Race & Yoga

I Do Practice Yoga! Controlling Images and Recovering the Black Female Body in 'Skinny White Girl' Yoga Culture

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Abstract

Black women's health and fitness practices remain under-theorized in Public Health, the Social Sciences, and Women's and Gender Studies. This paper positions the controversy over the *XO Jane* 2014 post "It Happened to Me: There Are No Black People In My Yoga Classes and I'm Suddenly Uncomfortable With It" by Jen Caron, a white woman, within a broader analytical context. It raises and answers two questions: How did Black women, especially yogis – teachers and students – respond to this post? And, what can their responses tell us about the nature of negative 'controlling images' in shaping participants' experiences of yoga and navigating yoga culture? To answer these questions I draw on comments posted on *XO Jane's* website in response to Caron's post, the blog posts from six African American female bloggers, as well as comments to their posts for a qualitative content analysis. Drawing on Black feminist analysis, I argue that Polacheck's post draws on longstanding tropes used to situate the Black female body, including otherness, monstrosity, deviance, and the idea that Black women take up "too much" space. Three themes emerge from the analysis: naming stereotypes and rejecting controlling images, affirming and resisting 'skinny white girl' yoga culture, and defending difference. Black women's responses to the post highlights the complex ways they may negotiate perceptions of yoga as accessible and inviting, and "race neutral," while also naming and challenging normative whiteness, dominant beauty standards, and reaffirming Black female worth and visibility. This analysis makes visible the multiple ways that many Black women experience and navigate predominately white yoga spaces. It also demonstrates the ways in which African American women resist stereotypes.

Keywords: Black Feminism; Controlling Images; Yoga; African American Women; Fitness

Introduction

A firestorm erupted in 2014 when Jen Caron,[1] a white woman, blogged for the website *XOJane* about her feelings when she saw an African American woman show up in her yoga class for the first time. Caron was neither the studio owner nor a yoga teacher at the time of her post. Her post, "It Happened to Me: There Are No Black People In My Yoga Classes And I'm Suddenly Feeling Uncomfortable With It," details her awareness of the "fairly heavy" African American female student and how it made her reflect on her own body:

> I was completely unable to focus on my practice, instead feeling hyper-aware of my high-waisted bike shorts, my tastefully tacky sports bra, my well-versedness in these poses that I have been in hundreds of times. My skinny white girl body. Surely this woman was noticing all of these things and judging me for them, stereotyping me, resenting me – or so I imagined (Caron 2014).

In the post, Caron imagines how awkward and uncomfortable the African American female student must have felt:

> I thought about how that must feel: to be a heavyset Black woman entering for the first time a system that by all accounts seems unable to accommodate her body. What could I do to help her? If I were her, I thought, I would want as little attention to be drawn to my *despair* as possible – I would not want anyone to look at me or notice me (emphasis added).

Caron imagines her yoga classroom not to be a space for that body or Black bodies, as she specifically states that Black students were few and far between, as were African American instructors, though she notes the "sizeable number of Asian students."

Her description of the Black female student shifts in the post from 'fairly heavy' to 'heavyset'. She felt that the African American woman's (unspoken) "despair and resentment and then contempt" must have been directed at her presumably for being thin, white, and a regular yoga practitioner. Moreover, she describes this Black woman as hostile and understands that she, the author, would be the recipient of "racially charged anger." It is important to note that Caron does not at any time describe herself interacting with the African American woman. The post ends with the author recounting how she returned to her house sobbing and reprimanding herself for not checking to see if the Black woman was "OK," for feeling judgmental, and being complicit in a yoga studio system that "advocates acceptance" but does not follow through on it. She ends the post with the question, "How do we create a space that is accessible not just to everybody, but to every body? The resulting commentary and responses to this post from African American women and women of color yogis, primarily, was swift.[2] The post received over 2900 comments before it was disabled.[3]

This paper positions the controversy over the blog post within a broader analytical context. It raises and answers two questions: How did Black women – especially yogis, teachers, and students – respond to this post?; and, what can their responses tell us about how negative "controlling images" shape participant experiences of yoga and yoga culture? To answer these questions, I draw on comments posted on *XO Jane's* website in response to Caron's post, the blog posts from six African American female bloggers, as well as comments to their posts using qualitative content analysis.

Caron's post draws on longstanding tropes used to situate the Black female body, including otherness, monstrosity, deviance, and the idea that Black women take up "too much" space. These tropes intersect with Patricia Hill Collins's articulation of "controlling images." Three themes emerge from the analysis: 1) naming stereotypes and rejecting "controlling images", 2) affirming and resisting 'skinny white girl' yoga culture, and 3) defending difference. I argue that Black women's responses to the post highlight the complex ways they may negotiate perceptions of yoga as accessible and inviting, and "race neutral" while also naming and challenging normative whiteness, dominant beauty standards, and reaffirming Black female worth and visibility. This analysis makes visible the multiple ways that many Black women experience and navigate predominately white yoga spaces. Moreover, this paper demonstrates the ways that "controlling images" permeate yoga spaces and affect African American women's

experiences. It also highlights the ways in which African American women resist stereotypes. Yoga as a physical activity is embedded in cultural norms and practices that make whiteness, thinness, and femaleness normative and idealized.

Background

Until recently, research about Black women and fitness centered on the documentation of practices. This line of inquiry provides important insights into particular patterns of fitness for African American women (e.g. how many times they visit a gym), but provides little nuance or critical perspective into how Black women navigate the complex terrain of stereotypes, beliefs, and cultural representations about their bodies as they seek out fitness spaces. The majority of this research is clustered in public health and/or social work (Ainsworth et al. 2003). Kimberly Lau's ethnography about Sisters in Shape, an African American women's fitness group, stands out for its ability to bring together complex analyses of fitness, gender, race, and identity and power (Lau 2011). Theorizing leisure and fitness spaces, and how Black women interact with them through a feminist and critical theory lens, is a relatively new line of inquiry (Berila, Klein, and Roberts 2016; Mowatt, French and Malebrande 2013; Ray 2014).

Growing in popularity as a mainstream fitness and health practice, yoga presents a new and important arena to focus on women's experiences. In the last few years, yoga has been sharply criticized by many activists, practitioners, and teachers as a site that reproduces inequalities (Berila, Klein, and Roberts 2016; Horton and Harvey 2012; Klein and Guest-Jelley 2014). Black female yoga students' and teachers' writings and activism in the digital space reveal that yoga spaces are not the calm, serene, and affirming places that are often advertised (Bondy 2014; Ford 2016; Haddix 2016; Jackson 2014; Velazquez 2016). These writers call attention to the ways in which they have been made to feel both invisible and hypervisible while experiencing various manifestations of racism, race and gender discrimination, including stereotyping. Black women's yogic self-representation in the digital space is also highly active (Cooper, Morris and Boylorn 2017; Vasquez 2016). How bodies are read in fitness spaces matter. As Beth Berila notes in the recent volume *Yoga, The Body and Embodied Social Change*, "bodies become markers of power dynamics, as some bodies are situated differently within power hierarchies and become targets for violence and oppression" (2016, 4). Yoga, thus, presents an important forum to consider how "different bodies are inscribed in different ways" (Berila 2016, 5) using a theoretical framework that explicates how stereotypes and "controlling images" shape Black women's experiences. Although the Caron post has been the subject of much online discussion and a few book chapters (Page 2016; Vasquez 2016), the post and its responses warrant a deeper and sustained analysis, one that builds on Black feminist theorizing about the body and engages us with an empirical analysis. This current work does this and builds an analytical bridge between much of the self-reflective, autobiographical, and theoretical work offered by Black female yogis. It contributes to interdisciplinary studies on yoga and fitness culture and extends theoretical work on Black women's bodies. This work integrates feminist theories about the body (Berila 2016) and yoga practices.

Yoga Culture and Practices

Yoga is an ancient physical and spiritual discipline and branch of philosophy that originated in India reportedly more than 5,000 years ago. The word yoga comes from the

Sanskrit word *yuj*, which means to yoke, join, or unite. Yoga's popularity and visibility has increased dramatically in the United States during the past two decades. Yoga in the West is commonly understood as a series of postures (or *asanas*) that can also include breathing exercises, meditation, and chanting.

A recent "Yoga in America" study conducted by Yoga Alliance and *Yoga Journal* found that over 36 million Americans practice yoga, up from 20 million in 2012. Additionally, yoga in the United States is a female-based and led practice. Studies find that between 75-82% of all people who practice yoga are women (Sports Marketing Survey 2012; Ipsos 2016). Moreover, it is estimated that over 4/5ths of the population who practice are white.

In the United States, people practice yoga for a variety of reasons. Many people practice yoga as part of a spiritual tradition. Many Americans, however, no longer understand yoga solely as a spiritual practice, but also as a health and wellness practice that provides various mental and physical benefits, including stress reduction. In the Yoga in America study by Yoga Alliance, the majority of participants answered the question 'What is Yoga?' with "Yoga is a practice of the body." The study found most Americans viewed yoga "as a physical activity, designed to increase flexibility," which is a positive activity for physical and mental health (Ipsos 2016). As Kauer notes, yoga fits other "forms of movement and fitness, which tend to be quite disembodied, yoga in the West has been guided by neoliberal ideology around one's health and well-being" (Kauer 2016, 91). Health in this context is less about an emphasis on improving community health or tackling and dismantling the structural issues that affect health, but as practice that is to be taken up solely by the individual.

Yoga is decentralized and practiced in the U.S. in a variety of spaces, but most often through individually-owned yoga studios and in fitness centers and athletic clubs. Despite greater professionalization among yoga teachers through the organization of Yoga Alliance, there is not a standard or credentialing process for a yoga teacher that is recognized by state or federal laws. There is no credentialing that is completely uniform across all spaces.

It is difficult to find any accurate information about the demographics of yoga teachers despite several major reports on yoga (Ipsos 2016; Sports Marketing Survey 2012). Moreover, in the last several major reports and studies about yoga in the U.S., race and ethnicity as categories are absent. Given the general pattern of what is known about current yoga practitioners, however, we can safely assume that white people, and particularly white women, constitute the majority of teachers.[4]

Yoga practice increasingly connotes a particular lifestyle orientation that can be characterized as healthy, stylish and affluent. Yoga is embedded in capitalist practices and it is a sixteen billion dollar industry (Kauer 2016; Kaushik-Brown 2016). In 2012 to 2016, the amount spent on yoga doubled in terms of sales of yoga classes, accessories, and mats. Although we do not have information about monies spent on teacher trainings, yoga retreats, or yoga themed vacations, one can imagine that these activities bring in a substantive share of revenue. Also, as Kaushik-Brown (2016) notes, yoga in the West is bound up with property and "legal propertization" that includes high rates of trademarks, patents and protections, deepening its involvement as a commercialized endeavor. She argues that these features of current yoga in the U.S. deepen its connection and incorporation into whiteness.

Increasingly, yoga culture and its practices have come under intense scrutiny. Feminist scholars have critically dissected yoga as practiced in the U.S. as inaccessible, culturally appropriating, heterosexist, and encouraging of body shaming (Klein and Guest-Jelley 2014).

These criticisms have encouraged fruitful inquiry examining the multiple ways that different kinds of bodies enter into yoga spaces and are viewed as dangerous, disruptive, or unworthy.

Controlling Images and the Legacy of Representing Black Women's Bodies

Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, provides us with a framework for examining the ways Black women have been externally defined and represented within dominant culture. She calls these pernicious images, promulgated outside Black communities, *controlling*. They are a legacy from the ideological justifications for control over Black women's bodies during slavery. Briefly, they are: The *mammy*, a faithful, asexual, obedient servant; the *matriarch*, symbolizing the mother in Black homes an overly aggressive and un-feminine woman; *the welfare mother*; lazy, and unable to instill morality in the family; and the *Jezebel*, a woman who is defined as lascivious and sexually aggressive (Collins 1990). Through historical analysis, Collins discusses how each of these images are embedded in popular culture, have informed discussions on policy, and have justified discriminatory treatment of Black women in the workplace and other institutions (Collins 1990; Jewell 1993). Although Black women have resisted these images, they constitute a persistent hegemonic influence. Controlling images "provide ideological justifications" for race, gender, and class subordination and permeate society (Collins 1990, 66).

Scholars have used the frame of controlling images to examine a variety of social contexts, including media portrayals of African American women (Jewell 1993; Berger 2005; Hobson 2005), perceptions about African American women and entitlement programs (Hancock 2011), the criminalization of African American women (Jordan-Zachery 2008), as a feature of material culture of the antebellum south (Simms 2001), in therapy (Miller 2008), the social organization of motherhood (Collins 1990), bias in sports media coverage of Black female athletes (Carter-Francique, Akilah, and Richardson 2016), in Black male directed and produced films of the 1990s (Berger 2005) and recently as contributing to negative health outcomes (Morgan, Cole, Ward and Avery 2017).

Despite the scholarship on the four controlling images, little has been done to examine another facet of controlling images that Collins discusses in *Black Feminist Thought*. She argues that controlling images aren't static: "controlling images of Black women are not simply grafted onto existing social institutions but are so pervasive that even though images themselves change in the popular imagination, Black women's portrayal as the Other persists" (Collins 1990, 78). She names externally applied dominant beauty standards as a facet of controlling images, "particularly [those applied to] skin color, facial features, and hair texture" (79). Although weight and body image are not specifically named in Collins's original concept, they are inseparable from dominant ideas of beauty and relevant in this discussion. The controlling images of the Mammy and Jezebel also connote ideas about beauty and attractiveness. As I will discuss later, this aspect of controlling images is deeply implicated in yoga culture.

There is also a rich legacy of Black feminist theorizing that examines how representations of the Black female body, through various discourses, shape lived realities (Christian 1975; Spillers 1984). Black women's bodies have been historically devalued, and governed by discourses of the grotesque, deviant, monstrous, disruptive and masculine, or hyper sexual (Collins 1990, 2004; Bennett and Dickerson 2000; Wallace-Sanders 2002; Hobson 2005). Black feminist theory has also explored the ways in which racialized and gendered bodies experience both the twin realities of visibility and invisibility in both public spaces and academic

discourse (Mowat, French, and Malebranche 2013). This legacy of representation stands in direct contrast to representations of white American women and African American men. These discursive frames of "normalcy and dominance" have long perpetuated Black women's "outsider" and "disabled" status (Hobson 2005, 14). Thus their "disruptive bodies" provide further justification for their devaluation and discrimination (14).

I argue that it is the intersection of these two rubrics of controlling images and stereotypes that create a context for understanding the responses to Caron. In Caron's post, with her emphasis on the Black female student's body type, she invokes a mammy figure. She also uses comparisons between herself and the Black female yoga student that draws on unstated normative values of beauty, another controlling image. Further, she invokes additional stereotypes including the "angry Black woman." Black female yogis swiftly responded to and challenged these categorizations.

Methods: Qualitative Content Analysis

This study uses a qualitative content analysis to explore themes that emerged from African American women's responses to Jen Caron's blog post. Qualitative content analysis is a research method that allows for the "subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). This approach is different from quantitative content analysis in that a qualitative approach relies heavily on inductive processes.

Content analysis is unobtrusive and engages with non-interactive texts. Blogs increasingly represent a rich data source that involves easy access to obtain public opinion information (Aharony 2010). Blogs also provide a public forum for a diversity of individuals to come together and offer a multiplicity of opinions in response to a particular topic of interest. There are challenges and limitations when using blogs to gather data and conduct analysis. These include 1) dealing with a voluminous amount of text; 2) difficulty discerning various aspects of the posters' identity (e.g. gender, race, etc.) as avatars can be used; 3) understanding selectivity in who posts as blog comments can be dominated by people expressing one side of an opinion that may give a distorted view of public perceptions; and, 4) blogs and blog posts on some platforms have the potential to be modified or deleted which may impact research collection or analysis. Despite these limitations, however, analyses of blogs yield important snapshots of the social world. They reveal to us the way ideas are constructed in culture (Hookaway 2008). Moreover, a transparent and attentive research design that clearly discusses how the data was gathered and analyzed can reduce the effects of these limitations (Hsieh and Shannon 2015).

The data for analysis are a subset of responses to Jen Caron's post on the *XO Jane* site, the blog posts of six bloggers who directly responded to her post, and the commenters who responded to their posts. These bloggers, Britni Danielle, Demetria Lucas D'Oyley (formerly Lewis), Pia Glenn, Cece Olisa, Maya Rupert, and Alexis Garrett Stodghill, were chosen because they were the earliest to respond, had the highest number of people responding, and addressed multiple aspects of the blog post. Other bloggers responded to one aspect of the blog or a created parody of the post as in the case of Kadia Blagrove's "It Happened To Me: There Are No White People In My Twerk-Out Class And I'm Suddenly Feeling Uncomfortable With It" (Blagrove 2014).

A research assistant and I worked independently to identify potential comments by African American women for a database. We only considered comments that appeared on the blog from 2014 through the summer of 2015 as this time period saw consistent engagement with

Caron's post (comments on the blog) and bloggers' responses (and comments on their blogs) indicated the continued resonance of the issue. We independently reviewed comments on Caron's post, the six African American female bloggers' posts, and comments to their posts. Initially in reviewing the comments, we looked for explicit references of self-identification (e.g. 'speaking as a Black woman'). The second pass through the comments, we each separately reviewed the avatars and/or photos noting if the avatars had a photograph or not and if it was of a woman of African descent. Although this approach is the current standard for research (Hookway 2008; Operario 2013), this is not a perfect process as trying to determine racial and/or ethnic identity from avatars or photos is complex and far from accurate. We then compared their lists and dropped any comments that lacked both a clear self-identification as a Black and/or African American woman in the comment itself and/or a photograph that represented a woman of African descent. From this process, we were able to gather a robust sample of over 900 comments out of close to 4,000 comments. This includes over 700 individuals who commented on various posts. Most individuals commented once, a few commented more than once. Although a researcher can never be 100% sure of the identity of anyone posting online (Hookway 2008), given the specificity of comments, insights, and personal narratives gathered in the sample, we believe we have captured ideas about African American women's experiences in predominately white yoga spaces to the best of our abilities.

This work uses thematic analysis as a coding strategy (Hookaway 2008). An inductive process of coding proceeded to examine emergent themes. As others have noted qualitative content analysis typically works inductively, and seeks to allow patterns to emerge from the data (Hookaway 2008). Our analysis proceeded in three phases. First, we read and open-coded the materials inductively to note phrases, concepts, and ideas that were consistent features of bloggers' and commenters' responses to the various blog posts to emerge and be defined through their words and experiences. Second, I developed a set of well-defined codes (e.g. rejection, resistance, enjoyment of yoga, visibility inside the yoga classroom, invisibility inside the yoga classroom, etc.), and trained my research assistant to apply them to the data. We were then able to focus more systematically on areas of interest. I returned again and again to the data, as is common in qualitative work. This work included noting comparisons across the materials as well as differences. What emerged were three main themes: rejecting controlling images, affirming and resisting 'skinny white girl' yoga culture, and defining difference.

This work privileges the posts of self-identified Black women for a few reasons. One, little is known about Black women's experiences in fitness, generally, and yoga, in particular. Two, the majority of people who responded as laypeople, yoga teachers, feminists, activists, yoga students, and bloggers were African American women. While others who were not self-identified as African American or female responded, often with a sense of solidarity, and made important critiques of Caron's post, they do not represent the majority of responses. This work is guided by a feminist analysis that seeks to ask questions of popular culture about gendered and raced realities that go often unasked (Leavy 2007). A focus on African American women's responses, in this project, yields insights into the experiences of yoga culture, barriers, and stereotypes that are experiences on and off the mat.

Naming Stereotypes and Rejecting Controlling Images

Rejection was a main theme that emerged from the analysis. Bloggers and commenters overwhelmingly rejected Caron's reading of the Black female body (and self-perception) as

described in her post. Naming manifestations of racism and sexism often followed the rejection of controlling images. In rejecting Caron's reading of both the physical and emotional state of the Black woman in her class, they highlight and name legacies of racism and sexism that have often condemned Black women in public spaces. Their responses run the gamut of naming the controlling image of the mammy figure and harmful tropes and stereotypes like the "angry Black woman." Additionally, many of the bloggers and blog comments focused on how Caron's comments fuel ongoing perceptions of strained relationships between African American and white women. CeCe Olisa (2014) noted this in her response, "many online and on social media agree that, rather than opening a useful dialogue, Caron merely reinforced the idea that many privileged, white women see Black women as inferior and pitiable." They noted that this perception stems from relationships that flow back to the historical context of slavery and post-Reconstruction when white women as a group exercised various forms of social control over Black women.

Bloggers and commenters stressed that one manifestation of racism are stereotypes. Many comments expressed that Caron was a perpetuator of unconscious racism, paternalism, and white saviorism. These vantage points, commenters argue, allow Caron to position herself (and other white people) as superior and exercising the (assumed) power to define and interpret others' actions. Responses addressed Caron's implied idea that Black women were somehow flawed, emotionally scarred, and are in need of help and rescue. In an attempt to highlight Caron's blind spots on race and offer a different vantage point besides a dominant one, Maya Rupert's response on her blog, "An Open Letter to the White Woman Who Felt Bad for Me at Yoga" was written as if she was the Black woman in that yoga class. It is worth quoting at length:

> It happened because we live in a society steeped in so much racism that it honestly didn't occur to you that I don't view my race as a burden that must be "accommodated" in order to feel comfortable doing yoga. It runs so deep, that you assumed that being confronted by your whiteness plunged me into a jealousy so deep, I had no choice but to curl up into a ball and stew in my own anger. But remember, I'm not as unaccustomed to seeing and interacting with white women as you seem to be with Black women. If I actually crumbled every time I was the only Black woman in any setting, I would have to quit my job, give up a lot of my favorite haunts, and go fold myself into the child's pose somewhere in the middle of Ward 8. This is racism that is so simultaneously powerful and invisible, that it deeply impacted your entire being that I – a Black woman – was in your yoga class, while it didn't faze me at all that you – a white woman – were in mine. It is systemic racism that runs so deep, that you probably overlooked several other white women in the *same* yoga class, there because of the *same* assumed New Year's Resolutions, struggling with the *same* poses as I was, and did not feel the pity and shame for them that you felt while looking at me. You didn't project anger and resentment onto them because you didn't immediately feel comfortable assuming to know their feelings. You allowed them be complex people with complex emotions, but allowed me only my Blackness and its relation to your whiteness. And that can be exhausting. And maybe that's what you saw in my eyes. I was tired. And not just from yoga (2014; emphasis in original).

In this long excerpt, Rupert names unconscious racism as a defining feature of Caron's assumptions. Equally important is that she names the consequence of such thinking – the lack of complexity and depth that was accorded to the Black female student. Rupert is calling attention

to the ways in which Caron strips this Black female student of an individual identity, instead looking at her as representative of a group.

The commenters also rejected Caron's characterization of this woman being angry and hostile, noting how often these descriptions have been used to silence, demean and trivialize African American women's experiences. Many discussed "the angry Black woman" as a stereotype.

> She also could have just been spacing out. But to automatically put the "angry Black woman" cape on her is just so gross (FYI, "It Happened to Me", 2014).
>
> How many times have we heard that we're angry when really we're just trying to exist? I get so tired of having this role put on me (Anonymous, "It Happened to Me", 2014).

Commenters frequently focused on white women being seen as the standard of beauty by the media and how many white women internalized that ideal. Bloggers and commenters questioned Caron's notion of "heavy and heavy set" suggesting that she might be "misreading" this woman's body through the unnamed universal norms of whiteness and femaleness. Other commenters identified that Caron unconsciously made the woman into a mammy figure – a controlling image – in the yoga space:

> The Black woman was probably looking forward to that class with excitement and trepidation. She never thought that it would go the way it did. In moments that have involved extreme shame due to my race, gender, or disability, I have experienced the sensation of being out-of-body and looking at myself from above. She probably was battling what sociologists call "stereotype threat." Poor performance is common when one has to perform counter to stereotype while under the gaze of another (Persephone Jones, "It Happened to Me", 2014).
>
> There is Mammy lurking in this post. I know her well. She is always in the back of some folks' mind (Anonymous, "It Happened to Me", 2014).
>
> SHE CHOOSES TO TRY PAINT BLACK WOMEN AS A BUNCH OF FAT UNATTRACTIVE MAMMIES TO BOOST HER SELF ESTEEM (Anonymous, "Dear Yoga Girl, You Know That Most Black Girls Don't Envy Your Shape, Right?", 2014).
>
> The projection that this woman put on the "heavy" Black woman is what a lot of Black women face daily (HalimaCherie, "It Happened to Me", 2014).

In addition to rejecting controlling images and naming stereotypes, most often commenters invoked the idea that African American women experience simultaneous forms of oppression including race and gender (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989). As Maya Rupert (2014) notes, "It happened because we live in a society steeped in a system of patriarchy so strong and so insidious that we learned from a young age and have it confirmed daily that you and I can't both be happy with who we are". In her blog post, "It Happened To Me: I Read An Essay About A White Woman's Yoga Class/Black Woman Crisis And I Cannot," Pia Glenn writes, "Black women are continually treated like animals in a zoo, our bodies on display for you to marvel at or pity, but ultimately walk away from, none the wiser and having affected no positive change for all of your tears and hand-wringing" (2014). This comment reflects an everyday understanding of intersectionality attentive to how race and gender shapes Black women's lived experiences. Their comments unpack the ways that various axes of oppression combine to form specific negative frames.

These representative comments respond to Caron in several important ways. Some questioned Caron's perception of what she was seeing, suggesting her viewpoint was tainted by unconscious racism. Commenters and bloggers connected it to prevalent stereotypes, including

the "angry Black woman". They also named and rejected the controlling image of the Mammy figure.

Affirming and Resisting the Narrative of 'Skinny White Girl' Yoga Culture

What is yoga culture and how it is experienced by many Black women? The second set of themes that emerged in the analysis was about Black women bloggers and commenters' perceptions and experiences of yoga culture. Throughout many of their comments, they acknowledge and affirm that there is a 'skinny white girl yoga culture'. The effect of this culture can be triggering and trauma-inducing for many Black women. They have to navigate in spaces where they may perceive that they "don't belong" or are subtly (or not subtly) given messages that they don't belong. They also actively resist skinny white girl yoga culture in multiple ways (e.g. kind self-talk, staying home, finding Black teachers or diverse yoga studios).

This subtle dance between affirming the social context of yoga spaces and resisting them is another way to understand how Black women simultaneously navigate being both hypervisible and invisible. Yoga, as is practiced in public, is not often a space that Black women control. They experience a type of invisibility when they are assessed as being the "right kind" of yoga practitioner and are ignored. They are also rendered at times hypervisible due to the circulation of controlling images and stereotypes. This finding builds on theoretical work charting the ways in which Black women navigate states of hypervisibilty and invisibility (Mowatt, French, and Malebrande 2013).

The six bloggers, in their responses, discussed their understanding of yoga as inclusive, for everybody, and an important practice for all types of bodies and people. However, despite stating this understanding of yoga, many also noted that yoga culture itself undermined this notion. Many commenters across all the blogs specifically used the frame 'skinny white girl yoga culture' both as a perception about how others perceive yoga (and who it is for), and also as an outcome of representation by the media. This term was frequently echoed in comments across all the posts. These comments illustrate this point:

> I'm a black woman who's been doing yoga regularly since 1989. I don't enjoy the 'skinny white girl' yoga culture that is prevalent where I live (upstate NY) so it's rare that I'll go to a class. Instead I practice at home, usually late at night. Light a candle, burn some incense, put on some mellow music and practice on my Mexican blanket for about 30 minutes. Yoga is for everybody (Anonymous, "Yes, Jen, Black Women Practice Yoga Too", 2014).
>
> This has made me so (irrationally) angry because I fear this is being perpetuated in yoga studios all over this country that being 'good' at yoga is about being skinny and bendy. The next time I hear a yoga teacher tell some skinny overly bendy person that they have 'potential' as a yoga teacher when they know NOTHING about the person, their practice, their worldview, their life – I'm walking out. Especially if it's a skinny white chick talking to another skinny white chick. Because that's what they believe yoga is. Keep YOUR stuff – your racism, your fat-shaming, your insecurities, your faux self-awareness, your b-s sympathy – on YOUR mat (GradMommy, "It Happened to Me", 2014).

Individuals use the 'skinny white girl' frame that Caron employs and expand on it, providing a counter narrative linking this description to dominant ideas of whiteness and female beauty that often shape the yoga space and interaction for many Black women. Although many commenters' personal experiences with yoga are positive, they also acknowledged that they are

aware of standing out, feeling unwanted, judged, or seeing themselves through 'skinny white girl yoga culture' that perceives them as not belonging:

> I wonder if the [B]lack people in your yoga classes have just been invisible to you in the past. [B]ecause I always hear people say that yoga is white and that just hasn't really been my experience practicing for over 10 years in dc, new york and texas [sic]. I see people of all kinds and all body sizes, honestly. I think the perception of yoga being a "skinny white girl" thing is largely by people who don't actually go to yoga. [M]ost of the people I know who practice yoga talk about how diverse it is, in actuality (Whit85, "It Happened to Me", 2014).

There were not many teachers who self-identified in the sample of commentators, but the following was representative of those who did and discussed perceptions of yoga culture:

> Jen Carson's attitude this [sic] is one of the reasons I became a yoga instructor last year. As a Black woman, I noticed some, not all yoga studios are predominately white with white female instructors. For Black women who are curious about yoga, there is an *implied* message that yoga is for thin, wealthy, white women (Whit85, "It Happened to Me", 2014).

In resisting the narrative, African American female yoga students asserted that they often came to yoga like others either for back pain and/or to reduce stress. They mentioned they do yoga because it helps manage their stress and makes them feel good. Many noted that practicing in diverse spaces or having supportive yoga teachers from any racial or ethnic background offset primarily all white yoga spaces. Overall, most commenters noted positive and affirming experiences taking yoga, despite often being the only African American in the class. This exchange was representative of this response:

> Pandaonaplane: I've been the only Black girl in most of my yoga classes for years (and I've practiced for years). I don't need your help to feel comfortable. Namaste knows no color.
>
> Sharon: I've never, ever felt out of place being the only Black girl in a yoga class. This pathetic screed speaks more to the author's own immaturity and thinly-veiled feeling of superiority, than to the supposed resentment felt by the 'heavy-set black woman'.
>
> Pandaonaplane: Same. Yoga class is one of the very few places that I can remember not really ever considering my race.
>
> Maleka2120: Same here. There are plenty of times I'm the only Black person in general and I barely even register that. Because we are all in our moving meditation dammit! ("It Happened to Me", 2014).

Navigating 'skinny white girl' yoga culture makes Black women more aware of themselves and their bodies in yoga classes. Repeatedly, Black female students used the tagline "I'm the only one" (i.e. in my class), or "I, too, practice, yoga." When discussing specifically yoga culture and their role/experience, they most often used language that specifically referenced their bodies. Many respondents referenced their bodies, both body parts (e.g. 'thighs', 'butt', 'Serena-esque legs', perfect hourglass, video vixen ass), appearance (often 'muscular', "thick' 'heavy', 'heavy chick', 'fat chick', 'curvy') and size, which often referred to weight, claiming 'fat, big, large' in both ironic and non-ironic ways like one commenter who writes, "As a size 14 [B]lack girl with hips, thighs, and a fairly large butt whom also practices yoga all I can think is 'how dare you?'" (Frochick Martin, "It Happened to Me", 2014).

Words like 'weight' and phrases like 'taking up space' and 'large bodies' were central to the language that people used to both describe themselves and convey that often yoga culture

makes assumptions about what certain types of bodies can do. More than half of the responses to the blog post mentioned body parts and/or weight. Here is a selection of blog comments:

> I practice yoga and run and swim and I am not skinny. Often people are surprised by all I can do. Half-marathons, tris, etc. And it is their assumption that as a heavy black woman I can't. that leaves them startled. I see it in the gym. On a trail or track (Me, "Yes, Jen, Black Women Practice Yoga, Too", 2014).
>
> a year ago I just started doing yoga ... Bikram at that. I love it and the instructors are awesome. Typically my husband and I are the only [B]lack people there. I'm not exactly fat, I suppose but certainly heavier than most with huge muscled Serena-esque legs. Sitting Japanese style ain't happening any time soon. Nor will my back ever lay flat with my 46" butt (prefect [sic] hourglass from the front but with a video vixen ass...between my tits and ass, I look like a comic book heroin [sic] literally 40-31-46). I can nail every other pose and my life long participation in sports has given me stamina like no other. Last night a youngish white woman commented loudly to me that if I lost the fat around my thighs I would be so much better...say what now? I apparently made a face that caused her to slowly back away, palms raised...The female instructor, who heard the whole thing then said, everyone's yoga experience is their own because everyone's body is different ... very Zen like. Then she whispered to me, I'd kill to have a body like yours (Frochick Martin, "It Happened to Me", 2014).
>
> As a 'heavyset' African American woman I'm ambivalent about knowing the racist, misogynist and patronizing thoughts people have about me when I'm perceived to be in space that 'belongs' to them (Allison, "It Happened to Me", 2014).
>
> Honestly being the 'fat [B]lack girl' in classes like this I go into the class knowing that this is the attitude a lot of women have. And my attitude? I don't give a flying flip. I'm there because for some reason that class fits into my schedule, usually due to working downtown. Honestly I would love to be in a class with other [B]lack wom[e]n. But I'm there to get healthy, reduce stress and get a good sweat going so that takes priority (Beautylovesco, "Dear Yoga Girl, You Know That Most Black Girls Don't Envy Your Size, Right?, 2014").
>
> 'Oh god, SAME! And I was a size 6. :| First and last yogalates class I ever went to, ugh. And amazingly enough, I wasn't even the biggest person in the class. I just have thighs and hips so naturally I was there for 'weight loss' reasons rather than because it'd be something fun to do. It's amazing the conclusions people come to about Black women and how we feel about our bodies, just because some of us have different shapes (Brooke, "It Happened to Me", 2014).

Bloggers and commenters also noted how they are frequently put in a position to acknowledge their bodies as different and as bigger than what is expected based on normative whiteness and femaleness:

> You see, from where I sit Jen's sudden awareness of her whiteness was only a reflection of how hyper aware she was of the big [B]lack woman in such close, intimate proximity to her. I mean it would be racist and weird to say 'OMG! You're so big and [B]lack!' so instead she says 'OMG! I'm so white and small' (Olisa 2014).

This long quote by blogger CeCe Olisa (2014) highlights the ways in which space, expectation, size, and access to bodies comes together powerfully:

> A few weeks ago I was taking a 7 a.m. class at a small and pricey fitness center in NYC. The classes at this fitness center only have 12 people in them, which means we all get lots of personal attention. While the majority of the students in my class were women, I was

> the only [B]lack woman in the class. Actually, I was the only [B]lack person in the class...and for what it's worth, I was the only plus-size person in the class too. Before class began we all introduced ourselves. There was a Kristy, a Liz, a Lisa, some other names I can't remember and myself, CeCe. For the duration of the class, our bubbly blonde instructor encouraged everyone by name, 'Nice Kristy!' 'Good job Liz!' and she would also encourage me, 'Go, Girl!' she'd say... 'Alright, Girl!'... 'Nice, GIRL!' she'd yell standing over me with a beaming smile. Everyone else in the class was called by name, but being the only fat [B]lack woman in the class was called 'Girl' (or was it 'Guurl'?). Can you imagine what it would be like to have people make announcements about the color of your skin or the size of their body every time they saw you? Welcome to my world!

This blogger invites the reader to imagine the everyday realities that face certain kinds of bodies. Historically, being perceived as large and African American and female marked one as other and at times invisible and other times hypervisible (Wit 2002). As Doris Wit notes, despite being absent in research that probes into the unique challenges with weight that some Black women face, "they most certainly have been highly visible in the spectacularization of corpulence in American culture" (2002, 246). Although Black women have often been represented as large, fat and unattractive in mainstream culture, Wit reminds us that many have "appropriated the spectacle of the large Black female body as a form of political protest" (247). She notes entertainers from Hattie McDaniel to Salt 'N' Pepa' have used their bodies to celebrate non-normative feminine looks. We might also consider the ways in which artists like Queen Latifah have consistently affirmed their body and desirability. The repetition and intensity of Black female bloggers and commenters claiming the language of weight in an affirmative way can be read as a type of resistance to being stereotyped. Moreover, I argue that this emphasis on how Black women feel about their bodies while doing yoga (as well as other kinds of physical activity) is one of reclamation.

Defending Difference

The third theme to emerge from my analysis was 'defending difference'. As stated earlier, in the traditional yoga studio model, most Black women do not get to set the tone of the yoga space (e.g. deciding what images should go on the wall, etc.). As Rashawn Ray notes, Black women are less likely to encounter themselves as physically attractive, less likely to encounter their ideal body "linked to physical activity nor … plastered all over media outlets unlike many white women" (2014, 784). Maya Rupert (2014) addresses the different dimensions of power as shaped by dominant beauty standards, "Because, if in order for Cinderella to be beautiful her stepsisters had to be ugly, and if in order to compliment Jennifer Lawrence we have to insult Anne Hathaway, then in order for you to be content in your whiteness, I have to despair in my blackness, and in order for you to be at peace in your body, I have to suffocate in mine." Some responded to Caron's comments by arguing that Black women's bodies are seen as "different" and stereotyped for that assumed difference in comparison to white and mainstream norms:

> What I wish this person would have gotten from her musings is that the concept of intersectionalilty is legitimate – she [Caron] is observing both size issues and racial issues that she has not yet considered – however, she is merging them into a single issue. All African American women are not heavy set. All heavy set people are not African American … [It] kills me that African American women are stereotyped and judged for

> having different body types and sizes even when they are healthy and fit FOR THEIR OWN HEIGHT AND DENSITY. We are NOT all built the same! And when are we all going to accept it? (Xxaire, "It Happened to Me", 2014).

A number of commenters and bloggers affirmed that there was a "real" difference between Black and white female bodies and how they were evaluated. Many argued for both this (essentialist) difference and also that this difference was celebrated as a broader standard of beauty, existing in the Black community:

> This may cause some alarm for white folk who think they are the center of the universe, but *those particular white folk* do need to know that Black folk have their own standard of "ideal" beauty. It involves curves in the "right" places – kinda like what Bey had pre-Blue...And there are [B]lack girls aplenty trying to get *that* shape, narrow waist, wide hips, thick thighs and plump ass *mandatory*. When most Black women exercise, we're mostly trying to cardio off mid-sections and keep everything else curvaceous so we can 'fill out' our clothes, ironically enough, just like Beyoncé' sang about on "Jealous". Milkshakes bring boys, of all colors, to the yard (D'Oyley 2014).
>
> …P.S: The 'jealousy card' which is constantly used by women that aren't [B]lack towards [B]lack women, is getting old. Plenty of [B]lack women love the way they look. What we don't like is the mistreatment that comes with the skin we are in (HalimaCherie, "It Happened to Me", 2014; emphasis in original).

This insistence of the "naturalness" of Black women's bodies also suggests contestation and a pushback on dominant norms. As Ray (2014) indicates, it also is an effect of larger cultural norms that Black women find themselves navigating. Ray argues that for some African American women, although they reject the negative connotations of controlling images, the "pervasiveness of the fat mammy and sexualized jezebel suggest that Black women may be more likely to embrace a genetic determinism argument about body size." All variations of these responses, however, defend the value and worth of Black women's bodies, an important response to prevalent stereotypes. Maria Velazquez (2016) has also labeled this kind of online response as a "digital praxis of love" and argues that in response to unwelcoming yoga spaces, many Black female yogis have created spaces that are self-affirming of weight, looks, gender presentation, etc.

In defending Black women's bodies not only does this theme reveal a discussion about how Black women navigate yoga culture, especially studio spaces, but also how 'skinny white girl' yoga culture is rooted in systematic and dominant issues of beauty, a controlling image.

Conclusion

Collins argues that there are many institutional sites that are not controlled by Black women that are essential for "transmitting ideologies objectifying Black woman as the Other" (1990, 85). One goal of Black feminist thought is to identify and interrogate those spaces. I argue that by examining these responses to Caron's post, we begin to understand the controlling images operating symbolically and materially in the lives of African American women in yoga culture. As revealed through thematic analysis, yoga as a physical activity is embedded in cultural norms and practices that make whiteness, thinness, and femaleness normative and idealized.

I argue that the responses suggest that Black women are continuing a longstanding pattern of naming the ways in which controlling images are operational. Collins argues that "the

controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance" (2000, 100). What's interesting and new here is that in responding to Caron's post, Black women make visible the similarity of controlling images suggesting that yoga and possibly by extension fitness oriented places continue to reproduce similar alienating environments that impact Black women's ability to develop themselves physically. We see the symbolic and material role that the intersection of otherness and reworked versions of controlling images play. We also see the complex and subtle dance of how Black women affirm the challenges of 'skinny white girl' yoga culture and also actively resist the normative effects of this culture.

What's the consequence of controlling images in yoga spaces? Commenters discussed that they were aware of and sometimes anticipated a negative response to their presence in yoga spaces, especially if they didn't fit the norm of what a yoga student or teacher is supposed to look like. Given that these controlling images, as some psychologists have labeled them, act as "metastereotypes" and are increasingly being shown to have influence on health outcomes, we need to recognize the impact of controlling images in a sphere that is seen as health focused. Morgan et al. notes that, "Black women's awareness of others holding negative stereotypes of their group has detrimental consequences for their health and well-being" (Morgan et al. 2017). Although many commenters often recognized and resisted controlling images and found strategies to overcome negative stereotypes, it's important not to minimize the possible subtle emotional and physical cumulative toll this has on some participants.

Despite the intentions of many white yoga teachers and students, responses suggest as Black women enter into yoga spaces, they are seen often as a less desirable, less able, disruptive body. As yoga becomes more mainstreamed, commodified, and profitable without intervention, many Black women may not feel welcome. The pattern described in this paper should make Black women yogis wary and yoga communities alert to dialogue and change.

The swift and sustained online response to Jen Caron's article by primarily African American women also suggests that it was important to many to engage, challenge, and provide counter-narratives to Caron's representation of African American women. This suggests a growing community of Black female yoga practitioners that is responsive and watchful and willing to speak up on their own behalf. They not only countered longstanding stereotypes (e.g. the "angry Black woman"), they reasserted a value in their bodies and claimed their presence in yoga spaces and the right to be there.

Black women and women of color are visible leaders tackling pointed questions about yoga practices and engaging others in difficult conversations on inclusivity and body diversity (Klein and Guest-Jelley 2014). Dianne Bondy, a Black yoga teacher has written several popular blog posts including "Confessions of a Fat, Black, Yoga Teacher" and "Yoga: Not Just for Young, Skinny White Girls" (Bondy 2012, 2014). This public recognition may go a long way in helping to challenge normative ideas about yoga practice in the United States.

Qualitative content analysis allows researchers to flesh out themes and responses in the data in a systematic way; it cannot, however, delve into the broader motive or context of the comments. More research is needed on the ways that African American women practice and teach yoga, and influence American yoga culture.

Notes

[1] Due to the strong feelings expressed when this post appeared, the author, Jen Polachek changed her name to the pseudonym 'Jen Caron'. Bloggers and commenters refer to both of her names. For ease of reading, I use Caron consistently throughout this article.
[2] I am focused here on African American women's responses, in particular, as I explain more fully in the Background and Methods sections.
[3] Velasquez (2016) notes that the widespread response by bloggers and readers could be the result of the post's wide circulation across several platforms.
[4] This assumption is supported through the various autobiographical writings and observations offered by many yogis of color.

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