Tightrope Walkers: An Ethnography of Yoga, 
Precariousness, and Privilege in California’s Silicon Valley

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Cultural Anthropology 
in the Graduate School of Duke University 
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An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School of Duke University 2013
Abstract

This dissertation offers an account of precarious neoliberal subjectivity by examining the suffering of the privileged as it relates to the practice of Western yoga in California’s Silicon Valley. Yoga culture underlines creating connections and community. But my research, based on twenty-seven month fieldwork in an epicenter of the global high-tech economy, reveals that yoga practitioners actually seek to experience and create “space.” I suggest that yoga practitioners often cultivate an interiority aimed at giving themselves room from the judgment and expectations of others.

This dissertation portrays the complicated lives of people who are more privileged than most. In so doing, this study questions the separation between “real” and “privileged” suffering; and it explores the ethical and political implications of the problems of the well-off. I suggest that the destructive aspects of neoliberal capitalism and late modernity do not hurt only the marginalized traditionally studied by anthropologists, but also—albeit in very different ways—those who supposedly benefit from them.

The social scenes of modern yoga are sites of ambivalently embodied neoliberal logic, where clusters of promises and recipes for an “art of living” are critical about aspects of capitalism while enjoying its comfort. Even though the yogic ethic and politics do not adhere to the anthropological ideals of political action, Western yoga is often an ethical practice that does not simply reproduce neoliberal logic, but also shifts it slightly from within. By creating disruption of subjectivity and gaining space
from old and habitual ways of being, yoga sometimes opens up a new territory of change and reflection.
To my parents
Contents

Abstract \hspace{2cm} iv
Acknowledgements \hspace{2cm} xi
Preface: Roots of Insecurity \hspace{2cm} xvi

1 Introduction \hspace{2cm} 1

1.1 Saturated \hspace{2cm} 2
1.2 Brainwashed \hspace{2cm} 7
1.3 Raw Motivation, or: Trying to Circumvent the Suffering of the Privileged \hspace{2cm} 8
1.4 Arrival Story \hspace{2cm} 11
1.5 Where, What, When, Who \hspace{2cm} 13
1.5.1 Where 1: Locations at the Age of Transnationalism and Neoliberalism \hspace{2cm} 14
1.5.2 Where 2: California \hspace{2cm} 19
1.5.3 Where 3: The Yoga Studio \hspace{2cm} 22
1.5.4 What: Yoga in the West \hspace{2cm} 24
1.5.5 Who: White Middle-Upper Class Women \hspace{2cm} 28
1.5.6 Methodology and Writing Choices \hspace{2cm} 36
1.6 Chapter Overview \hspace{2cm} 41

2 The Suffering of the Privileged: Foundations \hspace{2cm} 46

2.1 Descartes and Mind/Body Dualism \hspace{2cm} 48
2.2 Alienated Workers, Vulnerable Bodies \hspace{2cm} 50
2.3 Rethinking Power and the Precariousness of Neoliberalism 59
2.4 Subjectification and its Discontents 65
2.5 The Journey Back In 73
2.6 Harmony and Disarray 80
2.7 Conclusion: Gender, Precariousness, and Yoga as an Intimate Public 88
  2.7.1 Stereotypical Femininity 89
  2.7.2 Intimacy, Publics, and Precariousness 91
  2.7.3 Politics 93

3 “I Need My Space:” The Connection Myth and the Mechanics of Stress 96
  3.1 Craving Connection, Aspiring for Community 97
  3.2 The Mechanics of Stress 110
  3.3 Space 123
     3.3.1 Internal Space 131
     3.3.2 Mind the Gap: Mental Space 132
     3.3.3 Beyond Skin Boundaries 134
     3.3.4 The Space Between Us 135
  3.4 Conclusion 138

4 Great Expectations: Psycho-Biological Stress and the Turn Inward 141
  4.1 The Anthropology of Stress 144
  4.2 Bio-Psychological Stress 147
  4.3 Bio-Psychological Stress in Yogic Discourses 153
  4.4 Stress as a Way of Life 158
  4.5 The Retreat Inward: Body Learning and Interiority Making 183
     4.5.1 How Does Your Body Feel In This Present Moment? 184
     4.5.2 Doubting the Mind 189
4.5.3 The Ego .................................................. 194
4.6 Conclusion .................................................. 201

5 Interior Enemies: Cancer, Anxiety, and Toxicity 207
5.1 Cancer, the Body, and the Spirit of the Times ............... 211
5.2 Space, Stress, and Interiority .......................... 219
  5.2.1 Cancer and Space ...................................... 222
  5.2.2 Cancer and Stress ...................................... 225
  5.2.3 Cancer and Interiority .................................. 227
5.3 Healing, Cleanliness and Toxicity ........................... 228
  5.3.1 Healing .................................................. 233
  5.3.2 Cleanliness and Toxicity .............................. 235
  5.3.3 Politicizing Cancer ..................................... 245
  5.3.4 Yoga and the (Im)Possibility of Structural Change .... 250
5.4 Conclusion .................................................. 254

6 The Yogic Ethics and the Spirit of Neoliberalism 258
6.1 Ethics, Happiness, and Virtue in Ancient Greek Thought ... 265
6.2 Yogic Self-Care .............................................. 271
  6.2.1 Yamas and Niyamas: The Self-Care Spin on Nonviolence ... 272
  6.2.2 The Little We Can Do ................................... 275
  6.2.3 The Right Affects: Anger, Compassion, and Detachment ... 280
6.3 Relationships ............................................... 288
6.4 Making a Difference ........................................ 296
  6.4.1 Small Steps ............................................. 297
  6.4.2 Nina’s Ethical Dilemma .................................. 301
  6.4.3 Vegetarianism and Veganism .......................... 304
6.4.4 The Art of Yoga Project ........................................... 309

6.5 Foucault, Lacan, and The Ethics of Self-Care ..................... 318

7 Conclusion: Embodied Aspirations as Social Critique ........ 326

7.1 Intimate Publics, the Private, and the Political .................... 328

7.2 Aspirations ................................................................... 331

7.3 Distinctions ................................................................... 336

7.4 Neoliberal Capitalism and the American Dream ............... 339

Bibliography ................................................................. 343

Biography ................................................................. 360
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As a new parent, I am just starting to realize how tricky it is to unconditionally love and support your child while also allowing her to make mistakes, find her own path, and relieve her from the burden of your own expectations and desires (as much as one can). My wise and loving parents, Sarit and Dani Bar, always helped me in whatever way they could, and were completely selfless about it. I know that my choice of studying in the U.S. was (and is) not easy for them, and that they miss us every single day. This dissertation is dedicated to them with unlimited gratitude. They are the best parents and grandparents anyone could wish for, and I thank them for their love, support, and sacrifice. More than everything, I thank them for choosing life, in the full sense of the word.
Preface: Roots of Insecurity

It is well known that axes of class, gender and race always intersect, and that certain intersections are underprivileged and thus, destine people to various disadvantages. But what happens at the fairly privileged intersections? Are they devoid of “real” suffering? This dissertation sheds light on one such intersection by examining “privilege” and juxtaposing it with issues of self image and stress, thus thinking about the significance of stress and precariousness from an anthropological perspective.

Can one easily distinguish between suffering that emerges from sexism, poverty, and racism (or, in my case, Jewish Israeli ethnic definitions), and suffering that entails low self esteem and a sense of insecurity? I was born and raised in an Israeli kibbutz, the daughter of a father of Libyan descent (Sephardi) and a mother of Polish decent (Ashkenazi). My mother was born to two holocaust survivors who scrambled to save their pennies and give their daughter an education and a profession, the two things my grandmother valued most. The home they built was a loving one, but it was full of sad silences and unspoken fears. Given that they were deeply traumatized immigrants who had their families and lives completely erased, it does not take much to guess that my grandparent’s family was built on a shaky foundation and that a great sense of ephemerality always dwelled in the tiny and dark apartment that was their home. My mother grew up to be a serious, anxious, and way-too-thin young woman (she later told me that for the first twenty years of her life “nothing ever

1 On racial inferiority in relation to self esteem, see: Long (1935); Zick and Chryssochoou (2004); Clark and Clark (1950).
tasted good”). She became a high school teacher, a job she still holds today. The queen of stability and safe routines, she is a magnet to many friends, neighbors and students who respect her for her gracefulness and wisdom, and seek her listening presence and advice.

My father never knew his own father, as the latter passed away due to liver failure caused by alcoholism at the age of thirty-two, not before gambling away all of the family’s small savings. My father was two years old at the time. His mother, a new immigrant from Libya to Israel, was left with four sons and a sick baby girl who passed away from polio soon after my grandfather died. My grandmother was an assembly line worker who did not manage to provide for her four sons. She never remarried. My father remembers stuffing pieces of dry bread into a hot cup of tea in order to make for a warm, satisfying meal. At the age of ten, he was sent to live on a kibbutz with a foster family (“external child” was the name that was used in the kibbutzim for foster kids). He had plenty of food there, but he was a brown, small kid, surrounded by strong, presumably bright, white kids who often made fun of him. He never finished high school, and while his childhood friends became business executives, he became a truck driver—a job he still performs at the age of sixty-three.

As a child, I was not aware of all of that. I had no idea how insecure life had been for my grandparents and parents. Though we never had much money, I was part of the Israeli elite, as kibbutz members enjoyed a certain prestige at the time. Despite the shadows of the first Lebanon War (1982), the first Palestinian uprising (1987-1993), and the first Gulf War (1991), life felt relatively safe for me. But there was always some sense of social insecurity in the air. I remember having a strong sense that my parents’ best friends were better than us. As a six- or seven-year-old child, I explained that to myself by assuming that it must be the result of them being blond-hair-blue-eyed families (having their roots in Germany, the Netherlands, and Australia), while we all have brown hair and eyes.
Feelings of self doubt and an inability to feel comfortable with myself were always part of my life. The markers shifted, but the feeling of not being good enough persisted. Being in academia for the last fourteen years has not always helped. For years, I brought my maternal grandmother one dean’s award after another, presenting her the certificates like religious offerings. She kept them in the closet near her favorite sofa, ready to be pulled out when guests come in. But I compared myself to everybody else and often felt like a fake. Since I was always honest about my feelings, I knew very well that many of the people around me suffered from the common academic “impostor syndrome.” Yet, like others from it, I was not fully able to respect the suffering of others because I knew that only in my case it was really real—whereas others simply did not realize how bright they were. Hence, knowing that “everyone in academia is anxious,” as so many interviewees and friends decisively declared, was personally meaningless. My travels and conversations, however, did teach me just how common those feelings are. I found intense unhappiness among so many privileged people, mainly women, and decided to make this the focus of my research.

Is it wrong to draw a connection between “real,” survival-like insecurities and “psychological” ones? The connection, if there is one, is by no means simple. Most people have some family heritage or scarring personal experiences of insecurity, even if they were lucky enough to be born in a Western country and never suffer from hunger, brutal violence, or curable “Third World” diseases. Differently put, life can be pretty rough, even for those who have relative financial stability. The stories in the following pages include experiences of abuse, eating disorders, sexual harassment, mental disorders, and more. How these translate into everyday life and into precariousness is a complex question, and the answer must not neglect political economy, class, race, gender, education, and other factors. However, the suffering I discuss in this dissertation does not always emerge from a specific trauma; it could also be a
haunting sense of low self esteem, or the emptiness, meaninglessness, and embodied stagnation that sitting in a cubicle for more than ten hours a day sometimes involves. Be they part of a difficult life story or not so much, at the heart of this dissertation are difficulties like low self esteem, insecurities, and anxieties, and the way in which sufferers seek to be address them through the practice of yoga. Ironically, choosing these issues as a research topic often made me more insecure, as I felt the need to apologize for the rather unconventional topic and my “hedonistic” fieldwork.

This project, which originated from my curiosity concerning what Freud named “common unhappiness,” or as I used to call it, “the suffering of the privileged,” opens up questions that are often discussed in psychological, spiritual, or self-help circles—but less so in anthropology. It is this sense of feeling as if you are not good enough, of not being comfortable with yourself and your place in the world, that I am most interested in. And it is those multiple, complex relations between “real” suffering and “privileged suffering” that anthropologists rarely acknowledge which are at the focus of my attention. I choose to study these questions through yoga because of the way in which the practice speaks to so many of the issues that piqued my curiosity. Firstly, yoga is everywhere (as I show later, the public sphere is saturated with yoga). Secondly, it is different from almost any other kind of exercise or spiritual trend because it speaks to the physical and the emotional, the spiritual and the superficial, all at the same time. Thirdly, even if one never practiced yoga, one probably knows that yoga is supposed to tone the practitioner’s body, relax the mind, make one feel great, contribute to good health, keep the practitioner young and pretty, and make the practitioner more stable, focused, and of course—happy. Finally, yoga is part of the mainstream and demands no religious commitment, it does not require the practitioner to leave her work (arguably, it facilitates and enables

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2 Some martial arts are similar to yoga in that they are spiritual and very physical at the same time. None of them, however, is as popular as yoga.
managing stressful jobs), and it speaks exactly to the suffering of the privileged. This dissertation, first and foremost, is about that form of suffering, but it is also about the relief practitioners find in yoga, and the way in which the practice reshapes them (literally) and their world-views, ambitions, and thought-patterns.

I came to yoga because it felt like a good field for my questions—I was not a yoga practitioner before starting fieldwork. It was when I started my fieldwork in California’s Silicon Valley, after nine years of higher education (that included by B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. coursework), that I first acquired tools to deal differently with my own stress and self doubt. It was not the first time I heard advice originating from yogic philosophy, Western Buddhism, cognitive/positive psychology, Self Help, New Age beliefs, or various assemblages of those frameworks. But it was the first time it resonated with me, perhaps because the practice was mainly corporeal. To my surprise, I found comfort in yoga and a common language with yoga practitioners. The research I have done for this dissertation made me a yoga practitioner and teacher. In this sense, this dissertation is an auto-ethnography.

Yet in many ways it is not. I am a Israeli citizen and a graduate student in the Silicon Valley, studying people with U.S. citizenship or Green Cards, whose income is about five to ten times the average graduate student stipend (or a kibbutz member). For example, their need for space (as in “I need my space!” or “give me some space”), a theme I investigate in depth in the third chapter, was foreign to me, as well as other things they did or took for granted. But we all shared some sense of insecure roots. Through this years-long journey, I never forgot my roots of insecurity and always respected theirs. This dissertation is the product of a journey in which I was pulled away from anthropology only to come back to it, but, this time, with a newly found voice and with a little less need to apologize for my research topic, my writing, my views (and my being). I started this project insecure and restless. I cannot say that I reached nirvana, but admittedly, I am a much happier, more peaceful, and
more stable person today than I was in 2007.

This is an anthropological project on yoga that is located somewhere between yoga and anthropology. Ultimately, I would love for it to reach yoga practitioners and encourage them to utilize their resources and commit to more structural, rather than personal change (see Chapters Six and Seven). I would also like this dissertation to encourage anthropologists to pay more attention to the privileged, if only because their views and behaviors have the power to shape our world.
1

Introduction

Olivia is a young editor and yoga practitioner, a bright and beautiful woman. We were strolling around downtown Palo Alto, looking at lovely houses nestled in green vegetation, when she told me about a childhood memory from one of her trips abroad with her family.

I have this horrifying memory of a little girl who was a tightrope walker, and her dad set it up an alleyway with no net, so here was this girl tightrope walking above the street and her dad was soliciting money from us. So terrifying to me.

When Olivia mentioned this childhood memory, I did not see how it related to the issues we discussed, and she did not provide a reason for telling me the story. It was only three years after the interview, when I read it again, that it occurred to me that all the people I came in touch with during fieldwork are, in many ways, tightrope walkers. They are at the top of the socio-economic pyramid, almost touching the sky. Yet they are so insecure, anxious and stressed—as if all it would take to fall down is one wrong step. They are going to yoga, maybe in order to be able to balance better
on the tightrope, perhaps with a hope that the practice can help them step down. The fact that the safety net does not exist makes perfect sense, given that this is how things work in neoliberal capitalism, a political economy that is characterized by growing individualism, independence, and ephemerality.\footnote{In 1995, a book named Working Without a Net—that featured a tightrope walker in a suit on the cover—presented a management philosophy fit for today’s neoliberal, changing, and risky business world. The book explains why safety nets do not work, what are the benefits of working without a net, how to increase competition, and how to change attitudes toward change (Shechtman 1995).} And of course, they are walking the tightrope in order to make money. The image of that young girl risking her life and health also speaks to the gendered aspects of this dissertation, since so many of the women I spoke with and observed are trying to meet impossible expectations, while feeling highly vulnerable and insecure. This dissertation is about tightrope walkers and their suffering, as it appears through their yoga practice.

1.1 Saturated

Mid summer in Houston is so hot and humid that the roads seem to be melting. One day in July 2010, I found shelter from the heat, and from my depressing temporary apartment, at a little Starbucks branch that was just off a main road, and I was trying to get some work done when two Texan men who seem in their sixties walked in. I paid little attention to them, but as they fixed their drinks at the service counter, one of them looked at the messages board and said to his friend: “What do you think about Urban Yogi?” I raise my head, surprised, and as they walk out the door I heard the tail of the conversation: “Holistic health,” one man says, and the other answers: “I ain’t got time for that.”

The summer of 2010 was my second summer in Houston. I had already reached a surprising observation: Texas ain’t California. Nothing in Houston was similar to the Silicon Valley, and things that concerned people in the Bay Area (climate change, toxins and pollutants, carbon footprints, healthy food, exercise, etc.) did not seem to
trouble Houstonians much. There were no recycling bins at my apartment complex in Houston. There was Whole Foods all right (the successful chain started in Austin, Texas), but the other grocery stores still handed costumers dozens of plastic bags, two products in each bag. The cheaper alternative to Whole Foods, Trader Joe’s, had not made its way to Texas yet. The air conditioning worked in every public space (It is typically over 90 degrees and incredibly humid outside), but the indoors temperatures were often way too cold—I always carried a sweater with me. Saving energy just did not seem to be a priority. People drove their Hummers and big SUVs everywhere in Houston, and I spotted very few hybrid cars. And all that summer, the collapsed BP pipe released oil into the Golf of Mexico. Yet at the home of the big oil companies, people did not seem to be concerned with the environment, or with reducing U.S. dependency on oil.

No, Houston did not resemble the Bay Area, with its bike-riders everywhere, its fit population, its outdoors farmers markets, and its voting patterns. But one of the four notes on that little Starbucks branch’s message board was for Urban Yogi, a wellness and holistic health center. The other three were notes regarding a crime reduction town-hall meeting, a dance performance, and samba classes. The fact that the sign was there may not be so surprising. But according to all stereotypes, those two elderly Texan gentlemen, with their thick accents and cowboy boots, should have been talking about the town-hall meeting or any other subject—pretty much anything other than considering a yoga class.

I start with Texas rather than California because it emphasizes a simple point: the public sphere is saturated with everything yogic. According to a Yoga Journal survey, in 2008 yoga was a 5.7 billion dollar industry in the U.S. alone, with some 15.8 million

\[ \text{In 2008, 60.9\% of the voters in California voted for Obama, while 55.5\% of Texan voters gave their vote to McCain. Based on The New York Times voting map: } \text{http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/map.html, accessed 7.16.2012. In San Francisco county, 84.1\% of the votes went for Obama. In Houston County, 50.5\% of the votes went for Obama a blue dot in a sea of red dots.} \]
practitioners. During the years in which I have done my research, these numbers grew. According to a 2012 Yoga Journal survey, spending is now $10.3 billion a year and 20.4 million Americans practice yoga.\(^3\) Moreover, in 2012, 44.4% of Americans called themselves ”aspirational yogis”—people who are interested in trying yoga. The Yoga Journal’s marketing-driven survey takes urban and suburban yoga studios into consideration, but it does not account for all those who practice yoga without paying for it, such as those practicing in prisons, public high schools, churches, kindergartens, retirement homes, professional sports, and even army training sessions. The variety of specific yoga classes and DVDs that are being offered is endlessly growing: there is yoga for runners, for surfers, for gay men, for pregnant women, for people who never thought they would do yoga, and for better sex. Yoga spending includes not only classes, but clothing, DVDs, books, props, workshops, retreats, CDs, and more.\(^4\)

Even if one does not practice, it is hard to escape the many images and references to yoga that resurface daily in popular culture. In just one day, I see that the most recent New York Times piece on yoga is at the top of their most emailed stories; that Nesquick’s new commercial shows their trademark bunny doing yoga poses on a yoga mat; and that in the 2009 movie Its Complicated, Alec Baldwin’s character tells his ex-wife and recent lover (Meryl Streep) that his current wife thinks he is in a yoga class and suggests that they do a (wink wink) “downward dog.” During the last six years, almost every TV series I occasionally watched referenced yoga at some point. A vary partial list includes Samantha dealing with her yoga teacher’s celibacy in Sex and the City; Gabi practicing yoga on her porch in Desperate Housewives; and even the narcissistic and misanthropic Dr. House puts his hands together, bows his head,

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\(^3\) In the four years that past since the 2004 Yoga Journal survey and the 2008 one, yoga spending almost doubled. Spending almost doubled again between 2008 and 2012.

and utters “namaste” when he wants to mock karma beliefs. Images from the yoga world can be found on greeting cards; they are used to advertise gyms and spas, apartment buildings, retirement homes, body lotions, vacation destinations, food products, and even medications. The best-seller *Eat, Pray, Love* opened the way for yoga and self-revelation memoirs like *Poser* and *Yoga Bitch* (Gilbert 2007; Morrison 2011; Dederer 2012). Most people who ask me what my dissertation is about either tell me that they love yoga, or explain to me why they do not practice it, clearly showing that the thought crossed their minds at one point or another. Over the last six years, I have seen my friends who never perceived themselves to be the “yogic type” turn to yoga due to sports injuries, personal problems (dealing with a cheating spouse or an illness), pregnancies, and of course, stress.\(^5\) Yoga is proliferating both independently and as part of much bigger trends, including the pursuit of green lifestyles (or green washing), ecologic life choices, responsible consumerism, health foods, and environmentalism. Simply put, if yoga is being considered by two Texan gentlemen in Houston, the practice really is everywhere.

However present yoga is in the U.S. public sphere, both the practice itself and “the suffering of the privileged” to which it is marketed are far from being popular research objects in anthropology. At least to some degree, anthropology has typically been invested in understanding everyday forms of violence and suffering in the third world (Schepers-Hughes 1996; Farmer 1999); the institutional processes through which violence and suffering are produced (Kleinman et al. 1997, 1986; Das 1996); and power-nexus in the first world (Martin 1991; Dumit 2010). As Jocelyn Chua writes in a dissertation on suicide in South India, this investment in short, violent and hungry lives and in life in the global south as a precarious enterprise is inseparable from the exhortation “to speak truth to power.” As a consequence, certain forms of

\(^5\) The fact that people turn to yoga because of personal problems does not mean, of course, that yoga always helps and never produces guilt or insecurities.
suffering are understood to be more legitimate than others, and “legitimate” suffering is taken to be that for which one bears no responsibility. As Chua writes:

By presupposing in advance that we know who suffers, and how and why they do, we deny the legitimacy of other experiences of stagnation, hopelessness, disillusionment and misery that shape everyday life and well-being in profound and important ways (Chua 2010:8).

In addition to anthropology’s sympathy toward the suffering of the disadvantaged (which I share), the discipline also tends to give less emphasis to research topics that have to do with pleasure, leisure, and wellbeing, and relates to “New Age” with condescension.⁶ Hence, it makes sense that while a handful of anthropologists and other writers have shown interest in yoga as a current practice in modern urban India; as a global phenomenon; and a practice of self transformation, only a few scholars have asked how yoga relates to current day issues and concerns emerging from neoliberal capitalism (Strauss 2005; Syman 2010; Alter 2004; Garrett 2001; Lea 2009; Horton and Harvey 2012; Horton 2012). Those concerns, discussed throughout the dissertation as stress, low self-esteem, anxiety, and the desire to seclude oneself from a perceivably hostile environment, are as much the focus of this project as the practice of yoga and its promises.

Indeed, even less legitimate and institutionally encouraged than the study of yoga is the research of yoga practitioners—meaning, the study of people who belong to the middle-upper class, people who are relatively privileged, and who live rather comfortable lives in urban and suburban areas of Western countries. This dissertation accesses and makes sense of their suffering though yoga.

When I made the decision to make yoga and the suffering of the privileged my dissertation project, I knew it was not as appealing for anthropologists as my previous

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⁶ Some anthropological writings on research topics that have to do with pleasure and leisure are: Starn (2011); Allison (1994, 2006); Stein (2008).
study of snipers (Bar and Ben-Ari 2005), but I was drawn to the happiness imperative (the cultural expectation to be happy or constantly seek happiness), its failure, and the on-going search for wellbeing and relief (from what?). I was attracted to the shadows lurking in the mundane, and fascinated with questioning issues that are often deemed boring. This project is about yoga’s discourses in Silicon Valley, and the social and economic climates it is part of. It is not so much about the tradition and the origins of the ancient practice, nor is it occupied with questions of “authenticity.” I am interested in Western yoga as a business rooted in a specific political economy; as a suggestion for a certain way-of-being in the world; as an ethical life philosophy; and as an attempt to offer healing for social sufferings in a particular space and time.

1.2 Brainwashed

A fine restaurant. We were four at the table, drinking wine and dipping bread into seasoned olive oil: three graduate students and one prospective graduate student. After she asked a few questions about my project, the prospective graduate started talking about her yoga experience (as usually happens). A former runner with a knee injury, she is doing yoga although she does not particularly like it. “Sometimes they just say things, like all those anecdotes they use, I can’t relate to that,” she said, not entirely without condescension. “I know what you mean,” I answered, and I went on to tell her that I had had many similar experiences. But I also told her about the moment in which one of those simple, sometimes banal clichés suddenly resonated with me in a deeply corporeal way. I started a new sentence with the words: “The moment in which” but I did not finish, because another graduate student at the table completed it for me: “the moment in which you become brainwashed!” she said.

The conversation moved on, but late that night I could not help but wonder if any anthropologist would have made such a comment had I talked about any other field site. Would any anthropologist assume to know another anthropologist’s field site
a priori, and be so dismissive about it, in any other anthropological conversation? What lack of self awareness is needed to declare me as brainwashed and to assume that anthropology itself is not a belief system that needs to be questioned just like any other? Why are New Age practices a site of such condescension?

One thing is certain: I do need to work hard to prove that I am not brainwashed (or perhaps that I am brainwashed only as a disciplined subject of anthropology). Common skepticism requires me to declare allegiance to my discipline rather to my object of study. I must admit that I am not sure how to navigate these muddy waters, since I do not share the assumption that as a group, yoga practitioners are more brainwashed, duped, or self absorbed than anthropologists. I refuse to label them and condescend to them, in the same way that I think anthropologists should refuse to label and condescend to any other group of people. Perhaps this is my ultimate loyalty to the discipline.

1.3 Raw Motivation, or: Trying to Circumvent the Suffering of the Privileged

“...and its not just for love, it seems we are always looking for that one thing to make our lives complete: that job, that chance, that family... I couldn’t help but wonder: when will waiting for the one... be done?” (Carry Bradshaw, Sex and the City, season 6 episode 12)

This project started during the summer of 2005. I was back in my home country of Israel after my first year of studying in the U.S., and the two months back home were completely packed with get-togethers with my friends. There was no time for small talk—it felt as if my friends and I needed to cover a year in just a few hours. So I talked to my friends, and did a lot of listening. By the end of the summer, I was left with a strong sense that has bothered me ever since: almost no one was happy, or even satisfied, with her or his life. They were all waiting for something to happen,
they were all complaining about things.

The conversations I had in the summer of 2005 were not specific to Israel and its political situation. Indeed, it seemed to be shared by people from other Western (or semi-Western) counties, who belonged to the global middle and upper-middle classes under neoliberal regimes. I had many similar conversations in the years that followed with people from the U.S., and a variety of other places (Brazil, Germany, Turkey, New Zealand, Sweden, to name a few). Maybe I looked for it, but the suffering of the privileged was not hard to find. A lot of people I know were often worried about how they were doing, what others thought of them, and what their current performance said about what would become of them. Most people I met fantasized about all sorts of “stuff”—be it material or not—that could have supposedly made a world of difference for them. The buzz I continuously heard was the repetition of the “if only” mantra. If only I had more money, more time, more focus, more talent, more discipline. If only I looked better, weighed less, had more muscles. If only my parents treated me better, if only I had a partner, if only I could get a job. If only I had what she or he is having, things would be better—I would be more productive, more accomplished, more successful, more secure. I would be happy.

These feelings are not exactly what I focus on in this dissertation, but they are the platform from which my research questions emerged (I will get into the specific questions and the people I studied later the introduction). They got me thinking about cultures of comparisons, competitiveness, and self doubt. Did my friends and I live in a social atmosphere where nothing is ever good enough, especially us? I was not sure, but I felt that many people around me spent their days feeling inadequate and stressed, feeling as if they continuously needed to prove themselves in order to survive, obsessing about their own unhappiness and dissatisfaction, and beating themselves up for not being happy.

This sensation was the raw motivation for this dissertation. Way before I fo-
cused on yoga, I started thinking about “the suffering of the privileged” as an all-encompassing category that ties together anxieties, stress, low self-esteem, loneliness, depression, unhappiness, and many other psycho-social phenomena that are associated less with hunger, poverty, political violence, and daily survival struggles, and more with the neoliberal imperatives of independence, consumption, and competitiveness. The suffering of the privileged has less to do with a hostile, openly violent world (at least in the brutal, physical sense of the term) and more to do with finding one’s place in the world. It has to do with a certain lack and certain desires: with an inability to feel at home in the world, a perceived lack of safety, reassurance, and support. It has to do with a craving for comfort, ease and stability. It has to do with stress and a constant need to be productive, to prove oneself to be worthy (of a paycheck, a positive feedback, love, respect), a steady sense of urgency and an everlasting mode of needing to do more; and with a culture where so many seem to be taking antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs such as Prozac, Cipralex, Seroxat, and Xanax. It seem to be about constantly being beside oneself and out of breath, about not having the time or ability to get off the merry-go-round.

Is it just me? I am well aware of the fact that writing about a social climate or phenomenon entails a production and a reproduction of the very thing I wish to describe. Yet, during the last few years, whenever I tell people that I write about the suffering of the privileged, their eyes grow bigger. And then their gaze wanders. They often nod and release a bitter smile, and they most often say: “Oh, I have a lot to say about that.” So we talk, and I get to hear about uncertainties, anxieties, comparisons, stress, and competition all around.

My readers might feel the need to distance themselves from such simplistic, overgeneralizing assertions. And quite rightly so. There are moments and periods when one feels comfortable in one’s skin, social positioning, etc. Some are satisfied with their secure jobs, paid-off homes, and families. Some are able to be satisfied without
all those desired “securities.” Some are even lucky enough to be born pleased and at-home in the world. But most people I have met during my fieldwork and in my life before and beyond fieldwork (which cannot be easily separated) know stress, know doubt, and know self esteem issues in intimate ways. These are the notions and curiosities with which I started. Later, I refined them and narrowed them down, focusing on stress, insecurities, and health anxieties as the main affects this dissertation explores.

1.4 Arrival Story

When I say I study yoga, people tend to assume that I am a long-time yoga practitioner who decided to study a field of which she was already part. This is far from being accurate. I took my first yoga class in Jerusalem, 1999. The teacher said that it was interesting to see how flexible I was in some parts of the body and how inflexible I was in other parts. I was annoyed by the aging hippie teacher, and it was too expensive for a student, so I never came back. The second time I tried yoga was also in Jerusalem, 2001. This time the class was closer—it took place on campus, it was cheap, and I liked the teacher. I remember his warm, big hand on my back. There was comfort in that touch, and in the adjustments he did. I liked it, but did not stick with it. Moving to the U.S., I took a yoga class every once in a while, but I was far from being serious about it.

After my second year in graduate school, I had my first research proposal at hand, which was all about common unhappiness, the suffering of the privileged, and spaces of pleasure and healing. During the summer of 2006, I spent a month in New York City, wandering between photography workshops, Chinese herbalism lectures, yoga classes, Buddhist gatherings, and cafes, where I stared at people who were having their coffee while working on their laptops, reading books, or talking to friends. I heard complaints about relationships, work, and money; I would see stress on people’s
faces, but also the pleasure of seeing friends and relaxing on the comfortable, old sofas of the now closed, lovely UTDT café (where the bulletin board was far fuller than the one in Texas). I heard many promises and various recipes for healing and well-being. I tried to figure out how to gain access into those worlds—where stress, loneliness, unhappiness, optimism, privilege, and pleasure seemed intricately intertwined.

I got myself a “two weeks for $25” deal in one of the yoga studios and went there almost every day. It felt great. I was especially intrigued by a fitness instructor who weaved yoga poses, extra demanding aerobic exercise, and positive affirmation in her classes. The first time I attended her class (which was named “find your happiness”) I was shocked to find myself among about forty women, all chanting repeatedly sentences like “I have the power to face my fears and let my desires grow” while performing demanding bodily sequences. I was cynical (as was expected and probably unavoidable), but to my surprise, I was also touched by the experience. I decided to focus on yoga as a way to study the issues I was interested in.

When I went to Israel to see my family that same summer, I got there just in time to experience the second Lebanon War in its entirety. Yoga was quickly forgotten. And even though I knew I was not helping myself, I also let it slip during my third year of graduate school and especially during the preliminary exams preparation period. Being stressed and full of self-doubt, I lived the experiences I wanted to write about, but did not do much to help myself. I just waited until it was all over.

I started fieldwork in September 2007. My original plan was to study yoga scenes in the New Age tourist destination San Marcos La Laguna, Guatemala; Tel Aviv, Israel; and the Bay Area, USA. I spent four months in Guatemala, doing yoga every morning, interviewing, and hanging out with expatriates and tourists in the little “healing” and “magical” holistic village of San Marcos La Laguna, on the shores of the majestic, volcanic lake Atitlan. My experiences there were fascinating—people talked about ghosts, healing crystals, and magic. But it was too far off, too esoteric,
and I wanted to study the mainstream. When I got to Silicon Valley in January 2008, I was more into yoga than ever. It was only in Silicon Valley, when I started a yoga teacher training (first and foremost for research purposes) that I got hooked. I loved going into the studio, inhaling the faint smell of hardwood floors, human sweat, essential oils, and candles. I loved leaving my belongings, my shoes, and sometimes, my thoughts outside, unrolling my mat, getting into a child’s pose, and taking the first deep breath of the day. I learned how to let go and relax even in the most challenging poses, and I watched myself become stronger, more flexible, and even—embarrassing as it is to admit—happier.

1.5 Where, What, When, Who

The study of Western yoga and yoga practitioners in Silicon Valley brings forward many challenges. A few clusters of questions can be raised regarding the way in which I produced my object of study. First, how does one study an amorphous, multiple, and transnational field? How does one focus, given the vast variety of yoga studios, workshops, conferences, books, journals, and styles? Is there an essence of yoga behind this multiplicity, and is it true that, as practitioners say, “yoga is yoga” no matter what style and where you practice? Secondly, questions concerning the practitioners and their location come up: How does one study a leisure activity which is often only a small portion of people’s lives? How committed to yoga should one be to be considered a practitioner? And how can nonverbal experiences, mass-produced images, and personal—supposedly psychological—questions be taken into consideration? A third cluster of questions revolves around the scope of this research. Should Indian gurus visiting the Bay Area be included? And what about Tibetan Buddhism temples in San Francisco? The following section will specify my writing and research choices in regards to where, what, when, and whom did I study.
1.5.1 Where 1: Locations at the Age of Transnationalism and Neoliberalism

Yoga is practiced at specific locations, but it is also a practice with multiple floating, abstract, global images. This dissertation relates to both aspects of yoga, as it includes tales from specific classes, workshops, and studios located in Silicon Valley, and also yoga publications and images from mass media and popular culture.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot makes a distinction between location, locale, and locality. Location is defined as a place that one might need a map to get to. In other words, it is situated and localized. A locale is a venue, a place defined primarily by what happened there (a temple as the locale for a ritual, for example). Locality is a site defined by human content, thought to be populated by people who are said to share similar cultures. Anthropology, says Trouillot, has tended to conceive of places at best as locales and at worst as localities, rather than as locations. Treating places as localities entails their perception as isolated containers of distinct cultures, beliefs, and practices (Trouillot 2003:122-123). Scholars have long criticized the anthropological tradition of studying remote and radically different ways of being which were thought to exist in “naturally” discontinuous places, frozen in time (Fabian 2002). This assumed isomorphism of space, place, and culture, which was the bread and butter of early anthropology, has been critiqued as neglecting those who inhabit the borders, as not accounting for differences within a locality and for the hybrid cultures of postcoloniality, and as not challenging the ruptured landscape of independent nations and autonomous cultures—when actually, spaces have always been hierarchically interconnected (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

The anthropological habit of associating culturally unitary groups with a territory was significantly eroded in the 1980s and the 1990s. Growing attention to globalization and internationalism as part of the logic and practices of late capitalism, or neoliberalism, brought concepts such as “flows,” “hybridity,” and “border-zones” to
the forefront of social theory. Despite historic accounts showing that globalization is not as new as it has been assumed to be (Wolf and Eriksen 2010), and that capitalism has always been expanding beyond national borders (Marx and Engels 1848; Trouillot 2003), the new attributions of the late twentieth century political economy have fascinated many scholars, who have tried to explain the qualitatively different era (Jameson 1991; Hardt and Negri 2000).

The now already-old debates regarding Americanization, homogenization, and cultural versus economic globalization are beyond my interests here. So are somewhat celebratory explanations of globalizations (Fukuyama 2006; Friedman 2006; Appadurai 1996) and the critiques that emphasize the unevenness and mercilessness of neoliberal globalization or the fact that it “flows” in very limited channels (Trouillot 2003). Yet, the overall new image of the globe is relevant for this dissertation, especially as it emerges from David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*. In his (perhaps dated but still relevant) book, Harvey claims that since around 1972, there has been a sea-change in cultural as well as in political-economic practices. Coining the much-used terms “flexible accumulation” and “time-space compression,” Harvey portrays the change from vertical integration, mass production, and capital accumulation (Fordism) to a system of vertical disintegration, instabilities, and flexible accumulation (post-Fordism). This change is a change of life itself, as everything—consumption, lifestyles and identities—moves at a growing pace. As circulation accelerates, the sense of disposability, temporariness, and ephemerality increases. The production of images and signs become a main concern of capitalism and money ceases to be a secure means of representation making the changes incredibly material and meaningful. Yet localism and nationalism, says Harvey, have become stronger precisely because of the quest for the security that place always offers in the midst of the shifting that flexible accumulation entails (Harvey 2004). In the following chapters, I examine how exactly time-space compression translates into bodily
compression and feelings of stress, and how yoga practitioners experience (and try to negotiate) that sense of temporariness and ephemerality.

In his later book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* Harvey focuses on the history of neoliberalism—a seemingly different topic that closely relates to my interests here. Harvey defines neoliberalism as the theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. As such, neoliberalism influences and filters into divisions of labor, social relations, ways of life and thought (Harvey 2007). The fieldwork for this dissertation was done in one of the epicenters of neoliberalism and one of the most expensive places in the world. It focuses on people that are deeply immersed in neoliberal ways of life, and nevertheless constantly complain about neoliberal characteristics such as on-going competition, individualism, and lack of community and connection.7

“In a world reconfigured by transnationality, how are anthropologists to handle the issues of instability, uncertainty, and flux in cultural reproduction and identity formation?” (Ong 2006). To answer the new challenges, anthropologists have come up with a variety of ideas as to how to do fieldwork in a global world (to the universal and the abstract) without losing the specificity of the local and to encounters on the ground—a challenge that I, too, try to rise up to. In the last two decades, to take just a few examples, anthropologists have studied people and objects in transnational movement, emphasizing relations of reciprocal flexibility and ability to morph within the frame of late-capitalism (Allison 2006; Ong 1999); as well as suffering caused by economically or violently necessitated international movement.

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7 The word union is double edged here: Literally, yoga means union, and, as the third chapter shows, practitioners often speak about the need for community and connections. But in a more concrete way, neoliberalism stands against the right of workers to unite. Since yoga practitioners very rarely work for structural change (see chapter six), it is not surprisingly that this latter meaning of “union” never came up in my fieldwork and interviews.
(Malkki 1995; Lan 2006). In *Friction*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005) offers the study of global connections in zones of awkward engagement. Not shying away from “the universal,” but suggesting that it can be studied anthropologically through specific situations, Tsing suggest studying global capitalism as it operates in friction: in transnational collaborations and sticky engagements. Tsing defines the universal as what is at heart of contemporary humanist projects, suggesting that generalization to the universal is always an aspiration that travels across distances and differences, an unfinished achievement rather than a the confirmation of a pre-formed law (Tsing 2004). In a similar vain, James Ferguson (2006) argued that discussions and projects that are framed at levels of scale and abstraction (“Africa,” “the West,” “the globe”) are indeed not amenable to ethnographic study in the traditional sense, but they can—and should—be studied nonetheless. The world, writes Ferguson, is full of talk of “Africa”—not as specific African nations, societies, or localities but as an abstract absent object signaled by failure and lack, the discussion on which is loaded with anguished energy and moral concern. Refusing the category of “Africa” as empirically problematic, anthropologists devoted to particularity have thus allowed themselves to remain bystanders in the wider arena of discussions about “Africa” (Ferguson 2006:3). Not neglecting universal, abstract, and dislocated images, both Tsing and Ferguson treat them as an aperture into the aspirations and anxieties of those circulating them and as powerful, world-changing discursive tools.

I find Tsing and Ferguson’s works inspiring because, like “Africa,” “Yoga” is an abstract concept. “Yoga” is familiar to many, whether they are practicing yoga or not. Actually, the general and abstract image of modern yoga is exactly what makes it so relevant for the suffering of the privileged—mainly because of ways in which it is assumed to solve or at least ease that suffering, even if the people sharing that assumption never set foot in a yoga class. Therefore, I do not want to let go of “yoga” as a global image, and I try to acknowledge its presence in the different locations,
When it comes to talking about global images and sweeping cultural phenomena, non-anthropologists might have it easier. In that regard, Michael Warner’s definition of “the public” as a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself is a useful one (Warner 2002). Inspired by Warner, Lauren Berlant defines U.S. women’s popular culture as an intimate public: a market which is hailing the wounded and cultivating fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real (Berlant 2008:5). Berlant defines women’s culture as an intimate public, a culture of circulation that operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires. Participants in the intimate public feel as if it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions. Berlant’s intimate public adds another way to negotiate international phenomena—such as paying attention to frictions and to images of grand scale and abstraction—while also opening up questions of what women’s culture exactly is, which I will negotiate later (Berlant 2008).

However ephemeral, ever-present, and abstract, “yoga” is nonetheless a concrete practice, discourse, and worldview, and it is part of this dissertation as such. On one hand, I would like to keep “yoga” in my text as it appears out there: a floating image appropriated for advertising and entertainment purposes; a cluster of promises of rest, peace of mind, and well-being that people actually turn to at times of need, one piece in a bigger assemblage of consumption and lifestyles such as environmentalism, vegetarianism, healthy living, and self-care. Therefore, I had an eye on nationwide circulations of yoga popular culture, such as journals, books, DVDs, blogs, websites, yoga celebrity appearances, and conferences (without assuming that I can do justice to it, or even find it all). Keeping an eye on yoga as an abstract image of grand
scale also allows me to see how it works as an intimate public—meaning, as a market people get drawn into, become part of, and whose discourse they circulate, due to the affects it produces and reproduces. On the other hand, I have tried to answer the challenges of contemporary anthropology by trying to portray a certain culture (of yoga, suffering, middle-upper class, and neoliberalism) in a place where almost everybody is from somewhere else, and in a place where people are often on the move. I practiced yoga in various locales, talked to people about yoga, and took yoga workshops in various places in Israel, San Marcos La Laguna in Guatemala, and throughout the U.S. (Houston, Texas; New York City; Durham, North Carolina; Denver, Colorado). Leaving those experiences aside would be an arbitrary and perhaps even unjustified dissection, since it is all part of this project. In all those places, but particularly in California’s Silicon Valley, I was able to note the frictions that are at the heart of this dissertation: What happens when people go into yoga studios and try to live the abstract ideal of yogic life?

1.5.2 Where 2: California

This dissertation has international aspects, but my fieldwork was mainly done in California. This location, like “yoga,” is famous worldwide. “California” is an empirical place and a symbolic configuration which is tied to multiple discourses (Rickels 1991; Davis 2006, 1998). A friend from Ohio tells me that her family thinks that all Californians are “nuts and fruits.” “California” may bring to mind images like Orange County and its housewives; riots in Los Angeles; Earthquakes; Hollywood and the Oscars; Gay history in San Francisco; blond, tan surfers; a whale washed onto the shore; and lost Indian tribes (Starn 2004), as well as many other images. For many, “California” brings to mind body-obsessions and many forms of self-care, as California often seems like “that surplus of everything which begins with feeling good about oneself” (Rickels 1991:3).
Northern California, The Bay Area, and the Silicon Valley may conjure additional images. For me, it entails expensive real estate; a mosaic of aging hippies and young high-tech geeks; bicycle riders with unbelievable calf muscles on narrow mountain roads; organic-food, health-obsessed vegans; Steve Jobs in his jeans and black T-shirt presenting a skinny and sleek Apple gadget. Associations also include fog climbing over the Santa Cruz mountains; beautiful golden-grass, oaks peppered hills; Google’s mega-campus and its colorful trademark sunshades; Stanford’s yellow-bricked, spotless campus, flowering in red; fields of artichokes and garlic. Others may think of earthquakes; naked spiritualism-seekers in Harbin hot springs; people who pay hundreds and hundreds of dollars for a few days of detox, mystical dance, or forgiveness workshops in Big Sur’s Esalen. A little bit to the east and north, in the Castro of San Francisco or at Berkeley, histories of civil right movements may unfold and the nostalgic echos of the 1960s may still be heard, if one cares to hear them (Didion 1990).

As the list above testifies, California and particularly Silicon Valley hold a very interesting conundrum. Silicon Valley can be described as the epicenter of the neoliberal subject, where the will can supposedly overcome all difficulties, where people work 90 hours per week and get $100 million payouts, where hedge funds look for the next big thing, and creativity, alongside beauty, is a necessity and a demand. California occupies both ends of a spectrum: it is the golden, liberal, casual, sometimes spiritual edge of the country, and it is also a highly stressful and technologically advanced place, that depends totally on media-technological structures of “liveness” to support the unstressed-out or friendly intentions it advertises (Rickels 1991).

8 Jobs’ biography is quite fascinating (Isaacson 2012).
9 These images of California already hint of a friction between indulgence and “real politics,” i.e., a desire and action directed toward structural change. The ethics and politics of yoga will be addressed in Chapter Six.
10 Both ends of the spectrum appear from the early ages of American California: it was through the
Silicon Valley is one of the most expensive places in the U.S. and the epicenter of the development of new and exciting information technologies, which are the privileged technology of neoliberalism (Harvey 2004). Many of those who live and work in the Silicon Valley are incredibly rich, overworked, overachieving and sophisticated. At the same time, California is the destination to which young people escape, as they run away from constricting parents and small-town U.S.A. It is a free, liberal/radical, outdoorsy, perfect-weather heaven. Between the office and the outdoors, Silicon Valley offers seemingly contradictory ways of life, having an ethos that merges pragmatism and the search for meaning (English-Lueck 2002). It is as if Google modeled its work environment after the Silicon Valley, and vice versa—it is all fun, games, and incredibly hard work. One ethnography claims Silicon Valley to be a technologically saturated space and a showcase of diversity, where the volatility of the high-tech economy results in a constant sense of insecurity. Interviewees, who view their wealth as ephemeral, work hard at achieving it while also “working” on their spiritual growth (English-Lueck 2002). I will describe the people I study later in the introduction, but for now, I want to emphasize the paradox of Silicon Valley: it is cool and young but deadly serious; it is loose and casual but aims towards the highest success possible. The Silicon Valley is about green buildings and barefoot running; taking care of the environment yet being protected from it; it is a hyper-stress-leisurely space, where people spend a lot of time outdoors, but (if only because of poison oak), they also always stay on the trail.

Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” makes a specific mention of Silicon Valley (the Manifesto will be discussed more fully later in the dissertation). As Haraway notes, technology makes Silicon Valley a place that brings the age of cyborgs to a certain extreme (indeed, even the bikers on the road look a bit like transformers).
But other characteristics of the cyborg, such as its vulnerability and ability to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as work force, subjected, and being out of place, also mark people in Silicon Valley, especially the women who live with high-tech workers (many high-tech workers, of course, are women). This vulnerability is one of the backbones of this dissertation, which is, in many ways, an exploration of precarious lives. Yoga—which is, among other things, a practice of balance and calmness—is a specifically fit entry point into the study of the intense atmosphere of Silicon Valley, its competitiveness, insecurities, and off-the-chart definitions of success.

1.5.3 Where 3: The Yoga Studio

Tracking images is important, but at the end of the day, fieldwork has to be done in specific locations. A lot of my work was done in one yoga studio in Silicon Valley. My “home studio” (not a studio in my home—I could only wish for one—but my fieldwork home-base) is different from the common image of the clean, white, Zen-type studios. Flowering plants outside and a lively, colorful display window draw the passer-by to walk through the front door. The minute one walks in, one will hear the music. It might be ‘Reiki whale song, Buddhist chantings, a relaxing Mozart piece, or any other album that falls into the category of New Age or “World” music. If the person working that day is in an audacious mood, a yogic hip-hop album might be playing. There is always a gentle smell of some aromatic oil (lavender, sandalwood, patchouli) in the air, which might not even register consciously but makes an impact nonetheless. Expensive yoga clothing drapes from hangers, their flowing and soft fabrics form an invitation to touch. Signs posted near Tibetan bowls and bells invite the visitor to try the instruments and hear their clear sounds. Yoga books, DVDs, and CDs are displayed in a semi-organized plethora, among myriad other products such as jewelry, scarves, and yoga props—bolsters, blocks, and mats. The heart of
the lobby is a long wooden bench covered with a blue velvet cushion for people to sit on and leave their shoes underneath.

A sliding wooden and glass door and a pair of long and heavy scarlet velvet curtains separate the engaging, inviting, and warm lobby store from the studio. The hardwood floor begins right there, at the entrance to the main room. The studio itself, albeit much less packed, is also warm and quite full compared to other yoga studios. As one walks through the door, one sees two long walls to each side that are painted cream; one of them holds a changing art exhibit. The narrow back wall has another door, leading to restrooms with mosaic floors, changing rooms, and cubbies for people to leave bags and coats. A five-gallon purified water tank stands on a small table, next to towers of small biodegradable cups. The wall to the left of the back door is painted dark blue, and the small wall to the right is covered with an ocean view mural. Little window niches hold little Buddha statues and candles for the teachers to use as they wish. The windows themselves are covered with cloths, so not much sunlight comes in. The last decorative element is a big Buddha statue at the corner of the room. Stacks of blankets, sand bags, and blocks are positioned alongside the far back wall. Once, there were mirrors covering one of the long side walls, but a dispute over noise with the neighboring store led to the construction of a noise proof wall, after which, the mirrors were not put back in place.

I describe the main location of my fieldwork in such details because the description already foregrounds a main argument I present in the following chapters. The studio is designed to address all senses (but taste). The music, the smells, the dim lights and lack of windows (a surprisingly common feature in almost all studios I visited, given that yoga is supposedly all about connection with nature) surround the practitioner in an attempt to create an atmosphere of peace and calm, and to isolate the practitioner from the world outside the studio. This retreat to the self is one of the main themes of this dissertation.
1.5.4 What: Yoga in the West

Every spiritual trend is intricately intertwined with the social, political, and economic climate in which it exists (even separating “spiritualism” from everything else is a historically specific epistemology). Just as the Western interest in Eastern religions at the end of the nineteenth century cannot be understood apart from colonialism, the current appeal of Self Help, New Age, and Eastern practices such as yoga and meditation, cannot be understood apart from neoliberal global capitalism. As Martin Sheen famously said: “everyone in Hollywood wants to be like Gandhi—tan, thin, and moral”—which means that certain images and aspirations are appropriated differently in particular places and times for specific reasons.\footnote{For lack of better terms, I use “East” and “West” rather reluctantly here. These terms are hierarchical, dialectically producing each other, and too general, but them seem to be necessary when discussing Eastern religions and practices in the West.}

The Western fascination with Eastern religions and spiritual practices started more than a hundred years ago, continued with the 1960s counterculture, and is still present in the current obsession with Self Help, New Age, and spiritual practices. When discussing the relations between “Eastern” religions and practices and the “West,” scholars often relied on Edward Said’s Orientalism. In spite of critiques, Said is acknowledged for his important analysis of the self-constructing othering of the “the Orient.” The Orient, as Said claimed, is a Western construction, an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in “the West” (dialectically created). Knowledge about the Orient was intricately bound with the power of imperialism, as the stereotype of the Orient as feminine, child-like, lazy, immoral, irrational, irresponsible, chaotic, uncivilized, and degenerate was rationalized through biological determinism and moral-political admonishment, and justified powerful measures of control (Said 1984).

The nineteenth-century “Western” responses to Buddhism, Hinduism, and yoga
varied from fascinated horror to complete rejection. Thomas Tweed studied the American discourse among later Victorians who criticized Buddhism and, at the beginning of the twentieth century, started to sympathize with it and even converted to it (Tweed 2000). Tweed documents responses to the movement from a period of simple disgust, through an era characterized by a detailed rhetoric of negation (seeing Buddhism as a pessimistic, atheistic, and nihilistic philosophy), to a time in which Buddhism became attractive. The bottom line of his research, though, is not that the American public grew to accept Buddhism, but that the American version of Buddhism was accommodated to the American taste. It is not until Buddhism came to affirm basic American values, such as theism, individualism, autonomy, self reliance, optimism, progress, and activism, that it became accepted in certain segments of the American society. Like other studies discussed below, Tweed’s study concludes by saying that supposedly eccentric practices often mirror the values of dominant, mainstream society.

Talking specifically about yoga (that was practiced as part of Hinduism and Buddhism), Suzanne Newcombe finds, like Tweed, that Americans moved from the nineteenth century revulsion, through a cautious acceptance of certain aspects, to the last decades’ creation of a new American yogic product that emphasized the physical aspects of yoga and celebrated the healthy, sensual, and beautiful body. This late image of the body stands in stark opposition to the image that circulates in the nineteenth century, when Americans were horrified thinking about yogis hanging upside down over fires, and the “obscene” aesthetics of naked bodies shocked Western sensibilities (Newcombe 2009).

Two good examples of the Western view on yoga are brought by Eliade and Fields. Mircea Eliade, after learning Sanskrit for three years and spending six months in an Indian ashram, published a thick book dedicated to yoga in 1936. Eliade studies yoga in order to understand “the Indian mind,” and indeed, he finds that yoga pervades
every layer of Indian life. The book is an encyclopedic collection of techniques and histories, but it also includes some interesting claims that probably say as much about the writer’s perceptions as about yoga. According to Eliade, yoga techniques are aimed at escaping the limitations of the body, allowing the soul to rise above regular life and reach the sacred, in that way achieving a symbolic death (meaning, liberation). Interestingly, Eliade claims, on the one hand, that yoga is a living fossil, a modality of archaic spirituality that survived nowhere else and, on the other hand, that the West should learn about what Indians thinks about temporality, anxiety, despair and the condition of being a human being (Eliade et al. 2009).

I mentioned earlier that yoga and Buddhism had to change in order to successfully immigrate to the West. Obviously, colonialism and post-colonialism affected Eastern practices in “the East” as well. Three recent ethnographies, one about Ayurveda and two about yoga, discuss the ways in which Indian practices changed as a result of encounters with Westerners and colonialism. In Fluent Bodies, Jean Langford quotes Indian doctors who claim that only by working with Westerners had they “discovered” the “true” essence of Ayurveda, meaning, its ability to reach psychological depth, way beyond bodily tissues. Hence, the premise of twentieth-century Ayurveda has extended from claiming over-excited body fluids (doṣa) to easing the excessiveness of industrial lifestyle, and from curing illnesses to curing modernity itself. In order to fulfill such promises, practitioners employ discourses of neo-orientalism, spiritualism, anti-materialism, nonviolence, and position themselves in opposition to biomedicine. Here, too, the Eastern practice is shown to reflect “Western” hopes, longings, and frustrations (Langford 2002).

Like Langford, Joseph Alter is trying to understand social changes that have taken place in India as a result of colonialism and postcolonial transnationalism, as well as hybrid science-spirituality, East-West phenomena such as examining head- standing “yogic” rats in Indian labs to test their reactions to being inverted for long
periods of time. Yoga, Alter concludes, has been positioned as a timeless icon of Indian civilization, but it is in fact a very modern phenomenon, at least as a form of alternative medicine and physical fitness training (Alter 2004).

A third ethnography, Sarah Strauss’ *Positioning Yoga*, examines one yogic tradition and its movement from India to the West and back. Strauss concludes that the “original” goal of classic yoga—isolation of self—is a far cry from the contemporary goals of health, stress reduction, and flexibility (Strauss 2005). It is exactly the marketing of yoga as a stress reduction, health technique that does not demand giving up on the capitalistic base, combined with re-orientalization done by the once colonized, that allows for yoga to “sit so well” with modernity. Strauss’ point is important and valid, but as I will argue, it is not only yoga that changes in order to sit well with modernity. The practice of modern yoga, ways of life under neoliberalism, and subjectivities are all changing one another, albeit in subtle ways. In addition, I argue that what Strauss defines as “the original goal” (is there an origin?) of subtle yoga, namely, isolation of self, might be resurfacing in Western yoga in surprising ways.

Recent articles and books explore the histories of yoga’s expansion to the West, examine yoga as an embodied and healing practice, and argue that yoga is a practice of self transformation that facilitates change of attitudes (De Michelis 2005; Garrett 2001; Kipnis 1994; Lea 2009; Love 2010; Syman 2010; Irigaray 2002). Some address yoga as a potentially ethical and socially conscious practice (Kipnis 1994), and some examine yoga from a phenomenological perspective, sensitive to experience and a sense of place and space, mind and body (Persson 2007; Smith 2007). Other recent books try to answer questions regarding how and why yoga can change one’s life, and how it has changed to answer modernity’s problems (Horton 2012), as well as tackling the body/mind problem, yoga’s healing capacities, community, and social engagement (Horton and Harvey 2012). My dissertation engages with—
and supplements—this fairly scarce literature by examining yoga as more intimately rooted in a specific time and place, and as thriving within a particular set of current affects. In my writing, I do not seek to fixate yoga as an ancient practice that transformed into a modern one. Rather, I see the Western yogic discourse as enabling an examination of responses to lives of stress, low self esteem, and anxiety under neoliberalism.

1.5.5 Who: White Middle-Upper Class Women

This section addresses the characteristics of the yoga practitioners I studied. Clearly, they are economically privileged. Some live in San Francisco, but most of them live in California’s Bay Area: Pacifica, Palo Alto, Menlo Park, San Mateo, Half Moon Bay, Redwood City, Cupertino, and Mountain View. They do not live in impoverished East Palo Alto, but nor do they reside in Atherton or Los Altos Hills (the ultra expensive areas), or lives in mansions (but then again, the tiniest shack in Palo Alto is worth at least a million dollars). Some work in the high-tech industry, investment banking, for pharmaceutical companies, some do not officially work, either because they have retired (in their forties, fifties, or sixties) or they are stay-at-home moms. I also talked to nurses, psychologists, and stress-management workshop leaders. Some of those interviewed are graduate students who barely manage their finances, living in rented apartments with roommates, some are post-docs, and many are yoga teachers who do not make a lot of money compared to the people they teach. Interestingly enough, many of my interviewees are either transitioning or looking to transition from their corporate and academic jobs into teaching yoga or into the therapeutic sector.

As for gender: about one quarter of my interviewees and interlocutors were men, the rest were women—numbers that pretty much reflect the breakdown of men and women in yoga classes (According to a 2008 Yoga Journal survey, 72.2% of yoga
practitioners in the U.S. are women and 27.8% are men. According to the more recent 2012 survey, the percentage of women grew to 82.2%). I will consider yoga as a gendered practice (and the gendered aspects of the suffering of the privileged) throughout the dissertation. Ancient yoga, the purely men’s ritual, is undoubtedly a feminized practice in the West, probably because it fits so well with stereotypical feminine traits such as being soft, gentle, caring, nurturing, introspective, quiet, mild—and belonging indoors. Even Bourdieu wrote that yoga is one of those “introverted sports” that emphasize self exploration and self expression, in opposition to manly sports of high energy (Bourdieu 1984). As I discuss in greater length in Chapters Two and Seven, I see yoga as an intimate public that redefines and conjures ideas of “the feminine” while producing its market, and I think that in many ways yoga reiterates traditional femininity. It does, however, challenge traditional conceptions of the feminine at the very same time, or at least, it is wrapped up in the production of femininity in more than one way.

Lauren Berlant claims that “Everybody knows what the female complaint is: women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking” (Berlant 2008:1). However, being disappointed by intimate relations was not the main complaint I have heard again and again during fieldwork. Rather, it was another cluster of women’s problems (which are shared by men, but somehow seem to be exacerbated in women’s lives): stress, inability to do it all and care for everybody, and more than anything else—low self esteem and harsh self-judgment. Tom, a yoga practitioner and an engineer at a high-tech company, phrased it pretty succinctly when he observed that:

I call it the superwoman syndrome—it’s never good enough to be and

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enjoy the fruits of your labor because you always have to put more stuff on your plate. So you are always striving to the ideal, and that causes, for women, issues of stress. I need to look like this... I need to be able to fit in that dress, rock my man’s world, make money, take care of my aging parents, have a career, be a mom. It’s never ending.

N: What do you think is the difference here between women and men’s stress?

T: I think that women have a unique stressor in that their role in society is to be the nurturer, the giver, stereotypically. Men are more the provider, doer, objectives and outcomes. I’m gonna do whatever it takes to get to this outcome, and not worry so much how I get there. The body [is] more aggressive, more tight. For me, yoga is not about applying effort and force, but let’s have that more intimate conversation with your body, where can I get soft?

Tom not only suggests that women have a different set of stressors, but that yoga helps him balance his own gendered stress by allowing him to get softer. One can claim, therefore, that yoga allows women to balance their own stress—first, by allowing them to cultivate their strength (many devoted practitioners are indeed very strong) and second, by giving them the permission and “space” where they can care for themselves and not for others. These points will be revisited throughout the dissertation and particularly in Chapter Six.

Yoga is also wrapped in the production of race. The vast majority of the people I talked to identify themselves as white. I also interviewed, either formally or informally, one African American, three Latinas, and three Asian Americans, all of whom are U.S. citizens. In addition, I talked to people from Israel, a couple of people originally from Germany, and also practitioners from Sweden, Britain, Australia, Brazil
and India who lived in Silicon Valley either temporarily or not. Like me, most of the interviewees who were not U.S. citizens seem to “naturally” fall into the category of “whites,” even if they do not tend to think of themselves that way.

Bluntly put, yoga is a largely white practice. The blog Stuff White People Like humorously lists yoga among other things that white people like, such as organic food, farmers’ markets, diversity, and non-profit organizations. Actually, yoga was the fifteenth entry on the blog (out of 133, as of June 29, 2010), and it appeared on January 22, 2008, only four days after the first entry (coffee) which was made on January 18, 2008 (yoga appears right after “having black friends” and before “gifted children”).

Whiteness, for the people I study, is often transparent and a non-issue, even if they are all for “diversity” and were jubilant when Obama won the first election—among other reasons, because of his race. Their experiences of stress are raced, but race rarely comes up as an issue for many of my friends and interlocutors in their daily lives. The same pattern exists in anthropology and cultural critique, where race is still examined as a tribute of “people of color” and disadvantaged groups—as if whiteness is not a color with many shades. Even whiteness studies most often deal with white poverty, and the white elites are hardly discussed and thus are often unmarked. Both my field and the scholarly legacy, therefore, make it a challenge to remember race while also being true to the Silicon Valley yoga scene, where people tend to treat their problems either as individual or universal issues (“this is human nature”) and not so much as a result of racial disadvantage (and quite rightfully so—most of them are not disadvantaged). This lack of group identity (or the transparency of whiteness) is interesting, especially as it intersects with questions of ethics, politics,

13 See: http://stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/full-list-of-stuff-white-people-like/. In a footnote to the footnote, I’d like to mention a second blog named Things Republicans Hate (see: http://thethingsrepublicanshate.com/?p=424). Yoga does not appear on that list yet (even republicans practice yoga, I guess) but vegans do (no.11), and so does recycling (no.35) and the Silicon Valley (no.48).
and class. This dissertation portrays people that are, on the one hand, liberal and left-leaning. Yet, on the other hand, they are so focused on their own issues and hopes that they rarely take active steps toward structural change on either racial issues or other political concerns. Having no group identity as “American whites,” they usually do not feel that they have any collective responsibility toward other races, or even nation-states.

Clearly, economic privilege is also very much at stake in the world of yoga but defining it is tricky. It is complicated not only because of the fact that (please excuse the crude generalization) most Americans I know will not talk about their income in numbers to almost anyone, but also because numbers are incredibly open to interpretation. I think that more important than numbers are a few simple facts: to the best of my knowledge, none of the people I talked to lost their homes or were unable to pay their rent, and that none of my friends and informants went without medical insurance or without food. Many of the people I talked to lost money during the economic crisis that began in 2008 (between 11-30%); some married women I know had to take jobs in order to supplement their husbands’ salaries or to create stability in case their husbands were laid-off; and some people were indeed laid off and either found another job or went back to school. By and large, this is what I mean when I talk about privilege and about being relatively comfortable and stable compared to so many others in the U.S. and worldwide who have it so much worse.

Yes, others have it harder. No wonder then that few anthropologists are willing to entertain the thought that the privileged also suffer—and more than that, to actually respect this suffering, take it seriously, and think about its social meanings. While questions concerning individualism, alienation, and modern life have accompanied and shaped the social sciences from their beginnings (De Tocqueville et al. 2003; Durkheim 1951, 1893; Marx 1976a; Marx and Engels 1848; Veblen 1889; Weber et al. 2002), the overtone concerning the middle or upper classes has usually
been (often quite rightly) judgmental and condemning. Marx’s stark distinction between society’s two great hostile camps, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, was aimed toward the workers’ consciousness and state of alienation. Marx was interested in bourgeois consciousness to the extent that he saw it as hegemonic, but he was definitely not sympathetic to it (although one can understand his discussion of commodity fetishism as implying that the entire social world under capitalism is characterized by alienation and objectification). Marx also failed to anticipate the emergence of the middle class in the Global North, the main market for yoga—but my guess is that if he lived today, he would be as critical toward yoga practitioners as he was toward the bourgeoisie in general. Weber and Veblen showed more interest in the complexities and nuances of class differentiations. Veblen’s study of classes coined still-relevant terms like “conspicuous consumption” and “conspicuous leisure” (among the latter, sports) (Veblen 1889). Weber’s portrayal of bureaucracy and rationalization (Weber et al. 2002), as well as Durkheim’s studies of anomaly and mechanic/organic solidity (Durkheim 1893), express concern about the direction in which the modern world is headed, regardless of any particular class.

Writings that examined the emergent American middle class after World War II and during the last decades of the twentieth century were written mainly by sociologists and journalists, who were trying to characterize “America” (meaning the U.S.), thus associating a certain social group with “national character” or “national mood”—mostly that of voiceless and a-political individualism. The middle class was typically conceptualized as predominantly white, heterosexual, and white collar in occupation (Mills 1951; Galbraith 1958; Riesman et al. 2001). The sociologist C. Wright Mills, a student of Veblen, saw the white collar world as characteristic of the twentieth-century existence. The white collar man, he writes, is always somebody’s man, whether the corporation’s, the government’s, or the army’s. Mills sees this development as more than a change in occupational patterns. For him, this is nothing
less than the decline of the independent individual and the marker of a life of slow misery, yearning for the quick American climb (that never happens), simple hopes, complex anxieties, and lack of any belief or reassurance. Inspired by Marx and Weber, Wright Mills also talks about man’s alienation from any product of his labor and from himself, as he sells traits like courtesy and intimacy. White collar people are therefore little people, interchangeable parts of a machine, politically voiceless, estranged from community and society (Mills 1951).

A second account that also dates to the 1950s, is David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd. In this book, Riesman describes a “sea change in American culture”—a movement from production to consumption and from “inner directed people” (who as children internalized goals that were implemented by elders) to “outer directed people,” sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others—peer groups and mass media (Riesman et al. 2001). Other classic books documented changes in the U.S.—especially those related to individualism, egoism, and lack of social and political involvement, family and community ties, responsibility and discipline. Christopher Lasch’s Culture of Narcissism is an attempt to understand narcissism as a typical personality structure in a society dominated by large bureaucratic organizations and mass media, where families no longer play an important role (Lasch 1991); Robert Bellah et al.’s Habits of the Heart discusses the crisis of civic membership, the growing disengagement from the larger society, the decline of social capital (networks, norms, trust, and cooperation) and the threat that they pose to personal identity (Bellah et al. 2007); and Barbara Ehrenreich’s Fear of Falling examines the professional middle class shift from generosity and optimism to cynicism and narrowing self interest (Ehrenreich 1989). More recently, but along the same lines, Robert Putnam asked what happened to civil and social life in American communities (Putnam

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14 Robert Bellah has long been interested in Japan, pre-industrialism, tradition, and the transition to modernity.
Like Bellah et al., Putnam mourns the loss of social capital due to overwork, suburban sprawl, racism, TV, mobility, divorce, and the breakdown of traditional family bonds.

Interestingly enough, none of the above mentioned authors focused on changes in capitalism, though some mention it along with change in occupational patterns and class distinctions. Differently put, capitalism seems to be one of the background factors, but it never receives the importance Marx gave it. The texts discussed above seem to be more Weberian and more psychologically oriented, as they do not seek to question power relations or political economy. The authors, rather, write about their own society, are troubled by a certain social climate and seek to expose it, explain it, and even offer ways to improve it. Another important point is that those writings about the middle class tend to focus on the white middle class and the working men—often without acknowledging it directly.

More recently, a growing body of literature is trying to account for the complex subjectivities of a global middle class. Current ethnographies that discuss the experience and uniqueness of the middle classes in different parts of the world shift attention from the white, Western subject to the global middle class and its desires for status and stability, habits of consumption, and relations with the nation. Surprisingly, ethnographies that discuss places as different as Brazil, Morocco, and Nepal end up making similar claims regarding the role of the middle class, transnational images, and political disengagement. The middle classes are usually supposed to play a part in moving from “backwardness” to modernity by embracing individualism, consumption, and merit. Thus, the middle class becomes the very embodiment of progressive modernity—a concept rooted in fantasies and dreams originating from elsewhere that never quite match up to the lived reality.

Recent ethnographies about the middle classes range from Brazil of the beginning of the 20th century, to Brazil, Morocco, and Nepal at the end of the 20th century
Despite geographic and historic particularities, all these ethnographies examine middle classes as associated with modernization and progress, alongside the less-intended consequences of moral superiority, alienation from political or ideological participation, and a withering commitment to the nation-state. Likewise, Setha Low’s research on gated communities made the connection between social anxieties, isolation, and moral minimalism (Low 2003).

Four decades ago, Laura Nader called for “studying up” (Nader 1972), a call that was followed by George Marcus’ call for the study of elites (Marcus 1983). This dissertation is such a study because middle class subjects in Silicon Valley are definitely part of the world’s elites. This research adds to middle class and elite studies by showing the inner workings and thought patterns behind the economically mediated choice to focus on the self and get involved in the public sphere in very specific ways.

1.5.6 Methodology and Writing Choices

I drew lines of various kinds in doing the research for this project. Between January 2008 and December 2010—which was a time of economic meltdown and presidential elections—I practiced yoga, went through a four-month yoga teacher training, attended workshops, and volunteered as a receptionist (in exchange to free yoga classes) at the above-described yoga studio. I interviewed almost every one of the people who went through yoga teacher training with me, as well as others I met at the studio and outside of it. Over all, I have performed over fifty formal, two- to four-hour recorded interviews in addition to innumerable less formal conversations.

Fieldwork also included many things that happened outside that particular studio. Following the networks that started there, I went wherever my yoga friends invited me: baby showers, dinners, hikes, devotional-music concerts, Indian guru
lectures, Christmas celebrations, election parties, and birthdays (some of which were yoga-themed). Importantly, I was not there as a distant observer—I was there as an anthropologist, yes, but sometimes even more so, I was there as a friend. I never hid or forgot what I do, but very often, it did not matter that much. Long and honest ongoing conversations made me and some of the people I met during fieldwork rather close and exposed, and I almost never felt superior or wiser than anyone in this highly accomplished, intelligent, well-meaning group of people. At different moments during those three years, we all struggled with insecurities (financial, occupational, or personal), myself included. Thus, I often needed them as friends and not only as interlocutors or informants which is why I use the word “friends” (or “friendformants”) throughout this dissertation. I do not think I could have done this research in any other way.

But this is not all that I have done. Six months into fieldwork, I was already a certified yoga teacher—and then a friend suggested that I teach yoga at Stanford, and handed me an email address. I have been teaching yoga for almost five years now. Teaching yoga was yet another activity that created another fertile ground for meetings and conversations. Being interested in ethics, I also started volunteering in a non-profit organization that brings yoga to teenage girls in the California Justice Juvenile System. Due to my interest in health and healing, I participated in and watched restorative yoga classes for cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers, and I took a restorative yoga teacher training course.

All these yoga-related locations, events, and people formed my research fields. But something else simultaneously happened—life bled into research to the degree of no separation. Yoga seemed be about stress, and stress was all around me. Living among graduate students and being part of a Stanford anthropology students’ writing group, I saw the job market stress taking its toll years before I planned on being there myself, and, all of a sudden, my Stanford friends came to take yoga classes with me.
A significant number of my yoga friends told me about their past or current decisions to quit their academic careers. And so, academia became part of this research as well. On top of that, friends I had known since my childhood in Israel, who had moved to the Bay Area before I did, were doing yoga and became vegan. So not only did my research subjects become friends, my long-time friends became my research subjects (which is perhaps not surprising given that this was my raw motivation to do this research).

This range had to be narrowed down somehow. So, to explain where I choose to draw one line, let me describe one rather uneventful Sunday afternoon, when five people were walking the streets of San Francisco. The tallest guy is a real-estate investor, and the petite blond is his wife, an artist. Another couple walks by their side: he works in a high-tech company in the Silicon Valley, she manages a retirement community in the city. The fifth one is an anthropologist who did not attempt to do fieldwork on the weekend. All of them are in their thirties, four out of the five practice yoga (the retirement community manager prefers jazzercise).

The person working in the high-tech company is the most avid practitioner of them all. He practices everyday between 6:30-8:30 a.m. at his neighborhood studio, six days a week. He initially started to practice yoga due to paralyzing back pain, but now he listens to lectures by Alan Watts and Pema Chodron, reads yoga philosophy books, and travels to New York in order to practice with a specific yoga master coming from India.\textsuperscript{15} The artist and the real-estate investor mostly practice at home with DVDs. They like the yogic and Buddhist aesthetics, and have several statues and pictures of the Buddha decorating their beautiful home.

Since all five of us are somewhere in the process of becoming vegan (some for ethical and environmental reasons, some for health reasons), we were having lunch

\textsuperscript{15} Alan Watts was a philosopher, writer, and speaker, who was greatly influenced by Eastern philosophy: \url{http://alanwatts.com/}. Pema Chodron is a Buddhist ordained nun, an author, and a teacher: \url{http://pemachodronfoundation.org/} accessed August 13, 2012.
at a vegan japanese restaurant, and decided to take a walk to Café Gratitude and get their fabulous vegan, raw, desserts.\textsuperscript{16}And then we saw a Buddhist monk on the sidewalk. Lifting our gaze, we saw a huge Tibetan Buddhist temple.\textsuperscript{17} The monk smiled to us and invited us in. “It’s the Buddha’s birthday,” he said, “please, come inside.” Oddly enough, the people most serious about yoga—the high-tech person and myself—were the most reluctant ones. I did not want to go into a forced donation trap, and he is just shy by nature. But the other three stepped right in there, and we followed.

The temple had two stories, each one held a huge Buddha statue and a dazzling array of decorations, pictures of different buddhas, flowers, fruit, cereal boxes, and canned goods that were given as offerings. We participated in a ceremony of bathing the Buddha which was supposed to purify ourselves, pouring warm water on an image of the baby Buddha pointing his finger up. Gold, blue, and red were the dominant colors, and our guide gave us some explanation about the different Buddhas, about some nectar coming from other dimensions, and about the Buddha’s birthday. People were bowing, kneeling, and even laying face down on the floor. There was no request for donations and the tour did not last more than twenty-five minutes.

After we got out, the small group talked about the short tour for about five minutes, before moving to other issues. “I didn’t know there was more than one Buddha,” the artist said. “She lost me when she talked about the different dimensions,” said the retirement community manager. The men did not have much to say. This form of Buddhism seemed totally unrelated to their lives, which are otherwise saturated with Buddhist (and Hindu) aesthetics, the practice of yoga, meditating, listening to yoga and Buddhism-related lectures, podcasts, and music, and reading spiritually inclined books. Western yoga and all its artifacts, for that matter, seemed

\textsuperscript{16} CafÉ Gratitude: http://cafegratitude.com/

\textsuperscript{17} The Tibetan Buddhist temple website: http://www.huazangsi.org/ accessed January 21, 2010.
worlds apart from this particular strand of Buddhism (which I am not claiming to be “authentic” or “Eastern” in any way, just different).

The same experience of estrangement happened to me just five days before that Sunday, when I was accompanying a few yoga friends to see Amma, a female guru from India who was visiting the Bay Area. My friends suggested we go to see her, but to our disappointment, this was not the Amma we expected (we were looking forward to seeing the famous hugging Amma, and this one was not really into hugging). To all four of us—people with some curiosity about everything Indian, spiritual, or anything that has a flavor of self-help—her words sounded rather meaningless and redundant. However, it was not her but her followers who seemed the most interesting to us—white people wearing white clothing, who followed the elaborate rituals and rules of engagement with the guru. Of all things, it was the young man who shielded Amma with a purple, shining umbrella as she walked to the indoor stage that caught our attention and sparked a lively conversation on the way back home. We could not imagine ourselves protecting another capable adult with an umbrella just in order to show respect, and we were trying to understand what was so deterring about that for us, and what it was that felt so strange.

I think that in both cases—of the Tibetan temple and the Indian guru—it was the rituals of worship that seemed most distant to the observers, despite their (our) affinity with this world of Eastern-influenced, American-based soft spirituality. Maybe the estrangement that we felt was a result of the colorful aesthetics, but mostly, I felt that it was the result of the worshippers’ dismissal of themselves in the face of the guru or the buddha. My friends and I distanced ourselves from the people laying on their bellies, face down, at the Buddhist temple, as well as from the person carrying a purple umbrella for his guru. The articulations of Buddhism, Hinduism,

New Age, and yoga philosophy common in the Bay Area (and by extension, maybe even the U.S. and the West) are not a religion in the sense that they do not demand obedience or self denial. On the contrary—if something is being worshiped it is the self and the religion of individualism, which is worlds apart from any form of institutionalized, follower-based Buddhism or Hinduism. Western yoga is “normative,” it is everywhere, and it is modular (in the sense that each person can decide on their own what and how much to take from it).

So this is what I do not study: “Eastern” religions traveling to California and their devotees. I am also not interested in what happened to yoga in relation to various Buddhisms and Hinduisms, or any other Eastern-based practices and beliefs; nor am I focused on questions of international flows and “authenticity.” These are interesting questions, but as one can see above, they have been taken on by others. My project is about Western yoga in California’s Silicon Valley, and mostly about the cultural climate in which it proliferates and the networks it forms and is part of—not about its ancient roots and scriptures, and not about yoga as a moving object between cultures and nation-states.

1.6 Chapter Overview

Each chapter of this dissertation is preceded by yogic exercise that is related to the topic addressed in the chapter, as a way of giving an example of yogic practices and maybe even providing a taste of the experience.

The second chapter lays the theoretical foundation for the dissertation. In it, I review the writings of Marx, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Haraway, Berlant, and early anthropologists like Malinowski and Mead in relation to the the suffering of the privileged, body, and interiority. This chapter is focused on ways in which canonical thinkers understood the suffering of the Western subject as a consequence of political economy and processes of subjectification and socialization, and on ways in which
this suffering is related to interiority and the subject’s mind/body. The chapter also presents yoga practitioners’ stories and expressed opinions, and thus opens up the dissertation’s main question: what does the suffering of the privileged look like (through the lens of yoga), and what could its ethical and political implications be. The second chapter presents the gendered aspects of the suffering of the privileged, the sense of precariousness that characterizes life in the Silicon Valley, and the yogic promises that speak to those experiences of stress, anxiety, and insecurity.

This dissertation flows along yogic lines. After the foundations laid in the introduction and the second chapter, Chapters Three to Five close in on the practitioner in smaller circles in an attempt to track practitioners’ cultivation of interiority and movement in to the personal and the private, away from a hostile environment. Then, Chapters Six and Seven tracked a certain movement outwards, focusing on the ethics of self-care and politics.

The third, fourth, fifth and sixth chapters form the dissertation’s ethnographic heart. In the third chapter, I explore the concept of mechanical stress, and argue that despite the emphasis on connection in yoga circles, and the expressed desire to create and strengthen community through the practice, what practitioners seek to experience and create when they go into yoga classes is first and foremost “space.” Despite common scholarly portrayals of modern life as alienated and lonely, and despite the declared intentions of yoga practitioners, many practitioners come to the yoga studio seeking space apart from others, rather than connection to them.

The fourth chapter continues the exploration of stress from the biological and psychological angles. If space emerges as an antidote to mechanical stress, turning inward seems to be the favorable mechanism through which yoga practitioners seek to handle bio-psychological stress and its detrimental consequences on their health. Drawing on Lacan’s mirror stage, I argue that practitioners are trying to close their eyes, turn the gaze away from the mirror, the other, and their ego, and find comfort
in feeling their body and breath rather than looking at it and judging themselves for being inadequate. This chapter offers a closer examination of yoga practitioners practice of cultivating interiority.

The fifth chapter continues the exploration of perceivably hostile environment, the pursuit of space, and the cultivation of interiority in relations to First World diseases and particularly cancer—an omnipresent, ultimate anxiety among yoga practitioners. I argue that cancer is a particularly apt metaphor for today’s anxieties, as it perceived to be a disease that emerges from within, in response a toxic environment. Examining the concepts of healing and toxicity, I suggest that the tendencies to draw inward and seek space encourage an attitude not of social involvement but of internal purification and suspicion.

The sixth chapter examines yoga as an ethical discourse. Based on the yogic axiom of self-care first, and in conversation with ancient Greek thought, this chapter shows that self-care can be an ethical practice. When it comes to current yogic world views, the ethical is always rooted in the personal. Every action begins with intimate checking-in with oneself and a careful consideration of personal well-being. And yet, I suggest that the yogic self-care can be an ethical discipline that promotes social awareness and (limited) responsibility.

The final chapter examines yoga as an intimate public, Lauren Berlant’s term. A discussion of yoga practitioners’ aspirations and social distinctions leads to the conclusion that as a practice rooted in neoliberal capitalism, Western yoga does not only reproduce it but also shifts it slightly from within.

Clearly, this dissertation is not a manifest in favor or against people who are more privileged than most. Rather, it seeks to portray their complicated lives, conflate the separation between “real” and “privileged” suffering, and ask what are the meanings of the latter. I suggest an account of the suffering of the privileged as a product of neoliberal subjectivity, and argue that this suffering and the ways to relieve it have
real consequences on the world around us, as it shapes the way people understand themselves, their role in the world, and their (in)ability to contribute to structural changes.
Sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes. Let your breathing remain natural. Relax the root of your tongue and let it drop down. Release tension around the eyes by imagining them falling toward the back of the eye sockets; allow the space between them to widen and soften. Listen to any sounds that come up and let them fade away. Feel the air on your skin and notice your breath under your nose. Taste your own mouth. Stay steady and quiet within the changing sensory display of the world (From: “Round Out Your Practice: Stress Relief” By Cyndi Lee. Yoga Journal http://www.yogajournal.com/practice/1522).
The Suffering of the Privileged: Foundations

Do you get frustrated with this project, of like, hearing about how rich women make themselves miserable? (from an interview)

When I was studying for my master’s degree in Jerusalem, I lived in a fairly dark basement apartment. To brighten up the room, I bought a poster at the Israel Museum which showed a soviet propaganda painting of four women walking in a vast, golden field with big, blue sky behind them. The women had fair skin, full figures, and rosy cheeks. They looked healthy, beautiful, and very foreign to me. The image of those women was the first thing that came to my mind when I met Kate. Tall and wide-shouldered, with a big smile and soothing voice, she seemed to be the epitome of stability and mental health. I liked her immediately, and the more I got to know her my affection for her grew. One sunny morning, we met for an interview. We sat outdoors, in a shaded part of a local coffee shop, and talked for over four hours. After that interview, we made it a habit to meet for a yoga class every Friday morning and get coffee after class. In all our interactions, Kate was thoughtful, reasoned, and honest, and her calm presence—just like those soviet women in the poster—brought light into my life.
I first met Kate in February 2008. At the time, she was a forty-year-old stay-at-home mom. Her son was six years old and her daughter was four years old. She was happily married to an engineer at a big high-tech company. “I met him right after I graduated from college,” she said, “and I sort of think back, and I think, I was totally coddled. I didn’t set out to find a relationship that settled. You know, to find a man that is that whole, emotionally, that was really kind of lucky. We have been married for fifteen years.”

When I asked Kate to tell me her life story, she started by saying that it is very long and tedious. And then she went on to tell me that her parents divorced when she was four because her mom was having an affair, and that her father is emotionally stunted. “Even today, with two grandchildren, the best he can do is talk about the weather,” she said. When Kate was six, her mother remarried to a man who owned a small ranch near a state park in Northern California. Kate used to ride the horses around the farm for hours, escaping her stepdad, who had a drinking problem and was violent toward her mother and her. After ten years of marriage, Kate’s mother finally left and moved with her daughter to the Bay Area. The transition from life that was lived “under the bar” to the “land of milk and honey,” as Kate described it, was not easy. Kate could not believe the privilege that she was exposed to (for example, she was shocked when she learned that the geology class in her high school was going on a field trip to Hawaii). Kate was no longer threatened by domestic violence, but she was “a fish out of water, so scared and miserable.”

After Kate graduated from college, her mother got married to her third husband. Kate started working as an architect, and lived “the life of luxury” with her husband in San Francisco. Kate tried to get pregnant for four years before she met the one fertility doctor who made things happen. After getting pregnant for the first time, Kate left her job at a big architecture firm and never came back. The couple relocated to the Silicon Valley.
Through Kate’s (and other yoga practitioners’) stories and expressed opinions, this chapter lays this dissertation’s theoretical foundations and opens up its main questions. It presents aspects of the suffering of the privileged and the sense of precariousness that characterizes life in the Silicon Valley, and the yogic promises that speak to those experiences of stress, anxiety, and insecurity. This chapter is focused on ways in which canonical thinkers have understood the suffering of the Western subject as a consequence of political economy and processes of subjectification and socialization, and on ways in which this suffering is related to interiority and the subject’s mind/body. I begin with Cartesian dualism and the understanding of the mind as interior and superior, and continue by exploring the works of Marx, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Haraway, Berlant, and others who help me in thinking about yoga practitioners’ rearticulation of the mind/body, attempts to find comfort in interiority, and views on ethics, politics, and gender.

2.1 Descartes and Mind/Body Dualism

The challenge of writing about the mind/body without succumbing to hierarchical dualism has been occupying scholars for centuries. In her famous *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz defines dualism as “the belief that there are two mutually exclusive types of ‘thing,’ physical and mental, mind and body, that compose the universe in general and subjectivity in particular” (Grosz 1994:vii). The mind/body dualism is as old as Western philosophy. Elizabeth Grosz sketches a history of the somatophobia Western philosophy has established itself on, starting from Plato and Aristotle, Christian traditions, and of course, Rene Descartes.

Referencing Cartesian dualism is a ubiquitous feature of accounts of the body in anthropology and beyond (Fraser et al. 2004). Rene Descartes is widely acknowledged as the thinker who radicalized the distinction between the mind and the body by doubting any information coming from the senses and trusting only what can be
directly perceived by the mind. The mind/body problem, therefore, is the question of how the two seemingly distinct entities of the biological matter and the pure, immaterial thought interact with one another (Grosz 1994; Fraser et al. 2004; Merleau-Ponty 1962).

The legacy of Cartesian dualism—that “unbridgeable gulf between mind and matter”—cannot be overcome by reducing mind to body and vice-versa. Reductionism which explains one in terms of the other does an injustice to the mind/body interaction (Grosz 1994:7). Grosz elaborates on three lines of investigation, all of which draw on Descartes’ disavowal of the body: portraying the body as an object, matter to be studied; seeing the body as a possession and an instrument; and finally, conceptualizing of the body as a vehicle of expression, a passive medium.

When dichotomous thinking dissects the universe into binary oppositions, as is the case when the body is seen as an object, an instrument, or a medium, it consequently ranks the opposing terms by declaring one more worthy than the other. As Hegel taught us, the less worthy concept is not only dependent but desires the whole and better concept in the dichotomous relations. For Cartesian scholars, the thinker (who can be also described as the I, the Ego, the mind, the soul, consciousness, or the psyche) was always superior to the body, the organism which was conceptualized as machine-like (Lock and Farquhar 2007). According to the perceptions that positions the body as subordinated and dependent upon the mind, the latter is often seen as the interior—the source of personal identity—whereas the body is an exterior, a surface (Grosz 1994: vii).¹ Across the ages, women, the poor, and people of color have been usually thought of as “more body” than mind, and thus, justifiably subordinated

¹ The image of this particular relation between the body and the mind can be seen in top-selling Hollywood science-fiction movies that portray body-like machines which are being operated by an inner mind/master. Examples that come to mind are the movie Men in Black (1997), where a tiny figure of an alien was located inside a fake body’s head. Second example comes from Avatar (2009) where the robots/war machine were controlled by a human sitting inside the robot’s chest (other images in Avatar play with the mind/body dualism in different ways).
and dependent on the white man. Acknowledging the way in which the mind/body split facilitates inequalities, however, raises another question: what is the price of trying to be “all mind” and neglecting the body’s wisdom and needs? In other words, what is going on with the white, Western subject (or the bourgeoisie)? Some of the scholars I review here answer this question in different ways.

2.2 Alienated Workers, Vulnerable Bodies

This chapter focuses on converging genealogies that begin with two thinkers whose influence is beyond description. In order to discuss two important images of the suffering Western mind/body in relations to interiority and political economy, I will focus on a genealogy that starts with Marx and the worker’s body, and then I will turn to Freud, Lacan, and what might be thought of as the nineteenth-century bourgeois body.

Marx and Freud wrote on the heels of historic movements of vast magnitude. Major changes in belief systems and ways of life were happening in Europe of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, changes which are sometimes summarized in big words like the industrial revolution, modernity, and capitalism. As modern science and technology made traveling across the globe relatively safer and faster, colonialism and global exploitation reached a different scale altogether. People’s bodies were literally molded inside and out by new machinery and work-demands, by new sciences that studied bodies systematically and intrusively, and by technologies that enabled killing people in much more efficient ways than ever before.

In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels mock the Young Hegelians for attributing independent existence to conceptions, thoughts, and ideals, thus divorcing human history from its most rudimentary foundation: the existence of living human individuals. “The writing of history must always set out from natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men” (Marx and
Engels 1998:42). Life-making requires, first and foremost, eating, drinking, habitation, clothing, and other secondary needs. To fulfill these needs, Marx and Engels argue, nature is being changed and turned into need-fulfilling goods through the life-processes of real, active men. People make their lives, produce and reproduce it by labor and procreation, and it is only on the basis of men’s actual, empirical, perceptible processes of development under definite conditions that ideology, religion, the state come into being. Consciousness or spirit, therefore, are not burdened with matter but dependent on it (matter being the body of men). Consciousness, therefore, is claimed by Marx and Engels to be a social product which only exists within social relations.

Dualistic thinking can be claimed to characterize Marx and Engels’ writing, since it seems as if they do not try to overcome the dichotomy but turn it on its head by pushing for the primacy of the material. But it was also argued that Marx and Engels’ materialism means that there is no real dualism here, since the world of thought and the world of things are two aspects of one process (Kamenka 1983). Whether dualistic or not-quite-so, Marx and Engels do discuss the material/mental split, which has very material effects: it is only when societies make a space for people who are responsible for mental labor, such as priests, that consciousness can flatter itself that it is independent and pure (Marx and Engels 1998:42). Put differently, it is only privilege—as freedom from manual labor—that makes it possible to fetishize thought (in the Marxist sense of fetish) and leave the laboring body behind. From this particular labor division a whole array of inequalities and exploitations arises, both within the family and in the market.

The body does not quite figure as such in The German Ideology, but it is constantly there, as well as in other of Marx’s writings (Marx 1976b; Marx and Engels 2019).

2 When reviewing Marx, I intentionally stick to the gendered language used in the English translation. Marx and Engels’ thought is gendered regardless of the language usage, as it is focused on men, who have the the active role of going out to work.
After all, history à la Marx begins with the materiality of bodies—their need for food and shelter. When divisions of labor separate man’s deeds from his needs, his actions become an alien power opposed to him, and he becomes a cyborg (not Marx’s term), a man-machine that leaves much of his humanity aside. Specialization requires that the body will perform a limited number of actions, and man’s identity become restricted by his social role—and so the body and the very being of man become rigid, and men become alienated from their work, the products of their labor, nature, society, family, and from their own humanity. Looking closer at alienation, I believe, will help in teasing out the Marxist body, how it is being shaped by power, and its laws of exteriority and interiority.

A famous Marxist axiom asserts that “the more wealth the worker produces, the more his production increases in power and scope, the poorer he becomes.” (Marx 1983:133). The wheels of capitalism and the extraction of surplus value do not only make the worker financially poor, but they also bring about the loss of big parts of the worker’s very being. The worker, in other words, becomes poor also by losing his very essence.

The process of alienation starts when the product of labor presents itself as a power independent of the producer. When the worker relates to his labor’s product as an alien object, his inner world becomes poorer; his life is being put in a place which is exterior to him:

The externalization of the worker into his product does not only mean that his work becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him independently, as something alien to him, as confronting him as an autonomous power. It means that the life which he has given to the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (Marx 1983:134)

As this quote shows, the idea of “the internal” and “the external” is very important
for Marx. The worker is capable of externalizing parts of his being and thus become a stranger to himself. He is now a vessel deprived of content, a working body which just goes through the motions and goes through the days, disconnected from his own life and subjectivity.

Shortly after making this statement, Marx turns to examine the processes of objectification and alienation closely, and by doing so he gives us a clue as to what, for him, makes man a human. Human history, for Marx, is the story of production: men mold nature and turn it into products which satisfy their means of life. But as soon as labor becomes a means to produce “marvels for the rich,” the direct relationship of labor to its product and the worker to the objects of his production is severed (ibid 135). Then, the activity of production becomes externalized, meaning that labor no longer belongs to the worker’s “essential being.” Alienated work does not affirm the worker, but makes him “unhappy (...) mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (136).

The meaning of labor for Marx cannot be overestimated. Labor is by no means what one does in order to support some real and private self. Far from being “mere means for his existence” (139), labor is the life-activity that makes us all human, and part of our species-life. Since man lives by operating on nature with his body (and thus he is part of nature), the alienation of this most basic life-activity entails alienation from nature, from other human beings, from his own body, and his spiritual and human being (Marx 1983).

The interiority of man, for Marx, is no simple concept. It definitely cannot be described as an inner operator that controls the machine of the body, and it is absolutely not located in some grand, universal, free, disembodied thought. There is, however, a deep sense of interiority in Marx’s writing—a notion of an inner world which is the complex whole of the active body and all that is around it; a producing man, living in harmony and as one with nature and other fellow beings. The man
who works for himself is a man with spiritual life, which cannot be separated from
the laboring body but is dependent on it and very much part of it. Only within this
primary and fundamental activity of life—the production which is directed towards
the self—can men be whole and connected. Interiority, therefore, is not within the
body or the self—but in its connections. Exteriority, on the other hand, comes into
play when one is separated from the products of one’s labor and by extension, from
labor itself, from other men, from the family, nature, and from oneself. Capitalism
is portrayed as a historic process that violently and forcefully dissects and separates
man from the activity that makes him human, objectifying him and hollowing him
from within (Marx 1976b).

Capitalism (and as I discuss later, the precariousness of neoliberal capitalism)
takes a particular toll on women. Facing the task of documenting women’s oppres-
sion and developing theories to account for it, writers such as Simone de Beauvoir
and Shulamith Firestone drew attention to women’s reproductive activity as a poten-
tial cause of inequality (Nicholson 1997). Simone de Beauvoir argued that humanity
is divided into two classes: women and men, and the former have always been sub-
ordinated to the latter (De Beauvoir 1952). Two decades later, Shulamith Firestone
gave materialism a slightly different resonance, as she argued that the original divi-
sion of labor between men and women produces the wife as the means of production
and the husband as the owner. The biological family is hence an inherently unequal
power distribution that demands the revolt of the underclass and seizure of control
of reproduction (Firestone 1970). Other feminist-Marxists writers draw attention to
the partnership of patriarchy and capital as it appears in the dependence on domes-
tic labor, family socialization for obedience, and ideology (Hartmann 1979; Barrett
1997). As I show later, women’s responsibility for the household and the children is
still the dominant model in today’s Silicon Valley, and this produces a unique set of
stressors for employed and stay-at-home women alike.
Translating Marxist alienation to today’s concepts, one can argue that stress (caused by the industrial or the technological revolution) goes hand in hand with alienation. Although Marx speaks mainly about the proletariat, and fails to predict the rise of the middle class, his words definitely resonate with the living experience of workers in Silicon Valley. Even if they are paid well, most workers are deprived of surplus value, and their work is sometime alienating and difficult on the body (as the many ergonomic chairs and keyboards can testify). Here are the words of Andrea, a chemist in a pharmaceutical company:

I am a chemist by training, work for a pharmaceutical company which is really kind of interesting, I work for a company that develops medication for like, depression, psychological disorders (laughs). No, we don’t need drugs, do yoga! So that part of my life, I’ve also used the yogic approach of detachment. It’s like, I don’t think I was ever meant to be a chemist, I was more maybe meant to be a psychologist, but at this point in life it’s too late now. I am not going to go back to school. So, it is what it is, and it pays my bills, and I am okay with that. Do I really believe in all the drugs and that everybody should take it? No. But it is what it is. And it allows me to do my yoga.

Andrea is alienated from her professional identity in more than one way. First, she does not think that she was meant to be a chemist, and second, she does not really believe in the necessity of the drugs that she helps to produce. Even though her job is external to who she really feels that she is (a psychologist, maybe) and not as valuable to society according to her opinion, she chooses to accept the reality rather than change it. Ironically, perhaps, Andrea uses her yoga practice (detachment) to help her do her job, and she does her job so that she can pay her bills, live her comfortable life, and devote as much time as she possibly can to her yoga practice.
Yoga, for her, is not just a tool that helps her go back to work every morning, but a practice that makes work worth it. Although she does not say it explicitly, one can guess that yoga also compensates for the long hours of sitting by a computer and in meeting rooms, and that Andrea’s body and “interiority” are much more aligned in the yoga studio than during the work day. Andrea’s words, as I see it, give a sense of what the alienation of the well-paid, neoliberal subject looks like—the worker who is still a replaceable part of the corporate machine, who still sells her body, labor, and time and suffers the consequences, and who finds her “real,” interior self outside of work.

Another form of alienation appears in life stories of people like Samuel, who opted out of a successful career due to a strong sense of meaninglessness and depression. Samuel was only twenty-six years old when we talked in 2008. I did not know that he was an Israeli Jew when we first started to talk because his English is perfect. But the discovery of our shared homeland seemed to make our conversation instantly open and frank.

Samuel was a student in one of the most prestigious high schools in Israel. His parents were immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and he testifies to being educated in an “anti-communist and a hard-core capitalist house.” His best friend, who is described by Samuel as a “prince charming kind of guy,” established a company that was sold for a few million dollars when he was seventeen years old. One day, completely out of the blue, the friend committed suicide. Samuel explained it as a case of manic-depression: “We saw him when he was high, but he hid the low moments.” It was the time of the dot-com bubble: “If you were in the internet business, everything you touched turned to gold.” Samuel and his friends made a lot of money. After school and before the army, they lived on a beach in Cyprus, riding their jet ski water motorcycles and doing nothing.
But there was a strong sense of dissatisfaction and depression. It was easy for me to make excuses: I had acne and never had a girlfriend. But now I know that money emphasizes your inner state because you have no excuses for that dissatisfaction, that discontent.

Samuel was drafted into an elite unit in the Israeli Army, which was very intellectually demanding. He started dating and met his first serious girlfriend. It was a big love, Samuel says, but they broke up after two years of dating, when he took a managing role in the army and at the same time started his own business, and later sold it for “tons of money.”

I knew then that I was settled for the next five to ten years, and that was the point when I was pushed to depression. This time I had no excuses. I looked good, I knew that I can have a relationship, I had friends, and I felt that something is fundamentally wrong and I had nothing to do with it. Everything was okay, but something was missing. I started doing yoga twice a week, and then practiced more and more. Even in yoga, it’s very clear that during the relaxation at the end you feel like the problem isn’t there, you take that thirty kilos of stones off your back for a minute. You know that something is wrong but you also know that there is that possibility, to be in a different state.

Samuel took an intensive yoga and meditation course and met many other people who shared the same distress he felt. Some led much simpler lives—as he says “instead of wanting to be a professor, they wanted to build a red-roof house”—but the effects were very similar. I asked Samuel if he had ever been to a place where people did not feel like that, and his eyes lightened.

I visited Slovenia once. An amazing place. Everything was spotless. I stayed with a local family, where both parents were elementary school
teachers. They left home at 7:30 a.m. and came back at 11:30 a.m. They told me that they don’t make a lot of money, but they had a three story house and two cars. It was great to see—every day there were traffic jams between 3:30-4:30 p.m., and at 5:30 p.m. everyone was out at a coffee house. Everyone is out and the offices were closed. So much better than Israel and the U.S., so much better. As a child, I heard all about the horrors of Communism, you see. But when I spent time in Slovenia and when I traveled with Kibbutznikim, it opened my eyes.³ I started thinking about friendships, about being a good person, and about spiritual life.

After he finished the army, Samuel traveled the world and finally got to the Silicon Valley, where he is still a high-tech entrepreneur and an avid yoga and meditation practitioner, and where he became a yoga teacher. I quote his final thoughts about happiness:

A Western person does not suffer less than a poor person, period. I experienced the great suffering of neurosis and restlessness. A person with tons of money isn’t much happier than a person who lives in a poor neighborhood. There are genetic dispositions for depression, there are friends and family factors. Money is mostly about what experience you will have in your life, if you are going to deal with materiality more or less.

A lot of the issues that Samuel raises will be discussed later in the dissertation. Samuel describes the meaninglessness of life on the fast track, the meaninglessness and depression that people may feel once they have already achieved “the American

³ Kibbutznikim is the Hebrew word for people (like me) who were brought up on an Israeli Kibbutz, a socialistic and agricultural community.
dream.” His story is unusual, as Samuel had to deal with success at a very young age, while he was still struggling with issues of adolescence (acne, first girlfriend). Yet, his ideal description of an elsewhere (in this case, Slovenia) where people live less competitive and stressful lives are echoed in the words of other yoga practitioners who compared the Silicon Valley to Australia, Italy, or India, claiming that people in the Silicon Valley are so much more insecure, stressed, and money oriented than people in other places. The meaninglessness Samuel experienced can be seen as a form of insecurity “that is not only material but also ontological: a sense of existential emptiness and social negation” (Allison 2012b:100). Samuel’s words, much like Andrea’s, testify to a Marxist alienation experienced by people who are definitely not the proletariat, yet experience emptiness, meaninglessness, and even depression as a result of not identifying with the labor they do and its products.

2.3 Rethinking Power and the Precariousness of Neoliberalism

The way in which power relations came to be seen had greatly changed since the 1970s. Arguing against the repressive hypothesis, Michel Foucault aimed to show that modern times had brought new and elaborate regimes into being. No longer working (only) as a deadly force emerging from a single source (the sovereign), power works through the production of knowledge, categories, body, and subjectivity. Foucault was interested in modern times, when prisoners are no longer tortured and literally ripped apart, but required to conform to a detailed time table and on-going (self) observation; and when the discourse about sex proliferated and with it, the obligation to confess and know sexual desires to great detail. It is then that politics/power enters the very being of subjects, making them into who they are down to the most minute bodily movement and the darkest corners of the soul (Foucault 1998, 1977, 1988a).

In coining the now famous term “biopolitics,” Foucault thought to describe “the
endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomenon characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race” (Foucault 2010:79). Biopolitics is deeply tied to liberalism—which Foucault sees as both a practice of governance and as a critique of governmental practices. As a technology and critique of governance, liberalism holds that “one always governs too much.” The reality of the market and political economy plays an important role in the liberal critique of excessive government. Veering away from governmental apparatuses on their bureaucracy and intervention, American neoliberalism (to use one of Foucault’s examples) seeks to expand the rationality of the market to not primarily economic areas, such as the family, birth policy, and penal policies.

Perceived though a Foucauldian lens, global capitalism (which was predicted by Marx) and neoliberalism—that incoherent cluster of theories and practices of political economy according to which, human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms (Harvey 2007)—add another dimension to Marxist alienation and insecurities. If power is everywhere, and it shapes subjects from within, then neoliberalism literally creates insecure subjects. Differently put, when Harvey’s terms of “flexible accumulation” and “time-space compression” portray a system of vertical disintegration and instabilities, they also indicate that subjects are fundamentally disposable and temporary.

A particularly appealing model for contemporary subject formation, one that emerged from science and technology studies and gender studies, is Donna Haraway’s cyborg. In her very influential “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway claims that fundamental changes accrued in the nature of class, race, and gender, and presents both a description of a changing world and a blueprint for a new world. Haraway’s cyborg is a creature of social reality and fiction, a lived experience and a possibility. Introducing one of her enigmatic yet strangely poignant charts, Haraway writes: “We
are living through a movement from organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system” (Haraway 1991:161). The cyborg works against the mind/body, animal-machine, idealism-materialism dualisms, on which so many socialists and feminists rely when they propose “an imagined organic body to integrate our resistance” (Haraway 1991:154).

Relating directly to high-tech culture and to Silicon Valley, Haraway sees the new times as characterized by a movement from hygiene to stress management, from microbiology to immunity. Stress, says Haraway, is one of the markers of the new era. Writing specifically about Silicon Valley women, Haraway adds:

In the prototypical Silicon Valley, many women’s lives have been structured around employment in electronics-dependent jobs, and their intimate realities include serial heterosexual monogamy, negotiating childcare, distance from extended kin or most other forms of traditional community, a high likelihood of loneliness and extreme economic vulnerability as they age (Haraway 1991:166).

Silicon Valley women, therefore, try to manage lives of acute loneliness and vulnerability. Questioning and destabilizing the categories of “women” and “female,” Haraway suggests that “to be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force” (ibid). Haraway’s “woman” is already a cyborg.

How does stress, as the privileged pathology of these days, and the cyborg—which stands for vulnerability, exploitation, and insecurity—relate to politics? Politics and solidarity, says Haraway, can emerge from the always already fractured and liminal cyborg, rather than from the founding myth of original wholeness. The non-gendered, binary-breaking cyborg image has the potential for changing the rules of the game.

The women Haraway talks about in the quote above are the women I study.
Ironically, these are women who often buy into the story Haraway seeks to undermine, the story that “begins with original innocence and privileges the return to wholeness” and “imagines the drama of life to be individuation, separation, the birth of the self, the tragedy of autonomy, the fall into writing, alienation” (ibid:177). This story is being repeated whenever yoga practitioners seek to connect and overcome separation through, as they often say, “recognizing the divinity or humanity of all,” and whenever yoga practitioners are trying to produce a (perhaps impossible) blissful immersion with nature and original, pure, full stages of being. I will return to the potentiality of the cyborg, through Lacanian disarray, in Chapter Six.

This is what Kate, who was working as an architect (and with whom I opened this chapter), had to say about her work experience and her husband’s:

After I gave birth, I didn’t want to go back to doing what I was doing. I loved making something functional from things that weren’t functional, like a kitchen or a bathroom. I did the whole construction, the electrical plan. Loved it. But the whole, you know, interacting, the whole financial BS, I hated that. Being called on a Saturday because someone had an issue. I fired myself from a few jobs because I realized, you know what, this client is crazy. No way around it. I just couldn’t see myself go back to it. And I couldn’t see any way to just do the design.

N: What does your husband do?

K: He’s by education an electrical engineer. He is getting to the point, age wise, he will be forty-six this year and he realizes that his time is running out in terms of being a desirable asset within a corporation, so he is pursuing two other things, sort of doubling to see what the future might hold for him. He is doing some tutoring because there’s such a lack in mentoring for young people; it goes so far beyond not doing their math
homework. These poor kids, especially in this area. Their parents, even if they are physically present, are just emotionally checked out. They are so busy with their own routine, and the kids feel that. They feel that they are fifth or sixth on the priority list. He is also doubling in commercial real-state. That is so he can do other things, it’s an easy generator. He does see focusing more on kids that their parents can afford it, so he can affect their thinking, more than the kid left behind. When you cross over forty something happens. You become acutely aware of your own mortality, there is a sense of emergency. Driving a hundred in the freeway just doesn’t have the same appeal. It’s almost over night, you’re thinking, I better get my shit together, better get my ducks in a row.

N: Was staying home with your kids a hard decision?

K: It wasn’t a hard decision. I realized that, oh my lord, kids need so much more. I totally get polygamy from the wife’s perspective. Even the best, most present mom doesn’t begin to touch a small percentage of what is required. There is just this constant, without sounding martyr-like, there is this constant sacrifice. If you want to raise whole people, guess what, there is nothing for free. You have to sacrifice a part of yourself to give to them. Every night I go to bed and I think, I hope that was enough cause that’s all I had to give today. Sometime it’s a life of luxury: I get to sit outside and have a coffee with a friend, I go shopping when no one does. You can’t only be in a place of giving and you can’t only be in a place of taking. And I don’t make apologies. But I will also tell you, I work my ass off to be the best parent I can be. Because I don’t want them to go to the end of their tether, to find their way back in. That’s my job and that’s the choice I made. I have a friend who
owns her own business, she’s a workaholic, she has her big house and big
fancy car and a horse that she rides. But her kid suffers tremendously,
been kicked out of two schools for behavior problems. And when she is
with me she is very apologetic, and I make no judgment. Observation,
no judgment. But every choice you make has repercussions. I had a shit
childhood—as a result I can be fully in my experience now, and give to
my kids.

Kate is neither a martyr nor a victim, and she is not someone who dwells on
her suffering (although she had her fair share of it). Yet, her story of quitting her
architecture career, like Andrea’s story, speaks to alienation and the stress of working
in too demanding of an environment. Her words also testify to the precariousness of
her husband’s life as an engineer in Silicon Valley, who realizes that his position as
an asset to a company will not last long; and more so, it shows the insecurity of a
wife who is dependent on her husband’s income.

Kate does not seem to be alienated from her job as a mother, but she does recog-
nize that nothing comes freely. The price she pays, among others, is dependency—
but she prefers that to the alternative of living life “on the fast track,” having a
lot more money and possessions, and having far less time to invest in her children.
Kate’s expectation of herself as a mother are incredibly high. Due to their assumed
responsibility for the children, both the stay-at-home moms like Kate and career
women like the one Kate speaks of are examples of women’s vulnerability to harsh
judgment—especially, but definitely not only, self-judgment. As Chapter Four shows,
women under so much stress and contradictory expectations go to the yoga studio
and cultivate a sense of interiority, where they find relief from vulnerability and
insecurity.
2.4 Subjectification and its Discontents

This section turns to a second genealogy that speaks to suffering, insecurities, and the mind/body, starting with Freud. Freud’s early writings first appeared in print about half a century after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. With different interests in mind than Marx’s but no less passion, conviction, dedication, and sweeping influence, Freud’s work transformed the way in which people all over the world understand themselves to be. Clearly, the following section does not attempt to pursue the impossible mission of covering the extensive and sometimes contradictory Freudian legacy. Instead, I will be reading some of Freud’s work (often, through Elizabeth Grosz) with an eye toward his sense of the interior, the subjectivization, and suffering.

It is sometimes hard—and perhaps somewhat unnecessary—to distinguish body, psyche, and society in Freud’s writings. Freud’s understanding of the mind/body is rather sophisticated—in fact, the term “mind/body” itself does not do justice to the psychoanalytic theory. For Freud, the body is never a simple biological entity, but a lived relations between the inseparable psyche, drives, desires, ego, and internalized societal demands. Showing the susceptibility of the biological to the psychological, Freud forged a “clear interaction” between the two, instead of assuming a rift between them (Grosz 1994:28).

The baby’s id is perhaps the closest Freudian concept to a “pure” Cartesian body, still deprived of the powers of reflection, language, and distinction—in other words, deprived of a sense of ego or subjectivity (but not deprived of a psyche). In *The Ego and The Id*, Freud describes the id as a pleasure seeking hub of anti-social sexual impulses and desires. The baby, unable to distinguish itself from the world, slowly learns that some sources of intense pleasure are his body parts while others, like the mother’s breast, are of less constant presence. And so the baby learns to
distinguish the self from the non-self. Along the way, the baby loses this sense of being inseparable from the world, and the ego comes into being as the agency which is motivated by the principles of “rational” compromise, mediating between the id and the external demands (Freud 2005; Freud et al. 1949; Grosz 1990). This version of the ego—the realist one—is therefore a “biological result of the interaction of psychical and social relations with the surface of the organism” (Grosz 1990:26). It is biological because it is an innate faculty—a natural, pre-given stage of development, but being biological does not mean that it is “pure body” in any way. On the contrary, the realist ego is an agency of internal management, mediating between society, the psyche, and sexual drives.4

A second notion of the ego arises from different writings of Freud, in particular On Narcissism: An Introduction and Mourning and Melancholia. The narcissistic ego comes into being when it takes part of itself as a sexual object, and it is “an entirely fluid, mobile, amorphous series of identifications, internalizations of images/perceptions invested with libidinal cathexes” (Grosz 1990:28). The narcissistic ego is a storehouse of libido which is completely indistinct from external objects of investment and withdrawal, and therefore very much like the realist ego, it is an inseparable mix of the bodily and psychic libido as well as external and internal objects of investment.

In her book Volatile Bodies, Grosz returns to the egos of The Ego and The Id and that of On Narcissism, claiming that in both essays the ego figures as a corporeal projection. “The child is a (passive) conglomerate of fleeting experiences, at the mercy of organic and social excitations to which it may respond but over which it has no agency or control” (Grosz 1994:31). This passive conglomerate that is the pre-ego child is perhaps pure id, or pure body in the Cartesian sense. The nonintuitive

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4 Instincts are a biologically universal set of processes and behaviors which are necessary to maintain life. Drives emerge from the sexualization of instincts. The drives therefore are attached to biological processes, yet they are autoerotic and regulated by an erotogenic zone (Grosz 1994:53).
conclusion therefore is that what in Freud might be the closest to a “pure” Cartesian body is actually a boundary-less, self-less, not-yet-socialized being.

A sense of self, a sense of “unity and cohesion over and above the disparate, heterogeneous sensations that comprise its experiences” is only achieved as “the end result of series of processes which construct the ego” (Grosz 1994:31). In another interesting articulation of the inseparability of the mind/body, Grosz describes the Freudian process of ego construction as dependent on the creation of a psychical map of the body’s libidinal intensities—a map of the surface of the body and its sensations, or, as Grosz puts it, a map of the body’s “orifices, erotogenic rims, cuts on the bodys surface, loci of exchange between the inside and the outside, points of conversion of the outside into the body, and of the inside out of the body” (ibid:36). Like a thermal map, this mapping (which is the ego) is a representation of bodily degrees of intensity—but it is far from being a self-contained creation, as “the notion of the body as a whole is dependent on the recognition of the totality and autonomy of the body of the other” (ibid:37-38).

The different notions of the ego that are found in Freud’s work do not succumb to the mind/body dualism. In addition, the clear-cut distinctions between the interior and the exterior, or the psychic and the biological, become blurred beyond recognition. Despite this complexity, Freud is known to claim that there is a clash between the subject and society (or culture)—a clash that leads not only to neurosis and psychosis but also to the common unhappiness of humankind (i.e., suffering). But when Freud makes this claim, he never suggests any simple or binary contrast between the subject and what he calls civilization. Unlike Marx, he does not seem to suggest that humans can be happy under a particular cultural constellation.5

5 Norman Brown, following Freud, suggests that humans can be happy—but that society needs to go through major transformations to allow that. Brown sees childhood as the period of freedom governed only by the pleasure principle. Society, alas, represses the individual who ends up repressing herself, as the capacity for pleasure in the body is slowly narrowed and sublimated into
Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* begins by discussing sexual perversion, and then moves on to infantile sexuality and adult sexuality, in what seems like a strategic writing choice in service to the main conclusions of the essays. Children, says Freud, are polymorphously perverse, hence perversions are innate in everyone; and so the making of a civilized and normal subject comes at the cost of what he calls happiness—the ability to fulfill sexual impulses (Freud 1975).

Decades after *Three Essays*, Freud develops and complicates this point further in the famous *Civilization and its Discontents* (1925), where he explores the roots of common unhappiness. *Civilization and its Discontents* was written after World War I, when Freud, mournful and diagnosed with cancer, seems more pessimistic than in his earlier writings. The essay begins with the sense of “oceanic feeling” which is, according to Freud’s friend Romain Rolland, the source of religiosity. Freud reports he never personally got to experience that oceanic feeling, and he attempts a psychoanalytic analysis of the feeling, associating it with the baby’s helplessness and gradually earned sense of self. The baby learns to identify his organs and the existence of an external other through seeking pleasure and experiencing met and unmet needs, but initially the self contains everything. Therefore, says Freud, the adult self is a shriveled remainder of that all-encompassing feeling (Freud 2005).

Unfortunately, that all-encompassing feeling is hardly available to adults, and common life is hard, too hard. Life, says Freud, is full of disappointments and pain. And while we probably cannot know what life’s purpose is, we can watch adult sexuality. Things that are not based on an infantile wish and on the body (such as money), do not offer happiness, because they are focused on accumulation instead of enjoyment. Therefore, they cannot bring happiness. But religious and oriental mysticism (like yoga) can, because they transcend the platonic dualism of soul and matter. The resurrection of the body, as Brown says, is a social project facing mankind as a whole, and it will become practical political problem when people seek happiness rather than power, and when political economy becomes a science of use-value instead of exchange value. When humans know how to fully live they will also be able to accept death (Brown 1985).

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6 Romain Rolland wrote a book about Ramakrishna named *The life of Ramakrishna: His Ramakrishna the man-gods and the universal gospel of Vivekananda*. 


people’s behavior and see what they seek: happiness, in the sense of avoiding pain and discomfort and experiencing pleasure. Among the ways to avoid pain, Freud names yoga as a way of controlling needs and deadening impulses. The successful yogi, according to Freud, achieves a certain happiness (nirvana) but also loses a great deal of pleasure. Freud names other art-of-living techniques, before he talks about love—and particularly sexual love, which he describes as providing people with the most intense experience of pleasure, and hence it is the ideal of happiness.

There are many recipes for happiness yet it is so hard to attain. Why? Here, Freud reaches the point: the culture is to blame. “The primitives” and the European are no different in that respect, even though modernity holds a different set of disappointments such as the failed promise of technology and growing further apart from nature. All cultures, however, need to face the primordial aggressivity which is as inherent as the ability to love and the desire to be loved. Communism, says Freud in a rare reference to Marx, is an illusion—it will not disarm aggressiveness. Freud concludes by saying that Thanatos, the death drive, is a great threat to civilization. The latter then turns it towards the self in order to survive. Internalizing aggression—guilt—is therefore the tool by which societies channel the threat, and so, humankind pays the price of progress by losing its chance for happiness.

The apparent contrast between the subject and society is not as simple as it may seem—the subject, as I mentioned before, comes into being only by and through the internalized exteriority, which is the very precondition for the establishment of an ego/self. The subject cannot exist differently—after all, polymorphous perversity or oceanic feeling will define a person as mentally ill should that feeling continue beyond childhood. It is important to remember that in no way is Freud suggesting a simple individual/society split, and that while the superego may be the internal representative of an external authority, aggressiveness emerges not just from it but also from the ego’s own original aggressiveness. This original aggressiveness is repeated
by the super ego (Bersani 1986:22)\textsuperscript{7}

*Civilization* is an important text for me not only because of its sweeping influence and ingenuity versus the Cartesian dualism, but also because it offers a very different view on happiness and suffering than the Marxist one. For Freud, the inner-split is biologically and psychically given. No civilization can make a person perfectly happy. The suffering of the privileged, in other words, is an inconvenient necessity, and one cannot hope for more than “common unhappiness.” By contrast to Marx, Freud holds that being one with nature, labor, and the humankind is impossible, and as a solution it simply will not do. Socialization and subjectification have a violent impact on the subject—an impact without which the subject will not come into being.

Like Marx, Freud influenced generations of feminist writing. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan points a finger at American articulations of Freudian theory. Friedan’s book provides a powerful image of the miserable housewife who supposedly has it all and yet finds herself depressed, unfulfilled, and empty; the mother who takes tranquilizers like cough drops and finds herself fighting unexplainable fatigue; the suburban woman whose intellect and ambitions were folded nicely and stored with stacks of spotless linens during the fifteen years following World War II. The idea that women were naturally fulfilled by devoting their lives to being housewives and mothers, Friedan writes, gained strength from the Freudian view according to which “the Feminine Mystique derives its power from Freudian thought” (Friedan 2001:166).\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{7} The “unexpected sameness of different terms” in Freud’s writing repeats itself again and again, including in *Civilization*, where multiple dualisms are broken (Bersani 1986:21). Paying careful attention to all sections of the text, Leo Bersani reads *Civilization* as an interplay between the conscious (the text) and the unconscious (the footnotes). Bersani notices that where Freud claims that aggressiveness is the representative of the death—the latter being different than Eros—he also says that the satisfaction of instinct is accompanied by a sense of omnipotent, narcissistic enjoyment. Aggressive enjoyment, therefore, sounds like the oceanic feeling and like that feeling, the enjoyment includes an intense erotic pleasure. Destructiveness, Bersani concludes, is identical with sexuality. The main gist of *Civilization* therefore is the redefinition of love as aggressiveness.

\textsuperscript{8} If *The Feminine Mystique* was the book that captured the lives of women during the 1950s,
Although it was problematic in many ways, Freud’s portrayal of Victorian women and their sexuality was also revolutionary.9 “According to Freudian orthodoxy,” as Gayle Rubin wrote, “the attainment of ‘normal’ femininity extracts severe costs from women.” As a theory of sexuality,

Psychoanalysis provides a description of the mechanisms by which the sexes are divided and deformed, of how bisexual, androgynous infants are transformed into boys and girls. (Rubin 1997:43).

Despite its flaws and reductionist articulations, Freudian psychoanalysis opened the way to question not only gender roles, but also phallocentric domination. It opened up ways of foregrounding the social, cultural, and the normative as creating the category of “the woman” and it turned sexual difference into a question rather than a biological fact (De Beauvoir 1952; Firestone 1970; Irigaray 1985).

Kate’s story is saturated with psychoanalytical references. Her understanding of herself is, in a lot of ways, Freudian, especially when she talks about her trauma, defense mechanisms, and the mind/body connection. “My childhood was so oppressive,” she said, “It took me many trips to the psychiatrist to help me separate the emotional wounds from the beauty of the horses. For a long time I shut the whole thing down. Because to remember the horses was also to remember all the other stuff.” Talking specifically about yoga and the body, Kate reflects on her bodily injuries and emotional wounds without clearly separating the two:

I had had several crashes, falls with my horses, and I was in two major car accidents. And when it becomes chronic like that you sort of bear

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9 Freud’s account of Dora’s case, for example, has drawn a lot of feminist critique that is summarized and supplemented in Toril Moi’s “Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud’s ‘Dora’” (Moi 1981).
it, but I went into yoga and thought, ha! I walked away [from yoga] when I was pregnant, because I didn’t do anything that could remotely cause a problem. But when I gave birth, you know, you drop all those pounds, and your back is like wait, what the hell? And I got together with a moms group and one of them had us go to yoga, and immediately I didn’t understand why did I let it go. One of the things that I realized was, over the years how completely disconnected I got from my body as emotional safety mechanism. Why would I want to get in touch with my pelvis? Why would I do that? And they would say “tuck your tailbone” and I was, oh dear God, I have a tailbone. And the whole drawing back in was hugely profound for me. Teachers say that all your emotional impact is stored in your pelvis, man, that light bulb went bing! right over my head. I am still very tight there, even today. Lunges are very painful for me. So, I guess, okay, to be better connected with what’s going on outside I really have to become, well, it’s more than being connected inside. You have to find gratitude, have to find empathy for who you are. And it started an evolution back, I had to find a new way to connect with myself. It made my outer connection stronger, deeper, more stable. It gave me a lot more, I can sit back and let any conflict go by. I don’t have to engage it and control it. Just sit back and let it go by. I think that it made me greater connected to myself and to everything around me, life in general. I appreciate everything around me so much more. Just sitting outside and having a cup of tea. And when I don’t practice the pain in my back starts again, and I start to wrestle more with stuff, I don’t take the time to sit outside and drink my tea.

Kate does not question the link that was offered to her in yoga classes between her
sexual trauma and physical tightness, as she sees the bodily and emotional memory of the trauma as stored in her pelvis. Kate’s story also pushes the recognition that while everyone experiences loss and violence through the processes of subjectification—the loss of polymorphous perversity and oceanic feeling, and the violence of guilt—some, those who were violently and sexually attacked, carry deeper wounds. I find it challenging yet crucial to acknowledge that, on the one hand, everyone suffers—the process of becoming a subject is, as Freud taught us, a violent one. On the other hand, not all suffering is equal. Yet, is it always necessary or even possible to rate sufferings on an hierarchical level? I suggest that not always, and that stories of privilege sufferings are important because they question the separation between themselves and real suffering, and in addition, because perceptions of suffering have ethical and political repercussions.

2.5 The Journey Back In

Lacan’s prose, as it is commonplace to observe, is notoriously remote and deliberately a-systematic (Silverman 1983:150). I suspect that the complexity and richness of Lacan’s psychoanalytical legacy make my attempt to engage with it a-priori a failure. But there is a relief in failing. While far be it from me to claim any mastery over Lacan’s many convoluted texts (which intentionally resist any sense of coherence or proficiency), I must admit that I simply like the Lacanian thought, especially his famous theorization of the mirror stage, which is one of my favorite textual moments. There were times in my life in which it was constantly on my mind. During those times, the mirror stage served me as a constant reminder of the fact that most people are not as whole and “put together” as they may seem, and that my (and others’) sense of being “all over the place” is, simply put, expected.10

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10 Lacan would probably disapprove of my usage of the mirror stage—I do not think that his goal was to make me (or anyone) live at peace and accept their sense of fragmentation as okay. Doing
It all begins with the order of the Real, an anatomical, natural order into which the child is born (Grosz 1994; Fink 1997). Being a “pure plentitude of fulness,” the Real has no boundaries, divisions, spaces, zones, voids, or gaps, which is why it was also described as a lack of the lack. While in the realm of the Real, the child is equated to an “hommelette” (Lacan takes the word omelette, broken eggs, and combines it with “little man,” thus signaling the little being’s borderless existence)—being an indistinguishable part of the Real, the child too has no borders. Any attempt to account for the Real is bound to collapse on itself, since the Real cannot be experienced or represented (Grosz 1990; Fink 1997; Lacan 2002).

Before entering the imaginary and the symbolic, a child has no understanding of himself as a distinct entity, apart from others. For the first months of its life, a baby is incapable of controlling its organs, movements, and behaviors and has no experience of corporeal unity. It has some experience of its body, but the body feels fragmented, “in-bits-and-pieces” (Lacan 2002). At some point between the ages of six to eighteen months (the mirror stage scenario is not limited to early childhood) the child first recognizes that the image in the mirror is itself, and adopts the visual image in its totality (Grosz 1990; Lacan 2002). The child sees his image in the mirror and learns to recognize it as his own and identify with it, even though his lived experience—a fragmented, incompetent body—is far removed from the Ideal-I in the mirror. Thus, the unified and mastering image is being taken upon jubilantly, with much pleasure and excitement. This earliest recognition by the child of its

so, after all, just results in another fortification of the ego.

11 The child is also born into his parents’ expectations, language, and the pre-established place his parents made for him.

12 As a new mother, I both feared and was looking forward to observing the process of the mirror stage happening to my child. But more often than not, her presence was so total and engulfing, that it left me with little desire to analyze or reflect. There was something so immediate and real in it (I use the word “real” carefully here), that Lacan suddenly seemed less relevant to life itself. My child, however, sneaked Lacan back in, when she started kissing her image in the mirror and, to my amazement, when she started referring to herself by the Hebrew word for “you.”
bodily unity, that is, the recognition that its skin is the limit of its spatial location, is at the same time a misrecognition, insofar as the image with which the child identifies belies the child’s own sensory and motor incapabilities (Grosz 1994; Viego 2007:39). Not only pleasure emerges from the mirror stage, but also the fantasy and anticipation of totality, and with it, the root of misrecognition, alienated identity, jealousy, and an acknowledgment of an intrinsic lack. In this process, the ego comes into being—not as a projection of the body, but as the body which is represented for the subject by the image of others (Lacan 2002).

The notions of exteriority, interiority, and visibility are crucial for the mirror stage. The mirror reflects only the exterior of the body, creating an image to which the only access is visual (Grosz 1994: 42). Hence, it is only by sight that the child can perceive itself as a total whole, a *gestalt*. As the child sees a totalizing image of itself, it encounters an anticipatory ideal of unity which its experience cannot conform. Therefore the ego is split between two extremes: a psychical interior, and a corporeal exterior (ibid:43). The word “anticipatory” is of importance here, since the child’s identification with the image can only ever be “partial, wishful, (...) put off into the future, delayed” (Grosz 1990:40). A particular sense of temporality emerges from the mirror stage—a temporality of a constant sense of not-there, not-enough, expectations projected onto a forever deferred future.

The temporality of not-there-yet and not-enough, and the idea that the subject is constituted around lack, have drawn fire to Lacan who has been criticized as a theorist of capitalism, which is also constituted around lack (Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Viego 2007). Lacan was also criticized for his assumed relation to phallocentrism and lack of ethics—mainly due to his emphasis on “lack.” Luce Irigaray famously claimed that masculine parameters have deemed female sexuality to be that of lack, atrophy,

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13 The primacy of sight for Freud and Lacan was a point of intervention for feminist theorists who claimed that the woman can seem castrated or lacking only if approached visually, while any other sense will confirm a presence rather than absence (Grosz 1990:39).
and penis envy (Irigaray 1985). On the other hand, Lacanian psychoanalysis goes against the very promises and temptations of capitalism: the idea that desires can be fully exhausted and that one can be satisfied if one only buys a certain commodity (Dean 2000). Moreover, some even claim that Lacan’s analysis of capitalism leads him to conclude that in a capitalist discourse, everyone is a proletarian (Declercq 2006). As I show later, the practice of yoga, too, can go both ways. Awareness of the adult re-living of the mirror-stage (comparing oneself with others, beating up on oneself, sense of inner chaos, low self esteem) can lead towards change and self sufficiency, less consumption, and less competition (as I show in Chapter Seven, many yogic voices resist some capitalist aspects). Yet, it almost goes without saying that Western yoga is a profitable market in the neoliberal economy, and that more and more expensive products are advertised with the promise that certain yoga clothes or a particular mat will change the practitioner’s life.

The temporality that emerges from the interplay of the exterior and the interior, the visual and the experienced, means that “the stability of the unified body image, even in the so called normal subject, is always precarious” (Grosz 1994:43). According to Grosz, the establishment of an imaginary identity means that it will always require work of stabilization, ordering, and placement. This work of stabilization might be more or less conscious. This project explores very deliberate attempts of placement and stabilization in the yoga studio, ones that attempt to use the body interior and finally shut the eyes closed in order to find a relief from the haunting image of the other.

Identification with images (of the other, even if the other is an image of the self) is the marker of the Imaginary as a developmental stage, whereas language marks the entrance to the Symbolic. As a child acknowledges the existence of a third term (Nom/Non du Pere—the symbolic father and also the no of the father, which stand for God, law, and language) he comes into being as an I, as a speaking subject that
enters a system bigger than himself—a symbolic system which is the condition of possibility for his very existence as a subject and ensures his place in the shared intersubjective world of common sense (Zizek 2012). In spite of the significance Lacan attributes to the Oedipus complex, the fear of castration, and the actual (or imagined) patriarchic threat, they are far less important for him than the much more dominant social law, i.e., language, that both produces the subject and splits it (Grosz 1990:66). Once the Symbolic is upon the child, it cuts into the real and cancels it out, establishing “reality” instead. The Real from now on is the “before” which can only be thought about or spoken of from the realm of the symbolic.14

At the very first paragraph of *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function*, Lacan declares himself being at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the Cogito. For him, any self recognition (whether imaginary or symbolic) is a misrecognition, and therefore, the Cartesian subject—“who must repeat to himself the words ‘I am thinking’ in order to be able to convince himself that he exists”—gets it all wrong. The Lacanian subject can either think or be—but he cannot do both at the same time (Fink 1997:42). That “false being” is typical of any utterance of the ‘I’ and therefore, it is the subject’s condition of possibility.

As Chapter Four shows, Lacan’s writing enables me to understand yogic practices

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14 There are important differences between need, demand, and desire. While need is supposedly natural, part of the domain of the Real, and demand, even though it begins using language, still belongs to the realm of the imaginary, desire is the symbolic equivalent or counterpart of need and demand (Grosz 1990: 64). In the imaginary, language is substituted for the satisfaction of need, as the demand is always addressed to someone (usually the mother) and thus it is tied to otherness. The thing demanded (e.g., food), however, is never the thing that is really wanted (love, fullness), and hence, satisfaction can never be achieved. Between and beyond need and demand, desire is defined as the difference or gap separating the two—the reminder left from subtracting the appetite for satisfaction from the demand for love. As a repressed and unconscious reminder, desire is defined as a movement, an energy that cannot be articulated. Since the unconscious emerges with the splitting of the subject, which in itself is an effect of the Other (language and law), and since the unconscious is structured like a language—a semiotic system of relations and differentiations—one can see how is it that unconscious desire is what breaks away from dual relationships into the broader world of signification. Thus, desire, as part of the realm of the Other and as something that does not exist prior to the introduction of the Other, is always the desire of the Other, and always in need of the other—who is the object through which desire is returned to the subject (ibid, 80).
as attempts to reverse the mirror stage by turning inwards, closing the eyes, and attempting to avoid judgments and comparisons. Turning in, as Kate makes clear, is a life mission:

I think that people go outside of themselves to find happiness, and the beauty of yoga to me is that if you realize that you can’t find it outside, you’ve got to find it inside. You get to this point of acceptance. I struggled with body image my whole life. I had some unfortunate experiences in my youth, unfortunately, that were sexual by nature, that were not appropriate, and that started a long chain of events—I found a whole bunch of pictures a few years ago, of me in my pre-teens. In hindsight, that is not how I felt that I looked. My recollection was that I was a mess. And I realized, oh my gosh, how much struggle do I have to put myself through before I stop putting myself through struggle? You get to this point that you realize, wow, I am struggling for no other reason than it’s a habit. And I’m getting absolutely nothing out of it. So you streamline—it doesn’t mean that you don’t work to be the best that you can, but you stop doing it because of outside influences. You need to be healthy because it is better for me as opposed to I need to be thinner or have a bigger car. The average Joe is not trained to reflect, to think better. There is a contest externally to be better. But there is a fine line between being better or being obsessive about it.

N: My partner just went on a field trip with undergrads from Stanford, and all they talked about was competition and stress, having no time for friends.

K: People start realizing that there is a lot of stress they are engaging in. The evolution is starting to go back inside, a journey back inside.
Like, we know that family, they have more money than four families will need in four lifetimes. They got more money in automobiles than we have in our net worth, total. Obscene. The dad is never home, stuck in a cycle where more is not enough. The kids are pre-teen, have no mentor in their life. And those kids are starting that giant journey outside of themselves because of the example they have. And the father may never be able to take the journey back. You live in a community like this, from the outside it seems like happiness just should be the way that it is. You have all those overachievers from a financial perspective going way beyond, getting lost in the wilderness.

Kate, like most of my interviewees, is portraying Silicon Valley as an overachieving, stressful, money-oriented social environment. As Chapters Four and Five show, the yogic discourse carefully draws the lines between “interior” and “exterior,” recreating and rearticulating the two over and over again in an ongoing attempt at separating negative external influences and recreating a better interiority. One of the questions of this dissertation is whether the attempts of drawing inward are a privileged response to a stressful climate that results primarily in self-focus, or if these attempts also entail an ethical life choice. Each possibility does not necessarily exclude the other, and both have wider social meanings.

This is how Samuel, whose life story was related above, responded when I asked if he were bothered by inequalities, and what does he do to make the world a better place.

“Fixing the world” doesn’t help. It’s peanuts. It’s like directing sewage to the Mediterranean. It has minimal effect. Maybe if you’re Bill Gates, and you give 40% of your money to charity, so okay there won’t be malaria but there will be something else. But if everybody changes something small,
then there could be much greater effect. There is a natural development
to things and natural development to each person, I don’t know if it can
be rushed. You say you have an issue with huge class differences, but I
don’t. In communism it wasn’t money but connections. People in Israel
and the U.S. don’t even know how crazy it was. Power is part of human
nature, and my mom always says that at least in capitalistic societies
there’s hope. Maybe you’re right and we are too obsessed with ourselves,
I will give it more thought. But being spiritual is better than just wanting
to be a millionaire, isn’t it? We should donate rather than buy huge
diamond engagement rings, yes. I call it balanced spiritualism. Because
greed creates unhappiness, and someone who is no longer obsessed with
himself reaches some content and has compassion.

Samuel, like many of my interviewees, believes in small and personal changes
rather than a collective effort toward structural ones. Whatever change one wants to
strive towards, he says, must emerge from the natural development of each person,
and must be in line with personal pursuit of happiness. This idea of ethics—according
to which, interiority and self-care are preconditions for social involvement—will be
discussed in Chapter Six.

2.6 Harmony and Disarray

Despite obvious and ocean-wide differences, similar notions can be traced in the
works of Marx, Freud, and Lacan. The three canonical thinkers do not necessarily
agree on the sources of human suffering and on its possible solutions, or even on the
existence of the latter. But I believe that they do share a vague sense of harmonious
existence—as a post capitalist utopia or as a forever lost, impossible stage of being.
Notwithstanding Marx’s idea of progress and perfectibility, I find his idea of utopia
and the harmony between the laboring body, nature, and other people to have some qualities of the Lacanian Real or the Freudian oceanic feeling, especially since it requires oneness of the internal and the external, body and mind, self and others. In addition, all three thinkers share an idea of the self as a socially constructed thing, and a sense of tension and contradiction as motors of subjectivity and history.

Influenced by Freud, anthropologists in Europe and the U.S. found indirect interest in the body in relation to sexuality, social structure, and cultural character. Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, for example, is a book written as an extended argument with Freud, in which Malinowski claims that the family structure and attitude towards sex in the Trobriand islands do not give rise to the Oedipal complex and to moral panic regarding sex. The pregnant, sexual, desiring, and playful body appears again and again in Malinowski’s text, only to make one of the most basic anthropological claims, namely, that it is more complicated than that (the “it” and the “that” keep changing, but not the claim). Universalisms do not work, writes the person credited as the father of the anthropological fieldwork. Freud is wrong—there is a way to live without so many sexual inhibitions, family drama, neurosis, and repressions. The savage body, seen as part of nature, is the material from which Malinowski draws the conclusion that European culture is to blame and not human nature. Culture creates the split between a person and its sexual drives, culture teaches shame and guilt. But for people in traditional societies who are supposedly more aligned with nature, things can be much simpler than they are for the Western subject (Malinowski 2001).

Like all of us, of course, Malinowski was a product of his era. The social scientist assumed himself to be an objective observer—his suffering, hypochondria, racist rage, loneliness, and love-life drama did not seem relevant to his fieldwork even one bit; and his right to peek inside people’s tents, as well as his presence in the field, was not questioned (Geertz 1988; Malinowski 1989). But with all of Malinowski’s
condescension, and the now-obvious power structure that made his fieldwork possible, I cannot help but feel sympathy with the Polish gentleman who saw something that he liked in a world that seemed so far away in time and space, so distant and foreign, yet appealing. Malinowski’s yearning for more “natural” life, free of neurosis, can be easily judged as colonial nostalgia or orientalism, and it definitely has a lot to do with those intertwined bondages of desire, sexuality, disgust, and fear which are part and parcel of the dialectics of colonizers and colonized (De La Cadena and Starn 2007; Bhabha 1984; Fanon 2008; Stoler 2006). But I would argue that none of that makes Malinowski’s desire for social integration and harmony any less real.

A similar desire seems to be threaded through Margaret Mead’s work. No less influenced by Freud than Malinowski, Mead’s work was focused on childcare, adolescence, and gender roles. In her Sex and Temperament, Mead portrays a too-good-to-be-true, threefold description of three societies in which gender roles are the opposite of what they were in the U.S. at the time of writing (and to some extent, today). Gentle men and women, fierce men and women, fierce women and gentle men, are all described as products of their natural landscapes (the mountain, the river, and the lake). Mead argues that culture is shaped by natural conditions, and in turn, culture shapes individual personalities. In a society with strict gender roles, the people who do not fit are deemed perverts. A more open and accepting society—or one that does not make a clear distinction between the masculine and the feminine—spares its members much suffering, as they are not deemed to be outsiders and hence do not accept the role of the pervert or the sick for themselves (Mead 1935).

Sex and Temperament, like other books by Mead, had a direct political thrust—the idea that Western ideas of sexuality and gender are not natural, and thus might be rethought. This political message is also an analysis and critique of the unnecessary suffering of Western women and men who live their lives according to norms and rules that are not harmonious with their sexual identities and orientations.

82
The same yearning for harmonious living—the imagination of life lived as one with nature, society, and the self—that were apparent in Malinowski’s writing exists here as well. As in Marx, Freud, and even Lacan’s work, there is a notion of some violent dissection that separates people from the core of their being and disrupts their chance of living peaceful, tension free, happy lives (if such a chance even exists). These anthropological perceptions, no doubt, can be the aim for much critique. They do not account for the ethnographer’s body and personality, tossing it aside (to the personal diary) as if it has no relevance. But it is also possible to say that Malinowski and Mead’s desires are present—however silently—in their texts. Most relevant for the sake of this dissertation, Malinowski and Mead remembered something crucial: that life is, indeed, not simple even if you are privileged enough to be born as the white colonizer.

Despite vast differences between the writers discussed so far, they all imagine either a world or a point in time where there are fewer cuttings and divisions and therefore, less suffering. Even today, Marx provides ways to think about yoga practitioners’ complaints about stress as a feature of modernity, alienation, and the ways in which political economies mold bodies and limit happiness. Freud and Lacan help me in thinking about low-self esteem and habits of judging oneself too harshly, as well as competition and stress that emerges from one’s too critical look at the mirror and at others. Malinowski and Mead open up discussions concerning the limitations of certain culturally correct ways of being, and the price people pay for having to live according to the high expectations of an ultra-competitive culture, where they have no time and “space” to be at peace. But maybe most importantly, the writings of Marx, Freud, Lacan, Malinowski and Mead suggest some possible ways to think about a similar yearning for harmony (and sometimes, fetishization of “simple” and “natural” ways of life) that is apparent at Western yoga classes and writings and suggests that the suffering of the privileged is indeed a very old problem.
The sense of oneness with nature, others, and most importantly with the self is for Marx the opposite of alienation, as it is the opposite of misrecognition and alienated identity for Lacan, even if it could never be achieved. Interestingly, the loss of the Real, the pre-verbal sense of body-without-borders, or the oceanic feeling (these are, no doubt, different things) is always related to some sort of violent split, an intervening exterior that immediately forms a different (and perhaps the only one possible) sense of subjectivity. The subject emerging from those accounts is, unfortunately, almost always unhappy, duped, or misled—it is a subject of false consciousness and misrecognition. For Marx, the revolution is the solution. For Freud and even more so, Lacan, there is no real solution except maybe in giving up on the illusion of wholeness and autonomy and making it possible for subject to be as fragmented and chaotic as they really are. Haraway’s cyborg is perhaps just that—a hybrid and incomplete entity, always already fractured and liminal. Politics and solidarity, says Haraway, can emerge that incompleteness, rather than from the founding myth of original wholeness.

The yogic discourse often reiterates yearnings for harmony and wholeness. Does it always fail? I do not mean to ask a neoliberal question—in the sense that it measures things according to the concepts of ultimate success and failure—but, following late Foucault’s writings, I do want to examine what happens in the process of yogic subjectification, considering how it relates to ethics and politics.

In his later and uncompleted project, Foucault moved from exploring power to the exploration of techniques of the self as well as ethical practices of self-care and freedom (Foucault 1985, 1986). Foucault works to explain the conditions under which a subject can reshape herself in alignment with a social criterion of the good. Is it possible to suggest that by reflecting and reshaping the self, yoga practitioners are able to gain some critical distance from the conditions that shape them, including neoliberalism? Differently put, maybe yoga usually fails to achieve harmony—but
maybe by creating disruption of subjectivity, and space from old and habitual ways
of being, it opens up a new territory of change and reflection. The ethics and
politics of yoga will be introduced in the next section and in Chapters Six and
Seven, where I discuss the ethics of making one’s subject the object of discipline and
displacement. Critical self-inquiry is examined as an internal process that, to some
extent, may refuse Ego Psychology’s whole, complete, and coping individual in favor
of growth, change, and disarray, and, along the way, may question the basic truisms
of neoliberalism.

This dissertation seeks to examine the suffering of the privileged, as well as the
yogic discourse and its ethics, without assuming in advance what they are, what they
should be, and without analyzing them as having only one meaning. As I show in
Chapters Six and Seven, the yogic ethic is deeply connected to people’s perceptions
of their suffering and the ways to relieve it. Happiness, ethics, and politics, therefore,
do not necessarily contradict one another. For Kate, they are intricately intertwined:

When I lived in the city, I had a ridiculously privileged life. Fantastic flat
in one of the wealthiest epicenters of the universe, sports car. Especially
with my background and because I already started my journey back in-
side, I started to feel a little uncomfortable about that, spending money
willy-nilly. And I didn’t really like it that much. I went to the minister
of my church and said that I want to help women who are trying to help
themselves. So I got the number of a safe house for women wanting to
leave prostitution and drugs. So twice a week I would drive my little
sports car to this facility, and I would go to the food bank, grocery shop-
ing, organize the clothes that were donated. I had minimal interaction
with the women because I wasn’t a professional in the field of psychol-
ogy. I would sometime drive them to their appointments. Here’s how it
manifested change in my head. I started feeling like maybe I shouldn’t be having this car. And I’m driving this woman to one of those meetings, and I’m starting to realize the parallels between our lives: broken marriage, alcoholism, child molestation. I realized that it was by the choices I made to bring myself back to center that I was in a position to have this car. And it wasn’t having this car that was bad, it was that I wasn’t appreciating having that car that was bad. So making a difference is constantly about keeping yourself on your center, so you can start affecting this and this, and then it’s the ripple affect. And more people came and wanted to help out, so they had more helping hands. I do believe that some people were born to make profound changes. I don’t necessarily know why. Gandhi, Jesus, Buddha, Martin Luther King. People who come to deliver a message. But I do truly believe it is about a lot of people doing a little bit [rather] than one or two people doing everything.

At another point in the interview, Kate described how much she disliked her life in San Francisco:

This was the life I lived in the city. I got involved or encompassed with people who were on the fast track and my perspective shifted about what was important to make my life whole and I was miserable. Oh my god, I was so unhappy. More, I got to have more, I got to have a bigger house, bigger car, better jewelry, better clothes, I got to have better furnishing. Oh God, I was so unhappy, and finally the light began to dawn. Why? How did this happen? How did I get here? And then the journey back, away from that. And then it was about finding the gratitude about what I did have and to do better and be better, not to have better. And then the happiness came back.
What Kate refers to as “the journey back” supposedly works against the consumerism oriented social climate, the atmosphere of comparisons and competition, and favors, instead, an ethics of gratitude and volunteering. While volunteering for women who had similar experiences to hers, she does not feel guilty for escaping their miserable lives, as she attributes their different lives to personal choices rather than to structural violence. The same attitude appears in Nicole’s words, a yoga teacher who organizes bi-annual fund raisers for disadvantaged women and children in poor parts of India.

I went through a strong period of anger and frustration in college, and saying we did this, we did that, and then I realized after my practice one day that it was our culture but it wasn’t us. So I’m really clear in how I speak to make sure that I don’t include myself in that because I didn’t do it. You know? It’s just a little thing, but at the same time I feel responsible, I feel that our culture should be responsible for what happened in the past. At the same time, guilt is not going to get us anywhere. It’s important to do things to make people more aware. It’s important to bring international projects to the community because we need to understand our global connection. And I watch people’s faces when I talk about it; some really don’t want to go there. But we have to. [The practitioners] are in survival mode, just like people in other cultures. Living in a world of fight or flight. But we got plenty of water and plenty of food.

Neta: Why can’t we see how privileged we are?

Nicole: I think a lot of it is the way that the economy is set up. Gross National Product, is based on having to get more so that the GDP goes up. So we are trained culturally that we have to work hard to have more,
and to do that we have to work all the time, not trained to take the time
to check in.

The two speakers above express a strong refusal of ethics and politics that emerge
from anger or guilt, and a strong tendency to do “the little we can.” At many
moments of this dissertation, these tendencies may seem selfish and oblivious to the
“real suffering” that happens all around us. Yet, the focus on the self appears to be
a part of a well articulated ethics of self-care.

2.7 Conclusion: Gender, Precariousness, and Yoga as an Intimate
Public

Feminist scholars (who were in conversation with Freud, Marx, Lacan, and Foucault,
amongst others) greatly influenced the undoing of the body in relation to suffering
caused by inequalities. The question of sexual difference and “sex” as located in the
biological body has been a point of contestation for feminist theory starting with
the second wave. The most influential work was perhaps Judith Butler’s (Butler
1993, 1990), where she argued against the differentiation between sex (biology) and
gender (cultural norms), suggesting that changes and transformations do not happen
only on the surface while the interior body remains closed and impenetrable. Sex,
says Butler, is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby
regulatory norms materialize “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible
reiteration of those norms. Performance, therefore, is the reiterative and citational
practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names (Butler 1993).

Remembering that neither sex nor gender is a given reality, this dissertation
understands yoga to be an outlet and a promised relief for a particular kind of
women’s suffering. I do not seek to treat “women” as a stable sign, nor do I seek to
exclude men. Yet, taking after Lauren Berlant, I seek to portray a certain women’s
culture, an intimate public that has no clear boundaries. This chapter concludes with three points regarding the connection between yoga, gender, suffering, and politics.

2.7.1 Stereotypical Femininity

I asked Kate why she thinks that yoga is such a feminine practice. Her understanding of gender and yoga, as the following quote shows, acknowledges the masculine aspects of women and the feminine aspects in men.

I think life is a pendulum, individually and globally. Like the sixties, right? Pendulum way up here, free love—bang! The nineties were the answer to that. And when you hit that harmonious middle you have to know that you are on your way out of that. So yoga was extremely masculine, and there was a big swing and it is now all feminine, but it starts to swing back. There are more and more male teachers, more presence in the classroom. It’s always yin and yang. When I was practicing Ashtanga regularly, my favorite experience is when these young buff guys come in and fifteen minutes into class they were getting their ass kicked. And I was like, yes, watch this! But you know, don’t you find the beauty in that too? Having women become more connected, in a very generic sense, to their masculine selves, empower themselves? And vice-versa, men are sort of forced to find connection with their more female, esoteric side? You know, the yoga barbies that come in, and they can initially get into most poses because they are thin and flexible, but there is very little ability to sustain the pose. They have to dig deep or do something else. But the women who dug deep and found a way, they are not yoga barbies anymore. They are buff, like Madonna.

N: I love Madonna’s arms.
K: I’d give my pinky. It’s never going to happen.

Kate was not predicting the yogic gender trends correctly. Statistically, the percentage of women in yoga classes only got bigger after this interview was conducted. But the interesting point here, for me, is that while Kate has no investment in saving masculinity for men and femininity for women, she relies on traditional notions of the masculine and the feminine. Yoga, in a lot of ways, is working along those parallel discourses, as the attempt to empower and strengthen, both physically and emotionally, is done through reliance on stereotypical femininity.

Traditional concepts of femininity appeared in my research in a second way—through stay-at-home moms like Kate who choose to be dependent on their spouse’s income and devote their time to their children. Olivia, a yoga practitioner whose life story will be presented at length in Chapter Four, talked to me about what she called the “opt-out” phenomenon:

Do you even get disturbed though by the whole opt-out phenomenon? I mean, it just seems like so many women go to law school, get a very expensive education, and then within a couple of years opt-out for motherhood. It’s very inefficient. Maybe it can be justified by mothers who are educators, need to be educated, but it just seems like, okay, I just... I don’t know what I want. I have a friend who has two masters degrees, speaks five languages, she is so educated, and she just got married. She is not a mother—just stays at home. She does that volunteer work, but I... I sometimes have this weird adversarial relationship. Why are you not doing something, Christiana? I don’t think they’re happy. Now I am already regretting being so judgmental.

Note the neoliberal conceptions in Olivia’s words—the education is expensive (not good or challenging) and the opt-out phenomenon is “inefficient.” Also, the
judgment—that Olivia almost immediately apologizes for—is clearly there. It is there when Kate speaks about her workaholic friend, and it is there when Olivia speaks about her friend who is a volunteering stay-at-home wife. Both share the understanding that “women remain the default managers of the intimate” (Berlant 2008:xi), and as such, women face these judgments whatever their life choices are.

2.7.2 Intimacy, Publics, and Precariousness

In her study on U.S. “Women’s culture” and sentimentality (novels, TV shows, etc.), Berlant suggests that what makes a public sphere intimate is an expression that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and a certain experience (Berlant 2008). Yoga, in that sense, produces and speaks to the experiences of stress, anxiety, and insecurity that are common for women and men alike (but perhaps in slightly different ways) under neoliberal capitalism. Specifically, yoga speaks to people marked by femininity and therefore can be assumed to have something in common.

Lauren Berlant studies intimate disappointments and romantic fantasies. Intimate relationships are far from being the focus of this dissertation, which is mostly interested in one’s relationship to oneself. Yet, the following pages are saturated with the “emotional generality” Berlant speaks of—the desire to be accepted, to feel secure and at ease, to experience a “relief from the hard, cold world” (Berlant 2008:5-6). Yoga, as an intimate public, is a market that circulates texts, practices, discourses, and things that express particular core interests and desires. As Berlant says, intimate publics are powerful because of their ordinariness—because the fantasies they promote are those of social belonging, and of being generally okay (Berlant 2008).

Thinking of yoga as constitutive of an intimate public, I suggest that this billion-dollar market is profitable not only because of the workout it offers, but also because of the way in which it speaks the language of ordinary anxieties and aspirations under
neoliberal capitalism. As the next three chapters show, the “certain experience” that yoga most often speaks to is precariousness. In an article on the condition of “social precarity” in post post-war Japan, Anne Allison defines precarity as “a condition of being and feeling insecure in life that extends to one’s (dis)connectedness from a sense of social community” (Allison 2012a:348-9).\footnote{In this dissertation, I use the word precariousness more often than precarity. I do so because the latter has the “precariat” meanings folded into it, and my friends are, albeit exploited, are not proletariats but middle-upper class. Judith Butler explains precariousness to be “a function of our social vulnerability and exposure that is always given some political form, and precarity as differentially distributed, and so one important dimension of the unequal distribution of conditions required for continued life” (Puuar 2012:169). This dissertation emphasizes the social vulnerability of the privileged rather than focusing on the ones that have less and thus suffer from inequality more, and in different ways.} Precarity, in that case, speaks to “precariat,” a word used by Amamiya Karin, a Japanese activist, to reference to the precarious proletariat. In that, Allison writes, precarity is related to, but not necessarily interchangeable with, precarious labor.

In Silicon Valley yoga scenes, precariousness seems to be less hopeless and desperate than in Japan. I will return to the temporality and political implications of precariousness in Chapter Seven, but here I would like to note that neoliberalism—as the market model that dictates competitive productivity and intensifies vulnerability—goes hand in hand with precariousness even in the richest, most prosperous of places. As Lauren Berlant puts it:

My assumption is that the conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world, even of relative wealth as in the U.S., are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject and that the irony—that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it—has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the “technologies of patience” or lag that keep these processes in place (Berlant 2006:23).

This wearing out of the subject is part of the multifacetedness of precarity that
Berlant discussed in a 2012 Virtual Roundtable (Puar 2012). Precarity, Berlant says, is at once an existential problem (as Freud’s and Lacan’s works come to show); an ongoing economic problem, because capitalism thrives on instability, and because “capitalist forms of labor make bodies and minds precarious, holding out the promise of flourishing while wearing out the corpus we drag around in different ways and at different rates, partly by overstimulation, partly by understimulation, and partly by the incoherence with which alienation is lived as exhaustion plus saturating intensity” (Puar 2012:166). In addition, precarity is a problem of the reproduction of life (“there are not enough hours in the day: making a life has become more precarious in fantasy and materially”); the privatization of wealth, and more (ibid).

Precarity, in other words, is an inherent part of today’s political economy; it is a personal, continuous, and ordinary mode of being; and it is a gendered reality. Yoga, as an intimate public, speaks specifically to this gendered precariousness.

### 2.7.3 Politics

What are the ethical and political implications of precariousness? After 9/11, Judith Butler urged her readers to imagine a world in which “violence might be minimized, in which inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community” (Butler 2004:XII-XIII). Taking feminism and the psychoanalytic understanding of our primary vulnerability to others into consideration, Butler offers a politically informed, psychoanalytic, feminist, non-violent ethics based on the various forms of subjection that “formed the condition of my emergence as an individuated being and that continues to haunt my adult sense of self with whatever anxiety and longing I may now feel” (Butler 2004:27).

As appealing as Butler’s proposed ethics/politics may be, yoga most often works in other ways—it helps practitioners to “survive,” thus making them “eat their anger” and use their energy to “cultivate intimate spheres while scraping a life together flex-
ibly in response to the market-world’s caprice” (Berlant 2001:127). Chapters Three, Four, and Five examine yoga practitioners’ tendencies to seek “space,” cultivate interiority, and seclude themselves rather than use precariousness and vulnerability as motives for establishing connections and working towards structural change. Notwithstanding the refusal to engage in politics (defined here as the inclination to work collectively toward structural changes), Chapter Six and Seven show that changes are happening—not as an opposition, negation, and resistance to neoliberalism, but from within it.

This chapter opened up the issues that are at the heart of this dissertation in relation to the main theories that inform my writing. I want to make it very clear that by speaking about the suffering of the privileged I do not mean to claim victim positions (and the right to have one’s voice heard that comes with it) for privileged women and high-tech workers, although they are often exploited and insecure. The people I studied, women and men alike, are in a relative position of power. To my mind, positions of power come with responsibilities, and hence the main questions I ask are: Why do yoga practitioners not see themselves as powerful? And what are the political implications of seeing oneself as insecure and suffering subject? I suggest that yoga practitioners’ suffering has real consequences—either because they choose not to work toward structural change, or because of the ways in which they do try to do the ethical and political “right thing.” Precariousness, in other words, has repercussions. But before turning to the wider circles in the last two chapters, I explore different aspects of this precariousness in the next three.
Lie down on your back with a folded blanket under your sacrum and your legs up the wall. Place an eye pillow on your eyes and one in each open palm; this gives a sense of grounding and safety. Stay here for at least five minutes. As you exhale, feel the entire front of the body, the belly, diaphragm, and rib cage soften and release into the back of the body. Then imagine the back of the rib cage spreading and melting into the floor. Allow yourself to feel supported by the earth beneath you (From: “Round Out Your Practice: Stress Relief” By Cyndi Lee. Yoga Journal http://www.yogajournal.com/practice/1522)
"I Need My Space:” The Connection Myth and the Mechanics of Stress

We Americans need to reconnect with one another. (Putnam 2001:28)

Interpersonal life, then, is an effort to connect, and, in connecting, to overcome psychological and physical space. (Josselson 1995:5)

“My message to women, if anything, over the course of this, is, find your space. Find your spot.” (Michelle Obama for *Time Magazine*, May 2009)

Thus, the magma pressure includes a pair of tractions of magnitude $t(a)$ pushing inward and a pair of traction of magnitude $t(b)$ pulling outward on element $A$. The former pair compresses the element in the radial direction and is used to define a component of *compressive stress*. The latter pair extends the element in a circumferential direction and is used to define a component of *tensile stress*. If the outward-directed pair of traction is great enough, the rock will pull apart (fracture) along a line oriented perpendicular to these tractions and the magma may invade this fracture to initiate dike formation (...) the compressive and tensile stresses are referred to as *normal stress components*. (Pollard and Fletcher 2005:208) (Emphasis in original.)

Modern literature has long decried the lack of human connection in industrialized countries. The assumed lack of human connection, and the attempts to reestablish it,
are also very prominent in yoga classes and workshops in California’s Silicon Valley. In this chapter, I closely examine the emphasis on connection in yoga circles and the expressed desire to create and strengthen community through the practice. I argue that despite declared intentions, connection is being pursued and created in the yoga studio in very limited ways. In order to understand how yoga practitioners understand what hinders their investment in connection and community, I take a close look at the concept of mechanical stress—a commonly used metaphor for embodied compression and burden—which is thought to be lifted through creating inner space in one’s mind and body, as well as external space between the practitioner and the felt load of the world outside. Mechanical stress underlines the importance of space, which may contradict the manifested desire for human connection.

3.1 Craving Connection, Aspiring for Community

According to a much circulated postulation of dubious attribution, the Sanskrit word "yoga" derived from the root yuj, which means to yoke, to bring things together.1 Popular yoga books and other publications often quote this common wisdom not only in order to explain the origins of the word, but also in order to educate people about the true essence of the practice of yoga. The following is a typical website blurb explaining yoga: “Yoga means ‘to yoke up’ or ‘union.’ The practice of yoga creates a union between the body, mind and spirit.”2

Importantly, what is being presumably yoked together through the practice of yoga is not only mind, body, and spirit, but also “the little self” with “Divinity.” Hence, by extension, the practitioner is to connect with everyone and everything (humans, animals, nature, and the earth) by virtue of the divinity that resides in

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1 Importantly, yoke also means to subject, to discipline, and to burden. I will refer to yoga as a discipline (and to discipline in the Foucauldian sense) in Chapter Six.

all. As one yoga book explains: “The yoga practitioner seeks to yoke his or her individual soul with cosmic consciousness (...) we are attempting, through these practices that have been developed over thousands of years, to yoke our individual experience as small selves with the Source of our being, so that we can overcome the illusion of separateness” (Gannon and Life 2002:3).

The above quote assumes the existence of a “Source of Being,” or “cosmic consciousness,” to which, through the practice of yoga, one can yoke oneself (just like a yoked ox) and thus walk in the same direction as the Divine. This basic postulation—that there is a “Divine” which exists in all and everything and that it is available for people to be in touch with (and to connect with each other through)—is being translated into multiple gestures and phrases commonly used in yoga classes. Take, for example, namaste, a word said at the end of almost every class. Namaste is often translated as “the light in me bows to the light in you,” which basically means—as yoga teachers often explain in class—that all beings share the same divinity within themselves, hence, all are the same and all are connected.

Declaring such sameness suggests not only that people are interconnected by virtue of the same divinity within them, but also that the acknowledgment of this interconnectedness is supposed to guide their life choices. These ideas are articulated in a mantra which is often sung or played in yoga classes. Its words are Lokah Samasta Sukino Bhavantu, translated as “may all beings, everywhere, be happy and free and may the thoughts and actions of my own life contribute, in some way, to that happiness and to that freedom of all.”

By wishing well to all others, and acknowledging the impact that practitioners’ actions and thoughts have on the wellbeing of people who are around them as well as those who are far removed, yoga practi-

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3 These are definitely romantic, nostalgic or naive ideas, since the connection is always with animals, nature, earth—never with cars, skyscrapers, or other man-made things.

tioners reiterate the idea of sameness and connectedness based on shared divinity or humanity.

Another basis of that supposed connection is the idea of karma. Karma is understood in many different ways, but in my fieldwork site, the concept of karma is commonly perceived as meaning that violence or harm done to someone else will eventually hurt the doer as well—not necessarily because of an avenging God or some vague justice principle, but because everything and everyone is connected by strong and intricate ties. Karma was often discussed in yoga teacher trainings I attended. In one of them, fourteen trainees were sitting on their yoga mats in a half circle, their seats slightly elevated by folded blankets. The teacher, sitting in front of them, said the following words with a wide smile:

[Your students] listen to you, they really listen—you have an effect on people’s lives. People will say thank you. Don’t take it in and say: “damn, I’m hot.” Give it on—thank your teachers. This is karma—it’s good, it’s a deposit—you build up your karma balance. You can’t withdraw from it when you want, but something good will come out of it, to you or others.

Karma, as it appears in this quote, is a vague concept that works, on the one hand, according to economic laws of accumulation and ATM withdrawal—if a yoga teacher mentally passes on the positive feedback she gets, and does not hold on to it, she makes a deposit and builds up her karma balance. On the other hand, karma flows freely and one cannot withdraw from it when one feels a need to do so. The perception that we are all connected—often, in mysterious ways—informs this quote, as one’s mental and emotional response to feedback is considered to have an impact on one’s karma balance that can benefit oneself as much as it can benefit others.

Even yoga practitioners with less spiritual aspirations or religious tendencies often circulate the discourse of connection. Those less inclined to use the words “Divinity”
or “God,” for example, may claim that consciously acknowledging the “humanity” or “suffering” of others enables them to connect with the people around them. Such was the case in a yoga class taught by a biology Ph.D. yoga teacher, who tried to encourage practitioners to develop “loving-kindness” through a specific form of meditation. Through that meditation, the practitioner is thought to be able to forgive, open up, and connect to another being by seeing and acknowledging the other’s suffering and search for happiness—a practice that might be seen as trying to develop mechanical solidarity in a world where there is either organic solidarity or hardly any solidarity (Durkheim 1893).

Whether they relate to divinity, humanity or suffering as what all beings share and what enables connection, I found it common for yoga practitioners to accept as a truism that people are connected by virtue of something intrinsic within them that is one and the same for all other beings. They also acknowledge that since “we are all connected,” their actions necessarily impact others. And yet, remembering and practicing this rather elusive meaning of “connection” in one’s daily life is often a challenge. How is this thought to be done, and what does it mean?

“Non-separateness,” “connection,” and “oneness” are words that are constantly repeated in yoga classes, conversations, and publications, forming a massively traveled junction within the discursive field of yoga. “We are creating a community by connecting to every single person in the room, and we are creating compassion by connecting to everyone in the world,” one of my favorite teachers used to say during his classes. As people come into the yoga studio and are instructed to close their eyes and take a few deep, slow breaths, they learn to perceive those moments as moments of connecting—first and foremost to themselves, their humanity/Divinity, and their bodies. Connection is also thought to be promoted through joint practice (helping one another in certain poses) and in rare activities outside of class (hikes, dinners, etc.). Yet, more than anything else, it is by connecting with one’s own divine nature
through practicing yoga that the practitioner’s compassion towards (and connection with) others is supposed to silently grow. Another way to foster connection is by thinking about separateness and trying to notice it outside of class—such as in one class where the teacher specifically encouraged practitioners to think about their driving habits and to notice how easy it is to get angry when one does not see a human being but just a car impeding one’s progress.

In Chapter Six, I will suggest that with all due respect to practitioners’ good intentions, the process of connecting often includes a rather narrow definition of one’s responsibilities. Here, however, I am interested in reviewing the rearticulation of disconnected and alienated existence. As they connect to themselves through practicing yoga, practitioners are supposedly also connecting to others (it is another widely accepted truism in yoga circles that only by the connection to oneself and the love of oneself can one connect to and love others). But for many yoga practitioners, this practice produces the recognition that all through the day, they feel separated and apart from their bodies and from other human beings. Differently put, by reiterating the value of connectedness and emphasizing the need for—and lack of—human connection of all sorts, yoga practitioners learn to identify, interpret and reproduce a world full of experiences of disconnection and loneliness outside the studio’s walls.

During fieldwork, I was volunteering in the California Justice Juvenile System, teaching yoga to incarcerated teen girls. One day, as I was preparing for a yoga class that was to be followed by an art activity, the artist who came to work with the girls started asking me what I do. As I was giving her my short and simplified spiel, explaining that I am interested in why yoga is so big here and now, the tall and dramatic woman unhesitatingly gave me her decisive and very common explanation.

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5 I explore this idea of self-care in Chapter Six.

6 I was surprised to find the following example for “schpeel” (meaning, spiel) in UrbanDic-
“Yoga comes from yoking. It’s all about connection, because that’s what we miss the most—connection to ourselves, to nature, to our communities. People don’t have that and we need it so much, this is why we need yoga today.”

Clearly, the assumption that privileged North Americans lead isolated lives is also widespread outside the yoga studio. The idea that life in the U.S. (and the rest of the Western world) is too individualistic, solitary, and deprived of human connection is by no means unique to the yoga world or to the twenty-first century. Lamentations over the loss of extended families, communities, involvement in politics, and other forms of solidarity are as old as the social sciences’ interest in modernity and capitalism. Karl Marx’s previously discussed concept of alienation between a man and his work, family, nature, and himself is an early example of how scholars perceived capitalism and modernity’s influence on human connection (Marx 1976b). Emile Durkheim provides a second example, attributing egoistic suicide to lack of social integration in modern, secular, individualistic societies (Durkheim 1951). During the second half of the twentieth century, much concern about loss of human bonds was once again expressed in works such as Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture Of Narcissism*, Robert Bellah et al’s *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, and Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together*, as well as in David Harvey’s suggestion that the breakdown of all bonds of solidarity is one of the dangers of the neoliberal economy (Putnam 2001; Harvey 2004; Lasch 1991; Bellah et al. 2007; Turkle 2012). All these writings and many others make—or examine—the claim that modern separateness, atomism, and alienation are psychologically and physically damaging, and that relationships, solidarity, civic engagement, and social connections are generally lacking, and therefore, much needed in today’s world (Fusé 1975; Rappa 2002; Moglen 2007; Sayer 1991; Giddens 1990; Heaphy 2007; Blazer 2005). During the later decades of
the twentieth century, much psychological research deemed social support and mutual solidarity a fundamental dimension of people’s functioning and health (Dressler 1990).

Focusing only on alienation and disconnection does not do justice to the complexity of our times or to the writings that try to capture aspects of that intricacy. It is not enough to say that people feel alienated from each other and disengaged from their communities (if they even have communities). At least technologically speaking, many people in the West (and East) today are more connected than ever. Smartphones and Wi-Fi internet allow people to be constantly in touch through Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Instagram, and many other technological novelties (many of which originate from Silicon Valley) that saturate the late-modern life with the ability and the imperative to be always available, constantly on-line and wired. As Donna Haraway tells us, these technologies change our lives and ourselves in more ways than I can account for here (Haraway 1991). Despite those cyborgian changes and new connectivity, the technological hyper-connectedness does not seem to provide the “real connection” which is idealized in the above-mentioned scholarly and popular writings. Often, it only magnifies the embodied and personal aspects of David Harvey’s famous time-space compression, increasing the sensations of shrinking space, increasing speed, ephemerality, disjunction, and stress (Harvey 2004). For example, in his book Hamlet’s BlackBerry, William Powers asserts that the emails, texts, and voicemails; the pokes, prods, and tweets; the alerts and comments; the links, tags, and posts (the list goes on and on) are making everyday life not only more frantic and rushed, but busier, overloaded, and out of control (Powers 2010). Digital connection, therefore, seems to rub against the nostalgic yearning for “real” human connection, characterized by spending leisure time together and sharing deep conversations or meaningful experiences.7

7 Digital Detox retreats offer tech addicts “four days of serenity and bliss. Yoga, meditation, hiking,
Is connection even possible? Is the yearning for connection a psychological given, and how much is it a marker of our times? Freud and Lacan might say that “connection” is always impossible due to our inevitable incompleteness. Breaking the barriers between self and other, in other words, can be hardly imagined as achievable when so many internal splits compose subjectivity. For Freud, the ultimate connection (or lack of a connection, because if there is no separation, there is no need or possibility to connect anyway) that characterizes the oceanic feeling might leave a residue and a vague sense of nostalgic longing that seeks to be fulfilled through religion and alteration of consciousness. For Lacan, any direct access to the Real is forever gone, and can be only imagined as the lack of a lack once a child is already at the symbolic stage. But even Freud and Lacan (and definitely Malinowski and Mead) might agree that some places and times make connection even less accessible. In *Civilization and its Discontent*, Freud argues that civilized man has exchanged the possibility of happiness for security. This deal with the devil is nowhere more apparent than in modern society, and the most dangerous society is one in which the leader is exalted and individuals do not acquire an adequate sense of identity. Freud pointed to American society as an example of this danger (Freud 2005). Lacan’s critique of ego psychology and the American society will be addressed in the following chapter.

For Freud and Lacan, disconnection is not necessarily a marker of the times (although it is definitely aggravated by American capitalism). With their description of disconnection, let me go back to the thesis claiming that modernization is characterized by individualization and atomization, and to yoga’s intervention into beliefs held both by scholars and popular writers. Based on yoga’s declared goal of pro-

moting human connection and compassion, one might assume that this is what is actually happening in the yoga studio. But while the positivity of the word “connection” necessitates further investigation into the particular kinds of connections that are being promoted by yoga and their nostalgic allure, and raises the question of what does it actually mean to aspire to be positively connected, a more pressing question is whether yoga practitioners really seek it at all. I argue that despite many statements in favor of connection, friendship and community are not what is being most pursued and promoted in yoga classes.

If connection and community are partly what people are looking for in the yoga studio, one might expect that this desire will show itself somehow—for example, by interior design choices (allocation of a space in the studio for “hanging out”). “In Europe, there’s tea and sofas in most studios, and people just sit and chat after class,” told me a woman who recently returned from a yoga trip to the Netherlands, “such a shame that this is not the case here. People just come and leave, don’t talk to others. They just rush to their next thing.” Indeed, friendships rarely start by simply going into a yoga class, however regularly. “It took me ten months of going to the same studio before I talked to someone in class,” another practitioner told me. Some of the late-night classes at my home studio used to end up with a dinner or a finger-food gathering at the studio’s boutique, but those cases were an exception. The following quote is taken from an interview with Alison, a psychotherapist and a yoga practitioner who is reflecting on “the yoga community.”

I’ve been involved in a variety of communities, what are called communities, and I hold that definition really lightly. I’m not sure that yoga really is a community of sorts. There may be certain demographics that people have in common who go to it, I would guess; certainly by breakdown there are more women than men. It seems like people start either
in their twenties or thirties or older; you don’t see a bunch of little kids doing yoga. I think about it as people with more disposable income go to yoga. But I don’t think about it as a community; in that, there’s no prescribed norms, people flow in and out, I mean, I was going to class for a year before I had a conversation with another student in the class. So I don’t know that it’s a community in the way that I think about community. You know, where the people come together and they have a bond amongst each other. I think that people are bonded to the activity. But I think if the activity wasn’t happening people wouldn’t stay together. So it doesn’t fit to my understanding of what a community is.

N: Do you think that people crave community here?

A: Yes. Yes, I think that the desire for a community is certainly present. And I hear people talk about it a lot (...) so it seems like there’s some interest that’s alive for that.

Despite the desire for community and the discourse about it, Alison suggests that there is no yoga community. Andrea, another practitioner I mentioned in the previous chapter, seems to suggest that there might be a community, but explains why she avoids investing time in the yoga community that was forming around her during her yoga teacher training, when people around her were initiating social activities. Lacking time, needing privacy, but also wanting a community, she defines her positioning as her own personal, daily struggle:

Neta: Do you feel like you have the community you need here?

Andrea: No. And part of that is just my own personal struggle, that I am still a very private person, and the more yoga I do the more protective I become of my time. So all these wonderful activities that [a person from
her teacher training suggested, oh my god, you know, between work and
teacher training and doing my [yoga] practice, it’s like, it was hard to
take the time. But then how do you build a community without taking
the time? So that’s like, my daily struggle.

I find the gap between the proclaimed desire and the reality fascinating. If people
are indeed lonely and disconnected, why don’t they connect? The answers I got were
mostly about “our” stressful way of life. Other options, such as shyness, cultural
norms, or other personal or social barriers, were not equally emphasized. According
to my interviewees and friends, people do not connect (to their bodies, themselves,
and to other people) because everybody is stressed, and no one has enough time to
make new relationships and to invest in community building. Often, when talking
about stress, yoga practitioners talk about their work lives, contrasting the corporate
world with the lifestyle yoga offers. As Maria, a yoga teacher, says:

It was probably in the late 90s when something really shifted in me. I
was working in a really intense corporate job. I’d been working corporate
for eleven years and I was burning out. And I was very ambitious and
very driven, I wanted to be a vice-president by the time I was thirty, I
had all these, like, goals. And I finally reached what I thought was the
pinnacle of my career at the time, I was twenty-nine, and only to find
out that it was not at all what I expected or wanted or hoped for. And
I looked around and I thought I am stressed out, I am twenty-nine years
old, and I decided to go back into yoga, I really needed to connect.

This sense of disillusionment repeated itself in many of my conversations, along with
the sharp contrast between life on the fast track and the connection (to one’s breath
and body as well as to others) that yoga seemingly offers. Interestingly, a lot of my
interviews ended with the interviewees saying that they enjoyed talking about things

107
they never get to talk about anymore, and that they are happy that my dissertation provided us with an excuse to get together and allocate the time to talk “for real” and “connect.” As Michelle said to me as we were getting ready to say goodbye:

I really appreciate that you are doing this—I have to say, I was thinking coming here, I don’t even have time to hang out like that, this is like, very rare. I work, I teach, I have two kids, it’s the end of the year, my daughter is having a bat-mitzva, but I’m thinking, to me this is the heart of life, this is beautiful and I think it’s great you are doing this. I’m getting a lot of joy here.

So once again, if there’s so much joy, support and health in connecting, what is going on with avoiding making connections? “The most obvious suspect behind our tendency to drop out of community affairs is pervasive busyness. This is everybody’s favorite explanation for social disengagement” wrote Putnam in *Bowling Alone*, not without skepticism towards that excuse (Putnam 2001:189). In line with Putnam’s findings, a lot of the yoga practitioners I met in Silicon Valley claim that connection to other people is good and necessary, but that they are too stressed and too busy to invest in it. The following is a quote from an interview with Adrianna, a yoga who is highly critical of the Silicon Valley social climate:

They have done studies regarding stress, and there are issues around stress and around buffers, and one of the buffers that’s emerging in new research is social connection, integration, and resources, you know, like how people feel like they belong and they are connected, and also how they believe they have resources and support networks. You know, and so, even though we are in this area, you know, it’s, like, hard. People

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8 Putnam concludes that busyness, economic distress, and the pressures associated with two-career families are a modest part of the explanation for declining social connectedness (Putnam 2001:203)
really don’t have as much time to just hang out and connect. Even though it’s a value, it’s a norm, family is a good norm and everyone got that norm and they’re there with their kids playing, and everything moves forward, but it’s a different kind of competitive value norm, you know what I mean? It’s like moving, everyone’s moving.

The above quotes talk about being busy, having no time, and being stressed. In conversation, these three modes-of-being are often interchangeable. But is stress really the same thing as being busy? Is stress just about not having enough time, or is there something else to this markedly prevalent affect? As a ubiquitous affect (or mode-of-being), and as the primary excuse practitioners give in order to explain their inability to connect, stress is of crucial importance for my research.

In the following section, I examine the mechanics of stress—a less common perspective than the one discussing stress as a bio-psychological phenomenon. The two are not mutually exclusive—both meanings of stress are used in yoga classes, teacher trainings, and informal conversations. Each meaning emphasizes different aspects of “stress” and the way in which it is related to why people do or do not “connect.” By focusing first on the mechanical definition of stress and its reiteration in yoga classes and publications, I am able to conclude that “space”—and not calmness, relaxation, or peacefulness—emerges as the most desired antidote for “stress.” Space is perceived as much needed both inside one’s mind/body and outside of it (as in distance from other humans and their demands and expectations), and teachers are very clear about wanting to cultivate it in the yoga class. Space does not necessarily stand in contradiction to connection—but the circulation of the term establishes a distinct set of priorities and a worldview according to which a person has to take care of herself and her “space” before she can attend to connecting and caring for others.
3.2 The Mechanics of Stress

Paul J. Rosch is the president of the American Institute of Stress and a clinical professor of medicine and psychiatry at the New York Medical College. The following quote, by Rosch, appeared on the home web page of the American Institute of Stress.

Stress is difficult for scientists to define because it is a subjective sensation associated with varied symptoms that differ for each of us. In addition, stress is not always a synonym for distress. (...) Winning a race or election may be more stressful than losing but this is good stress. Increased stress increases productivity—up to a point, after which things rapidly deteriorate, and that level also differs for each of us. It’s much like the stress or tension on a violin string. Not enough produces a dull raspy sound and too much an irritating screech or snaps the string but just the correct degree of stress creates a beautiful tone. Similarly, we all have to find the right amount of stress that permits us to make pleasant music in our daily lives. You can learn how to utilize and transform stress so that it will make you more productive and less self-destructive (my emphases).

I find this quote interesting for a few reasons. First, the author shifts back and forth between stress as a wide social phenomenon and stress as an individual subjective sensation. As Rosch writes, We all have to find the right amount of stress, but it is up to you to learn how to manage it and to be less self-destructive. Stress,

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9 It is interesting to position stress against a cultural background where more and more “diseases” (such as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Multiple Chemical Sensitivity) are being medicalized and sufferers push for scientific acknowledgment and insurance recognized (Dumit 2006). While many yoga practitioners talk about stress, and I knew quite a few people who teach others to cope with stress, the fight for institutional recognition was not part of my fieldwork. If anything, practitioners sought to relieve stress through yoga, alternative medicine, and natural remedies.

therefore, is a social problem to be solved on an individual level. Second, the author emphasizes productivity and winning—meaning that the modern, capitalist work-ethic of moving ahead and making progress definitely informs this quote. Third, I am struck by the self-help, encouraging tone that dominates Rosch’s words. Lastly and most important for the purpose of this chapter, I wonder why Rosch chose to use a mechanical, inorganic example (a violin string) and not a biological one, given that the biological and the mechanical definitions of stress are very different from one another. In this section, I follow the lead provided by the president of the American Institute of Stress, and use the mechanical definition of stress in order to examine how stress and space are articulated in yoga discourses.

Mechanical stress refers to the measure of force per area. It is a productive concept which, counterintuitively, provides useful insights about the human experience of stress. To briefly make the distinction between Mechanical and bio-psychological stress, I would like to note that the latter is often examined as a set of biological responses triggered by a sense of threats to an organism’s homeostasis, meaning, its preferred state of existence (Dressler 1990).^{11}

If experienced repeatedly, bio-psychological stress can cause various diseases—ranging from hypertension to cancer. I will discuss the bio-psychological definition of stress in the next chapter. Here, I ask why is it that mechanical stress is the metaphor used by the president of the American Institute of Stress, and so very often, by stressed yoga practitioners? I suggest that rather than providing a biomedical and psychological explanation of stress, mechanical stress is indicative of the intuitive and embodied understandings of stress. Furthermore, mechanical stress foregrounds the importance of space. The ephemeral quality of space cannot be assumed to mean

^{11} The word homeostasis comes from homeo, which means “similar to,” “like, resembling, of the same kind,” and stasis, meaning “standing still.” Albeit not etymologically related, I find it interesting that you cannot spell “homeostasis” without also spelling “home.” A home is a space made into one’s supposedly safe and intimate place—where one supposedly finds her homeostasis. The spatiality of safety is beautifully theorized in Bachlard’s *The Poetics of Space* (Bachlard 1994)
one particular thing. Actually, space is not a thing but the negation of a thing—it is a void, a lack, a gap. If stress is experienced as having too many expectations, demands, things to do, and possible connections, then space is the repudiation of these experiences. As such, space is not only the very opposite of mechanical stress, but surprisingly, it also emerges as the antidote to the human experience of stress as it gets articulated in yoga classes.

In the world of physics, mechanics, and geology, stress is thought of as a material, measurable, and relational reality that operates on all objects. Stress, according to Pollard and Fletcher is “at the heart of our subjects,” being “the unique way continuum mechanics has for specifying the interaction between one part of a material body and another” (Pollard and Fletcher 2005:194). This short and elegant definition includes all forms of material bodies contacting one another, rubbing against each other, changing one another in the process of touching, operating force and resisting it.

The textbook *Foundations of Structural Geology* (Park 2004) provides a more elaborate definition. Park starts with defining “force” as the product of a mass and its acceleration. Stress, in turn, is a pair of equal and opposite forces acting on unit area of a body. Thus, stress results from force acting on a surface, surrounding or within a body, and comprises both the force and the reaction of the material on the other side of the surface. The magnitude of the stress depends on the extent of the force and on the size if the surface area on which it acts, so stress=force/area. True to this definition, when geologists see breakage, bending, rupture, displacement or rock deformation, they try to understand the nature and processes of stress to which rocks were subjected.

I am definitely not the first to draw from the laws of mechanics or the “hard sciences” to understand human experiences. Sigmund Freud is known for his fascination with and usage of archeological and geological metaphors to describe the
deep and layered structure of the human psyche (Breuer et al. 2000; Freud 1977); and Claude Lévi Strauss claimed to be influenced by Freud, Marx, and geology in his search for hidden structures and the uncovering of deep patterns (Lévi-Strauss 1973:57-8). Unlike Freud and Lévi Strauss’ structural metaphors, however, I do not seek to uncover deep structures and universal truths. Instead, I follow the usage of metaphors taken from the world of mechanical stress in order to better understand not what stress is, but what it feels like, and how these experiences of stress motivate yoga practitioners to seek other experiences of healing, relaxation, and stresslessness.

The concept of human stress, in fact, has been tied to engineering and mechanics all along. In the seventeenth-century, stress had come to mean “hardship” (Hinkle Jr. 1974). Toward the end of the century, Robert Hooke’s writing about the law of elasticity and how “load,” “stress,” and “strain” work in man-made structures influenced the perception of human stress as an external demand placed on a bio-social-psychological system (Cooper et al. 2001; Lazarus 1998). The nineteenth-century engineering mentality is apparent in questions that were prevalent at the time, such as how much can one take, and how can the organism be strengthened or become more flexible (Kugelmann 1992). In 1939, Walter Cannon suggested that bodily systems go through wear and tear (Cannon 1939).

Another example of a social-psychological research that tried to apply the laws of mechanics to human experiences is The Midtown Manhattan Study (Srole and Fischer 1978; Langner and Michael 1963), an ambitious project surveying mental health among 1660 residence of Manhattan’s central business district. It was initiated in 1952 and published in two volumes in 1961 and 1963. The first volume presented the relation between demographic and background factors (such as age, sex, and socioeconomic status) and mental disorders and illnesses. The second volume presented mental disorders in relation to multiple other variables, including experiences in childhood, adolescence, and adult life, such as death of a parent,
lack of close friends, and marital worries. In the second volume of the study, the researchers—Tomas S. Langer and Stanley T. Michael—use a stress-strain model as their conceptual framework. And so they write:

In this conceptual scheme (which is by no means original, having been used in one form or another by thousands of clinicians, social scientists, and layman over the centuries) the noxious, or potentially noxious factors we shall call stress. The reaction to the stress we shall call strain. (…) Our usage of these terms will be similar to the engineering usage, particularly in testing the strength of materials (Langner and Michael 1963:6).

Langer and Michael see the mechanical metaphor as apt due to the way in which it captures the relationship between environmental factors (stress) and psychiatric disorders (strain). The stress factors are seen as pressing on one’s personality, which can either adapt (just as any material would, using its elastic qualities), or break down once flexible adaptation has reaches its limit. Interestingly, the researchers did not pursue the stress-strain metaphor further. Space, the antidote for mechanical stress (there can be no pressure or stress between bodies if there is space between them) does not appear in their research. Instead—and in line with the literature discussed above—The Midtown Manhattan Study emphasized close and good connections with others as a good indicator of mental health. The number of responders’ close friends, for example, was found to be very highly associated with mental health risk, as those who have close friends were found to be at much lesser risk for having mental health problems than others (Langner and Michael 1963:285).

Very few studies have followed up on the stress-strain model since the 1960s. The psychological research on stress seemed to shift more into the bio-medical sphere, neglecting the mechanical metaphors in favor of stress hormones and their effect on
related chemical brain reactions, body, and health. In interviews and conversations, however, one can hardly avoid the mechanical space metaphor, as in the following examples.

Lola can be spotted from a distance due to her full and dark curly hair, as well as her tattoos. She was in her early thirties when we talked. I saw her in a few yoga classes, and when I asked if she will be willing to be interviewed, she happily agreed. We met in the cute, tiny place she rented with her boyfriend, an in-law unit of an elderly couple’s house in Menlo Park. When I opened with my first question, she started telling me her life story, talking freely and hardly pausing for a breath.

I was defined as a “gifted” girl. I always knew I was smart. I grew up in a small town on the East Coast, but my parents were pretty gender-blind when it came to raising me and my sisters. We were encouraged to do whatever we wanted: ride horses, martial arts, play soccer, dance. I was a geek, good in physics, math, French. Every evening, I used to prepare four bags for the following day. I was good at sports and I loved school. I went to college in Boston and did very well. In graduate school, I got a degree in software engineering and moved here because I had a great job offer. I started working, lived in a nice apartment in Redwood City Shores. I made some friends, and I didn’t even realize that all my life, I was so stressed—until life started to seem heavy and narrow. I was stuck, my body was stuck, going to the same places, doing the same things, wanting to be the best, working so hard—and for what? It all became so narrow. It wasn’t exactly depression, but I felt like it was so heavy and there was no reason to continue, no reason to do anything.

N: Can you tell me more about what it feels like?

L: It feels like a force is pulling me down, sucks the life out of me. Like
there’s heavy weight on my shoulders and on my chest. I can’t inhale fully—my breath gets shallow and my lungs feel like they’re squeezed.

N: So when did it change for you?

L: I started to do yoga and didn’t like it at first. I am not flexible at all, and it’s hard to like something you’re not good at. My teacher looked great, was very calm. She looked great in a way that is not the gym-kind-of-looking-great-way, where something is missing. She was stunning, so beautifully shaped. She was so calm, and that’s what got me. I wanted to be just like her. Because all my life, I was so stressed. And slowly, I got it. I got it, it was about balance, life is about balance, everything is connected, if your body isn’t flexible your mind isn’t flexible. If you can’t balance... It just clicked, and I understood how important it is. Yoga solved my back problems, lots of things. I still need a teacher though; I still don’t have the inner voice. I get lazy and I can’t get out of it by myself. Know Thyself—it’s so important... I had so many beliefs about myself that made me worry all the time about how am I doing. I managed to change some of them. That’s what I like about yoga.

Lola quit her job and went on a three-month backpacking trip through Europe. She came back and met the boyfriend she lives with today, who is also a software engineer. After her trip, she went back to school and became a teacher. At the time of the interview, Lola and her boyfriend were engaged to be married, and she taught mathematics in a private high-school and to grownups in a night school.

Lola’s story talks about a lot more than stress. Although she says she was not depressed, it sounds like she might have been. She also talks about meaninglessness and a sense of emptiness. Yet, it all connected to how much stress she was under, starting from her childhood and her gender-blind parents who sent her to every
possible after-school activity, to studying in great schools and doing well in traditional men’s disciplines, to moving to Silicon Valley, renting a nice apartment, and doing the same things (in the best way possible) day after day. Note Lola’s metaphors when she speaks about the hardships that pushed her to change her life around: being stuck and not flexible, doing repetitive things at work and with friends, feeling that life is both heavy and narrow. Lola felt that the stress she was under pulled her down, like the weight was too heavy to bear. Importantly, she also talks about constricted breath and limited lung capacity.\(^{12}\)

Lola’s story resonates well with the story of Jeremy, who was also a bright boy, maybe too bright and successful for his own good. Jeremy sometimes subbed at the yoga studio where I did most of my fieldwork. He is a tall and rather muscular guy in his mid-thirties, with thinning hair and a wide smile. We had a few short and informal conversations after and before yoga classes, and he knew that I was writing my dissertation on yoga. Jeremy almost invited himself for an interview, and suggested that we talk over dinner. Almost without thinking but probably due to a gut feeling, I put my wedding ring on (I don’t usually wear it), and went out to meet him. We met at a restaurant that he chose—a candle-lit, quiet Italian place just across from the studio. Unlike other interviews, which started with me asking about the person’s life story and how she/he came to yoga, the interview with Jeremy started in the middle of things, as if we were in the middle of an ongoing conversation. Referring to practitioners he had met at the studio and to the benefits

\(^{12}\) Some of the description of stress sound similar to what Jackie Orr describes in her *Panic Diaries*. Orr writes: “Once upon a time one spring night as I was turning over to sleep I suddenly became terrified that I was going to die. I started trembling, and my heart beat so fast in my chest I was sure it would just stop” (Orr 2006:9). But stress is different from a panic attack, although continuous stress can probably lead to one. Stress is not a crisis moment but an everyday reality (in other words, it can be thought of not as a disorder but as part of the order of things). Also, while panic (anxiety) is medicalized and treated with pills (like Xanax), and so is depression, I have yet to hear of a drug that is thought to cure stress. Moreover, even though prescription mood drugs were mentioned in interviews and conversations as part of the symptoms of “our sick society,” yoga practitioners can take them and still be under a lot of stress.
of yoga, Jeremy said:

People don’t spend time cultivating and nourishing their relationships with their children, family, friends, and also with themselves. In yoga, we do just that. It’s so hard for people to say they love themselves. I love myself. I am a good person and I try to be better. Why don’t we hear that more often? What I’m constantly learning is that in order to help others you must help yourself first. I met many yoga teachers, just like psychologists, some of them are there because of their problems, and they think that they know about others’ issues and how to help even if they didn’t solve theirs. I believe in teaching by example, not by holistic bullshit. I don’t preach, I’m having fun. I’m type A, I had severe insomnia, and yoga helped me in that. I learned how to be in the present and not think about two things at once. Yoga helps you in learning who you are; you learn so much about yourself. Recognize your stress. It’s exploration.

N: Why did you start doing yoga?

J: I started doing yoga because I wanted to be better, more flexible, tone my body, but I understood that this is just one piece of the puzzle. Right after college I came back to live with my parents. I went to the gym and there was one cute girl who taught a class, so I looked to see where she was going and joined the class. And I was high, it felt so good. At the end of class I actually had a hard-on, not because I was aroused but because I was so high.

At that point, I started twirling with my ring. Jeremy did not seem to notice that he had made me somewhat uncomfortable, and continued:
I was pre-med in college, twenty-seven credits a semester, life was stressful, my childhood wasn’t super easy, my parents were really poor, on welfare. My brother used to hit me frequently. We still don’t speak. So my childhood, college, it was all tense and then this class, I suddenly really relaxed, my mind was focused on one thing. And I just felt like, holy shit, I was high. My mom was anxious and I was an anxious child. And then I came here and started working in a venture-capital firm. I loved it and I was good at it, I made a lot of money, but I also lost a lot of money. There was so much stress. And then I got back to yoga and it helped me be at peace and separate between who you are, what you do, and what you have. I was finally able to sleep. I discovered that I don’t need so many things. I am a strong and beautiful human being. I also broke up with my girlfriend at the time, and my dog died. I left the firm and switched to real-estate investing. Today I know that if you learn to appreciate the moments you learn to appreciate your life. I have money and I can always sell assets, but today I live on the minimum and love it.

N: So when you were stressed, what did stress feel like?

J: For me, it feels like a hand is grasping my windpipe and applies pressure on it. I am bothered, I may sweat at night, sometimes I feel pressure under my armpits. I can’t concentrate as well. But the most important thing is that it feels like someone is holding, squeezing my windpipe.

As the quotes above show, stress is often being talked about through mechanical metaphors. Stress is associated with compression, pressure, weight, burden, and tension. One is considered to be under stress, and the body is often reported to be responding as if there were real force applied to it. The constriction of being trapped in a box, writes Kugelmann, captures the pressure side of the deformed spatiality
of stress. For example, when stressed, one cannot breathe fully, as if the lungs were compressed; and one might find it difficult to stand tall, as if there were real weight on one’s chest and shoulders, as if the world were closing on one’s head (Kugelmann 1992).

In my mind, the beauty of the mechanical stress definitions lie in how precisely they describe subjective feelings of being under stress and their embodiment. I find that it makes sense on a very intuitive and embodied level: being stressed feels like being compressed, squeezed, and rubbed in the wrong way. Being under stress is about having too much and too many external and internal forces applied on oneself, and it is about trying to resist it and work against it. It is about having the world bearing heavily on one’s shoulders, about not being able to breathe and lift up, and about being tired from the continuous struggle. In short, the spatial and mechanical realities of stress are almost indistinguishable from deep embodied sensations that are often associated with being under stress or under pressure. Mechanical stress gives a whole new meaning to “time-space compression,” as the compression, in this case, is deeply embodied. “The crowded roads reflect the clogged arteries that we read about in the newspaper and see on television,” writes Kugelmann (1992:4), expressing the ongoing flow and blurring of metaphors, experiences, and conditions of living. External demands, thought-patterns, and the reactions to them register on the body as compression, which is highly related to the increased speed of life and to diminishing space (Harvey 2004).

Stress is also about not having enough resources to resist the pressure people have to deal with on a daily basis. Resources can be time, money, prestige, sense of safety, sense of control, discipline, or myriad other things that are imagined to provide a buffer between oneself and the world, and thus, to create space and ease the burden. Indeed, those buffers are much needed, but without certain changes (those that yoga practitioners seek in yoga classes) all the money, time, and success in the world will
not do. Given that sense of compression, there is no wonder that yoga practitioners seek to slow things down and create more space for themselves.

The intuitive, silent, commonly understood perception, which sees stress as the embodiment of external and internal forces and one’s reaction to them, is also apparent in cues given in the yoga class. Often, teachers make no distinction between “real” demands, perceived threat, habits of the mind, and their results (manifested in the shape of bodily compression, poor posture, shallow breath and eventually, illness). In response to the combination of it all, students are instructed to put their bodies in poses that reverse the bodily positions most associated with stress (and computer work)—hunched back, lowered head, and shoulders dropping forward or raised up. Most yoga classes incorporate deep breath and poses that open the chest and elongate the spine, and practitioners often leave class feeling taller and lighter—in other words, less stressed.

As said, mechanical stress is force per area. To continue exploring the metaphor, I would like to focus on the concept of “area.” In solid objects (e.g., a table or a rock), the bigger the area on which a force operates, the smaller the stress is. Arguably, yoga practitioners try to diffuse the stress that operates on them in ways that can be described as enlarging their own “area,” for example, by literally standing taller, expanding their bodily movements and taking up more space (practitioners really do measure as taller due to improved posture). Outside the yoga studio, women are socialized to capture less space, perform small and un-intimidating movements, and make themselves seem shorter by bad posture. But in the studio they stand tall, capture space, and move their arms and legs in big and expanding movements. If we bring Marx back into the picture, remembering that Silicon Valley workers may feel like a small and insignificant parts of huge corporative machines, practices of becoming bigger and occupying more area make even more sense.
To push the metaphor further, I would like to introduce three other qualities of materials: yield strength, elasticity, and viscosity. First, yield strength is the measure of how much stress is needed in order to break a solid object. For example, less stress is required to break a matchstick than a needle. In yoga classes, practitioners really do build strength—As Kate said (in the previous chapter), strong and athlete men are often surprised to find that the practice is much more challenging than they expected (as captured in the otherwise pretty bad Madonna movie *The Next Best Thing*, in which she plays a yoga teacher). While practicing yoga, one supposedly both builds up one’s emotional and bodily strength and endurance, and decreases one’s chances of breaking down. This, too, is related to work demands, as the practitioner’s body becomes stronger and her ability to handle many hours on a chair grows. Some yoga practitioners say that they even miss fewer work days due to improved health.

Second, elasticity is a measure for materials’ ability to deform reversibly under stress. Rubber bands are more elastic than leather bands since they deform more reversibly under the same stress (i.e., able to return to their original shape). There is no doubt that yoga makes practitioners more flexible, and hence, perhaps, more elastic and less brittle. On the emotional level, one’s ability to retain balance, calm, and peace of mind can be attributed to elasticity/flexibility, as people might not get “bent out of shape” as easily as they would have before practicing yoga.

Third, viscosity is a measure of a material’s fluidity—its ability to respond easily to stress by flow. Water flows more easily than honey. The most popular kind of yoga in the U.S is flow yoga, maybe because it supposedly helps practitioners imagine that they become more flowing, as in “rolling with the punches” or “going

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13 I cannot write the word honey without thinking of Mary Douglas and her analysis of honey as having a consistency that is neither fluid nor solid, and therefore disturbing and possibly dangerous [Douglas (2002)](http://example.com).
with the flow.” As materials under stress, yoga practitioners (and many others) are often afraid of breaking down and going through deformation. In numerous ways, yoga helps practitioners cultivate internal qualities that supposedly help against such threats. Yoga is seen as making people stronger, more flexible, and more fluid, and thus more capable of resisting and sustaining stress (I will return to flexibility later in this chapter, in the subsection “Mind The Gap: Mental Space”).

One can try to cultivate strength, flexibility, and fluidity, and these qualities might help one handle stress. More than anything else, however, the opposite of mechanical stress is space. If there is space between objects, mechanical stress cannot exist. If force does not meet a surface, there is no stress. With the idea of space as the opposite of stress, I would like to go back into the yoga studio and see how it operates there.

3.3 Space

Sensitivity to space and place has always been an object of anthropological interest. An early example I previously discussed is *Sex and Temperament*, in which Margaret Mead builds an elaborate argument concerning the impact of landscape and spatial conditions on the development of human nature (Mead 1935). During the 1990s, anthropological interest in space and place peaked and changed, as spatial dimensions of culture were no longer deemed mere background and space became an essential component of social theory (Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). Attention to transnationalism and globalization changed the anthropological thinking about space, as the very concept of localized, bounded culture, typical of Mead’s days, was called into question and, with it, long-time anthropological methodologies and assumptions. At the same time, questions concerning practices of space-making and their relations to identity,

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14 The February 2013 Issue of *Yoga Journal* details the most popular styles according to a readers poll. Vinyasa Flow yoga got 35% of the votes, followed by Hatha 19%, Ashtanga 13%, Anusara and Bikram (5% each).
gender, race, embodiment, and power relations in the late-capitalistic, postcolonial world gained importance (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Appadurai 1996; Dressler 1985; Herzfeld 1991; Löfgren 2003; De Certeau 1988; Löfgren 2003; Stewart 1996). Despite the booming anthropological interest in space since the 1990s (and in the body since the 1970s), the examination of bodily spaces and personal spaces has remained limited. Spatial analyses, Low and Lawrence-Zuniga write, “often neglect the body because of difficulties in resolving the dualism of the subjective and objective body, and distinctions between the material and representational aspects of body space” (Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003:2). Space occupied by the body, and the perception and experience of that space, have been understood to be inherently social and cultural by many scholars (Turner and Schechner 1988; Mauss 1973; Bourdieu 1984; Douglas 1973) but personal space did not receive much attention.

In an early publication from 1968, Edward Hall coined the term “proxemics” to mark the study of “man’s perception and use of space” (Hall 1968:83). Hall discussed the culturally dependent aspects of people’s need for personal space and their different ways of interpreting and using spaces. Hall’s research draws his conclusions from photographs, observations, extended interviews, experiments, linguistic models, and even from zoological studies in which rats responded to overcrowding with signs of stress and sensory overload. The disorder of the overcrowded rats, Hall claims, showed “a striking resemblance to those of some contemporary Americans who live in densely packed urban conditions” (ibid:87). Another one of his finding is that the normal American question of “Where do you go to be alone?” tended to puzzle and angry his “Arab subjects” who replied by saying “Where do you go to to be crazy?” or “Who wants to be alone?” Hall concludes that there is no fixed, universal distance-sensing mechanism, and that interpersonal distance is a constellation of sensory input that is coded in a particular way.

Erving Goffman suggested that personal space marks and mediates personhood
in liberal societies (Goffman 1971). Personal space can be of particular interest in societies going through a transition, a condition that is always characteristic of Silicon Valley where people, companies, and economic arrangements are in constant flux. Tomas Matza provides a close look at how personal space is understood in another changing society—Russia during the 1990s and the first few years of the twenty-first century. There, personal space was woven into an ongoing conversation on “respectful distance” as a sign of “civility,” and “elbow culture” as a sign of poor upbringing and lack of respect. Analyzing Russian talk shows, Matza suggest that the conversation concerning personal space is part of a preconception of selfhood that advances a view of the autonomous, partitioned, choosing, and socially unobligated subject (Matza 2009). Surprisingly, even in the ultra-neoliberal Silicon Valley (where people constantly talk about the cost of isolation and loneliness), there is also an ongoing discourse that testifies to the desire for more space and “respectful distance.”

“The absence of proportion, the dissolution of place and time, and the numbing of the body,” Kugelman claims, “are three constituents of a world under stress” (Kugelman 1992:5). Indeed, personal space and the desire for it are deeply intertwined with cultural shifts, socialization processes, shifting subjectivities, and personhood-in-the-making. So what does it mean to crave space in a place which is supposedly already neoliberal and autonomic to the bone, where people are assumed to be already sovereign, self-possessing, empowered, and polite—the qualities Matza names as the desired end-product of neoliberalization?

I started devoting thought to this particular understanding of space after my encounter with Latika, a beautiful, passionate and articulate young woman. Latika was born in India, raised in Singapore, and educated in England and Canada. When we met, she was deeply invested in Mexico through an NGO she is managing with her husband, a law student. We met after a yoga class I was teaching that evening, and as we were unlocking our bikes we started talking. New not only to Stanford and
to the Silicon Valley but also to the U.S., Latika had some passionate observations
to share about the new culture she found herself trying to manage. “It is so much
about self sufficiency!” she said:

People come to yoga classes like this one in order to create a community,
but when I look them in the eyes they look down. Ever since I got here, I
have been waiting for connections to happen organically, but they don’t.
People are lonely, but they don’t connect, it doesn’t pass the “hi, how
are you” stage.

Latika’s intonation became more poignant, and her big eyes grew even bigger, as she
asked me:

And what’s that thing about “space?” Did you find that weird as well?
I lived in co-ops before, where people try to revive the kibbutz idea,
but when some disagreement occurs, North Americans always need their
“space”! What is this about?

Later that night, I got a follow-up email from Latika. “It was wonderful to talk to
you on the walk back today”, she wrote:

I do apologize if I came on “strong” or if I sort of “invaded” your “space”
(to use the parlance of our North American friends!). But I value human
connection very, very much and really believe in engaging with people
at a deeper level (i.e. I am not a fan of collecting acquaintances just to
show how many people I know. That’s a lonely way to be in the world).
So it was refreshing for a change to actually chat with someone beyond
“hello, how are you?” (-:

I felt that Latika, as a perceptive and somewhat estranged foreigner, made an im-
portant point. Indeed, what’s up with “space?” I started noticing that it was one of
those words that kept on resurfacing in multiple contexts. Teaching yoga to at-risk teen girls at the correction complex, a co-teacher once told me I should “take more space and put out more energy, otherwise the girls will take over the space.” I understood her to be saying that she thought I should talk more, talk louder, and make my presence felt so that the girls’ minds would be focused on me and on the yoga, and their thoughts would not wander off. This advice somewhat correlated with positive feedback I received during my teacher training, when I was commended for my ability to “give space” to myself and my students. The recommendation to “take more space” in the juvenile hall, where girls are distracted and potentially disruptive, is indeed an exception that points to the communality outside, where good teachers “give space” and where practitioners crave it. Being a foreigner, Latika experienced the North American need for—and respect of—personal space as confusing and frustrating. She felt as though she were constantly being pushed away. But for others I met during fieldwork (who were originally from the U.S. or lived there for many years) “space” was not an irritation but a necessity. Actually, it was something of which—just like time—they never had enough.

The importance of space manifested itself in a web video series which went up on the Yoga Journal website in April 2009. The short episodes (4-5 minutes each) titled “Ogden: the Inappropriate Yoga Guy” were promoted as “hilarious.” I describe a few scenes here at length, because Ogden behaves in a way that breaks all yogic

15 I see no contrast between the advice and the praise, since the correctional facility is an exception. In the yoga studio, there are hardly any teenagers, most people are slim and fit (unlike the incarcerated girls), and there are no discipline problems (in the sense of no chatting, giggling, complaining and flashing gang signs during class). Ironically, the only resemblance between the teen jail and the yoga studio might be that in both places there are quite a few people on prescription mood drugs at any given time.

16 Being a non-working, Stanford student’s wife, Latika tried to audit classes and establish connections with people at Stanford. She had a great way to describe her experiences of being rejected by Stanford people who felt, according to her, that she was invading their space. Whenever rejected, she used to say that someone yet again “pulled a Stanford on her.”

norms—and interestingly, most of the norms he breaks seem to be about invading spaces.

The first episode starts in a yoga class in Santa Monica, California, where thin and beautiful people are instructed to stand tall and focus on their breathing by a male yoga teacher who appears to be in his fifties. The next scene takes place in the *Yoga Journal* offices in San Francisco, during an editorial meeting. “Everybody knows that *Yoga Journal* is doing better and better every year,” says a middle age man who is clearly in charge, “and we want to broaden the demographic.” His voice continues to escort the viewers as we move back to the yoga class in Santa Monica, where one practitioner, dressed in very tight flashy blue shorts, a tight yellow sleeveless shirt, and a red bandana is gazing at a woman’s breasts. “I want to hire a spectacular guest editor,” says the man back in San Francisco. “I want the hottest yogi there is.” Back in the yoga class, the practitioner we will come to know as Ogden starts yelling and cursing because of a cramp in his leg. He grabs hold of the woman practicing next to him, gripping her just below her breasts.

The class ends, and the teacher receives a call from *Yoga Journal*. He is being asked for a recommendation for “the hottest yogi” there is. Meanwhile, Ogden makes a move on another woman who rejects him, utterly disgusted. When the yoga teacher—who sees a rare opportunity to get rid of the nuisance—approaches Ogden with the offer, Ogden says that he has been waiting for *Yoga Journal* to call him for a while now. As he says his goodbyes, even the teacher avoids his touch. Outside the studio, Ogden brags about the invitation to another practitioner who has just arrived on his bike, and soon after, blames the man for scratching his shiny yellow Hummer with his yoga mat. Driving home, Ogden hits a bunch of boxes on the sidewalk and tells his mother to make sure dinner is ready.

In the next episode, Ogden is already in San Francisco, being introduced to the *Yoga Journal* stuff. He hugs people who offer him their hand for a handshake; he
is always wearing his tight yoga clothes while others are wearing casual working attire (except when he is doing a handstand completely naked); he criticizes other employees’ eating habits, preaching at those who eat tuna about saving the dolphins; he insults a redheaded guy by calling him Conan O’Brian; and he sleazily hits on Zoe, the beautiful marketing director. The following episodes continue in portraying Ogden as an inconsiderate and self-centered person who talks on his cell phone during meetings and hangs posters of himself in the corner office which he demanded for himself.

The fifth episode of “Ogden: The Inappropriate Yoga Guy” includes a conversation between him and Zoe, the object of his harassing courtship. “Do you understand the concept of personal space?” she asks, and Ogden answers, “Look, in my Hummer, I don’t want anyone else sitting in the driver’s seat but me.” Her serious expression almost frozen on her face, Zoe continues, “This is my personal space,” marking a circle of about three feet diameter around herself. “At work, I don’t want anyone to come closer to me than how we are right now.” Ogden sends his hand towards her, right into the imagined circle that she had just drawn in order to establish a boundary. “What if I came right over here?” he asks. “No, that’s too close,” she replies. “You and I—Never!” are her final angry words to him.

Ogden is one of those fictional characters that make an anthropologist happy. Coming from a mainstream and popular magazine such as the *Yoga Journal*, intended to be a joke, he lends himself to be read as a certain story that “the yoga community” is telling itself about itself, by marking who they are through clearly defining who they are not.

Being the potentially revealing discursive moments that they are, jokes can be a very serious thing (Freud 1963; Nelson 1999). In the case of Ogden, the amusing aspects of his fictional character stem from the fact that all of the yoga world’s “don’t dos” are materializing in his rude and sexist behavior. Some of Ogden’s deeds—such
as public nudity and sexual harassment—are not particular to the yoga scene but
inappropriate in any U.S. working environment, and, of course, forbidden by law.
But Ogden does not only cross legal lines. More than anything else, he is invasive
and inconsiderate, be it with his unsolicited advice, his loud voice, his unwelcome
touch, and the smells he allows himself to disseminate. Time and time again, Ogden
is intruding in other people’s spaces, to the point where he becomes intolerable. I
suggest that it is his inability to understand and respect “personal space” that makes
Ogden the ultimate “inappropriate yoga guy” and makes his character productive to
consider.

So what is the story that Ogden’s figure tells us about what yoga? I see this
comic, short, and rather marginal web series as repeating a common understanding
I have heard many times in yoga teacher trainings and in yoga classes: yoga is a
practice of creating and maintaining space. But what kinds of spaces are created
and supposed to be respected in the yoga class? Are these “spaces” coming into
existence in life outside the studio as well, and if so, how?

In Proxemics, Hall referred to “contemporary Americans” who live in densely
packed urban conditions, suggesting that crowded conditions may impact people in
the same way they affect deer and rats, who become stressed and less reproductive
in crowded conditions. Although the experience of space is culturally constructed
and subjective, it is not a risk to assume that Silicon Valley is nowhere as crowded as
the places Hall had in mind, such as Manhattan, which is geographically limited in
space, or poor neighborhoods where people are crowded because of financial reasons.
Granted, land is very expensive in Silicon Valley, and most people live in houses
that may seem small to a Texan. Yet, postulating that the yoga practitioners I

18 I see this web series as marginal despite the fact that it is coming from the most successful yoga
magazine, because it is positioned as a little joke played by the Yoga Journal. It is on their website
among myriad other things, and does not get referenced in the printed magazine. On average, there
are only three to five online responses to each episode.
studied do not live in crowded conditions, one must ask once again—what is up with space, and how is it connected to privilege and neoliberalism? One option (that I am less convinced by) is that practitioners continuously seek to produce more of that ephemeral quality because space is something that powerful people have more of, like territory and land. In other words, space may be seen as another a mark of success, like conspicuous consumption. A second suggestion is that neoliberalism (and time-space compression) construct a social atmosphere where no one has enough space and time. The next four sections examine the different kinds of space that are supposedly produced through the yoga practice (and hence, supposedly eradicated by the culture of neoliberalism).

3.3.1 Internal Space

One of the spaces most talked about in classes is the space inside the body. If internal compression is thought of as the physiological manifestation of stress, creating space is presented as the solution to the squeeze. As one well known and respected yoga teacher from the Bay Area said in one of his classes: “We generate and maintain space on every level—in our molecules, cells, and joints.” Another teacher, who is also a yoga therapist, echoes the first teacher’s words: “You must always keep the spine straight, do lengthening poses to create space and let the disk breath. Let the nutritious came in.” During a restorative yoga class for cancer patients and caregivers, my attention was piqued as I heard the teacher instruct her students to “feel the good space each breath creates inside” and to do inversions in order to keep the cells round and young, rather than shriveled, saggy and old.19

The idea that one can get “space” into the body’s cells and joints, and thus maintain flexibility, youthfulness, and health is interesting and maybe not entirely untrue on the scientific and therapeutic levels. Coming from an anthropological

19 One can definitely find a hint of ageism and maybe even sexism in this warning.
perspective, however, the attempts to experience space-making in an embodied and internal way cannot be seen as separate from the internal compression of socially generated stress (for example, during the long hours of sitting in meeting rooms, cars, and offices). I discuss interiority in the next chapters—for now, I will just say that space making is definitely one aspect of creating a sense of rich interiority.

3.3.2 Mind the Gap: Mental Space

Importantly, space is not to be achieved only on a bodily level. Space is seen as much needed inside one’s mind, or, in other words, as a skill to be added to one’s thinking patterns. Mental distress, I have learned from yoga teachers, emerges from lack of space, alignment, and balance in one’s thoughts. Prakash, a mid-aged yoga teacher who was born and educated in India and therefore enjoys the authority of traditions past, put it rather bluntly: “Most of my thoughts are just rubbish anyway. The mind is cluttered with a lot of junk, and there is no space. This is why we all need to meditate.” In meditation, the practitioner is thought to stop the thinking process, even for very short periods of time. By developing the ability to observe thoughts, reduce identification with them, and eventually slow their flow and enlarge the gaps between one thought and the other, the practitioner develops the ability to become an outsider to his own mind. This gap between thoughts is one and the same as the much-talked-about space, which, on both the physical and the embodied level, is seen as having an infinite ability to heal both the practitioner and others around her. As another Ayurveda and yoga teacher announced during her class: “People who have profound space in their consciousness have profound love.” During a restorative yoga teacher training, the teacher said that “when you are in the present, and your mind is not occupied with a million other things, there’s space for compassion to arrive.” With a smile, she added: “But that doesn’t really happen as much as I want.”

So space is a desired entity—or, importantly, the lack of an entity, of cluttering,
and of compression—inside one’s body and mind (or inside one’s “mindbody” as a whole). Even though it is hard to find the language to speak about the mindbody as a whole—and despite the fact that the differentiation between the mind and the body definitely exists in yoga classes—it is commonly understood that there cannot be space in one’s body without mental space, and vice-versa. One cannot possibly be concentrated, focused, and at peace when one’s body is in pain or compressed, and one cannot sit straight and take a deep, slow breath without feeling an immediate feedback from one’s mind (i.e., thoughts and emotional state). Moreover, the clear Cartesian hierarchy between mind and body seems to be falling apart, due to the dependency and inseparability of the mindbody, and due to the emphasis of yoga on the moving, breathing body.

In the discussion of mechanical stress above, I mentioned flexibility as a quality of materials. In the yoga studio, flexibility is counted as one of the benefits attributed to space—joints and thoughts are perceived as being able to move more freely when there’s space in them. Also, flexibility stands in contrast to stiffness, and, as mentioned earlier, is known to have its own modality of strength. In teacher training, we were taught that short and tight muscles—the kind being developed by pumping weights at the gym—are capable of fast and intense effort, but have no endurance and are pretty susceptible to injuries. As Noah Maze, a yoga teacher, said in a YogaGlo class that was recorded on January 22, 2012: “The image that inspires this class are sugar canes that exist in the tropics, and big storms come through. Their strength is in their ability to bend. To get blown down and then come back. That kind of resiliency. So the title of this class is ‘Bend, don’t break.’” 20

In yoga, strength, both emotional and physical, is considered to be inseparable from one’s ability to move freely, bend with the wind, and then stand up tall again.

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20 YogaGlo is a website where, for eighteen dollars per month, practitioners can choose from an endless variety of videotyped yoga classes and practice at home. See: http://www.yogaglo.com.

133
Flexibility, as I hinted before, is related to space in the body and mind, which enables morphing with the circumstances without losing an inner core. Going back to mechanical stress, one can literally see how yoga practitioners perceive yoga as changing the very material they are made of, making them stronger, more flexible, and more capable of flowing—both mentally and physically. Arguably, those changes help practitioners in resisting and handling stress better.

3.3.3 Beyond Skin Boundaries

Yoga practitioners and teachers are aspiring to create space not only internally, but externally as well—meaning, beyond the permeable boundary marked by skin. Examples from classes show that practitioners are often trying to expand themselves beyond bodily boundaries and actually take (or create) more space not only for themselves, but of themselves. In this way, the very idea of who one is is morphing, as yoga teachers cultivate the notion that people’s essence can expand beyond their bodies. As Max Strom, a celebrity yoga teacher from Los Angeles, explained in a workshop held in the Silicon Valley: “In yoga, the mind is an aura; it is the personal space which is larger than the body.” Another popular Silicon Valley yoga teacher often creates a pause in his classes, right after a series of challenging sun salutations and standing poses, and asks his students to close their eyes and extend their hands slowly forward, palms facing out. “Do you feel the warmth?” he asks, and explains:

This is you that you feel. If you feel a little bit of cooler air and then warmth again, this is your neighbor’s space that you have entered. Do you see how much bigger you have become during class? Don’t be afraid to take that space.21

21 As a way of emphasizing this point, yoga teachers will sometimes read in class the following quote by Marianne Williamson (which is often attributed to Nelson Mandela): “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond imagination. It is our light more than our darkness which scares us. We ask ourselves who are we to be brilliant, beautiful, talented, and fabulous. But honestly, who are you to not be so?”
If mechanical stress is translated as experiencing too close of a proximity between the world’s demands and oneself, and as a sense of being burdened which is manifested through the hunched over, shallow breathing body, then the act of expansion and creating space is thought to balance those embodied effects of stress. Thus, when one’s personal essence (be it “aura” or “the mind”) is supposedly expanding beyond the physical body and modifying the latter inside and out by creating space, the heavy weight that burdens the body (the embodiment of stress) is supposed to be lifted and pushed away.

I hope it is clear by now that when space is talked about in yoga classes and trainings, it is at once metaphorical, spiritual, and deeply corporeal. The space that is beyond skin boundaries (yet part of the self) may sound like the New Age “aura” cliché, but as a sensation that speaks to the mechanical stress metaphor, it makes perfect sense. It can be described as being shielded from external force by some sort of magnetic protection field, or an invisible, magic cloak. I can only imagine how comforting such extra layer of space between a pressing reality and the self can be. Keeping that extra level of space/self that practitioners sometimes try to create in mind, I now turn to the last kind of space which is promoted in the yoga studio: the space between people.

3.3.4 The Space Between Us

I tend to believe people when they say that they want to feel connected and to be part of a community. And perhaps it is not quite a contradiction to assert that in yoga studios, space emerges as highly desired and appreciated not only inside the body and mind but also as distance between human beings. This social space often comes up as an antidote to stress in yoga classes. For example, in a yoga workshop with the theme of “how to get better sleep,” when the tall, charismatic teacher asked, “Who has felt stressed in the last week?” the vast majority of the fifty people in the room
raised their hands. “It wasn’t always like this, you know.” The teacher continued, clearly not surprised by the stress level in the room:

The levels of stress went up in the last decades. Technology has changed, and I am addicted to cell phones and emails like all of you. But it makes our lives harder. We can be available and there’s an expectation that we will be available all the time. There are no boundaries. When I grew up banks closed at 2:00 p.m., and everything was closed on Sunday. You couldn’t go to Nordstrom at 8:30 p.m.

The above quote wraps together stress and time, which are intimately related to space. When the speaker mentions closing and opening hours, he talks about a world without boundaries and times in which people are expected to be constantly available and reachable. He talks about ever-growing connections, but ones that produce stress rather than comfort. Does space, then, mean distance from others? In a highly technological place like the Silicon Valley, does it mean that yoga practitioners want time alone, free of expectations, demands, and gadgets mediated interaction? Technology, and the permission to cut oneself from it once in a yoga class, is part of the story but it is not all of it. Over a cup of coffee, right after our favorite Friday morning yoga class, Kate was telling me that she and her husband were planning a vacation with their two children, just the four of them. “But then my mother realized we have no specific plans and suggested we all drive to see my aunt, whom I love, and she recently lost her husband. Now, I am happy to see my aunt, but arrrrrrrr!!! I need some space!”

Kate is an involved community member. She goes to church, volunteers at her children’s school, and organizes neighborhood events. Being a stay-at-home mom and raising young children, she is one of the people I met during fieldwork who seems to appreciate the value of community and social support the most. Yet she
rarely spoke to me about her need for people while often speaking about of her need for time and space. It is possible that she is not a good example, given that she is surrounded with family, friends, and obligations. But what about another yoga practitioner, a woman in her forties who has been divorced for many years and living by herself? After she was hurt in a car accident, and before she had to go through another surgery, our little group of friends came to visit. Surprisingly, what she was most worried about was her parents coming to help her and how long they would stay. “You know,” she said, “I have a one-bedroom apartment. It will be just a few days before I need my space back.”

On a very material, daily, non-metaphorical level, there are many such small examples of people trying to claim space for themselves or recognizing others’ space by trying not to invade it while in the yoga studio. During a yoga conference, in a big room with no chairs, a woman who came to sit next to me by the wall apologized, saying “sorry to disturb your space—I am trying to protect my back.” (The excuse of “trying to protect my back” speaks to the self-care axiom that will be discussed in length in Chapter Six, “The Yogic Ethic and the Spirit of Neoliberalism”). At a yoga party I attended, a woman who came in late stayed in the studio’s lobby and practiced there by herself, being too hesitant to come in and ask others to make room for her. While I was working as a receptionist at a yoga studio, I heard costumers advising each other to buy longer mats because then they can secure more space to themselves in crowded classes. Yoga etiquette forbids practitioners from stepping on others’ mats (though this unspoken rule is not always respected), and the unwillingness to move one’s mat closer to another in order to make room for someone else showed itself at the beginning of many of the hundreds of yoga classes

22 Yoga parties were a monthly occasion at my home studio, where practitioners had a chance to exercise their own unguided practice at the dark, to the sound of loud music with lyrics (which is rather unusual in yoga classes). The room was usually packed at those occasions, which started around 9:30 p.m. and ended approximately at 11:00 p.m.
In the previous subsection, I discussed the attempt to create a shielding layer of space by becoming “more” of oneself. Once again, this resonates well with the mechanic stress metaphor, especially when returning to the “area” part of it. Becoming bigger, mentally and physically, means increasing the area on which stress is operating and thus becoming less susceptible to it. The space between people that was discussed in this subsection works in similar ways: if people do not come in contact with one another, they cannot trigger stress.

3.4 Conclusion

Let me state my argument in a simple, straightforward way: despite claims that yoga is a way to create community and connect to people, what becomes apparent is an unfulfilled desire for distance from other people both on a physical and a communicative level. I argue that more often than not, practitioners do not really want to connect with others when they come to yoga. What they want is to have time and space for themselves, or, as one interviewee once told me “these are the only 90 minutes of my day when I speak to no one, I am not available, and I am told exactly what to do.” This resonates with the way in which Luce Irigaray articulates the power of breath in her book about yoga:

To discover that I can live in an autonomous manner, that no one is absolutely necessary for me, that I do not need to invent mothers or fathers for myself in order to subsist. To breathe by myself allows me also to move away from a socio-cultural placenta (Irigaray 2002:5).

23 The fact that the Silicon Valley is one of the most expensive real-estate markets in the world might be of relevance here. When living spaces are so expensive, the importance of the real-estate one temporarily captures on the yoga studio floor should not be underestimated.

24 One may wonder if the allure of “being told exactly what to do” also explains some of the appeal of Fifty Shades of Grey.
This yogic aspect of the isolation of the self may be very old and traditional, as Sarah Strauss claims (Strauss 2005). Yet, Strauss also claims that practices of isolation did not migrate to the West with the practice of yoga. My argument is not that ancient yogic practices resurface, but rather that given the critique of neoliberalism as creating separation, and given all the declared intentions to connect, the ongoing desire for space is telling.

My argument, in other words, is that instead of reaching out for connection, practitioners are withdrawing into themselves. Other practitioners have told me that they stopped going to one teacher’s yoga class, despite the fact that they used to enjoy it, just because she makes people work in pairs on poses—and they do not want to engage with others during class. Or, as a Yoga Journal newsletter that was sent out by email on May 23, 2012 put it: “At the core of yoga is the concept of unity, between the body and breath and through our interconnectedness to one another. Most of your students would probably agree with this right up until you ask them to partner up.”

This, of course, does not mean that practitioners do not want human connection—some definitely feel the need for more social ties and talk about it. But the willingness to “connect” comes from a worldview in which the practitioner, first and foremost, learns how to recognize (and co-create) her own desire for space and time. Only once this need is fulfilled (and one may rightly ask if it ever is), a practitioner might be able to reach out to others—but this, too, shall be done on her own terms. The yoga discursive field teaches the practitioner to recognize and create a growing need for personal space, in a very material way as well as a metaphoric one. This is one aspect of a well articulated worldview, according to which yoga teaches the practitioners to take care of themselves first by claiming the time and space for self-care and self-observation.
Lie on your back with your legs bent and arms by your sides. Draw your knees into your chest and drop them to the right as your arms open out into a T shape. Turn your face to the left. Notice what you are looking at when you turn your head. Try to soften the muscles around your eyes and simply see what is right in front of you; relating to what is actually happening is a powerful way to let go of frustration, anxiety, and stress. Can you let your eyes be receptive? Stay here for 5 breaths, then release your arms, bring your knees back to center, and lower both feet to the floor (From “Yoga to the Rescue!” By Cyndi Lee. Yoga Journal http://www.yogajournal.com/practice/1521).
Great Expectations: Psycho-Biological Stress and the Turn Inward

Stress is the lingua franca of the day. It can be the badge you wear that shows you’re afloat and part of what’s happening—busy, multitasking, in the know. Or it can be a visceral complaint against being overworked, underpaid, abandoned by the medical system, or subject to constant racist undertones. (...) Stress is a transpersonal bodily state that registers intensities. (Stewart 2007)

Many people sense at times that they are working towards something they do not really want, striving to live up to expectations they do not even endorse, or mouthing goals they know perfectly well they have little if any motivation to achieve. The unconscious is, in that sense, overflowing with other people’s desires. (Fink 1997)

The prevalent disease in our culture is low self-esteem. (...) Our culture has done an excellent job of making us all feel fearful and quite inadequate. This lack of self confidence makes us think that what we do as individuals doesn’t matter much to the whole and that our actions are insignificant. (Gannon 2008)

The previous chapter examined mechanical stress as a metaphor that highlights the body, the desire for space, and feelings of being burdened and overwhelmed. This chapter continues the exploration of stress—only this time, from the biological and...
psychological angles. Bio-psychological stress provides an entry point into another set of suffering experiences, among them the feelings of being inadequate, insecure, and threatened. The chapter begins with a short review of the anthropology of stress, and then turns to review a genealogy of stress as a biological and psychological research object, on its connections to modernity and the military. Bio-psychological research tends to emphasize coping and endurance—two keywords of Ego Psychology, a branch in psychology that Lacan fiercely criticized. With Lacan in mind, I will show how bio-psychological understandings of stress inform the yogic discourse and the way in which the yogic discourse accounts for “the ego” and “the mind” as sites of insecurity, judgment, comparisons, and low self-esteem.

Tom, a yoga practitioner and an engineer at a high-tech company, was already quoted in the introduction where he was speaking about the super woman syndrome. Here, he talks about everyday stress:

People are so driven to survive and do that their notion of being is so out there, they never have a conversation with themselves. It’s in the grasping and reaching and going... So many times in life you wake up and the first thought of the day is: oh shit. You know? I got to drive to work, the dishwasher needs unloading. My girlfriend isn’t happy, what the fuck does she want now. Your feet aren’t even on the floor. And then by the time you get in the car, it’s like, okay, this idiot is driving forty miles per hour, and I need to get in this lane, because the exit ramps of the inner state... Why do you think you have to drive sixty miles an hour? Because I’m not present with myself, I’m thinking about a conference call and my boss, all that chatter and mind trap.

Tom’s words are echoed in the following quote by Kimberly who is also a software engineer, yoga practitioner, and a new mom:
I don’t think people were intended to wake up alone, drive to a cubicle, spend ten hours frustrated, beating their ego, drive home, pop something in the microwave that barely looks like food, and then go to sleep or hop online which maybe for some people is a community... Having a daughter makes it apparent that two people weren’t meant to raise a child alone. The U.S. ranks way low on a countries’ happiness list—yet we are so far removed from survival. I think it creates a gap, and we ask ourselves what is the meaning? It has nothing to do with getting by in life. We lead these privileged lives but very little happiness—and how lucky are we? Why do you need cup holders everywhere? We want to feel good about ourselves, and we have all these expectation concerning degrees, body, looks—but where did I get this notion that I have to do things all the time? I try to erase the word “have” from my vocabulary. I plan to, I am going to, but I don’t have to.

The quotes above are dense. First, both Tom and Kimberly talk about survival, but in different ways. Tom says that people are driven to survive (thus hinting at chronic insecurity), Kimberly says that we are far removed from survival and as a result, experience lack of meaning. These, I believe, are two sides of the same coin. In the Silicon Valley’s competitive and ephemeral culture, yoga practitioners often feel as if their very survival is at stake (a phenomenon that will be explained later using the bio-psychological stress model). On the other hand, as Samuel’s story came to show (in Chapter Two), being financially secure may mean that practitioners no longer find meaning in—or draw satisfaction from—the “rat race.” Second, Tom and Kimberly describe Marxist alienation (“they never have a conversation with themselves”) and an overachieving, hyper-active mode of being (“where did I get this notion that I have to do things all the time?”). Third, Tom mentions stress, in the
sense of having too many things to do at home and at work, but also interpersonal
difficulties. Stress is not the existence of duties and miscommunications, but the
on-going mind-chatter, racing thoughts and complaints about them. Kimberly also
describes a busy and alienated day, in which one sits in a car, sits in a cubical, eats
bad food and watches TV. She mentions loneliness and the lack of community, but
also “beating their ego”—an action that stands out in that chain of ordinary, passive
activities. This action of harshly judging oneself seems to go hand in hand with the
expectations that Kimberly mentions later, one of which is degrees (official proof of
achievements and smarts) and the other two involve external appearance—body and
looks. Just like Tom, Kimberly talks about the stress of being in a constant “doing”
mode and having to comply with numerous demands (I “have” to).

All these issues and many others are at the heart of this chapter. They are taken
together in order to portray a vast cultural phenomenon of trying to meet “external”
(or imagined) expectations. The yogic discourse does not break it all apart either,
but instead, underscores one general solution that will be discussed in length toward
the end of the chapter—turning inwards.

4.1 The Anthropology of Stress

In comparison to biologists and psychologists whose work will be presented in this
chapter, anthropologists do not seem to be as interested in stress. Allen Young is
perhaps the best known anthropologist to dedicate much of his work to stress and
PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). In his book *The Harmony of Illusion: Inventing
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*, Young describes the way in which traumatic memory is created and elaborated by knowledge workers, and how PTSD is glued together by various practices, technologies, and narratives (Young 2001). In an earlier publication that examines stress (rather than PTSD), Young critiqued
the bio-medical model of stress as an ideological discourse that individualized, nat-
uralized, and hence decontextualized social relations and their effects (Young 1980; Adelson 2008). Problematizing knowledge and knowledge production, Young claims that “by displacing the human subject from his place in society to a desocialized and amorphous environment, the [stress] discourse banishes the arena of conflicting class and group interests from the real conditions of existence” (Young 1980:133). Other scholars claim that the rhetoric of trauma and the introduction of PTSD into the DSM-III in 1980 have resulted in a sense of widespread victimhood, dependency, vulnerability, and inability to subsist (Kugelmann 1992; Fassin et al. 2009). Indeed, the reason why much of the research on stress and disease fits within the biomedical model is that psychological factors are treated as independent of social and historical contexts (Dressler 1990). Yet, as I show later, the bio-psychological (bio-medical) stress model does not have to erase social relations, and it can actually shed light on social and economic context. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock write in “The Message in the Bottle: Illness and the Micropolitics of Resistance”—the medicalized “stress-response” at least recognizes the potential pathogenicity of such events as bereavement and loss; unemployment or overwork; gender, race, and class inequities; marital conflict” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1991:420).

As one might expect, when anthropologists do show interest in stress, it is mainly in order to emphasize the often neglected social and historical contexts—and in particular, those of continuous inequality. The few anthropologists who write about stress focus on communities and places like Latino immigrants in the U.S., Southern black communities, Central Harlem, and Aboriginals in Australia; and on the ways in which poverty and racism join in the production of stress and depression (Burbank 2011; Dressler 1991; Cohen 1979; Mullings and Wali 2001). Victoria Burbank’s *An Ethnography of Stress*, for example, investigates the social determinants of health and the high mortality rates among Aboriginals in Numbulwar, Australia, and their relations to experiences such as lack of control and predictability (Burbank 2011).
A study done on a black community in the south ties low social class with hospitalizations and severe health problems (Dressler 1991). These studies do an important work of drawing connections between structural disadvantages (race, class, gender) and stress, personal experiences, and health problems. While Silicon valley workers are also being extracted of surplus (even if their pay is good), they cannot be easily collapsed into the same category with the underprivileged populations named above. For the most part, Silicon Valley workers have good health insurance and are less likely to suffer the same health problems as the poor and the uninsured. Differently put, stress in Silicon Valley shows itself in slightly different, and usually less overtly violent, ways.

So what about people who do not easily fall into the category of the underprivileged? Stress, after all, is by no means exclusive to underserved groups—and it has deep connections to modernity, neoliberalism and late-capitalism. The ephemerality, disposability, and space-time compression that characterise our times are particularly strong at the high-tech edge of Silicon Valley, where people, jobs, trends, and money come and go. According to Kugelmann, stress is “a kind of grief unique to the modern period, which is a time of rapid and relentless change” and “the engineering of the grief of adapting to the changes of modernity, for good or for ill” (1992:xvi).

So what about the middle and upper classes’ experience of modernity? A significant gap in the anthropological literature becomes obvious here—a gap that might be attributed to the anthropological priorities and alliances that were discussed in the introduction. By and large, anthropologists tend to take the modern experience that Marx, Weber, and Durkheim portrayed and study how exploitation, alienation, rationalization and anomie take their toll on minority groups, the poor, and the indigenous. While psychological findings show that the lower an individual’s social class status and education level, the more vulnerable she is to strain as a result of stressful experiences, certain characteristics of the middle classes were also found to
be indicative of high stress levels, findings that were explained by the middle class’ striving toward goals and concern with self image (Langner and Michael 1963; Srole and Fischer 1978; Dressler 1991; Cohen 1979).

Stress, to quote Kugelmann once again, testifies to the expectation that we accommodate all the changes that a modern industrial and information society makes possible by remaking ourselves and our habits (Kugelmann 1992:44). Arguably, no one is more prone and susceptible to this fantasy of remaking oneself by consumption than people of middle-upper classes, who have the means and the aspirations to improve. The members of the middle-upper class that I studied definitely experience stress, and most often, they understand it through the bio-medical model, to which I turn now.¹

4.2 Bio-Psychological Stress

The history of stress—as a constellation of the biological, psychological, and the social—cannot be understood apart from modernity. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century mechanical metaphors, ideas concerning the misfit between the primitive body and the modern world, and medical hypotheses about stress’ relations to illness and disease are woven together throughout the genealogy of the concept. In the following section, I briefly present some of that genealogy.

The word “stress” was used as early as the fourteenth-century to mean hardship, adversity, or affliction (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Although biological stress already appears in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, it did not appear in its systematic and contemporary meaning until the nineteenth-century, when an engineering mentality took root (Kugelmann 1992). With the industrial revolution, the

¹ The fact that my friendformants do not know or care about anthropological views of stress, but take the bio-psychological model for granted, might hint that anthropology is rather irrelevant for their lives, and that in many ways, anthropology fails in speaking to ”the public” and to those of relative privilege.
world came to be perceived as operating much stress (the ratio of force, or load) on a strained (i.e., deformed or distorted) individual, thus bringing the mechanic stress metaphor to life (Hinkle Jr. 1974). It was also during the nineteenth-century that the earlier focus on internal damage (strain) shifted into the focus on “the dangerous state of outer and other”—meaning that the individual came to be seen as facing an external hostile world (Kugelmann 1992:59). Although Karl Marx does not discuss stress directly, he clearly had great concern with the toll of modernity (as can be seen in the second chapter). In the quote I discussed in the second chapter, Marx portrays an image of stress when he says that the worker’s labor “exists outside him independently, as something alien to him, as confronting him as an autonomous power” (Marx 1983:134).

Not yet a popular research topic, it was only after the Second World War, and with the growing interest in shell shock and trauma, that stress began to proliferate in the professional literature surrounding health and illness. (Stress may have a lot to do with hysteria, shell shock, trauma, and panic, yet, unlike those disorders, stress is much more mundane). The publication of Men Under Stress by Roy R. Grinker and John P. Spiegel, two American Air Force psychiatrists, drew attention to research questions that were fairly new at the time: How does the mind and body react to sudden and severe stress? How important is the environment as a source of stress? And what happens to human beings when the world becomes unrecognizably hostile (Grinker and Spiegel 1945)? These questions expanded on the pre-war research concerning stress led by Walter Cannon, who considered stress to be a disturbance of homeostasis. Influenced by studies done on World War I pilots, Cannon discussed the body’s similar response to all threats (“fight or flight”) and the ways in which a threat of change triggers action (Cannon 1939). Bringing Cannon’s work into conversation with the new level of industrialized war and with research done on World War II pilots and soldiers (and later, Korea and Vietnam
soldiers and veterans) Grinker, Spiegel, and others now turned to the investigation of endurance, tolerance, and improved functioning under stress (Grinker and Spiegel 1945; Kugelmann 1992).

Another important development in the psychological study of stress emerged in the 1950s, with the introduction of perception into the stress equation (that so far included mostly the hostile environment and the person responding to external stress). In his *Stress and Disease*, Harold Wolff discussed perception as a crucial component of stress reaction which is based on past experiences and other factors such as individual needs and longings, cultural pressures, and generic equipment. By seeing perception and stress as dynamic states, Wolff emphasized the active processes of interplay and feedback between environment and organism (Wolff 1953; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). This research inspired a later differentiation between events and circumstances that increase the probability of illness, and social relationships, beliefs, and values that may increase or lower the chances of falling ill (Dressler 1991). As part of studying attitudes and predispositions, researchers also came up with the categories of Type A and Type B personalities, bringing the study of individual differences into organizational psychology (Cooper and Dewe 2004). These studies, of course, were meant to find ways for keeping people working (Yoga sometimes has the same effect—it helps people work for longer hours and to be more focused. At the same time, as I show in Chapters Six and Seven, yoga practitioners challenge and change neoliberal assumptions from within).

The interest in mediating beliefs, values, attitudes, and perception continued as the twentieth-century progressed. Hans Selye, for example, saw stress as an orchestrated set of bodily defenses against any demand, a generalized physiologic pattern which is evoked in response to environmental stimuli. Selye called this reaction the General Adaptation Syndrome, which is composed of alarm, resistance, and exhaustion (Selye 1946). Stress, according to Seyle, was not the environmental demand
but a universal set of reactions and processes created by that demand (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

The importance of perception also informs the bio-medical study of stress. Biomedical researchers show great interest in stress, and study its effects from the cellular to the behavioral level, in particular moments and throughout life, and from the level of bacteria to animals and humans. Hence, it is not surprising that in the vast fields of biology and medicine, there is no one singular definition of stress. And yet, it is a common understanding (for stress researchers and yoga practitioners alike) that biological stress cannot be easily separated from cultural and social aspects, and that the biological responses—rapid breath, blood circulation, and secretion of hormones—are mediated by learned, personal interpretations. In the introduction to The Biology of Animal Stress, Gary Moberg defines stress as the biological response elicited when an individual perceives a threat to its homeostasis (Moberg and Mench 2000). A similar assumption is repeated in an article from Nature Reviews Neuroscience of April 2009 (which included a special section titled "Focus on Stress"), which opens with the words:

Any actual or potential disturbance of an individual’s environment—a “stressor”—is recognized or perceived by specific brain regions. The subjective state of sensing potentially adverse changes in the environment is called ‘stress’ and leads to the release of molecules that we here call ‘stress mediators’ (...) together, these effects constitute the ‘stress response,’ which enables the animal to adapt to the changing environment (Joëls and Baram 2009:1).

Stress, as describe by biologists, is caused by a perception of threat or a disturbance—be it real or imagined—to one’s environment. The perception of threat, which is clearly subjective, brings about multiple biological reactions described in great detail
in many other articles appearing in prestigious scientific journals such as *Nature*, *Science*, and others.

In addition to the study of animals’ and people’s biological stress responses, a second branch of the post-World War II psychological research turned to the study of stressful life events such as divorce and death in the family. A distinction was made between the latter and “daily hassles,” such as money concerns, losing things, and sleep deficiency. Perhaps surprisingly, some researchers found daily hassles to provide a more direct and broader estimate of stress than major life events (Kanner et al. 1981). Among the circumstances and life events that cause stress, researchers include culture changes and “modernization” (Cassel et al. 1960). In the last few decades, biomedicine widely explored the connection between stress and the immune system and various diseases. I will discuss illness, immunity, and stress in Chapter Five.

Richard Lazarus is probably the leading post-World War II stress scholar. Lazarus is well known for his studies on appraisal, meaning the process, conscious or unconscious, by which an individual evaluates the impact of an event on his or her self or well-being. Lazarus established the UC Berkeley Stress and Coping Project, and co-authored the book *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*, where stress is defined as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984:19). Coping, on the other hand, is “the process through which the individual manages the demands of the person-environment relationship that are appraised as stressful and the emotions they generate” (ibid:19). Many of the space-creating yogic techniques I reviewed in the previous chapter can be seen as coping mechanisms.

The entanglement of bio-medical and psychological understandings of stress definitely filters into the public discourse on stress, and especially into work-related
stress, stress management, and self-help. In their book *Stress: A Brief History*, Cary Cooper and Philip Dewe claim that self-help techniques (e.g. exercise, relaxation, meditation, bio-feedback, and a philosophy of life) began appearing in the 1960s, with the aim of providing an inner sense of energy and wellbeing, and a greater capacity for dealing with and building resistance to stressful encounters” (Cooper and Dewe 2004:102). As my fieldwork shows, these trends did not subsided fifty years later.

Lazarus’ emphasis on adaptation and coping is characteristic of American Ego Psychology, a branch of psychology that idealizes the healthy, rational ego rather than critiquing the environment and structural inequalities. Ego Psychology was a target at which Lacan aimed many (rather poisonous) arrows. Lacan strongly criticized Hartmann’s American ego-psychology school because Ego Psychology proposes to strengthen the ego (Brennan 1993:30). As I showed in the second chapter and will discuss further below, Lacan’s ego is a construct rooted in misrecognition and alienation. The Lacanian subject is necessarily barred and split. Therefore, it is no wonder that Lacan had faith neither in Ego Psychology’s emphasis on ego mastery, wholeness, and completeness—nor in its preferred strategies for adjusting and adapting the troubled and conflicted ego to the demands of “reality” (Viego 2007). Lacan writes that “the conception of psychoanalysis in the United States has been inflected towards the adaptation of the social environment,” but the assumption that the human subject can be adapted and assimilated to its environment and can be made whole and complete is an aspiration that Lacan finds misguided (Lacan 1997; Viego 2007:39). Ego Psychology skips the critical edge of Marxism, according to which the human can be whole and complete only under radical economic changes. Differently put, what is required is not personal adaptation processes but a revolution. Ego Psychology also fails to attend to the complexity of Freud’s work by assuming that humans can adapt and be “whole.”
Lacan’s polemic against Ego Psychology sits within the larger context of his polemic against the social order which produces it. Lacan shoots arrows not only at American psychoanalysis, but also at the “American way of life” (Brennan 1993). For Lacan, as Antonio Viego (2007) sees it, America and the American way of life stand for the alienating register of the imaginary itself—and for the assimilationist and pragmatist imperatives guiding American culture. Take Lacan’s praxis of jouissance for example. By one definition, jouissance is an ecstatic pleasure or pain that takes the subject “beyond his or her nothingness, his or her mere existence as a marker at the level of alienation, and supplies a sense of being” (Fink 1997:60-61). Jouissance stands against the pragmatism of the need to be happy, as it is anything but practical. It ignores the needs of capital, health insurance companies, socialized health care, public order, and mature adult relationships (Viego 2007:62).

Lacan’s critique is a social critique situated in a particular time and space, and it resonates with the time and space of my research. Lacan’s theory will be discussed through this chapter, but for now, I would like to return to bio-psychological stress as it appears in the yogic discourse.

4.3 Bio-Psychological Stress in Yogic Discourses

The bio-psychological perceptions of stress discussed above echoed in my fieldwork. This, of course, makes sense given that my informants are highly educated, often in the fields of biology, chemistry, medicine, and psychology. Even those who are not educated in those fields read articles about stress in popular high-brow journals, or hear about it in stress relief workshops (which may be sponsored by the work place) and daily conversations. Yoga teachers are very likely to hear about bio-psychological stress in their teacher trainings. In all these ways, “the scientific” is translated into generally accepted views. As for me, after trying to plow my way through a few Nature articles—for some reason, it did not occur to me to look for popular science
resources—I realized that I could not trust myself to fully understand the jargon (it had been a while since I had taken neurobiology classes during my undergraduate studies) and decided to tap into my friendformants’ knowledge. I started with asking my friend Donna some questions over dinner, since she is a brain cancer scientist and a highly trained yoga teacher. Coming from her, the biology of stress sounded pretty simple. “Stress,” she started her explanation, “is measured and defined by stress hormones—Glucocorticoids.” We were sitting at a restaurant, and my friend jotted down the name on a napkin.

Glucocorticoids are being extracted from the adrenal gland and are deeply related to fight or flight response. In fight or flight, the body re-directs all its resources to handle the current situation and stops long-term activities such as digestion and healing. Which is why stress hormones have a direct impact on the immune system—once you actually drop them into a blood sample you can see how they immediately lower the counts of white blood cells.

Stress, then, is intrinsically related to survival. I have heard this popular-science account of biological stress before, during an anatomy class in my yoga teacher trainings. Liz, our anatomy teacher, an ambitious and highly accomplished young woman, gave us her version of the biology of stress. Since it was a yoga teacher training and class was aimed towards the usage of yoga and mindfulness, she peppered the class with yogic philosophy and life lessons. “Stress is a habitual filter you put on any experience in life,” she said and paused, giving us a moment to think. “Stress comes from your expectations and from your ego, it emerges when we are afraid to lose control and when you perceive any sign of impermanence—especially concerning the sense of who we are.” This short sentence encapsulates a lot of what the rest of this chapter is about: the yogic ego, expectations, and insecurity.
Liz went on, describing what the “mindbody” does in those moments of perceived stress. According to her, the mindbody activates the fight or flight response, which is useful in life-threatening situations but not when one’s ego or status are on the line. During a fight or flight response, the whole body prepares for an emergency: adrenaline rushes in, digestion stops, the heart rate goes up, the breath gets rapid and shallow or stops all together, and clogging agents are getting into the blood stream to stop future bleeding. The sympathetic nerve system kicks in and the mindbody is preparing—either for action or it tries to make itself less visible as prey. With a twinkle in her big green eyes, Liz gave us a quick tip: “what you do when you are stressed says a lot about how you perceive your power, whether you think you can fight back—or not.”

Fight or flight, as well as other less often discussed responses (such as “tend or befriend” and “freeze or please”), is indeed useful when one needs to escape fire or avoid a collision. But for humans as well as animals, according to Liz, the problem begins when the mindbody’s wisdom is displaced and stress is becoming a habitual filter, and thus, chronic. Under a condition of chronic stress, the “fight or flight” response never really stops, meaning that the parasympathetic nerve system (the one responsible for “rest and digest”), hardly ever takes control. Then, as I once heard a famous yoga teacher saying, “people are in a constant stage of mild to medium freaking out,” and cortisol (a stress hormone) is persistently present—a situation related to belly fat and heart disease. As if the above description were not

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2 The “mindbody” is a term I adopt to discuss embodied thinking patterns and other moments where the body and mind cannot be easily discussed separately. It is yet another attempt to overcome the mind/body dualism.

3 From the same anatomy class: “The response of freeze/please refers to breath holding, tension in the jaw, trying to make no mistakes, controlling one’s behavior or trying not to be noticed. People who tend to freeze or please or the ones who are always trying to keep people happy. Tend/befriend is the classic female response of helping people and supporting them, talking about your problems and nurturing as a response to stress.” As in many other cases that describe “the feminine” as soft, caring, round and supportive, this instance of the yogic discourse reiterated classic gender differentiations.
worrisome enough, the following sentence Liz said really got me stressed.

Under chronic stress, our brains marinate in cortisol, which leads to memory loss, damages inhibition, and emotional control. There’s a connection between this and depression, and what ends up happening is that neurons are actually dying, and they are never coming back. And that doesn’t even begin to cover the ways in which stress underlies pretty much every disease you can think of.

There was, however, a solution, a promise, and reassurance at the end of this somewhat anxiety-provoking description. If stress is one’s mindbody treating the world as if it has high demands and consequently creating a lot of demands from the physical body, one needs to lessen those demands by drinking less alcohol, eating less sugar, sleeping more, getting social support and of course, practicing yoga and meditating (note the lack of mind/body separation here). Yoga, according to Liz, Donna, and various medical journal publications, will improve practitioners’ health not only by the power of working out, stretching, breathing and relaxing, but also by changing the way in which the practitioners perceive and react to threat in the world (Granath et al. 2006; Smith and Pukall 2009). “When you learn how to incorporate the parasympathetic nerve system by treating situations like they were a challenge and not as a threat,” Liz was ending her lecture with a reassuring smile, “you don’t lose the part of yourself that is calm and present in any moment.”

There is a lot to comment on in Liz’s description of the biology of stress. First, an interesting concept of the mindbody’s relations and the role of mindfulness emerge from the lecture snippets quoted above. One of the declared goals of yoga is to yoke mind, body, and spirit, yet the body is presented here in an intriguing way. The biomedical stress definition describes the body as a phenomenally clever machine, which is nonetheless outdated. The examples given in the anatomy class and other yoga
workshops I attended are always weirdly prehistoric—yoga teachers talking about the fight or flight response will usually explain how the body prepares to deal with a tiger attacking, but they will never give earthquake, car accident, or robbery as examples. The distinction being made is clear: the body knows how to deal with real, wild-life emergencies, but not with the chronic stress of the modern world. And so, being in a constant mild-to-medium stage of freaking out, the body reacts in the same way to a burned cake, to the possibility of being five minutes late for a meeting, and to an accident on the highway. In order to teach the body to respond differently, one must teach the mind not to freak out—meaning, to separate real threats from imaginary ones—and not only notice but manage their bodily reactions. This is to be achieved through observation, awareness, mindfulness, discipline, and practice.

Second, I find the relations between stress and “the ego”—in the sense of self-identification and others’ expectations—fascinating, and will turn to further discuss it next. The next sections will address the threats experienced by yoga practitioners in the Silicon Valley, which are most often not life-and-death threats (even though the body might react as if they were). Stress is caused by perceived threats to hopes, expectations, social status, and self esteem. Here, too, yoga suggests mindfulness and discipline as a way of developing the habit of doubting the mind’s false alarms. Yoga teachers also seek to promote flexibility concerning self identification, a sense of safety which is independent of life events, and an ability to “live in the moment.”

If mechanical stress pointed me in the direction of space, bio-psychological stress points me into the exploration of expectations, chronic insecurity, self-esteem issues, and the suggested way of coping with stress: retreating inward and by doing so, cultivating a sense of safe interiority. Even though the bio-medical and ego-psychology approaches to stress echo loudly in the yogic discourses, it is Lacan that enables me to present an analysis of this mechanism.
4.4 Stress as a Way of Life

In what follows, I will present a few different ways in which stress appears in yoga practitioners’ lives. I found it hard to insist on a narrow definition of stress, as stories related to stress involve issues as different as job insecurity, financial fears, bodily injuries, self-image, and eating disorders. In addition, stress often bleeds into depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. For some of the people I talked to, stress began at early childhood, while others became stressed when they started their current jobs. There are yoga practitioners who blame the environment, and there are others who blame themselves. Stress, as I use it here (building on the bio-psychological model), is a general name for not being at home in the world, not finding one’s safe space, and being unable to reach homeostasis or equilibrium.

Building on the bio-psychological stress model, I suggest that stress is what happens when one feels threatened, and as such, it stands for both the perception of a hostile environment with impossible expectations and demands, and feelings of inadequacy and low self esteem (meaning, being unable to meet those demands and expectations). Stress is disharmony and misfit, it is about chronic insecurity, or in short, about the suffering of the privileged.

To be clear, I take the freedom of collapsing all those different issues together because this is how they get articulated—albeit not necessarily in so many words—in yoga circles. A yoga class is not a psychotherapy session, and practitioners do not usually get advice about any specific situation during a class. In many of the yoga classes I attended, however, it is assumed that there is a need to discourage negative thought patterns and multi-leveled insecurity, and to boost the practitioners’ self-esteem (I will get to how this is thought to be done right after this section). In interviews, as I show below, stress was also part of a greater life story, and it cannot be easily distinguishable from other forms of suffering. I leave it for the DSM
(The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) to create typologies of emotional suffering—here, I suggest that there are things to be learned from taking it all together. In this section, I will present cases of work-related stress, move on to academia, and end with eating disorders and self-esteem.

When asked about stress, yoga practitioners’ usual first explanation is that they have too much to do. But when I ask a few more questions (such as: what will happen if you don’t get things done on time, or if you don’t get it done as well as you want to) it turns out that very often, stress points to the burden of expectations, and to perceived threats caused by constant comparison to others and an imperative to be better or different from who you are. As such, stress goes far beyond one’s to-do list. Stress, I quote from an interview, is “a constant feeling that I should be working and making a progress, that I am always behind—a heightened sense of anxiety and worry.” According to this quote, stress involves self-doubt and harsh judgment; and it is what happens when one feels the imperative to be always moving forward, improving, and changing.

The following is an email I got from a yoga friend who moved away from Silicon Valley because he found another job. It was a response to a simple question like “how’s work going”:

I am working 9 hours a day now, which is really nice, but still—managing others is stressful, (there are) unexpected emergencies all the time, and I still have a lot to learn. It’s good in a way, but on the other hand I want to work in something with less action, less daily wars and uncertainty. I am building myself in the job and learning it while doing it, it takes a lot of effort and I am not sure how many energies I have for this constant fighting. I want a break... When I come to think about it, there’s so much basic insecurity in our lives. I have just seen a movie about an
Eskimo family. The father is a talented hunter. One or two winters after the movie was filmed, he and his family died of hunger because the deer changed their route or something. I always feel this is not that far away from us. All it takes is a little movement here or there, a slight change in the direction of the wind (Private email, 6.30.2009).

But really? Is there such a small difference between a 1920s hunter in Alaska and a software company team manager like the one quoted above? I dare to assume that the chances of starving to death are not quite that big for the people I exchange friendly emails—or go to yoga classes—with. So what makes people live their lives as if their lives are always on the verge of collapsing, as if a single wrong step can lead to a catastrophe?

In the second chapter, I mentioned that Lacan’s ego is a rigid construction and a center of resistance, and the ego’s objects are conceived of as fixed. Any unregulated movement or change in these objects poses a threat to the ego’s concept of itself as fixed, which explains the need to control the environment in an attempt to predict and regulate changes within it (Brennan 1993). Quite similarly, the yogic discourse explains the feelings of insecurity and being constantly threatened as having to do with an embodied habitual and irrational interpretation of reality. Whenever the threat of failing a comparison or a competition arise in the simplest, most daily of occasions, the body gets into a stress response accompanied by a supposedly rational—yet not fully articulated—train of doubts. Not meeting a deadline translates into losing a job, and the prospect of losing a job leads to never finding a new one. Even though yoga practitioners are quick to admit that most daily, small “failures” that bring about much stress usually have no important consequences, the bio-psychological stress theory holds that small failures nevertheless translate into

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4 At the time, the writer of this email had no idea that I was going to write about stress and insecurities.
genuine anxiety that registers as a survival struggle.

Yoga teachers have multiple explanations relating job and money issues to the primordial need for shelter, food, and stability. They are quick to point out how fears of not being able to support oneself financially bleed into fears of not being loved or appreciated. This supposedly happens on a deeply embodied level, where the smallest event might register as deeply troubling and acutely threatening, be it a driver’s honk, a coffee stain on one’s shirt, or a boss’ remark. According to yogic explanations, many causes of suffering (work or school competitiveness, job or home insecurity, and relationship hardships) can be attributed to the same basic sense of chronic insecurity, of not having a secure place in the world (in both a material and an emotional sense), or of not being “grounded.”

There are many other examples of how stress surfaced in yoga practitioners’ professional lives. Here are a few of them: Angela worked at a high-tech company, in a job that did not interest her, and suffered recurrent attacks of paralyzing back pain. She spent a small fortune on mattresses, ergonomic chairs, acupuncture, and massage therapists before she started to practice yoga. Today, she practices Ashtanga yoga at a studio near her house every day before she goes to work. She is still not interested in her work, but at least she is able to enjoy weekends and holidays. As she told me: “I wake up very early to do yoga every day. It just strikes me how much more human I feel after that, rather than working all the time!”

Christina agonized over leaving her job at a law firm after giving birth to her only child at the age of thirty-eight. She did not think that she could work the long hours that would grant her partnership at the firm, but she did not want to waste her career either. She ended up finding another job with better work-life balance, but it is far less challenging. She was always scared of getting laid off.

Julie, who worked as a consultant, hated her “stupid boss” who did not respect her opinion and wanted to control everything she did and every communication she
had with others at the firm. She walked on her tip-toes not to upset him, which made
her work week incredibly stressful. Mark graduated with a Ph.D. and started his own
start-up company. After two years of hard work and a lot of family savings spent, he
had to close the company and look for a job as a hired programmer. As an employee,
he lost two jobs in the last three years. Cory lost his job and a substantial part of his
investments in 2008, and looked for another job for over a year after that. His wife,
who came from a traditional background, started resenting him for not providing as
a man should. Slowly, he started to build his own company, which is still struggling.
Brittany, who got to Silicon Valley right after college and started working at one of
the high-tech firms, felt that she needed to compete with all other entry-level hires
so that she could keep her job. It goes without saying that she was very insecure.
Megan, a technical product manager who was married to an immigrant from Chile,
told me that she was thinking of making money for another two years and then
relocating to Chile, where life is far less stressful. As far as I know, today she has
two kids and a huge mortgage on a house across the bay. Right after the collapse of
2008, Sharon, who was talking about her privileged life, stopped and said: “I rent
a great house, I have great neighbors, my work and my yoga studio are only fifteen
minutes away, I got my life in order. I don’t know what will happen if I lose my
job.” Ruth, a fellow yoga practitioner, told me one weekend that her husband (not
a yoga practitioner, yet) who worked at a big high-tech company, was away doing a
100km run. “Yes,” she said, “He runs one marathon after the other because running
in extreme weather conditions and hard terrain for ten hours straight (and more) is
his way of relieving stress. He is under so much stress.”

These are all pretty regular stories, and the people who are in these stories were
experiencing pretty regular stress, but they were also talking about deep insecurity,
alienation, and dissatisfaction. Very late did I notice that for some reason, work
stories tend to be much shorter and informative than the eating disorders stories that
will follow. Perhaps the boredom and alienation that the interviewees experience make them unwilling to dwell on work in interviews, or maybe it was my lack of experience in having an office job and lack of knowledge about working environments that stopped me from asking more (and the right kind of) questions.

If there was something I did know a lot about (at least from the perspective of the student) it was academia. Not surprisingly, the same feelings echoed in conversations related to higher education and academic life. As a matter of fact, academia and yoga—my two (not at all mutually exclusive) areas of existence since 2008—constantly bled into each other. Conversations held after yoga classes over green tea merged into conversations held in our writing-group office on the Stanford campus over coffee. In many social scenes, I have heard echoes of the same struggle and the same complaints, focusing on the difficulties of navigating a competitive environment without letting it damage one’s sense of confidence. As Stephanie says:

Last quarter I was supposed to write an article working one-on-one with a professor, and I didn’t end up finishing it. She was really judgmental, and that got me... I’m not good at it, got me thinking all these negative thoughts about academia. I was taking another class with her that I hated, I actually really hate graduate seminars. I think they are just totally insufferable. So I was unhappy professionally, and, I was really depressed, maybe it had to do with being overworked, but I thought about checking myself into the hospital at one point. And from that I got hooked on that anti-anxiety drug that I loved because... It’s called Ativan and it is related somehow to heroin, and it has the effect of just making me demure in that wonderful way, and I really like myself when I am like a fifties housewife drugged out, so dysfunctional. There is such pleasure in complacency sometimes.
Stephanie’s example immediately shows how self-doubt and professional dissatisfaction are inseparable from her experience of getting addicted to anti-anxiety drugs. Another practitioner, who did her Ph.D. in chemistry, told me that she had eight job offers in academia when she graduated (“well my field fit a lot of stuff, it’s chemistry engineering, and everybody wanted to hire a a woman”) but she did not know any young happy people in the academic world, so she took a corporate job. Other graduate students and young professors said that “everybody is anxious in academia,” “academia is a poisonous environment,” “people age quickly here,” and that “it is all about ego, competitiveness, and aggressive insecurity,” as they were reflecting on life choices they took when they were younger and much more naive.

Not only graduate students but also undergraduate students seem to suffer from over-achievement and isolation. An article published in the Stanford magazine of May/June 2009 reiterates the way in which stress often gets translated to an undermined self worth. “Stanford students do not experience a dog-eat-dog environment. They experience dog-eat-self,” says the article, as it (perhaps unintentionally) underscores a not-so-subtle connection between stress and self-harming behavioral patterns, such as metaphoric or actual eating disorders. Albeit not in Silicon Valley (but in many ways, just as competitive) another example comes from Duke University’s Duke Magazine, that ran a cover story titled: “Stressed for Success: Why the Drive to Excel is Taking a toll on Duke Students” (November/December 2011). True to the mechanical stress metaphor, the title of the article itself was, “Pressure Beneath the Surface.” The story was about the “crushing burden” many Duke students deal with, needing to be perfect in every possible field of their lives. The article quotes a report done by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) at Pennsylvania State University, which observes that today’s students experience high levels of academic stress and social anxiety and that a growing number of them are on psychiatric medication before coming to college. Shockingly, it also says that sixteen percent
have considered or attempted suicide before or during college. An example of life on the verge of catastrophe comes from the *Duke Magazine* article: “In Clocktower Quad, a sophomore is distraught over a poor grade, convinced it marks the end of his career aspirations.” Duke’s Counseling and Psychological Services director Kelly Crace is quoted as saying: “This generation has a significantly higher fear of failure than previous generations. People of my generation had faith that if we worked hard and did things the right way, there would always be opportunities for us. There is no longer that faith. Instead, there is the fear—and it’s based on reality—that they can do everything right and still not attain the goals they set for themselves. When combined with the belief that disappointment equals failure, it’s easy to see how fear can be amplified.” Importantly, this article too does not neglect the eating disorders angle, and dedicates a specific, separate box in the text to discuss stress and unhealthy eating.5 Both examples speak to the way in which expectations and chronic insecurity (the fact that there is little faith and little guarantee that things will turn out to be okay) translate into self-harming behaviors. This, as said, has everything to do with neoliberal capitalism that is built on harsh competition, ephemerality, and the lack of safety nets (which brings me back to the tightrope walkers metaphor).

Criticism of the academy was especially interesting coming from yoga practitioners who, in some way or another, had given up the race. I met quite a few people during fieldwork who decided to quit pretty successful careers in academia and went on to dedicate their lives to other careers (such as teaching yoga, switch to psychology, or working at a hospice). Most of those people had a lot of criticism towards the system they left behind. Margaret, for example, quit her post-doc at Stanford and with her Ph.D. in chemistry at hand, went on to be a yoga teacher and a private tutor. The decision came after Margaret dreamt that she was pregnant with twins.

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In her dream, she took one fetus and sliced it in her laboratory, while the second grew up to be a lovely little girl. She claims that the dream made her realize where her future is, especially after talking to her psychologist who pointed out how the dream represented the inhuman treatment Margaret felt she herself was receiving in her work environment. Margaret’s unflattering portrayal of academic life (versus the yogic option) was reiterated by others. Laurie, to take another example, also decided to break away from her planned future as a psychology Ph.D., despite her parents’ anger, concluding that she was deeply disappointed in academia: “It was all about ego and competitiveness, I was miserable, and I always thought: aren’t we here to help people?”

Deidra’s explanation provides another angle, as she says that the process of writing her Ph.D. was so depressing for her that she decided to quit.

At first I blamed myself. I judged myself for not being as bright as others, or as hard working as they seemed to be. It was so hard, to disappoint myself and others. I failed the expectations, you know? I felt like a failure, like an imposter. But then I decided to stop measuring myself according to the academic standards. Academia is horribly judgmental, and who you are is mixed up with what you wrote last, so if this article is not that good people feel free to say that you are a moron.

One can hardly disregard the gendered aspect of Margaret, Laurie, and Deidra’s stories. Margaret clearly felt that she was missing her opportunity of becoming a mother, and Laurie wanted to “help people” rather than compete continuously. These two tendencies are stereotypically gendered, but here I am interested mainly in the third: the mechanism of taking professional judgment in, internalizing expectations, and punishing oneself for not meeting the standards. As I show later, this mechanism is particularly apparent in eating disorders—and gets special attention
in yoga classes.

This portrayal of harsh judgment (and the attribution of many social ills to it) is common in yoga circles not only when academia is discussed. The working environment, school, and the family are described as factors that share the same logic of comparisons, a logic that creates a rather hostile environment and undermined self worth. Practitioners who embark on the journey of self discovery and self improvement through yoga often try to handle insecurities not by winning the race, but by seemingly stepping “outside” of it (even if most keep on working as usual) and withdrawing “inside,” thus questioning their own habitual understanding of themselves and the situations they are in. As I will show later, against what they come to see as competitive, hostile, and insecurity-producing environment, yoga practitioners practice bodily presence and mindfulness, trying to retrieve a sense of safety from their very being.

Susan is a divorced forty-five-year-old woman who was emotionally and physically abused as a child, and has been suffering from alcoholism and eating disorders for most of her life. In spite of her troubled upbringing, at the time of our conversation she was managing a successful career that had her comfortably settled in the expensive Silicon Valley area. Susan’s story, like many others, questions the differentiation between “real suffering” and “the suffering of the privileged.” One can hardly dispute the fact that being abused as a child is “real suffering,” and there is no way to know when this suffering ends, or how it influences adult life. Susan is still tightrope walking—she tries not to fall down from her advantageous position by attending AA meetings, OA meetings, yoga classes and meditation sessions regularly.\(^6\) Let me dwell on Susan’s story before I get to what she has to say about stress in a corporate environment.

\(^6\) AA - Alcoholics anonymous. OA - overeaters anonymous. Susan’s story presents a good example of the challenges of fieldwork on a leisure activity in a dispersed, high-tech, transnational space where people cannot be singularly labeled as yoga practitioners.
Susan grew up in an upper-middle class family. Her parents were less well-off than others in their neighborhood, but they sent all of their three kids to private schools. Her mother was depressed, angry, and frustrated with life. As a child, Susan’s mother was abused and “brought that into being a parent.” In those days, Susan says, there was not much help available for kids who were abused.

Everyone felt that they needed to have a perfect family. So she took it out on my sister and I. There was no sexual abuse, but emotional and physical from age six or seven until we were fourteen or fifteen. And there was all the stuff that came with that, she was an alcoholic, and you had to learn to lie to your friends. I remember wanting my mom to die, and when I was seventeen, she got cancer and died. I thought, oh my god, did I make this happen?

After graduating from college, Susan got a job overseas.

I was working in Europe, but your problems follow you. I wasn’t happy and I started to drink hard. I joined a Masters’ program and drank only on weekends. I was working, learning, and drinking. When I started seeing my mom in myself, I went to an AA meeting, and I didn’t have a drink since. My career started to take off, but all the depression came to the surface. My career was doing well and I was, oh my god, now I want to kill myself.

Susan went to a psychiatrist who put her on medication that helped. “I probably need to get back on them again,” she says. But she still was not happy. She struggled with stress and body-image issues.

Stress is interesting, especially in corporate America. In a company, stress comes from, obviously getting things done but mostly, you know, there’s
this ego and we are all trying to look good and be the best and have the best apartment, and get promoted the quickest and have the most visibility, all these things.

Stress, as articulated by Susan, does not stem from the need to get things done in a short amount of time. Being busy simply does not have to carry the unpleasantness of stress with it. Stress, rather, comes from wanting to measure up and prove oneself better than others. This portrayal of consuming competitiveness Susan presents appears when yoga practitioners talk about their kids, the education system, life choices, their corporate jobs, and the academia. This on-going comparison and attempt to live up to great expectations make a very distinct mark on the female body (and even more so when it comes to someone whose bodily integrity and autonomy has been violently violated since childhood). I asked Susan about an eating disorder that she mentioned to me in a previous conversation, and she answered:

I have so much shame around my eating disorder. It is so interesting that I automatically cut it out; I forgot that I shared that with you. I don’t know exactly where it came from, but I know that when I was younger, I just wanted to be loved—and love comes in the form of a boyfriend, and it looked on the outside like, if you will be thin you will get a boyfriend. So I thought, I better get thin. For the first two years of college I was depressed and I was eating. And I was about twenty to twenty-five pounds heavier than I am now. I wasn’t hugely obese but people were noticing. I carried it all in my hips, whatever. And people were saying “you eat a lot,” “honey, are you okay? Your weight is getting a little bit out of control,” and I freaked out. I was eighteen or nineteen, and I remember my step mother told me, not very tactful, one day I had a gallon thing of ice cream and I was just eating, right out of... and she
looked it me and said “you are going to get bigger if you keep doing that, you are already big.” In my head, I thought, oh my god. And that was the very first time I experienced anorexia, because after that for like a year I was, okay, fine, I’m going to show you. And I started not eating. I went from 130 to 103, and people started saying things like “oh my god, you are so skinny”... Sugar to me is like alcohol. I can’t just have a piece of a cake. I want to eat the whole cake. So my weight would go up and down. My body was crazy. So, when I was about five years sober I was at an AA meeting and someone mentioned OA, Overeaters Anonymous. And I knew I had a problem with food. These people would get to 230 pounds; my experience would be that I go up 10-20 and then go way down. But I started that program, no flour and sugar, three meals a day. You measure food and for me that is important because I would under-eat. My body, emotions got much better. My sister is the same way. She is not recovered; she is my size if not smaller but she will eat all the frosting off the cake. So the program helped me a lot with the anorexia-bulimia part... One day at work I passed out because I didn’t eat for two days. And here, we all show up for yoga... My friend took me to this yoga class, and I really felt like, wow, for the first time, I intuitively knew that my body could heal. I didn’t expect that yoga will make me not care about the shape of my body, for the first time in my life. I don’t get on the scale, I used to want to and now it’s okay. It’s not always like that—last night I felt really fat. But I said, you know what, as long as I don’t look—cause when I start looking I get really... I don’t know, I start seeing... I go crazy. But if I can just say to myself today—you are not huge, you are not fat, you are beautiful, and do yoga to feel the strength of my body in the poses, something happens. The
chatter, the image stops. So, yes, yoga is good, helpful for that. Isn’t that amazing that in my mind it’s always “if I could only look like Neta, if I could only look like Emma”—isn’t that crazy? The whole body image, I had an a-ha with it. Not that it changed my behavior, but I did have a a-ha. I was really thin and I’m thinking, I am doing that for a man?? I am not nourishing my body?? All the magazines... And the mirror, it’s a big piece of that. I still can’t look at it, because I don’t see right. But experiencing our body through yoga is different, and I don’t go to any teacher that is not about healing but doing a particular pose. Because body image is also about perfectionism, and I can do the same thing at the yoga studio. And that gets to the point of the suffering of the privileged, because some people in the world, they don’t know where is their next meal. Are you kidding me? You are upset because you are too fat? We are starving. Oh my god, my friends feel guilty because they eat twenty people’s share.

Susan sees ties between her abusive mother and her yearning for love. Yet, what she thinks set off her anorexia was her interpretation of social norms, including those reflected from magazines, those who deem some people more worthy of love than others, and those reflected in the expectations that surrounded her. This combination makes her story demonstrative of the inseparability of personal and cultural suffering, as well as “real” and “privileged” one. Suffering from depression and alcoholism, Susan seems to be already susceptible to other kinds of dependencies and imbalances that many others share, often in less extreme ways.

What is particularly interesting for me in Susan’s story is her intentional avoid-
ance of the scale and the mirror, and every form of “looking.” The comfort she finds in yoga lied in experiencing her body differently. In that, she already hints at the
(impossible) attempt to reverse, or correct, the Lacanian mirror stage.

Unfortunately, Susan was not the only one to talk to me about eating disorders. In an interview with Michelle, another forty-five-year-old woman, she related her daughter’s eating disorder (which started at age twelve) to the competitive climate surrounding the child. In a long sequence of short and fiery sentences that make no mind/body differentiation, Michelle jumped back and forth between stay-at-home moms and their “brilliant intense energy” that makes their kids into “life projects”; the Silicon Valley environment of competitive universities and the “breed of people it perpetuates”; and her daughter, a perfectionist who always gets A plusses. Michelle sees her daughter’s “full-blown eating disorder” as a result of her associating with other kids who are all stressed, perfectionist, and carrying the burden of living their not-working mothers’ dreams. “I am intense and competitive myself, but I work, I don’t care about grades, and I am aware of how my insecurities drive me,” Michelle said. “She didn’t get that from us.”

I was struck as more and more interviews mentioning severe cases of eating disorders piled up. All speakers, not surprisingly, were women. Like Michelle, my other friendformants did a fascinating job of presenting their body-image issues and eating disorders stories as an indistinguishable part of their lives, alongside their upbringing, parents’ expectations, relationships, perfectionism, the Silicon Valley environment, and more.

Olivia and I went through a week-long restorative yoga training together and immediately connected after we worked as a pair during the first day. Olivia is twenty-eight years old. She is an editor and a yoga practitioner with a Master degree from an Ivy League university. She is married to a lawyer and thinking of having kids in the near future. Her wavy blond hair, big blue eyes, and nose that is just asymmetric enough to add character and uniqueness to her otherwise perfect face make Olivia look just like one of those yoga-barbies photographed on the cover of
Yoga Journal. Physical beauty aside, Olivia struck me as a gentle, brilliant, frank, and self-aware woman. After we met at the training, we used to get together for coffee or dinner every once in a while, and we still keep in touch. The day of our interview was a beautiful April evening, and after spending all day indoors, we decided to walk around the streets before dinner. Here are some parts of Olivia’s story, as she told it—including the story that gave this dissertation its title:

I grew up in small town in Washington, an only child. We traveled about a fifth of my childhood. I think my mom needed the outlet of travel to endure the small town. We visited the Soviet Union, and I have this horrifying memory of a little girl who was a tightrope walker, and her dad set it up an alleyway with no net, so here was this girl tightrope walking above the street and her dad was soliciting money from us. So terrifying to me. We spent several months in Thailand when I was seven, they took me out of school. So that was childhood, and then I went to boarding school when I was fifteen. I guess I wanted to get out of the house. But my high-school guidance counselor, they said that I need to graduate early and I didn’t want to go to college at sixteen. And then college in Seattle, was really good, because the boarding school was sixty people, and then to go to college where not everybody knew all about me, the anonymity was so liberating.

At this point in the conversation, there was a long silence. I waited for Olivia to continue, and perhaps she waited for another question. And then she said, with a smile: “I’m usually the one asking questions. My therapist thinks I’m resistant, because I never know what to say.” Without waiting any longer, she started talking about yoga:

I started yoga seriously after a really terrible sophomore year. I mean, I
was happy and I loved college but it was also, I was dating an older man, I was drinking a lot, and it was very much like a life-of-the-privileged thing—we were going to really fancy dinners, go to opera, theater, whatever. Weirdly sort of middle age wealthy person’s life when I was eighteen. It was incredibly sexually exploitative, I have seen it all in retrospect. So then he left, and I needed to cut back on drinking. Then I got into yoga as a way to get over that weird thing. In retrospect I think it was bad instructions, no flow, very static poses, but it was great just to be alone, not have to talk to nobody in a room full of people... weirdly avoidance. It is just nice to feel like nobody expects anything from you, you don’t have to give anybody anything... after a year of like, essentially, sexual slavery.

I thought it was ironic that exactly at this point of the interview, Olivia and I got to a park and sat down on a bench with a lovely dedication from a woman to her deceased husband. I did not ask about “sexual slavery” and what that entailed, and we continued talking about yoga:

At the beginning it was about getting the yoga body, this is for toning, I didn’t want to do breathing. I don’t actually know how it changed for me. And it probably hasn’t completely.

Olivia and I drifted into talking about art that hangs on yoga studios’ walls, Buddha statues, mirrors, and how other aspects of studios’ interior design influences the atmosphere at the studio. I asked her if the studio where she practices has mirrors, and if she faces them. She said she usually does not, because she does not like to be looking at herself. From there, we soon came back to talking about yoga and the suffering of the privileged.
N: I’m always bothered and fascinated by how amazing, beautiful women feel so inadequate.

O: Well, I am reading *The Golden Cage*—a classic book from 1978 on anorexia. And she says that anorexia is such a rare disease, you would think that once it becomes widespread the appeal will disappear, but I think it’s not that, but rather it’s no longer a special disease but women feel like they need to meet this expectation... It got me thinking about ordinary, un-triggered anorexia. Yoga is so often used as a treatment for eating disorders, but it also has the potential to focus so much on the body... I guess it’s the transition from what your body looks like to what it can do, which maybe is healthy, I don’t know. For me, I was pretty underweight at college, I don’t think I qualified as anorexic but certainly there was a time when people asked me if I was sick. And that was when I was doing a little less yoga and more running, training. I don’t understand the mechanism of why yoga would make people feel better about their body. My friend claims that it makes her feel great about her body during the 90 minutes she is practicing, but on either side of that there is the judgment of when you walk in the studio and see yourself in the mirror and right after savasana, it’s like a switch, and then she starts body judgment all over again. No one really wants to talk about it, and you pretend that there isn’t judgement. And actually, you are the first person that I met in yoga and talked about it. People will say, you shouldn’t eat five hours before yoga, all the fasting stuff in Ayurveda, the whole purification thing... There’s a very popular diet right now that is like lemon juice, water, cayenne paper, maple syrup, and apparently it has all the nutrients you need to survive. So women in
LA are going on that, and a lot of them are among the people who do yoga, and it’s justified by “I am getting pure,” getting in touch with my higher consciences, but in effect I want to get to size zero.

N: Or six.

It was starting to get dark and chilly, so Olivia and I continued our conversation in a nearby restaurant. Just as one would expect, we had salad and soup, no dessert. Over the food, we returned to anorexia.

There’s this ultimate helplessness, wanting to be taken care of. When I was at my most underweight, I had no mental energy to think about anything else but food and getting my schoolwork done so I can go exercise. And my fantasy was that my boyfriend at the time will stand by my bedside and feed me yogurt. The constant fantasy... There must be some women without body issues, I just don’t know any.

N: What other expectations and judgments make our lives harder than they should be?

O: I think I am pretty good with being pretty gentle to myself with the notable exception of weight. Maybe it’s me right now, after dating so many men I have my life set, I am happy at work, I feel like I met a lot of the expectations, which is a huge relief. In a weird way, this is exactly the life my parents wanted for me, but I am sort of relieved that I can be happy in that life. I don’t think that my mother was happy.

Olivia seemed to have a way of talking openly about difficulties without soliciting pity, and without dwelling on the hardship or hiding it. Her story touches upon many issues: multi-generational female unhappiness, how hard it is to be an only child and carry your parents’ expectations, the difficulty of being brilliant (she almost went to
college at the age of sixteen), self-damaging behaviors like drinking and subjecting oneself to sexual exploitation, and, of course, the violence of self-starvation and self-beratement. Another point in Olivia’s words that testifies to the unique set of expectations that women face, is the fantasy of being helpless (the fantasy of complete surrender brings me yet again to the mechanical stress metaphor, since surrender is another way to relieve stress—think of a material that succumbs to the stress and gives in, changes form completely or breaks—rather than to continue the resistance).

Clearly, eating disorders can be attributed to numerous causes—gender expectations and capitalism are two of them, as Susan Bordo points out in *Reading the slender body*. Bordo draws a connection between anorexia and self denial, obesity as capitulating to consumption, and bulimia as a move between the two. This economy of desires, where, on the one hand, one is expected to sublimate, repress, delay desires; and on the other hand, to display a capacity to capitulate to desire and indulge in impulse and hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction, becomes an ongoing problem. Seeing uncontrolled consumption and self denial as two contradictory imperatives of capitalism, Bordo shows how power works from below on the bodies of women. The slender body, Bordo writes, codes the ideal of well-managed self in which all is kept in order despite the contradictions of consumer culture (Bordo 2004).

The connection between political economy and eating disorders suggests that women’s (and men’s) bodies often express and incorporate social expectations in complex ways. When yoga practitioners such as Susan, Michelle and Olivia spoke to me about their own (or their daughters’) struggles with body-image and eating disorders, they sometimes related it to the stressful, over-achieving, technology-oriented Silicon Valley education system and parenting styles; sometimes to general, abstract “perfectionism” and “expectations”; and at other times, to meaninglessness and a
sense of being lost. I present their suffering and eating disorders here as it appears in interviews, conversations, and yoga classes—as a mosaic that takes many different things into consideration, between them wealth and two complementary kinds of suffering that often come with it: either the stress of being an overachiever, or the sense of being a failure and dropping out of the race. The two, of course, are not the only ones, nor do they negate each other. Bordo’s argument once again becomes relevant here, since this, too, is a contradiction that emerges from political economy and makes its mark on (mostly female) bodies.

Here is another example, coming from the most mature college student I have ever met. Tall and poised, Ashley was twenty years old when we spoke, and she had a lot to say about her high school experience in Silicon Valley:

I started yoga when I was a freshman in high school. And I had an eating problem, I was anorexic but didn’t, like, admit it, but I lost like twenty pounds; it was not good. I don’t really know why I was; I think it was probably because I was stressed out, pressure. I still don’t really know why. And then I started yoga... I went to a teen class. I made my boyfriend go with me. Actually, I think he was why I was a little bit anorexic. I don’t know what sparked it. He didn’t call me fat or anything, he wasn’t a bad boyfriend, but I just wasn’t that happy, and I really didn’t like to go to school because I didn’t like the people there. I hated school. It’s really really superficial stuff, all girls only care about what they look like... I care about what I look like but that’s not it, there is so much money, you have no idea, it’s disgusting! Brand new Lexuses covering the parking lot. I don’t know. It took a while for it to start helping, but then, think about body awareness, I felt more connected, I didn’t want to hurt myself. Like, I wasn’t super serious, I didn’t have to
go to rehab or anything. It just wasn’t healthy. It went on for probably a year and it kind of just went away. I think, also, when you are exercising every day you just feel good and you feel like you need to eat. I got more confident; I am not really confident now but more than I was. But I think it helps so much in confidence and body awareness. Being comfortable in my body, and it also helps in school with stress. I think it would be so great if people my age did it, because a lot of my friends are just really depressed, I have two bi-polar friends. My best friend went to rehab and she is still messed up.

N: Rehab from what?

A: Ecstasy. It would just help her so much if she came to yoga, it helps so much for everyone my age, and also, like, drinking. It’s so bad, there’s so much drinking. In yoga you don’t have to do anything, perform anything. I think it’s important to bring it to young people but it’s hard, short attention span or whatever. And the suicide too, it was so big at my school, I don’t know what it is, it’s crazy though. So many of my friends cut. And also, with sex—really, if you don’t, like, respect yourself, especially right now, you are going to have sex with older people, whatever, and mess it up because you are not happy with yourself. Yoga helps in that so much too, it makes it okay to be by yourself, and so many of my friends can’t be by themselves. Like, if they have a friend—my one friend does that all the time, it drives me freaking crazy. She has a boyfriend, she says she loves him, whatever, and if she thinks he is going to break up with her she starts texting all these guys, five guys for backup. But you will never have a good relationship if you are doing that.

N: From the outside, what better place to live, yet people here are so...
A: People here are so rich though, they don’t really care, to be honest. In my high school every kid had a brand new car; their parents don’t really care what they do. Especially the white people, their parents just don’t care. Black people especially, their parents will enforce them to do well because they want them to succeed, to do better than them. It is just sad, because so many people if they just apply themselves they have enough money to get into any college; their parents can probably pay to get them in, you know. But they went to Foothill [community college]. Not that there’s anything wrong with Foothill, but they can do it, but they just don’t apply themselves. There is no motivation if there’s so much money, you know you don’t have to work hard. It might be self-discipline too, and yoga helps with that. That’s what I like about it the best, actually. This is why it is hard to get people into yoga: you get no external rewards like a trophy or anything. No competition, whatever. You don’t get any praise at all, unless you have a strange teacher.

In one breath, Ashley mentions suicide, cuttings, drinking, teens having sex with adults, dependency, and drugs as behaviors that were common at her high school. Above all, she speaks about meaninglessness and disrespect for oneself. I will come back to her experience of yoga. For now, I want to emphasize that tales concerning youth eating disorders, drinking habits, and cutting play into a discourse typical to the yoga scenes in the Bay Area, a discourse of expressed concern and disdain towards extreme affluence, competitiveness, meaninglessness, and their harmful effects on one’s self-esteem.7

7 While the high school culture in the Silicon Valley is beside my point (and probably worth a whole different dissertation (see: Shankar 2008), I would like to briefly mention that Ashley’s words echo in other high school kids’ and their parents’ complaints about impossibly high demands and expectations, competitive climate, and what is perceived to be their toll—from “dropouts” who settle for a community college when they can make it into an Ivy League school, to self-harming behaviors and the extremity of kids who kill themselves walking onto the train tracks (I have heard
While Ashley and Olivia tell the story from the point of view of the anorexic youth, Susan’s story presents an adult fighting all sorts of dependencies, and Michelle is telling a story of a worried mother who distinguishes herself from other mothers, who need their kids to be the best at everything. In all those stories, expectations and the desire to be loved get entangled in different kinds of suffering. The comparison and experiences of chronic insecurity that were discussed in relation to work, academia, and body image, repeat themselves in other women’s words—even if they do not suffer from eating disorders or depression. I do not mean to deny men their insecurities, but one can hardly dismiss the gendered aspects of the stories above. I do not know what makes women seem particularly prone to self-doubt, but women, it seems, are more likely to feel insecure in various aspects of their lives—maybe because of the “super-woman syndrome,” maybe because they are still more financially dependent than men, and maybe because they have fewer resources to defend themselves in more than one way. What I am most interested in is how women try to fight the habitual ways in which they take it all upon themselves and how they try to change the patterns of taking all the expectations and judgments in.

At this point, the discussion comes back to how the bio-psychological stress model is interpreted in yogic discourses. Earlier, I mentioned how one of my yoga teacher training instructors described the relations between stress and self-esteem: “What you do when you are stressed says a lot about how you perceive your power, whether you think you can fight back or not.” Chronic insecurity, in other words, entails mistrust in oneself and one’s resources. Indeed, how many women were educated to—or feel that they can—defend themselves by fighting back, both physically and verbally?

Concluding with self-esteem runs the risk of using a brush too broad and drawing a general pop psychology picture, thus offer a sweeping and unspecific description. About five cases in two years).
It is therefore important to mention that not everyone suffers from low self-esteem and that not all conversations carry an undertone of comparison. Yet, I have seen far too many women torturing themselves, and I cannot help but find it astonishing yet so very common.

Clearly, my focus on self-esteem problems is also time and space specific. In yoga classes, one can often hear sayings like “You are your own worst enemy.” Over a casual dinner with Olivia and her partner, I said something about conversations I had had where women expressed “harsh self judgment, verging on self loathing.” Olivia, who is truly stunning, lifted one eyebrow, and simply said “only verging?” Her partner, who was plowing through his fourth serving of cannelloni, lifted his head from his plate and shook his head in disapproval and disbelief.

Low self-esteem was present in so many of my conversations and in interviews, as shown above. It shows when women speak about being overweight (even though they do not look overweight to me); when Susan talks in disgust about her “chicken arms;” when another yoga practitioner talks about sleeping with too many man as a way of affirming herself as an attractive woman; and yet in another interview where a yoga practitioner talked about being destined for a professional failure because she thinks everyone is better than she is at her job. For so many of the people I have known in the field and in life outside of it, the stress of work, along with overreaching, non-specific competition and constant comparisons, means that they usually do not feel secure or safe, but on the contrary—they feel constantly threatened. Differently put, the comparison and expectations are interwoven into a person experience of herself—to go back to Lacan, that is how she becomes herself—and their internalization sometimes makes life absolutely miserable.
4.5 The Retreat Inward: Body Learning and Interiority Making

Although they struggle with chronic insecurity (which is produced both in the yoga studio as well as outside of it), most yoga practitioners I met do not seek to change their environment much. Instead, they retreat inward and practice an embodied production of safe interiority. In Chapter Six, I will discuss the avoidance of structural changes at length and yoga as a fairly depoliticized practice. In this section, I will describe how the cultivation of interiority is being done through the body and through the reiteration of concepts such as the present, the mind, and the ego. Importantly, the yogic discourse does not aim just towards Ego-Psychology-style “coping” mechanisms, but as I show later, it also has aspirations of deconstructing the ego and its need of control. To be clear, the yogic discourse is not a Lacanian discourse—but it is neither just another popular version of Ego Psychology.

In the second chapter, I reviewed the concept of interiority in relations to power (society) and the mind/body question. For Descartes, the mind is interior and the body exterior. According to Marx, only when there is alignment between a man’s human nature and the labor he does will there be harmony. As long as there is a class exploiting his labor, and work is external to him, the worker will be alienated from himself. For Freud and Lacan, there is no coming back to the oceanic feeling of being pure body, Id, or the full plenitude of the Real. Since the dissections are made with a cultural, social knife, the ego and the subject come into being through the internalization of an external ought. There is a way to read politics and inequalities with Lacan (Viego 2007), but regardless of any specific perpetrators, such as capitalism or sexism, it is civilization and the very process of subjectivization that makes the outer and the inner inevitably infused. Feminist writers who built on Marx, Freud, and Lacan demonstrated that political economy and power relations

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8 As I mentioned earlier, some of the people I met during fieldwork did change their career paths. Yet, this choice is overshadowed by the choice to retreat inward.
give more weight to already existing problems that emerge from specific processes of subjectivization.

As I showed in the second chapter, the questions of mind/body and interiority/exteriority are wrapped up in the question of how one lives in modern patriarchic society, and what price the subject pays for it. The yogic discourse also addresses the mind’s dominance over the body and even more so, the challenge of not living only according to the other’s desire (which is, as the self-esteem struggle demonstrates, an indistinguishable part of the subject). Shifting one’s attention to the body, to the present, and to one’s thoughts is a discipline of interiority-making.

4.5.1 How Does Your Body Feel In This Present Moment?

As said, the causes for stress, threats, and insecurities are usually not discussed in a yoga class. Instead of a psychotherapeutic verbal processing of a particular problem, it is commonly taken for granted that everybody is dealing with their own stress, unhappiness or insecurities. Hence, the practitioner is thought to be provided with an embodied experience of having a place in the world, which is supposedly independent of any competition or a need to perform. The practitioner is taught how to summon a feeling of safety and calm amidst stressful situations, and how to cultivate an inner sense of being-at-home-in-the-world. And so, the “outside” is demarcated as a space where competition rules, where people yearn to be at the top of the pyramid, and where expectation for perfection bring about much suffering and anxiety. At the same time, the “inside” of the studio—and even more so, the “inside” of oneself—is where every person should be able to find her own place, let go of comparisons, and accept imperfections.

Different versions of the question in the subtitle (“how does your body feel in this present moment?”) are often asked in yoga classes. A typical yoga class starts with a mellow beginning—a mindbody warm-up consisting of a few minutes of silent medi-
tation, possibly a chant, and a few simple poses performed slowly and gently. During this introduction, practitioners are often asked to pay attention to their breath, forget about the day they had been having so far and what is yet to come, and “come back to the present moment” through careful manipulation of their attention. As class proceeds—even if it is a gentle class—poses will get either slightly or much more intense, the pace may become faster, and the sequences may get slightly harder to perform. At the most challenging moments, teachers often remind the practitioners to keep breathing deeply and not to hesitate to back off and take a rest in a child’s pose. By keeping the breath deep and stable while performing a difficult pose, practitioners are supposed to exercise keeping calm in a stressful situation. Even more important, they are presumably enabling the emergence of a different interpretation of the very situation they are in, meaning, developing the ability to experience a demanding situation as challenging yet not threatening. Even when thoughts that involve comparison and competition come up—and they inevitably do—the idea is to notice them and not get entangled in them, thereby lessening their hold on one’s mind. While yoga practitioners are encouraged to do so verbally, they agree that it is only once those experiences of breathing through stress and profoundly relaxing are produced again and again and come to resonate deeply in one’s body, that the skill of relaxing in a challenging situation actually becomes available in one’s daily life—thus suggesting that they are able to cultivate changes in their habitus.

Often, people find it hard to describe the processes and consequences of such embodied processes, as they never felt the need to articulate how the skills and experiences translate into life outside of class. But this embodied learning is medi-
ated by verbal instructions given repeatedly with the purpose of eventually having them resonate and understood through the body. Hence, the (more often than not) economic usage of language in class is very important in order to produce certain experiences, and it poses many challenges to teachers who want to facilitate a certain mood in class. In order to shape minds and bodies, teachers are coming up with very specific jargons which can be slightly alienating to new comers (like the Anusara instruction of “hug the muscle to the bone” or “inner body bright”).

Yoga classes always end with savasana, the final relaxation pose, also known by the somewhat morbid name corpse pose. In savasana, the practitioner is laying flat on the mat, palms facing the ceiling and feet falling sideways. The relaxation at the end of class is considered to be the most important part of the practice, when the effort melts into profound calm. In savasana, students may be instructed to pay attention to their body areas that touch the floor. Then, the teacher will suggest the word “support” (feel how the earth is supporting you) and in response, she might be...
able to detect a slight movement: a further drop of the head or a deep sigh. As the practitioner learns to pay attention to the feeling of the ground supporting her body and recognize it consciously, she may also note the feeling of being safe, supported and held, and will hopefully be able to summon it at times of need. The quote below is taken from a conversation with Tasha, a yoga practitioner:

Sometimes I get to the studio feeling so vulnerable, anxious, and stressed. And then I take child’s pose, close my eyes, and start to deepen my breath. I focus on the sensations of my breath and my body; I feel the support of the floor beneath me. I focus on the present moment, and I acknowledge that right now I am supported, that at this very moment everything is fine. I try to let go of being anxious about the future or beating myself up for things I have already done, and come back to where I’m at right now.

In order to find peace of mind and a sense of protection, Tasha is focusing her attention not only on her body but importantly, on the present moment. Bringing one’s attention to the body is an often-used technique for focusing on the present—after all, when one is focusing on one’s bodily sensations, one’s attention must be dedicated to the here and now. Focusing on bodily feelings and the immediate surroundings is a way of bringing about a feeling of safety and calm. Attempting to verbalize this feeling, teachers will encourage practitioners to notice their presence, their breath, the lack of pain or danger, and the presence of safety and wellness.

Competitive impulses and insecurities, I would argue, are related to the temporality produced by Lacan’s mirror stage, since the mirror stage is characterized by anticipation. The child’s identification with the image can only ever be “partial, wishful, (...) put off into the future, delayed” (Grosz 1990:40). This temporality of

14 One of the most community used meditation techniques requires practitioners to focus on the breath.
the not-there-yet, and of expectations projected onto a forever deferred future, means that “the stability of the unified body image, even in the so called normal subject, is always precarious” (Grosz 1994:43). According to Grosz, the establishment of an imaginary identity means that it will always require work of stabilization, ordering, and placement. The fact that the interior is the site of the projected ideal other that always reinscribes the lack does not mean that the attempts of stabilization—which may be be more or less conscious—cease to exist.

Yoga offers deliberate attempts of placement and stabilization, ones that attempt to use the body interior and shut the eyes in order to find relief (that can be partial at best) from the haunting image of the other. Therefore, it makes sense that the technique of bringing a sense of balance and calm to the insecure, stressed subject draws confidence not from being better or special but simply from being. The sensation of safety is produced not by receiving guarantees about the future, getting positive feedbacks, or from the accumulation of credits and possessions, but from producing a present-focused, embodied sense of calm and relaxation. It is about making one’s body into a home and intentionally drawing the attention in, thus retrieving a sense of safety and comfort from the materiality of the body and the sensation of the breath.

So far, I named two bodily techniques that are supposed to help practitioners handle stress and insecurity. On the one hand, teachers are attempting to create a sense of safety for their students by encouraging them to return to the supported body. On the other hand, practitioners are supposedly learning how to summon a feeling of safety and ease, even when they are physically and mentally challenged while they perform difficult poses. Both techniques rely on cultivating a sense of interiority, something that yoga teachers are often enthusiastic about. “People at the gym work out—we work in,” they say, as they seek to cultivate a sense of true-to-itself, “authentic,” richly present interiority. In fact, the idea behind being “grounded” often means
that one becomes acutely aware of one’s own physical presence—which, despite being temporal and fragile in the large scheme of things, is very much concrete in the here and now. This turning inward for comfort is thought to minimize the need for external securities, as the practitioner reminds herself—however unconsciously—that she has a presence that exists independently from her anxieties and identifications.

Paying attention to the body and one’s physical being does not mean identifying with it completely, nor does it mean trying to put all discriminatory and comparative faculties asleep. “Getting into the body” is just one way in which yoga practitioners are encouraged to develop the position of the external observer—the one who notices feelings, sensations, and thoughts but does not get shaken by any of them. “Turning inward” and “connecting to the body and breath” are techniques that are intricately connected to mindfulness and to the attempts to disentangle from the automatic, judgmental workings of the mind and the ego—to which I turn now. By drawing inward, practitioners are supposedly able to observe their habitual ways of being from an external point of view. In order to develop this ability of observing oneself, the yoga practitioner is encouraged to question her “mind” and “ego,” two terms that can also be translated into “thoughts patterns” and “identity constructions.” “The Mind” and “The Ego” are two important key concepts that kept coming up during fieldwork. I would like to discuss them both, starting with “The Mind.”

4.5.2  Doubting the Mind

“The Mind” can be talked about as a noun—an entity to be observed (“know how your mind works”); it can come up as a verb which signals the action of focusing one’s attention (in the 2009 yoga journal conference, a famous teacher said that what yoga really means is “mind your own business”); and it is always at the backdrop of conversations concerning thought patterns and the way to stop or transcend them
by the practice of meditation and mindfulness, or the desired state of mindlessness.\textsuperscript{15}

The concept of “the mind,” as I discuss it below, is assembled from various ideas that come from multiple sources, among them Buddhism, ancient yoga philosophies, self-help, and global popular culture. By and large, the concept of “the mind” that gets articulated in the rich Buddhist and yogic philosophies (as well as the secondary literature dedicated to the history and analysis of these philosophies), is irrelevant for the Western yogic discourse and as such, it is beyond the scope of this project. Yet, the yogic discourse does co-opt ancient texts to some extent—first and foremost, the yoga sutras of Patanjali.\textsuperscript{16} The yoga sutras are sometimes reiterated in yoga classes and they are likely to be included in any yoga teacher trainings. The succinct, ancient phrases are seen as guidelines for living, and although they hardly engage the yoga poses (\textit{asanas}) directly, they are considered to hold “the spirit of yoga.”

The second yoga sutra of Patanjali, which often gets mentioned in yoga classes and publications, reads: \textit{yogash chitta vritti nirodhah}, and often gets translated as saying that “yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind” or “yoga is the mastery of the activities of the mind-field.” I first heard this phrase during a philosophy lecture which was part of my yoga teacher training.

It was Friday night, the studio was dimly lit, and we sat on the hardwood floor. I was tired and impatient. The philosophy teacher was a middle-aged man, who was born in Northern India and therefore enjoyed the aura of being an “authentic” Indian yogi. When I asked him if I could record his lecture at the beginning of class, his unapologetic answer was simply “you are not allowed,” which I found to be somewhat rude, since no explanation followed. I retreated back to my corner,

\textsuperscript{15} The saying that what yoga really means is “mind your own business” supports an argument I made in the previous chapter—that yoga is very much about creating space between people—and also an argument that will be made in Chapter Six regarding the depoliticizing aspects of yoga.

\textsuperscript{16} The yoga sutras of Patanjali is a collection of aphorisms written more than 2000 years ago in Sanskrit by an Indian sage known as Patanjali. There are a few English translations available, one of them by the famous yoga guru B.K.S Iyenger (Iyengar 1993).
confused and slightly irritated. The lecture went on for two hours, with no questions or discussion permitted until the very end. The late hour, the dim lights, and the burden of sitting upright on a yoga mat took its toll on the listeners. People started yawning, text messaging each other, and took turns leaving to get coffee from the coffee shop across the street. Time went by very slowly. I fought my own drowsiness with obsessive note taking.

Despite my mental state and the feelings of resentment that saturated the moment, the lecture turned out to be an interesting one, and the message stuck with me. The lecture was all about “the mind” and about the second sutra, meaning, about stopping the fluctuation of the mind, also known as thought-waves (chitta vrittī).

I am slightly embarrassed to admit that until that point in my life, I never really understood the simple ideas that were suggested to me on that low-energy Friday night; until then, I never had a taste of the sense of liberty encapsulated in observing the workings of the mind. I am conveying the main messages of the lecture at some length below, since it forms a good representation of how “the mind” is often thought about in modern yoga and its importance. The teacher started as follows:

The mind is the finest instrument that we have, and the very definition of a yogi and a yogini is “the one who knows to direct the mind.” The mind, being an activity and not something substantial in us, is like a river that cannot be separated from the water flowing in it. Hence, the mind equals thinking, and people’s problems start when they identify with their thoughts. When we identify with the thoughts and with the body we lose our original identity, and remain ignorant and bounded.

Identifications and identities, therefore, are what is at stake when the practitioner is encouraged to examine and partially separate herself from the workings of her mind. “The ultimate question,” said the teacher, is ”Who am I?” According to him, the
answer to this question does not reside in the color and shape of the body, in being a yoga teacher, or in one’s bank statement.

It is only when we detach from identification that we understand that the self is pure “I,” and that there is no difference between people—we are all one. Our identification with emotions, sensations, judging others and ourselves, ultimately results in suffering.

Sitting cross-legged, his back straight and his voice monotonous, our philosophy teacher kept on lecturing, suggesting that only when we separate our true identity (pure I) from thoughts, bodily features, and other common nodes of identification, is it possible to be one with others and transcend the illusion of being separated from them.

Only in a world of difference is there something to like and dislike. When there is no anger and greed, no separateness, the mind goes to sleep. Right knowledge brings silence from within, no judgment, and the answers come quickly from the right center. But wrong knowledge leads to bad decisions. We have some interpretation that tweaks everything according to our bias. Being obsessed with sin, guilt, jealousy, lust, greed, fear, and judgment are all wrong knowledge.

So the habitual ways of the mind consist of erroneous beliefs and feelings. How is one to control the mind and get rid of them? The philosophy teacher moved on:

Yoga is a science of the mind, a tool to know and direct the mind. It is through yoga that we learn how to live within ourselves, how to live in the external world, and how to link the two. When we are not getting involved, we are in the discipline of yoga. When the waves of thought stop, self-realization happens. Then, we are not doing anything, just

192
being, without judging or getting entangled. Just watching. When the thought waves stop, you understand, become aware to all the absurdity, this game of identifying with the mind.

The messages I heard in this extensive philosophy lecture repeated themselves at many yoga-related occasions. “Sit beside yourself,” “observe without judgment,” and “notice your mind” are frequent utterances meant to encourage the practitioner to doubt her thoughts and train her mind not to take itself so seriously. When the practitioner doubts her thoughts she does not necessarily transcend the mind, but she is observing thought patterns and introducing new thoughts and new awareness, thus being mindful. For example, a practitioner might notice during class that her mind gets tired before her body does. Through the observance of thoughts and the introduction of new ones, the practitioner can cultivate discipline and choose to doubt one thought and favor another. Translated to life beyond yoga, this acquired ability helps practitioners to be less affected by and less identified with certain thoughts which are judged as harming or “wrong knowledge” and by doing so, gain a new perspective and introduce some new peacefulness into their lives.  

Oddly enough, the perception of the mind and thoughts as an alien or harmful matter works quite well with the bio-medical stress model and with the Lacanian theory. After all, comparisons that lead to feelings of inadequacy are the same false alarms and interpretations of threat that activate the fight or flight stress reaction. In addition, what are unrealistic expectations and the following insecurities if not an ongoing repetition of the mirror stage? “When my mind is destabilized,” says a yoga practitioner named Sandra, “I get anxious and insecure.” Stabilizing the mind requires ongoing attention and self-monitoring. George, a yoga teacher, says that

Transcendence of the mind, by contrast, is an idealized situation when the thoughts seize and one steps outside of herself (sometimes talked about as an “outer body experience” or nirvana). I have talked to a few people who had this experience but never had it myself, and, given that this is an experience so much out of the ordinary, it is not part of this dissertation.
his most advanced students are not those who can perform fancy poses, but those who are focused, quiet, breathing deeply, and are mindful of every action. Yoga practitioners may not be fully able to undo the way in which the desire of the other constructs them, at least not in the deep sense of how it makes them who they are. But they can circumvent parts of it, isolate them, and look at them from a distance and in a critical way. As Susan and Olivia mentioned above, the practice of yoga, the sensations of feeling your body differently, and the growing awareness of the negative thought-patterns actually help practitioners become healthier and reduce their suffering. Stress, as said above, is often seen as a consequence of mind chatter, and that mind chatter is full of the voices of the others (that become one’s own voice).

Cultivating the habit of questioning “the mind” and quieting the unwanted voices has a couple important consequences. As the above quotes show, questioning one’s thinking patterns entails questioning one’s “ego,” which is to say, one’s ideas of identity and attachment to one’s self image. The ego, of course, is intimately tied to mind-chatter, to stress, and to the mirror stage.

4.5.3 The Ego

In yoga circles, negative thought patterns and anxieties that fill the mind are known as the workings of the “ego,” which is most often seen as one’s fragile, secluded sense of identity. Ego is the faculty that separates human beings from one another and makes them into discrete entities, as well as the inner voice of comparisons and of self-fashioning (the latter works both through high praise and grueling critique). “Don’t come from your ego” is the equivalent of “open your heart,” an often heard piece of advice that is meant to encourage yoga practitioners to loosen their emotional guards and protect themselves (or their understanding of themselves) a little less; to acknowledge their hunger for praise and superiority; and to cultivate the ability to
see others not as enemies or as entirely separated people (i.e., not as competitors) but as part and parcel of oneself (sometimes only in abstract and theoretical ways).

Clearly, the ego is a key concept both for Lacanian psychoanalysis and for many yoga practitioners—actually, the two understandings of the ego share quite a bit of similarity. According to Lacan, the mirror stage process brings the ego into being—not as a projection of the body, but as the body that is represented for the subject by the image of others (Lacan 2002). The ego, according to Lacan, arises as a crystallization or sedimentation of ideal images, tantamount to a fixed, reified object with which the child learns to identify with him or herself (Fink 1997:36). Bruce Fink adds:

> Once internalized, these various images fuse, in a manner of speaking, into a vast global image which the child comes to take for him or her self. (...) In general, it is this crystallization of images which allows for a coherent “sense of self” (...) This self or ego is thus, as Eastern philosophy has been telling us for millennia, a construct, a mental object (Fink 1997:37).

The mirror stage is a process of shifting identifications and misrecognition through which the barred (or split) subject is produced. As I previously wrote, Lacan’s mirror stage first happens between the ages of six to eighteen months, but it is not limited to this time period. The child, who is rather incapable in the motor and sensory senses, feels herself to be fragmented, incomplete, and uncoordinated; she is “truly but an unorganized jumble of sensations and impulses” (Fink 1997:36). The mirror stage begins when the child first recognizes the image in the mirror as herself. That image, however, is an ideal image that suggests a gladly assumed fantasy of completeness and mastery, a unified surface appearing similar to that of the child’s far more capable, coordinated, and powerful parents (Fink 1997; Grosz 1994, 1990; Lacan 2002; Viego
2007). This internalization captures the basic alienation and misrecognition that constitutes the ego and that corresponds to the imaginary register, which is organized around illusions of wholeness and synthesis (Viego 2007:9).

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the notions of exteriority, interiority, and visibility are important for the understanding of the mirror stage. The mirror reflects only the exterior of the body, creating an image to which the only access is visual. Hence, it is only by sight that the child can perceive itself as a total whole, a gestalt. Through the internalization of those external images, and through identification with a counterpart that appears as an external point, that the ego is constituted (Viego 2007:9). As the child encounters an anticipatory ideal of unity to which its experience cannot conform, the ego is split between two extremes: an interior—the psychical, sensory, and motor experiences of the child; and an exterior—the corporeal, assumed ideal image (Grosz 1994). And so, when a subject assumes an image, she identifies with a point outside herself, and the imagined world is divorcing itself from the world of sensory connection and sensory experience. The visual focus on a particular image, suggests Teresa Brennan, means cutting oneself off from the flow of information from the other senses—in other words, visualization observes difference rather than connection (Brennan 1993:12). Brennan suggests that it is probably most helpful to think of the mirror stage as always occurring from within the symbolic order and as an event which is in some ways culturally orchestrated since ideal representations are always socially mediated.

The previous chapter foregrounded the importance of space. The construction of the Lacanian barred subject has spatial repercussions, to which I would like to briefly relate here. The inevitable process of constructing the self through the image of the other entails objectification of the other. The process of objectification depends on establishing a spatial boundary by which the other and the self are fixed—yet the fixing of the other leads to the fear that the other will retaliate, which in turn
leads to a feeling of spatial constriction. And yet, the rival is perceived as the self and becomes a threat to one’s separate identity and a threat to one’s “space,” a potential invader of one’s territory (Brennan 1993:53). With spatial constriction, one’s boundaries are threatened, and an aggressive territorial imperative is coming into being (Brennan 1993:8-9). What follows is resentment toward the image of the other that remains external to the subject (Silverman 1983:158).

The subject, in other words, is structured as a rival within itself (Brennan 1993:40)—a rivalry that Lacan thought to increase particularly in the spatial restriction of an urban environment and the ever-constricting “living space” in which human competition is becoming even keener (Brennan 1993:41). Confined space—such as the office cubicles, perhaps—or the subjective perception of confined space, appears to be connected to more aggression, rivalry, dependence on the others’ social approval, and a sense of competition—feelings that are, by the Lacanian definition, part and parcel of the mirror stage and the outward-gazing subjectivity it produces.

The comparison to others who seem more in control of their bodies, more “put together,” and more whole—as well as the resulting tendency to judge oneself harshly—is often acknowledged in yoga classes and thought to be countered by invoking compassion, non-violence, and self-love. As if acknowledging the mirror stage, teachers will often instruct students to close their eyes, to soften their gaze, or to discipline it by fixing it on different points (drishti) but not on their fellow practitioners. In my home studio, the mirrors were removed and never re-installed—perhaps, among other reasons, to avoid the other’s disciplining gaze in the mirror. In addition, yoga classes are full of moments when teachers try to invoke senses other than the visual one, to encourage other sensations, and to promote the feeling of the body rather than gazing at it in the mirror. Differently put, many times, a yoga class may feel as if someone deliberately (and maybe helplessly) tries to undo the mirror stage. This attempted undoing was also very clear in Susan’s story, where she avoids looking at
the mirror because she knows that she “doesn’t see right” and focuses on feeling her body moves instead; and in Olivia’s story about her friend who feels great during the ninety minutes of class, but goes back to judging herself the minute she looks back at the mirror.

The ego—in its need for control, stability, comparisons, and judgement—is often negotiated in yoga classes. During or right after teaching an advanced pose, teachers will instruct students to be mindful of their thoughts. “Let it go,” they would say, “it doesn’t matter if you were able to do the pose or not. Accept where you are today.” Others might jokingly say that “since we are all one, if one of us did the pose we all did.” While some teachers refer to “levels” as they give more demanding variations of a certain pose, others deliberately and persistently refuse introducing “the levels theory” saying that levels implies targets, and “there is no purple belt in yoga.” Teachers often talk about the fact that everybody is different, that yoga is not about goal poses, and that the yoga studio is not the place to compare and compete—especially not when comparisons tend to end up in self-judgment. “Be kind to yourself,” “listen to your body,” “take care of yourself,” and “child pose is always available for you” are sentences one hears very often in class, as are encouragements to “check in” with oneself, to be attuned to one’s body and mind, and not to push oneself too hard in an attempt to meet external measures. “Don’t try to do the pose, think how the pose is doing you” was another sentence I often heard, as well as its parallel instruction to “do the pose so that it works for you.” This drawing-in is seen as a way to allow for a re-examination of who one “really” is and develop sensitivity to one’s “real” needs, while loosening the grip of internalized demands and criteria (i.e., ego).

Maria’s classes are a good example for that particular ego discourse. Maria is a petite yoga instructor whose classes seem to be full of thin Silicon Valley stay-home moms. At 10:00 a.m., not a lot of workers make it to her demanding classes. Her
parents immigrated from Guatemala, and she is married to a tall, white, clean-cut man. She is the mother of two kids, one of them is a mixed-race child the couple adopted, not caring about his external dissimilarity to them but about “his soul, which has been part of our family in past life cycles.”

Maria always starts her classes with chanting and a theme, and she briefly massages each student’s forehead in the final relaxation pose (savasana). It was a sunny winter day when I arrived to her class and learned that the theme was “surrendering.” “So much of our day is ego,” said Maria, encouraging practitioners to step outside themselves and bring someone else to mind. “Devote the practice today to the higher self, or to God. Maybe to the neighbor on the mat beside you, who got here today for the same reasons you did.” The playlist included relevant songs by Elvis and Perry Como. As we were attempting to try the full split (hanumanasana), a difficult pose if one is not a lifelong dancer or gymnast, Maria talked about using props:

Why don’t we want to use props? There are so many places in life when we are taught not to ask for help, and not to receive it. Surrendering is usually the last thing we do—we get down on our knees and pray only as a last resort. But surrendering the ego allows us to be here as a community.

The idea promoted by Maria as well as other yoga teachers goes as follows: self-identifications (ego) make people into discrete beings. Taking them too seriously—meaning, believing that people are truly separated from one another—brings about competitiveness, vanity, and low self-esteem (the latter two can be two sides of the same coin). People’s inability to admit weakness, to ask for help, and most importantly—to question who they are and step out of the eternal struggle and comparison they live by (however temporarily) forms an obstacle to authentic communication. Maria’s encouragement to surrender speaks to the helplessness fantasy
that Olivia spoke of and to the super-woman syndrome—in other words, it acknowledged women’s expectations of themselves to do it all and the resulting helplessness fantasy.

Taking the ego’s hunger for comparisons, praise, and stability into consideration makes yoga teachers’ job more complicated than it may seem. The challenge facing teachers is to give students the workout they want without making them feel bad about failing to preform a pose or getting out of breath and to promote self-love, forgiveness, and acceptance during ninety minutes when not much talking is possible. Maria was good at doing that—I loved her classes for the messages she peppered in, as did other practitioners. But when I brought it up in interviews, interviewees told me that they often feel frustrated by their inability to go into certain poses—and that when they look at the mirror (as said, Lacan’s mirror stage is happening quite literally here), they constantly hear that voice in their heads telling them that they are not skinny enough (compared to all the others in the room), not flexible enough, and not good enough (note that once again, body image and eating disorders appear). As I mentioned, yogis tend to call this voice “the ego.” While yogis often feel that they are not good enough, the one question that is almost never asked is good enough for what, and for whom. Indeed, inadequacy is not a specific and isolated feeling but a way of life—feeling that one is not good enough (low self-esteem) is part and parcel of the state of continuous threat, also known as stress.

As discussed above, yoga teachers counter (and perhaps recreate) harsh self-judgment and stress not only by spicing classes with what may seem like empowering New-Age clichés and references to “the mind” and “the ego,” by also by embodied cues and shifting awareness to the present. The latter practice is also related to the ego, since the stressed yoga practitioner—as she emerges from conversations and yoga publications—is a subject who knows herself primarily through her past and prospective progress. Yoga practitioner, just like others who never practiced
yoga, identify with their achievements and failures, expectations, fears, and goals—in other words, their investment in past and future. Self identifications of any sort are bound to be time dependent, since the awareness of one’s life narrative and hopes for who one will become are an intrinsic part of who one perceives oneself to be at the present moment. One way of dealing with expectations and dissatisfaction is by drawing attention to them and cultivating forgiveness for the person one is at this given moment.

At the very last moments of a demanding yoga class, my body full with heavy, sweet exhaustion, we were all instructed to sit tall and meditate. “Focus your attention on the Ajna chakra” the teacher said, “and imagine your best self, the one you want to be.” A few silent moments went by before he continued. “Now, see yourself the way you are today.” Another couple of moments went by. “Now merge the two images. Both of them are you—both of them are wonderful. Be at peace with both of them.” This idea of forgiving oneself for who one is, without letting go of hopes for improvement, repeated itself in many classes. The assumption concerning the constant presence of judgment, blame and guilt reached its most blunt articulation at one crowded yoga workshop I attended. The impressive speaker opened with a short meditation, right after which his deep voice resonated across the room: “Forgive everyone in this room. Forgive everyone in your life. Now, forgive yourself.” No further explanation was given as to why are we supposed to forgive others and ourselves, and for what. But these words must have struck a chord, because at the far corner of the room, I heard someone quietly sobbing.

4.6 Conclusion

The picture I presented in this chapter is supported by an article that was published in The New York Times on January 7, 2011. The piece, titled “Fear (Again) of Flying,” described the surprising tendency of women to turn inward in their search for
happiness, rather than changing their life circumstances—be it family or professional life. The story by Judith Warner began with a portrayal of a mid-1970s phenomenon, when women dropped out of family life. Based on the 1974 best-seller *Passages*, Warner tells the reader that outward-bound adventures of runaway moms were one of those days’ fastest-growing phenomena. “Today,” Warner writes, “the daughters of these runaway moms, having arrived at the shores of middle age, are taking flight, too.” Today’s women, the author continues, are fleeing to yoga, imitating flight in the downward-gazing contortion called the crow position. They’re striving, through exquisite new adventures in internal fine-tuning, to feel more deeply, live more meaningfully, better inhabit each and every moment of each and every day.”

The article continues by quoting *Poser: My Life in Twenty-Three Yoga Poses*, a book by Seattle-based author Claire Dederer (Dederer 2012). The book, writes Warner, is one among many in which the trope of female midlife rebellion is turned on its head. The deep desire manifested in these books is not for rule-breaking, but for regularity, order, and contentment. Making a home, therefore, and not leaving it for a fulfilling career and public engagement, is a form of freedom from the burdens and demands of the workplace. The new “narrative of liberation” Warner describes reiterates many tropes I heard during fieldwork, such as the desire to find “my own quiet center” and exchange professional ambitions for peace of mind, as well as the difficulty of managing what often seems like too many demands.

This *New York Times* article defines yoga as a multibillion-dollar-a-year escape from the crush of modern life. The fashioning of the self that occurs in yoga is portrayed as a striving toward perfection (and not away from it) through inward-turnedness. According to Warner’s piece, the seeking of salvation in an ever-greater connection to home, and in a homebound sense of self, is focused on the self and

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not necessarily on the domestic, married-plus-kids self. “For some of these women,” Warner writes, “such interiority seems to be a way to manage an unbearable sort of existential anxiety: a way to narrow the scope of life’s challenges and demands.

Sensitive to the changing economic landscape, Warner notes that it is harder to look outward at a time of retrenchment and shrinking opportunities, and it is even harder when the family depends upon your salary and health benefits. The author concludes by saying that “given the constraints of most families’ lives these days, there really is nowhere to go but in.”

Is Warner’s explanation enough? Is it all the fault of the current economic crisis? I doubt it. I suggest that it is no coincidence that women in the 1970s sought a way out and women in the 2000s are retreating inward. Yes, things became more unsteady for many people across the U.S. and beyond as the current economic crisis began in 2008. But people feel insecure with and without a direct connection to current economic events. Ephemerality, insecurity, and constant production of crises are defining characteristic of neoliberalism. The constant crisis mode of late capitalism (one is either before, during, or after a crisis) produces chronic insecurity and stress becomes a way of life, and not only a feature of the crisis situation itself. This, arguably, is taking a specific toll on women, who are still more economically dependent than man. Even though they earn less money and are more limited in their professional development, women are supposed to provide and manage a career, but also make themselves worthy of love by maintaining a certain appearance (as Olivia, Susan, and Ashley said), and take care of their children and families (as Michelle made very clear). A good example of this double demand is experienced by Ruth, the person who told me that her husband runs 100kg ultra-marathons as a way of de-stressing. The couple has a little boy, but it is assumed that Ruth’s husband can go away during weekends, while she would never dream about doing so. Yoga, unlike running marathons, is limited in time, done mostly indoors, and it is (in many ways)
In such a demanding and insecure atmosphere, it is no wonder that all some women want is regularity and safe routine—it is hard to venture out when one’s foundation is shaky. Yoga provides women with a short time during which they do not need to take care of anything and anyone. They are told what to do. At the same time, their fears and anxieties, as well as their desire for space, peace and quiet, are being acknowledged (and possibly reproduced).

These last two chapters have examined mechanical stress and bio-psychological stress. The mechanical stress metaphor was useful in illuminating yoga practitioners’ desire for space (rather than connection) and bodily practices that are aimed at expending and strengthening. If space emerged as an antidote to mechanical stress, turning inward seems to be the favorable mechanism through which yoga practitioners seek to handle bio-psychological stress. Drawing on Lacan’s mirror stage, I argued that practitioners are trying to close their eyes, turn the gaze away from the mirror, the other, and their ego, and find (impossible?) comfort in feeling their body and breath, rather than looking at the mirror and judging themselves for being inadequate. Yoga practitioners are attempting to counter perceived threats and the resulting stress by focusing on the present moment and cultivating a sense of rich and safe interiority. Informed by Lacan’s understanding of the ego and how it comes into being, I examined the yogic suggestion to use mindfulness as a way of getting into the habit of doubting the mind’s false alarms and interpretations of reality; and the practice of loosening self identifications created by “external” measures.

In order to handle an ephemeral, precarious world, yoga practitioners seek not (only) better and other ways of connecting, but to anchor in themselves and gain control of the interior and the personal, thus making one’s interiority into a home (as Liz, a yoga teacher and a biology Ph.D. once told me, “my mission is to enable
people to develop secure attachment to themselves”). Thus, the separation between the interior and the exterior is becoming more distinct and important. The main concern of yoga practitioners emerges not as being stuck in one’s mind and neglecting the body, but as being constantly beside oneself, attuned to the other’s demand and desires. As Bruce Fink puts it in the quote that opens this chapter, the subject is overflowing with other people’s desires. Is disengagement possible? According to Lacan, it is not. Is it possible to some extent? Maybe. Either way, being a vast social phenomenon, the attempts to disengage are worth tracking.

The bio-psychological stress model helps in portraying a chronically insecure, stressful social environment, which sometimes translates into “real suffering” (like anorexia or abuse) and sometimes into regular, daily, “privileged” suffering. Neoliberalism fosters a culture of competition, comparisons, and unrealistic expectations—which, in turn, produce insecure subjects. As shown in the eating disorder stories, and as Freud famously explained, there is nothing civilized subjects are trained to do better than perpetrating violence against themselves. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, I argued that in an ephemeral world, yoga practitioners can be seen as seeking a temporary refuge from the forever unfolding mirror stage by seeking a refuge in one’s interiority rather than seeking connections and positive feedbacks from others, or rather than turning to political activism (the lack of political unionizing is yet another supposed marker of neo-liberalism). In this chapter, I hope to have shown that the precariousness of current political economy and the demands of gender roles hurt not only the economically marginalized or those who suffer overt political violence, but also those who lead comfortable lives in the beautiful, always sunny Silicon Valley.
Sit comfortably, close your eyes and tune in to your breath. Inhale as you count to six, hold your breath as you count to three, then exhale as you count to six. Repeat 10 times. Lie Down Close your eyes, surrender your body to the earth, and bring your attention to your breath. Place your hands on your heart and breathe gently. Now, think of something that brings you great comfort. It can be a person, a place, a color, an object, a prayer, a word—whatever you like. Visualize this thing of comfort in as much detail as you can. Continue to visualize this thing of comfort as you take your hands to your belly—inhale for a count of six, hold for a count of three, exhale for a count of six. Then, continuing to visualize this thing of comfort, move your hands to your heart—inhale for six, hold for three, exhale for six. Continue this practice—moving your hands, in turn, to your throat, mouth, ears, eyes, and head. Next, scan your body, looking for any place of disturbance, tension, or pain. Now, visualize your thing of comfort as you move your hands to this place. Inhale for six, hold for three, exhale for six. Repeat 10 times. Sit Comfortably with eyes closed, chant namaha three times. Open your eyes and chant it three times, inviting this healing to help you and to benefit the entire world (From “Meditation as Medicine” By Carol Krucoff. Yoga Journal http://www.yogajournal.com/practice/2572).
My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous. (Foucault 1984:256)

[T]he more we have learned, the more threatening our environment has become. (Kleinman 1988:21)

When Michelle Parodi was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003, a miraculous thing happened: Her life was transformed for the better. “Before my diagnosis, I wasn’t happy,” she says. “I wasn’t centered on what mattered most to me: dance, music, my family, working with children.” Instead, the San Francisco native was immersed in the corporate world and frantically racing toward what looked like a better future just over the horizon. (Yoga Journal http://www.yogajournal.com/health/1491?utm_source=MyYogaJournal&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_campaign=MyYogaJournal)

About four months into fieldwork, I decided that I should see if I could attend a yoga class for cancer patients and care-givers. On April 2008, I stepped into the yoga studio, with the hope of catching the teacher and exchanging a word with her before class started. This class, which was taught twice a week in the studio where I volunteered as a receptionist, was co-sponsored by the studio and a local
Cancer Center, and it was free for cancer patients and care-givers. A short, skinny woman in her forties, with loose straight hair and a Hindu *Mala* prayer bead necklace approached me, her smile as wide as her face. “Hey,” I said. “I’m Neta, and I am now completing the teacher training. I am interested in restorative yoga for cancer patients and I was hoping to be able to observe your class sometime.” “Sure thing!” Malia enthusiastically responded, “Why don’t you take it three times and then observe three classes. This is what I usually do with people wanting to train with me. Do you want to take the class today?”

I was not prepared for this. I had just stepped into the studio on my way from here to there. “I am wearing jeans,” I replied, confused. “I wasn’t planning on participating today.” If she was not so kind, I would think that Malia was finding me ridiculous, as she dismissed what I just said laughingly: “I have people right out of surgery here, and you are worried about your jeans? It won’t be a problem.”

Inside the studio, people were already preparing themselves. But it was unlike any regular yoga class, where people stretch, meditate or chat before class begins. Here, people were lying on their mats, with blankets rolled up under their heads and ankles and a bolster stuck under their knees. They had eye pillows covering their eyes and there was no talking. Most people seemed to be in their fifties, some in their seventies, but I have never been a good judge of people’s age (maybe because people in the U.S. seem so much younger than the Israelis I am used to). Out of the fourteen people in class, three women had a scarf tied around their heads, and one chose not to cover her chemotherapy baldness.

Soft music was playing. Class was about to start. Malia instructed people to settle in, breathe deeply through the nose and exhale through the mouth. Class included no more than five or six restorative yoga poses. After staying in supported *savasana* (also known as corpse pose or final relaxation pose—no irony intended) for about fifteen minutes, Malia instructed the practitioners to move through supported
twists, a supported back bend, and supported child’s pose. All poses lasted a long
time, made extensive use of props (blankets, bolsters, blocks, sand-bags, and eye-
pillows), and required no physical effort. Malia put lavender aromatic oil in people’s
palms and instructed them to inhale the scent deeply and imagine lavender fields.
She talked about medical research that found a connection between relaxation and
healing, pH levels (a measurement of acidity) in one’s body, and releasing toxins. She
moved around a lot, adjusting people and making sure they are perfectly comfortable.

Malia, as I learned later, sees her work as a mission. Her tools are bodily ma-
nipulations using props, precise usage of breath, guided imagination, and positive
thinking. Malia’s eyes sparkle when she talks about being able to provide some
comfort to terminal patients who come to class, their skin yellow because their liver
had already stopped functioning, or those who come in with an IV or portable oxy-
gen. Unlike many (including me), she was fascinated by hospitals and death from an
early age, and she experiences no aversion in face of the suffering and illness she is
exposed to. During the classes I went to, she attended to each practitioner’s needs
compassionately and carefully. When she talked, her soothing and soft voice seems
to float around the room. In the first class I attended, I occasionally lost track of
her words as I sank into profound relaxation. Leaving class, I felt as relaxed as I
ever had been. I returned to that class as a participant and an observer a few more
times, and was able to record Malia’s words—words that escaped me the first time
around, when I was in a different zone altogether. Here is an exemplary quote by
Malia: “What is health?” she asks and immediately answers:

Health is on the inside, not the outside. Not in things we usually think
that will bring us comfort. We need to be focusing on finding the comfort
on the inside, and then we are comfortable hanging in any situation, no
matter what is happening on the outside. Your deep, slow, conscious
breathing is one of the fastest ways to find the comfort of your body. Every deep breath you take works deep inside your body, every cell breathes in and breathes out; takes nutrition and oxygen and releases toxins. We walk around breathing but not paying attention to our breath. Take deep and slow breath, and feel the good space each breath creates inside.

The word “inside” repeats itself four times in this quote, and the word “outside” appears twice. Supporting cancer patients, Malia offers the same advices yoga teachers repeat in regular classes which are much more active. She teaches those struggling with disease to retreat inward, to pay attention to their breath, to disengage with what is happening outside and find the comfort within, by breathing deeply. Thus, breath is conceived of as a tool to take in the good (nutrition, oxygen) and release the bad (toxins)—as a selective method to filter an environment that may be unpleasant or even hostile (especially in the case of hospitalization and aggressive medical treatments).

Yoga classes for cancer patients and care-givers repeat the same discourse I laid out in the previous two chapters. This chapter discusses the ways in which cancer fits the yogic discourse, first when it is seen as a burden on the body and as consuming space (Chapter Three), and second, when it is described as related to bio-psychological stress. Just like the negative thought patterns, comparisons, and expectations I described in Chapter Four, cancer is considered to be a hostile entity (an “ego”) that emerges from within due to the interiorization of a hostile environment.

Later in this chapter, I examine the way in which cancer fears expose different aspects of the suffering of the privileged and precarious lives. I suggest that yoga’s emphasis on healing is deeply related to the fear of toxins and pollutants, and to a sense of helplessness that provides yet another motivation to draw inward. This
chapter ends with the question of yoga’s relations to the political and the possibility of structural changes as they emerge from the discourse that revolves around healing and disease.

5.1 Cancer, the Body, and the Spirit of the Times

Cancer is a very old disease. In *The Emperor of Maladies*, Siddhartha Mukherjee unfolds cancer’s convoluted history. The disease was first described in a surviving papyrus by Imhotep, a great Egyptian physician who lived around 2625 BCE. There is no mentioning of it in the Western medical literature for the next two millennia. In 440 BCE, a Greek historian recorded the story of Atossa, the queen of Persia, who had a bleeding lump on her breast. The remains of malignant tumors were found in thousand-year-old mummies both in Atacama desert (in Southern Peru and Chile) and in Egypt. Even though those findings testify that cancer existed, there is very little early history of the disease, mostly because people died of other diseases and were not around long enough to get cancer, which is age-related; because the capacity to detect it earlier and attribute more deaths to it grew tremendously; and because changes in the structure of modern life have shifted cancer’s spectrum in radical ways (Mukherjee 2010).

It was only during the twentieth century that cancer rose to public prominence, following adamant public relations campaigns, strong lobbying, and funding efforts to fight the disease. Since then, like stress, it has been studied primarily by bio-medicine and psychology researchers. While recent academic studies and popular writings have shed light on the fascinating history of cancer (Skloot 2011; Mukherjee 2010), and examined the deep disjunction between the reality of cancer and culturally available frames as resources for dealing with it (Perusek 2012; Jain 2007a,b; Ehrenreich 2001), cancer is still mostly studied as it appears and as it is experienced among minorities and disadvantaged populations (Singer 2011; Balshem 1991; Gregg 2011; Drew and
Schoenberg 2011).

Even with the fear and ignorance that surround it (Jain 2007b), cancer is a disease with enormous social presence. I do not think that it is a coincidence that patients suffering from no other disease had bi-weekly, free classes offered to them in any of the Silicon Valley yoga studios I visited during fieldwork (I visited and practiced yoga in at least seven studios). It is hard to find anyone who does not closely know people who have been diagnosed with or have died of cancer. U.S. Americans consider cancer to be a creepy, scary disease—a study from February 2012 found that the most feared disease in the U.S. is cancer (41 percent), followed by Alzheimer’s disease (31 percent).¹ Heart disease and stroke came next in at only 8 percent each, and 6 percent of those surveyed said they dreaded diabetes the most.² As Siddhartha Mukherjee puts it, cancer is “the emperor of all maladies, the king of terrors” (Mukherjee 2010:xiv).

Like other people who belong to the same milieu, yoga practitioners are not particularly scared of war, hunger, or poor countries’ plagues.³ Moreover, due to their lifestyle, yoga practitioners are usually not concerned with health problems typical to rich countries such as heart disease or diabetes. This is interesting, given that more people die of heart disease than of cancer.⁴ One explanation could be that

¹ I find it interesting that Alzheimer’s disease is so feared, given that it is far less common than cancer or heart disease. This anxiety opens up interesting questions about the symbolic importance of the mind vs. the heart for one’s identity in the U.S. (Lock 2002), and the fear of “losing one’s mind” and losing control.

² The study is available at http://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/contributions/foundation/alzheimers-2011.pdf, accessed January 19 2013. The same finding is supported by a Gallup poll from 2003, that found cancer to be the most feared disease in the U.S. http://www.gallup.com/poll/9832/americans-worry-most-about-getting-cancer.aspx. Other studies suggest that cancer is second to Alzheimer’s disease, but it is usually these two diseases that fight for the dubious honor of being the most feared disease in the U.S.

³ By “poor countries’s plagues” I refer to tuberculosis, cholera, malaria, etc.

⁴ In 2010, 597,689 people in the U.S. died of heart disease, 574,743 people died of cancer, and 83,494 people died of Alzheimer’s disease. In 2011, a slightly fewer deaths were attributed to heart disease (596,339) and a slightly more people died of cancer (575,313) and Alzheimer’s disease (84,691). In 2010 and 2011 Alzheimer’s disease ranked in the sixth place, while heart disease and cancer were the
heart disease seems to be perceived as less random than cancer. The risk for heart disease is significantly lower for people who exercise, eat healthily, and maintain low weight and low levels of cholesterol. Cancer risks are also reduced by lifestyle choices, but overall, cancer is linked to causes that are much more elusive, and are often seen as random and beyond one’s control, at least to some extent. The causes of cancer include (but are not limited to): growing older, tobacco, sunlight, Ionizing radiation, certain chemicals and other substances, some viruses and bacteria, certain hormones, family history of cancer, alcohol, poor diet, lack of physical activity, or being overweight.\(^5\)

One morning I met my cynical and funny friend Sarah in a yoga class. Her eyes were red and she looked as if she had not slept all night. I asked her what was going on, and she said:

Yesterday was the worst day. I felt sharp pain under my armpit, so I felt the area and found a small mass. I immediately decided that it is terminal cancer. I went through all the mourning and grief processes, and imagined myself going through heart-breaking separation scenes from my children. I talked to a friend who said it is a false alarm. I considered believing him, but the best I could do is keep my hysteria under control. I’m going to see a doctor right after class.

Later that day, Sarah found that the mass was not cancer. The thought that Sarah might have cancer, however, seemed so unavoidable that it was hard to imagine a different response to finding a small mass where there should be none. Cancer, and death from cancer, are so present in the public imagination that Sarah did not even

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consider that it might be a cyst or infection. I heard a similar story from another yoga practitioner, who had felt something in her left breast. Terrified, she did not speak to anyone about it until she was told that it was related to hormonal changes and would be gone after her next menstrual cycle.

Heightened public awareness of cancer is attributed not only to its status as being among the most feared diseases. Campaigns against different kinds of cancer—and particularly breast cancer—contribute to its enormous social presence as well.\(^6\)

I think it is safe to assume that in any trip to a mall or a grocery store in the U.S., one can find at least a few items bearing the mark of the pink ribbon. Barbara Ehrenreich (2008) claims that breast cancer is perhaps the biggest disease on the cultural map today, bigger than AIDS, cystic fibrosis, or spinal injury, bigger even than those more prolific killers of women—heart disease, lung cancer, and stroke.\(^7\)

People from every social-economic class, gender, sexual orientation, race (and weight) get cancer, and therefore, it is identified with no one group in particular (which may be related to it being de-politicized, in a lot of ways).\(^8\)

As others have said before me, cancer and anti-cancer campaigns gain so much visibility also because as a metaphor, cancer perfectly matches today’s zeitgeist and the changes of modernity. At different points in history, Susan Sontag writes, the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) have been identified with diseases that became metaphors (Sontag 2001). Cancer, like modernity, is often associated with industrialism and ruthless capitalism, and it is thought to be fought with science, warfare, and biomedicine. In the twentieth century, there

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\(^6\) Now that Lance Armstrong publicly admitted drug usage, it will be interesting to see how much the tarnished reputation of the fallen hero will impact LiveStrong (Lance Armstrong’s foundation for cancer survivors and cancer awareness).

\(^7\) Whether heart disease, lung cancer, and stroke are really more prolific killer of women is depend on the year and the age group. Jain notes that in 2007, breast cancer was the number one cause of death between the ages thirty-four to fifty-four (Jain 2007b:79).

\(^8\) Cancer is common among rich people as well as the poor, but the survival rates are influenced by the early detection and quality of health care and therefore by patients’ economic status.
is high correlation between cancer and that era’s complaints (Sontag 2001). Mukherjee agrees that every era casts illness in its own image, and cancer is the defining plague of our generation, the disease that “struck the raw strings of anxiety already vibrating in the public psyche” (Mukherjee 2010:181). In the nineteenth century, doctors already imagined cancer as linked to civilization, thinking it was caused by the “rush and whirl of modern life” (Mukherjee 2010:44). Cancer, writes Arthur Kleinman, seems to implicate our very way of life. “It points to the frenetic pace of an economy predicated on ever more rapid technological change and its accompaniment, disordered physiology” (Kleinman 1988:21). These days, says Mukherjee, cancer can serve to describe many other social processes, like corruption and moral decay.

As a disease of overpopulation and unstoppable growth, cancer also stands for modernity and capitalism itself (Mukherjee 2010). Indeed, cancer is often random, it often grows at a very fast pace, it takes over space, and at its worst it spreads in the form of metastases. It is actually more than two-hundred different diseases, so there seem to be few ways to defend oneself against it. As such, it fits almost too perfectly with the atmosphere I described thus far—and even more so when it comes to interiority. Cancer emerged as the main object of horror in the 1970s, when Americans shifted from an being anxious about external threats (the Cold War) to internal threats (Salecl 2004; Mukherjee 2010; Martin 2009:182). As such, it fits with yoga’s emphasis on the interior of the body, which is thought to be cultivated in yoga classes.

The omnipresence of cancer raises the question of what its ever-present shadow means not only for the sick but also for the healthy. This chapter examines this era’s particular complaints and subjectivities as they emerge through the terror of cancer. In yoga classes and workshops for people dealing with cancer and for those who are not, cancer is woven into the same discourse I presented in the last two
chapters: it is a disease that consumes space and one that emerges from within in response to a hostile, poisonous environment. In this context, the attempts to create space and draw inward, thus secluding oneself from negative influences, acquire a new resonance.

Not only cancer, but the human body and its diseases are being described in ways that speak to the spirit of the times. Mary Douglas’ 1973 analysis of how society both shapes and is mapped onto the body was groundbreaking—Douglas was thinking through the body as a symbolic medium of expression, and asserted that the body both reflects the image of society (e.g., in its hierarchies between different organs or the front of the body against the back) and expresses inner messages and states through externally shaped conventions of behavior (Douglas 1973).

In *Flexible Bodies*, Emily Martin presents a shifting perception of the body and the immune system. The late 1940s and 1950s, Martin writes, “were times of heightened middle-class domesticity, as women were forced out of jobs they had held during the war and families often settled in newly burgeoning but isolated and commodity-oriented suburbs.” The house, the children, the husband, and the belongings were supposed to be kept hygienically clean. During the Cold War and the times of nuclear threat, the world outside the safe and clean house looked dangerous and hostile (Martin 1995:31). The body was imagined in similar ways, as having a rigid border that needs to be protected.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, media coverage and immunology have described the body both as a scene of total war between ruthless invaders and determined defenders, and therefore as having clear and rigid boundaries between the self and the external world, and as a police state with clear hierarchical division of labor which is gendered and raced (Martin 2009, 1995).9

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9 In “Toward an Anthropology of Immunology: The Body as Nation State,” Martin suggests that this ideological work might make violent destruction seem ordinary and necessary. This crucial
The major shifts of the 1970s brought a new body ideal into the picture. Complex systems, nonlinearity, lack of boundaries, constant change, and most of all, flexibility, were seen as the new characteristics of the desired worker and of the body. As Martin writes:

At the moment, many (myself included) may feel delight at some of the changes being brought about in the new flexible corporations: the elimination of some old hierarchies between management and labor, the effort to include women and minorities (...) Equally appealing may be the ideal person who will hold jobs in these corporations: a lean, agile, innovative, flexible soul (...) the trouble is that this ideal (as would any) rests on a narrow vision of the able person, one that will discriminate against many people (Martin 1995:248).

As the political economy changes, the body and the immune system are also coming to be seen as flexible. Martin’s somewhat celebratory, albeit cautionary, account of flexibility does not forget that flexibility also entails giving up securities and working without support and without a safety net within the corporate caste system. Employees of the Fortune 500 corporation where Martin did fieldwork were trained to become flexible, agile, and fearless specifically by, as Martin puts it, “work without a net.” All employees, from line worker to manager, were trained on rope courses, a practice that makes the metaphor in the title of this dissertation, *Tightrope Walkers*, quite literal. Martin writes: “We climbed tall poles, crept across high wires, and slid down zip wires” (Martin 1995:213). This training—exposing workers deliberately to fear and risk in controlled environment—was supposed to enable them to rapidly adjust to continuously changing conditions. (Martin 1999:110-112).

This points is deeply tied to cancer, as the disease is often used as a trope to speak about “the enemy” (Sudanese refugees, Palestinians, or Israeli-Jewish settlers) in Israel, my home country.
Building on the Freudian and the Lacanian views on subjectivization, this chapter shows a slightly different way of conceiving the body and separating the inner and the outer. The body that emerges from the yogic discourse has permeable borders that are thought to be protected through the creation of space around them. At the same time, the understanding of the external as continuously folded in explains why the subject requires a careful and continuous labor of cleaning and detoxing.

Ed Cohen echos some aspects of Martin’s work. Cohen analyzes the modern invention of immunity-as-defense, claiming that immunity is not a natural choice of images for our ability to live as organisms among other organisms of various sizes and scales. Instead, “immunity” as well as “defense” derive from the ways in which Western legal and political thinking accounts for the complex, difficult, and at times violent manner that humans live among other humans. Immunity, says Cohen, “defensively renders the organism distinct from the vital contexts in which it necessarily exists (...) defining the organism as a defensible interior which needs to protect itself ceaselessly from a hostile exterior” (Cohen 2009:14). The modern personhood thus comes to conceive itself as fundamentally, if not biologically, defensive (and perhaps less aggressively active, as Martin claims). As living organisms, says Cohen, we must actively and relentlessly fend off the predations of the very world that sustains us (ibid:25-6). The military vocabulary, practices, and worldview are very much part of modern medicine (Cohen 2009; Kugelmann 1992; Kutcher 2003). We fight diseases, both individually and collectively, be it flu or cancer, malaria or AIDS. “What we no longer do,” says Cohen, “(lest we incur the stigma of being terribly ‘New-Age’) is consider that we might harbor a capacity to heal” (Cohen 2009:4). Cautious not to be dismissed as a “New-Age” dupe, Cohen dares to suggest that natural healing expresses the immersion of living beings in the universe and affirms their fundamental connection to the matrix from which they arise and to which they will one day return, and that harmony—a concept that fell out of Western biomedicine in the
late nineteenth-century when immunity replaced “natural healing”—might enable us to imagine new ways of living, both singularly and together, which might be more healing than those that modern medicine currently offers us.

As this chapter shows, a more harmonious and alternative view of healing does not necessarily lead to a perception of immersion in nature and affirmation of humans as part of mother earth. The yogic discourse, with all its emphasis on healing and nature, is still very much invested in the separation of the inner and the outer, even though the two seem to be in constant flux—as do the categories of what is healthy and what is dangerous. I will get back to the perception of the body at the conclusion of this chapter.

5.2 Space, Stress, and Interiority

The stress-space-cancer-yoga-interiority nexus is best described through the life story of Donna, whom I already mentioned in the fourth chapter. A brain cancer scientist and yoga teacher who has gone through some rough times herself, she has a complex, personal, and professional understanding of yoga and cancer. I am bringing in her life story at some length here because it is a good example for the arguments made in the previous and the current chapters.

Donna is an interesting woman, whose very presence plays tricks on one’s expectations and stereotypes. Her full lips, big eyes, and round face seem to stand in contradiction to her slim and athletic figure. Often, after telling me a difficult story about a struggle she is going through, she will find the ridiculous side of the whole saga—and then, her piercing gaze will crack into laughter which is as passionate as her pain. A successful scientist whose true passion is yoga, she is simultaneously cynical, strong, honest, and warm.

When Donna was about to finish her dissertation, hardships piled up. She was getting divorced and her father became severely ill and died just a few months later.
Her departure for a prestigious post-doc in New York loomed large, and she reached exhaustion levels she had never experienced before. A psychiatrist prescribed her Prozac, and despite her reluctance she tried using the antidepressant. After a few days, the situation got worse. Donna was having nightmares and her pulse was high. The doctor suggested sleeping pills and Donna, in response, threw away the three months worth of Prozac she had, and approached the situation through her scientific training. “It’s all serotonin levels in one’s brain,” she said, “so I am going to produce more of it naturally. And that’s a doctor’s order, not just me being spoiled—I really must enjoy life and make myself happy.”

So Donna started swimming every day and taking belly dancing classes twice a week. She wrote her dissertation, published articles, and presented at conferences. Before starting her post-doc, Donna went on a two-week scuba-diving trip in Thailand. After the first week she realized she was simply not going back to the same life rhythm as before, and decided she was going to take three months off, postponing her post-doc. Then, in Thailand, she was introduced to yoga for the first time. After her first class, on the beach in Thailand, she felt like something finally clicked into place. “I was driving with a filthy front window and suddenly someone cleaned it, and the voices in my head got silent,” she says.

Donna was under extreme stress due to the accumulation of professional demands and personal crises. Her hardships took the best of her, and she plummeted into deep depression, losing her interest in life. Yet, she was able to fight it off by utilizing her knowledge of the biological mechanism of stress and depression. She took time (and space) for herself, justifying fun and supposedly unproductive activities by defining them as “doctor’s orders.” Donna’s response to her series of life crises (a divorce, the loss of a father, and relocation) was neither in finding a way back to her family and friends, nor in seeking a new supportive community (although she definitely found that as well). It is apparent from Donna’s story that her happiness was not to be
found in connecting or replacing her old relationships, but in creating distance from her the entire life through traveling on her own. Once she took a vacation and was introduced to yoga, she fell in love with more “spacious” life. Donna got immersed in yoga as a way to find comfort independently of other people and her connection to them.

Being both a scientist and a yogini, Donna strongly believes in the physiological impact of yoga (which, she says, cannot be easily divorced from awareness and thinking patterns). “There’s something very potent in the poses themselves,” Donna explains, “a regular practice of the poses activates certain nerve routes and so improves anyone’s health.” Our conversation soon shifted to cancer, and since she was an expert on the matter, Donna was happy to explain the connection between cancer, stress, and yoga.

A cell in a multi-cell organism divides only in consideration with the environment. After the organism reaches its final size—and we still don’t quite know how this happens—there are only certain kinds of cells that get to divide, be it for maintenance or for emergencies. What happens with cancer cells is that they don’t give a shit about the system—they are like parasites. This could happen because of a change in the genetic information in the cells which affect the genes that are critical for division control. But it’s not just a singular damage—a few mechanisms needs to get affected so that cells start dividing without asking anyone, without responding to signals that tell them to stop. But when this happens, they are working with no dependence, no consideration, without harmony. Cancer is disharmony, that’s what it is.

I was fascinated by Donna’s description. “So, cancer sounds like a metaphor for social life,” I said. “For both bodily and social harmony, cells and people have to know
their space and stick to it.” Donna instantly got where I was going, and added: “Yes, 
but they also need internal harmony. For social or bodily harmony there needs to 
be individual harmony—and that’s what we do in yoga. When the body is in proper 
alignment you help it—you give the nerves space, and the nervous conduction flows 
properly. You see, it’s all related.”

Undeniably, it is all related. Just like stress and space, cancer is a corporeal 
reality, a metaphor, and a concept with social life of its own. Donna’s story and 
explanation ties it all together: the space aspect, the health dangers of stress, and 
the emerging importance of interiority.

5.2.1 Cancer and Space

In the third chapter, I explored the concept of mechanical stress and showed how 
mechanical stress, experienced as embodied compression and burden, is supposed to 
be lifted through creating inner space in one’s mind and body, as well as external 
space between the practitioner and the felt load of the world outside. Based on the 
multiple ways in which mechanical space is talked about and supposedly created in 
yoga classes, the third chapter concluded that what practitioners seek to experience 
and create when they go to yoga classes is first and foremost space.

Donna’s words testify that in the yogic popular discourse, cancer is folded into 
the same mechanical stress-space discourse. Cancer (like mechanical stress) is the 
opposite of having space—it takes over spaces that do not belong to it, it takes over 
the body’s resources, it invades with no consideration or respect. Mechanical stress 
and cancer are described in similar ways—both are a load, a burden on the body. 
(The relations between mechanical stress and cancer was already recognized by the 
ancient Greeks: the Greek word Onkos—the root of oncology—means mass, load, 
or burden.) Cancer is also deeply tied to space—metaphorically, says Susan Sontag, 
cancer is not so much a disease of time as a disease or pathology of space (Sontag
Cancer, writes Mukherjee, is “an expansionist disease; it invades through tissues, sets up colonies in hostile landscapes” (Mukherjee 2010:38). It is a ruthless, secret invasion of an entity which is not exactly an “other” yet not exactly oneself; it deprives the sick person of her energy and life (force). “It” is out of control—cancer, as Donna says, has no manners, boundaries, and respect for space. Cancer cells are cells that have shed the mechanism which “restrains” growth (Sontag 2001:62-63)—in other words, they are spreading violently, taking up space and resources, consuming with no consideration.

Typically, neither cancer nor any other disease is talked about directly in yoga classes. What is talked about in yoga classes and trainings, over and over again, is healing as related to space and stress. Such was the case in the restorative yoga training I attended. Restorative yoga is the one yoga everyone can do, since practitioners are required to exert no physical effort whatsoever. Using multiple props (blankets, blocks, bolsters, chairs, sand bags, and eye pillows) practitioners are put into bodily positions where they are fully supported. The poses include forward bends, back bends, twists, and more, and they are held in silence for long periods of time (five to twenty-five minutes).

Judith Lasater is one of the most famous yoga teachers in the U.S., a developer of restorative yoga, and one of the founders of the Yoga Journal. According to Lasater, restorative yoga reduces stress due to the full support the body receives in each position. This support activates the parasympathetic nerve system and thus allows for a “real rest” that is more healing and more profound than sleep or watching television. Lasater explains that when the body is supported, the weight of the body and on the body is reduced. It is not only that practitioners no longer need to carry their own weight, but that the weight that sits on the body (what I described as mechanical stress) is lifted. Through full bodily support and very precise manipulation of the nerve system (through the careful positioning of the neck, wrists,
and other joints), practitioners are led to feel that a burden has been lifted off their minds and bodies. This burden is corporeal and mental—it is both the weight of thoughts, duties and expectations, as well as the suffocating compression on one’s chest and shoulders. “When weight is lifted, space is introduced,” says Lasater, “and then stress is necessarily reduced, and the body naturally seeks healing and equilibrium.” Among other things, restorative yoga is claimed to be healing because of this belief that the body naturally heals itself once space is surrounding the body and all compression is gone. As restorative yoga teachers in training, we were told that our role is to provide our students a physical space (both in the sense of the yoga studio and, more so, of the atmosphere in it) in which to deeply relax, a space that will be given to them by no one else in their lives. This, in turn, will allow them to introduce space and alleviate stress from their bodies and minds, and thus to promote healing.

Susan Sontag writes that unlike contemporary American cancer patients, who invariably report having had feelings of isolation and loneliness since childhood, Victorian cancer patients described overcrowded lives, burdened with work and family obligations, and bereavements (Sontag 2001:51-52).10 As the third chapter shows, today’s yoga practitioners (maybe because the vast majority of those with whom I spoke were not diagnosed with cancer) do speak about loneliness and a desire to be connected—but like the Victorian patients, they mostly complain about their overcrowded, stressful, burdened lives, and seek a spacious refuge from it. Cancer fits into this worldview perfectly—just like Ogden (“the inappropriate yoga guy” discussed in the third chapter), the deadly disease has no manners or respect for people’s pri-

10 The description of Victorian cancer patients bring to mind the ultimate female Victorian disorder—hysteria, a disorder that also blurred the supposedly clear distinction between the mind and the body. Freud’s theory, which was based to a large extent on hysteric women, does not clearly separate mind from body either. Another association between cancer and hysteria is presented in articles that draw a connection between the media’s inaccurate description of chemicals’ risk and “almost public hysteria” (Marks 1993; Russell 1999).
vate (and internal) space. In the yoga studio, however, everyone is supposed to have manners, to behave, and to know her place and respect others’ space. Hopefully, even cancer.

5.2.2 Cancer and Stress

Donna’s description of cancer, as well as the restorative yoga example, do not neglect the bio-psychological meaning of stress. Bio-psychological stress is thought to be the cause behind many diseases, including cancer. As Donna explained, cancer is related to stress because the latter harms the body’s ability to protect itself. As a bio-psychological state of being, stress is described as reducing the body’s immunity and weakening its defense systems, thus making it harder for the body to recognize and exterminate unhealthy cells (here, too, the militaristic language appears).

The logics of cancer and yoga work perfectly well together here, too. While many people see cancer as frighteningly random, others believe that cancer is a disease afflicting those who are stressed or, as Sontag writes, those who are “sexually repressed, inhibited, unspontaneous, incapable of expressing anger” (Sontag 2001:21). At the same time, yogis are quick to say that the body’s treachery has its inner logic and that proper self-care and attention paid to the body’s calls will protect the healthy from getting sick. The relations between mental states and cancer was also recognized by the Greeks: In Greek theater, the word Onkos was used to denote a psychic load (Mukherjee 2010:47). Another equivalence between cancer and mental states appears in Greek medicine: Hippocrates thought that the human body is composed of four fluids: blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm. The physician Galen assumed that cancer is caused by an accumulation of the most malevolent of the four: black bile. Only one other disease was attributed to an excess of black bile: depression. “Depression and cancer, the psychic and physical diseases of black bile, were thus intrinsically intertwined” (Mukherjee 2010:48).
As discussed in the fourth chapter, bio-psychological stress is a concept that encompasses many instances of privileged (and not-so-privileged) suffering, like work related stress, comparisons, expectations, self-harming behaviors, and more. Most of all, it is a mechanism by which negative inputs are internalized and harsh self judgment emerges and makes the yoga practitioner’s life miserable. As I mentioned above, yoga teachers will often make comments such as “you are your own worst enemy.”

The concepts of the “inner enemy” and the “ego” provide another equivalence between stress and cancer. In the public imaginary, cancer works in a similar fashion to low self-esteem and the entity known in yoga circles as “the inner critic.” Scholars and yogis alike perceive cancer to be an inner enemy—a primordial other that inhabits the self and destabilizes one’s sense of self (Parish 2008). Cancer is often talked about as the enemy within or “the barbarian within” (Lorde 1980; Sontag 2001:61), with whom one fights inside one’s own body. Even though it is increasingly thought to be the environment that has caused the cancer, once it is present, it cannot be reversed or diminished by a move to a better (that is, less carcinogenic) environment (Sontag 2001). It is an inner reality, often fought through the poisoning of the patient, and the civilian use of post cold-war technologies like radiation (Kutcher 2003). Chemotherapy and radiation, of course, are dangerous in and of themselves, as they may kill the patient and the disease together (Mukherjee 2010). No wonder, then, that the yogic discourse—which is already invested in interiority—becomes even more poignant when it comes to cancer.

In a yoga workshop, when learning about the stages of disease development according to Ayurveda, students were again told that life’s stresses harm the immune system. “We are always coping with something—it’s the meaning of being alive,” the teacher said, “but when we go out of balance without being aware of it, disease begins.” Western medicine, according to the presenter, might help, but often it just
puts a blanket over the fire. “You might be taking pills morning and evening, but
the stress didn’t go away.” Finally, a serious disease might develop in the body. In
fact, it might be so serious that it gets an ego of itself:

When there’s a disease in the body that doesn’t want to leave, they say
that it has ego—it became an entity in your body. Like cancer. There
are rare cases when it really leaves. In most cases it comes back after five
to twenty years. The disease has a life of its own—it enjoys the attention
given by yourself and those treating you.

Interestingly, even the author of The Emperor of all Maladies: A Biography of Cancer
agrees, as he treats the disease as a living being. The book, Mukherjee writes, is “an
attempt to enter the mind of this immortal disease, to understand its personalty,
to demystify its behavior” (Mukherjee 2010:xiii). The ego of the disease supposedly
works just like human ego (in the yogic, negative sense of “ego”)—in both cases, the
problem is in blurred boundaries between “self” and “other,” needing and craving
affirmation (or resources), and wanting to grow indefinitely.

Cancer, indeed, is not only one of the greatest concrete fears of privileged yoga
practitioners and many others, but it is also the perfect metaphor for all that seems
wrong in their lives: competition, lack of space, limited resources, and hostile entities
that consume one from within.

5.2.3 Cancer and Interiority

Interiority, as was discussed in Chapter Four, is a key concept in yoga—especially
when it comes to practitioners’ desire to retreat inward as a way of dealing with
judgments, self-esteem issues, and a culture of comparisons and competitiveness. In-
teriority also comes up in Donna’s story, where she says that cells need to maintain
internal harmony in order to keep the harmony of the bigger organism—and so do
people. As discussed above, the space that is thought to be carved by yoga practitioner is first and foremost internal; it is a distance gained from demands, from others and their piercing, judgmental gaze, but also from the internalization of that gaze—the internalization that is a fundamental part of the process of subjectification. As Donna says, one must achieve internal harmony in order to be in harmony with one’s surroundings, and this internal harmony is supposedly developed through multiple practices of turning inward and creating boundaries (or space) between one’s “true” (loving, trusting, compassionate, open) nature and one’s poisonous thinking patterns.

As Malia, the yoga teacher who leads classes for cancer patients, said in her class: “Health is on the inside, not the outside.” Emphasizing interiority over and over again, she encouraged the practitioners in her class to take a deep breath, thus supposedly taking “nutrition and oxygen” in, and releases toxins out. This split between external toxicity and internal purity, and the nature if the interiority which is being cultivated and reshaped, are described in the next section.

5.3 Healing, Cleanliness and Toxicity

In their research on Flammable, Argentina, Auyero and Swistun concluded that although the place is clearly heavily polluted, the residents who suffer from pollution-related health problems nonetheless hold a lot of doubts, mistakes, and misinformation, which the authors group under the concept of “toxic uncertainty.” Residents also argue for shifted responsibility (e.g., blaming lead poisoning on poor parenting), present denial of existing data, and ignore their own risk-perpetuating practices (Auyero and Swistun 2008). Following up on the concept of toxic uncertainty, Merrill Singer researched environmental suffering among lower-income African American

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11 The words “bigger organism” bring the old functionalist body metaphor to mind—which is somewhat ironic, given that a tight-knit collectivity is pretty much the opposite of what has been described in this dissertation so far.
residents in Louisiana’s chemical corridor. While recognition and concern about industrial pollution was a dominant theme in the explanations offered about the sources of health problems by residents in Louisiana, the residents also attributed health problems to smoking and the stress of unemployment and interpersonal conflict (Singer 2011). In this section, I examine a complementary scene: privileged people, who, despite living in a relatively non-polluted environment, are constantly aware of toxicity and its dangers while still holding on to individual responsibility.

Cynthia is a stay-at-home mom, who is married to a life science professor at Stanford University. She spent the last fifteen years taking care of their two daughters, who are now sixteen and fourteen years old. She takes creative writing courses and hopes to publish a novel. She is also fond of various artistic activities—she makes jewelry and paints colorful images on big canvases. She has a yearly pass at a yoga studio, and one can often see her there at the early morning classes.

We met at Cynthia’s house one evening, when her husband was away at a conference. A candle was burning at the corner of the room. I explained what my research is about, and she said: “Yes... this idea of suffering now for the promise of future happiness, well, guess what. There is no future.” As she started talking, I noticed that my digital tape recorder stopped working, so I wrote down everything she said. Here is Cynthia’s story, as it was documented in my notes:

I was drawn to yoga since I was a child. Not sure how I got exposed to it, but my mom found a hippie teacher just out of college that taught her, my sister and me. I loved moving the body and feeling flexible, and I was also drawn to the mudras (hand gestures) and the sound of the OM. In high school I got a video and did yoga on my own. And that accompanied me my whole life, on and off. Yoga in the U.S. became an exercise, it’s very physical. It’s nice but that’s not what yoga is really
about. It is about union, intention, being here and now. In college, I took a lot of religion classes. I also wanted to know what is common to all religions—like abstinence, fasting, and prayer. I studied Buddhist meditation, read *The New Testament*. God, Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, it’s all the same.

Cynthia spoke softly, and I regretted needing to write it all down rather than being able to look at her face and body language. She did not seem to mind, though. She talked about the healing aspects of yoga, and when I asked what she meant, she stopped and asked if I would like some tea. We went into a beautiful kitchen that looked as if it has been taken from a Nora Ephron movie. She made us tea in one of those heavy cast iron teapots, and continued:

> After I gave birth to my younger daughter, I was diagnosed with uterine cancer. They said it was aggressive and it needed to be operated on. I read books and heard stories on people that healed themselves, so I said, give me a few months and I’ll show you what I can do. I laid my hands there every day and imagined myself in perfect health. After five months, they said it was much smaller. And I went through the operation, which was long because they had hard time finding it! They apologized for making the wrong diagnosis—it wasn’t the kind of cancer they thought it was—and they don’t expect it to return. Now, I don’t believe it was the wrong diagnosis. I think that my body changed. And it taught me so much. I believe that all suffering comes from desire, attachment, duration—how long do I choose to hang on to something.

Later in the interview, I asked Cynthia about her opinion on the suffering all around us and our responsibility towards those who have so much less. Cynthia said that
she often contributes to causes which are close to her heart, like yoga for underserved populations and cancer research. But, over all, she tries not to think about it:

   In my experience, things like suffering, hatred, war, hunger—I try not to give it energy. If there’s something I can do to help, great. But there’s no benefit in worrying, getting sad, and being angry. You need to be what you want, set an example. Just like I keep my house clean, I keep my mind clean of bad thoughts and energies.

The thought that an educated woman (who is married to a life science professor, no less) would postpone a necessary surgery was mind-blowing to me. Her belief that by practicing meditation she was able to change the size and nature of her tumor was foreign to me, too. Yet, a couple of years after my interview with Cynthia, I read Steve Jobs’ biography and realized that Apple’s legendary co-founder, chairman, and CEO shared the same thought but, unfortunately, had less luck. According to his biography, Steve Jobs thought that his cancer might have been a result of a weak immune system emerging from work-related exhaustion. After the diagnosis, Jobs did not want his body to be opened up in surgery, but rather, he kept a strict vegan diet and sought healing in acupuncture, herbal medicine, and fresh juices. He was treated by a natural healing doctor whose methods included fasting, enema, and expressing negative emotions (Isaacson 2012). Walter Isaacson, Jobs’ biographer, attributes this choice to Jobs’ ability to screen out unwanted information and to distort reality according to what he wanted to believe in (the term used in the biography is “reality distortion field,” which refers to Jobs’ ability to convince himself and those around him of almost anything). Yet, the belief in cleansing and natural remedies—which probably made Jobs’ life shorter than it could have been—is not unique to Steve Jobs and Cynthia.

   The idea that life threatening diseases can be healed—and more so, prevented—
by natural remedies is present in many ways in Silicon Valley and in yoga classes. The idea that de-stressing and detoxing work as preventative medicine contains many interesting assumptions, among them, the dichotomy that separates natural remedies from chemicals, the fetishization of “the natural,” and the co-existence of supposedly competing rationalities—assumptions that testify that in a society which would like to imagine that everything can be mastered through technology and science, cancer’s randomness seems to call for other ways of coping. What I find most fascinating, however, is the way in which “poisons” and “toxins” are articulated, and the perception of risks that are thought to be embedded in the Silicon Valley way of life. This way of thinking demonstrates an interesting perception that does not clearly distinguish between the mind and the body. If stress and exhaustion can cause cancer, while positive thinking and meditation can heal it, there is no telling where the mind ends and the body begins. The important split, therefore, is not between the mind and the body but between purity and toxicity. In order to be healthy, one supposedly needs to get clean inside and out: by drinking juices, not consuming “bad foods,” and avoiding stress and negative thoughts. “I keep my house clean, I keep my mind clean,” says Cynthia, and this cleanliness might also have something to do with avoiding politics altogether.

Cynthia’s story is an exception. Unless they are sick or supporting someone who is sick, people do not want to talk about cancer. It is depressing and scary—who wants to spend time talking about it unless they have to? Admittedly, even as I write these words, I fight the urge to move away from thinking about cancer and do anything else but that. Yoga practitioners, however, constantly talk about cancer and other diseases indirectly when they talk about toxins and detoxing, healing, and cleansing.
5.3.1 Healing

At the introductory circle of our teacher training, we were asked what brought us to yoga. Some people talked about physical injuries, while others talked about seeking mental, physical, and spiritual healing. After that first class, the word “healing” resurfaced continuously in different contexts. Many conversations, yoga classes, and interviews reiterated the coupling between yoga and healing. “We are in here to heal,” teachers would say. Classes would often include instructions like “Take a big healing breath and give it right back.” Practitioners spoke about healing themselves through yoga, saying, “I had a headache today, so I took healing time and came for class instead of going to the lab;” or, “After my first class I was blown away. Such a spiritual and physical healing.”

In a conversation with Chris, a single yoga teacher, he was talking about the prospect of meeting a partner at class:

Women are 95 percent of my classes. If I say that I will never go out with a student there’s never a chance I will meet someone, but people come to yoga for various reasons, one of them is healing. This needs to be a sacred and protected space, if the teacher is looking around, scoping around the room... I meet beautiful, fantastic people. But people need to feel that they won’t be approached during class. It happens that cupid is getting involved but we need to see how.

On the one hand, Chris portrays a picture of the male yoga teacher who can (and wants to) choose whom to date from a room full of beautiful women. On the other hand, he is sensitive to the fact that some practitioners come to yoga in order to heal, possibly from sexual harassment, sexual violence, or from relationships that have gone bad. Therefore, yoga classes must not feel like a pick-up bar.

Ayurveda classes, which were part of my yoga teacher training course, were packed
with cleansing and healing methods, including vomiting, special detoxing diets, and using a nose string (a practice where one inserts a flexible and strong thread through the nose and takes it out of the month, and so flosses the nose canals). In yoga classes that were meditation oriented, it was claimed that thoughts are responsible of our health, and that exercises and diet are not enough. In pre-natal yoga classes, the affirmation that all practitioners repeated at the beginning and the end of class was: “May I be at peace, may my heart be open, may I be healed, may I bring healing to all beings.” “Yoga,” as one yoga teacher told me, “restores physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, and I want my classes to be a healing practice for the person practicing in class at that given moment.”

Our teacher training anatomy teacher, who was mentioned in a previous chapter, was more specific: “Yoga is healing for everyone, not necessarily in the organ-specific level but for general calmness and effect on the nerve system” (meaning, in reducing stress). “You can’t send blood to specific organs, but you can create pressure on the digestive system by twists.” Skepticism toward conventional medicine was apparent as she said that “inflammation is good for healing. Ibuprofen reduces it, so it’s better not to take it in some cases. The body has self-healing and self-adjusting qualities, through quietness and state of mind.”

In interviews, yoga teachers who consider themselves to be healthy people said things such as: “What I do is healing, yoga teachers are healers, we are not healing just the people in the room but every person on earth because we are creating peace in the world.” Another yoga teacher claimed that the visualizations they do in classes have healing powers and that “healing is an art, not just science.”

Cynthia, talking about the ills of our culture, referred to healing at another point of the interview, saying that: “People want to be accepted for who they are without judgment. That’s what people need from other people, more than anything else. And that is healing.” Another yoga practitioner was raving about the positive influence
of breathing exercises (*pranayama*), saying that “*prana* is the healing energy of the universe, you breath it in and let it heal every bit of you, you let it bring you to your very best.” These words were echoed by others, who also thought *prana* to be a healing force that has the capacity of healing every cell in your body and bringing it to perfect health.

This mosaic of healing-related quotes makes one thing clear. Whether directly or indirectly, as a result of the breathing exercises, the poses, or the cultivation of awareness and attention, yoga is considered to be healing for the practitioners and those around them. It is assumed that everyone needs be healed—perhaps from the insecurities discussed in Chapter Four, but also on a corporeal level (which is, of course, deeply related to the emotional level by the very idea of stress and the practice of breath). This rich “healing” discourse, as the cancer patients’ yoga class I opened with shows, speaks directly to the need to purify, to cleanse one’s interiority not only of harmful thoughts but of toxins and pollutants.

5.3.2 Cleanliness and Toxicity

Ellie is my toxins guru. She was the first to tell me not to drink water from plastic bottles—especially if they had spent some time in a hot car—when the BPA scare broke.\(^\text{12}\) She knows exactly what the numbers inside the little recycling logo at the bottom of the plastic bottles mean. In coffee shops, she asks if the decaffeinated coffee was Swiss water processed (apparently, that is the healthier method). She became vegan after reading *The China Study*, but she has no problem with wearing leather.\(^\text{13}\) Ellie does not touch money because, as she says, most of it has residues of semen and cocaine, and she never eats fried food in restaurants because who knows how many times the oil was reheated.

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\(^{12}\) Bisphenol A (BPA) is found in plastic products. It was banned for use in baby bottles in 2010.

\(^{13}\) *The China Study* is a bestseller that examines the correlation between nutrition and diseases. Basically, it claims that the more animals products people eat, the sicker they are.
Notwithstanding the possibility that she is has a mild version of OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder), Ellie has good reasons to be scared for her health. Her mother died of intestine cancer, and her father passed away due to a heart attack. They left Ellie an orphan before she turned twenty-one years old. When Ellie was diagnosed with HPV (genital human papillomavirus, a sexually transmitted disease that may lead to cervical cancer) a few years ago, she felt that her worst fears were coming to pass. She went through a surgery and fully recovered—she is no longer in danger of developing cancer as a result of the disease. Regardless, Ellie is as careful as she always was. I asked her about her yoga practice, and she said that it changed after she was diagnosed with HPV.

I started practicing yoga before that, but when it was discovered I did it more for cleansing. I imagined that I am cleaning my body. A day after the surgery they called from the hospital to ask how I was doing and I was just doing yoga to clean and heal myself, and I told them that. They said that if I’m doing yoga everything is fine. Today, too, I’m doing it when I’m in bad mood and I need to release blockages that are caused by residues of bad mood in my body.

Ellie’s words emphasize the importance of cleaning and the perception of mindbody as one. Bad mood and HPV can supposedly be cleaned by setting one’s attention on cleaning the mindbody. I asked her what does she perceive as dangerous for her health today.

We eat organic, I’m scared of pollutants, pesticides, chemicals. We don’t eat genetically modified food. For my child, I bought a mattress that doesn’t have that foam that leaches toxins. I buy him organic clothing. I’m brainwashed, I think. I’m walking around with a hand sanitizer and I don’t let him come in touch with germs that are good for him. I know
that I crossed the line with what I see as healthy and dirty. I don’t want him to lie on the carpet in our house, because it’s Persian and old and I think of the dynasty of germs in it. In a coffee shop, if he drops a toy, I can’t help but think about layers of germs, people that went to the restroom and stepped on this floor. When it comes to food we don’t eat white sugar and processed food. But it doesn’t stop us from eating out a lot.

N: And what does that protect you from?

E: Two things. From germs, diseases and viruses, and in the long term I immediately think of cancer. I don’t know if that protects me though. We all have a chance to get sick and maybe it slows the risk. I assume that it will or should happen and it needs to be prevented. I was thinking of Steve Jobs, he ate vegan food his whole life, but he was under a lot of stress. A friend of mine just told me that he had the flu for three weeks now, and he only eats vegan and raw food, and he said, “How can that be? I am doing everything right.” He was a little shaken. But he tells himself that without it (his vegan diet) it would have been more severe.

Ellie’s emphasis on cleanliness and purity is an extreme case that testifies to general, less extreme perceptions. The world seems dangerous to her, on an immediate level (the flu) and long-term one (cancer). Even the things that are in her house (the carpet) are suspected as containing a “dynasty” of germs. The external which is continuously being folded inward (through dropping things on the floor and through the consumption of food) needs, therefore, to be closely supervised and purified.

Ellie might be an extreme case, but other yoga practitioners told me that it is not healthy to touch recipes with oily hands because there is some dangerous material on them. Others informed me that they only buy rice from India because
“there is arsenic in the rice.” Before and after classes, in blogs, journals, and friendly conversations, there is an on-going discourse about avoiding chemicals in favor of “natural” products, buying organic foods, boosting one’s immune system with superfoods with their remarkable healing qualities, and the latest findings about what is poisonous. When Proposition 65 passed in California, I overheard the following conversation in a yoga studio between a forty-something-year-old man and a thirty-something-year-old woman.\textsuperscript{14}

Man: Everything is bad for you, but it doesn’t mean that we don’t go to McDonald’s, does it?

Woman: I don’t go to McDonald’s.

M: But do you go to Starbucks?

W: (Looks alarmed) What’s the problem with Starbucks?

M: They put out new signs, that their stuff might cause cancer.

As this conversation and others like it, and as the detox kits sold at Whole-Foods testify, omnipresent carcinogens, chemicals, and pollutants are very much on yogis’ minds, be they healthy or sick.\textsuperscript{15}

One evening, I met with Jonathan and Lori at their nice Mountain View condo. Jonathan is thirty-seven years old and Lori recently celebrated her fortieth birthday. Jonathan is an avid yoga practitioner and a scientist at a bio-medical company,

\textsuperscript{14} As I walked into a Starbucks that week, I spotted the new sign: The State of California warns against Acrylamide, a potential carcinogen, which may exist in my baked goods and coffee. The same warning appears when I buy cosmetic and cleaning supplied online. This is the result of California’s proposition 65, a proposition intended “to protect California citizens and the State’s drinking water sources from chemicals known to cause cancer, birth defects or other reproductive harm, and to inform citizens about exposures to such chemicals.” see http://oehha.ca.gov/prop65.html (accessed June 14, 2012). California is known to be one of the strictest states when it comes to toxins regulation.

\textsuperscript{15} I do not mean to imply that there is necessarily clear line distinguishing the healthy from the sick, especially in the case of cancer where the fear is that the disease is always lurking. Perhaps the better distinction is between the diagnosed and the not-diagnosed.
and Lori is a social worker who practices yoga occasionally in addition to dance classes. They have been married for thirteen years, and they have no children by choice. During our conversation, the vibrant and energetic Lori often explains quiet Jonathan’s words or answers for him.

We talked about their healthy lifestyle, their yoga and meditation practices, and how they both use breathing exercises when they get stressed. Just a week before our conversation, Jonathan was hospitalized due to a severe infection, and Lori was telling me that they did meditation, breathing exercises, and chanting in the hospital and during walks they took after Jonathan was released. Due to the recent health problems Jonathan experienced, I asked them about their health concerns. Jonathan opened:

Well, we live pretty close to a highway. And they say that all of this area was once semi-conductor factories, so it’s better not to grow anything here. There is a lot of contamination around here, I spoke to an environmental engineer and she told me about it.

Lori: I’m vegan for ethical reasons, so when it comes to my food my focus is more ethical and less about health. But practically we buy at the farmers’ market, we try to buy organic as much as we can, I don’t care if it costs more. It’s not the most important thing for me, but it is important for Jonathan, and rationally speaking I know it is important. And we can afford it.

J: The cleaner the better. When it’s not organic, by definition there are more chemicals and you can never know what else. By the way, even when you buy organic they say it’s not the best, but it’s better. It’s like a lot of other things—

L: We act out of ignorance. We don’t know. We don’t go and check the
source. Do I know what stands behind USDA Organics? No. And now they talk about fair trade, so if it says fair trade I feel better about it. But I buy even if it doesn’t say that.

J: All those vegan restaurants, they’re not healthy. It’s better to eat at home.

L: Because of that hospital experience, we bought that super healthy tea (points at the tea she just served). It has four times the anti-oxidants there is in other teas, it’s herbal, organic, and sweet without a drop of sugar.16

N: What’s wrong with sugar?

L: It gives you diabetes, it has no vitamins and minerals.

N: Is diabetes scary for you?

L: Diabetes, heart disease, cancer, brain diseases.

J: We think we are protected from diabetes and heart disease because we are vegan.

L: Also cancer, somehow, although the minute they told us at the hospital that they are talking to oncologists I repeated to myself like a mantra: there’s The Gerson Method that proved that you can heal advanced cancer.

J: Somehow you close your options when you live such healthy lives, because once you are sick there’s nothing much you can change. It’s a little scary to think that you do all the healthy things and you can still get sick.

16 The tea Lori was serving is Jiaogulan tea by a company named “immortalitea,” a name that probably testifies to how they perceive the desires of their customers.
Lori and Jonathan repeat similar notions to those expressed by Ellie: we have no way of really knowing what is out there (industrial waste, how trustworthy organic food really is), and therefore, one needs to control what one can very carefully; the organic and vegan diet is supposed to protect the practitioner from disease, but there is no telling if that really works; all we can do is be extremely cautious and selective.

I see the discourse on healing and toxins as a prominent way in which fear of cancer and other diseases expresses itself in yoga classes, even when it is not named as such. I do not claim that healing and toxicity relate only to cancer, since they are also linked to another related constellation of meanings and imaginaries mentioned above, such as the purity of nature versus the corruption of modernity, ethical ideologies of localism and sustainability, and more. My claim is, rather, that these issues are all connected to one another. In a rare occasion of speaking the unspeakable, a yoga practitioner refused a glass of wine during a social gathering at the studio. “I don’t drink alcohol,” she said with stern face, “I don’t want to get cancer.”

The food at that event, as in other similar gatherings, was vegan, organic, and raw. Albeit less blunt, other yoga practitioners constantly talk about avoiding alcohol, coffee, conventional (non-organic) fruits and vegetables, junk food, fast food, frozen dinners, everything that comes in a can or a plastic container, fried foods, preservatives, white sugar, white flour, ice-cream, cooked foods, grilled foods, red meat, mercury-laden seafood, poultry rich in hormones and antibiotics, all animal products, and so on and so forth—depending on the diet they are on.

“Everything is dangerous,” said Foucault, and he could not have described the seemingly protected life of yoga practitioners in Silicon Valley better. It is enough to step into the many grocery stores and see the multitude of health products on the shelves to realize that the environment is indeed perceived as dangerous, and

\[17\] A few months later, I saw the same woman in a grocery store, with what looked like chemotherapy baldness covered with a kerchief. That suggests that she might have been in remission at the time, which could explain her unusual comment.
that the common understanding is that one cannot protect oneself except through very careful consumption—consumption being, in this case, the act of literally taking things into her body.¹⁸ Much as in the case of judgments and competition, when it comes to health, the only way to fight the toxic environment seems to be the previously discussed separation from the external environment and retreat inward. As in the previous chapters, here too I claim that many yoga practitioners are leading very selective lives that are directed toward a well-guarded interiority.

See, for example, the following quote from an article by Kelle Walsh, which was published on the *Yoga Journal* website:¹⁹

You buy only organic produce, take vitamin supplements, and do yoga daily. You’re on the path to lasting health, right? Not necessarily. Experts say if you don’t scrutinize your home the way you do the rest of your life, you undermine all the good work of a healthy lifestyle (...). “People have a lot of awareness about food additives and pesticide residue, so they eat organic, but they don’t realize that the cleaning products they use are far more dangerous than any additives in their food,” says environmental consultant Debra Lynn Dadd, author of *Home Safe Home* (Tarcher/Penguin, 2004). Almost all household products—carpeting, furniture, cleaning products, and electronics—emit toxins. “Everyone needs to realize that toxic exposure is happening whether or not you feel it today,” Dadd says. “It’s affecting your health, and you will feel it someday.”

This article tells the reader that her clean house is actually dangerous for her health, and that by using certain products she undermines her costly efforts to maintain

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¹⁸ The fetish of safety seems to be nowhere stronger than around children, which brings to mind a whole different discussion on temporality and reproductive futurity.

This article, which is addressed to Yoga Journal readers and subscribers, takes a particular lifestyle (buying organic produce, taking vitamin supplements, doing yoga) for granted. As ways of limiting toxic exposure, the author recommends avoiding ammonia, using a fan above the stove to blow away combustion by-products such as carbon monoxide, and replacing polyester sheets, which can emit formaldehyde.

This Yoga Journal article is a good example of the point I am trying to make. The general view—among yoga teachers, practitioners, and writers—is that toxins are everywhere. The concern with toxins can be folded into the modern work of purification, which creates a split between science/culture and that to which it is opposed, the primitive and the natural (Latour 1993; Taylor 2005). In the yogic discourse, modern products that were supposed to make life cleaner, safer, and more hygienic, such as immunizations, cleaning supplies, and medications, are deemed dangerous and toxic, while the market for everything that is labeled “organic,” “local,” “natural,” and “biodegradable” grows. Interestingly, this new framing of “the toxic,” or “the dirty,” takes what used to be “clean” and reframes it as polluted. As Mary Douglas famously claimed, dirt—seen as “matter out of place”—is productive, especially since it tells us something about boundary crossings and the mixing of categories.

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of

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20 Joseph Dumit writes about “multiple chemical sensitivity” in “Illnesses You Have to Fight to Get: Facts as Forces in Uncertain, Emergent Illnesses” (Dumit 2006). Multiple chemical sensitivity is an allergy-like reaction caused by low-level chemical exposure, and it is one of many diseases that are attributed to chemicals and pollutants. (see http://www.multiplechemicalsensitivity.org/)

243
a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements (Douglas 2002:44).

Dirt, pollution, and danger teach us important things about the social order. What, then, is there to say about a culture of social disorder, where the categories of what is pure and what is dangerous are in constant flux, and where new warnings and scares continuously appear in the news and are immediately incorporated into lifestyle and consumption choices? Here, too, the spirit of the times emerges as hectic, forever changing, and productive of chronic insecurity. The body, in turn, appears to be perceived as vulnerable and at-risk.

This sense of the being at risk and needing to be constantly engaging in a healthy lifestyle is one thing that yoga and today’s bio-medical ethos have in common. Most often, as Cohen writes, Western human bodies are not seen as living in harmony and having a capacity to self-heal, but as being at-risk and needing of defense (Cohen 2009). Joseph Dumit describes this perception of the body from another angle, as he analyzes the shift away from an “inherently healthy” body, which assumes that most people are healthy at their core (Dumit 2010). Whereas health was once “the silence of the organs” (Canguilhem 1989), in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, a very different notion of illness has taken center stage, one in which bodies are inherently ill—whether genetically or through lifestyle or traumas. Coming to see ourselves as fundamentally fragile and always on the verge of mortal disease means that the body and life are at constant risk—a perception that serves pharmaceutical marketing and the growth in the number of new prescriptions (Dumit 2010). While there is no drug that prevents or even lowers the chances of cancer (at least as far as I know), the body-at-risk that is articulated in yoga classes opens up other markets, such as the “natural,” “alternative” ones. My focus here, however, is not on these markets but on the way in which notions of risk produce a sense of helplessness and
personal responsibility, and discourage structural changes.

5.3.3 Politicizing Cancer

Campaigns against cancer were criticized as apolitical on two main fronts. The first critique sees the campaigns (especially those focused on breast cancer) as limited in the scope of the subjectivities that they acknowledge and promote, and the second focuses on the problematic emphasis on individual, rather than corporate, responsibility. I will review those two critiques before concluding with yoga’s relation to the apolitical.

In her moving piece “White Glasses,” which critically examines shifting identifications, friendship, and mourning in light of AIDS and breast cancer, Eve Sedgwick writes about her diagnosis—breast cancer that had already metastasized to several lymph nodes. Sedgwick writes:

One of the first things I felt when I was facing the diagnosis of breast cancer was, “Shit, now I guess I really must be a woman.” A lot of what I was responding to was the way the formal and folk ideologies around breast cancer not only constructed it as a secret, but constructed it as the secret whose sharing defines women as such. I can’t tell you how many people—women, men, gay, straight, feminists, gender traditionalists—have said or implied to me that my proper recourse for counsel, encouragement, solidarity in dealing with breast cancer would be (i.e., I infer, had better be) other women in their most essential identity as women. All this as if the most obvious thing in the world were the defining centrality of her breasts to any woman’s sense of her gender identity and integrity! (Sedgwick 1999:202).

Sedgwick refuses to be identified as a woman by a disease emerging from her breasts—she sees her mammary globes as relatively peripheral to the complex places where
sexuality and gender identity really happen. After describing hospital-organized breast cancer support group meetings, where women are told by a social worker that “with the proper toning exercise, makeup, wigs, and a well-fitted prosthesis” they could feel just as feminine as they ever had (Sedgwick 1999:203), Sedgwick testifies that her sense of femininity has never been routed through a pretty appearance in the imagined view of heterosexual man. Hence, she feels “inconceivably far” from finding herself “at the center of the mysteries of essential femaleness” (Sedgwick 1999:204).

Eve Sedgwick is not the only one to find herself resisting breast cancer’s demand to surrender to femininity. In her well known *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde criticizes the pressure to wear prostheses and have reconstructions as steering women away from coming to terms with the multiple losses that accompany the disease, and making them feel the lack of breast as a stigma, a sign of shame (Lorde 1980; Jain 2007a). Likewise, Barbara Ehrenreich seems to fight her pink-washing caused nausea in the face of all the cuteness, sentimentality, cheerfulness, pumped-up optimism, and perkiness that surrounded her after she came to inhabit the sick role. She finds that the pink kitsch of breast cancer is not only infantilizing, but also produces and polices gender in multiple ways (Ehrenreich 2001; Jain 2007a).

The “pumped-up optimism” Ehrenreich rejects is not unique to breast cancer campaigns and the production of femininity. The pressure to have “the right attitude” and exercise positive thinking can be potentially absurd and cruel, writes David Perusek, who lost his brother to cancer and then was himself diagnosed with the disease. “There is a deep disjunction between the reality of cancer as we were confronted by it, and culturally available frames as resources for dealing with it,” Perusek writes. “At every turn our lives and experience seemed out of sync with the world around us as clichèd language and maddening cultural constructions presented themselves without solicitation while right words and useful frames for us, at least, seemed largely unavailable” (Perusek 2012:499).
In her “Cancer Butch,” Lochlann Jain adds to the critics of the narrow feminine identity that emerges from campaigns against the disease. Describing a BMW fund-raising event (“A-Dollar-A-Mile-For-Breast-Cancer”), Jain describes the event as offering

...the same redoubling of femininity that fissure through the entire biomedical complex of cancer treatments: the pamphlets that let women know how soon after mastectomy they can return to “washing walls;” the mascot color pink, understood to be “comforting” to women; the Look Good, Feel Better classes that teach women how to use cosmetics to make themselves look good throughout treatment” (Jain 2007a:504).

The heterosexualization of the disease, as Jain sees it, needs to be opened up—and not just to other, queerer, identities. The activist desire, Jain writes, is to proliferate the possible identities of illness—including dying, the ugliness of the disease, the suffering it causes (Jain 2007a:504). In her “Living in Prognosis: Toward an Elegiac Politics,” Jain further develops the point:

I don’t believe that cancer, or suffering more generally, can be understood cleanly through a politics that tries to disavow death (as the survivor politics does), or cheer it up (as the pink-ribbon rhetoric does), or deny or defer cancer suffering (as does the “drive for the cure”). An elegiac politics argues for pushing the private face of cancer culture—grief, anger, death, and loss into the public cultures of cancer—perhaps even if only alongside of LiveStrong, or sipping, driving, and walking for the cure—with the recognition of the enormous economic profits and gains that parallel these losses (Jain 2007b:89).

By criticizing the pink, feminine, and optimistic face of the fight against cancer, queer critiques open up other ways of being (and also, ways of ceasing-to-be). In
addition, both Sedgwick and Jain compare AIDS activism to cancer campaigns (just these words: AIDS activism vs. cancer campaigns seem to say it all). “Act UP did not talk about how beautiful they all were,” Jain writes. “Act UP acted out.”

[They rioted, they educated, they stormed the National Institutes of Health, they unleashed power and they were arrested and they made news (Jain 2007a:527).

While HIV/AIDS activism tended to be angry, confrontational, and organized, the public is most often called to fight cancer by philanthropy via consumption—a “fight” with no dissent that goes hand in hand with middle-class lifestyle patterns and thus produces the ideal citizen as a consumer and a volunteer (King 2004). This leads me to the next main criticism against the campaigns: the way in which they are wrapped up in consumerism and individualism.

The strong connection between the disease and capitalism, corporations, and well-funded public campaigns against cancer is another theme that runs through the above-quoted literature on the social aspects of the disease. The injuries of cancer, writes Jain, are central to, and inevitable in, U.S. economic exchange. Her example—BMW—is a company that sells a product that pumps carcinogens into the environment, while taking on the cause of curing breast cancer in an aim to sell more cars—and making it seem as if they care about the cancer they are causing (Jain 2007a:517). While cancer may be experienced as shameful for the individual, it is sin-free cause for companies that support campaigns against it—a partial list includes Revlon, American Airlines, BMW, Avon, Ford, General Electrics, Kelloggs, Tiffany, Pier 1, Este Lauder, Ralph Lauren, Lee Jeans, Saks Fifth Avenue, JC Penney, and Boston Market (Ehrenreich 2001; King 2004).

Breast cancer, as Ehrenreich adds, is pink—rather than green—for a reason. By ignoring or underemphasizing the vexing issue of environmental causes, the breast
cancer cult turns women into dupes of what could be called the “Cancer Industrial Complex: the multinational corporate enterprise that with the one hand doles out carcinogens and disease and, with the other, offers expensive, semi-toxic pharmaceutical treatments” (Ehrenreich 2001:52). Audre Lorde suggests an alternative—what would happen, she asks, “if an army of one-breasted women descended upon Congress and demanded that the use of carcinogenic, fat-stored hormones in beef-feed be outlawed?” (Lorde 1980:15). Perhaps not quite as visibly, multiple public battles against the industrial use of carcinogens have been fought and won. And yet, public campaigns (like Race for the Cure) emphasize individual strength and optimism (while, outrageously, withdrawing breast-exam funding from Planned Parenthood).21

But what about the environment and the politics of pollution? After all, the environmentalism discourse does not seem to subside and the awareness of the prices of industrialism and post-industrialism paid by humans, animals, and the environment is only growing. Cancer is one of those prices, or, as Audre Lorde puts it: “my scars are an honorable reminder that I may be a casualty in the cosmic war against radiation, animal fat, air pollution, McDonald’s hamburgers, and Red Dye No. 2” (Lorde 1980:61). Jain adds to the list of carcinogens plastics, auto and truck exhaust, long term effects of nuclear testing, and phthalates, concluding that everything seems to cause cancer (Jain 2007a)—or, as Lorde puts it, that “our earth is poisoned” (Lorde 1980:20).

This sense of fear and mistrust towards the food we eat, the air we breath, and the water we drink is shared by many people I met during fieldwork. But if this awareness is not channeled into social protest and political activism, what do they do with it and to where does it lead?

21 The decision was made on January 31, 2012 and withdrawn heavy criticism since.
5.3.4 Yoga and the (Im)Possibility of Structural Change

A study from 1999 compared three “Cultures of Activism” in the Bay Area: Racing for the Cure, Walking Women, and Toxic Touring during the 1990s. While the study describes “Race for the Cure” similarly to the above depiction, it suggests that other activists groups are more sensitive to environmentalism and critical toward the “cancer industry”—alas, they have been misrepresented and ignored in the media (Klawiter 1999). During fieldwork, I never heard of Toxic Touring. I know one woman who walked in New York City to fight breast cancer, and another who did a triathlon in Hawaii with Team In Training for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. In addition, I became aware of Yoga Bear, “a national non-profit organization dedicated to connecting cancer fighters and survivors with free access to the benefits of healing yoga.” However beneficial Yoga Bear’s work might be, the infantilizing aspect of using a cute teddy bear as the logo and name of an organization for adults with cancer strengthens the points made by the critiques I laid out above.

Cancer, as Jain puts it, appears as an individual rather than a communal disease—not angry and in many ways, not public (Jain 2007a). Even though the image of cancer that emerges from my fieldwork seems to include contamination paranoia and mistrust in the polluted environment (toxic insecurity), it does not provoke anger and criticism, but instead it is perceived as a matter of personal risk and responsibility (King 2004). Ironically, yoga practitioners’ sensitivity to environmentalism gets folded into consumerism patterns and rarely crosses the threshold of political action directed toward structural changes. Yoga practitioners’ attempts to cultivate space, reduce stress, and withdraw into a carefully cultivated interiority are yet another manifestation of a position of relative helplessness in the face of powerful forces that seem to be beyond one’s influence. The choice to retreat, seclude oneself, and

protect only the near and dear contributes to the perception of sickness and health as a matter of individual responsibility and consumption choices.

Ellie, the toxins expert mentioned above, was the one to tell me about the high cancer rates in the Bay Area. She said that “they say” that it might be related to alcohol and postponing having children to a late age, but she also wondered if “it has something to do with all those Cold War missiles buried in the ground.” Indeed, Marin County, just north of the Golden Gate Bridge (which is not part of the Silicon Valley) is known to have exceptionally high rates of breast cancer. Between 1995-1999, breast cancer rates for white women in Marin were 28% higher than rates in other counties in the Bay Area and 38% higher than rates in other urban parts of California. 23 Research inspired by this finding supports the individual responsibility thesis, as high breast cancer rates in the 1980s and 1990s were sometimes attributed to reproductive choice—late age at first pregnancy and small number of children (this, of course, can be seen as another instance of blaming the middle class victim).

A 1997 report on Stanford University’s website claimed that:

Ever since a 1994 report identified white women in the Bay Area as having the world’s highest incidence of breast cancer, many have worried that some unknown hazard in the local environment might be increasing their susceptibility to this disease. Now, a study by Stanford epidemiologists should help dispel that concern. The higher incidence of breast cancer here is entirely explainable in terms of known risk factors prevalent among women who live in the Bay Area.24

The results were explained as a matter of population characteristics: “As a county,


Marin has higher proportions of women with known breast cancer risk factors, including white race, lower numbers of children or later age at childbearing, college graduates, and higher household incomes. Likewise, the more recent decline in cancer rates in the Bay Area was attributed to other socio-economic status related lifestyle decisions such as quitting smoking and getting screened regularly.

Ellie was more aware of these studies and statistics than I was, but her queries regarding nuclear waste did not push her or anyone else I know of to question the authorities, (nor did it push her to consider getting pregnant at a younger age—she was thirty-seven when she gave birth to her only child). She did drop her alcohol consumption (as well as the consumption of everything else that was declared as dangerous for one’s health). Thus, the way to protect oneself against toxins emerges not as pushing the government, lawmakers, and corporations into social responsibility and sustainability, but by focusing on oneself and internally clean, detox, and purify one’s body and home.

One reason why yoga practitioners avoid structural changes might be because they feel helpless and too insecure to act. Yet another—and in my opinion, stronger—reason is that politics itself, let alone the driving force of anger, seem poisonous, dirty, and dangerous. The yoga class I opened with was full of people who experience “real suffering” and may be dying. Yet, there is no protest or dissent in those classes—or in any other yoga class I attended. This might be related to the common yogic view on anger, according to which, anger is considered to be yet another toxin while


27 I am aware that this might portray an inaccurate dichotomy. Yoga practitioners do care about sustainability, most of them voted for Obama, and some sign petitions. Yet, these activities and opinions can be considered as part of a consumerist lifestyle, and I am not sure they qualify as political activism that takes responsibility on making structural change (like the AIDS activism, for example, that Jain discusses).
positive thinking and acceptance might be perceived as healing. Malia, like many other yoga teachers, encourages practitioners to release their emotions and let go of fear, pain, anger, and resentment. Internalized judgments and negative thought patterns are thought to be literally toxic—after all, if stress and low self-esteem are not healthy for the healthy, they cannot possibly be healthy for the sick who are often overwhelmed by grief, anxiety, loss of identity, and stress.

Just like the logic behind Race for the Cure and other cancer awareness campaigns, the perception that sees cancer as individual responsibility produces “a form of ideal citizenship that gains virtue and elicits identification and support because of its innocence and apparent distance from the corruption and conflict of all things political” (King 2004:488). The political, in other words, is also deemed poisonous, risky, and dirty—it is yet another aspect of the stressful “outside” which is to be avoided.

In the age of intimate citizenship, politics via mass anger and disruption is dismissed as silly, futile and even dangerous (Berlant 1997; King 2004). In “Cancer Butch,” Jain quotes Lauren Berlant’s discussion on the peril of politics in the sentimental mode. Berlant writes:

[T]he ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy. The political as a place of acts oriented toward publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures. Suffering, in this personal-public context, becomes answered by survival, which is then recoded as freedom (Berlant 1998:641, quoted in Jain 2007).

The unavailability of the political is deeply tied to the mode of survival mentioned by Berlant. If one experiences oneself as constantly at-risk, what are one’s possibilities for action? If anger—the main political motive—is circumvented and disqualified as
dangerous for one’s health, what can motivate a stride toward structural change? In the next chapter, the aperture that I just closed will be reopened, as I examine “doing good” as a motivation for action.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter continued the exploration of precarious lives by examining how the experiences of needing and creating space (Chapter Three) and retreating inward (Chapter Four) get articulated in relation to perceptions of toxicity and disease. Cancer supposedly emerges from personal attitude to life (stress, repressed emotions) and it takes over space. Just like undermined self-worth and other harmful thinking patterns, cancer is considered to be an internalized hostile entity (with its own “ego”) that consumes one from within. In addition, cancer is thought to emerge from the environment—which gets experienced as untrusted, risky, and toxic. In other words, cancer is seen as an interior disease that emerges from the internalization of pollutant materials and thoughts.

When cancer is folded into the larger picture of this dissertation, the key concepts examined so far—namely stress, space, and interiority—point to particular consumerist desires and specific lifestyle choices. The desire to isolate oneself from a toxic environment (be it emotionally or literally poisonous) and to lead a selective life, as well as the assumption that the social and material environment is dangerous and not entirely trustworthy, leads to a strong split between the interior and exterior. This split is reworked through the cultivation of inner space, inner peace, and inner cleanliness and harmony.

The interior/exterior dissection, however, is not a simple one, since the interior is continuously at risk of being tainted and polluted by thoughts, foods, ideas, or chemicals one is inevitably surrounded by and exposed to. Since one becomes who one is by consuming and being consumed by the environment (in the always un-
folding process of subjectification), a constant work of selective intake, attention, and discipline is required. Seeing the environment as toxic, in other words, requires monitoring and policing one’s thoughts, beliefs, and food intake, among other things.

In this chapter I further argued that yoga works in a fashion similar to genetic screening, pharmaceutical logic, and medications targeted for “at-risk” patients, articulating the body as a ticking time bomb. The body, therefore, emerges as a project to be defended and healed—but not necessarily by turning to conventional bio-medicine. This sense of helplessness and insecurity, I further argue, is part of the de-politicizing of the social sphere and the unwillingness to engage in structural changes.

What image of the body emerges from it all? The body that emerges from the yogic discourse has permeable borders that are thought to be protected through the creating of space around it. At the same time, the understanding of the external as continuously folded into the interior explains why the subject requires a careful and continuous labor of cleaning and detoxing. The body and the subject, therefore, are constantly changing as they taking things in. “You are what you eat,” yoga practitioners will say, which means that—like the Freudian and Lacanian processes of subjectivization—one is in a constant process of becoming. The exterior is constantly reintroduced and consumed by the yoga practitioner, who has little to do to protect herself but to consume carefully. In addition, the body is experienced as non-linear. Chemicals one might have taken in, in this way or another and during different points of life, might reach a certain, unknown threshold and create disease.

Emily Martin portrayed an image of the body as a complex system, flexible, and in flux. In yoga, the inner and the outer are being perceived as being in constant flux—as do the categories of what is healthy and what is dangerous. Yet, even though yoga makes practitioners more flexible, the idealized image of the worker who is flexible, confident, and adjusted to conditions of insecurity that Martin examined is far from
being the image of the worker I met. Yoga practitioners, in other words, are seeking control and stability, which are to be achieved through withdrawing inward. It is possible to see the withdrawal I described as a form of adjustment to the demands of neoliberalism, but as the next chapter shows, this will only be a partial explanation.

In the previous chapter, I quoted an article titled “Fear of Flying,” that described women’s tendency to withdraw into their homes and families rather than venture out for self-fulfillment. In *Flexible Bodies*, Martin mentions the housewife of the 1950s, whose job was to keep her house orderly and clean. In a way, today’s yoga practitioners do exactly that—the difference is that they assume the body to be permeable, non-linear, and ever-changing (and hence, at-risk). Seeking (perhaps impossible) equilibrium, they find comfort in an on-going process of purifying inside out.
Make yourself comfortable. Take a deep breath. Relax. Try to smile.
The Buddha taught that there is no other person in the whole world more
worthy of your well-wishing than yourself. I love that teaching! It’s so
kind and it makes so much sense. When I am unhappy, tense, frightened,
tired, or irritable I think, “Of course! Who else could I possibly wish well
to? I can’t see past myself. I need to feel better first.”

These are the words I am saying these days. Until you find others more
resonant for you, I invite you to try them. Say them out loud if you’re
alone; otherwise, think them. Begin with yourself. May I feel protected
and safe / May I feel content and pleased / May my physical body provide
me with strength / May my life unfold smoothly with ease.

Now say the phrases again. This time, stop after each phrase and take a
deep breath in and out. Close your eyes as you take the breath and feel
how that wish feels in your body. Then make the next wish and feel how
that one feels.

When you know the wishes by heart, close your eyes and say them
over and over. Pay attention to how good it feels to wish yourself
well. Later, you’ll send your wishes to others. For now, just yourself
for as long as you like. And really do try to smile (From “Metta in
The Yogic Ethics and the Spirit of Neoliberalism

Is there a contradiction between spirituality and veganism, environmentalism or animal-rights activism? The latter are associated with politics, and many yogis have been cautioned not to mix spirituality with politics. (…) Being political means to care about the politic, the community of others we live with. (…) To care about other beings and act on their behalf, therefore, is very much in line with the teachings of yoga. (Gannon 2008)

Matthew Sanford was sleeping during the accident that killed his father and sister, and left him paralyzed from the chest down at the age of thirteen. Sanford spent three-and-a-half days in a coma, his lungs full of water, his neck and back broken, and his internal organs malfunctioning. The doctors suggested to his grief-stricken mother that she might consider letting him go. She did not, and the young boy slowly recovered. With the advice of his doctors, the chest-down paralyzed Matthew Sanford tried to forget about his legs and pelvis and to develop his upper body.

These days, more than three decades later, Matthew Sanford is a renowned yoga teacher who teaches yoga to students with disabilities as well “traditional students,” as they are described on his website. He teaches the latter by maneuvering his
wheelchair between their yoga mats. He is also the author of a book titled *Waking* and the founder of “Mind Body Solutions,” a non-profit organization that seeks to “transform trauma, loss and disability into hope and potential by awakening the connection between mind and body.”¹ Sanford was recognized as a “Pioneer in Integrative Medicine” by the California Pacific Medical Center in 2010.² He gives lectures and guest classes in yoga conferences and studios across and outside the U.S. I heard him speak in San Francisco on January 17, 2009.

Sanford’s big message to the world is about the integration of mind and body. He seeks to distribute this message though bodily practice and through the written and spoken word. His story begins with his own disconnect, which started when he was dragged out of the car, almost dead. Such traumas, he says, very much like molestation, teach the victim to dissociate from his body as a way of surviving injury, pain, and horror. The second injury, however, came from the treatment he received. Doctors, says Sanford, understand injury in two ways: physical and psychological. But they do not understand the mindbody injury. Their advice to strengthen his upper body only made the injury worse, as it did not help him find his body again. In the lecture I attended, Sanford said that the doctors compared the sensations he had in his legs to phantom pain: “They said it’s not real,” he protests, “but I have sensations and they are the cornerstone of my practice.”

Today, the disabled yoga teacher guides others into feeling and inhabiting their whole body, be it paralyzed or not. Through breathing and simple stretching techniques, Sanford instructs his students to pay attention to subtle changes—how smiling feels in their whole body, how sitting upright changes their relations to gravitation, and how lifting the hand shifts sensations in the legs. Sanford’s message to the disabled is that they do not have to be defined by their injury, and do not have to

¹ [http://www.mindbodysolutions.org/content/who-we-are](http://www.mindbodysolutions.org/content/who-we-are), accessed June 8 2010.
lose contact with their disabled body parts.

Interestingly, Sanford claims he does not see a huge difference between those who can and cannot walk. “After I taught people with disabilities I understood that sitting in a cubical for ten hours is not that different. We all suffer.” To hear this from a chest-down paralyzed person was surprising, to say the least. I am not sure if he really thinks that the life experience of the walking and the disabled is indeed so similar, as much as he wants to draw attention to the ways in which most people neglect to pay attention to bodily sensations. When giving lectures at corporations, Sanford talks about the way one stands while waiting for the morning coffee, and suggests sitting on the floor while watching TV, as a way of “living your body in more spaces”—meaning, increasing awareness of the body, caring for it, and learning to decipher its subtle messages. In order to cultivate awareness of the body, one has to focus one’s attention on bodily sensations and disconnect, to some degree, from the world outside—be it the doctors’ advice or the full attention one gives to the TV.

Sanford’s story speaks to many of the themes I examined in previous chapters. It provides another example of the complicated relations between the mind and the body, seeing them—as many of my friendformants do—as one entity. The story also speaks to the suffering of the privileged and to the physical stagnation involved in most white-collar jobs, and gives voice to a critical perspective on bio-medicine. In addition, Stanford opens up the last big themes this dissertation engages with—ethics and politics.

Although the ethical and the political may seem as antithetical, I discuss them as two ways of engagement with the world, not only in one’s home, office, or yoga studio, but also beyond those semi-private spheres. Ethics, for me, is the lived experience of moral values, and “the political” will be discussed as one’s willingness to engage in action directed toward structural changes.
Matthew Sanford strongly believes that he has a life-changing message for people all over the world and for the medical establishment, which only increases injury by relating to paralyzed body parts as dead (rather than still-living) matter. But his passion does not end in improving lives—it extends into saving the world, no less. “I have never seen anyone becoming more aware of his spine without watching him becoming more compassionate,” he says:

We got to move off the mat, take the basics we learn and understand how can we apply it. By studying this you make your life better. We are great candidates to save the world—because we got self interest built into it.

The connection between yoga, ethics, and world-saving may seem far-fetched, at best. The relations between ethics and politics, as well as their definitions, can also be obscure. Yoga can be easily viewed as a leisure practice that has no bearing on ethics or politics, especially given all that I written so far on the desire to gain space and retreat inwards. Moreover, yoga can be judged as a pseudo-ethical practice—that is to say, as a leisure activity that pretends to carry (empty?) ethical messages. Conversely, this chapter presents the yogic discourse as constantly circulating and articulating notions of “the good” and promoting self-fashioning as an ethical subject. Acknowledging whatever political desires I or the reader may have, I argue that the ethical discourse suggested by and to yoga practitioners should nonetheless be examined as it is, without assuming we know in advance what it is, what it is not, or what it should be.

In an article on ethics and freedom, James Laidlaw claims that despite the interest in ethics among anthropologists, anthropology has yet to develop a body of theoretical reflection on the nature of ethics (Laidlaw 2002). Even though the people ethnographers encounter are usually trying to do what they consider good or right,
the anthropological tendency is either to confine the scope of ethical validity within
the tidy and closed boundaries of one or another “culture” or “tradition,” or to over-
look criteria of—and debate over—right and good in favor of analyses that empha-
size structure, power, and interest (Faubion 2001; Lambek 2010). When addressing
ethics, anthropologists often focus primarily on their own moral dilemmas—thus ex-
hibiting a certain ethical self-consciousness and ethical anxiety—rather than those
of the people they encounter in the field, or at least they categorically separate the
two issues (Faubion 2001; Widlok 2004; Castañeda 2006).

This chapter does not confine ethical validity within the (non-existing) boundaries
of the studied culture, neither does it address ethics as my own moral dilemmas in
the field. Instead, I see my experience as part of the material analyzed, and I ask how
the ethical perception of yoga practitioners shapes their world—and their society at
large. Ethics, in other words, can be a motivation for activism or for disengagement,
and these life choices of the relatively privileged, I argue, have a big impact—even,
and especially if, the choice is to remain passive and not exercise the relative position
of power one has.

My perception of politics and power was fundamentally shaped by Marx and
Foucault. Marxist and early Foucauldian analyses are likely to see yoga as frosting
over structural inequalities, as another form of control, or as a practice that serves
those in power by enabling practitioners to keep working. The ethical views I review
should be seen as responses to a certain disadvantage women experience and to an
environment that makes everybody disposable and hence, insecure. Yet, as I was
doing research for this dissertation, I often felt a need to defend myself against the
Marxist voices (that were mostly in my head) telling me that “the good” should
point in the direction of the poor and the disadvantaged, and that being ethical
equals being politically active on their behalf. Even though it does not confirm with
this (perhaps simplistic) Marxist ought, the yogic discourse, I argue, has a lot to say
about ethical life and choice-making, and its messages filter into practitioners’ lives and shape them in various ways. This chapter examines modern ethical logic as it emerges in yoga classes, publications, and conversations among yoga practitioners. In it, I use my informants’ and my own ethical dilemmas as case studies.

According to modern, Western conceptions of ethical behavior, good deeds often involve giving up on one’s money, time, and comfort in favor of others, while focusing on oneself is considered to be a selfish act. These conceptions have long been ideals in Christian ethics (Devettere 2002). Universal ethic is also one of the legacies of Christianity, Descartes, the Enlightenment, and Kant. For the latter, to be good is to act independently of any given or particular interest, and the very nature of the ethical lies in its difference from any particular or personal fact (Colebrook 1998).

Ancient Greek ethics presents an alternative to Christian altruism and Kant’s “universal good.” Albeit very different and distant from the Silicon Valley of the twenty-first century, ancient Greek understandings of ethics saw self-care as part of an ethical practice and as a moral duty. These ancient traditions of virtue ethics were deemed somewhat irrelevant until the last few decades, when interest in them reemerged following Foucault’s later work. Drawing from Foucault, Hadot, Macintyre and others, this chapter will engage with the philosophical traditions that see self-care as an inseparable component of ethical life.

Ancient Greek virtue ethics was an art of living and not a theoretical exercise. Its emphasis on self-cultivation, virtue, and happiness makes it tempting to compare it to current popular ethical formations such as yoga. Before I turn to discuss it, two reservations are required. First, I do not attempt to do justice to the details and histories of Ancient Greek ethics. I am drawing on scholars who make generalizations about various schools and centuries, and I definitely do not try to summarize the vast modern scholarship written on the issue. The parallels between Eastern and Western ethics, for example, between Confucius and Aristotle are even further beyond my

Second, it is important to acknowledge that the ancient ways of life are hardly accessible to us today—who are the modern subjects who are “inescapable inhabitants of advanced modernity, bearing its social and cultural marks” (MacIntyre 1984:xi). The very construction of selfhood was different prior to the ethical traditions that shaped the modern ethical thinking—among them, Christianity and psychoanalysis. The Greeks, for example, did not share the Judaeo-Christian religious framework of ethics and the idea that morality is in some way guaranteed by God. Their thought was not deontological (focused on ought and duty) or consequential (the belief that one should produce the best consequences) (Annas 1995). Most importantly, it was not therapeutic. As Foucault points out, Greek self cultivation is “not equivalent to an obligation for the subject to speak truthfully concerning himself; it never opened up the soul as a domain of potential knowledge where barely discernible traces of desire needed to be read and interpreted” (Foucault 1985:89). The Greek ethic was focused on actions, and not the intentions, will, or desire of the subject that produced them (Annas 1995; Colebrook 1998). Hence, any linkage made between these ways of life and the modern ones is necessarily mediated, problematic, and therefore, will be done with caution. I do not assume to know what life looked like back then; rather, the questions that guide me are: What does it take for self-care to be considered ethical? And what potentials, motivations, and desires emerge from modern thought and curiosity towards ancient Greek thought?

When describing yogic discourses and world-views, the importance of self-care, self-nurturing, and self-awareness cannot be over emphasized. True to the yogic axiom of self-care first, this chapter is built in expanding circles that all draw from the primary ought that shapes every ethical discussion and action I present below: to pay attention to oneself. The chapter’s second section discusses one’s relationship with oneself and the attempt to be less violent and more compassionate toward oneself. I
hope to show that this practice of self-care is a form of discipline, rather than the lack of it. The third section examines relationships, and particularly the attempts to be both good to others and true to oneself. The fourth section focuses on engagements with social causes. I will demonstrate that even when a yoga practitioner decides whether to press charges in a case of sexual harassment or volunteer with incarcerated teenagers, she most often does that with one foot deeply rooted in the personal and the private. Differently put, when it comes to current yogic world views, the ethical is always rooted in the personal. Every action begins with intimate checking-in with oneself and a careful consideration of personal wellbeing. This logic guides yoga practitioners in various areas of their lives, even those of larger scale which are far removed from the yoga studio.

6.1 Ethics, Happiness, and Virtue in Ancient Greek Thought

A few of the scholars who write about ancient Greek ethics found that they needed to address the egoism suspicion, as I did. “It is very often assumed that ancient theories must be, at some level, egoistic,” writes Annas, “just because their starting point is the agent’s reflection on his life” (Annas 1995:12). As I mentioned above, a common and basic assumption is that ethics should be about duties or rights rather than about a practitioner’s own life. But not only does ancient Greek ethics begin with the individual and not duties, it also aims at happiness—eudaimonia. Indeed, the pursuit of happiness is an integral part of ancient ethical life.

In order to make sense of this ancient form of ethics, I will briefly present the concepts of happiness, virtue, the good, practice, and freedom as they are described in the works of Foucault, Hadot, Macintyre and others. Let me try and untangle them from one another, using a few simple questions: A. What does it mean to care for oneself? B. What is the nature of happiness eudaimonia? C. What is “the good”? D. What is Virtue and how is it related to freedom?
A. What does it mean to care for oneself? According to the Greeks, all moral action involves a relationship with the self—but the Greek version of having a nurturing relationship with oneself was not exactly what may come to mind today. Ancient self-care is not about enjoyment, pleasure, pampering oneself, or even about self awareness. Rather, self-care is about rigorously forming the individual into an ethical subject. As Foucault puts it, “[T]he individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept that will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself” (Foucault 1985:28).

Using writing, reflection, dream analysis, physical exercise, diet, and ongoing awareness, the male (non-slave) citizen was to develop the good in himself and monitor anything that was less than a virtue. Citizens were to carefully cultivate practical wisdom and excellence of character (virtue), spending their lives as a permanent exercise in learning how to live (Foucault 1986; Lakoff and Collier 2004). This self-fashioning is not only an attempt to ensure behavior in accordance with a code of good conduct, but a project that involved all aspects of one’s being: intellect, imagination, sensibility, and will. The subject acts upon himself in an attempt to know himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself (Davidson 1990).

B. What is the nature of eudaimonia? Greek self-cultivation is not an end in itself, but a way to lead a happy life (which is also to say, an ethical life). While pleasure fixes the subject on the present desire which asks to be satisfied, eudaimonia is about life as a whole and the long term fashioning of the subject. It is not a matter of feeling good or being pleased at the moment, but it is one’s whole life which is said to be happy or not. Eudaimonia, sometimes also translated as blessedness or prosperity, is also defined as an activity of the soul in accordance with excellence (Annas 1995, 2000). I understand it as a state of alignment: it is cultivated when one
is aligned with the good—“when every activity, every enquiry, every practice aims at some good; for by “the good” we mean that at which human beings characteristically aim” (MacIntyre 1984:148). The idea is to make sense of one’s life as a whole by directing oneself towards a final aim or goal—telos. Ultimately, life guided by a telos will be human life lived at its best. Therefore, says MacIntyre, it is the “narrative” of a human life across time—and not an inner ethical substance—which ought to be the object of ethics (Colebrook 1998). Acting ethically constitutes a happy life and vice versa, since happiness cannot be separated from moral action or virtue—only a man who lives his life guided by “the good” can be happy (Lambek 2010; Hadot and Davidson 1995).

C. What is “the good”? The existence of public and shared criteria according to which one fashions oneself is part of what makes the Greek practices of self-care ethical. But what these criteria are is not exactly clear. The transformation of the self was done according to a common notion of the good life and an ethical goal, or telos, that was defined within a polis. Actions were evaluated according to certain ends, and these ends were defined, not according to some general or transcendent “good” but according to the practices themselves and the particular Athenian values of the good life (Colebrook 1998). Unlike Judeo-Christian ethics, the Greek belief was that the good is what we desire anyway (Devettere 2002). Yet, the concrete nature of “the good” remains vague, because it is context dependent and not universal. There is no general and transcendental good, so much as local and specific valuations (Colebrook 1998). Importantly though, the unspecified good is the very thing that makes self-care into an ethical practice, since it involves cultivating the better part of oneself and thus going beyond the self to think and act in unison with the whole (Hadot and Davidson 1995).

D. What is virtue and how is it related to freedom? The concept of virtue complements that of “the good.” Virtues are tied to disposition, and are seen as
forms of habit in practices. It is possible to describe virtues as practical wisdom and excellence of character that enables us to come to terms with what is best for each of us to do in the particular here and now of our always somewhat singular lives (Faubion 2001). The tradition of the virtues (in ancient Greece and in its contemporary manifestations) is always in everyday life—“it is always through the engagement by plain persons in a variety of practices, including those of making and sustaining families and households, schools, clinics, and local forms of political community” (MacIntyre 1984:xv).

Virtue is a matter of practice and action, not abstract principles. No single action or choice is good in itself, but virtues are what guide the activities and choices—actually, Aristotle himself regards ethics as the practice of virtues and even eudaimonia is not described as an interior state but always refers to some activity (Colebrook 1998). Later theories of ethics look at what an action means (in terms of intention, or the soul), but ancient ethics differs historically in asking what an action does. Macintyre defines “practice” as:

Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (MacIntyre 1984:71).

Practices, therefore, are the schools of virtues. Justice, courage, and truthfulness, for example, can only be cultivated through participation and action in the mundane activities of life (MacIntyre 1984:10).³

³ While Bourdieu’s theory of practice does not seem to engage with the ancient Greek under-
Foucault adds the aspect of freedom to the description of virtues. In his early writings, including the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault often seems to be thinking that modern “liberal” realities (including political domination, economic exploitation, and psychosocial subjugation) diminish ethical possibilities nearly to zero-degree (Faubion 2001). During the course of the long interruption between the first and second volumes of the *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault shifted emphasis and possibly underwent a change of mind. In his later writings, Foucault moved from governmentality to the power individuals exercise independently on themselves, in which self-regulation is seen as a freely chosen project involving available and imagined cultural models rather than being fully imposed or externally derived (Lambek 2010).

In the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault shows interest in the possibility of freedom as an ethical practice. To the techniques of production, signification, and domination, Foucault adds that there is also a fourth kind, which he calls techniques or technologies of the self. These “permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct—and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state—of perfection, happiness, purity” (Foucault 1988b; Laidlaw 2002:322).

Freedom, perhaps un-intuitively, goes hand in hand with exercising self control. Pierre Hadot describes the Greek technologies of the self as technologies of control: "Above all every school practices exercises of reason that will be, for the soul, anal-

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4 In an interview from 1984, Foucault was clear in repudiating the way he was already coming to be read. Yet, in two published pieces deriving from talks given in 1981 and 1982, he admitted that he had left himself open to such misrepresentation by emphasizing techniques of domination in his studies on asylums and prisons (Laidlaw 2002:322).
ogous to the athlete’s training (...) generally, they consist, above all, of self-control and meditation. Self control is fundamentally being attentive to oneself’ (Hadot and Davidson 1995:59). Foucault also describes virtue as a relationship of domination, of mastery, while persistently distancing himself from two utopian ideas about freedom: the idea that to act freely is to act in conformity with reason or one’s “true” interests (agency), and the idea that freedom is only possible in the total absence of constraint or relations of power (Foucault 1985; Laidlaw 2002). The Greek idea of self-care puts the accent on the relationship with the self that enabled a person to keep from being carried away by the appetites and pleasures, to maintain mastery and superiority over them, to keep his senses in a state of tranquility, to remain free from interior bondage to the passions, and to achieve a mode of being that could be defined by the full enjoyment of oneself, or the perfect supremacy of oneself over oneself (Foucault 1985:31). This ethical ideal preceded Freud’s theories and, thus, it does not equate “appetites and pleasures” with the id and “mastery and superiority” with the super ego. If one were to consider these terms, however, one can understand the Greek-inspired relationship with the self as offering a gradual process, an ongoing practice of fine-tuning that lasts a lifetime. I doubt that guilt was as much a part of this process as it is part of the super ego (and with guilt, the judgments and comparisons that were discussed in Chapter Four).

To conclude, ethical practice requires not simply a repertoire of technologies, but also an “open territory”—a social terrain in which a considered freedom might actually be exercised.\(^5\) Freedom from desires, appetites, fears, and involuntary actions seems to be what ultimately enables the release of oneself from oneself, and the invitation for each man to transform himself (Davidson 1990; Faubion 2001). Foucault uses the words “reflection” or “thought” as that which allows one to step

\(^5\) In ancient Greece, that open terrain was largely the province of citizen males; women and slaves had little, if any, access to it. In the panoptic apparatus, it is nowhere to be found (Faubion 2001).
back from ways of acting or reacting, to present those behaviors to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its condition, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what it does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem (Faubion 2001; Foucault 1997; Laidlaw 2002). Therefore, the freedom of the ethical subject, for Foucault, consists in the possibility of choosing the kind of self one wishes to be (Laidlaw 2002).

Before I being taking all this back to yoga, I would like to revisit the questions I opened with: First, what does it take for self-care to be considered ethical? It seems that in ancient Greece, self-care was considered ethical when it was directed toward the social whole, and not just for oneself. If one’s actions are aligned with a sense of the good and the virtuous, they are ethical. Second, what potentials, motivations, and desires emerge from modern thought and curiosity towards ancient Greek thought? Despite the vast differences between our days and ancient times, scholars seem to see potentials and lessons in ancient Greek thought. Ethics as a localized practice is one useful and relevant idea that is clearly present in the writings reviewed above; so is the goal of achieving some freedom from oneself (desires, weaknesses, and automatic responses) and self transformation. Not surprisingly, both ideas are present in the yoga studio as well.

6.2 Yogic Self-Care

Throughout this dissertation, I questioned whether the yogic discourse just encourages practitioners to draw inward and disengage, and what the meanings and repercussions of such tendencies are. Therefore, it may be counterintuitive (or it may sound like an unconvincing excuse for self-obsession) to claim that the yogic discourse that is the focus of this dissertation sees the practices of turning inward, creating space, and caring for oneself as making the practitioner into a better and
more ethical subject. In order to understand what makes self-care into an ethical practice, one has to understand what self-care actually means in a given time and place, and what different modes of engagement and disengagement it entails. So what does taking care of yourself mean for yoga practitioners in the Silicon Valley at the beginning of the twenty-first century? What kinds of emotional qualities characterize the desired relation to oneself? This section presents yogis’ views on *ahimsa* (nonviolence), anger, compassion, and detachment, as ways of promoting a healthier relationship with the self that ultimately leads to a more ethical way of life.

### 6.2.1 Yamas and Niyamas: The Self-Care Spin on Nonviolence

When I ask about ethics in interviews, yoga teachers and practitioners will often retreat to the *Yamas* and *Niyamas*—the most official and traditional articulation of yogic ethic, while giving it a strong self-care spin. The *Yamas* and *Niyamas* appear in Patanjali’s yoga sutras, as the first two of the eight limbs of yoga—which are not to be understood as consecutive steps but more as spokes on a wheel (Gates and Kenison 2002). The *Yamas*, which compose the first limb of yoga, are the five moral constraints:

- *ahimsa*—non-violence;
- *Satya*—truthfulness;
- *Asteya*—nonstealing;
- *Bramacarya*—moderation/continence;
- *Aparigraha*—nonhoarding/noncovetousness.

The *Niyamas*, included in the second limb of yoga, are the five observances:

- *Sauca*—purity/cleanliness;
- *Santosa*—contentment;
- *Tapas*—heat/zeal/austerity;
- *Svadhyaya*—self study;
Isvara-pranidhana—devotion to a higher power/surrender to God.

The other limbs are:
Asana—the postures;
Paranayama—mindful breathing;
Pratyahara—turning inward, meaning, withdrawal of the senses;
Dharana—concentration;
Dhyana—Meditation/contemplation;
Samadhi—the eighth and final stage of union of the self with the object of meditation (Iyengar 1993; Gates and Kenison 2002).

Often mentioned in popular yoga books, classes and interviews, the Yamas and Niyamas are open for interpretation, and they are by no means obligatory or rigid. Practitioners take from them whatever they wish to take, and some of the Yamas and Niyamas are definitely more popular than others. My impression is that the most repeated of them all is the first Yama, which is ahimsa—nonviolence. True to my disciplinary upbringing, when I think about non-violence, I think about violence—and then I think about the military and about various forms of structural violence, about forms of colonialism, capitalism, and development, about health-care and the poor. But in the yoga classes, workshops, and trainings I attended, ahimsa was most often reiterated as an encouragement to be good to oneself and to take care of the self. Violence was most often seen as ongoing criticism and negative thoughts, and as a habit directed first and foremost towards the self. Presumably, once a practitioner is good to herself—not in the sense of indulgence and hedonism, but in the sense of positive thinking and discipline—it is much easier and natural for her to show the same kind of compression and kindness towards others, seeing them as not entirely separate or different from herself.

In my teacher training course, I was taught that ahimsa means refraining as much as possible from doing harm, given that life without harming no one or nothing at all
is impossible. “Start with yourself,” our philosophy teacher said, quoting Gandhi’s famous saying of “be the change you want to see in the world.” A young woman who had just given birth four months earlier raised her hand. “What about ahimsa and vegetarianism?” she asked. The teacher said only that it is a personal decision, and that telling others to be nonviolent is a violent act. “It needs to come from within, not from should and should-nots,” was his answer.

The “do no harm” rule applies not only to actions but also to words and thoughts, and, as such, it is very much open for interpretation. Some yoga practitioners will refrain from killing bugs; some will do their best to decrease their carbon footprint and waste production; some will practice random acts of kindness; others try to gossip less or stop eating meat, eggs, and dairy products. Others will do none of the above, while finding other ways of ethical living for themselves. And there are, of course, yoga practitioners who do not really care about any of this, despite the fact that if one is part of the yogic discourse, ethical callings are hard to miss.

Ahimsa is perhaps the most popular ethical rule, but others (like truthfulness, non-stealing, and contentment) also resurface in classes and interviews. Some aspects of the Yamas and Niyamas were hardly talked about in my fieldwork (such as devotion to God, sexual celibacy, study of the scriptures, and austerity) even though these, too, were briefly mentioned in the teacher trainings I attended. Because this dissertation is less concerned with the formal teachings and more with how they translate and weaved into people’s lives, I shall leave the Yamas and Niyamas to that, acknowledging their importance yet not delving into their deep histories and textual life.

The tension arising from this short introduction on Yamas and Niyamas is apparent and important. The emphasis on the self-care as an ethical practice gives the chills to some (if not most) of the anthropologists and activists I know—in a way, it works against everything we are taught to believe. My own experience reflected this
tension as I kept experiencing and expressing anger, and kept receiving comments about it from yogis around me.

6.2.2 The Little We Can Do

Often, expressing anger felt like I was banging my head against the wall. The wall, of course, did not move. Naturally, my head started hurting, yet I could not help it. There was something behind that wall that I wanted to know more about, there was something there that I wanted to better understand, and there was something I wanted to change, not knowing how. So I kept asking the same questions and getting the same answers. I wanted to know how come others are not as angry as I am? How can they be at peace with injustice, poverty, violence, wars? Why do they seem not to care? Do they not know what is going on in the world? But I was not angry with others any more than I was angry with myself. I did not know why I was not doing more, or how I could utilize my anger. Queries about care, attention, and passion were burning inside me, but the unintelligible questions in my recorded interviews testify to how hard it was for me to articulate them. Eventually, the question was this: How can we (or should we) lead a political or ethical life today, as people who are among the privileged of the world, yet are not political leaders or committed activists (in other words, as people whose social status, resources, and commitment are still limited)?

Some of my interviewees realized what I was doing, and suggested that maybe I should try taking a different route, perhaps bypassing the wall I was banging my head against. Maybe, they said, you should consider working on your own attitude? I listened to their advice, but I felt the wall’s presence and kept rubbing against it, not quite knowing what to do. I was annoyed and bothered by the answers I got, but I also respected the people I spoke to and their points of view. Ultimately, I had to admit that I had no better answers myself, and that fact really got to me.
Below is an example from an interview in which I felt like I was banging my head against that unseen wall. At the time of the conversation, Mariam was a yoga teacher, who had recently left a potential career in biology (she had a position as a post-doc in an ivy-league university before quitting and moving to the Bay Area). She was living with her boyfriend in a co-op on the “wrong side” of the highway, and we were talking about being part of a community.

Neta: I am wondering what is our responsibility towards other people, in and outside of our communities. I wonder if we should protest wrong-doings, be really involved. I just wonder if, for some, being part of the “community” stops once you leave the yoga studio. When you watch the news, what do you care about? And what do we really care about enough to do something?

Mariam: The only real responsibility is that you set up for yourself. We talked about in it meditation class: if you have a strong independent practice, and you spend two or three hours a day just off on your mat, meditating for a long period of time, so isn’t that actually participating in the world? Not doing? But if you take a step back and think who you would be if you didn’t take that time, what you are actually doing is contributing to the bigness of the world by practicing yoga, by keeping yourself, by giving yourself that space to be and to do. So there’s so many things we could be doing right now, and if we take on too many things then everything is compromised and doesn’t happen. So is it better to take on one small thing, and really do it, or is it better to take a thousand huge things that don’t really make a difference?

N: I see your point. It’s just that whenever someone says in class “you have done something good for the world just by being here,” I’m like,
well maybe, but it’s not enough. We should be doing more. Stand up for somebody’s rights, you know? People are really suffering out there, and doing yoga won’t help them. Not that I know what will, but I worry that this soothes our consciences.

M: Eliminate our guilt, well, if you have a thousand people, and a hundred of them spend three hours a day going to yoga class, and five hundred spend three hours watching TV, and another four hundred go out being angry and maybe a little bit destructive in their relationships, I can see how those hundred people doing yoga create peace and change the world, and maybe those five hundred are brutal and four hundred who are actively destructive change the world for worse. So I can see how this doesn’t feel like a lot, but at the same time I can see that you have done good things. Even on the consumption level, you are not consuming at this time. Yes, it is very small. But if we had a few moments in time when everyone could create that peace within them, we will really heal a lot in the world.

So there you have it. Mariam avoided my question about politics and activism, while I wanted a revolution, right there. What should it look like, against what or whom, or how should it be done, I had no idea. At the very least, I wanted my interviewees to be as frustrated as I was (and in many ways still am). But my conversation partners had no intention of assuming that role. And they would not humor me by pretending to care more or any differently than they did. For many of them, taking care of themselves and becoming more peaceful and aware was enough of a contribution. It does have an impact, they insisted, and maybe this is all that we can wish for. Again and again, I asked about contributing one’s time or money, about being engaged and caring for larger causes. And time and time again, my
interviewees reiterated the ought of caring for oneself first, as in the following quote by Kalinda, a forty-something yoga teacher:

You make this commitment for the benefit of others. It’s okay to make sure that you are okay in order to give to others, it’s okay to have a little bit of time to reflect and contemplate in order for you to be this clear strong vessel to give to others. You have to refill yourself, you have to. (...) You need to replenish your energy. And if anyone says it’s pure selfishness, I disagree. I think that we all need a little bit of space to first ground ourselves before we are able to give (...) if you are grounded you can be nice to other people, you can be open to other people, you see somebody in a line in the grocery store let them go ahead of you, it’s about being so aware of your surroundings that you are able to give; I think the opposite makes you much more selfish.

Kalinda later suggested that we start a yoga class for Palestinians and Israelis in the Bay Area (but this never came to pass). Don, a yoga practitioner approaching retirement, also tried to teach me to care for myself first “because no one else will.” Maria, a yoga teacher I mentioned before, also told me to start on my own mat and be an activist for myself, explaining that:

We are unhappy as a culture and especially around here where we have everything, everything! We are so lucky in this country, and yet we probably have the highest rates of depression and mental illness and suicide. I don’t know the statistics for a fact, but just even people I come into contact with in my classes will come up to me and say I’m really dealing with this thing I think it’s because they are not showing up for themselves. They are not being activists for themselves, because they don’t understand the value of themselves.
After hearing again and again that being grounded and centered will make me a
nicer person and benefit everyone around me, I started asking if sparing mosquitos’
lives and being nice is enough. The same logic seemed to prevail: “Be the change
you want to see in the world,” they said. “Peace starts with me.” Lilly, who had
been working for a large company, explained it as follows: “I am just one person.
There isn’t a ‘them’ that is running things. The whole world is just a collection
of individuals. Institutions are just a bunch of individuals that agreed to think a
certain way. So, for me that makes me feel powerful actually, because I feel that can
make a difference.” What kind of difference? I asked.

If I am nice to people in the grocery store, then maybe that person, for
that one moment I will not have added to their stress, and maybe that
will lighten their load just a little bit. Or maybe I haven’t added to their
load. And I don’t know who that person is. Maybe a leader of a big,
giant thing, or the husband of a very powerful woman, and maybe he can
support that woman who does something great in the world. Like, you
know, there’s a domino. I feel like simple acts of making my immediate
environment can only be good. Two, I feel like I do not have the skill
to work with the things that make me angry, make things happen in a
way that won’t add to the negativity. Right now I want to be part of a
solution not to come from my anger, frustration, or fear. I want to be a
positive force in my immediate environment.

A few basic assumptions facilitate this point of view: first, as individuals we have
limited resources—there is only so much we can do. And doing “not much”—not
adding to people’s load (note the mechanical stress metaphor)—is still much more
than doing nothing.

This position of humility or helplessness (depending on the reader’s point of view)
is accompanied by a second assumption: that even the smallest deeds are meaningful. Yoga practitioners like to call it “the ripple effect,” saying that you can never know how far a little kindness go. As in the quote above, being nice to the people serving you or standing next to you in line at the grocery store is perhaps the most common example yoga practitioners gave me for how the ripple effect works: “Maybe the person next to you is a scientist or an important CEO? Maybe you have changed someone’s experience, and they would go on and do something meaningful? You can never know.” Clearly, I cannot really know if yoga actually makes practitioners nicer on a daily basis, beyond their testimonies and my interactions with them. I do not know how nice they were to begin with, and how they behave through their day. I will return to discuss “the grocery line answer” toward the end of this chapter.

Thirdly, practitioners usually mentioned the even more unsatisfactory: watching TV, shopping, working out at the gym. Doing yoga, my interviewees said, is far better than any of those activities, which are much more common than actually volunteering, making calls to congressmen and congresswomen, or doing something else that is considered to be an ethical activity (meaning, an activity that is aimed at some “good”) or political activity (one that is aimed at structural changes).

6.2.3 The Right Affects: Anger, Compassion, and Detachment

Given my own tendencies specified above, one of the first aspects of self-care I encountered was yogis’ views on anger. When I idealized the 1960s, the older members of my yoga teacher training course said that there was no need to be nostalgic since “these were very angry times.” When I repeatedly asked our philosophy teacher about collective responsibility and engagement with the world’s problems, other trainees later gently hinted at me that I may have some anger issues—“it is the second time he tells you to start with yourself,” said one women, clearly annoyed at my questioning of the teacher. In interviews, I was told that the term “activism” has bad
connotations because it is related to anger, violence, rage, and self-righteousness, and that there is another activism—a yogic, peaceful, compassionate one. In meditation workshops, participants were told that values are very important but getting upset with others does not help and usually just makes us feel righteous. Instead, they need to aspire to “live their values” and feel compassion for those who do not. In yoga classes and workshops, anger was often compared either to a hot coal one picks up in order to throw at others, but that burns one severely in the process; or to poison one drinks in the hope that someone else will die. The rationale behind these metaphors is simple and compelling: anger only destroys the one experiencing it. It is of no use to anyone. Anger is considered to be a negative emotion that needs to be controlled. There are better ways to change the world, if one is so inclined. At a social gathering, I heard a vegan yoga teacher saying that smoking is not a matter of liberties, but public health, and it should be banned even inside people’s homes because when her neighbors smoke in their houses, the smoke enters her home through the balcony and windows. She wants to do something about it, but the only reason she does not is because she will be motivated from anger—and that would be a wrong motivation for action.

Another example comes from a lecture by Seane Corn—a yoga celebrity, teacher, and activist. I heard her speak at a big yoga conference, and anger was one of the many things she talked about. Corn teaches yoga in Los Angeles, guides workshops all over the world, and is the co-founder of a non-profit organization named Off the Mat, Into the World (OTM). Each year, yogis and yoginis take part in a project under her guidance: they pledge to raise a substantial sum of money through various fundraisers and activities. People who are able to raise more than twenty thousand

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6 “Rather you are a man, woman or child you may occasionally struggle with anger. Some people experience this negative emotion more than others or to a greater extreme. In any case, yoga can be a great tool to help control fury.” From Yoga for Anger Management: http://sports.yahoo.com/news/yoga-anger-management-040200105--spt.html accessed August 21, 2012.
dollars accompany the founders on their annual trips to poverty and disaster-stricken countries (Cambodia in 2008, Uganda in 2009, South Africa in 2010, Haiti in 2011, India in 2012, Amazon in 2013) where they support NGOs and help in projects such as the “creation of an eco-birthing center and school, as well as an orphanage for children living with HIV/AIDS.”

Corn has a long history of activism, starting with her work for *Children of the Night* (a non-profit for helping children who were forced to work in prostitution) in the 1980s. At her lecture during the yoga conference, Corn described an old picture of herself from 1984, which was taken during a pro-choice demonstration. She was eighteen, and in the picture her eyes are shut, her mouth is huge, and she is screaming. “This is a picture of rage,” said Corn, “And rage makes one a bad activist—as it is clearly seen in the picture, when you are angry you cannot hear or see anything else.” I heard the same message in one interview after the other. “Anger is not going to serve you,” I was told, “It blinds you.”

One does not have to be a yoga practitioner to agree that very often, anger is indeed a bad adviser. But there is something interesting for me in the way that yoga discourse circumvents anger, defines it as a bad motivation for action, and delegitimizes it. Anger, writes Eva Illouz, is probably the most political emotion of all. One cannot imagine revolutions, demonstrations, and protest without it. By teaching us to “own” and manage our anger (very neoliberal advice), modern psychology and the self-help discourse claim anger to be a private problem and thus de-legitimise it (Illouz 2008). It can be argued that yoga works in a similar fashion, as it often labels anger as a negative emotion. “Shame, anger, guilt, offended honor, admiration are all emotions defined by moral content and by a substantive view of relationships, and these emotions have been progressively made into signs of

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emotional immaturity or dysfunction” (Illouz 2008:103).

Anger is a motivation for political action, and it is certainly being disqualifed as such in the yogic discourse. But it would not be right to say that it disqualifies action all together—sometimes, it seems as if yoga teachers and practitioners aim at redefining what political action and activism actually is.

The quote below is taken from my interview with Maria, who was mentioned before. Maria is a vegan and animal rights activist yoga teacher, who left her corporate job at the age of thirty.

There is so much working against something else, well, I am righteous because I’m vegan, I’m a yoga teacher and bla bla bla and I am doing all these things for good therefore screw everyone else who doesn’t do things the way I do. So you are working against something. There is this notion that yoga practice has to be hard, has to be a workout and I’ve got to get sweaty (...) in order for me to feel like I’ve done something. When you work against or when things are hard you are resisting something. Our yoga practice is supposed to connect us, unify, not separate. So when you work for Obama, when you are an activist for something, whether it’s being in a tree like Julia Butterfly Hill.8(...) Whatever it is that you do, like me talking about vegetarianism in class, if you are angry, proselytizing, preaching, making people feel less than because they are not on board with you, you will not succeed, period. You have to have a whole lot of compassion, because his perspective is different than mine does not make him bad, just in a different place (...) The only way we, as yoga practitioners, people of change, radicals if you will, you cannot meet people who have a different perspective than you with animosity,

8 Julia Butterfly Hill is an activist and an environmentalist who lived in an ancient redwood tree for more than two years and rescued it from being cut down.
anger, and violence. You got to take the Gandhi approach. At some point it does tap into *ahimsa*. When we continuously resist a different point of view we will get nowhere. It is about coming together, talking about religion and politics in a constructive, open-hearted way. Detached from your ego.

Talking about anger and resentment (and about defining oneself against someone or something) leads the speaker above to talk about *ahimsa*—non violence (which is stereotypically associated with the “Indian tradition” in the same way yoga is). I opened this chapter with *ahimsa*—an important aspect of self care and ethical life. As mentioned above, *ahimsa* is very often seen as an encouragement to be good to oneself, especially in a way of avoiding judging and being hard on one self (as discussed at length in the fourth chapter). Avoiding anger—which is perceived as a hot coal or poison and hence as a harmful affect (or energy)—is definitely part of practicing *ahimsa*, and it is to be done by practicing forgiveness and compassion.

How are compassion and forgiveness practices? Certainly, the words themselves are repeatedly tossed around in yoga classes, often without much explanation. Teachers will say things like: “Be compassionate to others, but remember to be kind to yourselves,” or “Don’t forget to be compassionate to yourselves, take a rest if you need to.” But every so often, teachers will actually take the time and lead practitioners through a forgiveness or compassion meditation. At one class I attended, practitioners were instructed to lay down on their backs at the end of class, relax their bodies, and imagine someone they love in a simple way, someone who instantly makes them feel compassion and love, perhaps an animal or a child. She asked them to silently say to themselves: “Like me, s/he wants to be happy and free of suffering.”

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9 Gandhi was brought up quite a lot in my research, not so much as a complex historical figure but as a symbol for non-violence and as the one that said “be the change you want to see.” These reiterations do not take into consideration the complicated history that led to the fall of the British Empire.
As the breathing of the room became slower and deeper, and silence prevailed, the teacher instructed practitioners to sense how this felt in their bodies. A few minutes passed before she continued. Asking practitioners to bring a normal relationship to mind, maybe a partner or a family member, she asked them to summon back the same sense of embodied compassion when holding the second person in mind—someone who is loved, but perhaps not in a simple, non-ambivalent way. Here, too, the yoga instructor paused and let practitioners feel the sensation and repeat the same sentence in their minds: “Just like me, this person wants to be happy and free of suffering.” Finally, practitioners were asked to bring someone annoying to mind—someone they are in conflict with, someone who is challenging to deal with. Reconnecting to the same sense of embodied compassion and the same sentence, practitioners had to acknowledge again that, just like them, the person they dislike seeks to be happy and free of suffering.

A similar pattern of what is known as loving-kindness meditation, or guided imagination, repeats itself in other classes and workshops. The attempt to foster a non-angry, non-violent approach to life is also done through the cultivation of forgiveness, such as in a yoga workshop for people with sleep disorders, which started by asking practitioners to forgive themselves. That same workshop ended with a forgiveness meditation I mentioned before, by the end of which sobs were heard across the room. I do not know who was crying and why, but I can only imagine that the theme of forgiveness struck a chord with that person and with others around him or her, as people accepted this in understanding and were not alarmed. The affective space of forgiveness speaks to the suffering of the privileged as it appears in Chapters Three and Four—to the tendency of my friendformants to take it all upon themselves, try to control all aspects of their lives, and therefore blame themselves for all that is going wrong. It also resonated with the Freudian explanation of guilt as internalized violence.
"Forgiveness," the yoga teacher guiding that workshop emphasized, "is not about justifying bad deeds and wrongs done—it just means that one releases the anger because it is poisonous to oneself." When it comes to compassion and forgiveness—words so misused and overused as to lose any real meaning—it can be relatively easy to understand why yoga teachers must rely on practice and bodily sensations in order to bring the message home. After all, one can be told to forgive over and over again, but it is probably safe to assume that most people know that actually forgiving, is, well, not the easiest thing to do (the relations between the body and the health risks of so-called negative affects were discussed in Chapter Five).

Trying to become more compassionate and less angry is all well and good—but for the politically minded anthropologist, it is also quite alarming, especially when bringing the concept of detachment back in. Detachment, the cherry on top of yogic self-care practices, is an old Buddhist teaching. It seems to be somewhat less intuitive and commonsensical than other concepts discussed above, and therefore it meets more resistance and is harder to teach. In a "spiritual activism" panel at a San Francisco yoga conference, detachment was brought up as an important issue. "We accept a lot of letters about detachment," said the editor of Yoga Journal, as she invited comments from the panelists. Julia Butterfly Hill opened: "If two people are doing the same thing for a cause, and at the end of their lives one of them is happy and the other is sad and exhausted because the world is not what he wanted it to be—who won? (...) Detachment means that when our day will come we will die with a smile, in peace and joy."

I never thought I would hear Julia Butterfly Hill—a woman who spent two years living in a tree—talk about detachment. The famous activist, after all, is everything but dispassionate. But detachment, according to her and many others in the yoga world, is not about being passive or indifferent. It is about doing your very best, but not being emotionally invested in the end-result; and it is about not becoming
upset with what is beyond one’s powers. Detachment has everything to do with
the cultivation of “the observer,” that part of the self that should remain calm and
still under all circumstances. Attachment, according to this logic, goes hand in hand
with suffering—be it attachment to a status-quo (which is bound to change), to loved
ones (from whom one will eventually be separated), to possessions, world views, and
beliefs. Richard, an African-American yoga teacher in his fifties (the only African
American I was able to interview), explained it to me as follows:

We don’t become without feelings—we are not attached to the outcome.
I love you, but not affected by whether you love me or not. Naturally we
have attachment to conditions or situations, and it is not easy to move to
detachment. It’s coping skills—it’s not that I don’t care, but the coping
skills are in how do I react to the situation. We learn through repetitive
exposure—in the first marriage you think you can change a person, in
the third marriage you see something about yourself. You can see things
coming. Some things you can simply avoid—I can choose to be angry vs.
anger is upon me. It’s not so much getting away from feelings as having
a choice, being observant. It’s not about being numb, on the contrary—
emotion is even more vivid. The difference is between being emotionally
involved or having an emotion. Being able to change my perspective
on the situation, keep my creative mind. I care about wars—but the
outcome won’t affect me.\footnote{Here, it seems as if Richard talks about wars in other parts of the globe that cannot impact his life in any obvious way. The thought of a war close to home does not come up as a possibility.} You can be passionate but not emotionally
involved.

Can you? According to Richard and many others, it is not easy to be detached
but it is definitely something to be tried out and experienced. Richard’s words, if
taken seriously and not just as New-Age clichés, articulate a different grid of caring
and responsibilities than the one I was used to in my academic life and volunteering activities. As I see it, they mean that one’s first and foremost obligation is to oneself—one needs to learn how to approach life in order not to be broken by it, in order not to be devastated by failures and tragedies. As another yoga practitioner put it: “Attachment as an obstacle for experiencing the present moment. I will enjoy this glass of wine but, as far as I’m concerned, it is already broken.”

A few important practices are encapsulated in the attempts to detach. First, one needs to acknowledge that all is temporary and bound to change, and not to grasp too much on that which is necessarily fleeting. Also, one must practice mindfulness and observe all, including oneself and one’s emotions or thoughts, from a carefully cultivated, external point of view. As a person who is usually fighting with reality (as said, I am good at banging my head against walls and not as good at practicing acceptance), this was hard for me to digest—and yet, I could see how this whole detachment, non-violence, non-angry, compassionate rhetoric can offer some relief.

6.3 Relationships

As I hope to have shown, the logic of the yogic discourse is built on the axiom of self-care: if one is miserable and violent toward oneself, one cannot possibly do good and be of any benefit to others. This is why yoga teachers will recommend that detachment, non-violence, forgiveness, and compassion be practiced first and foremost in relation to the self. Importantly, these are not relations of hedonism, nihilism, or convenience. On the contrary—the popular philosophy of yoga often offers a discipline, a demand, and a way to align oneself with ethical principles, and, importantly, to constitute oneself as an ethical subject. The demand to do the right thing, and not only the convenient thing, manifests in classes where teachers, on the one hand, will encourage practitioners to back off if they feel pain and take a rest if needed, but on the other hand, will try to push practitioners beyond the limits
their minds dictate (stay in a pose, hold it, observe the thoughts, find ease in the
difficulty). This compassionate discipline shows itself in relationships with others as
well. Here is how I first came to recognize the “ought” beyond the seemingly soft
and fuzzy self-care discourse.

It was the fall of 2009. I came back to California after being away for the summer.
Upon my return, a close group of friends introduced me to someone new they had
just met at an art exhibition. He is great, they said. Intelligent, open minded, kind,
and a great cook. Plus, he is single and just moved to the area, so he really needs
the company. I was curious to meet him, and it was not too long before we were
all invited to his house for dinner. The gathering went pretty well, but there was
something slightly off about the host. I could not really explain what it was.

As a few more social gatherings passed by, I started getting seriously troubled.
Our new friend wanted to get together all the time—be it for lunch, for a yoga class,
or for dinner. During the weekend, he invited the whole group for dinner parties and
hikes. His neediness was somewhat touching, but when we met, he was unable to talk
about anything else but himself in excruciating detail. His self-perception seemed
to be so misguided that it became impossible for me to be around him. He seemed
to be a depressed, sad person who testified that he was cheerful and lively; a self-
obsessed person who thought of himself as a considerate and loving friend. There was
something so sad, desperate, unaware, yet passive-aggressive and demanding about
him. My whole group of friends felt trapped—we could no longer have a get-together
without inviting him (doing that would be totally devastating for him, as he already
perceived himself to be an integral part of our small groups). We did not want to
lie and hide, but his presence became so burdensome that we actually met less and
less. It was a vicious cycle of guilt and resentment.

One day, as I was sitting with a few of my friends from yoga teacher training, I
brought up the issue, seeking advice. A big holiday was approaching and I planned
on inviting people over. I did not want him there—just the thought of his presence burdened my heavily. I admitted that being around him made me feel sad, angry and tired, and that I did not even know why—but that was the case, and what was I to do?

The answer surprised me. I was expecting a self-care oriented answer, something along the lines of “your first commitment is to yourself.” I expected this group of yoga teachers and practitioners to encourage me to stay true to my “authentic” feelings. But instead, they said that I should invite him, since it is a big holiday, and he is by himself. Furthermore, I should take it as an opportunity for cultivating awareness and practicing detachment. “Don’t respond to him,” they said, “watch your emotions rise, but don’t get engaged.” One of my yoga friends at the table, an experienced yoga teacher, told me to read yoga sutra 1.33, quoting the long phrase, in Sanskrit, from memory.11 Sutra 1.33 talks about the cultivation of friendliness, compassion, joy/delight and indifference/equanimity—and after referring me to it, my friend continued elaborating about the case at hand:

You are going to run into people like that, and you just have to disregard. So you invite him but don’t engage, say hi, how you doing, and whatever it is that he is bringing to the table, say “we are here to have good time, we’d love you to join us.” And then you move on. You don’t get into a sewing circle about how horrible this person is. It’s the water against the edge of the stone. But it’s not easy.

The following day, another person who was part of the conversation emailed me a poem by Mary Oliver. The opening lines were:

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11 Sutra 1.33: maitri karuna mudita upkasanam sukha duhkha punya apunya visayanan bhavanatah cittaprasadanam, translated as “through cultivation of friendliness, compassion, joy, and indifference to pleasure and pain, virtue and vice respectively, the consciousness becomes favorably disposed, serene and benevolent (Iyengar 1993).
“You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.”

I loved the reassuring message of the poem and its refusal of Judeo-Christian guilt. Moreover, this poem expresses a belief in the inherent goodness of human nature. The poem, as I saw it, was a double message: first, it told me not to punish myself and not to force kindness out of myself. It said that I am already a good person and that I do not have to work hard in order to become good. But in a way, it did urge me to do just that—the poem, as I read it, was about choosing love over resentment and guilt, about focusing on the positive rather than on the negative. Moreover, it was about making a deliberate and conscious choice and not being tempted by selfish motives and comfortable solutions.

Managing that particular relationship with compassion and awareness, and without guilt and anger, remained a challenge for me. I am afraid I did not do a very good job—I invited him to that gathering, but eventually my resentment became obvious. But confessing my sin is not the reason for bringing this story here. Rather, I am telling it because the advice my yoga friends gave me surprised me. Their answer did disciplining work—it required me to take responsibility for myself and my relationship, to be kind and generous despite my will, and to do the right thing—in this case, to invite a lonely person into to my home. It was not about some free-floating, self-serving pseudo-ethics. It demanded that I do something I did not want to do,

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12 Wild Geese/Mary Oliver - You do not have to be good./You do not have to walk on your knees/for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting./You only have to let the soft animal of your body/love what it loves./Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine./Meanwhile the world goes on./Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain/are moving across the landscapes,/over the prairies and the deep trees,/the mountains and the rivers./Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,/are heading home again./Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,/the world offers itself to your imagination,/calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—/over and over announcing your place/in the family of things. [http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/oliver/online_poems.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/oliver/online_poems.htm) accessed July 23 2010. About two years after this poem was sent to me by email, I heard it being quoted at the end of a yoga class.
and it also demanded that I be aware of my inclination and to change my behavior and thought patterns. More than anything, it demanded me to detach, not to get engaged in anger, not to automatically respond. However insignificant and personal this may seem, the fact is that it was not easy. After all, I failed to rise up to the challenge.

Similar ethical demands, folded into relationship stories, kept repeating in my interviews and conversations. Sporadic references to the challenges of relationships during yoga classes echoed the demands as well. People talked to me about their friends, students, co-workers, partners, parents, and mothers-in-law (somehow, fathers-in-law seem to be less of a problem), and about their attempts to do the right thing—meaning, not to be hurtful, angry, and mean—even when it seems like the other deserves it. This, of course, is not unique for the yoga world. But challenges that probably all people experience in their relationships seemed to be colored and influenced by yogic discourse, which is apparent in people's attempts to detach, accept their nemeses as they are, and take responsibility for their relationships. Such was the case with Don, a sixty-something-year-old yoga practitioner who had been divorced twice. I was asking him if he currently had a partner, and he said that he indeed has one:

I've got a partner who is not happy with me. We have a great time when we are together, you know, but she doesn't like it that my daughter is at home so she can't be with me all the time. So there's this need, so, that's an issue right now. And I tell her, hey, this is an issue that you have,

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13 The forever tense relationship between mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law is a fascinating issue that probably relates to gender expectations in many ways. It is beyond the scope of this research (I could write a lot on the subject, though) and it could provide enough material for many different dissertations. Without doing research on the topic, I can only guess that women's identities are traditionally more invested in their relationships, children, and families; and that the competition, comparisons, judgments, and need for space that I discussed in the Chapters Three and Four are related to this seemingly inherent tension.
you gotta address this. This is all from the yoga thing. So she hates whenever I bring it up. She keeps pushing it off (...) And she would love to get married, but I don’t know that I even want to be remarried again. You know is there really a need, to be married? If you have kids yes, I can see that, if you want to start a family, yes, absolutely, but at my stage in life do I really need that? You know two adults can be together, and share a life together, not necessarily be so bound together that they have to be married. But she is very old fashioned from that standpoint. And the relationship has been extremely positive from my perspective, and it’s only because I have taken it from that standpoint that, hey, you don’t like it—I’ll see you later. You know it will break my heart that we will have to leave, but I can move on. (...) It helped to maintain the relationship.

Don’s scenario is a classic one. After all, what is more stereotypical than a man not willing to commit and a woman eager for commitment? But here, the story takes on an interesting yogic twist. At least when he speaks to me, Don is very clear on where he stands and what he can and cannot give his partner. He will neither take responsibility for her desire to get married, nor will he be willing to entertain it. For him, this is a mindful act of self-care—Don knows where he stands, and makes his position very clear. He actively refuses to get entangled in a web of guilt, emotional extortion, and doubt. Don is drawing his line and willing to pay the price of a break up, if needed. In a way, he already let go of the relationship while still being in it. He can see a future in which the relationship ends, and even then, his heart may

14 Don’s story emphasizes another aspect of gender-related stress—the desire for commitment. A twenty-three-year-old yoga practitioner who had just moved in with her boyfriend after college told me that her parents were not happy about her new living arrangements and at least wanted a proper wedding proposal. The man’s parents, on the other hand, put a lot of pressure on him to postpone the official commitment.
be broken but he trusts that he will be fine. Letting go of something pleasurable while it still exists—like the exercise I mention above of enjoying a glass of wine while imagining it already broken—is a practice of detachment. For Don, this is what makes his experience of the relationship extremely positive. One may see his behavior as selfish, but it can also be claimed to be very considerate: he does not lie and does not deceive. He sees himself as responsible for his own happiness and calls on his partner to be responsible for hers. This point of view testifies to a well considered ethical position concerning responsibility, truthfulness, and self-care. If I choose to believe Don (and I do), it seems that he cares about his partner and is clearly interested in being with her, but his first obligation is to himself, while being honest with (and fair to) his partner.

Not only detachment, but forgiveness and compassion as antidotes to anger resurfaced in a lot of my conversations when relationships were discussed. The following quote is from an interview with Mandy, a yoga teacher who is explaining to me how she made peace with her mother and mother-in-law.

The yoga practice is alleviating my ideas, my thoughts. I moved out of my ego a lot more because I found that my resistance towards her (the mother-in-law) was either something within in me that I didn’t like—she was mirroring back at me—or this notion that I know better, that I’m right. And that’s ego, that’s ego based. And our yoga practice helps us to get out of that, because that’s not guiding us in the correct way. Once you surrender, the relationship changes completely. You may not be best friends, but there’s a neutrality that moves in, like an energy. When I started to accept my mother-in-law for who she is instead of vilifying her for who she is, and really just say, you know, this is where she’s coming from and why can’t I receive that (...) You have to let them
be who they are and receive that... it’s who they are. And the minute you stop resisting they will too—when you can start meeting them with compassion, and meeting them with... “this is where she is at, I don’t know what her story is.” You know when I started to know more about my mother in law and her story, and where she came from, post World War II Germany, and the trauma in that, and all these things, all of the things that I would make fun of, her neuroses—well wait a minute, how would I be if I came from that and who am I to judge? So, it’s not like we were best friends right off the bat but she tried and I tried. Same thing with my own mother, same thing. My mother is still my mother, don’t get me wrong. She is still a little crazy. But now I can love her for that as opposed to roll my eyes. She has something of value to bring to the world, to me, to my daughter. But it takes time, and we co-create the pain, the hurt, all of that. Sometimes it doesn’t have to be a sit-down-let’s-have-a-come-to-Jesus as I like to call it conversation when we get to each other’s truth: it’s just a gesture. It’s that simple. Like hey, you want to go to lunch sometime, just hang out, talk about nothing? Or she is making dinner, can I help you? “No no, I’ll do it myself.” Okay, well if there’s anything that I can help you with I’ll be more than happy to. And you just keep doing that, it’s like taking water against a stone. And eventually that edge starts to soften. (...) But you have to be in an authentic space, cause if you are just trying to do that just to look good... You gotta want to heal.

Wanting to heal, yes. Many of my interviewees and friendsformants badly wanted to heal. The way toward healing, as it seems, runs through these themes of changing from within by becoming less violent and angry, more aware, more detached, and
more compassionate. But how does one heal from relationships with abusive or alcoholic parents, or from a mother who gets more emotionally stable the farther away her daughter is? Clearly, the people telling me these difficult stories did not rely on yoga alone to help them. The passing years, becoming a parent, psychotherapy, meditation, support groups, and drugs (mostly legal ones) were all bricks composing what was perceived to be the road to recovery. Yoga was woven into those stories over and over again as a practice that promoted the practitioner’s ability to be mindful of her harmful behavior patterns, and simultaneously disengage from people and forgive them. Once again, taking care of oneself—being mindful, calm, forgiving, and compassionate was seen as the ethical and responsible thing to do, and as a practice benefiting oneself and all others. I cannot emphasize enough that this practice is far from being the easy or a selfish thing to do—after all, keeping silent or expressing one’s anger and resentment is often far easier than getting over oneself. Practicing awareness and mindfulness requires a fair amount of responsibility and discipline, but not one acquired through guilt and shame.

In the next section, I discuss how these life lessons are carried over to bigger circles and issues: a woman debating whether to file a sexual assault complaint, and people wanting to contribute to a better world beyond their family and friends.

6.4 Making a Difference

So far, I discussed intimate relations—of a person with herself or with people from her close circles. But as I mentioned above, my interviews included questions about engagement, activism, power relations, and “the political.” Most often, the answers I received circled back to intimate relationships and to the near and dear, as people spoke in favor of “doing the little one can do.” In my conversations, terms like “small steps” and “the ripple effect” repeated themselves a lot, alongside the imperative to be attentive to oneself. After I discuss these common responses, I will move on to
three specific examples in which I witnessed the yogic ethical discourse surface. First, I discuss the dilemma of a woman contemplating whether to press charges against a man who sexually assaulted her, framing her problem through the yogic discourse. Second, I will discuss the case of veganism and vegetarianism. Lastly, I will tell the story of my involvement with a non-profit organization that brings yoga to teen girls in the California Juvenile Justice System. In all of these case studies, the question of doing the right thing is framed within the principles of self-care I described above. Based on this material, I suggest that there is no clear divide between individual self-care and organized politics (just as there is no such divide between the suffering of the traditional oppressed and the suffering of the privilege). Moreover, I suggest that the lack of such division reconfigures the notion of activism and the political in interesting ways.

6.4.1 Small Steps

As I mentioned above, whenever I tried to push the question of our responsibilities as relatively privileged people, my interviewees gave me disciplining advice. Again and again, I was encouraged to focus on myself rather than seek involvement in world-changing activities. When I asked what our responsibilities are, I was told that “we need to coexist” and that yoga helps people in being friendly to one another. More than anything else, I felt that I was being told to scale back. When I asked in one interview if not killing mosquitoes and being nice to people is enough, the interviewee, a Buddhist and a yoga practitioner, told me once again to be the change I want to see. “Peace starts with me, and I am just one person” she said unapologetically. When I dared to ask a stay-at-home mom what she actually does, or differently put, how does she see her service today, I got answers like: “My job at this point is to better what’s coming next—my kids. My contribution to the world is through them.” When I asked a therapist the same question, the answer was: “I feel like my
work allows me to make a contribution.” Not only did the answers reflect what I perceived to be a narrow scope, so did the explanations—before one acts, I was told, one has to figure out what is her specific role in life, meaning, what are her skills, and also where, when, and how she feels most comfortable intervening. One yoga teacher says: “I was figuring out what my role was. Probably it is to get certain ideas into people’s minds, my skills are being a writer and a teacher.” Another practitioner echos the same logic: “Everyone needs to figure out what their timing is for being active” and a third practitioner simply explains that she is not the person who will volunteer, since it does not feel right to her. “It doesn’t make me a bad person,” she adds: “if I minimize carbon footprint and be a better person and help people I meet, by nature of that I lift the universe—that has just as much value as shipping food to Africa. It is more on a spiritual energetic level. It’s about the intention and the energy you put into it.”

Once again, the motifs of drawing inwards to the private and the personal, and finding one’s own space, surface. But these small changes that we make through our self-improvement and self-discovery, I have been repeatedly told, can go a long way. “I’d rather have 1 percent from a hundred people rather than a 100 percent from one person,” Kate said, “the more people become engaged the better. There will be a lot of people doing something little. That’s the ripple effect (...) I do believe that some people were born to make profound changes. I don’t necessarily know why. Gandhi, Jesus, Buddha, Martin Luther King. People who come to deliver a message.” It was at that point that she looked right at me and asked: “Are you in a place in your life you can do that?” Clearly, I was not. But I did ask if she thought that doing the little we could was enough. “It’s not enough,” my friend firmly said. “But it is a beginning.” Andrea, who immigrated from Europe, also advocated doing little—but not without self-criticism and an expression of helplessness:
I pray not for myself but for world peace. That’s real nice, I have a cushy job, I’m doing yoga, I’m praying for peace. Very American thing, donate your time, Angelina Jolie model. I can never quite reconcile that. If I can be at peace, not angry, that’s a huge contribution to world peace. Am I falling short? It gets daunting, I did pack food and clothes—you are such a small piece and it’s daunting, who are those people making decisions?

While some clearly express that sense of helplessness (“Some days you don’t want to get out of bed, what does it matter? (...) There’s the hopeless feeling of what do I have to offer”), others tie it with that mistrust in those making the decisions that shape our lives, and the choice to accept life as it is. Here, for example, is part of my conversation with Andrea about food choices, which is reminiscent of the conversations quoted in the previous chapter:

Who really knows what’s healthy or not? Tap water? Who knows what’s true anymore. There’s chemicals—what are you going to do? I can figure that out, I am a chemist. But you accept life. It’s what it is, I’ll drink tap water.

The following conversation I had with Lauren sums up, I believe, the recurring themes I have tried to flesh out.

Neta: Yes, be the change you want to see, but is it enough? There’s part of me that wants more. Okay, I’ll be the change, but as an Israeli, there’s the occupation, and what did I do about that? I’ll be nicer to people, leave bigger tips, but what about Iraq? The Palestinians? The homeless in the street?

Lauren: Those are big, big questions. I think that they can overwhelm you. Because we, immediately, when we go into the activist state, there’s
the desire to be the change, and by the way in order to do that you have to be willing to look at your own stuff that keeps you from being receptive, from having that connection to the earth. The connection to the earth should be steady and joyful; when it’s not you can’t be the change. At the same time, if you want peace you have to give it to others first. Be of service. That’s huge. Sure, we would all love to solve the world’s problems, hunger and war (...) I don’t know that it’s my problem to solve. What I do think—it’s the small things that make a difference. It’s the little things. It’s what you do on the mat. It’s huge. How do you meet your poses? Start there (...) When you get off the mat, then you can really start applying those things. The big stuff is overwhelming (...) all you can do is start small, and not put that kind of pressure on yourself to solve the world’s problems, whether it’s becoming vegan, becoming more kind, more compassionate, more connected, less I me mine, more we.

All of the ideas expressed above (start small, do little, focus on yourself and on how you live your life) are not just excuses that were given to me in private conversations. In the yoga conference in San Francisco I mentioned above, explicit calls for ethical life were also anchored in the personal and in the primary ethical ought of self-care. One session of the conference featured four women, two of whom were previously mentioned. Kaitlin Quistgaard, the editor of Yoga Journal, was the session’s moderator. With her on stage were Seane Corn and Julia Butterfly Hill (when Julia Butterfly Hill was introduced, a yoga teacher famous for her avid animal rights activism rose up to her feet, clapping and encouraging the mostly reluctant audience to give a standing ovation). The third panelist was Katchie Ananda, a yoga teacher who teaches classes at San Quentin prison. The panel was dedicated to “spiritual activism.” Below is a section of the conversation that took place on stage:
Kaitlin Quistgaard: Not everybody come with passion. What do you do when you don’t know what to do?

Seane Corn: Send an envelope, answer a phone. The universe will give you the opportunity and the skills. It’s about making small steps.

Julia Butterfly Hill: I didn’t plan to live in a tree, I didn’t know how to do it. We have to stop believing the myth that we have to know how to do something before we do it. It always starts with the first step, one foot in front of the other. Don’t let what you don’t know stop you. We are overwhelmed because we get isolated. We need experience in small groups, we need support. There’s a symbolic tree to everyone in this room and in the world. Start at the beginning—discover what is the cause, who am I called to be in my life. Inspiration, community, action. To be an activist is to be in your community and see something out of alignment, very close by and of interest to us. When we are seen, valued, and cared for, we can sustain involvement. Every time we are on the mat we are in such place of profound privileged, we don’t worry about food or bombs. With privilege comes the responsibility.

Even in a conference session that is meant to motivate people for action, there remains an emphasis on small steps, starting at the beginning and close to home, and above all—self-care. The same themes came up in another case study I present next, in which a friend consults with me on the painful issue of sexual harassment.

6.4.2 Nina’s Ethical Dilemma

“Doesn’t that mean that I betray all women?” Nina asked with all seriousness. What was I to say? The woman cruising the farmers’ market with me on that sunny winter day was a yoga teacher and a highly accomplished professional. We were just
heading out of a Sunday morning yoga class, and decided to take a walk and get some coffee. I already knew that she was sexually harassed by a high-ranked person in her company a couple of years back. Now, she was telling me that the company’s lawyers were trying to exhaust her energies and resources during multiple ten hour sessions of questioning. Simultaneously, they were trying to buy her off. After a year of negotiations, the lawyers suggested a relatively modest sum of money in return for her silence and disappearance. The suggestion was tempting, since Nina had no interest in staying in California or with her company. Between munching one organic fruit sample and the other, she told me about her boyfriend, whom she had met on her last summer vacation, and her desire to go back to him and to her European home country. “What I really want is to teach yoga and get pregnant,” she said, her voice saturated with anticipation and joy. Her dream life would become much more feasible if she accepted the company’s offer. Going to court, on the other hand, would mean staying in California for a few more years and suffering the emotional distress of having a high profile, billion-dollar company working to discredit her in any possible way. Wanting children, she didn’t feel that she had time or money to waste on the torment of a trial.

We bought some organic oranges and sat in a coffee shop, overlooking the lively farmers’ market. Kids were running by and a band was playing cheerful country music. It was then that I found myself saying: “So why don’t you take the money and go home, be with your boyfriend, have babies, teach yoga, and live the life you want?” Nina looked at me, surprised, her coffee cup at a halt halfway between her lips and the table. “But doesn’t that mean that I betray all women? Don’t you think I should be pursuing justice for all women out there?” We sat there for a while, discussing what became not only a concrete life choice but an ethical dilemma. Did Nina have a commitment to all women? Did she have to pursue justice at whatever personal cost? Should she prefer her own wellbeing, knowing that the man who did
her wrong gets to keep his job and possibly hurt others, and that the company gets away with its cover-up? Will an anger-driven action be useful to her and to the general wellbeing? And how can she practice compassion to herself in this difficult situation? We didn’t come to a concrete solution, but it seemed that the idea that pleased her most was to go back to her home country and find other ways of “paying off her debt” and “giving back” to women. She was thinking about solutions like volunteering at a rape crisis center and teaching yoga as a way to raise money and as a free service to women who have gone through sexual injury.

Like all other conversations quoted in this dissertation, the scene I just described could have happened in many other contexts. And yet, while it is in no way particular to the yoga discourse, it is definitely colored by it. The legitimacy of self-care—seeing it not as the non-ethical and selfish thing to do, but as yet another ethical calling—is very much impacted by my friend’s ten-year-long yoga practice, as is her emphasis on action which is not motivated by anger or revenge but by a desire to do good and “give back.”

Admittedly, as a feminist with a strong sense of justice (and possibly, anger issues), it was hard for me to suggest to my friend that maybe she should take the money and go home. I strongly believe that sexual harassment victims have an obligation to speak up. Yet, influenced by yogic lessons myself, I thought that it is not my place to demand justice when she, and she alone, will be paying the price for it. As a forty-year-old-woman, she clearly was unwilling to pay the price of postponing having children in order to go for a trial. The yogic discourse, in this case, allowed her to be at peace with herself in spite of making a presumably less ethical choice.

On that beautiful Californian day at the farmers’ market, the contrast between the exploitative, violent side of the human existence and that scene of beauty, leisure, and pleasure around us was overwhelming. Likewise, the contrast between Nina’s
two choices, framed as “self-care” vs. “justice” seemed almost too sharp to be fully grasped. Nina’s choice can be dismissed as easy and unethical—after all, I strongly believe that structural change will happen only if more and more women complain and press charges against those who harass them. Yet, so many women choose to keep silent, without even being concerned that they may have an ethical and political obligation. Nina, at the very least, was torn by her choice and reflexive about it.

While it is important to remember that the darker aspects of life form an integral part of seemingly innocent social scenes, and that acknowledging them often entails a call for ethical choice-making, it is also important to recognize that ethical awareness does not have to be a result of an existential dilemma or an encounter with violence or inequality.\(^\text{15}\) Differently put, ethical choices emerge not only after “life altering” experiences but also as part of daily life.

My last example examines those issues from yet another perspective—that of women who choose to teach yoga to incarcerated teen girls, thus coming in contact with the victims of sexual abuse, prostitution, crime, and gang or domestic violence—but first, I turn to discuss ethical food choices.

6.4.3 Vegetarianism and Veganism

If I had to guess, I would say that most of the people who practice yoga in the U.S. are neither vegetarians nor vegans (vegetarianism means eating no meat. Veganism is the avoidance of any animal products: meat, dairy, eggs, honey, leather, etc.).\(^\text{16}\) But I would also guess that the rates of vegans and vegetarians among yoga practitioners are higher than among the general population—not only for health reasons but also

\(^{15}\) This was the case after another friend’s trip to Cambodia, when she struggled to make sense of her privilege as the memory of the killing fields haunted her. Feeling grateful for being born in the U.S., she felt she had to make a difference, however small, and decided to collect and donate children’s books to a rural school.

\(^{16}\) I did not manage to find any quantitative research on the ratio of veganism and vegetarianism among yoga practitioners.
for ethical reasons. In an article that was published in *Yoga Journal*, Jennifer Barrett writes:

Many traditionalists see yoga as being inextricably linked with the meatless path, citing numerous ancient Indian texts to prove their conviction. Others put less stock in centuries-old warnings like “the slaughter of animals obstructs the way to heaven” (from the Dharma Sutras) than in what their bodies have to say. If eating flesh begets health and energy, they argue, it must be the right choice for them—and their yoga.

(...)

Scores of yogis live and eat with the understanding, as expressed by B.K.S. Iyengar, that a vegetarian diet is “a necessity” to the practice of yoga. But other, equally dedicated yogis find flesh a necessary fuel, without which their practice suffers. Those yoga enthusiasts still on the fence when it comes to the meat question should take heart, however. It seems that a thoughtful, deliberate, and at times even challenging consideration of vegetarianism is very much in the spirit of the Indian spiritual tradition.17

Although it may not be the majority, there is certainly a distinct voice within the yogic discourse that preaches for avoidance of some or any animal products—a voice that easily convinced me, an on-again-off-again vegetarian since adolescence, to finally give up meat, eggs, and almost all dairy products for good.

Those who choose a vegan (or vegetarian) lifestyle do so for many reasons. The *Yama* of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) is deeply tied to that decision, as well as ideas concerning karma and health. Many of my yoga friends struggled with the question of eating meat, as in the following example from a conversation I had with two friends from a yoga teacher training:

Franchesca: I stopped eating meat, and after a while I found myself weak and anemic. I almost eat right off the shelf at the grocery store, and I said, wait a sec, what’s going on with me? I am torturing myself.

Kristin: When you torture yourself you are being hard on yourself, and you can’t be good to others. Being strict has more violence to it than anything else.

F: Yes, I felt like I was torturing myself. So I let it go, I let my body decide. I am not eating [meat] every day. I never wanted beef or pork. They forced me to eat it as a child.

The same ideas surfaced in other conversations I had with meat eaters: the desire to stay true to what one’s body seems to be needing, and to avoid being harsh on oneself. The same logic dominates yoga classes as well—even if they avoid eating animal products, yoga teachers usually avoid discussing vegetarianism in classes, as they do not want to alienate or judge their students.

Other voices in the U.S. yoga world take a much firmer position on the issue. The Jivamukti yoga school, which was founded and is being led by Sharon Gannon and David Life, is a hub for animal rights activists. Their main center in New York, near Union Square, supports a vegan café and a store where their books (Jivamulti Yoga, Yoga and Vegetarianism, Cats and Dogs are People Too) are being sold. In their Jivamulti Yoga book, Gannon and Life articulate an uncommon view of ahimsa:

Ahimsa is a yama, a restraint. It is a recommendation for how you should restrain your behavior toward others, not toward yourself. (...

Nonetheless, some contemporary yoga teachers interpret ahimsa more as an observance than as a restraint, as a directive not to harm yourself. “Don’t be aggressive in your asana practice, be kind to your body,” they say, or “Don’t restrict your diet with extremes like vegetarianism; it might
harm you.” Not harming yourself is an aspect of *ahimsa*, certainly, but it is of less importance than the directive to avoid harming others. If you limit your practice of *ahimsa* to being kind to yourself, you will deny yourself the ultimate benefit of yoga practice, which is everlasting happiness. Everlasting happiness is achieved by putting the welfare of others before your own (Gannon and Life 2002:56).

The call for ethical living is sound and clear. On the one hand, Gannon and Life urge yoga practitioners to be attuned to others’ well being, as they say that the right thing to do—not hurting others—is more important than individual needs. On the other hand, even that call is grounded in the personal, since one’s own happiness is dependent upon putting the welfare of others before your own. In other words, an argument for selflessness turns to be all about the self: the practitioner should put others before herself because, ultimately, this is the only way to be truly happy.

For Gannon and Life, as well as other vegan yoga teachers, veganism is not just a matter of happiness but of justice and kindness. In a conversation with Liz, a vegan yoga teacher, she says the following:

I’ll tell you what’s really unsatisfying for me. I have a friend who runs podcasts; she is a big vegan. She interviews famous yoga teachers, asks about *ahimsa* and vegetarianism. So far, I am the only person who said yes, I am vegan. All the other answers are the same: “its not about eating meat, its about how you treat yourself.” She stopped asking the question because she always gets the same answer. I want people to understand karma. Recognize the cost of an action. There are no harmless lives. In this society, you can’t get meat without torturing. And your actions should be consistent with values.
The yogic call for ethical food consumption resonates with the growing intellectual curiosity toward the relationship between humans and animals, including the consumption of the latter as food (Rudy 2011, 2012; Haraway 1989, 2003; Adams 2010; Kheel 1995). While some writers draw a direct connection between feminism, veganism, and animal rights (Kheel 1995), others are more interested in understanding the intricacies of nature, culture, gender, race, and labor division as it appears in the way in which humans relate to animals (Haraway 1989, 2003, 2007).

Arguing for the political dimension of love, Kathy Rudy sees eating meat as legitimate as long as the animal whose flesh is consumed lived a (relatively) long and comfortable life (Rudy 2011). Rudy sees vegans and vegetarians as “an extreme” who believe that meat eating is wrong regardless of the animals’ living conditions (Rudy 2012). Quoting Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet*, Rudy claims that Haraway criticises the vegan “heroic fantasy of ending all suffering or not causing suffering.” The vegan fantasy of not using animals for instrumental human purposes is, for Haraway, a false purity discourse, a sanitized dream (Haraway 2007:70).

Rudy’s claims resonate with the yogic ethic in number of ways. Her reiteration of Haraway can serve as a critique of the purity discourse that was discussed in the previous chapter—where one’s diet was examined as an aspect of careful and anxious consumption, which is motivated by fear of being literally poisoned—as Sharon Gannon puts it, “in case of eating meat, fish and dairy products, the suffering may occur relatively quickly in the form of health problems like heart disease, stroke or cancer” (Gannon 2008:25). This brings yet another self-care aspect to the ethics discourse, as the reason to avoid eating animal products emerges from the concern for one’s health.

Second, when it comes to ethics—as when it comes to stress and disease—the yogic discourse highlights interiority and focuses on personal emotions. Like Rudy, yoga practitioners will often emphasize love and gratitude, rather than an ethics that...
is built on “oughts” and rights, thus articulating an intimate and affective ethics—and what can be more intimate and literally interior than the food we consume, which then becomes the building blocks and the energy of our bodies? (Tuttle 2005).

The vegan diet speaks to the yogic ethics (and to feminism a-la Rudy) in a third way. It is about personal choices that are assumed to have larger impact. In that, it speaks to the “small steps” and the “ripple effect” notions. By making small and daily choices, one is assumed to benefit the wellbeing of animals and the levels of violence our society is based on, but also on the ecological price of meat-eating.

To conclude, being vegan allows people to feel political or active while doing the most intimate and mundane activity of all: eating. It allows them to feel better, cleaner, almost pure. It may soothe anxieties, and most of all, it is the perfect combination between being ethical and caring for oneself.

6.4.4 The Art of Yoga Project

While I was doing fieldwork, I participated in and was invited to numerous fundraising events and benefits for many causes, such as the 2008 Obama campaign, an orphanage in India, the victims of the Haiti earthquake, fighting leukemia, and others. One cause with which I was involved from the very beginning of my field work is The Art of Yoga Project, which will be taken here as one example of yogic activism.

During my first encounter with The Art of Yoga Project, I felt very much like an outsider. Only two weeks into fieldwork, I noticed a sign on the yoga studio restroom’s door inviting female practitioners for a three-hour introductory training with The Art of Yoga Project. I was intrigued by the idea of women teaching yoga to incarcerated teen girls, but it was hard to leave the house and get myself to the studio on that beautiful Sunday. Still, I went there, arriving at the very last moment.

The sun was high in the sky, but the studio was dimly lit by sporadic artificial light. About thirty women were already seated on the hardwood floor, their backs
straight and their legs crossed beneath them. To my horror, I noticed that I was the only one wearing jeans. There were quite a few statement T-shirts in the room—such as “VOTE” (with the Sanskrit symbol for OM replacing the letter O), or “Key for the Cure—Saks Fifth Avenue.” The women representing the project wore a white T-shirt saying “The Art of Yoga” in front and “nothing beyond her reach” at the back, written in pink.

The gathering started with “centering”—participants were asked to close their eyes and leave behind the search for parking and the beginning of this day. Then we all practiced the moon salutation (a sequence that includes round and sideways movements, by contrast to the forward moving, “masculine” sun salutation). After the short meditation and movement sequence we all introduced ourselves, and once again I was embarrassed to find out that I was probably the only one in the room who was not a yoga teacher or currently enrolled in a yoga teacher training. And then, two very slim women in their forties started describing the project.

A lot of information was given: The Art of Yoga Project provides yoga classes in intake facilities, probation departments, and group homes in the Bay Area and San Francisco. The girls are mostly Latinas (about 60-70 percent) and the rest are equally Caucasians, African Americans, and Pacific Islanders. They suffer from depression, eating disorders, physical and emotional abuse, involvement with gangs, drugs, and pregnancies. Most of them are on some sort of mood stabilizing drug. Sometimes a girl will refuse to do a pose because it is “nasty”—that’s a sign that they suffered sexual abuse. We always ask for permission to touch them. “This is a different world”—the redhead, delicate-looking speaker’s voice became slightly more emotional—“you suddenly realize what happens to kids in this country, this country incarcerates its children.”

During a short break, we were provided with mineral water, oranges, and health bars designed for women. I was talking to a stunningly beautiful woman with light
brown hair, blue eyes, and cheek bones from heaven. “I don’t know,” she said. “I think that these girls are so low on the Maslow pyramid of needs, I don’t know if yoga can help them the way it works for us.” I found this statement interesting, especially because it was not in line with the messages coming from the project’s leaders. I take it to mean that yoga can specifically help the suffering of the privileged, but not so much “real suffering” of girls who suffer abuse and brutal violence. This statement also testifies to some disbelief in the “small steps” theory and to the necessity for structural changes—but the break ended and I did not have a chance to present the speaker with more questions.

After the break, we resumed. The speakers, whom I learned to identify as the founder and the director of the project, continued their explanations.

The declared mission of The Art of Yoga is to teach girls accountability to oneself, to others, and to the community. The idea is to bring girls to self awareness and develop self respect and self control, for example, by teaching them how to breathe through the moment, how to make better choices for themselves, and how to say no. All of that is done through yoga, meditation, creative arts and journaling. They are fresh in the process of change. They are learning what basic human kindness is. We are reaching out for girls to make a difference in their world—we are not taking away their culture, and we try not to show them a standard of living that is way beyond them. We know that there is a change—their therapists notice it and report that the girls can talk more openly about their feelings and about their bodies.

The minutes passed by. Some women were still able to sit straight, but I noticed with glee that many others leaned on the wall or props. The younger women lay on their stomachs, supporting their heads with their hands, rocking their feet in the air.
When the speakers came to discussing the yoga teacher’s duties, their voices were filled with new resonance and a different, more intense mode of listening dominated the room.

Our first duty is to the girls—they are very wounded and we have to be trauma informed. Secondly, we are supervised all the time—we once had a teacher who, in the event of a fire, took the girls outside the building and gave them coats from her car, with keys in the pockets. Now, some of those girls cut themselves and want to run away. This was way out of line, so if you are having authority issues don’t come. In case of emergency we do nothing, we obey the trained stuff. Also, we have to acknowledge that yogis sometimes get a bad reputation, and we need to get rid of myth about yogis. We are real people in the world with feet on the ground, and while we bring grace and spirituality we are also grounded and centered.

The projects’ director and founder made it very clear that not everybody is welcome to be a teacher in this delicate environment.

We all have our histories, but there will be no substance abuse. We do not need you right now if you are needy. You should be able to be in your woman, not in your girl—we need good boundaries and to be yogis to the full extent. If emotions surface, do not encourage them to talk, there are things you don’t want to hear, and this is not your job.

The last words, I believe, start to explain why and when self-care can be ethical—because when one is unaware, demanding, or unstable in an already explosive environment, one can do more harm than good. During my years with this program, I received much encouragement and support. I was also encouraged to take good care of my self in order to be of better service to the girls. For obvious reasons,
the project’s directors are very clear on the fact that they do not want anyone with authority or dependency issues involved. This requires the teachers and volunteers to practice awareness, discipline, compassion, and control. These are all perceived to be essential aspects of self-care, and the latter is seen as crucial for the project’s success.

The training ended with the feminine warrior sequence. We stood in a circle in tree pose and moved our hands in coordination with words such as: protect (hands on womb/low belly), create (open hands at low belly), celebrate (arms in V overhead), act (cross wrists in two fists), light (thumb to first finger mudra), and unite (hands on each others’ shoulders). I was inspired. But not being a yoga teacher yet, there was little I could do. Seven months later, however, I started teaching yoga to girls in the California Juvenile Justice System, taking the scenic highway up to the intake facility almost once a week. I have taught there since the summer of 2008, and I still teach there today, four-and-a-half years later. Below is a description of one typical class I taught in October 2010.

After a twenty five minutes drive, I arrived at the Youth Service Center and met my co-teacher for the day. Together, we went through the main door and an airport-style security check and were then led by a stuff member though multiple doors and gates. Each heavy door closed after us with a bang. Finally, we reached our destination: the girls’ ward. Green, purple, and a few other bright colors decorated the walls, trying to conceal the dominating grayness without much success. One can recognize that an effort has been made to make the place less prison-like. To me, however, the result looks like any other sad bureaucratic space meant for kids—something resembling an urban high-school, a kindergarten, and a kids’ hospital, all together. Paintings done by the incarcerated teen girls decorated the stuff’s elevated control desk, marking Halloween (the decorations always change according to the occasions that are being celebrated by shopping, eating, and getting together with
family and friends in the world outside: Christmas, St. Patrick’s Day, Mother’s day).

As we entered the last door, the guards used the speaker to call the girls who were in their cells and told them to stand by their cell’s door if they were interested in doing yoga and allowed to participate today.

About a dozen serious faces appeared across the transparent cells’ doors. There was a buzz, and the doors were open. The girls, fourteen to seventeen years old, dressed in black pants and pink polo shirts, got into a little room with a gray wall-to-wall rug, and sat slouching on the purple mats we have prepared for them. They do not usually like to take their socks off, so most of them kept them on throughout class. The class started with a “check in”—we all said our names and how were we doing today. The girls said that they were tired, anxious, or doing well. Then, we asked them all to get into child’s pose and keep their forehead on the ground. Girls who did not want to be adjusted, as well as girls who are pregnant, were asked to raise their hands.

Like any other hatha yoga class, this class in the Juvenile Hall consisted of sitting poses, standing poses, sun salutations, forwards bends, back bends, balancing, and twists. (Each teacher creates her own class sequence, and one is never identical with another. Often, the girls are being asked to suggest a pose or a sequence they particularly like, and even lead it. Yet, classes in jail are pretty mellow compared to the ones in a studio. The girls are usually heavier than the typical yoga practitioners and, albeit much younger, less fit). The girls complained and chatted a bit, but they really liked the passive poses in which the body is fully supported and the emphasis is on breathing and relaxing (teachers sometimes say to one another that the girls are so detached from their bodies, and lack body awareness to such an extent, that their complaints about pain—which are being heard and respected—are not always trustworthy as they might just be experiencing a stretch that they never felt before).

The girls’ (and my) favorite moment is right at the end of class. No matter how
chatty, distracted, or depressed they are, the girls lay there on their backs (or their stomachs, if they tend to feel more protected that way), let their feet fall to the sides and let their palms roll up to the ceiling. We gave them little eye-bags to cover their eyes and asked them to breathe deeply and let go. The atmosphere of the room changed as we went to each girl and gently touched her feet, hands, shoulders, and head. In trainings, the project’s directors are very clear on the nature of those adjustments: they must not be touchy-feely. In their words, this is “a firm touch, no rubbing, and no massaging.” Or, as another yoga teacher put it, it is a “bone to bone touch, and not a skin to skin touch, which is only okay with people who are very close to you and sleazy when they are not.”

As the girls lay there in that could-be-vulnerable position, eyes closed, I saw more. I could see their gang tattoos; I could see the scars on their bodies where they tried to write someone’s initials. I put one hand in the palm of one girl and put my other hand on her shoulder, applying light pressure and so elongating her arm and encouraging her shoulder to ease towards the ground (I used to like doing that because of the silent messages that I hoped were going through in this semi-hand shake—messages of trust and support). As I was doing that, I could see many thick cutting scars all over the inner forearm of this sixteen year old, and I could barely keep myself from gasping. At that instant, a sentence I heard during our last training came to my head. “Touch their scars,” one of the women leading the training said, “this is healing work.” So, working against my own thinking patterns, I touched her forearm in the same manner I gripped her palm—firmly and gently. I could see her body ease a little bit more.

Clearly, when describing these moments, I cannot assume an external point of view, but that does not mean that I do not recognize the inequalities these scenes

18 Here, again, the complexity of the mindbody resurfaces. It is complicated to explain different kinds of touch in words, and yet, when it resonates in a corporeal way it makes perfect sense.
are made of. They are a captive audience, while we get to go there, volunteer two hours of our time, and go back home happy, fulfilled, and convinced that we have done our part for a better world. The girls are mostly Latinas or black, poor and overweight; the volunteers, by and large, are—as described by the project’s yoga teachers and volunteers—“rich white skinny women.” But while this is all true, it is also too cynical of a perspective. I am more interested in asking how activism, in this case, goes hand in hand with self-care. Before that, however, let me briefly comment on gender.

As it was already clear in the first training I attended—when the women were led through the soft and round moon sequence and through the female warrior sequence—The Art of Yoga Project ascribes to many traditional gender stereotypes. Its website and logo are bright pink, the emphasis is on caring and supporting, and the awareness concerns mostly girls’ issues like prostitution, sexual trauma, and teen pregnancy. There is also something very feminine in the way in which the project is run. The directors are supportive, encouraging, and enabling. The atmosphere is always kind, and no one spares good words—so much so that at times, a cynical and emotionally reserved Israeli might feel out of her comfort zone. At the same time, the project emphasizes women’s strength (plank pose is often called “strong lady” in classes), and its leaders’ kindness cannot be mistaken for lack of dignity or strong will, quite the opposite.19

In an interview with Sylvia, a yoga teacher and a director at The Art of Yoga Project, I asked what motivates yoga teachers to volunteer for the project. Sylvia attributed the motivation not to principles, ideals, and values but to inner wounds:

19 The project’s Christmas parties are usually held in beautiful houses in downtown Palo Alto that belong to board members. During the first party (at which, once again, I appeared in jeans, while most other women wore cocktail dresses) I felt out of place and wondered if the project directors and board members were a bunch of women living off their husbands’ wealth. But during the years that followed I realized that the women working for the project come from all ways of life. Some were stay-at-home moms, some worked their whole lives in a secondary job, some made their own wealth, and some are yoga teachers who, most likely, will never get rich.
“Most women,” she said, “have a part of themselves that is a wounded girl. And if
you are a yogi, which everybody involved in the organization is, you are conscious of
that. You want to be of service, and there’s something about the work that touches
you.” Later in the interview, I asked about power relations and the goal of structural
change. Sylvia pretty much dismissed structural change as a goal, advocating instead
for individual empowerment:

I believe that ultimately, every individual needs to be their own change
agent, and to empower the individual is better than changing the system.
And it’s not that we don’t work on the level of the system, because we
are, we’re just not involved in policy change. But yes we are, because we
have presence and we are at the table with the judiciary, with probation,
with mental health, we’re there at the table giving our opinion about
things. So we can influence the institution and we are; we would love
those girls never to be incarcerated ever again, and we want to see them
in the community and shift our focus there eventually because girls don’t
belong in prison. I think that’s a problem in our culture. Right? So we
have that philosophical approach, but to get in there and empower each
individual to know that she can change her circumstances and give her
the tools to make better decisions, I think it’s much more effective. To
see herself not as a victim of a system, but to be a grounded empowered
individual. I think, working directly with the individual, help her mitigate
the harsh environment by being there, and then give her the tools to get
out and stay out, and never go back. And then also teaching her to bring
those philosophies to her grandma, her mom, her brothers, teaching them
yoga, teaching them peaceful ways of being. That is changing the larger
system.
In this quote, Sylvia is expressing the same themes I have presented throughout this chapter. She reiterated the belief in small steps and the ripple effect, the belief in the power of the individual to change and thus influence her surrounding, and the disengagement from politics and structural inequalities. Above all, hovers the ultimate ought: take care of yourself and be aware of your inclinations and wounds, or you can be of no help to others.

It is important to note that even for a person who is an activist, someone who is engaged with disempowered populations and works on their behalf on a daily basis with little financial reward, the self-care axiom is very much present. That is to say, the yogic discourse can influence passivity and withdrawal from the public sphere, but it does not necessarily do so. There is another form of activism out there, a self-care motivated activism. And who am I to say that it is not a legitimate public engagement?

6.5 Foucault, Lacan, and The Ethics of Self-Care

This was supposed to be a chapter that criticizes Judeo-Christian ethics and advocate for a guilt-free, practical, tolerant ethics. But as I read and reread my notes, I found that despite all my understanding toward my friendformants, I could not help but getting a little annoyed and feeling that old familiar anger bubbling yet again. I identified with the disappointment Kevin O’Neill described in City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala—the anthropologist’s frustration with his informants’ failure to live up to his expectation for conventional political action as citizens of postwar Guatemala, instead of spending their days engaging in “spiritual warfare” by praying and fasting (O’Neill 2010). Admittedly, I wanted people to care more and to stop giving me “the grocery line” answers. But they did not, and that means something, too.

When Saba Mahmood called for questioning our political and analytical certain-
ties and the desire for resistance and “the political” as we know it, she was not thinking of neoliberal subjects but of women of Muslim faith (Mahmood 2005). Yet, to some extent, her call applies here as well. Yoga is a form of being and action that does not work according to the narrative of subversion, but it is not a simple case of passivity and docility either.

Greek ethics, according to Foucault and others, was not a set of regulatory norms but a set of practical activities that are germane to a certain way of life. Ethics, in other words, refers to those practices, techniques, and discourses through which a subject transforms herself in order to achieve a particular state of being, happiness, or truth (Mahmood 2005). Subjects can transform themselves into willing subjects of a particular moral discourse, which is to say, they mold themselves into ethical subjects according to certain roles and not in an individual manner.

Despite many differences that were discussed above, there is a resemblance between the current yogic thought and Greek ethics. Yogis strongly believe that happiness can only be achieved when one does “the right thing,” even though in our polyphonic societies there is much more freedom in deciding what “the right” is. Yet, yogic ethics are not as free floating as an outsider may assume. They demand self awareness, self examination, and a certain amount of discipline.

As the third chapter shows, yogis look for space. At the beginning of this chapter I discussed the Foucaudian concept of “open territory”—a social terrain in which freedom might be exercised. In other words, freedom from desires, appetites, and fears seems to be what ultimately enables the release of oneself from oneself, and the invitation for each human to transform him or herself (Davidson 1990; Faubion 2001). As I mentioned above, Foucault uses the words “reflection” or “thought” as what allows one to step back from ways of acting or reacting, to present oneself to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its condition, and its goals. Freedom is the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, estab-
lishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem (Faubion 2001; Foucault 1997; Laidlaw 2002). Therefore, the freedom of the ethical subject, for Foucault, consists in the possibility of choosing the kind of self one wishes to be (Laidlaw 2002). Space can also be seen as a version of the Foucauldian “open territory,” especially when it allows a partial release of oneself from oneself, and opens up the possibility of taking a step back from ways of acting or reacting. The search for space and freedom from one’s thinking habits, the legitimacy of attending to and examining oneself, the “small steps” and ripple effect theories, the attention to affects and disavowal of anger and self-sacrifice—all come together to create a somewhat coherent worldview. This worldview often stands for sustainable living, responsible consumption, kindness, and progressive politics. It may not be quite as active and passionate as anthropologists (myself included) like it to be, and it is definitely wrapped up in neoliberal capitalism in more than one way (see next chapter). But it is still an ethical worldview that focuses on a life project of happiness, daily practices, and self-awareness. When Silicon Valley workers who suffer from too many demands, physical stagnation, judgments and insecurities—and particularly women who feel that they need to perform perfectly in every aspect of their lives, including their traditional responsibility of home-making—bring these forms of suffering with them into the yoga studio in search of relief, they are engaging in opening a new territory, where they try to gain a partial release of oneself from oneself (which can be seen as the attempt to undo the Lacanian mirror stage discussed in Chapter Four).

Bringing Lacan back into the picture helps in making sense of this ethic. Lacan and Foucault seem to be worlds apart. Foucault is known to mention psychotherapy as another modality of power (Foucault 1998), while Lacan is skeptical about ethics and would probably be in favor of any “dismantlement of the various imaginary identifications, among them, one’s identity as a good person” (O’Sullivan et al. 2011:51). Yet, a couple of scholars have dared to suggest that the two views of the subject
might not only coexist but complement one another.

As discussed in the second chapter, both Lacan’s and Foucault’s subjects undermine the Cartesian subject of knowledge (O’Sullivan et al. 2011:59). In addition, both thinkers suggest models of subjectivization whereby the subject comes into being through an external power. Foucault’s techniques of the self are not necessarily verbal, but they can include psychoanalysis—especially when it is seen as a form of attention and as “a certain way of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought” (Foucault et al. 2006; O’Sullivan et al. 2011:11). Psychoanalysis, on other words, can be more than a confessional practice of power that the early Foucault thought it to be. As a space of reflection on oneself, it can help in carving that Foucauldian open territory.

Lacan’s subject is harder to reconcile with Foucault’s. Lacan despises the suggestion that the subject has a coherent and autonomous agency, while the late Foucaudian subject must have some degree of coherence and autonomy in order to actively care for himself, reflect on himself, and shape himself. But what if Foucault’s subject, in his self-care practices, can suggest a turn away from the conscious subject, meaning, the ego? What if self-care “opens the possibility of something stranger, something that interrupts this economy of the subject as is, of business as usual” (O’Sullivan et al. 2011:55)? Might the transformation that the subject goes through—the emergent potentiality of freedom and the awareness of one’s thought—bring Foucault’s subject closer to Lacan’s? Antonio Viego (building on Hortense Spillers’ notion of interior subjectivity), as well as Simon O’Sullivan (building on Deleuze’s description of an inner space of freedom created by the outside which is folded back to create a relation to oneself), suggests that a subject that pays attention to herself, and even ruins parts of herself, is a subject that has an emancipatory potential.

The reference to an “emancipatory potential” might sound too close to the repres-
sive hypothesis, but I do not understand “emancipation” to be a step beyond power’s reach. Rather, I understand emancipation to be the possibility of reflecting on subjectivization, a refusal of “the false amplitude that yield from how our function in society has been reduced to our so-called differences” (Viego 2007:29). When Viego expands on Spillers’ concept of “interior intersubjectivity,” he does so in relation to race—but is it farfetched to propose that everybody could use some release from the desire of the other, as partial as it may be? When Spillers suggests that an aspect of the emancipatory hinges on a process “of making one’s subjectiviness the object of a disciplined and potentially displaceable attentiveness” (Spillers 1996:108, quoted in Viego 2007:79), she seems to suggest that self-critical inquiry may help the subject in rescuing “the blank space that race somehow came to fill in the constitutive work of subjectivity formation” (Viego 2007:202). This internal process (not a goal) is not about rigidity of the ego. It refuses Ego Psychology’s whole, complete, and coping individual in favor of growth, change, and disarray.

Far be it from me to claim yoga as a emancipatory practice per-se. I am not sure if yoga works to decentralize and disperse the knowing subject, ruin the ego, or if it facilitates a Lacanian disarray. I can say, however, that yoga practitioners experience subjectivity shifts all the time, and that the practice seems to enable them to reexamine things they always took for granted (just like a good Introduction to Cultural Anthropology class). As such, the destabilization of the subject that sometimes happens through yoga may speak to Haraway’s cyborg. Even though many yoga practitioners seem to seek happiness through the myth of original wholeness that Haraway speaks of, they also question capitalism’s ability to provide fullness, happiness, and securities. Moreover, by recognizing that they are vulnerable and subject to constant change, as by attempting to disengage (seek space, withdraw inward) rather then connect, yoga practitioners may be articulating a somewhat cyborgian ethic: a humble, partial, self-centered, present-focused, and always changing...
ethic, which is based on vulnerability and the little one can do in any given moment.

This attention to the self and the reshaping of the self is particularly interesting when it comes to neoliberal capitalism. Simon O'Sullivan suggests that the principle of self-mastery, which constitutes the importance of the ancient Greeks for Foucault, can be a method of self governance that might “operate against neoliberal governmentality and a politics of a self beholden to the transcendent operator that is Capital” (O’Sullivan et al. 2011:55), as long as this self-refashioning “arises from a decision made by the subject and a concomitant practice of living differently, against the norms of the world that such a subject is born into” (O’Sullivan et al. 2011:66).

In some ways, this is what workers who quit their jobs or get off the fast track—and even stay-at-home moms—do. Although some yoga practitioners use the same measures for success or failure as before, some rephrase their view of themselves and of the norms to which they conform. Differently put, I think that there is noting simple or easy in “getting off the marry-go-round” and rearticulated the measures according to which one examines oneself.

Antonio Viego also sees a radical aspect in Lacanian subjectivity. Lacan’s presentation of the ethics of psychoanalysis, writes Viego, defines analysis in opposition to the imperative that subjects should or can be adjusted to the demands of reality. In the Lacanian scenario, as Kaja Silverman writes, the notion of an original and unqualified wholeness is a cultural dream, and the condition of cultural subjectivity is therefore characterized by “restlessness, the sense of being beside oneself, and the yearning for something else” (Silverman 1983:154). These ways of being are especially poignant when it comes to the temporality and affects of neoliberal capitalism. Can yoga help practitioners carve out spaces of reflection on this condition of being? Or does it cultivate yet another illusion of fullness and wholeness? The next chapter examines just that.
Sitting quietly, begin to become aware of the part of you that is aware. (...) Next, think of a loved one. Bring to mind someone to whom you feel close and think to yourself, “With all of our differences of personality and history, we both share consciousness. At the most fundamental level, the level of awareness, we are one.” If that seems too abstract, consider, “Like me, this person seeks happiness. This person too feels pain.” The more you can identify yourself with awareness, and recognize the awareness in the other person, the more deeply you will feel kinship.

Now think of an acquaintance. Bring to mind someone about whom you feel neutral, and have the same recognition: that there is one consciousness in both of you.

Think of an enemy. Bring to mind someone you dislike, perhaps someone you regard as an enemy, or a public figure you hold in low esteem. Remind yourself, “Different as we may be, the same consciousness dwells in that person as in me. On the level of awareness, we are one.”

Feel the energy. Expand this idea to include the physical world, and allow yourself to contemplate the fact that a single energy underlies everything in the universe. On the level of subatomic particles, everything you see and feel is part of one great energy soup. With that in mind, look around and say to yourself, “All that I see, all that I touch, all that I imagine, is made of one single conscious energy.”

Hold that thought. Questions will come up—and they’re worth exploring. However, there is great power in simply holding the thought, “All this is
one consciousness,” as a mantra, and then trying to see the world that way. See how the thought of oneness softens the edges of your judging mind. Find out whether it eases feelings of frustration, anxiety, and fear. Notice how it tends to bring up feelings of peace.

After you’ve practiced this contemplation a few times, try taking it into your world. Look at the angry driver in the lane next to you, or the sad woman on the bus, and think, “The same consciousness is in that person as in me.” Or see the person on TV whose politics you disagree with and think, “The same consciousness is in that person as in me.”

As these practices become part of your life, look for different ways to recognize that kinship of consciousness—be recognizing the light in the eyes of an animal, or the living sap in a tree. As you do, keep observing the effect it has on you. When you notice that you’re feeling more connected or more open, honor those feelings. Know that you are experiencing some of the qualities of the enlightened state of being (From “Practice Enlightenment Meditation” Yoga Journal, http://www.yogajournal.com/poses/2449).
A few years ago, one of my department’s professors made a casual comment that stuck with me. “It’s interesting,” he said, “that one of our most political students decided to study yoga.” I was flattered to know he thought of me as a “political student,” but I also thought that this comment was interesting. Mostly, it was revealing of the fact for many anthropologists, whose interests and sympathies tend to lie with the poor and the victimized, studying yoga practitioners seems not political enough or actually, not political at all. This final chapter examines yoga practitioners’ (un)willingness to work toward structural change in relation to aspirational practices, thus locating the emergence of new social distinctions and their social meanings. I also want to keep in the background the questions of why anthropologists are less likely to take on the suffering of the privileged, and what does that say about the anthropological desire for resistance and active antagonism as forms of political engagement.

The people I study are often uncannily close to me, and perhaps to the reader
as well. They are almost automatically suspected of being too privileged and thus inherently embedded in capitalism and likely to be duped by it. According to the same logic, the leisure activity of yoga may seem innocent, or perhaps too saturated with the logic of the market to be interesting for a discipline that is often invested in power relations.

I am invested in questioning power relations too. Yet, I am also intrigued by my informants and friends—the relatively privileged yoga practitioners in California’s Silicon Valley, who tend to portray themselves as wounded, at-risk, and chronically insecure. I hope that this dissertation shows that the destructive aspects of neoliberal capitalism and late modernity do not hurt only the marginalized traditionally studied by anthropologists, but also—albeit in very different ways—those who supposedly benefit from them. In this final chapter, I ask what the socio-political meanings of complaining against stress, competition and insecurity—and the active attempts to work against it—are. Differently put, I ask what yoga’s relations to neoliberal capitalism are, and whether it changes aspects of the neoliberal way of life from within.

In this chapter, I return to Laurent Berlant’s writings as a way to reflect on intimate publics and their politics. I examine the option that yoga may not only serve capitalist imperatives by providing temporary relief from stressful work and family life, but that yoga may also articulate social critique by questioning a few basic

1 In his 1919 essay “The Uncanny,” Freud explores the psychological roots of uncanniness by exploring its appearance in language and literature. Freud begins his essay by posing two antonyms: the unheimlich vs. the heimlich: the frightening, uneasy, and gloomy vs. the familiar, intimate, and homelike. Nevertheless, the seeming antonyms turn out to be more complicated than they appear, since heimlich does not only mean “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly” but also concealed, kept from sight withhold from others (Freud 1919:155). Consequently, unheimlich—the “uneasy, eerie, blood-curdling”—which seemed like the opposite of heimlich’s first meaning, becomes closely associated with the second. “What is heimlich thus becomes unheimlich” (Freud 1919:156), meaning that not only can the home be a frightening place, it is intrinsically so. Here, I use the concept of the uncanny to point at the way in which the familiar can be uncomfortably foreign, and the foreign can be uncomfortably familiar.
assumption of neoliberal capitalism. The presentation of the yogic social critique will be done through the unpacking of yogic aspiration and social distinctions.

7.1 Intimate Publics, the Private, and the Political

Since Aristotle’s *Politics*, Western social theory has constituted the public and the political by contrast to the private.\(^2\) This constituting dichotomy between the private and the public, the political and the personal, has been attacked by many scholars and schools of thought that have politicized the personal and the domestic—such as Marx, Foucault, and many feminist scholars, among them Firestone, MacKinnon, and Rubin (Holston 2008; Firestone 1970; MacKinnon 1989; Rubin 1997).

In his piece *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner defines a public as a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. The reality of a public, Warner writes, lies in the reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence. Warner defines “a public” by seven markers, among them that a public is self-organized, a public is a relation among strangers, the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal, a public is constituted through mere attention, and a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse (Warner 2002). Yoga, therefore, is a public which strangers self-organize themselves into and become part of by paying attention and circulating the appropriate discourse.

In my case study, politicizing the seemingly private is rather easy. As a prevailing affect, stress is very much a social phenomenon with political and economic meanings. As a commodity and a practice that promises relief from chronic insecurity, Western yoga is not only done in public but is also constitutive of a public. My interest lies, however, less in situating the mutually constitutive fields of stress and yoga as

\(^2\) The ancient Greeks compared the public sphere to a well-managed, hierarchical household, but only those who control and manage the household (free men) were able to engage in politics and go out to the public sphere.
public or as having political implications, and more in asking why it is that a practice and a discourse with so much public visibility and economic investment are deemed personal and hence, a-political.

The fact that the personal is political has been well established. But what about the political which is personal? In her book *The Queen of America Goes to Washington*, Lauren Berlant claims that during the presidency of Reagan and later, Clinton, the public has become privatized as a desired effect of conservative cultural politics, the aim of which is to dilute the oppositional discourses of the historically stereotyped citizen. The privatization of U.S. citizenship, claims Berlant, is rerouting the critical energies of emerging political spheres into the sentimental spaces of an amorphous opinion culture. In the contemporary United States, therefore, the citizen is positioned as an isolated spectator to the publicity that claims to represent her—a publicity that speaks the language of personal trauma, anxieties, and vulnerability (Berlant 1997).

Sentimentality, as Berlant writes, has long been the means by which mass subaltern pain is advanced. When the pain of intimate others burns into the conscience of classically privileged national subjects, the latter’s identification can lead to structural social change. Yet, “feeling politics” can dissolve contradiction and dissent by focusing on happiness as a guide to the aspirations for social change (Berlant 2001). The vulnerability that Judith Butler suggests as the basis of a new psychoanalytic and feminist ethics (Butler 2004), in other words, often becomes a language that everybody learns to speak in order to get their voice heard, but it also generalizes suffering, dilutes the consensus, and produces aspirations for an unconflicted world.

Intimate publics’ relations to the political and to politics, according to Berlant, are extremely uneven and complex. Berlant sees mass-mediated, affective communities as thriving “in proximity to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but more often than not, acting
as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough” (Berlant 2008:x). Politics, according to Berlant, “requires active antagonism, which threatens the sense in consensus: this is why, in an intimate public, the political sphere is more often seen as a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization than a condition of possibility” (Berlant 2008:11).

Indeed, as an intimate public, yoga hovers somewhere in proximity to the political—cultivating fantasies of transcending or dissolving the obstacles that shape historical conditions—but it does not directly engage with it because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites, and also because it is deemed risky, dangerous, and dirty. Nina, whose sexual attack story was related in Chapter Six, is a good example for the refusal of direct politics. In Nina’s case, striving for structural change entails pursuing charges against the man who attacked her and taking legal, public action. The engagement with the law can be a second trauma and demands too much sacrifice on Nina’s part. Instead, she hovers in proximity to the political, as she decides on making a so-called positive, empowering change through caring for other women. As I further discussed in Chapter Six, yoga does suggest ways of social involvement which are, by definition, not antagonistic.

The refusal of the American dream (as a key scenario of individual and phenomenal success against all odds), if you will, appears in yoga’s articulation of ethics as well. Yogis believe in the “ripple effect,” in humble action, and in kindness, self-care, and mindfulness as not only life altering, but world-changing practices. This very well may be a shallow, spiritualistic excuse for non-doing. But social changes do not happen only as a result of big revolutions, and they can and often are a consequence of many small decisions of people who work separately on their personal wellbeing—especially if, by doing so, they almost unknowingly question hegemonic ideologies.

Berlant claims that while the displacement of politics to the realm of feeling shows
the obstacles to social change that emerge when politics becomes privatized, intimate publics are not simply a-political. The ambivalence of ordinary restlessness, in other words, needs to be understood as something other than a failure to be politics. Academic progressives, Berlant adds, “tend only to respect and take seriously what is convertible to their vision of politics. But since most collective life takes place to one side of or under the radar of politics it seems important to understand what is absorbing in the defensive, inventive, and adaptive activity of getting by, along with the great refusal to go through power to attain legitimacy” (Berlant 2008:27).

Thinking of yoga as an intimate public helps me to situate it in a bigger socio-economic and political context in which publicly induced emotion management takes the place of political involvement. However, I suggest that the discursive and embodied articulations of stress, precariousness, and chronic insecurity within this particular intimate public not only reproduce the same experience they seek to undermine and strengthen future-oriented normatively, they also produce social critique and ways of living that do not fully conform to the ideals of the U.S. political economy. As Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd write, “culture constitutes a site in which the reproduction of contemporary capitalist social relations may be continually contested. In such cultural struggles, we find no less a redefinition of ‘the political’ (for it) has never been a discrete sphere of practice within the nation state; (...) the political must be grasped instead as always braided within ‘culture’ and cultural practices” (Lloyd 1997:26). In this chapter, I will present how yoga works as social critique through the examination of the American dream, the aspirations and temporality it cultivates, and the distinctions that emerge from them.

7.2 Aspirations

By definition, aspirations are projections into the future. Aspirations are about destinations, hopes, and goals. Aspirational practices are the anticipation and prepa-
ration for a movement up and forward, and they are deeply tied to imaginaries of social mobility. Economies of investment characterize the hopeful moments of wanting to become different and better, to have more, and to be positioned elsewhere. On the one hand, the practice and discourse of yoga embody the neoliberal logic of individual responsibility, self-improvement, self-care, and a future-oriented outlook. People practice yoga because they want to become slimmer, healthier, and calmer. At the same time, the temporalities that characterize late-capitalism, neoliberalism, and even heteronormativity—temporalities oriented toward production, reproduction, consumption, and a constantly deferred future—are being redefined as harmful.

In California’s Silicon Valley yoga scenes, aspirations are not always aimed toward the future. Rather, the aspirational practices of modern yoga articulate the desire to stay still and move nowhere—in other words, to gain happiness and relaxation by being satisfied with what is, rather than consuming or climbing up the social ladder. The aspiration of safety in the present rather than upward mobility leads to unique social distinctions and economic positionings, those that resist neoliberal capitalism’s pace of life and the ought of accumulation. Yoga scenes, therefore, can be seen as—I quote from Lauren Berlant—“scenes of (...) disappointment, and not refusal—that nonetheless derive the register of critique” (Berlant 2008:25). I suggest that the social scenes of modern yoga are sites of ambivalently embodied neoliberal logic, where clusters of promises and recipes for an “art of living” express critique towards aspects of capitalism while enjoying its comfort.

In a piece titled “Cruel Optimism,” Lauren Berlant discusses a story named Exchange Value. In the story, two brothers are facing two kinds of cruel choices under capitalism: either you work yourself to death without ever getting to the promised land of financial security, or, with the security of capital, you hoard against death, deferring life, until you die. The American dream, therefore, figures as a cluster
of promises which are bound to fail, a fantasy that operates to secure attachment to a forever deferred futurity and to normativity (Berlant 2006). The futurity of neoliberal capitalism and the American dream, arguably, is exactly the futurity of the Lacanian mirror stage: living in an anticipation of a forever postponed, imagined future of wholeness and harmony.

In order to discuss yogic temporality, let me take a short detour through queer theory. In recent years, queer theory took a special interest in temporality. Lee Edelman sees queerness as rejecting reproductive futurism, which takes the child as a perpetual horizon (Edelman 2004). As a belief in the progressive betterment of life, reproductive futurism imposes an ideological limit on political discourse and preserves the absolute privilege of heteronormativity—a privilege that Edelman seeks to undermine by refusing futurity. Judith Halberstam also sees queer uses of time and space as developed in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. According to Halberstam, the AIDS epidemic at the end of the twentieth century, and the constantly diminishing future created a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and the potentiality of life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing (Halberstam 2005).

If heteronormativity is the guardian of temporal (re)production, capitalism is the guardian of production. In his previously discussed The Condition of Postmodernity, David Harvey claims that postmodern time is organized according to the logic of capital accumulation. Without claiming that yogic temporality stands outside of capitalism, I am inspired by queer temporality to investigate the meaning of yoga’s insistence on “the here, the present, the now” (Halberstam 2005:2).

Progress is constitutive of Western epistemology and rationality. But what happens once one achieves the American dream? It is this moment—once one supposedly has it all and still find oneself unhappy and insecure, that many yoga practitioners talk about (as did Samuel, the Israeli golden boy who had it all by the time he
was twenty years old, whose life story was related in Chapter Two, and others I quoted throughout the dissertation). It is this realization that makes them doubt the promise of the American dream, or—to put it in Berlant’s words—to “insist on a pacing different than the productive pacing, say, of capitalist normativity” (Berlant 2006:25). Being privileged, they do not run the risk of working themselves to death in the desperate hope of ever feeling financially secure (although many people in Silicon Valley do work themselves to death even though they may seem financially secure), but they are unwilling to hoard capital against death and defer life, either. People who quit promising careers and live their lives differently are at one end of the spectrum, but others are practicing many such small decisions on a daily basis, avoiding the temptation of consuming more, working harder, and competing against everyone around them. Their aspirations, in other words, are no longer solely focused on the future, accumulation, and financial or professional success. No doubt yoga practitioners are invested in the future—their emphasis on health proves that they are—but their attachment to the neoliberal definition of success and their investment in it, I wish to claim, may be wearing down around the edges.

As I have shown in previous chapters, the yogic discourse circulates much criticism in regards to comparisons, accumulation (defined as “wanting to have more and be better than others”), judgments, and what is known as “living in the future.” Differently put, the strong emphasis on the present moment, on breath, and on “being in the body” stands in contradiction to the neoliberal imperative of moving forward at a fast and growing pace.

Max Strom, a famous L.A. yoga teacher, published a short piece in Huffington Post where he writes:3

Americans are depressed and stressed out. Our careers, cars, [and] smart

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phones will not ultimately make us happy, healthy, or feel that we live a meaningful life. I witness many white-collar businesspeople park their $85,000 cars, turn off their cell phones, and walk into yoga rooms in a courageous attempt to transform their bodies and emotional states without the use of pharmaceuticals. Through the practice of special breathing techniques, meditation, and a sequence of postures, one day they experience a sense of calm beingness that they have not felt in years or even decades. This wondrous heart-opening consciousness triggers the profound realization that a 90 minute, $20 yoga class fulfills many of their essential needs, more than any of their other possessions they have worked like dogs to obtain.

Note how the writer seeks to destabilize his readers and students’ investment in material goods, as well as their financial and emotional investment in the future. What he is suggesting is nothing less than a reexamination of life and pacing it differently, thus redirecting aspirations toward the now, rather than toward the future. The yogic aspirational logic is intertwined with bodily techniques of focusing on the present as a way of dealing with a constant sense of precariousness and dissatisfaction.

In the third and fourth chapters, I discussed mechanical and bio-psychological stress, space, and self esteem. I quoted yoga practitioners who express their resentment toward the stress of ordinary living, and even more so, toward an atmosphere of overreaching, non-specific competition, constant comparisons, and precariousness. Yoga practitioners often talk about yoga as a relief from life saturated with chronic insecurity—in other words, yoga is described as an experience that substitutes the sense of displacement and unsteadiness with, as one interviewee puts it, “a settling feeling, a grounding experience that allows me to be anchored in my body.” In yoga, practitioners are encouraged to focus on their breath and on their bodies as a way
of increasing their awareness to the present moment. Yoga teachers often say things like: “There’s nothing to do, nowhere to be. Relax and let go.” After practicing a challenging pose, teachers will instruct practitioners to “let go of goal poses” and not to dwell on their success or failure in “achieving” the desired pose.

As the previous chapters showed, a subtly cultivated critique toward emotions and thoughts that promote comparisons, stress, and undermined self-worth is often present in yoga classes. This critique, combined with the practices of breathing and increased awareness to bodily sensations and cues, adds up to a slowly cultivated sense of “beingness.” In other words, a sense of richly present interiority and safety of one’s own body in a given time and space is cultivated as an antidote to precariousness. It is not a movement forward, up, and beyond, therefore, that is being conceptualized, and not an aspiration to be situated elsewhere—but an aspiration to be still, to stop the mind from racing, and, for a change, go nowhere. This is thought to be done through careful attention to the body, through movement, breath, and mindfulness, and through deliberate attempts to bring the mind (as the wandering thoughts) to the body and thus reintegrate the mindbody and rearticulate it as one.

7.3 Distinctions

Picking up on Marcel Mauss’ reference to habitus, Pierre Bourdieu defined the term as a primary form of social classification made second nature which “functions below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will” (Bourdieu 1984). As “a lasting, generalized relation to one’s own body, a way of bearing one’s body, presenting it to others, moving it, making

4 Marcel Mauss’ well known essay “Techniques of the Body” is often acknowledged as a predecessor of the 1970s anthropological interest in the body as an object of study (Mauss 1973). No longer merely a natural object, the body and its techniques (e.g. sleeping, swimming, eating) emerges from Mauss’ piece as deeply shaped by culture. Like Freud and Bourdieu, Mauss referenced yoga directly: “I have studied the Sanskrit texts of Yoga enough to know that the same things occur in India. I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body which we have not studied” (Mauss 1973:68).
space for it, habitus becomes a basic dimension of the sense of social orientation and a particular way of experiencing and expressing one’s own sense of social value” (ibid:474).

For Bourdieu, the classificatory systems he so meticulously describes were means of power. Social class distinctions shape the body inside and out, down to the muscular level and to seemingly personal matters of taste and preferences. Bourdieu’s work can be read as describing how society holds people firmly in a predetermined social place by shaping psychic and material interiority and by bringing subjects into being in a way that leaves little room for changes of status and social positions—yet, people always aspire to climb up the social ladder. Writing about the wage-earning petite bourgeoisie, Bourdieu asserted that their ascetic virtues and cultural intentions (like those that manifest in taking evening classes, enrolling in libraries, and collecting stamps) very clearly express the aspiration to rise to the higher position (Bourdieu 1984:123). The privileged classes, therefore, are escaping “the vulgar” and aspiring to be elsewhere, to go higher and further to new experiences and virgin spaces.

As said, yoga practitioners do want to “move forward” in many ways. But some also come to think that being at the top of whatever socio-economic or professional pyramid will not necessarily make them happy and will certainly not make them less stressed. In fact, as practitioners cultivate newly acquired dispositions to differentiate the like-minded from the rest, they most often mark themselves as diverging from professionals who hold high-stress social positions—not from those of lesser means. Type A CEOs, finance people, and high-tech geeks—all of whom may be in the yoga classes or may be the partners of those differentiating themselves from “the corporate world”—are repeatedly signaled as, to use Bourdieu’s terms, “the vulgar,” meaning, those who live their lives in “bad taste.” The alternative, therefore, is either to quit, that is to say, to learn how to live with less income and without so much prestige, but lead supposedly happier and more meaningful lives, or to learn how to bring that
sense of safe “beingness” into one’s hectic life and corporate or academic job.

These are not just empty words. During fieldwork I interviewed and met more than a dozen women who had left successful jobs in the corporate world or in academia in order to lead different lives. People who quit promising careers and live their lives differently may be at one end of the spectrum, but others are practicing many such small decisions on a daily basis, avoiding the temptation of consuming more, working harder, and competing with everyone around.

Lilly is a forty-five year-old, soft-spoken, petite woman with a Ph.D. in chemistry. She worked in a pharmaceutical company for eleven years. One day, after getting a big bonus check, she decided to go to Canyon Ranch—a spa in Arizona where three nights cost between 3000 and 6000 dollars. There, she had her first experience of yoga and energy work, which she describes as a life changing event. Slowly, Lilly started migrating towards a different lifestyle. Eventually, she took a year off, ended her relationship with a CEO of a big company, and immersed herself in yoga and meditation. I still see her occasionally, and to the best of my knowledge, her year off still continues since early 2008. Here’s what she says:

We live in an very affluent society. We don’t worry about food, shelter, clothing, this kind of stuff. I don’t know why society came up with the idea that happiness is in things, external things, including status, or objects. The media and the industry are trying to sell you something, and how they try to sell you something is make you feel this sense of lack. And I think its debilitating (...) and this message is really consistent and constant. When I became aware of that maybe two years ago I became angry. How come nobody told me that this is all bullshit? Why [has] everybody bought into this? It really has no value, and nobody talks about that.
Lilly’s story is not rare. These feelings of being duped and waking up from a culturally cultivated illusion constantly appeared in other narratives of practitioners that have been quoted throughout this dissertation—practitioners who shifted to lower income jobs in order to “be happy.” Other practitioners who cannot afford or do not want to quit their jobs, are practicing other small decisions on a daily basis, such as avoiding the temptation of consuming more, working harder, and competing against everyone around. As they do that, they redefine themselves against others who are invested in upward mobility, accumulation, conspicuous consumption, and forever deferred futurity.

7.4 Neoliberal Capitalism and the American Dream

In this dissertation, I used the term “neoliberal capitalism” to mark an incoherent cluster of theories and practices of political economy according to which, human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms (Harvey 2007). Subjects under neoliberal capitalism are often governed as autonomous, self interested market agents who are encouraged to cultivate themselves as human capital for investment and return (Rose 1996; Binkley 2009). In Foucault’s concepts, biopolitics and liberalism are practices of moving away from governmental apparatuses to expending market rationality and the creation of the self-governing, always-improving subject. In Lacan’s concept, neoliberal capitalism speaks directly to the lack around which the subject is constituted by providing the false promise of wholeness, fulfillment, and adaptation.

The aspirational logic and practices I have described are by no means an external force to the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Therefore, I do not assume the existence of false consciousness, nor do I buy into the repressive hypothesis. Instead, I look for subtle critiques, shifts in perception, reflection, and subjectification. I see the point of view of those who have already achieved “the American dream” and found
it unfulfilling—a point of view that does not receive anthropological attention very often—as a telling one, especially in regard to ambivalence toward capitalism at one of the epicenters of the global high-tech economy.

Ambivalence, as Lauren Berlant puts it, is not the failure of a relation but an inevitable condition of intimate attachment (Berlant 2008:2). In the yoga studio, moments of ambivalence and refusal are very rarely framed in relation to “capitalism” or “neoliberalism.” But as people struggle with life-altering decisions, they often talk about wanting to “stop participating in the rat-race.” So how are such fleeting moments and life-changing decisions to be understood? It is not untrue to claim that they “serve the machine” by providing temporary relief from work life, a relief which, it turns, enables productivity. But as J.K. Gibson-Graham wrote, capitalism has been unnecessarily stabilized within Marxist representations as a totalizing force and a unitary entity. If we destabilize the meaning of capitalism, we begin to see the multiplicity of noncapitalist forms that constitute global capitalism and also its alternatives (Gibson-Graham 2006; Halberstam 2005). Neoliberal capitalism, in other words, is not a coherent entity. As people live under this political economy, they find ways to negotiate it, even in little and daily acts. Noticing the suffering of the privileged—paying attention to stress, anxiety, competition, precariousness, and processes of subjectification—allows an examination of how neoliberal axioms (bigger, faster, better, more!) are being criticized by people who are just doing their yoga practice.

Assuming that the culture of stress under late capitalism and the culture of yoga and self-care are mutually constitutive, I suggest that the moments in which yoga practitioners experience, reproduce, negotiate, and temporarily reject parts of themselves and of the neoliberal, late capitalist ways of life are productive moments—not necessarily in the capitalist or heteronormative meaning of being (re)productive. Rather, these are productive moments because they allow subjectivization to take a
slightly different angle, because they articulate capitalist cultures somewhat differently, and because they provide an open territory for reflection and questioning—which, for me, is exactly what anthropology is all about.

I also want to suggest that perhaps one of the reasons why the anthropological discipline is not very interested in the privileged, their suffering, and its consequences is that—as I said at the beginning of this chapter—it is too close to home. Living under neoliberalism and an ongoing pressure to be productive, many anthropologists are continuously stressed; some are yoga practitioners; I doubt there are many who do not know yoga practitioners; and I honestly do not know how many anthropologists, at the end of the day, are involved in much political activism (good intentions, declared sympathies, and political desires aside).

But if “they” (yoga practitioners) like “us” (anthropologists) are primarily involved in “social critique” rather than in activism, what does it say about “us” as political beings? Why did I feel flattered when I was called “a political student,” and why do I bother to examine what might be political in the workings of yoga as an intimate public? What does all of this say about the slippage between the politics of our research objects, the politics of the research itself, and “our” political involvement?

I suggest that anthropological desires may neglect subtle changes in the form of capitalism itself, and worse—as in the “brainwashed” story that was included in the introduction—they may lead to patronizing as a way of distancing “ourselves” from people who are actually us, those trying to go through the day, manage their tasks, find some happiness, and during the process of ordinary living, also do some good.
Lie down on your back. Place the small pillow or folded blanket underneath your head so the neck is well supported and the chin drops below the level of the forehead. Take a moment to relax the legs and let them fall open. With the palms facing up, spread the arms away from your body so the upper arms do not touch the sides of your rib cage. You should have an expansive feeling, as if you are taking up as much space in the room as possible. Set your timer for 15 or 20 minutes (you can work up to 30), cover your eyes, and lie back. Take up to 20 steady, even breaths, gradually increasing the inhalations and exhalations. Then completely let go; release any controlled breathing, allow your body to drop into the floor, and observe your thoughts without reacting to them, as if they were clouds drifting past you in the sky. When you hear the timer, exhale and bend your knees to your chest. Roll to one side, letting the eye cover fall off by itself, and use your arms to sit up slowly (From “Find Serenity in Savasana” By Judith Hansen Lasater Yoga Journal http://www.yogajournal.com/practice/1515).
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348


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354


Biography

Neta Bar was born in Israel on August 16, 1976. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2002 (Magna cum Laude), and her Masters of Arts in Anthropology from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2003 (Summa cum Laude). Her Masters’ thesis title was: “Good Intensions - Israeli Snipers in the Al-Aqsa Intifada.” An article based in the thesis was published in *Third World Quarterly* 26(1) under the title “Israeli Snipers in the Al-Aqsa Intifada: Killing, Humanity and Lived Experience.”

Bar started her graduate studies at Duke University in August 2004 as a Fulbright scholar. She received her Masters in 2007, and her Doctorate in April 2013, along with a Graduate Certificate in Women Studies. Her work was supported by Duke Graduate School Summer Fellowship, Duke Women’s Studies Ernestine Friedl Award, Duke University Center for International Studies’ Graduate Award for Research and Training, Duke University Department of Cultural Anthropology, and the Mellon Graduate Student Research Awards, the Consortium in Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University.

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