

**Eating the Other Yogi:
Kathryn Budig, the Yoga Industrial Complex, and Appropriation of Body Positivity**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the appropriation of body positivity discourse by Kathryn Budig and the yoga industry. During the appropriation process, the political nature of the movement is decontextualized and erased through adoption of individualized messages of body acceptance that largely ignore bodily differences, which reflects an ideology of *body-blindness*. Despite the best of intentions and positive, heartfelt messages of body acceptance, Budig’s developing role as the face of body positivity continues overrepresentation of the ideal yoga body in mainstream yoga culture and contributes to restricted systems of meaning regarding who is an “authentic” yogi, and what the practice of yoga consists of, that continue to marginalize Other yogis who face burdens of new industry demands to #loveyourbody (as long as it is white, thin, acrobatic, female, heterosexual, and so on). By downplaying the importance of the movement’s systemic critique of dominant yoga culture to focus on individual solutions, Budig and the yoga industrial complex contribute to the marginalization and “eating” of the Other yogi while simultaneously profiting from the individualization and depoliticization of the body positivity movement.

Keywords: Yoga; Cultural Appropriation; Social Movements; Body Positivity; Colorblindness

“From the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the ‘primitive’ or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the status quo... Exploring how desire for the Other is expressed, manipulated, and transformed by encounters with difference and the different is a critical terrain that can indicate whether these potentially revolutionary longings are ever fulfilled” (hooks 1992, 22).

Introduction

This paper discusses the appropriation of body positivity by Kathryn Budig, *Yoga Journal*, and other actors within the yoga industrial complex. I begin by reviewing the timeline of events involved in *Yoga Journal*’s #loveyourbody campaign featuring yoga celebrity Kathryn Budig as prominent spokesperson. Because of narrow media representations in the yoga industry (of which Budig is largely representative), many Othered yogis face marginalization as well as the burden of additional industry demands to #loveyourbody. Budig’s responses to this systemic critique are often reactive, which reflects an ideology of *body-blindness* that serves to maintain

current power systems. I clarify how Budig and the yoga industry have appropriated the discourse of body positivity. This process individualizes movement discourse while ignoring the political history of body positivity and the cultural critique inherent in the movement's goals. Regardless of intent, by focusing only on individual rather than structural solutions to negative body image, Budig and the yoga industrial complex contribute to the marginalization and "eating" of the Other yogi while simultaneously profiting from the depoliticization of the body positivity movement.

Background

The yoga industrial complex¹ is the web of relationships between studio systems, yoga celebrities, certifying agencies, and large yoga businesses or industry, including yoga product companies like Lululemon® or ToeSox® as well as cultural producers like the *Yoga Journal* or *Women's Health*. Those who are part of the yoga industrial complex engage in activities that construct yoga as a professional field as well as produce conceptions of the practice of yoga and representations of who is an "authentic" yogi. As such, this term not only reflects a set of network ties between prominent individuals, groups and organizations within the yoga industry and governing bodies, but also encompasses a set of unique interests that have consequences for producers and consumers including continued marginalization and exclusion of Othered yogis.

While this yoga industrial complex often claims yoga is "for all bodies," accessible to all ages and abilities, and welcoming to all individuals, the field continues to be characterized by inequality and exclusion. While demographic information is sparse, data shows yoga users are disproportionately female, white, well-educated, wealthy, and young, indicating certain populations are excluded from the practice.² Issues of racial and class exclusion are exacerbated by the heavy concentration of yoga studios in wealthy white neighborhoods, meaning many lower income or nonwhite communities have less access to yoga spaces (Murphy 2014). Exclusion within yoga is also reflected in the yoga industrial complex's production of cultural content that over-represents an "idealized" yoga body. Yogis who do not fit stereotypical yoga body experience marginalization in the practice and profession, especially those who are nonwhite, curvy, or queer as well as those differently abled or poor.

While there are few empirical studies on disproportionate representation (indicating the need for further research), Miller (2014) and Plummer (2012) indicate that the bodies represented in *Yoga Journal* are far from inclusive. Analyzing one issue of the magazine, Plummer found disproportionate coverage of white women; only 2.5% of images depicted African Americans and no Hispanic or Native American populations were featured at all. She found 98% of bodies represented in the issue had nearly identical measurements: all were thin. Only 3% of adults pictured in the magazine could be over 55 years old.

With the advent of new media technologies, however, a growing coalition of social justice activists and non-stereotypical yogis sought to revolutionize the field. They developed the body positivity movement within yoga; they draw attention to the marginalization of the Other yogi by advocating for more diverse representation in media, and they promote body acceptance regardless of race, class, gender, size, sexuality, or age. The body positivity movement seeks to reveal the socially constructed nature of the ideal yoga body by linking cultural representation and practices within the yoga industrial complex to larger systems of inequality prevalent in the field. Utilizing social media, advocates of body positivity seek a

revolution within yoga, hoping to drive cultural change to create a more socially, politically and economically just system where yoga can truly be for all bodies.

Social media networks enabled the creation of the Yoga and Body Image Coalition (YBIC), a formal organization that shares the movement's goals and helps facilitate on-the-ground actions such as events, workshops, or presentations to raise awareness and gain supporters. The body positivity movement and the creation of social movement organization YBIC have allowed activists to gain additional resources, "share grievances, accelerate social movement activity, decentralize mobilization efforts, facilitate recruitment efforts through virtual forms of collective identity, and hold authorities accountable" (Carty 2015, 5).

As the movement gained prominence and visibility, the yoga industrial complex appropriated messages used by body positivity activists originally intended as a critique, often in ways that individualize the movement's goals and continue to marginalize the Other yogi. For this project, I utilize content analysis of online resources, including prominent yoga blogs and social media posts (and comments) to develop a critical analysis of recent events in yoga. I investigate how this appropriation of movement discourse has taken place in circumstances that serve the interests of the yoga industrial complex, continuing the marginalization and exclusion of the Other yogi despite heartfelt and well-intentioned attempts to be more body positive. Beginning with a timeline of events regarding the #loveyourbody campaign, I clarify activists' criticisms of Budig's and *Yoga Journal's* efforts at body positivity, explaining why representation matters, the ways appropriation of body positivity has profited the yoga industrial complex at the continued expense of Othered yogis, and conclude with a brief discussion of future avenues for research.

Kathryn Budig and the Controversial #LoveYourBody Campaign

Kathryn Budig rose to prominent yogi celebrity status after her involvement in the ToeSox® "The Body As Temple" advertisement campaign began in 2008, which features Budig wearing nothing but ToeSox in a variety of advanced postures. The advertisements faced criticism from prominent yogis, feminists, and other activists who argued images like those featured in the campaign contributed to the sexualization and exploitation of women in the yoga industry.

In 2010 one of the founding members of *Yoga Journal*, Judith Lasater, wrote a letter expressing her unease about the magazine's oversexualization of the practice. She was "concerned about ads... [portraying] naked or half-naked young women... [that] do not teach the viewer about yoga practice or themselves... [and] aren't even about the celebration of the beauty of the human body" (Harvey 2010a). Instead, she claimed "these ads are just about selling a product." Although Lasater was not specifically referring to the campaign, once published Lasater's letter became associated with Budig and ToeSox®. Prominent yoga blogs *It's All Yoga Baby* and *Yoga Dork* featured images from the campaign to illustrate trends of sexualization in yoga advertising and openly agreed with Lasater's concerns about "body image, sexuality, and yoga" (Yoga Dork 2010; Harvey 2010a; Harvey 2010b). These posts were picked up by prominent yoga websites like *Elephant Journal*, who similarly featured images from the ToeSox® campaign in their coverage.

Despite the controversy, Budig's (near-nude) involvement with ToeSox® opened numerous doors for her within the yoga industry. The following year she released her first solo DVD and has since used the phrase "Aim True" as the foundation for her personal brand. In

2012 she became a sponsored athlete by Under Armour modeling their studio line and worked with *Women's Health* to produce their *Big Book of Modern Yoga*. With her large following she stopped teaching classes at YogaWorks in Santa Monica, instead hosting workshops and retreats internationally and filming classes with the online site Yoga Glo. She has been a contributing writer for *The Huffington Post*, *Yoga Journal*, *Gaiam*, *The Daily Love*, *Elephant Journal*, and *MindBodyGreen* and has been featured on the covers of numerous magazines, including *Yoga Journal*, *Yoga International*, *Om Yoga* and *Common Ground*. She is also the founder of Poses for Paws, a nonprofit that began in 2007 as a way to raise money for animal shelters through yoga (Budig 2015d; Wikipedia 2015).

The years following the ToeSox® controversy saw the growth of an online community of yoga activists, bloggers, and academics who were critical of mainstream yoga culture for its one-sided and often stereotypical portrayal of yogis and yoga, and the sexualized and commodified direction of what some were beginning to call the yoga industrial complex. The advent of social media and popularity of prominent yoga blogs allowed for the creation of an active network of social justice advocates focused on body image and inequality within yoga. Their efforts were spurred by a number of scandals that rocked the yoga industry, including the Lululemon see-through-pants controversy and subsequent claims of sizeism, which were widely reported through this online network (Bhasin 2013; Yoga Dork 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2013e). In the midst of the scandal, this group of activists drew awareness to the overrepresentation of what many claimed was an unrealistic “ideal yoga body,” forming the Yoga and Body Image Coalition (YBIC) in an effort to promote awareness and educate the general public and yoga industry on issues of access, inequality, and exclusion. The YBIC was met with widespread praise, and in subsequent months even yoga celebrities like prior model, dancer, and weight-loss oriented Tara Stiles would try to cater to the growing body positivity movement (Yoga Dork 2014b; Harvey 2014a); the yoga industry would soon follow suit.

Yoga Journal began making changes to address criticisms of their involvement in perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards and disproportionate coverage of thin, white women. Long time Editor-in-Chief Kaitlin Quistgaard quietly stepped down in the spring of 2013 to be replaced by Carin Gorrell of the popular women's magazine, *SELF* (Yoga Dork 2013f; Harvey 2013). The magazine's website was redone and over the next few months the *Journal* laid off at least four senior staff members, including Creative Director, Deputy Editor, Conference Director, and Executive Online Editor (Yoga Dork 2014c). They also made efforts to reach out to the recently formed YBIC to address concerns about industry practices that many argued were elitist, exclusionary, and discriminatory. In partnership with yoga service foundation Off the Mat and Into the World® the *Journal* organized “Practice of Leadership” panels during 2014, inviting industry executives as well as prominent yoga bloggers, academics, activists, and members of the YBIC to participate in discussions on leadership, social responsibility, and body image (Yoga Dork 2014a).

However, *Yoga Journal* fell into hot water almost immediately when the July issue featured an article titled “Love Your Curves.” Many critics felt the piece engaged in body shaming, noting, “instead of taking the opportunity to celebrate our differences, our shapes, bulges, and dimples, YJ chose to share tips on how to hide them instead” (Yoga Dork 2014d). Activists claimed the *Journal* had “hopped on the body positivity train without really *getting it*,” and while their intentions were good the execution left much to be desired (Penny 2014a). *Yoga Journal* published their controversial “Body Issue” in October, featuring a number of articles written by YBIC members. However, despite attempts to cater to body positivity the issue was

met with continued criticism of mixed media messages and concerns over their choice of “Cover Model Kathryn Budig on Self-Acceptance” as the featured article.

As part of marketing efforts to promote the upcoming edition, Budig and *Yoga Journal* actively tried to engage with the topic of body image during a number of interviews leading up to the issue’s release. Budig discussed how she considers herself a curvy yogi: “I am curvy. I get praised on a regular basis, with people telling me, ‘Wow, you’re so brave,’ simply for showing my curvy body.” She speaks about her realization that “anyone saying negative things about themselves empowers other people to do the same. When you speak positively about yourself, it doesn’t mean you are 100 percent OK with your body, but you are living with it and loving what you have today.” Budig admitted to feelings of self-doubt about aging, but emphasized the importance of loving the body you have (provided it is still strong and capable of advanced poses, with—only—ten additional pounds): “it has been a challenge to watch my 25-year-old body turn into a 32-year-old body. It is not depressing... This body, whether it is 10 pounds skinnier or 10 pounds heavier, can still do those postures because it is strong” (*Yoga Journal* Editor 2014). When the issue was released, the *Journal* featured unphotoshopped images of Budig and the magazine encouraged readers to share their own stories of self-acceptance using the hashtag #loveyourbody.

Prominent bloggers hailed the “Body Issue” as a rebranding effort rife with “mixed messages and conscious contradictions” (Penny 2014b), describing the unphotoshopped cover of Budig as “nothing too new looking... besides the words ‘self-acceptance’” and arguing the issue seemed “like another half-assed attempt at something the community has been asking for, nay, demanding for a while now: the acknowledgement and embracing of diversity in yoga.” Harvey (2014b) expressed “concerns about Budig, as lovely and articulate as she is, being the voice of body love. A spokesperson who has a conventional beauty doesn’t quite represent enough of the spectrum of lovable bodies. When it’s her body carrying the message, there’s a subtle messaging that you should love your body [only] if you conform to societal and cultural norms.”

Despite criticism, Budig utilized momentum from the “Body Issue” to post about the importance of self-love as a way of “aiming true.” In April 2015, she published an article with *Women’s Health* where she tells an autobiographical story of how, in spite of being successful, “currently 5’2”, a size four, and strong as a bull,” she sometimes gets insecure about her body (Budig 2015a). She recounts an episode five years ago when a producer called to tell Budig “she couldn’t hire me—even though she thought I was the most qualified for the job—because I had a tire around my waist.” As a result she still has to remind herself to love her body, and encourages other women to do the same. Accompanying the post is a near-nude image of Budig in her underwear.

Online activists, including YBIC members Dianne Bondy, Elen Bahr, Carol Horton, and Melanie Klein, responded with concerns about the increasing visibility of Budig as sole spokesperson for body acceptance within mainstream yoga culture. Bondy (2014) wrote, “I appreciate Ms. Budig has struggled with body image issues like all women... This article is co-opting the message of positive body image and bringing the focus back to her. We are not seeing or talking about who is truly pushed to the margins... the people who are underserved here and ignored are the truly larger bodied practitioners, people of color, disabled bodied, transgender bodied.” Bahr tweeted she was “Saying NO to #kathrynbudig as face of #BodyPositive #Yoga. Where are larger bodies? People of color?”

In response, Budig (2015b) claimed her heartfelt story was met with “people who will misconstrue your good intentions into something despicable and wrong,” calling critics “bullies”

who despite “claiming to create positive body image for all” engaged in practices of body shaming. Budig felt they had “venomously proclaimed NO to me as the face of positive body image in yoga” and that “there was no equality for all in [Bahr’s] post.” Arguing “this kind of attitude will kill us and any progress being made towards self love and acceptance” she feels the solution to “bullies and body-shamers” is to speak so loudly critics are rendered invisible, to “color the world... so loudly that we can no longer see differences.” She did not deny she is becoming (or cultivating an identity as) the “face of positive body image in yoga.”

Many critics felt Budig missed the point of their concerns by failing to distinguish between a personal attack and a systemic critique of the overrepresentation of bodies like Budig’s within mainstream yoga culture. Klein (2015) encouraged Budig to acknowledge her own privilege and the ways in which whiteness, thinness, youth, and able-bodied physique contributed to her success in the yoga industry. Amber Karnes of Body Positive Yoga was equally frank, claiming Budig’s body privilege was the reason “why *Women’s Health* and other media outlets approach her first before they’d ever ask a person of color, a person in a fat body, or transgender, queer, or a differently abled yogi to chime in on body image issues” (quoted in Klein 2015). Such activists asked Budig to critically reflect on her experiences if she desires to be an advocate for body positivity.

Regardless, Budig continued cultivating the role of “positive body image” spokesperson, becoming the most (and often only) visible speaker on these issues within the yoga industry during subsequent months. She was the only presenter on body image at the second annual MindBodyGreen Revitalize retreat, an invite only event held at the Miraval Resort & Spa in Tuscon, AZ, where the base rate is \$500 a night (Mind Body Green 2015). Talks were filmed and made available to the general public following the event. Budig’s (2015c) talk (which met with rave reviews on industry sites like *Yoga Journal* and *Women’s Health*) begins with a story of not wanting to go to yoga because she “[felt] bloated” and did not want to be seen in tight yoga clothing. She also shares experiences of online body shaming, noting how many of her fans came to her defense.

Clarifying Critique: Why Representation Matters

To understand the appropriation of the body positivity movement, it is necessary to clarify critique of the #loveyourbody campaign. First, it is important to distinguish between critiquing Budig, Budig’s body, experiences, or message, versus critiquing the industry that increasingly presents Budig as the face of body positivity and that overrepresents bodies like Budig’s in general. Many people interpret critiques of the system that perpetuates narrow and potentially damaging stereotypes around body image (and Budig’s role in that system) as blaming Budig for her body, charging there is “reverse body-ism” occurring or claiming Budig is being penalized for not being large enough to experience body-shaming or self-doubt. Budig’s own comments imply critics want “positive body image for all... except for anyone who is a size 4 and Caucasian” (2015b). Other misreadings interpret systemic critiques as judging Budig’s body or trivializing her experiences.

Drawing attention to the way the yoga industrial complex has increasingly represented the body positivity movement with images of Budig and stories of her bodily experiences is not an attempt to downplay, trivialize, invalidate, or dismiss Budig, her experiences, or her message. Stories like hers speak to a common suffering of body-shaming, self-doubt, and self-hate experienced by many in our society, *including* those who are white, size 4, young, able-bodied,

and cisgender. Rather, critics seek to acknowledge the *systemic overrepresentation* of voices, bodies, and bodily experiences like hers, which generally receive more attention, applause, acceptance, and support. They draw attention to the role the yoga industrial complex has played, with Budig's complicity, in appropriating body positivity in ways that don't accurately reflect the diversity and complexity of yoga or yogis: Budig's articles and talks (published with the support of that same industry) continue a tradition of privileging particular bodies and marginalizing others.

It's true that Budig's body is not as "slender" or "firm" as some other yogi bodies celebrated in yoga media. In her post (2015a), Budig discusses how her size 4 frame is often considered "softer" than the ideal (recall she described herself as a "curvy yogi"). Her curves have contributed to her own experiences with sizeism ("the DVD producer called me to tell me that she couldn't hire me—even though she thought I was the most qualified for the job"), self-doubt ("The experience left an emotional scar that made me constantly doubt myself"), and self-hate ("All I could feel was pain and how worthless the producer made me feel"). These negative emotions were focused on her belly, a part of the body often the target of fat shaming in our society. As Bordo notes:

Areas [of the body] that are soft, loose, or 'wiggly' are unacceptable, *even on extremely thin bodies*. . . [Under capitalism,] excess body weight came to be seen as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy, or lack of will. . . Significantly, the part of the obese anatomy most often targeted for vicious attack, and most despised by the obese themselves, is the stomach, symbol of consumption (1993, 189, 192, 202, emphasis added; see also Farrell 2011 and Saguy 2014).

It is true even thinner women can experience the impact of unrealistic body standards. However, Budig's *ToeSox*® advertisements have set industry standards for what the ideal yoga body looks like and how the ideal yogi body moves since 2008, prior to her interest in the body positivity movement. In many ways, it is ironic the yoga celebrity idolized by practitioners for nearly a decade has in recent months become the only visible face of body positivity. Critics discuss Budig's body because they seek to draw attention to narrow and limiting ways bodies are represented within the yoga industry, not because they hope to body-shame or bully her. Budig's body in this context becomes a symbol that has widely proliferated over the years as representative of the ideal yoga body.

Regardless of how well-intentioned, Budig's and the yoga industry's attempt to engage in body positivity are problematic when bodies like Budig's are the only ones represented in conjunction with statements of body acceptance, especially when there is little acceptance or visibility of other body types in dominant yoga culture. It is also disconcerting given the industry or Budig could easily reach out to numerous activists who are experts on these issues, have researched these topics, or have been working to encourage body positivity, increased access and equality within yoga far longer than Budig has such as those who are actively involved in the body positivity movement and the YBIC. Rather than becoming an ally in the body positivity movement, Budig and the yoga industry have dominated the discussion, driving the conversation while presenting Budig as spokesperson.

But *why* exactly does representation matter? Budig (2015b) herself mistakenly implies focusing on who is represented "will kill us and any progress being made towards self love and acceptance." Why not stop talking about bodies altogether and focus on loving ourselves? Representation matters because as Hall (1997, 259; emphasis in original) identifies, there is "power *in representation*; power to mark, assign and classify." Over time the overrepresentation

of the ideal yoga body can become internalized, generating stereotypes regarding who a yogi is, what a yogi looks like, how a yogi moves, and what yoga consists of. In other words, representation marks, classifies, or inscribes particular bodies as more “authentically” or “essentially” yogic, simultaneously implying any Other body is not a true yogi. Whether intentionally or not, bodily representations and the stereotypes they produce create and maintain boundaries between who is naturally considered a yogi and who is considered Other.

Bodily ability is particularly relevant to this boundary maintenance since advanced poses are often interpreted by practitioners as reflecting advanced knowledge of, experience with, or ability to teach yoga despite the fact this is not always true. In addition, this is particularly true for body size, since size is often (incorrectly) interpreted as being indicative of qualities considered antithetical to the practice. Heavier yogis face claims they are not adequately adhering to yogic values of *ahimsa* (non-harm) regarding their own health or that they are not “correctly” listening to their bodies both on and off the mat (and subsequently aren’t a “real” or “good” yogi). For example, it is common to see social media comments such as: “Is it really yogic to ‘celebrate’ a body that has so much fat on it that it is considered to be unhealthy?” or “I just don’t think real yoga (the yamas and niyamas) supports being unhealthy.”

A post by Kell, a curvy yogi, claims: “Of all the sports and athletics I have participated in as a fat person, yoga has sadly been one of the most judgmental and the least emotionally safe” (2013). She goes on to describe numerous ways that students and teachers contribute to making curvy yogis uncomfortable in their classes, including asking them to consider starting a fitness program (without any prior knowledge of fitness activities these fat yogis may already engage in), asking about “disabilities,” refusing to make eye contact or offer adjustments, adjusting in ways that are unsafe for larger bodies, assuming they are new to yoga, or offering encouragement that yoga will help them lose weight (regardless of whether or not that is their goal). Other prominent curvy yoga teachers, including Dianne Bondy (2014) and Anna Guest-Jelley (2012) have written about the skepticism or surprise of new students, some of whom walk out of class upon learning they are the teacher. While such microaggressions may seem minor, they reflect and contribute to an environment within yoga that marginalizes Othered yogis, especially curvy yogis.

Because bodily appearance and ability are interpreted as indicative of the depth or “authenticity” of one’s yoga practice, the overrepresentation of bodies like Budig’s influences distribution of status, prestige, and wealth within the industry, maintaining inequalities of power that privilege stereotypical yoga bodies. Because of widespread visibility in publications like *Yoga Journal*, normative yogis are able to garner fame and fandom, social capital which translates into financial security in a highly competitive industry. They receive more opportunities to teach classes (like Budig’s regular appearances on Yoga Glo), workshops (Budig regularly holds international retreats), video series (like Budig’s Aim True video with industry giant Gaiam), receive sponsorships (such as Budig’s partnership with Under Armour), modeling deals (like Budig’s work with ToeSox®), or book contracts (like Budig’s involvement with the *Women’s Health Big Book of Yoga*). While this type of success does require hard work, the numerous opportunities Budig and others like her receive is in part *because* they fit industry standards of the ideal yoga body.

For Othered yogis, especially those who are nonwhite, curvy, or queer, despite how qualified or knowledgeable they may be and regardless of how hard they work to achieve success (often following the same strategies Budig herself has used, such as getting professional photos, having a social media presence, developing a personal brand, teaching online classes to

broaden their student base, and so on) remain largely invisible within the industry, rarely having access to privileges people like Budig regularly experience. In this way, narrow media representations maintain a system of unequal power where those who largely fit bodily ideals benefit and those who do not are marginalized and excluded. Consequently, representation is “part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between... the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological,’ ...what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’” (Hall 1997, 258). As Butler (1991, 20) notes, such “oppression works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects—*abjects*, we might call them—who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law. Here the oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability.” The Other yogi is denied the possibility of being a “real” yogi at all; it becomes unthinkable to name them as yogis because of their non-normative bodies.

With yoga’s increasing popularity, stereotypes about who a yogi is, what a yogi looks like, and how a yogi moves are consumed not just by yogis but increasingly by the general populace. Over time with repeated reinforcement such stereotypes become internalized without conscious awareness, what social psychologists call *implicit stereotypes*, preventing populations who might benefit from yoga most from pursuing the practice. Marginalized populations (including those who are nonwhite, queer, or curvy) face stigma within larger society and could use yoga to reduce chronic stress or anxiety due to discrimination. Similarly, yoga could be particularly advantageous for populations facing higher rates of obesity or other health concerns (including those who are poor, nonwhite, or elderly). However, considering stereotypes regarding the ideal yoga body it is common for such populations to assume they won’t be welcomed in the practice. For example, a popular blog post on *MindBodyGreen* identifies the “7 Common Excuses for Not Doing Yoga” (Knosher 2014), including: “(1) I am not flexible enough for yoga,” “(4) I am too old to do yoga,” “(6) I don’t ‘look’ like a yogi,” and “(7) Yoga studios intimidate me... [because] everyone would be watching me, secretly laughing as I non-gracefully tried to contort my body into a pose.” These fears are largely maintained by the overrepresentation of stereotypical yoga bodies in the media. In a practice already dominated by normative, white, affluent women, stereotypes of the ideal yoga body influence who participates in a way that perpetuates exclusion within yoga, causing those who are Othered to avoid the practice altogether or experience feelings of isolation, shame, or anger in the practice.

Ironically, despite Budig’s (2015b) claims that focusing on bodily representation will “kill us and any progress being made towards self love and acceptance,” overrepresentation of the ideal yoga body can cause the very self-hate and self-doubt Budig seeks to combat. Research studies have shown that unrealistic images of beauty in media (to which the ideal yoga body largely conforms) can detrimentally affect self-concept, including body image and self esteem. As Eisend and Muller (2007, 103) identify, our “body images are based on a cultural ideology that underlies body satisfaction, senses of ideal and desirable bodies, and activities motivated by these perceptions and feelings.” Media consumption plays an important role in influencing body image and lowering body satisfaction (see Cusumano and Thompson 1997; Field et al. 1999; Groesz et al. 2002; Grogan 2007; Levine and Smolak 2002; Martin and Gentry 1997; Milkie 1999; Shaw and Waller 1995; Silverstein et al. 1986; Tiggerman 2002). Richins (1991) revealed exposure to advertising featuring conventionally attractive models temporarily raises comparison standards for physical attractiveness among viewers. Such images also enhance beliefs about the importance of attractiveness (Tan 1979) and can contribute to the development of eating

disorders (Botta 1999; Stice et al. 1994; Shaw 1995). Hendriks (2002) identifies female consumers are more likely to perceive unrealistic thin bodies as standard, arguing media images contribute to the fact one out of every two women is dissatisfied with her body.³

Given that media can *cause* lower self-esteem and body dissatisfaction, it is imperative any conversation aimed at combating these issues critically discusses bodily representation in the yoga industry, which largely perpetuates stereotypes of the ideal yoga body rather than challenging them. In other words, if narrow limitations on *who* is represented in the yoga industry in part *causes* the very self-doubt and self-hate Budig wants to combat, it's important to discuss and critique why Budig has become the only visible representation of body positivity within the yoga industrial complex when the ToeSox® campaign has led to her symbolizing the ideal yoga body.

Budig's experiences reflect how insidious and unattainable the ideal is even for yogis like Budig who largely fit the stereotype. She clearly has experienced sizeism as well as feelings of self-doubt and self-hate despite being largely normative. However, it is important to acknowledge that Budig often experiences these feelings (and their treatment) from a position of privilege that is deeply interconnected to her numerous privileged bodily identities. The impact of unrealistic body standards is *intersectional*, meaning various axes of identity such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, or size, interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels to produce systems of oppression or discrimination (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989). Given overcoming negative body image is different for individuals based on their particular identities, it is important to ask: how different is Budig's experience from someone who may never come close to the normative yoga body?

While Budig can empathize with a non-normative yogi's struggle, she hasn't experienced the same microaggressions that come with being Othered based on identities like race, age, sexuality, or size. The fact that Budig is not regularly discriminated against is a sign of privilege, as is the large support network she has (that includes actors within the yoga industry) to help her through such struggles when they do occur. Her ability to step back into the safety of a normative body is also a privilege, giving her the ability to ignore the consequences of unrealistic body ideals when it suits her, ignore the conversation, or walk away from the conversation altogether, all tactics Budig has engaged in. For example, her response to concerns about her complicity in the sexualization of yoga during the ToeSox® debate often ignored critics concerns, claiming she was a "scapegoat" and that criticisms the result of "misdirected frustrations about a deep-seeded issue in themselves." This is similar to her later reaction to concerns about her appropriation of body positivity when she claimed critics were "body-shamers" and "bullies" (Budig 2010; 2015b). Similarly, recent criticism about Budig's co-optation of movement discourse, including several open letters explicitly directed to Budig from activists like Melanie Klein (2015) went completely ignored by the prominent yoga celebrity who walked away from the conversation as it suited her, ironically exercising the very privilege (to exit the discussion) that activists suggested she acknowledge.

It is impossible to solve negative body image without acknowledging the diversity of those who experiences self-hate or self-doubt, which vary according to intersectional identities. Budig epitomizes only one (privileged) experience, yet she is increasingly the only visible representation of body positivity within the yoga industry. The voices, experiences, and bodies of non-stereotypical yogis are rarely represented in dominant yoga culture. To undermine the cultural system that negatively impacts body image we need to show more diverse bodies, something that will not happen if Budig becomes the sole face of body positivity. Despite the

best of intentions, Budig inadvertently appropriates body positivity discourse in a way that contributes to the further marginalization of Othered yogis and dismisses systemic causes of the very body shaming that she hopes to overcome.

Eating the Other Yogi: Profiting From Appropriation of Body Positivity

Budig and the yoga industry have appropriated from the body positivity movement. Appropriation is defined as a process where one group takes intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from another group's culture without permission or understanding of the original history, meaning, or use of the appropriated good (Ziff and Rao 1997). The process is characterized by a power difference where members of a dominant group have more power to take from a culture that has often been systematically oppressed. As a consequence appropriation can be emotionally, economically, or intellectually harmful, and is a cause for concern for this reason since the process (regardless of the intentions of the taker) may negatively impact the culture, identity, or life course of those experiencing appropriation.

Appropriation benefits the taker in a number of ways, often at the expense of the appropriated culture. Typically, only members of the dominant group profit from appropriation, often through commodification of the appropriated cultural good that simplifies the meaning or history and utilizes stereotypical representations. This results in the *symbolic annihilation* of the original culture, which is marginalized, misrepresented, trivialized, or ignored entirely (see Coleman and Yochim 2008; Gerbner 1972; Gerbner and Gross 1976).

bell hooks (1992) describes the process of appropriation as “eating the Other.” She uses consumption as a metaphor to highlight the unequal nature of this exchange:

The commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization (31).

By eating the Other, appropriation allows for a broader audience of Othered cultures in a way that fundamentally alters the appropriated good, recouping and modifying the message to ensure it is more “palatable.” In the process, cultural messages are depoliticized or universalized so they can be “offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate” such that “the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (39). It is thus “by eating the Other... that one asserts power and privilege” because the act of appropriation is largely driven and controlled by the more powerful, dominant group (36). The terms of “exchange” take place according to the needs and desires of this group in ways that largely benefit only them.

Because of the power imbalance inherent in the process, the taker is able to appropriate aspects of Othered cultures without facing stigma, prejudice, and discrimination Other groups face when engaging in the same consumption. The taker appears supportive of non-dominant groups because of their *desire* to engage in cultural exchange (“they see their willingness to openly name their desire for the Other as affirmation of cultural plurality... they believe their desire for contact represents a progressive change”); however, because the “exchange” typically ignores inequality that marginalized groups face, appropriation often serves to *maintain* unequal systems even while *seeming* more progressive (24). In this way, the taker is able to engage in the politics of self-serving distinction, utilizing the appropriated culture to garner higher prestige or status unavailable to members of the non-dominant group. For example, as Rodriguez (2006, 649) notes when discussing the appropriation of hip-hop by white youth: “Whites who pick up on African American styles and music do not necessarily want to be black; they seek to acquire

the characteristics of blackness associated with being cool.” When whites consume hip-hop they *gain* status, but when blacks engage in the same consumption they are unable to because of the stigmatizing nature of their racial identity. Rather, such consumption becomes an affirmation of negative stereotypes about blackness. “Eating the Other” becomes a form of self-distinction for those appropriating rather than a means of progressive change, especially those who are privileged, since appropriation allows whites to “acknowledge the salience of race for others while denying it in oneself” in a way that seems progressive but does little to address larger issues of systemic racism (Rodriguez 2006, 655).

We can see these characteristics of appropriation in the co-optation of body positivity by Budig and the yoga industry. The body positivity movement originates from the feminist and “black is beautiful” movements of the 1960s. During this time a number of prominent fat activists emerged, drawing attention to size discrimination and its intersection with other forms of oppression, particularly sexism (see Cooper 2008). Simultaneously, many black feminists emphasized the intersections not just of gender but also race in the experience of body-isms (Caraway 1991; Collins 1990; Guy-Sheftall 1995). They argued American culture portrays blacks as less desirable or attractive, damaging the psyches of African Americans. In response, the movement encouraged blacks to shed ideas of beauty predicated on whiteness and engage in acts such as reclaiming one’s natural hair (see Banks 2000; Craig 2002; hooks 1988; hooks 1989).

With the rise of third wave feminism and the advent of the internet, Cooper (2008) argues there was a diversification of the fat acceptance movement as activists expanded their reach, arguing for health at all sizes and body positivity for all. The body positivity movement emphasizes the intersectional nature of bodily oppression and “seeks to defy *media projected* bodily stereotypes, celebrate diversity, and encourage bodily self-appreciation” with the aim to “shift the focus from the modification of one’s body to the modification of one’s relationship to one’s body” (Sastre 2014; emphasis added). Activists make an effort to connect systems of oppression regarding body type to *cultural* influences, emphasizing the role media plays in the development of negative body image at the personal level and the perpetuation of inequality in society more broadly, encouraging more diverse representation as a possible solution.

This background indicates body positivity is political, rooted in feminism as well as civil rights activism and characterized by cultural critique. However, as the discourse of the movement was appropriated by the yoga industry and yoga celebrities like Budig, the political nature of the movement is downplayed, trivialized, or ignored. In this case, a more powerful group (the yoga industry or yoga celebrity Budig) has appropriated body positivity discourse from activist groups (such as pulling the #loveyourbody slogan directly from the YBIC’s mission statement), in the process commodifying messages of body acceptance and disconnecting them from the sociohistorical context they derive from. As hooks notes, “commodification strips these signs of political integrity and meaning... Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption... When commodified it is easy for consumers to ignore political messages.” (1992, 33-34) The appropriation process decontextualizes and eliminates the radical nature of systemic cultural critique inherent in the movement. The phrase “love your body” becomes not a rallying cry for activism, allyship, and cultural change, but a marketing slogan designed to sell the *Women’s Health* 21-day bikini body plan.

From Body Positivity to Body-Blindness

To understand appropriation of body positivity, it is helpful to distinguish between positivity as a movement aimed at cultural *and* personal transformation, and the solely individual goal of body acceptance that is part of, but not equivalent to, positivity. Rather than *body positivity*, which argues broader culture needs to become more accepting and supportive of all bodies regardless of size, race, gender, age, sexuality, or class, Budig and the yoga industry advocate *body acceptance*, individualizing the movement's message and ignoring the structural nature of oppression. By focusing only on body acceptance, the yoga industry highlights the *individual*, universalized experience of body love (#loveyourbody) rather than the way our ability to love our bodies is *embedded* within larger cultural systems. Within this appropriation, the call to #loveyourbody becomes the sole responsibility of the consumer (often presented as achievable through consumption of goods produced by the yoga industry), and the role of the yoga industrial complex in the creation of negative body image is rendered invisible even as that same industry boosts their profits and legitimacy by claiming "progressive" values. Rather than creating a *body positive yoga*, we end up with what Budig calls "positive body image *in yoga*," which largely ignores the intersectional nature of bodily oppression or underlying structural causes of negative body image.

As Budig's increasing visibility as spokesperson for body positivity indicates, the bodies and bodily experiences portrayed in the yoga industry are still normative, fitting closely the stereotypical ideal yoga body. Othered yogis and their experiences continue to be ignored or marginalized despite the appropriation of their radical messages of body positivity and self love. When messages of body acceptance are associated with the same normative bodily representations it implies, we should seek to attain the ideal yoga body while simultaneously maintaining positive body image, somehow loving our bodies despite constant media messages that our bodies are not enough. If you cannot #loveyourbody it must be because of *your* inability to accept your "flaws," rather than unrealistic standards perpetuated by the yoga industry that make it difficult to cultivate positive body image despite our best efforts.

The simplification of body positivity ultimately benefits the yoga industry and Budig. By rendering invisible the role of the yoga industry in causing negative body image through overrepresentation of an unrealistic ideal yoga body, that same industry never has to pursue structural changes that could be considered risky to corporate interests. The yoga industry never has to critically reflect on its connection to, involvement in, and subsequent responsibility to address social justice issues in yoga. At the same time, this tactic makes industry giants appear more progressive by catering to social justice movements taking root in yoga. Their co-optation of body positive discourse becomes a form of self-distinction, a means to gain status, prestige and power denied to the very groups they appropriate from. By spreading an individualized message of body acceptance while utilizing normative models like Budig they *appear* more body positive (distinguishing themselves from other companies) even while they avoid engaging in practices that actually *are* body positive.

Budig is similarly not immune to the politics of self-serving distinction. She has used her increasing role as the "face of positive body image in yoga" to build her brand and fan base, profiting off appropriation of body positivity. Ultimately, her efforts focus attention not on combatting the underlying structural causes of negative body image but in self-promotion. Rather than use her platform to promote greater diversity in yoga (such as sharing stories or images of Other yogis or collaborating with body positivity activists), she has ignored Other

yogis and accused those who are critical of her increasing role as spokesperson for body positivity of engaging in “body shaming.” The dominant group (the yoga industry and yoga celebrity Budig) has largely controlled the appropriation process, utilizing their greater power, prestige and status to set the terms of the “exchange” and drive the conversation in such a way that they are able to benefit from the inclusion of a simplified, decontextualized body positive message at the expense of the Other yogi who continues to be excluded, marginalized, or underrepresented.

A common reaction when faced with claims of appropriation is the insistence that if intentions were positive there can be no harm. Budig (2015b) falls prey to this when she claims “no good deed goes unpunished” and “people will misconstrue your good intentions into something despicable and wrong.” However, even those with the best intentions can engage in appropriative acts that are damaging. Most appropriation occurs *because* the taker has good intentions and is genuinely interested in the culture they seek to appropriate from. As hooks (1992, 26) notes: “The contemporary crises of identity in the west, especially as experienced by white youth, are eased when the ‘primitive’ is recouped *via* a focus on diversity and pluralism which suggests the Other can provide life-sustaining alternatives.” The Other is eaten precisely because they are desired. In this case, despite the best intentions Budig and the yoga industry continue to ignore the concerns, experiences, and needs of Other yogis even while they appropriate messages they find desirable from this very population. This ultimately supports hierarchical systems that continue to marginalize Other yogis thus doing little to change institutional practices that are the underlying cause of negative body image and body-isms.

Budig’s response to criticism from body positivity activists is aligned with the ideology of color-blindness often incorporated into the appropriation process. According to Wise (2010, 23), “The term colorblind racism refers to the dominant white racial ideology of the modern era, in which whites, under the guise of being color-blind, refuse to acknowledge the reality of racism and reject any consideration of how their own racial identity provides them with privileges vis-à-vis people of color” (see also Bonilla-Silva 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011; Brown et al. 2003; Rodriguez 2006;). Color-blindness posits the best way to end discrimination and promote racial harmony is by ignoring racial or ethnic differences and treating individuals as equally as possible without regard to skin color. Research by Bonilla-Silva (2006, 222) indicates color-blind ideology is incredibly popular among Americans; only 10-15% of all whites seem to acknowledge and actively refuse color-blind racism; even “a significant number of blacks are indirectly affected by this ideology and use some elements of it.”

However, as Wise (2010, 18) notes “colorblindness not only fails to remedy discrimination and racial inequity, it can actually make both problems worse.” Color-blindness is based on a romantic “vision” that doesn’t exist in reality, making race a taboo topic despite its continued importance in American society. Dovidio et al. (2015, 1-2) discuss how *all* individuals internalize “racial biases that unconsciously and uncontrollably strategically shape the behavior of White Americans, even among seemingly well-meaning people” such that “even Whites who profess to be color-blind automatically activate racially biased thoughts and feelings, which may be expressed in ways that systematically disadvantage Blacks.” Color-blindness obscures institutional arrangements by reproducing discriminatory practices, often justifying the racial status quo, which makes the ideology ineffective at combating racial inequality despite its romantic appeal.

In the case of yoga, the ideology of color-blindness is expanded to incorporate other embodied identities, including size, gender, age, class, or sexuality into what might be called a

more general ideology of *body-blindness*, evident in Budig's (2015b) calls to color the world "so loudly that we can no longer see differences" at all. Budig's lack of acknowledgment of her own privilege within the yoga industry reflects the common tendency for whites to be color-blind—or in the case of Budig, body-blind—to their own advantages. As Rodriguez (2006, 646) notes, "color-blind eyes interpret racialized cultural symbols in ways undermining their racially coded character" (646). In yoga, body-blind eyes appropriating body positivity discourse reduce diverse bodily experiences to universal messages (#loveyourbody!), creating "a veneer of tolerance while deflecting attention away from unfair treatment (and thus undermining motivation for action toward equality) among members of both dominant and disadvantaged groups" (Covidio 2015, 1). Consequently, body-blindness allows whites to "acknowledge race [or bodily difference] while disregarding racial hierarchies by taking racially coded styles and products and reducing these symbols to commodities or experiences that whites and racial minorities can purchase and share," resulting in little change of larger structural conditions that might be the underlying cause of inequality or discrimination (Gallagher 2003, 5).

The body-blindness reflected in Budig and the yoga industry's appropriation of body positivity is antithetical to political aims of activists seeking to eradicate body-isms not through ignoring difference but by acknowledging it, increasing diverse representation of all body types within media to generate societal acceptance and facilitate self-love and healing. Individualizing the cultural critique inherent in the movement's goals, such as the yoga industry's calls to #loveyourbody draw on abstract, universal notions of equality by assuming we are all equally capable of loving our bodies or that there is an essential sameness in all bodily experiences despite unequal social locations, different body types, and distinctive histories of oppression and privilege. Appropriation of body positivity thus disconnects bodily difference from the power relations in which our ability to love our bodies is embedded, making it harder to solve the underlying causes of negative body image and body-isms.

Conclusion

Despite the best of intentions, the appropriation of body positivity by Budig and the yoga industrial complex has largely served to undermine the political nature of the movement, creating a veneer of tolerance and support while simultaneously reinforcing structures that perpetuate bodily hierarchy and inequality. While the individualized message of bodily acceptance is indeed a positive and valuable step towards promoting self-love and positive body image, decontextualizing this message from cultural critique perpetuates unequal systems by individualizing solutions rather than encouraging structural change. By associating messages of body acceptance with the continued overrepresentation of bodies and experiences largely reflecting the ideal yoga body, Other yogis continue to be marginalized and their experiences, bodies, and needs are obscured or omitted. Budig's reaction to criticism, including the ideological stance of body-blindness, exacerbate these structural inequities, making it taboo to discuss bodily difference as critics are labeled "bullies," "body-shamers," or "un-yogic." By downplaying the importance of the systemic critique of dominant yoga culture to focus on individual, body-blind solutions, Budig and the yoga industrial complex contribute to the marginalization and "eating" of the Other yogi while simultaneously profiting from individualization and depoliticization of the body positivity movement.

Future research should develop more empirical analyses of both written and visual content produced by the yoga industrial complex, including the *Yoga Journal*. More quantitative

studies on issues of access, exclusion, and marginalization within yoga are sorely needed, especially those focusing on inequality or discrimination experienced by yoga users. Further research investigating the distribution of resources and opportunities within the yoga profession and industry is needed too. Additionally, more research should investigate the nature of body-blind ideologies and their role in the reproduction of social inequality within yoga and broader society.

In order to solve problems of negative body image or body-isms, we must acknowledge the structural forces individuals attempting to love their bodies are embedded within. Rather than a spokesperson, what is needed is allyship based in mutual, equitable cultural exchange. However, whether this is possible remains to be seen. As hooks (1992, 22) notes, “Whether or not desire for contact with the Other, for connection rooted in the longing for pleasure, can act as a critical intervention challenging and subverting racist domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance, is an unrealized political possibility.” I hope this paper creates a space for further discussion on the nature of inequality and access in yoga, raising awareness of these issues and educating others to create more effective change both on and off the mat.

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Notes

¹ Broad (2012) first used the term “yoga industrial complex” to describe economic incentives present within the yoga industry to avoid acknowledging the risks of injury for those involved in the practice.

² In 2002, researchers found that yoga users were 76% women and 24% men (Birdee et al.). More recent statistics from 2012 indicate this gender division has only increased in recent years to 82% women and 18% men (Yoga in America Study). There are fewer statistics on race, however, Birdee et al. did find a significant difference in racial composition as of 2002 with 84% of practitioners being white and only 6% being African American (10% other). In 2008, 71% of yoga practitioners were college educated with 27% having postgraduate degrees, while 44% of practitioners had household incomes of \$75,000 or more, and 24% made more than \$100,000 (Yoga Journal). Comparing this to the general population, only 28.2% of all US citizens had a bachelor’s degree or higher and the median household income in America was only \$52,762 (Census). In 2008, 40.6% of practitioners were 18 to 34 years old, 41% were between 35 and 54, and 18.4% were over 55 (Yoga Journal) indicating that yogis come from a relatively diverse age group but are disproportionately young.

³ While several factors affect the degree to which audiences internalize media messages such as education level or degree of trust in media source. Research by Milkie (1999) indicates media influence works through indirect social psychological processes where individuals engage in a “third person effect,” overestimating the degree peers are affected by media representations (Davison 1983; Perloff 1993). This suggests media representations are a “significant part of the generalized other... whose views we take into account in understanding and evaluating our self,” including self-esteem and body image (Milkie 1999,193; see also Felson 1985, 1989; Ichiyama 1993).

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