Race and Yoga

"Giving you the best of what God has Given You": The Use of Yoga among Members of the Nation of Islam

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Abstract

This article provides a critical discourse analysis of interviews, speeches, social media posts, and writings produced by members of the Nation of Islam to explore how they define, describe, and use yoga in their holistic medicine practices. I argue that for Black women members of the Nation of Islam, yoga is a tool used to resist white supremacy. Muslims use yoga to reclaim their health and create new Islamicized bodies by prioritizing self-health, self-care, and physical and spiritual fitness. Furthermore, I argue that Nation of Islam members' embrace of yoga is a result of the organization's unique religio-racial identity which defines them as Asiatic Blacks and part of a broader pan-Asian decolonial movement. My research contributes to the growing focus on Black Muslim women's knowledge production and creative agency.

Keywords: African American Muslims; Black-Asian relations; Nation of Islam

Sociologist Robert Crawford notes that since the 1970s, US society has put a greater emphasis on health in everyday life (2006, 402). This manifested in a desire for a long life free of pain or suffering (404) while creating a multi-billion dollar wellness industry that works through a process of individual bodily surveillance and intervention (Derkatch 2022, 3). However, social structures prevent everyone from living a long, pain-free life. Black people across all socioeconomic classes have higher rates of chronic diseases and conditions compared to their white counterparts that can lead to shorter life expectancies because of weathering, environmental racism, and classism (Sacks 2019, 25-26). Recognizing that US healthcare institutions have often contributed to Black people's poor health outcomes rather than alleviated them, a growing number of members of the Nation of Islam (NOI) began practicing yoga and other holistic medicine techniques to "reclaim" their health, build community, and deepen their religious commitments to Islam. Instead of relying on traditional allopathic healthcare centers that have provided inadequate care or been inaccessible to them, NOI members are encouraged to turn inward and use their own knowledge of their bodies to improve their health and well-being. I argue that for members of the NOI, yoga is viewed as a tool for resistance against white supremacy. Through reclaiming their health, members of the NOI produce new Islamicized bodies that strengthen long-established cultural, political, and religious ties to Asia that are essential to decolonial projects.

This article profiles two Nation of Islam wellness practitioners to explore how members of the Nation of Islam define, describe, and use yoga. In doing so, I highlight yoga's global and cultural reach, including its potential as a tool to challenge white supremacy, and reveal the complex negotiations around health, wellness, and care that Black women undertake in their daily lives. I add to the growing body of literature on women's experiences within the NOI to highlight how Muslim women of African descent are active participants in their own self-making and deploy creative agency to challenge gendered and racialized social hierarchies in the United States (Gibson and Karim 2014; Jeffries 2014; Taylor 2017). I begin with a brief literature review that details the NOI's constructions of new Islamicized bodies through dress, diet, and exercise; the NOI's relationship with Asia; and how the organization has used yoga. Next, I use a critical discourse analysis to present two profiles of practitioners within the NOI – Shakeila Muhammad and Dr. Audrey Muhammad – to explore how yoga is used within the community. I discuss how the NOI's views of race and gender shape members' interactions with yoga. As I am a double outsider – a Black Muslim woman, but not a member of the Nation of Islam, and not a yogini – I chose to use a critical discourse analysis rooted in grounded theory to allow Black women yoginis in the Nation to speak for themselves. Through this study of the Nation of Islam, I reveal how gender, race, and class identities intersect to construct contemporary US American understandings of yoga and religion.

Literature Review

Creating Muslim Bodies

Despite their relatively small size, the Nation of Islam (NOI) has a significant cultural influence, especially in large Black urban areas in the Midwest. We can see their impact in politics, hip hop music, men's fashion, and racial justice advocacy especially around police brutality and mass incarceration. As a part of their recruitment strategy, the NOI is often situated in large Black urban areas and provides social services to Black people regardless of their religion. Outside of the Black Church, an institution that has played an important role in Black Americans' political, cultural, and social development, the NOI has one of the largest cultural influences on Black Americans among Black religious traditions, which makes the organization an interesting study.

The Nation of Islam was founded by W.D. Fard Muhammad in 1930 in Detroit, Michigan. Fard Muhammad taught his followers that Black people were the "Original People," the founders of civilization, who had forgotten their ancestral heritage as Asiatic Muslims during the transatlantic slave trade (Curtis 2006, 2). Partly inspired by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), the NOI promoted racial pride, economic self-determination via Black capitalism, and encouraged transnational solidarity especially with Asian and North African countries (Taylor 2017, 2). Through following his lessons, Fard Muhammad taught his followers that they would be restored to their original state and create "heaven on Earth" that included financial success, improved physical health, and greater respect among their peers (Curtis 2006, 15). The NOI provided a direct critique of Protestant Christianity's focus on suffering on earth to achieve a better position in the afterlife. Despite several leadership changes, the organization has maintained these core values.

Following Fard Muhammad's disappearance in June 1934, Elijah Muhammad, one of his most faithful followers in the NOI, left Detroit and moved to Chicago. There, he consolidated

power and appointed himself as Fard Muhammad's successor (Taylor 2017, 53). Under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad and his wife Clara Muhammad, who led the organization from 1942 to 1946 while her husband was incarcerated, the organization grew from a small Midwestern new religious movement to one of the largest Black Muslim organizations in the United States. The NOI created new religio-racial identities that included spiritual, social, and physical transformations (Weisenfeld 2016, 91). Following Elijah Muhammad's death in February 1975, his son W.D. Mohammed was appointed the Supreme Leader of the Nation of Islam. Under Mohammed's leadership, the organization continued its commitment to transnationalism and integration of Sunni theology from an African American perspective.[1] Louis Farrakhan broke off from the organization in 1981 to re-establish the "original" Nation of Islam. Yet, as Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim note, he updated the organization's gender ideology in response to NOI women's advocacy (2014, 131). Today, women are encouraged to take public leadership positions within the organization and to pursue employment outside of the home as long as it does not affect their caretaking obligations, and the dress requirements and dietary restrictions have been relaxed, in part, to recruit more women (138).

Most of the academic discussions of the Nation of Islam's "theology of the body" have centered on dress and diet. The NOI teaches its members that to return to their elevated position, members must discipline their bodies. Edward E. Curtis IV explains, "The body was a sign. Members separated the signifier – the civilizing of the body – from what was normally signified – a capitulation to the values, norms, and beliefs of the middle class. The old signifier now pointed toward a new signified: the Islamized black body" (2006, 134). To properly communicate their new position, members of the NOI had to physically and materially distance themselves from their old lives and the white supremacist stereotypes associated with it: fat, lazy, ungroomed, frivolous, and hypersexual. This translated into thin, well-dressed members with men wearing dark suits and bowties while women wore modest dresses or tunics and high-collared shirts paired with headscarves. These images communicated unity and success, which was accomplished through embracing a "healthy" lifestyle.

The Nation of Islam has long been a proponent of health and wellness, most notably observed through Elijah Muhammad's books, *How to Eat to Live: Book 1* (1967) and *How to Eat to Live: Book 2* (1972), which focus on the importance of "clean living." He encouraged his members to only eat one meal per day and, after their bodies got used to it, to eat once every three days although during these fasts members are permitted to drink water and black coffee (Muhammad 1967, 22). Elijah Muhammad also provided an extensive list of foods to avoid and foods to consume. The list of banned foods included: collard greens, turnip greens, sweet potatoes, white potatoes, white rice, peas, cornbread, most beans, white bread, nuts, fried food, and hard-baked foods (5–8). He described these foods, which are essential to soul food, as cheaply raised foods that are meant for animals and are not easily digestible humans. Foods that members were encouraged to eat were fruit, most vegetables, whole wheat bread, and navy beans (11–12).

The Nation of Islam emerged during the Great Depression, which disproportionately affected Black people. The majority of the organization's members were poor or working class and likely were greatly affected by the Great Depression. Encouraging members to fast or at least limit their daily food intake provided them with a theological justification for their circumstances. Instead of desiring to eat multiple meals a day, which Elijah Muhammad saw as sinful, members were praised for their restraint. This remained true even in instances where food was readily available, making it an important element of creating a new Islamicized body, free of

the stereotypes of fat, overly indulgent Black people, which often focused on Black women's bodies (Strings 2015, 123; Taylor 2017, 48). To be thin and physically fit was to be civilized. As Elijah Muhammad writes, "We cannot be successful in making progress of a spiritual life, unless we have guidance for the physical life" (1967, 102).

Beyond the Great Depression, as R. Marie Griffith notes, the post-World War II period also brought an increased focused on weight (2004, 165). This was primarily due to the leading causes of death shifting from injuries and communicable diseases to chronic conditions, like heart disease. Rather than going to the doctor to treat their ailments, members of the NOI were encouraged to diet and exercise to reverse and prevent chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease, which disproportionately affect Black Americans, especially those who are poor and working class (Roberts 2018, 175). This focus on diet and exercise aligned with the Nation of Islam's "do something for self" mentality. Members were taught to not trust allopathic healthcare workers because of the US government's history of medical racism, often pointing to the history of forced sterilizations, or "Mississippi appendectomies," and The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male as proof of anti-Black racism in the US healthcare industry, both of which targeted poor rural Black southerners (Curtis 2006, 96–7). While poor and working-class Black people have historically been disproportionately affected by medical racism, as Tina Sacks notes, Black people across all socioeconomic classes have experienced anti-Black racism while receiving medical treatment, which in turn, affects their view of and relationship to the US healthcare industry (2019, 7–9). The difference lies in how they respond to anti-Black racism, as middle- and upper-class Black patients often have more time and access to resources that allow them to advocate for themselves and are more likely to seek second opinions for treatment (108).

For the Nation of Islam, Black people's survival and success depended on their individual actions. Medical doctors could not be trusted, as they often worked in service of anti-Black racism and white capitalism, who, according to NOI teaching, provided treatments instead of cures. As such, healthy living was viewed as a good financial decision. This suspicion of white-run medical institutions and a push for Black-led individual and community health initiatives could be found outside of the NOI, largely through the work of middle-class Black women in private clubs who sought to discipline and reform poor Black people's bodies during the first half of the twentieth century (Smith 1995, 19). According to Crawford, taking personal responsibility for one's health is deemed a sign of "good citizenship" (2006, 402). This includes acquiring health information and adopting a healthy lifestyle through dieting and exercising (402). The NOI has taken a similar approach to health, advocating for Muslims to use diets, fasting, and exercise as preventive medicine to produce healthy and fit bodies to serve the Black community in their commitment to racial uplift. In an ableist society, health and ability become important markers of a person's identity and failure to live up to these standards are often viewed as moral failings.

Scholarship on the Nation of Islam's emphasis on physical fitness through exercise or movement is underdeveloped. NOI pioneers, members who joined the organization before the mid-1950s, noted that physical fitness has been an important part of members' daily lives since the organization's founding (10X 1973, 11). Physical training and calisthenics were practiced by both men and women. Maryam Aziz highlights how members of the Fruit of Islam, the NOI's male auxiliary group that provided security in the community, began learning martial arts as early as 1955 (2021, 312). They note that many Black men were first introduced to martial arts while touring occupied Asian countries mainly during World War II and the Korean War (311).

These unarmed self-defense techniques provided Black men with control of their bodies and personal autonomy, things that white supremacy had sought to deny them (Aziz 2020, 53). The Fruit of Islam's martial arts training also provided Black women with a sense of safety, or at least the knowledge that if they were harassed or attacked by white people that they would be defended by male members of the NOI.

Many Black women joined the Nation of Islam based on this "promise of protection," but in doing so, they were embracing a subordinate position within the organization where men were leaders of the "nation" while women were the caretakers of the nation, limited to the domestic sphere so they could help build the nation and avoid interracial harassment and sexual violence (Griffin 2001, 215). In theory, this meant that married men were expected to be the primary breadwinners and married women were expected to stay at home to raise their children and manage the household. However, as most of the organization's members pre-1960s were poor or working class, most women worked so they could financially contribute to their household while also performing the majority of the domestic labor. Many worked in businesses owned by the Nation of Islam, while others worked outside of the organization as nurses or teachers, or built businesses within their homes, such as selling food and designing clothes. Finding the right balance between managing the household while ensuring its financial stability remains a challenge for women in the NOI.

Like their male counterparts, exercise played an important role in Muslim women's physical and spiritual development. Nation of Islam offered weekly fitness classes that were meant to help members develop mental and physical character (Aziz 2020, 50). Members of the Muslim Girls' Training, the NOI's women's auxiliary where girls and women learned the organization's gender ideology as well as domestic skills such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, and interior design, did calisthenics and military drills to create their fit bodies. In the NOI, fatness was seen as the result of white supremacy, therefore "good" Muslims were thin. For example, Reformer Burnsteen Sharrieff, W.D. Fard Muhammad's secretary and one of the earliest female NOI writers and intellectuals, explained, "When we were stolen and brought over here 379 years ago into North America, and enslaved, we were not shapeless, large awkward people. We were high esteemed intelligent people" (1934, 3). Sharrieff linked fatness to self-hate and lower intelligence and encouraged female followers to lose weight so they could develop their "true selves" (Sharrieff 1934, 3). Women were expected to weigh no more than 120 pounds. As Ajile Amatullah-Rahman notes, some temples subjected female members to weight checks (1999, 89). Those found to be overweight could be subjected to punishment, including being fined $0.50 for every extra pound a member weighed or being suspended.

The Nation of Islam reversed the dominant racial hierarchy in the US, which places white women on the top and Black women on the bottom. Black women in the Nation were reimagined as "Mothers of Civilization" and "Original Women" who were celebrated for their reproductive labor and their embrace of a new Black beauty ideal that both drew from and challenged mainstream white American beauty standards and hegemonic femininity that they had historically been excluded from. The ideal Black woman was thin, dark-skinned, well-groomed (combed yet unprocessed hair, minimal makeup), and well-dressed (Wheeler 2025, 62). Thinness played a key role in this new beauty standard and identity because it was linked to Black women's "original" morality, modesty, beauty, and femininity that were necessary components for Black women to bring about their salvation on earth. As Stephen C. Finley and Margarita L. Simon argue, fat Black women's bodies have often been viewed as contaminants that feminize men and harm their children (2009, 8). I argue that the NOI positioned thin bodies as redemptive

and necessary for strong nation building because they are seen as producing healthy and moral children. Of note, Black women in the NOI under Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad emphasized thinness and fitness amongst themselves rather than muscle building and strength, which can also promote health and longevity, likely due to its perceived association with masculinity. The Nation sought to create hyper-feminine women. Ava Purkiss notes many Black women in the mid-twentieth century promoted thinness, rather than fitness, as a form of racial uplift and upward mobility that distanced themselves from the Mammy trope that depicted Black women as unfeminine and asexual (2023, 112). Embracing thinness also challenged the Jezebel trope, the voluptuous hypersexual and hyper-fertile Black woman. Both stereotypes were constructed to justify the physical and sexual violence that Black women endured in bondage (Banks 2021, 341). For Black women in the NOI, fatness was seen as a "social control previously exerted over black bodies through white domination" (Finley 2022, 50) and was linked to sin and bad motherhood. These early religious values – domesticity, physical and spiritual purity, personal responsibility for health, thinness, fitness, and embracing motherhood – paired with a general suspicion of allopathic medicine helped shape the contemporary views of yoga by Black women in the Nation of Islam.

Asiatic Muslims

The Nation of Islam has religiously, culturally, and politically tied itself to both pan-Islamic and pan-Asian futures to support their own liberation project, which can explain why members are attracted to yoga. The Nation of Islam's engagement with Asians and Asian culture, including South Asia can be traced back to the very foundation of the organization. Fard Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, and Elijah Muhammad were committed to coalition- building among oppressed and colonized people across the globe. The Nation of Islam rejected the term "Black" and instead referred to members as "Asiatic," likely influenced by Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), who first introduced the term to describe African Americans who joined his organization (Deutsch 2001, 196). Fard Muhammad was likely a member of the MSTA before he established the Nation in 1930 (Finley 2025, 260). He explained to his followers that they were members of an Asiatic nation that included all non-white people. Sonsyrea Tate writes that she was taught "that Asians and Africans, people of color, are all the same but that Caucasians gave us different names to try to divide us" (1997, 37).

Nation members were encouraged to embrace their imagined Asian heritage materially and culturally. Their definitions of "Asian" often collapsed diverse ethnic and cultural identities, irrespective of religion. For example, Tate explains that when members of the NOI could not eat at Nation-owned restaurants, they often patronized Chinese restaurants to support their Asian comrades (Tate 1997, 66). Many members have been given or chosen on their own, surnames that reference their imagined Asian heritage including Shah, Faiz, and Pasha (Essien-Udom 1962, 204). Members of the NOI drew inspiration from South Asian culture in terms of their dress practices. For instance, Karimah Faiz, a celebrated designer in the NOI developed a collarless men's suit that was inspired by the kurta (Our Hidden African American Muslim Figures 2017). Additionally, they have embraced bodily practices that derived in Asia, including martial arts and yoga, to fulfill the organization's racial uplift project, which I discuss below. The NOI centers the Black experience in the US; however, it has always been open to all people of color and has drawn from their cultures.

Yoga in the NOI

Perhaps the most notable figure in the Nation of Islam to practice yoga is Mother Tynnetta Muhammad, who is viewed as the "Supreme Mother" of the Nation of Islam and an ideal woman that all female members of the NOI should aspire to be like (Muhammad 2004). Mother Tynnetta and Elijah Muhammad had four children together between 1963 and 1967 while he was legally married to Mother Clara Muhammad. After Louis Farrakhan left the World Community of Islam in the West (the new name of the Nation of Islam under W. Deen Mohammed) and re-established the Nation of Islam in 1981, he elevated Mother Tynnetta to the position of Elijah Muhammad's spiritual wife (Taylor 2017, 189). Two of Mother Tynnetta's sons, Ishmael and Rasul, were given leadership positions within the organization. Farrakhan uses Mother Tynnetta and her sons' support to legitimize his organization as the "true" heir of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. For Mother Tynnetta, yoga was a way to maintain her physical fitness and potentially extend her life (Muhammad 2004). She encouraged other women in the Nation of Islam to take up yoga to keep them healthy. As the wife of Elijah Muhammad and one of the most influential theologians in the NOI, Mother Tynnetta's public support of yoga serves as affirmation that it is not only permissible for all Muslims to participate in it, but encouraged (Muhammad 2008, 55). The accounts of Mother Tynnetta's use of yoga do not explain *how* members should practice yoga, rather they focus on why: to maintain youth, thinness, femininity, and health. This framing of yoga treats it as a "technology of femininity" that has historically been associated with white women (Strings, Headen, and Spencer 2019, 8) and promoted white supremacist beauty standards through its emphasis on creating smaller bodies and taming larger ones.

Within the Nation of Islam, yoga is often positioned as an easier form of exercise that can help maintain a healthy lifestyle, thereby extending members' lives. Yoga provides an interesting intervention to the NOI's gendered body politics because while it is widely viewed in the West as an exercise, Amani Richardson (2018) explains it is also a "peace practice" that can "create a community of spiritual healing" for Black women by addressing intergenerational trauma and promoting body positivity. It serves as a challenge white supremacy without putting an undue burden on Black women to "reform" or "civilize" their bodies, instead focusing on healing and care.

Shreena Gandhi argues that in the US yoga, both its practice and products (clothing, classes, mats), are most readily available to upper-middle class white women (2017, 338). The whiteness of yoga in the US has prevented many Black Americans, especially the poor and working class, from accessing yoga studios (Tenfelde 2018, 234). As such, many members of the Nation of Islam have turned to social media or community pop-up classes to familiarize themselves with yoga and its potential physical, spiritual, and psychological benefits. Although there are many wellness microcelebrities in the NOI, there has not been a widespread institutional push to create wellness businesses, including yoga studios. Those members who do have their own wellness businesses often provide free classes or charge on a sliding scale to ensure that Black people have access to its benefits. While the NOI encourages entrepreneurship, it is meant to be undertaken in service to the Nation and more broadly, Black people in the United States. For Black people, and especially for Black women, wellness has historically been a way to resist anti-Black racism by focusing on self-care, claiming one's humanity, and building community. That does not mean, however, that no member of the NOI has profited from the

wellness industry. Rather, that, when possible, wellness practitioners in the NOI have sought to make their knowledge and skills accessible to all those in need. For Shakeila Muhammad and Audrey Muhammad, who I discuss next, that has meant using social media and journalism to introduce yoga to more Black Muslims.

Analysis

I performed a critical discourse analysis of interviews, social media posts, and digital articles and books, and interviews produced by two Nation of Islam wellness instructors – Shakeila Muhammad and Audrey Muhammad – to determine how members of the NOI view yoga. A critical discourse analysis highlights how discursive practices shape how people make sense of social systems and how they fit within them. I was introduced to Shakeila Muhammad after conducting a keyword search, "NOI and yoga" on Facebook and Instagram. I chose to include her in my study because of her emphasis on syncretism and women's wellness. I have been a subscriber of Audrey Muhammad's magazine, *Virtue Today*, which focuses on Black women's culture including fashion, music, and fitness, since 2015. I chose Audrey Muhammad because she represents an "official" NOI voice, as she is a columnist for *The Final Call*, the official NOI newspaper. Shakeila Muhammad explicitly states that she is focused on women's health while Audrey Muhammad implicitly centers women. Audrey Muhammad's magazine is for women and girls, and her columns in *The Final Call* draw on her experiences as a daughter and mother. By contrasting Shakeila Muhammad's approach to Audrey Muhammad's, I show that there is not a one-size-fits all approach to discussing Black women's experiences in the NOI. Even when women in the Nation seem to affirm official Nation of Islam teachings, which is primarily constructed by men, they do so in a way that makes sense to their lived realities and shows their creative agency. As such, women in the NOI should be viewed as active participants in their own self-making, rather than passive victims of patriarchy. I took a grounded theory approach, letting the results guide my analysis rather than beginning my data collection with pre-set categories (Charmaz 2006, 6). Through my research, three overlapping themes emerged: yoga as self-care; yoga as helping one take control of their lives; yoga as a tool for developing physical and spiritual health.

Shakeila Muhammad: Yoga as Self-Care

Shakeila Muhammad is a holistic wellness practitioner who helps guide "women toward, balance, restoration, and empowerment" (Healing Energy n.d.). She began her wellness journey in 2002 when she became a hand and foot reflexologist. Muhammad uses social media, primarily Instagram and Facebook, to teach yoga and publicize the benefits of it to members of the Nation of Islam, focusing on postural yoga, breathing techniques, and meditation. She also offers mobile yoga services, where clients can hire her to travel to their location to provide yoga instruction. As Sandi M. Tenfelde, Lena Hatchett, and Karen L. Saban note, Black women often have limited access to resources, which increases their rates of stress (2017, 232). To cope with this stress, they often engage in self-care practices including prayer and meditation, which may make them more willing to try yoga. However, the lack of access to affordable and inclusive yoga classes proves to be a major barrier that prevents them from trying yoga (233). Social media provides a corrective, providing Black women with an opportunity to anonymously participate in yoga without the fear of criticism or harassment. As Black yoginis like Tawnja Cleveland have noted,

the whiteness in many American yoga spaces has led a lot of Black women to first learn yoga in the safety of their homes through instructional videos rather than by going to studios (2017, 9). Muhammad's presence as a middle-aged, mid-sized Black woman in a head scarf challenges mainstream images of what a yogini looks like and shows Black women that yoga is also for them and that they can practice it in public. For her, healthy living is not connected to weight loss, but rather to boost one's immune system and as a form of preventative medicine. This falls in line with the Nation's focus on personal responsibility for maintaining good health. Where she diverges from the organization's official teachings is through her body neutral perspective, which rejects ableist views that position poor health or disability as a moral failing. For Muhammad, yoga's primary purpose is not to create thin beautiful bodies, rather to bring inner-peace and wellness to its practitioners.

Shakeila Muhammad's practice is rooted in the belief that "self-care is sacred, especially for women who are holding so much for others" (Healing Energy n.d.). She is committed to making space for "women to pause, reset, and reclaim their inner vitality, free from guilt and overwhelm" (Healing Energy n.d.). Oftentimes, Black women embrace the "Strong Black Woman" trope to cope with misogynoir and structural racism. This leads them to embrace a "collectivist-oriented" (Cameron 2019, 19) mindset that ignores their own physical, spiritual, and emotional needs while providing care to others, which long-term can be detrimental to their health (Oatis-Ballew et al. 2023, 3). Yoga can help treat depression and anxiety, reduce symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder, and contribute to stress management (Oatis-Ballew et al. 2023, 4). Tenfelde, Hatchett, and Saban recommend constructing culturally relevant classes that reflect the specific needs of Black women tailored to their local neighborhood context (2017, 234). For women in the NOI, this might include creating yoga spaces that are child-friendly, or in the case of Shakeila Muhammad, creating a business that allows her to promote yoga to Black women while still performing her prescribed domestic duties.

Even as official Nation of Islam teachings have expanded its gender ideology to encourage Black women to take on different roles within the organization, including formal leadership positions and more public recruitment of new members, their primary duty is still to raise the next generation of Muslims to ensure the nation's continued growth (Gibson and Karim 2014). What makes Shakeila Muhammad's use of yoga notable is her focus on women's wholeness and her shift away from a survival mindset that is centered on domestic labor, specifically women's reproduction. While being a mother is one of her primary identities – she homeschools her teenage son and calls herself a "mompreneur," a mother who effectively balances work and family – Muhammad recognizes that domestic labor *is* labor, and tiresome labor at that. Muhammad and her followers prioritize self-care as a form of self-preservation. This aligns with Black feminist thought on self-care, which is not focused on material consumption to promote rest and rejuvenation. Rather, it is a "way to survive the oppression, violence, and erasure" of Black women who navigate interpersonal and structural misogynoir daily (Rosenbaum and Talmor 2022, 363). As self-care in a Black feminist framework is relational, it is necessary to care for oneself to be able to take care of others.

When asked how she justified participating in a practice that was originally South Asian, Shakeila Muhammad explained that yoga also has African origins (Farrakhan in Tucson 2021). She was trained by Yirser Ra Hotep, who created the YogaSkills Method, which developed poses such as Wheel and Lotus based on hieroglyphs found in ancient Egyptian temples and pyramids (Evans 2021, 57). According to Dianne Bondy and Kat Heagberg Rebar, Kemetic yoga is often slower paced and focuses more on meditation and chakras than *Hatha* yoga does (2020,

3). By doing Kemetic yoga, practitioners learn to control their breathing, which is essential for meditation and can help people control their emotions and practice patience. Proponents of the Kemetic theory argue that the earliest rulers of ancient Egypt, responsible for many of the world's most famous pyramids, were ruled by Black Africans for centuries. In Nation of Islam theology, Black people derive from the Great Asiatic Nation of the Tribe of Shabazz, whose ancestral land stretched from the Nile Valley to Saudi Arabia (Muhammad 1965, 31). Members of the Nation of Islam do not ignore the fact that yoga also originated in South Asia, but by highlighting an imagined parallel development of an African practice that combines meditation, postural movement, and chanting, Kemetic yoga provides Muslims of African descent with space to claim yoga as part of their culture and resist the whitewashing of yoga in the US. Yet, Amara Miller (2014) cautions against this alternative historiography of yoga, which emerged in the 1990s, and decenters South Asia and South Asians.

Miller notes that while there are hieroglyphics that feature people in poses that are similar to poses found in yoga, ancient Egyptians did not practice yoga as we know it and that this alternative historiography is merely the "product of us seeing what we want to see in the records of the time" (Miller 2014). I argue that this alternative historiography potentially prevents interracial dialogue where Black American Muslims might collaborate with South Asians to make yoga more inclusive to all. South Asian scholars and practitioners such as Sheena Sood, who challenges rising Hindutva narratives that erase South Asian Muslims' shared ancestral connection to yoga (2020, 3), highlight how reclaiming yoga's distinct South Asian origins can serve as a challenge to white supremacy.[2] Still, the positioning of yoga as indigenous to Africa likely makes Black women more comfortable with engaging in a practice associated with young, thin, white, middle-class women that has proven physical and mental health benefits, and the potential to promote emotional healing and facilitate spiritual transformation. For Muhammad, Black women being able to practice self-care including through practicing yoga is essential for creating strong healthy families and communities by centering Black women's individual health.

Audrey Muhammad: Yoga as Physical and Spiritual Exercise

Dr. Audrey Muhammad is a teacher, certified personal trainer, and a long-time columnist for *The Final Call*, the Nation of Islam's official newspaper. In 2004, she founded *Virtue Today*, a women's magazine, which she describes as "a 'little helper' of *The Final Call*" (Gibson 2019, 385). The magazine focuses on fashion, fitness, family and women's empowerment (BlackNews, 2025). Her column, "Get Fit to Live," in *The Final Call* focuses on health and fitness, often drawing direct inspiration from Elijah Muhammad's two *How to Eat to Live* books (1967; 1972). As Dawn-Marie Gibson explains, Muhammad's articles in *The Final Call* often reinforce the NOI's official gender ideology (2019, 384). For Audrey Muhammad, yoga has three functions: a form of exercise that can help with muscle strengthening and toning; a relaxation technique to be done as a workout cool-down or on its own as a stress reliever; and as an important tool to promote a healthy life. Audrey Muhammad provides an example of a more official line of thinking in regards to yoga: it is a form of exercise that promotes healthy living, slows age progression and therefore helps create a strong Nation. However, she provides moments of disruption by emphasizing the value of women building muscle.

According to Audrey Muhammad, Muslims are already doing yoga, even if they do not name it as such. This aligns with Stephanie Y. Evans' (2021) study of Black women's yoga practices, which highlights contemplative exercises and postural movement of Black women

dating back to the antebellum period. Muhammad draws a connection between *salah* (prayer) and five popular yoga poses (Muhammad 2010). A *rak'ah*, or prayer cycle, consists of five parts: *takbir*, *al-qiyyam*, *ruku*, *sujud*, and *julus*. These moves are similar to five yoga poses respectively: *tadasana*, prayer, *uttansana*, *balasana*, and *vajrasana* (Farboudmanesh 2014). Like white Christians in the nineteenth century United States, yoga is positioned as a supplement, rather than a replacement for *salah*. Audrey Muhammad (2022) states, "As a soldier, recuperation and rejuvenation is also an important part of training no matter which exercise you are doing. Sometimes I enjoy doing stretches or yoga after prayer and reading the Holy Qur'an." Members of the Nation of Islam often refer to themselves as soldiers – soldiers of God and soldiers fighting against white supremacy. To be a soldier requires physical, mental, and spiritual fitness and an emphasis on self-care. For NOI members, one way to obtain such fitness is through yoga. The organization prioritizes producing healthy bodies to be in service to God and the Black community. Like *salah*, yoga fosters self-discipline and promotes relaxation. For Muhammad, the self-discipline and relaxation that *salah* creates helps to empower people to resist Satan's temptations and instead focus on building one's faith and community (Muhammad 2018).

Audrey Muhammad (2008) explains in her book, *Get Fit to Live,* that yoga can help women meet their fitness goals. She writes, "Yoga will also help with strengthening and toning your muscles. As my mother would say, be patience and 'keep the faith.' As long as you are consistent or 'constant' in your exercise, you will see results" (Muhammad 2008, 38). Under Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam emphasized producing thin and healthy women, rather than muscular women because that was associated with masculinity (Rouse 2007, 14). Given that Black women already fell outside of the "Cult of True Womanhood" because of their intersecting identities, he did not want to contribute further to their masculinization. Audrey Muhammad advocates for strength training to prevent women from developing osteoarthritis, not to change the shape of their bodies. This emphasis on women's strength reflects the NOI's shifting gender ideologies under Louis Farrakhan, who made reforms within the organization to give women more space to participate in the public sphere and loosened dress restrictions (Gibson and Karim 2014, 131).

In addition to being a supplement for *salah*, Audrey Muhammad positions yoga as an important aid for exercise cool-down routines. She explains,

> Exercises such as yoga and Tai Chi help to increase 'internal energy.' The wonderful combination focused movement and deep breathing exercises helps to relieve tension in your body and leave you with a sense of inner peace. I try to incorporate yoga exercises at the end of my high intensity workouts (Muhammad 2011).

For Audrey Muhammad, yoga provides a sense of calm, which is essential for Black women to acquire for their survival in a white supremacist society. This view of yoga, as a stress reliever and a vehicle for finding inner peace, mirrors Shakeila Muhammad's views. However, the continual focus on yoga as a form of exercise or as an exercise cool-down that can contribute to a longer, healthier, and stronger (rather than thinner) life upholds anti-Black and anti-fat discourses that devalue certain Black women's bodies. Audrey Muhammad is still focused on producing civilized bodies by treating yoga as a disciplining technique, rather than a means to challenge narrow views of Black womanhood.

Conclusion

The Nation of Islam is open to using any practice that can benefit Black people as long as it does not undermine NOI theology and is able to make sense of "outside" practices through an Islamic lens. Yoga aligns with the Nation of Islam's commitment to "clean living" and its commitment to challenging medical racism through its focus on disciplining the body and mind; additionally, yoga can be practiced at home. Because NOI members primarily view yoga as an African, Asian, or "eastern" practice, rather than connecting it to a particular religion or people, their embrace of yoga is not seen as undermining their Muslimness. As Stephanie Y. Evans argues, Black people's engagement with yoga requires a much more nuanced conversation about race, culture, and embodiment than mainstream discussions of cultural appropriation allow (2021, 54). In her review of literature on yoga produced by South Asian scholars (54), Evans reveals that yoga is "inherently transnational" and that innovations to yoga are not new (51). Like the Black women in Evans' study, the Nation of Islam members' engagement with yoga as a healing practice aligns with the decolonial projects of many South Asian yoga practitioners (55).

Carolyn Rouse notes that the move towards holistic medicine is similar to the cultural shift towards spiritual seeking and away from spiritual habitation (2007, 117). People are more interested in finding religious knowledge from multiple sources, including sources of healing, than solely relying on inheriting one religious tradition. For members of the Nation of Islam, this has included turning to Kemetic and *Hatha* yoga to promote self-care, strengthen their religious practice and their physical bodies, and to challenge medical racism. While Rouse takes an optimistic approach in her discussion of holistic medicine, focusing on its potential to empower Black women, Robert Crawford is more pessimistic. He argues that the emphasis on holistic medicine has further moralized health (Crawford 2006, 411). Crawford warns, "The failure to achieve health or to seek it was equated with a failure to embrace life, an inability to master one's emotions or to appreciate the spiritual dimensions of being. All versions of individual responsibility risk sliding into victim blaming" (411). This focus on personal responsibility for one's health reaffirms the idea that some bodies are more disposable than others, does not hold healthcare workers or health institutions accountable for their actions, and encourages surveillance and control of irresponsible people. While yoga can be empowering for members of the Nation of Islam, transforming "clean living," including practicing yoga, into a form of worship can lead to the marginalization of people who do not have the time, ability, or space to practice yoga. That includes old people, disabled people, and the unhoused, the very people on the margins that the Nation of Islam seeks to minister to.

Notes

[1] The main differences between the Nation of Islam and Sunni Islam are the source material used to construct their theologies and the view of the role of Elijah Muhammad and Fard Muhammad. In addition to the Qur'an, NOI theology also draws from the Bible, as well as Freemasonry, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Moorish Science Temple of America, and Garveyism. In recent years, the organization has also engaged with Scientology through its embrace of Dianetics, with thousands of members being rained as auditors. Many members of the NOI view Fard Muhammad as "god in person" and Elijah Muhammad as a Messenger of God, whereas in Sunni Islam, Prophet Muhammad is the last prophet, or the seal of the prophets. For a women's centric perspective on the theological differences and the evolution of the NOI's theologies, see Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim's *Women of the Nation* (2014).
[2] For more writing on the South Asian origins of yoga, see Narin Hassan's "Travelers, Translators, and Spiritual Mothers: Yoga, Gender, and Colonial Histories" (2020) and Farha Ternikar's "Desis on the Mat: Building BIPOC Community During Two Pandemics" (2021).

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