Negotiating Physical Activity – Afro Immigrant Women in Canada Tackle Cardiovascular Disease

by

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Abstract

Epidemiological research suggest that regular physical activity is beneficial for overall physical, psychological and mental health but more specifically, as a modifiable risk factor for cardiovascular disease, physical activity, done a regular basis, has been shown to be positively associated with lowered risk of cardiovascular disease (Pate et al. 1995; Tremblay et al. 2011). Unfortunately, research on physical activity participation rates suggests that a significant percentage of Black women are not sufficiently active (Bryan et al. 2006 and Chiu 2010). However, since much of the existing research places emphasis on the barriers to physical activity for ‘inactive’ Black women, less is known about the experiences of the women who are physically active. Using a feminist cultural studies framework that integrates the critical insights of anti-racist feminism, Black feminist theory and postcolonial feminist studies, this study seeks to understand and explore the behaviour patterns, and their associated meanings, for a small group of highly active Black women. Fifteen women participated in the study; three of whom are non-Black women.

The women’s narratives suggest that their perceptions and experiences of their body was a major determinant in how they participated in physical activity. The women received, processed, and interpreted messages about the benefits of physical activity in the maintenance of healthier lives in ways that motivated them to be physically active. The implication is that Black women are paying attention to their bodies and to health messages about their bodies. The challenges that the women experienced, related to issues of race/racism and ideas around Blackness as well as disparities in cultural expectations. The extent to which the women were physically active had a bearing on how well they had learned to work around issues of Blackness, evidenced in how they chose to strategize and negotiate around possibilities to be active.

This study has served as a starting point for dialogue around the participation of ‘ordinary’ Black Canadian women in physical activity. It has established that the diversity that exists among Black people/women as well as the complexities around ideas of a Black community require strategies that are sensitive of these issues.
Keywords:  physical activity; Black women; cardiovascular; feminist cultural studies; Black bodies; Canadian
Dedication

To my wonderful mother, Sheila D. Evans, Thank you! Mom, this would not have been possible without your continued love, support and encouragement.

I love you!
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This journey would not have been possible without the support of some special persons in my life – persons who have stood beside me every step of the way. Their kind words, little nudges, loud cheers, made all the difference in keeping me focused on my goals. Thank you to everyone who made this journey possible!

I am extremely grateful for the support and encouragement from my husband Colin Francis, who has been a tower of strength – literally. Talking me through the days when quitting felt like a viable option, reminding me of my dreams and aspirations and providing a listening ear, or two, when the going got tough. Thank you for being my rock and a sounding board when I needed to get feedback on my thoughts.

Mom, you have always supported me fully in whatever decision I made. Never one to object, your only question would be, “Are you sure that that is what you want to do?” An affirmative “yes”, would get your blessings and kind words of wisdom. My sisters Allison and Peta-Gaye and my brother Leighton, thank you for your love in getting me through these years. You have understood that I could not always be ‘big sis’ in every sense of the word, and I appreciate it. The frequent ‘check-ins’, the surprise calls and messages that I often receive from family members; near and far, have reminded me that they care, that they are rooting for me, and that has made a great deal of difference in getting me over the hurdles.

I want to thank my senior supervisor, Dr. Cindy Patton for her support and encouragement since the first day that I started in the programme and for her patience and guidance as I tried to find my way through a frightening new world of PhD uncertainty. She has provided me with avenues to groom my skills and has always believed in my ability to get the job done – even when I had doubts in myself.

I also want to thank the other members of my supervising committee, Dr. Helen Leung and Dr. Marina Morrow, on whose insightful feedback, I could rely. Both Dr. Leung and Dr. Morrow have been invaluable mentors to me throughout my PhD journey, for which I am grateful. A special thanks to Professor Wanda Thomas Bernard for
agreeing to act as external examiner for this project and for her thoughtful suggestions and encouraging words. To the internal examiner, Professor Scott Lear, thank you so much for your interest in my study and for sharing your thoughts on how this study can further bridge the gap between the social sciences and the health sciences. Thank you.

I must thank my extended family of close friends who have who supported me along the way by offering advice and assistance whenever and however they could. Friends provided me a channel through which I could vent when I felt frustrated, laugh when I needed to forget about my challenges and cry when I felt overwhelmed. My besties, Althea, Janette and Faithlyn who sent me off with pride to take on life’s challenges and to pursue my dreams, I am eternally grateful for their friendship. I am more than anything, thankful to my ‘Sistas in Christ’, whose prayers and fellowship I received in abundance. Through it all, my friends have made it easier for me to persevere. My Vancouver friends and family have given me a sense of home, even when ‘real’ home feels like a distant memory. For that, I will always be thankful.

I am also extremely grateful to the 15 brave women who made this study possible. They did not hesitate when they were contacted to be a part of this process. They accommodated me in their world and spoke freely about their experiences. I will forever be in their debt.

I must also say a warm-hearted thank you to the faculty and staff of GSWS who without hesitation provided me with an office space from which I could work uninterrupted during my final year of writing. Kat, thanks for watering Plant, for your words of encouragement and for all those calls and emails to Grad Studies. I truly appreciate it.

I am filled with gratitude and joy as I complete this phase of my journey but I am also overcome with sadness and grief at the thought that my chief mentor and the inspiration for this journey is no longer physically with us. There have been so many times when I have wanted to call you – for your feedback, for affirmation but could not. I miss you Prof. Chevannes. May your soul rest in peace! – Marcia.
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Preface

My work sits between two academic languages that do not always share ontological and epistemological assumptions about health, immigration, and race. I am forced to use terms that seem neutral to one audience, but are quite political to another. The tensions cannot be reduced, but I can try to be clear about the definition of some terms and clarify the context in which I use them in this study.

An ‘immigrant’ according to Statistics Canada (StatsCan, n.d.) is someone residing in Canada who was born outside of Canada, and excludes temporary foreign workers, Canadian citizens born outside of Canada, and persons with student or working visas. For purposes of settling in and rendering assistance, immigration settlement organizations tend to use the term in reference to ‘newcomers’ legally accepted into Canada. Under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (2001), persons may be selected to enter Canada as a permanent resident under one of three categories: family reunification, economic class or refugee. The term has however become somewhat of a contentious topic for persons in migrant communities, since it is felt by some that upon receiving citizenship status or after having lived in Canada for a certain number of years, they should no longer be regarded as immigrants. Like the women, I too had reservations about the use of the term. It is one that connotes the image of a non-white individual who migrated from a significantly poorer country to seek betterment in a wealthy one. The implication then is that an immigrant should eternally be grateful to her/his host country (and its white citizens). Additionally, the term also carries with it notions of an individual who is professionally and educationally challenged. However, while I am in objection to the use of the term, for the purposes of this paper, the use of the term immigrant will be in reference to the above Statscan definition and will include second-generation immigrants (children born in Canada to parents of immigrants).

‘Visible minority’ is classified and recognised by the Canadian government as persons other than Aboriginal peoples who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour (Statistics Canada, 2009). It is interesting to point out that in 2007, the Convention
on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination called on Canada to “reflect
further” on its use of the term. It is regarded by the UN anti-racism watchdog as being
discriminatory and racist, since the distinction which is being made on the basis of “race,
colour, or national or ethnic origin” not only positions whiteness as the norm but sets it
up as different from, and the standard against which all other ethnicities should be
judged (Canwest Media Publications, 2007). The use of the term is indeed troublesome,
for it immediately sets up the non-white person as the ‘other’, whose visibility is
heightened because of the colour of her skin. Like the term “immigrant”, “visible minority”
suggests a group of people or groups of people who occupy a socially less important
position in society compared to persons of white skin color. It is further problematic in the
sense that it robs persons labeled “visible minorities” of achieving a true sense of
Canadianess. Such persons are forever on the periphery – excluded because of their
visibility. The study uses the term “visible minority” in reference to persons of colour,
such as Black men and women and persons of South Asian ancestry who are visibly
non-white.

The term “racialized/racialization” is used to emphasize the socially constructed
nature of racial categories. Constructed as real, it is used in relation to the categorization
of race for purposes that inadvertently negatively impact the economic, social, and
political composition of society. Galabuzi points out that the process of racialization is
itself discriminatory as race takes on a matter of social significance when certain
biological features are used as the basis for designating distinct groupings. As such,
groupings become imbued with values that lead to socioeconomic practices, which
reflect and reinforce those values. It is these practices that are “responsible for the
differentiation in individual behavior and institutional practices, policies, treatment, and
the emergence of hierarchical structures that privilege some and oppress other
members of society” (2006, p.34).

Reference to the term ‘Black’ is used in the context of this paper to refer to the
group of people who identify with the term and for whom this identification springs from,
and reinforces, a sense of identity and belonging that extends beyond skin colour.
‘Black’ is also used in preference to prefixes that go with the label ‘African,’ since using
the term ‘African’ erroneously implies that (a) all the participants identify with or define
their cultural history to an African past and (b) that the individual's cultural history is recognizably foreign and can be distinctly, without thought or complexity, traced to a country somewhere on the African continent. This will be explicit in participants’ own reactions to use of the term, and making this decision was not an easy one. I was informed by a potential participant that she would not have participated had the criterion stated solely “African women” or “women of African descent,” rather than “Black women,” and I was also reminded by a participant of the painful and unpleasant memories of the past to which the category ‘Black’ is associated, a past that some Black people would rather forget. The emphasis that I have placed on the term Black, denoted through the use of a capitalised ‘B,’ is an attempt to represent the uniqueness of the cultural history of Black people, to recognize Black people’s struggle for legitimacy and to embrace a politics of identity – a politics of "becoming black" – and of black consciousness.

**Ambiguous Nature of Race and Ethnicity**

According to Statistics Canada (n.d.) the concept of *race* is “based primarily upon genetically imparted physiognomical features among which skin colour is a dominant, but not the sole, attribute” (StatsCan, n.d., para.2). Conceptualizing race from this perspective, would categorize people as being brown, black or white skin colour. StatsCan, however also pointed out that it is possible for an individual to be of “mixed races” (para.2). Researchers argue that the use of the term produces system of racism as it disadvantages people based on skin colour (Dua & Robertson, 1999; Ighodaro, 2006). Persons who are furthest away from the “white skin colour norm” are disadvantaged the most (Calliste and Dei, 2000, p.20). In this sense, race is determined to be socially constructed (Dua & Robertson, 1999; Ighodaro, 2006). Due to its emphasis on classifying individuals based on their physical attributes many researchers are not in agreement with the use of the category ‘race’ to classify individuals. Similarly, a number of persons object when referred to in these categories, as they find it to be derogatory.

Statistics Canada (n.d.) defines *ethnicity* as a multidimensional category that “includes aspects such as race, origin or ancestry, identity, language and religion. It may
also include more subtle dimensions such as culture, the arts, customs and beliefs and even practices such as dress and food preparation” (StatsCan, n.d., para.1). They noted that the concept of ethnicity is one that is dynamic and is subject to change as new identities are formed due to “immigration flows, blending and intermarriage” (para.1). Ethnic categories are reflective of ancestry, such as Chinese, Spanish, Lebanese, German, for example.

However, due to the ambiguity in the terms, they both tend to be used, especially in health research in ways that are unclear. Bhopal and Donaldson (1998), pointed out that in epidemiology, “minority groups are usually compared with populations described as White, Caucasian, European, Europid, Western, Occidental, indigenous, native, and majority. Such populations are heterogeneous, the labels nonspecific, and the comparisons misleading” (p.1303). This is a challenge faced by this research as it relates to the literature review. Throughout the empirical and analysis chapters, ethnicity is used in relation to ancestry of origin, such as South Asian and Aboriginal and the terms Black and white in reference to skin colour. In instances, research participants in reference to white individuals or persons of European ancestry use the term Caucasian. The uses of the categories are however not meant to be derogatory.

**Acculturation** is generally understood to mean the changes in cultural patterns that different groups undergo as a result of prolonged contact between individuals of and groups of different cultural backgrounds (Crespo et al. 2001; Sam 2006; Gerber et al 2012). Acculturation is therefore “often described as the process by which immigrants adopt the attitudes, values, customs, beliefs, behaviors, and the lifestyles of a new culture and the dominant society” (Gerber et al 2012). Furthermore, in the absence of more specific measures, researchers tend to measure acculturation using scales associated with factors such as age of migration, length of time since migration and language use (Evenson et al., 2004). Acculturation is also closely associated with the idea of the “healthy immigrant effect” which suggests that new immigrants have a health advantage over non-immigrants and even longer-term immigrants, as immigrants when they first arrive are generally healthier but then their health tends to deteriorate as they become acculturated.
Cardiovascular Disease (CVD) is a form of chronic disease that is caused by disorders of the heart and blood vessels. It includes coronary heart disease (heart attacks), cerebrovascular disease (stroke), raised blood pressure (hypertension), peripheral artery disease, rheumatic heart disease, congenital heart disease and heart failure. “The major causes of cardiovascular disease are tobacco use, physical inactivity, an unhealthy diet and harmful use of alcohol” (WHO n.d., para. 1)

Physical activity is any movement that causes the body to use energy (Caspersen, Powell & Christenson, 1985). It can be categorized into activities such as occupational, sport, leisure, domestic chores (yard and household work) and other forms of unstructured activities (Booth, 2000).

Exercise, as a subset of physical activity refers to activities that are planned, structured and repetitive. The objective of exercise is to improve and/or maintain an individual’s level of physical fitness (Caspersen et al., 1985).

Physical fitness is an individual’s ability to perform particular health-related or physical activity (Caspersen, 1989).
Chapter 1.

How it all began

Caught doing what I like to do best: Autoethnography at work

July 13 2011 - Spin Class – MRC Centre¹

Ideally this first entry should have been done on the day these incidents took place. Unfortunately, I had no idea at the time what I was about or even what exactly was taking place. I have since wrestled with some of these indecisions and uncertainties and believe that I am now in a place where I am ready to begin documenting.

Though intellectually I believe I know that an individual’s body size does not determine their level of health and fitness, in a more layman kind of way, I still believed that it did and to some extent, I still do. I am still wrestling with this. This for me means that an individual with a larger body size is less healthy and I dare say more fit than one who appears to subscribe to society’s norms of being “slim and trim.” Still holding this view, it was little wonder that when I bounded into my spin class and saw the substitute spin instructor, I wondered what in the world she was doing there? I immediately began to imagine that my workout was going to have been an effortless and non-tiring one – this considering that the new female instructor was more heavy set and robust (and appeared older) than me.

Much to my distraught and misery, I was almost murdered without a fighting chance right there on the spin cycle. I had to fight hard to keep up. Phew! What a workout it was! That being my first humbling lesson which sought to deconstruct my world of physical fitness and health.

¹ The MRC Centre is a pseudonym for the name of the fitness centre.
Thursday October 13, 2011 - Heart-Pumper

Delayed on campus so I rushed to get there on time. Was late but the instructor was later. I was acutely aware that I wasn’t feeling my best – gaseous and bloated from having not eaten until pretty late, due to meetings. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

The Thursday class had really grown. The studio was practically full but the regular “superstars”, as they had taken to calling themselves weren’t there. That was the other thing. It felt lonely without the regular vibes people. The energy wasn’t the same. I knew that despite how I felt, if the others were there, then I’d definitely be in a better mood.

2 newbies, 1 prodigal child. It was still a good session. I was however so conscious of my belly, bloated and sticking out beneath my top, I could hardly workout in peace – too conscious of my heaviness. I felt defeated! Was it really me or was it because I was so gassy? I knew that I had felt like I had lost weight and my clothes had started to fit better but now I wasn’t so sure. Sigh! The class ended but I wasn’t too sure of how much I got out of it. I felt too conscious of my own heavy body in the space to notice anything.

Saturday October 15, 2011 - Heart-Pumper

Late again! 2nd time in a row. I’m not normally late. The Aboriginal girl seem to be taking this Heart-Pumper thing serious, I’m beginning to think. Its always surprising when I see her there, participating in such a uniquely Caribbean space – obviously that’s my own stereotype and bias coming out. I know I shouldn’t but I couldn’t help thinking it every time I see her.

5 males present today but 1 was missing – 1 partner in crime. Otherwise, it was a room filled with mostly women of Caribbean descent, who had lots of energy. And oh, 2 kids; one who knows the various routines so well she could teach the class. The other child is a newbie.

2 Heart-Pumper is a pseudonym for the name of the class.
Woke up feeling pretty pumped about my decision to go to the gym today, I had been having feelings of guilt for having not consciously exercised in 2 weeks, so come what may, I knew I had to go. Since registering, I had been to the gym only once, so this time, it seemed like I was there for the first time. Its one of those gyms with a “women only” section, so even though I was accustomed to working out in a more co-ed atmosphere and I figured that i’d be pretty comfortable working out in the ‘male’ section, I still headed for the “She’s Fit” section of the gym.

The general section of the gym, to which I refer as the “male” section, as from the look of things and the fact that there is a dedicated space for women to exercise in confidence, meant therefore that the general or main section is for male patrons (my weird reasoning – cynical but rationally true, I thought). This area is much larger and hosts more types of equipment than She’s Fit. There were only a few persons working out there and among them only 2 women, I believe (note to self – take better note of these things). There was however a group class about to begin in the She’s Fit section. It was a “Hoist Roc It” class, noted to “push your cardio capabilities and challenge you in active rest stations…” It also involved the use of some of the cardio machines. The instructor, a small framed Asian girl wanted to know whether I’d be joining the class. I declined. I wanted to do my own thing. Noticeably though, was that the class consisted of older white women. That too, I think was a deterring factor for me – I needed more fun activities; excruciatingly absent from the list of group fitness classes offered by the gym.

There were a number of women exercising in the She’s Fit section, however, most of them using the cardio machines – treadmills, ellipticals and cycles. I joined them. There were no other Black women present except myself but there were South Asian and white women. About 15 minutes before I left, more women began to arrive, one of whom was Black. The gym was preparing to start another group class; a Speed Zone Circuit.” I was the only female in the weights section. I guess it must have been the time of day; 9:30/10 on a Tuesday morning. And then again, all the possible candidates were probably doing the Speed Zone. There are a number of things that I need to take better note of when I return the next few times.

3 TLC Fitness is a pseudonym for the name of the gym.
Exercising Reflexivity in Auto-ethnography

As these field notes reveal, the challenges of doing ethnographic research, especially reflexively, foreground the confrontation with power dynamics of both the researcher’s prejudices and biases, and the ones to which she is subject. For me, the process was one of constant self-evaluation met at times with rude awakening. A common feature of my entries is the day-to-day struggle with my own issues with sustaining physical activity and my consciousness of body within the spaces that ‘it’ often occupies – put bluntly, like my subjects’, I was black where Black was not expected to be.

How my body looked and the way it performed were important to me. It was important that a body – my body – move about and have the appearance of a body that is accustomed to physical activity. The fact that I work simultaneously in health sciences and cultural studies created tensions: my position in the health sciences, with its conviction about the importance of fitness to good health, and my position in cultural studies, understanding of the oppressive role of the very norms of that science. Neither of these did much to override the cultural perceptions that I found myself to harbour: ideas about what fitness means and what ‘fit’ bodies look like. Ideas that, in referencing Butler’s use of the term, have had time to “sediment” and become reified through my own ritualised practices (Manley 2013; Boucher 2006). I offer these field notes then not only to position a researcher in her own research, but also to highlight the influence of culture on how we all experience and interpret life.

I have also grappled with questions that have to do with cultural authority, appropriation, legitimacy and representation. In essence, who owns culture, who has the right to participate in cultural exchanges, and can cultural outsiders lay claims to authenticity in cultural representations? I remember vividly the day when a white young woman who had recently moved from Toronto introduced herself to a group of us (Caribbean people) as an instructor for a Caribbean-dance-based fitness class that had recently started in Vancouver. Her introduction led to an immediate audition. Sceptically, we asked her to “show us some of her moves,” a request that arose amidst larger
questions of authenticity, representation, and cultural ownership. Did this ‘outsider’ have the right to take a cultural artifact and express it as though it was her own? Moreover, if allowed, could she do so without distorting its form? This crystalized a more diffuse observation I had made. When I began pouring through my notes I was not so surprised that all along I have been describing my “awe” at the fact that the Caribbean fitness classes around the city had begun attracting more and more enthusiasts who were of neither Caribbean nor African ancestry.

My “awe” at the fact that outsiders, to what is locally an extremely tiny culture, felt sufficiently comfortable to want to continue being a part of the cultural experience complicated the discussions of ‘belongingness,’ especially regarding the heightened sense of self that persons often experience when they engage in foreign spaces. Women from visible minority groups often talk about the fact that we tend to experience a sense of ‘un-belonging’ when we perform in predominantly ‘white’ spaces, but that somehow does not appear to be the case when reversed – or so it seemed to us, especially when white bodies confidently occupied “Black Space”. Indeed, there is a longstanding anger among racial minorities who create meaningful cultural forms only to have these musical, dance, or fashion styles taken over in dominant (white) culture. The case of dance classes marketed as “fitness” blurs the lines of cultural consumption earmarked for, or deemed ‘natural,’ for white bodies and for Black bodies. I acknowledge my scepticism as a form of insecurity about cultural ownership and, as I recorded in my field notes, I am aware that some of my perceptions about who owns these movements are perhaps grounded in my own biases thus creating a conflicted position for an insider/outsider concerned to unpack questions of the role of cultural representation and authenticity in framing Black women’s experience of fitness.

While I was struggling with questions concerning power and the influence of power dynamics between researcher and the researched, I was caught by surprise at my reaction to an axis of power that I did not remember experiencing: sexism in the gym. In an article published in the Queen’s University Journal on January 14, 2014 that carried the caption “No Gents at Ryerson Gym!,” I remember scoffing at the headline, feeling angry, and then becoming defensive. A search revealed that the article was among a few that had carried the story of the controversy around a request by female
students to introduce “women only gym hours” at one of Ryerson’s athletics facilities. Not a new initiative, female only options have been around for quite some time but continue to receive all-round opposition. The initiative itself was a new experience for me, having been exposed only to co-ed fitness facilities most of my life. When I started out in my fieldwork, a women only facility was among the sites that I visited. I admit that it did feel strange. While I felt that I understood the need for it, it did not resonate with me – it was not my experience. I was comfortable either way. Now, reflecting on my field notes, I somehow feel as though the attitude of the gym was the same. The ‘women only’ section of the gym feels like an afterthought, a token: women do not really belong here but since we are all into equal rights and stuff, let us give them their own little space where they can work out without men. On the other hand, it could also be that it makes better economic sense, since more women are increasingly participating in physical activities outside the home. The fact that I do not share the experience of women who need the comfort and security of an all women facility or space in which to be active does not mean that it is not a legitimate concern for some women, some of whom were involved in this study and whose voices need to be heard.

As a researcher committed to feminist research, it was important for me to be sensitive of these situational dynamics between my participants and me. Using autoethnography as a methodological tool allowed me to explore these differences in depth. I was able to use my own experiences to reflexively look in depth at the interaction between myself and the participants in my study while being cognizant of the fact that we were, together, producers of the knowledge that we sought to produce. Through autoethnography I was given permission to use my personal experiences to tell the stories of women whose voices have been absent from a critical body of work.

Physical Activity: A love hate relationship

For much of my adult life — well, as far back as my mid-twenties — I have found myself participating in some activity or another; physical activity has always felt like an important thing for me to do. I would not go as far as to say that physical activity gave my life purpose or meaning but it felt good; it felt good to be able to respond when
asked, "oh yes, I go to the gym" or "I do exercise," but better yet, it felt good when I saw weight loss results, which perhaps was a primary motivator for me. The truth is, I have a love-hate relationship with physical activity. I love that it makes me feel good about myself but I often hate the commitments that I have had to make ‘just’ to be active. Whereas prior to leaving my home country I had never felt that financial constraints were a limiting factor to being able to be active because I had been gainfully employed, I find that now, my options for physical activity tend to revolve around my financial status. I now consider being physically active a financial commitment in itself. The truth though, is that the hardest commitments I have had to make concerning physical activity have only occurred since my move to Canada. It was hard heading out to the gym on a cold morning and even harder getting into ‘workout mode’ in an environment that felt cold and void of a friendly face. Nevertheless, I have somehow managed to keep going. The ‘managed to keep going’ part is what brought me to this particular area of research.

One of the first things that I did when I registered for the doctoral program at my new university was to start working out at the gym – the facility was huge and had everything an enthusiast could ask for; I was there by 7:30am every other morning except weekends, right through fall and winter. I hated the cold but I layered up and made my way by transit to the campus on the mountain. By year two, my enthusiasm began to wane and I hated everything about my workout at the gym. However, I wanted to keep going so I joined an outdoor fitness boot camp that started at 6:30am. Through the cold and the rain I got there 5 days per week. I loved that boot camp until I realised that this “thing” was no longer financially possible. A year or so later, after going intermittently to save some money, I finally stopped completely. I was left trying to figure out other sensible and economical ways to work out, and between the loss of my beloved boot camp and now, I must have tried a million types of workouts at various fitness facilities in Vancouver (indoor and outdoor). When these were impossible, I managed to work out on my own, even though my drive for solo workouts is often lacking and I do better when there is an instructor shouting commands at me.

Although I started my journey through the workout culture of Vancouver mainly to keep myself fit and sane, I soon noticed that I was not seeing many women of African descent in the places where I worked out. This did not bother me until I began working
on a project on immigration, physical activity, and cardiovascular disease, where epidemiological evidence continually argued that a lack of physical activity among women of African descent and Black women was a major cause of morbidity in this “population.” According to the literature, Black women were less likely to be physically active than women of other ethno/cultural groups, with the exception of women of South Asian descent. While this literature offered cultural, social, and economic reasons why this might be so, I was not fully convinced because I knew that I was not the only Black woman who was physically active. It was not possible that barriers to exercise worked to universally stop Black women from fending off cardiovascular disease with fitness. In fact, I have seen other Black women working out, doing activities at their own pace and working up a sweat – they were just in smaller numbers. I decided that I needed to find these women, talk to them, and hear what it was that set them apart from the large percentage of women that the literature kept telling me was inactive and therefore at high risk of disease. I needed to hear their stories and, by joining my own voice with theirs, create a venue for stories of active Black women to be heard. I wanted to: (1) break the stereotypes about Black women and physical activity, and (2) act as a guide to direct and shape public policy and programmes aimed at encouraging greater physical activity participation among Black women. More than anything, I wanted to be able to challenge the literature with my version of, “Black women are physically active, we just need to find out what it is they are doing.”

Thus, to get a better understanding of Black women’s participation in physical activity, I employed feminist cultural studies and integrated critical insights from anti-race theory, Black Feminist scholarship, and Postcolonial Feminist scholarship as a critical framework for the study. Since the major concern of the study was to explore the ways in which physically active Black women made negotiations related to their participation in physical activity, I also investigated the women’s understandings of physical activity, their perceptions on the importance of physical activity, as well as the strategies they employed in their attempts at being physically active.
Background and Context

"Eighty-five percent of adults and 93% of children and youth are not meeting Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines" (Active Canada 20/20).

Concern about the relationship between physical activity and health is not new.⁴ However, since the early to mid-1990s, there has been increasing attention directed to its association with rising cardiovascular disease, mortality, and morbidity rates (Pate et al. 1995). This sparked renewed attempts by researchers and public health officials to re-evaluate policies and recommendations around physical activity and physical activity guidelines (Pate et al. 1995; Tremblay et al. 2011).

Until the 2007 to 2009 Canadian Health Measures Survey (CHMS), which used accelerometers to collect objective measures of physical activity for a nationally representative sample of Canadians, information on physical activity trends came from self-reported data (Colley et al. 2011). However, these latter data indicated that over half the population (52.5%) was sufficiently physically active, and trends in obesity and overall fitness showed a decline (Colley et al. 2011). Using the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines⁵ as a benchmark, the findings of the CHMS revealed that only 15% of Canadians (17% men and 14% women) were sufficiently physically active to derive any significant health benefits (2011).

While the CHMS findings sought to understand the gap in the discrepancies between physical activity participation rates and disease prevalence for the general population, relatively little was known about the distribution of cardiovascular disease risk across ethnic populations in Canada. Emerging research however, is indicating the existence of disparities between ethnic groups (Chiu 2010; Chiu et al. 2012). The studies

⁴ See Pate et al. (1995) for a concise discussion of the epidemiologic research on physical activity.

⁵ See the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) webpage for detailed information on Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines and Canadian Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines.
found that when a comparison was made between the Chinese, South Asian, White and Black populations residing in Ontario, the Black population had the least favourable overall cardiovascular risk profile (Chiu 2010). Whereas Chinese and South Asian women were more likely to be physically inactive than the overall population, Black women were more likely to be physically inactive and obese than the overall population (Chiu 2010). Similar Canadian research indicates that Black women and South Asian women, in comparison to White women, were least likely to be moderately to highly active (Bryan et al. 2006). Findings such as these (Bryan et al 2006 and Chiu 2010) are consistent with the findings of studies done on ethnic populations in the US.6

In addition, studies also indicate that not only were Black women less likely to participate in physical activities outside the home, they were less knowledgeable about physical activity (Nies et al., 1999; Shea et al. 1991; Wilcox et al., 2002). Researchers have suggested that even if Black women are aware of the benefits of physical activity, the multiplicity of barriers that they face on a daily basis act as a deterrent to their participation in physical activity (Joseph et al. 2015). The factors responsible for their low participation rates have included lack of time and financial resources, poor accessibility to exercise facilities, fulfilling the demands of maternal and occupational roles, concern for physical safety, perception of physical activity, and psychosocial factors, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and lack of social support (Bopp et al., 2004, 2006; Eyler et al. 1998; Eyler et al., 2002; Im et al., 2013; Walcott-McQuigg et al., 2001).

While many of these factors affect women generally, irrespective of ethnicity, Black women’s experience as racialized minorities have put them at a particular disadvantage. Historic racism rooted in chattel slavery continues to breathe life into longstanding cultural stereotypes that exploit and subordinate Black women. White settler societies still hold entrenched beliefs that produce forms of racial segregation that extend from material ones in which Black persons are relegated to particular labour market locations, to cultural and symbolic ones where Blackness marks cultural and

intellectual deficiencies, hyper-sexuality, and violence. Even among groups of persons of color, colonialism’s legacy still awards preferential treatment to persons of lighter skin tones – that is, those who are white or closer to white than to Black – over darker skinned individuals. This doubling of historical power relations (the racializing and sexualizing of Black women) still influences individual behaviour and values, as well as institutional policies and practices. This doubling spills over into social and political understandings of Black women’s status as immigrants; when people who are of non-white European descent relocate in white settler societies they are immediately and sometimes forever identified and labeled as ‘immigrants’ even though their families may have lived in the settled space as long as, or longer than, white residents.

As a matter of political, social, cultural, and economic convenience for white residents, the label ‘immigrant’ extends to any individuals who are visibly non-white, including those who are Canadian born, sending the message that such individuals “do not belong,” and blurring the ideas of “immigrant” and “minority” in relation to a dominant, and presumptively white and long-resident population.

The research on physical activity is confusing to read because most of it also falls prey to these labels and categorizations, sometimes using the terms immigrant and Black to mean the same thing, or making little distinction between persons who are Canadian-born and those who migrated from elsewhere. When the data is presented we get a distorted picture of how these populations participate in, or make decisions around, physical activity and in particular, how minorities/immigrants experience the social worlds in which physical activity is supposed to occur.

However, even as researchers attempt to get a better sense of the basis for the disparities, they duplicate the problem; while they often identify cultural factors as the underlying cause of low rates of physical activity participation, they work from hidden evaluations that position one culture as superior to another (i.e. good culture versus bad

7 For instance, in “Black Skin, White Masks”, Fanon was critical of the representation of Black bodies as inferior to white bodies – of colour prejudice – and of the signifiers which depicted the Negro as dirty, savage, intellectually deficient and licentious.
culture) thus obscuring the diversity within ethnic groups, as well as failing to challenge the power dynamics behind cultural variability within a settler society like Canada’s. Actually, this more culturally attuned research identified what has been called “the healthy immigrant effect.” The finding that the health status of a majority of immigrants at the time of their arrival in the country tends to be high but subsequently declines and converges towards that of the Canadian-born population was identified by researchers as having an influence on the lifestyle behaviour of immigrant populations (Newbold, 2005; Tremblay et al., 2006). According to the body of research, the gradual decline in immigrants’ health, a stark contrast to that which is observed when they first arrive in the country, is primarily attributable to the uptake of unhealthy behaviours upon settlement in the host country (Newbold, 2005). Though in this picture where the evidence is reversed, the implication remains the same — that some cultures are superior to others. More precisely, immigrant cultures/societies practice better health behaviours than North American societies. A further challenge also arises in this model; in attempting to account for the disparities in health between immigrant and non-immigrant populations, the emphasis placed on “the healthy immigrant effect” obscures settlement challenges faced by “newcomers” and ignores the extent to which the immigration process screens out people with lower health status in a variety of ways. In discussing the former, McDonald and Kennedy (2004) note that the presumption that recent immigrants are healthier than non-immigrants, or immigrants of longer years of residence, could also be due to factors such as unfamiliarity with the healthcare system and lack of a family doctor, resulting in under-utilization of healthcare facilities and subsequently unreported cases.

I do not want to continue the debate on the “healthy immigrant” effect, however, I note it here because it accelerated the pace for research on the influence of immigration on migrants— work that carried problematic assumptions about cultural differences into research that on the surface seemed concerned about immigrants’ health. This latter research is what propels studies like this one, which asks in part, on whose behalf do we

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8 For a comprehensive discussion on the utilization rates of health services by immigrant and non-immigrant populations as well as a discussion on the impact of Canada’s Immigration Law on the immigration process, see Laroche, (2000).
research health? The legacy of the “healthy immigrant” research seems to further stigmatize immigrants because they fail to sustain their “good health.” Despite the interest in understanding the ethnic disparities around physical activity, very few studies have explored the meanings, beliefs and values held by Black women about physical activity (Bopp et al. 2004, 2006; Joseph et al. 2015; Nies et al., 1999; Walcott-McQuigg et al. 2001).

In this small project, instead of asking whether Black women are better or worse off after they migrate, I chose instead to understand the behaviour patterns, and their associated meanings, for a small group of highly active Black women. For instance, in societies and cultures where body weight is indicative of success or failure, the fear of being skinny may be a deterrent to physical activity; since, for most citizens of the global south, migrating to a ‘more developed’ country in the global north should be accompanied by success and a better way of life, it is generally expected that having migrated, the individual will “put on a little weight” after being in the host country for a period of time. Though not intentional, it nevertheless signals to family and friends “back home” that life is good with you in your new home. In considering the relationship between the practices and ideas before and after migrating, I hope to uncover the features that have made it not only possible, but pleasurable, to find ways over the long haul to, in their words, “work up a sweat.” In this sense, the women represented in this study are models not just for Black immigrant women who need to get active, but for all Canadians who seem unable to follow their government’s exercise guidelines.

Rationale

The framing of sedentary lifestyle and lack of physical activity by health researchers as a major cause of morbidity and mortality among populations of people, in particular visible minority immigrant populations, has resulted in discourses which:

(1) Weights the culture of the dominant society as superior to that of immigrants;
(2) Sends a message that immigrants have a distinct (and static) culture that is different from that of the ‘dominant’ culture and;

(3) Points to the cultural practices and behavioural choices of immigrants as the ‘problem’ that must be addressed in order to tackle cardiovascular diseases.

These inferences are particularly troubling in that, as Hall (n.d.) noted, when associations are repeated over time, they become part of the “sedimented collective” (p.5). They become taken for granted and are used without even thinking, subsequently helping to reproduce discourses of oppression (Hall, n.d.). This affixes negative stereotypes onto the visible minority immigrant whose experiences are often misunderstood.

My thesis rests on the notion that if healthy lifestyles are to be achieved and maintained, it is necessary that the research into the relationship between physical activity and Black women employ a feminist cultural studies framework that allows it to integrate Black and anti-racist perspectives best suited to unpack the historical-cultural specificity of Black women’s experiences. Though there is a growing body of research, much of the emphasis has (1) been placed on the multiplicity of challenges that the women face, and (2) been positioned from a purely epidemiological perspective. My point of departure from this research rests on the argument that:

(1) Current research places emphasis on the Black woman who is less active. Thus, the larger issue concerning the experiences of the women who participate in forms of physical activity remain unknown. With this in mind, a concern of this study is to address the issue of the exclusion of women’s voices in the production of knowledge.

(2) Research needs to shift emphasis away from a strictly epidemiological perspective to embrace a feminist cultural studies approach that is more geared towards a concern for the women in the context of “their everyday lives, as shaped by their histories - as members of a particular society” (Krieger, 1994, p. 896). The challenge with using a strictly epidemiological framework has to do with the fact that at the foundation of epidemiology rests a biomedical model that has maintained a closed system of power and prestige. It ignores the presence of social hierarchies such as gender and race and “how such relationships
mediate an individual’s power, personal agency, and available choices related to their health. As such, it does not concern itself with the meanings, beliefs and values held about physical activity by the women per se, but with the occurrence and prevalence of physical activity/inactivity across population groups.

Alternatively, a feminist cultural studies approach provides a framework for examining the socio-cultural conditions physically active Black women confront as well as how they make meaning of their (new) social order. Of particular interest are cultural influences upon their exercise experiences and the ways in which they challenge, disrupt, and/or reconstruct dominant cultural perceptions of the place of physical activity in their lives. Furthermore, given feminist cultural studies’ concern with the ways in which, “culture reproduces certain forms of racism, sexism and biases against members of subordinate classes” (Hammer and Kellner, 2009, p.xiii), its use in this research is necessary to enhance our understanding of how these affect the physical activity experiences of the women as well as how they make negotiations around them. Additionally, an important point to note is that the perceived health benefits of physical activity in the medical discourse may not necessarily be in-sync with cultural dictates or the cultural interpretations that the women have of physical activity. Thus, where-as the health research positions the uptake of physical activity as a significant factor for improving one’s health (reducing cardiovascular and chronic disease risk), they may not necessarily articulate the women’s participation or non-participation in physical activity as such. In this way, a feminist cultural studies framework is useful in highlighting the cultural contexts governing Black women’s physical activity behaviours for it can critically take stock of the ways in which Black women experience and make meaning of physical activity in their lives. With this in mind, the following questions guided my research:

- What are the meanings and benefit(s) of physical activity to the women?
- How do these meanings affect the place of physical activity in their lives?
- How do black women experience physical activity in a “western” cultural context?
- What are the negotiations involved in being able to incorporate physical activity as a part of their every-day lifestyle?
What has been the impact of having frameworks that emphasize culture on public health strategies?

Organization

This study consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 provides a brief discussion into the impetus for this study. Using ethnographical writings, it gives the reader permission to venture into the world of the researcher and to experience physical activity through her eyes. Chapter 2 presents the literature relevant to the study by engaging in a discussion of some of the theoretical frameworks that researchers have used to analyse physical activity. The chapter also discusses the theoretical frameworks used to guide this study. Chapter 3 presents the methods employed to answer the research question. It takes the reader through the design of the study, the selection of participants, the procedure for the data collection, the analysis of data and the measures undertaken to ensure the credibility of the study. Chapter 4 provides the reader with a brief discussion of the participants and their various journeys with physical activity. It brings the reader into a closer relationship with the women through their stories. Chapter 5 begins the discussion on the findings of the study and provides a context for understanding how the participants make meaning of physical activity. The discussion in chapter 6 revolves around the women’s physical activity experiences in a white settler society. It grapples with issues of racism and (un)belonging and discusses some of the strategies employed by the women as a way of keeping physically active. Chapter 7 takes the research a step further by highlighting the nuances around the application of cultural or culturally sensitive models as a remedy for culturally determined behaviour. The final chapter, chapter 8, engages in a discussion that reviews the findings of the study and neatly brings all the sections together. It also discusses the limitations and challenges of the research and makes recommendations for future studies.
Chapter 2.

Theorizing Physical Activity and Immigrant Women

The discussion in this chapter is broken down into three sections. Section I provides an in-depth discussion of the components of physical activity and talks about the recommendations for physical activity based on the 2011 Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines. The section then moves into a discussion of the predictors of physical activity for different population groups based on gender and ethnicity. It concludes the section by exploring some of the discussions pertaining to the issues with using a purely epidemiological framework.

Section II provides an overview of key psychological theories that have been instrumental in guiding the understandings of ethnic minority women’s participation in physical activity. While the two theories referenced are not exhaustive, the author finds that the tenets on which they are built offers insight, from a psychological perspective, into the physical activity practices for Black women.

Lastly, section III brings the topic under investigation together by engaging in a discussion that locates the study within a feminist cultural studies framework. It first lays the groundwork with a discussion around the historical perception of Black women’s bodies, particularly as it relates to the physically active body. The section then builds on this by exploring in more detail, the critical theories that the study relied on to investigate Black women’s participation in physical activity.
SECTION I: UNDERSTANDING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

*Breaking it down: The Science of Physical Activity*

The 2011 Canadian Physical activity Guidelines recommend that for health benefit, adults should accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week. These recommendations come at a time when researchers across the globe are beginning to identify inactivity and a sedentary lifestyle as being high risk factors responsible for the increase in cardiovascular diseases. Epidemiologic studies emanating in Canada also suggest that the increase in the disease’s prevalence is related to a decrease in physical activity and fitness levels of Canadians (Shields et al., 2010; Colley et al., 2011; Tremblay et al., 2011).

In addition to the physical activity guidelines, The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) also released a free downloadable and interactive handbook where Canadians are encouraged to ‘get active’. The 32-page booklet includes strategies that individuals and families can adopt in order to “plan to be physically active every day, using the Guidelines” (CSEP, n.d., para.1). It includes examples of activities as well as a physical activity logbook that individuals can use to keep track of their activities. The examples of physically activity given include an array such as dancing, walking, and running, playing fetch with the dog, taking a more active commute to work/school and taking the stairs rather than the elevator. The approach taken by CSEP is one that signals to the public that it is not difficult to adopt a physically active lifestyle. It further dispels notions of physical activity as structured forms of activities. Instead, it promotes physical activity as everyday activities that a person can enjoy doing.

Physical activity is also done to achieve physical fitness. Whereas CSEP (n.d.) encourages Canadians to reduce sedentary time by becoming more physically active, the recommendations for activity duration, intensity and frequency attempt to ensure that individuals (1) achieve physical fitness and (2) reduce their risks for diseases. While parking further away from the supermarket and leisurely walking the distance would be
considered as physical activity, there would be no significant health benefits, such as
disease risk reduction, unless it involved a brisk walk that led to increased
breathing/heart rate. Additionally, in order to reap significant health benefits, experts
advise that activities should be done for a specific amount of time ranging anywhere
from 10 – 60 minutes at a time and performed at least 2-3 times per week. It is at this
point that professionals are able to determine whether individuals are sufficiently
physically active.

While physical fitness can be achieved through various forms of everyday
physical activities (housework, walking, hiking, etc.), it can also be achieved through
exercise. The difference is that the latter involves activities that are intentional, planned,
structured, and repetitive. In this sense, the activities are done in a purposive manner to
improve and/or maintain components of physical fitness (see figure 1 below) as a goal
(Caspersen, Powell & Christenson, 1985). Including weight training as part of a weekly
physical activity program is implemented with the intention of improving and maintaining
muscular strength. Unfortunately, the ‘ordinary’ person does not always understand the
difference between physical activity and exercise. This sometimes results in the
perception of physical activity as either hard work or boring – a notion that CSEP is
working to dispel through its Handbook. An additional challenge is that oftentimes
individuals use the terms interchangeably to convey the same meaning. Booth (2000)
suggests that this could simply be because both terms may be understood differently
across cultures and among different groups. However, it could also be indicative of the
gap that exists between epidemiological knowledge and ‘lay’ understandings of physical
activity, the latter often imbued with cultural values. Thus while physical activity experts
use ‘neutral’ measurements of physical activity, borrowed from the natural sciences, to
assess and promote physical activity participation at the population level, the
significance of these activities may be culturally driven. For instance, if a culture
perceives physical activity as frivolous play or as a waste of valuable time, strategies to
promote physical activity may be ignored.
Within the context of exercise, physical activity is performed to enhance physical performance. For example, professional athletes undertake specific activities aimed at improving performance related attributes, such as increasing power, agility, speed, coordination and flexibility (Donatelle and Thompson, 2015). At the same time, there has been an increasing trend among recreational exercisers to participate in more performance enhancing styles of physical activity drills, such as those best accomplished through interval training. While the reasons for this increased trend may not be clear, a possible explanation may rest with the lack of clarity among the terms.

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9 Interval training focuses on engaging the exerciser in using short bursts of concentrated energy to perform specific activities, such as running, swimming, cycling at maximum intensity with recovery periods in between. More precisely, it "involves performing multiple repetitive exercise or work bouts that are broken up by active or passive recovery periods. By alternating repetitions of higher intensity with easier recovery periods, a tremendous amount of higher-intensity work can be undertaken — well beyond what could be accomplished in a continuous workout. Exercise intervals and recovery periods can range from a few seconds to several minutes depending on the workout objective" (Roy, 2014, p.3). Thus for many persons, the appeal of interval training is that it allows an exerciser to complete an intense workout in a shorter period of time than would a more moderately paced workout.
and misunderstandings about physical activity. If for instance, persons perceive physical activity as something that should be intense in order for it to be beneficial, then there is a greater likelihood that they will also believe that the greater the intensity of the activity, the more beneficial it will be for them.

Summary

The purpose of this section was to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of the concepts of physical activity. Physical activity is any movement of the body's musculature. The goal of physical activity is to achieve a level of physical fitness that is beneficial to the maintenance of good health and thus an absence of disease. CSEP (n.d.) encourages physical activity as part of daily living and promotes it as participation in activities that are enjoyable and activities that can be easily achieved (walking, jogging, biking and playing with the kids). As a subset of physical activity, exercise refers to activities that are structured and repetitive, such as sports and conditioning activities like weight training exercises that enhance and maintain muscle strength. A central argument of this section is that much of the time, the difference between physical activity and exercise is not clearly understood by 'ordinary' individuals who are constantly being encouraged to participate in physical activity. The result is a gap in knowledge between the experts and the 'lay' or 'ordinary' person further complicating understandings around 'the doing' of physical activity. The influence of these understandings will be examined in the next section through a review of the literature as it relates to the evidence around physical activity participation rates across population groups.

Population Characteristics and Physical Activity

Determinants of physical activity vary across populations based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, sex, socio-economic status, and education. Studies reveal that physical activity levels decline with age (Cleland, 2012; Miles, 2007; & Troiano et al., 2007). For instance, Belcher et al. (2010) found that among children and adolescents,
more time was spent engaging in physical activity among groups of 6-11 year olds than among groups of 12-15 years old. Irrespective of gender, there tends to be a decline in physical activity among children as they reach adolescence. Older adolescents were the least active (Miles, 2007). The number of hours spent engaging in physical activity also decreases when individuals reach adulthood, and as they age. The data further reveals that age is closely associated with gender, as discussed below:

In general, across all age groups, males spend more hours per week involved in physical activity than girls (Sagatun et al., 2008; Troiano et al., 2007). For girls, being younger was more favourably associated with physical activity (Roth and Stamatakis, 2010). There was a sharp decline in physical activity particularly among adolescent girls than among adolescent boys (Miles, 2007; Troiano et al., 2007). However, after adolescence, men were most physically active between 16-24 years while women were most active between 35-44 years (Miles, 2007). Cleland, Dwyer, & Venn (2012) hypothesised that the general decline in physical activity between adolescent and adulthood may be “because the support and organisational structures that schools provide for physical activity are no longer available” (p.599). Cleland et al. (2012) further suggested that physical activity adherence might have been highest among adults who, during their school years, had allocated time to participate in physical activity away from school. Children, on the other hand, who had engaged in less physical activity outside of school may not “perceive physical activity as a priority and therefore may not feel encouraged to participate in physical activity” or “may not be in the habit of spending their discretionary time being active” (p.600).

Whereas gender and age have been shown to be associated with physical activity levels, social-ecological studies have also pointed to a correlation between socio-economic status (SES) and physical activity participation, especially among women (Ball et al., 2006; Crespo et al., 2000; Dowler, 2001;). SES, commonly measured by household income, educational attainment, or occupation, is a key determinant of health inequalities. It influences health behaviour through a variety of, or through specific mechanisms (social, environmental and intrapersonal factors), that may be independent of individual income. For instance, Ball et al. (2006) found that negative early-life physical activity experiences, especially among low – mid SES women often predicted
their participation in physical activity in later years; they were often not highly motivated to engage in physical activity.

Furthermore, while they found that lack of motivation was also common to all SES groups, neither perceived lack of facilities nor cost as major barriers to physical activity (Ball et al., 2006). These findings were consistent with studies done by Giles-Corti and Donovan (2002) who found that physical activity participation was also low among persons of low SES even when they had good access to physical activity facilities. Studies also indicate that like income, the attainment of various levels of educational may be associated with varying levels of perceived benefits of physical activity (Cerin and Leslie, 2008). An individual’s level of education may therefore influence their “capacity to seek, understand, internalize, and act upon” physical activity messages (p.2597). The research suggested that individuals with higher disposable income might choose to reside in areas that are more conducive to physical activity. Similarly, while higher educated individuals seek to live in communities that promote and foster active lifestyles they were also more likely to enjoy the support of family and friends who share similar values around physical activity (Cerin & Leslie, 2008).

**Summary**

Understanding the factors that influence whether or not people participate in physical activity is complex. As the above studies show, some of these factors might be individually based, such as age and gender, or others might be socially determined, such as is the case with socio-economic status (SES). Based on the evidence presented, both age and gender were associated with physical activity participation rates. While participation rates declined in both genders during and after adulthood, participation rates for males were consistently higher than for females during childhood and into adulthood (Miles, 2007; Sagatun et al., 2008; Troiano et al., 2007). According to the research, the declines might be related to changes in the support and organizational structure between school and adulthood, childhood physical activity participation, as well as added maternal and familial responsibilities for females (Miles,
Socio-economic status was also shown to be associated with physical activity participation rates. However, while levels of both education and income had an influence on whether or not individuals chose to be active, studies indicated that an individual’s level of motivation was also a major determinant (Ball et al., 2006; Cerin & Leslie, 2008). The upcoming sections will address other factors, such as immigration, race, and ethnicity that are pertinent to this study.

Physical Activity and Immigration

As was discussed in chapter 1, the literature on physical activity and immigration has pointed to the influence of the “healthy immigrant effect” as a factor responsible for the disparities between recent immigrants, longer-term immigrants, and non-immigrants (Newbold, 2005; Tremblay et al., 2006). Both a longer residence in the host country and language acculturation was suggested as significantly affecting the way in which immigrants participate in physical activity (Dogra et al., 2010; Tremblay et al., 2006). Dawson et al. (2005) found that among women in Sweden, there was a correlation between length of migration and levels of physical activity. Women who had recently migrated spent less time on physical activity than those who had been residents for a longer period of time. This, however, was not the case among men. Likewise, Somali women who had migrated to and lived in the United States for 10 years and longer were more likely to be physically active than those who had migrated less than 10 years ago (Devlin et al., 2012). The researchers suggested that moral norms that prohibit Somalian women from exercising in public or in Western-style clothing were a primary barrier to their physical activity participation (Devlin et al., 2012).

Other studies identified language acculturation as being associated with physical activity participation rates among Latin American women in the United States. Evenson et al. (2004) found that for Latina women English language acculturation was positively associated with physical activity. According to their research, Latinas who had arrived in the United States prior to age 25 had higher English language acculturation than those
who had arrived after age 25. Those who had higher English Language acculturation reported being more physically active than those who had arrived in their later years (Evenson et al., 2004).

Research also points to a relationship between gender, cultural values and beliefs about physical activity as influencing immigrant women’s attitude towards physical activity. In their study, Im and Choe (2001) reported that among a sample of Korean immigrant women, physical activity was viewed broadly as “all human activities and functions” (p.574). The researchers suggested that the women’s definition reflected Korea’s holistic view about the mind, health, and body. It was also reflected in their perception of health as positive, necessary and pertinent to both mind and body (2001). According to the researchers, this view contrasted with the biological view of Western medicine (2001). The women also perceived exercise as separate from physical activity. Exercise was regarded as a specific type of physical activity that was “purposeful, recreational, and enjoyable” (p.574). The women indicated that due to lack of time, they lacked exercise but felt their roles and responsibilities kept them sufficiently physically active. Additionally, the women’s beliefs about the negative impact of physical activity on a woman’s health during and immediately after childbirth caused some of the women to stay away from forms of physical activity during early and post pregnancy (Im & Choe, 2001).

The findings of Im and Choe’s (2001) study were similar to studies done by Eyler et al., 1998; Juarbe et al., 2003; and Södergren et al., 2008. These studies found that cultural values and beliefs also determined immigrant women’s attitudes towards physical activity as well as their participation in forms of physical activity. While the women in the study by Eyler et al. (1998) did not identify themselves as exercisers, they felt that they got adequate physically active from the work that they did in and outside the home. Similarly, Juarbe et al. (2003) explored the belief and behaviour patterns of Mexican immigrant women to the U.S. The study revealed that the women had “little or no desire” (p.112) to engage in regular physical activity due to their overwhelming responsibilities inside and outside the home. Furthermore, they felt that cultural values and beliefs about physical activity and sexuality made it difficult for them to exercise, as exercise was regarded by partners/spouses and family members as harmful to women’s
reproductive health. Additionally, they felt that exercise leads to a “physical image that is incongruent with motherhood” (p.112). Furthermore, since traditional Mexican culture dictated that motherhood was to take centre stage, the expectation was that married women and women who had children should not have a desire to look ‘sexy’ nor attractive (Juarbe et al., 2003).

An important cultural component that may hinder or influence immigrant women’s participation in physical activity has to do with the appropriateness of the exercise activity. In the study by Södergren et al., (2008) they focused on exploring preferred forms of physical activity and the appropriateness for immigrant women to Sweden. Södergren et al. (2008) indicated that the women in the study felt that some activities were more proper than others were. Since, for a number of the women, leisure-time 10 physical activity and the act of going to a gym to exercise was a new experience, they often judged an activity as proper if they knew that others had performed it. Exercises where women had to stand in front of men were considered by the women from Iraq and Turkey to be a sin. Thus, any such activity was avoided. The challenge for the women were related to issues of feeling comfortable in the space, feeling confident in gym wear, feeling normal not wearing a veil, and not feeling exposed (Södergren et al., 2008). Being in a women-only facility or at an activity dedicated only for women however, gave them comfort and freedom (Södergren et al., 2008). The women also indicated that it was important that they plan their exercises close to their homes and around times that did not conflict with their duties at home.

10 Though conscious participation in physical activity for purposes of health is not entirely new (Shelley McKenzie (2013) documents the rise of fitness culture in America, since the Cold War), physical activity conceptualised as leisure has been a much more recent phenomenon; one that is being increasingly promoted and implemented by countries, as they develop into more urban spaces. The emphasis on ‘active living’ for seniors, for instance, is an attempt by governments in more developed countries to get older individuals who would otherwise not have any reason be active, to be up and about. Likewise, the explosion of walking/running groups and running events throughout the year in Caribbean countries, such as Jamaica signals a move towards embracing physical activity for health as leisure.
Physical Activity and Ethnicity

Ethnicity is one of the many factors that researchers have pointed to as having a bearing on physical activity patterns across all age groups. Studies indicate that the white population was more physically active than other ethnic groups (Crespo et al., 2000; Dogra et al., 2010; Lee & Im, 2010; Liu et al., 2010). Data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (2000/1) revealed that of the Canadian population that was surveyed, 49% of whites were physically active in comparison to 40% Latinos, 39% East/Southeast Asian, 38% Black, 36% West Asian/Arab and 34% South Asian. Aboriginal men and women had the highest prevalence of being physically active (Bryan et al., 2006).

Several studies have attempted to account for the disparities between ethnic groups. In the study by Crespo et al. (2000), they concluded that socio-economic status did not adequately explain the disparities in participation rates among ethnic groups. The study found that African-American and Mexican-American men and women reported lower rates of leisure-time physical activity than their white counterparts across almost every variable including education, family income, occupation, employment, poverty, and marital status (2000). In another study by He and Baker (2005), they found that when leisure-time physical activity was compared to work-related physical activity (WRPA; heavy household chores and strenuous job activities), Blacks and Hispanics reported higher rates of WRPA. WRPA rates were reportedly lowest for Whites and persons with greater educational levels (He & Baker, 2005). Similarly, adolescents of ethnic origin also had lower physical activity participation rates when compared to their white counterparts (Brodersen, 2005; Brodersen et al., 2007). However, in their study, Gordon-Larsen et al. (2000) found that indicators of significance were related to maternal education. That is, having a mother who had a graduate or professional degree was positively associated with higher physical activity participation rates. Being in a high-income family was also positively associated with higher physical activity participation rates.
Physical Activity and Black Women

Research on the physical activity participation rates of Black women is still limited. However, few studies have explored these rates in relation to the health consequences of physical inactivity among ethnic minority women as a larger group (Chiu et al., 2010; Tremblay et al., 2006; Young et al., 2002). According to some of these research studies, Black women in North America report lower levels of physical activity compared to their white counterparts (Adams-Campbell et al., 2000). Studies have suggested that these lower rates may be associated with the higher incidence of hypertension and obesity in this population (Ainsworth et al., 1991; Bild et al., 1993; Li et al., 2010). It was further suggested that this might have resulted, in part, from lower levels of health promotion behaviors in Black communities (Nies et al., 1999; Williams, Lavizzo-Mourey, & Warren, 1994).

According to the research, Black women do not exercise on a regular basis, are physically inactive, are less likely to engage in leisure-time physical activity, and are less knowledgeable about physical activity compared to white women (Shea et al., 1991). Physical activity barriers for Black women were identified as a combination of sociocultural barriers. These included lack of time, insufficient financial resources, and poor accessibility to exercise facilities, maternal and occupational roles, physical safety, physical activity perceptions, and psychosocial factors, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and lack of social support (Bopp et al. 2004, 2006; Eyler et al., 2002; Joseph et al., 2015). The frequency of social support, in particular from family and friends was identified as a major factor in influencing the physical activity participation rates of Black women (Eyler et al., 1999; Martin et al., 2007). Women who had high levels of social support – family, friends, and community - were more likely to engage in forms of physical activity. However, in a study by Martin et al. (2008) that explored the correlates of self-efficacy to overcoming barriers to physical activity; making time for physical activity and; adherence to physical activity, the researchers found no association between social support and physical activity participation. The findings of their study indicated that barriers to physical activity were related to perceptions of physical activity as being hard work or boring.
Summary

Physical inactivity is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease (Gilmore, 2007; Kesaniemi, Danforth, & Jensen, 2001; Pate, Pratt, & Blair, 1995). Demographic data indicate that characteristics such as gender, age, and socio-economic status are associated with physical activity participation rates at the individual and population levels. However, when factors such as immigration, ethnicity and race are taken into consideration, these associations become more messy. Complex patterns are realised about the ways in which women as immigrants, ethnic minorities, and racialized minorities participate in physical activity. The research finds that cultural norms, values and beliefs are associated with immigrant women’s participation in physical activity (Eyler et al., 1998; Im & Choe, 2001; Juarbe et al., 2003; Södergren et al., 2008). It also finds that years of residence and language acculturation are associated with physical activity participation rates of immigrant women (Dogra et al., 2010; Evenson et al., 2004; Tremblay et al., 2006). Additionally, the research on ethnicity indicates that disparities exist in participation rates among ethnic groups (Crespo et al., 2000; Dogra et al., 2010; He & Baker, 2005; Lee & Im, 2010; Liu et al., 2010), yet little is known about the factors that account for them. Furthermore, although the literature indicates that Black women are substantially more inactive compared to their white counterparts (Adams-Campbell et al., 2000; Ainsworth et al., 1991; Bild et al., 1993; Li et al., 2010), the challenge is that Black women are not studied independently of immigrant women. Given that research indicates that Black women are at more risk of developing diabetes and hypertension when compared to their white counterparts (Ainsworth et al., 1991; Bild et al., 1993; Li et al., 2010), there is need for research that examines the physical activity practices of Black women as a group that is separate and distinct from the category “immigrant.” Furthermore, because much of the research is epidemiologically driven - focused primarily on gathering data on occurrence and prevalence, it obscures our understanding of the ways in which Black women experience and make meaning of physical understanding. There is therefore a need to bridge this gap in knowledge. Furthermore, a search of the literature locates a large body of the work outside of the Canadian context, and is more specific to the United States of America. This is perhaps indicative of a difference in migration patterns between the two countries as well as the emergence of systems that contest racial and sexual politics. The limitations of the data
have resulted in a stark absence of current research that explores how Black women understand and experience physical activity as well as in a body of literature that is alarmingly dated. The following section will explore in more details, the limitations of using a purely epidemiological framework for a study such as this one.

**Challenges with relying on a purely Epidemiological Framework**

The difficulties that exist are that many of the studies on physical activity have been primarily epidemiological in nature, focusing largely on the demographic characteristics of groups and individuals who do not meet the required recommendations for physical activity. At the core of epidemiology is a framework that is based heavily on public health policies that place the blame of poor health on individuals, “portraying risk as a lifestyle choice” (Inhorn & Whittle, 2001, p.554). Its primary purpose is to identify groups that are at risk of developing diseases linked to inactivity, so that intervention strategies can be targeted towards them. Epidemiology research focuses on the complexity of disease and disease prevalence in populations but it does little by way of critically questioning people’s understandings about their risk to diseases. Epidemiology, for instance, ignores the presence of social hierarchies such as gender and race. It ignores “how these relationships mediate an individual’s power, personal agency, and available choices related to their health” (Inhorn & Whittle, 2001, p.554). It further overlooks “how local and global political economies, including policies of nation-states, affect health and disease” (p.554). The reported inactivity among Black women for instance, though associated with a number of sociocultural, economic, and psychosocial factors (Eyler et al., 2002; Joseph et al., 2015), is positioned in the literature as a behavioural lifestyle for which they are fully responsible.

Inhorn and Whittle (2001) note that because epidemiology was historically built on a biomedical model, it has maintained a closed system of prestige and power – one of elitism, where:
an elite cadre of epidemiologists, biostatisticians, biomedical professionals, and public health practitioners possess the privileged knowledge, power, and authority to identify and name diseases; collect data pertaining to these diseases; define and measure the variables hypothesized to produce disease “risk”; create and evaluate interventions aimed at preventing disease risk; and establish public health goals and policies which determine how resources are to be allocated and health issues prioritized (p.558).

Thus, for epidemiological approaches to be useful in helping us better explain the varying social distribution of health and illness with respect to Black women, it has to seriously deal with the issues of knowledge production and power relations that have plagued epidemiology from its inception. Epidemiology must be willing to ‘open up’ its system and to begin asking critical questions of itself - about its methodologies and assumptions of difference. It must be willing to think about individuals in the context of “their everyday lives, as shaped by their intertwined histories - as members of a particular society” (Krieger, 1994, p.896). It must also be able to address the exclusion of ‘minority’ people’s voices in the production of knowledge.

Epidemiology’s focus on the association between disease risk and the individual has also given rise to discussion around the pathologization of fatness. Proponents of fat studies have put forward that the negative discourse around fatness, as promoted through the epidemiological framework has led to a medicalised view of fatness and weight management. This discussion will be further taken up in the following section.

Fat Studies and the Obesity Discourse

The medical discourse defines bodies that have a BMI of 25 and greater as either overweight or obese. These numbers place individuals along a continuum that ranges from class 1 to class 3 obese where each class is associated with different levels of disease risk. However, the fat studies discourse has rejected the medical fraternity’s reliance on BMI as a means of “mapping bodies” (Cooper, 2010, p.1021). It has argued that the use of BMI “fails to address human diversity” (p.1021). Some researchers have
put similar arguments forward. They have argued that while BMI might be a useful measurement for predicting disease risk at the population level, it is an inaccurate indicator of body fatness at the individual level. They pointed out that the use of BMI fails to account for physiological makeup such as bone density and muscle mass or characteristics such as age and gender (Pasco et al., 2014; Romero-Corral et al., 2008).

More specifically, the fat studies literature has sought to challenge the understandings of “fatness as a pathological medical, psychological and social phenomenon” (Cooper, 2010, p.1020). It has suggested that the negative treatment of fatness and of fat persons rests squarely on the shoulders of a health (and medicine) discourse that has placed a value on body size (Rothblum & Solavay, 2009). Within the health framework, fatness has become a public health concern requiring eradication through medical and health interventions. The need to eradicate fatness – framed loosely as an obesity epidemic - has taken on a life of its own. The World Health Organization (WHO; n.d.) for instance, has suggested that “obesity is one of today’s most blatantly visible – yet most neglected – public health problems…If immediate action is not taken, millions will suffer from an array of serious health disorders” (para.1). In Canada, the Canadian Minister of State (Public Health) made clear Canada’s intentions to combat obesity:

> Encouraging and supporting healthy weights will require cooperative action across all sectors and levels of government … Social, economic, physical and environmental factors must be addressed to create environments that will support Canadians in making healthy choices (Library of Parliament, 2005, p.13).

The fat studies literature makes it poignantly clear that the intentions of the activism around fatness are to reframe the obesity discourse by challenging how “structural power is enacted upon fat people” (Cooper, 2010, p. 26). In this way, focus on the body shifts to the real problem, which is structural and institutional power. However, while this body of research acknowledges the impact of a medicalized approach to fatness, it is hard to ignore the body of work that increasingly points to the relationship between body size and disease risk. Therefore, for me, the question really is, “How does a research study such as mine critically navigate the thin line between fat (and self) acceptance and what has been proven to be medically sound?” Mohr et al. (2011) suggest that the answer may lie in challenging the widespread notion that a thin body is
a naturally healthy body and instead have a dominant narrative that frames unhealthy bodies as existing in all shapes and sizes. Thus, the focus would not be on body size but rather on “being healthy and active at any size and in any body” (p.168). In reality, this view echoes the objectives of the physical activity handbook by CSEP. The intention is for people to lead less sedentary lifestyles and instead embrace a more physically active way of life for health reasons. In that respect, it is about the activity (the amount) that an individual does and less about what the size or shape of their body looks like. Hopefully, such a shift would also help to dispel notions around the relationship between physical activity and that of ideal body sizes.

SECTION II: PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACHES TO BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

The need to better explain and account for Black women’s participation in physical activity has been guided by theories that seek to understand the determinants and correlates of physical activity. Theories that have over the years dominated the literature are theories that have attempted to provide insight into the social psychology of physical activity behaviour (uptake and maintenance), a common element of which is ‘self-efficacy,’ thought of as a “powerful predictor of behaviour” (Buchan, 2012, p.2). Other theories include the social ecology models of health behaviour. Unlike psychosocial behaviour change models, social ecological models of health focus on the individual as well as on the impact of environmental factors, social and political factors, and those of policies (Buchan, 2012).
Physical Activity and Psychological Theoretical Practices

Though the literature shows the use of other popular theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (formerly the Theory of Reasoned Action) and the Health Belief Model in explaining physical activity, it is the Social Cognitive Theory and the Transtheoretical Model that will be discussed here. The Social Cognitive Theory, for its role in acknowledging the link between environmental factors and individuals’ behaviours – recognizing that an individual’s behaviour may be as a consequence of the environment. For instance, in the physical activity literature, environment has often been cited as an important determinant in Black women’s uptake and maintenance of physical activities. The Transtheoretical Model is unique in that though it also places emphasis on self-efficacy, it rests on the belief that behavioural change can be accomplished through a cyclical process comprised of specific stages through which individuals pass, dependent on their readiness to change. Understanding how individuals transition through the stages from pre-contemplation to maintenance, with possible lapses in between is invaluable in understanding cues to action for Black women and the motivational factors at work. Furthermore, the importance of both theories to the physical activity literature carries much relevance, as both have been cited among the four models/theories that have been “tested and adopted most widely in the health behaviour and physical activity literature” (Buchan, 2012, p.2).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Social Cognitive Theory, as put forward by Albert Bandura, posits that environmental, personal and behavioral factors determine behavior change (Bandura, 2005). The model is useful in that it describes factors that may affect and determine behaviour, specifies mechanisms through which the factors work, and provides a blueprint for how the factors may be altered to bring about effective behaviour change (Buchan et al., 2012). Despite SCT’s prominence as a theoretical model for behaviour change research, the most widely used and arguably the most powerful component of
the model is its theory of self-efficacy (Buchan et al., 2012). Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy suggests that “self-efficacy, the confidence in one’s ability to be physically active in the face of barriers is a major basis of action and is a key variable of SCT that research geared at health promotion and intervention strategies for physical activity finds useful (Choi et al., 2008).

Research on physical activity among immigrant women for instance, reveals that factors such as environmental resources (neighbourhood/community and/or work facilities), demographics, financial and social support, as well as acculturation have direct influence on immigrant women’s self-efficacy to engage in exercise (Eyler et al., 1999; Choi et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2007). The presence of safe spaces and social support from family members, for example, foster individuals’ confidence so that they can improve their fitness and health through taking part in exercise activities away from home. In their study, Choi et al. (2008) explored the physical activity behaviour of Korean immigrant women to the United States and found that the women had positive attitudes towards physical activity and believe physical activity to be beneficial to both mental and physical wellbeing. Most of the women in the study live in communities that had environmental resources. However, the women who were most active in their leisure time were the women who reported use of the environmental resources in their community. Further research into why some of the women did not use the resources in their community as opposed to why others did, was a drawback of the study. Nonetheless, it signaled the need for intervention strategies to situate appropriate environmental resources in communities based on population characteristics of the community. The study further found that self-efficacy for regular exercise was low, suggesting to the authors that the women may have had a “realistic view of the barriers facing them when they pursue exercise” (p.634).

The challenge that self-efficacy poses is that if individuals do not believe they possess the capability to effectively change their behaviour, then there is no incentive to act. Research focused on increasing immigrant women’s participation in physical activity must take into consideration social and structural systems that act as barriers; the unavailability of adequate financial resources for instance, as well as time constraints or even lack of social support pose as barriers to a successful uptake of physical activity.
Studies indicate that a number of immigrant women do not participate in exercise because of barriers related to hectic schedules, lack of reliable child care, language barriers and social isolation (Choi et al., 2008; Im & Choe, 2001). Presumably then, it is individuals with stronger self-efficacy who reap the benefits associated with an active lifestyle. Nonetheless, Nies et al. (1999) argue that Bandura’s focus on self-efficacy and the theory’s ability to provide meaningful explanations of individual differences in exercise behavior places it at an advantage for exploring and determining exercise in the daily life of African American women. Additionally, being able to determine the facilitators and barriers to exercise “adds to nurses’ knowledge and provides the basis for developing culturally relevant individualized interventions for African American women in the community” (p.24).

SCT is versatile in that it also emphasises behavioural capability - the belief that arming the individual with relevant knowledge creates the precondition for change. “If people lack awareness of how their lifestyle habits affect their health, they have little reason to put themselves through the misery of changing the bad habits” (Bandura, 1998, p.3). Studies that have identified lack of knowledge as a barrier (Eyler et al., 2002; Drummond et al., 2011) for African women tend to stress the importance of health promotion strategies aimed at providing information on the consequences of inactivity. However, like with efficacy, if structural disadvantages disallow women from the belief that they have the capability to bring about change, then the information targeted at them is useless.

**Transtheoretical Model**

Another popular behavioural model that researchers have used in the analysis of physical activity behaviour is the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), which is cyclical in nature. In this model individuals are expected to pass through five specified stages that signify their readiness to change their behaviour. These are precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance (Buchan et al., 2012). Interventionists find the application of the TTM to physical activity behaviour to be particularly useful in that intervention strategies can be designed to meet individuals at different stages of behavioural change. This further implies that the model is flexible in
its approach, as it is able to utilize the most appropriate intervention strategies at
different stages (Price et al., 2013). More importantly, it recognizes that individuals who
seek to make behavioural change can relapse at any time. Therefore, self-efficacy is a
crucial component of success (Price et al., 2013).

However, TTM has been accused of not being effective in promoting long term
physical activity behaviour change given its failure to recognize the influence that “other
external and social factors, such as age, gender and socio-economic status” (Price et
al., 2013, p.7) can have on physical activity uptake and adherence. In their systematic
review, Adams & White indicate that a TTM based approach to promotion is more
effective in general than non-staged intervention strategies in promoting short-term
activity adoption (2003).

Summary

A major contribution of Social Cognitive Theory to research in physical activity
revolves around an individual's belief in their ability to change from a sedentary lifestyle
to one that is more active. However, the individual will not be inclined to change without
the knowledge about the health effects of inactivity or sedentariness. Additionally, the
individual must believe that there are support systems (environmental, structural, and
personal) that will facilitate involvement in physical activity. Transtheoretical theories on
the other hand, is useful in its understanding of human behaviour; it recognizes and
takes into consideration the possibility that individuals on a physical activity journey may
experience lapses in between being active and inactive.

SECTION III: FEMINIST THEORETICAL APPROACHES

This research is located within a feminist cultural studies framework. The theory’s
interdisciplinary approach and its concern with the relations between forms of culture
and forms of power make it ideal for this study. The ability of the theory to interrogate
cultural practices by engaging in conversations across different historical and disciplinary
areas resonated with my own need to critically and reflexively engage in research that would truthfully describe other women’s, as well as my own, lived experiences. In this way, feminist cultural studies served as a starting point from which I could attempt to understand how “social groups subordinated on the basis of class, race or gender contest and negotiate power relations through various cultural practices” (Schwichtenberg 1989, p.202).

Feminist cultural studies’ diversity meant that I could also adopt, in an integrative way, the use of other critical perspectives—primarily Black feminism, anti-racist and Postcolonial feminism—to study the phenomenon under question. By taking this approach, it allowed me to pay particular attention to the ways in which issues of race (more specifically Blackness), gender, ethnicity and a history of colonialism intersect and converge to shape ideas of culture and cultural practices. The remainder of this chapter is therefore dedicated to situating the discussion on the physical activity experiences of racialized women within a feminist theoretical context.

Historicizing Femininity and the Physical Body

During the latter half of October and into early November 2014, a slew of controversies emerged over the comments made by Russian Tennis Federation President Shamil Tarpischev about female tennis superstars Serena and Venus Williams. Russian tennis player Elena Dementieva, who appeared on a Russian late night show along with Mr. Tarpischev, was asked to give her experience of “what it was like to play against the Williams’ sisters.” Before Elena could respond, Mr. Tarpischev interjected with something along the lines of “what was it like to play against the Williams’ brothers?” He was also heard saying that the Williams sisters were “frightening when you look at them.” Shamil was fined $25,000 by the WTA and banned from touring for one year.

That was not, however, the first time that the sisters have been the subject of racist and sexist comments. Like the plague, it has followed them around since their
entry into tennis, a racially segregated and elitist sport. Backlash from mainstream society has accused them of not being feminine enough, attributing their success to their supposed ‘natural’ athletic ability and masculine physique. More recently, after her 6th Wimbledon title and having been voted *Sports Illustrated* “Sports Person of the Year, 2015”, Serena was faced with another round of criticism and was body shamed for not having a slender body like that of Maria Sharapova or Eugenia Buchard – critics felt that she had an unfair advantage because she was “built like a man.” Along with the fervent tweets and blogs contesting and validating the legitimacy of her body, from various angles, different stances, soft light, hard light, you name it, the media was also immediately flooded with sensationalised images of her body, some juxtaposed alongside other bodies, such as those of Caitlyn Jenner and American Pharaoh, the Triple Crown thoroughbred horse.

Much of the emphasis was placed on highlighting the definition of her muscles, her ‘curves’ and most of all, her derriere - an instant reminder of the objectification and economic exploitation faced by Sara “Saartjie” Baartman (Venus Hottentot) under colonial imperialism. Like Baartman, the athlete’s body was (is constantly) put on display, the object of criticism and representation of images of “savage sexuality and racial inferiority of Black women” (Speight, et al., 2013, p.117). Black women are constantly judged against Eurocentric ideals of femininity. As athletes, they are further castigated when they step across racially elitist lines in sports and other physical activities. Notwithstanding, the Williams sisters, like a number of other Black female athletes before them (Ora Mae Washington, Althea Gibson and Lulla Ballard, to name a few), have broken into the colour barrier of all white prestigious sporting activities. They have resisted and are transforming western narratives of white racial superiority and Black female bodies as inferior and unattractive.

Historically located, the criticisms around the Williams sisters’ are constructed along racially polarised lines (white women vs black women). Normative ideals of feminine beauty have served to reinforce categories that have long sought to label black women as the inferior other (Cahn, 2004). The idea of femaleness was wrapped up in notions of sexuality, beauty and feminine virtue. The ideal feminine form was seen as best represented through a swimmer’s physique. Swimmers were perceived as
“perfectly proportioned…queens, beauties, nymphs [and as a] dazzling show of youth and beauty” (Cahn, 2004, p.222). Thus by the turn of the 20th century, swimming was positioned as one of the most popular (and the most appropriate) forms of physical activity among white females (Entine, 2000). Entine (2000) hypothesized that swimming’s popularity was largely due to its association with Miss American beauty pageants and white beauty queens. Similarly, other activities that were regarded as best suited for maintaining a white middle-class ideology of feminine beauty were primarily tennis, equestrian, skating and gymnastics. These activities were closely aligned with notions of motherhood and reproduction (Entine, 2000).

Regarded as inferior, Black women’s bodies were the antithesis of feminine beauty. Best suited for hard work, Black women were excluded from activities that were associated with Eurocentric femininity, beauty and finesse. That coupled with anti-black feelings and prejudices against Black women, Black women were barred from accessing sites of recreation during the 19th and 20th centuries (Cahn, 2004).

To date, the most formidable barrier to Black women’s participation in physical activity appears to be race. Rooted in colonised constructions of race, gender and sexuality, representations of the physical Black female body have often been through the lens of sports, where it is susceptible to policing and ridicule if it is deemed to have deviated from norms of (Eurocentric) femininity. The invisibility of Black women in non-competitive activities is conspicuous and speaks to a discourse of race and gender, in which racism and sexism have historically rendered the Black female body incapable of engaging in leisure-time physical activities.

Within the competitive genre of sports, Black women like Serena and Venus Williams have had to struggle against “racism overlain by the belief that sports and

11 bell hooks has spoken extensively about the anti-black sentiments and prejudices among white women in the women’s movement against Black women. She notes that even though white women lobbied for the end of slavery, they did so primarily out of religious sentiment and moral reform but were still keen on maintaining a racial hierarchy in which Black women would be inferior. White women’s fear of sexual and occupational competition kept them from wanting to associate themselves with Black women. Consequently, in an attempt to uphold segregation, sexist and racist stereotypes portrayed Black women as “morally impure” and “diseased” (hooks 1981).
femininity are incompatible” (Entine, 2000, p.297). Activities that are seen to require too much physical exertion or to result in the development of masculine physiques have been considered “masculine in nature and…would make women unfit for motherhood and would sacrifice their health, physical beauty, and social attractiveness” (p.214). Positioned as racially better off than Black women, it was the reason that many white women, especially in the 19th century, avoided competitive sports, leaving a void that was quickly filled by eager black female athletes (Entine, 2000).

For many black women, their entry into athletics was never a question of femininity versus athleticism; a niche was created in which they could fit. Black women could not afford to “tie femininity to a specific, limited set of activities and attributes defined as separate and opposite from masculinity” (Cahn, 2004, p.215). They could not afford to be defined by middleclass ideas of womanhood—theirs were different. Cahn (2004) noted that for Black women, womanhood was carried out through sensibilities associated with a “heritage of racial and sexual oppression” (p.215). Womanhood was expressed through the women’s experiences of “occupying multiple roles as wageworkers, homemakers, mothers and community leaders” (Cahn, 2004, p.215).

The view of female physicality held by the Black community did not deter women from being active participants in competitive sports but restrictive notions of gender still permeated aspects of black women’s entry into sports. In basketball for instance, a sport that had become popular among Black females, limitations were imposed on the five-player rule between 1926 and 1942 at Bennett College, a historically Black women’s college in North Carolina. Instead of having five players like in the men’s game, six-player teams were instituted as it was felt that “five player basketball was too rough for women and that girls always look inadequate and butter-fingered under boy’s rules…[furthermore, it was] too strenuous and did not bring out the finer qualities in girls” (Liberti, 2004, p.92). The administrators of Bennett College felt that it was important that their girls were trained to be ‘ladies’. Consequently, the physical education class was also seen as instrumental in molding lady-like qualities. The idea that the ability to master total body control while performing activities that require much “physical exertion, intellectual accuracy and emotional control simultaneously” was viewed as critical in
developing appropriate behaviour, such as high moral standards and respect (p.88). Liberti (2004) makes the point that,

Bennett [College] sought to uphold middle-class standards of refinement and respectability among its students in part to counter lingering stereotypes of African Americans as immoral and uncivilized...black college women in particular were considered conveyors of character and culture...many educated blacks believed that upstanding behaviour by black college women reflected positively not only on the individual woman but also on the entire black community. College personnel carefully molded and monitored students’ behaviour, deeming actions seen as unbecoming for a ‘lady’ inappropriate and discouraging them (p.86).

Although the administrators at Bennett College sought to bridge the gap between femininity and athleticism, the tension between them remained, as arguments concerning the suitability of females to participate in rigorous physical activity continued. In 1942 Bennett College eventually withdrew its support for women’s intercollegiate basketball. In its place was a structure of physical activity that emphasised non-competitive activities that “develop in women the qualities of beauty of movement, poise, femininity...in an atmosphere of dignity, courtesy and refinement” (Liberti, 2004, p.94).

Although ideas of femininity and womanhood did not preclude involvement in 'rigorous' forms of sports for Black woman, a great majority of Black women still did not participate in sports or any time-consuming leisure activity. Cahn (2004) noted that the drudgery of “work, of earning a living and raising a family, often in near-poverty conditions” prevented many Black women from participating in leisure activities (p.216). The double work burden to which they had become accustomed was demanding of their time, such that it left no place in their lives for ‘frivolous’ leisure physical activity (Cahn, 2004).

The influence of race and its implications for physical activity should not be taken for granted. How Black women act and live is not only shaped by the situational circumstances in which they live but is also a reflection of historical prejudices. Therefore, any analysis aimed at explaining the differences in physical activity participation rates among women, must do so from a critical perspective that addresses
the historic inequalities, oppression and long-standing racial and cultural stereotypes that have racialized Black women. However, despite changing understandings of social determinants of health, dominant views that reinforce notions of racial and cultural deficit still plague Black women. Understandings about Black women still imply that they are inferior, and that their non-participation in physical activity is to be blamed on their racial/cultural and (individual) lifestyle, rather than on structural conditions or the burdens of racism and sexism (Vertinsky, 1998, p.94). It is therefore imperative that a study of this nature be grounded in a feminist framework that is capable of critically analysing the influences of sexism, racism, gender and colonialism in affecting the lives of racialized women.

**Investigating Physical Activity through a Feminist Cultural Studies Lens**

The emergence of feminist cultural studies in the late 1970s was a response to the visible absence of women in early cultural studies discourse. Cultural studies as a discipline had come about at a moment in time when it was critical to understand the role of culture in reproducing certain forms of biases - racism, sexism - against members of subordinate groups (Hammer and Kellner, 2009). However, the challenge to feminism was that it was mainly concerned with relations in the public sphere— i.e. on how cultural production and consumption were being negotiated by white middle class men. Women and other marginalized groups had no representation in the discourse.

Niranjana (2007) noted that the intervention of feminism in cultural studies opened up the question of the ‘personal is political,’ thus shifting the “object of investigation in cultural studies” to consider relations of power in the private domain as well (Niranjana, 2007, p.210). As a discipline, cultural studies concerns itself with relationships of domination and subordination. Slack & Whitt (1992) posit that:

Cultural studies advocates for the disenfranchised and has served as a voice for those individuals and groups who are variously seen as subjugated, silenced, repressed, oppressed and discriminated against...for those without a voice in the dominant discourse (p.573).
Feminist cultural studies is uniquely placed at an advantage from which to investigate and inform the discourse on how racially marginalized women participate in and consume physical activity, since it can ask questions about power and its relationship with sexism, racism, and gender as it operates in the private sphere. This can be useful for understanding much of the dialogue around cultural norms, particularly those practices that act as barriers to physical activity. It further problematizes the notion of ‘cultural practices’ by resisting an ideology of cultural homogeneity. Instead, it emphasizes the diversity in meanings of social and cultural practices. Thus, rather than positioning racialized women as cultural ‘dupes’ to systems of patriarchy (and colonialism), feminist cultural studies argues from a place where marginalized women possess the agency to challenge, disrupt and reconstruct dominant perspectives and attitudes held of them in relation to physical activity.

With the increasing presence of women of colour in public spaces of physical activity, hegemonic structures once held in place by racist and elitist ideology are being constantly challenged. While this represents a victory for feminism, women of colour are more than ever subject to bodily surveillance and racial and cultural stereotypes. Black athletic female bodies for instance, are viewed with suspicion. They are ridiculed and are made into spectacles where racial stereotypes are written onto them (Hall, 1997). They become sexualized bodies where they occupy a liminal space between desirability, grotesque, and unfeminine where the standards of beauty and femininity to which they must measure up are based on Eurocentric ideals (Hobson, 2003).

Hall (1997) posited that the stereotyping of Black people in popular representation has persisted well into our present century. According to Hall (1997), Black people have been “reduced to the signifiers of their physical difference – thick lips, fuzzy hair…” and to ‘innate’ racial differences, such as inherent laziness (Hall, 1997, p.249). The latter, he argued, positions them as suitable only for servitude. Additionally, stereotypes of “innate primitivism, simplicity, and lack of culture, sends the message that Black people are incapable of ‘civilized’ refinement” (p.244). Unfortunately, when these stereotypes are reflected through the discourse on physical activity and Black women, they have the potential to do significant damage, affecting Black women’s experiences of
physical activity as well as the ways in which strategies are designed to meet their needs.

As a critical theory of inquiry also tasked with exploring the ways in which concepts and categories of difference operate within culture, feminist cultural studies is aptly positioned to engage in conversations that challenge the “racialized regime of representation” (Hall, 1997, p.249) through which Black women in physical activity are signified.

An Anti-Racist Feminist Lens

At the heart of anti-racist feminism is the idea that women of colour have particular and legitimate issues that affect our lives - issues that make us distinct from white women or from men of colour for that matter. Anti-racist feminism thus challenges the idea that there is a common experience of gender. Rather, it places emphasis on the fact that the historical context of racialization produces differences in experiences among women (Dua & Robertson, 1999).

From an anti-racist perspective, race is understood to be a socially constructed concept that works to benefit the socially dominant who use it to maintain the inequitable distribution of social rewards (Dua & Robertson, 1999; Ighodaro, 2006). It therefore creates an “economic and social advantage for dominant groups that identify themselves as ‘desirable races’, while at the same time creating a disadvantage for racially minoritized people” (Ighodaro, 2006, p.16). Although there is disagreement among researchers about the concept of race science, there is agreement that as a social construct, race is deeply entrenched in our society (Ighodaro, 2006). Thompson (1993), however, pointed out that the biological aspect of classifying people according to physical attributes is still systematically used as “justification for discrimination and inequality” (p.17). The result is the manifestation of a system in which racism and social oppression are reproduced based on ideas of superiority versus inferiority (Thompson, 1993).
Calliste and Dei (2000) further emphasized that “while the reproduction of racism can be rooted in contemporary social, political and economic forces, the production of racism extends to an ideology that supports white supremacy” (2000, p.19). Consequently, when racism is manifested, it is normally against those who are furthest away from the “white skin colour norm” (p.20). The implication then is that in matters related to immigration and health inequity, visible minority immigrants fair worse than immigrants of European heritage. The latter, generally faring better than dark-skinned immigrants, because of skin colour. Thus, in the discourse on physical activity, understanding the historical production of racism is crucial to engaging in productive discussions surrounding Black women’s current participation in physical activity. For instance, Henderson and Ainsworth (2000) found that a history of oppression, racism, and overt segregation had an impact on the value that African American women placed on physical activity, further influencing the forms of activities in which they participated. Activities such as swimming, for example were referenced by women in their study as something that was mostly done by white people, as a system of racism barred Black women from access to swimming facilities or to formal swimming lessons. Some of the women in Henderson and Ainsworth (2000) study mentioned that the reason they had not learned to swim during their youth, was that there was no proper place for Blacks to learn to swim. The “river” or “creek” was the only option available to them (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2000, p.12). Similarly, the women’s tendency to disregard physical activity outside the home was associated with the women’s belief that their heavy work burden – inside and outside the home – did not warrant additional amounts of physical activity (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2003).

In the absence of overt displays of racism, subtle forms still permeate institutions making it difficult for racialized groups to access social benefits and to participate fully in the functioning of society. Canada’s focus on multiculturalism, diversity, equity and social inclusion does not preclude it from accusations of racism. In fact, the country’s legacy of a racist history reared its ugly head in the form of racial stereotyping and xenophobia. In as recent as 2015, Sue MacDonnell, a Conservative Riding association director, was called on to step down from the Bay of Quinte Conservative association due to racist comments that she had made on social media. Some of these read:
(January, 2015) If Indians want to eradicate racism, then assimilate. Ditch the Halloween costumes… and adopt 20th Century dress, leave the reserves, stop acceding to demands made by chiefs who live like millionaires while their subjects live in poverty, find unemployment, stop demanding money you haven’t earned, become educated and join our society.

(August, 2015) Yes, because nothing says strengthening Canada like inviting illiterate, unskilled, primitive refugees with all their children and emotional baggage and bankrupting the country to pay for their upkeep!!

(Lau, 2015)

MacDonnell defended her actions by saying that she did not post anything inappropriate. Rather, she that she invoked her right to freedom of speech, and noted that that right extended to her Facebook posts (Lau, 2015). Suffice to say that it is these acts of microaggression and instances of everyday racism that continue the perpetuation of institutionalized and systemic racism. In talking about everyday racism, Walton et al., (2013) noted that it is “recurrent”, “normalised” and “infused into familiar practices, such as talk (and jokes) and behaviour” (2013, p.75). Thus, while under the law, blatant acts of racism are punishable, a more subtle, persistent and oppressive form of racism, masked by its unconscious integration into everyday social practices continues to flourish.

Anti-racist theorists have acknowledged that implicit racism and difference based discrimination continues to permeate mainstream Canadian society (Ighodaro, 2006). Proponents of this discourse have argued that a critical anti-racist framework that examines “social institutions and the ways they continue to keep the issue of racism alive in present-day society” was required to eliminate the “barriers and practices that give rise to racism” (p.17-18).

Anti-racist feminism’s determination to interrogate white power/privilege underscores its significance to a study such as this one. Its acknowledgement of the importance of the experiences and histories of racially marginalized people is significant to the discussions. Furthermore, Calliste and Dei (2000) make the point that an anti-racist feminist lens “locates the dialogue in the reality of women’s lives and at the intersection/s of race, gender and class” (p.15). It therefore has the potential to empower
racialized women to challenge dominant, essentialist and racist ideas about them. Unlike other bodies of feminist theorizing, anti-racist feminism is concerned with unearthing the process and historical patterns of racialization. It further concerns itself with analyzing the ways in which both race and gender work to marginalize/racialize women of colour in white settler societies, such as Canada. In highlighting the pervasive nature of racism in Canadian society, Dr. Carrie Best, in 1968, articulated the following:

Canadian society is a white society. Its legislators are white. Its judges are whites; its teachers are almost universally white; its police are white; its executives are white; its newsmen are white; its real estate agents are white; its landlords are white; its schoolboard administrators, its mayors and alderman, its bankers, its armed forces and its Prime Minister are white. They support and perpetuate the institutions and customs that make Canada what it is. Thus they are racist.

If you are a liberal, middle-class white, the word ‘racist’ has a very concrete and narrow definition. Apartheid is racist. Segregation is racist. The political, social and economic systems which enslave human beings, which deny them their identity, their freedom, their dignity and their future are all racist systems. This definition is good as far as it goes but it only begins to scratch the surface of racism (Backhouse, 1998, p.23).

Some almost 50 years later, even with the changing landscape of immigration patterns, Dr. Best’s statement still rings through in many facets. This further underscores the urgency of the need for researchers to adopt an anti-racist feminist framework in their analyses of racial and gender inequity.

Black Feminist Thought

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have Black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from Black men, or a present part of the larger group ‘women’ in this culture (hooks, 1981, p.7).
I feel that it is only pertinent that this thesis advances a discourse on Black Feminist Thought to account for the Black experience of the women that this study has chosen to highlight. While discourses such as anti-racism offer up a paradigm from which to interpret the social constructedness of race, a specialized thought that reflects the distinctive themes of African and Black women’s experiences has to be advanced as a way of locating and “constructing a Black feminist consciousness” (Collins, 2000, p.252) that makes Black women’s ideas and epistemologies visible.

Whereas it may be argued that Black women’s experience of racial and gender oppression make their needs and problems separate and distinct from white women and other oppressed groups (women), Collins (2013) suggests that to do so runs the risk of perpetuating biological determinism and essentialism. By positioning Blackness as a biological category rooted in the nature of race, the implication is that Blackness is the means through which a Black feminist consciousness is not only possible but is an inherent feature of being Black. Furthermore, to suggest that all Black women possess a Black feminist consciousness would be erroneous.

Since historically intersecting oppressions linked with a legacy of slavery and colonialism have produced recurring patterns and commonalities in the experiences that confront individual Black and African women, it stands to reason that it is these common experiences that generally propel individual Black women to develop a distinctive group consciousness concerning those experiences (Collins, 2000). Since these historical conditions are neither static nor experienced in similar ways by individual group members, it is anticipated that when changes do occur, they change the types of experiences that Black women have, while at the same time affect changes to the related group consciousness (Collins, 2000).

Thus, whereas a shared legacy of slavery and colonialism may predispose Black women as a group to common challenges, it does not mean that individual Black women experience, interpret, or respond to these challenges in the same way as “differences among individual Black women produce different patterns of experiential knowledge that in turn shape individual reactions” (Collins, 2000, p.27). The diversity that exists among Black women makes it impossible to lay claim to a homogenous or even normative Black
female experience. However, the multiplicity of intersecting oppressions – race, class, gender - that constrain the everyday lives of Black women produces a Black feminist standpoint from which Black women’s experiences are articulated and made visible. Such a position demands that Black feminist theorizing be a central feature in the analyses and “articulation of the multiple oppressions” and “multiple social locations” (Brewer, 1993, p.13) that make up Black women’s experiences.

Since a common concern of Black feminism rests with the fact that historically Black women’s experiences have been “distorted”, suppressed, and “excluded from what counts as knowledge”, Black feminist scholars have sought to reclaim, construct and reposition Black women as producers of knowledge by privileging Black women’s voices through intellectual, social and political activism (Collins, 2000, p.251). Thus, Black women’s subjectivity is at the centre of analysis of feminist theorizing, giving primacy to the “taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American [and Black] women as a group” (p.269). Consequently, for Black feminist scholars, an important point of departure from mainstream feminist epistemology is that Black feminist thought moves beyond a mere focus on oppression to being equally concerned with acts and forms of resistance, activism, and politics of empowerment (Alina, 2015).

More closer to home, while Canadian Black feminists have acknowledged that the theoretical underpinnings of the discourse are centrally located in African American and U.S. Black scholarship, they have sought to develop a framework that represents and accounts for the “specific materiality of Black women’s lives in Canada” (Massaquoi, 2007, p.7). As while (globally) a Black feminist movement challenges homogenization within feminist discourse, the articulation of a Canadian Black feminist theory is an inevitable step towards challenging systems of oppression that restricts and confines discourses around Blackness in Canadian society. According to Massaquoi, a Canadian Black feminist theory asks questions about:

How do racially sexualized identities shaped by silence, erasure, and invisibility coexist with other identities? How do these subjects articulate discourses that shape their lives? What are the spaces that they shape and occupy in Canada and how do these emergent identities shift and transform as they cross borders? (p.9).
The impetus behind a Canadian Black feminist theory is to eke out a space that is recognizably Canadian and privileges Black Canadian scholarship, the works and struggles of Black Canadian feminists, and that reflects the “complexity and diversity of Black culture within Canada” (Massaquoi, 2007, p.11). Though Canada has had a long history of a Black experience - Black migration and settlement - dating from as far back as slavery in the 1600s, Black Canadians have historically been “excluded from the content and processes of mainstream Canadian history” (Wane et al., 2013, p.13). The contributions and struggles of Black Canadians in Canada and abroad also continue to be an invisible part of the Canadian landscape (Wane et al., 2013). Canada’s participation in Black slavery for instance represents a classic example of Black invisibility. For while it is a well-known fact that our neighbours to the south participated in the atrocities of slavery, there is very little known about Canada’s role; likewise, little is known about the struggles of the men and women on this side of the border who fought for freedom and equality of rights and opportunities.

However, while it is important to make [past] struggles visible, a Canadian Black feminist movement is primarily concerned with articulating the complex realities of the lives of more recent immigrant women from Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. Thus the emergence of works, activism included, by Black feminists in Canada has made it possible to “solidify a clearly Canadian-based Black feminist movement” that addresses “more clearly something that locates subjectivity and/or politics within a self-defined Black Canadian political framework” (Massaquoi, 2007, p.11).

Within the context of this study, adopting a Canadian Black Feminist framework becomes necessary to theorise and report on the diverse physical activity experiences of Black women in Canadian society. These are experiences that do not focus solely on the intersections of race and gender but experiences that bear connections with the “uprooting, movement and reconstitution” of Black gendered bodies across national borders (Massaquoi, 2007, p.17). This framework is particularly useful in understanding the impact of transnational migration in shaping identities and patterns of resistance. In particular, a Canadian Black feminist framework is well placed to unpack the ways in which Black women’s experiences of movement and ethnicity affect the ways they participate in, and identify with, the physical activity pursuits of mainstream Canadian
society. Thus, as a necessity, a Canadian Black feminist framework is concerned with issues of migration and the conditions under which Black women relocate. It is concerned with exploring the similarities and differences in the migration experiences of Black women from different diasporic locations, as well as with understanding the ways in which the Black female body is located and constructed within the transnational spaces that it occupies.

Furthermore, Massaquoi argues that a Canadian Black feminist framework also allows for a more holistic understanding and engagement “with multiple theoretical positions” encompassing the spiritual, intellectual, the political among others (2007, p.12). In Yvonne Bob-Smith’s (2007) study on Caribbean Canadian women’s spirituality, for instance, she found that spirituality played an integral role in the women’s lives – that “spirituality is used as a strategy of resistance…to respond to oppressive everyday life experiences” (p.56). She noted that in the face of oppressive situations like racism and classism, the women used spirituality and religion learned from home as both a coping mechanism and a means of collective and community empowerment (Yvonne Bob-Smith, 2007). In another study done by Beagan, Etowa and Thomas (2012), they found that African Nova Scotian women placed great importance on faith and a connection to God. The women’s faith gave them the security of believing that if they had God in their lives, they would have “the strength to carry on and to move on” (p.115). Beagan et al., (2012) noted that the women used their faith as a coping strategy that went beyond dealing “with stress to healing from illness” (p.115).

In the context of physical activity, spirituality or religion talked about in this way and viewed through a western or mainstream feminist lens takes on negative values for it is blamed for engendering fatalistic beliefs that people have of their lives. Believing for instance that “whatever is supposed to happen to me will, regardless of my efforts”, as it is God’s will (Evenson et al., 2004, p.2514), generally prompts western feminist advocates to work with the women on organising programmes and workshops aimed at bringing the women out of traditional (read: backward) ways of thinking and to instead embrace modernity. In contrast, a Black feminist perspective mandates Black feminist advocates and practitioners to understand the role, meaning, and the historical value of spirituality in the women’s lives at both the individual and the community levels and to
use these understandings as a guide in working with the women towards achieving greater compliance with physical activity goals.

Faulted for being a “bastion of identity politics,” and for falling prey to essentialism, Black feminist thought has been challenged for its “[in]adequacy as a mode of critical analysis” (Griffin, 2007, p.484). The suggestion is that the focus of Black feminism on centralising and making visible Black women’s lives – of using the knowledge presented and produced by Black women as a way of theorising Black women’s subjectivity - does not “easily fit into any available theoretical framework” (Keizer, 2007, p.1) and thus disqualifies it as an “intellectual enterprise” (Weheliye, 2015, p.5). In addition, the assumption is that the primacy that the discourse gives to Black scholarship is representative of the ideas of scholars who put “forward their work because they are racialized and gendered beings” (Dua, 1999, p.9). Dua’s argument suggests that such an approach is as essentialist as it is reductionist for it “shifts attention from the ideas and debates that are crucial for the study of interconnections” necessary to theorise and understand the multiple subjectivities of women of colour (p.9).

**Postcolonial Feminist Theorizing**

In applying a postcolonial feminist lens to this study, I am acknowledging the obligation of feminist health research and practice to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism, homogenizing, and representational politics to which Western feminist discourse often falls prey. Formed from loosely organized feminist networks prior to the 1850s, feminism emerged in the west in the mid-late 19th century as a more sophisticated political movement, described by LeGates (2001) as “many movements” (p.197). The central feature of feminism, which held the movement together, was the disdain that the participants had surrounding the unjust power relations between men and women. Theirs was a call for equality of opportunity and rights for all women. Accordingly, participants attacked the male monopoly of education, professional careers, and culture; married women’s economic and legal dependence; sexual and moral double standards; women’s lack of control over their bodies; the drudgery of housework; low wages; and, not least, women’s exclusion from politics (p.197).
LeGates (2001) further makes the point that even though the feminist movement at the time advocated equality for all, the participants’ status as white middle class women was reflected in their primary concern for having greater influence in family and public life versus concerns around racial and economic oppression.

Whereas the first wave of feminism was representative of white middle class (and cisgender) women, the second wave, which developed a decade later, had a different tone. Charged with ridding society of all forms of sexism, the second wave adopted an “identity politics” stance to “demonstrate that race, class and gender oppression are all related” (Rampton, 2015). It was felt that because women’s oppression is rooted in patriarchy, all women, regardless of race, sexual expression or class, face objectification and discrimination. Nevertheless, since mobilization was based on the premise of women’s shared experience of oppression, the movement’s early development did not resonate with women who were “experiencing other oppressions, like class or race” (LeGates, 2001, p.358). However, unlike its predecessor, second wave feminism – though still inherently white and middle-classed – had by the ‘80s come to appeal to women of colour and other marginalised groups “seeking sisterhood and solidarity” (Rampton, 2015).

The participation of women of colour in the second wave – through for instance, writings done by feminists such as Moraga, Anzaldua, Lorde and Mohanty in the 1980’s – continued through to feminism’s third wave in which postcolonial feminism found a home and from which it works to challenge western feminism’s notion of universal womanhood. A point of departure for postcolonial and Third world feminist perspectives from other forms of feminism is that of recognizing the impact of colonialism on states of the Third world. Simply put, “postcolonial feminist theory is primarily concerned with the representation of women in once colonized countries and in Western locations” (Tyagi, 2014, p.45). As argued by postcolonial feminists,

The history of colonialism is largely the history of exploitation of non-white, non-Western others. Colonized countries have been deeply affected by the exploitative racist nature of colonialism…colonial oppression particularly racial, class, and ethnic has in large part overlooked women in postcolonial societies. [Thus] Postcolonial feminists are critical of Western forms of feminism, especially radical (in the sense it seeks to make differences visible in non-oppressive ways) and liberal forms (for, they have no sense of differences) of feminism and their habit
to homogenize and universalize women experiences of the whole world (Mishra, 2013, p.131).

Rebuffing feminism’s assumption that all women across cultures and classes share a sameness of oppression (powerless, exploited, sexually harassed), Mohanty (1991) noted that in Western feminist discourse, Third World women, as a category of analysis, are constructed “as a homogenous “powerless” group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems” (p.57). Constituting Third World women as powerless, weak and victimized, not only robs them of their voices but positions Western women as saviours of their more oppressed and less fortunate sisters who cannot represent themselves and so must be represented (and saved). Referring to Sati, a Hindu widow sacrifice, Spivak (1988) made the point that the abolition of Sati by the British was “generally understood as a case of White men saving brown women from brown men. White women – from the nineteenth century British Missionary Registers to Mary Daly – have not produced an alternate understanding. Against this is the nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: “The women actually wanted to die...One never encounters the testimony of the women’s voice-consciousness” (p.93). Additionally, throughout the discourse,

Scholars often locate “Third World women” in terms of the underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism, and “overpopulation” of Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries. Corresponding analyses of “matriarchal” Black women on welfare, “illiterate” Chicana, farmworkers, and “docile Asian domestic workers also abound...Besides being normed on a white, Western (read: progressive/modern) or non-Western (read: backward/traditional) hierarchy, these analyses freeze Third World women in time, space and history (Mohanty, 2003, p.47).

Within the context of physical activity, these meanings read onto Third World women, make assumptions that the women lack knowledge of the issues that affect them. Research has often pointed to a lack of knowledge about physical activity and its consequences as being a reason for Third World women and ethnic minority women’s failure to be physically active. In this sense, programs aimed at educating them are developed but often do so from an ethnocentric perspective. Thus, ignoring or misinterpreting the cultural understandings about the place of physical activity in the women’s lives. Additionally, within the physical activity literature, the women’s lack of participation is blamed on oppressive cultural norms and beliefs that restrict women’s
movement or position them in specific domestic and caring roles that do not place value on physical activity. From their vantage point, Western feminists see Third World as powerless and silenced victims who must be spoken for, if they are to be freed from their oppressive situations. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, I argue that it is actions as these, which reduce Third World women’s capacity to act, thus robbing them of their agency.

Postcolonial feminists take issue with these assumptions and call for the need to have them “named and challenged” (p.57). Furthermore, since the lives, experiences and circumstances of postcolonial women differ from those of Western women, Third World and non-Western women’s experiences should be evaluated and treated accordingly (Mishra 2013) rather than in relation to Western women (and the West) who are codified as the norm or “the primary referent in theory and praxis” (Mohanty et al., 1991, p.52).

In their eagerness to speak for and represent colonized women, Western feminists have overlooked racial, cultural, and historical specificities of colonized women’s lives, thereby imposing on them Western feminist models that work only to further oppress colonized women (Tyagi, 2014). In these models, the heterogeneity that make up the lives and experiences of Third World women are ignored and instead Third World women become a monolithic category that is judged according to Western standards, producing what Mohanty (1984) described as “ethnocentric universalism” (p.336). Postcolonial feminists call on Western feminists (and indeed Third World feminists guilty of universalizing Third World women’s experiences), to examine their ethnocentrism by recognizing differences and acknowledging “the historical specificity of women of colour in other places and time” (Mishra, 2013, p.131). They warn that to insist on “an analysis of ‘sexual difference’ in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of ‘Third World Difference’ - that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries” (Mohanty, 1984, p.335). It is in this production that “Western feminisms appropriate and ‘colonize’ the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries” (p.335).
Postcolonial feminists are also concerned with the question of voice - who speaks for whom, whose voices are being heard in discussions about Third World women and whose voices are privileged to speak (Mishra, 2013). In her essay, “Can the Subaltern speak?” Spivak (1988) criticizes the West for the way in which it has tried to silence the voices of Third World peoples by claiming to know them (the ‘others’) and as such, can speak for them. In so doing, Western intellectuals position themselves as “transparent communicators of the voices of oppressed peoples” (Hinterberger, 2007, p.76) in an act that serves only to displace non-Western women. Third World women’s perceived backwardness, illiteracy, and lack of agency robs them of the privilege to speak and for their voices to be taken up and heard within dominant discourse.

Summary

The theories examined in this section, provide a rationale for their inclusion as viable critical theories through which to explore and understand Black women’s participation in physical activity. An anti-feminist perspective through its emphasis on analyzing the historical context within which minority groups become racialized adds value to this research. My argument is that by interrogating instances of white privilege, it is able to account for everyday experiences of racism and discrimination that the women in the study may encounter in their physical activity pursuits.

While anti-racist feminism is focused on unpacking patterns of racialization, Black feminist theory places the experiences of Black women at the centre of the discussion. Within the context of this study, it is important to employ the perspectives of a framework that is able to account for the experiences of Black women. The aim of my work is to give a voice to these experiences, for as the research has indicated, that distinction has not been clearly made. Black women remain a category embedded within the broader discourse around issues that affect visible and ethnic minority women. A further problem is that the research homogenises the experiences of Black women as a category of women who are physically inactive. The value of theorising from a Black feminist perspective within the Canadian context is that this body of work will add to the voices and experiences of Black Canadian women, whose voices have historically been absent from mainstream Canadian society.
Postcolonial feminism’s concern with the representation of Third World women by the West is of value to this study as it calls on Western feminists to pay attention to the voices and stories of women from postcolonial societies. It further challenges Western feminists to recognize the heterogeneity in the lives of Third World in their attempts at designing strategies aimed at meeting their physical activity needs of Third World women.
Chapter 3.

Methodological Approach and Design

A key feature of cultural studies research is its focus on being truthful to the lived realities of people’s lives (Saukko, 2003). With that in mind, my intention from the outset - as researcher and scholar investigating a culture and a phenomenon to which I am inextricably linked – was to engage in research that has the potential to empower the lives of women who struggle daily to resist racial and cultural stereotypes. I was interested in exploring the ways in which Black women (first and second-generation immigrant women) made negotiations around what the literature cites as barriers to physical activity.

Because the intention of the study was to investigate the women’s experiences, a crucial part of doing this was to understand the sociocultural, environmental and historical factors that work to shape their lives. With this in mind, it was necessary that the study’s design and methods come from within the traditions of ethnographic research that was best suited to (a) document the lives and activities of the women; (b) understand their experiences from their point of view; and (c) conceptualize their behaviour as an expression of social contexts (Reinharz, 1992). Furthermore, given the paucity in the literature of the experiences of this group of women, it was important that the design and methods of the study not only explore the etic questions as the primary concerns of the study but also be willing to facilitate an exploration of emic questions and concepts as they arise. The latter of which was of particular concern to me for two key reasons. Primarily, I wanted to be true to the impetus for this research by privileging the voices of the participants. And secondly, at the same time that I was an outsider – being influenced by my position and knowledge as a researcher - I was also a cultural insider – being privy to certain cultural nuances, shared experiences and a possible level
of acceptance from the participants to which an ‘outsider’ may not necessarily have access.

Reflecting these goals, the study employed a qualitative method of inquiry, which holds at its core the fundamental belief that there are different ways of making sense of the world (Jones, 1995). This sensibility can only be had however, through “discovering the meanings seen by those who are being researched and with understanding their view of the world rather than that of the researchers” (p.2). Bearing these features in mind, I applied a multi-method approach, which included the use of auto-ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interviews to the data collection process. The interdisciplinary nature of feminist cultural studies, the foundation upon which this research is based, places it at a particular advantage for engaging with the kinds of questions that are of importance to this study. In this way, methodologies deemed most useful from more than one traditional discipline are utilized.

Captured in this chapter is a discussion of why it is that my research lends itself to a qualitative methodology. Additionally, I discuss the ethical concerns of the study, the data collection methods and procedures, the data analysis procedures as well as the measures undertaken to produce both credible and trustworthy study results, including a discussion focused on my insider/outsider position.

Doing Qualitative Research

As a method of inquiry, qualitative research has always had a home in the social sciences but has attracted criticisms from scholars in the natural sciences, the health sciences included, who have questioned the rigour of its methodology and its ability to arrive at rich, meaningful and credible data. Steeped in traditions of positivism – an assumption that there is a stable knowable reality that is different from how humans understand reality (Green and Thorogood, 2013) - quantitative research methods, against which qualitative research methods is pitted, are deductive in nature and focuses on generating data via statistical sampling methods. Qualitative research on the other hand, rests on principles of induction, thus making it a prime candidate for research that
invests in understanding and “locating meanings that people place on events, processes and structures of their lives…” (Al-Busaidi, 2008, p.12).

Though not taken on wholeheartedly, qualitative research has made its way into health research as a way of bridging the gap between the sciences, enhancing epistemologies around health and disease, understandings of health behaviour and ultimately influencing the construction and implementation of social health policies. Furthermore, the appeal of qualitative inquiry rests in its ability to provide researchers with a myriad of genres from which to find suitable approaches that would “enable us to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” (Higginbottom, 2009, p.4). Of benefit to a research of this nature, is the need to employ an approach that would take account of people’s life stories. Echoing Warr (2004), qualitative research’s suitability to lend itself to such concerns speaks to its versatility; presenting “researchers with an opportunity to listen to people tell their life stories and the method yields rich and complex data. The stories give researchers a window into lives that might be very different from their own” (p.578).

**Rationale for Ethnography Methodology**

Within the framework of qualitative research, I chose to use ethnography. As both a research process and methodology, ethnography provides the researcher with the unique opportunity for immersion in the natural environment of the group under study. Thus, the researcher becomes a ‘participant’ - observing and engaging in the field setting – gaining firsthand experience and an insider’s point of view into the routines, activities, behaviours, attitudes, norms, beliefs and values that “create a describable pattern in the lives of groups of people” (Gulati et al., 2011, p.525). In this way, the researcher gains invaluable insight into the “daily activities and social contexts of everyday life from the perspectives of those being studied to gain an understanding of their life world” (Buch & Staller 2007, p.188). Furthermore, because ethnography is premised on using the self as an instrument of knowing (Ortner, 1995), it engages the researcher in an iterative process of doing research that allows for “critical categories
and meanings to emerge from the ethnographic encounter rather than imposing these from existing models” (Hoey, 2014, p.2).

The value of ethnography as the most appropriate design for this study rests on its ability to investigate the social and cultural practices of a group of women whose experiences and voices remain absent from mainstream scholarship. The benefit of ‘doing’ ethnography for a study such as this gave me the opportunity to interact with the women in their natural habitat – that of ‘working out’ - to gain a better understanding of how they experienced, perceived and navigated the ‘world of physical activity.’ Additionally, the flexibility of ethnography to interpret cultural contexts “through close exploration of several sources of data” (Hoey, 2014, p.2) brings quality to the research and enhances the “thickness” of the data – a kind of thickness that Ortner (1995) contends is ethnography’s commitment to qualitative research “to producing understanding through richness, texture and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement and…elegance” (p.174).

Furthermore, ethnography’s ability to appreciate and acknowledge the researcher’s “tacit impressions and emotional experiences” (Hoey, 2014, p.3) as vital to the research process gave it relevance to this study by humanising the relationship of the researcher to the participants. Being able to reflect on these relationships and to critically assess my emotions throughout the research process was important to me, given the nature of my relationship to the study. Thus, I am in agreement with Hoey when he states that:

The explicit professional project of observing, imagining and describing other people need not be incompatible with the implicit personal project of learning about the self. It is the honest truth of fieldwork that these two projects are always implicated in each other. Good ethnography recognizes the transformative nature of fieldwork where as we search for answers to questions about people we may find ourselves in the stories of others. Ethnography should be acknowledged as a mutual product born of the intertwining of the lives of the ethnographer and his or her subjects (2014, p.3).
Autoethnography:

“To write an individual experience is to write social experience”

(Holt, 2003, p.16).

As part of the ethnographic approach to the study, I also used autoethnography as a thoughtful way of exploring the personal narratives that inform my own subjective experiences as a physically active Black woman. At the core of autoethnography is the researcher’s need to write herself into her work as a main character in her story as it sees the self as a critical lens through which cultural experiences can be examined. This has represented a shift from a more positivist style of research in which researchers are pressured to show a certain kind of traditional scientific rigour (reliability, validity, objectivity) in their research, to one that is driven by researchers’ need to “place greater emphasis on the ways in which the ethnographer interacts with the culture being researched” (Holt, 2003, p.2).

Ethnography began as a positivist method of research that was concerned with issues of objectivity. Entrusted with the task of producing data that reflected her participants’ own points of view and ways of doing, the ethnographer was obligated to strive for scientific objectivity (Tedlock, 1991). Hence, while being empathetic of her participants’ experiences, it also involved distancing or detaching herself from the data, so as not to interfere with and/or compromise the objectivity of her findings, rendering her devoid of agency- an ‘absent ethnographer’ un-positioned in relation to the evidence (Tedlock, 1991). Tedlock (1991) further points out that since the 1970s there has been a greater shift from engaging in ethnography from the perspective of a participant observer to that of an observer of participation. The latter acknowledges the ethnographer as an active participant in the research process, as one whose presence can be influenced by, and who can be of influence to, her participants. In this way, the ethnographer is not only the researcher but she also becomes the researched, immediately blurring the hierarchical and distinct lines that once separated the researcher from the researched. In this way, it forces the researcher to focus on perspectives of ‘self,’ bringing her into closer contact with herself. Tedlock (1991) notes that this process of self-examination “led to the examination of other ethnographers’ selves” (p.79) as ethnographers sought
to write themselves into their texts, developing alternate styles of ethnographic representation that would best account for, and give life to, their interactions with their participants in a critical and reflexive way. Proponents of this ‘new’ type of ethnography, referred to as “autoethnography,” noted that the “observer and the observed are not entirely separate categories” (Tedlock, 1991, p.80). Both the Self and the Other are “vulnerable experiencing subjects working to coproduce knowledge” (p.80). Tedlock further charged that both knowledge and experience from outside fieldwork should be brought into our narratives as well as a critical space made for us to demonstrate how ideas matter to us, thus “bridging the gap between our narrow academic world and our wide cultural experiences” (p.80-81).

Autoethnography therefore presents itself as a valuable methodology through which researchers/authors are able to use “their own experiences in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions” (Holt, 2003, p.2). Autoethnography permits authors to use their personal experiences as primary data, allowing them to celebrate rather than obscure their individual stories – “stories that are framed in the context of the bigger story, a story of society” (Chang, 2008, p.49). Because people’s experiences do not take place in a social vacuum, to write autoethnography in whichever form one chooses is not limited to the self alone but should rather be seen as the author’s way of searching for a better understanding of others through engaging with the self (Chang, 2008).

In choosing to use autoethnography, I am looking to challenge much of the accepted views about silent authorship in an area (physical activity and Black immigrant women) in which qualitative research is a relatively new development. I am also acknowledging the power of autoethnography to confront dominant forms of representation and power, and to reclaim, through self-reflective response, these spaces of representation (Holt, 2003; Tierney, 1998) that have marginalised Black immigrant women. The study of physical activity among immigrants of Afro-descent to Canada is becoming an area of interest in the social sciences and the pure and applied sciences. Furthermore, it has sparked public health debates in countries that tend to receive Afro-descent immigrants. Meanwhile, in Canada, as public health officials and practitioners try to make sense of this emerging discourse, a huge gap remains between Black
women’s experiences of being physically active and the already in existence health narratives that capture and try to make sense of women’s experiences. From these narratives we hear stories about Black women who fail to be ‘sufficiently’ physically active because they face a plethora of obstacles, mostly cultural in nature but which also result from personal choice, financial insecurity, as well as social and domestic challenges. What these narratives fail to acknowledge are the success stories of the Black women who are ‘sufficiently’ active – who are engaged in numerous forms of physical activity. Speaking from a position as one of ‘these women,’ my intention is to use autoethnography as a “method of discovery and analysis” (Sparkes, 2000, p.22) – as a way of reconstructing and (re)presenting the narratives by reflecting on my relationship with physical activity. It is also an attempt to render legitimate the missing stories that have become “trapped in the empty space and are deemed too subjective or too self-indulgent to report” (Muncey, 2010, p.3).

Throughout the study, personal accounts interject ethnographic writing and analyses, as a way of taking the reader into my world, while at the same time make visible parallels and variances between my experiences and those of my participants. As an “insider” researcher, I felt that the women’s stories were also my stories – stories of shared historical, social and cultural experiences, and like the women who each had a story, I too had mine. I wanted to give a voice to that story not simply as a larger part of the discourse around Black women’s relationship with physical activity, but as one that is distinguishable from the women in the study. Subsequently, I used autoethnography to chronicle both significant moments in the past as well as events that occurred throughout the duration of the study.

**Sampling**

In an ideal world, researchers, if left to their own devices would be quite content to study an entire population so as to capture every bit of detail that would make their studies “richer.” Unfortunately, it is not always feasible to do so. Thus, we must instead work with samples of our population that will yield the most valuable information. As
Hesse-Biber (2007) reminds us, “logic of qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding and usually involves working with small samples…the goal is to look at a ‘process’ or the ‘meanings’ individual’s attribute to their given social situation, not generally to make generalizations” (p.119). Since my primary aim was to have access to participants from whom I would gain valuable insight about their experiences of being physically active in an adopted foreign country, purposive sampling (selective sampling), which lends itself to selecting information-rich cases for in depth study (Patton 2002) was the method used to select the participants.

Given that I was already an active participant in different forms of physical activities and at various locations across the lower mainland, I already, in a sense, had access to a set pool of participants, which I had envisaged would have been an advantage in recruiting participants when the time had come. But despite that assumption of advantage - of going into a research with a set pool of participants from which to choose - I had to ensure that the pool from which I was selecting would have the suitable participants matching the criteria that would give me the most useful results. One of the pools to which I had relatively easy access was a Caribbean-based dance fitness class, which attracted between 10-15 participants on a regular basis. The clientele primarily consisted of Caribbean and African women, though it included a few participants of other ethnicities. The performance style, traditionally Caribbean in its origins, reflected the composition of the class, which itself was a reflection of the style of dance, the genre of music, and perhaps more poignantly that of a disapproving colonial gaze. By nature, African and Caribbean music is not only rhythmic but the techniques involved in the bodily movements often encourages performers to dynamically dip and suspend the rotation of their hips – a form of gyration – and, for women, is especially regarded as a site of “female strength, liberation, sensuality, virtuosic ability and eroticism” (Carey 2011, p.127). Carey (2011) further pointed out that, in Caribbean popular culture, women express sexual agency by showcasing skills involving the rotation of hip and derriere, demanding and inviting men to gaze. However, it is not the sentiment in Western culture since in Western culture, the Black female body is perceived as hypersexual, erotic, freakish, and grotesque, compared to animals, and referred to as “other” and “savage” (p.135). Admittedly, such perceptions of the Black female body have seeped into Caribbean culture rendering such bodily portrayals as
disrespectful and hedonistic. Thus, while I had access to these women, my first concern was related to the power that colonial history had over the representations of Black women’s bodies, perhaps responsible for limiting the pool from which I could select participants. My second concern was that I wanted to ensure that I had a diverse sample of participants. I wanted to ensure that my participants varied in age, years since migration, as well as the types of activities in which they participated.

My next step was therefore to identify participants who were involved in other forms of physical activity. This journey led me to taking on various forms of activities along with registering for membership at different fitness facilities and with different programmes. Some memberships I held concurrently while others started a few months after one ended. Also driving this process was the question of “when is generally a good time to recruit participants?” As I realised after some time of being out in the field, late spring and summer months were the times that I was most likely to see and meet potential participants.

Although I was working with a small sample size from a seemingly large population, I cannot downplay the importance of maximizing and taking advantage of referrals both from participants and from within my network of contacts, as this approach proved to be hugely beneficial in getting suitable participants for the study. Snowballing, as a sampling method, is believed to be particularly useful when researchers are trying to access ‘hidden’ populations, such as groups that suffer from stigma or are marginalised (Noy, 2008). Since I had no previous contact with referrals that were suggested by friends and participants, I had to rely heavily on the follow-through of both the referee and the referrer. In most cases, both parties had placed a level of importance on the study that made first contact with referrers happen within a short time. And though delighted by the prospect of adding to my list of potential participants, the response received through this method of recruiting came as a surprise, as each time the enthusiasm for my work and the willingness to participate was not what I had envisioned from persons that I did not know. In her interview, one participant told me that when she was approached by her friend, upon hearing that it was a study being done by a PhD candidate for fulfillment of the degree requirements, she immediately said yes, as she was more than happy to help in whatever way that she could to make that goal
possible. I also had no doubt that my status as a Black woman wanting to research other Black women aided in this regard.

In total, there were 15 women who participated in the study, three of whom were in fact not self-identified Black women but were of other ethnic origins. The group of women were selected from a sample of physically active women in Vancouver, Canada. The criteria for selection for the Black women were that (a) they were self-identified Black women; (b) first or second-generation immigrants; and (c) at the time of the study had been consistently participating in physical activity for a period of three or more months. The purpose of this was to ensure that participation in physical activity had become a habit.\(^\text{12}\) The selection criteria for the second group of women were that they (a) be of any ethnicity, except of African or Caribbean descent and; (b) at the time of the study, had been consistently physically active for a period of three or more months. While participating in the Caribbean fitness classes, I was often intrigued by the presence and participation of visibly non-Black\(^\text{13}\) women in this predominantly Black space, and so the decision was made between my senior supervisor and I that it was indeed a unique opportunity to talk with some of those women and to hear about their experiences. My curiosity around wanting to talk with these women was coming from a place of not solely wanting to learn of their experiences participating in the space. I also wanted to know more about why they chose to participate in a space of cultural display that was ‘not theirs’ – a space that was unfamiliar to them, to which they had no bond or sense of belonging. In retrospect, I realise that I had entered my research with my own preconceived notions surrounding not just ethnicity but that of culture and it practices; in other words, “to whom does cultural legitimacy belong?”

\(^\text{12}\) See Lally et al. (2010) for an in-depth discussion on how habits are formed.

\(^\text{13}\) While acknowledging the ethnic diversity among peoples of African and Caribbean heritage I use the term “visibly non-Black” here somewhat loosely in reference to skin colour.
The Interviewees

Fifteen participants were interviewed for the study. They ranged between the ages twenty-five to sixty years old and included twelve Black women, one white woman, one Aboriginal woman and one woman of South Asian descent. Both the white woman and the Aboriginal woman were born in Canada. The woman of South Asian descent was also born in Canada. One of the Black women was born in Canada. Of the Black women, ten had migrated from countries in the Caribbean and Africa. One had migrated from the United States America and one woman was born in the UK to Caribbean parents who migrated to Canada when she was a child. The length of period during which the women had migrated ranged between eight to fifty years. At the time of the interviews five of the participants were married, four of whom had children (one of the four women being a grandmother). All the women were at different points in their careers (full-time employees in mid-level and professional jobs; full-time student; self-employed; and homemaker). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the demographic characteristics of the participants in the study.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Region of Origin or Country of Birth</th>
<th>Age range (years)</th>
<th>Years of Residence in Canada</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Spaces – Out in the field

Participant observation was done at more than one facility. What is described in this section is my observation at the facility from which more than half of my participants were selected.

In the dance studio

The room in which the Caribbean dance fitness class took place was a room with wooden floors, of approximately 1500 square feet, and could comfortably accommodate 20 active bodies. The dance studio was sandwiched in between two smaller rooms, which led to the dance studio sometimes getting unbearably hot during the summer months, and on occasions, the air conditioning would also break. During the winter months, it took much longer for the room to feel heated and for the class’ participants to get warm - indicated by their reluctance to remove their sweaters & hoodies until sometimes halfway into the 1-hour session.

The instructor stood at the front of the class, sometimes with her back to us, in order for the class to mirror her movements and at other times, she faced us. The class faced an entirely mirrored wall that ran the length of the room, from ceiling to floor, and would get foggy during the winter months from the heat of the sweaty bodies in the room. Other than the mirrors indicating the direction of the class, the music player in one corner (front left) of the room and the speakers in the ceiling, the room was bare. There was a small enclosed room to the back left corner that stored the yoga mats that the class participants had access to for the strength & flexibility portion of the class- usually the last ten to fifteen minutes.

The Researcher

More and more, as researchers begin to delve deeper into trying to understand and make meaning of social contexts, it has become increasingly important for us to
take stock of our biases – our differences and similarities between our respondents and ourselves – and to acknowledge that these could potentially have an impact on the research process and outcomes. Hertz (1996) acknowledged that, “it is essential to understand the researcher’s location of self (e.g. within power hierarchies and within a constellation of gender, race, class and citizenship)” (p.5).

Throughout the process of conducting this research, my experience was a constant reflection, which began with the formulation of the research idea itself, questioning whether or not my desire to conduct a study of this nature was purely personal or whether my intention was for more than personal satisfaction. In essence, the question was really about who potentially stood to benefit from the process.

During both the observation and interviews, I noted verbal and nonverbal cues that indicated a need for further exploration or probing and found myself revising questions or the ways in which they were asked to get the most appropriate responses or responses that would generate useful data. In one instance, I realized that I had to revise one of my research questions – one pertaining to safety – as I realized soon after that not all the participants interpreted it in the same way, or in the way I had intended for it to be interpreted. I saw this as a consequence of my being immersed in the literature and taking for granted that participants were privy to the same information. Being aware from the outset that misinterpretations such as this could happen, I had made the decision to treat my first two interviews as pilot interviews, which allowed me to review my technique as an interviewer and to make the necessary adjustments in order to feel comfortable in my capacity as an interviewer.

I also viewed power relations as an important factor to be aware of and on which to reflect. I was an active member in the Black, African and Caribbean communities and a number of the persons with whom I interacted, some more immediate than others, already knew me or knew of me as being a graduate scholar at the university. This kind of recognition brings with it certain amounts of intangible benefits and levels of respect. I also became increasingly aware of the responses and the reactions of potential participants when I gave them my programme of study and research interest, as I was soon to realize that some apparently held me in high esteem. Thus, one of my major
concerns while conducting the interviews revolved around the issue of how I was perceived by my participants. I constantly reflected on questions such as, “How could I ensure that my participants do not feel intimidated by the interview, or during the interview, especially if they perceive themselves as being interviewed by an academic scholar, rather than a peer?”

Additionally, I also grappled with the decision of representation of voice in the research. Questions of “how should my voice and how should the voices of the participants be represented?” and “whose accounts would be given priority over others?” were some of the concerns that I had, especially when thinking about issues of truth, validity, reliability and even authorship. Ultimately, I decided to trust that my desire to ensure self-reflexivity would allow me to write the study in such a way that multiple voices could be heard and validated as representative of the truth.

**Ethics**

Ethics approval was received from the Research and Ethics Board (REB) at Simon Fraser University. After receiving this permission, I first approached the instructor of the Caribbean fitness class to which I was already a participant, with a formal letter of request to continue the classes as a participant observer with the intention of recruiting some of the participants for my study. I got the instructor’s written approval to do so (See Appendix A) but found myself struggling with the decision of whether or not to disclose my intention to the rest of the group for fear that this knowledge could potentially change the group’s dynamic or the behaviour of its individual members. After talking it through with my senior supervisor, we decided that it was perhaps best that I let the group know. I relayed this information to them at one of the Saturday morning sessions where there was the likelihood of more participants attending the class, as opposed to a Thursday evening session that attracted fewer numbers. However, to ensure that it was common knowledge, I made a conscious effort to individually inform participants over the course of a few sessions.
I also approached two other fitness facilities of which I was a member but one was less keen on facilitating the process. Persons who met the criteria for participation in the study and indicated their willingness to participate were given more information about the study; they were informed of their rights and responsibilities as a participant, along with a copy of consent form. Though they were given the option of using a pseudonym, none of the participants’ chose to do so. However, in the interest of ensuring privacy and anonymity, I decided that it was best to use pseudonyms in place of participants’ given names.

**Data Collection Techniques & Procedures**

The process of data collection utilised three main sources: (a) participant observation; (b) face-to-face in-depth interviews which lasted between 60-90 minutes; and (c) written research notes.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation was an integral part of this study and took place at various fitness sites such as indoor gyms and outdoor bootcamps where there were potential participants. My decision to be a participant observer rested on the notion that being a member of the group would increase familiarity and help to build trust between my potential participants and me. It was anticipated that by ‘becoming one of them,’ potential participants would be more willing to participate and would be encouraged to speak more freely about their experiences. Becoming knowledgeable of the fitness and exercise routines and understanding the language and dynamics of the groups were important aspects of this process. Theoretically, Bolin and Granskog (2003) suggested that it is important that ethnographers of physical activity be involved in the lives of the people that they study.

Becoming one of the ‘team’ acts to open ‘doors’ of experience that is needed to know the life of the [participant].…learning the exercise subculture and the levels of participation, the ethnographer can begin to
forge an analysis that facilitates her seeing the experience itself and the interpretative framework with which the experience has meaning (p.11).

Thus, the use of participant observation in this research was meant to bridge the gap between the spoken and unspoken language of the women; I wanted to share in their experiences of the activities to understand feelings of pleasure, displeasure, moments of frustration and exhaustion. Consequently, rather than relying solely on participants’ verbal responses to the place of physical activity in their lives, the participant observation phase was a rich complement to the interviews, allowing me to record subtle unconscious actions - important details that could not have been collected sans this method.

**In-depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection for this study. It was felt that this method of qualitative research would have been best suited for a study of this nature, as it has the potential to elicit rich data of value in interpreting and representing the realities of women whose experiences are often not articulated. Since the qualitative research interview is an “attempt to understand the world from the subject's point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world…” (Kvale, 1996, p.1), the purpose of the interviews for this study was to gain an in-depth insight into subjective understandings and knowledge of physical activity, and the factors responsible for the continued physical activity participation of a select group of Black women in Canada.

As a guide, to ensure that the participants responded to the overarching concerns of the study, I employed the use of semi-structured interviews (see Appendixes B and C). This style of interviewing gave the participants the liberty to speak freely about their experiences. The questions were therefore phrased in such a way that they encouraged the participants to recount and share their stories. To that end, the majority of the questions were framed as “tell me about…” or “describe…” rather than “why” or “how”. The semi-structured interview style was flexible in that there was room to ask leading questions or to seek further clarification to responses. In a sense, it was designed to probe for meanings and to dig deeper into grey areas that perhaps might
have been left unexplored in a more structured interview. For as Hesse-Biber (2007) suggested, it is an interview style that is not tightly controlled and leaves room for researcher and interviewee spontaneity. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Notes for further reference and reflection were also taken during the interviews.

To make the process as hassle free as possible for the participants, they were given the option of choosing a location of preference for the interviews. It was also based on the assumption that when participants are able to do this, they will more than likely choose a setting to which they are familiar and in which they feel comfortable. While it is suggested that it is best to conduct interviews in settings that are quiet and provide the least distraction, the locations chosen were easily accessible to the participants. Although participants were given the option of choosing a setting, I found that a majority of the women relied on me to select locations. Consequently, one interview was done at my Vancouver office, five in study rooms at the SFU Surrey and Vancouver libraries, three in the meeting room of a popular coffee shop, one in an open spaced coffee shop in a busy mall, two at the participants’ places of work and three at participants’ homes.

Though I am aware of the necessity to minimize distractions during the interview process, the open spaced coffee shop was unavoidable due to the participant’s hectic schedule and one of the only times that she would have been available to facilitate a face-to-face interview was immediately after one of her martial arts classes that was more centrally located. This interview was by far the most difficult one to conduct due in part to noise distractions of the music and mall announcements, as well as distraction from the flow of mall patrons. At the end of one of the interviews that took place at a participant’s home, she showed me two small pieces of what looked like Asian artifacts and asked me whether I knew what they were. I did not. She explained to me that she used them during her yoga and meditation sessions when she was home and wanted to get centred or relax especially if she had work to do. She explained that yoga and stretching were important aspects of her daily routine and so she made sure that no matter how busy she got, she had what she needed to be able to practice at home. She also showed me the area that she would clear, so as to make sufficient room. I realised
then that in the truest sense of the word, I was being given special access into my participant's world; I was being given the opportunity to better understand and make meaning of the value that she placed on physical activity by seeing an intimate part of her physical activity ritual.

**Data Analysis**

Echoing the sentiments of researchers who write on research methodological approaches, the process of data collection and analyses can be as overwhelming as it can be exciting when everything is coming together. As this was my first formal attempt at this process, I chose to adopt an interactive model advocated by Miles and Huberman (1984). According to the authors, data analysis follows three basic stages: (a) data collection; (b) data reduction; (c) data display; and (d) drawing/verifying conclusions, during which “the researcher steadily moves among these four “nodes” during data collection, then shuffles among reduction, display, and conclusion/drawing verification for the remainder of the study… [As such], it is an interactive and cyclical process” (22).

![Figure 2. Components of Data Analysis: Interactive Model](image)

*Adapted from Miles & Huberman (1984, p.23).*

Interpretation and analysis of the data, in essence, began during the data collection stage, as “there is typically not a precise point at which data collection ends
and analysis begins” (Patton 1990, p.377). Thus the formation of concepts, themes, and ideas had started to evolve sooner rather than later but had to be constantly refined as I attempted to make better sense of the data and ask critical questions of it. Since the data analysis for my study was guided by a feminist analytic understanding, I wanted to ensure that the ideas informing the analysis were in fact coming from the data and not from the theories.

The process required that I first familiarize myself with the data. This happened in two phases. Since my participant observations had started prior to the interviews, in this first phase I read through the observation notes I had made, making notations of thoughts and ideas that occurred to me. The second phase started when the interviews began. All the interviews were audio recorded and then typed verbatim into interviewee transcripts shortly after the interview was done. I then read through the transcripts along with any observational notes that were taken during the session and summary notes that I had made at the end of the interview.

I read the Interview transcripts for a second time with my research questions in mind to identify “relevant texts” (Auerbach & Silverstein 2003, p.37). This method also cut the text down to manageable proportions. The other texts were put in a separate folder in the event that I should need them. From my relevant texts, I searched for repeating ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein 2003). These included looking for (a) the use of similar terms, words or phrases by participants when speaking about their experiences; (b) the frequency of use; and (c) trends or concepts that seemingly cut across the interviews. Along with the observational notes that I had made, I then looked for linkages in the repeated ideas and clustered them together according to themes (Neuman (2004), some of which were influenced by my prior readings in the area.

From there, I moved into organizing the themes that I had come up with into larger abstract ideas, which formed the analysis chapters of this study. Throughout the data display process, I found that a useful strategy for engaging with the evidence was to identify the quotes, phrases, and narratives that appropriately illustrated the themes. Later, when organizing my findings into chapters, I was able to use these quotes,
phrases, and narratives to put the women’s experiences into context and to tell their stories from their points of view. As Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) aptly put it:

[The narrative] provides the bridge between the researchers’ concerns and the participants’ subjective experience, using their own words as much as possible. However, it also includes the researchers’ theoretical framework by including the theoretical constructs and themes in parentheses throughout the narrative. Weaving together subjective experience and abstract concepts brings together the two very different worlds of researcher and participant (p.40).

Methodological Challenges

The major methodological challenge that I encountered while doing this study was during the data collection phase. My initial idea of recruiting participants from several fitness facilities in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland was not achieved due to financial constraints. Being a participant observer meant that I had to register at each of the facilities of interest, as well as pay respective fees. Some of the membership fees at the time ranged between $60-$75; with the addition of monthly fees, this was not a feasible option. This reality severely hindered the rate at which I was able to recruit participants.

Summary

This chapter described the means by which an in-depth analysis of Black women’s participation in physical activity was produced. The study was qualitatively designed to get a better understanding of the negotiations involved in the ways in which Black women engage in physical activity. To do this, the inquiry employed such data collection techniques as semi-structured interviews, participant observations and autoethnography. The strength of autoethnography to a work such as this was that it underscored a fundamental principle of feminist cultural studies by indeed making the personal political. By giving voice to the shifting identities of the researcher, autoethnography legitimised the authenticity of the insider voice. In so doing, it took this
body of work on physical activity to a place where it could not have gone without self-exposure; allowing the self to make public (and political) the innermost and personal feelings of the researcher in an attempt at unpacking what is undoubtedly a more complex discourse surrounding physical activity participation and the ‘ordinary’ Black woman. While a noted challenge of effective autoethnography has been the need to maintain a balance between that of self and subject representation, I also found the process of self-disclosure to be less than comforting. I felt vulnerable. Being in the shoes of the researched not only caused me to reflect deeply on my own experiences but also allowed me to witness the points of hesitation and caution around ‘disclosing’ from my participants’ perspective.

Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) idea of using relevant text, and repeating ideas and themes to form larger ideas guided analysis of the data. I also presented a discussion of the major challenges that I encountered while carrying out the study. In the next chapter, I give an insight into the lives of the women who agreed to participate in the study.
Chapter 4. Description of the Study’s Participants

As often happens with auto-ethnographic research, I found myself as the researcher, sharing similar experiences to some of the participants—feelings, thoughts and passion, while at the same time experiencing bouts of discontent, disagreement and even disconnect with some of their stories. However, a study of this nature would not be complete without a portrait of the lives of the participants who made it possible. I include this chapter as a way of connecting the reader with each participant. Brief snippets of narratives are included where appropriate to “give life” to the participants as they talk about their physical activity journey. This section focuses on a discussion of the women’s involvement in physical activity from as far back as they could remember into a discussion of their current engagement with physical activity as well as their physical activity preferences.

The Women’s Journeys

AH’s Journey

AH was born in England to Caribbean parents who migrated to Canada in the 1960s when she was 9 years old. She described her mother as an active person who up until she passed away was one of her role models. She fondly described her mother as being “like a police woman” on top of her. Whenever it looked like she had put weight on, her mother would constantly ask her whether she had stopped going to Weight Watchers. She spoke about the impact that her mother had on her life as what has kept her focused on her journey with physical activity. Physical activity started for her when she was much younger and somehow grew into a habit. In high school, she was on the gymnastics team but also loved dancing. As she got older, she found herself avidly
participating in the 80’s aerobics craze, making it her habit to stop off at the gym before going home. She mentioned that like her mother, she loved to swim but during her early years, was a bit “chubby”, so she tended to stay away from the pool and the beach because she could never seem to find a bathing suit that could fit her. While she sometimes goes to the gym to get a full body workout, her activity of choice, which she does most of the time, is yoga. She described her passion for yoga as her “love.” “It makes me feel great. Like, I can’t really say that when I, you know, been on a treadmill or the bike or the Stairmaster, I feel great. I feel like I did something that was good to my body but I don’t feel great...” AH’s passion took her on a yoga journey with first becoming a certified yoga instructor to teaching yoga part-time at Mountain Place University in Vancouver.14

AS’ Journey

AS was born in the Caribbean. She migrated to Canada more than 47 years ago. During her early years of living in the Caribbean, much of her commuting - to school, to visit friends as well as to get the bus - was done on foot. However, she admitted that while she was active in her home country, she was much more active in Canada. Two of her favourite activities, swimming and cycling, were activities that she only learned to do when she migrated to Canada. While she tried to use cycling as much as she possibly could – to school, to the farmers market etc. – swimming was the activity that she enjoyed the most. She remarked that, “If for some, heaven forbid reason that all the other activities were taken away and swimming was left, I’ll be fine. I’m absolutely alive in the water.” AS also does a number of other outdoor activities such as skiing, snowshoeing, hiking, mountain biking, and scuba diving. Her passion was definitely for the outdoors.

14 Name used for the university is a pseudonym.
DG’s Journey

Unlike some of the other participants, DG did not participate in much physical activity prior to her arrival in Canada. She was born in a West African country and left for Canada in 2003 to attend university. Her parents regarded physical activity as frivolous play. She was therefore not encouraged to participate in physical activity. Instead, her parents placed emphasis on ‘book learning’ and getting an education. She noted that in her home country, physical activity and exercise were not things that they went out of their way to do but happened unconsciously through the tons of walking that they did. She described the society that she left behind as one that “unconsciously” embraced an active way of life. However, when she returned home several years later, she saw persons “dangerously jogging by the roadside.” This she attributed to North American influence that had begun to creep into their cultural ways of doing things. She admitted that 2007 was the very first time that she ever joined a gym. She felt that she had reached a point in her life when she had started to feel that she needed to adopt a more physically active lifestyle. However, being new to fitness as a conscious activity and new to the gym, it took her a while to figure out what she liked doing or what was right for her. She tried several different types of activities, including running. Running had seemed natural to her because everyone in Vancouver was a runner but she hated it. She tried different sessions at the gym but never found them challenging and got bored quite easily. She took a break until she decided to get a personal trainer, which worked for a while but ended shortly “due to life circumstances.” She tried hot yoga and enjoyed it because she loved the heat. She later learned to swim and found that she enjoyed being in the water. She eventually started doing African and Caribbean dance classes, which was what she absolutely loved, primarily because she enjoyed dancing and the genres were culturally relatable to her. She described these forms as something that “comes naturally.”

KW’s Journey

KW was born in the Caribbean and migrated to Vancouver, Canada in 2009 to pursue work opportunities in the health industry. From as far back as she could
remember she had always been an active person. Her parents used to make her “do stuff.” She however said that physical activity became an even greater part of her life after her mom was diagnosed with having with diabetes. She knew that she had to take up regular physical activity, since her family history made her at risk of developing cardiovascular disease. Her mom loved walking so she would walk a lot with her in the mornings. While KW was open to trying different types of activities, she enjoyed swimming and dancing, even more. She mentioned that she was, however, mostly doing “Caribbean kind of dancing, cause I miss that from back home.”

DB’s Journey

DB migrated from the Caribbean to Montreal, Canada when she was in her late teens. This was shortly after she had finished high school. She later moved to Toronto but almost thirty-five years ago decided to move to Vancouver with her husband and two children at the time. Her husband in particular, was in search of better job opportunities. Though she had never thought about her active early years as ‘doing physical activity,’ DB could not remember a time when she was never active. She noted that they would always walk to meet friends and they always walked to school, which was far away from where they lived. When she was in high school, she used to play lawn hockey and volleyball. She would also participate in track related field events. DB loves running and being outdoors. She mentioned that she was willing to try any form of outdoor activity, such as Dragon Boat racing, which she did once as a spur of the moment decision when a co-worker was trying to find an additional member for his team.

AA’s Journey

AA, an African American woman who was born in the United States, migrated to Canada in her early 20s soon after she got married. She talked about having lead an
active lifestyle since childhood but acknowledged that she has had gaps between periods when she was most active (working out at the gym) and when she was not. For her, physical activity started in elementary school when her school’s coach would have her class “work out every other day.” She noted that she just “kind of slacked off” when she moved to Vancouver. She was new to her environment and did not know anyone. Additionally, she was “new to marriage and kids, so I didn’t go to the gym for quite a while, maybe 6, 7 years.” She was however, always an outdoor person so despite her absence from a gym, she always found the time to go for a run or a walk whenever the weather permitted. AA also spoke about her love for dance, thus she would generally gravitate towards those kinds of fitness activities.

**CW’s Journey**

CW migrated from the Caribbean 8 years ago with her husband and 2 children. Now an avid exerciser, CW was never fond of physical activity when she was a teenager. She explained that there was sweating involved, which meant that her sweat would ruin her hair and her uniform. However, she decided to get active after she started having children. It was important for her not to gain weight (so she would look good in her clothes). She was also concerned about avoiding health issues, as she had seen the problems that cardiovascular disease caused for her parents. CW explained that when she started out, she experienced challenges in trying to find “something that worked for me and not something that was the “in thing.” She registered for gym memberships several times but never foundd her fit until she tried running. While she participated in other types of activities, running was the activity that she most enjoyed.

**FK’s Journey**

FK was born and raised in Vancouver to South Asian parents who migrated to Canada in the 1970s. She described her lifestyle as an active one, and placed a lot of emphasis on keeping active all year round. Maintaining a high level of physical activity was important to her as a history of chronic health issues runs in her family. FK noted
that she snowshoe’s during the winter, and runs and does “martial arts, specifically Mortai, in spring and summer when the weather is decent.” She added that she would sometimes hike as well but if she felt that she was not getting enough physical activity, she would also go to the gym. She stated that she had a passion for all things dance and even though she was not of Caribbean descent she enjoyed participating in weekly Caribbean fitness classes. She explained that she did martial arts because it was hard work – serious, disciplined and focused - but at the end of a session, she would generally feel “exhausted and tired.” The Caribbean fitness class and Zumba, however, made her feel “refreshed and energized.” She further added that the gym was really a last resort for her. She has never found it to be a welcoming or warm place.

AO’s Journey

A First Nations Canadian by birth, AO was born and grew up in British Columbia. For most of her life, she has been an active person and prided herself on her ability to run long distance races when she was much younger. Into adulthood however, she has tried to keep active for health reasons - her weight in particular - as her family has always struggled with putting on weight. She mentioned that she had tried just about every type of fitness activity that there was, including “hiring a personal trainer for lots of money to like work with me one-on-one.” She however admitted that she had never tried yoga because it was too slow for her and did not appear “to do anything.” She preferred activities that were high energy and involved dancing. When she was on her weight loss journey, she would gravitate towards such kinds of activities, including aquacize. AO had decided on participating in the Caribbean dance fitness class because she had always loved Caribbean music.

SV’s Journey

SV was born in Canada to Caribbean parents who ensured that her and her siblings were always involved in various forms of physical activity. For as long as she
could remember she had always been active. Periods in her life when she was not consciously physically active only came about when she became an adult and was responsible for herself. Though she does not have any interest in losing weight, she tried to keep as active as she could manage. She loved hiking, so sometimes, depending on her financial commitments – she was starting up a new business - she would go outdoors and enjoy the activities that were free. She mentioned that she was motivated to keep active because she would notice that whenever she was not active, she would get unusually winded from any form of physical exertion.

SB’s Journey

SB was born in the Caribbean and migrated to Canada when she was in her teens, approximately 18 years ago. SB admitted that she did not like exercising but that prior to migrating, she did karate classes as a stress reliever. She considered herself as being more active now compared to a few years ago. Much of her activities included sometimes working out in the gym in her building and weekly participation in a Caribbean fitness class. The latter, she enjoyed, as it “beats the boredom in the gym.”

MK’s Journey

MK migrated from the warmth of an African country to live in Canada in 2003. She first resided in Ontario until five years ago when she decided to move to Vancouver because she was told that it was much warmer on the West Coast. MK had been active since childhood. She did gymnastics and played lawn tennis and basketball. She said that her father had paid to have her to trained professionally by a coach but that the training stopped because she went to boarding school. Nonetheless, whenever she went home for the holidays, she would play lawn tennis with her dad. After she moved to Canada, her activities mostly included going to the gym and working out on her own. She recalled that before having her son, she and her husband would go to the park every Saturday “and just shoot some hoops.”
RA's Journey

RA was a professional athlete. She was born in West Africa but lived for a while in the Netherlands. She later moved to the United States, after which she made the transition to Canada in 2003. However, RA’s ultimate goal was to become an Olympian but she also wanted to get “a good education.” When she was in elementary school, she participated in a number of track and field events, as well as volleyball and basketball. She was even interested in soccer but her father would not hear of it. He did not see it as a suitable sport for females. She mentioned that her father had been a national champion in soccer. Although she loved heptathlon because it kept her busy compared to participating in a single event, RA’s love for long jump was undeniable. She recalled how jubilant she was when she realised that she had broken the Canadian record in long jump that had been standing for 16 years. She noted that at the time she was still an international student but that she received her citizenship shortly after breaking that record. She went on to break it yet a second time. She felt that compared to all the other events that she participated in, she was “world-class” in long jump “because I went to the Olympics in long jump.”

AM’s Journey

AM was a group fitness instructor who taught a Caribbean and African fitness programme. She is Canadian and identified as Caucasian. She had a love for Caribbean and African music and loved the vibe of the people. She admitted that before becoming an instructor, she did not have any formal dance training but that she enjoyed the music, so she figured that she would “give it a shot.” Her first exposure to the fitness programme was via another Caucasian woman who was in her forties, had a bigger body compared to her but had a lot of energy and was a great instructor. Therefore, she figured that if that woman could do it, then, so could she. Furthermore, it was appealing in that in order to be an instructor of the programme, an individual did not have to “fit a certain mold.” AM was active in high school but before becoming a part of the programme, she participated in various group fitness activities, in particular through the
ones offered at her university. She also enjoyed boxing and did it for three years before moving to Vancouver.

**RB's Journey**

RB is of Caribbean heritage. She moved to Canada when she was six years old. Prior to her participation in the Caribbean and African fitness programme, she had never been dedicated to physical activity, as she never had the drive. She described her interaction at the gym as "incredibly boring" and that if she used her elliptical at home once per week, she would “consider it a good week.” She got committed to the fitness programme after she had made a New Year’s resolution to lose weight. She did achieve her goal but continued because she was having fun in the classes and felt that it was a good workout.

**Summary**

Participation in physical activity was not a new venture for most of the participants. For a number of them, their exposure began quite early. Some were garnered through the emphasis of physical education in school programmes. Others were encouraged by parents. While some of the women had the opportunity to participate in organized and formal types of physical activity, others spoke about physical activity as unconscious aspects of their daily living. The stories also pointed to differences in cultural perceptions about the importance of physical activity – the role and place – in people’s lives. A commonality across all the stories was that all the women were at a point in their physical activity journey where they were able to participate in an activity that they enjoyed doing. However, for some women, the journey to get to that point involved a process of trial and error before they found the right fit of what worked for them.
Chapter 5.

Embodied Experiences

I need to get back to my, my thing is, I was, maybe 110 maximum before I had my son...I need to lose those 20lbs. I need to! I just, I don't like my body figure how it is...When I had my son, I gained like 60lbs in my pregnancy. 60lbs! And then, so the last 20lbs um, yeah, even though at the back of my mind is the “at risk for diabetes and hypertension and stuff like that,” yeah, when I look at my body, I’m like ugh! Where did my body go, I want back my pre-baby weight (KW).

The above narrative speaks to one participant’s perception of her body and the ways in which pregnancy causes her to experience her post-birth body as losing a body that she once had. Her weight gain and the stubbornness of her weight loss is the source of much of her anxiety, frustration and discontent with her body. Her self-criticism of her body and her desire to reshape her body and have it return to a prior state is a reflection of Nettleton and Watson’s opening statement that:

Everything we do, we do with our bodies – when we think, eat, listen, speak, sleep, walk, relax, work and play, we ‘use’ our bodies. Every aspect of our lives is therefore embodied...We may look in the mirror and notice bodily changes: yet another grey hair, the size of our stomach, a spot that has just appeared on our chin...The extent to which we are conscious of our bodies and how we feel about them will vary throughout our lives and within different social contexts...Everyday life is therefore fundamentally about the production and reproduction of bodies (Nettleton and Watson 1998, p.1-2).

At the same time, her narrative also suggests that the ways in which women perceive and experience their body is often couched around notions of a desirable body – one that is influenced by sociocultural ideas of an ideal body and less by health or medical values. According to research, these body experiences cause women to monitor their bodies and attempt to regulate their physical appearance to fit cultural ideals (Bordo
1993) which are neither static nor impermeable to cross-cultural influences. Nevertheless, it is through these ideals, that women evaluate not only their own bodies but also the bodies of other women and make comparisons in relation to what is deemed as the ideal (Bordo 1993). How women choose to regulate their bodies is dependent on how they relate to the messages – social, cultural, medical and health – that they receive about their bodies. In today’s consumerist society, media messages play a significant role in how women perceive and experience their bodies and in influencing the decisions that women make with regard to body regulation and modification.

For instance, messages promoting physical activity are everywhere. Capitalising on physical activity epidemiology, these messages target women as their primary audience; the literature also reminds us that women are less physically active than men (Al-Sobayel et al. 2015; Beville et al. 2014; Azevedo et al. 2007). It was therefore not surprising that when Sport England unveiled their new fitness campaign in January 2015, the target population was women. Hailed by the Daily Mail UK, as a “bold new campaign” the “This Girl Can” campaign set out to tackle the barriers that prevent women from being active. Citing statistics that indicated that fewer women than men were involved in physical activity, campaign organizers voiced that they wanted to “encourage women to defeat any fears surrounding activity…to prompt a change in attitudes and help boost women’s confidence.” The campaign promoted realistic images of women, and incorporated diverse representations of women. Organisers hypothesised that by putting “images of real women exercising on the national stage,” women who “sweat and jiggle as they exercise” (Kirkova 2015), it would encourage women to be more accepting of their bodies as well as their appearance during and after a workout, consequently resulting in greater participation rates among women (Kirkova 2015). The images would find their way into the private spaces of homes via regular television programming, at the cinema, in shopping centres and on massive public billboards (Kirkova 2015).

Notwithstanding its good intentions, initiatives such as the “This Girl Can” campaign add another layer to the complex interplay of messages, information, experiences and understandings around which Black women make decisions about physical activity. Campaigns like this one challenge ordinary Black women - historically
excluded from publicly participating in physical activity – to brush aside cultural and historical perceptions about physical activity and instead embrace it soulfully in its repackaged form as something that is good for them. Furthermore, it holds Black women accountable for their own health and wellness with little or no emphasis placed on contextual and environmental factors, which research indicates have a bearing on Black women’s participation in physical activity (Ball et al. 2006; Eyler et al. 1999, Yang et al. 2007).

At the same time, it is through such initiatives that the dialogue around Black women and physical activity shifts away from one where the physically active Black female body is an athlete to one where there is recognition of the physically active ‘ordinary’ Black female body. Within this context, bodies that are active as a choice gain visibility - bodies that juggle work, school, family, and community responsibilities. Additionally, through the exposure given to physical activity by the USA’s first Black First Lady, Michelle Obama, ‘ordinary’ Black women who are not interested in competitive sports can realise their options for physical fitness. By tying aspects of culturally relevant pop culture (hip-hop, rap, etc.) to physical activity, the move by Mrs. Obama represents a significant cultural shift in the packaging of physical activity to meet the consumption styles of Black women.

This shifting understanding of Black women’s participation in physical activity – one that is located outside the natural and applied sciences - gives legitimacy to the experiences of ‘ordinary’ Black women who are physically active. Furthermore, engaging ordinary women who are physically active “in talk about their bodily experiences” (Nettleton and Watson 1998, p.2) is critical to understanding the context within which women make decisions about physical activity. Thus, this chapter explores how physically active Black women make meaning of physical activity and the tensions that exist between these meanings and their bodily experiences.
Feeling Fit and Healthy

The women’s discussions within the context of how they understood physical activity revolved around their personal experiences. They spoke about physical activity in relation to desired and experienced outcomes as well as to commonly held assumptions about the benefits of physical activity, such as feelings of improved health and fitness. The general perception was that regular physical activity and exercise aids in the maintenance of good health, synonymous with a longer, healthier and active life. When asked for an example, one participant used an analogy:

You know the feeling you get when you run up a flight of stairs and you get to the top and you just like, “I’m absolutely winded?” Yes. So you think about things like that and you let that inspire you to go back into the gym and work, so that you can be healthier (DG).

I noticed that at times, the women used the terms physical activity and exercise interchangeably, perhaps an indication of an understanding of the fluidity of movement that is possible between both realms while at the same time implying that there are more health benefits to exercise than there are to physical activity. Alternatively, the ways in which the women used the terms could indicate a gap between lay and professional or expert understandings around the concept of physical activity. In other words, the personal meanings that the women attribute to physical activity may not fit entirely or even neatly with the systematized knowledge of biomedicine. One such example is the relationship between sweating and weight-loss or calories burned discussed further in the upcoming section. Some of the women interpreted their bodily experience of ‘sweating buckets’ during a workout as having to do with the ‘lay’ belief that the more one sweats, the more calories burned and hence the more weight lost. However, biomedical knowledge runs counter to this belief, suggesting instead that sweating can be an indication of many things – including an indication of the intensity of a workout or an indication of the temperature of the workout environment (Cespedes, 2015).
When some of the women talked about their experiences of being physically active, they placed emphasis on the ability of exercise to help them “tone up” and “lose weight.” Gym memberships and forms of outdoor activities such as running, hiking and biking were among the choice of activities that a majority of the women perceived as being most beneficial to their health and fitness. One participant however, talked about the tasks that she undertook as part of her domestic responsibilities and outdoor work obligations. She explained that her hectic schedule when her children were young made it difficult for her to have dedicated times for working out but that she still managed to keep fit by the things that she “did unconsciously.” “I’m a person who’s always cleaning, doing things, so I think all those kept me until I had my free time to say, “okay, now, I’m going to do this” (DB).

I like it when I Sweat

‘Sweat’ played a significant role in the women’s understanding of physical activity. When I asked what their activities of preference were, I received responses such as “anything that’s going to make me sweat” (CR) and “I’m more interested in the classes because its high energy and I sweat a lot” (AA).

Just being in that room with everybody dancing and doing all this vigorous exercise just helped me so much in terms of…I felt that I had worked out. I don’t know if that makes sense but I felt that I had done something. And I went home really motivated to do it again and again and again and kept imagining that oh my God if I do this every single week, can you imagine what the results of this would be? All the sweating (laughs), you know (MK).

The women’s responses suggest that the act of sweating was an indication of the intensity of the workout. The amount of sweat that one accumulated was also a measurement of how satisfied one was about any particular activity in which they participated. Within this context, the women consciously aligned their fitness goals with the level of intensity of the activity. MK for instance, rejected the idea that any other type of activity besides an intense cardio workout would keep her “slim;” “I’ve always just felt that the more physical and the more vigorous exercise is (laughs), the more weight I’ll lose” (MK).
Given the women's perception of ‘cardio’ activities as activities that cause them to sweat more than other types of activities, such as strength and flexibility activities, it was little wonder that they mostly participated in aerobic activities.

Is it my body or is it your culture?

Some of the women took issue with the focus that North American culture places on ideas around body image and that of an ideal body size. In the discussions, some of the women spoke about the fact that the society’s expectation for women to have a thin body does cause them some amount of anxiety as they feel pressured to live up to these ideals. DG saw the society’s attitude towards fatness and/or overweight as being a public indication of an individual’s ability for self-restraint. She remarked that:

It’s not as acceptable to be fat or overweight or unhealthy, it’s seen as such a taboo, it’s like “oh my God, are you not doing anything to be healthy? Do you not see yourself in the mirror?” There’s a lot more pressure on you to be healthy here and so um, it’s definitely a different culture. It’s a different mindset. I don’t know, I don’t, I think that, that’s where it’s ended for me, the idea it was like fat shaming, “oh hoo! You’re fat!” you can’t be fat. No it’s not allowed. You have to...and I don’t even know if it’s about being healthy, it just seems like it’s about being skinny (DG)

Although DG was clear in her argument about society’s perceptions in relation to body size, she had mixed feelings about whether the focus on body size reflected concerns about health or whether it was more to do with image and aesthetics. When asked whether she felt that there were expectations placed on her to be active, one participant indicated that:

There is definitely pressure to exercise because you want to look a certain way. Whether you try...I think even if you try your hardest not to take it on, the media ultimately affects your head. You should look a certain way. How do you look that way? Well, diet or exercise. And you can get there faster if you do both, so I think that’s the focus here (SB).

Thus, from the women’s point of view, the pressure is to ‘look’ healthy, not so much to ‘be’ healthy since a sole requirement of the former is to have a thin body, irrespective of whether or not the body is healthy. In this sense, even though the women associate
physical activity with health and weight management, their discussions suggest that cultural narratives about women’s bodies do not always reflect professional or expert understandings but rather a close alignment with patterns of physical activity, diet, and exercise consumption.

**Maternal Instincts**

The significance of regular physical activity carried distinct and separate meanings for the women dependent on whether or not they have children. The women who are mothers talked about their relationship with physical activity in a way that was reflective of their roles and responsibilities as carers and nurturers. The expectations of this group of women were primarily to act as role models for their children. They saw the task of encouraging their children to develop a positive attitude towards physical activity as largely theirs. In addition, several of the women spoke strongly about the importance of being in good health while their children are growing up. It was important to them that they are in adequate physical shape to participate in various aspects of their children’s (and grandchildren’s) lives.

**A) Being a Good (Active) Role Model**

The vast majority of the women in this group had their children enrolled in either a form of structured physical activity such as dance, or in a competitive sport such as soccer or martial arts. DB, who has adult male children, explained that when her children were growing up:

I was not at that moment thinking “oh its physical fitness or its anything." I just needed to get them involved. After school instead of just staying home and playing and kind of getting into and fights and whatever. We were an active family…I saw it as getting them involved and active. I wasn’t thinking about it as exercise, like now they stress kids should be doing 1 hour a day. I never thought of it that way. Nobody told me that way. Its just I thought, “Okay, these boys, we need to do something.”

Being an active person, DB’s concern for wanting to ensure that her children lead active lifestyles suggested that she saw ‘being active’ as a natural course of action with
the added benefit of keeping her boys out of trouble. In many ways, DB's rationale for wanting her children involved in "something" was similar to another participant's experiences growing up. SV had explained that her mother (an older woman and first generation immigrant) had her and her siblings participate in various activities, "so we would've stayed out of trouble" (SV).

It is interesting that the narratives of the older women contrast with those of the (younger) women who have younger children. KW for instance, emphasised that she wanted her son to be active – to be "involved in stuff" for "health" reasons. While she did not talk about the physical activity requirements for children, she spoke about physical activity in relation to its health benefits and noted that it was important for her son to be healthy. Whereas parents no doubt want to keep their children out of trouble by keeping them active, the narratives show a generational divide in the understandings about physical activity. This suggests that the messages that parents receive about the role and place of physical activity influence the decisions that they make with relation to physical activity for their children, which as the discussions reveal, vary across periods in time.

Since it is popular perception - also supported by studies on Social Learning Theory (see Chapter 2 on Social Cognitive Theory) and physical activity participation among adolescents - that children live what they learn, some of the women talked about wanting to be role models for their children:

I want to be a good example for my kids as well, especially, I have one daughter, and I want to be her role model, right, so it's important for her to see me exercise and work out and as well, eating healthy...I want to be that example (CR).

Thus, while there were personal factors that motivated CR to be active, she saw her influence on her children as a major reason for putting out the effort to be active. She further stressed that this was of particular importance to her where her daughter was concerned as she knew that the physical activity participation rates for adolescents, especially for those of African descent, were not in favour of females. In this respect, we see a mother who is hopeful that her enthusiasm for physical activity and the
encouragement she provides to her children regarding physical activity participation would serve as positive reinforcements.

(B) Being around to celebrate accomplishments

The ability to be an active participant in the lives of their children was also central to the discussions. Similar to the concept of being positive role models for their children, some of the women’s discussions centred on the idea of building ‘active’ relationships with their children. CR noted that even though her and her daughter participate in different activities, there are times when they would “stretch together and stuff like that” if they are home at the same time. MK, who has a young child, talked about tailoring her schedule so that she could enjoy active time with her son:

I’ve also been thinking of changing how I work out a little bit or incorporating more activities in my preferred ways of working out. I’ve noticed for example that [child’s name] is very interested in swimming or in the tub, so I suspect that he likes water, so I’ve been thinking that perhaps I could go swimming on Saturday with him and have him in the pool, and it would be an exercise we both enjoy (MK).

In addition, the women saw their participation in physical activity as a way of ensuring that they had the physical ability (fitness) to share in the physical activity pursuits of their children and grandchildren as well as in their social accomplishments. Having parents whose lives are impaired by cardiovascular disease (hypertension and stroke) has clearly influenced CR’s approach to physical activity. She discussed it in terms of a broader understanding of the association between cardiovascular disease and the benefits of physical activity to reduce the disease’s risk and noted that a big motivation for her has to do with the fact that she misses “having my healthy parents around.” She stressed:

I want to be an active grandma, so, in order, you know, I say to people, “I want to be healthy.” I’m depositing now, in order to be able to have that strength and vitality to be able to move and not complain about the aches and pains and stuff, so that’s, well my motivation and again my kids, I want to be here for them (CR).

Similarly, AA, who has young children, talked about not wanting to “just be sitting on the side lines while they’re running and playing and doing sports and I just can’t keep
“up with them.” She explained that her children “have a lot of energy” and so the only way for her to “keep up with them” was to ensure that she was “physically fit.”

**Aging Gracefully**

Some of the younger participants explored the connection between physical activity and the process of aging in the context of their experiences with close relatives and friends. They expressed concern that a woman’s body tended to undergo visible changes after she reached 30 years old and noted that since it was a lot harder to lose weight at that age, regular physical activity was important.

So I said, you know what, around that time I had just, I think it was around that time I turned 30 or in my early 30s, so I said, you know what, I have to get serious about it because I also watched other people um, friends in particular who were much older than me and I saw what, what some of their lives looked like and I said, I don’t want that for myself (SV).

MK, who has a child, said that she did notice changes to her body after childbirth as well as when she reached her 30s. She believes however, based on observation, that women who are physically active somehow seem to manage to retain the youthfulness of their bodies or at least keep their bodies “in a way that they can manage.” Adding that since she did not want her body to change that much – she wanted to maintain her weight - she believed that “exercise” was a useful way of ensuring proper weight maintenance.

**Toning for less muscles**

Albeit the fanaticism around some of the more contemporary types of physical activities - traditional aerobics and cardiovascular type activities with less focus on strength training - still appear to occupy a central part of women’s physical activity preferences. Dworkin (2003) points out that there is nothing arbitrary about the way in which women choose to exercise, as their choices are often influenced by aesthetics - a desire to want to look a particular way – and are “shaped by complex power
relationships where gender, race, class, sexuality and age are likely central” (150). Suffice to say that although the sport of female bodybuilding has increased in popularity in recent years, dominant ideologies around femininity and masculinity persist, influencing women’s perception of, and aversion to, participating in activities that emphasize heavy weight lifting.

While some researchers have argued that women’s participation in physical activity can be empowering\(^{15}\), others have noted that it can be a repressive practice since women generally use exercise as the means through which they attain the ideal feminine body (Krane et al., 2001). Because western society holds that an attractive female body is the body that is “firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin” (Markula 1995, p.424), women are pressured and encouraged to sculpt their bodies, and endure rigorous exercise regimes including toning and conditioning routines to achieve an elusive ideal body. Though it is important to have a slender figure, it is equally important to have muscles that are ‘toned’ just right to show some amount of definition but not be too muscular; the intention is not to look masculine but to look ‘defined’. Since society holds that masculinity is synonymous with masculinity and “represents the visible differences between men and women” (Choi, 2003, p.71), female masculinity is commonly met with disapproval. Society chastises women who have too much muscle definition and accuses them of disrupting a gender binary strongly tied to ideas of femininity and masculinity (Choi 2003). Ideas, that position women as subordinate to men - fragile, weak and dependent on men for assistance and protection (Choi 2003, Greenleaf et al. 2006).

Not surprisingly, and similar to the literature, the majority of the women in the study avoided activities that emphasized heavy weight training and muscle development. The activities that they primarily participated in were aerobic in nature, such as dance fitness, running, hiking and biking. Weight and strength-training activities were not

\(^{15}\) Research done by writers such as Bolin 1992, Cahn 1994, Gilroy 1989 among others have challenged theories that suggest that women are docile dupes to the oppressive grip of patriarchy and that their fitness and exercise experiences are merely as a result of their obedience to patriarchy (Dworkin, 2003).
priorities and as such, the women only did them if they were included as part of their cardiovascular workout or if the programme required them to do so. MK explained that although her husband constantly tells her that it is important to add weight training to her workout, she admitted that she would rather not as her focus is on weight loss and not on building strength:

[He] has been trying to tell me, no you need to do a little bit of weight training which, which actually strengthen your core and actually also help you lose fat because you’ll be building muscle but, I think I haven’t really been sold on that, I’ve always just felt that the more physical and the more vigorous exercise is, (laughs) the more weight I’ll lose, and that the toner, the slimmer I get. I’m really not so concerned about, you know regretfully, about toning and strength… so I do spend a lot of time on cardio machines and not much on weights or anything (MK).

Like a majority of the women in the study, CR is concerned about not putting on weight. In discussing what her fitness programme looked like, she explained that it consisted quite a bit of outdoor activities as she loves “anything outdoors” but that she would sometimes do gym sessions or work out at home, depending on her schedule as well as on the weather. She stated that when she got into running, she found that she loved it. It became her “high”; thus forcing her to invest in a treadmill for those days when she is unable to go outdoors. “It [running] just takes me to this different, I don’t think of anything. I just focus on my breathing and everything.” She described a typical workout week as comprising 3-4 days of different activities but noted that on days when she did not run, her “body goes crazy.” She talked about mixing things up to include “a little weights” but made the point that even though she had started including more weights and the use of resistance bands in her workout, she was “not too much into the weight lifting.”

Another participant, who had indicated that one of the reasons for her commitment to exercise was that she wanted to lose weight, participated in a variety of the classes offered at her gym. However, most of the ones that she attended were either aerobic in nature or were classes that focused on abdominal workouts. When I asked her what she thought about using weights in her workout, she noted that:
Well, according to the information online that you see about the different exercise techniques that you would need to do, weights usually play an integral part of that because they said it helps you to lose weight (KW).

I was then curious to know why she did not include the use of weights more often, since she knew that it was beneficial in helping her reach her weight loss goal:

KW: “I am not driven, not interested really in doing weights”
JWF: But why?
KW: “Just lazy, I guess. I just can’t be bothered with just lifting weights over and over.”

Interestingly, the discussions indicate that even though some of the women may be aware of the value of including strength activities (use of weights) in their workout, they do so reluctantly, if any at all, suggesting that ideas about masculine and feminine bodies still hold as do notions about gender appropriate exercises and activities. In KW’s case, she viewed the inclusion of weights in her workout as a monotonous task that she would rather not do.

What was also significant in KW’s narrative is the role that the media plays in providing health advice, particularly information about physical activity for women. This is in line with arguments made earlier in the chapter about the abundance of physical activity messages that target women. Previous narratives also indicate that further to the mass media, women are most likely to receive exercise and fitness tips from significant others, who are more often than not males. However, as is reflected in the narratives, the extent to which women act on the information that they received is determined by traditional (and long-standing) systems of beliefs as well as pervasive stereotypes about masculinity and femininity.

Furthermore, contrary to ideas around fitness and aerobics as a repressive practice that objectifies women’s bodies, by continuing to participate in activities that give them the most pleasure the resistance to weight and strength training by the women in this study reflects agency and critical self-awareness of their own bodily experiences.

Unlike several of the participants in the study whose concern was to lose weight, one of the women was concerned that she was losing too much weight.
Um, I like dancing, you know, while I’m breaking a sweat, toning (laughs), I’m really into the toning of my body because I’m not trying to lose weight (laughs), which I’ve been doing, you know, since I’ve been going to the gym, so you know, I’m really interested in toning, so I’m trying to find a balance of um, not too much cardio but tone it up and maybe gain weight while I’m toning (AA).

At the time of the interview, AA was at a precarious stage of trying to find the right balance between continued physical activity and keeping her body from losing weight. AA’s fear of losing too much weight is not uncommon among women who work out. Unfortunately, as in AA’s case, this fear can act as a deterrent to women working out on a regular basis. Moreover, unlike the plethora of mass media messages that target women who are desirous of losing weight, information on how to tone and put on weight is not prevalent. Thus, women like AA are left to their own devices of trying to figure things out on their own or seek expert advice.

**JWF:** But it seems to me that you rather those classes where, you know, those cardio classes, that you’re also doing some amount of dancing and stuff. Have you done the step classes?

**AA:** I have. I would say they are one of my favourite classes. It’s very challenging but I like it. But I think that’s why I’m losing weight, so I kind a cut back on it (laughs), you know but I enjoy the TRX\(^{16}\) because its more the body tone, the core and your body strength, so I think I’m gonna be focusing more on that cause I don’t, you know, cause I think that’s what I need to be doing. But I’m always gonna dance, cause just what I like to do, right.

AA’s narrative is also a reminder that body dissatisfaction does not rest solely with women who are desirous of losing weight and can just as well be a concern for women of all body types and sizes. Body (dis)satisfaction encompasses a range of experiences that women have with their bodies. Dissatisfaction, for instance, can be displeasure over specific area(s) of the body that women perceive as needing more rigorous work than can be achieved through regular exercise and toning routines. The perception of toning, is that it is less rigorous – burns less fat and produces less

\(^{16}\) TRX (Total Resistance eXercise) is an approach to strength training that uses a suspension trainer, typically a strap, to get its user to perform bodyweight exercises while being suspended. The aim is for its user to develop “strength, balance, flexibility and core stability simultaneously” (https://www.trxtraining.com/).
aesthetically pleasing) muscle definition – and as such is reserved for those areas of a woman's body that are closer to satisfaction. What this means is that the unsatisfactory areas, though not ideal, may not cause significant stress as do concerns about other parts of the body. For instance, though KW wanted to lose weight, there were parts of her body that caused her more concern than others:

My initial thing when I came back to the gym was, I had a wedding to go to (laughs), so I have to tone up the body for the wedding… in terms of losing weight, my tummy, everywhere else, just to tone it up (KW).

Within this framework, the body takes on the image of a dismembered entity. Like a mannequin that “has no depth, no totality; [the body] is an aggregate of parts that can be made acceptable” (Kilbourne 1990). Thus, for the purpose of the fitness industry, the way in which the body is viewed shifts from that of a functioning whole to one that comprises separately malleable parts that allow specific areas to be targeted and manipulated using various fitness regimes. For though KW's ultimate goal is to lose weight, the idea that her “tummy”, as a separate entity, is alterable gives her hope. In many ways, the ideas around dismemberment of the female body as depicted in advertisements are similar to the strategies employed by the fitness industry. As Kilbourne (1990) notes:

Women are also dismembered in commercials, their bodies separated into parts in need of change or improvement. If a woman has "acceptable" breasts, then she must also be sure that her legs are worth watching, her hips slim, her feet sexy, and that her buttocks look nude under her clothes ("like I'm not wearin' nothin").

Like the advertising industry, the fitness industry uses women’s vulnerabilities and dissatisfaction with their bodies to target them with programmes that profess to fix their bodily flaws. For instance, in the “About” section describing of one of the classes that I observed, it read:

[The workout] includes cardio, weight training, toning and tightening drills and combos to help you tone those troubled spots: arms, abs, legs and butt! The ultimate goal of the program is to workout with emphasis on carefully selected music and movements to synchronize with the mind and body to burn calories FAST (up to 1000 per session).
Similarly, one of the questions that fitness clients are first asked by their trainer is whether they have specific parts of their body that they wish to target – a question that gets responses similar (in reference to the body as separate pieces) to the one given by KW – “my tummy, everywhere else, just to tone it up.”

What was also interesting in the narratives was the ways in which some of the women talked about the act of toning their bodies. KW, for instance mentioned that, “I have to tone up the body...just to tone it up” and similarly AA “…but tone it up”. Within this context, the implication is that while the women acknowledge their body as belonging to them – as owned by them – the body was also separate from the real self and therefore could be altered and manipulated as she saw fit.

Black bodies and white bodies should look different

The women talked about the types of bodies that they would consider as “ideal” bodies. A majority of the women explained that their idea of an ideal female body is a well-toned body – a body that is firm but not muscular. When asked what such a body would look like, it was explicit in the women’s responses that the expectations for Black bodies were different from those for white bodies. In articulating her response, one participant explained that Black women should “have curves.” Black women, she argued, should have “a little meat on their body but not excessive, while in a Caucasian culture, a toned woman is a really slim, thin looking woman” (KW). In giving an example of an ideal Black body, she named singer superstar Beyoncé Knowles. KW was quick to point out that although Beyoncé is not skinny, she has a toned body – she is “firm and does not have any flabs hanging off her”.

While MK also believed that an ideal female body was a well-toned body, she explained that close relatives and friends often made her believe that her ideas of what an ideal Black body should look like were atypical and not reflective of broader cultural views. As a result, she would sometimes face accusations of wanting to have “the white look,” especially since for her, Black women who had ideal bodies were actresses
Gabrielle Union and Nicole Ari Parker but who according to some of her friends, did not have typical Black bodies:

The typical Black woman cannot be without any meat on her bones and when you do not have some meat on your bones...you are told you look white, she looks like a white girl, the usual phrase, she looks like a white girl and so for me to like someone who looks like a white girl, then it means that I’m not really pursuing, or my ideal body image is not really representative of me, so I should look for someone else who I would have a better chance of looking like, cause that is not the typical look...and for a Black man, it’s not, not only typical, it’s also not ideal (MK).

Negotiated Meanings and Practices

“I decided that it was important for me to make physical activity a part of my life” (DG)

The above quote is reflective of the decision that each woman in the study made at some point in her physical activity journey. It further underscores the value that they each place on physical activity. Suffice to say that with society’s preoccupation with the body - weight, shape, size and aesthetics - it is not surprising that many women choose physical activity as the route through which to realise their goals.

Nonetheless, as discussed in the previous section, the women’s view of physical activity - how well the benefits align with their goals – is what drives their commitment. The decisions of the women in the study, if interpreted through the perspective of the Health Belief Model (which posits that the belief that a specific health action will prevent or cure an illness), suggest a willingness to endorse professional perspectives of physical activity. Their belief that they can reduce their risks to cardiovascular disease, attain weight loss, and achieve the ideal body through physical activity is among the factors that motivate them.

However, while the women understand and interpret physical activity in “coherent frameworks that are meaningful to them” (Armstrong and Murphy, 2008, p.1075), these frameworks may not always converge with medical understandings and may in fact rest
on understandings that are more in line with their experiences and the experiences of others. In the following section, I explore physical activity as an important aspect of the women’s lives and the bearing that this has on the ways the women attempt to manage physical activity as a lifestyle choice.

The Conviction:

How the women talk about physical activity and their efforts at participating in forms of physical activity is telling of the extent to which physical activity is important to them. The discussions suggest that the women have made two significant resolutions about the place of physical activity in their lives: (1) to make physical activity a part of their everyday life and (2) to make an effort to engage in physical activity.

**Physical activity for life:** Some of the women talked about wanting to participate in physical activity to the extent that it became a lifestyle—natural and routinized but expressed some of their challenges:

I do have to make sacrifices, I mean, life gets busy but um, I find when I make physical activity a priority, then it’s easier to put it first and fit it in before drinks with friends or (laughs) or going out to dinner or if I um, sometimes I make it like a reward based thing, like, okay, if I spend 30mins in the gym, then I can go have drinks after, so I do that too but um, it hasn’t really been easy to develop a very good habit. I don’t feel like I have, because if I had developed a habit then I don’t think I would stop as easily as I do, cause I’m very quick to say, “oh I can’t go (laughs) and that’s it” (DG).

Acknowledging that she does not always put out the effort to go to the gym, KW explained that her mood was mostly a hindrance; as to whether or not she went to the gym was sometimes dependent on how she felt after work or even on a day that is cold:

Well, sometimes I don’t do it (laughs) because like I said, if its like too cold and stuff, you’re like, “no, I’m not going” and stuff like that, so, um, I’m not always good with it. I try as much as possible but there are days that I just don’t go and stuff like that, yeah, um….In terms of my son, there’s always somebody watching him but I mean, like if there are days that I felt like I haven’t spent enough time with him, and its exercise time, then I prefer to spend the time with him than to actually go and exercise, which I know is not the right thing because I need to exercise to maintain
my health but there just days like “mommy don’t go,” so yeah, I stay home (KW).

Although the physical activity patterns of the women were continuous, there were breaks in their routines, such as skipping days or stopping for short periods at a time. Thus, in a way, physical activity as a lifestyle remained a challenge for them.

For some of the women, their participation in physical activity was less challenging, in that, while they had to make commitments, they were better at eking out times for physical activity:

My Day Timer. I make an appointment with myself and I put it in my Day Timer. Plus, I have the experience and the knowledge of knowing how wonderful I feel after I’ve done it. I develop that practice through university of putting the Day Timer, my exercise time in my Day Timer and I make an appointment with myself, just as I do with anything else (AS).

Similarly, when asked how she managed to fit physical activity into her hectic schedule, AH responded to say:

Oh, its just like brushing my teeth….so even if its only, like I said, 20 minutes at home, like some days I’ll do a lot of, you know, an hour and a half or whatever at home but even if its only 20 minutes I’ll say to myself, at least I did 20mins. Um, only if I did some stretching…I would say that it is a skill to be active…Once I started working for a living and as an elementary school teacher, it was just a habit that when I would…before I would go home and even I would stop off at the gym and that was in the 80s, so the craze was for aerobics right…I've always just tried to incorporate it in my life when I can (AH).

While the women adopted strategies that worked best for them, I noticed that among the women who were better at managing their physical activity time, with the exception of one woman who migrated to Canada approximately 8 years ago, the other women have been residents in Canada for 40 years or more. On one hand, this finding might suggest evidence in support of a positive association between acculturation and physical activity (Wolin et al., 2006). Researchers argue that with increasing acculturation, the more likely it is that individuals will adopt the physical activity preferences and habits of their host country (Gerber et al., 2012). On the other hand, studies also show that immigrants experience settlement stress, related to their economic situation (work, finance, and employment), housing, discrimination, and loneliness, among others, when they first arrive (Robert and Gilkinson 2013). Thus, until
their settlement and survival needs (adequate housing and employment for example) are met, physical activity may be regarded as a luxury that they either cannot afford nor have time to think about. In this sense, while acculturation may be of value in providing some amount of insight into the women’s attitude towards physical activity, given the potential for multiple factors playing a role in influencing the process of acculturation, acculturation in and of itself may only be a partial explanation.

Overall, the women’s narratives suggest that their knowledge of the benefits of physical activity does not always translate into equal action. Thus, even though the women may acknowledge the importance and benefits of physical activity, the way in which they practice physical activity may depend on a number of factors, including their belief in their ability to quickly ‘bounce back’ and take up from where they left off, as is the case with skipping days/sessions or taking breaks.

**Making the effort to be physically active:** In Annesi et al.’s (2010) study of African American preadolescents, they found that, using the Stages of Change Model (see Chapter 2 – Transtheoretical Model), participants who were not yet at the action stage were significantly less motivated to be physically active than those already in the action and maintenance stages. As the women in the study talked about their experiences of physical activity, it was apparent that their effort to be physically active also differed in relation to their prior experience with physical activity. In a majority of the cases, prior experience correlated with the level of ease with which the women incorporated physical activity in their lives.

For some of the women, their experience of physical activity started when they were quite young and transitioned into adulthood:

Well, it started off in middle school, no, actually in elementary school for me, um, we would work out every other day; our coach would make us run a lot. At first I didn’t like it but then I turned out to love it and I was um, picked out of the whole school to run for the school which surprised me but I did pretty good, you know, so, exercising it became fun to me. I liked to um, run, work out. I like to challenge myself. I like to see how far I can go. And that started at a young age (AA).
While AA’s experience came through school, some of the other women spoke about the influence of their parents:

I cannot say exactly when it started but I grew up, as I said in a big family and my dad, which I did not know then, he knew the secret. My dad got up every morning, maybe around 4, 5 o’clock, he made a big pot of coffee and he went for a walk...and he was gone 3, 4 hours and when he did come back, he would tell my mom where he walked; what family he visited and I remember those stories but I was too young to think, is this health, is this, what is it? Now, when I look back, I realise it was the secret....I realise why and he died at the age of, 2 months away from 90 years old, and I never remember him being lying in bed, being sick...So that’s how we went through but we were always active; walking and stuff...I guess it was something built in me from my dad that you have this urge to do something (DB).

My mom was a good example for us...and she swam a lot, so she used to go swimming with us sometimes...she would walk, even you know, with stage 4 cancer, she had stage 4 cancer for several years and she walked every day, she’d swim 3 days a week uh, you know she just kept being active, even when she was you know, supposedly in hospice and particularly the last month of her life, I walked into her room and she had a mat out and she was doing stretching and she said, she said something like um, “I’m not just gonna lie down and die you know,” and so ah, you know, so, she is my you know role model, I know that’s an overused word but every time I think about oh God, I just don’t want to you know, do this today and I think about how my mom would just jump out of bed and do this and do that (AH).

Whereas research on the relationship between physical activity in early years and continued physical activity into adulthood reflect a positive correlation, one of the participant’s narratives shows a deviation. In reflecting on the difference between now and her adolescent years, CR shared her disdain for physical activity:

So for me um, I hated exercising. As a teenager, right, for me, it was so brutal; every excuse to not be a part of PE. I just uh, sweating for me, I just hated it, right, so that was me, and even my friends today will always remind me, you know when I post up on Facebook, they would always tease me on Facebook, “I could never remember seeing you in gym class, like who are you?” My siblings and my dad were always active...I just didn’t care for it. However, moving forward, as I um, as I grew, mature, the kids started coming around and you realise you have the weight to get rid of and eating, eating less wasn’t helpful (CR).

The narratives reflect the fact that for a majority of the women their experience of physical activity came formally either through school or through the influence of their
parents. However, one participant whose first experience (except through informal play) was not until 2007, shortly after she had migrated to Canada, explained that physical activity had never been a priority for her parents:

So, um, even when I was in school, and we'd have track meets or athletics or anything like that, my parents didn’t really encourage me to do that. For them, the focus was on studies, your school work and just um, focusing on that instead of what they deemed was play. (DG).

DG went on to explain that her parents were not alone in their perception of physical activity – that it was cultural; taking time out to be active was not seen as necessary, especially since people's day-to-day lives required them to do a lot of walking. She noted that while growing up, "there was just a lot more movement."

Notwithstanding her childhood, now an adult, DG draws inspiration from close friends and relatives who were active.

It’s really just my friends...my close friends are definitely trying to incorporate PA in their lives and you know Birds of a feather, so, yeah, it helps, cause I know it helps them, so it helps me... a very close friend of mine, she is an Olympian, so I look at her and I you know, she makes you want to be fit (laughs)...I’m definitely now being surrounded by people who inspire me to be fit. My husband, he's always saying "oh you know, we could always go for a run (DG).

The women believed that a fundamental part of leading a physically active lifestyle rests on a willingness to put in the effort to get active and stay active. Their attempt to achieve this was done through a variety of ways, such as participating in activities that were within close proximity to work or home, activities that they enjoyed, or by associating themselves with friends who are also active. These factors, which I regard as survival strategies, will be discussed in more detail in the upcoming chapter.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have outlined the ways in which the women in the study make associations between their embodied experiences, their perceptions of their body, and
the benefits of physical activity. Studies point out that women’s perceptions of their body – their physical appearance (size, shape and weight) are driven by dominant society’s ideas around ideal body image, which get reflected and reinforced through the mass media (Bordo 1993; Liimakka 2008).

While this may be so, the women’s stories suggest the existence of a tension between these ideals, which are located around perceptions of beauty for white bodies, and traditional cultural perceptions of beauty around Black women’s bodies. For some of the women, the tension between the two manifests in anxieties about their bodies as they struggle to exist between both worlds. Thus, whereas studies suggest that cultural differences may act as a barrier to Black women’s participation in physical activities (Young et al., 2002) for the women in the study, these differences place pressure on them to be active. While it forces them to strive for a body image that they are aware is in conflict with their traditional cultures, it also causes them to want to be a part of the physical activity culture. Webb et al., (2004) note that historically, perceptions among peoples of African descent have held that fat women were attractive, sexy and appealing to men in their communities. More importantly, fat bodies and thin bodies expressed levels of health, vitality and state of mind. Fat bodies were perceived as attractive healthy bodies whereas thin bodies, in contrast, held negative connotations - they were lifeless bodies; ‘dry’ bodies that “lacked the vitality associated with moist ‘good’ fat” (Sobo, 1993:35). They were therefore undesirable and undesired bodies. However, even though research suggests a shift in these norms, the ideas remain pervasive through African American communities (Webb et al., 2004). Arguably, weight loss and a desire to be thin, have not been salient in determining body figure attractiveness for the African American female, (Webb et al., 2004). Consequently, efforts to facilitate physical programmes in societies that hold these views require community effort, stakeholder involvement, such as religious institutions and dialogue that is sensitive of both gender and cultural norms, as well as an understanding of race within a historical context.

While several studies (Eyler et al. 1998, Wilcox et al. 2002) indicate that Black women tend not to exercise because they lack the motivation, the discussions in this chapter suggest that the personal and social value that the women place on physical activity drives their motivation to be active. Thus, similar to their perceptions of the
cardiovascular and other health benefits of physical activity, how they perceive their bodies significantly affects their desire to participate in physical activity, which in turn has a bearing on the types of activities in which they prefer to participate.

While on the one hand, a number of the women’s misconceptions around ‘sweat’ cause them to gravitate towards activities that make them sweat profusely, it could also be argued that the messages about the importance of moderate to vigorous bouts of physical activity are not falling on deaf ears.

More importantly, it could also imply be that Black women may no longer perceive their hair as a major deterrent to them participating in physical activity. Studies by Hall 2013; Hall et al. 2013; and Versey 2014, among others, that have explored the barriers to physical activity for Black women have identified sweating as a deterrent; not only does it mess up Black women’s hairstyles but there are also time and economic constraints related to hair maintenance. Contrary to other researchers, the women in this study have chosen to be active, using sweat as a measure of their level of activity and in so doing, are in their own ways, beginning to challenge accusations which imply that “Black women use hair as an excuse not to exercise” (Versey, 2014, p.810). Additionally, since the public display of sweating Black female bodies are normally confined to the sporting realm, celebrating the ‘sweaty’ body comes as a form of resistance to gendered and racialized stereotypes held by mainstream white society surrounding the aesthetics of Black female bodies. Sweating thus becomes the route through which these women who ‘love to sweat’ are able to redefine and reconstruct narratives around the ‘active Black female body.’
Chapter 6.

Shifting Identities

The process of transitioning from societies and cultures that seemingly place less emphasis on physical activity to societal cultures that position physical activity as a “natural part of life” can lead to cultural dissonance and confusion for newcomers; for some of the participants, this transitional experience is hinged on the embedded nature of the cultural values instilled from the country of origin, the influence of those present in the host country, and desire to ‘fit in.’

While this chapter focuses on the responses of first generation immigrants to their new cultural environment, it also engages in a discussion of how cross-cultural spaces are negotiated between Black women and non-Black women. It tries to get a sense of how both groups of women understand their experiences of participating in cultural spaces that are foreign to them.

Embracing New Horizons

“It's a way of life here,” “there’s a lot more hype here,” and “you have more opportunities to do certain things” – these type of statements were commonly shared by the participants regarding the highly coveted Canadian city of Vancouver. It is therefore not surprising that for participants, an added benefit of migrating to Vancouver is the opportunity to ‘try’ and to pursue new forms of activities. It is from these new experiences that some of the women found their passion. For other women, it provided them with an avenue to indulge in some of their favourite activities.
Swimming

Like many of the participants, I did not learn to swim. Born an ‘island girl,’ it comes as a shock to persons living outside the Caribbean that I cannot swim. Like my mother, I never learned to swim but unlike my mother, I tend to be quite adventurous with water and have made a promise to myself that I will take swimming lessons. Now, living in a society in which a number of the persons with whom I interact can swim, I feel more pressure to learn how to swim – particularly as I am always told that it is a useful life skill to have. Listening to the women’s narratives of physical activity made me realise that these experiences are not unique to me. Like me, some of the women who I interviewed are unable to swim or have only learned to swim since migrating to Canada.

What is striking is that neither I, nor any of the women who could not swim, except for one of the older women, had a proper reason for why we were not taught to swim. Like many other schools at the time, neither my primary or high schools had swimming pools but swimming lessons were readily available (i.e. at the YMCA). While financial and time constraints, as well as proximity to pools, could act as deterrents, I was not sufficiently convinced that that was the reason why a majority of the Caribbean women of my age and older that I have met are unable to swim. One plausible rationale was from AS, whom recalled that swimming, like bike riding, were among the activities that her parents did not permit her to do:

We had this whole um attitude that ladies didn’t do certain things, so you know, which, and I, of course I had parents that um wanted to make sure that ladies didn’t do swimming, whatever, but its funny as I recall, I used to steal away and go swimming, go to the beach which, I never told them anything like that but it was great but I certainly could not ride a bicycle, because certain ladies did not straddle (emphasis hers) a bicycle (AS).

The restrictions on women’s bodies to partake in swimming or bicycling could be traced to colonial values and systems that were still entrenched into the cultural landscape of how Caribbean peoples participate in physical activity. The emphasis on reproduction placed on women’s bodies restricted their participation in activities that could potentially jeopardise their ability to have children. “Straddling” a bike was most certainly risky. It was expected that women would participate in activities that allowed

them to “play safely” (Wilde, n.d., p.4). Sporting activities that were seen to require too much physical exertion or to result in the development of masculine physiques were avoided as they “would make women unfit for motherhood and would sacrifice their health, physical beauty, and social attractiveness” (Cahn, 2004, p.214).

As Wiltse (2014) had noted, Black American’s lack of affinity to swimming as recreation or sport was in part due to the history of racism and discrimination upon which swimming was built (see chapter 2). Hence, while swimming on its own was a ‘safe’ activity for females, the lack of access that Black women had to appropriate and safe swimming facilities – leaving them with only rivers, lakes and oceans – impacted their ability to learn how to swim (Henderson, 2000). Furthermore, the portrayal of Black women’s bodies as hyper-sexualized, has in part, worked to restrict Black women’s freedom. Caribbean writers have noted that females, unlike males were not free to participate in unsupervised recreation and other activities, as the need to protect them from the unwarranted attention of the opposite sex and to protect them from unwanted pregnancies subjected them to policing from older male relatives (Brown & Chevannes, 1998).

Swimming was a ‘deal-breaker’ in the choice of activities for the women who were non-swimmers prior to coming to Canada.

When I’m trying to decide, at least this last facility that I signed up with, when I was trying to decide on them, I was looking for a pool because I really enjoy swimming, you know, it’s a good low impact way to get your cardio exercise (DG).

So, it does have to have some fun in it. Swimming is definitely…I joined the Y two weeks after I came to Canada and um started taking swimming lessons and quite frankly, I haven’t looked back. I took scuba diving lessons, so I’ve been a scuba diver for 27 years, yeah, so I still, the odd times scuba dive (AS).

AS further explained how integral swimming was to her:

After my surgery which was back many years now, it was interesting, that was back in the time when we were quite opened up and um, I used to put the pillow between me and the steering wheel and drive down to the pool and I couldn’t actually swim because I was so sore, so I used to walk
in the water. As long as I was in the water, I felt as though I was healing (AS).

Gender Patterns

Traditional views on gender – masculinity and femininity - also played a role in how the women were encouraged to participate in physical activity. While in AS’s case, her parents were explicit in their view of certain activities as “un-lady like”, some of the other women’s discussions about their early years of physical activity participation were not as stark. At the same time, their narratives suggested that there was gender division in how physical activity was practiced:

As kids, my mom and dad, they put us into dance. The girls were in dance, the boys were in karate, soccer and then in high school, we were in soccer, we played track or ran track um, my brothers were in baseball (SV).

Although the women, except one, never spoke about the decisions that went into the physical activity pursuits of their children, it was evident that the pattern of participation remained the same; girls for instance did dance, while the boys did competitive sports activities:

The boys are all involved in sports, my daughter, she does stuff (CR).

Like with my son, he’s also involved in, I get him involved in stuff. He plays soccer…(KW).

However, traditional ideas and stereotypes are hard to break. One participant best explained this:

I tried different things, like my eldest son…I tried him in gymnastics because I love gymnastic and they have such nice bodies…He didn’t like it, you know, so I said, “You’re wasting my money!” after the second or third term. But my husband is from the old generation when they used to say it’s a sissy thing, but that’s the old generation that didn’t do anything that looked girly and my husband, after the term said, “I don’t think…” but I think that it was my husband more than him, “I don’t think he wants to go”… So, I said “fine.” So, I draw him in the soccer and karate. The next year I put him in again and I find that he didn’t, you know, so I never bothered to try it with my other sons because after the first one didn’t
want gymnastics, so now, like sometimes we talk and my second son, he says, “I love that, you should have…” But after the first one, so that’s when I had them into the soccer and the karate (DB).

**Outdoor Activities**

The ability to enjoy being active outdoors is of significant importance to some of the participants who cherish the idea that the weather permits them to be active outdoors all year round and that their environment is one that promotes and fosters active living. Participants felt that the abundance of parks, pathways, and mountains make it possible to enjoy outdoor activities. AS, who migrated from the Caribbean over 40 years ago, shared her passion for an outdoor life that was new to her but one that she had come to appreciate:

I do a lot of cycling…I learned to ride when I moved to Kelowna in 1971. I didn’t live far from work but I bought a bicycle and I walked the bicycle home back to my apartment. And my landlord saw me, he said, “how come you’re walking your bicycle?” I said, “because I don’t know how to ride.” He said, “Okay, you bought a bicycle but you don’t know how to ride?” I said, “that’s about the size of it, that covers it.” He said, “Oh my, get on and I’ll teach you how to ride.” And that was the end of it…I spend a lot of time in the snow. When winter comes, I spend a lot of time outside…In the summer time, if it’s, I have to be honest with you, if it’s really, really hot, then I don’t do a whole lot but I take my um, my beach chair and my briefcase and I go out to um, Whitecliff Park and I go in the ocean for about an hour and then come out and carry on some work and relax and go back for another hour, so I swim in the ocean in the summer time (AS).

Although the women maintained that they felt a general sense of safety in going outdoors for activities, they did feel that it was necessary, especially as women, to exercise common sense.

So, what I do, I choose, I’m a very sensible runner and walker. I choose where I’m going and the time. If I’m going down to the park, I choose certain times when I know it’s gonna be crowded…Every so often, I’m just going to scan who is around (DB).

Participants like KW who are involved in more indoor type activities also emphasise the need to exercise caution and to be aware of her surroundings. For her,
part of exercising safety was by not parking in the underground parking area when she goes to the gym:

I know the underground parking isn’t safe, yeah, like sometimes, that scares me. I don’t park there because I don’t want anybody to break into my car and stuff and me just walking under there by myself, that scares me (KW).

**Keeping up with the Joneses**

Apart from the opportunities that appear to foster physical activity participation, the women talked about the fact that physical activity in Vancouver was more about “keeping up with the Joneses” (AH). It was something that everyone did and wanted to be seen doing. Therefore, for some participants, the ‘hype’ around exercise was less about health and fitness and more about fitting in. But it was felt to be such an ingrained part of the west coast lifestyle that some of the participants admitted that it was hard to not succumb to being active. Participants reported that physical activity engagement was prolific; everybody is “running marathons, doing this, doing that” (KW), or “walking around with a mat” (MK). Similarly, “everybody rides their bikes, everybody you know hikes, you know uh, so I think that influenced me a lot” (AH). Like the weather, physical activity was a “topic of conversation” (DG) with the assumption that everyone could enthusiastically participate. One participant noted that being active was all about the appearance:

“There’s also that culture here where everybody’s on a bike, everybody’s in yoga pants like. Its even if you’re not physically active, there’s still a culture where you have to look like you’re physically active, right by wearing your yoga pants by being on your bike to go to the corner store to get stuff. Its almost like this little hippie yuppie culture where you’re supposed to be this way. It’s the appearance.” (RB).

However, during one of the interviews, I was compelled to pause and reflect on how my life, beliefs, expectations and assumptions have changed since residing in Canada. I wanted to know whether she felt that there were expectations placed on her to exercise in Canada:
I definitely would say that. I do feel that there’s pressure and there’s expectations that I should be working out and I think I remember when we were at…I attended the thesis boot camp, and I think someone asked me “where you go to the gym?”… You did. Because it’s just expected that you know, you have to have a place to go to the gym… it has come to be a part of the expectations that I have for myself, granted that they are imposed on me by my environment (MK).

This response made me realize how much I, too, had subconsciously fallen prey to the “everyone’s doing it” assumption. Despite claiming to understand some of the challenges to physical activity, I still assumed that everyone participated in some form of physical activity or other; that everyone had a gym membership or could afford a gym membership; that everyone had sufficient time to dedicate to physical activity; and that everyone had some sort of yearning to be physically active. I questioned the idea of acculturation and wondered about whether I was losing aspects of my culture and was instead becoming ‘more Canadian’ the longer I lived here. Somehow, that thought petrified me, as I thought about some of my friends who have lived here much longer than I have, and who to me, have become less Jamaican/Caribbean and more Canadian in their ways of doing and even speaking. I viewed this as a loss – a loss of a cultural identity of which I was proud – one that defined me and one that was symbolic of “the ruptures and discontinuities that constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s uniqueness” (Hall, 1994, p.225). Stuart Hall reminds us that, “cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification which are made within the discourses of history and culture” (p.226). I was scared that if these histories were lost, or the memories of these histories, then I could be left “without an anchor…stateless…rootless” (p.226). I found this uncertainty just as alarming as it was unsettling.

“It’s something that white people do.”

It is hard to ignore the ways in which race and racialization have influenced society’s perceptions of the physically active person. Portrayals of the physically active Black person, generally represented through images of the professional or aspiring Black athlete who is already ‘toned’ in all the ‘right’ places, continue to be pervasive throughout mainstream media. This representation stands in stark contrast to the multiplicity of images that have consistently portrayed the physically active white person
in diverse capacities as both ‘ordinary’ physical activity enthusiasts and professional athletes. Albeit physical activity was not a new phenomenon for the majority of the participants, the emphasis being placed on it as a conscious and intentioned action that should and could be done by everyone – all ethnicities and including the elderly – made it foreign. KW spoke of how surprised she was when she visited Vancouver for the first time and saw older people out walking. It came as a shock to her because it was not a customary norm for her to see in her country.

I’m like, wow! These people like they exercise a lot! Like they walk up and down and stuff. Back home it’s not unless like you sick or you’re training for something that you really go and exercise...nobody really focuses on um, like I said, unless you’re sick, nobody really focuses on jogging and going to the gym and stuff like that. Like only those persons um, like dancing, people enjoy dancing, like they’ll go do that but in terms of those who are, those who have North American influence in their families, and stuff like that, they go to the gym but the typical family, they don’t focus on that, right (KW).

For KW, being active not only took on a new meaning but perhaps complicated previously held stereotypes about physical activity and those best suited to engage in physical activity. At the same time, however, her experience may have also reinforced the idea that physical activity is something that only North American people, who have many privileges and a different ways of life, could afford to do. Due to ideologies that privilege the global north (i.e. North America) and its citizens as superior and ‘better,’ North American constructions regarding physical activity engagement are regarded as ‘better.’ This, further suggesting, that the pervasiveness of North American mores has far-reaching effects.

Like KW, DG describes physical activity as a foreign concept that has deep-seated cultural roots; it has never been something people in her culture consciously did and so attempts by persons from her culture to engage in physical activity were regarded as an unusual thing to do – it could not be rationalized or comprehended. In our interview, she discussed the uncomfortable process of overcoming her cultural hang-ups about physical activity to being able to confide in her sister, who holds a medical degree about her decision to adopt a “healthier” lifestyle:
And even when I talk to my sister about it, it’s almost like, it’s this foreign thing. She knows about being fit but when I first started, saying “oh, I’m doing this...” you know, “to be healthy and fit,” it just didn’t, you know, she’s always make fun of me because it seems so strange (laughs) so, um, it took me a while to develop a different mindset where being fit or jogging or going for yoga wasn’t, you know, wasn’t something that I was blocked off from doing because I wasn’t the correct skin tone (DG).

“It’s still something that I think white people do,” she went on to say; even with her experience of living in Vancouver, where people tend to lead active lifestyles, her encounters with other black women in the gym or being active outdoors has been rare. At this juncture, it is hard to ignore the ways in which race and racialization have altered society’s perceptions of the physically active person. Portrayals of physically active Black people are generally represented through images of the Black athlete, whereas, images of physically active white persons carry a more diverse representation; but there is also bias towards reflecting a middle and upper class (who have time and resources at their disposal to be leisurely active).

I am the only Black person in the room

I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “sho’ good eaten” (Fanon, 1967, p. 112).

As the token Black woman in a room filled with sweaty mostly white and Asian bodies, I often find myself overcome by mixed emotions – trying to decide whether I should give in to the burning desire to hide at the back of the room where I would go unnoticed (or so I think, since the blackness of my body hardly makes me invisible in white spaces) or whether I should assert myself and occupy a space towards the front. However, the latter comes at a price. Like it is expected of the token Black academic to be the foremost expert on issues of race – genuinely willing to share her experiences, be the ‘race’ ombudsperson, speak for all Black people and represent all Black people – I am acutely aware of the expectations placed on me. I am expected to represent my
racial group, to avoid looking clumsy, since of course Black people are blessed with coordination and superb dancing skills, but more importantly, as the sole Black woman, I was being called upon to demystify prejudices about Black women and exercise and stereotypes that hold Black women as “lazy, unmotivated…” (Jones and Shorter-Goeden, 2003, p.155).

The women pointed out that being a Black person in a fitness class (that is not specifically Afro or Caribbean based) meant they were either the only Black person in the room or among less than a handful of other Black persons. This often made them conscious of their presence within the space. For some women, it was intimidating. Additionally, it was felt that sometimes the presence of Black women participating in fitness activities is met with patronization from other members and at times staff. During the course of being “out in the field,” I recall two instances that have made me angry: the first was perhaps over a year ago now. One morning while participating in one of my weekly boot camp sessions, the instructor pointed out a Black woman who was new to the facility. The woman, she told me had migrated from a country in Africa and had never been to a gym before in her life until now. This information was followed by comments such as “oh, poor woman” and “so sad.” Stereotyped images of the poverty-stricken, uneducated and helpless African woman fleeing her homeland to seek refuge in North America are pervasive – they have had time to sediment, grow deep roots and dangerous tentacles. This comment reflected these stereotypes of the poor Black woman who finally ‘arrives’ in North America to access opportunities for better health and well-being. The second was a few weeks ago. I was speaking about my research with a friend. She informed me that she was frustrated with trying to find a workout regime and space that was comfortable. During her last visit to a yoga studio, one of the female participants approached her smilingly to state “how good it [was] to see women of her type coming in and participating.” My friend recalls how aghast she was – any kind of common-sense response eluded her – for she could only assume that the woman was referring to her body size and her darker skin tone. These racialized micro-aggressions are acutely felt by those targeted and often serve as barriers to safely participating in health-promoting activities.
But I am also invisible

While on the one hand, the women spoke of experiencing times when the blackness of their bodies made them hyper-visible, one of the women also gave instances of when it seemed as though she was invisible:

I noticed at the yoga studio, I do remember this has happened in, well you know one of its classes, and that is where there would be a crowded class and person comes in late and she looks around to see where she can stand and it's like she stands in my space, of all the other 30 people in the room. It's all like she's saying, there's nobody here, I'll take this spot. And so, aah, I noticed that over and over again um and also I think that, again, it's not so much an immigrant woman of colour but I suppose to them that's what I am, Black, as you just could never possibly belong, you know (AH).

Much like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), AH’s experience suggested that she knew that she was physically present – that she was there in flesh and blood, occupying a space in the room - yet she was invisible since other participants refused to see her because her Black body did not belong. While it is common for visible minority individuals to experience a sense of un-belonging when operating outside their own ethnic community, AH’s comment calls attention to the constructed nature of Blackness – the signifiers and social meanings of Blackness - and to Blackness as inferior such that its social manifestations produces what George Yancy refers to as “racialized invisibility” (2008, p.76).

Survival Strategies: Overcoming the Odds

“I try to stay active in many different ways…”

Contrary to findings that position Black women as either too overwhelmed with responsibilities or too poor to afford to participate in physical activity, the women in the study have managed to develop strategies that work to circumvent factors identified by
the literature as ‘barriers’ to physical activity. Managing physical activity meant perceiving ‘barriers’ as inconvenient obstacles that can be overcome through a process of purposeful and meaningful negotiation. Much like the concept of self-efficacy put forward by Bandura (2004), the women’s ability to maintain a physically active lifestyle rests on their belief that they hold the power to determine their physical activity capacity. What follows next, is a discussion of these processes of negotiation.

**Financial Instability**

Financial instability and lack of adequate financial resources have long been identified as barriers to physical activity for Black women (Eyler et al. 1998; Im et al. 2013; Walcott-McQuigg et al. 2001; Young et al. 2002). Black women, labeled foreign-born and read as ‘minority’ are at a particular disadvantage – they are poorer by virtue of “being both women and members of a minority group” (Elmelech and Lu, 2004, p.158) and find it challenging to come up with gym membership fees and money for fitness programmes that would otherwise benefit their health. Research on ethnicity and gender gaps further indicate that this gender difference in financial access depends largely on whether or not the woman is white or non-white, as ethnic minority women face a greater economic hardship that is not experienced by white women, who tend to enjoy a visible socioeconomic advantage over non-white women (Elmelech and Lu, 2004). In situations where resources (financial, time, and social and familial support) are limited, fitness gets placed on the backburner for it is not regarded as a necessary means of survival.

However, although having access to adequate financial resources was acknowledged as a potential barrier to physical activity participation for black women, the women in this study were not convinced that it was sufficient reason to not be physically active, and for the following reasons, should especially not be an excuse for women who reside in Vancouver:
The weather

Compared to other Canadian cities, Vancouver has been touted as having the mildest and most seasonally pleasant weather across all provinces, thus making it an ideal location to enjoy all-year-round outdoor activities. Some of the participants shared that participating in and enjoying physical activity does not ‘come with a heavy price tag,’ as the weather permits outdoor activity. Both KW and DB noted that the only reason they had purchased a treadmill was for their love of running and they wanted to be able to run even when the weather wasn’t so nice. DB shared how “amazed” her niece from Montreal was, when she visited one year to participate in the Vancouver Sun Run.

She said, “I just love it, cause everywhere you turn, somebody is doing, you see people doing…” so she noticed it, right. And I guess too because we have the weather, right… (DB).

In thinking about her journey with being physically active, AH also acknowledged the role that the weather plays in facilitating or deterring physical activity.

I think that even the lifestyle of this side because, you know, living in Chicago where everybody eats deep dish pizza and then you come in out to the west coast where people are, because of the weather and thing, everybody rides their bikes, everybody you know hikes, you know uh, so I think that influenced me a lot… (AH).

And in the times when the weather makes certain outdoor activities difficult, there are activities that can be done indoors with good results.

Even before being financially able to purchase my treadmill here, I went out and I ran and I walked, right…Before being able to purchase those things, I used stuff that you use your body weight for, right, like sitting and pushing up and all those things, so I used my weight for that. So saying um, I don’t have the resources; it’s an excuse that you just have to hear yourself say because it’s the easiest thing to say (CR).
Accessibility and Availability

As a matter of fact, the ability to enjoy outdoor activity is an added bonus in terms of lessening the cost of physical activity. In comparison to her native home, KW felt that the cost to participate in physical activity is more affordable in Vancouver, as people in Vancouver can “just go walking in their neighborhoods, which is free of cost.” But while the weather may be a facilitator, being able to go walking in one’s neighbourhood also comes with a sense of personal safety and security, which in comparison to her home country, Vancouver is better able to provide. This affords women in Vancouver more opportunities to go out and enjoy outdoor activities such as walking, hiking, biking and running.

I think here it’s different in terms of more opportunities here for you, in terms of the variety of stuff you have…. I think its more here because the first time I came was on vacation here and I was like so surprised. Like, grandma walking with her cane was walking up and down on the road. I’m like, wow! These people like they exercise a lot! Like they walk up and down and stuff (KW).

The accessibility of the great outdoors also makes it conducive for mothers with children to be able to be active with their kids, whether or not they have childcare arrangements. AA, who has 4 children, admitted that at times when she is unable to go to the gym due to a lack of access to childcare or insufficient finances, she would take the kids with her.

If I’m going for a walk or, I just bring them with me, you know. Um, they ride their bikes. I push the baby in the stroller (AA).

Though Vancouver has been touted as the most expensive city in Canada, the women have found economically feasible ways to participate in paid forms of physical
activity. One such medium is via the use of “Access Passes\(^{17}\)” that can be redeemed at participating community centres in Vancouver. It is felt that the provision of the access pass is especially beneficial to immigrants and newcomers who may not necessarily have sufficient funds to afford regular gym membership fees and so with this, they do not get left behind. CR, felt that the government was doing something right in this regard; in the city of Midway\(^{18}\), for instance, where she and her family have volunteered at different community centres, “there’s so much…it’s there um, so that was easy access and still is for immigrants when they come in” (CR). Like CR, AS also spoke about the benefits of having an access pass. But even prior to that, she explained, financial concerns were never an issue for her, as she would normally look for financially efficient ways to get in her workouts.

When I was going to university, then I used university pool, so that helped there. But um, even with, let’s say now that, if for some reason, there were finances, there’s the access passes at all of the centres that I can do, um, since I turned, became a senior here, now I get tickets at seniors rates, so its um, yeah, I’m very fortunate (AS).

The general perception was that like everything else, fitness often comes with a cost, and so if one is keen enough to make physical activity a priority, it can be accomplished. KW found that for her, budgeting lessened the financial burden. She described her strategy as, “you put okay, this you have to exercise, you have to do this and stuff like that” (KW).

But some of the women made mention of the fact that while such opportunities may be available, the absence of cultural familiarity in the spaces made it an isolating experience that took a great deal of **self-talk** to get them through exercise routines. Cultural familiarity was cited as the key component that could make the difference between exercising because “I should” and exercising because “I really want to.”

\(^{17}\) Access Pass, as they are called by users, is available to eligible residents under the Leisure Access Program in British Columbia. It provides low-income Vancouver residents with access to basic recreation programs and services at Park Board facilities at a reduced cost.  
\(^{18}\) The name of the city is a pseudonym.
Distance away from the metropolis was also cited as a limiting factor in being able to access activities that are culturally familiar.

I actually looked up quite a few different activity things to do cause I like to dance, so I wanted to take up different kinds of dancing and there’s nothing available outside of Vancouver. There might be classes here and there in Burnaby but in my side, there is nothing. If you wanna take Zumba, great! because that’s taking off at gyms but there’s a cost associated with doing that but are there specific things that immigrant women could identify…especially with their culture, I don’t think that’s readily available. (SB)

When I just started at the Rec centre, um, and, like the classes I mentioned before were predominantly white individuals there, um, so I’d go in and I’d hold my little corner and then when the class got moving then you just start exercising and you didn’t ah mean think of anything, you didn’t think of it. Then you realise, “oh, that person struggling just as much as me,” yeah, she’s white and I’m black but we’re all the same, exercising the same together and, yeah, we’re doing it, so…I mean, you know your purpose, you know the reason why you’re doing what you’re doing, so if you goal is, you need to go exercise 3, 4 times a day and you’re the only black person in the class, so be it, you go and you exercise and you enjoy yourself. You don’t look at anything else around you. You’re there for that purpose. Um, yeah, so I don’t think being a black person hinders you or should hinder anybody from exercising. Yeah, its kind of intimidating when you go into an area where you’re the only person there like, only your culture or you colour and stuff like that but depending on your personality, I guess, and if you smile, they say if you smile, then (laughs) that should kind of, you know warm people up and stuff like that, so, you shouldn’t really use that to hinder you, yeah…” (KW)

In KW’s case, she had a keen sense of awareness of her position as an outsider. The colour of her skin and the unfamiliarity of the music was a constant reminder that she did not quite belong. And though she made attempts at fitting in, it is apparent that she still felt like an outsider – going through the exercise ritual, unfeeling, without emotion but conscious of each breath, each step and each ripple of sweat because it was for a purpose; there was something to be gained. But the isolation did not rest solely with community recreation centres. It was echoed to be a problem across a majority of the gyms, particularly the larger privately owned gyms where the experience is “very lonely…You don’t feel engaged with what you’re doing. It’s boring. It’s tedious” (SB). But not all experiences are the same. A participant, who has membership at a public
recreation centre, explained that she was wonderfully surprised by the show of affection and support that she received on one of her many visits to use the pool.

I actually had a ski accident that tore up my left knee and I waited a while until I could actually bend the knee because I couldn’t because it was just awful… I walked in on my crutches and as I was putting my crutches down, I saw all of these people came, “now, you be careful, now you be careful, now watch yourself, now let me help you…” and I’m thinking, where’s all of these people coming from? You know, it was really amazing. It was really, really wonderful, because obviously, since I was regular there, these people were, it’s not that we were chitty chatting all the time. We all did our own thing but obviously we were…it was wonderful. It was really wonderful (AS).

AS’s experience at the gym would seem to suggest that that persons who work-out do care about whom they share their space with but at the same time, perhaps in keeping with an ideology that the gym is a space for people who are serious about working-out, it requires that everyone appear more focused on things like their technique, form, method and performance level, than on chit-chatting or making friends. Thus, for anyone to successfully operate within that space, she must conform to its subculture.

F – In Fun: Fitness is fun

The physical activity preferences of the women indicate that there were stark differences in the way they were motivated to keep active. The factor that mattered most, however, was that it was an activity they enjoyed. The majority of the women spoke about their love for dancing and the ability to express themselves through dance. Being able to participate in dance fitness classes was a beneficial motivator for them, knowing that they could look forward to an enjoyable activity. But they also wanted a genre that they were either “familiar” with or one that had a “vibe” that would keep them inspired to keep going back. Some of the women with whom I spoke, were participants of Caribbean and African dance fitness programmes. A common view that they shared was about the intense feelings of enjoyment and sense of satisfaction that they got from participating in the classes, especially knowing that they worked hard without feeling
pressed to do so, as the classes were such that “even when you look like you’re not doing any work, you’re working” (DG). One participant said she found that after her first class, she “went home really motivated to do it again and again and again” because she had felt a “sense of wellbeing and accomplishment” (MK).

**Group Fitness and Cross-Cultural Spaces**

Some of the women also found participating in group-fitness activities to be quite enjoyable as they were able to ‘feed off’ the energy of the instructor and the other participants. Group fitness classes that were high energy and had instructors who exuded a great amount of energy to keep the session vibrant were most desirable. The main criterion tended to be that the instructor was energetic. Furthermore, working out in a group setting was all the more reason to keep up with everyone and not be the one to slow the group down. In this way, each woman felt responsible for the success or failure of the class and that gave her reason to work even harder; ‘slacking off’ was not a viable option.

An important part of many of the women’s workout was the added need to feel that they belonged to a community of other similar women. Whether through fitness goals or sheer affinity with the mode of fitness workout, camaraderie and acceptability within the space played a vital role in exercise adherence. In particular, the women who participated in the Caribbean and African dance fitness classes indicated that they felt encouraged to be at the classes because of the high level of energy, welcoming vibe, and the warm and supportive relationship that existed among the participants. It was a space in which they could relax and be themselves:

It’s a combination, it’s definitely a personal thing for me but it’s also again about that energy, it’s a family affair when you go to Heart-Pumper, even if you’ve not gone for a while but you, when you go, you’re like, oh my gosh! It’s like, it’s like a family, they welcome you back, everyone’s excited to see you and you just have fun (SV).

Everyone in the class is very accepting. Everybody is very supportive. Ah mean, we all joke around too in class and if you can’t do something, we kind ah give you a little bit of energy to try and do it. Everybody is very friendly. I’ve gotten to know a lot of people more by going…I’ve been to a couple other exercise classes to the gym and everybody just comes, does
their thing. Unless you know people who are in there, you don’t really socialize; you’re not friendly. Just come and go (AA).

However, while women of African and Caribbean heritage predominantly occupied one of the spaces in which the Caribbean and African dance fitness was held, there were a few women who were ‘outsiders’ to the culture. I spoke with three of the women. They were not of African or Caribbean heritage, nor did they identify as Black. While the women’s initial reaction to the fitness programme varied depending on their prior experience of the genre and even with the people, none of them felt as though they had immediately fit in. It took some time before they were ‘invited in.’

I feel comfortable and welcomed like I… I’m trying think back when I first went. I remember kind of being more like on the outside looking in, like I watched a lot and I think it was because I knew I wasn’t like Caribbean and nobody really knew where I was coming from and I would like know all the words to the songs and I think, they were all kinda like, “who’s this girl?” but I didn’t feel like a threat or like weird, I just remember being kind of aware of it, but I felt comfortable and like after a couple of sessions they started being more open… “What are you doing here?” and “where do you come from?” (AO).

Another participant recalled her first experiences as “a little uncomfortable.” She was acutely aware of her position as an outsider in a (sub)culture to which she did not belong and knew very little about. However, she was quick to point out that the discomfort she felt was perhaps her “own thing” as opposed to the atmosphere itself.

Well, I don’t come from Caribbean descent, and like a lot of the people that were in the class already knew each other from before, so I kind a felt like the new person that didn’t quite understand how things worked and I didn’t really… So, I felt self-conscious being there and sometimes I felt like I didn’t belong there because I didn’t come from that background... I feel more comfortable now that I have a better understanding of it and also that I’ve had a chance to get to know people better and like see that they don’t feel that I’m an outsider coming in and that that they’re quite welcoming… Um, I think I have a good relationship (laughs) with them. I feel really comfortable with them and it’s a good place for me to go (FK).

The instructor for the class also spoke about her experiences as a student in the program and later her transition to becoming an instructor. She did the classes at
two different locations, each catering to a specific demographic of people. This ultimately affected the kinds of experience that she had. In one space, she was an ‘outsider.’

You know being an outsider to a group, you know everyone’s looking at you, you know, look at this white girl, wining her waist. How does she know how to do this? So eventually it kind of moved on to acceptance and once it got to acceptance, I kind of really eased in. it was a lot less intimidating (AM).

I was the only Caucasian female in the classes and there was no males in the classes. So, it was all females, mainly Jamaicans, not a lot of Trinis besides [The name of the instructor]. That was a different experience. I didn’t feel as comfortable as I did when I was going to the initial classes in Agave but the group kind of warmed up to me, especially since [The name of the instructor] warmed up to me very quickly, in that she kind of singled me out and (laughs) that was a little bit kind of troubling because I didn’t want to be singled out in a sense (AM).

In AM’s case, group acceptance was made easier (and quicker) once she had received the nod of approval from the instructor. She was also aware of the fact that as outsider to the culture, all eyes were on her and even though she would have liked to remain unnoticed in her “space at the back,” she did not have that privilege. Her experience in Agave, a more suburban area was different. A Caucasian woman taught the classes.

I didn’t feel a ways about it because I was like, here’s a bunch of Caucasian women standing around wining their waists. I’ve been doing it like since I was a kid. My friends growing up; I’ve always been close friends with Trinidadians, Jamaicans, Bajans. They were a big influence in my schools where I grew up. So that’s very normal for me. It was a very comfortable environment for me. I did feel though that it could be done better. So, that’s why I went searching for the source (AM).

19 Agave is pseudonym for the name of the city.
The above narrative described AM’s first time attending one of the Caribbean and African fitness classes in which her whiteness made her ‘just another member.’ Nonetheless, while she was comfortable in the space, it seemed she was uncomfortable with inauthentic experience.

While the idea of ‘a cultural space’ may be viewed as an exclusive space by members of ethnic minority groups, the women’s narratives suggested that it is possible that interruptions in cross-cultural spaces can serve the same purpose for all its members. Thus, even though there were cultural differences, the women shared a similar love for the genre and for physical activity that allowed them to form bonds and to co-exist in the same cultural space.

**Negotiating Spaces**

The gym also operates as a safe space for other reasons for some of the women. Being able to workout in an environment that is not perceived as judgmental was seen as providing a sense of comfort and security. For some participants, a ‘female only’ gym provided that assurance. Knowing that they were working out in a space dedicated solely to women – women who would perhaps share similar goals, fears and concerns and thus be more understanding – seemed to offer more appeal for these women, especially in situations where there may be concerns with body image issues and appearance. For one of the participants, the choice to be a member of, and to workout in, an ‘all female’ facility was deeply personal and appeared to cause some amount of embarrassment when she attempted to respond to the question.

I feel comfortable, you know, it doesn’t matter, you know sometimes you have those women days where you are not in a good mood or your period is on and you know, you just don’t, you know, I think when I go to a gym, where its men and women, I think, you know, you try to, you’re more cautious about how you look and what you’re wearing…you know, you don’t want no one to see through this or you know, or women issues, right, you know, um, but when I go to the all-women’s gym, they have the same issues as I have, you know, so, so I’m not that worried and concerned about you know, women issues, period and stuff and is my thing showing and you know, stuff like that, right, so it just makes me feel more comfortable…I mean, I’m not a hundred percent secure with my
body. I have stuff that’s going on that doesn’t, to my opinion, doesn’t look too good, you know, underneath…and my hair is, could be a challenge as well (AA).

While in this instance, the need to participate in an ‘all female’ facility was centered on appearance, it was driven by deeper concerns related to biological issues and to some extent cultural and ethnic insecurities. As discussed in chapter 4, Black women’s hair – a symbol of status and beauty - can be a major concern for Black women and often acts as a barrier to physical activity. As AA talked about her ‘hair challenges,’ it became apparent that the dilemma with which she was faced not only had to do with decisions around appropriate hair do’s and maintenance but with the so-called mystery and exoticness surrounding Black hair. She mentioned that she loved having a different look and as such constantly changes her hairstyles but was often concerned that people who were not accustomed “to seeing African American women change their hair so much” would constantly be asking curious questions. “I think about that stuff when I go to the gym. What am I going to do with my hair, you know.” While she reasoned that her constant hair change routine may be a form of “insecurity,” she admitted that it bothered her less being in an ‘all female’ facility.

Not wanting to feel intimidated by men who lift weights was cited by another participant as a reason for her preference for ‘women only’ facilities. While feelings of gym intimidation (gymtimidation) is not solely experienced by women, a hierarchy of supremacy is said to exist in the gym that stratifies men according to factors such as age, experience, and musculature (Bunsell, 2013). Perceptions of the regular gym and in particular the weights room as a masculine institution still hold (Craig and Liberti, 2007), thereby causing women to feel insecure about their intrusion into this competitive male dominated space.

You go into a large gym and you have, you know, all these guys and they’re just like strutting around and you know lifting the weights and you’re like oh my God, like, I need to go find a corner to work out (DG).
Similarly, in her research on female body builders, Bunsell (2013) noted that the women in her study felt particularly intimidated and threatened by the noise – the “grunts and groans” coming from the guys in the weights room – which admittedly, did nothing to boost their confidence. It is therefore not surprising that there continues to be a rapid increase in female only facilities across North America, offering a ‘safe’ workout environment for women who had previously felt excluded from fitness venues due to “physical or social barriers” (Craig and Liberti, 2007, p.677).

RB noted that ‘women only’ gyms had become popularised in North America compared to the Caribbean. She felt that the increasing trend was related to women’s insecurity around their appearance under the watchful gaze of men.

“I think it’s for women to have that comfortable space, right. I think when they go to mixed space, they do feel like they’re being stared at, especially if they don’t have the perfect body. They might think that men are saying, “well why is she here?” If there’s a woman who is perfectly toned and physiqued the men are looking at her with desire, whereas the woman who is not, she knows that the men are not looking at her in that way and she might feel like she’s being judged. Where if you’re at a women only gym, you’re more likely to see women who look like you in terms of your overall physical appearance, so you might feel more comfortable going back.” (RB).

Although, there were benefits in group participation, group activity was not for everyone. Some of the women had a preference for activities that allowed them to ‘go solo’. Thus, in contrast to the women who need the reassurance, motivation, and accountability of group activities, these women gravitated towards activities that allowed them time to themselves – time to reflect, to problem-solve, pray, or to simply appreciate their surroundings. AS, who loves to hike and ski, stated that she usually does most of the things by herself because she wants “to be centered.” She was able to breathe and enjoy her surroundings without “a lot of ‘chattering’ around” her.

Outdoor activities such as running, walking, hiking, and skiing were also some of the women’s preferences. More than anything, they appreciated that decisions on whether or not to be active on any particular day or time were left solely to themselves. Additionally, they were not responsible for anyone else’s level of enjoyment, physical activity capability or level, and they were accountable to no one except themselves. As
DB explained, the reason she loved running and walking by herself was because, as she puts it, “I don’t have to force myself to talk with someone or find out am I going too fast, am I going too slow” (DB).

In this realm, each woman has the capacity to own the space in which she chooses to be active and to assert full ownership over the physical capabilities of her body – she is the boss – and for the women, this is part of what motivates them.

**Time is of the Essence**

One of the most common reasons people give for not being active enough, is lack of time. And for women, multiple role responsibilities including childrearing and caregiving obligations can severely hinder their ability to engage in physical activity. However, research indicates that Black women tend to be at a higher disadvantage than their European ancestry counterparts due to their “race and gender social statuses [which] expose them to higher barriers to meeting the challenges of time allocation than other raced and gendered groups” (Ray 2014, p.783). But for these participants, fitting physical activity into their busy schedules was a matter of priority.

I have to do it in the morning. I have to be up and about um, before my family needs me. There are some mornings when I just feel to do something different, then I go out to the gym at 5, by 6 I’m back home um, I have to do it early on Saturdays. Usually when people are coming out I always joke, I’m coming back in, so ah, that works for me. Very rare, I would ever work out in the afternoon…I can’t when I get home. It’s my other shift, right; picking up the kids, the homework… (CR).

I work nights full-time and my husband days and we had all these boys and they were all into different sports and of course during the week, its homework and practice. So you had to figure out, so that's what I did…I fit it in where I can or what suits me but I don't have a regimen to say I go Monday, Wednesday, Friday, yeah (DB).

Sometimes, the ability to fit physical activity into an already hectic schedule, requires unconventional means and a ‘thinking out the box’ attitude. DB, who admitted that she has never been a slow person, uses that to her advantage:
If I’m going down the stairs, I’m running. If I’m coming up the stairs, I’m running. If I’m walking I’m brisk. If you see me walk, I’m a brisk walker. I don’t just walk, even if I’m shopping, I’m not just a walker. I’m a brisk walker. I use that as my exercise…and there comes a time if a customer asks for something, and I want to go to the back, I’m running there, you know…so I think because I didn’t have a schedule for my fitness then, I wasn’t thinking about it, I was still keeping fit by the things I did unconsciously, so I think all those kept me until I had my free time to say, “okay, now, I’m going to do this” (DB).

One participant found that the strategy that worked best for her was to choose a facility that was closer to her work. It would mean that she was less likely to give in to “laziness” or fatigue if it was “easily accessible; I could go there right after work and then come home because I find if I come home, then I don’t feel like doing anything else other than being home” (DG).

While the women acknowledged that they experienced time allocation challenges, they expressed confidence in their ability to work around those challenges. They felt that they were also doing it out of self-love and not wanting to “become a statistic.” AS expressed that she thought she owed it to herself, her body, and her “mental state to stay physical active.” Being inactive was not an option. By chiseling out time for physical activity, they seemed to have succeeded in in their goal of making physical activity an important part of their lives.

Social Support and Role Models

The women cited social support as a huge factor in being able to keep active. The support of significant others was important in enabling mothers with children to “take the time out” to exercise. For being able to participate in physical activity was regarded as something that one has to “make time for” and for women with children, physical activity came as much needed therapy and “away” time.

My husband, his schedule is very limbo, so he’s able to watch the kids while I go to the gym, you know, because to be honest, if he wasn’t around, I probably wouldn’t be at the gym as much as I am…He plays a
really big role in the reason why I’m able to come every so often. And I think he, you know, he realize that when I wasn’t going to the gym and not being PA, I wasn’t in such a good mood (laughs), so, he would, you know, make the time, you know, he would really push me, “you need to go, you know, go have some me time, whatever, just go do something,” so I just took that as, I need to go to the gym and release some stress, so um, so that’s how I’m able to keep it going because I do have the help, you know, to do that because I don’t think if I had that extra hand, I wouldn’t be going as often as I do (AA).

Peer group support was also identified as an important motivator that helped the women to keep physically active. For CR, knowing that she had the support of her running group gave her a sense of belonging and that there were others who genuinely cared about her progress and success as a runner. She noted that if she didn’t show up for a meeting, she would get calls wanting to find out whether everything was okay; further, the support offered by these group members in checking in about her marathon training – “people from the group came out and cheered me on” (CR) – was vital in sustaining activity. In thinking about how hectic her schedule sometimes gets, SV also values the support of her peers:

It’s easy to say well, I’m gonna exercise um…and you do it for a week or 2 weeks or a month, wooo, right. But then, you get so busy with life, and this and that and the other and you fall off, right, and so, its important to have your circle, your accountability circle where…it comes from within but when you have that supportive group and circle, it keeps you going when you don’t necessarily feel like doing it (SV).

In order to make physical activity work for them, the women explained that they had to have an open mind, be willing to explore new activities, and to have the prudence to know which and what forms of activities would encourage adherence. For DG, it took a while to get accustomed to the idea that she could participate in other activities besides going for a run and still be sufficiently active.
Summary

Fitness programmes such as “Black Women do Workout” and earlier projects such as “Sisters in Shape” are constant reminders of Black women's struggle with physical activity and their struggle to challenge racism, damaging stereotypes, and harmful sexual politics about their bodies. As Lau (2011) notes, a major challenge to physical activity for Black women is associated with cultural myths of the super-human capabilities of the ‘Strong Black Woman’. The “image of the strong black woman has been positively accepted within Black communities and fetishized by the larger society…such that [Black women] measure themselves against an ideal of superhuman capabilities – the ability to care for everyone, to hold everything together, to solve everyone’s problems. Obviously, the strong black woman does not have much time for herself; nor – as the myth would have it – neither does she need much time” (2011, p.9). If nothing more, the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman must be viewed within the context of essentialism, since by assuming that Black women are naturally (genetically) predisposed to be “resilient and hardworking, with the ability to survive and succeed against all odds” (Reynolds 1997, p.98) is based on arguments around biological determinism. In attempting to live up to the stereotyped ‘Strong Black Woman,’ Black women are compelled to get everything done and to look after everyone while considering herself and her welfare last. However, while the women in the study did not speak of themselves as ‘strong Black women,’ their inclination to get everything done was evidenced in some of the discussions around the challenges with eking out time for physical activity.

Often used as a celebratory way of honoring the tenacity and determination of Black women, the image of the ‘Strong Black Woman’ – a superwoman of the Black community - poses difficult challenges to Black women and Black feminist activism. Collins notes that by positioning Black women as strong, independent and indestructible, it limits their ability to “confront oppression” (2000, p.79) and ignores larger issues of racism that affect them. Additionally, such images are limiting for they ignore the real differences that exist among Black women and cast them in roles as helpless victims.
The narratives of the non-African/Caribbean participants brought me back to my earlier reflections around the heightened sense of self that persons often experience when they engaged in foreign spaces. In a sense, the women’s stories bore similarities to the stories of hypervisibility told by some of the Black women. However, what the narratives have pointed to is the existence of a complex combination of factors that help to define the ‘outsider’ experiences of the women. On the one hand, while, white privilege may have helped to facilitate ‘easier’ access to minority spaces, it did not account for the access granted to non-white ‘outsiders.’ On the other hand, the narratives of the Black women suggested a continued situation of unease; there did not appear to have been ‘an eventual acceptance’.

The women in the study expressed an awareness of the influence of social and cultural norms in guiding the decisions that they make around physical activity. The choices that they made reflected considerations of the situational dynamics that they encounter in their day-to-day lives as well as their shifting identities as Black women, immigrant women, and outsiders. The decisions speak further to the women’s determination in wanting to live physically active lifestyles. It showed that the women exercised agency in their daily negotiations with physical activity, finding strategies that worked for them – strategies that catered to their lifestyles and that motivated them to keep active. Despite the challenges associated with the socio-cultural and economic environment, their experiences of racism and discrimination and their struggles with fitting-in and feelings of non-belonging, the women remained resolute in not being deterred from participating in forms of activities that they enjoy and feel are beneficial to them.

Arguably, another important factor to consider (and one that is consistent with the literature) is the existence of a positive relationship between neighborhood environments (the availability of and access to resources, activities, and facilities) and physical activity participation (Humpel et al., 2002; Wilcox et al., 2000; Sallis et al., 1997). The women’s narratives affirm that an environment, in which residents hold the perception that physical activity is encouraged by governing officials, is one that generally facilitates greater physical activity participation among its citizenry. Additionally, not only do attractive, safe, and interesting neighbourhood environments encourage outdoor
activities such as walking and jogging but researchers argue that such environments also encourage more vigorous activities and habit-forming activities (Giles-Corti and Donovan 2002).

How the women participate in physical activity is a reflection of how they understand and interpret physical activity, a concept that is first and foremost driven by their experiences – whether first or second hand - of the benefits that can be derived and the importance that they place on any of the benefits. Whereas all the participants agreed on the importance of physical activity and were desirous of performing physical activity as a part of their everyday lives, the study found that various factors, such as prior experience, the presence (or absence) of active role models, and cultural beliefs were at play in influencing the women’s management of physical activity. Recurring narratives of the “inactive Black woman” are challenged by the findings of this chapter. Contrary to popular understandings, Black women are not content to sit and be sedentary while they make excuses for lack of physical activity participation. Instead, as the evidence suggests, they utilize various strategies to successfully combat factors that the literature has identified as barriers to their inactivity.
Chapter 7.

What’s Culture Got to do with it?

Canada, the country that persons have come to recognize as a place that stands for democracy, freedom, and cultural diversity, was sent reeling five years ago by a publication from the city of Gatineau, Quebec, which advised new Canadians of ways in which to successfully integrate into Canadian society. In the guide, newcomers were cautioned about the importance of things such as good hygiene and against cooking foods that give off strong smells (CBC News 2011). Naturally, this action raised the ire of several persons, including government officials. The guide was withdrawn but the damage was already done. Such an initiative is in conflict with the idea that culture – whether the ability or the inability to practice or participate in it - has the potential to influence individuals’ health and as such is an important factor to consider when thinking about reducing health disparities and promoting behavioural change. Similarly, the ability to ‘fit in’ with the culture of the adopted country also rests on the ability to hold on to traditional customary beliefs and the ability to share and participate in them.

The influence of culture as a determinant of health, on individuals’ behaviours, as well as on the decisions that they make, has been receiving an increasing amount of attention in various areas of research and from prevention and promotion intervention programmes. In Canada, for instance, the country’s growing multi-ethnic population

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20 Broadly speaking, culture is understood as a complex system of shared beliefs, practices and values held by a group of people within a social, geographic or political environment. Within this system, culture operates to influence the attitudes, experiences and behaviours of members of the group. A recurring theme throughout the immigrant health literature is an emphasis on the crucial role that culture is believed to play in influencing the ways in which members of diverse communities define and think about health and illness. Thus, the meanings that members attribute to health and health associated activities and the ways in which members carry out health related practices are said to be shaped by culture.
appears to warrant an approach to healthy living that recognizes the diversity that exist within the population and an approach that is culturally tailored to facilitate that diversity. In this chapter, I will be exploring the role of culture in relation to physical activity intervention strategies, using the views of the women to inform the discussion.

**Representations of Culture**

Though there was agreement among the participants that the culture of physical activity in Vancouver was predominantly white, further discussions with the women indicated that they had mixed feelings about the need for culturally appropriate fitness programmes or more specifically, fitness programmes targeted at them. The sentiment from some of the women suggested that to do so was unnecessary, especially since the ability to participate in physical activity was fairly accessible to everyone (as discussed in chapter 4) and was not an exclusionary practice. Additionally, they felt that with so many options from which to choose, it was not possible to not find an activity that one could participate in. “It seems to me there are a lot of stuff out there if you want to get involved” (DB). The women did not perceive any barriers to physical activity for Black women but rather, saw access to be in excess and was available for anyone who was interested; and if they were interested, all they had to do was “just go and get it” (AS). The decision of whether or not to be active rested solely with the individual and was a matter of choice – to be or not to be active – mirroring an approach to health which focuses on individual action and ignores external influences that may have a bearing on behaviour. In this model, it is the individual who is blamed and as is held responsible for her health outcomes. Additionally, since there is universal access, the decision to be active or the choice of activity should not be determined by skin colour or ethnicity. One participant felt that it was nonsense to even entertain such discussions.
Well, there’s so much…What would you go to the gym as, people label me as a black woman but why would it be different from a European woman, I don’t even get it. When people say that, like I’m sorry. I, why are we even going there because I don’t get it? A gym is a gym is a gym anywhere, right, so to say, um, you know I’ve been somewhere that doesn’t cater for non-European or my community, um, I just find that as just such um, wasted energy, you know what I mean? It’s just wasted energy. It’s a gym. How different are non-Europeans when it comes to working out? We use the treadmill, we use everything, you know… (CR).

Implicit in CR’s comment is the idea that “we are all people…we all eat, drink, sleep, breathe…no different from the other, so why see colour?” We should therefore see individuals – see ourselves - as people rather than as the colour of our skin. In essence, colour should not define or restrict us. I remember at the time trying to contextualise that specific comment, thinking about my own subjectivity and about how foreign that thought had somehow seemed to me as I could no longer see the world in dull black and white frames. People aren’t just people, no matter how much we want them to be; we are a sum of all our experiences – lived and imposed - historical and present. To admit that we do see colour and ethnicity may not be such a bad thing, since it is perhaps an acknowledgement of the diversity among us, rather than to be blind, thereby leaving little room to engage in discussions that matter to us.

In contrast to the above discussions, other participants, though agreeing that there is, to a certain extent accessibility, expressed views that made it clear that they felt that emphasis should be placed on making culturally appropriate activities available, as there is a greater likelihood that if an activity is culturally familiar, then the chances of it being maintained is much greater. Some of the women felt as though ‘things’ have started to change but still believe that “more can definitely be done” to encourage Black women to be more active.

Hmmm…I think we’re now starting to have, you know, specific activities are geared towards things that would be recognized by Black women, like say the music, like you know, say I go for a workout and they’re playing country music, it’s not going to inspire me to you know, jump faster (laughs)...Um, yeah, so it’s good that I’m seeing African fitness dance classes or like Caribbean fitness dance classes coming out because when I do go for these classes like 90% of the women or persons there are of African descent or you know, they don’t um, you wouldn’t really find them encouraged to go to other activities because you tend to feel like an
outsider, you’re not really recognize these different cues. People might joke about something and you don’t really recognize that, so you don’t really feel like you belong (DG).

In this sense, familiarity is taken to mean much more than having the opportunity to participate in one’s culture but is also regarded as an important aspect of helping racialized groups feel a sense of belonging. But though the women spoke about the need to feel a part of a collective and to have a sense of connectedness with others who share similar cultural backgrounds, there was surprisingly no sense of a shared Black community as distinct from other communities. One participant found it difficult to respond to the question, as since moving to Vancouver, she has “been trying to figure out who the Black community is here” (AH). It was challenging for her, as she was convinced that there was “more to the community” than she was seeing and felt that maybe if she went to church (she mentioned that she had previously enquired and was told where to find a Black church), it would not only help with the “longing for Black people” that she has been experiencing but she would also find the Black community that she was hoping was out there. But for her, the challenge was that the church was located so far away from where she lived and the service time conflicted with her favourite Sunday morning yoga session. She mentioned that she once made an attempt at going but by the time she found the church, after getting lost several times, the service had ended, which made her disappointed.

The idea of cultural familiarity and a sense of belonging appear to be conceptualised as separate constructs, nonetheless conflicting. Whereas cultural familiarity was (in this case), indicative of a particular genre of music, styles of dance and rhythm, belonging addressed a larger concept, not exclusive to shared cultural connectedness but referred to a feeling of ‘Canadianess’ - of feeling like a welcomed and included part of Canada's broader cultural landscape. This is perhaps why, when the some of the women spoke about the role of their community in fostering and encouraging physical activity, it was less about their ethnic community and was conceptualized more in terms of the school with which they were affiliated and seemingly spent most of their days or the city in which they lived. “I would say that for my school, which is the community that I'm involved in, it doesn't really target the needs of Black immigrant women” (MK) or “from aah reading and reading community papers, it seems
to me there are a lot of stuff out there” (DB). It is to these communities that they look for ways of belonging and inclusion.

At the same time however, when the idea of a community was spoken about with reference to ethnicity, it was articulated as though being specific to different ethnic groups, such as the African community or the Caribbean community, rather than to a larger collective that could perhaps be considered as representative of a group of people who share similar historical and cultural legacies and who are made visible by the ‘racial’ categories colonially bestowed on them. One participant who is of Caribbean heritage, while she was able to identify a few events hosted by the Caribbean community, did not believe that her community did a whole lot when it came to encouraging physical activity and that much of activities such as dancing were party related and involved “a lot of drinking” (SV). From her point of view, she felt that there was much more that her community could and should do to get people involved in physical activities. Another participant, of African descent, said that she believed a part of the problem is that this whole idea of physical activity – having to take time out of your day to be active - is still a new concept to many migrants and as such, she does not feel as though it is yet of significant importance to the community. And thus unlike other aspects of the African culture that have taken root, the importance of physical activity has not “gone very deeply within our community” (DG).

Part of the challenge is that whereas the Black population represents the third largest visible minority group in Canada (StatsCan 2011), except for ethnic concentrations of groups of people of African and Caribbean descent in specific areas of major urban cities where the Black population represents a large majority, (such as Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa) the Black population, unlike the Chinese and the South Asian populations in Vancouver, for example, is a non-enclaving immigrant group. And with Vancouver having a smaller Black population than Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa, per se, the settlement choices of Black families result in a Black population that is widely and, to an extent, thinly spread across all the cities of the Greater Vancouver and the Lower Mainland area, giving the sense of an absence of a Black community while at the same time perhaps limiting its formation.
Some of the women spoke about the fact that what was lacking were representations of themselves where physical activity was concerned. They were concerned that all around them, the images that were being displayed did not look like them and so do not appeal to them. As one participant puts it, “even having posters of Black fit women in the gyms, that would be nice…but you don’t really see things like that” (DG). KW shared the same sentiments, agreeing that,

I don’t think, like they make um, the advertisements are, I think, like in general, and its mostly Caucasian looking, Asian looking people on posters. Nothing that would um, attract a Black person walking by to see a Black lady running, then you kind a do a double look and say "oh!" you know but its normally like a Caucasian person and you’re thinking, “okay now, that’s not for me.” And you just walk past there, right? Um, the government is good in terms of they offer all these Rec centres all over the places and they make it affordable and they offer assistance if you can’t afford it but in terms of, yeah, advertisements and stuff like that, it doesn’t pull you, a black person into it… I think make advertisements with us. Ah mean, to encourage us to come out and do stuff too, cause, I mean it’s all white people and stuff, basically that are on the posters, that are on whatever advertisements they have there… Activities that appeal to them [us] culturally, try to offer that too (KW).

For these women, representation, like cultural familiarity plays an important role in how physical activity is understood and consumed. Hall (1997) notes that representation is the cornerstone of understanding culture; connecting meaning and language to culture, it tells us something meaningful or represents the world meaningfully to other people, thus making it “an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (p.15). And since visual images carry meaning – though sometimes many may not always be interpreted positively – the visual portrayal and display of images of Black women consuming physical activity would, as articulated by the women, be a useful strategy in getting more Black women to be physically active.

However, despite varying perceptions on the relevance or even the necessity of ethnic or culturally specific activities, some of the women also voiced skepticism about the feasibility of trying to implement any programme of physical activity that would be geared specifically towards the Black population. Similar to the perceived absence of a Black community, it was felt by one participant that the Black community was riddled by
too many disparities, one of which had to do with how widely dispersed across the Greater Vancouver Area (GVA) the Black population is. This, she felt, would hinder the possibility of implementing targeted programmes, since there would be issues of centrality of location such that accessibility would not be seen as a major barrier to the specific population being targeted. She also spoke frankly about the diversity that exists among the Black population as a major pitfall that would lead to the failure of any such attempt at a programme of that nature:

If you provide maybe have like a subsidized facility in which people can work out, I find that we; when I say we is because I’m part of the community we are discussing here, we’re very socio-economically diverse too and I find that if I was to talk about especially Africans, I find that there’s a lot of class issues going on, so I would think that there are people who try...there are Black people or Africans, let me say Black, which is more encompassing, there are people that will not be involved in much that has other Black people, especially if its subsidized, if it’s you know, if it’s too target because they feel well, “I’m not that person, I’m very successful, I’ve been born here or I was born here, I’m not really that, they’re looking for immigrants or recent immigrants who cannot afford private or you know, who cannot afford working with trainers. I have a trainer; I am the kind of person that needs a trainer.” So, I think it would be useful in terms of, it would actually get some people, depending on where its located, it might get some people that needed but then I think there’s also this need, this desire to distance ourselves or distance ourselves based on class issues or regional issues too, I believe because, I mean I know that we’re all Black people, we could all be Africans or we could all be Caribbeans but there are also differences amongst us, so, I think it would be a very complex thing to do but I think it would probably be worthwhile, especially...it would be a worthwhile attempt and effort but I think it would have to be one that’s made with a lot of considerations being kept in mind...yeah, that’s what I believe (MK).

Without a doubt, the above quote brought some of the major challenges associated with implementing ‘culturally sensitive’ intervention strategies to the forefront and begs the question of how best to address these deep seated cultural, geographical, and individual differences that exist among a group of people who to the ‘outsider,’ researcher, and/or programmer are seemingly the same? Ashcroft et al. (2005) suggests, that these disparities are often misunderstood or not understood at all and so even when a ‘culturally sensitive’ lens is applied, by simply using proxy markers for
ethnicity that homogenise Black people would not only be disastrous to the programme’s longevity but would be inherently racist.

One participant also felt that another possibility for promoting change and encouraging physical activity among the Black population, especially for women was to do so through the institution of the church. While acknowledging that the physical activity needs of Black people in general should receive some amount of attention, she pointed out that she did notice that the women in particular were left out, since you would see activities such as boys’ basketball and soccer events taking place. Having her mention this had me reflecting on what brought me to this particular study and of the often times when I would get indignant about the lack of equal recognition that women and girls would receive in the African community with respect to the game of soccer, a favourite community leisure and professional sport in the community. The first time I volunteered to render assistance at a church related soccer tournament, I was disappointed at the roles the women played; like me, they were all assisting in aspects of organising and assisting players, who were mostly males, from kindergarten and up. The only female players were a handful of white pro players, who played for a local Vancouver team. Black female representation was absent and so that was the last time that I volunteered at that event. I have since volunteered at several other African soccer events and each time end up in heated debates with members of the executive for their seemingly blatant disregard to acknowledge their few female players (and even to attract/target female players) in the same way that they do their male players. There is however something to be said about trying to implement a programme of physical activity through the church. Since religion is known to play a central role in the lives of peoples of African descent, health organisations and agencies in the United States have seen it beneficial to use church-based health promotion programmes (CBHPP) to reach members of the African American and Black communities (Tomlinson 2011). Thus the potential to influence and shape community behaviour rests favourably with the Black church given the powerful role that it plays in the lives of its members. The extent to of the success of such programmes however rests highly on the perceive roles and the place of gender within its organizational structure.
Dance as an expression of Culture

Dance has been an essential part of the sociocultural, political, and even economic landscape of the lives of peoples of African descent. Prior to slavery, music, song, and dance were thought to have played significant roles in the traditional daily life of Western Africans, elements of which have been retained (Thompson 2014). Accounts of the transatlantic trade tell stories of slaves dancing on slave ships on a cruel journey, forcibly separated from their families to be sold to foreigners in foreign lands. Thompson (2014) writes that the “tradition of dancing the captives, interlaced with violence, rape and subjugation was a cruel and common act that took place for 150 years of the Atlantic slave trade” (p.44). Though the arguments made by the slavers were that the practice was solely to give slaves exercise, accounts indicate that the slaves were used as a form of entertainment and as an expression of power to dance “under the crack of the whip” for the ships’ crew. In particular, to dance the women, was to do so for sexual stimulation. Women (and men) who refused to dance because they simply could not dance due to being deathly ill were whipped unmercifully (Thompson 2014). Dancing not only became a survival strategy for the slaves but was also an expression of cultural resistance, which later, even after slavery’s abolition, was bound up with meanings that expressed pain, social and economic hardship, as well as issues of rights and freedom for Black people (Thompson 2014).

In contemporary society, both traditional and non-traditional African music, dance, and rhythm have at times overlapped to create quasi-new genres; overrepresented by Black performers and consumers, these have been labelled by pop culture as Black cultural representation and as belonging to Black people. Albeit the significance of newly formed genres may not hold the same meaning for contemporary consumers as did the traditional forms for Blacks during the pre and post emancipation era, the rhythmic melodies of the music still foster a sense of identity for many Black people and people of African descent. It is therefore not surprising that a number of the women in the study find the idea of offering culturally relevant physical activity programmes appealing. They not only want to dance but they want to dance to a rhythm that is familiar – a rhythm that, like blood, is fuel to their veins. Although the common
perception that dancing is an inherent part of being Black is particularly troubling – to do this is not only to simplify the historical experience of Blackness but to also ignore the legitimacy of African cultural displays and customs – the women’s preference for types of physical activity is indicative of how deep the historical legacy of African music and performance goes. One participant who explained that it is generally difficult for her to find suitable activities that she enjoys and would want to continue doing, spoke about the love she has for dancing and how natural it felt to her.

I also find that I enjoy dancing, so I’ve done Heart-Pumper and I’ve also done um, I’m currently doing a Soko fitness class, which is like African dancing, Ndombolo. It’s very high energy. Even when you look like you’re not doing any work, you’re working. So, I like that… It doesn’t feel like work at all, and that’s what I like about it. It comes naturally. It’s like you’re busy having a good time and just so happens you get a good cardio workout or a good workout (DG).

Like DG, six other participants spoke of their love for dancing and the feeling that they get from doing it: “With Heart-Pumper, you kind ah get the vibe to say, ah going, soca music, you get to dance and you know…” (KW). In this sense, dancing to the familiar beats of African and Caribbean music served two purposes: the first being to satisfy physical activity requirements and secondly, though seemingly more important, dancing was a form of cultural expression for the women and was most certainly a way of holding onto aspects of their cultures that they deemed important.

Walking as a Socio-cultural Activity

Although we are constantly being encouraged by physical activity and health experts to “walk more and sit less,” walking is already perhaps the most prevalent of all the various ways of being physically active. Apart from the need to invest in an appropriate pair of walking shoes, it is the most cost effective (free) and the most flexible – based on time and level of intensity preferences - of other types of physical activity. It is the most recommended form of physical activity by the Canadian Society of Exercise Physiology (CSEP) and is indicated as an option for all age categories except 0-4 years.
“You walked to the school, walked to the bus and stuff like that” (AS). It was not uncommon to hear similar responses throughout the interviews as walking, for a number of the women, made up a significant part of their daily activities and the manner in which walking was spoken about suggested that it was accepted as a ‘natural’ thing to do; it was how one got around to get things done, even in the big cities. One of the participants who explained that because she had always tried to incorporate some aspect of physical activity in her life, she found that walking had become a way of life for her while she was pursuing her PhD studies. “Oh I walked a lot, yeah when I lived in Ottawa, I walked a lot. In…I walked several miles to school each day, that kind of thing. (AH). However, the significance of AH’s walking differed from that of some of the other women. Take for instance the nature of DB’s walking:

We always walked to meet friends because we always went to school far from where we lived, so over all that was there but I never did anything in particular, like this is for exercise because I never thought about it, so that’s how we went through but we were always active; walking and stuff...So coming to Canada now, still did not...but we always liked to go for walks. I remember we did a, in Trinidad, we did a Sunday walk, right, Sunday walk, you get dressed up nicely and we went for a walk. So, when we came to Canada, my sister and I who’s just one year difference and both of us came to Canada together, the same day, they sent us together; she’s one year older than I am, and so we sort of stuck together and we’d go for walks, just to the park (DB).

AH had made a conscious decision to walk being fully aware of the benefits of walking but for women like AS and DB whose realities were different from that of AH’s, such was not the case. These women walked because it was necessary and because it was an important aspect of their traditional social customs. It was customary to get finely dressed on a Sunday afternoon and to go out to visit friends. Rather than regarded as a form of leisure physical activity in the sense in which it is now being promoted by public health programmes, these Sunday evening walks meant much more – they were social events which served the purpose of allowing neighbours, families, and friends to see each other in a relaxed atmosphere and to socialize and catch up on the latest events and happenings. In the sense that it was culturally acceptable, it would be erroneous to argue that it was not consciously done, but more appropriately, it should be contextualised within a framework that legitimises the concept of leisure-time ‘walking with a purpose,’ taking at its core an understanding of the cultural dynamics around
walking. Albeit DB admits that even after years of having migrated she still finds herself “going for walks,” the experiences of the immigration process, such as feelings of isolation and separation, especially during the years of ‘settling in,’ environmental differences and differences in cultural customs work to render obsolete a cultural pastime of leisure walking. Like running on the treadmill was described by a participant as “running into nothing” (SB), walking as it is being promoted and encouraged can within this cultural context (with no intention to minimize the multiplicity of reasons for which various people walk) be similarly defined as walking to nowhere - void of a purpose, except for that of satisfying physical activity requirements.

Bridging the Gap and Cultural Negotiations

Researchers and policy interventionists are becoming increasingly aware that in order to tackle the challenge of insufficient physical activity among immigrant and racialized populations, it is important that it be approached with a cultural lens. Findings suggest a relationship between culture and its influence on the beliefs, values, and practices of groups of people. For instance, research focused on identifying and understanding barriers to physical activity for immigrant women have often cited cultural factors as being among them. In their study, Wilbur et al. (2002) cited a lack of physically active role models in African American communities as a cultural influence on African American women’s lack of physical activity. And in other studies, the influence of both religious and cultural norms has been identified as a barrier to women’s participation in physical activity (Koshoedo 2015; Abasi 2014; Caperchione 2009).

However, many targeted strategies still appear to be missing their mark. The findings of this study suggest that while framing culture as an important category of analysis is necessary, a more nuanced approach to understanding and exploring culture as not merely the differences in culture or lifestyle practices is needed. Indeed, many times, the implication of this view of culture suggests that the responsibility for lifestyle changes is primarily the work of the individual: the individual within the context of the
community has the ability to change her approach to physical activity by adopting values and behaviours that lead to ‘healthier’ practices. This view is particularly problematic for at least two reasons. The first is that failure to change results in an affirmation of stereotyped characteristics aligned with those given to the culture. Such practices inadvertently run “the risk of lending support to victim blaming explanations for health outcomes” (Viruell-Fuentes 2007, p.1525). Furthermore, in dominant discourse, culture categorised as a determinant of health tends to focus on the deficiencies of a culture – in which culture is theorised as a “social dysfunction” (p.1525), thus limiting the space for dialogue, and consequently impacting the success and feasibility of interventions. In the literature on physical activity, for instance, the prevalence of cardiovascular diseases such as diabetes and hypertension among people of African descent is blamed on sedentary lifestyle choices. This permits stereotyped messages of Black people (women in particular) as lazy, to frame dominant health discourse around Black people and physical activity.

The other reason is that the judgement as to whether racialized immigrants and ‘minority’ groups are practicing healthy lifestyle choices and how they should be treated lie not just within the purview of health professionals, but becomes a matter that members of the dominant society also get to determine, thus resulting in cultural elitism in which minority and racialized groups are ‘othered’ for not engaging in behavioural practices that are deemed healthy or appropriate by the dominant culture.

Closely aligned with the above is the idea of acculturation. Regarded as “the process whereby immigrants change their behavior and attitudes toward those of the host society” (Hunt et al., 2004, p. 974), acculturation is at the core of sociocultural debates and immigrant health as it is often used as a measurement to account for disparities that exist between ethnic groups by assessing the extent to which individuals have adopted or embraced the dominant culture of the host country. These discussions have been fueled by debates around the ‘healthy immigrant effect.’ The challenge however, has been that since there are no specifically defined variables for measuring acculturation, researchers are free to use a range of proxy measurements, which generally tend to include length of residence in host country, age at migration, and language competence. An additional challenge is that given the complex nature of what accounts for culture, researchers often make broad claims about the nature and effect of
culture on health outcomes (Hunt et al. 2004). For instance, in a study done by Wolin et al. (2006) to measure the relationship between acculturation and levels of leisure time (LTPA) and occupational (OPA) physical activity, they found that:

Individuals who were less acculturated or who were foreign born generally had lower levels of LTPA and higher levels of OPA than those who were most acculturated or who were second plus generation. Public health efforts to increase physical activity levels should consider acculturation level when developing policies or interventions (271).

Although the researchers concluded that a number of factors, such as additional work responsibilities, lack of access to information on recreational facilities, lack of facilities, lack of access to safe places of recreation, smaller networks to share activities with, as well as the value placed on activity and rest could have been responsible for the lower levels of physical activity among less acculturated individuals (2006), the data was presented as valid evidence for the use of acculturation measures in developing public health strategies. My contention here is two-fold: the first being that research that 'objectively' rests on presumed ideas around the attitudes, values, and beliefs of immigrant and racialized populations perpetuates essentialism and is often reflected in public health strategies. Secondly, it assumes that there are distinct traits and characteristics inherent to a 'culture' and thus promotes (1) the idea of the existence of a dichotomy in which “an ‘ethnic’ culture is presupposed to be different from the ‘mainstream’ culture” (Hunt 2004, p. 977) and (2) the idea of good versus bad culture or cultural attributes.

The literature on physical activity and acculturation is positioned as different from that of acculturation and other lifestyle behaviours, such as diet. Whereas the dietary lifestyle of immigrants are said to deteriorate with acculturation, studies on physical activity indicate that physical activity is actually improved with acculturation. Many of the women in this study were already leading physically active lifestyles from before they left their home countries, and so for these women, continuing a behaviour that they had become accustomed to was normal. And although the immigrant woman is expected to have migrated in good health, the assumption that acculturation makes is that she was not already sufficiently active before migrating. Thus, attempts at maintaining a physically active lifestyle upon migrating, as is with the women in the study, is perceived
as successful integration or assimilation into the culture of the host country. According to Sam and Berry (2010), individuals typically adopt four different stages of acculturation when they come into contact with a new culture(s). The strategies, they argue, are based on the individuals’ preference in relation to the degree to which they wish to hold onto their cultural heritage and identity or the degree to which they wish to interact with and become a part of the culture of the larger or mainstream society. Assimilation, one of the four strategies, occurs when the individual does not wish to maintain their cultural heritage and instead adopts that of the mainstream culture (values, beliefs, etc.). Another strategy, integration, is the preference of individuals who do not wish to abandon their original culture but rather to maintain it, while at the same time participate as a functioning member of the larger society and in the culture.

The way in which some of the women talked about their experiences with physical activity is more characteristic of Berry’s concept of integration. For reasons indicated in earlier chapters, the women’s need to keep physically active took precedence and since institutional barriers or discrimination did not prevent them from doing so, the women actively pursued and participated in various forms of physical activities done by the mainstream society. But their desire to do so in a manner that fostered cultural integrity – integral to integration - was for the most part a need that was largely unmet. Successful integration operates like a two way street and so for members of the immigrant group, not being able to share in one’s original culture in various spheres of the society creates feelings of non-acceptance and un-belonging, as was repeatedly talked about by some of the women. This was an unmet need for the women, one that appears to operate in contrary to ideas about cultural diversity.

Furthermore, Berry (2001) makes the point that just as the immigrant is required to adopt cultural values of the host countries, successful integration is also dependent on the receiving society adapting national institutions, such as health for example, to better meet the needs of its incoming citizens. In the face of such absences the women contested and deconstructed notions of belonging as it is linked to integration and acculturation. Their experiences of 'fitting in' came with the realisation that it also meant being a part of the "fitness" landscape to be able to converse with members of mainstream society about fitness experiences. Unlike Berry’s theory of integration which arms the immigrant with a choice of whether or not to integrate, though a choice which
can only be made “when the receiving society is open and inclusive in its orientation toward cultural diversity” (p.2001), the women in this study exercised agency and made negotiations around integration such that integration and presumed acculturation was fueled by a desire to belong and to ‘fit in,’ rather than integration occurring as a result of the society working to create greater access for them.

Additionally, the data suggests that the process of integration is anything but static and can occur along a continuum, ultimately leading to discussions that question the extent to which an individual is integrated or whether or not an individual is truly integrated and on what basis are we making such claims? For the women in the study, integration was the most likely route but the feelings of un-belongingness that some experienced in certain spaces of intercultural contact is an indication that integration in its truest sense – as put forward in theory - has not been achieved and that unresolved conflicts between cultures can cause integrated individuals to lay somewhere along a continuum of integratedness. Where physical activity is concerned, as is the case with some of the women in the study, the possibility is created for spaces of tension to exist between physical health – the desire to be physically active – and emotional health – the lack of a sense of belonging in physically active spaces.

While the theoretical perspectives included in this study have been instrumental in unpacking the experiences of the women in this study, it is to postcolonial feminism through a convergence of Black feminist scholarship that I turn for pointing the way forward as it relates to challenging racist and cultural stereotypes about Black women’s bodies and physical activity.

**Postcolonial and Black Feminist Theorising**

My interest in wanting to find out more about this topic was driven by the wealth of biomedical data and epidemiological risk profiles which suggested a relationship between physical inactivity and an increasing prevalence of cardiovascular related illnesses among Black women and women of African descent. And like other researchers before me, I acknowledge the usefulness of these data in “alerting
communities, the health sector, and policy makers to emerging trends in health status” (Browne et al. 2007, p.132). The challenge however arises when such data are viewed and discussed outside a framework that allows for critical analyses that take into account the relationship between the data and the historical, sociocultural, economic, and political processes that influence it. The result is that it runs the risk of perpetuating stereotypes and misguided conceptions about groups of people, which then get framed as health problems in public health discourse. For instance, research on obesity and physical activity among African Americans often tell one story – one that equates African Americans with a culture of poverty that prevents them from consuming ‘healthier’ alternatives and having access to safe recreational sites. These understandings can therefore be used to justify intervention strategies that are paternalistic in nature and prone to dependency (Browne et al. 2007).

As revealed by the data, the women experienced physical activity in a context within which culture, as a complex system, operates at the core. As the women came into contact with new cultural experiences the decisions that they made about being physically active were informed not purely by traditional cultural preferences or understandings of the place of physical activity in their lives but also by cultural stereotypes held about them. These were further complicated by the influence of biomedical interpretations related to physical activity as a risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Figure 3 provides a visual display of these influences as they are discussed in the chapter.
The experiences of the women in the study as well as my own have been poignant reminders that the legacies of colonialism have remained, altering and shaping how we experience physical activity. The insight of postcolonial theory tells us that there is indeed nothing ‘post’ about postcolonialism. It does not imply that colonialism is behind us, but rather that ‘post’ suggests an awareness of a history of racialization, inequities, oppression and cultural essentialism that have plagued certain groups of people (Anderson 2002; Browne et al. 2005; Smye and Browne 2002;). Whereas the experiences of the women have been less about institutional access, as identified in other studies, and more about cultural messages and “stereotyped identities” (Browne et al. 2005, p.21), they warrant discussion, for they call attention to the need for a reflexive policy process that is able to “determine when and under what circumstance an initiative (policy or research) might be ‘oppressive’ and ‘limiting’ and when it might be emancipatory” (Smye and Browne 2002, p.44). Anderson points out that to use a postcolonial lens enables us to “understand how conceptions of ‘race,’ notions of the racialized ‘Other,’ fluid identities, and hybrid cultures have been constructed within particular historical and colonial contexts” (Anderson 2002, p.8) like Canada, for example.

Similar to me being caught off guard by the exceptional fitness level of the spin instructor, messages about fitness and body size (to be fit is not to be fat) can be potentially harmful for Black women on two levels. In the first instance, ideas about ideal body size and body mass index (BMI) held by public health and policy interventionists and researchers have the potential to influence the surveillance and policing of Black women’s bodies as well as the treatment that is meted out to them. This was particularly drawn to my attention several months ago while reviewing the observation notes taken by a health researcher of a focus group session, in which the researcher described one of the participants based on the individual’s perceived BMI.

On the one hand, Black women’s bodies, stereotypically depicted as fat, may be seen as deviant and in “need of policing for [their] moral failures” (Kwate & Threadcraft 2015, p.213), thereby triggering strategies that reflect ideas intended to get “them” to look like “us.” On the other hand, colonial representations of the Black female body as
Mammy\textsuperscript{21} or likened to that of Venus Hottentot imbues onto it a normalizing view of having a physiology of larger body size. This therefore means that Black women who are overweight may get passed over by physicians and other practitioners as being of normal weight. Both perspectives have profound impact on how physical activity strategies are targeted towards Black women. A postcolonial perspective brings these constructions under the microscope; challenging ideas of sameness between Black women and white women and at the same time, examining the context under which meanings are imposed on Black women’s bodies. Thus, as Anderson (2002) puts it, “the ‘looking’ is done through the conceptual lens of histories of colonisation that have structured notions of ‘race’; and, gender and class relations, in ways that cannot be neatly sifted out from the historical forces” (p.20). It is therefore up to the researcher or strategist to be sensitive of the ability of colonial structures to imbue racial and cultural categories with debilitating stereotypes.

While biomedical information and epidemiological profiles are inherently good in their intentions, they can lead to pathologizing discourses. These have the ability to cast different bodies, particularly racialized bodies, as inferior to other bodies. The idealization then of slimness or of the typical European body type as the norm sends messages of racial inferiority to Black women that in order to be accepted, their bodies must adhere to white standards. At the same time too, Black bodies that resist conformity to cultural stereotypes may be faulted for being different. As such, the experiences of these women, perceived as an anomaly to the norm, may be discounted as inconsequential to the struggle intended to challenge the dominant cultural discourse around Black women’s bodies. These controlling images, not only permeate social and cultural institutions influencing policies but they “distort the ways in which Black women see themselves and each other” (Hobson 2003, p.89). Data from the study reveals that when this happens, it creates a cultural (and emotional) conflict in which one culture, the traditional culture, is questioned or criticized on its flaws.

\textsuperscript{21} The stereotypical image of a ‘Mammy’ is that of an African American female domestic servant who is overweight and good-natured. Her task is generally to be the nurse for white children.
Assumptions of immigrants, Black immigrants in particular, as Third World, synonymous with backward and unaccustomed to ‘modern’ ways of doing and being revealed by the data, is further evidence of colonialism’s influence on how the women participate in physical activity. While initiatives attempt to encourage the racialized immigrant woman to ‘get out’ and ‘get active,’ longstanding Eurocentric ideas of the helpless, uncivilized, and oppressed Black native are still pervasive among those who have taken on the challenge of ‘whipping people into shape.’ As a consequence, it is not uncommon, as expressed by some of the women, for Black women to experience instances of being patronized as a result of their presumed cultural inadequacy.

The complexity of the women’s experiences has challenged essentializing perceptions that members of the same ethnocultural group share the same experiences of access and discrimination or that they are able or willing to respond to strategies in the same manner. However, in the absence of a postcolonial feminist lens, these differences are not necessarily evident and instead the strategies that are framed ‘with the women in mind,’ are meaningless to them. To avoid this pitfall, postcolonial feminists call for processes that through dialogue have the “potential to reframe dominant discourses and to create a perspective on knowledge development that reflects multiple social locations” (Anderson, 2002, p.18). At the same time, they point to the fact that until “the voices that have been marginalised are recognised and treated as legitimate in the social production of knowledge” (p.18) strategies will continue to racialize Black women and women from Third World countries.

In conceptualizing culture, it is hard to ignore the ways in which sociohistorical experiences intersect with factors such as class, race and gender to determine how the women will participate in physical activity. For instance, while women who had children had to make different negotiations from the women who did not have children, to engage in physical activity, these negotiations were primarily determined by their “social positioning within hierarchies of power relations” (Browne et al. 2007, p.127), such as whether or not they had access to familial or other kinds of social support, interlinked with whether or not they were in a financial position to afford childcare fees. Thus, as an instrument of analysis, culture must be understood and interpreted in relation to these intersections. Furthermore, taken out of context, women’s failure to successfully
navigate these relations, have “the potential to become reified into a lifestyle or behaviour syndrome” (Browne & Smye, 2002, p.33) in which the women’s inability to participate in physical activity becomes indicative of a cultural trait that reads, “Black women are inherently lazy.” Consequently, in framing physical activity strategies to address concerns around Black women’s inactivity, the above discussion underscores the importance of utilising a postcolonial feminist perspective.

**Summary**

The disparity in the views among the women as it relates to the importance of cultural representations in physical activity is closely tied with each woman’s desire to “fit in.” The feeling appears to rest on the notion that one should be able to fit in and adopt aspects of the culture that one finds desirable without compromising or sacrificing aspects of their own culture that bear significant meaning to them. The latter comes at a cost – one that inevitably leads to a gradual erasure of cultural traditions and ways of life, and eventually a forgotten homeland.

The fact that the health literature has identified an association between the influences of culture on physical activity behaviour affirms its relevance when thinking about useful strategies for encouraging physical activity among racialized and immigrant women. However, it is important to note that culture is never static nor does it function on its own in a vacuum, unaffected by outside forces. Rather, it has the potential to be influenced by external forces.

Evidence from the research highlighted that strategies aimed at reducing health disparities among racialized immigrant groups must do so from a position of cultural sensitivity and awareness of how the constructions of race, class, gender and culture working simultaneously can reproduce systems of inequality. Further, understanding culture as a dynamic process characteristic of multiple subjective experiences rather than as a fixed entity in which individuals share common social realities is central to implementing culturally appropriate intervention strategies.
Currently, the focus of strategies addressing physical activity among immigrant and racialized populations emphasize barriers to access. But as this research revealed, such an approach, though well intentioned is myopic for it assumes that the challenges experienced by this population are a direct result of socio-economic and situational circumstances, primarily those of low financial status, education, language barriers, and cultural beliefs. This was not the experience of the women in the study. Thus, for such strategies to be beneficial they cannot rest on surface level understandings and solutions that fail to recognise the heterogeneity of experiences and the diversity (cultural and otherwise) that exists within and between racial groups.

In their research, Ashcroft at al. (2005) argue that often times when strategies have been noted as having employed a cultural framework, it is either through the use of proxy variables, such as race, ethnicity or nationality to account for cultural differences, or by designing interventions that have made “only surface modifications to established programs by hiring staff members with ethnic backgrounds similar to those of the participants” (p.40). This is not to say that it is only insiders who are privileged to develop culturally sensitive policies. What it is saying is that researchers and interventionists must pay close attention to the “voices, perspectives, and experiences of people who typically have been marginalized” (Browne et al. 2005, p.26).

At the same time as well, a common mistake that is made, as evidenced by this research, is when only one set of voices is heard while other experiences that tell different stories are neglected. A point of concern is that within health, the voices from the margins should belong to those who are visibly discriminated against or oppressed. But as this research shows, while the women’s experiences reflected neither of the two, their voices tell important stories significant to furthering the discussion around appropriate strategies for encouraging greater uptake of physical activity among Black women.
Chapter 8.

Conclusions

I designed this qualitative study out of my concern that the experiences of Black women who were physically active had been largely ignored in the literature. I attributed this absence to two key factors: One relates to the increase in the prevalence of cardiovascular diseases, of which physical inactivity is a primary risk factor; and two: the nature of the biomedical model on which epidemiological research was built. In its attempt to identify groups of people at risk of disease, epidemiology ignores people’s real experiences (Inhorn and Whittle, 2001).

Using a feminist cultural studies framework that integrates critical insights from anti-race theory, Black Feminist scholarship, and Postcolonial Feminist scholarship, the study explored the ways in which physically active Black women made negotiations related to their participation in physical activity. I investigated the women’s understandings of physical activity, their perceptions on the importance of physical activity, as well as the strategies that they employed in their attempts at being physically active. I also sought to understand their transnational experiences of physical activity.

I employed the use of indepth interviews, participant observations, and autoethnography to capture the data. The decision to use autoethnography as part of my methodology was driven by my identity as an “insider researcher.”

The discussion in this chapter is a representation of the findings of the study. It begins with a reiteration of the major themes that make up the study, followed by an analysis of the themes. This chapter also discusses the implications of the findings of the study, the limitations, as well as present recommendations for future research.
Summary of Findings

Reflecting on the gap in knowledge that I had set out to fill through the findings of my research, I realise that the issue of Black women’s participation in physical activity is much more complex than I had initially imagined. The question of “why are Black women not physically active?” is one that I have always tried to avoid thinking about or answering but have found it difficult to do. Any mention of my studies to persons was often met with a question such as that one. Furthermore, in order to think critically about the raw data that I had collected, I sometimes had to revisit the information in the literature. It was as though I needed to take a step back in order to go forward. For instance, where the literature attributes Black women’s inactivity to a multiplicity of factors, such as socio-economic and cultural (discussed in chapter 1), the findings of my research revealed that factors such as those were not reasons for inactivity among the group of women that I studied. Rather, the women had figured out how to deal with these factors. In other words, the women in the study had other reasons that motivated them to be physically active, some of which related to personal and socio-cultural factors, such as ideas around the cultural perception of bodies.

Thus, “embodied experiences” – how the women perceived and experienced their body – was a major theme in the study. The women received, processed, and interpreted messages about the benefits of physical activity in the maintenance of healthier lives in ways that motivated them to be physically active. Their determination to be physically active was also tied to the relationship between health messages and perceptions around their bodies. To my surprise, these perceptions extended beyond ordinary ideas about body weight and size to understandings around the relationships between aging bodies, diseased bodies and physical fitness. For a number of the women in the study, concerns around aging and the avoidance of disease were cited among the reasons for their continued participation in physical activity. In their article, “Jane Fonda, Barbara Bush and Other Aging Bodies: Femininity and the Limits of Resistance,” Dinnerstein and Weitz (1994) pointed to the socially constructed nature of aging and its link to physical fitness. They noted that the culturally appropriate age appearance for women has shifted over time from one that reflected the biological
realities of aging to one that is tied to slenderness and fitness. “Failure to take up the new ethic of fitness became a sign of social or even moral failure” (p.4). In this respect, aging could be a cause of distress for the women. However, while further research would need to be carried out to explore Black women’s attitudes towards aging, for the women in the study, their anxieties about aging was tied predominantly to understandings about disease and aging bodies. These were among larger concerns that had to do with their maternal roles as nurturers and carers.

The women also expressed anxiety in trying to live up to the disparities in cultural expectations between their host country and their country of origin. Both societal pressure and the desire to fit in heightened these anxieties. What was additionally interesting was that some of the women in the study showed awareness of these cultural biases and questioned the legitimacy of cultural expectations – whether it was that of their own traditional culture or that of their adopted culture. In obvious ways, this suggested that the women were being mindful (exercised agency) in their decisions around physical activity as opposed to blindly following society’s dictates.

While the messages communicated to the women encouraged physically activity, the spaces in which they were being accommodated were not culturally ‘ready.’ Because of this, some of the women experienced subtle forms of racism from individuals who were unsettled or surprised by their presence. Furthermore, the sense of un-belonging that some of the women talked about was directly related to a lack of cultural appeal within the context of physical activity. The fact that there were few culturally familiar activities or culturally driven promotional messages were significant challenges that the women had to work around. This therefore led to the other central theme of significance in the study: the idea of “cultural representation.” A reality check moment occurred during data collection when I realised that culture was not viewed by some of the women as having a bearing on their preference for types of physical activity. In fact, I was somewhat disappointed. In a way, I felt a sense of betrayal that I know must have stemmed from my own ideas around the importance of culture and cultural signification to ethnic minority residents in white settler societies. This was of course, how I felt. I found that my desire for all things ‘home’ mattered to a huge extent and as much as possible was reflected in my recreational and leisure pursuits. Later, however, as I got
over my initial reaction, I interpreted the women’s ‘nonchalance’ towards cultural
signifiers in relation to their physical activity participation to mean that their perceptions
of physical activity (benefits and meanings – discussed in chapter 5) were greater
drivers of their participation.

For some of the women, however, being able to participate in physical activities
that were culturally familiar was encouraging. It meant the difference between a workout
that was done simply because it was necessary and a workout that was both
pleasurable and satisfactory. Furthermore, the ability to do so also gave them a sense of
belonging within the space.

The study also found that part of managing and maintaining a physically active
lifestyle was associated with factors such as previous experience, support systems, role
models, and the accessibility and availability of appropriate physical activity spaces. In
respect to Vancouver, the fact that structural systems that encouraged physical activity
were in place (parks, community centres, etc.) made their physical activity pursuits
easier. However, the larger challenges were related to race/racism and the disparities in
cultural expectations.

Analysis of Findings

Can I now give a resounding yes, to the question of “Are Black women physically
active?” Of course, I can. I have found women who are just that – physically active.
While Black women may be fewer in numbers compared to white women, their
representation in physical activity is not to be overlooked. The complex relationship that
Black women have had with physical activity has set them apart from other women and
even from other ethnic minority women. As was mentioned in the study, the
uncomfortable history of slavery that has plagued Black people has had a significant
effect on how Blackness and Black bodies are constructed. It was therefore no surprise
that the concept of Blackness was an evident commonality across the themes in the
study. Blackness, for example, conveyed the idea of an individual who occupied a
specific and particular positionality – an individual who had particular disadvantages
(and advantages). Within the context of physical activity, the participation of ‘ordinary’ Black women has interrupted our understandings of Black bodies, their place, function, and certainly aesthetics. Depending where on the fence one stood, the physicality of Black women’s bodies and the presence of Black women’s physical bodies moving through a space carried different meanings. Similarly, these meanings evoked different emotions and responses.

In this regard, Blackness played a significant role in influencing the ways in which some of the women made negotiations around physical activity. The women’s awareness of Blackness as discomforting was just another hurdle that they had to overcome in their quest towards bettering their lives through physical activity. Some women chose to ignore it and instead focused on their ultimate goal – the purpose(s) for which they were being physically active. In this sense, the gain was greater than the pain. Other women sought more accommodating ways of getting over the hurdle. Opting for activities that were culturally familiar or activities that had the potential of attracting other people of color was a way of lessening their consciousness of their Black bodies in the space. For one woman, her choice of a female only facility had more to do with the notion of shared womanhood, rather than culture or cultural familiarity. She rationalised that as a Black woman who had ‘hair challenges,’ her struggles with dealing with her hair would be better understood by women. In this way, reducing her chances of being subjected to ‘hair’ criticisms. Thus, in many ways, the extent to which Black women in white settler societies are physically active appears to have a bearing on how well they have learned to work around issues of Blackness.

The concept of Blackness was also interwoven throughout other aspects of the women’s lives. Even in instances where Blackness was not articulated as an issue of concern with relation to physical activity, ideas about its existence, as an important signifier in Black women’s lives was key. It shaped the ways in which the women as mothers instilled values in their children. It shaped their interactions with family, friends and institutions, and it shaped the ways in which Black communities took form.

While my research acknowledges that systems of oppression such as racism, classism and gender intersect to influence Black women’s experiences in white settler
societies, the primacy of race and ethnicity in ordering and structuring power relations within Canadian society plays an even greater major role in determining their experiences as well as the ways in which they navigate the system. In talking about the Canadian class structure, Dennis Forcense (1997) noted that their ethnic background determines a person’s position in Canada. Therefore, even in situations where immigrants and ethnic minority groups are relegated to particular types of low wage jobs, these positions are often interlinked through systems of racial bias and discrimination that predestines visible ethnic minority persons as inferior to the ‘superior’ dominant majority. When Black women’s experiences of participating in physical activity are explored, it is the issue of racism that looms in the foreground much more than that of class, as was revealed by this study. The implication then, is that while it may be “difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression” (Lutz et al., 2011, p.9), where cultural practices are concerned the possibility still exists to understand and contextualise Black women’s experiences of contesting and negotiating power relations through critical frameworks that do not necessarily hold systems of oppression as mutually intersecting categories.

Thus, my findings demonstrate that while Black women do face difficulties with respect to physical activity, they exercise both mindfulness and agency in strategizing around possibilities for physical activity. Rather than giving into challenges associated with the socio-cultural and economic environment, their experiences of racism and discrimination, their struggles with fitting-in, and feelings of non-belonging, the women remained resolute in their determination to keep physically active. The women’s interpretations of physical activity rested somewhere in the tension between professional knowledge (biomedicine) and their own experiences of their bodies. The implication is that Black women are paying attention to their bodies and to health messages about their bodies. The difficulty that exists is that when these messages converge with socio-cultural expectations of the body, the communication that Black women receive produces anxieties.
Implications and Directions for Future Research

This study has served as a starting point for dialogue around the participation of ‘ordinary’ Black Canadian women in physical activity. Whereas epidemiological data has pointed to their absence in physical activity, the voices of Black Canadian women who are physically active are missing. It is still my belief, as it was when I started this research, and even more so now, that if we are to successfully engage with inactive Black women, being cognizant of the experiences and strategies adopted by active Black women is imperative. Furthermore, this study has established that the diversity that exists among Black people/women as well as the complexities around ideas of a Black community require strategies that are sensitive of these issues. It is not enough to implement strategies based on assumptions of the reasons for ethnic minority women’s inactivity or assumptions of cultural and historical sameness. There needs to be more targeted approaches that for instance, understand the place of cultural habits and ways of doing in shaping the ways in which Black women interpret and interact with systems in their host country.

There are a number of questions that remain unanswered that more research is needed to tease out. I felt as though I had opened “a can of worms” that this study could not have possibly addressed as it relates to the question of access and privilege in cross-cultural physical activity spaces. It would be useful to explore in more depth, the negotiations that take place within these spaces.

Limitations

While I started out with grand ideas of recruiting at least twenty Black women for the study, as I was convinced that I could have found the numbers with ease. I however encountered challenges that had to do with my own assumptions, for instance that the
Black women that I had been seeing were born elsewhere. I was primarily interested in the stories of Black women whose country of origin was not Canada. Additionally, due to financial limitations (identified in chapter three), I was not able to recruit women whose participation in physical activity took place at a wider range of sites and included a wider range of activities.

**Concluding Thoughts**

An important discussion that came up in the interviews was how the women felt about being referred to as “immigrants”. While the views differed, the consensus among the women was that the use of the term did not represent who they were. They felt that even if they were thought of as “immigrants” when they first arrived, they should not be seen as an immigrant for all of their lives. The Canadian born Black woman, for sure rejected the use of the term in relation to her status. “I am definitely not an immigrant!” She had said. These discussions, even before I had finished the interviews caused me to rethink how I was using the term to represent the women. In retrospect, I wished that I had been more sensitive of these nuances prior to designing and naming the study. And so, if I were to correctly represent the voices of the Black women in the study, the title of this study would be “Negotiating Physical Activity: Black women in Canada Tackle Cardiovascular Disease”.
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Appendix A.

Letter of Permission from fitness instructor

Caribbean Fitness
Logo

July 6, 2011

To Whom it may Concern,

Re: Permission to allow Joy Walcott-Francis to recruit potential participants

This is to advise that I have granted Ms. Walcott-Francis, a member of my ___ fitness group sessions, permission to recruit potential participants for her study on Physical Activity among women of Afro descent.

I currently run these sessions privately as well as through larger facilities, such as the ___ . Ms. Walcott-Francis is permitted to recruit members who attend the sessions that are privately run.

Should you require any further information, please feel free to contact me at: ___

Sincerely,

[Name]

Fitness Instructor Specialist
Appendix B.

Participant Interview Questions

Fitness Instructor Interview Questions

How were you introduced to [Name of the Fitness Programme]?

Were you attending the fitness classes before becoming a [Name of the Fitness Programme] instructor?

If yes, what was your experience like being in that space, [Name of the Fitness Programme] being a Caribbean based workout?

How would you describe your feelings/experience now, having now crossed over from being a student to being the instructor?

Were you involved in other forms of group fitness activities?

Were you a fitness instructor before becoming a [Name of the Fitness Programme] instructor?

Tell me about what made you decide on becoming a [Name of the Fitness Programme] instructor?

Did you have reservations/concerns/doubts about taking on this challenge?

Do you have any regrets - Tell me about your feelings (your passion) for [Name of the Fitness Programme] as a group fitness activity?

What are your thoughts on how you were received by members of the Caribbean community on hearing that you (a non-Caribbean Caucasian woman) would be bringing [Name of the Fitness Programme] to Vancouver?

Tell me about the effect that this had on you (emotionally, physical) and how did you attempt to deal with/address it?

What are your thoughts now on how people view you, after having taught diverse groups of people across the lower mainland?
Based on the groups that you have taught, how well received would you say that [Name of the Fitness Programme] is by women across various ethnic groups? And what makes them want to keep coming back?

How would you describe the attendance and participation styles of Black women towards [Name of the Fitness Programme] (Do you find that your classes are attended primarily by Black women?)

What would you say are the biggest challenges for women when it comes on to being physically active? Do you think it differs across ethnic groups?

If you could have redone anything, pertaining to your decision to become a [Name of the Fitness Programme] instructor, is there anything that you would have changed?

How would you rate (rather describe) the enthusiasm of the groups that you have taught in Vancouver to those of groups that you’ve experienced in your home city?
Appendix C.

Participant Interview Questions

Other Participants Interview Questions

Have you always lived in Canada? [If no, where and how long have you lived in Canada?]

Tell me about your participation in physical activity, starting from whenever time you can remember, describe your experiences, what have you done in the past or do now in terms of activity?

Tell me about how you go about deciding on doing any kind of physical activity [and] about how you ended up at this particular facility?

Are there any forms that you prefer most? Why?

How have you managed to continue to do them, that is how have you managed to fit the type of physical activity that you do into your lifestyle?

What things, such as people, your own feelings, the time of the year, the facility (type or availability), physical activity preference, obligations, or finances help or hinder your participation in physical activity?

How would you say that your status as an immigrant woman of colour has hindered or facilitated (affected), if any at all, your ability to participate in physical activity?

What would you say has been the role of physical activity in your life? And have you had any kind of sports or physical activity role model that has influenced you in your decision to be active?

If you could change anything about the way in which you participate in physical activity, such as the types that you are involved in or the spaces in which they take place, what would these be, and why?