike Love of the Beach Boys, and Mia Farrow at his ashram in Rishikesh, India in 1968 that brought the movement its first major wave of mainstream media attention in the United States. For college students, he founded the Students International Meditation Society [SIMS] in 1965, an organization that would expand to over 1,000 branches at institutions including Harvard, UCLA, Ohio State, The University of Colorado, and New York University. Jack Forem, SIMS' New York Area Coordinator, would describe TM in 1974 as "a grassroots movement," noting that "the main source of the movement has been satisfied practitioners, spreading word of the movement by word of mouth."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> TM likely failed to spread effectively in India due to Maharishi's sharp deviance from Hindu orthodoxy. As noted by *Time* in 1967, "The Maharishi has been sharply criticized by other Indian sages, who complain that his program for spiritual peace without either penance or asceticism contravenes every traditional Hindu belief." *The New York Times* concurred: "[Indians] do not regard Maharishi as a saint or sage, partially because they are used to Hindu holy men who conduct their lessons in one thatched room, not in a modern colony built to western specifications." "Mystics: Soothsayer for Everyman," *Time*, October 20, 1967; "The Prophet the Beatles Follow Is Without Honor in His Own Country," *The New York Times*, November 4, 1967.

<sup>24</sup> Goldberg, *American Veda*, 155-159.

<sup>25</sup> Forem, *Transcendental Meditation*, 9.

TM appealed to these groups for its promises of authenticity, human fulfillment, and self-discovery. By spreading its practice, Maharishi and his followers dreamed of uplifting humanity. And as for them, meditation was an empowering experience, it makes sense that they did. TM was not just an abstract philosophy or spirituality, but one tied to a physical exercise. The act of meditating went beyond de-stressing, as it allowed people to make sense of how they viewed the world and their place in it. Though meditators interpreted their experiences differently and claimed its benefits to widely varying degrees, they all assigned some sense of purpose to the act itself. They would not have been able to extrapolate ideas from it otherwise. As early as 1967, *Time* magazine noted the potential of TM's accessibility, describing Maharishi as a "Soothsayer for Everyman." Indeed, TM's teachings were "comfortable," its meditative technique a way "to succeed spiritually without really trying."<sup>26</sup> Of course, meditating "without really trying" was the point. In the United States, TM, adapted from its traditional origins in India, was molded by Maharishi, his followers, and new students of meditation to fit American understandings of individualism and self-fulfillment.

The memoirs of Nancy Cooke De Herrera, an early follower of Maharishi, are instructive for how they relate TM's ease, accessibility, and promise to its meditative technique. A close reading of her first meditative experience in the late 1960s, in which she simply practiced the technique before subscribing to TM's philosophy, reveals how its technique melded together mind, body, and spirit for its practitioners. In many ways, De Herrera was the perfect initiate. She was curious enough to seek out and try different spiritualities, and as a socialite, she had the time and money to fully invest in her personal

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<sup>26</sup> "Mystics: Soothsayer for Everyman."

life. But her first attempt at a different kind of meditation ended in failure, as she related her experience to TM follower Helena Olsen:

“I had to kneel on the floor for half an hour with my eyes closed, visualizing a cross. When it stood still, I was to dive through the apex and thereby transcend normal consciousness. Only after I had dived for three months would [the guru] send me a mantra and further instructions.”

“Did the technique work?”

“No. It was maddening. I would close my eyes and try to see a cross, only to see everything but a cross. All I got out of that meditation were headaches, sore knees, and a lot of frustration. After three weeks I stopped.”<sup>27</sup>

Olsen then referred De Herrera to TM and Maharishi. After paying fifty dollars to take a two-month course with teacher Jerry Jarvis, De Herrera was open to TM’s teachings, but was skeptical of its promises: “Would this really work? My other meditation hadn’t. Will I be down on my knees again, only to close my eyes—and nothing?” When the time came for De Herrera to meditate, Olsen carried out the *puja* to induct her into the practice—a worship ritual in which she bestowed offerings of flowers, fruit, and a handkerchief to a portrait of Guru Dev, Maharishi’s teacher—before whispering to De Herrera her own, personalized Sanskrit mantra. De Herrera proceeded to meditate, closing her eyes and mentally repeating her mantra, and something happened: “A warm physical humming enveloped and permeated my body. I gazed blankly into a blue expanse. A humming welled up out of that blueness. I lost feeling in my arms and legs... I was descending into that pleasant humming and blueness. I had

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy Cooke De Herrera, *All You Need Is Love: An Eyewitness Account of When Spirituality Spread from East to West* (San Diego, CA: Jodere, 2003), 54.

transcended.”<sup>28</sup> While De Herrera would continue to have some doubts about TM’s efficacy, this first meditative experience was both accessible and meaningful enough for her to get her to continue trying.

Whether De Herrera’s experience was simply the result of deep breathing and or the metaphysical connection with “Being” that TM purported to be, such experiences were common enough among people meditating for the first time to convince them of the movement’s potential. TM’s meditative technique and philosophy were mutually constitutive. That meditators came to subscribe to Maharishi’s teachings—especially the idea that meditation was a spiritual or secular cure-all—testifies to how the appeal of its worldview and practicable technique were intimately tied together. As historians Mark Smith and Rob Boddice argue, it is the interactions between the senses and emotions that constitute lived experience. In other words, human minds do not function independently from human bodies.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her characterization of ritual in her seminal work *Purity and Danger*, provides a model for how TM functions as a means of ordering one’s world: “ritual focuses attention by framing; it enlivens the memory and links the present with the relevant past. In all this it aids perception... It does not merely externalize experience, bringing it out into the light of day, but it modifies experience in so expressing it.”<sup>30</sup> The very act of meditating informed how TM’s followers understood the philosophy of their movement, just as the movement

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<sup>28</sup> De Herrera, *All You Need Is Love*, 56-61.

<sup>29</sup> Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, UK: Routledge, 1966), 65. See Robert McCutchan, “The Social and the Celestial: Mary Douglas and Transcendental Meditation,” *The Princeton Journal of Arts and Sciences* 1 (1977): 130-163 for a contemporary application of Douglas’ thought to the TM movement.

informed their understanding of meditation. Meditating and thinking about meditating thus informed how people in the movement understood the world more generally.

Certainly, the ease and inclusivity of the movement and its technique made it possible for De Herrera and others like her to join it. She would not have been able to engage in the kind of meditation originally taught to Maharishi, as she was a woman, and more importantly, had not been trained according to ascetic Hindu tradition.<sup>31</sup> But she also had not found the other meditative practice she had previously tried accessible. TM's accessibility was thus a product of its combined technique and philosophy. And this ethos certainly struck a chord with De Herrera, as she quickly became a crucial movement leader for her connections and media savviness, dedicating herself to TM's spread. An encounter she had with Maharishi in the late 1960s may have been the impetus for his deliberate pursuit of media attention: "Maharishi, given the right connections, a lot of things can be obtained for nothing," she told him. "What do you mean?" he replied. "Well, if we let the papers know you are a person of interest, they will want to interview you. Radio, television spots can be arranged. Programs use up so much material, producers are constantly looking for new faces."<sup>32</sup> De Herrera's recommendations would prove instructive. It was no coincidence that she worked as Maharishi's media liaison as he cultivated his star pupils: the Beatles and the Beach Boys.

Assessing TM's appeal to the Beatles and the Beach Boys, arguably Maharishi's most famous followers in the late 1960s, suggests what made it attractive to the rich and famous more generally. Its promise of the fulfillment of human potential was naturally appealing to artists intent on pushing creative boundaries, and its technique represented to

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<sup>31</sup> Williamson, *Transcendent in America*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> De Herrera, *All You Need Is Love*, 91.

them a welcome treatment for the stress of musical labor. When the Beatles—John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr—first met Maharishi in August 1967 in London, where he was giving a talk at the Hilton, it made sense that they would be interested in TM. The band, Lennon and Harrison in particular, had been experimenting with psychedelic drugs and learning about Eastern religions. Just a few months prior they had released *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, demonstrating their interest in both a greater level of sonic experimentation and interest in Indian culture, audible in the sitar-backed musings of “Within You Without You.” And, in the midst of their studies with Maharishi, their manager Brian Epstein passed away. Learning to meditate helped them cope with their loss.<sup>33</sup>

While the Beatles did not necessarily see TM as the all-encompassing philosophy Maharishi held it to be, they nonetheless found value in its teachings and meditative practice, which they found useful for stimulating their creativity. They certainly valued Maharishi's brand of meditation to the point of studying with him at his ashram in Rishikesh, India, alongside Mike Love of the Beach Boys and soap opera starlet Mia Farrow. It was this highly publicized retreat that would attract the movement major mainstream media attention in the US and contribute to its first significant wave of spread there. Before departing for India, Lennon and Harrison spoke in detail on their interest in TM. “You don't feel you have more actual knowledge—or at least I don't,” conceded Lennon, “but you feel more energetic. You come out of it and it's just a sort of ‘let's get going’ feeling about whatever work you've got to tackle.” It was a practical solution to practical problems. But it could also mean more. As TM offered an accessible, easy

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Oliver, *Hinduism and the 1960s: The Rise of a Counter-Culture* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2014), 62-63.

meditative technique, for Harrison, it was an egalitarian, holistic means of better understanding the self and realizing its full potential. “Drugs don’t really get to the true you, the real self,” said Harrison. “The way to approach the real you is through meditation or some form of Yoga. We’re not saying that this particular form—Transcendental Meditation—is the only answer... each soul is potentially divine and Yoga is a technique of manifesting it to arrive at that point which is divine.”<sup>34</sup>

Once in Rishikesh, Lennon and Harrison expounded further on TM to *Saturday Evening Post* reporter Lewis H. Lapham, where they alluded to the greater intellectual benefits it offered them. Writing much of their self-titled “White Album” while on the retreat, they reflected on what fame and fortune meant to them. “‘We had all the material things,’ Harrison once said. ‘Fame and all that. But there was still something needed, you see. It can’t be one hundred percent without the inner life, can it?’” Lapham suggests Harrison was still thinking about Epstein: “death still remained ‘a bit of a hang up,’ which was where philosophy and religion began to get useful.” To the Beatles, TM and Eastern spirituality more generally were also a means by which they could legitimate the artistic depth of their music. Lennon referred Lapham “both to their photographs and to their records as diaries of their developing consciousness. In the recent photographs, he said, he hoped people might notice ‘something going on behind the eyes other than guitar boogie.’”<sup>35</sup> Though the Beatles would have a falling-out with Maharishi over his alleged sexual impropriety with Mia Farrow (the song “Sexy Sadie” would be based on this disillusionment), TM’s imminent explosion in popularity proved that their public

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<sup>34</sup> Tony Barrow, “Harrison & Lennon Discuss Religion,” *KRLA Beat*, November 4, 1967, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/harrison--lennon-discuss-religion>.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis H. Lapham, “There Once Was a Guru from Rishikesh (Part II),” *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 18, 1968.

disavowal of it was not enough to utterly mar its appeal. And even then, only Lennon remained alienated from Maharishi for long, as Harrison and McCartney still had good relations with their teacher in the decades following, and Starr had been less invested from the start.<sup>36</sup> Though the rock scene became skittish towards TM for a time, meditation's benefits were still evident enough among rockers for singer-songwriter Donovan to advocate for its practice in a 1970 interview: "McCartney, Harrison, [Pete] Townshend and myself all use meditation... but now everyone is frightened to endorse the system because of what happened with the Maharishi. Well I say stuff the system—it's the results you obtain by the exercise of a little common sense that counts."<sup>37</sup>

The Beach Boys—brothers Brian, Carl, and Dennis Wilson, Mike Love, Al Jardine, and Bruce Johnston—also took to TM for its spiritual philosophy, creative stimulation, and de-stressing. They met Maharishi following a lecture in Santa Monica, California in 1967, and Love in particular was enthused with it enough to travel with the Beatles on their retreat. Whereas the Beatles were seeing an upsurge in their career, the Beach Boys had it rougher. They had scrapped their much-anticipated *Smile* album earlier the same year as Brian's mental illness left him incapable of completing it, but even before then the strains of their touring and countless hours in the recording studio had taken their toll.<sup>38</sup> It is therefore no surprise that the Beach Boys were interested in a technique that would help them relax, especially considering how they cried for help in the liner notes for their 1965 album *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*: "With every tour we do we meet more kids, go more places, have more parties, and do more things,

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<sup>36</sup> Humes, "Maharishi Mahesh Yogi," 77.

<sup>37</sup> Keith Altham, "Donovan: Meditation Is Like A Miracle Cure," *Record Mirror*, January 3, 1970, <https://www.rocksofbackpages.com/Library/Article/donovan-meditation-is-like-a-miracle-cure>.

<sup>38</sup> I use the Wilson brothers' first names to avoid confusion among them.



and lose more sleep than anybody could call normal,” wrote Love. “There’s never enough time in any one city to really enjoy it—or maybe worse, it’s very seldom we ever have time to talk with and be with someone you know you would like.” Al Jardine’s comments were even more alarming: “if you look close at any one of the guys you’ll see the strain of our work. Don’t expect to see an immaculate Carl or Dennis but look for someone who seems to need a first-aid kit.”<sup>39</sup> As the Beach Boys took to TM, it helped alleviate some of these stresses. In 1969, Carl commented on TM’s benefits in an interview with students of the Krishna Consciousness Yoga system: “I found it [TM] to be a great thing for me. You know, nowadays we don’t really have a feeling of well being as much as they did at other times... You just meditate, and through a long period of time you develop something, a state of awareness that is really good. It’s really just natural.”<sup>40</sup>

Mike Love, the most politically and socially conservative Beach Boy, became the band’s foremost TM acolyte. Disillusioned with the substance abuse of the music industry, especially among his bandmates, he saw meditation as the solution, as he illustrates in his memoirs: “The important revelation was that [TM] allowed me to relax in a completely natural way... It was as if we were all living in this laboratory of self-destruction, and TM offered a healthy escape.” Even at this early stage of TM’s spread, some of its followers were clearly more aware of its philosophy and its greater implications than others, Love being one of them: “It seemed to me that all faith traditions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—offered their people various forms of salvation, atonement, and redemption, and all of it sounded inspiring, but it didn’t make

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<sup>39</sup> The Beach Boys, *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*, Capitol Records T 2354, rel. July 5, 1965, liner notes.

<sup>40</sup> “The Beach Boys Talk Transcendental Meditation,” *Back to Godhead*, December 1969, <https://back2godhead.com/beach-boys-talk-transcendental-meditation/>.

any difference.” In contrast, “changing the arc of history was the goal of Transcendental Meditation: using the full potential of the mind to create a better person and ultimately a better world, where the Earth would shine not with the fires of war but the light of humanity.”<sup>41</sup> And unlike Lennon, Love was a true believer: “When the Beatles split from the Maharishi I didn’t care because they dug what he was saying and they could grasp it. I wouldn’t cop out because the Beatles did.”<sup>42</sup> But even as he held these beliefs, Love was still cognizant of the fact that TM’s main lure was its accessibility and malleability. In “TM Song” in 1976, Love and the rest of the Beach Boys sing its praises as a cure-all, distilling its complex appeal down to a four-line pitch: “Transcendental meditation should be part of your time / It’s simple, it’s easy as making this rhyme / Transcendental meditation really works for me good / More, much more, than I thought it would!”<sup>43</sup>

Though celebrity meditators, just as other meditators, understood TM’s practice varyingly, they broadly shared Love’s interpretation of it as an individual practice and collective good. In turn, they spread it among their high-profile peers and used their platforms to gain Maharishi more exposure.<sup>44</sup> While not all of these endeavors were successful—Beach Boys fans did not take kindly to a tour that alternated between surf rock hits and lectures delivered by Maharishi—they still prompted mass media coverage that attracted an ever-greater number of followers to the movement.<sup>45</sup> Director David Lynch, a 1973 TM initiate, was—and still is—the most dedicated of these celebrity

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<sup>41</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 180.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Green, “Beach Boy Mike Would Love To Convert You,” *New Musical Express*, July 26, 1969, <https://www.rocksbkpages.com/Library/Article/beach-boy-mike-would-love-to-convert-you>.

<sup>43</sup> The Beach Boys, “TM Song,” track 8 on *15 Big Ones*, Reprise Records MS 2251, rel. July 5, 1976, Spotify.

<sup>44</sup> These prominent meditators included Jane Fonda, the Rolling Stones, Mary Tyler Moore, Clint Eastwood, and Stevie Wonder, to name but a few.

<sup>45</sup> Loraine Alterman, “The Maharishi, The Beach Boys and the Heathens,” *New York*, March 6, 1968, <https://www.rocksbkpages.com/Library/Article/the-maharishi-the-beach-boys-and-the-heathens>.

followers, as he continues to promote the spread of TM today through the David Lynch Foundation. His memoirs, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*, contextualize his life and craft within TM: “My thirty-three-year practice of the Transcendental Meditation program has been central to my work in film and painting and all areas of my life.” Crucially, Lynch interprets the practice of meditation as authentic to the self, allowing one to understand the world from one’s own personalized perspective: “It takes you to an ocean of pure consciousness, of pure knowingness. But it’s familiar. It’s *you*.”<sup>46</sup> Another celebrity, talk show host Merv Griffin (also creator of the game shows *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune*), directly heralded a major wave of growth for TM in 1975—lovingly dubbed the “Merv Wave” by the movement—by interviewing Maharishi on *The Merv Griffin Show* to advertise what was, by then, widely regarded as a purely secular technique. “I admire you, I admire what you’re doing,” Griffin told Maharishi. “And I think I’ll make everybody comfortable and just start off by saying I’m a meditator... and I’ve never felt better in my life. It is terrific! I feel like the man of *La Mantra*!”<sup>47</sup>

With the support of its early adopters, like Nancy Cooke De Herrera, and its celebrity followers, icons like the Beatles and the Beach Boys, TM was primed for its further spread. Media coverage of the movement in the United States, prompted by the publicity these prominent followers attracted, earned the movement crucial exposure in

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<sup>46</sup> David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity* (New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), 2, 4. See Corrina Laughlin, “Transcendental Meditation’s Tipping Point: The Allure of Celebrity on the American Spiritual Marketplace,” *Popular Communication* 18, no. 2 (2020): 108-120 for a media studies analysis of the David Lynch Foundation and celebrity’s relationship with TM more generally. Laughlin’s analysis as a whole is astute, but she primarily links TM’s secularization with the Foundation. In reality, this dates back to the early 1970s with Maharishi and his followers.

<sup>47</sup> Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (YouTube channel), “The Merv Griffin Show host’s Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1975,” YouTube video, uploaded August 31, 2009, [https://youtu.be/Nkyh9i\\_j9Ls](https://youtu.be/Nkyh9i_j9Ls).

the late 1960s and thus precipitated its explosion from 1970 to the end of 1975. TM operated in a manner akin to a counter-counterculture; that is, a countercultural movement that embraced all that made the counterculture attractive while requiring far less effort. Meditating twice a day proved far more accessible than student protest and violent revolution, and as we have seen, neither drugs nor religious expertise were required for TM's spiritual highs. Most importantly, TM as taught by Maharishi embodied a highly simplistic worldview when it came to sociopolitical issues, as he argued that the spread and practice of meditation was the solution to every conceivable human ill. This was deliberate, as avoiding taking a firm stance on such subjects kept the movement free from controversy. Not all meditators saw the world in such reductive terms, but those who did failed to see the contradiction of being in a countercultural movement that, in practice, upheld the status quo. Indeed, they saw no contradiction, as to them, meditating and teaching others to was enough to change the world.<sup>48</sup>

Surveying media coverage of TM in the late 1960s, as Maharishi and movement leader Jerry Jarvis toured universities across the country to crowds of thousands to promote TM, teach it, and expand SIMS, reveals how college students were attracted to the movement for not only its technique, but for its simplistic worldview. As they were disillusioned with modern American society and the counterculture, TM let them have it both ways. Its philosophy resonated with countercultural ideas while accommodating the status quo. As *Look* magazine covered TM in 1968, it mused upon these themes and

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<sup>48</sup> Shelley Cowden has similarly argued that TM, in practice, serves the status quo of capitalism as a "Counterculture Spirituality" turned "Postmodern Commodity." However, as we will see here, it was not only "the West" that commodified TM, but Maharishi and the movement. The movement, in rejecting capitalism's consequences but advocating for meditation as a means of improving one's material position in life, got to have it both ways. Shelley Cowden, "Transcendental Meditation: Counter Culture Spirituality to Postmodern Commodity," *Man in India* 90 (January 2010): 353-364.

surveyed student interest in the movement. From its assessment, the late 1960s, as an age characterized by “the ‘dehumanization of mass society,’ the withering of old beliefs, Automation, the Bomb, Vietnam” had created a “widespread growing sense of inadequacy.” The countercultural alternative was no better, as “the hippie movement in general became so commercialized and overpopulated that there was no longer a sense of identity within it.” TM offered a third path:

To the applause of student revolutionaries, ex-hippies, and ‘straight’ kids as well—here comes Maharishi Mahesh Yogi with a safe, natural and inexpensive vehicle for the continued exploration of inner space... In youthful eyes, therefore, the whole meditation movement, like hippiness, enjoys the luminous appeal of something existing outside society’s conventions.

Learning to meditate for themselves or having heard of friends who did, college students attested to its broad benefits. Joe, a twenty-year-old UCLA student, liked that it was drug-free: “I’d like to arrive at this Bliss Consciousness thing where my mind and body are completely at rest. Yeah, I had acid. It wiped me out. I even got all the way to the top—took heroin... Drugs seemed to make me unstable.”<sup>49</sup> A student at UC Berkeley asked Maharishi what would happen if two meditators at a corporation wanted the same promotion. “Then, the corporation would expand,” replied Maharishi. This reply was met with “applause, and as he finished, hundreds rushed out to the lobby to fill out applications.”<sup>50</sup> “‘The student’s life is so *tense* today,’ one Los Angeles meditator exclaimed. “You go to school and get involved in the peace movement and the Sexual Freedom League and everything, and gee, by that time, you’re too uptight to have to think about studying *too*... We’re really fortunate in this generation to have Maharishi!” Such enthusiasm, and this was for a figure and movement that openly defended the state

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<sup>49</sup> William Hedgepeth, “The Non-Drug Turn-On Hits Campus,” *Look*, February 6, 1968.

<sup>50</sup> Don McNeill, “What’s New in America? Maharishi and Meditation,” *Village Voice*, November 9, 1967.

of the Vietnam War and advocated for obedience to governmental and parental authority.<sup>51</sup>

While some were skeptical of TM's simplistic sociopolitical claims, enough people accepted or tolerated them to stick with the movement. Michael J. Barrett of the *Harvard Crimson*, the university's student newspaper, wrote in disbelief of the willful political ignorance of the movement gripping his campus and others like it: "SIMS's attitudes on politics are disturbing not because they are forced upon meditators—they are not—but because all those who have been in the movement for a long time, who have reached 'bliss consciousness,' think alike." He continued on to recount a political exchange he had with Jerry Jarvis:

"What would students do about Vietnam?"

"One's rulers are always wiser and know more than the followers. Maharishi believes one must always be obedient to authority."

"Even in a dictatorship?"

"The leaders of a country are not to be blamed for conditions in his country, or for decisions that affect other countries," Jarvis explained. "The people determine the atmosphere of their nation, while the leaders are mere slaves."

"But if a meditator thinks a war is wrong, and non-meditators order him to fight, should he refuse?"

"Maharishi says we shouldn't violate any laws. We are not in a position to make an accurate evaluation of whether a law is just, if we meditate or not."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Hedgepeth, "The Non-Drug Turn-On Hits Campus."

<sup>52</sup> Michael J. Barrett, "Salvation Through Meditation," *Harvard Crimson*, May 27, 1968, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1968/5/27/salvation-through-meditation-pbibt-not-sure/>.

Poet Allen Ginsberg echoed Barrett's grievances as he recounted an explosive argument he had with Maharishi following a lecture the holy man delivered. From Maharishi's responses to Ginsberg, it is apparent TM's explicit support for the prevailing political order allowed it to comfort its anxious followers, avoid controversy, and secure its further spread by advocating for meditation as a way to change the world: "I heard [Maharishi had] said all sorts of outlandish things like poverty was laziness and I saw... his equatory communism = weakism... So after I was introduced I sat at his feet and literally started yelling at him." Maharishi defended the movement's position. "He [Maharishi] said [Lyndon] Johnson and his secret police had more information and they knew what they were doing... His final statement on war was he didn't want to get into that, he wanted only to emphasize meditation, meditation, meditation." Ginsberg, a countercultural firebrand and a student of Eastern spirituality, was in a better position than most Americans to ascertain the subversive legitimacy of TM. He ultimately found it lacking: "I thought his political statements not so evil as dim and thoughtless, somewhat sucking up to the establishment so as not to cause opposition and trouble."<sup>53</sup> But the movement's simplification of social issues held its own allure, as it could at once critique modern society, deny the need for systematic change, and render its utopian aims of a more enlightened world achievable.

This process is further detailed in an interview of Maharishi in *Ebony*, a Black middle-class lifestyle magazine: "Maharishi Says Meditation Can Solve Race Problem." Just as he had done with Ginsberg, Maharishi trivialized the issues posed by his interviewer, reporter Era Bell Thompson, who was naturally curious about the holy man's

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<sup>53</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "The Maharishi and Me," *Fifth Estate*, May 16, 1968, <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/54-may-16-31-1968/the-maharishi-and-me/>.

interest in uplifting Black America. After Thompson asked Maharishi a series of precise questions on topics ranging from the civil disobedience of Martin Luther King Jr. to the political separatism of Black nationalists, he replied by trivializing Thompson's concerns, generalizing the underlying causes of race relations:

'Narrowness of vision,' he explained in a lot more words than this, 'is the root of the racial problem. The ingredient of hostility is not rooted in the skin but in the consciousness, so through transcendental meditation we raise the level of consciousness in both black and white people. Once universal awareness begins to gain ground in one's conscious level, all will be peace, harmony, and happiness.'

This reductive understanding of America's racial tensions repeated throughout the interview. When asked about Black nationalism, Maharishi likened the concept to a matter of personal pride: "Indian people are all black. What's the difference? I would be the last man to go to somebody's house who doesn't want me in it. I have my own pride." Thompson then asked Maharishi how he would improve the slums and ghettos. Again, he prescribed TM as the answer: "the softening of the heart, the broadening of vision, improved efficiency cannot let any community remain in the slums." Asked about meditation instruction, he puzzlingly suggested segregating Black students from white students: "if 50 Negroes come, I'd hold a separate course for them... I wouldn't like to waste my energies in reconciling their differences on the surface... the whole thing is going to resolve itself because we are hitting at the root. Ha, ha, ha. We are hitting at the root."<sup>54</sup> Maharishi and the movement thus repeatedly advocated for TM as a simple solution to a simple issue, and enough meditators continued to believe in its promises to sustain its growth.

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<sup>54</sup> Era Bell Thompson, "Meditation Can Solve Race Problem Says Maharishi Mahesh Yogi," *Ebony*, May 1, 1968.



As the United States entered the 1970s, people flocked to TM in ever-greater numbers as their anxieties heightened with the tumult of the decade. Maharishi and his followers, in the interest of widening the movement's reach, began describing meditation differently. The 1970s incarnation of TM would still be taught as it was in the 1960s, but it was no longer portrayed as "spiritual" or "religious" to new initiates in the movement. This is not to say that it shed really any of its original character, as it retained its philosophy, use of the *puja* worship ritual, and claim to be the solution to every conceivable issue, but rather, it was simply labeled as secular. Over the following years, TM's ambiguity would manifest in full force, as Maharishi and movement insiders continued to believe as they had while new initiates joined them and rose within the movement fully unaware of meditation's spiritual implications. And why would they? As the movement advertised and marketed the practice, it drew upon the legitimacy of scientific research and claims that meditation increased workplace productivity. In theory, TM was a way to transcend the trappings of modern life, but in practice, it just helped its practitioners cope with them better.

"We meditate to find, to recover, to come back to something of ourselves we once dimly and unknowingly had and had lost," writes psychologist Lawrence Leshan in his 1974 bestseller *How to Meditate: A Guide to Self-Discovery*. "We may call it access to more of our human potential or being closer to ourselves and to reality... or our ability to see and function in reality more effectively."<sup>55</sup> Though Leshan was not part of the TM movement, the opener to his self-help bestseller speaks volumes to the appeal of TM at the time of its publication: its ability to help people make sense of the complicated world

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<sup>55</sup> Lawrence Leshan, *How to Meditate: A Guide to Self-Discovery* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 4.

around them. Indeed, the authors of the 1975's *TM: Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress*, a psychiatrist, an artist, and a social scientist, concurred with Leshan, but, as members of Maharishi's movement, they drastically overextended these claims. First, they define what they term "The Crisis of Modern Life," an existential tension brought about by "contemporary pressures," "sensation to the point of damaging stimulation," and "the spiraling development of new techniques for fulfilling man's needs and desires" which "necessitated continuous mental and physical adaptation to overwhelming transformations in every aspect of life." Naturally, TM would solve these issues: "a solution... lies in the widespread application of a technique [TM] to psychophysiological strengthen the individual and unfold his untapped resources." Despite its supposed secularization, the movement still assigned TM an all-encompassing power, one that could be realized simply by meditating two times a day. Crucially, TM empowered the individual while leaving the question of systemic change abstract. Modern society was not maligned in the movement's view, but rather, "man's failure to meet the demands of progress," which resulted "from his inability to utilize his full physical, emotional, and mental potential."<sup>56</sup> The movement's lack of specificity regarding how exactly TM could change humanity for the better prompted new followers to come to their own understandings of how it worked.

And just as the TM movement invited new followers into its fold, it also came to them, styling itself and its teachings according to the groups it wished to target. Maharishi and his followers deliberately cultivated TM not as a spirituality, but as a secular lifestyle, and, because of this, new meditators came to view it as such. Jack

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<sup>56</sup> Bloomfield, Cain, and Jaffe, *TM*, 1-2, 7

Forem is perfectly clear in his mass market book on TM that this was a conscious strategy. He details how the movement, in a manner akin to market segmentation, established different organization to teach meditation in accordance with the interests of particular groups:

The Students International Meditation Society (SIMS) focuses on the student community. The American Foundation for the Science of Creative Intelligence (AFSCI) offers courses to business and industry. The Spiritual Regeneration Movement (SRM) makes the teaching available to that segment of the population which has a particular interest in philosophical and spiritual values. The International Meditation Society (IMS) offers courses to the general public. The fifth branch of the movement is Maharishi International University, which offers comprehensive courses in the science of creative intelligence.<sup>57</sup>

TM was not just a spiritual movement, but a consumer brand to be bought and sold to as broad and diverse an audience as possible. Led by Maharishi and the dictates of the market, the leaders of the movement came to take on a more conservative look, both aesthetically and politically, to better appeal to the American mainstream. “Because of the problems we have with people associating TM with drugs, counter-culture, things peripheral to society, we wear ties, jackets, short hair,” explained one TM coordinator in 1975.<sup>58</sup> Another noted that “there is a growing trend towards conservatism, to value structure and authority, especially among TM teachers.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, my argument that TM came to resemble a consumer brand is not new: it was being made in its time. *The Washington Post* referred to “The TM Empire,” noting that the movement that had taken on “a corporate look.”<sup>60</sup> Sociologist Hank Johnston, in a contemporary study, defined TM as “The Marketed Social Movement,” an ideal type of a new kind of social movement

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<sup>57</sup> Forem, *Transcendental Meditation*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Eugene L. Meyer, “TM Movement Academy—Practicing the Happiness Business,” *The Washington Post*, September 23, 1975.

<sup>59</sup> Eugene L. Meyer, “Rules Govern Duties, Clothes—Even Thoughts,” *The Washington Post*, September 23, 1975.

<sup>60</sup> Eugene L. Meyer, “TM Takes on Corporate Look in U.S.,” *The Washington Post*, September 22, 1975.

that did not rely upon grievances that new initiates brought to it, but rather grievances that it itself cultivated in its followers: “With sophisticated promotional and marketing techniques, social movements have the tools to convince potential members that they have grievances which they indeed may not have.”<sup>61</sup> I disagree in part with this assessment, as TM was responding to real anxieties in its followers. But, as Johnston astutely notes, the movement also created its own demand. Like any good advertisement campaign, it offered its new initiates a product they had not even known they needed.

This trend is most evident in how the movement taught TM’s technique as a way to get ahead in the workplace. Though TM appealed to the disillusioned on the basis of its critiques of modern American society—the product of industrial capitalism—it did not explicitly critique capitalism itself. In fact, in the 1970s it supported it by marketing TM as a means to increase one’s efficiency in the workplace, as evidenced by *The Transcendental Meditation Program for Business People*, a 1976 book written by movement insider Robert B. Kory. His secular understanding of TM likened meditation to a technological advancement that, if applied to the American workplace, could advance economic modernization: “The TM program challenges the Protestant work ethic in the same way that the power shovel challenges the belief that digging a 60-foot trench must be a drudgery... The TM program may constitute a discovery in the technology of human development equal in importance to the great achievements of industrial technology.”<sup>62</sup> The unlocking of human potential that TM had wielded in its appeal to the counterculture was thus reinterpreted by the movement in service of the

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<sup>61</sup> Hank Johnston, “The Marketed Social Movement: A Case Study of the Rapid Growth in TM,” *Pacific Sociological Review* 23, no. 3 (July 1980): 334.

<sup>62</sup> Kory, *The Transcendental Meditation Program*, 50.

bottom line. Even meditation's collectivist and utopian appeal could be refitted in service of the economic competition that drove the American capitalist system:

American business thrives on competition because it inspires people to draw on their inner resources and perform at their best. The competitive spirit weaves teamwork out of individual strength. If the people who make up a team are weak, the competitive spirit falters in inefficiency, poor interpersonal relations, and failure. The TM program revitalizes a healthy competitive spirit by directly strengthening the individual.<sup>63</sup>

This repurposing of TM's promises was certainly appealing in a United States wracked by deindustrialization, stagflation, and the energy crisis. There was at least enough interest in this aspect of TM for Kory's target audience to take it seriously. As reported by *The Washington Post*, in November 1974 forty-five business leaders and government officials paid \$75 apiece to attend an eight-hour seminar on "SCI and management" hosted by the movement at the University of Maryland. There, Franklin M. Davis Jr., a retired US Army Major General and meditator, directly related TM to the financial woes of the time: "When you see some of the frightening signs in the economy, with layoffs... anxiety will spread quickly through the work force, an anxiety about jobs, and it will grow... TM can solve stresses and strains."<sup>64</sup> To the movement's new initiates, meditation could keep American capitalism alive.

Dianne Witowski, reviewing *The Transcendental Meditation Program for Business People* in *Library Journal*, was not impressed. "This short book... provides no actual practical suggestions on how to apply TM to business. It merely rehashes explanations of TM with quotes and testimonials from business people already involved in it."<sup>65</sup> Witowski's scathing review of the text recognized TM's ambiguity in the midst

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<sup>63</sup> Kory, *The Transcendental Meditation Program*, 56.

<sup>64</sup> William H. Jones, "Meditation as Aid to Business," *The Washington Post*, November 24, 1974.

<sup>65</sup> Dianne Witowski, review of *The Transcendental Meditation Program for Business People* by Robert B. Kory, *Library Journal*, December 15, 1976.

of its popularity. But it was this very ambiguity that allowed business people to make whatever they wanted of the movement. While they may not have been convinced by its most ambitious claims, its meditative technique at least offered a practical way to relieve stress. As *The New York Times* noted in 1973, “the new meditators are people with pressure jobs, the ones expected to make decisions, sell the company and handle a dozen problems while staying on friendly terms with top management.”<sup>66</sup> Just as countercultural celebrities had found relief from their high-pressure careers by meditating, so too did Establishment executives. William E. Hickey, an executive vice president of a small manufacturing firm, easily integrated TM into his daily routine, meditating both at home and in his office. “I’m happier,” he said. “I think more clearly and work more efficiently, I find myself more involved in helping other people. I’ve learned to deal with stress, and at the end of the day I have more energy left for my family life.” Ronald A. Dwight, an associate at a Wall Street law firm, spoke of similar benefits: “I find I’m more relaxed and don’t get flustered by problems at the office.”<sup>67</sup> TM’s ambiguity, just as it had in the late 1960s, lent the movement flexibility, as business people drew whichever meanings they found useful from their meditation, whether it was simple de-stressing or a holistic solution to capitalist decline.

Throughout the 1970s, the movement also came to embrace scientific research to substantiate TM’s holistic claims, emphasizing the “Science” of the Science of Creative Intelligence. Articles in *Science*, *Scientific American*, and *The Lancet* appeared to validate the movement’s claims. Doctors began prescribing TM to their patients for

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<sup>66</sup> “Meditation Helps Tense Executives,” *The New York Times*, September 2, 1973.

<sup>67</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “Thousands Finding Meditation Eases Stress of Living,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 1972.

stress.<sup>68</sup> Scientists both within and outside of the movement conducted studies of meditation's efficacy and generally found it to be a physiologically effective means of de-stressing, thus legitimizing TM's marketing as a secular technique. To some extent, these studies made sense. After all, regardless of what personal meanings people attached to meditation, its physical practice involved breathing deeply and calming down. But the movement certainly exaggerated these claims. One TM follower, Dr. Herbert Benson, demonstrated that the TM technique could be performed for its physiological benefits without its worship rituals or purported connection to Being, dubbing his adapted meditative technique the "relaxation response" (consequently, Maharishi expelled Benson from the movement).<sup>69</sup> *Science News* noted in 1973 that scientific studies of TM tended to be distorted by confirmation bias, as "experimental" groups were often drawn from those already devoted to the movement, and concluded that "while meditation does seem to produce beneficial effects in certain subjects, researchers are still not agreed on how these effects are produced."<sup>70</sup> A more recent study, conducted in 2003, concluded that "there is no convincing evidence from randomised controlled trials that Transcendental Meditation has specific and cumulative positive effects on cognitive function other than those fostered by practice effects or an expectation/motivation effect."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Sawyer and Humes, *The Transcendental Meditation Movement*, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Herbert Benson and Miriam Z. Klipper, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975). Benson's "relaxation response" lived on as a therapeutic practice. As late as 1986 it topped a national survey of self-help books most often recommended to patients by clinical psychologists. Daniel Goleman, "Feeling Gloomy? A Good Self-Help Book Might Actually Help," *The New York Times*, July 6, 1989.

<sup>70</sup> Robert J. Trotter, "Transcendental Meditation," *Science News*, December 15, 1973.

<sup>71</sup> Peter H. Canter and Edzard Ernst, "The Cumulative Effects of Transcendental Meditation on Cognitive Function," *Wien Klin Wochenschr* 115, no. 21-22 (2003): 764-765. Furthermore, in reviewing 107 studies of TM's effect on cognitive function, Canter and Ernst found that most of them "used no controls or did not randomise subjects between interventions."

Nonetheless, the movement took full advantage of this veneer of legitimacy to fund and promote studies that went far further in their claims and used (pseudo)scientific language to describe and teach TM. As Scott Lowe has argued, the movement utilized Western science insofar as it could be construed as affirming its claims and readily conflated the hard sciences with a more general definition of science as “systematized knowledge.”<sup>72</sup> The science itself was less important for the movement than its ability to affirm TM’s legitimacy to the mainstream. By 1974, introductory lectures were based solely off of meditation’s physiological benefits, with teachers quoting readily from “The Fundamentals of Progress,” a booklet of over one hundred scientific studies of the TM technique.<sup>73</sup> Movement literature also reveals this tactic, as books on TM often bombarded their readers with complex graphs testifying to meditation’s benefits without neither clarifying the meanings of the measurements nor disclaiming whether the studies were conducted by the movement. For instance, *The TM Book*, a *New York Times* bestseller, included thirty-four pages of charts bereft of the contextual information needed to interpret them, measuring everything from “auditory discrimination” to “spontaneous skin resistance responses.” It went on to extrapolate more abstract claims from this data, ranging from “ecological growth” to “increased creativity.”<sup>74</sup> *TM: Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress* boasted twenty-seven charts, while *The Transcendental Meditation Program for Business People* included twenty.<sup>75</sup> While these mass market books cited their charts’ specific studies, as we now know, these studies highly varied in their credibility. Of course, regardless of any scientific merit TM may have possessed, it

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<sup>72</sup> Lowe, “Transcendental Meditation, Vedic Science and Science,” 59-61.

<sup>73</sup> Lowe, “Transcendental Meditation, Vedic Science and Science,” 61.

<sup>74</sup> Denniston and Peter McWilliams, *The TM Book*, 121, 151, 169, 197.

<sup>75</sup> Bloomfield, Cain, and Jaffe, *TM*; Kory, *The Transcendental Meditation Program*.



is highly unlikely that a student listening to a lecture or reading a book would have had the time, let alone the will, to track down the academic journals containing the referenced scientific studies.

As the movement utilized “science” to support its claims, Maharishi International University [MIU] gave the movement a semblance of academic credibility and a base from which it could appeal to its more dedicated followers and conduct its scientific studies.<sup>76</sup> Founded in 1971 and fully realized on a campus in Fairfield, Iowa in 1974 with the movement’s purchase of the debt-ridden Parsons College, the university certainly fell outside of the American mainstream the movement aspired to, but its operations nonetheless attest to how adaptable TM was. From the basis of its meditative technique, it could be anything from a secular technique to an academic curriculum. While outside observers were skeptical of MIU’s long term prospects, it was taken seriously enough to warrant an article in *Science*, which illustrated the depth of the university’s commitment to TM: “The Maharishi people are clearly intent on establishing the legitimacy of the movement... they even strive to describe the state of consciousness in scientific terms. Thus meditation is described as a way to achieve ‘minimum entropy’ which, as scientists know, is consonant with maximum order.”<sup>77</sup> MIU was designed as a blueprint for the movement’s future, as every class it offered conceptualized TM and SCI as the foundational principles of all knowledge. For instance, one physics lecture in 1975 was titled “Waves of Matter: Quantum Mechanics of Atomic States—the Atom as a Model of

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<sup>76</sup> See Weber, *Transcendental Meditation in America*, 71-88 for a brief overview of the history of MIU and its operations today. A private, non-profit, degree-granting institution, MIU would eventually receive accreditation in 1980 from the Higher Learning Commission. It remains in operation today.

<sup>77</sup> Constance Holden, “Maharishi International University: ‘Science of Creative Intelligence,’” *Science* 187, no. 4182 (March 1975): 1177-1178.

the Meditating Mind.”<sup>78</sup> And it was from MIU the movement conducted its scientific research and trained many of its new teachers, structurally supporting TM’s continued spread. Its students, “lively, interested and willing to work” and seemingly willing to “accept the whole MIU atmosphere without dissent,” would go on to promote TM in less esoteric contexts. “Instead of going into the system and messing around with the problems of the system,” said MIU’s student body president in 1975, “we want to raise people’s ability to perform in the system through TM.”<sup>79</sup> MIU’s professors and students directly made sense of the world through TM and, in turn, assisted the movement by helping others learn to meditate.

Furthermore, at least until mounting religious criticisms and the decision of *Malnak v. Yogi* in 1977, TM’s dual embrace of business and science paid off, allowing to effectively avoid being labeled as a religion despite its Hindu roots. Tom Wolfe, in his famous essay on the “Me Decade,” concluded that “what the Urban Young People want from religion is a little *Hallelujah!* ... and *talking in tongues!* ... *Praise God!* Precisely that!”<sup>80</sup> TM, with its deliberate ambiguity, could capitalize off of the spiritual passions described by Wolfe freed from the implications that came with the label of “religion.” According to Maharishi in *Science of Living and Art of Being*, TM transcended existing faiths in its distinct ability to connect its followers with Being: “transcendental deep meditation is the practice to live all that the religions have been teaching throughout the ages; it is through this that man readily rises to the level of divine Being, and it is this that

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<sup>78</sup> Allison Engel, “Maharishi International University Mixes Meditation and Education,” *Change*, May 1975.

<sup>79</sup> Eugene L. Meyer, “TM University: ‘Bold in Its Thinking,’” *The Washington Post*, September 24, 1975.

<sup>80</sup> Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade.”

brings fulfillment to all religions.”<sup>81</sup> But TM’s spread was not a simple matter of deception, at least as its teachers saw it. As Humes and Sawyer note, “Transcendental Meditation teachers believed that simply by practicing TM, devotees would ascend spiritually and eventually realize that what they really wanted was enlightenment.” Particular religious labels mattered less than the outcome of the technique. As such, “Transcendental Meditation teachers felt no disconnect as they performed puja ceremonies that included the names of Hindu gods, repeated Sanskrit mantras, read the Bhagavad Gita, followed a vegetarian diet, listened to recordings of Sama Veda, and still believed they weren’t Hindus.”<sup>82</sup> What seems contradictory in retrospect was consistent then. Even as they subscribed to the movement’s philosophy, TM teachers did not necessarily think they were spreading a religion.

Because of this, many of their students certainly did not consider TM to be a religion. The movement’s followers thus constituted a wide spectrum of belief in TM’s meditative technique and philosophy and found it completely consistent to subscribe to disparate, even logically contradictory aspects of its teachings. Movement literature firmly denied TM’s religiosity. As noted by *The TM Book*, “The TM program does NOT involve religious beliefs... The TM technique is a scientific discovery which happens to come from India. As with all scientific discoveries, it works everywhere because it involves the basic laws of nature.” The books include letters from clerics across different faiths who stress that TM is not a religion, with a Catholic priest going so far as to declare Christianity and TM mutually beneficial to each other: through TM “one becomes more sensitive to the presence of God in our universe and the interdependence and

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<sup>81</sup> Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Transcendental Meditation*, 255.

<sup>82</sup> Sawyer and Humes, *The Transcendental Meditation Movement*, 26.

harmony which He intended to exist between people and things.” In response to the questions, “but doesn’t meditation have something to do with knowing God? Doesn’t that make the TM program essentially a religious practice?” the book generalizes the issue. “The TM program has something to do with knowing *anything*. It makes the mind more orderly, gives the body deep rest, and improves the coordination between the two.”<sup>83</sup> In his own movement book, Jack Forem argued that “because TM is a spontaneous process of direct perception, faith or belief is irrelevant... It is not helped or hindered by skepticism or faith in its efficacy.”<sup>84</sup> Robert B. Kory, in *The Transcendental Meditation Program for Business People*, concurred: “the program has nothing to do with flower children or religious cults.”<sup>85</sup> Scientific studies of TM funded and promoted by the movement addressing the technique’s religiosity altogether.

Because TM was effectively presented by the movement to the American public as an easy, accessible, secular cure-all verified by celebrities, scientists, business leaders, and even some clerics, it is perhaps no surprise it became so prominent. TM’s popularity was such that *Time* magazine described its popularity as a “craze” as it surveyed the movement and assessed what it meant to its varied followers. Richard Nolan, a Democratic Congressman from Minnesota, welcomed the calm meditation offered him: “When you are in the political arena, your day can start at 6 or 7 in the morning at a plant gate, and before you know it, it’s 4 in the afternoon and you still have hours of work in front of you. That’s when it is nice to meditate, so you can get the rest you need.” Marilyn Forman, a Long Island housewife, found that TM helped her cope with the stress

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<sup>83</sup> Denniston and McWilliams, *The TM Book*, 15-19.

<sup>84</sup> Forem, *Transcendental Meditation*, 39-40.

<sup>85</sup> Kory, *The Transcendental Meditation Program*, 9.

of parenting: “Whatever TM does, it releases those pressured, tense, harried feelings we all have from life today.”<sup>86</sup> The list goes on. Anyone could get anything out of TM, according to whatever stresses they needed to sooth or any meanings they needed to make sense of reality. By 1976, TM’s reputation as a practical, secular technique was such that *Ebony* magazine, slighted by Maharishi’s trivialization of racism in 1968, saw fit to revisit the movement to cover how Black meditators were defining meditation on their own terms. “Blacks need TM because of all the stress we accumulate just by being black and trying to succeed in this society,” said Dr. Shirley McNeil, director of Transcendental Meditation Center East in Detroit. She echoed Maharishi’s reductive utopianism in her claim that TM could uplift the ghetto, but unlike him, she imagined TM as a means to an end, rather than the end itself: “these people are like sleepwalkers who need to be shaken up and shown that there are avenues out of their situation... If they meditate, they’d discover the energy needed to make positive decisions.” Other Black meditators embraced TM to improve their daily lives. Dr. Sydney Jenkins, a psychiatrist, did so to better balance his workload. Willie Mae Tyson, a former welfare mother, meditated to gain “a much more positive outlook on life.” Lloyd Powell, an attorney, found that TM helped him deal with the stress that came with presenting his findings to the public.<sup>87</sup> Maharishi’s movement may have been one of ambiguous enlightenment, but an important contingent of his Black followers appreciated how it could be tailored to the particularities of their lives.

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<sup>86</sup> “Behavior: THE TM CRAZE: 40 Minutes to Bliss,” *Time*, October 13, 1975.

<sup>87</sup> Shawn D. Lewis, “Transcendental Meditation: Ancient East Indian Technique for Relieving Stress Gains Foothold in Black Community,” *Ebony*, July 1976. Transcendental Meditation Center was an organization the movement founded to better reach Black Americans. Dr. McNeil notes that TM course fees were generally lower in Black communities, another means by which the movement sought greater spread.

But it was TM's definition as a religion that would bring about the movement's decline. It could perhaps get away with its claims to the counterculture, politics, capitalism, and even science, but so much of the reputation it cultivated in the 1970s was premised upon its technique being secular and therefore compatible with Christianity. The movement did not entirely avoid criticism, as evidenced by the laments of writers in *The Christian Century*, who defined TM by drawing attention to the implications of its practice and the authoritarian nature of its inner circle. "Today there seems to be a growing preoccupation with personal salvation, with biblical literalism, at the expense of ministering to the neighbor," noted Kenneth Conners, a Methodist lay leader. "We see it in the flourishing of fundamentalism... in the phenomenon of the Jesus freaks, the spreading charismatic movement, the popularity of Transcendental Meditation."<sup>88</sup> Professor of Religion George E. De La More Jr. was worried by TM's claims to transcend religion: "There are certain deceptions being practiced in TM which trouble me: claims to originality, claims to compatibility with all religions, claims that TM is not a religion, claims that it is best not to tell an initiate where he is being led." Most importantly, the movement was simply not being honest about what it was preaching: "This last claim smacks of the dictum of Marx and Lenin that it is not necessary for the revolutionary to know what kind of society will follow the revolution."<sup>89</sup> But in 1975, at the height of TM's mainstream appeal, these critiques failed to seriously damage the movement. The movement had cultivated a prestigious enough reputation to continue on as it had before. TM had even been adopted by some public schools. In 1972, a New

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<sup>88</sup> Kenneth Wray Conners, "Legalisms or Logos?," *The Christian Century*, December 17, 1975, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/legalisms-or-logos/>.

<sup>89</sup> George E. La More, Jr., "The Secular Selling of a Religion," *The Christian Century*, December 10, 1975, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-secular-selling-of-a-religion/>.

York school superintendent wrote of his district's use of TM with no awareness of its religious roots: "We understood that [TM] was not a religion or even a philosophy but rather a thought process to teach people how to meditate... we agreed not only that transcendental meditation possessed considerable potential for our secondary school students but was administratively feasible; it involved no religious or philosophic content."<sup>90</sup> Such was the movement's success in branding itself as secular.

However, this was not to last. Overzealous in their pursuit of the mainstream, Maharishi and his movement inadvertently exposed TM to definition by pursuing federal funding for its teaching in public schools. Though they were successful, receiving support in the form of a Title III Education Research Program to assess TM's efficacy in New Jersey public schools, they were opposed by concerned parents Alan and Edwina Malnak, who decided to investigate TM further despite reassurances from their school district and pastor. They were joined in their opposition by secularists and former Transcendental Mediators-turned-Jesus People. This culminated in *Malnak v. Yogi*, a 1977 District Court of New Jersey case that found TM to be a religion, and thus forbade its teaching in public schools on the grounds that it violated the First Amendment. The movement had faced legal challenges before, but the District Court set a firm legal precedent for TM's definition, and even recognized its ambiguity in its ruling, dismissing it on the grounds that it could not take the individualized interpretations of every meditator into account: "subjective characterizations of actions and beliefs as religious or scientific or philosophical will vary among individuals because of their varying concepts of religion

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<sup>90</sup> Francis Driscoll, "TM as a Secondary School Subject," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 54, no. 4 (December 1972): 236; Sawyer and Humes, *The Transcendental Meditation Movement*, 31.

or science or philosophy.”<sup>91</sup> In 1979, the Third Circuit Court affirmed the decision. TM had been defined.

Faced by mounting public criticism and blocked from further teaching TM in public schools, Maharishi doubled down on TM’s utopian promises, providing esoteric clarity to exactly how TM could empower the individual and solve sociopolitical issues. He unveiled the TM-Sidhis Program, which promised that meditation could unlock supernatural powers, most strikingly the ability to levitate through “yogic flight.” Movement scientists proclaimed the discovery of the “Maharishi Effect,” which held that mass meditation could tangibly lower violence and crime in the area surrounding it, a huge logical leap from the basic principle that the spread of meditation would make people calmer. These new ideas divided the movement even within its inner circle, and most damningly, the media was ready and willing to inform the public of how the Maharishi Effect was enacted in practice.<sup>92</sup> It was far harder to give TM’s claim to secularity the benefit of the doubt when you could read in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* about how the movement’s most dedicated meditators practically sought to realize its utopian promises. In 1978, in the midst of the overthrow of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, “Executive Governors of the World Government of the Age of Enlightenment,” a group of 108 “thin, male, white” TM followers, arrived in the country’s capital of Managua to resolve the civil strife. “We have heightened our skills to exercise influence over an area with our minds,” said TM devotee Jonathan Gordan. “We are able to increase orderliness, generate more positivity and so through the fundamental

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<sup>91</sup> Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools*, 39-44; Sawyer and Humes, *The Transcendental Meditation Movement*, 30-33.

<sup>92</sup> Sawyer and Humes, *The Transcendental Meditation Movement*, 33-35.



field of human consciousness calm down the environment.”<sup>93</sup> Meditators were also sent by the movement to quell racial violence in Rhodesia, and were not quite met with success. The *Times*’ coverage of their mission, titled “War Begets Absurdity in Rhodesia: Con Men Thrive and Meditators ‘Silence’ the Guns,” said everything about the movement’s decline.<sup>94</sup> Now defined by its religiosity and tangible attempts to effect change, TM was increasingly seen by the mainstream it had aspired to as deceptive, even pathetic. As the movement’s ambiguity dissipated when faced with cold, hard definition, it became increasingly apparent to Americans that a mantra and a message were not enough to solve the world’s problems.

Transcendental Meditation may have begun in India, but it certainly ended in the United States. While the movement has grown since the 1970s and continues to appeal to celebrities and business leaders, its definition in 1977 has precluded its return to the American mainstream.<sup>95</sup> But in the late 1960s and 1970s, TM could be anything you wanted it to be. From the perspective of the movement and those it attracted, we better understand how the late 1960s and 1970s were defined by the aspirations and anxieties of ordinary Americans. Whether you were a college student looking to change the world, an overworked celebrity in need of rest, a scientist desperate for research funding, a businessperson looking to work harder, or a disaffected churchgoer looking for more excitement in religion, TM was for you. Its message, which promised to unlock human

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<sup>93</sup> Marlise Simons, “Maharishi’s Peace Squad,” *The Washington Post*, November 14, 1978.

<sup>94</sup> Michael T. Kaufman, “War Begets Absurdity in Rhodesia: Con Men Thrive and Meditators ‘Silence’ the Guns,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 1978.

<sup>95</sup> Tanner Garrity, “What Do Successful People Mean When They Say ‘Transcendental Meditation Changed My Life’?” *InsideHook*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.insidehook.com/article/health-and-fitness/transcendental-meditation>; Richard Feloni, “Transcendental Meditation, Which Bridgewater’s Ray Dalio Calls ‘The Single Biggest Influence’ on His Life, is Taking Over Wall Street,” *Business Insider*, November 4, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/wall-street-trend-transcendental-meditation-2016-10>.

potential and realize world peace, was so resonant because it was ambiguous enough to address individual needs to whatever extent was demanded of it. And its meditative technique was accessible and effective enough for people to take these claims seriously and find them meaningful. To the movement's followers, TM, in its moment, changed the arc of history: it made meaning of meaninglessness, offered them a practical means of realizing their individual potential, and made their bad days feel just a little more hopeful.

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