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## **Self-Representation of Black Queer Athletes in the WNBA: Resistance to Misogynoir and Heteronormativity in Women's Basketball**

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**Self-Representation of Black Queer Athletes in the WNBA:  
Resistance to Misogynoir and Heteronormativity in Women's  
Basketball**

*A Thesis submitted to the Department of Women's and Gender Studies of the Liberal Arts and  
Science College at DePaul University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts*

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**Committee Chair: Dr. Ann Russo**

**Committee Members: Dr. Anne Mitchell, Dr. Julie Moody-Freeman**

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For the Black queer women I call my family

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## First Quarter: Tip-Off

The Women's National Basketball Association's (WNBA) inaugural season began in June of 1997 with the motto "We Got Next."<sup>1</sup> It is fitting that I, born less than a month after the season began, would join the generation of young girls inspired by the promise of that phrase. I approached the game not trying to be like Mike, but instead like Lisa, Candace, Dawn, Tamika, and Cynthia. As the league grew up, so did I, and I began to interrogate the sport I loved and the representations of the athletes who played it. The WNBA pays ample attention to the way that gender impacts their sport, but each of my questions focuses on the dynamics of race and queerness within the WNBA and the sports media that covers them. I watched as the WNBA's marketing campaign shifted from over-emphasizing the femininity of their athletes in an attempt to sell the league as sexy<sup>2</sup>, to being at the forefront of social justice activism in sports. The priorities of the league had shifted over the past 25 years, at least on the surface, but by employing a Black feminist lens my analysis of the sport and sports media changed. I began to ask different questions. Considering the WNBA is a primarily Black league (80%) and has a large number of queer players, how does race impact the ways those players are treated? How does the media understand and represent the WNBA and the complex identities of the athletes that play in it? Ultimately, who is included when the WNBA says, "we got next"? The more I interrogated these questions, the more I began to see pervasive misogynoir, a term coined by

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<sup>1</sup>Sarah Banet-Weiser. "Hoop Dreams: Professional Basketball and the Politics of Race and Gender," *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 23.4 (November 1999): 403.

<sup>2</sup> Shannon Ryan. "Banking on Beauty," *Chicago Tribune*. (Accessed: May 1, 2022). <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2008-05-04-0805030427-story.html>

Moya Bailey,<sup>3</sup> and an enforcement of heteronormativity in the practices and coverage of the WNBA.

I see intimate connections between my work in Women's and Gender Studies and the representations of Black queer athletes. As my life as a college athlete came to a close, I found a new mode of engagement with sports outside of playing them and this work is the culmination of these seemingly separate interests. The purpose of my M.A. thesis is to critically engage with the questions I have posed and themes of race, queerness, and representation within women's basketball in the US. The WNBA is going into its 26th season and the league has a prominent place in sports discourse. The increased visibility of the WNBA is undoubtedly good for the league's popularity but the players that have been centered within that discourse are not representative of the makeup of the league. Despite 80% of the 144-person league being Black, white women are the face of the league.<sup>4</sup> White players such as Sue Bird and Breanna Stewart are highlighted more often than Black players like reigning Most Valuable Player Jonquel Jones or WNBA Players Association President Nnemkadi (Nneka) Ogwumike. The centering of white players also occurred when representing the WNBA as a queer-friendly league as well. This calls for a more critical and intersectional analysis of the WNBA and the media representation of its players conducted through Black feminist, queer of color critique, transnational feminist, and fat studies frameworks.

Authors such as Muene Mwaniki, Manuel Zenquis, Sabrina Razack, Janelle Joseph, Nefertiti Walker, E. Nicole Melton, Anima Adjepong, and Ben Carrington have all developed

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<sup>3</sup> Moya Bailey and Trudy. "On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism." (2018) *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395

<sup>4</sup> Risa F. Isard and E. Nicole Melton. "Make This The Season We End Discriminatory Sports Coverage." *Sports Business Journal*. 24 May, 2021. 29 May, 2021. <https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/SB-Blogs/COVID19-OpEds/2021/05/24-IsardMelton.aspx?hl=risa+isard&sc=0>

projects focused on the representation of Black athletes. Some of these have even focused specifically on the representation of Black women,<sup>5</sup> but I believe there is a significant gap in the literature when it comes to the representation of Black queer women athletes. My research speaks to this gap by conducting a critical discourse analysis of media (mis)representations of Black queer athletes in the WNBA. When using queer, I draw on Cathy J. Cohen's explanation of queer as both an identity marker but also the potential of queer politics. She states

[T]he label 'queer' symbolizes an acknowledgement that through our existence and everyday survival we embody sustained and multisited resistance to systems (based on dominant constructions of race and gender) that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labor, and constrain our visibility.<sup>6</sup>

I turn towards her definition of queer because she identifies queer politics as a direct challenge to "systems of domination and oppression, especially those normalizing processes embedded in heteronormativity" which is one of the key analytic frameworks within this analysis. Cohen defines heteronormativity as "both those localized practices and those centralized institutions which legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and 'natural' within society."<sup>7</sup>

This project specifically looks at the WNBA but comes at a time when Black women athletes across sports have become more outspoken about their treatment and representation. These representations are important because the (mis)representation of Black queer women is not isolated within the sporting world, but instead it is a particular manifestation of misogynoir and

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<sup>5</sup> Jamie Shultz. "Reading the Catsuit: Serena Williams and the Production of Blackness at the 2002 U.S. Open." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 29.3 (August 2005): 338 - 357.

<sup>6</sup> Cathy J. Cohn "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* Vol. 3 (1997): 440.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



heteronormativity that is pervasive in the United States. Sports studies have and continue to be conducted as specific analyses of cultural violence and power. These analyses are important in drawing connections between how culture enables and justifies structural inequalities, oppression, and violence.<sup>8</sup>

The WNBA has seen a consistent increase in viewership since its inaugural season in 1997 but saw a particular boom in engagement the last two years. The 2020 season saw an increase in viewership that coincided with an increase in nationally televised games on ESPN and CBS.<sup>9</sup> The 2020 season was important for multiple reasons. In a year that was defined by the global COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter social justice activism, the WNBA season was conducted in a new format. A bubble, dubbed the “Wubble,” was held in Bradenton, Florida due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus. The Wubble allowed all the teams to compete in a controlled environment and minimize their chances of contracting the virus. The Wubble was successful in mitigating the spread of the virus amongst league personnel, but also created the unique circumstances that set the stage for the social justice activism that players enacted in the Wubble. In the wake of Louisville police officers murdering Breonna Taylor, the players in the WNBA wanted to dedicate their season to Taylor, the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM), and the fight against police brutality.<sup>10</sup> This collective action was sparked by the Women’s National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA) in conjunction with the WNBA and led to the creation of the Social Justice Council.

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<sup>8</sup> Johan Galtung, “Cultural Violence.” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27:3 (August, 1990), 291-305.

<sup>9</sup>Erica L. Ayala “The WNBA Turns 25. What Will Viewership Trends Mean for the Future?” <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericalayala/2021/04/25/the-wnba-turns-25-what-will-viewer-ship-trends-mean-for-the-future/> (accessed June 6, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> “WNBA Announces A 2020 Season Dedicated To Social Justice,” *WNBA*, <https://www.wnba.com/news/wnba-announces-a-2020-season-dedicated-to-social-justice/> (accessed Feb. 10, 2022).

The mission of the Council is “to be a driving force of necessary and continuing conversations about race, voting rights, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and gun control amongst other important societal issues.”<sup>11</sup> WNBPA President Nneka Ogwumike spoke to the legacy of resistance by WNBA players stating that “as many WNBA players—past and present—have said and, more importantly, consistently demonstrated, the reason why you see us engaging and leading the charge when it comes to social advocacy is because it is in our DNA.”<sup>12</sup> Her statement operates on two levels. She speaks generally to the legacy of resistance by WNBA players that have historically combated patriarchy, racism, misogynoir, homophobia, and heteronormativity. More particularly I believe by using the phrase “in our DNA” she is articulating a form of resistance that comes from the multiple positionalities of the players. For a league like the WNBA that is made up of primarily Black athletes, these issues are of particular importance. The players’ dedication to their activism sparked news headlines that had nothing to do with their play. The players wore jerseys honoring Breonna Taylor that donned her name; wore shirts in warmups and in media interactions that said things such as “Black Lives Matter”, “Black trans lives matter”, “Say Her Name”, “arrest the cops that killed Breonna Taylor”, and “vote Warnock”; and refused to play games following the murder of Jacob Blake by Kenosha, Wisconsin police. In addition to their on-court resistance, the Council

designated spaces for community conversations, virtual roundtables, and other activations to address this country’s long history of inequality, implicit bias and systemic racism that has targeted black and brown communities. With an intentional plan to educate, amplify and mobilize for action, the WNBA and the WNBPA focused on engaging educators, activists, community and business leaders with players, team and league staff, and fans.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “Social Justice Council Overview & Mission,” WNBA. <https://www.wnba.com/social-justice-council-overview/> (Accessed Feb. 10, 2022)

The Council is led by six current WNBA players: Layshia Clarendon, Sydney Colson, Tierra Ruffin-Pratt, Satou Sabally, Breanna Stewart, and A'ja Wilson. WNBPA Director of Player Relations Jayne Appel-Marinelli also is a part of the leadership group. The Council partnered with Black feminist scholars and activists Kimberlé Crenshaw, Alicia Garza, and Raquel Willis in addition to Executive Director of Rock the Vote, Carolyn DeWitt, who acted as advisors to the council. The Council sought out their advisors to be able to work in conjunction with existing organizations in an attempt to bolster the efforts of those on-going movements.

In addition to the WNBA and WNBPA's focus on gendered-racial justice, they have been a driving force in the representation and acceptance of queer athletes within sports. Queer folks are represented in leadership positions within the WNBA on every level including, but not limited to owners, coaches, and players. The acceptance of queerness is not only in terms of sexuality but extends to gender as well. In a sports world that is segregated by gender and continues to reinforce the bodily determination of gender, the WNBA has taken a public stance in support of non-binary athletes. For player Layshia Clarendon, a non-binary person (she/they/he), they have been embraced by their teammates, the WNBA as an organization, and media affiliated with the league. Announcers for the games made sure to get his pronouns correct, oftentimes switching between he and they pronouns although Clarendon still uses the pronoun she as well. Instead of policing its borders and reinforcing that it is the *Women's* National Basketball Association, the league has grown so that it can be more inclusive of the identities of the players that already exist within their organization. These are some of the contributing factors to the WNBA being given more visibility in mainstream sports discourse than ever before.

## *Significance*

In her essay titled “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes the importance of Black women’s perspectives and argues that we can generate a distinctive standpoint on existing paradigms.<sup>14</sup> I am a light-skinned Black American queer woman and former NCAA Division-III basketball player. I enter this research as a fan of the game. I was raised in the sport and played on primarily Black, and oftentimes queer teams, until I got to college. During that time, I began to discuss my experiences with misogynoir and homophobia with other Black queer collegiate athletes. I found our collective experiences to illuminate the ways that sports reinforce white supremacist heteronormative ideals and became a starting point for me developing my interests in feminist sports studies. In my work, my positionality forms the questions that I ask, impacts the way that I interpret the texts, and shapes the conclusions that I will draw. Most importantly my positionality is one of the reasons that I am able to identify the silences within the existing literature on Black queer women athletes and this research has stemmed from those silences.

This thesis will make significant contributions across interdisciplinary fields of Sports Studies, Black Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and Queer Studies. It will intervene in key conceptual frameworks like heteronormativity, colorism, and misogynoir. Particularly this thesis will demonstrate how continuous misogynoir, colorism, and heteronormativity pervade sports and sports media; how race, color, and performance/perception of masculinity impact the media representation and acceptance of queer athletes; and how WNBA players have found paths of resistance through self-representation and through their relationships with individual journalists. I believe these findings can have a profound impact on the sporting world and the discipline of

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<sup>14</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. “Learning From the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought.” *The Society for the Study of Social Problems* 33.6 (Oct. - Dec. 1986): S14- S32.

Sports Studies. This analysis would benefit students and professors in a variety of disciplines, including journalists in sports journalism and in other areas, members of sporting organizations and governing committees on every level of sports, and individual athletes. The most important impact would be highlight how Black queer athletes are misrepresented and offer insights into how they navigate these (mis)representations daily. By calling attention to the misogynoir and heteronormativity that pervade sports and sports media with this initial project, it lays the groundwork and possibility for this research to be taken further. The next step in building upon this research would be to interview the athletes themselves. It would give a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Black queer athletes in the WNBA and would also provide another platform for their self-definition in the hope that these counternarratives can change the way they are represented in media, racist rules and referring, and can spark a larger discourse on misogynoir and heteronormativity.

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

This project aims to connect the disciplines of Women's and Gender Studies and Sports Studies. These disciplines are oftentimes seen as distinctly separate fields of inquiry but there are scholars that have been carving out space for feminist sports studies. Collections such as *The Routledge Handbook of Sport, Gender, and Sexuality*, *Race, Gender, and Sport: The Politics of Ethnic 'Other' Girls and Women*, and *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory* all take an intersectional approach to the study of sports and show the possibilities of what sports studies can be.<sup>15</sup> Black feminist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality"

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<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves and Eric Anderson. *Routledge Handbook of Sport, Gender and Sexuality*, New York: Routledge, 2014. Aarti Ratna and Samaya F. Samie. *Race, Gender and Sport: The Politics of Ethnic 'Other' Girls and Women*. New York: Routledge, 2019. Jayne Caudwell. *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

in 1989 to describe and draw attention to the way that power operates from multiple axes. The term is used to destabilize a unidirectional understanding of power and oppression.<sup>16</sup>

Intersectionality grounds the analysis of the aforementioned collections and my own. It provides a framework for adequately theorizing race, gender, and sexuality when looking at the representation of Black queer women athletes.

I highlight Black Feminism as a framework that is central to this analysis because it speaks to my positionality as a researcher; it provided the term misogynoir which is one of the key analytic frameworks within this project; and is one of the theoretical lineages that has discussed the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Moya Bailey coined the term misogynoir in 2008 to describe the “anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience.”<sup>17</sup> Bailey developed the term in response to the “racial visual violence [she] was seeing in popular culture throughout history” and for her “naming misogynoir was about noting both a historical anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intraracial gender dynamic that had wider implications in popular culture.”<sup>18</sup> I argue that the representations of Black queer WNBA players are another example of the racial visual violence in contemporary media that Bailey describes. It is for this reason that misogynoir is one of the key analytic frameworks that informs this project. In Patricia Hill Collins’ seminal work *Black Feminist Thought*, she developed a framework for understanding the representations of Black women that is critical to this work. She coined the phrase “controlling images” to describe the racist images of Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel that Black women are oftentimes understood through, read against, and portrayed as.<sup>19</sup> Collins uses

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<sup>16</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989.1 (1989): 139-167.

<sup>17</sup> Bailey, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

the phrase controlling images to emphasize the fact that these images operate as “powerful ideological justifications” for race, class, and gender oppression. She asserts that “the ability to define these symbols is a major instrument of power” and are “designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life.”<sup>20</sup> In this way, Collins challenges us to think past stereotypes as just simply representation, but instead powerful ideological tools that justify misogynoir and uphold structural oppression.

Each of these controlling images create distinct and oftentimes contradictory narratives about Black women. Mammy is defined as the “faithful, obedient domestic servant.”<sup>21</sup> Mammy represents the ideal Black woman in the white patriarchal gaze. She is a willful servant to the white family that she works for. Mammy is described as dark skin Black woman that is oftentimes asexual. The image of Sapphire is constructed contrastingly to docile Mammy. Sapphire is rude, loud, angry, unfeminine, and domineering. She is one of the “bad Black women” that should be controlled. Lastly, there is the image of Jezebel. According to Collins, this image is central to Black women’s oppression because of its attempt to control their sexuality. Jezebel depicts Black women as having deviant sexualities. They are hypersexual and participate in non-normative sexual acts. Because Jezebels are already depicted as having deviant sexuality, they are assumed to be queer. Collins states that “regardless of any individual woman’s subjective reality, this is the system of ideas that she encounters. Because controlling images are hegemonic and taken for granted, they become virtually impossible to escape.”<sup>22</sup>

These images craft narratives surrounding Black women that strip them of their agency and ability for self-definition. Instead, their actions are distorted to fit these images or as Melissa

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 69 - 70.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 90.

Harris-Perry argues in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Black women bend to fit the shape of the “crooked room” that these images create. Both Collins and Harris-Perry highlight that these stereotypes do not just affect how Black women feel about themselves. These representations are wielded to justify structural inequality, harm, and violence against Black women.<sup>23</sup> Harris-Perry additionally argues that these negative representations of Black women influence how Black women “understand themselves as citizens, what they believe is possible in their relationship with the state, and what they expect from their political organizing.”<sup>24</sup> Collins, Harris-Perry, and other Black feminists have laid the groundwork to see that the representation of Black women is never benign but instead always has larger ramifications that influence interpersonal interactions and interactions with the State. Controlling images as a framework for understanding the treatment and representation of Black women athletes has already been applied in a number of works. Specifically, Anima L. Adjepong and Ben Carrington in “Black Female Athletes as Space Invaders” use controlling images as an analytic framework to understand the discourse surrounding Black women athletes. Their piece offers sports as a social institution that reproduces these controlling images specifically. The goal of their analysis is to map how Black women athletes are perceived to fulfill these images and how they resist them. Their work is just one example of how Black Feminist frameworks can be applied to the discipline of Sports Studies. My study pushes this analysis further by theorizing sexuality in addition to race and gender.

Patricia Hill Collins continues to theorize the ways that race and sexuality are intimately linked for African Americans in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 69-96.

<sup>24</sup> Melissa Harris-Perry. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. New Haven: Yale UP (2011), 45-46.



*Racism*. In this work, she focuses on the ways that hypersexuality, deviancy, and aggressiveness have been imposed upon African Americans sexualities.<sup>25</sup> While controlling images and Collins' further analysis plays a central role in the way that I analyze the representation of Black queer athletes, they need to be adapted to more adequately address Black *queer* women. It is at this juncture that I find Queer of Color Critique frameworks and Hip-Hop feminisms helpful. Queer of Color Critique frameworks theorize the silences around race that are so prevalent in Queer Theory, but they can also theorize some of the silences surrounding Black queerness in Black Studies. Particularly, I draw from authors such as José Esteban Muñoz in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*; Roderick Ferguson in "Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality"; Cathy J. Cohen in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics"; and the numerous contributors to the collection *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* and its following collection *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*.<sup>26</sup>

José Esteban Muñoz's work can be applied to understand the way that these athletes craft a narrative about their own identities. His work is intended to "contribute to the formation of a queer performance-studies lens" which is interested in "theorizing the political force of performance and performativity by queers of all races."<sup>27</sup> Muñoz's definition of "disidentification" is crucial to understanding how Black queer folks resist hegemony. He theorizes disidentification as the way that queers of color transform dominant exclusionary frameworks and ideologies to fit their own cultural needs. Disidentifying is multifaceted and has

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<sup>25</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick E. Johnson and Mae G. Henderson ed. *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Patrick E. Johnson ed. *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Jose Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, xiv.

no set blueprint for how it should be done, but Muñoz does outline the core tenets. He describes it as a survival strategy to navigate heteronormative world, a way to envision and activate new social relations, and always political in nature.<sup>28</sup> Muñoz asserts that “to disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject.”<sup>29</sup> These disidentificatory performances are “reformulating the world *through* the performance of politics.”<sup>30</sup> I argue that the self-representation and resistance of Black queer women athletes in the WNBA should be understood through the lens of disidentifications. Particularly the way that WNBA players craft a counter-discourse about themselves, their media representations, and their treatment through the use of social media.

Sports scholars such as Sabrina Razack and Janelle Joseph in “Misogynoir in Women’s Sports Media: Race, Nation and Diaspora in the Representation of Naomi Osaka” and Muene Mwaniki and Manuel Zenquis in “The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Nationality in Sport: Media Representation of the Ogwumike Sisters” have produced contemporary work that analyze Black women’s representation in sports. Each of their works provides a critical discourse analysis of their media representations and the ways that the athletes push against narratives that do not fit their understandings of themselves.<sup>31</sup> Each work references the social media usage of the athletes. For these authors, social media is an accessible way for athletes to craft their own narratives about themselves. Social media, unlike interviews, is something that all athletes can

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, xiv.

<sup>31</sup> Sabrina Razack and Janelle Joseph. “Misogynoir in Women’s Sport Media: Race, Nation, and Diaspora in the Representation of Naomi Osaka.” *Media, Culture, and Society* (2020): 1-18. MR Zenquis and MF Mwaniki. “The intersection of race, gender, and nationality in sport: media representation of the Ogwumike sisters.” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 43.1 (2019): 23–43.

have if they want it. Opportunities for interviews are only available to the best players, and oftentimes even those opportunities are unevenly distributed among the players. Social media following and engagement is not always determined by play or endorsements by the league. It can be generated through popularity with fans or prior social media presence for example. Social media is not only a tool for self-definition but can also be monetized. I believe that with an already small platform compared to other leagues, the players in the WNBA use of social media becomes even more important to analyzing the positionality of women athletes. It helps promote their league, increases their celebrity status, and allows for brands to view them as viable partners.

Additionally, I find that Hip-Hop Feminisms offers pivotal insight when thinking about Black women's masculinity. Authors such as Saidah K. Isoke offer an important distinction between masculine presenting lesbians and tomboys. In their master's thesis entitled "'Thank God for Hip-hop': Black Female Masculinity in Hip-hop Culture," Saidah K. Isoke parses out the differences in these identities by saying:

I differentiate between masculine-presenting lesbians (MPL) and tomboys based on the extent at which each identity centers masculinity. While tomboy is understood as a hybrid space between traditionally legible performances of femininity and masculinity, masculine-presenting lesbian is understood as a majority masculine presentation in conjunction with lesbian sexuality. I employ the term masculine-presenting lesbian to include various expressions of masculinity and lesbian sexuality among Black women.<sup>32</sup>

While Isoke's project explores "the racialized, gendered and sexualized implications that underscore the navigations done by Black tomboys in hip-hop,"<sup>33</sup> the framework for

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<sup>32</sup> Saidah Isoke, "'Thank God for Hip-hop': Black Female Masculinity in Hip-hop Culture." Master's thesis, Ohio State University, 2017. [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=osu1492775852958055](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1492775852958055)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 2.

understanding this particular racialized masculinity is applicable to sports as well. The connections between hip-hop culture and sports have been well documented; especially as it relates to basketball.<sup>34</sup> The insights made by Hip-Hop scholars therefore resonate on a cultural level within basketball generally and can speak to the presentation of some of the Black women within the league regardless of sexuality but specifically for the masculine Black queer women who are the focus of this analysis.

In addition to examining how social media can be used for resistance and self-representation, both works analyze the media representations of Black women athletes along the axes of race, gender, and nation. An interrogation of the nation will be imperative to address the ways that “Blackness” is differently constructed and manipulated within national contexts. Stuart Hall argues that “race works like a language” and because it is developed relationally it is “subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation.”<sup>35</sup> Blackness therefore will never be static and will be impacted by a variety of other social categories, such as nationality, that carry with them their own set of meanings. Black women are not a homogenous group and depending on their national context, they are racialized in very particular ways that reflect specific nation-building projects, and the relationships between nations. A transnational feminist lens becomes helpful to decenter US definitions of Blackness and parse out the ways that nation/nationality impact the ways the athletes are perceived and represented differently (or similarly) but also in relationship to one another. In *Black British Feminism: A Reader* Heidi Safia Mirza articulates the problem with generalizing experience saying “to assume a naive

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<sup>34</sup> C. Keith Harrison and Jay J. Coakley. " Hip-Hop and Sport—An Introduction: Reflections on Culture, Language, and Identity", *Sociology of Sport Journal* 37, 3 (2020): 166-173, accessed Mar 16, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2020-0087>

<sup>35</sup> Stuart Hall. “Race, The Floating Signifier: Featuring Stuart Hall,” transcript of lecture delivered at Goldsmiths College, New Cross, London, 1997. 8. <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Race-the-Floating-Signifier-Transcript.pdf>

essentialist universal notion of a homogenous black womanhood, [is] no better in its conception of the self and the nature of power than that embodied in the authoritative discourses we seek to challenge.”<sup>36</sup> Although the stereotypes of controlling images are contextualized within the United States, the perceptions of Black women as hypermasculine, hypersexual, and overly aggressive is misogynoir which is embedded in a global white supremacy. White supremacy is a global project that is not relegated to the United States or the West. These images occur in one form or another across borders and are manipulated to fit larger nationalist narratives and particular histories. These controlling images are often developed in relationship to one another.

It is at this point that Paul Gilroy becomes helpful in understanding how race and racial identity is constructed relationally across borders. He also provides a framework for understanding Blackness outside of essentialist definitions. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy states that:

here racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.<sup>37</sup>

Gilroy makes the argument that Black intellectual thought and culture should be understood within a transnational frame instead of looking at them as developing individually and disconnected from one another. Gilroy’s argument shifts our understanding of Blackness as something that is constructed solely within the bounds of the nation. Christina Sharpe further develops this in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Sharpe uses her work to “declare that we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to

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<sup>36</sup> Heidi Safia Mirza. *Black British Feminism: A Reader*. (London: Routledge, 1997): 4-5.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993): 1.

be respected, and to position us in the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think and be and act from there.”<sup>38</sup>

Aarti Ratna further explains how developing a transnational feminist approach allows us to think beyond difference in “Not just merely different: Travelling theories, post-feminism and the racialized politics of women of color.” She asserts that transnational feminism “facilitates thinking through the differential impacts of complex systems of power, experienced in, through and across organizing structures such as gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, age etc., responding to both internal and external politics of the ‘nation.’”<sup>39</sup> Ratna repeatedly draws attention to the role that nation plays in defining other organizing structures. I wanted to highlight these works because of the way that they interrogate themes of national and diasporic belonging. Black women are not a monolith and although the WNBA is based within the United States, players have different ethnic and national identities that impact their representation as Black women. The construction of Blackness for African American players is different of that than the model-minority stereotype that is imposed upon Nigerian American players such as Nneka and Chiney Ogwumike.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, Fat Studies scholars have developed frameworks that direct attention back to the physical bodies of the athlete’s that I am analyzing. Works such as *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women’s Unruly Political Bodies* by Andrea Elizabeth Shaw and *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia* by Sabrina Strings both engage how

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<sup>38</sup> Christina Sharpe. In *The Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 22.

<sup>39</sup>Aarti Ratna. "Not just merely different: Travelling theories, post-feminism and the racialized politics of women of color." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 35, no. 3 (2018): 202.

<sup>40</sup> Zenquis and Mwaniki, 2020.

anti-Blackness and anti-fatness come together.<sup>41</sup> Their arguments have been built upon most contemporarily by Da'shaun L. Harrison in their work *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*. Harrison argues that anti-Blackness should be understood as anti-fatness and vice versa. This book serves as a step towards that by interrogating the effects and affects of anti-fatness as anti-Blackness. Harrison examines how anti-fatness as anti-Blackness “materializes through Desire/ability and Desire Capital, health by way of the medical diet industries, policing and prisons, and gender, particularly as it relates to fat Black trans men, trans masculine folks, non-binary people, and cisgender men.”<sup>42</sup> Although Harrison's text focuses on trans men, trans masculine folks, non-binary people, and cisgender men, they offer a nuanced critique of both anti-Blackness and anti-fatness that moves beyond self-love and body-positivity. They instead focus on the structural inequalities and violence that is a product of both ideologies. Black fat folks do not have access to things such as housing, employment, health care, and medical care. Black fat folks are more likely to experience interpersonal and structural violence such as rape, assault, and death. Both self-love and body-positivity operate solely on an individual level and cannot combat the structural ramifications of either ideology. Instead of focusing on individual solutions, the focus should be on addressing the structural aspects. I use Harrison's work to engage with the ways that Black women athletes who are not thin are treated differently by game officials and by media members. I use frameworks of Desire/ability, anti-fatness, and anti-Blackness to interpret the way that the media portrays these athletes and the effects that it has on their economic opportunities, treatment in game, and representation broadly.

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<sup>41</sup> Andrea Elizabeth Shaw. *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*. NY: Lexington Books, 2006. Sabrina Strings. *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia*. NY: NYU UP, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Da'Shaun L. Harrison. *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021.

## *Literature Review*

These are the theories that I have found to be most salient in this analysis, but this project is informed by a multitude of women of color feminists and queer theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Jose Esteban Muñoz, Roderick A. Ferguson, and the array of Sports Studies scholars whose work predates mine and comprise this literature review. I have organized the following sections by four major themes found within the literature: misogynoir sport; queer theory, queer representation, and heteronormativity in sport; and intersectional analyses of race, gender, and queerness in sport.

### Misogynoir in Sport

The four readings reviewed here offer perspectives on the discourse surrounding Black women athletes. By looking at these pieces together, a framework for understanding the Black woman athlete's unique social location and oppression can be developed. Akilah R. Carter-Francique highlights the need for critical theories to examine the sporting experiences of Black women and provides an overview of theoretical frameworks that can be employed in her article "Theoretical Considerations in the Examination of African American Girls and Women in Sport." She parses out the differences between three related but distinct lineages of thought including Womanist Theory, Black Feminist Thought, and Critical Feminist Theory. I found Black Feminist Thought most applicable to my work because it is a form of empowerment, a mode of self-expression, and a catalyst for political activism.<sup>43</sup>

Anima L. Adjepong and Ben Carrington's "Black Female Athletes as Space Invaders" maps "how the varying meanings of black identity and femininity come together in the body of

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<sup>43</sup> Akilah R. Carter-Francique, "Theoretical Considerations in the Examination of African American Girls and Women in Sport." in *Race, Gender and Sport: The Politics of Ethnic 'Other' Girls and Women*. ed. Ratna, Aarti and Samaya Farooq Samie. New York: Routledge, 2018. 82.



the black female athlete, accentuating the sexualization of the black female form while at the same time black sportswomen attempt to resist those same images.”<sup>44</sup> Adjepong and Carrington use the controlling images as an analytic to understand the discourse surrounding Black women athletes. Their chapter offers sports as another social institution that reproduces these images. The goal of their analysis is to map how Black women athletes are perceived through these stereotypes and how they resist them. According to the authors, Black women must navigate the assumed masculinity that comes with being an athlete and the masculine stereotypes of Black femininity simultaneously. Another mode of othering that Adjepong and Carrington highlight is the sexualizing of Black women athletes. One of the most pervasive stereotypes that undergirds all of the controlling images is the assertion that Black women are inherently more masculine than white women.<sup>45</sup> Although masculinity is a focus of their analysis, it only speaks to the way that masculinity is imposed upon these athletes. A focus of my analysis is when athletes intentionally perform masculinity. I believe that this area has been something that has been *undertheorized* when it comes to Black women athletes. Particularly I point to the lack of nuance in the discussion of South African track athlete Caster Semenya by the authors. They accurately contextualized the sex verification testing that Semenya has been subjected to within a larger history of masculinizing Black women and colonial ideologies about Black women from South Africa. However, they fail to address the way that Semenya’s performance of masculinity and queer sexuality influenced their decision to test her. In doing so, the authors do not look at the complexities of Semenya’s identity and erase the role that heteronormativity plays in the

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<sup>44</sup>Adjepong, Anima L. and Ben Carrington. “Black Female Athletes as Space Invaders” in *Routledge Handbook of Sport, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Jennifer Hargreaves and Eric Anderson. New York: Routledge, 2014. 169.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid, 176.

misogynoir directed at Semenya. My project looks to more adequately theorize heteronormativity's role in the misogynoir.

Adjepong and Carrington's work focused on multiple athletes across sports but more focused analyses on individual athletes have been conducted. Two of the most contemporary examples of this were conducted by Sabrina Razack and Janelle Joseph in "Misogynoir in Women's Sport Media: Race, Nation, and Diaspora in the Representation of Naomi Osaka" and Manuel R. Zenquis and Munene F. Mwaniki in "The intersection of race, gender, and nationality in sport: media representation of the Ogwumike sisters." In Razack and Joseph's article they examine the media representations of Japanese-Haitian American tennis player Naomi Osaka. Osaka has been the focus of contemporary research because of the way that her seemingly contradictory identities are represented within the media. Osaka is representative of the lack of acknowledgement of racial hybridity in the project of nation building as well as the way that Blackness is constructed relationally. In their analysis three major themes were revealed: misogynoir and colorism continue to pervade sports media and athlete sponsors representations of Black women athletes; racial, national, and diaspora (mis)representations are insufficient at representing athletes identities and are actually harmful representations; and one avenue for resistance to the gendered racism of media (mis)representations is through self-representation.<sup>46</sup> They show how sports, and its insistence upon national affiliation, reinforce both national and racial binaries while rejecting ideas of hybridity. Osaka not only exemplifies the way that Blackness can be erased when it is beneficial to the nation but in the frequent comparisons to African American tennis great Serena Williams, we can see how the understandings of Blackness are developed relationally depending on nationality. Here is an example of the ways that

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<sup>46</sup> Razack and Joseph, 1.

international competition becomes representative of more than individual achievement and instead reflects ideologies that are closely connected to the nation. In comparison to Williams, Osaka becomes more Japanese which in turn erases her Blackness and her Haitian identity. The erasure of her Blackness is not a byproduct of her representing Japan but actually a requirement for her to do so. To be understood as Japanese she cannot be understood as Black.

In “The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Nationality in Sport: Media Representation of the Ogwumike Sisters,” Zenquis and Mwaniki analyze the impact of nation and immigration in the construction of Blackness in the representation of Nneka and Chiney Ogwumike. The authors assert that “Black African immigrants have served as a kind of model minority in U.S. society. This means that they tend to avoid some of the stigma that plagues African Americans.”<sup>47</sup> Oftentimes Black immigrants are seen as more hardworking and more desirable than African Americans. They are “acceptable” Black because they adhere to certain white middle class respectability politics. This viewpoint is a direct result of African immigrants’ movement from one context to another and their acceptance is conditional. The model minority stereotype assumes a homogeneity to Blackness that comes from outside of the United States. It creates a separation between the unacceptable African Americans and the desirable, but still othered Black immigrants. The representation of the Ogwumike sisters is created in contrast to their African American counterparts in the WNBA. Their Blackness is constructed in relationship to the understanding of what it means to be Black and from the United States. The movement between contexts is what prevents the Ogwumike sisters from being read as African American or from Nigeria. If they had been born in Nigeria, they might have been read through the stereotypes that are applied to Caster Semenya. If they were not as vocal about being Nigerian-American, they

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<sup>47</sup> Zenquis and Mwaniki, 25.

could have been subjected to the racist stereotypes surrounding African Americans. Their position as somewhere in between brings its own challenges to self-representation.

Both articles influence this project because they are methodological examples of what is a well-executed critical discourse analysis. Additionally, they bring together many of the themes that are present in this project such as misogynoir, colorism, navigating controlling images, and the role that nationality plays in the construction and understanding of Black women's representations and resistances. These works are of particular importance due to their attention to the way that Blackness is differently constructed and manipulated within varying national contexts. As this project goes forward, these will be important axes of identity that will need to be considered to accurately examine media representations.

#### Queer Theory, Queer Representation and Heteronormativity in Sport

The readings reviewed here offer perspectives on the discourse surrounding Queer Theory, queer representation and heteronormativity in sport. By looking at these pieces together, a framework for theorizing queerness in sport can be developed. Susan K. Cahn explores historical relationship between lesbianism and sport in "From the 'Muscle Moll' to the 'Butch' Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women's Sports." She traces development of "mannish lesbian athlete" in relationship to oral histories of mid 20th century lesbians; outlines the linkages between masculinity, lesbianism, and sport that came together surrounding the image of the mannish lesbian athlete; and crafts a nuanced argument surrounding the way that the lesbian athlete was a figure of discourse but also a product of women's cultural innovation.<sup>48</sup> Cahn's analysis is helpful not only because she situates the stereotype of the mannish lesbian athlete but because she shows the importance of self-

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<sup>48</sup> Susan K. Cahn. "From the 'Muscle Moll' to the 'Butch' Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women's Sport." *Feminist Studies* 19.2 (Summer, 1993): 343-368.

definition. The use of oral histories allows for the agency of lesbian athletes to be recognized alongside the development of lesbian athlete stereotypes. Because of it, lesbian athletes are not reduced to the stereotypes about them but instead we can see the complex ways that lesbian representation in sport manifests.

Heather Sykes chronicles the use of queer theories in existing sports studies in “Queering Theories of Sexuality in Sports Studies.” Sykes’ chapter is useful in tracing genealogies of queer theorizing and the various strains of thought that have impacted Sports Studies thus far while calling for further engagement between the disciplines as well as with Disability Studies, Queer of Color Critique, and other frameworks. This piece highlights a few theoretical themes that I find particularly useful: sexuality and gender within Sports Studies in relation to racialization, global capitalism, and feminism; Post-colonial Studies influence on theorizing hybridity; and theorizing masculinity in sports.<sup>49</sup> I believe that my analysis can build upon these themes, in particular theorizing masculinity in sports. My project aims to theorize masculinity intentionally performed by Black queer women instead of solely focusing on the perception of Black women as being more masculine which is where masculinity is primarily discussed.

Many studies that have focused on lesbians in sport have focused on the way that historically homophobia has prohibited women from claiming a lesbian identity within sport. In *Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity*, Jennifer Hargreaves draws the connections between how claiming a lesbian identity could open athletes up to homophobic treatment during play. She goes a step further with this analysis to show how athletes also would run the risk of losing sponsorship and potentially their position within their respective leagues. The athletes had a vested interest in performing heterosexuality to protect their livelihoods, but

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<sup>49</sup> Heather Sykes. “Queering Theories of Sexuality in Sports Studies.” in *Sport, Sexualities and Queer/Theory* ed. Jayne Caudwell. New York: Routledge, 2006. 13-32.

the leagues did as well. For many of these women's leagues that were in the beginning stages, they wanted to avoid backlash, so that they could maintain their funding. The sustainability of the sport depended partly on the desirability of their women athletes.<sup>50</sup> Mary McDonald contextualizes the early years of the WNBA in a similar way in "The Marketing of the WNBA and the Making of Post feminism." McDonald's analysis of the WNBA's marketing shows how it celebrated ideals of heterosexual femininity and took a colorblind approach in its representation of the league.<sup>51</sup> This piece was written in 2000, which was in the first five years of the league, and I think it is important to note the marketing approach that was taken during the early years of the league's operation. The WNBA needed to be able to survive economically and marketed itself in ways that would be most profitable. Within recent years, there has been a shift in the WNBA's image from cisgender heteropatriarchal ideals of femininity to being accepting of queerness as long as it still reinforces heteronormative ideals and hegemonic femininity.

### Intersectional Analyses of Race, Gender, and Queerness in Sport

Intersectionality is central to a Black Feminist framework and is the basis of understanding the particular experiences of Black queer women athletes. Scholars such as Nefertiti A. Walker, E. Nicole Melton, Cheryl Cooky, Faye L. Wachs, Michael Messner, Shari L. Dworkin, and Risa F. Isard have all conducted intersectional sports analyses that examine race, class, gender, and sexuality into the experiences and representation of athletes. In "It's Not About the Game: Don Imus, Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Media," Cooky et al. examine media response to comments made by sports newscaster Don Imus following the 2007 National Collegiate Athletic Association's women's basketball championship

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<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves. *Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>51</sup> Mary G. McDonald, "The Marketing of the Women's National Basketball Association and the Making of Postfeminism." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. 35.1 (2000): 35-47.

game. Imus used multiple racist slurs including calling the members of the Rutgers University women's basketball team "nappy headed hos" and equating them to players on the men's professional basketball team the Toronto Raptors on his radio show.<sup>52</sup> One of the most compelling frameworks that the authors use within their analysis is that "basketball is a cultural site wherein blackness is both invisible and hyper-visible."<sup>53</sup> Imus' comments made racist stereotypes of Black womanhood hyper visible within the context of women's basketball. In response to his comments, the media continually quoted Imus which continually re-circulated the comments for months. This approach, although media outlets condemned his comments, they created an entire discourse centering his rhetorical violence. Cooky et al. highlights the relative invisibility of the players' voices and their inability to represent themselves. In this way, the representation of these athletes was challenged, but there was not a moment for them to have agency over their own representations. This silence is important when thinking about the approach to my project, since I will not have any interviews with the athletes. It will be incredibly important for this project to highlight the social media of the players and center the way that they choose to represent themselves.

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<sup>52</sup> Cheryl Cooky et. al. "It's Not About the Game: Don Imus, Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Media." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 27 (2010): 140.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 143.

## Second Quarter: Game Plan

I have conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of media representations of Black queer women athletes in the WNBA and their self-representation through a diverse range of media including news media, print media, and social media. CDA is a qualitative method that examines how power is exerted through language.<sup>54</sup> Michel Foucault asserts that,

There are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.<sup>55</sup>

Teun A. van Dijk identifies two primary modes through which power is exerted in discourse:

In the first case, dominant speakers may effectively limit the communicative rights of others, e.g., by restricting (free access to) communicative events, speech acts, discourse genres, participants, topics or style. In the second case, dominant speakers control the access to public discourse and hence are able to indirectly manage the public mind. They may do so by making use of those structures and strategies that manipulate the mental models of the audience in such a way that preferred social cognitions tend to be developed, that is, social cognitions (attitudes, ideologies, norms and values) that are ultimately in the interest of the dominant group.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Norman Fairclough. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972 - 1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. 93.

<sup>56</sup> Teun A. van Dijk, "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis," *Discourse & Society*. Vol. 4(2): 279 - 280.



CDA as a method has developed as a resistant response to this exertion of power. This study specifically examines the way that the misogynoir and enforcement of heteronormativity in the representations of Black queer WNBA players by mainstream media is an exertion of power through discourse.

Norman Fairclough in *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* asserts that for a discourse analysis to be critical it must be concerned with “how socioeconomic systems are built upon the domination, exploitation, and dehumanization of people by people, and to show how contradictions within these systems constitute a potential for transforming them in progressive and emancipatory directions.”<sup>57</sup> Fairclough emphasizes that a researcher’s goal when conducting a CDA should be promoting emancipatory politics through their work. Many feminists have gravitated towards CDA as methods for this very reason. In “Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis,” Michelle Lazar describes an explicitly feminist discourse analysis as showing “the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities.”<sup>58</sup> These objectives have shaped my decision to use CDA as a qualitative method to examine the representations of Black queer women athletes that keys in on the function of racism in the representation of sexuality and gender for these athletes.

CDA allows for multiple representations to be read together and against one another to see larger trends. Each representation serves a purpose and those goals do not always align with one another. For this reason, I have two streams of analysis for this project. First, I offer a brief

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<sup>57</sup> Fairclough, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Michelle M. Lazar (2007) *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis*, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 4:2, 142, DOI: 10.1080/17405900701464816

examination of mainstream media, which I argue crafts the dominant discourse surrounding these athletes. The second is focusing on the resistance of these athletes through their social media and the unique relationships that they have with individual journalists. The image that the WNBA puts forward in its marketing and branding varies from the way that the media represents them; and varies from the way that individual athletes wish to represent themselves. Each of these discourses are interconnected and create a more nuanced narrative surrounding the WNBA and the athletes that play in it. I have analyzed news articles; interviews that players have given previously; commercials and advertisements containing individual athletes and/or teams; and social media content from players, the WNBA, and companies that endorse some of the athletes on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. By pulling from this vast array of media representations, a more nuanced discourse is seen.

In the case of the representations of these athletes, I argue that mainstream media crafts the dominant discourse. I define mainstream media as major news outlets that cover the WNBA such as The New York Times (NYT) and local outlets in cities that have WNBA teams. I have also included sports specific outlets such as Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) as an additional source. I chose to define mainstream media broadly to address a variety of issues, one of which being access. Traditional newspaper outlets, such as the NYT, are paywalled and limits who has access to the stories that they write. To define mainstream media discourse solely through outlets that require subscriptions, would be placing value in only those who can afford to access them. Other outlets such as ESPN, are free but they have their own limitations. They are extremely limited in their coverage of women's sports and do not keep archival records about them in the same ways that they do men's sports. This created a barrier when attempting to source the articles for this analysis solely from sports specific outlets. When

it came to Black WNBA players who present as masculine specifically, coverage was even more limited. According to Isard and Melton, these players “received an average of just 44 media mentions. Meanwhile, white athletes who present more masculine receive more than five times that amount (an average of 212).”<sup>59</sup> This lack of coverage has fundamentally shaped my approach to this project and forced me to get creative with my methods. Although the lack of coverage is not the focus of this project, the general silence surrounding women’s sports is another manifestation of misogyny and has been well documented in other studies. The common threads between the outlets chosen to constitute mainstream media are their popularity and influence. Because of that, I argue that they shape the dominant narrative surrounding women’s sports and more specifically the Black queer WNBA players that are the focus of this work. Smaller niche outlets are less visible to the casual viewer. Instead, they may be outlets that fans of women’s sports or the WNBA in particular have sought out. Because they are less popular and have a more engaged and specific audience, I argue that they play less of a role in shaping the dominant discourse surrounding Black queer athletes. That is not to say that those representations are unimportant but instead they, along with the social media of the athletes, contribute to a counter-discourse.

Players’ social media is the emphasis of this analysis because it is one of the few places where players are able to define their identity and shape discourses about themselves and their fellow players. These representations are not only counternarratives but resistant narratives. Many players do not have the opportunity to speak with the media in interviews or in other places where they would be able to assert their own voices and shape the narratives being crafted about them. Although these social media posts do not have the same reach that large news outlets

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<sup>59</sup> Isard and Melton, 2021.

do, they are still a powerful and ever-growing tool at the athletes' disposal. Initially, I was focused on self-representation solely through social media but through my research I have found that their social media efforts are bolstered by individual, oftentimes independent, journalists that specifically cover women's sports or the WNBA itself. There is a sort of partnership between the players and these journalists that is mutually beneficial. The journalists create a more niche platform that not only covers women's sports but provides insight and access that stretches further than the court. It is not simply that the journalists provide this platform but that they care to hear and tell the stories of the athletes in their own words. The athletes trust these journalists with their stories because of the way they handle them. It is not an attempt to push a narrative that is marketable, but instead to tell stories that accurately reflect the athletes' experiences and do not distort their representation.

The scope of this project spans from 2015 to the present. The goal is to see contemporarily how these athletes are represented as the WNBA heads into its 26th season. The WNBA experienced a shift within the first two decades of the league. It changed and adapted due to the needs of the league, what was most profitable, and the organizing led by the athletes themselves. It is helpful to look at the ways that the league itself has changed because it allows us to see the larger trends in the way that athletes have been represented by the league itself and the way that it influences the outside media representations of these athletes.<sup>60</sup>

I took multiple approaches to collect my research. Initially, I conducted an online search related to the WNBA. I set up Google Alerts for the WNBA; some of the key players that I

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<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Abrams and Natalie Weiner. "How the Most Socially Progressive Pro League Got that Way." *The New York Times*. October 18, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/sports/basketball/wnba-loeffler-protest-kneeling.html>. Natalie Weiner. "Sue Wicks, the First Out WNBA Player, on the Activism of the League." *Fanbyte*. October 30, 2020. <https://www.fanbyte.com/features/sue-wicks-out-gay-wnba-player/>. McDonald, 2000. Lyndsey D'Arcangelo. "The WNBA's LGBTQ+ Evolution," *Just Women's Sports*. June 24, 2021. <https://justwomenssports.com/this-is-peoples-truth-the-wnbas-lgbtq-evolution/>.

wanted to focus on based upon their race, sexuality, and gender expression; and for specific WNBA teams. This approach allowed me to get updates on articles as they were being published. Although this provided a broad return, it was useful to see what kind of articles were being published, from what outlets, and how frequently news on the WNBA was being reported. In the formal search, I used various combinations of key words such as “WNBA”, “race”, “gender”, “sexuality”, “representation”, “aggression”, “coming-out”, “pioneer”, “suspension” and “controversy” in conjunction with the names of specific Black queer players or WNBA teams. Another strategy used was to identify beat writers, specialized journalists that focus on a particular issue or organization, that cover the WNBA as a whole or specific WNBA teams from multiple publications and trace articles backwards. The strategy of back-tracing was particularly helpful when looking for independent journalists who write about the WNBA in ways that contribute to a counter-discourse. Many of those journalists have their work in a wide range of publications. Some of those publications are niche while others are publications that house mainstream articles as well. This contradiction in the type of reporting was contextualized through what section these articles were found. Instead of them being under the sports heading, they were often listed under alternative headings such as opinion pieces. The last strategy was another form of back-tracing. I found that many of the articles that contributed to a counter-discourse were either directly in response to, or made mention of, reporting that was discriminatory. Through their critique of other articles, these authors had already begun to identify, name, and address the misrepresentation and mistreatment of these players. I chose to conduct searches in this way instead of through academic databases because they were limited in their returns. Articles from ESPN, BR, and Sports Illustrated for example were not housed within these databases.

After selecting and analyzing the texts, I narrowed my focus to texts that demonstrated the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. The articles were separated into two initial categories, mainstream and counter, based upon where they were published; how much they centered the voice of the athlete or team that was being reported on; and if the language reproduced hegemonic discourses of race, gender, and sexuality or if it resisted it.

One of the major ethical concerns within this analysis is my own role in potentially (mis)representing the athletes that I discuss within this project. Since I have not conducted interviews with players, I am interpreting existing representations of them and providing my own through my analysis. I believe it is important to consider the way that I represent these athletes especially because there is not any way that they can actively represent themselves within my project. Specifically, I pay attention to the way that I speak about the athletes and make sure not to impose any labels upon them that they do not claim for themselves. Some of these athletes have varying degrees to which they are “out”, and this project is not about arguing for anyone’s queerness but instead thinking critically about the way that race impacts the representation of queer athletes and how they resist those images through self-representation. This concern speaks to why my emphasis is on the athlete’s self-representation. I want to be able to center the players’ voices as much as possible. My goal is not to offer my own representation but instead to highlight the misogynoir present within mainstream media’s representation and point the folks that engage with my work towards alternative representations and ones that are more accurate. I have attempted to counteract this by focusing heavily on the way that the players represent themselves through the use of social media and their relationship with particular media members. I want to acknowledge those media members as active contributors to this project. I see them, in addition to the athletes, as co-researchers although they will never directly engage with this project. They have done the heavy lifting by seeking out, recording, and uplifting the stories of

the players. My work is possible because of theirs and falls within their legacy of resistance. The immediacy of their impact cannot be overstated and provides a compelling point of contact for further research.

### Third Quarter: Full-Court Press

#### *Introduction*

In “Make This the Season We End Discriminatory Sports Coverage,” Risa F. Isard and E. Nicole Melton examined the disparities in media coverage for BIPOC and white athletes within the WNBA. Although Black women make up the overwhelming majority of the league, white women received more media coverage even during a season that was dedicated to racial equality.<sup>61</sup> The disparity in WNBA media coverage becomes even more uneven when it comes to Black players who present as more masculine. The lack of representation is about more than developing their celebrity status or being recognized for their play. It has a direct impact on economic disparities between white and Black players. Isard and Melton’s research speaks to the silence and erasure of Black athletes within the WNBA although they make up a substantial portion of the league. Their erasure is one manifestation of misogynoir in mainstream media. I want to push the idea of media representation further by arguing that there is not just a disparity in media mentions but also the type of representation that *is* present.

Scholars such as Zenquis and Mwaniki have already begun this work by analyzing impact of nation and immigration in the construction of Blackness in the representation of WNBA players Nneka and Chiney Ogwumike.<sup>62</sup> I take a different approach by centering queerness within my analysis. I use the following examples to key in on the way that misogynoir, colorism, and heteronormativity pervades women’s basketball and the mainstream media that covers the WNBA while paying particular attention to the way that race, sexuality, and performance of masculinity impacts these representations. Specifically, these examples highlight

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<sup>61</sup> Risa F. Isard and E. Nicole Melton, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Zenquis and Mwaniki, 2019.



how Black WNBA players, particularly Black queer WNBA players, are depicted as aggressive, combative, naturally athletic, and unable to feel pain.

### *Mainstream Media Analysis*

“C’mon, she’s 300 pounds” is what Connecticut Sun coach Curt Miller yelled to a referee during a May 2021 game against the Las Vegas Aces. Miller said this in reference to then Aces star, Liz Cambage, in an attempt to argue a foul call. Miller’s comment is informed by anti-fat and anti-Black ideologies. In *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, Da’Shaun L. Harrison argues that anti-Blackness should be understood as anti-fatness and vice versa. Harrison describes the ways that “the world has normalized the teachings that fat Black people are not Desirable and, thus, fat and Black bodies are deserving of the abuse they endure” and that “anti-fatness is coercive in that it teaches people to believe that the bodies of fat Black folks are only supposed to endure pain.”<sup>63</sup> Miller argued against a foul call on the Sun on the basis of Cambage’s height and weight. Miller exaggerates Cambage’s weight, she is 6’8 and 235, as justification for her apparent inability to be harmed by fouls and to depict her as inherently being the aggressor. Although he only explicitly comments on her weight, Harrison becomes helpful in understanding how anti-Blackness and anti-fatness are intimately linked. Miller’s comment draws on both of these ideologies as justification for Cambage’s ability to tolerate pain. Their text allows us to think broadly about the ways that Black athletes’ height, weight, race, and color impacts how physical their opponents think they can be with them and the calls that they get from referees. They are seen as having an unfair advantage or innate strength; that fat Black bodies do not experience pain; and they do not deserve protection or care. Their pain is

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<sup>63</sup> Harrison, 2021.

oftentimes dismissed and excused because their bodies are seen as having a higher tolerance for pain.

The ideologies of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness were not just present within Miller's comment but in the media, coverage following the incident. Articles describing Miller's comment and Cambage's response frequently used passive voice when talking about Miller. Additionally, they would frame Cambage as the aggressor for the Instagram video that she posted detailing the comments made by Miller and her feelings about them.<sup>64</sup> For example, the title of an *Insider* article about the conflict reads "WNBA Star Rips Opposing Coach for Commenting on Her Weight During Game and Says He Is Lucky it Didn't Happen Somewhere Else."<sup>65</sup> The use of "rips" and "says he is lucky it didn't happen somewhere else" positions Cambage as the aggressor while the use of "commenting" makes Miller's words seem benign. That portrayal continues throughout the article with the first line reading "Don't mess with Liz Cambage" and describing her Instagram video as "scathing."<sup>66</sup> Even when the author seems to give Cambage a compliment by calling her the "dominant Las Vegas Aces center," it contributes to the image of Cambage as aggressive. Lastly, the author takes Cambage saying "he is lucky it didn't happen somewhere else" out of context. The way that Cambage's quote is framed makes it seem as if she were thinking about being physically violent when in her video, she contextualizes her statement by saying that she did not verbally respond although she is known for talking on the court.

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<sup>64</sup> W Lead. @WNBALead. Twitter Post. May 23, 2021. [https://twitter.com/WNBALead/status/1396671594324533248?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1396671594324533248%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_%ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.insider.com%2Fwnba-coach-curt-miller-apologizes-liz-cambage-weight-comment-2021-5](https://twitter.com/WNBALead/status/1396671594324533248?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1396671594324533248%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_%ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.insider.com%2Fwnba-coach-curt-miller-apologizes-liz-cambage-weight-comment-2021-5)

<sup>65</sup> Meredith Cash. "WNBA Star Rips Opposing Coach for Commenting on Her Weight During Game and Says He is Lucky it Didn't Happen Somewhere Else," *Insider*. May 24, 2021. <https://www.insider.com/wnba-coach-curt-miller-apologizes-liz-cambage-weight-comment-2021-5>

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Additionally, Cambage notes that this was said to her while she is at work, but it is not mentioned until almost the end of the article. With the entire context, it is clear that Cambage is noting that Miller's comments should be considered workplace harassment. If she was not an athlete but instead worked in an office, it would be recognized as such. Cambage describes Miller's comments as "protected abuse" because the dynamics between players and coaches means she cannot say anything back. These quotes from Cambage's video were not included in the article and leaves the reader without the full context and framing of Cambage's feelings. Instead, the media framing perpetuates the idea that Black women - particularly tall muscular women in the WNBA - are aggressive, inherently strong, and can tolerate more pain. Their representation in this way impacts the way that they are treated on the court. This representation can affect the level of physicality that players use against them and if referees call fouls for them during the game. This introduces the athletes to the possibility of injury that can have lasting effects outside of basketball. Although Cambage is not queer, she is a Black woman, and her representation does not solely impact her. It sets the precedent for how other Black women's bodies within the WNBA and more broadly are understood.

Cambage is not the only athlete that is misrepresented within mainstream media. Many athletes are not seen in nuanced ways within mainstream media reporting. Their stories and representations lack context and nuance similarly to Cambage. For example, former Atlanta Dream guard Courtney Williams was involved in an altercation outside of a club that resulted in her release from the Dream after she posted a video of the fight months later. Most reports solely focused on Williams' apology and used language that sensationalized the altercation in multiple cases referring to it as a "brawl."<sup>67</sup> By using the term brawl, the journalists play into racist

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<sup>67</sup> Jack Maloney. "WNBA Suspends Courtney Williams, Crystal Bradford for Roles in Fight Outside Atlanta Club Earlier This Year," *CBS Sports* November 24, 2021. 9:16 a.m EST. <https://www.cbssports.com/wnba/news/wnba->

perceptions of Black women as overly aggressive. Because Williams is a Black masculine presenting queer woman, this narrative is read easily onto her body and circulated throughout the media. Only a handful of journalists pull at a different thread within their reporting and suggest that Williams she was acting in defense of herself and her people. The idea that Williams could have been acting in self-defense was either unmentioned or glossed over. One of the few reports that hinted at this possibility was an ESPN article by Mechelle Voepel who writes that in her YouTube video Williams “appeared to make light of the incident, but she also voiced concern about being outnumbered.”<sup>68</sup> This was the only hint within the article that suggests Williams might have been acting in self-defense. This thread is furthered in an article that appeared on *Just Women’s Sports* that stated, “The altercation reportedly began when someone made a comment about Williams’ girlfriend, prompting the guard to respond with her teammates serving as backup.”<sup>69</sup> None of these articles explicitly name self-defense as a possibility but when you read them in conjunction with one another they paint a different picture. I highlight these moments in an attempt to read the silences in this coverage. Nowhere does it state that this could have been a situation where a homophobic comment towards Williams’s girlfriend may have been the motivating factor. No space was left for Williams to speak in detail about how she felt that she was outnumbered or about what motivated the altercation. Williams instead was immediately marked as guilty because her apology was centered, and the framing of her altercation was sensationalized.

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[suspends-courtney-williams-crystal-bradford-for-roles-in-fight-outside-atlanta-club-earlier-this-year/](https://sports.yahoo.com/dream-guard-courtney-williams-apologizes-after-posting-video-fight-atlanta-food-truck-012628536.html). Ryan Young. “Agent Confirms Dream Will Not Re-sign Courtney Williams After She Posted Video of Fight at Atlanta Food Truck.” *Yahoo! Sports*. October 4, 2021. <https://sports.yahoo.com/dream-guard-courtney-williams-apologizes-after-posting-video-fight-atlanta-food-truck-012628536.html>

<sup>68</sup> Voepel, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Emma Hruby. “Courtney Williams Apologizes for Atlanta Dream Fight Video.” *Just Women’s Sports*. October 4, 2021. <https://justwomenssports.com/courtney-williams-apologizes-for-atlanta-dream-fight-video/>.

One of the WNBA athletes that has been most impacted by media misrepresentations is Brittney Griner. The 6'9 center for the Phoenix Mercury is a Black masculine presenting lesbian woman with long locs, tattoos, and a deep voice. Throughout her career she has been likened to a man, described as overly aggressive, and had her body scrutinized.<sup>70</sup> She was frequently portrayed in ways that were homophobic and racist. In a 2015 *New York Times* article about Griner's marriage to her first wife, and former WNBA player Glori Johnson, Griner is frequently referenced as "gender blending."<sup>71</sup> Griner never describes herself as anything other than a woman, but the article attempts to position her outside of womanhood due to her masculine gender presentation. The author also chooses to frame the wedding as a "marriage between a gay woman and a straight woman."<sup>72</sup> The choice to frame their wedding like this plays into gay panic and the idea that a Black masculine lesbian would be able to "turn" a straight woman gay. This fear is one that is rooted in homophobia. Her race, physical appearance, and performance of masculinity is not read as being present within womanhood. In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam offers a more nuanced understanding of gender, one that is inclusive of masculinity in female gender presentation. He chronicles the history of various female masculinities not to make the argument that it is at this point in time that masculinity must be incorporated into our understanding of womanhood but instead that masculine women have always been present and have contributed to the contemporary construction of masculinity.<sup>73</sup> It is through Halberstam's more expansive understanding of gender that Griner should be contextualized. Her masculinity is

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<sup>70</sup> Kate Fagan and Morty Ain. "Brittney Griner Opens Up and Bares All." *ESPNW*. July 6, 2015. [https://www.espn.com/espnw/story/\\_/id/13176422/phoenix-mercury-center-brittney-griner-opens-bares-all-espn-magazine-body-issue](https://www.espn.com/espnw/story/_/id/13176422/phoenix-mercury-center-brittney-griner-opens-bares-all-espn-magazine-body-issue)

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Jack Halberstam. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998.

one that is performed, not one that is enforced upon her, but should not be used to exclude her from womanhood which is an identity that she claims.

Black queer WNBA players speak back to their misrepresentation from mainstream media but also to the misrepresentations of their identities by the WNBA itself. In an article written for *The Athletic*, Tamryn Spruill interviewed current WNBA players about their representation. One of the players she spoke with was Layshia Clarendon (she/he/they) who

characterizes the league demographically as having a strong representation of 'queer women of color.' That fact, coupled with a long-standing cultural animus toward athletic women, queer women and black women, creates what Clarendon calls 'layers on top of layers' of challenges the league has faced in its attempts to market the league and its players to the masses.<sup>74</sup>

Clarendon notes that initially the WNBA failed them in their marketing. Clarendon, like many others, acknowledges when Griner entered the WNBA as the turning point for the acceptance of Black queer players within the league. Change was largely generated by the openness of the players to asserting their identities and their place within the league and its marketing. Clarendon notes that "We've preached, like, over and over again that they need to market us more authentically. And that's everything from, like, the queerness side of it to the blackness side of it."<sup>75</sup> Clarendon names the way that these athletes are looking to be represented in nuanced ways and their fight to do so. This article is an example that media misrepresentations do not stand alone. WNBA players and particular journalists are actively resisting through the creation of counternarratives. These narratives center athlete voices and self-representation. They are a large

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<sup>74</sup> Tamryn Spruill. "The WNBA's Long Road to Embracing and Marketing the 'Layers on Top of Layers' of Player Identities." *The Athletic*. June 21, 2019. <https://theathletic.com/1040613/2019/06/21/the-wnbas-long-road-to-embracing-and-marketing-the-layers-on-top-of-layers-of-player-identities/>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

tool at the disposal of the athletes. In the following section, I examine the ways that athletes use social media and their relationships with individual journalists to achieve self-representation.

### *Social Media and Self-Representation*

“Basketball is a part of my life but by no means does anything that I do on the court make me feel less or more about myself. It’s a sport. It’s our job and it’s fun.”<sup>76</sup>

“You remain a good person to people... I just did not let people change who I was or my belief in myself. So, if you stick to who you are. If who you are is a decent person. You will be okay. Treat other people well whether things are going well for you or not.”<sup>77</sup>

- Sydney Colson, Las Vegas Aces guard and seven-year WNBA veteran

“I mean I bring my family with me. My daddy came with me overseas.”<sup>78</sup>

“Imma do it my way because they not gone be able to deny me.”<sup>79</sup>

- Courtney Williams, Connecticut Sun guard and 2021 WNBA All-Star

“What you put into the world it will always give back to you. Like I believe that if you do things the right way out of the goodness and kindness of your heart God will always provide.”<sup>80</sup>

“Me, I’m goofy. I’m a small-town kid. I love my family and Imma always make sure everyone’s good. Like if you my people Imma always make sure you’re good.”<sup>81</sup>

- Natasha Cloud, Washington Mystics guard and 2019 WNBA Champion

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<sup>76</sup> HighlightHER, “All on the Table: Episode 1 - hosted by Ari Chambers,” YouTube Video. (45:02) February 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBf8pZ-R2ZA>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> HighlightHER (March, 2022).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

WNBA players craft a counter-discourse about themselves, their media representations, and their treatment through their use of social media. By examining Black queer WNBA players use of social media and other tools of self-representation, I found that athletes are not only naming the discrimination that they experience within media, by brands, and by the WNBA but they are utilizing social media for self-representation and articulation. While social media can be a liberatory space, these athletes also understand it to be a highly surveilled space that reinforces misogynoir and heteronormativity which makes them selective in how they engage with it. These choices are often driven by the economic strain they face and the potential gain if they can present themselves in ways that produce more economic opportunities. Finally, I found that players' individual relationships with journalists who are invested in telling their stories are an integral part of athletes' self-representation. The initial focus of this research was to look at the role that social media plays in players self-representation, but as the project progressed, it became apparent that the role of independent journalists was integral to the construction of these counternarratives. Players have cultivated relationships with journalists that are invested in telling their stories. These are symbiotic relationships that are mutually beneficial to players and journalists because they facilitate spaces for players to tell their own stories. They also provide the journalists with an angle to women's sports reporting that is significantly underdeveloped, especially within the WNBA. By taking this approach, they are appealing to the invested WNBA fan by facilitating access to the players in ways that are normally reserved for big name players - primarily white, cis, and feminine presenting - that have been canonized within WNBA discourse as the faces of the league such as Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi, and Breanna Stewart. This access not only provides a more nuanced perspective on the league but subverts the misogynoir and enforcement of hetero/homonormativity that is present within mainstream WNBA reporting.



I argue that this counter discourse should be understood through the lens of disidentifications. The way that Black queer WNBA players represent themselves such as the way they dress, the way they speak, the identities that they claim publicly, and the narratives that they craft about themselves, and their peers is an example of “reformulating the world *through* the performance of politics.”<sup>82</sup> These athletes are crafting spaces of resistance through the way that they represent themselves and articulate their racial and gender identities. This chapter overall functions to explore the way that these forms of self-representation are resistant, complex and nuanced narratives. I use both resistant and complex narratives to describe and highlight the nuance of these forms of representation. I argue that these athletes' forms of self-representation are resistant narratives that come in response to the misogynoir and enforcement of heteronormativity that they experience within mainstream media. They may not be in direct conversation with any one comment or publication, but instead speak to their overarching misrepresentation. This misrepresentation should be understood not solely on an individual level but also a collective misrepresentation of communities that they are a part of. Therefore, the players’ resistance should be understood individually and communally as well. Resistant narratives are always relational but only understanding the players self-representation as such does not recognize their full agency. Instead, I want to complicate the understanding of these narratives to also recognize that players representations are complex and not solely tied to their oppression. These are the moments where the players are simply existing and showing up in space in ways that feel good to them. It is important to understand their self-representation as something that is ultimately for themselves instead of always in relationship to their oppression. Oftentimes the narratives that players create are both of these simultaneously and examining

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<sup>82</sup> Muñoz, 12.

them together crafts a distinct counter-discourse to the mainstream discourse surrounding Black queer WNBA players.

The following sections take a closer look at each of the main themes in relationship to three current WNBA players: Jonquel Jones, Natasha Cloud, and Courtney Williams. Each player was chosen for three reasons: they are currently prominent players in the WNBA; they self-identify as Black queer<sup>83</sup> women; and they have used social media and interviews as opportunities to craft their own narratives about themselves. Additionally, the final section will explore the relationship between these players and other current/former WNBA players with sports journalist Arielle (Ari) Chambers.

*Jonquel Jones - Connecticut Sun forward and 2021 WNBA Most Valuable Player*

In 2020 the WNBA and the WNBPA ratified a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA). The terms of the CBA brought with it changes on all fronts including raising the “maximum salary to \$215,000 per year, with players eligible to make up to \$500,000 annual between league marketing agreements, additional incentives and mid-season tournament cash prizes.”<sup>84</sup> This salary increase is representative of the maximum in 2020, by 2022, the current WNBA season, the max salary is \$228,000 with the minimum salary of \$60,000.<sup>85</sup> According to Spotrac, the largest online sports team and player contract online resource, only 14 of the 144 players in the WNBA make more than 200,000.<sup>86</sup> The average WNBA player made about \$120,000 in the 2020-2021 season. The low salaries leave WNBA players searching for other

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<sup>83</sup> Queer is used here as an umbrella term to encompass both the lesbian and bisexual identities that the players have used when speaking about themselves in interviews or in their social media posts.

<sup>84</sup> Clare Brennan. “Two Years After WNBA’s CBA Nneka Ogumike Continues the Fight.” *Just Women’s Sports*. February 11, 2022. May 4, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> WNBA. “Women’s National Basketball Association Collective Bargaining Agreement.” *WNBPA*. <https://wnbpa.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/WNBA-WNBPA-CBA-2020-2027.pdf>

<sup>86</sup> Spotrac. “WNBA Salary Rankings.” *Spotrac*. (Accessed: May 4, 2022). <https://www.spotrac.com/wnba/rankings/>

opportunities to supplement their income. Even the players at the top of the league, like reigning Most Valuable Player Jonquel Jones, are looking for and relying on alternative sources of income to supplement their low salaries. In a series of tweets she states,

It's all a popularity contest and politics in [women's basketball]. In [men's basketball] you just gotta be the best. In [women's basketball] you gotta be the best player, best looking, most marketable, most IG followers, just to sit at the endorsement table. Thank God for overseas because my bag would've been fumbled.<sup>87</sup>

Jones speaks to the difficulty in gaining endorsement deals as a women's basketball player. She immediately highlights the gendered differences in the way that women's players are evaluated for potential endorsements. For men, Jones feels they simply have to be good at their sport but women athletes' viability as brand partners hinges upon their on-court performance, appearance, marketability, and social media presence. In terms of performance, Jones should be at the top of lists for brand partnerships considering she was named 2021 WNBA MVP but in her subsequent tweet she names why she is overlooked. She states, "Not to mention me being a black lesbian woman. Lord the seats disappearing from the table as I speak."<sup>88</sup> Jones puts her identity as a Black lesbian woman in conversation with what it means to be the "best looking" and explicitly draws connections with that impacting her marketability.

Harrison explores what it means for "Desire/ability [to be seen] as a form of systemic violence" that Black, particularly Black fat, people can never attain.<sup>89</sup> Harrison crafts a complex

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<sup>87</sup> Jonquel Jones. @jus242, Twitter post, February 18, 2022, 1:16 a.m., <https://twitter.com/jus242/status/1494571538720436229>

<sup>88</sup> Jonquel Jones. @jus242, Twitter post, February 18, 2022, 1:18 a.m., <https://twitter.com/jus242/status/1494572095942152194>

<sup>89</sup> Harrison (2021), 12.

argument that focuses on the construction of “Prettiness,” “Beauty,” and “Ugly” as social categories that “name who does and does not have access to Desire Capital.”<sup>90</sup> Harrison defines those who have Desire Capital as “who owns or embodies more or less of the identities that grant one access, power, and resources,” which is determined within the United States, and elsewhere, by desirability.<sup>91</sup> Harrison argues that desirability is “predicated on anti-Blackness, anti-fatness, (trans)misogynoir, cissexism, queer antagonism, and all other structural violence.”<sup>92</sup> Harrison repeatedly redirects concepts that are understood to be subjective, such as beauty, to be understood as inherently constructed by power. Throughout the text the capitalization of words such as Pretty, Beautiful, and Ugly do this redirecting work. I have adopted their system of capitalization to serve as the same reminder throughout this section. Therefore, Beautiful with a capital B emphasizes the “structural and often interpersonal benefits of being Beautiful.”<sup>93</sup> According to Harrison, people are considered Beautiful “when they are cisgender, when they are thin, when they are not disfigured”<sup>94</sup> additionally when they are white or are light skinned. Harrison’s framework of Desire/ability as capital is exemplified in Jones’ tweets and which she directly connects to her economic opportunities.

If Beauty is defined by whiteness and heteronormative ideals, then Jones does not have access to Desire Capital as a dark skin Black lesbian woman who is masculine presenting. Desire Capital is needed to be perceived as marketable from major companies, brands, and the WNBA itself. Without this form of capital, Jones lacks access to opportunities that otherwise her basketball skill would afford her. Conversely, WNBA players such as Te’ya Cooper - a guard who

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 9.

was recently waived by the Los Angeles Sparks before entering her third year in the league -<sup>95</sup> is one of the few WNBA athletes signed to Jordan Brand.<sup>96</sup> Cooper, although much less accomplished on the court than Jones, has the largest social media following of any WNBA player across all social media platforms totaling 3.5 million.<sup>97</sup> Her large social media following is undoubtedly connected to her athletic abilities and out-going personality but is bolstered by her access to Desire Capital as a cis, straight, light skin, and feminine presenting woman. Cooper was able to monetarily capitalize on this combination by securing large endorsements such as the one with Jordan Brand. Without large endorsements, Jones is left with limited options and has chosen to play overseas in the offseason where women's basketball players have historically been able to make four to five times their WNBA salaries.<sup>98</sup> The Russian team that Jones plays for, UMMC Ekaterinburg, is known for being one of the highest paying teams and attracting top talent such as fellow WNBA players: Brittney Griner, Breanna Stewart, Courtney Vandersloot, Allie Quigley, and Emma Messeman.<sup>99</sup>

While Jones' tweets highlight the discrimination that she experiences, they also provide her with a space for self-definition and expression. Through naming how she experiences discrimination, she simultaneously asserts her identity as a Black lesbian woman and her status

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<sup>95</sup> Jason Owens. "Sparks Announce Surprise Release of Te'a Cooper Months After Signing Her to New Deal." *Yahoo!Sports*, Yahoo!, May 4, 2022, 2:56 p.m., <https://sports.yahoo.com/sparks-announce-surprise-release-of-tea-cooper-months-after-signing-her-to-new-deal-195613941.html>

<sup>96</sup> Nike. "Five WNBA Athletes Join the Jordan Brand Family." *Nike*. December 18, 2020. <https://news.nike.com/news/jordan-brand-wnba-signing-jordin-canada-te-a-cooper-crystal-dangerfield-satou-sabally>

<sup>97</sup> Mirjam Swanson. "Sparks Re-sign Popular Guard Te'a Cooper." *The Orange County Register*. January 20, 2022 4:24 p.m., <https://www.ocregister.com/2022/01/20/sparks-re-sign-popular-guard-tea-cooper-2/#:~:text=According%20to%20Sports%20Pro%20Media,her%2018th%20overall%20in%202020>.

<sup>98</sup> Deon J. Hampton. "It's Not Uncommon for WNBA Players like Brittney Griner to Compete in Russia. Here's Why They Do It." *NBC News*. March 7, 2022, 6:11 p.m. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/not-uncommon-wnba-players-brittney-griner-compete-russia-rcna19068>

<sup>99</sup> Alexa Philippou. "Connecticut Sun's Jonquel Jones Says She'll Continue to Play Overseas in WNBA Offseason." *WNBA. ESPN*. April 21, 2022. [https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/33778374/connecticut-sun-jonquel-jones-says-continue-play-overseas-wnba-offseason](https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/33778374/connecticut-sun-jonquel-jones-says-continue-play-overseas-wnba-offseason).

as one of the top players in the WNBA. When discussing playing overseas she references UMMC Ekaterinburg saying she is glad they are paying her “what I’m worth and see the value in me simply being one of the best at my craft.”<sup>100</sup> Jones’ statement expresses her confidence in her abilities and that she feels that she is underappreciated by companies, brands, and potentially even the WNBA itself. Through her tweets Jones is able to insert herself into the discourse surrounding the WNBA, WNBA players, and endorsement deals that she was previously excluded from. Jones created visibility for herself through her use of social media and her insistence upon not being erased directly combats the silencing found in mainstream media’s coverage of women’s basketball. Jones’ tweets did not go unacknowledged. Instead, journalists such as Ari Chambers and Khristina Williams<sup>101</sup> each amplified Jones’ critique by quote tweeting her original posts. Quote tweeting means the original tweet is being reposted in its entirety with the author’s name and twitter profile visible. Additionally, the person who is quote tweeting can add their own commentary that sits above the original tweet and puts the two tweets in direct conversation with one another. Chambers response to Jones’ tweet about being a Black lesbian woman reads,

Nah because you are the standard. I hope companies/brands see the series of tweets and wake tf up. MVP for a reason. The marketability is there and it’s INTERNATIONAL appeal/reach too.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Jonquel Jones. @jus242, Twitter post, February 18, 2022, 1:17 a.m.  
<https://twitter.com/jus242/status/1494571724066758663>

<sup>101</sup> Khristina Williams. @Khristina, Twitter post, February 18, 2022. 2:53 a.m.  
<https://twitter.com/Khristina/status/1494595905231540227?s=20&t=mIeXxdC5bV2aRPdR1YJXjQ>

<sup>102</sup> Arielle Chambers. @ariivory. Twitter post, February 18, 2022. 6:46 a.m.  
<https://twitter.com/ariivory/status/1494654543476449283>

Chambers is a sports journalist and founder of HighlightHER - Bleacher Report's women's platform and fastest growing women's sports platform in 2020<sup>103</sup> - who has become one of the leading voices in coverage of the WNBA. Her tweet affirms Jones' identity and her performance as a basketball player. Chambers highlights Jones' potential international appeal for marketability because she is Bahamian. Chambers further affirms Jones' identity through this acknowledgement and also shows how the reach of the WNBA stretches further than the United States, through the players who proudly represent their countries. The tweet serves as a reminder that the Black women within the WNBA should not be seen as a homogenous group. Their experiences vary and those identities fundamentally shape how they understand themselves. This nuanced understanding of Jones' Blackness is apparent in the way that she utilizes her social media. Her Instagram biography reads in list form what she wants her followers or anyone who visits her page to know most: "6'7 Center for the Connecticut Sun (WNBA)/UMMC Ekaterinburg (Russia)", "Proud Bahamian", "GW Alum", "Dog Mom", and "Love my community."<sup>104</sup> Each line has a corresponding emoji that exemplifies the words that come before it. Accompanying "love my community" is a rainbow flag that indicates that Jones is a member of the queer community. In her bio, she defines herself in a range of ways. She incorporates her social identities, her profession, her educational background, and even lets the public get a glimpse of her personal life by mentioning her pets.

Chambers used her own platform in a similar way to uplift the identities that Jones has articulated are important to her through her social media. Jones and Chambers interactions show the importance of relationships between athletes and the journalists that cover them. Chambers

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<sup>103</sup> Arielle Chambers. "Bio". Arielle Chambers. <https://www.ariellechambers.com/bio>

<sup>104</sup> Jonquel Jones. @jus242, Instagram post, (accessed: May 7, 2022, 2:38 p.m.) <https://instagram.com/jus242?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>

specifically seeks to use “storytelling to amplify the voices of women and magnify her excellence” through her journalism.<sup>105</sup> Chambers’ approach to covering the WNBA allows space for the athletes to tell their stories in nuanced ways and represent themselves. This approach extends to how she also uses her platform, including her social media. By quote tweeting Jones’ tweet, she keeps the original words of Jones intact while simultaneously contributing to the discourse herself. Additionally, she gives Jones’ tweet and Twitter profile exposure through her engagement. Chamber’s centers not only the words of the athlete but Jones herself through this exposure. Chambers could have replied to the tweet, tweeted her own commentary separately, or simply retweeted it. The choice to quote tweet is an intentional one that privileges the athlete’s ability to represent themselves and places importance in both what it is that Jones is saying and how she is saying it. By choosing to put herself in conversation with Jones, Chambers is amplifying Jones’s critique and acknowledging that it is noteworthy. Jones’ critique may have gone unnoticed had Chambers and other journalists engaged with her differently or not at all. Instead, it has become something that is referenced in mainstream media as well.<sup>106</sup> Chambers’ commentary does more than help propel Jones’ into mainstream media but also provides a take that is missing in mainstream media as well. Chambers’ attention to Jones’ international marketing ability adds a layer of nuance to the discussion that is lost, and often absent, when talking about lack of economic opportunities for WNBA players.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Cassandra Negley. “WNBA MVP Jonquel Jones Says Women’s Hoops Endorsements About ‘Popularity Contest and Politics’” *Yahoo! Sports*. February 18, 2022. [https://sports.yahoo.com/wnba-mvp-jonquel-jones-says-womens-hoop-endorsements-about-popularity-contest-and-politics-162555596.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xiLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAjvSWzcwaf-KCWvJOoqamygFLv7HImNDwdpWRI9PFT5En8-TgqdKiOotGXA\\_hfr2YLI7iq8RU\\_eU1BsarKbnZnQf2WsDXqkP\\_fS6LqsQeTli9ZOCox9qAOi5oZXXa-J09ArUBN\\_5xVf04qvNkpNmxnOehjeTqfgqpRw7jAN2Tt](https://sports.yahoo.com/wnba-mvp-jonquel-jones-says-womens-hoop-endorsements-about-popularity-contest-and-politics-162555596.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xiLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAjvSWzcwaf-KCWvJOoqamygFLv7HImNDwdpWRI9PFT5En8-TgqdKiOotGXA_hfr2YLI7iq8RU_eU1BsarKbnZnQf2WsDXqkP_fS6LqsQeTli9ZOCox9qAOi5oZXXa-J09ArUBN_5xVf04qvNkpNmxnOehjeTqfgqpRw7jAN2Tt)



*Natasha Cloud - Washington Mystics guard and 2019 WNBA Champion*

“A lot of times people try to put this label of role model on you. Do you like it?” asks Ari Chambers. Natasha Cloud, WNBA Champion and Washington Mystics guard, initially responds by describing the pressure that she felt early on in her career to be a role model. She states that there “were a lot of eyes on us... no matter what we tweet, no matter what we post, no matter what we say or do.”<sup>107</sup> Cloud begins to touch upon a recurring theme between her and the other athletes in the interview: an inability to control what is being said about them. She elaborates by saying,

People will try to create their own narratives. They try to twist your words. So, my first three years I stayed out [of it]. I didn't really say anything. I feel like once I signed my big contract with DC and I knew that was my home then I needed to use this platform.<sup>108</sup>

Within Cloud's statement she names the construction of a narrative that she does not have the power to change. Although Cloud is not naming misogynoir and heteronormativity explicitly, she does name the way that mainstream media has control over the way that athletes are represented. As exemplified in the previous chapter, the narratives by mainstream media are oftentimes framed through ideologies of misogynoir and heteronormativity so the narratives that Cloud is referencing are never benign and are actually harmful narratives. Cloud's statement shows that not only do the athletes have an awareness of the narratives being constructed about them and a willingness to name that but that they also change their behavior and the way that they interact with social media because of it.

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<sup>107</sup> HighlightHER, 45:20

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 45:35.

Social media was not a liberatory space for Cloud at the beginning of her career. It was a space that she found was highly surveilled. That surveillance impacted the way that she chose to interact with social media. She says that it was not until after she signed a big contract with her WNBA team the Washington Mystics, that she felt she could engage with social media in other ways. Financial security was a motivating factor for Cloud. The WNBA is one of the hardest leagues to become a part of with only 144 roster spots across the 12 teams. For Cloud, securing one of those spots and cementing her place within the league was her priority. She speaks to the need to fly below the radar saying that she had that “mid-major” mentality of “just trying to make it” and “just trying to keep my job” because “it’s hard to get into this league. It’s even harder to stay in this league.”<sup>109</sup> Because of the financial and job insecurity that she felt early on in her career, she was less willing to use her platform in a way that might make it more difficult to achieve that security. Cloud talks about the shift that came about once she knew she had job security with the Mystics saying,

I need to use this platform. And so, I’m turning that microscope that I felt was on me for three years into a microphone and I’m going to utilize it in that way. I’m going to use this platform that God gave me. To speak on a community that looks like me on shit that people identify with the same stuff as me.<sup>110</sup>

Cloud has been one of the leading and most outspoken voices advocating for racial justice within the WNBA over recent seasons. She sat out the 2020 WNBA season to focus on community

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 45:41.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 47:30.

organizing efforts in and around D.C. and has dedicated herself to using her platform to speak on issues that impact the various communities she is a part of.<sup>111</sup>

This is not the first time that Cloud has spoken out about the importance of using her platform and each time Cloud has continually asserted more than just her racial identity when speaking about social justice. In a 2020 *Slam* cover story, Cloud said,

I'm going to embrace being proud to be Black, to be a woman, to be bisexual. I'm going to embrace every facet of me so that you can't dim my light, and when you have that type of mindset, and that type of motivation to keep pushing forward, it becomes a snowball effect.<sup>112</sup>

Cloud's social justice activism is intimately linked to her identities and the communities that she is a part of. She frequently talks about the intersections of her identities and how they impact the way that she approaches social justice activism and her role in building Athletes Unlimited Basketball.

*Courtney Williams - Connecticut Sun guard and 2021 WNBA All-Star*

"How do you guys advocate for yourselves?" asks Ari Chambers. Courtney Williams, WNBA All-Star and Connecticut Sun guard, looks pensively at the table while rubbing her chin before answering the question. She responds with an undeniable assertion of self:

I think I be myself. Ya know what I mean? A lot of people gone say that about me. 'Court is Court.' You know what I mean? Imma be myself. Imma talk the way I talk. Imma move the way I move. Imma stay lit. Believe it.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Mike Wise. "How Washington Mystics Guard Natasha Cloud Became the WNBA's Unofficial Minister of Social Justice." *Washingtonian*. July 8, 2021. <https://www.washingtonian.com/2021/07/08/how-washington-mystics-point-guard-natasha-cloud-became-the-wnbas-unofficial-minister-of-social-justice/> (Accessed: May 1, 2022).

<sup>112</sup> Camille Buxeda. "Natasha Cloud Talks Fighting for Social Justice & Using Her Platform," *Slam*. August 26, 2020. <https://www.slamonline.com/the-magazine/natasha-cloud-story/> (Accessed: May 9, 2022)

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 42:40.

Williams ends her statement with a shrug, slight smile, and her signature phrase. She is dressed in a black hoodie with the strings tied at her neck. She continues to talk about the importance of being yourself even if other people do not like it. For her, it seems to signal to other people the surety that she has in herself and her capabilities. To emphasize her point, she runs her hand over her head - her hair is cut short, dyed blond, and faded on the sides - and says “I’m not putting back on no wig. I’m not putting the bundles back in.”<sup>114</sup> The table erupts in laughter. Each of the women seem to be recalling the period of time when Williams wore long weave, a look she has not had since soon after she was drafted into the WNBA and acknowledge the difference in her appearance. Williams continues to explain how she stays true to herself,

Don’t get the way I talk confused I got a degree too... We can talk business we can talk numbers... but I’m still gone talk the same way. I think we all are different. We all ourselves in our own way and I don’t think it should be looked at in any negative [kind of way].<sup>115</sup>

When describing how she speaks, she asserts that her speech is staying true to herself, but she simultaneously challenges the racialized and classed assumptions that people have about her because of it. By saying that she has a degree too, she is pushing against the idea that the way that you speak has any bearing on your intelligence. Patricia Hill Collins outlines how “oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group.”<sup>116</sup> As a Black woman, Williams rejects the notion that she has to speak differently for her ideas to have value.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 43:33.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 43:30.

<sup>116</sup> Hill Collins (1990), vii.

She continually speaks in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) throughout the interview and emphasizes that her choice in language is intentional.

Black feminist scholars such as June Jordan emphasize the cultural importance of AAVE and the knowledge that it produces. She argues that it is an “irreplaceable system of community intelligence” and that when we are taught to “hide our original word habits, or we completely surrender our own voice, hoping to please those who will never respect anyone different from themselves.”<sup>117</sup> When talking about the way that she speaks, Williams says that she will continue to speak the same whether she is in a professional setting or “in a room with my partna that stand onna corner.”<sup>118</sup> Williams juxtaposes one space with the other and positions herself as the bridge between the two. Through this framing, Williams not only asserts the complexities of her identity but does not place value in one space more than the other. Williams continually references her community of Folkston, Georgia throughout her interview and within her social media. By choosing not to code switch - shifting from one linguistic code to another -<sup>119</sup> in professional settings, the way she shows up stays consistent and is accessible to each of the communities that she is a part of. In “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” María Lugones describes that the most important way to be “at ease in a particular ‘world’ is by being a fluent speaker in that ‘world.’ I know all the norms that there are to be followed, I know all the words that there are to be spoken.”<sup>120</sup> Williams acknowledges the norms that are being asked of her and she is intentionally rejecting them. Williams privileges not only what she has to say but the way that she says it. Although the context that she is in has changed, Williams refuses to be a

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<sup>117</sup> June Jordan. “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan.” *Harvard Educational Review* 58.3 (September 1988): 160-161.

<sup>118</sup> HighlightHER. All on the Table: Episode 3, 43:45.

<sup>119</sup> Carlos D. Morrison. “Code-Switching.” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/code-switching>

<sup>120</sup> María Lugones. “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception” *Hypatia* 2.2 (Summer, 1987): 12.

different version of herself. By doing so she stays true to herself and does not allow for her personhood to be lost in the translation of her speech.

For Williams, things such as her more masculine dress and the way that she speaks are all intentional choices for how she wishes to represent herself. In a 2019 SB Nation profile, Frankie de la Cretaz spoke with Williams in more detail about her style. de la Cretaz writes that “Williams describes herself as dressing ‘like a little boy.’ That presentation is important to her. At the same time, she also feels like people assume her orientation because of the way she presents.”<sup>121</sup> de la Cretaz notes that Williams does not want to be “put in a box” and they seem to encapsulate that with the language that they use to describe Williams. de la Cretaz describes Williams as “being openly and visibly queer” instead of assigning her labels to describe her sexuality such as lesbian or bisexual and also does not assign labels to describe her gender presentation such as dyke or stud. Instead, de la Cretaz allows for the words that Williams has chosen for herself to be the guide of the story. Williams’ joy is centered within the article including the joy that she has when expressing herself through her clothes. de la Cretaz notes that Williams states “I’m easily best dressed in the WNBA.”<sup>122</sup> Williams not only says that the way she dresses makes her happy, but she brags that she is one of the best dressed in the WNBA. She wants to be accepted for the person that she is, not the person that is most palatable to the masses. Some public figures craft their images to meet these expectations, but Williams does not want to do that. de la Cretaz’s interview takes a distinctly queer lens to their reporting. They choose to focus on the way that Williams presents herself and explores the way that queerness shapes that presentation.

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<sup>121</sup> Britni (Frankie) de la Cretaz. “Courtney Williams is Showing the WNBA How to Let Loose.” *SB Nation*. May 23, 2019 2:30 p.m. <https://www.sbnation.com/2019/5/23/18637099/courtney-williams-connecticut-sun-trash-talk-profile>

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

Williams has also used her social media to comment on queer masculine representation in mainstream media. In a recent tweet, she commented on the *Sports Illustrated: Swimsuit Edition* article that featured WNBA players: Breanna Stewart, Nneka Ogwumike, Sue Bird, Didi Richards, and Te'a Cooper.<sup>123</sup> Each of the women are styled differently. The cuts of their swimsuits are unique to each player. Some of them are one-piece suits, some two-piece suits, some have large cut outs, and others have long sleeves. While the issue shows a range of options for what women's swimwear can look like, Williams notes a glaring absence tweeting:

I love Sports Illustrated's attempt to be more inclusive and amplify women in the W[NBA]. At the same time though it would of been raw to see a sleek lil sports bra & some shorts swaggin'. There's more than one way to look sexy, and I hope in the future we can tap into that [prayer hand emoji].<sup>124</sup>

Williams' tweet speaks to her own expression of sexiness. Williams can be seen on her Instagram account wearing something similar to what she describes on the beach and poolside.<sup>125</sup><sup>126</sup> The article and the athletes within it speak to the inclusivity of the shoot as being representative of the diversity within the WNBA. Bird is quoted saying, "This is who we are; this is the makeup of the league. We represent a variety of things: of course women, women of color, members of the LGBTQIA2+ community and much more"<sup>127</sup> but none of the women represented Williams in the way that she would have wanted to be. Williams specifically notes the lack of

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<sup>123</sup> Dorothy J. Gentry. "WNBA Athletes Highlighted in SI Swimsuit 2022." *Sports Illustrated: Swimsuit*. May 9, 2022. <https://swimsuit.si.com/swimnews/wnba-2022> (Accessed: May 9, 2022).

<sup>124</sup> Courtney Williams. @CourtMWilliams. Twitter Post. May 9, 2022. 9:42 p.m. <https://twitter.com/CourtMWilliams/status/1523855882357981185>

<sup>125</sup> Courtney Williams. @Courtneywilliams10. Instagram Post. August 1, 2017. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BXQ2f2UHFEe/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: May 12, 2022).

<sup>126</sup> Courtney Williams. @Courtneywilliams10. Instagram Post. December 6, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5voH6ZJqN/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: May 12, 2022).

<sup>127</sup> Dorothy J. Gentry. "WNBA Athletes Highlighted in SI Swimsuit 2022." *Sports Illustrated: Swimsuit*. May 9, 2022. <https://swimsuit.si.com/swimnews/wnba-2022> (Accessed: May 9, 2022).

masculine dressed athletes present within the shoot. Although there are Black women represented and queer women represented within the article, no Black queer women and more specifically no Black queer masculine presenting women are represented. When Bird says, “this is who we are” it is a very specific portion of the WNBA who constitutes that “we.” Williams, a 2021 All-Star and prominent member of the league, and masculine presenting players like her are notably missing within this representation.

Williams’ assessment of the shoot is contradictory to some of the athletes that were represented within it. In her section of the interview Bird continues to speak about representation saying that, “The [Swimsuit] issue for so many years has been iconic and has represented a lot for women. Now you are seeing an evolution in what that can mean and what that can look like, and I think the WNBA players being a part of that is what makes it special.”<sup>128</sup> Bird notes an evolution in what can be represented within the swimsuit issue but does not recognize the silence surrounding queer masculinity although she is a queer player. By reading herself and her own presentation into this shoot, Williams marks a persistent enforcement of femininity in the representation of WNBA players in media although the players themselves are embracing more androgynous and masculine dress.<sup>129</sup> de la Cretaz explores this shift in fashion within the WNBA as a whole in an Opinion piece for *The New York Times* arguing that “androgyny is now fashionable in the WNBA.”<sup>130</sup> The article opens with a picture of Williams in a zippered jacket, black fitted jeans, and bright yellow Air Force 1’s. de la Cretaz is firmly cementing Williams within the conversation surrounding WNBA fashion and masculinity. Although they chronicle the shifts in expectations of femininity for WNBA players and firmly root those expectations in

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Britni (Frankie) de la Cretaz. “Androgyny Is Now Fashionable in the WNBA.” *The New York Times*. June 18, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/18/opinion/androgyny-wnba-fashion.html>

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.



legacies of homophobia within women's sports, they do not contextualize the role that race plays for all of the players that they mention within the article. Scholars such as Roderick Ferguson articulate why disregarding race forms an inaccurate assessment of sexuality. He argues that by understanding sexuality as "the critical product of women of color feminism" sexuality becomes "not extraneous to other modes of difference. Sexuality is intersectional. It is constitutive of and constituted by racialized gender and class formations."<sup>131</sup> Conceptions of masculinity and femininity have also been historically racially constructed.

The common thread between these interviews is that they focus on who Williams is away from basketball. By allowing the athlete the space to talk about more than the game, we get to see a very different narrative than the ones told by mainstream media.

### *Sports Journalists*

The common thread throughout each of the previous themes is the relationships that each of these players have with journalists that cover their sport. I chose to focus this section on Chambers for a number of reasons: first, she covered the WNBA for a multitude of years; second, because she has intimate professional relationships with WNBA athletes specifically and is featured prominently in each of the aforementioned athletes' sections; third, she centers storytelling within her journalism; and lastly, she takes an intersectional approach that accounts for race, gender, and queerness that allows for her subjects to be written about in nuanced ways which is a perspective that is rarely seen in mainstream media. This section pays particular attention to who she chooses as subjects; the themes that she focuses on within her reporting; the kinds of

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<sup>131</sup> Roderick A. Ferguson. "Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality." *Social Text* 1 (December 2005) 23:3-4, 85-100.

questions she asks and the way that she frames them; and the type of publications and spaces that her work can be found.

*Ari Chambers - Mixed-Media Journalist and Founder of HighlightHER*

“The WNBA is so important.”<sup>132</sup> The phrase is simple but one that is now canonized within #WNBATwitter discourse and eventually became Twitter Sports’ WNBA 25th Anniversary Campaign.<sup>133</sup> Fans and journalists alike can be seen quote tweeting WNBA moments with the phrase and attributing it Chambers. The sentiment is not new, but Chambers gets credit for being one of the media members that is driving that narrative forward. Chambers understands the impact her role as a media member can make in the progress of the league and in the lives of the athletes that play in it. In an interview with *Yahoo! Sports*, Chambers spoke about the role of media in promoting the WNBA specifically her work with HighlightHER saying:

Just knowing that HighlightHER was a part of that groundwork, really getting into the community and sharing what the fans wanted to see online is phenomenal. Social [media] drives everything. To know we’re in front of that and helping to provide visibility is all a part of our asset to the league.<sup>134</sup>

Chambers is a unique asset to the league and specifically the players within it because of the way that she approaches journalism. Chambers believes that her “calling [is] storytelling”<sup>135</sup> and looks to utilize it “to amplify the voices of women and magnify their excellence” specifically

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<sup>132</sup> Arielle Chambers. @ariivory. Twitter Post. April 5, 2017. 2:34 p.m. <https://twitter.com/ariivory/status/849706797606817792>

<sup>133</sup> Naya Samuel. “Arielle Chambers is Asking Black Athletes to Tell Their Real Stories” *Sports Illustrated*. January 25, 2022. <https://www.si.com/media/2022/01/25/arielle-chambers-bleacher-report-100-influential-black-women-sports>

<sup>134</sup> Vinciane Ngomsi. “Ari Chambers is Using HighlightHER and Social Media to Prove Women’s Sports is Not a Trend.” *Yahoo! Sports*. October 13, 2021. <https://sports.yahoo.com/ari-chambers-highlight-her-wnba-182419597.html>

<sup>135</sup> Samuel, 2022.

seeking “to show girls and women, world-wide, that their potential is limitless.”<sup>136</sup> When working with the WNBA, Chambers “saw a league of 80% Black women, many of them part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and I saw how their stories had been overlooked” and that impacted the way that she looked to approach covering the league.<sup>137</sup> She considers the athletes she covers to be her friends and that,

there was power in knowing what my friends would want their stories to be and knowing that I could be a safe space for them to communicate that - without any hidden agenda, or without any media bias. I like to think that as Black women, especially young Black women in the field, we have the capacity to do that. We see each other.<sup>138</sup>

Chambers names the potential bias within mainstream media. By referencing her identity as a Black woman, she gestures towards misogynoir as influencing this media bias and the role that having more Black women media members might play in disrupting these narratives.

The impact that Chambers believes Black women media members can have is more than simply representational. She is not describing a sort of insider knowledge that Black women will have that will make them inherently more equipped to tell other Black women’s stories but instead articulates that their own positionality would allow them to see each other more nuanced ways. The journalist guides the interview but does not craft independent narratives about them. Chambers thinks about her own positionality in a similar way that mine guides this research. It forms the questions that she asks, impacts the way that she interprets the responses the athletes, and most importantly her positionality is one of the reasons that she is able to identify the

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<sup>136</sup> Chambers, “Bio.”

<sup>137</sup> Samuel, 2022.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

silences within the existing coverage of Black queer women athletes and her reporting has stemmed from those silences.

This approach is exemplified in her work in partnership with Athletes Unlimited Basketball to create a “long-form series where she leaves it all on the table with athletes” titled *All on the Table*.<sup>139</sup> Parts of these interviews appear in the sections of this chapter covering Cloud and Williams in addition to this one. Athlete’s Unlimited describes these episodes as “covering everything from playing abroad to music, and never-before-heard stories about their lives on and off the court, these conversations focus on topics and themes that are important to the athletes.”<sup>140</sup> The questions that Chambers asks and the way that she frames the athlete’s stories are an integral part of achieving this goal. In Episode 3 of the series, Chambers tells the athletes “I want you all to tell me your identity outside of basketball. Cause we know y’all as a basketball player.”<sup>141</sup> She poses the question to three current WNBA players Cloud, Williams, and Jantel Lavender in addition to former University of Georgia standout Taj Cole. The players each reply not with identity markers such as their race, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality but instead described the way that they move through the world.

The first person to answer is Cloud and her response centers her faith and how she acts in relationship to others. She says,

I truly believe what you put into the world it will always give back to you. Like I believe that if you do things the right way out of the goodness and kindness of your heart, God will always provide...Me, I’m goofy. I’m a small-town kid. I love my

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<sup>139</sup> Jenny Jeffries. “Highlighter, Ari Chambers Join Athletes Unlimited for 2022 Content Partnership.” *Athletes Unlimited*. January 24, 2022. <https://auprosports.com/read/HighlightHER-ari-chambers-join-athletes-unlimited-for-2022-content-partnership-beginning-with-basketball/>

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> HighlightHER, “All on the Table: Episode 3 - hosted by Ari Chambers,” YouTube Video, (20:31), March 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVEW5UsIBv4>

family and Imma always make sure everyone's good. Like if you my people Imma always make sure you're good.<sup>142</sup>

Cloud started her response by articulating the philosophy that guides her life. She chooses to answer who she is by the way that she approaches her interactions with others which is always “out of the goodness and kindness” of her heart. Although she does not name her religious affiliation explicitly, she is able to speak to the importance of her faith in informing how she shows up in her daily interactions. This is what Cloud finds most important to know about her not a list of identities, her educational background, or activities that she likes but instead she wants people to know that she is a kind person who is guided by her faith. It is only after she establishes that that she gives descriptors of herself but even those descriptors speak to the way that she moves throughout the world. She describes herself as “goofy” so the listener can assume that she likes to make herself and others laugh. She describes herself as “a small-town kid” which leaves the listener with the impression that her hometown of Broomall, Pennsylvania has fundamentally shaped how she sees herself. The listener may impose whatever preconceived notions they may have about small towns, but Cloud says this phrase with a smile. For her, it is clear that she calls herself that with pride. Cloud ends her statement with her family. She does more than just say that she loves them she describes the role that she plays within her family. She says that she is always going to make sure they are good. She articulates a protectiveness over the people that she loves and a desire to care for them. Each of the ways that Cloud describes herself is centered around the way she is in relationship to others.

By framing the question as “tell me your identity,” Chambers leaves room for Cloud to interpret the question in ways that foreground what is important to her. If Chambers had not

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 20:34.

asked an open-ended question, she may have gotten a very different answer. The importance of her open-ended framing is exemplified by the variety of answers that she gets from the athletes. Williams takes a slightly different approach to answering the question than Cloud did. She drops her head backwards and interlocks her fingers before taking a big sigh and starting to describe herself as someone whose

Identity used to be just turnt. And not really caring what nobody yeahhh just turnt and not really caring what nobody really got to say about me. Imma say what I want. Imma do what I want. Imma club. Imma date who I want. Like you know what I'm saying. And I feel like my identity now is more like growth and being more mindful cause, I think like I was at a point where I really just didn't care. I didn't care what nobody said. Like imma rock.<sup>143</sup>

Williams's response emphasizes a shift in who she is and how she sees herself. She starts by saying that her identity was turnt meaning high energy or likes to party. She builds upon that by saying not only did she like to party, but she did so with no regard for what other people thought about it. Williams's self-assuredness is something that is evident throughout all of her interviews and social media posts. This statement is no different but here she acknowledges the complexity of her turnt persona. She speaks to the way that she became more mindful of the way that she represents herself and her mindfulness is positive growth.

Williams's statement is multi-faceted because she takes the opportunity to respond to the reckless reputation that she had. She references the "fighting situation"<sup>144</sup> that resulted in her receiving a two-game suspension by the WNBA and being released from her former team the

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 22:25.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 23:20.

Atlanta Dream.<sup>145</sup> Williams posted a video of an altercation that she was involved in during May 2021. Williams posted a YouTube video discussing the altercation months after it occurred to a YouTube channel that she ran with her then YouTuber girlfriend who goes by Glamazon Tay. The video has since been deleted but Williams and former Dream teammate Crystal Bradford can be seen engaging with a group of people outside of a club.<sup>146</sup> Williams has been associated with other disputes, each with former teammates,<sup>147</sup> that have contributed to her conflicting representation within media. She is a talented player known simultaneously as a fan favorite and as a player that needs to mature off the court.<sup>148</sup> Williams was allowed the space within the interview with Chambers to address how these incidents have impacted how people perceive her and the represent her. She says, “I had to understand that once you put it out there you can’t get it back. Once you do put it out there you give everybody this leeway to create all these narratives. All these narratives of who they think I am.”<sup>149</sup> Part of Williams self-definition includes naming that that ability has been stripped from her. When answering Chambers original question, “tell me your identity outside of basketball,” Williams chooses to directly respond to her misrepresentation saying she became “everybody worst basketball player” after the fight broke out.

Through the space that Chambers created, Williams was able to articulate who she is and show how misrepresentations affect more than just her. She notes that people not only talk about

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<sup>145</sup> Mechelle Voepel. “Dream’s Courtney Williams Apologizes for Posting Video Making Light of Altercation in Atlanta. *ESPN*. October 4, 2021. [https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/\\_/id/32340139/dream-courtney-williams-apologizes-posting-video-making-light-altercation-atlanta](https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/32340139/dream-courtney-williams-apologizes-posting-video-making-light-altercation-atlanta)

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Clare Brennan. “What Led to the Dream’s Suspension of Chennedy Carter,” *Just Women’s Sports*. July 8, 2021. <https://justwomenssports.com/what-led-to-the-dreams-suspension-of-chennedy-carter/>

<sup>148</sup> Alexa Philippou. “WNBA All-Star guard Courtney Williams Returns to Connecticut Sun as Team Eyes a Franchise-first Title,” *Hartford Courant*. February 2, 2022, 5:37 p.m. <https://www.courant.com/sports/hc-sp-connecticut-sun-free-agency-20220202-20220202-4roe4abxyzcj512hhax7g7i35y-story.html>

<sup>149</sup> HighlightHER, Episode 3.

who they think Williams is but also about “how [her] mama and daddy raised [her] and how her relationship is a negative influence.”<sup>150</sup> She is most frustrated by the way that her loved ones are portrayed and pulled into the narratives that are told about her. Williams’ response asks for her humanity centered and the ability to represent herself. Chambers reply shows that she has a vested interest in Williams being able to represent herself in this way. She tells Williams, “You know we talked about it, and I was like I never want you to apologize for something you felt you had to do...I was proud of you because it’s the accountability but what would you say to someone who is still looking at you like mmm.”<sup>151</sup> Chambers amplifies that Williams thought she “had to” fight. Chambers reading is one that runs counter to mainstream medias portrayal as a “brawl.” Williams’s response to Chambers it paints a more nuanced picture. Williams earnestly asks the listener to understand that she is “still a human being” and just because she is who she is she will not “let somebody come hit [her] in [her] mouth and [she] just be like oh well.”<sup>152</sup> Pulling from these three sources, it is clear that Williams did not begin fighting randomly. Someone, or a group of people, made comments to her girlfriend. When she responded she was hit first and “hit in the mouth” and was concerned “about being outnumbered” yet none of the articles named the possibility that Williams was acting in self-defense. It is not until Chambers tells Williams “I never want you to apologize for something you felt you had to do” that the altercation is explicitly framed differently.

Chambers not only takes a unique approach in how she conducts her interviews but also the way that she uses social media. She asserts “social media is yours - it allows you to have something you believe in and watch it grow exponentially and gauge interest in it” but even

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 27:30.

<sup>152</sup> HighlightHER, Episode 3.



something that is yours is not done completely alone.<sup>153</sup> Chambers takes a collective approach to social media and her reporting in general saying “we grow together, and we learn from each other... It’s all about intertwining each other’s gifts, not using each other, but *utilizing* each other’s strengths, and having that support system.”<sup>154</sup> Chambers directly speaks to the symbiotic relationship between athletes and journalists in creating spaces for their own self-definition. She believes that “we’re stronger together when we occupy these spaces. It *won’t* just be a trend, especially in leagues that are predominately Black, predominately queer.”<sup>155</sup> She urges athletes to use social media to control their own narratives as well in ways that are not directly tied to media members.<sup>156</sup>

### *Conclusion - The Creation of Alternative Spaces and Opportunities*

WNBA players are not only using the tools at their disposal to craft their own resistant narratives about themselves but are also seeking out and creating spaces and opportunities to be themselves. They are looking to be more critical of the silences surrounding their representation and are emphasizing their self-determination in everything that they do. When looking to create these opportunities for themselves they are also looking to create them for other Black queer WNBA players. The landscape of women’s basketball is changing, and players are at the forefront of leading that change. In late January 2022, a new league named Athletes Unlimited (AU) Basketball burst onto the scene featuring WNBA stars, Olympic medalists, and former collegiate standouts. AU is known for its unconventional structure and player-driven approach to the game. AU places emphasis on the individual athlete. Instead of having four set teams that

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<sup>153</sup> Jefferies.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Clare Brennan. “Ari Chambers on WNBA Twitter: ‘We Are So Passionate,’” *Just Women’s Sports*. January 26, 2022. <https://justwomenssports.com/ari-chambers-on-wnba-twitter-we-are-so-passionate/>

compete in a tournament style and declare a championship team at the end, players represent themselves by accumulating points from individual and team performances. The player with the highest point total at the end of five weeks is declared the AU Champion. Teams change weekly with the top four performers from the previous week serving as team captains. Each captain gets to draft their teammates and serve as the leader of their team because there are no formal coaches in AU.<sup>157</sup>

AU founders Jon Patricof and Jonathan Soros reached out to Cloud, whose wife Aleshia Ocasio was the AU Softball Champion during its inaugural season, when they decided to launch AU Basketball.<sup>158</sup> Cloud along with WNBA players Sydney Colson, Tamera (Ty) Young, Tianna Hawkins, and Jantel Lavender make up the player executive committee and worked to recruit their fellow WNBA players to participate in AU. When approaching other players, the committee proposed the AU as an alternative to playing overseas that would provide a playing option domestically. By encouraging other WNBA athletes to play in the league, Cloud believes that the athletes “are the perfect protection of their [the WNBA] investment. We keep players at home... You get to keep your players home, in-market, and then it’s about a month in between the end of AU season and the start of the W [WNBA].”<sup>159</sup> This option comes at the ideal moment for WNBA players whose relationship with their overseas responsibilities will become more complicated next year due to the prioritization clause within the CBA that will begin to penalize WNBA players for missing time with their WNBA teams due to playing overseas.<sup>160</sup> This is a

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<sup>157</sup> Athletes Unlimited. “How We Play: Basketball.” *Athletes Unlimited*. <https://auprosports.com/basketball/how-we-play/> (Accessed: May 5, 2022).

<sup>158</sup> Kareem Copeland. “Mystics’ Natasha Cloud Hopes New League Will be Viable Offseason Option for WNBA Players” WNBA. *The Washington Post*. January 26, 2022 5:00pm EST. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2022/01/26/athletes-unlimited-basketball-natasha-cloud/>

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Sean Hurd. “Athletes Unlimited: The Women’s Pro League Offering More Basketball Options in the U.S.” *Andscape*. February 25, 2022. <https://andscape.com/features/athletes-unlimited-the-womens-pro-league-offering-more-basketball-options-in-the-u-s/>

common occurrence for players who's overseas leagues have post season play that extends into the beginning weeks of the WNBA season. Not only has AU become a viable economic opportunity for current WNBA players, because of its player driven focus it has provided spaces for former players, such as Colson, to revive their careers and be resigned to WNBA teams<sup>161</sup> in addition to multiple players who had never played in the WNBA, such as Taj Cole, signing Training Camp contracts.<sup>162</sup> By advocating for the league and being active participants in its development, Cloud, Colson, and Young, all Black queer players, have created economic opportunities for other players.

These opportunities are unique because they will have a level of control over their treatment and representation that is not seen in other spaces. A staple of the league has been its attention to the stories and representation of the athletes. They partnered with leading voices in women's basketball at every stage such as Sheryl Swoopes who served as a color commentator for games. One of the most impactful decisions that AU made was to partner with HighlightHER and Chambers to create *All on the Table* along with other forms of social media. The emphasis on covering stories that are important to the athletes gives them access and resources for self-definition. Chambers spoke about the partnership prior to the launch of the league saying, "I think players tell their stories on the court through their game. I'm excited to amplify their stories off the court, too, alongside my peers."<sup>163</sup> During the course of the season she continued to speak about the importance of her role tweeting a picture of herself alongside Cole, Cloud, Lavender,

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<sup>161</sup> "Aces Sign Veteran Guard Sydney Colson," Las Vegas Aces. March 2, 2022. <https://aces.wnba.com/news/aces-sign-veteran-guard-sydney-colson/>

<sup>162</sup> Eric Nemchock. "In Inagural Season, Athletes Unlimited is Already Earning its Players WNBA Opportunities," *SB Nation*. March 13, 2022, 10:38 a.m. EDT. <https://www.swishappeal.com/wnba/2022/3/13/22971830/wnba-athletes-unlimited-taj-cole-tianna-hawkins-kalani-brown-sydney-colson-meme-jackson-destinee>

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

and Williams with the caption “Yesterday was beyond filling. These stories need to be told. And they will. Believe it.”<sup>164</sup>

Chambers’ approach to storytelling made her the perfect partner for a league that is player led. She encapsulates the importance of her partnership with not only AU but the athletes by tweeting,

Every moment led to another story told. Every moment led to a training camp contract. Every moment led to a lifelong friendship. Every moment led to a chance for players’ families to see them hoop professionally in the US. Thank you @AUProSports for creating unlimited opportunity.<sup>165</sup>

She emphasizes that this was the intent of the league and the players that helped create it because “AU did exactly what it set out to do: create opportunity & allow the players to be exactly themselves.”<sup>166</sup> The players and journalists played an active role in the creation of spaces for their resistant narratives to be told and amplified. They also created professional spaces that did more than just allow for those stories to be told but for the athletes to exist in nuanced ways. AU did not focus solely on the players that were affiliated with the WNBA when seeking out these stories. Whether they were a player that already had a high profile or one that was relatively unknown, they were given an opportunity for self-definition. Journalists other than Chambers note the difference in approach that AU takes. W. G. Ramirez comments “I’m not sure anyone will ever see a league generate stories on just about every athlete. You won’t see that anywhere”

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<sup>164</sup> Ari Chambers. @ariivory. Twitter post. January 19, 2022, 10:47 a.m. <https://twitter.com/ariivory/status/1483843633014984705>

<sup>165</sup> Ari Chambers. @ariivory. Twitter post. February 26, 2022. 8:53 p.m. <https://twitter.com/ariivory/status/1497766863815774211>

<sup>166</sup> Ari Chambers. @ariivory. Twitter post. February 26, 2022. 8:53 p.m. <https://twitter.com/ariivory/status/1497766861404000265>

and play-by-play broadcaster Cindy Brunson says “the fact that we don’t have to stay in the conventional lines, and we can take the time to do more storytelling and interviewing of the players and get to know them as people and not just basketball players.”<sup>167</sup> Each of the decisions about the way that the league operated to the journalists that they chose to tell the stories center the humanity of the athletes that are playing the game. Black queer WNBA players have been at the driving force behind the creation of spaces such as these. These players have placed value in not only their own ability for self-definition and representation but that of athletes more broadly. The players self-representation has ramifications larger than themselves. Players like Cloud, Williams, and Jones are pushing the WNBA and their sports media affiliates to become more inclusive of racialized queer players through their persistent self-representation and creation of alternative spaces.

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<sup>167</sup> W. G. Ramirez. “Opinion: AU Hoops Left Its Mark and is Here to Stay” *Athletes Unlimited*. March 8, 2022. <https://auprosports.com/read/opinion-au-hoops-left-its-mark-and-is-here-to-stay/>

## Fourth Quarter: Closing Out the Game

In this project I have explored the ways in which Black queer WNBA players have found paths of resistance to mainstream media representations through self-representation. Black queer WNBA players experience a simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility within mainstream media, as direct results of misogynoir and an enforcement of heteronormativity. Generally, there is a silence around Black players that erases their contributions and presence within the WNBA. When they are mentioned, they are frequently portrayed in racist and misogynistic ways that depict them as aggressive<sup>168</sup>, combative<sup>169</sup>, and able to endure higher levels of pain.<sup>170</sup> Black queer players are most frequently the target of these narratives, especially if they are masculine presenting or dark skin women.

I focused particularly on the ways that these players have utilized social media to craft counternarratives to their media misrepresentations. While social media is a site of resistance, and in some cases a liberatory space for players, it is also one that is highly surveilled. It resulted in athletes having a complicated relationship to social media. At points, they were able to use it to name their experiences with discrimination, assert their identities, represent themselves, tell their own stories, and create opportunities for economic gain. At other points, they felt restricted in their engagement with social media for fear of being perceived as unprofessional or unmarketable, which would have negative impacts on their economic opportunities such as

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<sup>168</sup> Scott Gleeson. "Brittney Griner Opens Up On Marriage Split, Anger and Her Renewed Focus." *USA Today Sports*. July 23, 2015. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/2015/07/23/brittney-griner-glory-johnson-marriage-split-domestic-violence/30547237/>

<sup>169</sup> Maloney, 2021.

<sup>170</sup> Shauntel Lowe. "W.N.B.A. Suspends Coach for Remark About Player's Weight," *The New York Times*. May 24, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/24/sports/basketball/wnba-liz-cabbage-suspended-curt-miller.html>

partnerships with brands and companies. A central theme for players was lack of control over their representation and a desire to create both resistant and nuanced narratives about themselves.

Through my research, I found that a valuable tool at their disposal for self-definition was fostering relationships with journalists who are invested in telling their stories in all of their nuance. Journalists such as Ari Chambers and Frankie de la Cretaz center athletes' voices throughout their reporting. The questions that they ask and the way that they frame them leave athletes ample room to highlight themes that they feel are important and take control of their representation. Each journalist takes a distinct approach to their work, often employing an intersectional lens, they pay particular attention to themes of race and queerness in the athletes' stories. These journalists intentionally choose to create spaces for the stories of Black queer athletes within the WNBA to be heard. This is an active form of resistance that requires journalists to be critical of their role as media members.

### *Limitations*

The limitations of this project deal with scope and inability to directly interact with the players. The scope of this project was limited because of the lack of formal databases that keep records of women's basketball. Additionally, I solely focused on players experiences with US based media outlets. Many players compete overseas and employ various forms of self-definition and resistance depending on the context that they are in. Lastly, since I have not conducted interviews with players, I am interpreting existing representations of them and providing my own through my analysis.

### *Future Directions*

My work comes at a time when Black women athlete's resistance has been at the forefront of social justice activism within sports. A critical engagement with the representations of Black queer women athletes is necessary because it is a part of a larger struggle for Black women's liberation in the United States. I will be building upon this work by interrogating these themes within sports and popular culture more broadly during my PhD studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. My specific research questions will further consider how Black queer women athletes create their own spaces and counternarratives. I hope to engage with the athletes themselves by incorporating different feminist methodologies such as conducting participatory observations, interviews, and focus groups. Additionally, I would like to further develop my analysis of the relationships between athletes and journalists by conducting interviews with them as well. Their interviews would provide more insight into the way that they go about conducting interviews and how they view their role as media members. Chambers is not the only journalist that helps to build spaces for athlete self-representation, and many do not have a platform as large as HighlightHER. By incorporating both local and national journalists, I will be able to examine the ways that spaces of resistance are being created simultaneously and in ways that bolster one another. Interrogating these relationships further is imperative to this work because I consider these media members as active contributors to this project. They already serve the role of co-researchers and although they will never directly engage with this project, they can be directly incorporated moving forward. My work is possible because of theirs and falls within their legacy of resistance. Incorporating them within the work more explicitly will only strengthen those connections and provide more insight in my analysis. Expanding my



methodological approach will enrich my work because it will create space for further qualitative research.

Additionally, I want to broaden my scope from solely looking at the experiences of WNBA players in the United States. As I highlighted throughout my analysis, WNBA players have migratory work patterns in the offseason that takes them overseas. Through my research I have found that WNBA players resist their treatment and representation abroad in ways that are both similar and different from how they resist domestically. Part of their resistance has been cultivating alternative spaces that are player driven such as AU. Not only is AU a league that allows for the athletes to be themselves, but it also provides economic opportunities that keep players within the United States in the offseason while playing professional basketball. As AU grows, the impact that its player-centered approach has or does not have on the WNBA will be an important dynamic that is worth exploring. The landscape of women's basketball is rapidly changing, and athletes' resistance is one of the driving forces of change on all levels of athletics.

In 2021, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) voted to institute policies that allow collegiate athletes to profit off their name, image and likeness (NIL).<sup>171</sup> Previously, collegiate athletes were not allowed to receive compensation in relationship to their sport in any capacity prior to the NIL policies. Women's basketball players have "earned the second-most compensation of all NIL deals" totaling 19%.<sup>172</sup> Athletes now have the ability to capitalize on economic opportunities before they become professionals. In a league like the WNBA where players struggle to supplement subpar wages, the ability to build partnerships with companies

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<sup>171</sup> Michelle Brutlag Hosick. "NCAA Adopts Interim Name, Image and Likeness Policy," *NCAA*. June 30, 2021. <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2021/6/30/ncaa-adopts-interim-name-image-and-likeness-policy.aspx>

<sup>172</sup> Kelly Cohen. "March Madness 2022: Women's and Men's Sweet Sixteen Players Are Heavily Involved in NIL Deals," *ESPN*. March 25, 2022. [https://www.espn.com/womens-college-basketball/story/\\_/id/33589255/women-men-sweet-sixteen-players-heavily-involved-nil-deals](https://www.espn.com/womens-college-basketball/story/_/id/33589255/women-men-sweet-sixteen-players-heavily-involved-nil-deals)

and brands earlier on could prevent them from having to play overseas. The visibility of collegiate athletes makes them attractive to companies and brands in some cases even more so than WNBA players. According to ESPN, “the 2021 women’s NCAA title game between Stanford and Arizona drew 4.1 million viewers”<sup>173</sup> in comparison to the 417,000 viewers for the final game of the 2021 WNBA Championship.<sup>174</sup> NIL deals will now allow for athletes to capitalize on that visibility and begin to build their platforms to attract more opportunities in the future. This dynamic will be one that is rapidly evolving as the NCAA has already begun to review the impact of NIL deals on collegiate athletics.<sup>175</sup> The 2022 draft class is the first in the WNBA that played collegiately with NIL. The impact of NIL on economic dynamics of the WNBA and player agency will be a compelling site of analysis in the coming years. Particularly the way that NIL compensation influences how athletes engage with social media. According to Opendorse, the top activities for NIL compensation is posting content on social media which accounts for 35.1% of all activities.<sup>176</sup> I anticipate that my future work will add to the current discourse around Blackness, Black athletes, misogynoir, masculinity, and performativity while making significant contributions across interdisciplinary fields of Sports Studies, Black Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and Queer Studies.

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Jabari Young. “WNBA Finals Viewership Was Up From Last Year - Here’s How Many People Watched the Chicago Sky’s First Championship.” *CNBC*. October 19, 2021 6:37 p.m. EST. <https://www.cNBC.com/2021/10/19/wnba-finals-ratings.html#:~:text=The%20three%2Dgame%20series%20averaged,25th%20anniversary%20season%3A%20an%20Aug.>

<sup>175</sup> Paolo Uggetti. “NCAA to Review NIL Policies, Including Impact on Student-Athletes and Potential Recruiting Violations,” *ESPN*. February 18, 2022. [https://www.espn.com/college-sports/story/\\_/id/33323409/ncaa-review-nil-policies-including-impact-student-athletes-potential-recruiting-violations](https://www.espn.com/college-sports/story/_/id/33323409/ncaa-review-nil-policies-including-impact-student-athletes-potential-recruiting-violations)

<sup>176</sup> Opendorse. “NIL Industry Insights: Through April 30, 2022” Opendorse. <https://opendorse.com/nil-insights/> (Accessed: May 9, 2022)

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