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Race, Femininity and Food: Femininity and the Racialization of Health and Dieting

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Abstract: 'Femininity as Portrayed within Western Society' is a research study that explored the ways in which femininity, what Moi (1989) defined as a set of cultural attributes assigned to the female sex, is racialized within western culture. To uncover black and white women's racialized perceptions of femininity a total of 42 women, 22 black and 20 white women were interviewed for this research. This paper will highlight the ways in which the discipline of diet is practised within the homes of white and black women in their endeavours reflect and perform femininity. With the white respondents, the message that is communicated within their homes, through the everyday practice of their mother's eating, was that dieting was perceived and learnt as the 'normal' way to eat. Within the homes of the black respondents, however, food, rather than being something that was restricted, was about sociability, something to be shared out and enjoyed.

Keywords: Femininity, Food, Diet, White women, Black women

Introduction

Many western feminists (De Beauvoir [1949] 1997, Greer 1971, Dworkin 1974, Moi 1989, Wolf 1991, Bordo [1993] 2003, Skeggs 1997) have attempted to address the question of femininity. They have all theorised femininity by stating that femininity is not biological nor does it have anything to do with the female physical body. Femininity is something that is imposed on a woman's body from the outside either through direct or indirect means (Andermahr et al. 2000). Moi (1989) defined femininity as a set of cultural attributes assigned to the female sex. De Beauvoir (1997) informed us that for the female body to be considered 'woman' that body must share in the mysterious and mythical 'reality' known as femininity. It is femininity that transforms the female body into a feminine one for it to become 'woman'. Ultimately, femininity is about gender, as Skeggs (1997) argues, femininity is the process through which women are gendered and become specific sorts of women. It is about transforming women's bodies into socially constructed feminine roles. According to Bordo (2003), femininity is always a representation of the aesthetic ideal of the time, and in contemporary western culture this ideal is thinness; the slenderness of the female body.

We are regularly bombarded with images of femininity in popular culture, and these images are always a representation of a woman's slender, slim body. Subsquently, Bordo (2003) argues that many women feel compelled to embody these images. The need to reflect these images is what makes femininity, and thinness; the slenderness of the female body, a relentless pursuit for women. When it comes to reflecting femininity, there needs to be a 'taking away' from the female figure if it is to be a representation of femininity. This 'taking away' (Jeffreys 2005) comes through utilizing the practices of diet and exercise; the female body needs to be trained and shaped to be considered feminine. According to Wolf (1991), the concept of femininity enables women to live under a beauty myth which makes women's eating habits a public issue. Food and the eating of food are central to our understanding of the westernised concept of femininity because women have been taught to restrain themselves and have a self-denying mentality when it comes to food. It is this self-denying mentality that has made the knowledge of weight-loss and disciplining one's body an important skill girls obtain from an early age.

Public images of women gave us a clear illustration of what femininity is and plays a central role in our understanding of femininity. This is because 'the environment in which women learn about the politics of the body is saturated with media presentations of what a woman's body should be' (Poran 2002:66). However,

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these images are not just a reflection of women who are thin; their pictures do not only reflect what Bordo (2003) calls the slenderness of the female body. The images of femininity that are everywhere in popular culture are also a reflection of women who are white. The women who were labelled 'skinny' or having 'slim-frame/figure' in newspapers and magazines are of women who were almost, always white. For example, the Mail Online (6th January 2016) had an article on the American socialite Olivia Palermo stating: 'Olivia Palermo displays her super-slim frame in a sunshine yellow bikini' (appendix, figure 1) and she was described as bright and beautiful. On the other hand, black celebrities such British model Naomi Campbell (appendix, figure 2) are described as having a 'glamorous muscular build', or they are bootylicious like Beyoncé. There seems to be a clear demarcation between the ways in which women like Victoria Beckham (appendix, figure 3) or Nicole Kidman (appendix, figure 4) were described from women like Lupita Nyong'o (appendix, figure 5) or Halle Berry (appendix, figure 6). It seems that the concept of femininity, or what Bordo (2003) describes as the slenderness of the female ideal, is a very racialized concept. Subsequently, we need to ask the question; has there been a lack of racial awareness when it comes to western feminists' analyses of femininity that we see everywhere in popular culture? Do women's relationship with food differ, as they attempt to reflect and perform femininity and the slenderness of the female ideal because of their race and ethnicity?

'Femininity as Portrayed within Western Society' (2011) was a research study that placed race at the centre of its exploration of femininity, analysing the ways in which femininity is racialized within western culture. This was done by empirically researching the lives of 42 women, 22 black women and 20 white women, through the use of semi-structured interviewing. To access data that was not only informative but also rich in knowledge when it comes to beauty, femininity and the female body, requests for interviews concentrated specifically on establishments that were relevant to this research. Beauty salons and hairdressers which catered to black women were targeted as well as mainstream (white) hairdressers and gyms in city centre Manchester. The main aim was to find respondents who frequently visited beauty establishments and women who made a concerted effort to reflect femininity. The data collected from the interviews were analysed through the main principles of grounded theory. Charmaz (2003) claims that grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for gathering, synthesising, analysing and conceptualising qualitative data to construct theory and the strength of grounded theory lies in its empirical foundation. The use of grounded theory ensured that focus was placed solely on the findings which emerged from the data.

Drawing from the data, this paper will argue that food and the eating of food is a highly racial and cultural practice that is primarily learnt within the home and this practice greatly influences white and black women's perceptions and understanding of femininity. This article will also illustrate the fundamental role mothers play in the ways in which black and white women 'restrict' their food intake to reflect femininity. The first section following this introduction will focus on the white respondents and the message that was communicated in their homes, through the everyday practice of their mother's eating. When it comes to understanding the relationship between food and femininity what was learnt within the homes of the white respondents was that food is a substance that must be restricted or controlled if a woman is to successfully perform femininity. As a result, dieting is learnt as the 'normal' way to eat. This section will then go on to show, that within the home of the black participants' food was not seen as something that should be highly monitored or controlled when it comes to reflecting femininity. The second section will focus on how white respondents of this study associated food with black women and their cultures and how the black respondents associated thinness with whiteness. This section will also draw attention to the ways in which the black women of this study were beginning to accept the message given to them by government policy and their doctors, that food, and the intake of food must be tightly controlled for health reasons.

Finally, this article will conclude by stating, as Craig (2006) argues, that western feminists' focus on thinness and the pursuit to maintain a slender figure to understand western women's practices of femininity, though not incorrect, is incomplete. By conducting a comparative study on the ways in which femininity racially affected both black and white women's lives, 'Femininity as Portrayed within Western Society' is a research study that has implications for the ways in which we read previous white western feminists' accounts of femininity. For their analysis of femininity are just racialized evaluations of femininity, and they inform us of the ways in which femininity primarily affects white women's lives. The restriction of food intake has always been central to a white woman's attempt to reflect and perform femininity. However, as this article will illustrate, this is not necessarily the case for black women. The relationship women have with food in their attempts to perform femininity is greatly influenced by their race and ethnicity.

Femininity and Diet

This section will clearly illustrate how racialized dieting is and how the concept of dieting has acquired meaning through historical and cultural factors. Drawing from the words of the white respondents in this study, the message that was communicated in their homes through the everyday practice of their mother's eating was that dieting was perceived and learnt as the 'normal' way to eat. They grew up to understand, through their mother's eating that restricting one's food intake makes a big difference to the way they look and feel. Sara, a 24-year-old white woman working in retail, continually argued that it was important for her to stay slim because being slim was not only about being thin, it was also about being healthy. This message, McKinley (1999) argues, became prominent in the 1970s with officials arguing that any level of thinness was healthier than being fat and that the thinner person was, the healthier person. Thinness essentially equated to healthiness, beauty and desirability.

McKinley (1999) claimed that programmes such as 'Shape Up America' advised women that if they were at or below the 'healthy weight', which is noticeable by the thinness of a woman's body, then a woman's goal is to maintain that weight for the remainder of her life. The message of maintaining an 'ideal healthy weight' rarely went unchallenged and the reasons given, McKinley (1999) states, for not losing weight were pregnancy and certain medical conditions. Within western culture, the idea of maintaining a 'healthy weight' has created the normalisation of diet. For example, there is a continued increase in the popularity of weight loss companies such as Slimming World and Weight Watchers as well as the increased use of diet pills. It is important to make a racial differentiation here. The idea that a woman must continually diet to sustain a 'healthy' weight that equates to thinness is a message that mainly affects white women. As this paper, will illustrate, this was not a message that was communicated within the homes of the black respondents who took part in this study. Sara, a 24-year-old white woman, was asked why she thought to be healthy meant being thin:

> **Sara:** My mum has always said that we should be healthy; you know, and eating food from say McDonalds made you fat and unhealthy, and I just grew up thinking that… I remember thinking I needed to go on a diet when I was about eight…I have three older sisters and my mum, and that's what I learnt from them, and dieting is just what we do because we want to be thin and healthy.

Cutting et al. (1999) claimed that studies have shown that parents' dieting history, eating concerns and child-feeding practices influence the development of children's eating behaviours and weight outcomes. They argued that young women who diet often learn to do so from their mothers, who may provide explicit advice on dieting. Cutting et al. (1999) cite the study of Fisher and Birch (1999) to argue that for much younger girls, mothers who attempt to control their daughters' eating reported restricting their daughters' food intake which is related to their dietary restraints. It is mothers that are the first to teach their daughters the art of restraint when it comes to food, to monitor and to control everything they put in their mouths. Angela, a white 28-year-old nurse, was asked when she first thought that dieting and exercise were necessary to be thin and beautiful:

> **Angela:** I've always thought that, well from a very early age because my mum is big and I have always known dieting to be part of her life… I've always known that dieting is something a woman does; my mum has dieted ever since I was a baby.

Angela continually argued throughout her interview that a woman cannot be genuinely happy with herself if she was perceived as overweight. Using her mother as an example, she claimed that her mother is happiest when she is thinner than her 'normal' weight. This illustrates that a mothers' attitude to food and her behaviour can not only affect the way her daughter may eat but can also affect her daughter's perceptions of femininity. A mother's attitude to food can even affect women's ideas of happiness. Angela claimed:

> **Angela:** When my mum is depressed she eats and gets fat and thinks she's ugly and when she's been on a diet and has lost loads of weight she is happy, confident and goes out. I'm 28 now, and that's affected me, and it's the same with…for me being happy means not being overweight.

In Angela's case when it came to her body representing femininity it was her interaction with her mother, the messages she received through her mother's dieting behaviours that affected the way she has learnt to present her body as a woman. It was Angela's mother who taught her what it means to be beautiful, and that beauty came through the careful monitoring of one's food intake. Angela was very candid about the effects dieting had on her life:

> **Angela:** You know what it's sad, but dieting has affected my whole life…From the day I was born dieting has had a great effect on me. I look at the pictures of my mum before I was born and she was beautiful and thin and then I look at the pictures of her after I was born and she was quite chubby. I think it was after having me that my mum got quite big and I sometimes blame myself for it.

Danielle, a black 31-year-old solicitor, was asked when she first thought dieting and exercise were necessary to be considered thin and beautiful:

> **Danielle:** Umm, probably when I was at school, you know at secondary school about 14 when friends would say that they were on a diet but I don't really think that a woman must be thin to be beautiful.

There is a clear difference between Sara and Angela, two white respondents whose knowledge of diet and restricting one's food intake was learnt from their mothers within the home and Danielle a black participant whose knowledge of dieting came from her friends at school. Cutting et al. (1999) argued that it was mothers that are the first to teach their daughters the art of restraint when it comes to food, to monitor and to control everything they put in their mouths. However, drawing from the data of the black respondents of this study this is not the case for black women.

For example, Danielle was asked if her mother ever went on diets when she was a child:

> **Danielle:** My mum's African (laughs), food's not something that was restricted in my house I was told that I was lucky to get a good supply of food and to eat rather than to control what I ate, no my mum did not diet, not that I remember anyway.

When Leanne, a black 24-year-old Fitness Instructor was asked if she would rather be a little overweight than underweight she argued that she would rather be a little overweight because of the importance her family has attached to being curvy:

> **Leanne:** Well you know everybody in my family is very curvy, and they all take the meek (tease or mock) out of me because I'm thin, so in Jamaican culture curves are beautiful...My family are Jamaican and big is beautiful, and that has a big influence on me and the way I see dieting and my body.

Sobo (1997) argued that in Jamaica, keeping slim has antisocial connotations because food is about sociability, sharing and is always readily available within people's homes. According to Sobo (1997) thin individuals in Jamaica, who are not sick or poor are labelled as mean or stingy because they have no good reason to restrict food. This perception about food that comes from Jamaica is also the same in Africa. Renne (2007) argues that in West Africa a parent's lack of provision of adequate food may be seen as a sign of a failed mother-child relationship. Food is an important part of sustaining good parent-children relationships, and weight loss signals social neglect. Sobo (1997) argues that if a Jamaican sees someone losing weight, they wonder what sort of life stresses may have caused the weight loss, rather than offering congratulations for it and attributing it to a 'good' diet. These perceptions about food and thinness were acted and re-enacted within the homes of the black women who took part in this study. There was stack difference between white and black women when it comes to their attitudes to food and dieting.

There is the common belief and assumption which western feminists have reinforced, and this is that all women have the desire to be thin because all women are surrounded by images of thin women in the media. As we saw with Angela, a white 28-year-old woman, Danielle, a black 31-year-old woman and Leanne, a black 24-year-old, their relationships with their mothers or family greatly influenced their association with food and their understanding of beauty and femininity.

By drawing attention to the importance of what takes place in the home, we can begin to understand that the eating of food, even though it is an everyday practice, is also a highly ethnic and racial practice. Therefore, we can begin to see the ways in which food influences white and black women's perceptions of their bodies in relation to the image of femininity. It is vital that western feminists who write on femininity and the female body consider the importance of race and the ways in which racial difference is enacted through the everyday practice of eating and dieting in their analysis of femininity and the female body.

Notions concerning health, Sobo (1997), claims can profoundly influence the symbolic communications made through our bodies. These notions greatly influence the ideal standards set for bodies and affect the ways we experience, care for, and shape (or try to shape) our bodies and those of others. In the West, it is widely believed that to be thin is to be healthy and that the healthier woman is, the thinner woman (McKinley 1999). The westernised message of femininity is that women must carefully monitor and control what is placed in their mouths. Drawing from the data in this study, however, it was mainly the white respondents who learnt as young girls to evaluate their eating and bodies not only through the thinness of the images of femininity they see around them in popular culture but also through their mother's eating and dietary behaviours. Bartky (1988) argues (white) girls have internalised the importance of their appearance by learning to watch their bodies as an outside observer regulating their body size and contours, its appetite, posture and gestures.

Sayers (2002) states that our bodies and what we feed them are conditioned by economic, historical, biographical, ideological and discursive factors. Health

traditions do not exist in isolation; they are not separate from other realms of culture, and there are cultural and racial differences in the way body ideals and health are perceived. Sobo (1997) claims that for Jamaicans the ideal body type is plump, hence, why Leanne, the black 24-year-old Fitness Instructor, argued that her family made fun of her because she was thin, and for her family, who are Jamaicans there are negative connotations attached to thinness. This is also the case for Africans; Danielle, a black 31-year-old solicitor, originally from Nigeria argued that when her friends and family saw that she had put on weight they all claimed that she was looking well:

> **Danielle:** I remember going to a party with some family and friends that I had not seen since I was a teenager and loads of my mum's friends, aunties and uncles came up to me saying I had put on weight, they all told me how great I looked. One of my aunts said that I now looked like a proper woman because I looked healthy and beautiful and comments like that do affect the way I think about my body…

There is a different 'health-related symbolism' (Sobo 1997:257) and sub-cultural variation which take place within the homes of black women. By understanding that black women have a different relationship with food and have a different health-related symbolism to white women, we can begin to recognise that not all women conform or attempt to reflect the thinness femininity represents. We can also understand why black women may have rejected or have not fully accepted the thinness of femininity or the slenderness of the female ideal. The significance food has within black women's homes and cultures have helped black women to be less concerned about their weight and are twice as likely to report being satisfied with their weight than their white counterparts (Hebl and Heatherton 1998). Food for black women is very much about well-being, and it is widely accepted that sickness occurs when there is a lack of food. According to Sobo (1997), food for Jamaican women rightfully fattens the body, making plumpness an index of quality, good social relations and especially good physical health. Sobo (1997), like Leanne, argued that Jamaicans value large curvy women. Conducting her research in rural Jamaica, Sobo (1997) claimed that her female respondents argued that the body should be built up by eating and one should eat to replenish what is lost through work and other activities. Claire, a black 35-year-old Recruitment Officer claimed:

> **Claire:** At work, many white women would just have salad for lunch, and I think that's just mad. I need some proper food to get me through the day because when I have something like salad I'm hungry again in about an hour I need food of substance to build up my energy. Salad goes with your meal (laughs) it's like a side dish; it should not be the meal.

Claire shows the importance of feeding her body with what she calls "food of substance" to replenish her body and it is this that will get her through her daily activities. For my white respondents, it seemed to be the other round; they were more obsessed with the pursuit of thinness, and continually exercised to remove the calories they had taken in through what they had eaten.

In African and Caribbean cultures, there is not a stigma with being large as there is in white western culture. Sobo (1997) argues that there are health benefits to being big among Jamaican women. The largeness of a woman's body also indicates that she will be successful in reproduction and there is also, as we saw with Danielle, the belief that the plumpness of a woman's body indicates her attractiveness. Hence, the reason why Leanne, the black 24-year-old woman, argued that she would rather be a little overweight than a little underweight and this is even though she is a fitness instructor.

Within black subcultures, food is also about sociability and the most respected person in African villages and rural Jamaica is the large person who is actively involved in food sharing (Sobo 1997, Renne 2007). Respected individuals like these would be described as 'big woman/mama' or 'big man/papa', and food sharing is a part of good social relations, and this food sharing has become part of western black sub-culture. Gloria, a 20-year-old black student nurse, told me the importance of food and how it is beneficial to her as a student:

> **Gloria:** One of the best things about being Nigerian is that I can go to a friend's house and there is food readily available. Because I'm a student I get family friends who want to feed me because they don't want me to lose weight. If someone gives you food it's rude to say no, so I love being African in that respect.

Crystal, the 35-year-old black domestic worker when asked about dieting spoke about being offered food from family members:

> **Crystal:** No and even if I wanted to diet I can't because I go to my auntie's house regularly and she is always offering me food and even if I've eaten its rude to say no.

Anna, a 30-year-old white housewife, married to a black man also told me about the availability of food within black people's homes:

> **Anna:** When I go round to my husband's family there's always loads of food, and they are like, come in, eat, make sure you eat, you are looking thin. When I've eaten my mother-in-law is like

> don't you want some more, there is loads left have some more. When I go round to my mum's I'm only offered a drink (laughs), a cup of tea.

According to Hughes (1997), food is central to black culture, and the easy availability and the sharing of it plays an important part in black people's lives. Slimness is not something that is valued, and mothers are continually asking their daughters and the younger women around them if they are eating properly. Food and the importance of food play an important part in the lives of black women and affect their attitudes to dieting and the ways in which they perceive the thinness femininity represents.

Food and Black Women, Thinness and White Women

Bordo (2003) describes femininity has a representation of the aesthetic ideal of the time, and in contemporary western culture this ideal is thinness; the slenderness of the female body. The white respondents in this study also associated femininity with thinness and they regularly argued that black women were not influenced by femininity because they are not necessarily influenced by the slenderness that femininity has come to represent in western culture. Black women are highly influenced by the images of femininity they see everywhere in popular culture. The difference is; however, they attempt to reflect or perform femininity in different ways from their white counterparts. Instead of monitoring and restricting their food intake to reflect the slenderness femininity, they attempt to replicate femininity through the alterations of their afro hair. When Laura, a white 19-year-old trainee hairdresser, was asked why she thought black women were not influenced by thin images of women in the media or why we rarely saw black celebrities labelled as 'thin' or 'underweight' she replied:

> **Laura:** I don't think femininity affects them and well black people have a culture of food, don't they? They love their chicken.

There is the common belief among white women as well as in feminist literature on the femininity and the female body that black women are 'protected' from internalising westernised ideals of femininity because of 'black culture'. This, therefore, enables them to have a more positive body image than their white counterparts. Poran (2006) states that there is the notion that 'black culture' is separate from dominant white culture. Additionally, the tendency to examine sub-cultural norms as distinct from or unrelated to, dominant cultural norms limits the conceptualisation of this protection. Black women's identity in this configuration is presented as fixed and stable, as a thing that – by its 'nature' – can withstand the pressures of dominant culture and this is not the case. What Laura described as 'a culture of food' might enable black women not to be as influenced by the slenderness of the aesthetic ideal as their white counterparts does not mean that they are 'protected' or not swayed by femininity at all. Black women spend thousands of pounds by buying wigs, having weaves and chemically straightening their hair to reflect femininity. Femininity is not only about what Bordo (2003) describes as the slenderness of the female ideal but also about its long flowing hair.

Julie, a white 23-year-old sales assistant, also claimed that the cultural labels that are placed on a large white female body compared to that placed on a large black female body is completely different, and she argued that this can help black women reject the pressures placed on women to be thin:

> **Julie:** I think people expect…they expect black women to be voluptuous…People kind of expect it, so there is not as much pressure there perhaps. Whereas when you see a fat white woman walking down the street and you see fat hanging out of her…it looks dreadful and blotchy; it just looks worse…I think it is also an image we've got in the UK of a big fat white woman which is scary; people just think they are just sitting there doing nothing all day eating pies and getting fat…it is that association of a lazy fat white person on the dole.

Black respondents in this study equated thinness with whiteness or an attributed closely associated with white women. One's endeavour to be thin for black women was about one's endeavour to be white, and this is something that my black respondents wanted to reject. The 'tyranny of slenderness' (Chernin 1981) was described as a taking away not just from one's body but from one's black self. There were some black women who took part in this study who saw and described thinness as a terrifying thought. The sizing down of the black woman meant that the removal of her weight equated to the removal of her blackness. Grace, the black 31-year-old Teaching Assistant, was asked why she thought we never really see extremely thin black celebrates in the media:

> **Grace:** I don't think that being skinny is really part of our culture and it doesn't look good on a black woman. I mean I want a nice curvy black woman's body, not sticks and bones… To be honest, I just think that it's not something black women do, but it's what white women do.

Leanne, the black 24-year-old Fitness Instructor, spoke of the way her family viewed her slender figure:

> **Leanne:** Everyone in my family is big, I'm around big women, and I am a size six/eight, and they say to me "oh you're too skinny, put on weight, put on weight, put on weight". When I'm stressed, I lose weight and my mum once came up to me, seriously (laughs), and said are you trying to act white because you are getting too thin…

Leanne also associated losing weight with Englishness and being a part of English culture:

> **Leanne:** Brought up around some English families I think they just believe that skinny is beautiful because it's just their culture. With their families, they hear their mum's say oh I need to lose weight and my mum is like oh I love my food… losing weight is not in my household, and that's just part of being English.

The negative association of thinness and white women also comes from an African subculture. The African women who were interviewed for this study could not understand why slenderness was such a coveted body figure in the West. Some were surprised that there was such a strong association between whiteness and thinness because whiteness for them is associated with affluence and wealth which means accessibility and access to food. For example, Crystal, a black 35-year-old domestic worker for Uganda said:

> **Crystal:** Our food is very important to us, and dieting is not something that is part of our culture. To be thin has nothing to do with femininity and beauty. In Uganda to be thin is to be sick, dying of malaria or aids. If it is not acceptable to see really thin people during famine, why is it acceptable on the red carpet and among white women in the West? I don't understand why people who have so much food stop themselves from eating it.

For the black African women who took part in this study, the connotations with the thin black female body are that of famine, sickness and death. Hence, they viewed thinness as an elimination of blackness rather than the celebration of it.

This is not to say that black women do not care about their weight because many of them do. Health and bodily wellbeing is something that both black and white respondents spoke a lot about during the interview process. The contemporary western focus on the body means that people are routinely exhorted to look after their bodies, for example through healthy eating, keeping fit and looking good. Food and the eating of food are the primary focus when it comes to the subject of health. There have been many healthy eating initiatives drawing on the work of experts and specialists such as nutritionists and scientists with the aim to convince people to embrace a healthy eating plan and lifestyle. Woodward (2008) argues that the promotion of the healthy body through healthy eating has become a regulatory strategy of the neo-liberal state; good citizens have healthy bodies and look after themselves. This message is not only a message that speaks to white mainstream culture but is also a message that affects black subcultures. There is a shift where black daughters are now informing their mothers about the benefits of healthy eating. Leanne, the 24-year-old black Fitness Instructor, spoke of how her little sister is telling her mother how to eat:

> **Leanne:** At the end of the day you can't get away from the health thing. My mum is a big woman, and my little sister is telling mother not to eat so many deep-fried foods, she is worried because she does not want my mum to get ill and now my mum is even thinking of getting a gastric band.

Woodward (2008) states that the body is targeted by the state because good citizens are healthy citizens and many of the black respondents in this study felt that it was the black female body that is being targeted. Many black women in this study argued that they, their mothers and aunties felt the need to monitor their weight, control and reshape their bodies. Naomi, a 22-year-old mixed-race hairdresser, claimed that she felt an overwhelming pressure to lose some weight and her West-Indian grandmother has also felt the same because of her doctor:

> **Naomi:** I know I need to lose weight for health reasons, but you know even my black grandmother also wants to lose some weight which I was surprised at because she's always cooking… her doctor has been telling her that she has a high risk of diseases, so she is trying to lose some weight.

When it comes to messages of health and black women's general eating habits, black women are also attempting to balance two separate cultures. The celebration of the thin body in popular western culture coupled with the repeated warnings of the dangers of obesity (Woodward 2008) by the government and doctors have made black women to rethink day-to-day cooking and eating practices. Sharron, the 40-year-old black doctor said:

> **Sharron:** As a doctor, I know that unhealthy eating can cause diabetes which a lot of black people suffer from…it increases the risk of heart disease and cancer…as a black doctor I know that food is more than just food …especially for older black people food is about heritage, the smells of back home, whether it's the Nigerians or the Jamaicans food plays a big part of that home comfort and it's a part of who they are. I have a lot of black patients with diabetes, and it's difficult to say your food could kill

> you, so it's about telling them to roast their chicken rather than deep fry it...

Black women are now beginning to buy into the healthy eating message and the belief that food must be tightly controlled. As a result, they are now joining dieting institutions such as Weight Watchers and Slimming World to help them size down. Phoenix, the black 27-year-old teacher, has been an on/off member of Slimming World, and it's a membership she shares with her mother. During my interview with Phoenix she claimed that the recipes in the Slimming World magazines and the foods she and her mother are encouraged to eat tend to be predominantly white European foods. This leaves the question, how does a black woman who is a member of Slimming World or Weight Watchers negotiate between the eating of her traditional African or Jamaican food and the food she is expected to eat to lose weight? Naomi, a 22-year-old mixed-race hairdresser, explained that in her desire to lose weight she joined Weight Watchers and had problems in following the eating regime:

> **Naomi:** Well I joined Weight Watchers last year, but I didn't lose any weight though (laughs)...I couldn't count the points; I go to my black grandma's house a lot, and I didn't know how to count the points for curry goat or ackee and saltfish, so I just got sick of it and stopped counting points.

Naomi's experience at Weight Watchers demonstrates that ethnic minorities are still discriminated against by simple mechanisms of exclusion in contemporary western culture. Her experience informs us that there are a noticeable absence and understanding of race and ethnicity by diet institutions. The same criticisms black feminists made against white feminists applies to dieting institutions; there has been a continual ignoring of black women's lives, struggles and experiences.

Conclusion

'Femininity as Portrayed Within Western Culture' is a comparative study which racially explores the concept of femininity and the ways in which it affects both white and black women's lives. It highlights the fact that previous studies which focus on the representations of femininity are in fact racial research that primarily focused on the lives of white women. This article has argued, drawing from the data in this study, that it was primarily white women that were influenced by the slenderness of the feminine ideal. Their interaction with their mothers and learning from their mother's normalisation of diet and control of food intake greatly influences their perceptions of femininity. As a result, they have learnt to closely associate femininity with thinness. The white respondents in this study, in their efforts to perform femininity, were preoccupied with losing or maintaining their weight. Thus, they learnt to continually regulate and monitor their food intake to reflect the slenderness of the aesthetic ideal. On the other hand, the importance and significance food took within the homes of the black respondents in this study enabled them to be less concerned with their weight. Food was more about sociability and sharing, and the quest for thinness was not necessarily an obsessive pursuit for them as black women.

Food for black participants was very much about well-being, and it is widely accepted among West-Indian and African cultures that sickness occurs when there is a lack of food. Food and the relationship white and black women learn to have with food within the home influences their perceptions of femininity. Understanding black and white women's relationship with food furthers our understanding of the ways in which the concept of femininity affects both white and black women's bodies. It is vital that western feminists who write on the female body consider the importance of racial difference and the ways in which racial difference is performed through the everyday practices such as eating and dieting. Notions concerning food and health, according to Sobo (1997), can profoundly influence the symbolic communications made through our bodies. These notions greatly influence the ideal standards set for bodies and affect the ways we experience, care for, and shape (or attempt to shape) our bodies.

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Appendix

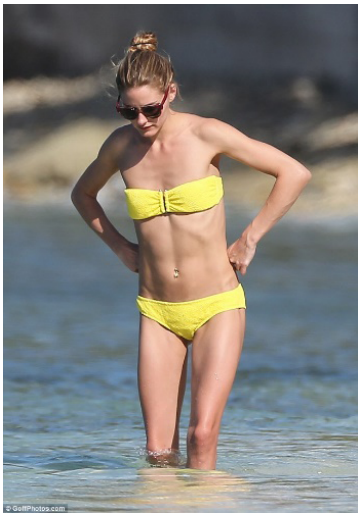

Figure 1: Olivia Palermo

Figure 2: Naomi Campbell

Figure 3: Victoria Beckham

Figure 4: Nicole Kidman

Figure 5: Lupita Nyong'o

Figure 6: Halle Berry