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## Be Still, Be Present: Black Girl Yoga and Digital Counter Spaces

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### Abstract

Controlling images of Black womanhood and the exclusivity of mainstream wellness spaces complicate Black women's relationship to yoga. The purpose of this study is to explore how a popular Instagram page, Black Girl Yoga, engages Black women with the spiritual practice. A combined Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) revealed that BGY engages Black women with yoga by a) constructing a culture of inclusivity, b) affirming the individuality of Black women, c) intertextualizing African American cultural discourse and yogic principles, d) decentering Black women's oppression, and e) creating continuity with physical yoga counter spaces. Implications for theory and praxis are discussed.

**Keywords:** Black women; Controlling Images; Digital Counter Spaces; the Mammy; Wellness; Yoga

Modern postural yoga is a form of exercise that remains exclusive to a privileged subset of the population. Americans spent over \$16 billion on yoga classes and accessories in 2016, and mainstream yoga platforms typically feature models that are thin, female, and white (Page 2016; Yoga Journal 2016; Webb et. al 2017). In congruence with the typical female yoga practitioner representation, most American yoga practitioners are also white, female, and enjoy higher socioeconomic statuses (Park, Braun, and Siegel 2015). Exclusionary framing combined with the perceived high cost of yoga accessories are potential barriers for Black/African American women and individuals with lower incomes who may especially benefit from a regular yoga practice (Atkinson and Permuth-Levine 2009; Page 2016; Spadola et. al 2017). Contemporary Black wellness advocates have made efforts to invite Black women to practice yoga by forming physical and digital counter spaces (Haddix 2016; Velazquez 2016). These communities disrupt hegemonic discourse and resist oppressive structures that have contributed to higher rates of chronic illnesses and lifestyle diseases among African Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016; Haddix 2016; Lau 2011; Velazquez 2016). Black Girl Yoga (BGY), a curated Instagram page with over 93,000 followers that was founded by Vanessa Lhèrrison in 2013, represents a counter space that aims to promote "community, visibility, and inspiration" for Black yoginis (Black Girl Yoga, n.d.). Digital counter spaces such as BGY may encourage potential practitioners to begin and maintain personal yoga practices outside of the confines of institutions.

The purpose of this study is to explore how BGY invites Black/African American yoginis to engage with yoga. This study is significant because even though yoga has been shown to improve mental and physical well-being, yoga and the potential benefits of the practice remain largely inaccessible to many people of color and those of lower socioeconomic statuses (Gaiswinkler and Unterrainer 2016; Park, Braun, and Siegel 2015; Ross et. al. 2013). Scholars assert that African American wellness counter spaces constitute a form of collective resistance and contribute to larger social justice movements (Haddix 2016; Lau 2011; Velazquez 2016). Though examining counter wellness spaces from a macro perspective is integral to understanding how activists promote equity within wellness communities (Lau 2011; Velazquez 2016), a micro perspective is warranted to determine how counter wellness discourse engages marginalized individuals. A visual discourse analysis (VDA) and a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the BGY Instagram page provides insight into how the BGY content curators use images, videos, and text to resist mainstream yoga narratives. This study contributes to the literature by theorizing new ways to support and create effective digital platforms to advance wellness causes.

I argue that BGY engages Black/African American women with yoga by a) constructing a culture of inclusivity, b) affirming the individuality of Black women, c) intertextualizing Black/African American cultural discourse and yogic principles, d) decentering Black women's marginalization, and e) creating continuity between digital counter spaces and physical counter spaces. I will begin with an exploration of the domination of Black female bodies to contextualize African American women's relationship to wellness. Then, I will situate Black yoginis within mainstream wellness spaces and Black women's wellness movements. Next, I will explicate the combined method approach for this study. Finally, I will analyze BGY's counter discourse and explicate the implications of these findings.

## Literature Review

### *Historic Domination of Black Women*

Social constructions of Black womanhood normalize Black female suffering. The Black female body has historically been positioned as a site for trauma, violence, and ungendering (Spillers 1987; Weheliye 2014; Sharpe 2016). After experiencing the violent theft of their bodies from West Africa, Black enslaved women were ungendered and subjected to abuse that paralleled that of their male counterparts, which denied them access to femininity and protection (hooks 1981; Spillers 1987; Weheliye 2014). The brutal legacy of slavery continues to permeate contemporary film and television industries through pornotroping, or the display of Black suffering for an aroused and appalled audience (Spillers 1987; Weheliye 2014). Pornotropes mirror how African American enslaved women were dehumanized and regarded as *things* to be exploited for economic gain and for the entertainment of others (Spillers 1987; Weheliye 2014). Continuing in the same manner as chattel slavery, post-antebellum African American women were considered labor mules who were only as valuable as their production (Collins 2000). This violent history precipitated the domination of Black women through the use of controlling images that were constructed to maintain and justify Black women's marginalization (Collins 2000).

Controlling images such as the *Mammy*, *superwoman*, and more recently, the *down ass chick*, contribute to a culture where Black women are expected to perpetually sacrifice their own comfort for the benefit of others (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Collins 2000; Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn 2017; Lau 2011; Sharpe 2009). The *Mammy*, a quiet, stoic, asexual figure who

diligently attended to others while jettisoning her own needs, informs Black women's identity (Collins 2000; Sharpe 2009). Similarly, the *superwoman* trope calls for the Black woman to do it all, namely, attend to the emotional, financial, physical, and spiritual needs of her family while satisfying her male partner's sexual desires (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Lau 2011). The *superwoman* should maintain her health so that she can be a better caregiver to those around her (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Lau 2011). The *down ass chick*, an intraracial controlling image that has been portrayed in hip-hop culture, refers to a woman who suffers unduly in romantic relationships with infantile Black male partners who presume women should endure their perpetual infidelity and abuse (Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn 2017). These controlling images disregard Black women's innate value as human beings in an effort to justify and normalize their oppression while simultaneously conditioning Black women to be collectivist-oriented, often at the expense of their own well-being (Collins 2000; Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn 2017; Lau 2011).

The brutal history of slavery taken with controlling images such as the *Mammy*, maintains a cultural climate that attempts to strip Black women of their agency and restrict their access to safe spaces and general contentment. Some Black women respond to these cultural scripts by sidelining their own physical and psychological well-being to accommodate others (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009). Other Black women, however, choose to challenge these controlling images by rejecting stereotypes and creating space for Black women to exercise ownership over their bodies (Berger 2018; Haddix 2016; Lau 2011). Black women's yoga counter spaces represent one avenue that activists use to disrupt the collectivist conditioning that impedes some Black women from fully participating in wellness spaces.

### ***Black Yoginis and Restricted Access to Wellness Spaces***

A derivative of the Sanskrit root *yuj* meaning to unite, yoke, or bind, yoga is an Indian spiritual practice that is predicated on the union of the mind, body, and spirit (Chopra 2004; Iyengar 1965). Yoga practitioners follow the eight limbs of yoga, which are intended to promote balance and unity among all aspects of life (Chopra 2004; Patanjali 2006). Despite being a spiritual practice, yoga is often mischaracterized as a form of exercise in Western discourse. The controversial positioning of yoga as a form of exercise for thin, upper-class, White women has prompted scholars to assert that Western cultures have appropriated yoga and obfuscated its Indian origins for economic gain (Ford 2016; Page 2016; Valdina 2017). Mainstream yoga spaces often mirror Western yoga discourse, and this lack of inclusivity continues to be a hindrance for many Black yogis. Some Black women disrupt mainstream platforms to combat controlling images of Black female yoga practitioners. Michele Tracy Berger highlighted Black women's response to an *xoJane* article by Jen Caron that portrayed Black female bodies as inferior and unsuitable for yoga classes that were meant for "skinny white girls" (Berger 2018). In addition to rejecting negative stereotypes of Black women, Berger (2018) asserted that bloggers and commenters rejected cultural norms that normalized skinny, white, female bodies in yoga spaces. Perhaps in response to this type of stereotyping and erasure within mainstream wellness discourses, Black women created counter spaces, both physical and digital, to support Black yogis as they navigate the exclusionary landscape of Western yoga (Haddix 2016; Velazquez 2016).

In her autoethnographic essay, Marcelle M. Haddix proclaimed that after a series of uncomfortable social interactions at local yoga studios, including encounters with white practitioners who avoided interacting with her all together, she launched a yoga brand, ZenG:

Everyday Living Well, and Gangsta Style, to serve as an inclusive space for Black women who are most often excluded from Western yoga discourse (2016). Marcelle M. Haddix intentionally incorporated the works of Black female writers and musicians into her group yoga sessions, which suggests that merging yogic principles with culturally familiar texts may offer one method for engaging Black women with the spiritual practice (2016). Marcelle M. Haddix is one of many Black yoginis who have created counter yoga spaces to encourage Black women to assert agency over their bodies in pursuit of physical and emotional well-being (2016). In lieu of creating physical yoga spaces, some Black yoginis use online venues such as Tumblr, podcasts, and blogs to invite Black women to practice yoga (Ford 2016; Velazquez 2016). Velazquez (2016) contends that Black women's online yoga platforms are modern iterations of political wellness spaces that contribute to larger social justice movements. While examining counter yoga spaces from a macro perspective is significant, this standpoint does not adequately explore the ways in which individual digital yoga counter spaces engage Black women with the spiritual practice. Considering the above discussion, I propose the following research questions:

R1: How does @BlackGirlyYoga connect with or disconnect from oppressive discourses about Black/African American women?

R2: How do @BlackGirlyYoga discourses engage Black yoginis?

## **Method**

Instagram is a largely visual platform with written components; therefore, I employed a combined visual discourse analysis (VDA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to attend to the images and written aspects of BGY. This mixed method approach is suitable for this study because VDA and CDA are commonly used to examine counter discourses, and these methods elucidate the micro and macro conversations within the visual and written components of a text (Albers 2013; Wodak and Meyer 2001). Researchers employ VDA and CDA when they are concerned with the underlying ideologies that are communicated through the texts or visuals (Albers 2013; Wodak and Meyer 2001).

### ***Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA)***

VDA allows researchers to explore how images *act* on the viewer (Albers 2013). Because Instagram is a mostly visual platform, VDA will help explicate how the images connect to discourses surrounding Black womanhood. Visuals are often regarded as supplementary material to written messages, but visuals are essential because they frame and alter the viewer's understanding of the written text (Albers 2013). I observe Gee's (2005) four suppositions to guide my visual analysis. First, visuals reflect the context in which they were created and provide the viewer with an additional framework that may be examined (Gee 2005). Additionally, viewers bring their past experiences to visuals and negotiate their own personal interpretation of the image based on their individual frame of reference (Gee 2005). In other words, visuals are always in conversation with other texts the viewer has been exposed to. Third, visuals are the result of a culmination of various social languages, which implores an examination of both dominant and counter discourses that are communicated through the image (Gee 2005). Fourth, viewers should be cognizant of how individual elements, such as the structure and composition of a visual, constitute the image (Gee 2005). VDA also provides a useful framework for examining the intertextuality of images and exploring the power relations that are communicated through the photographs.

### ***Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)***

I employed CDA to engage with the written elements of the BGY posts. CDA regards language as a foundational social practice and calls for an exploration of the relationship between discourse and power (Wodak and Meyer 2001). Rather than solely focusing on the text itself, CDA situates the object within broader issues of power, historical context, and ideology (Wodak and Meyer 2001). This method elucidates underlying power struggles by deconstructing the surrounding political and institutional forces that may impact the messaging (Wodak and Meyer 2001). Finally, CDA is appropriate for this study because it asserts that any discourse that disrupts the broader acceptance of hegemonic discourse constitutes a form of resistance (Wodak and Meyer 2001).

### ***Data Collection***

Founded by Vanessa Lhèrrison in 2013, BGY is a curated Instagram community with over 93,000 followers. BGY's large following speaks to its significance as a digital counter space that disrupts mainstream conceptions of yoga. Furthermore, as a curated space BGY features a unique combination of post images and captions from other Instagram profiles. BGY, as a consequence, constitutes one salient example of shared meaning-making among Black female yoga practitioners on Instagram, a perspective which may not be as explicit on a profile that features an individual yogini.

Instagram users are known to pay close attention to the general content and aesthetic of their pages in an effort to attract and engage potential followers (Loren 2018). Consequently, I began my analysis with an examination of the BGY Instagram profile page rather than beginning with an individual post image. This allowed me to gather the general tone and aesthetic of the visual and written elements of the brand. I narrowed my sampling frame to BGY posts from November 2018 to understand the community's most recent messaging and engagement patterns. This yielded a sample size of 54 posts for analysis. Next, I conducted a systematic random sample and analyzed every 3<sup>rd</sup> post from the sampling frame. Out of these 54, I analyzed 18 posts. Each unit of analysis consisted of three components: a) post image, b) post caption, and c) post comments. The VDA and CDA employed in this study revealed that BGY engages Black women with yoga by a) constructing a culture of inclusivity, b) affirming the individuality of Black women, c) intertextualizing African American cultural discourse and yogic principles, d) decentering Black women's marginalization, and e) creating continuity between digital counter spaces and physical counter spaces.

## **Analysis**

### ***Constructing a Culture of Inclusivity***

BGY creates an inclusive digital space for Black yoginis. In this context, inclusivity suggests that BGY appeals to Black women who vary in proximity to mainstream beauty and behavioral standards. Black women possess a diverse range of hair styles, hair textures, body types, body sizes, and skin colors, and BGY makes an effort to attend to this diversity. The name "Black Girl Yoga," first and foremost, centers Black yoginis, which is a stark contrast to top online yoga spaces that most often reflect the Western yogi prototype described earlier (Berila, Klein, and Roberts 2016; Ford 2016). The name "Black Girl Yoga" or the acronym BGY is featured at least 6 times above the fold on the main BGY Instagram page. Repetition of the BGY name reminds the viewer that the digital space is intended for Black women, and this messaging

is employed consistently throughout the BGY profile. The BGY logo is comprised of pastel blue, lime green, and a touch of deep brown. The employment of a lively script font for the phrase “black girl” combined with a sans-serif font for the word “yoga” brands the Instagram page as casual, fun, and inviting. If the curators had chosen darker colors or more conservative serif fonts, these stylistic choices might be deemed as off-putting to Black women who are new to yoga or those who may be seeking a casual space.

BGY also appeals to Black women who may or may not fit European standards of beauty. For example, one particular post features @blackgyogamom, who despite being African American, is in fairly close proximity to the prototypical American yogi (Black Girl Yoga 2018c). The yogini is wearing a yellow cropped top and gray yoga pants. She is thin and has an athletic body type. She has long, straight, relaxed hair rather than the natural, curly hair that is considered more phenotypically-Black. In some social contexts, @blackgyogamom’s relaxed hairstyle may be associated with assimilation and an internalization of European beauty standards (Ellis-Hervey et. al 2016). However, the BGY community seemed unconcerned with @blackgyogamom’s hairstyle. In fact, BGY was supportive of her inclusion as positive responses such as “beautiful pic” and “this is a good picture” dominated the comment section on this post (Black Girl Yoga 2018c). This suggested that the viewers did not connect @blackgyogamom wearing a relaxed hairstyle with a desire to assimilate, which signals a disengagement with discourses that categorize and criticize Black women based on their hair. Considering BGY was supportive of a Black woman who appeared more in line with the prototypical yogini, this could indicate that the counter space reinforces dominant messages about the prototypical yoga body.

However, further examination revealed that the BGY community was also supportive of Black women who more explicitly contrasted with the prototypical yogi. For example, another post displays a photo of @christajanine, who has natural hair and a fuller figure. In the photograph, @christajanine wore a bright red yoga top that exposed her midriff coupled with neutral-colored, form-fitting yoga pants that emphasized her choice of top. She projects an air of confidence as her body bends back into Camel pose. Comments such as “beautiful” and “such a lovely pose!” affirm the yoga practitioner and suggest that BGY is also an inclusive space for Black women with curly hair and larger body types (Black Girl Yoga 2018e). This is significant because some Black women may identify with @christajanine’s non-chemically processed hair and larger body size because these traits align with their self-perception and exist outside of narrow European templates of beauty (Black Girl Yoga 2018e; Lau 2011). This image signals to the viewer that the BGY community supports @christajanine’s aesthetic, level of flexibility, and ultimately, her personal yoga practice.

In addition to photographs featuring single yoginis, BGY also uses select group photographs to construct a culture of inclusivity. A post from @yoga\_by\_leslie\_davis is one of only two group photographs in the current sample, and it features a photograph of five Black women<sup>1</sup> standing in what appears to be a yoga studio (Black Girl Yoga 2018j). At least two of the women are lighter-skinned, three of the women may be considered plus-sized, and a variety of Black hair styles are represented. Perhaps most telling about the image, two of the women are wearing headscarves. Black women often wear headscarves to protect their hair while sleeping or exercising. While headscarves help Black women maintain their hairstyles, some women refuse to wear them in public out of concern that headscarves accentuate their Blackness and draw attention to the difference between their tightly curled hair texture and the phenotypical European textures that are deemed more acceptable (Vibe Vixen Staff 2011).<sup>2</sup> Headscarves may be considered uncultured or “ghetto” because wearing a headscarf could violate respectability

politics, a term that calls for African Americans to conform to Victorian standards of morality, cleanliness, and chastity in pursuit of equality (Higginbotham 1993; Vibe Vixen Staff 2011). For Black American women, wearing a headscarf might signal incomplete or insufficient grooming techniques, which contrasts with the concept of cleanliness that is mandated through respectability politics (Higginbotham 1993; Vibe Vixen Staff 2011). Therefore, it is significant that BGY featured an image of Black women wearing headscarves because it signals to the viewer that BGY does not police women's bodies for violating hegemonic ideals of beauty and "respectable" behavior. This would likely be a significant message for the viewer who may be seeking a yoga space where she can be free to wear what she wants without fear that she will be criticized for not adhering to "respectable" behavior. The image caption reinforced this message as the user conveyed that the BGY meet-up in Lynchburg, Virginia was an "amazing class" and she followed that statement with, "thank you to all the beautiful black queens that joined" (Black Girl Yoga 2018j).

The above discussion elucidated that BGY constructed a culture of inclusivity through their brand visuals, post images, post comments, and post captions. The counter space communicated that a variety of Black women – thin, plus-sized, athletic, beginners, natural hair, relaxed hair – were welcome in the BGY community, which disrupts mainstream yoga spaces that largely erase women of color (Haddix 2016; Velazquez 2016). This suggests that content creators should move beyond simply labeling a digital space as "inclusive" for a group of marginalized people, and instead employ images and written content that represents and affirms a variety of individuals within the marginalized group. While the Black women in the respective sample do not fit the mainstream prototype of yoga practitioners, it is important to note that all of the images represent able-bodied Black women.

### ***Affirming Black Women's Individuality***

BGY also engages Black women through their counter space by affirming their right to individuality in lieu of the collectivist socialization that many African American women receive through the propagation of controlling images. African American women are conditioned to be collectivist-oriented despite living in the United States, a society that emphasizes individualism (Canizales 2015; Lau 2011). This conditioning has been reinforced through controlling images such as the Mammy, *superwoman*, and the *down ass chick*, all of which reduce Black women to stereotypes and caricatures (Collins, 2000, 2005; Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn 2017). Consequently, Black/African American women are burdened with a double consciousness, or the dialectical tension between how Black women perceive themselves and their understanding of how a racist society views them (DuBois 1999). BGY offers an alternative to this discourse. Instead of focusing on commonalities between Black yoginis or frequently posting group photographs, BGY promotes the singularity of Black womanhood and the importance of one's personal yoga practice. In line with this reasoning, the majority of posts in the sample included images of a single yogini. Out of the 18 posts in the sample, 15 posts featured Black women practicing *asanas*, or the physical yoga poses, and out of these 15 posts, 13 images depicted the yogini practicing alone. At first glance, the emphasis on yoga as a personal practice may seem antithetical to the goals of BGY, a curated Instagram space that aims to promote community. However, a critical perspective reveals that BGY's emphasis on individualism not only disrupts hegemonic discourse that flattens Black women to caricatures and cultural scripts, it also challenges the viewer's assumptions about Black women's unrelenting commitment to collectivism.



A black and white photo featuring @ndanu17 in Cow Face pose with her arms stretched toward the sun exemplifies this break with collectivism (Black Girl Yoga 2018f). The combination of the black and white filter and @ndanu17's despondent expression projects an air of melancholy. As one of the few posts in the sample that featured a yogini who appeared unhappy, this photo functioned to validate Black women's pain while refusing to make hardships the focal point of the space. The viewer may be reminded of her own personal hardships upon viewing the image. Furthermore, the exposure to another Black woman who may have endured similar emotional difficulties affirms the viewer's individuality and elucidates the importance of healthy coping mechanisms. The caption supported this contention as @ndanu17 wrote, "my darling girl, it's okay to cry when the world feels heavy on your shoulders. And just because you do yoga or have a smile on your face most days, remember it is okay to be human (Black Girl Yoga 2018f)." These words undermine the *superwoman* image and remind the viewer to prioritize herself, which has been a fundamental function of Black women's wellness spaces (Lau 2011). Beginning the caption with "my darling girl" evokes a sense of closeness with the viewer and simultaneously provides the viewer with emotional support and validation.

Because crying has been associated with weakness, BGY reminds Black female viewers that "it's okay to cry," a notion that offers a stark contrast from the hegemonic discourse that reifies "the strong Black woman" and *superwoman* tropes. The caption also elucidated that Black women may feel pressure to smile even as "the world feels heavy" on their shoulders, mirroring the *Mammy* figure who attends to everyone else's needs but her own. Rather than pressuring the viewer to adhere to controlling images, @ndanu17 provided an alternative for the viewer with the phrase "it is okay to be human," which disrupted hegemonic discourse that stripped Black women of their agency. This framing casts Black women as full human beings rather than subhuman entities who are emotionless, stoic, and fit to endure perpetual suffering. Showing a Black woman sitting despondently in a yoga pose without attending to the needs of others undercuts controlling images of Black womanhood.

While BGY affirmed Black women's individuality through images, they also incorporated captions that reflect this messaging. Consider the following caption from @nikkigrowfit,

Allow yourself to be alone behind that door. What exists on the other side is no longer your concern. Rather, be aware of your own suffering so that you know how to take care of it and transform it. Heal thyself (Black Girl Yoga 2018i)!

The above messaging contrasts with the collectivist values that many Black/African American women are socialized to adopt and uphold. The pronouns "you" and "your" instructed the reader to center her own well-being and "be aware of your own suffering" echoed this message. The concluding call to "heal thyself" after suffering trauma within interpersonal relationships juxtaposes the *down ass chick* trope, which mandates that Black women endure constant suffering to support their male partners. The post caption urged the reader to distance herself from interpersonal relationship turbulence with the phrase, "allow yourself to be alone behind that door." Additionally, calling for Black women to "be aware of your own suffering" disrupts dominant discourse that appraises Black women based on their labor – physical and emotional (Collins 2000; Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn 2017). Rather than including images and text that reinforces controlling images, the BGY curators position yoga as an individual act of self-love that Black women can use to exercise agency over their bodies.

### ***Intertextuality of Black American Discourse and Yogic Principles***

In addition to positioning yoga as a personal spiritual practice to affirm Black women's individuality, the curators engage Black women with their digital counter space by intertextualizing Black American cultural discourse and yogic principles. One particular post includes an image of @yogawithsasha on the beach (Black Girl Yoga 2018g). Upon viewing this photograph, the viewer is struck by the contrast of @yogawithsasha's stillness and other elements in the image (Black Girl Yoga 2018g). The ocean waves created movement in the background of the picture, and the grass appeared to blow in the wind. Meanwhile, @yogawithsasha remained motionless in Camel pose. The viewer may deduce that yoga allows one to be still, present, and at peace even when the world is moving quickly and spinning into chaos. The yogini's stillness contrasted with the movement of the natural elements exemplify the yogic principle *ishvara pranidhana* or surrender. Similar to Haddix (2016) during group yoga sessions, the BGY curators also evoked the words of a Black female poet Nayyirah Waheed to prompt the viewer to simultaneously meditate on the image of a Black woman and the words of a Black female poet. Waheed's command "be a lion" to an unnamed antagonist is significant because it communicates a level of surrender and echoes *ishvara pranidhana* (Waheed 2013, 132). Subsequently, the words "I will still be water" (Waheed 2013, 132) indicates that the protagonist is secure in her identity and will remain unchanged despite worldly circumstances. The intertextuality of Waheed's poem and *ishvara pranidhana* may mitigate the distance between yoga and Black women who may be new to the practice. Looking beyond the text, centering the words of a Black female poet signals to the viewer the value, meaning, and power behind a Black woman's perspective. This may prompt the viewer to identify with Waheed, another Black woman, and in turn, validate her own experiences.

Another salient example of intertextuality was a post that featured @yogaelixir in crane pose alongside a brief clip from an Oprah Winfrey interview (Birch 2014; Black Girl Yoga 2018h). At first glance, the viewer would likely recognize that Crane pose is a fairly advanced pose. Crane pose requires diligence and extensive practice, but it also requires a strong core and stamina (Birch 2014). The image interestingly corresponded with Winfrey's message in the accompanying clip. In the video, Winfrey reflected on how she had to do a "clearing" in her life and distance herself from people who were "not supportive" of the person she wanted to become (Black Girl Yoga 2018h). Winfrey criticized these "energy suckers" and communicated to the audience that "you cannot continue to move forward in your life to the level, and level, and level that you need to be if you are surrounded by energy that brings you down" (Black Girl Yoga 2018h). Coupling an image of a Black yogini in an advanced yoga pose, which requires core strength and stamina, with a video of Winfrey, who is a symbol of success and Black female empowerment, is significant (Birch 2014; Lau 2011). Winfrey signals to the viewer that she should value herself enough to avoid "energy suckers." This mindset largely contrasts with historical constructions of Black womanhood that devalue Black women and mandate that they allow destructive individuals access to their lives and their bodies. BGY challenged these notions by intertextualizing an advanced yoga pose with Winfrey to convey a message that Black/African American women have agency and the right to restrict and grant access to their personal space. On the surface, it may appear that the image of the Black yogini doing Crane pose and Winfrey's statement were unrelated. However, a closer examination reveals that this intertextuality works to remind Black women of their agency and to value themselves more than the damaging interpersonal relationships that they may be conditioned to maintain. Thus, the fusion of yogic principles with the video of Winfrey may position yoga as a safe and

approachable spiritual practice for Black women who are less likely to see their culture reflected in the images, mantras, music, and art that is most often associated with yoga in the West. Considering Winfrey's affiliation with Weight Watchers, she complicates BGY's body inclusivity messages (Bomey 2019). At the same time including Winfrey, a successful African American female cultural icon, may orient BGY viewers to decenter their marginalization and engage with discourses that present a more nuanced view of Black womanhood.

### ***Decentering Black Women's Marginalization***

BGY also appeals to Black women by decentering their marginalization and disengaging with oppressive discourses. Since BGY targets Black women, one may presume that BGY would constantly feature stories that display the harsh realities of being Black, female, and American. However, none of the BGY posts in the current sample overtly mention racism or sexism. The absence of this discourse indicates that BGY empowers their audience by disengaging with their marginalization. A repost from Instagram user @justdavia is a salient example of BGY's deviation from centering Black women's oppression (Black Girl Yoga 2018b). This image may initially capture the viewer's attention because of its color and composition (Black Girl Yoga 2018b). The image features vibrant shades of yellow, along with gold, and shades of brown as @justdavia is practicing asana outdoors on what appears to be a sunny fall day. She is wearing a white blouse, with black pants, and high-heeled dress boots. Her outfit appears out of place for the occasion. Her clothes appear more suitable for a night out than a yoga class. Her sartorial choices along with her position as a Black woman violate Western yoga ideals, yet she appears calm, confident, and at peace as she holds Dancer's pose. The blurred bokeh background draws more attention to the yogini and her unconventional sartorial choices.

The image of @justdavia represents a larger trend within the respective BGY sample. Eleven out of the 18 sample posts featured Black yoginis practicing yoga outdoors. Given the current social and political climate, public spaces may be viewed as particularly precarious and unsafe for African Americans due to the ongoing policing of Black bodies. BGY viewers may be aware of recent incidents such as #BBQBecky where white people called the police on Black Americans for simply existing in public spaces (Herreria 2018). African Americans have been conditioned to be cognizant of the white gaze and are accustomed to having their actions scrutinized and policed when they are in public places (Higginbotham 1993). Therefore, showing Black yoginis practicing yoga outdoors communicates a sense of freedom that is inaccessible to many African Americans.

The image caption reiterated this disengagement with Black women's marginalization as @justdavia wrote, "I hope you didnt think I was going to be super deep and talk about how the beauty of life can be deceiving blah blah blah. Naw, life is dope and I like this pic. The end" (Black Girl Yoga 2018b). By stating that she is not going to "be super deep and talk about how the beauty of life can be deceiving", the yogini disengages with discourse that reinforces the danger and hostility that often surrounds Black life in America. Instead of engaging with mainstream discourses that exacerbate Black people's position within "the wake", or "the aftermath of being considered property" during enslavement (Sharpe 2016, 15), @justdavia rejects these notions. She succinctly used the word "naw" to disengage with the misery and fear that many expect to haunt African Americans, and she redirects the viewer's attention back to her image that promotes the idea of freedom for Black women. This decentering of Black women's oppression offers an escape from hegemonic discourse that catastrophizes Black life. BGY offers viewers hope by disengaging with discourse that centers their oppression.

In addition to the image of @justdavia, BGY conveyed a similar idea by reposting an image from @inspired\_yogi21 (Black Girl Yoga 2018a). Similar to the image of @justdavia, @inspired\_yogi21 is also frozen in Dancer pose while practicing yoga outside. But unlike many of the photographs on BGY, this image does not try to convey the beauty of nature. There are no beautiful fall colored leaves in the background. In fact, @inspired\_yogi21 appears to be on a sidewalk in a large city, and she is surrounded by metal pipes as she stands on dirt and debris. She appears unaffected by her surroundings as she stands confidently in Dancer pose on what appears to be a sunny day, on the sidewalk, in a major city. This photo communicates confidence, stillness, and freedom to the viewer. For the African American viewer, this image of a yogini practicing yoga on a sidewalk violates social norms. The bravery and comfort required to be a Black woman, in a major city, boldly taking up space, seems to make racism an afterthought.

This photograph continues BGY's counter narrative that conveys the Black female body, not as a thing to be owned and controlled by state apparatuses and policed by white individuals who work to maintain racist structures, but as a vessel that desires to be free, whole, and content. BGY decenters Black women's marginalization to highlight that through yoga, it is possible for Black women to be free. The BGY curators imply that yoga is a spiritual path that can help Black women cope with racism, not necessarily by avoiding it, but by surrendering and letting those discourses exist in the background of their lives instead of at the forefront. Digital counter spaces like BGY may provide relief from the hegemonic discourse that catastrophizes Black life in America.

### **Creating Continuity Between Digital and Physical Counter Spaces**

Finally, BGY uses their digital counter space as a conduit to attract Black women to their physical counter spaces. In particular, BGY uses color to invite the viewer to practice yoga in a physical counter space. The BGY profile page largely includes consistent brand colors (Black Girl Yoga n.d.). Most of the graphics reflect the same blue and green that is used in the logo. However, the community breaks with their brand color scheme to highlight two Instagram cover images in particular. The respective cover images, which are magenta, feature information about the BGY in-person meet-ups. If the curators had utilized the same blue and green colors for these cover images, the viewer would be less likely to notice the invitation to participate in the physical counter space. Incorporating the magenta, conversely, positioned the in-person yoga classes as an important aspect of the BGY community, so much that it warranted a disparate color scheme.

In addition to their use of color, BGY invites users to participate in physical yoga spaces by showing select images of group yoga classes. One of the two group photographs in the sample included a group of Black yoginis laying in a circle on their yoga mats, which created a sense of unity among the practitioners and the viewer.<sup>3</sup> The photograph, which is from @namasteconcharde, incorporates powerful imagery that invites the viewer to practice yoga in a safe space and offers her the opportunity to be immersed in a yoga experience that starkly contrasts with most mainstream yoga studios. Furthermore, the yoginis are notably surrounded by Black art – paintings of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, and other activists fill the room (Black Girl Yoga 2018d). These images invite Black yoginis to discuss the stress of discrimination and marginalization because the paintings in the background demonstrate a level of engagement with Black politics. However, as beautiful and bold as the images are, they are

merely backdrops in a photograph that is intended to promote relaxation and unity among Black women and invite them to physical yoga spaces.

Echoing this postulation, the caption reads, “Show up & show out... This Sisterhood gathering filled with manifestation & relaxation was just what I needed and right on time. I’m manifesting more of this” (Black Girl Yoga 2018d). @namasteconcharde suggests that the in-person yoga classes parallel the inclusive counter space that BGY creates. The user posits that the class was full of “manifestation” indicating that attending the class was an enriching experience. For the viewer, the image and the accompanying caption offer an opportunity to physically engage with yoga outside of the narrow paradigm of Western yogic discourse. The BGY meet-ups are portrayed as a safe place where Black yoginis can “manifest” and relax, which juxtaposes the uncomfortable and unwelcoming experiences that Black women often endure at mainstream yoga spaces (Haddix 2016). The “show up & show out” phrase is a call to action to the viewer. The powerful image coupled with the call to action compels the viewers to participate in the physical yoga counter space. Blurring the lines between their digital counter space and physical counter space, BGY attempts to fully engage Black women with yoga. The curators seem to recognize the limitations of digital spaces, so they work to position their digital space as a conduit to their physical yoga classes. Moving Black women toward a physical counter space outside of the BGY Instagram page aligns with their mission to create community and visibility as they prompt the viewer to move beyond her electronic devices and into a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment where she can “manifest” and “relax.”

Notably, photographs from the BGY meet-up signifies the overlap between the digital counter space and the physical counter space discourse. The in-person classes feature a wide variety of African American women and represent the diversity among Black women, which parallels the messaging of the BGY Instagram page. The curators chose a space where the yoginis would be surrounded by Black art, which continues the intertextuality that the curators incorporated into the digital spaces. And while the group meet-up space features images of Civil Rights leaders, the political images remain in the background and are not centered in the photograph. Instead, the curators continued to decenter Black women’s oppression and positioned relaxation and positive manifestations as the focal point of the physical counter space. Using similar techniques to engage Black women with yoga, the BGY curators position their Instagram page as a conduit for their physical yoga spaces in an effort to extend the tangible impact of their work.

## **Conclusion**

The BGY curators endeavor to make yoga more accessible for Black women who are conventionally excluded from Western yoga by a) constructing a culture of inclusivity, b) affirming the individuality of Black women, c) intertextualizing African American cultural discourse with yogic principles, d) decentering Black women’s oppression, and e) creating continuity between digital and physical counter spaces. This study contributes to existing research by taking a micro-perspective on a curated digital space that attends to the need for visibility and community for Black yoginis. Examining digital yoga counter spaces allows scholars to theorize new ways to extend yoga beyond thin, white, female, and upper-class individuals, which may make yoga more accessible to those outside of this narrow paradigm.

The fact that Black Girl Yoga has built such a large following even though they largely disengage with Black women’s marginalization suggests that Black women desire spaces that do

not serve as continual reminders of their oppression. By the same token, it is essential to explore digital counter spaces from a micro perspective in order to uncover the nuance inherent in their counter discourse. While Black women may never escape the violence of slavery, racism, and controlling images, they may benefit from more academic explorations that do not center the ways in which their Black bodies have been and continue to be policed, tortured, and subjected to trauma.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The five women in the photograph were not named, and their Instagram handles were not tagged in the original post.

<sup>2</sup> This article was attributed to Vibe Vixen Staff at Vibe.com, and the author's name was not listed.

<sup>3</sup> The yoga practitioners in this group photograph were not tagged or named in the original post.

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