



Social Sutra:

Yoga, identity, and health in New York's changing neighborhoods

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Abstract

Taking note of the rapid, visible expansion of yoga studios in American cities, this article explores the role of yoga as a social determinant of urban health and yoga's entanglements with race and class identities. Who are the interpreters of yoga in America, and how has yoga, based on a premise of psychosomatic wholeness, paradoxically served as a prism for refracting social difference? Answers to these questions hold significant implications for the culture of health observed in cities today and possibilities for wellness. Through narrative inquiry, my argument centers on three identities that embody the role of yoga in health: the yoga teacher as healer, the yoga student as seeker of spiritually informed mind-body wellness, and the modern yoga practitioner as consumer of a physically focused, commercialized yoga.

A recombination of the identities involved in yoga – healer, seeker, and consumer – can recover the possibilities for yoga to contribute to improved urban health across race and class.

Keywords: *yoga; health and wellness; identity; psychosomatics*

Social Sutra:

Yoga, identity, and health in New York's changing neighborhoods

P.Biswas¹

1. Introduction

“When you find yourself lost on your spiritual path, try reading Albert Einstein. I always do. Here’s something he said I’d like to share: ‘A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.’ It’s as good a definition of yoga as any I’ve ever heard.” These words, spoken by a yoga teacher before a class in New York City, are the point of departure for a study of the intersection of identity and holistic health practices in the context of urban social inequality, focusing specifically on yoga practice in Brooklyn, New York.² In recent years, yoga has surged in popularity in American health culture. Surveys estimate that between 16 to 30 million people practice yoga, the majority of whom are middle-class white women, and that the yoga industry generates \$7 billion annually (Hakuta, 2012; Birdee, 2008). Who are the interpreters of yoga in America, and how has yoga, based on a premise of psychosomatic wholeness, paradoxically served as a prism for refracting social difference? Answers to these questions hold significant implications for the culture of health observed in cities today and possibilities for wellness. My argument centers on three identities that embody the role of yoga in health: the yoga teacher as healer, the yoga student as seeker of spiritually informed mind-body wellness, and the modern yoga practitioner as consumer of a physically focused, commercialized yoga.

Current scientific evidence indicates that cities can be incubators for ill health. Factors such as environmental pollution, insufficient space and opportunity for physical exercise, overcrowding, and elements of contamination in the architecture of cities such as asbestos or lead in old apartment buildings, all contribute to disease. Equally crucial are social determinants of health with deleterious impacts, such as high levels of stress, frequent exposure to criminal violence, and the numerous dire repercussions of concentrated poverty, ranging from the lack of access to affordable healthy food such as fresh fruits and vegetables to the preclusion from quality healthcare. As a result, increased rates of chronic illnesses such as heart disease, asthma, diabetes, obesity, depression, anxiety, and chronic pain are endemic to inner cities (Fitzpatrick and LaGory, 2010; Gesler and Kearns, 2002). In the American context as well as other industrialized nations, urban poverty is explicitly racialized through

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² New York City is comprised of five boroughs, of which Brooklyn is the most populous (approximately 2.5 million people).

a history of discrimination and segregation. Consequently, the incidence and magnitude of ill health is far more pronounced among ethnic minorities (Fitzpatrick and LaGory, 2010). Therefore, race introduces another dimension to the social determination of health in the urban environment.

Taking note of the rapid, visible expansion of yoga studios in American cities, I explore the role of yoga as a social determinant of urban health and yoga's entanglements with race and class identities. Evidence-based research has substantiated the beneficial effects of yoga on physical afflictions including asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, rheumatoid arthritis, and in managing other painful conditions including scoliosis (Manocha, et al, 2002; Guarracino, et al 2006; Alexander, et al, 2012; Telles, et al 2011; Cade, et al 2010; Monroe, 2010; Wren, et al 2011; Tillbrook, et a, 2011). Yoga has also proved helpful in treatment for psychological conditions such as depression and for stress management (Shapiro, et al 2007; Yoshihara, et al 2011). Thus yoga is an ideal holistic intervention to address illnesses concentrated in American inner cities. However, biomedical researchers acknowledge that barriers that are social in nature exist to individual participation in their experimental yoga interventions, such as the desire expressed by participants for yoga classes to include time for social interaction, the lack of availability of yoga classes outside of the experimental setting, and the apprehension by students that they are not fit enough to perform the physical poses involved in yoga (Skoro-Kondza, et al 2009). Through qualitative ethnographic research, I document the ways in which yoga teachers in the non-biomedical context of Brooklyn yoga studios facilitate biopsychosocial healing (cf. Yoshihara, et al 2011) and how yoga students seek holistic wellness through yoga practice, solidifying the place of yoga studios in a landscape of urban healing. In addition, I document how economic development in the inner city in the form of gentrification serves to commodify yoga and imbue the practice with a specific class and racial identity, effectively identifying some yoga students as privileged consumers of health. This problematizes the understanding of yoga as a positive social determinant of health because at the local, neighborhood level, it has the repercussion of excluding less affluent students from the social spaces of yoga practice. However, in conclusion I point towards a recombination of the identities involved in yoga – healer, seeker, and consumer – that recovers the possibilities for yoga to contribute to improved urban health across race and class.

This article is organized in the following sequence. I first briefly review the philosophical armature of yoga that distinguishes it from other forms of physical fitness and which imbricates yoga in processes of social change. Next I explain social change as it is manifest through gentrification, a contemporary mode of urban development. Third, I outline the methodology used for this qualitative research. The research findings and analysis are then presented, followed by concluding arguments that gesture towards further research in yoga, health, and identity.

II. Yoga Philosophy and Implications for Identity

Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, largely regarded as the ancient and definitive source text for ruminations on yogic philosophy, states that "yoga is the stilling of the changing states of the mind" (Bryant, 2009). By stilling mental fluctuation, yoga is further described as a system of Indian philosophy that teaches the means for an individual human spirit to coalesce with a "Supreme Universal Spirit" and to attain blissful liberation from worldly suffering and attachments both mental and physical. This enlightened state is known in yoga as samadhi (Iyengar, 1966). In other words, the yoga adept is one who achieves equanimity of thought and behavior, transcending an egoistic vision of the self and instead identifying one's own soul and consciousness with a sacred sense of the universal. The transcendence of otherness within the material world is therefore an integral component of yogic enlightenment.

The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali outlines eight "limbs" of yoga that are the steps to enlightenment, summarily referred to as ashtanga yoga. They are yama, ethical restraints, such as non-violence, truthfulness, and non-stealing; niyama, behavioral observations, such as cleanliness, contentment, and self-inquiry; asana, the practice of specific

physical postures; pranayama, the measured control of breath; pratyahara, sensual detachment; dharana and dhyana, concentration and meditation; and finally samadhi, the realization of universal spiritual consciousness (Iyengar, 1966). The Yoga Sutra delineates a specific, limited role for the physical body in attaining samadhi. Because the body serves as the vessel for the soul, it is important to keep it pure and fit essentially to facilitate meditative practices in pursuit of samadhi, with an emphasis on keeping the physical postures, known as asana, “steady and comfortable,” through the “relaxation of effort and by absorption in the infinite” (Bryant, 2009:491)

Modern history significantly reconfigured the perception and significance of the physical within the realm of yoga. Clearly, it is asana practice that has largely become synonymous with yoga in the Western world, with the meditative and moral aspects relegated to a secondary or tertiary presence in American studios, or at times complete absence. Within India, colonial encounters with European physical culture invigorated the corporeal aspects of yoga practice for Indians, often with militant, nationalist underpinnings, and transnationalized physical yoga is manifest as an Olympic-grade competitive sport in the United States (Singleton, 2010). Nevertheless, all yoga teachers in their training are familiarized with the concept of union between the body and soul as definitive of yoga:

Asanas have been evolved over the centuries so as to exercise every muscle, nerve, and gland in the body. They secure a fine physique which is strong and elastic without being muscle bound and they keep the body free from disease. They reduce fatigue and soothe the nerves. But their real importance lies in the way they train and discipline the mind. Many actors, acrobats, athletes, dancers, musicians and sportsmen also possess superb physiques and have great control over the body, but they lack control over the mind, the intellect, and the Self. Hence they are in disharmony with themselves and one rarely comes across a balanced personality among them. They often put the body above all else. Though the yogi does not underrate his body, he does not think merely of its perfection but of his senses, mind, intellect, and soul. (Iyengar, 1966: 40-41)

Complementing Patanjali’s work, personal identity in yoga is explored by Swami Vivekananda, a religious scholar who arguably introduced America to Eastern spirituality at the turn of the 20th century. As part of his soteriological teachings, Vivekananda specified four specific yoga paths: karma, bhakti, raja, and jnana yoga (Nikhilananda, 1953). Expressions of these identities are present in most New York yoga studios in some form or another.

Karma yoga is the yoga of action, including charity and social reform. When yoga students in Brooklyn work at their local studio in exchange for free classes, it is often called “karma yoga” by the studio owner. Practicing postures is also understood as karma yoga, because it entails “doing something.” Bhakti yoga is the yoga of devotion enacted in prayer, or in performing live music such as sacred chanting, known as kirtan. Bhakti yoga provides the premise for weekend social gatherings at many New York yoga studios, often incorporating traditions that are locally familiar, such as the performance of American soul music alongside Sanskrit chanting and practicing yoga asana. Jnana yoga and raja yoga refer to the yoga of knowledge and meditation respectively. In the American setting, these yoga practices are to a large extent limited to the realm of special workshops, either for the duration of two hours one evening per week at the yoga studio, or on a weekend afternoon, or sometimes spread as a series of meetings led by a teacher over the course of a few weeks. Topics include the interpretation of sacred Hindu texts central to yoga, such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, and there is discussion of their application to modernity. Many yoga studios do not have the resources in terms of teaching staff to offer jnana or raja workshops at all. In the studios where these workshops are held, they can cost the same as an asana class, two to three times the price of an asana class (approximately \$35 for a two hour workshop), or occasionally, they are donation-based. Quite often, these classes are packed to capacity, gathering 25-35 students in the space of a small room typically used for yoga classes. The high attendance at these workshops attests to the conviction of many yoga practitioners that spirituality is constitutive of their practice.

The four classical identities of yoga are reinterpreted to resonate with the American context in productive ways described above. Yet identity within yoga is also subject to contemporary socioeconomics that alters the contours of yoga as a psychologically and physically restorative practice. Below, I trace the history of how yoga is reconfigured through shifting identities in gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhoods.

III. The Context of Gentrification and Emotional Geography

Gentrification is a phenomenon that has defined urban economic growth and development in the U.S. since the 1980's with pivotal implications for urban social identity and social exclusion. Summarily, gentrification is an intricate web of processes that recast the criminalized, sometimes derelict, and otherwise socially marginalized inner city containing poor, ethnic minority, and working class people into reconstructed residential havens for professional, middle- and upper-class denizens. Smith (1986) demystifies the political economy of gentrification, tying together the impacts of deindustrialization and urban rent gaps created by suburbanization on the city, followed by the onslaught of neoliberal capitalist growth models as the forces that restructured de-valorized urban space into a prized commodity. Concurrent with the economic mechanics of gentrification, cultural critiques draw in the subjective, humanistic factors that drive processes of gentrification (Zukin, 1989; Osman, 2011). In the first wave, the potential spaces of gentrification might be incubated by artists looking for large studio spaces and putative bohemians squatting in abandoned buildings; in other words, those who are economically diminutive, but those who have a relative choice in being so, and can cultivate a captivating atmosphere of cultural alterity. In the second wave, gentrification entails a population flowing into a neighborhood primed for gentrification by the speculative real estate market. This population seeks extant amenities simultaneously invoking urban authenticity and counterculture such as historic architecture, proximity to appealing, safe public spaces such as parks, fair-trade coffee shops, local organic restaurants, live music venues, and yoga studios.

Intrinsic to gentrification is the social exclusion and displacement of original neighborhood inhabitants, a racialized and class-identified process that casts conflictual subjectivities into sharp relief. For example, the gentrification-led development of Chicago's Humboldt Park area was steeped in a discourse that maligned the impoverished Puerto Rican community that lived there and antagonized their ethnic characteristics. They were marginalized and purged from the area through selective discriminatory policy tools in order to attract more affluent residents (Wilson and Grammenos, 2005). Similarly, gentrification of the Lower East Side in New York City posited a crucible for the crisis of representation and the identities contained in social space, juxtaposing the suffocating white privilege of gentrifiers with the anger of working class women of color whose subjectivity was subordinated as their streets were appropriated by the market as "prime real estate" (Cahill, 2006). The women of color, referred to as "the fed-up honeys," joined in a participatory action research project that allowed them to voice their frustration not just with pejorative stereotypes held about them, e.g. that they are promiscuous and welfare-dependent, but with longstanding issues of tangible inequality, such as the poor standard of public education they had access to.

Gentrifiers, neighborhood newcomers, are ambivalent about or only rhetorically embrace social diversity. In reality, gentrification and social mixing have proved a relative impossibility (Davidson, 2012). Gentrified neighborhoods experience profound social segregation, with gentrifiers occupying their own spaces and enjoying amenities catering to their tastes and economic capabilities. This is not inherently bad; scholars note the value of culturally segregated spaces for what might be called "subaltern identities" when they provide the context to invert dominant power relations and serve as psychological sanctuaries from an unequal society. However, the spaces only serve as subaltern sanctuaries until poor, working-class, and minority residents are eventually priced out of their own neighborhoods (Lees, 2008; Freeman, 2006; hooks, 1990).

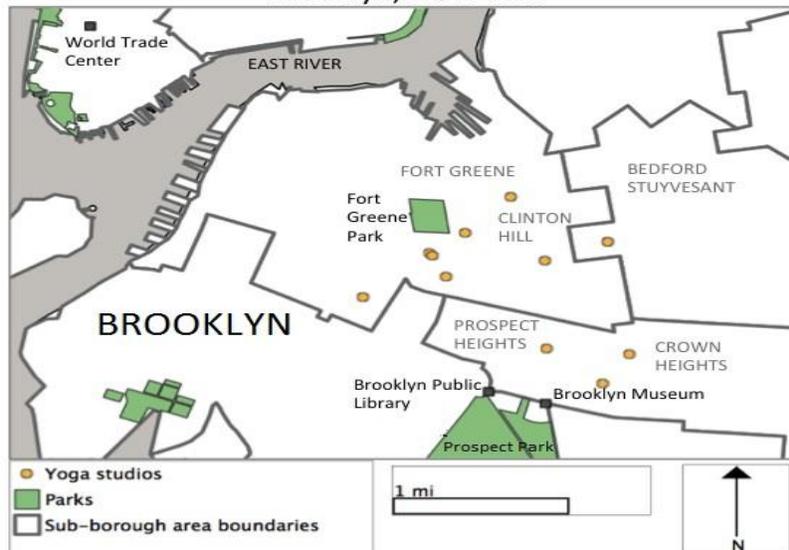
In that vein, the recent cultural turn in human geography has complemented political economic analyses of space and legitimated research into emotion and affect as a means of knowing, experiencing, and shaping space, appropriately named emotional geography (Pile, 2010). Emotional and affectual geography frame a scholarly mandate to investigate amorphous matters such as pain and alienation as they intersect with identities, bodies, and race to posit a more robust, sophisticated understanding of how cities and spaces are socially inhabited (Tolia-Kelly, 2010). Attendant to the emergence of emotional geography, research in medical geography has documented how people's conceptions of health and healing are deeply rooted in place, from natural landscapes to constructed spaces that manipulate embodiment in recursive, socially ordered ways. The concept of emotional health geography and its real impacts on human health has been legitimated through empirical and theoretical work including research about notions about body image or sexuality; the effects of the social construction of space on health disparities between races and economic classes, also known as "social determinants of health"; and the ethics of encounter between people in spaces of care, i.e. experiential settings involving both emotional and physical labor (Smyth, 2005; Cutchin, 2007; Fitzpatrick and LaGory, 2010; Northridge, et al, 2003; Conradson, 2003).

This research on yoga studios in New York's gentrifying neighborhoods adds to the growing discourse on emotional health geography by interpolating "alternative" health practices with conceptions of identity. Yoga studios and yoga practice have been exposed as "a mark of conspicuous, embodied and emotion-centered middle-class consumption" traditionally encompassing the dual ethics of self-care and compassion for others, now reinvented as a commodity that reinforces the exclusionary emotional terrain of gentrification (Kern, 2011). I address this critique directly in my own analysis, understanding it as one piece of a more complicated narrative about American yoga that is still unfolding. Close examination of the dynamics of yoga studios in Brooklyn, New York suggests that the numerous senses of identity encompassed in the social space of yoga indeed contain the transformative, cultural ingredients for a healthier society and can be recuperated as such.

Notes on methodology

I use ethnographic research examining yoga studios in the rapidly gentrifying borough of Brooklyn in New York City to trace the intersection of social identity with the American practice of yoga, yoga being conceptualized as part of a regimen for health, healing, and overall wellness. I focus largely on one studio in particular located in the neighborhood of Prospect Heights. The 2010 U.S. Census revealed that Prospect Heights was the fourth fastest gentrifying neighborhood in America using an increase in white share of population as an indicator. In ten years, the white percentage of the population in Prospect Heights more doubled, from 17% to 38% (Berg, 2012). In addition, through the organizing work of neighborhood associations, several of the blocks in Prospect Heights have been designated as a "landmark historic district," an urban planning policy tool that will preserve the 19th century architecture characteristic of neighborhood housing stock. Prospect Heights also contains the Brooklyn Museum, the iconic central branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, and shares its border with Prospect Park, designed by Olmstead and Vaux, the landscape architects who created Central Park in Manhattan. Summarily, Prospect Heights is emblematic of a gentrifying New York City neighborhood. The neighborhood yoga studios I used to triangulate my data, Clinton Hill, Fort Greene and Bedford Stuyvesant, are similar to Prospect Heights in their location and exposure to gentrification.

Yoga in Gentrifying Neighborhoods Brooklyn, New York



The narrative data presented is based on interviews with fifteen key informants. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews with eight yoga teachers from the primary site in Prospect Heights. One of the yoga teachers was the founder of that yoga studio, and all had taught there for at least five years. I took on the role of participant-observer by attending classes almost daily at the studio for one year with a variety of teachers. I also attended numerous community events and special yoga workshops organized by the studio to understand its place as a community social center built around a notion of holistic wellness and spirituality. Finally, I interviewed the superintendent of the building where the yoga studio is located, a long-time neighborhood resident who could reflect on socioeconomic shifts in the area.

I triangulate my data drawn from the Prospect Heights studio that is the primary site of this research with in-depth, semi-structured interviews with three yoga studio owners and yoga teachers in adjacent neighborhoods which are also experiencing gentrification. I conducted one in-depth semi-structured interview with one yoga teacher who founded her own studio in Bedford Stuyvesant, a less-gentrified, predominantly black neighborhood located on the eastern border of Prospect Heights. I also conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with one yoga teacher who teaches in a studio in Fort Greene, a more-gentrified neighborhood to the north of Prospect Heights, and one studio owner in Clinton Hill. Last, I interviewed and have remained in dialogue with three long-time students at the Prospect Heights studio. Two of them are work-exchange students and perform administrative work for the studio, such as signing in students to class and cleaning the rooms, in exchange for free classes, i.e. they are karma yogis per the studio owner. One work-exchange student has resided in the neighborhood for eight years, and the other for eighteen years.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for content using the principles of narrative inquiry and research (Andrews, et al, 2008). Following Kearns (1997), I privilege the validity of narrative and metaphor in deconstructing the subjective emotional geography of health, employing an analytical framework that trusts the stories I collected. My analysis is rooted in the metaphor of “non-traditional therapeutic landscapes,” such as yoga studios in New York City that situate shared symbolic meanings and signifiers regarding wellness. Kearns construes the health geographer as a “co-creator of local histories and translator of local aspirations.” Accordingly, I quote at length from interviews in order to invoke a sense of oral history around contemporary yoga, and I include myself as a researcher as part of the interpretive community that negotiates the space of urban yoga studios as a place of healing.

IV. The Yoga Teacher as Community Healer

Interviews with yoga teachers and studio owners in gentrifying neighborhoods in Brooklyn reveal a tripartite layering of identities. Yoga teachers are at once healers, community builders, and the mediators of social alienation incubated by gentrification. Each identity is explored in the narratives presented below.

Unlike activities such as running or walking to maintain good health, yoga requires a fair amount of instruction from someone experienced in its principles and methods before it can be safely and effectively practiced independently. Numerous self-help yoga instruction manuals exist, in addition to DVDs which allow better visualization of postures, but few students of yoga would disagree that the nuances of breath and alignment that remit the maximum benefits of yoga will elude the beginner without a teacher's guidance. This is especially true in the case of those who wish to pursue yoga as part of therapeutic treatment for an injury, or for chronic conditions such as arthritis and asthma, or for stress management.

As a result, the yoga teacher assumes a role of leadership within yoga practice specifically as a healer. The teacher possesses specialized knowledge which is understood to alleviate suffering both physical and mental. An organic sense of community is fostered between those who seek the mind-body healing attributes of yoga and the teacher who conveys them. Teachers evoke a sacred space out of the setting of an urban yoga studio with sensual effects including sound, such as chanting "om" and playing inspirational music during the class, and sometimes by the burning of incense at altars filled with images of Hindu deities before they begin their classes. During class, the yoga teacher will often adjust students individually, modifying their postures in accordance with injuries or inflexibilities they may have, and explicating the alignment of the pose in accordance with yogic perspectives on anatomy and bodily energetics. Alternatively, the teacher might encourage more adept students into advanced expressions of the poses, such as guiding them into deeper twists with a combination of gentle pushes on their spine and slow breaths that the student is to emulate. In this way, the teacher acts as a healer accessible to varying levels of infirmity and agility alike, and signifies a metaphysical orientation for physical practices.

The identity of a yoga teacher as community healer is illustrated in the story of how the first yoga studio in Prospect Heights came to be. A neighborhood resident had completed a yoga teacher training course just before the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. She and her family were able to watch the towers burn from their apartment window. For days afterwards, the air in Brooklyn carried soot from the smoldering ruins across the river, making the new teacher and others in the area physically ill in addition to being emotionally traumatized. Memorial services and vigils were held for the numerous lives lost, including one for the local fire company that had lost all of its firefighters on the morning of 9/11. The teacher recounts:

I remember the frustration I felt right afterward. I just wanted to do something to be of service, but I had no venue. I remember the feeling of impotence, walking around with these new skills and this desire to be of service, and there was no opportunity. So I went to the director of the Washington Avenue Merchants Association.³ He was a great guy, African-American, about my age, coming out of 1960s community activism and grassroots organizing. I said I'd like to offer a free yoga and meditation class for the community. Could you help me find a church basement, or a community center, or something?

That was the time when this neighborhood, certainly over by Washington Avenue, was a war zone, gangs and drugs, and he was really at the forefront of trying to rebuild the community. [The director] looked at me and said, that's not what this community needs. With this community needs is a full-time center for healing. And I

³ Washington Avenue is a main commercial thoroughfare in Prospect Heights and is the neighborhood's eastern boundary.

think you are the person who should do it, and I know the space. So he took me to look at the space. It was in a building that had been vacant for thirty years, a crack house for about twenty of those years, with no roof on it.⁴

In this teacher's narrative, the metaphor of healing a wounded city (Foner, 2005) translates locally to healing a pre-gentrification neighborhood struggling with the social decay associated with drug abuse and violence. The healing metaphor subsequently acquires literal meaning at the scale of the bodies that enter the studio after it opened in October 2001 as a response to an explicit community need. This teacher, as well as yoga studio owners in the adjacent Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bedford Stuyvesant and Clinton Hill, asserts that at the forefront of their consciousness is hiring teachers who ethnically reflect the population of their neighborhoods. They state that many yoga teachers working in their studios reside in the neighborhoods themselves; some even received teacher training specifically to teach in their own community. Indicatively, the studio owner in Prospect Heights recalls:

....walking down Washington Avenue [in 2001], I was the only white person. Often, I would open the doors to the studio and the only people who would come in were African-American and West Indian. I'd be the only white person in the room teaching to a class of 15 people of color. So I knew that I needed to represent that in the teaching staff. I was aware of the importance of the image you give off in terms of attracting and providing a comfort level for people that might feel that this isn't their milieu; that they are not welcome. At one point, we had a staff of about ten and seven of them were people of color.⁵

To further ground yoga into the social realities of the neighborhood, several of the classes offered when the Prospect Heights studio first opened were donation-based, "community classes," meaning that students paid according to their abilities. The availability of community classes prevents price from excluding anyone from potentially practicing yoga when the typical price of a yoga class in Brooklyn is between \$10 and \$18. Almost all yoga studios in Brooklyn continue to offer at least one community class per week, often attracting the highest number of students compared to any other class at the studio. The economic dynamics of community yoga classes posit the yoga teacher's identity and role as a healer into that of a public health resource: some students pay one dollar for a 90 minute yoga class. Despite the economic challenge offering community classes poses to yoga studio owners, they internalize the challenge as a rewarding component of their social mission. A studio owner and yoga teacher in Bedford- Stuyvesant where the majority of students are people of color described it as such:

We have a free class every Saturday at noon. I consider that class to be one of the greatest gifts to this studio. Quite a few people have said, why not do it by donation? I don't want any donations, because if you ask for donations, it is embarrassing if you do not have it to give. Or, you still feel like you should give. It is a good thing if you can, but I feel like this is a level playing field. Just come, you get here early, I don't care why. It doesn't necessarily have to be economic need. If you have a mat, bring it. If not, we will give you one. We will give you towels. We will give you water. You will have everything that you need. And that is my favorite class to teach. It is packed. We have to turn people away [because the studio is full]. It is amazing. It feels like all of those categories go away. If you want, you can practice in your socks, I don't care. If you are 300 pounds, you are welcome. It's like there was a call to have a space in this community. At the core of my vision is creating a space where movement has meaning, a space that is dedicated to pleasure and living

⁴ Interview with yoga teacher, May 8, 2012.

⁵ Interview with yoga teacher, May 8, 2012.

through your body and your body's wisdom. It is such a gift to watch people come in, and maybe they are closed or shut down, or confused or sad or depressed, then you just see them start to blossom and light up and open. And you're like whoa, that was the same person! It's a wonderful transformation to watch.⁶

Stories such as this encourage a vision of yoga as a collective social practice that reclaims the urban neighborhood as a collective social space. But unsurprisingly, yoga teachers are simultaneously compelled to mediate social divisions in gentrifying neighborhoods while they work to build a community of health. By introducing new forms of physical culture to areas divested of basic health resources and by serving as a magnet for gentrifiers, the advent of yoga studios accentuates difference and inequality between neighborhood residents. Health is represented as a luxury and the influx of gentrifiers in studios insinuates a cultural hegemony of health. One teacher recounts the following anecdote from the Prospect Heights studio in its first year:

Every now and again you would get people saying things, just like, hey, what's going on in there? That's part of being in a neighborhood where people aren't used to seeing yoga. People come and peer in the window, and they are not trying to be subtle about it either. I actually had an altercation with someone. A guy kept knocking on the glass. I had gone over and pointed to a sign that said, 'class in session, please come back at such and such a time.' And he just kept knocking. Finally, I pulled the curtain aside and I said through the glass, 'please come back later, we are having a class in here.' He started yelling, and I believe he called me 'a stupid white b***h.' And a pin could have dropped at that moment. There were a lot of white people in class that day, more than usual, as the universe would work it. Everyone was in their pose, and their eyes just got really big, and they were looking at me because I am the girl who will call people out in class, and say, 'you need to listen to me.' And so, in a very deadpan way, I just said, 'shows what he knows, because I am only half a white b***h.' I'm half Japanese.

After class, two of my students, adorable, sweet gay boys living way deep in Crown Heights⁷ over on some the street that I don't even know where it is, got their shoes and walked outside, and they were waiting. And they said, we wanted to walk with you. Isn't that sweet? They just wanted to make sure that the man who called me a stupid white b***h wasn't waiting for me.⁸

This anecdote veritably encapsulates the dialectics of social space in gentrifying neighborhoods, not just yoga studios. Long-time neighborhood residents feel shut out of a transformative process that is proceeding in plain sight and is beyond their control. At the same time, newly arrived gentrifiers oscillate between a fear of the extant social construct they are penetrating whose literal spatial boundaries they are unfamiliar with, and a paradoxical sense of ownership of urban space regardless of their alterity as yoga teachers (and, in this case, as homosexuals) with the self-assurance that people "need to listen" to them. In this way, yoga teachers are healers, but not for everyone in the community.

Not all the accounts of yoga teachers' identity as healers within the space of the studio are purely celebratory either. Several accounts involve significant level of skill on the part of teachers in mediating psychological and psychosomatic crises with students, as described below by a teacher in Fort Greene:

⁶ Interview with yoga teacher, April 20, 2012.

⁷ Crown Heights is a neighborhood adjacent to Prospect Heights that is also one of America's top 25 fastest gentrifying zip codes.

⁸ Interview with yoga teacher, April 11, 2012.

I had students coming to me with a really brutal stuff, like, 'I was raped, that's why my hips are like such and such,' or, 'I was abused as a child.' Others would just fall apart during a hip opening posture, like the wheel, and then realize then that they had been abused, or tap into something that they weren't sure what. So I became interested in how our bodies beat us up that way, how all our history is stored and how we somaticize. I continue to work with those students. I pace them in a lot of those poses that open up those energy centers so they are not just getting bombarded by their history, so that when they do flood, they can say, 'I know what flooding is.' I don't get freaked out. I think just knowing that your teacher isn't freaked out is helpful, that I have seen this, this is normal, this is human, you are working through this. Here, if it happens in the room, I can still be with them. Nonverbally, just sit with them.⁹

In this instance we re-establish the place of a yoga teacher as a leadership figure in a healing process, one that would impact individuals deeply and theoretically affect social dynamics in the larger community. Yoga teachers act as the figures who, "create a sanctuary to make people feel connected to something whole."¹⁰ Even when teachers focus on physical postures and precise alignment and lead a yoga class that minimizes soteriological language, they feel that through a proper asana practice, a student will access the energy centers that moderate their emotions. Ultimately, even without articulating the yogic language of spiritual transformation, yoga teachers reciprocate social expectation from students and identify themselves with the responsibility of a healer.

V. The Duality of Identity among Yoga Students

Based on the narratives in the preceding section, it is evident that yoga teachers bear the identity of the healer because they are recognized as such by the community of students they serve. But who constitutes the student community? The identity of yoga students has undergone shifts in tandem with the population shifts associated with gentrification. I discern two discrete identities for yoga students through this research. The first is the yoga student as *sadhaka*, the Sanskrit term used in traditional yoga to mean seeker or aspirant, i.e. one who aspires to the mind-body union that lies at the core of the yogic conception of physical health and a state that facilitates spiritual liberation. The second identity, a direct consequence of the sociology of gentrification, is the yoga student as a consumer of the business of yoga.

Yoga students as *sadhakas*, or aspirants, interpret their experience with yoga classes as something distinct from pure physical exercise. In the case of the Prospect Heights studio, for example, although students may not have been familiar with yoga, its cultural orientation, or its methods before entering the studio, since the early days the students were receptive specifically to the combination of engaging both mind and body as a means to wellness. Often at the end of class, the students express to the teacher their appreciation of the relaxing, meditative qualities of the class. At some classes, it is not uncommon for *sadhakas* (usually women) to shed tears of emotional release elicited by the combination of practicing postures based in the science of psychosomatic energetics, and by the metaphysical explication of the sequence of postures by the teacher during class. The teachers in turn claim that they can detect decreases in tension somaticized in individual students, and invite them to cultivate a sense of individual transformative energy as they close their practice, e.g. "join your hands and honor the space between your palms

⁹ Interview with yoga teacher, April 17, 2012.

¹⁰ Interview with yoga teacher, April 11, 2012.

where anything is possible.”¹¹ Both teachers and students concur that sadhakas have a sense of personal investment and ownership in the yoga studio itself. A student described her early experiences at the Prospect Heights studio thus:

It was a plain and simple space, which is how I think a yoga studio should be.¹² I would never worry about having plans for a Saturday evening because I always thought I could go to the kundalini class,¹³ and it would just be about women connecting with their bodies and each other through movement, and through consciousness. I used to sweep up the studio before the class, and I would be all smiling and pushing the broom around singing. You know, my mother cleans houses, and when I told my sister that I clean the yoga studio she said, ‘Does Mami know you do that?’ But I really liked it, I felt like that space was mine, it was ours, plain and simple. We would just come together and it was about consciousness.¹⁴

In contrast to the spiritual inclinations of sadhaka yoga students, newer students arriving as part of neighborhood gentrification approach yoga as consumers in the fitness industry. They focus on its gymnastic aspects and seek a challenging workout in the studio, often adding their own advanced postures beyond the teachers’ instruction, such as inverting into handstands or headstands intermittently throughout the class. In interviews, teachers remarked that the majority of students currently patronizing their classes were interested almost singularly in a rigorous physical practice that they can fit into a busy schedule:

You’re looking out into a room and people are just like, Christ, I am here and I just want to move and stretch. I am stressed out and I have to leave. They are not here to feel their spirit soar.¹⁵
Many of the questions [potential students ask] are: is it going to be hard? Am I going to sweat? I know it’s only for one hour, but I am pressed for time. I will come, but is it core? Is it power yoga?¹⁶

Apart from prioritizing a physically challenging class, yoga studio owners in Brooklyn attest to the material demands that a consumerist student will project on the studio. Demands from newer students have included higher-quality yoga mats made available for use at the studio, the production of T-shirts and tank tops branded with the yoga studio name, and request for the availability of refreshing drinks and snacks for after class, such as freshly squeezed vegetable juices, fruit smoothies, chilled vitamin water, and macrobiotic protein bars. In response, studios such as the one in Prospect Heights have introduced a wide range of yoga products for sale, including natural rubber yoga mats, yoga mat bags, yoga clothing, water bottles, and locally made, natural, organic toiletries such as soap and hand cream.

The tastes of consumerist gentrifiers are not just limited to the introduction of expensive yoga accessories. Their preferences have been asserted more aggressively within the yoga classroom in direct confrontations with teachers that are incongruous with the philosophy of yoga. An African-American male yoga teacher related an incident when a Caucasian female student, new to his class, demanded that he shut off the music that he had selected

¹¹ Quote from a teacher at the Prospect Heights studio, February 2011.

¹² The Prospect Heights studio moved to a new, larger location two blocks away from the original location in June 2011.

¹³ Kundalini is a style of yoga focused on the notion of transformative energy.

¹⁴ Interview with student, May 20, 2012.

¹⁵ Interview with yoga teacher, April 17, 2012.

¹⁶ Interview with yoga teacher, May 10, 2012.

which included a song by Stevie Wonder. She then told him after the class that she forgave him for playing it in the first place.¹⁷ At the same studio, a female yoga teacher of mixed African American heritage recounted that a Caucasian female student attending her class for the first time inquired before the class if she was the teacher. After confirming that she was, the student collected her belongings and left. The teacher interpreted the student's departure as rooted in prejudice.¹⁸ Ostensibly, the students in both these incidents understood yoga not as a means for the dissolution of social divisions and the boundaries of otherness, but purely as a product they purchased. When the yoga they received did not satisfy their desires, the practice was rejected.

The materialism of newer yoga students, their primary identity as consumers, and even their subconscious prejudices do not preclude them from being seekers in their own right, according to studio owners. In defense of gentrifiers, yoga teachers state that “everybody needs some ego” in a competitive society, even consumers constitute community, and “any community space is a spiritual space”¹⁹:

It is definitely a community yoga studio. Totally. Nobody is coming from the city to take a yoga class here. Oh! Wait, yes and no. A community of wealthy Fort Greeners. Wealthy, white Fort Greeners.²⁰
I think that people don't think they want it [spirituality], but then they start to see that in wanting to sweat, something changes when you sweat. They are letting go of something. It is more complicated than I can put into words, but I think that they do yearn for it, they just don't know what ‘it’ is.²¹

As yoga studios in Brooklyn neighborhoods evolve to absorb a population of gentrifiers, yoga teachers have taken note that people of color are far less present in the studio. In part, this is a result of residential displacement and forces in the property market that are out of the purview of yoga teachers. However, the teachers maintain that displacement notwithstanding, there are proportionately fewer yoga students of color now than there could be, considering that these neighborhoods are still “majority minority.”

In response to the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities practicing yoga and the intuitive sense that this was related to the large number of white students in yoga studios, two African American yoga teachers challenged the assumption that every yoga studio is a socially inclusive space and organized seasonal yoga retreats with people of color in mind. The retreats were open to everybody of all races and held in location where other yoga retreats were simultaneously occurring, but advertised to the public with a “people of color” label. One yoga teacher described the motivation behind organizing the retreats this way:

I think it is an American or maybe a Western [thing] that we still have an issue around race that we don't want to acknowledge. Sometimes people don't challenge their own assumptions that they bring to an experience. There is a certain amount of privilege to not challenge those things. It's good to create spaces where you don't have to feel any of that. You can just show up and do your thing. You don't have to monitor yourself or have that double-consciousness.

¹⁷ Interview with yoga teacher, June 27, 2012.

¹⁸ Interview with yoga teacher, June 21, 2012.

¹⁹ Interview with yoga teacher, June 26, 2012.

²⁰ Interview with yoga teacher, April 17, 2012.

²¹ Interview with yoga teacher, May 10, 2012.

At the people of color yoga retreat, we organize around themes. There was a breast cancer theme. They might talk about how, as black women, it might feel like to lose a breast, how your body image is impacted by it. It is not different than what white women would talk about, but maybe a heavyset black woman would not want to talk about it with a white woman who is a housewife. Maybe she has had to do that and to work as a bus driver. There was a whole thing on gun violence, whether it was women who had lost their sons to gun violence or something else, and that was pretty heavy. They were grieving and they didn't know where to put the loss, especially because it is endemic to the black community, that situation. I think the thing that is more common that they don't want to talk about with other people is body image. Being overweight, that is an issue.

I went to a people of color retreat where was a woman from Thailand who said that she had gone to some other retreat, and people made her feel like she wasn't welcome, and she was like, 'but the Buddha is brown like me!' So it's not just black women who have a "bad attitude." A lot of people of color feel that way. I think people think that we are having some agenda meeting on blackness that they are excluded from, and it's not that. There have been times when there have been Laotian women, and Latino women, and the whole gamut. It's that they want to feel comfortable. It's just about comfort level and nothing else.²²

The words of this teacher invoke none other than Patanjali's own pronouncement of yoga as a space of comfortable relaxation. In responding specifically to emotional crises identified with race and class such as gun violence, but also maintaining an equal, open atmosphere that consciously welcomed all cultures, the retreat organizers rescue yoga from bourgeois entrapment and reinstate it as a community healing resource.

VI. Conclusion

Through ethnography in gentrifying New York neighborhoods and employing metaphors of identity, I have located the yoga studio as conflicted terrain within an emotional geography of urban health. I examined how yoga, and by extension, the social context for wellness, is configured through the layered identities of yoga teachers as both community leaders and mediators of healing; of the identity of the yoga student as a seeker of holistic means to maintain health, including a sense of spirituality and psychological clarity; and third, of the identity of yoga students as demand-driven consumers of yoga in its commodified form which is not divested of yoga health benefits, although it is distinct from more traditional conceptions of yoga practice.

Yoga teachers perceive of the space of yoga practice as a sanctuary for building affirmative connections to one's own body and mind. A mutual recognition between teachers and students identifies the yoga teacher as a provider of therapeutic practices that mitigate stress, pain, and other chronic or recurrent hindrances to health in a nurturing, non-competitive environment. Teachers who have founded studios in inner cities undergoing gentrification identify themselves as figures who have responded to the need for community spaces that promote a sense of healing and well-being. Based on this research, the yoga teacher embraces the identity of community healer and serves to promote good health.

Students of yoga take on a dual identity in this particular ethnography. In the first instance, students are those individuals who desire a combination of physical exercises complimented by some version of conscious effort that mediates and calms the activities of their cognitive mind. By participating in the full range of yoga, i.e. physical postures as well as breathing and meditation, they experience mental as well as physical ease as a consequence of practice. These students develop a sense of belonging in the studio space, along with a sense of community with

²² Interview with yoga teacher, June 14, 2012.

others practicing in the studio. Speaking broadly, I identify them as sadhakas because they maintain integrity to the yogic premise of mind-body union and the transcendence of ego as instrumental for good health.

In the second instance, yoga students who are gentrifiers, i.e. affluent urban residents in formerly marginalized neighborhoods, are identified as consumers of a service. They approach the studio as a site for enacting acrobatic physical postures made available through certain styles of yoga. The performance of advanced postures affirms their corporeal sensibility of health. This sensibility is accentuated by the induction of material effects to the studio such as name-brand yoga clothing, and the intolerance of existing cultural attributes of the studio such as the ethnicity of the teachers. Nevertheless, yoga teachers serving consumerist students optimistically suggest that if consumer-students did not at least subconsciously hunger for spiritual attunement, they would not choose to practice a physical tradition grounded in a metaphysical science of the body. In taking this stance, yoga teachers retain their identity as community healers while functioning productively in a capitalist context.

In response to the appropriation of urban yoga studios by larger forces in the dominant culture, some yoga teachers and students, particularly those who identify as people of color, have collaborated to create spaces for yoga that they consider culturally convivial (cf. Gilroy, 2005). In these spaces, yoga as a holistic healing practice is reclaimed as a source of strength. Although nurturing separation is counter to the philosophy of yoga, actualizing spaces for yoga that appreciate cultural difference is essential in order for yoga to serve as a health resource for people of all identities. Further research on such spaces for yoga is necessary to ascertain their ability to convey yoga as a means towards better community health in an unequal society.

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