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“Roll Out My Mat and Take Up Space”: A Study of Black Women’s Resistance to Yoga’s White Normativity

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Abstract

Yoga in the West, specifically in the United States, is often a deeply exclusionary space. While the practice of *āsana*, or posture with steady breathing, can be performed anywhere, the ability to engage in a full medicinal yoga practice may be unattainable for some practitioners, Black women in particular, due to how white normativity is bolstered in the US yoga industry. Contributing to the emergent literature that asks if the benefits of physical activity are universally shared by *all* people, this article discusses the historical and social contexts that influenced the whitening and gendering of US yoga and utilizes a Black feminist perspective to theorize how historically and contemporarily Black women have employed yoga as a critical survival strategy. This qualitative study specifically charts how Black women have and continue to employ yoga to navigate and resist white normativity and violence inside and outside the yoga studio.

Keywords: Black Feminist Theory; Qualitative Methodology; Wellness

Introduction

Yoga in the West, specifically in the United States, is often a deeply exclusionary space (Berila 2016; Putchu 2021). While the practice of *āsana*, or posture with steady breathing, can be performed anywhere, the ability to engage in a full medicinal yoga practice may be unattainable for some practitioners, Black women in particular, due to how anti-Blackness functions in the US yoga industry. While the South Asian, African, and Indigenous roots of yoga were not and are not devoid of systemic oppression, the dominant discourse that modern US yoga bolsters is white normativity as it operationalizes anti-Blackness.

White normativity describes the cultural beliefs and ideals that lead whiteness to be perceived as the norm or as the “right way” (Ward 2008). White normativity occurs through the institutionalization of whiteness, by which the thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes of those who present within the white racial identity are reflected in norms, policies, and practices (Humphrey 2022). As such, white normativity does not require physical intentionality, rather it thrives on unconscious docility. Whiteness, however, was not constructed in a vacuum and is context specific. However, the globalization of white supremacy, with consistencies across contexts, highlights how racial hierarchies have been formulated to juxtapose whiteness to Blackness. The two are binary opposites (Hall and Gieben 1992) and exist in an antithetical relationship. In this view, white normativity inherently operationalizes anti-Black rhetoric.

We may see this anti-Black rhetoric when we consider that white, affluent, able-bodied, young, and ‘pretty’ cisgender women are heavily represented among yoga practitioners in the US (Moran 2013). A consequence of this overrepresentation is the dominant socio-cultural discourse that has long associated yoga with notions of thinness, femininity, and whiteness (Page 2016; Strings, Headen, and Spencer 2019). The relationship between yoga, whiteness, and femininity is dangerous as it not only encourages a sense of ‘ownership’ and ‘mastership’ for white yogis (Putchá 2021), but it maintains the operation of anti-Blackness and thus may deny Black women unadulterated access to a medicinal practice that could increase their quality of life. This article will focus on how white normativity is commonly activated in yoga spaces through dominant ideals relating to physical appearance and social interactions.

While the dominant discourse that US mainstream yoga demonstrates operates in an anti-Black fashion, some Black women yogis do find themselves able to breathe through the practice of yoga and consider their yoga practice a form of self-care, wellness, and physical activity (Berger 2018). This article considers their actions as a form of Black feminist resistance. Black feminist theory provides a scaffolding to cognize discourses concerning Black women, yoga, and wellness, and offers a theoretical approach that counters hegemonic understandings of yoga and physical activity. Applying a Black feminist lens, this article draws on ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Black women yogis¹, and seeks to answer the following questions: 1) how do Black women navigate the yoga space and experience wellness in the US and 2) how does the intersection of their social identities influence their yoga practice?

These research questions are critically shaped by the 2021 National Academy of Kinesiology (NAK) conference, which acknowledged that the field of Kinesiology,² and the general study and practice of exercise and physical activity, can be marginalizing (DePauw 2021). NAK’s 2021 call has ignited a social justice imperative within Kinesiology and physical activity research that is centered around the following questions: “Do physical activity settings allow people to freely express themselves? Are the benefits of physical activity universally shared by *all* people?” (DePauw 2021, 104).

The short answer to these questions is *no* because the primary benefit of physical activity is improved health, and health is defined as a state of “*complete* mental, physical, and social wellbeing” (World Health Organization 1995, emphasis added). In a society that is built on anti-Blackness and is historically and contemporarily violent towards Black women’s mental, social, and physical health (Harrison 2021), I critically question if Black women can truly obtain the *complete* benefits of physical activity. This is especially important if we consider how physical activity spaces, such as the yoga studio, demonstrate an anti-Black ethos.

Contributing to the emergent literature that explores if the benefits of physical activity are universally shared by *all* people (Armstrong 2021; DePauw 2021; Hodge and Harrison 2021), this article discusses the historical and social contexts that influenced the whitening and gendering of US yoga and utilizes a Black feminist perspective to theorize how historically and contemporarily Black women have employed yoga as a critical survival strategy. Yoga has been proven to reduce stress and support overall physical wellness for many people. In this regard, I critically explore how/if Black women yogis experience yoga’s promise of wellness and how/if their practice is influenced by the intersection of their race, gender, class, sexuality, or ability. In doing so, I chart how Black women employ yoga to navigate and resist the consequential violence of white normativity, both inside and outside, the yoga studio.

In what follows, I provide a brief history of how yoga in the US came to normalize whiteness and operationalize anti-Blackness, and I discuss the theoretical approach that

underlines my analysis, namely a Black feminist conceptualization of resistance. report the interview findings, which show how this trend continues into the present.

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten Black women yogis between May and August 2022 on Zoom. All participants were recruited through a digital flyer that was circulated to various online listservs; participants had to self-identify as “Black” and “woman”, be over 18 years of age, and have practiced yoga before. For confidentiality, participant names have been changed. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and later transcribed and coded using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software. I evaluated the interviews using a three-step thematic analysis, which recognizes and interprets patterns and themes within a data set (Clarke and Braun 2017; Braun and Clarke 2019; Joffe 2011). I utilized inductive and deductive approaches during this analysis, where the analysis is guided by both the content itself and a theoretical framework (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016, 192). After open coding the data for content and overt meaning (Clarke and Braun 2017), I created a codebook to help visualize what patterns formed across participants responses, and how these patterns may answer my research questions. I then closed-coded the data, reorganizing codes into broader interrelated concepts based on my research questions (Jamison 2019), which identified three themes: youth experiences with physical activity, white normativity in yoga spaces, and embodied liberation.

In the third section of the paper, I focus on the insights from these interviews, outlining the significance of these three themes, culled from my coded analysis. First, I discuss how participants shared that they endured discrimination in formative experiences with holistic physical activities like dance and how these experiences informed their entrance into yoga practice, another holistic physical activity. I discuss these childhood wellness experiences along with the two other themes that emerged from the interviews: experiencing discrimination due to white normativity in yoga studios and experiences of embodied liberation, which I understand to be active corporeal resistance against yoga’s white normativity and the physiological benefits yoga can support when freedom from anti-Black constructs is accessible. I briefly conclude with an overview of the study’s findings and its limitations.

The Whitening and Gendering of US Yoga: A Brief History

While the origins of the practice of yoga are well-documented (Newcombe 2009; Singleton and Byrne 2008; Singleton 2010), few scholars have explicitly traced the history of how yoga came to be represented as a predominately white and feminine practice of physical culture in the US (Strings, Headen, and Spencer 2019). It is known that that yoga became influential in the US when Indian monk Swami Vivekananda visited the country in 1893, during the period of Reconstruction, to speak at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago to raise money for the development of British India and bring the promise of yoga to everyone in America (Douglass 2007; Evans 2021). This is the same year Ida B. Wells-Barnett began her anti-lynching campaign in Chicago to bring international attention to the omnipresent threat of violence that afflicted Black Americans in the US (Page 2016). During this time, there is an explicit disregard for the Black body and dominant practice of anti-Black violence that included lynching, race riots, and castration in the southern US. This violence was the product of prejudice, fear, and anxiety that white Americans had towards racial integration (Putney 2009). Three years later, fears of racial integration were codified by the 1896 passing of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine that legalized racial segregation.

While Vivekananda was considered a world teacher and generally well-received by European American elites, particularly white Anglo-Saxon Protestant women, in racially violent America he was often mistaken as African and met with racial hostilities (Hassan 2020). Due to segregation, Americans of color were not allowed to participate in Vivekananda's yoga lectures or practices (Page 2016). Their absence left space for European American elites to hoard the wealth and benefits of yoga while infusing elements of American anti-Blackness within yoga's US framework.

In 1920, 18 years after Vivekananda's death, another yoga philosopher and teacher, Paramahansa Yogananda, whose book, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) inspired the yoga practice of Apple founder Steve Jobs, established his fellowship in Los Angeles (Bhalla and Moscowitz 2020). At this time, yoga in the US was mainly taught and practiced by men. This changed when a prominent female yogi named Indra Devi was given permission by Sri T.K.V Krishnamacharya, also known as The Father of Modern Yoga, to become a yoga teacher and move to Hollywood from India in the 1940's. There she established a practice where she taught many celebrities such as Gloria Swanson, Jennifer Jones, and Marilyn Monroe (Singleton and Goldberg 2013). Marilyn Monroe credited her much-admired physique to yoga. Often photographed in yoga-ish postures, Monroe's stamp of approval allowed yoga to transform into a routine that touted youth, beauty, and desirability (Putcha 2021).

At its mainstream conception, yoga had the approval of affluent white women, thus linking its popularity (and subsequently its authority on health and beauty) to the interests of whiteness and femininity as it secured its role within the fitness industrial complex (Berila 2016; Strings, Headen, and Spencer 2019). Due to its mainstream birth in the affluent hills of Hollywood, centering the mind, body, and spirit was not the only goal of yoga in the US; instead, it also functioned to emphasize values that corroborated the centrality and superiority of whiteness and physical postures that cultivated a fit and youthful-appearing physique. But regardless of how yoga has been positioned within the dominant discourse, many Black women resist stereotypical notions that strengthen yoga's white normativity. Black feminist theory is useful for examining this resistance.

Historical Black Feminist Resistance through Yoga

Black feminist theory provides a scaffolding to understand discourses concerning Black women and wellness. The dominant health and wellness discourse that circulates in the US has a long-standing history of positioning Black women's bodies as pathological, primitive, disruptive, and untamable (Spillers 1987). This discourse is intimately linked to, and a factor of, white supremacy (Collins 2002). Some scholars even argue, for example, that the political, cultural, and public health discourses that emphasize high rates of 'obesity' among Black women operate as a contemporary racial project that serve to strengthen notions of white normativity (Sanders 2019). But rather than solely focusing on the repressive nature of dominant health and wellness discourse, Black feminist theory allows us to consider Black women's resistance to oppressive structures (hooks 2015). Born in response to the lack of antiracist and antisexist policies in mainstream feminist, Black liberation, and civil rights movements (Hull et al. 1982), Black feminist theory urges multiple ways of knowing, centers voice and storytelling, and reveals Black women's ongoing resistance (Collins 2002).

The idea of resistance is especially important to consider within Black feminist epistemologies because while oppression occurs so does opposition. Regarding health and the practice of yoga, an important means of contemporary resistance is the way that scholars have mobilized against hegemonic health and wellness discourses by centering the lived wellness practices of Black women.

For example, Evans (2021) explores how Black women have long-acknowledged and practiced meditation-based yoga to manage trauma and stress. In her book *Black Women's Yoga History: Memoirs of Inner Peace*, she traces how Black women have learned to breathe despite the conditions that were “painfully breathtaking” (Evans 2021). Evans discusses how Harriet Jacobs, who was enslaved, wrote of her own *rāja* yoga practice to help cope with the trauma of slavery, sexual abuse, and the absence of her children. On several occasions, Jacobs wrote about her practice of meditation, movement, and prayer during her seven years in hiding and confinement. In one account, Jacobs describes her walking meditation as such, “Again and again I had traversed those dreary twelve miles, to and from the town; and all the way I was meditating upon some means of escape for myself and my children” (Evans 2021, 179). While in hiding Jacob also discusses her need to “crawl around the tiny space”, “stand erect”, “feel the earth under her feet” and stretch her muscles (Evans 2021, 180-181). Harriet Jacobs was committed to her wellness practice and lived to be 84 years old.

Evans (2021) also discusses how, unbeknownst to many professional historians, Rosa Parks also practiced yoga for four decades, a practice that was passed down to her by her mother. Parks even gave public demonstrations in Detroit in her sixties. She lived to be 92 years old. Similarly, iconic singer and performer Tina Turner openly discussed her turn to Buddhist meditation to cope with the trauma of domestic abuse (Evans 2021). She passed in 2023 at the age of 83. As Black women are disproportionately subject to personal, cultural, and structural violence, in addition to being socially conditioned to carry the weight of resiliency, it is unsurprising that some Black women have taught themselves to breathe, meditate, and pray as survival strategies. Without doing so, their health, well-being, and overall quality of life would be impacted more than it already is. Since the first captive African woman stepped foot on ‘American’ soil in 1619 (Hannah-Jones 2021), breathing, meditation, and practices of wellness remained integral to their survival.

Recognizing how yoga can significantly improve Black women’s overall quality of life, Black yoga teachers have begun to create yoga inclusive spaces that decenter whiteness and emphasize the release of trauma, suffering, and pain while fostering multi-racial connections with yogis of color. Cameron (2019) writes of this resistance as she investigates how digital spaces aide in Black women’s disruption of yoga’s exclusionary space. Specifically, Cameron examines how @BlackGirlYoga, an Instagram page, creates an inclusive counter space for Black yoginis. Through digital curation @BlackGirlYoga invites Black women to affirm their individuality and come to know themselves divorced from the controlling images that marginalize them. Rather than focusing on the trauma that is inscribed on Black women’s bodies, Cameron encourages scholars to decenter trauma by creating an alternative narrative where Black women’s standpoints are central. In addition, Sabrina Strings along with Tria Blu Wakpa, co-founded the first academic journal dedicated to intersectional examinations of race and yoga, which speaks to the journal’s title *Race and Yoga*. This journal has published various studies that examine the connectedness of race and yoga (Ansari 2020; Berger 2018; Hagan 2021; Nair 2019; VanHester 2021). Adding to this canon, this article employs the theoretical concept of resistance to

explore how Black women navigate, and ultimately resist, the operation of anti-Blackness and white normativity that is engrained in modern US yoga studios.

Contemporary Black Feminist Resistance through Yoga

In this section, I discuss how Black women yogis today continue to use yoga as a strategy of survival and resistance to white normativity both inside and outside the yoga studio. I share three resistant narratives that counter dominant wellness discourses and/or demonstrate participants' resistance to anti-Blackness in the yoga studio. These resistant narratives are: 1) how discriminatory childhood wellness experiences inform entry into yoga practice, 2) how Black women yogis experience and navigate anti-Blackness in their yoga practice, and 3) how Black women yogis find embodied liberation despite yoga's white normativity.

Resistant Narrative #1: Childhood Wellness Experiences as Counter Discourses

All the yogis I interviewed discussed being physically active in their childhood and enduring discrimination based on their race. Some participants reported that they mainly engaged in unstructured physical activity (such as playing double-dutch and riding bikes with friends) and others mentioned participating in organized sports or dance lessons. I begin this section with the theme of adolescent physical activity because it links youth holistic practices to the holistic practice of yoga as an adult. Therefore, youthful physical activity informs their entrance into yoga practice and perhaps their turn to a holistic wellness practice in general.

Generally, participants reported that their childhood was filled with jovial play. Keisha's statement illustrates this viewpoint,

I was physically active as a child. Obviously, going outside to play from six years old to ten years old out in the street in Philly on a big wheel outside. That's pretty much where I got my physical fitness as a kid. Going outside to play hopscotch, big wheel, jump rope, trying to do double-dutch when everybody could, I couldn't, but those things.

However, for some participants the joviality of childhood physical activity was overtaken by racism and exclusion when it came time to participate in more organized forms of play. For instance, Shonda describes her elementary school dance experience and how she was passed over for a role because she was Black,

I was very physically active as a child. I started taking tap when I was two, and that turned into tap, acrobatics, gymnastics, and ballet. In elementary school, when I was between the ages of six and eight, I was in *The Nutcracker* and my mother asked the director why I wasn't trying out for Clara. The director told my mother that 'Clara is not Black.' Clara is the main character, a little girl in *The Nutcracker*.

Nova explains a similar experience,

I was a cheerleader in high school. I liked it because I loved to dance, but I was the only Black cheerleader at my school since I went to a very white high school. I wanted to fit in, be popular, and wear the varsity jackets and the nice outfits. I wanted to be the center of attention. I was used to being teased for being dark-skinned while I was growing up, and I thought being a cheerleader would dilute some of the teasing that I would receive from the other students. Being on the cheer squad was my first time engaging in organized physical activity, and what started my fitness journey.

Both Nova and Shonda linked their childhood physical activity with racism. Both recollected feelings of exclusion and moments of anti-Blackness when they participated in activities they loved. Interestingly, both participants mentioned that they were one of the few Black kids in their activity, and because of that, early in life they connected their race and skin color to their ability to fully engage in physical activity and be accepted in their respective physical activity spaces. While this finding is not directly linked to yoga, this childhood experience is important to consider for two reasons. First, it offers a counter narrative to the dominant childhood obesity discourse that often positions Black girls and women as obese due to a lack of physical activity engagement during childhood (Caprio et al., 2008). Second, it illustrates that at an early age, Black girls and women may encounter anti-Black moments of exclusion when participating in physical activity. The latter deserves consideration because it demonstrates how white normativity and anti-Blackness may penetrate wellness spaces, inhibiting Black women's ability to fully share in the complete benefits of physical activity. To this point, there are consequences to the operation of anti-Blackness in physical activity and wellness spaces, which the next section illustrates, specifically in the yoga studio.

Resistant Narrative #2 – Recognizing and Navigating the Operation of Anti-Blackness in the Yoga Studio

As discussed in the literature review, the inception of modern yoga in the US is fraught with practices, thoughts, and beliefs that promote white normativity (Berila 2016; Putcha 2021). While anyone can practice yoga anywhere, the yoga studio remains linked with and dominated by notions of whiteness, affluence, femininity, and thinness (Page 2016; Strings, Headen, and Spencer 2019). However, there are consequences to yoga's white normativity. For instance, some participants mentioned that when they entered the yoga studio, they are burdened with recognizing how, if at all, their practice would be limited by their race, gender, and size. Nikki stated that when she started attending in-studio yoga sessions she was self-conscious of her body, "Because of my body size, I didn't want to look *too crazy* being a big girl trying to do those poses [...] Once I got into the class, people were very friendly and very welcoming, but in those settings, most of the people are very slim. It is a little bit different being a thick girl in the yoga class." Here Nikki is cautious to not "look too crazy". This comment illustrates that she is aware of yoga's white normativity that manifests in the idea that the ability to perform postures is linked to thinness and beauty. Nikki considered herself a "big girl" and thus assumed that size was a barrier to her practice.

Another consequence of white normativity that participants elevated were racist encounters/anti-Black moments that took place in the yoga studio. Some participants specifically discussed how racism showed up in the studio. For instance, Mimi describes her racist encounter with a yoga practitioner,

I am a certified Bikram instructor and I have a 200-hour Vinyasa certification. When I first started teaching my students were not very diverse. Many were thin, young white women. I did have a couple of white men who would come take class, but rarely did I have Black students come in for practice. When I would stand at the front-desk and check-in people for class, some students would ask me "Are you the teacher?" or ask me my credentials. I remember one time a student, an older white man, started complaining during class. He loudly asked, "why is it so hot" and yelled "we're going to pass out in here." I became annoyed because he was challenging me. The room temperature is

always 105 degrees. That day he complained it was 104 degrees. So I told him “it’s actually colder than usual in here.” He laid in savasana the rest of the class. Afterwards he let the studio owner know that I made the room a *dangerous* temperature. The owner let me know that he complained and told me that I should be nicer to that particular student. In my mind I’m thinking “how the hell can you nicely say it’s cold in here and that you’re being dramatic?” If I was a white male teacher, I don’t think he would have mentioned the heat, he would have stood there and took it.

Mimi, who is a certified instructor, expressed that her credentials were often questioned by white yogis and recalled a time where she was challenged during class by a white male student. The white male student told her she was putting him in “danger” by having the studio “so hot.” This statement is heavily impactful because this student deemed Mimi untrustworthy in a practice that is predicated on the trust between a yogi and their teacher (Singleton 2010). The word “danger” also speaks to historical framing/controlling images of the Black female body as “wild” and “untamable” (Collins 2002; Spillers 1987). Thus, white normativity here is manifest in the form of expectations. Mimi’s students did not *expect* her to be able to render a service worthy of their practice. The consequence of this expectation is the reframing of some Black women as incapable and ultimately inferior to their white yogi counterparts. This notion is similarly mentioned by Zula who recalled her racist encounter with a white yoga instructor,

There was a time where our yoga teacher, she was a guest instructor, skipped the left side. Me and the lady next to me, who was white, her name was Barbara, knew the sequence and continued to go to the left side. We looked at each other and giggled at how in sync we were with our practice. Barbara and I practiced together often, we also stood in the front row together, so we knew what to do next. After class is over, the instructor walks over to me and says that I *distracted* everyone in the room by *interrupting* the sequence. I didn’t want to escalate the situation, I could tell the instructor was really upset, so I didn’t respond. However, Barbara heard what the instructor said and told her, ‘No, I’m the one who interrupted. I thought it funny that you did not correct yourself after you skipped a posture in the sequence.’ Barbara continued, ‘This is what Black people mean when they say that y’all don’t treat them the same, that they’re not treated equally. Why did you feel that it was acceptable to raise your voice to her, but you’re not raising your voice to me?’ I was embarrassed. I don’t know why I didn’t say anything or speak up for myself. I work in corporate America, and I am often challenged by my white counterparts and prepared with a professionally snappy comeback. I just didn’t want the yoga studio to become that place where I have to be *always prepared*.

Zula’s white yoga instructor reprimanded her for “distracting” the other students and “interrupting” the sequence. This is another instance that can be linked to the long-standing anti-Black controlling images that were constructed to portray Black women’s societal marginalization as a natural consequence of their disposition (Collins 2002). In this instance, the white yoga instructor inscribed “disruptive” upon Zula even when she was doing what she was told. This moment reifies a violence and racialized trauma that is often experienced by Black people as they are often policed and punished for simply being Black (Harrison 2021).

In addition, Zula mentions that while she acknowledged the discriminatory moment, she did not advocate for herself out of fear that it would turn her wellness space into a place where she would have to “always be prepared.” In her work life, Zula mentions how she must place extra energy into preparing to deal with her white counterparts. The tiredness that Zula infers signals what William A. Smith, Walter R. Allen, and Lynette L. Danley (2007) refer to as “racial

battle fatigue,” which describes the “physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy lost coping with racial microaggressions and racism” (555). Zula did not want her yoga studio to become the grounds in which she does battle against racial aggressions. And, arguably, Zula implies that the yoga studio is where she comes to recover the energy lost from racial battles that she encounters in her work life. In her interview, Keisha also mentions the need to be prepared for racial battle. She states,

I’ve never felt uncomfortable [in the yoga studio], but I have always felt the need to *overperform* because I can feel discomfort coming for me. If I see a [white] woman that’s uncomfortable with me, I might be right next to her and show her like, ‘Why are you falling and flapping? See how a real yogi does this shit.’ I don’t know why I have the need to do that, but I will just play that game and compete.

While Keisha did not mention racial battle as explicitly as other participants, during yoga she is burdened by the controlling images that project a negative inverse association between Black women and physical activity. The need to overperform, or appear strong, that is felt by some Black women is not a new phenomenon and is a consequence of the strong Black woman (SBW) stereotype. The SBW and its effects on Black women are well-documented (Bellinger et al. 2015; Black and Woods-Giscombé 2012; Harrington et al. 2010). According to a scoping review conducted by Zaria Thomas et al. (2022) that covers 25 years of literature, the effects of the SBW stereotype on Black women’s physical health primarily focuses on stress, sleep quality, eating behaviors, health care quality, and help-seeking for physical issues. What is interesting here is that while the SBW stereotype may be operating to constrain Keisha’s ability to exercise self-compassion, it is simultaneously encouraging/ driving her increased engagement in physical activity and yoga. Thus, this point counters the assumptions of the dominant literature that position controlling images as *barriers* to Black women’s engagement in physical activity (Smith-Tran 2021).

Resistant Narrative #3 – Embodied Liberation

The last resistant narrative that was patterned across participant interviews is that of embodied liberation. Embodied liberation here is described as participants’ active corporeal resistance against the white normativity of yoga and the physiological benefits that may result in freedom from the anti-Black constructs that yoga can bolster. Active corporal resistance is illustrated by various participants who mentioned that while they acknowledge the discriminatory nature of modern US yoga, they practice anyway. This is verbalized by Nova who states,

I come in, I’m going to command my space. It may be from my history. My history is that I was bullied as a kid really, really bad. I let other people tell me who I was and I didn’t know my worth or my voice, but when I found it, and I found it. When I come into an environment or a space, I come, and I come to show up and be present, and I refuse to let anybody make me feel otherwise.

Similarly, Taryn expresses, “I do have a right to be here. My money’s green. I have a right to be here, and I’m going to roll out my mat and take up space.” Both Taryn and Nova actively resist anti-Blackness within the yoga studio by not only being present, but by “taking up space.” A Black feminist theoretical lens, then, suggests that these participants are not only aware of their hypervisibility in the white normative yoga space, but that they reclaim their space on their own

terms. This illuminates the process and praxis of resistance and empowerment touted by Black feminist theory (Collins 2002).

The physiological benefits of embodied liberation, however, is best captured by Tiara's recollection of her experience with the Black Yoga Teacher Alliance (BYTA),

It wasn't until I started practicing with the Black Yoga Teacher Alliance that I really started to resonate with my practice. BYTA was a Blackity-Black-Black experience that shocked most of us yogis because we were used to being the only or one of the only Black yogis in the room. When I started breathing with my Black brothers and sisters I felt *relief, lifted, like I was flying*. My soul sang and told me that I needed to be here, deserved to be here. The dialogue sounded different. It felt different. Certain poses that I resigned myself to and typically struggled with in my traditionally white studio, I did with ease without self-doubt at BYTA. My body melted and I surrendered to the pose. In this environment my body suddenly opened up, I relaxed, and was able to lift my chest. When you think about it, lifting your chest in any pose requires vulnerability. As humans we innately want to protect our precious organs, especially our heart. Which is why I never felt fully comfortable doing certain poses in a room with people who have been conditioned to oppress and abuse. I realized that the Black relationship to survival is so deep. You never know when you'll have to *snatch your muscles up* and leave when you practice at white studios.

Tiara's comment demonstrates that the yoga space does have the ability to liberate the Black body from the oppressive societal constructs that normalize whiteness and uphold anti-Blackness. Tiara's yoga experience at the Black Yoga Teacher Alliance is a testament to that. Being surrounded by other Black yogis, Tiara was no longer filled with "self-doubt" and her body "melted" into postures that it usually would not. Many yoga postures require you to lift your chest and expose your heart (Stanley 2017), but that movement is hard to do when your body, like the Black body, has been conditioned to always be prepared and alert, never able to settle, and always ready to fight. Scientifically, Tiara's physiological response when practicing in white studios aligns with Arline T. Geronimus et al.'s (2006) "weathering" hypothesis which posits that Black women's early health deterioration is a consequence of living in a race-conscious society that stigmatizes and disadvantages Blacks, which may cause disproportionate physiological deterioration. While weathering is evidenced in both Black men and women, the increased socio-cultural responsibilities of Black women lead them to experience poorer health conditions (Geronimus et al. 2006). In a white yoga space, Tiara's allostatic load, or level of stress, may impede her ability to fully benefit from the posture.

In the same vein, it is critical to acknowledge that Tiara found release while practicing with other Black men and women at BYTA. The BYTA is a collective of yoga teachers whose mission is to "share the peace and power of yoga to support better physical and emotional well-being for all" (Black Yoga Teacher Alliance 2023). Many of the BYTA teachers have been Othered while practicing at traditionally white studios, and as a result, aim to create spaces where Black yogis can heal from race-based stress and trauma. As this is the mission of the BYTA, it is unsurprising that Tiara mentions a physical release, which can be described as embodied liberation, or the physiological relaxation that is felt when one no longer feels corporeally inhibited by anti-Black constructs. Embodied liberation, then, may be the goal for Black women yogis who are seeking to enter a state of total wellness, and may best be achieved when practicing with other Black yogis. Embodied liberation also aligns with yoga's original purpose – healing (Malebranche 2016; Page 2016). This is not to argue that true wellness for

Black women can only be found in predominately Black spaces, but Black women share a collective trauma that sometimes requires communal breathing to heal (Parker 2020).

Conclusion

It has been suggested that engagement in physical activity can provide context for personal empowerment, motivation of others, and achievement of well-being, which can be essential for resisting the effects of white normativity (Ashdown-Franks and Joseph 2021; Ritenburg et al. 2014). This study, informed by Black feminist theory, established that there are consequences to white normativity and anti-Blackness that may result in Black women having to undergo extra labor to achieve the full medicinal benefits of yoga. While Black women may have to navigate the effects of white normativity in the yoga studio, findings suggest that their resistance to white normativity is also significant. Particularly important is their resolve to “take up space” to receive the benefits of yoga. The contemporary notion of Black women yogis “taking up space” is particularly liberating considering that Harriet Jacobs, who lived in a tiny attic crawl space while in hiding, also used yoga to heal her body and mind from the wounds of confinement. Findings suggest that Black women yogis are still using yoga to heal and survive the threat of anti-Blackness that continue to pervade American society.

As revealed through thematic analysis, the resistant narratives portrayed here center and disrupt the dominant framing of Black women as most likely to be sedentary (Sanders 2019) and uninterested in the practice of yoga (Strings, Headen, and Spencer 2019). Findings from this study suggest that some Black women, even from an early age, learned how to navigate racism while engaging in physical activity. It remains, unclear, however, if Black women are able to truly benefit from the practice of yoga if they must navigate anti-Blackness and face additional challenges in their practice.

There are limitations of this study. First, this examination intended to capture how and if intersecting identities (e.g. race, gender, class, sexuality, or ability) affected Black women wellness practice. Participants mainly focused on their race and racism. Another limitation is that this study did not capture which style of yoga participants practiced. As such, it is unclear whether a particular style of yoga enabled participants to feel more or less marginalized. Lastly, while all participants lived in the US, their specific city and state were not analyzed. Analyzing region may have provided more information about the yoga opportunities and communities that were available for participants.

Future research should consider how Black women’s bodies physiologically respond to physical activity when conducted with Black versus non-Black peers. Doing so may uncover, as findings in this study suggests, why and how Black women practitioners may experience the physiological ability to relax in a primarily Black wellness space whereas they may be unable to in a primarily white wellness space thus further contributing to the emergent literature that explores how and if the benefits of physical activity are universally shared by *all* people.

Notes

¹ To be eligible for this study, participants must identify as regular yoga practitioners or “yogis.”

² Kinesiology is the multi-disciplinary study of human movement (DePauw 2021).

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