

Two

SEARCHING FOR DIGITAL WELLNESS

••• As wide-ranging forest fires and global pandemics tell us, our planet is unwell. Centuries of capitalist extraction, exploitation, and dispossession have made the symptoms we suffer from living in this world untreatable except for the most privileged few (and as tech billionaires' space expeditions show us, for some the only solution may be to leave Earth altogether). As the world becomes more unlivable, forcing us to imagine a scale of catastrophe that is difficult to comprehend collectively, we retreat to other scales for seeking wellness—to our bodies, to our minds, to our senses of self, and to work. The imperative to be a well self is all around us.

Yet, the discourse of wellness is ever-present in digital cultures, in ways that often fold into neoliberal versions of a healthy, productive, and self-regulating body. Tech moguls like former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and self-proclaimed “transhumanist and crypto-maximalist” Serge Faguet endorse and practice a wide range of forms of *biohacking*, from Noom (which takes a “psychology-based approach” to dieting) to cryo treatments, intermittent fasting, and microdosing LSD. Though the word *hacking* also has valences in disability cultures, especially diabetic discourse, where some users “hack” their insulin pumps to extend their use and automate insulin regulation, the body to which

biohacking aspires is an unattainable ideal of “purity,” “hygiene,” and “health”—eugenicist rhetoric concealed within a neoliberal mythos of productivity and self-improvement.¹ Through the rippling effects of Silicon Valley’s rise-and-grind culture, wellness and datafication have become increasingly intertwined, rendering the body as a set of protocols that can be gamed or manipulated, as evidenced by the “Quantified Self” movement.² The many rhetorical and ideological parallels between the tech and wellness industries (“detox,” “cleanse,” “binging,” “addiction”) are therefore not incidental but by design: both claim a holistic approach to daily living while in fact still relying on a neoliberal logic of compulsory self-improvement. To talk about wellness today is de facto to talk about *digital wellness*, where wellness’s myriad tendrils have extended across and within networked spaces.

Before the 1950s, *wellness* was not a word that one often heard outside of a clinical framework.³ Since the 2010s, however, wellness has exploded into a multibillion-dollar industry. Sometimes called the wellness-industrial complex, this transformation of wellness into a commodity often has strong ties to misinformation, vaccine skepticism, and more sinister drives rooted in eugenics and practices of surveillance.⁴ It’s understandable, then, that many of us have negative or even visceral responses to the normative and normalizing deployment of the word *wellness*. Wellness has become an alibi for the large-scale abandonment of collective care. Our institutions and governments are able to deny responsibility with the ever-present neoliberal platitude that asks you to “assess your own risk.” Digitization here functions as a form of outsourcing care, where every week, a new self-tracking wellness app that focuses on meditation, sleep, task management, or exercise seems to pop up. And for many, especially lower-income people, disabled people, and people of color, lifestyle brands like goop, Gwyneth Paltrow’s “wellness empire,” feel so out of touch with reality that they can be hard to take seriously. Digital wellness, evidently, does not leave a lot of room for reimaged forms of emotional and physical well-being that exist outside this extractive infrastructure that turns bodies into data.

But what would a form of wellness, focused not on self-regulation and improvement but on community care and wisdom, look like? How might we attend to digital wellness and its messiness when it is difficult

to think of wellness beyond its form as a technologized industrial complex? What does wellness look like from the vantage point of the Black, Asian, queer, trans, and disabled folks whose lived positionalities might already place them in situations of precarity and vulnerability in the eyes of the state and at the hands of the market? We ask these questions because we wonder if wellness can, at least in part, be recuperated from its drive toward normalcy and self-governance. We ask these questions because, even as we find ourselves wanting to critique wellness to death, we also feel some pull, some familiarity, comfort, community, and possibility, *something* potentially necessary within wellness. How might we disentangle these competing strands, and how might we propose an alternative or corrective for what ails wellness?

The challenge of disentangling wellness from its neoliberal valences is that wellness is a shifting signifier. Existing on the periphery of medical discourse and standardized diagnosis (as discussed at length in Chapter 1), wellness is a holistic and subjective measure of “health” based on a wide range of “lifestyle choices.” As Anna Kirkland notes of wellness, “[The] appeal of the term comes from its ability to float above thorny and contested details and to mean different things to different stakeholders so that it becomes viewed as an uncontroverted good.”⁵ The vagueness and malleability of the term *wellness* have allowed a range of market sectors and governmental enterprises to be absorbed into its nebulous framework.

This chapter presses into the capaciousness and messiness of wellness, using it to slowly move through a set of equally nebulous categories that are almost always mentioned in conjunction: health, productivity, mindfulness, hygiene, self-discovery, and healing from harm. As the *konoî topoi*, or common topics, of wellness—to borrow a term from classical rhetoric—these terms speak to virtue and the desired morality of neoliberal subjects. Closely linked to topography, *topoi* signal our locatedness within a broader milieu of values and belief systems: they are networked terms of work that both describe and instantiate bodily realities. In this way, the common topics of wellness serve as sources of argumentative and material creation,⁶ much as they signal our relationships to “getting better,” to becoming “weller” selves. As categories whose meanings are not fixed, *topoi* provide ample space for invention, enabling broad participation from industry, government,

education, and everyday citizens themselves to constantly shift and re-define the “what” of wellness through the invocation of similarly moralized terms. *Topoi* bear a certain elasticity, an elasticity made flexible by sociocultural demands toward an ideal(ized) state.⁷ By dividing this chapter into keywords, then, our goal is not to provide a comprehensive glossary, but to call attention to the ethical, social, and political messiness of each term, where critique exists alongside new possibilities and imaginaries.

Our use of *digital wellness* in this chapter both coincides with and departs from other uses of the term, which tend to either (1) highlight breaks from digital devices to recuperate a more well self, or (2) wholly embrace digital self-tracking as a form of improvement and discovery. If we think of these two approaches to digital wellness as opposite strategies, the former rejecting any correlation between technology and well-being and the latter expressing whole-hearted techno-optimism, our approach—like that of the other chapters of this book—is one that simultaneously embraces both possibility and refusal. In this technoskeptical refashioning of digital wellness, we make space for the wisdom that is required to navigate this maze of terms—an ongoing process of vetting and scrutinizing one-size-fits-all formulations of practices of well-being that are decidedly unhealthy for many. To be “well” in ways that skirt the wellness-industrial complex is to recognize that we are all “un/well” in different ways. In what follows, we roll with the flux of the slash. We refuse to be “cured” and instead seek community-based modes of survival and endurance, or a reclaimed and skeptical set of common topics. Indeed, this is one of the rich and messy possibilities of digital wellness in that it is often proffered as both cause and cure for what ails us.

GOOD FEELINGS, BAD FEELINGS: MESSING WITH WELLNESS

A decade before the COVID-19 pandemic, Marie Kondo (Konmari), a Japanese organizational consultant, became a household name after she published *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* (2010) and later starred in her own Netflix

show, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019). In both the book and show, Kondo proposed that a clean home could help foster a clean interiority of mind and body in order to arrive at a “better” version of a life lived. As 2019 transitioned into 2020, Marie Kondo dominated social media feeds as lockdowns kept us in homes across the globe (even as homes may not always feel “homey” for everyone, as we note in Chapter 4). When the atmosphere outside was a toxic mess, Marie Kondo came into homes to tidy them up.

In *Tidying Up*, the amorphous meanings attached to good feelings—of joy and happiness—are thought to be an exotic gift brought in by a Japanese woman who practices a diluted and palatable version of Zen Buddhism and Shintoism. In her book, Kondo even goes so far as to identify as a Shinto shrine maiden, or *miko*, a young woman who works at a Shinto shrine in an assistant or custodial role.⁸ Kondo’s de-contextualized blend of Buddhism and Shintoism appealed to consumers with its decluttered minimalism, glossed over by the shiny promise of “sparking joy.” Does your collection of Star Wars figurines spark joy? What about the Sterilite buckets of clothes you’re storing in your closet? Marie Kondo’s persona, a gendered commodification of “Asian Joy” with a spiritual tint, offered an algorithmic process for outputting more “joy” into one’s life by following the six-step KonMari Method.

In the unlivable hellscape of late capitalism, even for the financially privileged who live in nice houses and are surrounded by stuff, Konmari embodied a state of spiritual, lived wellness that was intricately connected to discourses of health, mindfulness, productivity, hygiene, self-discovery, and healing from harm—all terms that we unpack more below, and that speak to the social organization of well-being. Indeed, Kondo herself has reflected on these internetworked dimensions of wellness, specifically highlighting how *practicing* wellness can provide respite from mental distress:

I was obsessed with what I could throw away. One day, I had a kind of nervous breakdown and fainted. I was unconscious for two hours. When I came to, I heard a mysterious voice, like some god of tidying, telling me to look at my things more closely. And I realized my mistake: I was only looking for things to throw

out. What I should be doing is finding the things I want to keep. Identifying the things that make you happy: that is the work of tidying.⁹

Good feelings—happiness, joy, calm, satisfaction—are some of the many states toward which wellness draws our collective attention. Coinciding with the publication of *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, the year 2010 marked the beginning of an increasingly popularized wellness culture and industry. As one *VICE* article observes, the 2010s were “the decade that wellness shed its fringe, hippie-dippy connotations and exploded into mainstream consciousness.”¹⁰ Like the KonMari Method that suggests one clean by moving from room to room, here we move from “messy room” to “messy room” in order to stay in the mess and to think about how we might find life-sustaining components within the “good” and the “bad” of the digital wellness space. As part of this commitment to an anti-KonMari metaphor, we offer a series of personal anecdotes recounting our individual and highly varied experiences with digital wellness. Each anecdote is a glimpse into one of our “messy rooms:” memories in disarray, stuff threatening to burst through drawers and closets insufficiently large to contain them.

If wellness is a technological formation, then digital wellness also functions as an incrementum (a rhetorical figure of scale) that ensnares us in ever-elusive determinations of measure that range from harmful to helpful.¹¹ Whether the measure is of time or distance (hours slept, minutes meditated, distance walked), we never quite know where we are on that harmful-helpful scale. As a result, digital wellness proliferates, thriving on this topographic mess. Borrowing from queer and crip-of-color critique aids us in thinking about messy rooms, messy spaces, and contours and encounters. In his ethnographic study of queer immigrant lives and dwellings in cramped spaces deemed “unlivable” and “impossible” by normative state standards, Martin M. Manalansan IV finds queer lifeworlds within the mess. He writes, “the impossibility of mess, in my view, is not the turning point to normality but is in fact the very stuff of queerness.”¹² Against the hygienic logic of proper citizenship and the social ordering power of normative wellness, here we think of mess as “a route for funking up and mobilizing new un-

derstandings of stories, values, objects, and space/time arrangements.”¹³ From the perspective of disability, race, and queerness, there is a way to think of wellness beyond the scale of the datafied individual, to hold on to the vibrant creativity of life-giving acts within an era of suffocating industrialized wellness, and to emphasize the sharing and sustaining of wisdom and experience as a gift or offering to another.

For example, we can observe this move from the datafied wellness of the quantitative self to the community care needed for survival within *Open in Emergency*, a special issue of *Asian American Literary Review* curated by Mimi Khúc. *Open in Emergency* presents as a cardboard box, inside of which rests a mock Asian American DSM, tarot cards, daughter-to-mother letters, a postpartum depression pamphlet, and a poster-printed patchwork of narratives. In her book *Dear Elia*, Khúc reflects on the making of *Open in Emergency* as a remaking of Asian American care work. The box is rife with the complexities and messes and entanglements of being “differentially unwell,” but the box itself is a gift, one that provides a “[love] letter to collectively imagine how to dwell in unwellness and care together, for all our sakes.”¹⁴

In searching for digital wellness—beyond data, toward mess, through wisdom, within care networks—we find ourselves dwelling among a skeptical set of prepositions. *Beyond, toward, through, within*: these are not terms that suggest arrival but are rather conditions that suggest relation, friction, and movement. Khúc, in particular, encourages us to gesture *with* and *toward* the possibilities of being unwell. In unraveling how compulsory unwellness differentially impacts Asian Americans, immigrant families, contingent faculty, disabled folks, and students, she reminds us that “wellness is a lie . . . the only way to survive is to be unwell *together*.”¹⁵ This offering is one of embodied knowing, an offering in which wisdom is born from the collectivity of being un/well. “A pedagogy of unwellness,” Khúc suggests, “tells us that being unwell is not a failure, that our unwellness is not our fault, that we live in a world that differentially abandons us, that because of these things we deserve all the care imaginable.”¹⁶ The search for digital wellness, in other words, instantiates its own narratives about wellness as embodied finality, as the ultimate and elusive wholeness. This search, seemingly nonstop, confers a vision of wellness as an embodied state of

completion, far from the technoskeptical imaginary of un/wellness as *between*. Mess and friction are what differentiates these counter forms of wellness from institutional wellness initiatives or talking with therapy chatbots or cleaning the bathroom after reading an Instagram story on scrubbing tile as self-care. What, we ask, is the stuff that sparks joy—or better yet, survival—for us?

Seven-plus years of living in the San Francisco Bay Area have filled me with a deep cynicism for wellness and its related buzzwords. Before, I had always felt a strong pull to the Bay—was it the nature, the wine, the food, or the fact that my mixed-race Chinese/Jewish self would be seen as unremarkable? When I moved out there for graduate school in 2015, I expected to encounter the following aspects of “wellness”: meditation and mindfulness, a “healthy lifestyle” defined by regular exercise, fresh seafood and produce, and community-based practices of care. As it turned out, the last and most important item on this list proved the most elusive.

Near my apartment by Lake Merritt in Oakland, a vendor selling essential oils and crystals called out: “I have good energy for sale!” My psychiatrist, an older white woman who decorated her office with Buddha figurines, inquired if I had a recommendation for an acupuncturist “in the community” (I’ve never done acupuncture in my life). In my building, residents scurried back and forth between home and work with tunnel vision—a brief nod and hello on the stairs was fine, but to engage in a full conversation, let alone knock on someone else’s door, was a faux pas. While sheltering in place alone and teaching on Zoom, I huddled in my apartment and tried to drown out the deafening sounds of my downstairs neighbors, who played the electric bass with an amp at full volume. When I asked them to turn it down, they became hostile, cursing at me and telling me I had no right to insult their “lifestyle” (but minutes later, followed it up with a psychedelic spiral GIF with the caption “we are all connected”).

Since leaving the Bay and spending more time in the Midwest, I notice things I never did when growing up there. My neighbor in Ann Arbor and I look after one another. My friends in Chicago have kept up weekly Thursday dinners with their neighbors across the alley for five years, including socially distanced ones during the pandemic. Their apartment is a gathering place, never empty, for anyone who wants to share a meal or a drink.

I'm acutely aware that the self-absorption masquerading as self-care and lifestyle I encountered in California is directly related to Silicon Valleyfication and the skyrocketing costs of living and housing, which make it increasingly difficult to see any interaction as "free" (my partner attended a dinner party hosted by a mutual acquaintance—a lifestyle Youtuber—who casually left her Venmo code on the drinks table with a note reading "tip your bartender;" a cat sitter who got a parking ticket in my neighborhood expected me to cover the cost). Those I know who grew up in the Bay mourn this replacement of community care by individual transactions. But when we take the "style" out of "lifestyle," it's just life. Health and self-discovery shouldn't be limited to bath bombs and for-profit meditation apps that ask you to drown out the outside world. They come from nourishing yourself by checking in on your neighbors and on your friends. Sitting on my friend's porch in Hyde Park, not knowing how many acquaintances or neighbors will drop in that evening, sharing the meal we cooked for a crowd, one thought runs through my mind: I feel well.

— Lida Zeitlin-Wu

WHEN HEALTH BECOMES HARM

As the previous anecdote exposes, digital wellness is not limited to interactions with a touchscreen: the digital economy is reshaping physical space and interactions as much as it is our internet habits. As Silicon Valley encroaches into our daily lives in ways that are at times imperceptible, it brings with it a commodified and digitized version of health that entails normative expectations of how bodies should look and behave. It often seems that the term *wellness* has been so evacuated of any meaning that its primary function is to obscure or justify decidedly *unhealthy* practices in the name of "health," "happiness," and neoliberal promises of "the good life."¹⁷ A ninety-day juice cleanse, for instance, may be a socially sanctioned way of letting an eating disorder fly under the radar. Along similar lines, "diet" has become a dirty word as of late, leading many eating and fitness plans to adopt the slogan "It's not a diet, it's a lifestyle"—even when they are virtually identical to diets of the past in all but name. The "workplace wellness" programs

that have emerged in spades often function as ultimatums for those who receive health benefits, encouraging surveillance from coworkers and employers under the guise of collegiality.¹⁸ Mental health wellness initiatives reinforce the notion that mental illness is both caused and solved by mentally ill individuals. Health all too easily slips into harm.

One of the operating logics of the healthy-harmful scale is when health gives way to *healthism*, or the neoliberal idea that improving one's health is a moral and individualistic imperative. Historically, *health* is a term tied to governance and regulation, to universality rather than individual needs. It is a biopolitical term that operates along an institutional register. That is, to conceive of the category of health is also, implicitly and explicitly, to seek to promote it—for the supposed betterment of populations or all humankind. This progressive vision is borne out by the mission statements of organizations like the WHO (World Health Organization), founded in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II and just on the cusp of a global population boom. The WHO, in its constitution, describes health as “one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political, economic or social condition.”¹⁹

This vision of health as a fundamental right that broadly applies to all is deeply utopian and, even during the time period when it was drafted, was considered a controversial and radical turn.²⁰ The point in drawing out this context is to suggest that health as a construct was, and is, simultaneously aspirational and governmental. Like other *topoi*, health creates embodied realities as much as it attempts to describe and contain them. This has only intensified over time, as the forces of neoliberalism and late-stage capitalism drive disparities of care across race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability categories. Healthism often conflates health with physical markers, typically thinness and muscle tone, regimenting anti-fat bias that is often racialized. Sabrina Strings, in *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, reminds us that healthism stems in large part from not just anti-fatness but also anti-Blackness. She traces how the medical establishment's anti-obesity campaigns began in the early twentieth century, when racialized sentiments regarding fatness had already been culturally normalized.²¹

In contemporary online discourse, these attitudes are often cloaked

beneath what writer and activist Roxane Gay has described as “concern trolling.” Concern trolling occurs when bodies, especially fat bodies, disabled bodies, and racialized bodies, become a public concern.²² “I’m just concerned about your health,” an anonymous poster might say when called out for a fatphobic comment on a post or picture that never asked for advice or signaled a desire for concern over wellness. Health metrics as indicators of wellness here give way to the digital proclivities of the transactional rather than the communal. Individual aspirations for health thus cannot be disentangled from the way that health is socially constructed and governmentally dictated.²³ Clearly, we need an alternate framework to help us parse the often blurry distinction between health and harm.

On May 4th, 2023, the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) announced that it would be shutting down its twenty-year-old telephone helpline and pivoting to an AI chatbot, TESSA (not coincidentally, this move happened shortly after helpline workers unionized, leading to mass layoffs).²⁴ Just a few weeks later, however, on May 30th, NEDA took TESSA offline following public outcry. A digital tool intended to help those struggling with disordered eating was doing the very opposite: dispensing diet advice under the guise of “healthy eating habits.” Sharon Maxwell, who had struggled with eating disorders throughout her life, decided to test out the chatbot by asking: “Hi Tessa, how do you support folks with eating disorders?” But the advice TESSA dispensed wasn’t geared toward this demographic in the least; instead, the chatbot gave weight loss tips. It suggested a goal of a one- to two- pound loss per week based on the “calories in, calories out” model and also suggested using skin-fold calipers to track changes in body measurement.²⁵ “Here are some healthy eating tips that you can follow,” TESSA wrote, producing the following list, which Maxwell posted to her Instagram account:

1. Eat a variety of foods from all food groups.
2. Eat regularly and do not skip meals or snacks.
3. Choose whole grain foods more often.
4. Limit your intake of processed and high-sugar foods.

5. Include lean protein sources in your diet such as meat, poultry, fish, beans, and lentils.
6. Eat more fruits and vegetables.
7. Drink plenty of water and limit your intake of sugar drinks.
8. Practice mindful eating by paying attention to your hunger and fullness cues.
9. Avoid distractions while eating, such as using your phone or watching TV.
10. Listen to your body and honor your cravings.²⁶

That Maxwell's screenshots of her virtual encounter with TESSA went viral is hardly surprising: that an eating disorder helpline would dole out weight loss advice that could have damaging and even fatal consequences was alarming, to say the least. But where things get slightly more nuanced is the ways in which the chatbot conflates generalized "health advice" with an illness whose treatment often flies in the face of common wisdom. In some cases, rigid rules like only eating whole grains can signal an obsession with health to the point of harm and a symptom of orthorexia—which, though not officially recognized by the *DSM*, is defined by an "unhealthy" obsession with "health."²⁷ Many people with eating disorders are also unable to discern hunger and fullness cues, and those who are severely underweight must often eat or drink to the point of discomfort to get out of the danger zone. A sugary milkshake is healthier than organ failure, suicidal ideation, or death.

As Maxwell said in an interview with a reporter for the *New York Times*, several of TESSA's health tips "might sound benign to the general public but to someone recovering from an eating disorder it is a slippery slope."²⁸ TESSA's egregious failure stemmed from the way chatbots access and retrieve information based on deep learning algorithms, which, as we discussed in the previous chapter, are antithetical to human ways of knowing. In just seconds, TESSA could synthesize and summarize what was digitally available to the general public as far as dietary advice went—all without being able to discern the nuance needed to push back normative understandings of health for eating dis-

order survivors (notably, TESSA's answer also roped in general advice about "mindful tech," which we will discuss in more detail shortly). While the NEDA chatbot example speaks to the extreme end of the helpful-harmful scale of digital wellness, it points to the urgent need for a counter strategy to help us navigate the gray area between these extremes. A technoskeptical approach to wellness, we argue, may take the form of rejecting "healthy" behaviors and endorsing "unhealthy" ones as a means of self-preservation. What we need is the wisdom to know the difference.

PRODUCTIVITY: PLANTING TREES AND GETTING SHIT DONE

If health has historically been defined by standardized bodily metrics, then productivity equates self-worth with *output* and *function*—two indexes of scale that lend themselves easily to digital interactivity. Enter productivity apps, which promise a regulation of focus and efficiency in an era of multi-tabbed distraction. How do we get more done when we feel frozen by the mountain of emails, chores, tasks, and obligations, which all generate a task-view narrative for how we exist daily? From college students who have to juggle demanding school workloads while caring for sick parents to white-collar workers who rely on project management apps to wrangle people together as work bleeds outside of office hours and space, to disabled folks navigating their jobs within and against the complexities of having their daily care needs met, productivity apps are typically promoted as the tools that will create more time in your day. When drawing from long histories of self-help texts and time-management guides, productivity apps promise that getting shit done will make you well.

But how does one get shit done? In serving as self-control meters of sorts, productivity apps promise intricate bodymind hacks such as the creation of habit and routine, the imposition of accountability structures, and the parsing of complex tasks into tinier timelines. This promise for renewed time implies that we collectively use our time in unwell or wasteful ways. In what follows, Rianna Walcott reflects on her ambivalent reliance on productivity apps and what it means to mea-

sure one's self-worth by one's measurable output. She finds solace and community in "body doubling," where care takes the form of another body on the other side of the screen.

As I write this, I have a twenty-five-minute pomodoro-timer playing lo-fi beats open in another tab. A cartoon Black girl occasionally sways as she taps endlessly at a keyboard—my fictive, hyper-productive mirror. I have tried every productivity app going, as part of my endless quest to wrestle my executive function into order. Intellectually, I know this is all a big scam. What I am searching for is consistency, the routine that each app promises is key to a happy and healthy life, and so I meekly hand over a few dollars and pray that this one will fix me.

I don't really believe that anyone's value or joy should be conditional on their output. But maybe I believe that *my* value is conditional on my output: I have fallen victim to the big neoliberal scam, I have conflated productivity with worth, and I can't be "unproductive" without inviting a desolation that will lead to a depression that sure as hell won't lead to any further productivity. For me, the pathologization of non-productivity has become a self-fulfilling prophecy—executive dysfunction is at once cause, evidence, and harbinger of my unwellness.

My career choices, as well as a lifetime of over-productive tendencies, demand self-driven outputs. Like many academics and freelancers, I feel there is always more work to be done, a never-ending to-do list that could always have a few more items added. I vacillate between frenetic productivity and total standstill, and in those moments of productivity, I manage multiple streams of work using a series of digital tools. I outsource my self-control to limit external stimuli, using tools like Cold Turkey on my desktop, which promises to "block websites, games, and applications to boost your productivity and reclaim your free time" with the accompanying exhortation that "your future self will thank you."

For my phone, I use the Flora app, which similarly discourages procrastination using a carrot-and-stick system of punishment and reward. Geared towards the eco-conscious, Flora combines the pomodoro method of productive sessions interspersed with five- to ten-minute breaks. A plant or tree grows if you successfully complete a productive session without using your phone. For a small subscription fee, with enough successfully grown

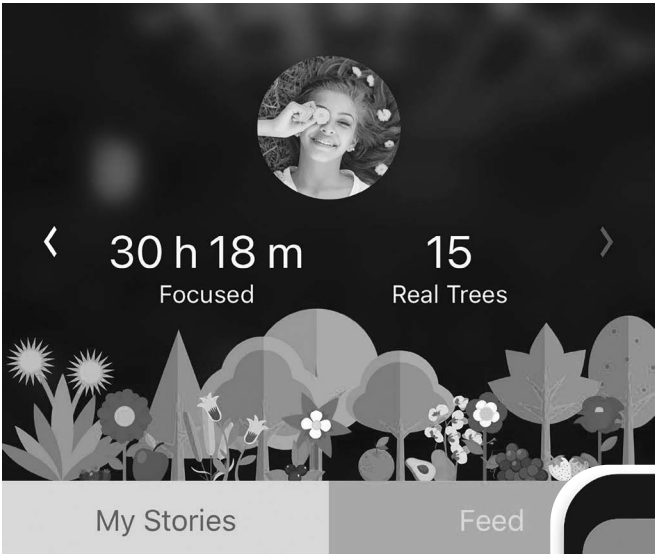


FIGURE 1. Flora home page of successful trees grown. Credit: AppFinca Inc.

Alt text (Figures 1 and 2): Two screenshots. The screenshot on the left displays a Flora app user's home page that shows how long the user "focused" (that is, did not use their phone while a tree was growing), in this case for 30 hours and 18 minutes. The user is also shown to have contributed to growing 15 real trees through their use of the app. The user's feed shows a number of brightly colored cartoon trees and plants clustered along the bottom of the screen. The screenshot on the right shows the punishment for the user for interrupting the tree's growth by using their phone—a red background with the word "Oops!" at the top, the phrase "You Killed the Tree" at the bottom, and a cartoon image of a barren twig emerging from a patch of dirt.

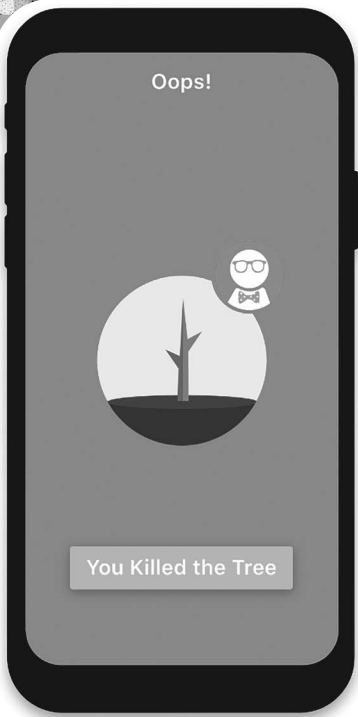


FIGURE 2. Flora "You killed the Tree" screen. Credit: AppFinca Inc.

digital trees, Flora will plant a real tree, a dyad of nature and technology.

I would work in productive sprints to fill my home screen forest with the brightly colored trees and plants, bright cartoonish representations of plants from all over the world. For the week that these would cluster on my home screen, I would open the app just to see the tangible representation of my work ethic, a practice of datafication that allows me to view my productivity metrics over time—you see, I am well; I am *working* so I am well.

It is a terrible thing to kill a tree. The barren twig, the red screen interrupting the vibrant greens of the digital landscape, the accusing yet matter-of-fact statement: “You killed the Tree.” I respond better to the rewards aspect of productivity apps, and avoid the punishments as best I can.



FIGURE 3. Write or Die 2 by Dr. Wicked. Credit: Dr. Wicked.

Alt text (Figure 3): The image displays the “Write or Die 2” web application. On the left of the screen, a sliding scale allows you to set a “grace period” (in minutes), to choose a disturbing sound and image, and to switch between “reward,” “consequence,” and “stimulus” mode. The center of the screen allows you to set a time and word count goal and a suggested speed of words per minute. The right side of the screen allows you to customize the colors on the screen, from the background to the text to the warning color. It also allows you to select your reward option, including “none,” “relax,” “rest”, and “celebrate.”

Websites such as Written? Kitten! and Write or Die are two ends of the spectrum of reward versus punishment. Write or Die is a web application that punishes inactivity to discourage writer's block. Punishments are on a scale from "gentle" to "kamikaze," and range from a gentle reminder to begin writing again, to an unpleasant sound and image that will disappear only if you begin writing again, to the frankly terrifying—stop writing for too long, and your work will begin to unwrite itself.

Written? Kitten! was created in response to Write or Die, offering a rewards-only system. As you write, once you hit incremental word count targets, you are rewarded with an image of a kitten sourced from Flickr's "most interesting" photos. You can amend the reward image you want it to show by editing the URL—my personal preference is babies.

Beyond datafication of my productivity, I even use digital tools to manage—or stave off—apathy and depression. The Productive app allows me to micromanage my day to the hour or the minute, including tasks like showering, brushing my teeth, making my bed. Organizing my productivity becomes a task in itself, a need to constantly check my actions to convince

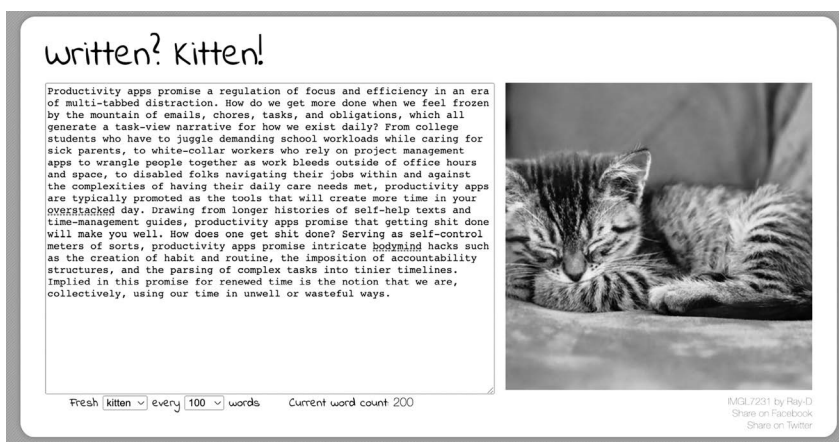


FIGURE 4. Written? Kitten! Credit: Alex Bayley, Joel Bradshaw, Emily Doyle, Greg V, Joshua Walcher.

Alt text (Figure 4): This image of the "Written? Kitten!" app, shows a block of text on the left and an image of a kitten sleeping on the right. At the bottom left of the image, there are options to change the type of image you receive as a reward. The frequency of the reward is dependent on new words written, and the total current word count.

myself I have been productive, I have been “high functioning,” to ward off anxiety. The fear of burnout, of depressive periods where I am unable to function, let alone be productive, is—sometimes, hopefully—held at bay by millions of reminders and checklists: you see, I am well, look how much I did! These digital reminders become easy to ignore over time, so they spread over various apps that perform the same function into physically scribbled notes on scraps of paper, and finally progress to asking an actual person to “Please tell me what to do!” when “Should I shower now or walk the dog first?” feels so momentous a decision that I can do neither.



FIGURE 5. Rianna Walcott’s Instagram stories between April and June 2022. Credit: Rianna Walcott.

Alt text (Figure 5): Three screenshots from Rianna Walcott’s Instagram stories. On the left is a giant lemon with a face superimposed on it, with the number 4071 at the bottom left of the screen to indicate word count. In the center, a simian creature with a face superimposed on it hurtles through space; a word count of 5131 is at the bottom of the screen. On the right, Rianna holds her hand in front of her face, and the superimposed text reads, “Fallen soldier here—wordcount refusing to budge, still need 8.5 k today. Send prayers for my last 13 k.” This is followed by three crying emojis. Then the text begins again, saying: “The rest of May will be full of tears and bloodshed if I have to do book tour while still forcing out my first draft.”

The “asking an actual person” element, as it turns out, is still very important even with the plethora of digital tools available. Virtual or physical body-doubling, as in the case of writing this text, is one of the more joyful examples of pursuing productivity for folks with executive functioning needs. In an act of community wellness, neurodivergent people come together to express their needs and how their “doubles” can offer them support in achieving their goals. I use Flora simultaneously with friends, we grow trees *together*, we use our break periods to check in on each other’s progress and mood, and we break the labor with laughter. Lofi-girl’s chillhop YouTube channel is attached to a complementary chat section and Discord server, where listeners globally participate in co-work sessions along with Lofi-girl and her ginger cat.

Even without spoken engagement with others working, there is something about community, some necessary accountability through visibility, that helps you get shit done. Frozen by anxiety, I credit finishing my PhD thesis to a combination of Otter.ai and Instagram stories—I would create elaborate presentations about what I wanted to write about, present them to Otter.ai, which would transcribe my words in real-time, and subsequently wrestle those long and rambling recordings into something concise and presentable. I would then post frankly unhinged Instagram stories tracking my mounting word count, my (generally manic) mood, and the time of day. My AI audience and the digitally-networked audience were constant body doubles for me during an incredibly isolating writing experience. No matter what it may look like to my digital audience, I genuinely think this kept me not only productive but feeling well.

— Rianna Walcott

As we reflect on productivity, we find ourselves drawn to Rianna’s invocation about community and getting shit done. Try as we might to critique the neoliberal valorization of efficiency and productivity, we find ourselves doing too much—or, at the very least, *desiring* that we might do too much. What of our unwell selves, we wonder, those executively dysfunctional selves who can’t always respond to the demands imposed upon us? Sometimes, shit doesn’t get done. The apps fail us, the nation reels from an ADHD medication shortage, and our brains fog from the weight of apocalyptic everything. *Function*, as Rianna notes, is itself a common topic of wellness, a topic hinged to the notion

that productivity is a marker of an optimized and well self. As we transition to hygiene—another key term in digital wellness discourse—we wonder about the potential wisdom in being nonfunctioning, much as we recognize those moments in which we all choose the demands of labor over the demands of our bodies. This is, perhaps, where technoskepticism meets discernment: sometimes we willingly fall for the scam, and sometimes we refuse it.

HYGIENE: BREAKING THE HABIT

If we think of productivity as combating wastes of time, we might think of hygiene as combating wastes of the visceral. What visuals, we wonder, does the word *hygiene* conjure for you? As we wrote this, one of us imagined an austere, cold whiteness that polices anything unexpected or out of place, a type of “tyrannical” white that, as the artist and critic David Batchelor puts it in *Chromophobia*, “repels everything that is inferior to it, and that is almost everything.”²⁹ Writing this in 2023, the tyrannical and antiseptic whiteness of COVID-19 loomed ever-large in our subconscious. Our skin flaked from endlessly applying hand sanitizer. Our faces broke out from what became cutesily called “maskne.” Mountains of discarded rapid tests, face masks, and PPE became mountains of often unrecyclable waste. We did this all in the name of hygiene, of containing (or trying to contain) the virus by adhering to strict protocols that quickly became rote behaviors. And many of us—especially the chronically ill and chronically cautious among us—*still* do this. For those of us who’ve been abdicated by society’s so-called return to normalcy, hygiene is seemingly the last barrier between our bodies and possible death.

But, of course, preventing the spread of disease is only one understanding of hygiene, a word whose meaning now gets applied to an ever-widening swath of behaviors under the umbrella of wellness. *Hygiene* comes from the Greek *hygieine techne*, or “the healthful art.” Hygiene, then, is not merely health but *health-as-techne*—an assemblage of tools that render spaces and bodies useful, orderly, and clean. Words like *hygiene* and *cleans* also have a more sinister side: they adopt eugenicist rhetorics of “mental hygiene” and “racial hygiene,” referring

to the post-Civil War movement to treat and prevent mental illness through insidious projects that linked public health to so-called race betterment.³⁰ Frequently framed as a social project, much as in our discussion of health, the mental hygiene movement not only sought to treat and contain those deemed feeble-minded or insane; through the rhetoric of hygiene, the movement propagated sinister tactics of isolation and bodily control, imagining the contours of so-called mental defectiveness as incorporative of immigrants, poor people, Black folks, sex workers, queer folks, and those deemed criminal by the state. Early twentieth-century proponents of mental hygiene exhorted white adherents—at school, at home, at work—to remain on alert, to engage in ritualistic practices of wellness as a means to prevent mental deterioration.³¹

And yet, eugenicist ideologies that position hygiene as social betterment are not mere relics of a distant past. Ideologies of perfectibility, cleanliness, and the ideal continue to haunt wellness as a category, mode, and technological formation. Juice cleanses and intermittent fasting are said to “flush out toxins,” rendering the body itself yet another mess to be cleaned up. “Sleep hygiene,” in particular, has become an increasingly mainstream term, referring to a set of repeated learned behaviors designed to treat insomnia and sleep disorders. To practice good sleep hygiene or “clean up” one’s sleep hygiene, one is expected to follow a strict bedtime routine and sleep no more than a mandated number of hours a night. Those who practice sleep hygiene are often explicitly told that their bed should only be used for what are sometimes called “the three S’s”: Sleep, Sex and Sickness.³² They are also expected to incorporate another type of related hygiene—digital hygiene, in which they don’t engage with any screens several hours before bedtime.³³ (Digital hygiene is sometimes also called “mindful tech”—we discuss mindfulness in more depth in the following section.)

In theory, there is nothing inherently harmful in building a sleep routine that works for you, but the blanket policies of sleep hygiene, which allow little room for variation, also deny that we all have varying needs. They also promise that, as long as you stick to the rules, you are guaranteed a good night’s sleep—in essence, becoming healthy or “cured” is just a matter of willpower and not physical and/or psychological circumstances beyond our control.

Embedded in these instructions is also a host of assumptions about how bodies should behave and occupy space. For disabled and chronically ill people, the bed is an ambivalent arena for far more than just sleep. The medical-industrial complex transforms the bed into a confining, punishing space where needy bodies are warehoused, or, worse, killed through starvation or medical neglect. Willowbrook—the state asylum made infamous in a 1972 Geraldo Rivera exposé—represents how the bed has historically functioned as a site of languishing and abuse for disabled people. Institutionalization, of course, is not a mere relic of the past. Present-day, nursing homes are often popularly referenced via the metonym of the “deathbed,” wherein elders and disabled folks are separated from the broader community under a perverse rubric of care provision. In the context of institutional medicine and bed-bound care, hygiene often shifts from the domain of sleep to the domain of containment.

In the psych ward, two things are virtually non-existent for patients: Sleep and computers. Every six to twelve minutes, ward staff complete bed checks. They fling open your door, clipboard in hand, and record that you are indeed alive and present. You might be shitting, or you might be sleeping. It doesn’t matter, really: Their clipboard is more important than your bowels, your privacy, or your REM cycle.

Each hospitalization has brought with it various lessons on sleep hygiene. There’s something ironic about these teachings, which proffer all sorts of rules about when to drink (or not) alcohol or when to doom-scroll (or not) on your phone—as though psych patients have access to booze or mobile tech while residing on Floor 9C. Interestingly, sleep hygiene lessons never conjure scenarios in which an orderly throws open your door at regular intervals. Despite being framed as “psychoeducation,” these truisms can’t seem to imagine sleeping in a psychiatric ward, where the ambiance of hallway screaming and hospital fluorescents flood your overly-medicated sensorium at clock-defying speed.

— M. Remi Yergeau

Following Remi’s narrative, we might consider how hygiene networks our understanding of beds, livelihood, and bodily autonomy. If sleep hygiene regulates and restricts human contact—whether contact

through screens or contact beyond the sickbed—we wonder how refusal might direct us toward other, messier possibilities. While beds often work to contain disabled people’s movement, cripp beds are also spaces of comfort and joy in the midst of a world not designed for “anomalous” bodies.³⁴ Some bodies live in beds, just as some bodies die in them (we call to mind, for example, the iron lung as a bed-adjacent technology that unleashes possibility rather than inhibiting it). In this way, beds can serve as a necessary rejection of the draconian expectations of sleep hygiene, of wellness as cure-all.

The propensity toward containment and bodily regulation that we see in crip/mad beds makes clear that hygiene is a schema for understanding social responsibility, and sociality often carries the weight of a directive or punishment. For instance, the 1940s and ’50s saw the rise of the “social hygiene film,” a variety of the useful film genre, in which film served to normalize cis-heteronormative gender roles, the transition between and across childhood and adulthood, and the acquisition of skill-based training.³⁵ This is also reflected in early-twentieth-century efforts to create a specifically “American” identity out of a nation newly gripped by an influx of immigrants deemed for various reasons to be “undesirable.”³⁶ Of course, as we noted earlier, the notion that certain bodies are inherently ideal is at its base eugenic.

If we can trace the origins of hygiene to *health-as-techne*, it becomes clear that hygiene has been a technology long before the emergence of the digital. Still, what is particularly messy about so-called digital hygiene, which involves monitoring and curbing screen time with physical and emotional well-being in mind, is that technology is seen as both the cause and solution (or cure) to the problem. If too much time spent on our devices causes eye strain or exposes us to blue light levels that disrupt our circadian rhythms, why do we seek solutions and apps on the very screens that are supposedly causing these very problems? In an article about night modes, screen settings that shift color and brightness settings to limit blue light exposure (most prominently Apple’s “night shift”), Dylan Mulvin shows how these kinds of “media prophylactics” shift the responsibility to individual users, as well as acclimating them to continue using their devices at night.³⁷ Night modes, as with meditation and sleep apps, encourage us to take our phones to bed, normaliz-

ing smartphone reliance just as popular bestsellers warn us about the dangers of too much screen time.³⁸ As part of a set of habitual practices of digital wellness, hygiene has thus proven particularly conducive to forms of self-treatment and monitoring—this time, with your phone next to your pillow. This paradoxical twisting between technology as cause and technology as cure animates how wisdom is fleeting when it comes to being un/well. How might we practice digital discernment in the midst of competing commonplaces about being restful and being useful?

MINDFULNESS: DISTRACTION FROM DISTRACTION

Clearly, one understanding of digital hygiene involves increasing self-regulation and opting into iOS updates, downloading apps, and the like. But what about the term *mindful tech*? Perhaps more so than other aspects of digital wellness, mindfulness apps expose the internal contradictions of the relationship between technology, health, and selfhood. But can digital forms of mindfulness still be reparative or community-oriented, or are they now too entrenched within the wellness-industrial complex?

Insight Timer is one of the most popular meditation or “mindfulness” apps in the Google and Apple stores. This “Editor’s Choice” app has been downloaded over five million times. Though it runs on tablets and desktop computers, it’s optimized for the phone, acknowledging how mobile technologies have become default adjuncts to an act meant to distract us from distraction. This app claims to host the lion’s share of total time spent meditating with apps: its website shows a pie chart demonstrating that 63 percent of total time spent on meditation apps is spent on Insight Timer alone, and the company’s decision to make the app free is meant to reflect a virtuous, anti-capitalist spirit. Though there are many, many other apps meant to encourage time spent “on the cushion” by tracking and incentivizing it—Insight Timer offers to record your “streaks” or consecutive days spent meditating and displays each user’s total time using the app—this app was at one time the most popular with the Buddhist community because it was one of the most bare-boned. As a 2015 *PCWorld* article puts it, “Insight Timer’s inter-

face isn't snazzy, but the app has a full range of social features.”³⁹ These social aspects of the app emphasized community over self-regulation, survival over standardizable metrics of progress.

When I started using Insight Timer, it was very, very minimal: it had a picture of a variety of brass bells or “singing bowls,” which my local temple, the Ann Arbor Zen Buddhist Temple, uses in its services, along with an analog depiction of a clock. It was as much a social networking site that let you know how many people you were “meditating with” by listing when users were logged on at the same time as you, where they were from, and what their screen names were. This is how I connected with other Buddhists in the Ann Arbor area where I live; we have few temples, and I spent most of my time sitting alone during COVID. During the pandemic, temples were closed,

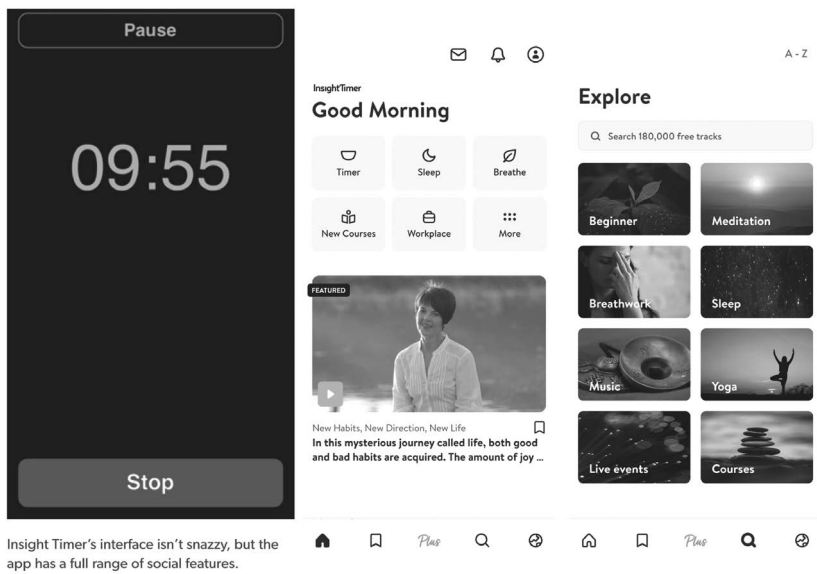


FIGURE 6. Left: Insight Timer’s more “bare-bones” interface, ca. 2014. Right: Insight Timer’s newer, sleeker aesthetic, June 2023. Credit: Insight Network Inc.

Alt text (Figure 6): The left side of this figure shows a timer with yellow text on a black background; it is paused at 9:55 above a red “stop” button. On the right side, are two side-by-side images of Insight Timer’s newer interface, which features clean white lines and colorful photographs corresponding to each meditation.

and mine still, in 2023, required masks during services. The app has since become much more graphically busy, with pictures of mostly white, female, non-Buddhist celebrity meditation “teachers” to follow, and has started to be much less religious, that is to say, Asian. This secularizing of what used to be an app used by practicing Buddhists is part and parcel of the emptying-out of “meditation” and its replacement by “mindfulness.”

— Lisa Nakamura

The commodification of mindfulness via app is bundled with a not-so-subtle style of anti-Asian racism that elides the presence and practice of Zen, Tibetan, and other Buddhists who have been using the internet for decades to share sutras and other religious texts, chants, dharma talks, and live video “sits.” During COVID, many Zen Centers and temples started to offer Zoom sits, and almost all of them continue to do so. The majority of these sits are conducted at traditional times, in the mornings at 7:30 a.m. or earlier, and in the evenings after work, overlapping with regular services. These Zoom sittings serve members of *sanghas*, or Buddhist fellowship communities, who are out of town and want to practice on the road as well as new members who want to try out a temple or join a virtual sangha. Basically, they allow meditators to “body double.” Body-doubling, as we described earlier, serves as a supportive practice in the disability community, a practice that leverages the power of the group to focus attention on a task like writing or, in this case, meditating. Long before yoga classes started channeling mindfulness by talking about “what you bring to the mat,” Buddhists were sitting on their cushions in temples, in their homes, and now on Zoom to light incense in front of bowls of water and small vases of flowers. Buddhist online sits want to remind you that though you are logged onto Zoom, you are connected to the physical space of the temple: the San Francisco Zen Center Zoom host profile depicts a still image of an altar for participants to look at while they are waiting for the bell to ring.

While the visual signifiers of Zen Buddhism’s actual practices have been gradually stripped away on the Insight Timer app—the traditional brass bell is no longer visible on the splash screen—the app has grown because it channels a non-Western spiritual practice as a panacea for

psychological and physical disease. Here, it's worth sharing the widely accepted but little-known narrative that Chinese railway laborers used snake oil as a soothing balm. Made from a water snake endemic to Asia, it was impossible to produce locally, but white entrepreneurs marketed and sold scam versions—hence the modern equation of snake oil with “quackery.” We might go so far as to claim that people who believe that essential oils can cure chronic disease are the spiritual descendants of snake oil purchasers in the nineteenth century. They marshal this pseudoscience as a genuine and justified response to their inability to access medical care.

Not unlike snake oil's decontextualization from traditional Chinese remedies, meditation or “mindfulness” apps are alternative medicines delivered via smartphone. Apps like Headspace, Calm, and the aptly named Buddhify—which turns a spiritual practice into a quick-fix life hack—are designed to address the unevenness of care without ever articulating that (or why) the lack even exists. The app tells users whom they are meditating “with” and where these others are from, to invoke a global “sangha,” or community—a concept that is immaterial to these subtly anti-Buddhist apps, but an indispensable part of Buddhist religious practice. Earlier versions of the app offered users a map with a pin representing each user sitting “with” you, showing just how widely distributed across the map other meditators are and invoking the visits to actual temples that were unattainable during COVID. Despite most Asian temples offering traditional styles of meditation that are, quite frankly, boring, physically rigorous, and inaccessible to non-Buddhists, temples are visually and aurally invoked by the multiple recordings of different styles of bell ringing and other Oriental signifiers.

As those who have visited Buddhist temples know, priests never claim that sitting will “cure” anyone; if anything, new meditators are given warnings about sore knees and hips, and shelves full of fantastically shaped cushions, bolsters, stools, and benches attest to the variety of bodies that commit themselves to sit completely still and often in great discomfort for twenty-five to forty minutes at a time. Buddhist meditation is meant to increase awareness of *everything*, including emotions like grief and anger, as well as body sensations, temperature, sound, and so forth—basically, everything everywhere all at once.

It's not uncommon to feel worse—or rather to be more aware of what hurts—after sitting than before. App-based meditation and guided meditation videos on YouTube are frequently recommended to psychiatric inpatients as part of their care plan upon release. The embodied Asian meditation practices that these videos exploit as cover for digital surveillance, ad delivery, and harvesting of geolocation data have never been recommended by Buddhists as part of any medicalized regime; if anything, unwell people are discouraged from attending retreats.⁴⁰ Psychiatry's racist appropriation of mindfulness as a cure-all frequently dons the twin rhetorics of self-regulation and self-discovery: to be mindful, in the psy-discipline sense, is to ground oneself in a morass of social norms.

SELF-DISCOVERY

“SELF-DISCOVERY: THE JOURNEY TO YOU.”⁴¹

“HOW TO BEGIN YOUR SELF-DISCOVERY JOURNEY.”⁴²

“HOW A JOURNEY TO SELF-DISCOVERY WILL SET YOU FREE.”⁴³

These popular headlines suggest that wellness has extended beyond self-care to self-discovery. The focus is not just on mindfulness or maintenance but on transformative experiences that will allow you to discover your *true self*. Corporatized self-discovery rhetoric is often distinctly colonial, suggesting that one may best come to self-knowledge through consumption of the other—as in the whitewashed “Buddhism” one encounters in commercialized forms of mindfulness. Appeals to ancient wisdom and untouched scenery dot the colonial discourse of finding self-truth. Self-discovery draws upon other wellness *topoi*, such as productivity and self-optimization, as a means of bridging authenticity with perpetual self-improvement. Whether the journey is geographical, virtual, spiritual, or embodied/enminded, discovery summons the connotation of conquering or overcoming obstacles, real or imagined. But what happens after this “journey”? This transformation from the hidden self to the known self requires inspiration or mediation of some kind, something to get one “over the hump” and into a newfound quest for self-actualization.

But is it only the digital citizen who benefits from this awakening? Perhaps a key example of this transformative desire is wellness tourism, which extends the colonial impulse for discovery into a fetishization of the exotic and commodification of indigeneity.⁴⁴ Whether via retreats to health spas in Asia or travel to the Caribbean for herbal remedies, wellness tourism boasts an epically long history of Orientalism, resource extraction, displacement, and exploitation. In an attempt to pin down a definition of wellness tourism, Melanie Smith and László Puczkó identify key themes and trends that typify discourse on tourism related to wellness and health; these themes include physically leaving one's home, as well as prioritizing health as at least one motive for travel.⁴⁵ And yet, "traveling for health reasons" is a metonym in its own right, wherein "health" becomes a stand-in for extractive knowledge-seeking and enlightenment. In this vein, wellness tourism's Western gaze exceeds traveling merely for medical reasons and can include re-discovering oneself via nature treks, spiritual and religious excursions, and culinary explorations. In psychological discourse, mindfulness is often framed as a means for self-discovery, much like the way in which productivity tools hinge on a discovery rhetoric for "finding what works for you as an individual."

But one doesn't need to travel to explore the deeper side of one's weller or soon-to-be weller self. The notion that future well-being can be discovered hidden within one's bodymind persists unabated across a variety of digital contexts. As we described in Chapter 1, "Desiring Diagnosis," this logic is in many ways diagnostic, presuming that through the use of more powerful digital tools, the intricacies and mysteries of disabled and racialized bodyminds will be solved. Here, we are thinking about the relationship between this digital diagnostic compulsion and the imperative to be well. We can see this imperative at work in genomic sequencing and other high-powered diagnostic technologies, much as we can see this imperative at work via companies that are increasingly shifting testing from the domain of the clinical to the domestic. Take, for example, Everlywell, which describes itself as a "consumer health testing company" that provides at-home health and wellness tests.⁴⁶ Users can purchase individual testing kits—which variously collect saliva, urine, and dried blood samples—or subscribe to a monthly testing service. The self-knowledge that Everlywell prom-

ises exceeds simple assurances about whether or not its consumers have a particular diagnostic label or condition. Rather, Everlywell's kits implore subscribers "to take action with tests,"⁴⁷ as though the act of turning over one's urine not only creates conditions for increased knowledge (about diabetes, about urinary tract infections [UTIs]) but likewise impels consumers to *act*. In this way, consumers are none-too-subtly encouraged to *do* something with their newfound knowledge, to translate self-discovery into self-optimization.

Far beyond Everlywell, this pursuit to reveal inner truths provides justification, often accompanied by a high degree of urgency, for the collection of biological samples and biometric data. This impetus to collect is a form of *bioprospecting*. Typically referring to the extraction of biodiverse resources from the land (a mashup of *biodiversity* and *prospecting*), we invoke bioprospecting here to suggest that digital wellness, in part, hinges on the notion that mining the body will lead to untold resources. The keywords, or *topoi*, that structure this chapter have a cartographic function: they are themselves locations, prompting the notion that resources are just waiting to be found and extracted.

As Leah Ceccarelli has noted, bioprospecting rhetoric deploys deeply colonial terms, such as *bounty* and *exploration*, because it "mirrors the orientation of Europeans toward the native peoples of the Americas in an earlier age of imperialist conquest."⁴⁸ Kim TallBear identifies these exploratory appeals in genomic research's attempt to "diversify"—namely, its desire to collect indigenous DNA in hopes of yet more "discovery." As TallBear suggests, "Read uncritically, these narratives are hopeful or inevitable, and they seem multicultural and democratic, but they also imply hierarchical research practices and extractive relations with research subjects, all contextualized within a broader history of colonial violence around the world."⁴⁹

Biocolonialism is bound up in wellness, and these interlinkages are manifest in practices such as digital sequencing of biospecimens and datafication of patient behavior. In the early 1990s, for example, Havasupai tribal members participated in a research study about diabetes through Arizona State University; without their consent, their blood was then used in additional studies related to schizophrenia, alcoholism, and histories of tribal migration.⁵⁰ In 2004, the tribe filed a

lawsuit against the ASU Board of Regents and successfully settled. In her work on genomic justice, Nanibaa' A. Garrison interviewed Institutional Review Board (IRB) chairs and biomedical researchers at medical schools funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to glean whether or not institutions have rethought their informed consent practices in light of ASU's biocolonial violence against the Havasupai. The common response from participants was that they "perceived no direct impact from the Havasupai case on their work; if they did, it was the perceived need to *safeguard themselves* by obtaining broad consent or shying away from research with indigenous communities altogether" (emphasis added).⁵¹ Missing from this biocolonial imperative to collect and exploit is an understanding of DNA as sacred: Horrifyingly, it wasn't until the settlement that ASU returned the genetic samples to the tribe. Self-discovery, in these biocolonial constructs, represents the antithesis of indigenous conceptions of what it means to be well.

Researchers and corporations alike entice Black, indigenous, and disabled people to submit their DNA for research with the promise of enlightenment through discovering their ancestors, as organizations such as 23andMe and Ancestry.com offer to do, and cracking the key to their otherwise indecipherable genomes. On an intimate level, BIPOC and disabled people know bioprospecting all too well and are frequently targeted by digital advertisements for biospecimen collection and participation in human subject research. More than this, receiving care might also necessitate participation in a study that uses one's biodata, often in ways contrary to one's desires. Spectrum 10K perhaps serves as an apt example of this phenomenon. Positioning itself as a research project aiming to "investigate the genetic and environmental factors that contribute to autism," Spectrum 10K quickly gained notoriety on autistic social media as being yet another autism prevention study.⁵² Despite Spectrum 10K's repeated contentions that theirs was not a eugenicist project, autistic Twitter users quickly pointed out that their genetic material could be used for exactly that purpose, well beyond the study's stated (and ambiguous) goals to improve autistic lives.

Extractive care often becomes a means to wellness. It is this tension that emblemizes a technoskeptical stance—needing healthcare, desiring a future in which you live and thrive, but knowing that the path

to survival involves losing literal chunks of yourself. In this way, the logics of self-discovery grow ever more complicated. Giving your spit to a pharmaceutical company may be the only mechanism you have for receiving an unapproved drug or connecting with others who share your disability. As with any digital encounter, this is the give-and-take of “being the product:” in order to find your people, keep living a little bit longer, and sustain your relations with your children and ancestors, you sacrifice bits of your body and bits of your autonomy, just to hang on.

Almost daily, a digital ad asks me for my spit or blood. Not infrequently, my social media algorithms highlight articles or websites that provide information on donating the tissues, brains, or corpses of people who share my disabilities. I frequently receive email invitations to participate in qualitative studies on what it’s like to live with my condition. I cannot escape this, even in digital spaces created by and for crip community. I have what is considered a rare disease. We have no dedicated presence on Reddit, and our lowly Twitter hashtag is dominated by a reviled charity. We are sequestered in a private Facebook group, where fellow members remind us how important it is to participate in research trials. Our blood provides hope for the future, they say. Meanwhile, one of the scant references to us I’ve found on Reddit comes from a panicked prospective parent who’s learned she’s carrying our defective gene. Should she still do IVF?

At times, it feels as though my primary worth as a disabled person lies in my disassembled body parts and fluids. Were I to grant you my severed head, that would be the biggest gift I could impart.

— M. Remi Yergeau

We also, though, want to highlight the complications of this turn toward DNA sampling on the quest to self-discovery by thinking through this act as a form of communal recovery. Taking into account the problematics of how sampling is conducted, the pseudoscience behind some of the services, and the additional problems of surveillance these systems bring to Black and Brown communities, is there space to treat these tracing processes as a praxis of wellness outside an individualistic or neoliberal lens?

Before my Dad passed, my Mom, responding to a Facebook ad, sent off his DNA sample to trace where we came from. Records of our ancestry hit a wall in the mid part of the 19th century on a plantation in Virginia when all the records of the town, and the ownership records of my ancestors were burned by Confederate troops. Yet I was firmly against the idea of recovering information about my ancestry through a send-away DNA service that would enthusiastically provide broad regional information based on questionable data while retaining my and my family's health information in perpetuity. All the same, the records came back: Benin and Nigeria. Not surprising, yet I also found that they added no new insight into who I am or where I come from. I come from that plantation in Virginia. I'm the descendant of enslaved folks who survived and built for themselves a culture and a history valuable all on its own.

— Catherine Knight Steele

There is joy in recovery for many, but the quest for wellness spurred by these for-profit ancestry sites can reaffirm that we're actually not lacking in the present. Black communities are being targeted with the promise of finding a missing part of themselves—a part stripped away against our will. Knowing our past can provide positive avenues to our future, but our wellness is perhaps not predicated on accepting that we are not already whole as we are.

HEALING FROM HARM: ON GAMING WELLNESS

As the rhetoric of self-discovery illustrates, wholeness is frequently framed as an ultimate desire of wellness. The metaphor, as it were, suggests that we are missing key pieces of ourselves, and wellness culture—in its many mindful, healthist versions—will help us put ourselves back together again. Spend any time on Instagram, and the influencers will tell you that you need to heal. Adopting (and morphing) the language of psychotherapy, healing frequently takes on the familiar rhetoric of the quest. Healing might involve going #glutenfree, or healing might involve ridding yourself of #toxicpeople. Whatever the recommendation (and Instagram has lots of them), locating your true, whole self supposedly depends on seeking healing and repelling harm.

Healing, like any other wellness *topos*, is complicated. The mere invocation of the term inevitably summons discussions of harm. As we wrote this chapter, we found ourselves wondering about the ways in which digital wellness lingers at the peripheries of those spaces in which we frequently spend our time, spaces that simultaneously signal community and joy alongside hurt and isolation. Immediately, gaming came to mind. Many of us have taught college writing and literature, and the accounts of gaming as harmful (as opposed to healthful) are legion in these spaces. We've all encountered anecdotes (and even scholarly arguments) that games supposedly harm literacy learning, focus, and developing brains. But these narratives strike us as incomplete and faulty, far from our own experiences or those of disabled, mad, queer, and BIPOC gamers. Those of us who are neurodivergent, for example, often have to riddle our way through a chicken-and-egg complex of sorts when it comes to stories of gaming, healing, and harm. We're typically understood as psychically unwell, with gaming proffered as a potential reason for our errant cognition. Are we ADHD because we game, or do we game because we're ADHD? This question strikes us as uninteresting, if only because it presumes that being neurodivergent is always unto itself an undesirable state. We want complexity; we want the sort of skepticism that enables us to say our brains are more than well or unwell, to say that our digital engagements are totalized neither by utopia nor hell. We want to find fellow Among Us players, even if it means we'll miss another deadline or irreparably harm our relationship with our cats.

Gaming, so much of it, is characterized by harm. In games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* or *Fortnite*, players frequently shoot, stab, slash, trap, hunt, destroy, and cheerfully engage in other modes of abuse. Moreover, there are cultural and material consequences to our seemingly never-ending submersion in gaming violence. Amanda Phillips, for instance, thoughtfully unpacks the unnerving and addictive spectacularity of the headshot.⁵³ All this doesn't even begin to consider the psychic harm gamers inflict on their machine and human combatants and allies,⁵⁴ nor does it include the harmful working conditions within gaming that disproportionately affect women, queer folks, and people of color.⁵⁵ There are many instances where, in the quiet alienating dark-

ness of living rooms, brutal insults and malicious taunts are hurled and wielded with the same ease as tossing a digital grenade or casting a spell. Here, however, we want to offer alternatives for thinking about gaming (in all sorts of instantiations, including and beyond video games) and its uneasy relationship to wellness and harm. We suggest that the themes and practices of un/wellness can offer a provocative counter to harm—not to assert a moral high ground for gaming but to consider the political and material consequences and possibilities of games being used to support and continue a rich landscape of digital health.

During 2020, at the pandemic's height, the once lazy isolation that characterized gamers—how they did nothing but sit and play—was heralded as a key tactic for stopping the spread of COVID-19. In other words, the World Health Organization went from pathologizing “Gaming Disorder” as a “mental health condition” in 2018 to offering gaming as a strategy to mitigate the spread of COVID in 2020 through its #PlayApartTogether Campaign.⁵⁶ From this point on, play changed.

How can you feel claustrophobic in an empty room? COVID-19 brought the world as close as a snatched plastic bag over the mouth. From the purported safety of my couch, I sat . . . and waited. I checked my temperature every hour, obsessing even over the smallest changes in degree. I sat. I stared longingly out of my apartment's third-floor window, seeing masked runners and dog walkers. I sat inside. Outside was dangerous. Disease was outside. I sat inside because I was scared of the very air. On the wind of each breath, for me, was an inescapable anxiety. I went outside as little as possible. I would be double-masked, sitting alone in a dog park. My spine tingled; I was being watched, at least that's what my mind told me. COVID-19 was hunting me, and I would not be easy prey.

Around then I started, for the first time, seeing a therapist. I was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), prescribed a low-dose prescription of escitalopram, and given a litany of breathing and meditation techniques. But also, my therapist recommended a mobile game for me to play. “It's Literally Just Mowing,” she said.

“Ok, I'll download it now. What's the name, so I can search for it in the app store,” I responded, from the comfort and sanctuary of our virtual therapy office.

“No, you misunderstand. The game’s name is It’s Literally Just Mowing.”

I’m not sure if there has ever been a better name for a game. For hours, at least 300, over the course of the pandemic and therapy sessions, I would mow a digital lawn via a dance of thumb swipes. I could be outside without being outside. As the company of my four walls began to smother and choke my spirit, my phone screen became a life-giving exit. Each swipe and lawn mowed, and there were thousands, was a medicalized accoutrement facilitating personalized diagnostic healing.

—Aaron Dial

“Leave your worries behind and enter the calm, simple world of mowing. Love nature? Love mowing? Love the simple life? . . . Zone out and mow to your heart’s content, totally stress-free.” This is how the developer, Protostar Games, describes it in the app store. Its emphasis on simplicity doesn’t just describe technical ease of play but also invokes a pastoral reading of health and the world. What does it mean to love nature and then engage with that affectual longing through the digital? Protostar’s website promotes its GrassTech rendering technology as creating the “best-looking grass on mobile.”⁵⁷ The grass is beautiful, gently swaying in the digital wind and cutely piling after being cut. What if we read Protostar’s attention to grass as a diagnostic aesthetic blending the whimsical transcendentalism of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* with an internet admonishment and meme telling people to go touch grass, which implies a combined directive to get offline to promote your well-being and a reminder of the dangers of living solely in your own head. As such, the directive to “go touch grass” has a derogative register.⁵⁸ Thus, in our present moment, grass becomes a symbol for “realness” that has taken on digital stakes, and as a technical object, the game and GrassTech unveil a media economy, object, and lived reality where the act of going outside could be beyond, for whatever reason, the abilities of real people. In very real terms, the game treats the sensory overload of outside, which during COVID was magnified by looming sickness and death, as needing a liminal space, one mediated through smart-phone touch screens.

The game doesn’t diagnose. It doesn’t tell you how well you are, nor does it reveal some core inner self that you’ve been waiting to uncover. It never says you are stressed, so play me. But it does presume a rich tech-

nological milieu of digital wellness, one in which haptic engagement gets us through a few more minutes, a few more hours, a few more days. In some ways, we're thinking about a different sort of wellness here, one tethered to the crisp wisdom of survival, of just getting through to the other side. Furthermore, it materializes a powerful suburban nostalgia: the longing for an outside before COVID and social distancing policies stole it from us. Indeed, as noted earlier, the hygienic turn during COVID remade our lives into the realities that chronically ill people have lived for far too long. This yearning for outside, for a time outside of sterility and cleanliness, indelibly has shaped how we connect our gaming selves to our un/well selves.

Some might say, as a criticism, this is just another in an endless turn of mindless mobile games. However, those games—Candy Crush, Toon Blast, and many others—are predicated on success and scaling difficulties. You can beat those games. They can become frustrating. There are scores and levels to pass. Here, there is none of that. It's literally just mowing. Moreover, the game's spectacularization of the mundane, of grass and mowers and lawns, offers a much-needed alternative to the ways that "outside" so often comes into gaming. There are no battlefields, just fields. It conjures those moments on TV and in films where medical staff wheel their patients outside to soak up the sun.

For a moment, we are allowed the healing privilege of just being outside. The game generates this sensation not as a diagnostic tool, but a formation embedded in our notions of safety and security. But also, by gesturing toward a larger wellness landscape and its philosophical regime of bodies, the game makes assumptions about the ideal body and how this body is supposed to exist in the world. In order to gain any joy or fun or healing from this game, the user needs to want to go outside. That is, they would need to have the technologized, deeply cultural, and highly classist muscle memory necessary to fetishize mowing as a way of achieving calm.

CONCLUSION: FINDING WISDOM IN UN/WEALTH

Wellness, ideally—but not crucially, as an ideology of the ideal—is implicitly built on relations: relations between virtual and physical spaces, between the human and more than human world. In other words, we

are interconnected and interdependent. This can be a revolutionary thought. If wellness technology is predicated on individual perfectibility, one alternative is *crip wisdom*, as we've been gesturing to throughout this chapter. As we write elsewhere, disabled people are uniquely implicated in digital diagnosis and medical surveillance regimes and are often deeply distrustful of such infrastructure, technology, and postures.

Wisdom is typically conceived as an alternative to the extractive practices that decimate vulnerable bodies and communities. *Crip wisdom* specifically emerges from disability justice. Disability justice is deeply cultural—certainly in contrast to disability rights and other attempts to standardize access and accommodation through legal frameworks like the ADA (Americans with Disability Act)—which places the burden and work of making access on individual actors. Therefore, while the disability rights movement might reach toward structural change, it is bound by the limitations of written law.⁵⁹

In contrast, disability justice is a community-led movement that aims to center and uplift the most marginalized among us, and to do so in an anti-capitalism frame because capitalism is built on the violence of profit. *Crip wisdom* emphasizes wholeness outside the often brutal, uncaring regimes of productivity, recognizing that each of us is always already in a body that must be cared for. In short, that is not enough to survive; we deserve the capacity to thrive. Instead of asking “How do we become well?,” what would it mean to ask, “How do we become wise?”

During the pandemic, I also turned to so many apps to replicate, recreate or provide the communal guidance needed to manage my mental health without leaving my home. I found an app called *Shine*, developed by Black women, that replicated many of the platform features of more popular mindfulness apps like *Headspace* or *Calm*. Rather than an overlay of Black voices and aesthetics, the founders placed community wellness through the work of justice at the center of the mindfulness practice. How can our practice of meditation prepare us to enter the spaces of harm we exist within because of misogyny and racism? How might we work collectively to provide resources to other Black women also using the app through

community dialogue and engagement? How might I relax into sleep through a dramatic retelling of a Black rom-com from the '90s instead of the more standard fare of nature sounds offered elsewhere? It seems to me apps like Shine and the communities of care they create help move us from wellness to wisdom in productive ways.

— Catherine Knight Steele

As this anecdote shows, community wisdom is, perhaps unsurprisingly, sustained by the labor of Black women, queer, trans, and femme folks. Endurance and survival take precedent over regimented wellness practices focused on cure and output. We observe a similar reconfiguration of wellness as wisdom in the realm of disability justice. Online—in addition to Sins Invalid, which is often credited as the engine for disability justice and its rise in visibility—various disability advocates and cultural workers emphasize the importance of living with the body, and working toward an awareness that bodyminds are finite resources that simultaneously contain great possibility and depth.⁶⁰ In the words of The Nap Ministry on Twitter, it is an intentional act of care to be gentle (and vulnerable) in a world “trained by toxic systems.”⁶¹ If online systems are often toxic, the choice to remain, return, to sit in them is a choice freighted with intention. What we do with those systems, even as they are toxic, is the messy tangle we grapple with throughout this book.

Disability justice directs our attention to core principles for action and relation. As Patty Berne notes, “Disability Justice is a vision and practice of a yet-to-be, a map that we create with our ancestors and our great grandchildren onward, in the width and depth of our multiplicities and histories, a movement towards a world in which every body and mind is known as beautiful.”⁶² Berne’s radical dreaming locates its persistence and imaginative power through its linkage of then, now, and yet-to-be. Crip wisdom is time travel in action. Our striving toward just futures is made possible through the knowledge and care work of those who’ve dreamed before us.

As we dwell on the complexities of what it means to be un/well, we routinely call to mind Berne’s principles of disability justice, which include commitments to wholeness, interdependence, and collective

liberation, among other aims. We yearn to imagine a wellness that recognizes wholeness. Or, as Berne puts it, a wellness that recognizes “each person is full of history and life experience.” We’re thinking about the narratives that Lida, Rianna, Remi, and Catherine shared in this chapter, as well as the broader arc of individual and collective stories from our full group of collaborators that are interwoven throughout this book. We are, in many ways, spooning our way toward a wellness borne of wisdom. In writing this, we are thinking about “spooning” as a double entendre, as a kind of slow-swaying-dancing, but also a crip reference to spoons as measures of a person’s finite energy resources. We invite you to spoon with us, in all of spooning’s complexities and messiness.