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**THE POLITICS OF TENDING TO THE BODY: WOMEN DOING
YOGA IN GENOA (ITALY)**

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Keywords:	yoga, self-care, politics of the body, women, Genoa, Italy, feminist politics of care
Abstract:	<p>Against a background of neoliberal precarity, the yoga industry promotes a practice experienced by, and inscribed on, the body that is meant to transcend physiological boundaries and expand individual and collective awareness. In this context, research on contemporary yoga has shed light on how women, and specific notions of womanhood, are key to a promise of wellness, healing, and self-realisation that is materialised by white, monied, slender female practitioners as embodiments of the proper way of undertaking self-care. The yoga industry, thus, participates in a politics of the body, embedded in the intricate structures of the current neoliberal politico-economic regime. Based on these observations, this article sets out to interrogate how the yoga industry's mandate of tending to the body enters the way female teachers and practitioners navigate, experience, and express their journey into yoga. By analysing selected interviews conducted with women yoga instructors and practitioners in the city of Genoa, the paper examines how they frame yoga as a way of caring for oneself while navigating personal issues and bodily ailments. As a path of self-scrutiny and self-realisation, yoga is talked about as providing some relief from life's predicaments and embodied vulnerabilities, while also accommodating gender normativity. The article develops a critique of the problematic appropriation of self-care by the yoga industry's mainstream cultural repertoires as a sociologically-neutral individual response to living with neoliberal precarity. The article contends that feminist politics of care provide a framework to re-inscribe yogic self-care within a broader process of collectively subverting neoliberal injunctions about tending to the body.</p>

THE POLITICS OF TENDING TO THE BODY: WOMEN DOING YOGA IN GENOA (ITALY)

Abstract

Against a background of neoliberal precarity, the yoga industry promotes a practice experienced by, and inscribed on, the body that is meant to transcend physiological boundaries and expand individual and collective awareness. In this context, research on contemporary yoga has shed light on how women, and specific notions of womanhood, are key to a promise of wellness, healing, and self-realisation that is materialised by white, monied, slender female practitioners as embodiments of the proper way of undertaking self-care. The yoga industry, thus, participates in a *politics of the body*, embedded in the intricate structures of the current neoliberal politico-economic regime. Based on these observations, this article sets out to interrogate how the yoga industry's mandate of tending to the body enters the way female teachers and practitioners navigate, experience, and express their journey into yoga. By analysing selected interviews conducted with women yoga instructors and practitioners in the city of Genoa, the paper examines how they frame yoga as a way of caring for oneself-the self while navigating personal issues and bodily ailments. As a path of self-scrutiny and self-realisation, yoga is talked about as providing some relief from life's predicaments and embodied vulnerabilities, while also accommodating gender normativity. The article develops a critique of the problematic appropriation of self-care by the yoga industry's mainstream cultural repertoires as a sociologically -neutral individual response to living with neoliberal precarity. The article contends that feminist politics of care provide a framework to re-inscribe yogic self-care within a broader process of collectively subverting neoliberal injunctions about tending to the body.

Keywords: yoga, self-care, politics of the body, women, feminist politics of care, Genoa, Italy

Introduction

In its different forms and articulations¹ contemporary yoga is generally presented as a practice for all that is inherently suitable for, beneficial and widely accessible to, everyone willing to embark on a path of well-being, spiritual search, and personal growth (Author, 2022). Despite the veneer of inclusiveness, however, lack of diversity seems pervasive ~~in~~on the Western yoga scene. Indeed, recent studies have highlighted that studios, retreats, and teacher trainings are overwhelmingly populated by middle-class and educated women². In addition, both the yoga and the advertising industries increasingly rely on images of white, slender, and young women doing *yogāsana* to promote and sell their products (Newcombe, 2007; Park et al., 2015; Penman et al., 2012)³. Such imagery is often associated with narratives about a quintessentially feminine way to practice and experience yoga (McCartney and Wittich, 2020; Webb et al. 2017). These observations have prompted the growth of critical research that highlights the gendered, racialised and classed dynamics in the Western yoga space (Berila et al., 2016; Horton and Harvey, 2016).

This article provides insights into the industry's female-centred orientation through an ethnography of the yoga scene in the city of Genoa (Italy). By exploring the notion of self-care as a central tenet of yoga's cultural repertoires on one hand, and feminist politics and practice on the other, the article delves into women's complex and complicated journeys into yoga as told and observed in actual spaces and contexts of practice. Thus, this article sets out to address two intertwined questions:

¹ Yoga is used here as an overarching term for a wide-ranging set of practices that include postural and meditative forms of yoga but also other contexts and forms of the practice that eschew this classification. While Elizabeth De Michelis (2008: 21-22) has proposed a differentiation between postural and meditative forms of yoga, Theodora Wildcroft has challenged this conceptualisation, as it overlooks widespread yoga subcultures that make up what she terms "post-lineage yoga".

² Yoga Alliance. 2016. 'Yoga in America Study'. Conducted by Yoga Journal & Yoga Alliance, <https://www.yogaalliance.org/Portals/0/2016%20Yoga%20in%20America%20Study%20RESULTS.pdf> (accessed 26 October 2020). For an ethnographic research on upper-middle class women doing yoga see, Bar (2013)

³ A simple internet image search reveals the pervasiveness of this kind of imagery.

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2 1) how is the yoga industry's self-care imperative entangled with gender normativity? 2) How do
3 women practitioners get caught up in a neoliberal ethics of tending to the body?
4

5 The article relies on six in-depth interviews conducted with women yoga practitioners and
6 instructors in Genoa between 2018 and 2020⁴. These fieldwork materials are part of a larger sample
7 of eighteen interviews collected during the same period and were selected for the relevance of their
8 discursive trajectory regarding yoga, embodied vulnerability and self-care.
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12 Based on anecdotal observation, the composition of the Italian yoga scene seems rather
13 homogenous in terms of sex, race, and class⁵. This is reflected in the sociological characterisations of
14 the respondents featured in this [paper/article](#): all white and of Italian origin, with a level of post-
15 graduate university education (Master or other academic specialisations) already completed or in
16 progress. Among them, one taught yoga as her primary profession, one associated yoga teaching with
17 other occupations in vegan catering and holistic-alternative medicine — while four presented
18 themselves as yoga practitioners⁶. All respondents had a degree of financial and time-related
19 investment in yoga, which emerged from their lifestyle and consumption habits, including their
20 participation in yoga-related trainings, retreats, seminars, and events. The selection of the
21 interviewees started with informal conversations within the Iyengar yoga studio I attended on a
22 weekly basis. Through those early interactions, I gained access to other local yoga networks. I also
23 used social media to get an initial idea of the people, groups, and schools that gravitated around the
24 yoga scene in Genoa and their ways of interacting online. The field research also centred on an
25 embodied observant attitude, which included my personal experience in yoga classes and ~~that~~ was
26 recorded in field notes and in a journal. The analysis proposed here, however, focuses particularly on
27 excerpts from the interviews, with the purpose of highlighting the entanglements, emerging in the
28 respondents' accounts, between yoga, self-care, and a sense of embodied vulnerability. In that respect,
29 the practice of yoga worked simultaneously as a context of crystallisation of practitioners' embodied
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47 ⁴ Respondents are identified with two letters contained in their names and surnames (though not necessarily
48 initials), followed, in square brackets, by their self-identification as practitioner or teacher, the main
49 school/style of yoga, and age range.

50 ⁵ In fact, there are no official statistics concerning the demographics of the Italian yoga scene. However,
51 according to the report "Indagine Stili d'Italia", Ufficio Studi ANCC-Coop (2018), "those who regularly
52 practice yoga are equally distributed among younger people, adults, and older people, but are instead
53 diversified between males and females". Granted that the survey placed yoga and Pilates in the same activity
54 category, 1 in 10 women claimed to be regular practitioners, while "the male population stopped at 3%". In
55 addition, 41% of women (compared to 26% of men) said they were planning to start or recommence
56 practicing yoga (98-99). [https://www.italiani.coop/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/coop-consumi-2018-web-
57 definitivo.pdf](https://www.italiani.coop/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/coop-consumi-2018-web-definitivo.pdf).

58 ⁶ Although one among them, identified with the acronym MR, had had previous experience as a yoga
59 teacher.
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2 self around gendered norms and as a space of potential interference with the tenets of neoliberal
3 precarity.
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6 In the next section, I outline the paper's theoretical framework. By relying on the concept of
7 *politics of the body* (Bordo, 1993; Phipps, 2014), this part situates the yoga industry's self-care
8 narratives in the particular socio-economic context in which they are produced. Then, through an
9 analysis of selected interviews with women yoga instructors and practitioners in the city of Genoa, I
10 examine the framing of yoga as a way of caring for ~~oneself~~ the self while navigating personal issues
11 and bodily ailments. This analysis shows that yoga as a path of self-scrutiny and self-realisation
12 provides some relief from life predicaments and embodied vulnerabilities, while also accommodating
13 gender norms. In so doing, the paper proposes a critique of the problematic appropriation of self-care
14 by the yoga industry's mainstream cultural repertoires as a sociologically -neutral individual response
15 to living with neoliberal precarity. In the final part of the article, I argue that feminist politics of care
16 might provide a framework to re-inscribe yogic self-care within a broader process of collectively
17 resisting neoliberal injunctions about tending to the body.
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27 28 Yoga as Politics of the Body 29

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31 Bodies are central in yoga. Various studies show how the bodily dimension represents for
32 practitioners a focal point of transformation that includes and transcends anatomical boundaries
33 (Author, 2022; Foxen, 2020; Goldberg, 2018; Nevrin, 2008; Newcombe, 2019; Smith 2017; White,
34 2011). A growing strand of this literature has shown that the way in which the yoga body is made
35 intelligible as the site of this promise of transformation reflects neoliberal ethics and practices. For
36 example, various studies have focused on how, by framing specific bodily configurations as
37 expressions of empowerment, holistic well-being and self-realisation, the yoga industry sustains
38 neoliberal projects. In particular, Andrea Jain contends that, by providing escape from everyday
39 hurdles, and commodifying and colonising dissent, the yoga industry upholds neoliberal ethics (Jain,
40 2020, 13-14)⁷. Similarly, Farah Godrej argues that, despite practitioners' claims of yoga's inherent
41 counter-hegemonic potential, Western yoga practice often risks "reinforcing neoliberal constructions
42 of selfhood" (Godrej, 2017, 773) through a "teleological project of progressive individual self-
43 fashioning, self-improvement, and optimization" (781). In that sense, the yoga industry participates
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55 ⁷ Moreover, according to Jain, "neoliberalism relies on the selective deployment of key ideological
56 assumptions, such as the importance of self-governance and individual responsibility [...] Neoliberalism, in
57 other words, delegitimizes political protest in advance of it by claiming that the current state of affairs,
58 including socioeconomic circumstances, is what we have all chosen. By privatising social and political
59 concerns, neoliberalism protects entrenched social structures (Jain, 2020, 13-14). On yoga and neoliberalism
60 see also, Biswas (2012); Godrej (2017); Kern (2011); Rosen (2019).

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2 in a *politics of the body* (Bordo, 1993; Phipps, 2014), embedded in the intricate structures of the
3 current politico-economic regime. The politics of the body is a paradigm that “re-conceptualises the
4 body from a purely biological form to an historical construction and medium of social control”
5 (Bordo, 1993, 182), and that recognises the contexts, practices and forms of bodily expression,
6 experience and materialisation as historically and socially situated. According to Alison Phipps, “in
7 western neoliberal economies the body has become a symbol of value and identity which is largely
8 performed and developed via the purchase of products” (Phipps, 2014, 14). Indeed, studies have
9 shown how, by promoting consumption habits that emphasise individual choice and empowerment
10 (Casalini, 2018; Ning, 2018)⁸, neoliberal economies’ insistence on taking care of the body has
11 become a fundamental principle of consumer culture (Phipps, 2014, 14). Thus, ways of tending to the
12 body, in terms of centring neoliberal projects of self-improvement in the corporeal dimension, feed
13 “markets that rely upon idealized representations of the body and the elevation of particular
14 prestigious bodily forms through advertising” (Ibidem). In this respect, Phipps also argues that in the
15 neoliberal and neoconservative age, discourses about the body have become key to sustaining the
16 privilege and power of dominant voices, whose views and concerns in turn silence other perspectives
17 (12-13). In various ways, feminist contributions have shed light on how gender norms constitute and
18 regulate neoliberal bodily regimes, providing a framework that locates them in a continuum of
19 racialised and classed patriarchal oppressions (Ahmed, 2000; Phipps, 2014). In line with these
20 debates, several studies show that the media’s imagery and textual content about yoga tend to
21 pathologise the female body, while simultaneously concentrating the spaces and expressions of
22 femininity within parameters of body size, age, gender, colour, and sexuality (Guest-Jelley and Klein,
23 2014; Murphy, 2014; Strings, 2017)⁹. Moreover, critical research on women, gender and yoga has
24 highlighted how the commercial use of certain imagery has contributed to normalise stereotypes
25 regarding femininity and to uphold hegemonic ideas of how women should look and behave (Bhalla
26 and Moscovitz, 2020; Miller, 2016; Webb et al. 2017a, b; McCartney and Wittich, 2020; York
27 Blaine, 2016). Drawing on fieldwork materials, the next section shows that similar discursive

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⁸ According to Brunella Casalini (2018) “neoliberalism, mostly, governs without directly governing individual conduct, rather creating a type of subjectivity capable of self-discipline: the entrepreneur self. The subject is called, in fact, to constantly invest in him/herself through a consumption-investment aimed at empowering him/herself and attracting investors. The resources to realise this entrepreneurial ambition, insofar as it presupposes investment (consumption) capacity, are, however, distributed unequally. What is at stake here is the construction of a particular type of body: a classed body, distinguishably middle class “(12-13). Author’s translation.

⁹ In fact, according to Manigault-Bryant, the over-representation of normative white femininities supports an industry based on white privilege as a tacit form of racial capital that mediates access to the socio-economic benefits generated around wellness culture (Manigault-Bryant, 2016). See also Haddix (2016), Ford (2016), and Page (2016) for a critique of white privilege in yoga spaces.

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2 repertoires resonate with practitioners' experiences. In particular, the underlying gender normativity
3 that foregrounds the industry's self-care ethics provides practitioners with a stable framework of
4 (gendered) social embodiment¹⁰, as a response to living through neoliberal precarity, while navigating
5 the realms of education, work, and relationships.
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10 Self-care, Yoga and Women

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13 The affirmation of a neoliberal economic regime has been associated with increasing precarity
14 in employment, as well as in the dimensions of individual identity, social positioning and sense of
15 self (Murgia, 2010). Introducing a Special Issue in the *Journal Cultural Anthropology*, Jennifer Shaw
16 and Darren Byler (2016) argue that precarity is a defining condition of the current capitalist phase,
17 which “promotes a political logic of radical individuality, self-responsibility, and independence” and
18 “asks us to see precarity as a result of moral failures of individuals, masking the power relations and
19 structural violence embedded in our global political economy”¹¹. In this respect, social hierarchies
20 get tacitly defined by the spaces of relative privilege individuals enjoy within the regime of precarity.
21 In this sense, according to Sara Ahmed (2017), privilege is a “buffer zone”. It does not mean being
22 invulnerable, but it can reduce the cost of vulnerability because enjoying privilege means that
23 someone or something will almost certainly take care of you (237-238)¹². Feminists have indeed
24 conceptualised precarity as both an epistemological category, to make sense of the functioning of
25 neoliberal political economy, and an ontological state of being, which manifests itself in relation to
26 the unequal distribution of resources and the hierarchies that structure social spaces (Butler, 2015)¹³.
27 It is in this nexus of relative privilege and precarity, of proximity to the escape routes “from the black
28 hole of frustration” (Borghi, 2020, 90) and a sense of isolation and embodied vulnerability that I
29 situate women practitioners' positioning in the yoga industry that emerged from my fieldwork. Based
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47 ¹⁰ Most of the time, by simply overlooking gender as a regulating principle within and without the yoga
48 world.

49 ¹¹Text available at: <https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/catalog/category/precarity> (last accessed, 15
50 December 2021).

51 ¹² Ahmed also adds that, “when a whole world is organised to promote your survival, from health to
52 education, to the walls designed to keep your residence safe, to the paths that ease your travel, you do not
53 have to become so inventive to survive. You do not have to be seen as the recipient of welfare because the
54 world has promoted your welfare” (2017, 237).

55 ¹³ According to Butler (2015), precarity is a “politically induced condition in which certain populations
56 suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury,
57 violence, and death [...]. Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized
58 vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of
59 aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection” (25-26).
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2 on respondents' accounts of their encounter with yoga¹⁴, I began to consider precarity as a carnal
3 experience of isolation, self-doubt and vulnerability, which manifested itself in relation to economic
4 difficulties or health-related problems experienced in everyday life. In that respect, respondents spoke
5 of their encounter with yoga as a breakthrough moment in a period of deep physical, psychological
6 or emotional suffering.
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10 I began to practice and I was going through a moment of...depression, in short, of great
11 difficulty. I remember that G. [her teacher at the time] helped me a lot by directing me towards
12 a practice that worked on opening the chest, the diaphragm and on the standing positions of
13 stability. [...] And what I was looking for, was to find a contact with the earth and with myself
14 in some way, because in this world, in this society you find yourself to be in the mental, no?
15 Not very present, always in the past, in the future, in what you have not been, in what you
16 would like to be, in what you are not, and through the practice I was able to be in the present
17 and this for me was a rebirth in some way, a way to get in touch with what I simply was, for
18 better or for worse (FF, Iyengar yoga teacher [40-45]).
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24 [...] to help me calm down a mind that is very competitive with myself, tyrannical, a
25 bit...unhappy with myself, trying to find spaces to centre in which a gleam — for a thousandth
26 of a second — can open up a sort of resolution. Yoga is union. I have had years of very
27 important anorexia...decades of anorexia so for me the separation of body and soul is
28 embodied. (CL, Iyengar yoga practitioner [55-60]).
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33 For FF and CL, Iyengar yoga became an instrument for taking care of themselves while dealing
34 with personal issues (FF's depression and CL's eating disorder). In so doing, it also provided a
35 language to situate such problems in a yogic discursive framework. For example, FF spoke of her
36 depression as “not being in the present” and her path through yoga as “rebirth”. CL instead referred
37 to her anorexia as “separation of body and soul”. In addition, yoga seemed to enter in the women's
38 lives as they experienced a pervasive sense of precarity in terms of dissatisfaction with — and
39 vulnerability of — their own sense of self.
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45 I can say that now I am a little kinder towards myself. But I still have that same sense of
46 disapproval for being the way I am (CL, Iyengar yoga practitioner [55-60]).
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49 Listen, above all I've understood there was something that...when you pride yourself to be in
50 a certain way and then you accept things...and tell yourself 'but this is not me'. You hide
51 behind a shell but you are vulnerable. I end up asking myself 'do you know who you really
52 are?' [...] All at the same time and so I had to find something. In my case it was yoga. (CR,
53 Vinyasa yoga practitioner, [25-30]).
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59 ¹⁴ The “initial stimulus” (Bichi, 2007, 29) of the biographic interview was: “come hai incontrato lo yoga?”
60 [how did you encounter yoga]?

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2 Women's pursuit of a yogic path thus configured itself as an individual strategy to deal with
3 personal hurdles and available to those who chose to take responsibility for their well-being (as CR
4 puts it, "I had to find something"). These narratives often relied on a discursive repertoire about an
5 exquisitely feminine capacity to approach the practice, which often ends up accommodating gender
6 norms. In particular, to explain the predominance of women in the yoga industry, respondents pointed
7 to women's unique ability to embody and express some of the distinctive principles of yoga. This
8 was associated with a self-representation as teachers/practitioners who approached yoga as "women".
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14 I think we [women] have a greater inclination for introspection, self-reflection, I would say
15 that. It's more ingrained in our veins, no? I don't know if there is...my husband would never
16 take yoga, absolutely not. The men I know, I was just thinking...no, my [male] friends are all
17 very...[mimics "uptight"] I think. We are more predisposed, I don't really know...(GR,
18 Iyengar yoga practitioner, [60-65]).
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22 Women are more prone to spirituality, it's intrinsic to feel things that men don't feel. A couple
23 can figure out this gap immediately, I am seeing this very much these days. There are nuances
24 that men cannot grasp. (AS, Shivananda yoga teacher [40-45]).
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27 Through their supposed "greater inclination for introspection [and] self-reflection" and their
28 proneness to spirituality, women here seem to incarnate a quintessentially feminine way of taking
29 care of themselves through yoga, which provides some relief from embodied vulnerabilities. In that
30 sense, the practice is articulated within the framework of self-care, which associates a greater bodily
31 awareness and a capacity to self-heal with personal growth and self-fulfilment.
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35 I think it is about personal growth because feeling better is about growing as a person [...] The
36 body is certainly the instrument, as far as I am concerned, it is an instrument through which we
37 can know ourselves. I have always suffered from cervical pain, trigemina nerve neuralgia. And
38 I have learnt to recognise the pain, to concentrate. So, it is not only an instrument but also an
39 alarm bell that tells you 'you must work a little bit on this'. [...] because perhaps your lumbar
40 pain is there because of stress, cervical pain because when you study you sit in a wrong
41 position...and thus you try to use...in fact, it is not about the strength, it is about the awareness
42 and the attention you give to that part of your body (CR, Vinyasa yoga practitioner, [25-30]).
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48 Even these statements, when she [the teacher] says 'welcome, relax'...the first time I heard
49 'relax your tongue' I thought 'what does that mean, anyway?' And then I said 'ok be quiet'.
50 You know, it is helping me to have a different approach to the things that come my way, even
51 those that have nothing to do with it [yoga] (GR, Iyengar yoga practitioner, [60-65]).
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55 Respondents then described yoga as a way of tending to (or working on) the bodily realm that
56 opened up spaces for personal growth ("growing as a person"), greater self-knowledge ("know
57 ourselves"), and individual transformation ("a different approach to the things that come my way").
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As Benedetta Panisson¹⁵ quite clearly shows, there is a paradox inherent in this imperative to “work” on ourselves in order to cope with everyday hardships:

We work in expectation of pay, we practice in expectation of *siddhi*, attainments, powers, liberations. Fortunately, on our shelves there is always a text by Karl Marx, next to the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, which motivates us and lets us understand with mastery why, in the breaks from our work, we also work on ourselves (2019).

This insistence on individuals’ responsibility for their own well-being (or lack thereof), and the mandate to work on those embodied hurdles that prevent its attainment, feeds into respondents’ narratives linking self-blame for lack of awareness or control over health, nutrition, work, and relationships to negative life experiences.

It doesn’t take much to realise certain things are wrong but I’ve let them happen to me. These are very long and painful journeys. I feel I am healing but it has taken at least two years...but I’ve suffered a lot because I didn’t expect something like that would happen to me. I thought I was invincible, my mother raised me in a certain way, you know, a family in which it’s the women who are in charge (CR, Vinyasa yoga practitioner [25-30]).

For example, I have a myth of speed. From the point of view of corporate culture, I’m always on time and everyone has incredible admiration for me, but I know that I’m a mess and I leave out things that are not done well in order to do them quickly. And how many times have I said to myself, “come on, grow up and do this work well, with care” it’s obvious that it’s the mind that says you have to be energetic, to perform while...they are false myths. I would really like to be good, obviously I am not, being so competitive. I try to live healthily but then it is not true because I do things like drinking very hot tea which I know is very bad. And I tell myself “you’re such a health freak and you say you love your body, then why you do this?” (CL, Iyengar yoga practitioner, [50-55]).

While here CR reflects on her experience of living through a rough patch, including having to deal with the unethical conduct of a university professor¹⁶, her choice of words reveals a sense of personal fault (“I’ve let them happen to me”). In a similar way, CL blames herself for her inability to tame a restless mind which compels her to live a fast-life and to be performative. Yet, while corporate culture values and promotes this attitude, her suffering and sense of personal failure is palpable

¹⁵ Benedetta Panisson is a yoga teacher, a researcher and visual artist with whom I exchanged views and recorded a video-conversation on various themes relevant to our shared interest in contemporary forms of yoga. The passage quoted here is taken from her essay: Panisson, Benedetta. 2019. *Glutei e Spiritualità*. <http://www.impossiblyyoga.com/2019/11/29/glutei-e-spiritualita/>. Last accessed 24 November 2021.

¹⁶ CR never spelled out in detail what had actually happened to her, aside from mentioning the fact that, among other things, she was finding it very difficult to finish her post-graduate studies due to a number of difficult personal situations, which included this professor's misconduct. I chose not to ask further details about what she had gone through because she was disclosing a very intimate emotional journey.

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2 (“grow up” and “I would really like to be good, obviously I am not”). Women's self-contempt thus
3 seems central to an industry relying on personal responsibility and individual will-power as
4 underlying moral injunctions to purchase self-care, overlooking structural issues at the core of
5 experiences of precarity. In fact, yoga seems to provide a soothing, empowering, and liberating path
6 for those who “choose” to finally work on and tend to an embodied self, which is however abstracted
7 from the structural constraints where differential experiences of vulnerability take shape.
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11 [Yoga's accessibility] depends on the person's capacity to really want to take care of one self
12 (CR, Vinyasa yoga practitioner [25-30]).
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16 In a way, women's newly found capacity to navigate experiences of fragility and suffering
17 rooted in embodied social norms neglects here the gender politics that govern them. The
18 preoccupation with individual will over potential structural constraints in the promotion of yogic
19 forms of self-care underpins women's position in the yoga industry. The much-needed and markedly
20 feminine turn towards self-care they come to embody does provide some relief from material and
21 existential precarity, as the words of the practitioners and the teachers I interviewed demonstrate.
22 However, the practice seems less a care *of* the self, and more a cure *from* the self's problematic
23 relationship with social reality. The industry's insistence on individual responsibility for one's own
24 well-being, which underscores the yoga-for-all discourse (‘all can do yoga if they want/choose to’),
25 not only voids women's personal struggles of their potentiality for critique of gendered precarity, but
26 also erases the differential ways in which self-care matters and the various forms it takes according
27 to — in the words of Sarah Ahmed — the “drastically unequal distribution of vulnerabilities”
28 (Ahmed, 2017). The next section identifies in feminist self-care a possible framework for inscribing
29 women's journeys into yoga within a broader *politics of care* as a practice of resisting the underlying
30 principles of neoliberal precarity.
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43 Feminist Self-care and Yoga

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45 The critique of neoliberal ethics and the subversion of its inherent individualistic logic through
46 a *politics of care* have been at the core of feminist theory and practice. By interrogating the separation
47 of public and private and politicising the realm of emotions, feminists have conceptualised self-care
48 as a central tenet of a politics of the personal that results in a “politics of interdependence” (The care
49 collective, 2021). A visionary and yet pragmatic feminist self-care agenda is contained in Audre
50 Lorde's “A Burst of Light”, a collection of her personal-political struggles as a “black, lesbian,
51 mother, warrior, poet” living with liver cancer (Lorde, 1988). The book's epilogue contains the
52 widely quoted sentence: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is
53 an act of political warfare” (130). In this work, Lorde articulates a black feminist politics of self-care,
54 rooted in the awareness of how embodied vulnerabilities manifest themselves based on intersecting
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layers of structural oppressions. The care of the body is thus situated within a larger political struggle to survive and live meaningfully in a system designed to demean, exploit, and erase certain bodies. “It’s not as if I’m in struggle over here while someplace else, over there, real life is waiting for me to begin living it again”, writes Lorde (Lorde, 1988, 132). I mention Lorde's work to refocus the problematic ethics of self-care promoted by the yoga industry as an individual and sociologically neutral response to life in neoliberal precarity. In contrast, Lorde historicises the forms and fields of self-care, wielding it as a subversive and healing act and situating it within the broader agenda of Black feminism. Indeed, as Sara Ahmed (2017) argues, Audre Lorde could actually be considered as a scathing critic of neoliberal self-care.

After all, she gave us a strong critique of how structural inequalities are deflected by being made the responsibility of individuals (who in being given the capacity to overcome structures are assumed to fail when they do not overcome them) (329).

So, while feminist politics of care allow for a critique of the narrative which universalises and normalises a yogic way of tending to the body around the yoga-for-all discourse, it could be relevant to ask whether everyday yoga spaces could accommodate such a disrupting orientation. This is, to a certain extent, a rhetorical question. Yoga has always crossed areas of social activism and there is a wide literature that not only explores but also clarifies this trajectory, starting from a clear political positioning¹⁷ and participating in a broader process of questioning power relations locally and globally¹⁸. However, the quotes from my interviewees reveal that, in everyday contexts of practice, there is substantial continuity between the yoga industry’s mainstream discourse, highlighted by the literature on women and yoga, and practitioners’ self-care narratives. At the same time, fieldwork materials hinted at potential interferences -between the two, when yoga’s bodily experience was made intelligible outside of neoliberal mantras of personal improvement through an all-embracing “yoga-for-all”.

If you tell me: if you do Ashtanga every evening, you open your legs like this then you unlock everything and become a better person, I don't believe this [...] Even the discourse that you have to sweat otherwise you don't purify yourself, that when you do the twists you eliminate

¹⁷ See, for instance, issues of the academic journal *Race and Yoga*, the text by Berila et al. (2016), as well as Blu Wakpa, (2018); Hagan, (2021); Nair and Singh, (2020); Strings and Blu Wakpa, (2016); Strings, (2017). See also (Haddix 2016) for a reflection on how online debates have opened up conversations about yoga and social justice. In this regard, reference can be made to this Facebook thread regarding the supremacy of whiteness and the yoga marketplace, versus the editorial choices of *Yoga Journal* <https://www.facebook.com/susanna.barkataki/posts/10156552603262123>. (Last accessed, September 12, 2021).

¹⁸ See, for instance, Bost (2016) and Wortham (2016) on yoga as a critique and embodied resistance to the devaluation and normalisation of violence on racialised and feminised subjectivities.

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2 the toxins [...] that if you can't do the split and you can't open a hip ...then if it's on the right
3 side it means one thing if it's on the left side it means another...these are things that honestly
4 make me cringe. [...] because in general it seems to me that it is something that instead of being
5 empowering, takes power away from you (MR, Ashtanga yoga practitioner [35-40]).
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8 Here MR criticises of some of the commonly held beliefs about the transformative effects of
9 yoga and their problematic association with individual empowerment. Instead, yoga's focus on
10 experiencing the lived body becomes a practice that “closes in on itself” and does not need
11 legitimation as a path of self-improvement for individuals choosing to mend their own embodied
12 vulnerabilities:
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17 What you do in your practice that day closes in on itself [...] In theory, the nice thing is that it
18 closes in on the practice itself and you have the opportunity to have the experience of something
19 that ends there but in a positive sense, that gives you all that it has to give you without leaving
20 you with the expectation that you have to do more (MR, Ashtanga yoga practitioner [35-40]).
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23 MR's words resonate with Benedetta Panisson's:

24 One learns to keep one's feet on the ground, to evaluate the indices of good practice, transmitted
25 or received. If, at the end of the lesson, this practice produces small effects, sensations, signals
26 of release and relief, conquests of small strengths, relaxation, will to know, a pleasant sensation
27 of lightness, on the limbs, back, ribcage, on the subtle mechanism of breathing, the practitioner
28 has a smile on her lips. And so does the teacher (2019).
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33 The sense of release that this attention to — and in — the body provides is another dimension
34 that emerges prominently from the interviews. In fact, respondents' narratives of experiencing (as
35 practitioners) or facilitating (as instructors) relief or well-being in the context of the yoga practice at
36 times interfered with the yoga industry's universalising discourse and its problematic individualistic
37 imperative of self-care¹⁹.
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42 Because first of all, to have people — often women — who come and say “finally I was able
43 to find the time to do something for me” — because I used to lead a yoga class at a gym in
44 Lagaccio²⁰ — they were all working moms so you can imagine their day...for them to have that
45 hour or so there and come to do yoga was wonderful and at the end of the lesson you could
46 feel the well-being coming out of every pore (MR, Ashtanga yoga practitioner, [40-45]).
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53 ¹⁹ This reflection goes against the tendency of both the yoga industry and the academia to identify the roots
54 of neoliberal governmentality in the postural practice of several, women-dominated, contemporary forms of
55 yoga. I have written about this extensively in my PhD dissertation, where I argue that the search for a “more
56 authentic” yoga tradition outside popularised and so-called *asana-based* forms of yoga, not only denotes a
57 gendered approach to what counts as “true yoga” but also deflects attention from the interferences with the
58 industry's mainstream cultural repertoires that emerge precisely when the corporeal experience of the
59 practice is given space and voice (Author, 2022).
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²⁰ Lagaggio is a working-class neighbourhood at the periphery of Genoa's city-centre.

1 This quote again resonates with Benedetta Panisson's words:

2 To cause or experience contentment and relief is a wonderful thing (2019).

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5 Realising the wonder of causing or experiencing "contentment and relief" in a world designed
6 to foster differentially precarious lives is still a privilege of those who can afford it. Yet, it could also
7 turn into an incentive to 1) switch the focus from the neoliberal injunction to purchase well-being, to
8 the structural sources of precarity and malaise ("they were all working moms so you can imagine
9 their day") and 2) acknowledge interdependence as a defining aspect of practicing self and collective
10 care. Feminist politics of care might matter to the discussion about yoga and women articulated in
11 this paper, by refocusing the right, need and commitment to self-care as part of a broader politics of
12 care. This entails a shift from cultivating individual awareness to developing a collective
13 consciousness, starting from how we position ourselves in a continuum of socially induced,
14 differentially-experienced vulnerabilities from which stems our sense of precarity. It also entails
15 waking up to the way embodied oppression and internalised self-hatred operate while recognising the
16 logic of privilege embedded in commodified self-care mantras; reclaiming the time and space to be
17 well, to reflect and act while acknowledging what kind of relative empowerment might derive from
18 accommodating gendered self-care regimes and the erasures operated in the process²¹; cultivating the
19 art of resisting atomised precarity, unemployment, gender oppression, racism, and institutionalised
20 violence by building new spaces of relationality. In MR's words,

21 I absolutely don't want to say that I don't have the potential to change, but in the context of a
22 change with contents decided, discussed and elaborated together. [...] Those aspects [of social
23 change] are played out on other levels, on a conscious level of cultural change, coordination
24 and implementation of practices (MR, Ashtanga yoga practitioner [35-40]).

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Yoga might then become part of broader collective efforts to claim and build forms of
"universal care" (The Care Collective, 2020), starting from the awareness of how differential forms
of precarity and oppression are exercised and experienced in and through bodies.

56 Conclusion

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As neoliberal precarity shapes everyday lived experience, the mandate to find health,
empowerment, and self-realisation both informs the yoga industry's discourse and infuses many
practitioners' journey into yoga. In this context, women and specific notions of womanhood become

²¹ While not in the purposes of this paper, this aspect also matters to how authority is affirmed through and exercised over bodies. The gender normativity that naturalises women's position in the yoga industry contributes to place practitioners (male and female) in a place of vulnerability and dependency vis-à-vis authoritative figures and the knowledge they embody while also producing a sort of gendered, racialised and classed hierarchy of bodies (Lucia, 2018).

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2 ideal embodiments of proper ways of tending to the body and caring for the self, predicated upon
3 individual responsibility for well-being (or lack thereof). Gender norms thus foreground a message
4 of accessible and socio-economically unmarked self-care regimes, which mediates the way women
5 teachers and practitioners experience yoga while navigating life predicaments, health issues and
6 bodily ailments. In particular, the analysis of selected interviews conducted in Genoa (Italy), shows
7 that, as a path of self-scrutiny and self-realisation, yoga provides some relief from embodied
8 vulnerabilities while also accommodating gender norms. Yoga's ethics of self-care thus configures
9 itself as an individual and sociologically neutral response to cope with gendered vulnerabilities.
10 Feminism's critique of neoliberal ethics and subversion of its inherent individualistic logic becomes
11 then a possible framework for re-inscribing women's journeys into yoga within a broader *politics of*
12 *care*, as a practice of resisting the underlying principles of neoliberal precarity. In that respect,
13 interferences between the yoga industry's self-care mantras and women's narratives about
14 experiencing and facilitating relief and well-being, can be regarded as potential impulses for
15 reimagining self-care in yoga in the context of a feminist politics of care.
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