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Abstract

The history of the slave era led to the creation of several different tropes of African American women used throughout history including the jezebel and the strong Black woman. Coupled with the matrix of domination, researchers are able to understand how this history has led to recreations of oppression among Black female athletes. This has been particularly evident among the sport of gymnastics in which several athletes have experienced severe oppression, which in many cases, has prevented them from speaking up about other serious concerns within their sport such as sexual assault and mental health. The creation of tropes for Black females, coupled with the matrix of domination, have contributed to the reproduction of oppression among Black female gymnasts.

Keywords

controlling images, matrix of domination, black, female, athletes, gymnastics

Disciplines

Africana Studies | Sports Studies | Women's Studies

Comments

Written for AFS 250B: Black Bodies in American Sport

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**Battling History: A Discussion of How Controlling Images and the Matrix of Domination
Causes Recreations of Oppression Affecting Black Female Athletes in Gymnastics Today**

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AFS 250: Black Bodies in American Sporting

Dr. Tyeshia Redden

May 4, 2023

Introduction

The history of the slave era led to the creation of several different tropes of African American women used throughout history including the jezebel and the strong Black woman. Coupled with the matrix of domination, researchers are able to understand how this history has led to recreations of oppression among Black female athletes. This has been particularly evident among the sport of gymnastics in which several athletes have experienced severe oppression, which in many cases, has prevented them from speaking up about other serious concerns within their sport such as sexual assault and mental health.

I propose that the creation of tropes for Black females, coupled with the matrix of domination, have contributed to the reproduction of oppression among Black female gymnasts. First, I will examine the history of gymnastics. Next I will assess each of the tropes as well as the matrix of domination and how they have historically marginalized Black women. I will then discuss how this discrimination has translated into the sport of gymnastics by examining two different cases of Black female gymnasts: Gabby Douglas and Simone Biles. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of possible ways to change the stigma

Literature Review

History of Gymnastics

Some of the very first types of gymnastics-type movements were performed by the ancient Chinese, Mesopotamia, Indian, and Mediterranean cultures. However, the Greeks of the Homeric and Classical eras had the most long lasting influence on the practice. Since then, the sport has become a culmination of its involvement through several different disciplines including the performing arts, military training, the educational profession, and the medical profession.

The earliest pictorial references to gymnastics activities came from paintings and engravings across Egyptian sites. From there, gymnastics became an important part of military training. There was obvious appreciation for physical prowess and therefore the training of soldiers began to employ and develop gymnastics-type skills. Military instructors consequently became physical education teachers across Europe. Gymnastics also gained presence in the medical profession in which it became synonymous with purposeful exercise, and used as a platform to emphasize the importance of physical education. This new emphasis on phys-ed and an increased presence of gymnastics in the military created a prominent place for it in schools.

As the field of gymnastics became more complex, it also increased its barriers to entry especially through financial burdens. With participation in the sport came requirements for gym memberships, coaching, leotards, traveling, and in many cases physical therapy. Green et al. (1981) argues that because of the status of Black women in society, this status translates into sports. As a result, Black women were more likely to have fewer gymnastics facilities and equipment available to them, while those they did have were often low quality.

Not only do financial obligations become an issue for Black females in sports, but also eurocentric beauty standards. Perkins (1983) argues that traditional standards of womanhood often reflect a model for upper and middle class white women, and fail to address the femininity of Black women. These European beauty standards then made it much harder for Black women to enter into sports such as gymnastics where there is a particular emphasis on grace and precision, and therefore heavily skewing representation in gymnastics to favor white females.

Controlling Images

Collins (1990) proposes four socially constructed controlling images, or tropes, of Black womanhood, two of which are vital to understanding the oppression of women in gymnastics:

jezebel and the strong Black woman. The jezebel image portrays Black females as whores and sexually aggressive women. This image originates during slavery when Black women were considered “sexually aggressive wet nurses” (Clarke et al., 1983). From then, Black women were placed in a category that labeled them as sexually aggressive. This was not only problematic for self-perceptions of individuals but also for the way in which others treated Black women. For example, these images provided strong rationale for widespread sexual assault among slave women by white men. Because they were assumed to have excessive sexual appetites, it “wasn’t possible” for sexual assault to occur, and therefore further forced Black women to work as “wet nurses” for white children.

Another controlling image is the depiction of a strong Black woman. Collins (1990) defines this trope as extremely self-sufficient and independent. Despite what some may consider positive qualities, labeling women in this light erodes their self-confidence and their ability to confront oppression, making them internalize that they are expected to handle struggle and adversity. Historically, the image of strong Black women emerged during its time as a powerful symbol for Black and white women alike. However, it often came across as a challenge to patriarchal power which left several women abandoned by their men, impoverished, and stigmatized as unfeminine.

Matrix of Domination

Collins (1990) also proposes a theory called the “matrix of domination.” This theory argues that there are systems of oppression that occur at the intersection of gender, race, class, and other social identities. It emphasizes the racialization of gender and how contributions from Black feminist thought can help analyze interconnections between gender and racial inequality among women. Black feminist thought has two main goals: fostering new ways in which we

think about oppression, and addressing debates concerning the ways of assessing “truth.”

Through these two goals, Black feminist thought examines how race, class, and gender create an interlocking system of oppression. It teaches us to conceptualize social relations and offer new knowledge and experiences that push back the types of narratives already ingrained in our society. Collins (1990) argues that our world is a dynamic place. Our goal shouldn't be to just survive but to take ownership and accountability of our actions. While individual empowerment is part of this, we are only going to be able to make long lasting change through collective actions towards social transformation of political and economic institutions.

The theory also serves as a lens which helps us see new ways of understanding women's self identity as impacted from several fluid and multidimensional systems. Once you consider the different systems of race, class, and gender oppression that make up the matrix of domination, these tropes provide “justification” for racial oppression. The more African American women that see reproductions of these tropes, the more they subconsciously begin to contextualize them and therefore are reproduced. These harmful tropes coupled with the matrix of domination found their way into the realm of sports and affected several Black female gymnasts in different ways. Among the most harmful are the ways in which they restrict Black female athletes from speaking up with other struggles they face in their sports such as mental health and sexual assault.

Gabby Douglas

In January of 2018, Dr. Larry Nassar was sentenced in Michigan for first-degree sexual assault and 60 years in Federal prison for child pornography. Nassar is alleged to have sexually abused over 250 female athletes from 1998 to 2015, several of which were gymnasts as young as six years old. For many victims, this abuse occurred repetitively for up to 10 years at a time and in several different locations including his clinic, his home, training campus, and hotel rooms at

competitions across the country. Nassar often claimed his “medical treatments” were curative techniques for physical injuries, calling himself, “the body whisperer.” Among many things, his reputation as an osteopathic sport medicine physician for a prestigious university in the NCAA collegiate system as well as a physician for the USA Gymnastics team ultimately protected him and was able to control early allegations of his alleged assault until it was practically undeniable.

However, this wasn’t the first time in history that we’ve seen doctors break their oath to protect their patients. James Marion Sims was an American physician and often regarded as the “father of modern gynecology.” Early on, he earned a reputation as a skilled general surgeon and made a living working on slaves at local plantations. Yet, ethical questions still remain regarding how he created his various surgical techniques. He was particularly interested in curing vesicovaginal fistulas after finding one case through examinations on his patients. From then, he was able to acquire 11 female slaves whom he repeatedly operated on, some of which received over 30 surgeries often without anesthesia. Today, he is considered a very controversial figure, who although found a cure that would eventually help thousands of women, ignored the first basic principle of the Hippocratic Oath, “primum non nocere” or “do no harm.”

Knowing this history, how could so many athletes not have stepped forward? Why didn’t more Black female athletes speak up? Gabby Douglas is quoted saying, “I didn’t publicly share my experiences as well as many other things because for years we were conditioned to stay silent and honestly some things were extremely painful,” (Nathan, 2017). While fear and painful recollections are definitely a factor for all athletes, there is another underlying factor for Black athletes like Douglas. I pose the “conditioning” that she refers to is the long time reproduced tropes and other stereotypes that prevent Black women from standing up for themselves. Scott (2021) argues that the mandate of Black women’s mythical strength demands, i.e. the strong

Black woman trope, means they persist no matter what the challenges; however, we need to reconsider the mandate in order to encourage Black women to stand up for themselves.

Douglas also faced particular criticism relating back to the Jezebel trope. In 2017, Douglas posted a response to a Tweet by Alexandra Raisman, a fellow Nassar victim, stating, “however it is our responsibility as women to dress modestly and be classy dressing in a provocative/sexual way entices the wrong crowd,” (Douglas, 2017a). Her teammate, Simone Biles immediately responded saying, “... honestly seeing this brings me to tears bc as your teammate I expected more from you & to support her,” (Biles, 2017). Later Douglas posted on Instagram apologizing to Raisman stating, “... I know no matter what you wear, it NEVER gives anyone the right to harass or abuse you. It would be like saying that because of the leotards we wore, it was our fault that we were abused by Larry Nassar,” (Douglas, 2017b).

Gymnastics is often regarded as a highly sexualized sport with a uniform that is commonly skin tight and revealing. When Black female athletes wear these types of uniforms, it further hypersexualizes them as commonly reproduced in the jezebel trope. I would argue that Douglas was fearful of backlash from the public in that her speaking up about the Nassar assault would result in reproductions of the jezebel stereotype.

Simone Biles

Simone Biles, beyond her abuse from Larry Nassar, became the focus of media attention when she withdrew from the team final of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games for gymnastics, stating that she needed to “focus on her mental health,” (Lewis, 2021). She later described her situation as the “twisties,” a dissociative state in which gymnasts lose control of their bodies as they fly through the air, a condition that could potentially result in serious injuries (Lewis, 2021).

Her actions caused a range of responses from news and sports media with some stating she was setting a good example and others calling her a quitter (Thompson et al., 2022).

Biles is often referenced in conjunction with Naomi Osaka during discussions regarding Black health, Black bodies, and power relationships. In the Summer of 2021, Osaka, a famous tennis champion, withdrew from the French Open due to concerns for her mental health while meeting required media interviews. Scott (2021) argues that pushing back against these commonly held motifs of “the strong Black woman” by publicly making statements about performance in order to better their mental and emotional health is a victory in itself.

Patricia Hill Collins’s (2000) further emphasizes history’s ability to construct value and worth of Black women to only include supporting, servicing, and saving others. Another author agrees with Collins stating, “No to taking care of everyone else; no to putting our own well-being last; no to entertaining and performing for others... This is a new model of strong Black womanhood,” (Scott, 2021). She argues that now more than ever it is important for Black women to turn their attention onto themselves, stating that in order to save others and transform a society we have to start with individual wellbeing.

Discussion

Review of Tropes

As demonstrated both in the cases of Gabby Douglas and Simone Biles, the tropes or controlling images proposed by Collins (1990) are very much relevant today. The jezebel trope creates a hypersexual depiction of Black women which is not only reproduced in popular media but also in sports. Gymnasts are among the athletes most affected by this as their required uniforms are commonly skin tight and revealing. The “strong Black woman” trope is also very relevant today as it increases expectations for Black women to confront oppression and in many

cases feel expected to handle struggles and adversities such as mental health issues and sexual assault. Mental health alone comes with several stigmas such as people “choosing” to be sad that can alone lead to reluctance to seek help or treatment, lack of understanding from others, or even bullying. Particularly in a sport like gymnastics, mental health is also important for an athlete’s physical safety considering they need to be in the right headspace to control their body as they go through routines. This makes it extremely important that Black women in particular feel comfortable enough to come forward and ask for help when needed.

Review of Matrix of Domination

In assessing each of these women’s stories, it is important to consider the intersections they face with gender and race. Both Gabby Douglas and Simone Biles identify as African American female athletes, and continue to reach new heights. In the summer of 2012, Gabby Douglas became the first African American and woman of color in Olympic history to be given the title of all-around individual champion, but also the first to win this title and the team event at the same Olympic games (Rex, 2013). Simone Biles also broke records becoming the first Black woman to win five all-around titles, three of which were consecutive. Now with fourteen medals, and ten of them gold, Biles is known as the most decorated American female gymnast in World Championships history (Peszek, 2023).

Despite their incredible records, both women have a lot of weight on their shoulders. Buckner (2021) argues that everytime Biles competes it's like a superhero tightening their cape. She has an incredible amount of pressure on her to not only perform and live up to the expectations others have of her based on her previous performances, but also an entire gender and race following her progress. The same could be said with Gabby Douglas. Therefore, they are not only fighting against the tropes of jezebel and “the strong Black women” through their

actions, but they know whatever actions they take to address social justice issues are going to be seen across two historically underrepresented groups.

Changing the Stigma

The question remains, how do we change the stigma. The answer isn't as simple as removing Black female athletes from the sport. In fact, that could end up having much more severe consequences. In October of 1995, Nike aired a commercial called, "If You Let Me Play," which highlighted the importance of allowing young adolescent girls to participate in sports. Among many, some of the statistics provided in the commercial included being 60 percent less likely to get breast cancer, suffer less depression, more likely to leave a man who beats them, less likely to get pregnant before intended, and more, simply from allowing young women to participate in sports. Yarbrough (1996) conducts a deeper analysis of this advertisement for Black female athletes. She argues that not only is it important for female athletes to play sports, but also for our society to offer these opportunities to Black women in particular. Among this minority group are more concerning statistics such as 10 percent more likely to get heart disease, 30 percent more likely to have diabetes, and 50 percent more likely to suffer from hypertension.

The brave efforts of athletes like Simone Biles and Gabby Douglas coming forward about their trauma in their sport is shown to have bigger effects on the community at large.

Tuakli-Wosornu and Darling-Hammond (2022) state that the general public was very supportive of Biles following her withdrawal from the Olympics in 2020. Young people since then have been more willing to prioritize their mental health and wellbeing as well as being publically open about it and taking meaningful actions to prioritize it. Both Biles and Douglas have modeled personal courage that Tuakli-Wosornu and Darling-Hammond (2022) compares to Rosa Parks.

They state that actions like Biles and Douglas take shape against modern versions of the same civil rights' struggles.

For institutions to take real action in erasing these stigmas, they need to be open and willing to implement change. Hirko (2021) offers several different ideas and resources for colleges in order to create reforms that increase equity in sports. Some of their ideas include the following: increasing educational opportunities across all demographic groups to create equitable pathways for Black college athletes, holding themselves and other institutions accountable in recruitment and hiring leadership across athletic departments to achieve diversity and equity, and investing in programs that offer support to Black athletes' college experience and overall feelings of inclusion within their respective institutions. At the individual level, we can do better to offer encouragement on social media and not contribute to negative attention across media platforms.

Conclusion

Controlling images such as the jezebel and "the strong Black woman" trope have emerged from a history of discrimination and long reproduced stereotypes of Black females. Black females face additional discrimination at the intersection of two historically underrepresented groups across race and gender. Together, this history creates reproductions of oppression among Black female athletes. The jezebel trope hypersexualizes Black women who wear the required uniform of leotards often making it increasingly difficult to speak up in cases of sexual assault. When paired with the trope of the "strong Black woman," including expectations to overcome extreme adversity, they are often silenced and fearful of speaking up. Society needs to do a better job of empowering Black women especially among Black female athletes who many regard as having the perfect platform to address these injustices. By empowering individuals and using our collective voices we can make this change happen.

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