



# Healing myths, yoga styles and social bodies: Socio-logics of yoga as a health practice in the socially stratified city of Marseille, France.

Mahé Ben Hamed

## ► To cite this version:

Mahé Ben Hamed. Healing myths, yoga styles and social bodies: Socio-logics of yoga as a health practice in the socially stratified city of Marseille, France.. *Anthropology and Medicine*, 2021, Special Issue on Yoga Bodies ('Yoga Bodies, Yoga Minds'), 28 (3), pp.374-394. 10.1080/13648470.2021.1949963 . hal-03100898

**HAL Id: hal-03100898**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03100898>**

Submitted on 5 May 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Healing myths, yoga styles and social bodies: socio-logics of yoga as a health practice in the socially stratified city of Marseille, France

Mahé Ben Hamed

**To cite this article:** Mahé Ben Hamed (2021) Healing myths, yoga styles and social bodies: socio-logics of yoga as a health practice in the socially stratified city of Marseille, France, *Anthropology & Medicine*, 28:3, 374-394, DOI: [10.1080/13648470.2021.1949963](https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2021.1949963)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2021.1949963>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 22 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1775



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Healing myths, yoga styles and social bodies: socio-logics of yoga as a health practice in the socially stratified city of Marseille, France

Mahé Ben Hamed 

Centre Norbert Elias – UMR 8562, French National Center for Scientific Research, Marseille, France

## ABSTRACT

Drawing on participant observation and interviews in two yoga studios in the highly socially stratified city of Marseille, France, this paper explores the understandings of yoga as a health practice that emerge at the intersections between yoga styles and their social contexts of consumption. Its insights emerge from the comparison of three modern yoga styles that were developed for Western English-speaking cultural contexts – Iyengar, Bikram and Forrest – and which differ in form but also in the chronology of their emergence on the global yoga market and that of their reception in France. These three yoga styles are also branded through contrasting mythologies of transformational healing, and the aim of this paper is to explore how a brand conceptualization of yoga as a health practice relates to or resonates with the embodied experiences of practitioners, and to the socio-cultural contexts in which practitioners and their practices are embedded. The paper contributes a new case study to the global yoga scholarship and to a poorly studied French yoga scene, but more importantly, it cross-examines the discourses through which a yoga style is branded, the way it is transmitted, and the social context and social positioning of the individuals who practice it. Combining perspectives on the body, narrative and rituals, it identifies how yoga healing is construed in relation to gender, ethnicity and class and the points of consensus and dissent that emerge from the encounters between French social bodies and exogenous yoga styles.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 January 2020  
Accepted 17 June 2021

## KEYWORDS

Yoga; France;  
transformational healing;  
gender; class; ethnicity

## Introduction

Modern Postural Yoga (after Strauss 2005) is a highly portable practice (Csordas 2009). In popular culture, it encompasses an array of elective reinterpretations of a repertoire of body techniques comprising physical postures, breath and attention practices, and cultural references drawing from Sanskrit vocabulary, notions of Vedic philosophy, spirituality and medicine, all filtered through local and subjective imaginaries of health, well-being, self-promotion and transformation (Alter 2004; Jain 2014; Puustinen and Rautaniemi 2015; Godrej

**CONTACT** Mahé Ben Hamed  [mahe.ben-hamed@univ-amu.fr](mailto:mahe.ben-hamed@univ-amu.fr)  Centre Norbert Elias – UMR 8562, French National Center for Scientific Research, 2, rue de la Charité, 13236 Marseille Cedex 02, France.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

2017). When first introduced to the West at the end of the 19th century, yoga was essentially construed as a spiritual practice, but over the next century, it was substantially reframed through the prism of body fitness (Alter 2004) and the health care regime of mind-body medicine (De Michelis 2007). Such medicalization was instrumental to yoga's globalization in the mid-1990s. Today, it is recognized as a viable complementary and alternative therapeutic option for a range of physical, emotional and mental health conditions (Jeter et al. 2015), with increasing endorsement by healthcare institutions worldwide (Stephens 2017) that reinforces the perception of modern postural yoga as a health practice in Western popular culture.

In the uptake of yoga, however, major discrepancies exist between Western countries. According to studies conducted in 2017 and 2019<sup>1</sup> in France, yoga's consumer base was about 3–4% of the general population, equivalent to what was reported for the USA in 1994 and the UK in 2004 (Singleton and Byrne 2008). This consumer base also pales in comparison with the 15% of the general population reported recently for the USA (Ipsos 2016) and the 19% reported for geographically closer Germany (Cramer 2015), although yoga in France has a 25% market share of the national wellness industry. And similar discrepancies also affect yoga's recognition within the corresponding national healthcare institutions. In the US (Hart 2008) and the UK (Mason et al. 2017) for instance, healthcare institutions have implemented yoga-based therapies and protocols for their patients and staff. In Germany, yoga classes provided by teachers with additional qualifications in medicine or psychotherapy are included in the national universal health coverage, and yoga is included in medical guidelines and multi-modal inpatient treatment programs in a number of hospitals (Cramer 2018). No such provisions exist in France however to this day, and while individual physicians may experiment with yoga-based regimens for pain-management and stress-reduction for their patients, the French healthcare system does not recognize yoga as a legitimate clinical option, or as a subsidized form of Complementary and Alternative Medicine.

This peculiar relationship to yoga and to yoga as a health practice in France is historically rooted. The French yoga market only started to flourish circa 2010 with an influx of yoga brands and trends from the US market and minimal resurgence of 'home-grown' yoga styles. Media discourses framing yoga as transformational healing<sup>2</sup> are also modelled in form, imagery, references and content after brands and yoga specialized media developed in and for English-speaking contexts. Little is known, however about how these exogenous brands are translated, reinterpreted, received or rejected within French society. This paper aims to provide a first step towards such understanding, with particular reference to yoga consumption in the city of Marseille. A major historical Mediterranean port, this city has always been ethnically diverse, but since the 1990s, it has also borne the sad privilege of being France's poverty capital, with social inequalities assuming an unprecedented ethnic component since the turn of the 21st century. As a practitioner of different yoga brands and a Bikram yoga teacher with experience in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the West Coast of the United States, and the French cities of Paris and Nice, I was struck by the social, cultural and ethnic diversity of participants in yoga classes in Marseille, in comparison with what I had observed in Paris and Nice. Even more striking, though, was the degree to which social differentiation among yoga practitioners seemed to align with choice of yoga brand, despite otherwise comparable urban locations, pricings and material settings. Alongside this socio-demographic differentiation, the meanings practitioners assigned to yoga in the

informal discussions after class were also remarkably distinct. This prompted a more structured exploration of how three imported yoga brands I practiced – namely Iyengar, Bikram and Forrest – were transmitted and received in the health cultural landscape of Marseille.

At their core, these three yoga brands offer the same promise – better body, better health, better self, and better life – but they do so by valuing differently what ‘better’ment actually encompasses, through what forms it is realized in practice, and the people who epitomize it. With different mythologies of healing and different formal and ritual practices, these three brands also correspond to different moments of yoga’s general developmental timeline in France and in Marseille’s own social transformation. They offer an ideal opportunity for exploring the socio-logics of diverse French practitioners’ engagement with yoga brands developed with an American or Commonwealth consumership in mind, in relation to the notion of healing and in the context of social change. Using an intersectional lens, this paper examines yoga brand preference by looking at the interacting effects of socio-economic position, gender, and ethnicity on the uptake of each of these particular brands. The paper thus seeks to identify the social factors that contribute to the integration or rejection of the healing models offered by these exogenous yoga brands in French society.

The first section of the paper contextualizes the idiosyncratic reception of Iyengar, Bikram and Forrest yoga brands in France, and in Marseille in particular. It describes how each brand conceptualizes healing and how these conceptions manifest formally in the performance of the yoga class, and it introduces the concept of yoga ‘style’ alongside that of brand. The next section describes the fieldwork site and methods. The Analysis first presents quantitative data to establish the socio-demographic characteristics of yoga brand preference, and then examines qualitatively the embodied meanings of healing that emerge at the intersection of social bodies and yoga styles. This is followed by a discussion of what is shared and what is divisive in practitioner experiences of yoga as healing across the three styles, and a conclusion that reflects on the contribution that intersectional analyses of yoga can make in identifying barriers and facilitators to yoga class participation, and thus in creating more socially and culturally inclusive healing spaces.

## **Yoga sites, brands and styles**

### ***Anglophone yoga’s asymmetric reception: French imaginings of yoga as a health practice***

Despite yoga’s rather simultaneous and uniform introduction in North America and Europe, its subsequent development and medicalization has been less homogeneous, resulting in an unevenly shaped current global yogascape<sup>3</sup> (Nizard 2017). Historically, English-speaking contexts have offered yoga an easier reception. This is partly due to the historical linguistic ties of English with India and its prevailing role in globalization, but more importantly, to the fact that in the US, Great Britain and the Commonwealth, yoga was not encumbered by the potentially negative connotations of organized religion (Hoyez 2005; Newcombe and Deslippe 2020). Consistently viewed as both progressive and traditional, yoga was first welcomed and incorporated and then progressively enriched and democratized beyond the elite circles where it had been introduced, into gyms, schools and hospitals.

By contrast, in France, the traditional ambivalence towards organized identities and a hard political stance on secularism and integration (rather than overt religious and cultural identifications) has had the polar opposite effect. In this context, yoga's first proponents sought to legitimize it against an historical defiance towards exogenous religions by embedding it in scholarly discourses and conservative references to Indian/Vedic philosophy, thereby conveying an image of yoga as intellectual, economically and culturally elitist, and esoteric (Ceccomori 2001). This situation changed with post-war economic prosperity, with yoga consumption in France surging in the 1950s–1970s as it did in other Western countries. With the expanding leisure economy, yoga started reaching beyond its original private wealthy circles of practice and into more public classes, first in Paris, and then in neighbouring secondary urban centres; and mixing with the social and counter-cultural movements brewing at the time. In this context, exogenous first generation brands such as Iyengar were promptly welcomed for their alignment with prevailing representations of the soteriological wisdoms of the Orient as peaceful, humanistic, and universal (Ceccomori 2001).

Yoga's popularity during this time, however, was short-lived, and the recession of French economy in the 1980s progressively erased it from the popular cultural landscape. By the 1990s, while powerful second-generation brands like Anusara, Bikram or Forrest were consolidating in English-speaking contexts and preparing for globalization (Jain 2014), in France, yoga was being gradually replaced by non-spiritually coloured practices like anti-gymnastics,<sup>4</sup> aerobics, or stretching which were overtly advertised as health-related practices (Vigarello 2014). So much so that in 2001, French Indianist scholar Michel Hulin prefaced Silvia Ceccomori's landmark 'Cent ans de Yoga en France (One hundred years of Yoga in France)' as a timely review for 'an essentially completed epic' (Ceccomori 2001, 11).

The specific idiosyncrasies of the French yoga scene thus reveal potential points of friction between yoga brands and the bodies that practice them even within the monolithic label of the West. Newcombe and Deslippe (2020, 352) have suggested that 'branded' and 'anglophone' yoga may actually be synonymous, as no distinctive features or historical elements could yet be singled out for 'anglophone' to form an analytical category *per se* for yoga studies. They suggest that linguistic analyses of English-based mediations of yoga would be useful to establish it as such, but also admit the difficulty of such an undertaking given the role English plays in both the expansion of dominant cultures and in their localized contestation. In a way, this paper takes on the humbler task of looking, from a reception standpoint, at how some of these anglophone mediations of yoga permeate a non-English speaking yet Western cultural setting that has a different historical relationship with it. In the three yoga brands of interest in this paper, classes were taught in French – even if English translations were made available to non-French speaking practitioners if needed. This allows, to some degree, the separation between the linguistic dimension of 'anglophone' yoga and more distinctive features of the social and therapeutic contexts in which these brands were stabilized (Hoyez 2007).

### *Yoga brands as competing mythologies of healing*

The construction of brand images has been instrumental to yoga's recent global popularization, replacing traditional legitimization by lineage and direct transmission from guru to disciple with images that comply with the expectations of global consumer culture (Jain 2014). To some extent, the language of yogic self-discipline intersects with neoliberal

constructions of selfhood in its promotion of notions and practices of autonomy, self-monitoring, self-cultivation, and self-mastery irrespective of brand (Godrej 2017). However, each brand entertains a distinctive image of how these notions are articulated as transformational healing, balancing their claims to novelty and efficacy with the expected reference to pre-modern yoga as the ‘touchstone of [yoga’s] authenticity’ (Singleton 2010, 14). In a sense, these brands represent yoga mythologies (Barthes 1957) that strategically utilize and re-combine elements of yoga’s symbols, images, and practices to create seemingly novel and ‘better’ systems of promise and process (Jain 2014). As such, the development of modern postural yoga is as much an illustration of the globalization of places of consumption as it is of the globalization of symbols (Koch 2013) because these mythologies of healing carry and convey specific notions of what is valued as health and as desirable transformation.

For instance, Iyengar Yoga – a first-generation yoga brand – conveys the image of a linear, unaltered trajectory of transmission going back to Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras (circa 350–450 CE), both in its discursive formalization, as in Iyengar’s *Light on Yoga* (Iyengar 1966), and in the structure of Iyengar yoga classes with the ritual opening Sanskrit invocation of Patanjali. At the same time, Iyengar’s biomedical descriptions of postures – anatomically deconstructed, with breath specifications and lists of associated physiological and mental effects, indications and counter-indications in relation to an array of conditions (such as pregnancy or menstruation), illnesses, and limitations – propelled Iyengar Yoga into scientific modernity (Jain 2012), establishing yoga as non-denominational system of transcendental therapeutics where the postural disciplining of the body is equated with spiritual attainment, and liberation with healing (Iyengar 1966, 20; Fields 2014).

Interestingly, 40 years later, Bikram Choudhury was to recycle the same combination of pre-modern authenticity and scientific modernity in laying out an opposing mythology for his controversial Bikram Yoga brand. Theorized as a one-size-fits-all, silver bullet remedy for all individual and societal ailments,<sup>5</sup> Bikram Yoga explicitly enforces neoliberal constructions of selfhood and optimized productivity, equating healing with self-optimization, self-management, and self-transcendence (Choudhury 2007). It expands on the ‘no pain, no gain’ neoliberal dictum (Hauser 2013, 131) in discourse and in the ritualization of the conditions of the practice – 40 °C, 40% humidity, for a 90-min invariant high-intensity dynamic sequence – such that the practice becomes the metaphor and training ground for the deliberate transcendence of adversity in the neoliberal jungle. The Bikram Yoga brand image is fused with Choudhury’s, who establishes himself – the epitome of the American Dream – as proof-of-concept of ‘his’ yoga’s healing power. Contrasting with Iyengar’s reluctance to say ‘I’, Choudhury gives rise in his brand’s companions books to a fully-fledged ‘I’ (first-person pronoun)-yoga, with abundant references to biographical events and a profusion of personal and possessive pronouns when speaking about ‘his’ yoga’s benefits. The whole brand is formally designed for global franchising and mass-production with its emphasis on three principles: inclusivity (a yoga for ‘everybody and every body’ (Choudhury 2007, 9); efficacy (with a regimen that supposedly works ‘every joint and physiological system’ (9, 71)), and portability (through invariance of the postural sequence codified in form, timing, practice settings and delivery). These are mediated by the Dialogue (Choudhury 2007, 96–97), a scripted and timed set of instructions that teacher trainees have to learn in order to deliver Bikram yoga classes, with more or less verbatim delivery required depending on the affiliated studio owners. The original dialogue is in English, it uses biomedical language to link anatomical cues for the postures with physiological effects,



and is built for conservative linguistic translations. In terms of content, its adaptation in French is straightforward, but adjustments are needed in the phrasing to respect the prescribed timing of the postures.

Also a second-generation brand enforcing similar constructions of selfhood, Forrest Yoga – the third brand figuring in this study – boldly establishes its brand image on the rejection of authoritative masculine Indian guru figures,<sup>6</sup> separating the postural repertoire of modern yoga from its habitual pre-modern Indian origin to combine it with notions, rituals and representations from the cultural repertoire of Native American indigenous healing, as popularly imagined, and with female mentorship (Forrest 2011). With self-referencing similar to Choudhury's, Ana Forrest, founder of the brand, roots her vision for yoga in her autobiography, narrated along the martyr-hero template prevailing in the Western Self-help industry (Illouz 2008) and exalting the 'Feminine'/'female Spirit' as the historical figure of wounding and therefore the expert figure on trauma and healing for self, society, and the world. Indeed, she defines herself not as a yoga teacher but as a 'Medicine Woman', whose mission is to 'not just teach, but heal', and she refers to the Hindu figure of Kali, simultaneously 'a terrifying death goddess and a nurturing mother, a black hag at the battlefield and a young and innocent girl' (McDaniel 2010, 17), and the 'ultimate Truth Speaker' (Forrest 2011, 100). The iconography of Forrest Yoga exalts poses that involve physical power and mental engagement – such as hand and arm stands, and other balancing poses – and lean, muscular, androgynous bodies (essentially like the body of Ana Forrest herself), countering the common yoga imagery of female bodies (Cartwright 2020) and linking female empowerment to bodies and postures usually associated with masculinity. In her discourse, Forrest singles out unacknowledged and normalized trauma as the epicenter of individual and societal ills, and the consequence of living in an emotionally stunted culture. Consequently, in her vision, transformation hinges upon expressing culturally denied pain, healing is equated with feeling, 'and it's obvious when it happens: there's a lot of snot, a lot of strong feelings' (Forrest 2011, 52).

### *De-essentializing yoga – styles and the 'many bodies social'*<sup>7</sup>

Formally, Bikram and Forrest yoga brands are modelled after successful first-generation brands like Iyengar yoga, in being constructed as a mix of pre-modern authenticity and scientific modernity, and named after their supposed founders,<sup>8</sup> with companion books outlining the brand's doctrine on yoga as a health practice, certifying teacher trainings and transnational registries of sanctioned teachers, and signature rituals and imagery. But practitioners are not necessarily aware of brands as a whole, or of how brands differ as systems of promise and process. They are only privy to the more formal material and technical elements that are implemented in the course of the yoga class. Brand images therefore do not tell us who engages with these brands or what their experience of them is. A practitioner may choose to experiment on the basis of what they consider the most effective or accessible path for achieving their personal health and well-being goals, but ultimately their embodied experience of the brand determines the quality and extent of their engagement.

In French yoga studies, however, there are few accounts of the socio-demographic backgrounds of yoga practitioners or of their embodied experiences of yoga (Lasserre and Guïoux 2002; Ferrero 2013).<sup>9</sup> This paper begins to fill this gap by addressing these issues in relation to the potential frictions between the three yoga brands outlined above. It asks:



Are particular yoga brands likely to attract practitioners of a distinct socio-economic group, gender, or ethnicity, and, if so, what is it about the brand, its myths or its teachers, that attracts or repels certain socio-demographic groups? In other words, how do individuals from different socio-demographic groups relate to each yoga brand and form local understandings of yoga as transformational healing?

In order to answer these questions, I take as a starting point the insight that healing practices are embodied ‘works of culture’ (Nichter 2008, 185). Bodies, discourse and social environments are intricately entangled in forming a practitioner’s experience of empowerment through yoga (Nevrin 2008),<sup>10</sup> but also supersede and actualize older therapeutic concepts present within the culture (Hauser 2018). Indeed, Newcombe (2018) shows how the mere material space in which yoga is practiced – the school stage, the yoga studio in a cosmopolitan city, the ritualized space of the yoga mat – produces different meanings of what yoga is for the practitioner. In the analysis below, I therefore distinguish between yoga ‘brand’ and ‘style’. While ‘brand’ refers to the meta-narrative of healing and symbolic image, ‘yoga style’ refers specifically to the recurrent elements constitutive of yoga classes that give flesh to the brand’s myth, and thereby, formally identify it, embody it and differentiate it for the average practitioner.

For instance, Iyengar Yoga may be branded and ritualized as a form of transcendental therapeutics, but for the practitioner, it is the use of props for correct postural alignment, the placement of the mats with respect to the teacher, the mantra chanting at the opening of the class and the long postural holding that characterize Iyengar Yoga compared with Bikram Yoga. Stylistically, Iyengar classes are simultaneously pre-modern and scientific, with bracketing rituals of an opening *Om* chant and a closing *Namaskar* bow framing an otherwise precise alignment-focused posture deconstruction using anatomical language. In comparison, Bikram Yoga is recognizable by the temperature and humidity settings of the practice room, the systematic presence of a mirror, and the normalized, immutable fast-paced sequence of postures that are held for 10–60 s maximum each. As styles, Bikram and Iyengar share however a technical linguistic description of postures, for example in directing the practitioner’s attention to the external/internal rotation of muscles and joints, dissociating muscle chains, directing awareness to minute parts of the body – the space between the index finger and the thumb or the external edge of the heel, for example, that is not typically part of the Forrest yoga style. In Forrest Yoga, teachers instruct with anatomical cues that are claimed to be Forrest yoga-specific – ‘active’ feet and hands, relaxed neck and ‘deep muscle’ engagement, for instance. However, they more consistently map the body in terms of an emotional anatomy – anger in the thighs, frustration/silencing in the jaw, sadness in the rib cage, grief in the shoulders, joy in the opening of the solar plexus – and femininity – associated with the left side of the body, the ritual starting side for asymmetric postures, ‘moon’ postures, and adjustments for the different phases of the menstrual cycle. Also, as a style, Forrest yoga consistently implements a ceremonial component evoking indigenous Native American healing in the course of the class – sage burning, drums, (non-mantra) chanting, body shaking, music, or dancing.

Styles and brands are thus different performative levels of yoga as a health practice. The distinction is important because what makes yoga a transformational healing experience for different practitioners in a single context of practice cannot be presumed in advance, especially in a context as socially diverse as Marseille.

## Fieldsites and data collection

### *Marseille' city centre – social duality in France's poverty capital*

Marseille is a landmark site in the French yoga scene, but as a major French urban center it is a sociological singularity (Peraldi, Duport, and Michel 2015). Marseille is France's second largest city and its third most important economically, but since the mid-1990s it has ranked first for poverty (25%, versus 14.3% nationally), unemployment (18.6% compared with 9% nationally), and school-dropout rates (35.5% rather than 10% nationally).<sup>11</sup> Marseille has one of the highest recorded levels of income inequality<sup>12</sup> in France, which has been assuming since the turn of the twenty-first century an unprecedented ethnic component (Baby-Collin and Bouillon 2017) despite the city's relative demographic stability<sup>13</sup> and proportionately small foreign (7.8%) and immigrant (12.9%) components<sup>14</sup> (Peraldi, Duport, and Michel 2015).

Initially, these socio-spatial disparities were spread between the city centre and its periphery, as in Paris or Lyon. But since the 1990s, gentrification has progressively produced micro-level inequalities within the city's central districts, resulting in what sociologist Donzel (2014) calls Marseille's 'dual nature' (62) – an urban geography with social stratification consolidated within the same urban micro-spaces, comparable to that of major cities in what were previously dubbed Third World countries. Since 2012, these central districts have been among the poorest in France and Europe, with poverty rates ranging from 20.2% to 52.8%, and with up to 10% of the population living solely on social benefits.<sup>15</sup> Coincidentally, immigrants and citizens of North and Sub-Saharan African descent constitute 20–40% of these districts' population (Baby-Collin and Bouillon 2017).

These districts also happen to have the highest density of yoga studios in the city; curiously, the city's socio-economic collapse in the 1980s did not deter the implantation of yoga. There has been a sustained Iyengar yoga presence since the 1990s in Marseille, where both Bikram and Forrest yoga were pioneered in France – Bikram yoga in 2001, witnessing the district's pauperization and its widening socio-economic divide and Forrest yoga in 2013,<sup>16</sup> in an already divided urban geography.

### *Fieldwork*

I conducted participant observation over ten months (September 2017–July 2018) at two yoga studios located some 800 meters apart at the heart of Marseille's social duality and poverty ring. The first studio specialized in Bikram Yoga, which requires specific heat installations and humidifiers, and branded itself exclusively through that yoga style, although the space was regularly rented out for workshops in other types of yoga. The second studio was the first to brand itself through Forrest yoga in France, but sought additional legitimacy and consumership by also offering Iyengar classes, emphasizing the historical significance of B.K.S. Iyengar in the global yogascape despite his overt disavowal by Ana Forrest. Both studios<sup>17</sup> were equally convenient for access and parking, and were aesthetically similar in their facilities and decor. Bikram Yoga classes were 23–30% more expensive on average than Iyengar or Forrest classes. With a typical drop-in fee of 20€ at both studios, monthly rates

of 85–130€, and annual rates<sup>18</sup> of 670–860€, these specialized studios are too costly for most of Marseille's population, and more especially so for those in its poorer central districts.<sup>19</sup> In comparison, the average monthly rates charged in gyms that also offer yoga classes are typically 19–29€/month.

Fieldwork involved attending weekly classes in all 3 styles, participating in a reduced version<sup>20</sup> of the Forrest yoga teacher training, and conducting semi-structured interviews with yoga practitioners at both studios. Part of the questionnaire addressed participants' socio-economic backgrounds, general yoga experience and motivations for practicing, with more open-ended questions designed to explore participants' subjective understanding of yoga as a health practice, the rationale for their brand preference, and how they connected each brand with the notions of health and healing. 113 interviews were collected and are categorized by participants' preferred/most practiced style (43 Bikram, 38 Forrest, of whom 19 were enrolled in the teacher-training, and 32 Iyengar). These practitioners are of comparable age range between the two locations (32–57 vs. 27–63) and had all come to the practice of yoga for health reasons or health maintenance (back pain, chronic pain, diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, but also, stress, anxiety, addiction or depression). There is a degree of circulation between yoga styles, which I refer to as 'brand nomadism', and which is highly asymmetrical. Seventeen Bikram practitioners (out of the 43) tried out either Forrest and/or Iyengar, while only one Forrest practitioner from the teacher training added Bikram to her practice regimen with the explicit motivation of weight loss, and only one Iyengar practitioner episodically attended Forrest yoga classes. All seventeen Bikram nomads decided to try out Forrest yoga first for its dynamic sequencing, but none persisted with it. Ten proceeded however to try out the Iyengar style, with seven committing to regular Iyengar class attendance – depending on their means – to complement their Bikram practice.

In all three styles, classes were taught in French, but when non-French speakers attended, translations were provided alongside the instructions in French. The possibility of English translation was explicitly advertised on the studio's website for the Forrest yoga classes, but translation was also made available when needed during Iyengar and Bikram classes, but not overtly advertised by the teachers or on the studios' websites. In the case of Bikram classes, where the dialogue is scripted and timed, translation was typically offered for either the first or the second set of postures, starting with the language of the least experienced practitioners.

My research institution did not require ethics approval for this research, but I obtained informed consent from all participants. To protect participant anonymity, I use unattributed quotes drawn from fieldnotes, or semi-fictional reconstruction of characters and quotes to relay 'the reality of interest' (Humphreys and Watson 2009, 45). All quotes provided in the analysis are my translations, with the original formulation in French between parentheses or as a footnote for unusual phrasings or ambiguous terms.

## Analysis

The following section first establishes quantitatively the socio-demographic characteristics of yoga brand preference, and then examines the embodied meanings of healing that emerge at the intersection of participants, as social bodies, and yoga styles.

## Social structure of yoga-style preference

### Income and education

Although Bikram classes are more expansive, practitioners of the Bikram style reported a 25% mean income difference (1450€/month) with those attending either Forrest or Iyengar classes at the second studio location (1900€/month), with significant style-based differences for these latter. As Table 1 shows, the least wealthy and educated consumership was at Bikram, a middle range at Iyengar, while the most wealthy and educated at Forrest. A significant proportion of Forrest studio attendees (26.3%), half of whom participated in the teacher training, were unemployed women, in labour market terms, in households supported by middle-upper to upper class partners (not factored in the mean income calculus).

Twelve (27.9%) Bikram interviewees reported receiving social benefits for long-term unemployment and negotiating lower prices or gratuity in exchange for work at the studio, while the rest of the Bikram sample showed a 10% excess of the middle income. In regard to these figures, the owner of the Bikram studio estimated that the proportion of low-income would be closer to a third of her consumership, against a lower proportion of upper-medium class practitioners.

As for the Forrest studio, there were significant brand-based differences between Iyengar and Forrest, with a pull towards the middle-income class in the former against a significant pull towards upper-middle and upper income classes in the latter, where no practitioners were on social benefits. These numbers tend to reflect the dynamics of the studios' own settlement, with the Bikram studio integrating the poverty landscape of the district as well as its dual nature, while the Forrest studio reflected more, and rather exclusively with regard to Forrest yoga, the wealth that has entered the district since 2012.

### Gender and ethnicity

Table 2 shows that for all styles attendance is predominantly female-based, in line with national statistics (80–95% female), but with significant style-based differences. Male practitioners account for a fifth of the Iyengar sample, with an average of 2–3 per class, and for more than a third (37.2%) of the Bikram sample – comprising on average a third of each class. Forrest yoga's female predominance, by contrast, is overwhelming, with transient male practitioners occasionally dropping in, essentially choosing these classes for linguistic convenience (the possibility of English translation for the Forrest yoga classes being

**Table 1.** Style-based distributions for income and educational status.

Yoga style (sample size)	Bikram (43)	Iyengar (32)	Forrest (38)
<i>Income (monthly)</i>			
RSA (550–1015€)	27.9% (12)	12.5% (4)	0
Middle (1300–1800€)	41.8% (18)	59.3% (19)	18.4% (7)
Upper-Middle (1800–3000€)	30.2% (13)	28.15% (9)	39.47% (15)
Upper (>3000€)	0	0	15.7% (6)
None but supported by partner	0	0	26.3% (10)
<i>Education</i>			
School drop-out	18.6% (8)	6.25% (2)	0
Any high-school diploma	11.6% (5)	15.6% (5)	0
University diploma	69.8% (30)	78.1% (25)	100% (38)

The number of individuals in each category is shown in parentheses.

**Table 2.** Style-based distributions for gender and ethnicity.

Yoga style (sample size)	Bikram (43)	Iyengar (32)	Forrest (38)
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	37.2% (16)	21.8% (7)	1 (irregular)
Female	62.8% (27)	78.2% (25)	97.3% (37)
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
African descent	7% (3)	0	0
Caucasian	83.7% (36)	93.75% (30)	100% (38)
North-African or Middle-Eastern descent	9.3% (4)	6.25% (2)	0

The number of individuals in each category is shown in parentheses.

explicitly advertised on the studio's website), or to 'spice up' their arm/hand stand practice. The only male practicing Forrest yoga alternated between this brand and Iyengar depending on his schedule to reach his goal of 2 yoga classes per week. As for the Forrest yoga teacher training, it was all female.

As for Ethnicity, also reported in Table 2, a diversity of nationalities and historical immigration waves (Italian and Armenian) is represented in all classes, as well as citizens and immigrants of North- and Sub-Saharan African descent, who are at the core of the French Black-Blanc-Beur (Black-White-Arab) post-colonial diversity issue (Fourquet 2019). In the overall sample of 113 yoga practitioners, only 9 (8%) were non-Caucasian, 6 of whom were of North-African descent (first or second generation) and 3 were first-generation immigrants from the Comoros (2) and Senegal (1). Despite this overall low ethnic diversity, it marks a departure from all Caucasian classes I had attended in Paris or Nice, which are equally if not more cosmopolitan cities than Marseille. Moreover, style-based differences are still remarkable, with the Forrest sample embodying the sociological stereotype of all-white wealthy women found in the yoga literature (Park, Braun, and Siegel 2015; Berila, Klein, and Roberts 2016, Cartwright et al. 2020), the Iyengar sample accommodating some diversity with practitioners of North-African descent, and Bikram concentrating most of it, (7 out of 9) with practitioners in approximately equal proportions of North and Sub-Saharan African descent.

### *The shared and the socially divisive – language, bodies and the meanings of healing*

The socio-economic, gender and ethnic divide exhibited between Forrest yoga on the one hand and Bikram and Iyengar yoga on the other is mirrored lexically in practitioners' emic accounts of yoga as healing, and in how practitioners, as inhabitants of socialized bodies, relate to sensation, language and emotion.

#### *A socially divided language of healing*

A lexical analysis of practitioner interviews shows that the social divide between Bikram and Iyengar yoga, on the one hand, and Forrest yoga on the other, is also manifested linguistically. In the former, practitioner accounts are condensed around body parts (bone/skeleton, breath/lungs, skin/sweat) and function (sleep, digestion, thirst, sweating, energy, suppleness, cognition), with a prevalence of sensory verbs – practitioners listen to their sweat, taste their breath, observe their bones stretching, sense the spaciousness of their skin,

although these are not typical utterances of either Bikram or Iyengar teachers. In contrast, Forrest yoga practitioners prevalently use cognitive verbs (realize, understand, think), nominal emotions (anger, sadness, grief, love) and emotion-related words (acceptance, forgiveness, heartfulness, compassion), as well as female-related words referencing motherhood, maternity, the feminine (power, intelligence, wisdom, magic), Mother Earth, moon phases, the inner-goddess or inner-guérisseuse (healer).

Beyond mere lexical frequencies, the experiences relayed in all three brands locate healing in the materiality of the body, as do teachers' transmissions. In Bikram yoga, departures from the normalized Bikram dialogue and peri-practice conversations between practitioners and teachers were rarely about yoga as spiritual, or its place in people's lives, but focused on the notion of re-training the body to allow its 'natural wisdom' to emerge. Teachers and practitioners recurrently spoke of sweat as a major operator of health, as 'detoxing' of physiological and symbolic (biographic and social) waste; while students referred to the skeleton as the foundation of their sense of healing, that extended off the mat into their being in the world. Practitioners equated skill with precision in anatomical alignment, such as in 'standing in one's bones', grace of movement, as in 'the natural flow of the body', and with concentration, as in 'getting out of the way of the body' and silencing the mental chatter. As for Iyengar yoga, the teacher also referred to the skeleton as the first principle of practice and of healing – 'stack(ing) the bones in their natural place so the breath (*le souffle*)<sup>21</sup> can do its work',<sup>22</sup> and to the body as an anatomical machine, the proper functioning of which was to be restored by rearranging the parts (bones, joints, muscles) in their intended architectural coherence. Awareness was drawn to the effortless and expansive nature of the breath (*souffle* or *respiration*) with proper postural alignment. Behaviorally, silence, fluidity and equanimity were encouraged, normalizing both the experience of ease and that of limitation, always referring back to the naturalness of breath – 'find(ing) its own range' – as both the operator and principle of (desirable/healing) transformation. In their own accounts, Iyengar yoga practitioners linked bodily sensations, such as transformation of sweat quality, muscle relaxation, joint opening or stomach gargling, to the restoration of a natural bodily state, equating effortlessness (of breath) with healing, and anatomical coherence (of bones) with a 'basic healthiness'<sup>23</sup> – 'sit(ing) in the basic healthiness of one's own bones'.<sup>24</sup>

In a markedly different register, Forrest yoga teachers and teachers-in-training directed practitioners' awareness towards the emotional structure of postural practice, encouraging its overt expression as that of one's 'authentic potential'. Teachers started classes by 'setting' for the class an 'intention' relating to the notion of natural (seasonal or moon) cycles, or that of women negotiating the 'wife'-life balance between their assigned social roles and individual creative drives, irrespective of the gendered composition of the class. The bodily practice invariably started with relaxing necks – to relieve the excess stress to which women are socially exposed – and hands – to allow more openness to give and receive. This was immediately followed by a 'power pose' (the Dolphin – *Ardha Pincha Mayurasana*), to 'connect' with the deep abdominal muscles and to the perineum, the reservoir of female power (with metaphorical references to fire, sun, volcanoes, as well as the to the womb, maternity and 'Mother Earth').

Interestingly, while pain is central to Bikram Choudhury's theorization of healing and physical discomfort is 'present as a teacher' for Iyengar (Hauser 2013, 118), pain was a minor theme of both Bikram and Iyengar yoga teacher transmissions and practitioner experiences, but central in Forrest yoga. In alignment with Ana Forrest's own words, the language of



Forrest yoga classes invariably referred to the notion that (emotional) wounds, pain, suffering, fear, feelings of unworthiness, disempowerment and emotional silencing underlie the material anatomy of every body and movement, and that the goal of the practice was to reconnect the practitioner with the silenced story emotionally stored in her body. Body parts were systematically mapped to emotions, with anger held in the thighs; fear in the shoulders; grief in the lower back and solar plexus; but also courage in the deep abdominal muscles; authenticity in the womb and perineum; and compassion in chest opening. Spectacular postures, such as hand and shoulder stands, other hand balances, and deep backbends, were included in all classes, irrespective of the skill level of practitioners, and overt displays of emotion were valued as authentic, brave, and, importantly as the sole obstacle to the successful performance or holding of the posture as well as the incontrovertible stepping stone towards healing. Encouragement to 'push through the pain', 'connect to the source of one's suffering', 'believe in one's self', 'connect with the inner goddess' or 'let one's power roar' would be associated with invitations to release anger through the 'silent scream' of the lion breath (sonorant contraction of the larynx during exhale with the tongue drawn out), and to allow tears to flow freely. Teachers would recurrently invite tears and lion breaths throughout the practice, and praise them as acts of courage and empowerment when performed. When one practitioner was overtaken by emotion or by pain, the invitation was extended to the group to form a 'sorority' of healing around the person, and to dedicate individual practice to 'the healing of the world'.

### *Bodies of discord – experiences of natural healing and the moral dramaturgy of emotions*

The words used in yoga instruction and in descriptions of personal experience show how yoga bodies are 'encircled by symbols and metaphor' (Womack 2010, 14) that could facilitate or obstruct participation, depending on social factors. The Bikram practitioners who tried Forrest yoga found being surrounded by Forrest yoga practitioners and discourses completely off-putting, but those of them who went on to try Iyengar yoga recognized it as both yoga and as healing, whether they persisted with it or not. All of the Bikram nomads found Forrest yoga too prescriptive, precluding them from relating 'authentically' to their yoga experience, or as one of the practitioners put it, pulling their attention 'away from the flesh of the practice and into a story'. This was part of a general defiance common to both Bikram and Iyengar yoga practitioners towards constructing personal 'I'-narratives of their bodily experience of yoga; instead, they praised the factual body-based wording of the Bikram and Iyengar transmission styles, considering that it helped them experience something that was authentically theirs, since they were the natural possessors of those body parts and organic facts.

In contrast, in Forrest yoga, the expressive and impressive drama of the teacher's body was the primary site of transmission of the practice, implicitly engaging students to transform their bodies in line with that of the teacher's. A recurrent object of reference by teachers themselves and of emulation and admiration by students, the expert Forrest body was both mirroring and communicative. The mirroring body of the teacher 'defined itself in acts of consumption' (Frank 1997, 43), telling the self-actualized story of healing through Forrest yoga. Visually, it combined overt signs of femininity (body-defining and revealing yogawear, healing jewellery, organic makeup) with signs of power usually attributed to masculinity –



promoting androgynous body shapes and muscle definition, and power poses that involve a lot of upper body muscle strength (power) and mental-engagement (courage/fearlessness). In that respect, in the teacher training, bodies that did not conform to that ideal were interpreted as 'not there yet' and as 'still' embodying unresolved trauma. Beyond its shape, the communicative body of the teacher transmitted authority and expertise about the process of healing, through postures such as hand and arm stands and balances and, more importantly, through tears, lion breath and facial expressions of pain or emotion. The role of this emotional dramaturgy was particularly salient in the teacher training, where future teachers systematically explained their physical limitations, injuries and pain as their therapeutic self in action – thus displaying knowledge of the healing process – and referenced every expressed emotion, even if through emotional contagion, as healing and rewriting of their bodies' trauma storylines – thus enacting a mastery of the process. To Forrest practitioners, the somatic anatomy of their experience came only second to its emotional dramaturgy, with a majority (21/38) describing somatic sensations as 'just body talk' until they were appropriately translated into emotional 'scripts'. Construed as objective forms of knowing and of healing through the validation by 'similarly expressive others' (Brissett and Edgley 1990, 3), the inability to perform the expected emotional dramaturgy was accordingly articulated as an indicator of the depth of the person's trauma. Forrest practitioners thus interpreted any overt defiance – including from some Bikram drop-ins – towards the perceived injunction to emote in negative terms, as poor emotional literacy – 'all about the body, no sense of self (*aucun être à soi*), it's a long way to go from there to real yoga' – or as a lack of courage to face one's 'own truth'.

Language *per se* is thus not the locus of the social divide, but points to differences in the key embodied dispositions that individuals cultivate through their yoga practice, and that they associate with healing. However, brand nomadism points to how 'body use in healing' (Frank 1997, 183) is socially informed. Three Bikram yoga students reported turning back after merely pushing open the Forrest studio's door, saying that seeing the body displays in fashion and postures in the practice room made them feel already inadequate and out of place. Bikram nomads typically viewed Forrest bodies and discourses as perfect renditions of the individualized neoliberal subject of capital, that hijacked the notion of self-care as yet another form of neoliberal governmentality (Dilts 2010). More specifically, all Bikram nomads considered the narratives of suffering and self-claimed feminism in Forrest yoga to be an abusive appropriation of social suffering by an already privileged social class while also enforcing class-based gender expectations of the maternal destiny of women and of the shape and behavior of female bodies (Froidevaux-Metterie 2015). Male practitioners also reported feeling denied in their emotional intelligence if they did conform to the prescribed emotional scripts, and reduced to normative gender roles, even if to transcend them.

But while Bikram nomads viewed the emotional dramaturgy of Forrest yoga as oppressive, class-based, and morally prescriptive, it afforded many of its practitioners (13/38), especially those engaged in the teacher training, a sense of skill and of social compensation. For instance, the well-off, stay-at-home mothers who were financially dependent on their partners, described themselves as feeling stigmatized for it and socially reduced to their attractiveness and their maternity, and Forrest yoga brought recognition of their suffering despite their privilege. As one of the teachers in training put it: 'we are all survivors, even if we don't remember what we were victims of'. Forrest yoga also attributed intrinsic value to their femininity, maternity and emotionality, reframing them as competence, and giving

them a social role as healers and universal mothers, and through it, a potential financial recognition. As such, Forrest yoga's dramaturgy of healing provided these women with an alternative model for re-defining their bodies and selves. Through the metaphor of the rising Phoenix, the common tropes of yoga as an 'investment' in oneself and 'self-care' were reframed politically, with a body-manifesto and the moral responsibility to share and teach others about suffering and healing, especially their male partners, whose socially-repressed feminine wisdom was deemed to be at the heart of both men's pain and their role in the reproduction of social violence.

At the other end of the social spectrum, Bikram yoga practitioners also reported how the practice gave them a sense of existence and competence through the experience of consistency of their own bodies, of their breath, the strength and range of mobility in their spines, and in the feeling of muscles contracting, which compensated for their powerlessness in many vital everyday interactions, especially with people such as social workers, benefit clerks and medical personnel. For both Bikram and Iyengar yoga practitioners, returning to the foundation of the anatomical body as a site of agency, skill and equality was a major component of yoga as a healing experience. Bikram practitioners considered the invariant setting and sequence of the practice as the core ritual of Bikram yoga and a social equalizer that fostered a sense of oneness (31/43), equality (29/43), and belonging (19/43), from which a sense of agency naturally emerged. For some of the more socially disenfranchised practitioners, that had a powerful effect on their sense of self and social place:

Before [Bikram], I believed I had no choice, because... you know... my situation [long-term unemployment, school drop-out, chronic sickness, addiction]. Getting my benefits and apologizing for needing them. Getting treatment at the hospital and apologizing for being sick. My addictions. Here [in Bikram yoga], I am like every other body (*je suis comme tous les autres corps*). We stand together... We move together ... We have our water together ... Hey, we all sigh together when we go to the floor [laughs]. Every one's making that face, you know [mimicking] ... when that [\*\*\*] Triangle is always too long, or when you're about to fall from that standing knee thing [Head-to-Knee] but you always want to fall last, just like your neighbour. We are all in the same boat, no matter who's who anymore and who is not. Mr. Professor on my right, it's difficult too, and he tries. Like me. He and I, we have the same choice to make. Try, or not try. Not fail or succeed. No! Try or not try. And that... [sigh] That is more than money. To me, it is healing. More than anyone saying, 'Bravo!'. It's pride [hand on heart]. This, I know how to do. So everyday, I try. In Bikram yoga when I can come and practice. And when I can't, anywhere so I can come and practice. I'm still unemployed. I'm still sick – and my addiction it comes and it goes – Come on, yoga won't magically cure my life [...] or the world. But now, in the mirror, I see a person. Not a poor man. Not an Arab. Not an addict. Not a burden.

This sense of one-bodiedness as a lever of equality was also emphasized by male and non-Caucasian practitioners as affording them respite from their racialized and gendered identities, and in the process, allowing them to explore alternative bodily frames of being. As for practitioners of African and non-African descent, they reported finding space to reconnect with cultural and familial somatic modes of sensing, knowing and emotion, allowing them to recover exiled parts of their culturally-denied or muted selves. Bikram yoga practitioners (11/43) also mentioned how learning to engage with one's own eyes in the mirror was a potent moment of shift in their well-being, but while the teacher would invite this as a way to re-connect with the self, these practitioners reported that what was most striking to them seeing themselves moving 'as one' with others.

Iyengar yoga practitioners also emphasized a notion of collective body as integral to their perception of yoga. They did so with reference to what they considered Iyengar-specific rituals: the systematic pre-practice rearranging – even if only slightly – of mats so that they are horizontal to the teacher's, with appropriate spacing of practitioners, sometimes, depending on seniority and health conditions, involving moving them to a different place in the studio, and the opening collective Om chant. Mat rearrangement was perceived as a ritual of inclusivity and equality to 'form one body that moves together'. Teachers always presented chanting as optional and non-devotional, even with/for long-term practitioners, and as a way to engage with the breath (*souffle*), which they referred to as the yoga practitioner's ever-present 'first teacher'. Both those who chanted and those who did not reported feeling 'in tune', like musical instruments in an orchestra, with the rest of the group and with a natural transcendental order. As a 6-month Iyengar practitioner with no prior yoga experience put it: 'I like this ritual. It reminds that I am human (first), and then that I am [name]'.

## Discussion

Beyond the myths through which yoga is branded and its neo-liberal individualistic reinterpretations, and although it may appear monadic on the outside, the yogic body appears to be the site for the embodiment of healing and health in terms of relational ethics. In choosing a specific style – a specific linguistic and ritual performance of how they relate to their own body and to others, practitioners do not assume their health agency simply as individual consumers, but as a response-ability as political subjects. In a context of spiritual capitalism, where the needs that define the neo-liberal subject revolve around increased individualism, self-enhancement and empowerment, illness and suffering become learning opportunities for a form of 'engaged spirituality' that links individual health and well-being to that of the whole – social – world (Leledaki 2014).

While Forrest and Bikram yoga teachers emphasized practice time as outside the scope of 'normal' social life – a 'parenthesis in [your] life that is just your own', practitioners of all three styles agreed that they felt a strong sense of continuity between their mat and the world. To them, yoga is not a lifestyle accessory but an ethical stance that provides them, through the disciplined and dramaturgical rituals and performances of their preferred yoga style, metaphorical resources for interpreting other social domains. From a combined perspective of body, rituals and narrative, yoga styles relay social values that indeed foster affiliation or rejection, but also fulfil a form of social rehabilitation that is essential to the understanding of yoga as healing. Despite the manifest socio-demographic differences between styles and the dissent expressed over representations of gender and ideals for the self across styles, all three share the construction of health and well-being as a re-indexation of an individual's own corporeal reality within a collective body. And although all practitioners interviewed in this study were motivated to start practicing yoga for a specific physiological or psychological health concern, these were only incidentally mentioned in their accounts of how yoga felt healing to them, emphasizing to the contrary the sense of feeling part of a social body and being able to contribute to it through individual practice.

However, whose bodies practitioners choose to practice with, and whose they do not is also indicative of how yoga is assessed somatically in relation to social context and specific socio-cultural categories. For instance, values and norms of autonomy and emotional authenticity carried by exogenous – here, American – yoga brands appear to be particularly

dividing. The way they are performed in Forrest yoga form strong barriers or facilitators to participation depending on social positioning, thus dividing practitioners along gender, race and class. As previously noted by Ehrenberg (2016) in his comparative study of the public management of social suffering in France and in the US, notions of autonomy, self, or social discontent encompass radically different experiential realities and normative values in these two cultural contexts. Contrary to America, where autonomy is characterized by the complementary features of independence, cooperation, and competition, in France it is perceived simply as independence and, as such, as an injunction to self-sufficiency irrespective of its social conditions of possibility. It is therefore also perceived as weakening social ties and enforcing inequality and privilege. Forrest yogic bodies, in their predominant concern with their appearance and the voicing of pain, may indeed perceive their experience as emotionally authentic and healing, but are perceived by non-Forrest practitioners as constructing and consuming ever more physical and cultural capital, to use Bourdieu's (1977) terms, and 'spiritual capital' (Leledaki 2014, 295). Against this perceived commodification of emotions mediated by the language of autonomy and self-realization, Bikram and Iyengar practitioners rely on the phenomenological body as the 'zero-point of orientation' (Waskul and Vannini 2006, 8). For these practitioners, the therapeutic self is not only dissociated from language but incompatible with it. Returning to what they perceive to be the neutral common ground of the natural body, embedded within a collective body through ritualized equality (through mat placement) and inclusion (mirror and bodies moving as one), their corporeal and subjective re-indexation is not articulated through collective understandings, but constructed self-referentially through objects and experiences of the senses (Illouz 2017).

## Conclusion

In examining variation in how different socially informed bodies and culturally constituted selves navigate the increasingly popular practice of yoga within health culture, I have attempted to show how healing is experienced at the intersection of body techniques, mythologies of transformation and socio-cultural contexts of consumption. This intersectional analysis of yoga style preference in a highly diverse and socially stratified city illustrates how social constructions of and relations between class, race and gender are articulated at the site of the yoga body, and how bodily ways of knowing provide levers through which practitioners negotiate agency in relation to their specific social conditions and social affiliations. The analysis reveals inequalities and biases in patterns of yoga consumption and experience that raise important questions about who benefits from yoga and who does not, who is included and who is not.

In settings where yoga is promoted as healing, transformational or spiritual, documenting both healing and adverse experiences of yoga can aid the detection of barriers and facilitators to participation and inform efforts to make yoga more inclusive and accessible within socially and culturally diverse contexts. At a time where yoga is expanding its reach culturally and socially as a complementary and alternative healing modality, a thorough examination of the 'appresentational references which are simply taken for granted' (Schutz 1962, 328) and which permeate the embodied worlds of modern postural yoga is needed. Any aspect of the body, its actions or 'recipes' for its transformation comprise presuppositions that are constructed, expressed, shared, learned and modified by relational bodies situated within

specific systems of relevance (Monaghan 2006). As such, points of friction between yoga styles and the different social, cultural and translational contexts in which these styles exist become diagnostic of their implicit biases and of how they exclude certain bodies and social groups from their imagination of healing, and sustain oppressive social and moral orders in their body-rituals and dramaturgies of transformation.

## Notes

1. National surveys by Yoga Journal France and by Chin Mudra – a major supplier of yoga wear and accessories on the French market – respectively report 1.4 million practitioners in 2017 and 2.6 million (3.8% of the general population) in 2019.
2. The French specialized yoga press is recent, with *Esprit Yoga* (since 2011), *Yoga Journal France*, and *Yoga Magazine* (since 2015) as its leading titles.
3. A yogascape would refer, after Appadurai (1990), to the forms of yoga – as practice, discourse, people and experiences – that create the global cultural flow of yoga and that intersect with the social and political dimensions of individual practitioners' lives.
4. A form of postural education technique developed by French physiotherapist Thérèse Bertherat in the 1970s.
5. According to Choudhury (2007, 51–67), these problems, which range from obesity, diabetes, cancer, addiction, and divorce through to crime and pollution, stem from a single cause – a widespread, Western, spiritual crisis.
6. The founder distances herself from B.K.S. Iyengar, her own yoga teacher, by questioning both his personal integrity and his cultural patriarchal behavioral templates.
7. Synnott (1993, 228–229).
8. B.K.S. Iyengar (1918–2014), Bikram Choudhury (1946–) and Ana Forrest (1956–).
9. Hoyez (2005) only tangentially mentions a correlation between yoga practice and the educated and wealthy social class in the specific context of Paris and the neighbouring city of Rouen.
10. Nevrin (2008) studies yoga forms from the Krishnamacharya lineage, namely Iyengar, Ashtanga, Vinyasa and Viniyoga.
11. The National Observatory of Inequalities – <http://www.inegalites.fr/Les-communes-les-plus-touchees-par-la-pauvrete-2086>.
12. The ratio between the highest and lowest income deciles is 18.4 before national redistribution mechanisms that bring it down to 4.2.
13. Compared to other major French cities like Paris, Lyon, Toulouse or Bordeaux.
14. Compared to Paris for instance, with 14.9% and 20.3% respectively.
15. The National Observatory of Inequalities, Ibid.
16. The year of Marseille's consecration as the Cultural Capital of Europe.
17. Already economically precarious at the time of the study, none of these studios survived the COVID-19 health crisis, which has heavily impacted Marseille's economy.
18. Monthly and annual rates are for unlimited access to classes, and across yoga styles for the Forrest yoga studio. The majority of practitioners had an average 2–3 practices/week, irrespective of the brand.
19. The national poverty threshold (50–60% of national medium income) is set at 846–1015 €/month for a single person. As for social benefits for long-term unemployment (RSA), they range between 550€ and 1156€/month depending on the size of the household.
20. A 60-hour FY specialization offered to previously certified non-FY yoga teachers.
21. In French, *respiration* – primarily a physiological term, or *souffle*, which has religious connotations.
22. 'empiler les os dans leur ordre naturel pour laisser le souffle travailler'.
23. 'santé fondamentale'.
24. 's'asseoir dans la santé fondamentale de ses os'.

## Ethical approval

The author's funding institution did not require formal ethics clearance. Oral consent for observation and interviews was obtained from each individual study participant. The research followed the American Anthropological Association ethical guidelines.

## Acknowledgements

This research was conducted under the auspices of my position at CNRS, the National Center for Scientific Research in France. In addition to the two anonymous reviewers, I would like to thank Alison Shaw and Esra Kaytaz for commenting on previous drafts of this article.

## Funding

This work was supported by the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS).

## ORCID

Mahé Ben Hamed  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5486-6788>

## References

- Alter, Joseph. 2004. *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture & Society* 7 (2–3): 295–224. doi:10.1177/026327690007002017.
- Baby-Collin, Virginie, and Florence Bouillon. 2017. "Le Centre-Ville de Marseille 1990-2012: Embourgeoisement Généralisé ou Accentuation Des Inégalités?" *Langage et Société* 162 (4): 107–111. doi:10.3917/lis.162.0107.
- Barthes, Roland. 1957. *Mythologies*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Berila, Beth, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts, eds. 2016. *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis*. London: Lexington Books.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brissett, Dennis, and Charles Edgley, eds. 1990. *Life as Theater: A Dramaturgical Sourcebook*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Cartwright, Tina, Heather Mason, Alan Porter, and Karen Pilkington. 2020. "Yoga Practice in the UK: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Motivation, Health Benefits and Behaviours." *BMJ Open* 10 (1): e031848. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2019-031848.
- Cecomori, Silvia. 2001. *Cent ans de Yoga en France*. Paris: EdDIDIT.
- Choudhury, Bikram. 2007. *Bikram Yoga: The Guru behind Hot Yoga Shows the Way to Radiant Health and Personal Fulfillment*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Cramer, Holger. 2015. "Yoga in Deutschland-Ergebnisse Einer National Repräsentativen Umfrage." *Complementary Medicine Research* 22 (5): 304–310. doi:10.1159/000439468.
- Cramer, Holger. 2018. "Yoga Therapy in the German Healthcare System." *International Journal of Yoga Therapy* 28 (1): 133–135. doi:10.17761/2018-00006.
- Csordas, Thomas. 2009. "Modalities of Transnational Transcendence. Introduction." In *Transnational Transcendence. Essays on Religion and Globalization*, edited by Thomas Csordas, 1–29. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De Michelis, Elizabeth. 2007. "A Preliminary Survey of Modern Yoga Studies." *Asian Medicine* 3 (1): 1–19. doi:10.1163/157342107x207182.

- Dilts, Andrew. 2010. "From 'Entrepreneur of the Self' to 'Care of the Self': Neoliberal Governmentality and Foucault's Ethics." In *Western Political Science Association 2010 Annual Meeting Paper*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1580709>.
- Donzel, André. 2014. *Le Nouvel Esprit de Marseille*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Ehrenberg, Alain. 2016. *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press.
- Ferrero, Gautier. 2013. "Symboliques du Corps Dans la Pratique Contemporaine du Hatha-Yoga." *Corps* 11 (1): 161–170. doi:10.3917/corp1.011.0161.
- Fields, Gregory. 2014. *Religious Therapeutics: Body and Health in Yoga, Ayurveda, and Tantra*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Forrest, Ana. 2011. *Fierce Medicine: Breakthrough Practices to Heal the Body and Ignite the Spirit*. San Francisco: HarperOne.
- Fourquet, Jérôme. 2019. *L'Archipel Français*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Frank, Arthur. 1997. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Froidevaux-Metterie, Camille. 2015. *La Révolution du Féminin*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Godrej, Farah. 2017. "The Neoliberal Yogi and the Politics of Yoga." *Political Theory* 45 (6): 772–800. doi:10.1177/0090591716643604.
- Hart, Jane. 2008. "An Overview of Clinical Applications of Therapeutic Yoga." *Alternative and Complementary Therapies* 14 (1): 29–32. doi:10.1089/act.2008.14103.
- Hauser, Beatrix. 2013. "Touching the Limits, Assessing Pain: On Language Performativity, Health, and Well-Being in Yoga Classes." In *Yoga Traveling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective*, edited by Beatrix Hauser, 109–134. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Hauser, Beatrix. 2018. "Following the Transcultural Circulation of Bodily Practices: Modern Yoga and the Corporeality of Mantras." In *Yoga in transformation: historical and contemporary perspectives*, edited by Baier, Karl, Philipp André Maas, and Karin Preisendanz. Vienna: V&R unipress. doi:10.14220/9783737008624.505.
- Hoyez, Anne-Cécile. 2005. "L'espace-Monde du Yoga. Une Géographie Sociale et Culturelle de la Mondialisation Des Paysages Thérapeutiques." PhD diss., Université de Rouen.
- Hoyez, Anne-Cécile. 2007. "The 'World of Yoga': The Production and Reproduction of Therapeutic Landscapes." *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) 65 (1): 112–124. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2007.02.050.
- Humphreys, Michael, and Tony J. Watson. 2009. "Ethnographic Practices: From 'Writing-up Ethnographic Research' to 'Writing Ethnography.'" In *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexities of Everyday Life*, edited by Sierk Ybema, Dvora Yanow, Harry Wels, Frans H. Kamsteeg, 40–55. London: SAGE Publications.
- Illouz, Ewa. 2008. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Illouz, Ewa, ed. 2017. *Emotions as Commodities: Capitalism, Consumption and Authenticity*. London: Routledge.
- Ipsos. 2016. "Yoga in America: A Study Conducted by the Yoga Journal and the Yoga Alliance." Accessed 26 January 2020. <https://www.yogaalliance.org/2016YogaInAmericaStudy>.
- Iyengar, B. K. S. 1966. *Light on Yoga*. New York: Schocken.
- Jain, Andrea. 2012. "Branding Yoga: The Cases of Iyengar Yoga, Siddha Yoga and Anusara Yoga." *Approaching Religion* 2 (2): 3–17. doi:10.30664/ar.67499.
- Jain, Andrea. 2014. *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jeter, Pamela E., Jeremiah Slutsky, Nilkamal Singh, and Sat Bir S. Khalsa. 2015. "Yoga as a Therapeutic Intervention: A Bibliometric Analysis of Published Research Studies from 1967 to 2013." *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* (New York, N.Y.) 21 (10): 586–592. doi:10.1089/acm.2015.0057.
- Koch, Anne. 2013. "Yoga as a Production Site of Social and Human Capital: Transcultural Flows from a Cultural Economic Perspective." In *Yoga Traveling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective*, edited by Beatrix Hauser, 225–248. Heidelberg: Springer.



- Lasserre, Évelyne, and Axel Guïoux. 2002. "Corps et Yoga ou la Quête de Fusion du Sens et du Sensible: approche Ethnologique de Groupes Associatifs." PhD diss., University of Lyon 2.
- Leledaki, Aspasia. 2014. "Body-Selves and Health-Related Narratives in Modern Yoga and Meditation Methods." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 6 (2): 278–300. doi:10.1080/2159676X.2012.712994.
- Mason, Heather, Nicole Schnackenberg, and Robin Monro. 2017. "Yoga and Healthcare in the United Kingdom." *International Journal of Yoga Therapy* 27 (1): 121–126. doi:10.17761/1531-2054-27.1.121.
- McDaniel, June. 2010. "Kali Goddess of Life Death and Transcendence." In *Goddesses in World Culture*, edited by Patricia Monaghan, 17–32. Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- Monaghan, Lee F. 2006. "Corporeal Indeterminacy: The Value of Embodied, Interpretive Sociology." In *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*, edited by Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini, 125–140. London: Routledge.
- Nevrin, Klas. 2008. "Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga." In *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, 119–139. London: Routledge.
- Newcombe, Suzanne. 2018. "Spaces of Yoga – Towards a Non-Essentialist Understanding of Yoga." In *Yoga in Transformation: Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, edited by Karl Baier, Philipp A. Maas, and Karin Preisendanz, 551–573. Göttingen: V&R University Press.
- Newcombe, Suzanne, and Philip Deslippe. 2020. "Anglophone Yoga and Meditation outside of India." In *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*, edited by Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O' Brien-Kop, 350–355. London: Routledge.
- Nichter, Mark. 2008. "Coming to Our Senses: Appreciating the Sensorial in Medical Anthropology." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 45 (2): 163–197. doi: 10.1177/1363461508089764.
- Nizard, Caroline. 2017. "Yoga, Entre Image Médiatique, Connaissances Théoriques et Réalités Vécues." *Inter Pares* 7: 35–43. [http://recherche.univ-lyon2.fr/epic/IMG/pdf/Inter\\_Pares\\_7.pdf](http://recherche.univ-lyon2.fr/epic/IMG/pdf/Inter_Pares_7.pdf).
- Park, Crystal, Tosca Braun, and Tamar Siegel. 2015. "Who Practices Yoga? A Systematic Review of Demographic, Health-Related, and Psychosocial Factors Associated with Yoga Practice." *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 38 (3): 460–471. doi:10.1007/s10865-015-9618-5.
- Peraldi, Michel, Claire Dupont, and Samson Michel. eds. 2015. *Sociologie de Marseille*. Paris: La Découverte (Collection. Repères).
- Puustinen, Liina, and Matti Rautaniemi. 2015. "Wellbeing for Sale: Representations of Yoga in Commercial Media." *Temenos – Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 51 (1): 45–70. doi:10.33356/temenos.40878.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1962. *The Problem of Social Reality*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Singleton, Mark. 2010. *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Singleton, Mark, and Jean Byrne, eds. 2008. *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Stephens, Ina. 2017. "Medical Yoga Therapy." *Children* 4 (2): 12. doi:10.3390/children4020012.
- Strauss, Sarah. 2005. *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts across Cultures*. Oxford: Berg.
- Synnott, Anthony. 1993. *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society*. London and New York: Routledge.
- "The National Observatory of Inequalities." Accessed 26 January 2020. <http://www.inegalites.fr/Les-communes-les-plus-touchees-par-la-pauvrete-2086>
- Vigarello, Georges. 2014. *Le Sentiment de soi-Histoire de la Perception du Corps (XVIe-XXe Siècle)*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Waskul, Dennis, and Phillip Vannini, eds. 2006. *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*. London: Routledge.
- Womack, Mari. 2010. *The Anthropology of Health and Healing*. Plymouth: AltaMira Press.