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African American Women Describe and Respond to Being Hypervisible Others

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No: 2018-1
<http://RARE.rice.edu/>

WORKING PAPER SERIES

African American Women Describe and Respond to Being Hypervisible Others Abroad

ABSTRACT

African American women who visit certain foreign countries become involuntary spectacles because of their *hypervisibility*. Their encounters with citizens of those countries cue them to their status as “the other.” This study asks: how do African American women describe and respond to their hypervisibility in Japan and South Korea? Data come from descriptions of 405 encounters recorded in weblogs written by African American women during their first year living in Japan or South Korea. These women visited Japan and South Korea to teach English as a second language and study abroad. Employing content analysis, I find that bloggers describe feeling *uncomfortable* and *marginalized* because of attention their race attracts, and discomfort and marginalization generate psychological distress. They respond to encounters in the following ways: (1) *they do nothing*, (2) *they stare back*, (3) *they downplay stigma*, and (4) *they become racial ambassadors*. I conclude anti-black racism creates boundaries African American women visiting Japan and South Korea must negotiate. As a consequence, some deploy protective strategies to negotiate their otherness.

KEYWORDS: African American women, Japan, South Korea, stigma, tokenism, weblogs

African American Women Describe and Respond to Being Hypervisible Others Abroad

Out of the corner of my eye though, I noticed her glancing at me out of the corner of HER eye! (Joia 2007)

This excerpt comes from *the Seoul of Black Folks*, a blog written by an African American woman teaching English in South Korea. The type of encounter described therein is not unique. For some African American women visiting Japan and South Korea, their race piques curiosity, touching, and staring. Such encounters are easily dismissed as humorous social gaffes; at the same time their awkwardness is significant sociologically. Blackness' novelty in Japan and South Korea invites unfamiliar intrigue, and African American women become involuntary spectacles because of their hypervisibility. This study asks: how do African American women describe and respond to their hypervisibility in Japan and South Korea?

Although Japan and South Korea are different countries with distinct and conflicting histories, both nations deploy the myth of homogeneity to construct racial difference (A. E. Kim 2009; Yoshino 1998). The practice of defining race through sameness renders both countries useful when examining African American women's descriptions of and responses to encounters with local citizens. In Japan and South Korea, racialization begins with blood and it distinguishes "us" (i.e., the Japanese or South Korean) from "them" (i.e., non-Japanese or non-South Korean) and legitimates racial boundaries (Cornell and Hartmann 2004; A.E. Kim 2009; Yoshino 1998). Therefore, both countries define "the other" as any foreigner who lacks Japanese or South Korean ancestry. Blood transforms Japanese-ness or Korean-ness into essential and inherited qualities unattainable by foreigners (N. Y. Kim 2009; Yoshino 1998). As a result, foreigners are actively excluded because of their difference, which manifests socially and legally through

Japan's and South Korea's strict immigration laws, and housing and workplace discrimination (Befu 2006; Seol and Skrentny 2009).

Race in Japan and South Korea depends upon the dichotomy of Japanese versus non-Japanese and South Korean versus non-South Korean. As a result, anyone who does not look phenotypically Japanese or South Korean is *othered*. As foreigners, African American women visiting Japan and South Korea occupy a peculiar position. In both countries outsider-ship is mired with its own hierarchy, and foreigner desirability depends upon the complex intersection of nationality, race, class, and gender. More specifically, given Japan and South Korea's acceptance of a Eurocentric racial hierarchy, African Americans are marginalized more than their white American or Asian American counterparts (Kim 2008; Russell 1991; Yamashiro 2011). Thus, African American identity in Japan and South Korea becomes *stigmatized*. Furthermore, for African American women, their race, nationality, and gender combine to attract unwanted attention abroad, and their hypervisibility may invite hypersexualization (Rawlins 2012; Willis 2015). In Japan and South Korea, African American women represent extreme and stigmatized *solos*. Solos are isolates whose difference makes them easy to stigmatize. Stigma, similar to othering, marks in-group and out-group boundaries based on ascription. Yet, stigmatized identities are sometimes negotiated.

This study invokes theories related to othering, stigma, and solo status to examine how African American women in Japan and South Korea describe encounters and respond to their hypervisibility. First, I review literatures on othering, stigma, and solo status. Next, I detail how African American women write about encounters with Japanese and South Korean citizens by examining how they describe and respond to these encounters. Encounters are described as uncomfortable and marginalizing. The women respond in the following ways: (1) *they do*

nothing, (2) they stare back, (3) they downplay stigma, and (4) they become racial ambassadors. Finally, I conclude by discussing how African American women visiting Japan and South Korea negotiate hypervisibility to protect their psychological well-being.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Othering: The Power of Difference

“Othering” describes how categories of relative worth are constructed (Wray 2006). Othering, a complex dialectic based on power, constructs fundamental and essential differences between groups. Ultimately, othering can legitimate superiority and dominance, and often cements the unequal relationship between colonizer and colonized (Memmi 1965). To maintain unequal power relations, the dominant group constructs the other as fundamentally socially and culturally inferior (Memmi 1965). The other is not simply different, but is inherently amoral, unintelligent, unattractive, and uncivilized. The other is inherently oppositional by every measure.

Othering may reflect racialization. Racialization creates a racial other that is fundamentally different; marking the boundary between *us* and *them* to legitimate racial dominance (Cornell and Hartmann 2004). Racial otherness is relational, it is achieved and maintained through racial ideologies enacted interpersonally. The label “white trash” reflects racial othering; it solidifies and refines the meaning of whiteness around morality, status, and social class (Wray 2006). In the United States Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans are the other because historical and contemporary racist policies defined these groups as outsiders relative to whites (DeGenova 2006).

Although Memmi (1965), Wray (2006), and DeGenova (2006) draw from different cultural contexts (as the current study does), the other legitimates the dominant group.

Nevertheless, sometimes individuals belonging to marginalized groups may try to negotiate their inferior position. When African Americans view media that define blacks as inherently inferior, they may critically engage with and reject these images (Diawara 1988). bell hooks (1992) defines this process as “oppositional gazing.” She argues black women exercise the oppositional gaze to contest, revise, and interrogate images constructed by the dominant group that define blacks as inferior others. Ward (1996) argues some African American parents arm their children with tools to contest notions of black inferiority. These tools instill racial pride, present alternatives to dominant representations, and caution against internalizing and emulating negative representations and stereotypes (Ward 1996). Further, black parents discuss race with their children more often than white parents discuss race with their children (Brown et al. 2007). Of interest here, negotiating inferiority may mean challenging the notion that one is the other. Relatedly, stigma also creates unequal boundaries of normal and abnormal. The next section introduces normality as an othering mechanism.

Stigma: The Power of Normality

Stigma marks social boundaries through defining *normality* (Goffman 1986). Link and Phelan (2001:377) argue stigma emerges when “labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together.” For Link and Phelan, power differences produce stigma. Thus, stigma operates to maintain power relations. Some stigma literature differentiates stigma into three categories: (1) enacted stigma (i.e., prejudice and discrimination towards the out-group), (2) felt stigma (i.e., the out-group’s internalization of stigma), and (3) perceived stigma (i.e., the out-groups belief they will be stigmatized, Corrigan, Watson, and Barr 2006; Jacoby 1994; Link and Phelan 2001; Pescosolido and Martin 2015; Scambler and Hopkins 1986).

Enacted stigmas are social cues like staring, rude comments, or avoidance that mark the boundary between normal and abnormal (Gray 2002). Self-reports of enacted stigma are less prevalent than felt stigma (Jacoby 1994; Scambler and Hopkins 1986), and felt and perceived stigma occur independent enacted stigma. This separation suggests stigma is effective even when it is not felt or perceived. Stigma is about power, not perception, and it operates to create an inferior other regardless of the out-group's internalization or awareness of stigma.

Additionally, felt stigma only occurs if individuals accept their stigmatized position (Corrigan et al. 2006). Thus, for some stigmatized groups, felt stigma is detached from perceived stigma. As a result, despite stigma's durability, members of subordinated groups may occasionally negotiate stigma. Negotiating stigma takes several forms. Discussed in the literature is *stigma reversal*, which occurs when marginalized groups redirect stigma towards the dominant group (Killian 1985). For example, multiracial women may accept their non-white identities and stigmatize whiteness (Storrs 1999). Racially ambiguous individuals, stigmatized for their uncategorizability, sometimes reject categorization and stigmatize the expectation of identity binaries (Grier, Rambo, and Taylor 2014). *Confrontation* and *identity management* are also destigmatization strategies (Fleming, Lamont, and Welburn 2012). Confrontation manages external perceptions by teaching away ignorance. Comparatively, self-management regulates the internal and avoids confirming stereotypes (Fleming et al. 2012; Lamont 2009). Regardless, negotiation does not reverse power dynamics, instead marginalized groups negotiate stigma to protect their psychological well-being.

As mentioned above, felt stigma is fundamental to destigmatization strategies. The literature argues divergent cultural norms may hinder felt stigma. Because Canadian Somali immigrants originate from a country without color-based discrimination, some disregard color-

based stigma in Canada. As a result, they redirect stigma towards the dominant group (Kusow 2004). These Somali immigrants simultaneously dismiss assumptions they are the other and reject Canada's dominant social hierarchies (Kusow 2004). Therefore, shared cultural norms are now and again essential for stigma.

Stigma is also socially and contextually dependent (Pescosolido and Martin 2015). To wit, what is stigmatized varies across social contexts. High academic achievers are not universally stigmatized. Instead, a school's socioeconomic dissimilarity predicts if high achievers are stigmatized (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). Some middle-class Haitian youth, who attend integrated schools but live in segregated neighborhoods, oscillate between racial stigma at school and ethnic stigma at home. These shifting stigmas alter the youth's destigmatization strategies. In a black middle-class setting, they acknowledge blackness, but distance themselves from their Haitian ethnicity (Clerge 2014).

Finally, destigmatization strategies are relational. Stigma is social; interactions reproduce and create stigma (Pescosolido and Martin 2015). Similar to othering, social encounters make stigma real (Pescosolido and Martin 2015; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Consequently, the dominant group's discriminatory acts shape destigmatization strategies (Denis 2012). For instance, Denis (2012) argues some Canadian aborigines' antiracist strategies respond to the dominant group's actions. Thus, destigmatization strategies may respond directly to enacted stigma. Below I address how solo status acts as context by shaping responses to stigma.

Solo and Token Status: The Power of Numbers

Solo status and tokenism address experiences with and psychological responses to numerical minority status. Solo status occurs when an individual is the *only* representative of their social category (i.e., only woman, Lord and Saenz 1985). Solo status may engender

hyperawareness about one's social identity, feelings of representativeness, and/or the desire to represent one's social group well. This self-imposed responsibility has negative consequences especially for low-status minorities for whom being different is detrimental (Sekaquaptewa and Thompson 2003; Thompson and Sekaquaptewa 2002).

A related concept is token status. It explores numerical rarity (i.e., not one, but few). Membership in an underrepresented group may create psychological distress (i.e., symptoms of depression and anxiety). Three responses typically accompany tokenism: (1) performance stress (i.e., feeling scrutiny and needing to act as a representative), (2) boundary heightening (i.e., exaggerating commonalities and differences), and (3) role entrapment (i.e., inverting stereotype resistance, Kanter 1993). Similarly, *racial tokenism* significantly increases stress exposure (Jackson, Thoits, and Taylor 1995).

Research Questions

Theoretical perspectives situating othering, stigma, and solo status explain *the power of difference, normality, and numbers*. These perspectives collide when individuals are hypervisible. Thus, this study addresses two questions: (1) how do African American women describe their encounters with local citizens in Japan and South Korea; and (2) how do African American women respond to encounters with local citizens? To address these research questions, I analyze 405 encounters as recounted in weblogs by African American women living and working in Japan or South Korea.

METHODS

To address how African American women visiting Japan or South Korea described and responded to encounters with local citizens, I examined descriptions of 405 encounters recorded in seven weblogs by six African American women during their first year living in Japan or South

Korea. The bloggers visited Japan or South Korea as English teachers and study abroad students. Their trips were motivated by a desire to travel, and teaching English and studying abroad satisfied this desire. Each blogger's trip was her first to Japan or South Korea. In Japan the bloggers lived in three different regions; Tohoku (Iwate Prefecture), Chubu (Toyama Prefecture), and Kanto (Tokyo). In South Korea, the bloggers lived in the Gyeonggi Province (Seoul or Bucheon). None of the bloggers spoke fluent Japanese or Korean, but each learned the languages. The bloggers were all college educated. They were from different regions of the United States; the Northeast (Pennsylvania; New York), Mid-Atlantic (Washington, D.C.), Southeast (Alabama), and West coast (Southern California).

Japan and South Korea are ideal locations to examine how African American women describe and respond to hypervisibility for two reasons. First, the small number of blacks in Japan and South Korea guaranteed hypervisibility for African American women. Second, both countries' large English as a second language markets employ thousands of American English teachers (International TEFL Academy 2017; The Japan Exchange Teaching Programme 2016; Yoder 2011). Thus, a sizable and diverse number of Americans enter Japan and South Korea temporarily for work.

Data Collection

I treated *encounters* as recounted in the weblogs as units of analysis. These encounters are meaningful because they were recorded. Every encounter was likely not recorded, because some were unnoticed, forgotten, or deemed unimportant. Thus, every encounter I analyze depends on the bloggers' perspectives, both what they noticed and decided to share.

Weblogs are individually authored "websites displaying dated entries in reverse chronological order" with links to other websites and blogs, and a section for readers' comments

(Karlsson 2007:138). Weblogs have numerous genres, and their content ranges from informal weblogs such as public diaries to substantial weblogs with in depth reporting on the news (Gregory et al. 2007).

For this study, descriptions of 405 encounters recorded in weblogs were content analyzed. There were 222 encounters from South Korea and 183 from Japan. The weblogs were obtained by conducting a Google search for “Black travel blogs in Japan” and “Black travel blogs in South Korea.” Both searches returned a link for a webpage listing African American travel blogs entitled “Black People do Travel A Directory of Black Travel Blogs and Black Expat Blogs on the Web” (Kiratiana 2010). From this webpage, I searched for travel blogs written by African American women living in Japan or South Korea.

Modified snowball sampling identified additional weblogs. The sample was expanded by referring to identified weblogs’ “blog rolls” (i.e., a list of blogs each author recommends), which linked to similar blogs about African American women living in Japan or South Korea, or to blogs listing African American travel blogs. Sampling from blog rolls is recommended when exploring niche or themed blogging communities, as examined here (Li and Walejko 2008).

Snowball sampling expanded the sample until no new blogs were found. Snowball sampling returned sixteen weblogs. There were twelve from South Korea and four from Japan. A blog was excluded if it was private, if the blogger had lived in Japan or South Korea for more than two years before their first weblog post, or if the blog was less than a year old during data collection in June 2012. The sample was limited to bloggers who self-identified as African American and female in their biographies or within their blogs.

One drawback to snowball sampling was coverage error. Sampling from blog rolls, which may not include all bloggers, limited representation (Li and Walejko 2008). Therefore, my sample does not represent the experience of all African American women traveling in East Asia.

To conduct the analysis, I initially selected three blogs from each country with the highest average monthly posting rate. Two blogs from South Korea were excluded because their posts were mostly photographs with short descriptions. Analyzing the three blogs with the most posts maintained a balanced representation from both countries and highlighted blogs with the most posts. My assumption was that more posts equated to more encounters. One blogger, however, maintained two concurrent weblogs; both weblogs were included in the final sample. I read every post written during each bloggers' first year blogging in Japan or South Korea.

Content Coding

First, every reported interaction with a Japanese or South Korean citizen was coded as an encounter. In addition, when a blogger wrote phrases like "sometimes people" or "the Japanese people" these interactions with indefinable people were coded as encounters.

Second, I coded how the blogger described each encounter by collecting direct quotes, and recorded whether the blogger described the encounter as uncomfortable and/or marginalizing. I argue discomfort captured how hypervisibility made the bloggers uneasy. Therefore, phrases like, "staring and touching make me nervous" or "I feel out of place because no one looks like me" were coded as discomfort. Feeling marginalized measured how the bloggers' social encounters cued them about their positions as "the other" and solos in Japan and South Korea. As a result, phrases like "people treat me unfairly," or "I notice people don't sit next to me" were coded as feeling marginalized. Codes for discomfort and marginalization could be coded simultaneously for a single encounter and sometimes appeared together.

Third, I coded how bloggers responded to each encounter by collecting direct quotes. Analyzing encounters revealed a continuum of responses. I grouped the African American women's responses into four categories: (1) they *did nothing* (i.e., "In the moment, I did not know how to respond"), (2) they *stared back* (i.e., "I turned around and stared right back") (3) they *downplayed stigma* ("I do not believe what people think about me"), and (4) they became *racial ambassadors* ("I will try and represent blacks the best I can").

RESULTS

Table 1 reports encounter rates per 100 weblog posts by country. The mean number of weblog posts with encounters varied: 61 for Japan and 74 for South Korea. The percent of weblog posts *without* an encounter were 56.3 percent for Japan and 55.2 percent for South Korea. Despite having more encounters in South Korea, bloggers in Japan wrote more frequently about their encounters, which balanced the difference.

Table 2 shows the distribution of encounters with descriptions of discomfort and/or marginalization, and no description (i.e., no discomfort or marginalization) by country. Overall, most encounters elicited *no description* in both Japan (58.5 percent) and South Korea (59 percent). In total, 111 posts described the women's discomfort, 86 described feelings of marginalization, and 238 mentioned no description. These codes often co-occurred in a single encounter. Feelings of discomfort were similar with 27.3 percent for Japan and 27.5 percent for South Korea. The bloggers were more likely to describe feeling marginalized in Japan (23.5 percent) compared to South Korea (19.4 percent).

Table 3 reports the number of encounters with responses and no responses. Overall, most encounters elicited *no response* in both Japan (64.5 percent) and South Korea (71.2 percent). The rate of no response was higher in South Korea. In total, 129 encounters elicited a response, and

276 elicited no response. The rate of response was higher in Japan (35.5 percent) than in South Korea (28.8 percent).

Discomfort and Marginalization

Less than 30 percent of encounters described hypervisibility as uncomfortable. Hypervisibility attracted unwanted attention that occasionally precipitated discomfort. Joia expressed discomfort when she wrote: “I was out running one day, looking a hot mess...and this guy just started waving at me profusely and blew me a kiss. What???? Yeah, a little strange” (Joia 2007). A Japanese man made Ande uncomfortable, “Last year, I had a Japanese gentlemen pointing at me and talking about the U.S. military. I had no idea what he was talking about. He really freaked me out” (Ande 2004). Sometimes touching also triggered discomfort. Kourt wrote,

I've had a few minor misadventures....there was an old guy who kept talking to me in Korean at the bus stop and one day he grabbed my arm to make me sit next to him on the bench at the bus stop. The next day I avoided him like the plague while waiting for the bus. Now I haven't seen him since...which does make sense considering he never got on my bus. (Kourt 2009)

These uncomfortable encounters were also marginalizing because they periodically alerted the bloggers to their “othered” status. As Kourt wrote,

I'm not really "missing" home, just some things that make the US and Korea so different, on a regular basis I get stared at, laughed at, or called "African"...it doesn't bother me 99% of the time, but there is always one day when I want to be just another person blending in with the others....which is very hard in Korea. (Kourt 2009)

Kourt occasionally desires the anonymity granted in the United States. Her wish counters Yamashiro's (2011) finding that some Japanese Americans gained a sense of invisibility in

Japan, a feeling few Japanese Americans experienced in the United States. Nonetheless, African Americans are hypervisible in Japan and South Korea, and countless stereotypes construct blacks as cool, exotic, and sexualized to arguably position them as objects of intrigue (Cornyetz 1994; Russell 1991). In some encounters, East Asia's small number of black foreigners magnified the bloggers' blackness, and their exaggerated difference positioned them as the other in ways that did not occur at home.

In the next section, I discuss how the bloggers' responded to encounters. Overall, the bloggers responded to encounters in four ways. First, *they did nothing*. Second, *they stared back*. Third, *they downplayed stigma*. Fourth, *they became racial ambassadors*.

They Did Nothing

The bloggers did not respond to most encounters. Joia did not respond after being touched:

Before I knew what hit me, she reached out and touched me! She rubbed my leg and started jammering in Korean and laughing shyly. I tried to wipe the horrified look off my face, but it was stuck. My reflexes didn't even function. I just sat there dumbfounded....
(Joia 2007)

Bloggers were not always paralyzed. Some encounters, prompted by their hypervisibility, elicited no response because stigma was not detected. Sha experienced this riding the train:

i was riding and gazing out the window not paying attention to anything, and then i felt that "stare." i look over and i see two elderly women looking at me. this has happened a couple times before, and when it does, i always smile and give a deep bow. so i did this of course, and the women smiled. a minute later, they motioned for me to come over and sit in the empty space next to them. i smiled and said no thank you b/c i was getting off

soon, and gestured hoping that that translated if not the english. they just kept smiling. it was pretty cool. (Sha 2007a)

Although hypervisibility occasionally aroused discomfort, Sha did not perceive this encounter as stigmatizing. Furthermore, some encounters are interpreted as endearing. LaShonda wrote:

I'm going over to Osaka... to get my hair done. ... Let's just hope that it turns out nice and that my students like it I'm sure that if it does or even if it doesn't I will be paraded by *Sugoi ne* 's [amazings] and *Kakkoi* 's [cools] kinda makes you feel good to stick out and find people that are interested in your hair! (LaShonda 2003)

Similarly Takara wrote:

My little [host] sister wants to be like me, so whenever I am in the mirror she gets in the mirror with me and attempts to make her hair curly like mine. When I put a scarf on for bedtime she has her mother put one on her hair also. (Kawaii- too cute!). (Takara 2003)

Although hypervisibility attracted attention, it was not always interpreted as stigmatizing. Below are examples of responses to encounters perceived as stigmatizing.

They Stared Back

In some encounters, the bloggers *stared back* at strangers. Takara told her readers about transforming *staring back* into a game:

Anyway, now staring doesn't bother me. It doesn't make me uncomfortable at all and I am fascinated at the way some Japanese people, in particular the older women do it. When I turn away they stare, examine, look, everything, but when I turn around and smile, some bow their heads, some turn away, and some say hello. It's become somewhat of a game to me to see what type of staring I will encounter for the day. (Takara 2003)

Takara's hypervisibility became intriguing. As the bloggers' trips progressed some grew to *enjoy* staring back. Ande wrote:

There are several things I learned in Japan * how to deal with everyone and their grandmother staring at me because I might be the first person of African descent that they had ever come into contact with. I dealt with all of the attention by turning it into a positive interaction. I've spent a lot of time in Japan smiling, waving, and speaking to strangers because I've found it easier to be positive than to get [angry]. * that I like a lot of attention. (Ande 2004)

Ande embraced the attention to manage the occasional psychological distress and anger her hypervisibility generated.

At times, these bloggers relished the confusion their difference created. Joia wrote, "I've been mistaken for a Korean before when some guy started yapping to me about the bus. Then when I turned around, he nearly had a heart attack. Love doing that..." (Joia 2007). Joia went on to write, when people see her and another black friend "[their] brains just malfunction and [they] can't understand what's happening" (Joia 2007), and the bloggers liked causing "malfunctions." Takara wrote, "I remember one day in particular a young man was riding his bike passed me and ran into a woman because he was looking at me so hard. I laughed :D. I shouldn't have... but I did" (Takara 2003). Through *staring back*, bloggers downplayed cues marking them as the other. However, staring back may have reified these bloggers' otherness by signaling a failure to conform to Japanese or South Korean social norms. Furthermore, periodically *staring back* failed to alter the consequences of otherness. Otherness and stigma remained active social constructs in both countries and the stigma attached to blackness persists.

These bloggers were aware of the stigma attached to their hypervisibility. By *staring back*, African American women in this study simultaneously acknowledged and negotiated the stigma attached to their difference. Beyond *staring back*, the bloggers responded to stigmatizing encounters through *downplaying stigma*.

They Downplayed Stigma

Downplaying stigma protected the emotional well-being of these African American women. *Downplaying stigma* was practiced in three ways: (1) by attributing encounters to language differences, (2) by referencing self-reliance in the face of adversity, and (3) by comparing racism in East Asia with American racism. Similar to Michelle Byng's (1998) findings that black women defined discriminatory acts as unimportant, *downplaying stigma* also devalued stigmatizing encounters.

Language barrier. LaShonda first encountered stigma leaving a bar with friends. The owner of the bar uttered several derogatory remarks. Regardless, LaShonda downplayed the incident because of a language barrier:

The situation wasn't as terrible as it could have been b/c 1. I can't understand Japanese and 2. she was VERY VERY drunk but still...kinda hurts to see someone's true feelings come out like that. It was definitely my first negative experience here. I know I can't let it get to me and thus I will move on.... (LaShonda 2003)

LaShonda was not alone. Others sometimes referenced the language barrier as a buffer. Joia believed not speaking Korean might have masked enacted stigma.

I DO NOT speak or understand a lick of Korean outside of hello, goodbye, and thank you. Oh, a curse word here and there. So I don't know what they're saying. They could be cursing me up and down. (Joia 2007)

Ande noticed not speaking Japanese protected her from potential stigma after learning her Japanese friends were shocked she enjoyed Japan:

They always look at me like I've recently escaped from a mental hospital. Basically they don't buy me happy Black woman in Toyama [Japan] story. It took me awhile to understand their vibe, basically, they know their people and I don't. I don't speak or understand the Japanese language well. I don't know what people are saying about me when I leave a shop, get off the train, or walk away from the counter. (Ande 2004)

Ande even dismissed the hidden stigma her Japanese friends warned her about. She asserted "what other people think of me is none of my business." Ande went on to write:

I don't care. I think that is remarkable growth on my part especially as a black-American woman. I have a feeling some Japanese people probably talk a little or a lot of shit about me because of my skin color, but I don't care. I don't need to know what they are saying because it doesn't mean anything to me. (Ande 2004)

Dismissing other's opinions was also one response to stigma.

Overcoming adversity through self-reliance. Ande's sense of security required remarkable growth and self-reliance, which emerged as the bloggers responded to encounters. The response of self-reliance emerged when Joia wrote that being black hampered her job search.

Yes, I'm black. I'm black, black, blackkity black black!! And it ain't gonna change! Yes, this seems to make it slightly more challenging to get placed. However, I'm not unaccustomed to adversity. I don't run and cry when someone makes fun of me (although I used to...back in 6th grade). (Joia 2007)

Sha also dismissed stigma when she wrote about friends offering her sympathy for the isolation and racism they believed she encountered:

they'll ask how i find korea and i say that things are great, then the conversation routinely leads to them telling me about how awful these close minded koreans are and apologizing for any stress i may be under while here. i dont need your sympathy, fools. im black, not weak willed or weak minded. dont get the two confused. (Sha 2007b)

For Sha the strength to endure stigma required self-reliance. Sha wrote, “these things don’t break me. These experiences are not new. What is new is my tolerance for it” (Sha 2007b). At times, the skill to tolerate ignorance helped these bloggers *downplay stigma*.

Comparing U.S. and East Asian stigma. Sometimes bloggers responded to stigma by comparing stigma in the United States and East Asia. The bloggers’ comparisons downgraded stigma’s severity and more readily forgave stigma in Japan and South Korea. Sha downgraded stigma when she wrote she experienced “a little bit of discrimination here and there but I’ve not experienced anything worse than I have back home” (Sha 2007a). Kourt also downgraded stigma leaving her boyfriend’s soccer game:

they made a comment about me being African, in which my [boyfriend] quickly replied in Korean that I was American, which caused them to break into nervous laughter. I give him credit because he’s been in Korea longer so he’s always trying to protect me from the racism of Korea. But I really don’t care, I’m fine with being called African, as long it’s not the n word, I could care less. (Kourt 2009)

The bloggers *downplayed stigma* by ignoring its severity, which helped protect their emotional well-being. However, the bloggers’ responses to stigma varied, and they sometimes did more

than overlook stigma. In some cases, they countered Japanese and South Korean's negative understandings of blacks with positive representations.

They Became Racial Ambassadors

Once in a while, encounters created *racial ambassadors*, actors who attempt to represent blacks well. Ande wrote:

I'm highly aware that everywhere I go in this land, I am representing not only myself and my family, but I represent the Black race. Therefore I always do my best to represent Black people as well as I can. (Ande 2004)

Takara also contemplated her role as a representative,

Many thoughts run through my mind. 'What am I doing here?' 'How long can I last here?' 'Should I watch my words?' 'Should I watch my behavior?' 'When I go out am I representing all Black people, in particular Black women, when Japanese people see me?' (Takara 2003)

Racial ambassadorship often involved teaching moments. Joia transformed an encounter into a teaching moment after her students called a black girl in their textbook a monkey. Joia wrote:

I walked right outta the classroom. When I came back, I had 5 sheets of paper. I handed them out and proceeded to write 3 sentences on the board. 'I WILL NOT CALL PEOPLE NAMES. IT IS NOT NICE AND IT HURTS THEIR FEELINGS. I AM SORRY, JOIA TEACHER.' For the rest of class, they wrote it over and over again. Some of their hands started to hurt and I didn't really care...But as a TEACHER, it is my job to bring a certain level of understanding. I can't single-handedly halt prejudice in the world but I can damn sure stop it in my classroom. (Joia 2007)

Joia acknowledged her actions did not dismantle prejudice. Regardless of their personal impact, the bloggers still occasionally elevated encounters to teaching moments. For Ande, a teaching moment emerged when meeting an English teacher from China:

Z. was talking a lot of crazy non-sense about Black-Americans. That pissed me off! I wanted to curse Z. out. However, I am fully aware that I'm representing African Americans, my family, and my country, so I politely introduced myself... Basically, Z. doesn't know any Black-Americans and has only read about them...and believes Black-Americans are poor and criminals except Condoleezza Rice....informed her that I'm not poor or a criminal. I also pointed out to her that I don't make disparaging comments about China or Chinese people. Why would she make disparaging remarks about Black-Americans when she doesn't know any of them? Then Z. asked me about Black people in America. I told her some of us are doing very well and some of us aren't doing well. I also had to inform her that white Americans fall in the same economic category. (Ande 2004)

Acting as *racial ambassadors* was a response to hypervisibility. Although ambassadorships' intermittent and singular acts attacked individual biases, like the other three responses, it is an ineffective anti-racism tactic. Stigma and othering are more than just biases. Instead, they are steeped in power dynamics that unevenly distribute resources and influence in Japan and South Korea. Still, the bloggers sometimes valued acting as *racial ambassadors*.

In summary, bloggers in this study described hypervisibility as uncomfortable and marginalizing. Marginalization typically created psychological distress. Further, their hypervisibility in Japan and South Korea positioned them as the other in ways that did not occur at home. As a result, the bloggers responded to protect their psychological well-being. The

bloggers' encounters sometimes undermined their sense of belonging by alerting them to the notion they were misplaced in Japan and South Korea. In some instances, encounters were interpreted as endearing and elicited no response. When stigma was detected, the bloggers responded in ways that may have mediated the psychological consequences of exclusion.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how African American women visiting Japan or South Korea described to and responded during 405 encounters they had with local citizens. It presented evidence describing their hypervisibility by invoking theoretical frameworks linked to othering, stigma, and solo status. Women in this study described less than 30 percent of their encounters as *uncomfortable* and *marginalizing*, but marginalization generated psychological distress. They responded in four ways: (1) *they did nothing*, (2) *they stared back*, (3) *they downplayed stigma*, and (4) they became *racial ambassadors*. Ultimately, the bloggers' actions did not upset the power dynamics producing othering, stigma, or solo status. However, their responses may have mitigated psychological distress attached to being a hypervisible other living abroad.

Although the encounters showed that enacted stigmas like staring and touching alert women to their hypervisibility abroad, in close to 70 percent of encounters, hypervisibility elicited no response. On the one hand, this finding may support the argument that African Americans are not bombarded with anti-black racism in Japan and South Korea (Carter and Hunter 2008; Kim 2008). On the other hand, this finding suggests that the social psychological literature on resistance to marginalization may overestimate how often stigma is challenged. The latter is consistent with the idea of hegemony and the durability of structured inequality (Scott 2008).

Some evidence in the encounters signaled felt stigma (i.e., the out-group's internalization of stigma). In some encounters, perceived stigma (i.e., the out-group's belief they will be stigmatized) did not engender felt stigma. Instead, when confronted in encounters perceived as stigmatizing, some bloggers occasionally responded to their hypervisibility in ways that personally affirmed they were not out of place. I speculate that the responses used to negotiate otherness and perceived stigma likely protected the bloggers' emotional well-being. For certain bloggers, their responses made the encounters less stigmatizing. Although the language barrier was referenced to undermine stigma, non-native language speakers are often stigmatized (Gluszek and Dovidio 2010). Additionally, practicing self-reliance mirrored Collins' (2009) argument that black women learn to embody self-reliance and independence as survival tactics.

I also found that solo status occasionally produced psychological distress. In some encounters, solo stress emerged from the uninvited attention hypervisibility produced. In other encounters, however, the bloggers welcomed the attention. Further, these findings offer evidence that some solos might respond to their hypervisibility by becoming racial ambassadors. Racial ambassadorship, however, is problematic because one person cannot represent an entire group, and attempting to do so risks essentializing. Furthermore, as racial ambassadors, the bloggers took on dual teaching roles, as ESL teachers and prejudice educators. Therefore, it is worth exploring how these dual teaching identities intersect (Yoder 2011).

Additionally, acting as occasional *racial ambassadors* highlighted that responses to hypervisibility may have unintended consequence. Although ambassadorship unsuccessfully attempted to dismantle stigma and otherness, responses of doing nothing, staring back, and downplaying stigma preserved stigma and difference. While this finding supports that

destigmatizing responses vary across encounters, it also suggests that responses may have conflicting aims.

It appears that responses embodied subtle interpersonal and intrapersonal acts for self-preservation not power disruption. Perhaps more specifically, responding to hypervisibility did not displace bloggers from their position as hypervisible others. Instead, the bloggers' responses personally rejected the notion they were distinctly inferior to endure the psychological burden their hypervisibility induced.

Although responding to stigma and otherness for self-preservation is commonplace, blogging has extended the process into the public sphere. Brock, Kvasny, and Hales (2010) argued that black women engaged in communal reflection, interrogation, and dismissal of personal experiences steeped in racism and sexism to construct affirming self-perceptions. Blogging has moved the practice of constructing and articulating racial identity to the internet and has transformed a traditionally inward facing practice into an external one (Brock 2009; Brock et al. 2010). Regardless, for the bloggers in this study, who imagined themselves speaking to family, friends, and other blacks curious about living abroad, the imagined community maintained the intimacy of the private sphere.

Staring back was an unexpected response to encounters. Yet, *staring back* reinforced otherness as relative, by showing that encounters construct the other. These bloggers, however, enjoyed *staring back* and returned the discomfort they initially felt. They savored malfunctions their presence created and drew attention to their hypervisibility. Unlike Goffman's (1986) argument that stigmatized groups use covering—tactics that reduce their stigma's distractibility—the bloggers learned to welcome the attention. For them, hypervisibility was an immediate distraction rendering covering ineffective. Instead of masking their stigma, the

bloggers played with their difference ultimately mining well-being from psychological distress. Nonetheless, playfully staring back diverged from social norms in Japan and South Korea, and in certain encounters, staring back may have reified racial boundaries.

Staring was commonplace in the bloggers' encounters, and their hypervisibility occasionally transformed them into spectacles who *stared back*. Outside of sociology, looking, also known as the *gaze*, is argued to apply cultural constructs, ideas, and stereotypes to mark difference (Lacan 1998). Thus the *gaze*, an abstract political concept, is one mechanism for constructing the other by producing dominant discourses around racism, sexism, and nationalism. The *gaze's* power lies in its ability to essentialize the other who is rendered passive (Pitman 2009). Critical analyses of the *gaze* show the other is not necessarily passive. In the instances where the bloggers stared back, the stigmatized other returned the *gaze* to maintain and preserve their self-worth.

Although prior research examines how African Americans used the *reverse gaze* to personally interrogate their position as the other and preserve self-worth (Diawara 1988; hooks 1992; Poran 2006; Ward 1996), the literature largely explores the power dynamics of stigma and otherness within a black-white binary. Globalization produces encounters in the United States and abroad outside the binary of white-non-white. African American women in this study entered contexts where whiteness was absent, and a native Japanese or South Korean identity was superordinate. In these contexts, they responded to a status order that privileged a non-white identity. This study explored how processes of othering and stigma negotiation function absent the traditionally dominant white gazer.

In Japan and South Korea, hypervisibility is not tied to blackness. Anyone who does not look phenotypically Japanese or South Korean is hypervisible. Additionally, the superordinate

status of a Japanese and South Korean identity exposes whites to the othering, stigma, and solo status attached to hypervisibility. Yet, both countries' acceptance of a Eurocentric racial hierarchy complicates hypervisibility's consequences for whites (Kim 2008). Although blacks and whites are both hypervisible in Japan and South Korea, I imagine few white people having their hair or skin touched abroad.

Future research should explore how othering and stigma negotiation function across multiple contexts with untraditional status orders. For example, African Americans are not the only blacks in Japan and South Korea. Both countries have sizable and growing populations of Nigerian and Ghanaian immigrants. How do these equally, hypervisible others respond to being spectacles abroad? Moreover, how do their descriptions and responses differ given they come from countries where color-based stigma is arguably non-existent? Further, how do hypervisible Japanese expats in Uganda negotiate their otherness? Do non-LGBTQ individuals who enter LGBTQ dominated social spaces (i.e., bars, sports teams, etc.) have encounters marking them as solos or stigmatized others? If so, do they feel discomfort and marginalization, and importantly, how do they respond? Comparing how different groups respond to othering, stigma, and solo status across contexts will provide further nuance to why hypervisibility is culturally and contextual dependent.

Additionally, the bloggers' interests in traveling to Japan and South Korea were partially motivated by a desire to see different places and experience new cultures. As Goffman (1986:138) writes, "the normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives" and from the bloggers' perspectives Japan and South Korea are abnormal because both countries are new and different. Similar to generations of American travelers before them, the bloggers journey abroad to explore the other (Urry and Larsen 2011). Yet, upon arrival the bloggers are

confronted with their own otherness, a reminder that shifts them from their positions as gazers to spectacles. For the women in this study, “proximity makes the boundaries between observer and observed permeable” (Rony 1996: 39) and creates potential for role reversal. Although research on the *reverse gaze* shows the *gaze* is not unilateral (hooks 1992; Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Maoz 2006; Rony 1996; Sweet 1989), few studies address how individuals respond to displacement and negotiate encounters marking them as the other. For example, how do African American roots tourist (i.e., travelers who trace the path of the trans-Atlantic slave trade) respond to encounters marking them as distinctly American in Ghana?

LIMITATIONS

Weblogs were a novel data source well-suited for this analysis, however, they have limitations. First, weblogs encompass a host of contradictions: they are simultaneously public and private, yet intimate and detached. When deconstructing weblogs, it was difficult to dismiss these fundamental contradictions. Second, what I know about the bloggers has been self-censored. Acknowledging blogging’s censored intimacy highlighted that bloggers carefully craft online personas for their readers, and the bloggers decided what to disclose. Thus, these weblogs arguably served as sites for the bloggers to perform their idealized selves (Goffman 1959).

Third, unlike diaries weblogs are a form of social media, bloggers interact with their readers (McCullagh 2008). Blogging is a social experience (Miura and Yamashita 2007) and its sociality engenders an interpersonal dynamic between the author and audience absent in traditional media. Thus, bloggers view their followers as friends, and followers come to embody support systems. Moreover, as Miura and Yamashita (2007) argue bloggers are motivated to post by their readers’ support. Thus, despite the limitations of weblogs, an author may believe her weblog is a safe form of self-expression. Prior to and independent of my study, bloggers choose

to share their experiences, and the trust embedded in weblogs overcomes the trust barriers found in case studies and interviews. Weblogs, however, are typified by more than their social nature. Similar to journals, weblogs are self-reflective. At times, writing regularly about their experiences helped the bloggers critically look at their encounters abroad.

Fourth, sampling bias was a limitation. Everyone does not blog, which creates self-selection bias. Further, the encounters I dissect were one-sided narratives. This study analyzes perceived encounters and self-reported responses. As Ande wrote, “I don't know what people are saying about me” (Ande 2004), and the bloggers’ ignorance influenced the study’s findings because they could not respond to unseen gazes. Still, the data are relevant because this study addresses how African American women describe and respond to their perceived hypervisibility.

Fifth, due to the small sample size, this study could not represent each African American voice in Japan and South Korea, and by no means is this study an exhaustive one on the experience of African American women in both countries. Instead, this study provided insight into a particular African American experience in Japan and South Korea; that of the young woman blogging about teaching English and studying abroad. But, even the bloggers who share important identity intersections were unique, and their experiences diverged to shape them in different ways. As Carter and Hunter (2008:194) write, “a black British model in Shibuya, an illegal immigrant from Ghana, an American banking executive in Tokyo, an American GI stationed in Yokohama, and an English teacher in rural Japan could never share a similar ‘black experience.’” It is overly ambitious to claim my research speaks fully to the experience of young African American women in Japan and South Korea.

CONCLUSION

Theorizing the meaning of hypervisibility as connected to concepts of “othering,” stigma, and solo status, the present study examined African American women’s encounters with citizens of Japan and South Korea. Most scholarship on blacks in Japan and South Korea narrowly focuses on experiences of black men, and assumes black women are absent from the Japanese and South Korean imaginary (Carter and Hunter 2008; Russell 1998). However, this study centered the experiences of young African American women bloggers in Japan and South Korea, with the hope of shifting the scholarly discourse on the nature and meaning of hypervisibility.

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Table 1. The Total Number of Weblog Posts, Weblog Posts with Encounters, Weblog Posts without Encounters, and rate of Encounters per 100 Weblog Posts in Japan and South Korea

	Number of Posts	Number of Encounters	Number of Posts without Encounters	Percent of Posts with no Encounters	Rate of Encounters per 100 Posts
Japan	208 (m=69.3)	183 (m=61)	117	56.3%	88
South Korea	290 (m=96.6)	222 (m=74)	160	55.2%	77
Total	498 (m=83)	405 (m=67.5)	277	55.6%	81

Notes: m refers to the average number of posts per blogger.

Table 2. Total Number of Encounters with Descriptions of Discomfort, Marginalization, and No Description in Japan and South Korea

	Discomfort (%)	Marginalization (%)	No Description (%)	Total Encounters
Japan	50 (27.3)	43 (23.5)	107 (58.5)	183
South Korea	61 (27.5)	43 (19.4)	131(59)	222
Total Posts	111 (27.4)	86 (21.2)	238 (58.8)	405

Notes: These percent do not sum to 100 because of multiple response. “No Description”

indicates the absence of discomfort and marginalization.

Table 3. Total Number of Encounters with Some Type of Response and No Response in Japan and South Korea

	Some Type of Response (%)	No Response (%)	Total Encounters
Japan	65 (35.5)	118 (64.5)	183
South Korea	64 (28.8)	158 (71.2)	222
Total Posts	129 (32)	276 (68.1)	405

Notes: “Some Type of Response” indicates one of the three responses revealed through the data analysis: (1) stare back, (2) downplay stigma, and (3) racial ambassadors.