Beauty, Strength, and Power: The Shaming, Disciplining, and Rejection of Black Women Athletes

By

Idara Foster
Class of 2015

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in African American Interdisciplinary Program

Middletown, Connecticut April 2015
Acknowledgements

Those who know me well know that completing this thesis is a true feat. I want to thank Professor Brown, in the African American Studies Program for all of her strengthening support. Professor Brown, you believed that I was more than capable of finishing this thesis and your certainty helped fuel me to the end. I cannot find words that are sufficient enough for me to explain to you how I appreciate you as a maternal figure, role model, and scholar. I will always remember you as a professor who gave her all to her students, and as a woman who genuinely wanted the best for each of us.

Next, I would like to thank the McNair Scholars Program for giving me the opportunity to complete a thesis. Thank you Ronnie Hendrix and Suzanne O’Connell for your assistance. In addition, I would like to thank my thesis tutor Caroline Mead for mentoring me.

A special thank you to my sprint coach, Mike Simeone, for always encouraging me on and off of the track. Your support has never gone unnoticed.

I want to express my gratitude for my close friends—Ama, Dawanna, Edrianny and Ngina—who have listened to me complain and fret about the completion of this work. You, my wonderful ebony friends, have pushed me to be the best that I can be. We started together, and we shall end together. Lastly, to my mother, thank you for keeping me on the right track my entire life. You are a walking example of a strong, black woman. I appreciate you, your energy, and your moral support.

You are my everything.
Abstract

This thesis seeks to critically analyze the socio-political transformations of legendary athletes Serena Williams, Brittney Griner and Briana Scurry and aims to examine the processes by which they become alpha females by an analysis of the experiences of these women. This research essay will evaluate race as it is imposed on female bodies, gender dynamics, sexuality and invisibility. These four key inquiries—all of which contribute to idealized femininity, true womanhood, and the tokenizing of—alpha females will provide an understanding of the ways in which white patriarchy is practiced on black female athletes.
Introduction

I do not believe that we are moving steadily toward a genderless society or even that this is a utopia to be desired, but I do believe that a major step toward gender parity, and one that has been grossly overlooked, is the cultivation of female masculinity.” - Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1998

The Alpha Female. What does she look like? How does she behave? Where might she be found? What evidence is there that she exists? The term “alpha female” which became popular in the early 2000’s, traditionally is used to describe the partnership between an alpha male and alpha female wolf pair. Typically, the alpha male and alpha female wolves are the oldest in the pack as well as the sole breeders. They are accountable for defending their territory and protecting younger wolves in their pack. Similarly, the alpha woman’s identity places her on top of a pedestal and deems her exceptional. Unique among women, she is capable of being moral, feminine, and beautiful in addition to smart, strong and dominant. The behavior of an alpha female demands the collision of societies: gendered masculinity and femininity. According to these established definitions, an alpha woman is accepted and adored under white male patriarchy constraints. This woman can appear accommodating, and docile, while also creating the distinctiveness of an alpha female.

This term “alpha female,” might initially seem attractive and complimentary but it is a term that is ultimately, detrimental to the necessarily fluid nature of gender. The identity of any “alpha female”, functions within a white male patriarchy regime that is reinforced by the submissive and oppressive nature of male-female relationships. Although the term “alpha female” aims to create a new identity for women, it still functions under thoughts that sustain oppressive male patriarchy. The
terminology also generates harm on women in contemporary times, as it aims to use the influence of white male heterosexuality to separate and create hierarchies within the constructs of womanhood by the influence of white male heterosexuality. Elite professional female athletes are frequently considered alpha women by men and women alike. Alpha women are often created in the likeness of masculinity, and are sculpted—symbolically and visually by men so that they posses the perfect combination of femininity and masculinity. Women athletes function as a exceptional symbols of how gender dynamics within the United States operate. An athlete who chooses to recreate her female image as an “alpha female” more often than not is imagined as deviant and delinquent and, in no time at all, this threatening figure is demonized. This thesis seeks to critically analyze the socio-political transformations of legendary athletes Serena Williams, Brittney Griner and Briana Scurry and to examine the processes by which they become “alpha females” by an analysis of the experiences of these women. This research essay will evaluate race as it is imposed on female bodies, gender dynamics, sexuality and invisibility. These four key inquiries—all of which contribute to idealized femininity, true womanhood, and the tokenizing of—alpha females will provide an understanding of the ways in which white patriarchy is practiced on black female athletes.

The assertion that sports were made for men may be unsettling for someone to imagine. However, the original introduction of sports was intended both to demonstrate and to measure masculinity as practiced by Greeks and Egyptians.¹ Judges of throwing, lifting and running assessed masculinity based on men’s strength,

speed, and endurance. The constant use and attention to bodily functions to determine masculinity had much to do with the evolving definitions of what constitutes a man. The definition of femininity, rooted in negation, was established by what a man was not. It was imagined as the complete opposite of masculinity, and therefore always rendered as subpar and inadequate. Thus, the interaction between masculinity and femininity was cohesive because it balanced each other and was sustained well into the American modern era of the 1800’s. The gender restrictions created by definitions of true womanhood caused many women to become displaced. Individuals who did not fit the role of true womanhood were then shamed. Consequently, athletic activity and competition became the medium through which men would learn about dominance and true masculinity. Sports developed into practices of masculinity, implicit and explicit degradation of women, and the obligatory maintenance of women and men’s hierarchical roles in society.

**Race**

The racialized bodies of black female athletes often are subject to denigrations based on white supremacy ideals. In terms of race and sports, athlete’s bodies are subject to the racialized gaze of their audience and the racialized hierarchies of their own bodies. Examples of racialized gazes are depicted by audiences who view athletes like, Jackie Robinson in Baseball of the Brooklyn Dodgers and Chuck Cooper of the Boston Celtics in Basketball. Thus—race in sports functions as a barrier in which hierarchies can remain unbothered.
Hierarchies are reinforced by way of rankings and competitions based on skill, intelligence and beauty. Race in sports is also used to practice harm and highlight difference in other people as to reinforce racial hierarchies and racial inferiority. Race functions to strip black women athletes of their skill, intelligence and creativity. Thus, the use of race against black female athletes is garnered in order to maintain white hegemony. Indeed, as critic Kevin Hylton, argues, there are “largely unseen facets of whiteness [in] the commonplace world that reinforce difference and ‘race’ normalizing this advantaged position for white people in sport.”

Hylton, who acknowledges the validated privilege of normalized whiteness in sport, also highlights here the necessity to acknowledge whiteness as a form of property and agency that function within sports and actively oppresses athletes of color. Those who survey black female bodies normalize racial stereotypes allowing these individuals to then automatically reject black female athletes and contribute to, if not ensure, the complete emotional, physical and mental exile of black women. The alpha female, however, is the rare athlete who can escape the humiliation and denigration while still posing no threat to white hegemony and status.

**Gender and Sexuality**

Like race, gender in contemporary times is conceptualized as a form of judgment, and instrument used to place hierarchies in order. These restricting roles define male and female gender binaries first coined by John Money in 1995. Others

---


who are incapable of fitting roles that are based on white heterosexuality and hegemony are exiled and ostracized. The usage of gender roles requires the acceptance and submissiveness of women accepting inferiority to men. Expert Brian Pronger in his 1990 groundbreaking book *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*, asserts: “Gender is a myth that justifies, expresses and supports the power of men over women.” The acknowledged disproportioned relationship “‘is an important tool [in] giving men that hegemony.’” 4 

Thus, gender acts as a provocative mechanism that nurtures and sustains heteronormativity. Varda Burstyn, award-winning author of *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport*, 1999, insists that “US culture, influenced by men’s culture, is marked by an intense denigration of the ‘feminine’ and its associated qualities of softness receptivity, cooperation and compassion.” She does not stop here, however, and emphasizes, “[t]oday’s erotic athletic flesh is hard, muscled, tense, and mean.” American audiences and fans need to be critical of viewer who recognize that, “[t]he unquestioning [of] the emulation of hypermasculinity by women does not constitute ‘androgyny’ or ‘gender neutrality’ but rather the triumph of hypermasculism.” 5 The hypermasculism, to which Burstyn refers, is a direct pervasive product of the practiced masculinity in sport and in gender binaries. The continued practice of both masculinity and “manliness” by women threatens the social construct and requires a revaluation of the definition of femininity and its

purpose. The abstract reconstructions of gender roles in athletics intimidate the existing constructs and serve as a vessel for liberation of women athletes.

This thesis seeks to analyze the use of deviant sexuality as it is applied to black female athletic bodies, and its heterosexual and homosexual practices in the production of the alpha female. The discussion of deviant sexuality as it relates to black female athletes encompasses performances of homosexual and publicly aberrant love. Sexuality relies on the heterosexual spectrum of morality, cleanliness, and deviancy. Indeed as growing number of scholars have noted, “because homosexuality is not a rejection of an oppressive myth but rather an option within the myth of gender difference,” society imagines that “homosexuality perpetrates the unjust myth of gender indifference and therefore shares in the patriarchal oppressiveness of gender.” As Pronger illuminated, the patriarchal power that men receive through the constructs of heterosexual gender and additionally requires that men take responsibility for the actions that give them power. The practice of sexuality, the deviance insinuated behind it, and its connections to gender further expose myths behind masculinity in sport. This understanding further facilitates the transformation of myths as sociocultural norms while it produces a more abstract definition of gender.

---

Invisibility in Public Spheres

Finally, this thesis aims to discuss the use of hypervisibility and invisibility by highlighting their purposes in sports. Analysis of the use of media and a study of the professional, public, and private lives of each athlete will reveal the pervasive restraints that cause for an athlete to be ridiculed, supervised or forgotten completely. Racialized athletic bodies are subject to white supremacy reinforced by racial aspersion. Additionally, gender binaries and queer communities in athletics are exiled to due the need to sustain white heterosexuality. Furthermore, the garnered invisibility of black and queer female athletes warrants white hegemony. Hence, athletics are viewed as a platform in which white supremacy remains prevalent, as it also is a staging of the racialized and queer social climate of America.
“My Ass is Too Big”: Serena Williams’ Excessive Hypersexualized Champion Identity

“I am not a robot. I have a heart and I bleed.” – Serena Williams
History Of Tennis

The competitive and fierce sport of tennis is rich in progressive history, and has challenged many gender norms throughout its storied history. The very first games of tennis were played during the medieval era in Europe and many member of diverse royal courts in Europe—especially those in England, France, and Scotland—as well as numerous dignitaries, enjoyed the game by using the palms of their hands and wrist to strike the ball. Harry Gem modified the game of tennis when he first used rackets in the Leamington Tennis club in Birmingham, England. Gem, who studied at King’s College in London, became an English lawyer, writer and sportsman. His partner Augurio Perera was a Spanish sales merchant and sportsman who came to England often for business made England his home. Together, Pereira and Gem created lawn tennis.

The first major tennis competition, The Davis Cup, began in the mid-nineteenth century as a nationally based competition that exists amongst countries. The Davis cup provided healthy competition and is still thriving as an international tournament. The International Tennis Federation, in 1863, created the Federation Cup for nationally based competition amongst professional women tennis players. This crucial and contextually early change in the late 1800s acknowledged the women who found the sport of tennis riveting. Both the Davis Cup and the Federation Cup continue currently as competitions for the respective sexes—grand prizes totaling 9 million dollars and no prize money respectively is to be split amongst the teams. Although the Davis Cup and Federation Cup are not regarded as major titles in
competition, the progressive inclusive attitude towards women’s competition remains significant.

Established in 1877, Wimbledon became the first major tennis tournament. Wimbledon differed from the Davis Cup and the Federation Cup because it was the first contest in which women and men were allowed to compete. The Wimbledon tournament is played on lawns in July, centered in the small city of Wimbledon, not to far from the monumental Wimbledon Bridge and in the midst of residential life. The major was moved to Church Road in 1922, in order to accommodate for the increased need for space for the growing audience. Although the first arena that Wimbledon was held has rich history, its legacy continues with the use of the courts by Wimbledon High School.

The United States introduced its major, the US Open, in 1881and held it in Newport, Rhode Island. Newport, Rhode Island was home to many people who established themselves during the Industrial Revolution. Cornelius Vanderbilt and The Vanderbilt family emerged quickly during the Gilded Age of America, and profited off of their investments in steamboats and the New York railroad system. The concentration of wealth in Newport, Rhode Island, was due to families like the Vanderbilt’s, heavy involvement and investments in the early trafficking of African bodies. His home in Newport, along with many others, functioned as lavish summer cottages. Vanderbilt’s own home was named the Breakers, and his extended family home was named the Marble House; they were regarded as one of the wealthiest families in America. Individuals like the Vanderbilt’s, made up the majority of the primary audiences at the tournaments and matches held in Newport. The excessive
wealth that supported the US Open shaped the class of audience that enjoyed tennis nationally.

The next major, The French Open was established in 1891, and quickly took a hiatus coming back to life again in 1925 due to a campaign to gain World War One reparations from Germany. During the First World War, the Roland Garros arena, was used as an imprisonment camp that held many “foreign nationals and political dissidents” for ten months in the summer of 1939 into 1940. The French Open, grand slam, is played on clay and is hosted in the city of Paris, France. The last and final grand slam to be created was the Australian Open in 1905. At a young start the political and racial tensions in Australia increased as the Australian Open flourished. Many genocides and massacres happened to the aboriginal population in Australia starting in 1911 and continued on in contemporary times. In all of the excitement and creating the grand slams for tennis competition, professional women athletes were not considered. Even more, the racial and classist tensions that plague the league currently present themselves as the foundations of the profit for the tennis tournaments internationally.  

The United States Tennis Association (USTA) prides itself for being founded in 1881, the same year in which the United States Open was launched. The Tennis Association in the United States, first known as the United States National Lawn Association, was created by a small group of men who played tennis on lawns in New York. Later the name was changed to the United States Tennis Association primarily

because of the modification of and increasing popularity of hard courts in the United States. The USTA delights itself in creating ways and space for people to regulate the game of tennis, develop the players and coaches, and well as continuously improving the skill that tennis requires. The USTA mission statement is a unselfconscious manifesto that reads:

The United States Tennis Association USTA is the national governing body for the sport of tennis and the recognized leader in promoting and developing the sports growth on every level in the United States, from local communities to the crown jewel of the professional game, the US open.  

The mission statement is solely based on the growth of tennis; however, it causes one to consider the various ways in which tennis can grow and the specific parts of tennis the USTA is trying to develop and promote. The game itself grows continuously as a direct result of the individuals who play professionally by the introduction of abstract skill in the game. However, the way in which the USTA in the United States has changed the most is in the way that it promotes and brands their athletes by the constructions of boundaries on normalized bodies and personalities in tennis.

Historically, tennis is a sport based on tradition and structure. The game was initiated in the Royal courts and developed into annual traditions and organizations of structured competition. These traditions continue to included men of high rank and wealth as seen in the royal courts in the nineteenth century, and in country clubs in the twenty-first century. Tennis plentiful in tradition, is a sport in which race and

---


gender breakthroughs have generally been supported by the audience and by the USTA, specifically in the United States of America. Internationally, Wimbledon added the first women’s singles tennis competition in 1884. In 1887, only three years after the opening of the US open, Ellen Hensel, was crowned the first woman singles champion. Consequently in 1887, the French open also held their first women's championship.

Tennis is still a sport of class and sophistication; typically, people who play sports like tennis are well educated and fairly wealthy. In the United States, whites have dominated tennis and their participation has deepened, to some degree, upon the strategic exclusion of people of color. People of color in the U.S. did not possess the wealth or the social habitats to be able to participate in the United States Tennis Association (USTA). In the 1900s, schools like The Tuskegee Institute and Howard University created tennis teams for black students. When the United States National Lawn Tennis Association banned blacks from competing in the national tennis tournaments, The American Tennis Association (ATA) emerged. The ATA aimed at providing a place where people of color could actively pursue tennis as a competitive sport. The ATA held competitions at historically black colleges and universities to overcome the discrimination of both housing and sports facilities that black men and women faced. The separation of the races into different tennis associations was initially challenged by player Don Budge, who was the first American to win all four of the Grand Slam tournaments; Budge later made history when he played against African American McDaniels and Dr. Reginald Weir, the captain of New York City College men's tennis team. After they defeated Budge, McDaniels and Weir became the first black men to play on lawn tennis in the USTA. In addition, Oscar Johnson,
1948 champion of the Long Beach Junior Open, blazed the trail into the grand slams for other black individuals.\(^\text{10}\) After competing and winning two junior championships at the US Open, Johnson clearly had secured the route to victory and prominence that tennis phenoms Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe.

Althea Gibson captivated audiences internationally when she became the first black athlete to break color barriers internationally.\(^\text{11}\) Gibson served as a racial ambassador for the United States to Europe and Australia and was respected because she conformed to the customs of traditional tennis so much so that she is quoted saying: “I have never regarded myself as a crusader. I don’t consciously beat the drums for any cause, not even the Negro in the United States.”\(^\text{12}\) Although she was viewed as a racial ambassador, she never accepted her role outside of tennis, resulting in her wide audience acceptance and appreciation. Arthur Ashe—an African American man who played in the grand slam tournaments, followed her closely. In 1963 Arthur Ashe was the first African-American man to be chosen by the United States National Team to play in the Davis Cup. In 1997, what was formerly known Louis Armstrong Stadium at the US Open in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, was renamed and inaugurated as the Arthur Ashe Stadium. Coincidentally, this ceremony was one of the first times that the African American Williams sisters competed against each other. Gibson earned her highest ranking at number 27th and Ashe attained the number one position, resulting in the highest rankings of African


\(^{12}\) Ibid.
American tennis players in the 1950’s. After them, many other African Americans followed, including Zina Garrison, Chandra Reuben and Katrina Adams.

On more than one occasion, Arthur Ashe was booed and less favored than his competition. One of Arthur Ashe’s international competitors at the US open was receiving more support from the audience than Arthur Ashe, the American, himself. This is an expressive example of how audiences in the United States did not, and still do not, fully support black athletes further demonstrating how audiences willingly ostracize fellow American citizens. Even more significantly, Arthur Ashe remains the only black man to ever have won a singles title at the US Open. Ashe’s athletic accomplishments earned him a memorial on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, in 1996, next to influential people like Robert E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. The statue postures Ashe raised above young children. Although he was not fully supported by fans in America, citizens appreciated him as a positively moral icon. This may be due to the fact that an uplifted black man is standing with a book in one hand and a tennis racket in his other hand promoting the importance and significance of education.

While the primary audiences at tennis matches are upper class whites, the competitions between black and white players drew a much larger audience. Contemporarily, tennis competitions between black and white players have drawn an influx of non-white audiences naturally making tennis arenas more diverse. Hence, sustained historical positive and negative gazes that occur in tennis arenas objectified the bodies of Arthur Ashe and Althea Gibson because they were two black bodies that dominated the very exclusive competition and social space. The love that the audience had for these two individuals was not based solely upon, or even partially
influenced by genuine awe. Rather, the fans’ affection was linked directly to, the novelty of having acceptable black people in the sport. Having other black tennis players was intriguing, but posed no real threat because of their lack of top rated skills. Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe were tokens, loved as novelty, and celebrated because they were outstanding. They were accepted because of their unique fit in the social structures of tennis in that they maintained a high level of class, depicted moral respectability, and submitted to white heteronormative behaviors.

During The Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Ashe and Gibson were capable of using their bodies in the space of tennis to make a difference by painting black people in a positive light. Ashe and Gibson’s success in tennis resulted from more than skill, but the required ability to show white audiences and white members of the USTA that black people could also be civilized and intelligent enough to play a sport like tennis. The presence of these two revolutionary black tennis players created an opening for players like Serena Williams into a life of tennis. Althea Gibson was able to destroy parts of segregation against women and African-Americans, by way of her celebrity while also being an asset to both tennis and America. In addition, Arthur Ashe was an individual who was able to break color lines while playing and excelling in tennis. Ashe was able to use tennis and the power that came with his celebrity to benefit people in the African-American community. Ashe used his social popularity to start the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health in 1992, a non-profit community organization that was conceived near the end of his battle with AIDS. Ashe was a representative for African American people in America; he gladly dedicated his life to education and community health for black people in America. Although, both Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe fit perfectly into
the civilized and intelligent roles that the USTA and white audiences stereotyped them into being, they remained exceptions of the black race. Their choice to take on these positions illustrated that Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe were pioneers in tennis. Gibson and Ashe, respectively inactively and purposefully attempted to desegregate tennis in hope for inclusion for many African Americans to come.

**The Arena for Gladiators**

The arena—of ancient times, of the twenty-first century, and of every era in between—provides a space in which the unadulterated gaze takes control. Instantly, the bodies within the arena are subject to the thoughts and opinions of those who pay to watch them. The conversation is no longer about race and gender, but rather how the two intersect one another and with the game. The dialogue focuses on the visibility of each body playing tennis, and the discipline of staying within the traditional boundaries of tennis. Considering visibility, discipline, and gender stratification, an analysis of tennis in the United States is less about the sport and more of an analysis of American culture.

Individual tennis players earn their income by playing in a number of tennis matches, but by also being branded by the USTA. The interest of the institution in branding tennis players is to make more money for USTA and the players themselves. The USTA acts as a connected sphere and working company; within this company, players can find coaches and endorsements. The USTA provides a balance system to ensure that all players receive equal publicity. However, the system of checks and balances within the USTA functions as a way to normalize players based on the
traditions and hierarchies that are reproduced in tennis. Those players that do not fit into the normalized vision of tennis are either excluded or made hypervisible. The ways in which various tennis players are normalized or deemed exotic is essential to the athletic institution’s success in tennis. These vast variations, allow for difference in tennis that is controlled by the institution’s success in publicly labeling each player’s bodily presence and identity. The USTA’s choice in labeling each tennis player is crucial because the brand is ultimately accepted by the audience. However, discussions of race and gender in contemporary tennis questions themes of perpetual exclusion, invisibility, hypervisibility, and femininity. As gender and race continue to intersect with each other, the ceaseless growth of invisibility and exclusion on non-normalized bodies force the gaze and institution of tennis to become nuanced and insidious. The labeling of bodies by the USTA causes one to think about the various ways in which the institution of tennis is complex and solely built for one type of individual—an individual who is of a white “sophisticated” class. The introduction of black female bodies within the tennis arena forces the discussions of racial and sexual disparity to the institution of tennis.

Serena Williams: The Greatest of all Time

At the 2015 Australian Open, Serena Williams became the first black woman to win nineteen Grand Slam titles. Serena Jameka Williams, born on September 26, 1981 in Saginaw, Michigan, was the youngest of five sisters who was raised in Compton, California. When she turned three years old, both she and her older sister, Venus, began to play tennis on the battered courts near their home. Their father Richard
Williams insisted on introducing tennis to his youngest girls because he hoped to drive them into an activity to teach them about dedication and discipline. In the heart of Compton, the two sisters played with each other across net that had deteriorated badly and that barely existed. As Serena Williams matured, she was known for her intelligence, power and independence as a female athlete. Even more so, Williams established a new category for women athletes that created space for what has been traditionally considered excess body and behavior. To date, she is the wealthiest female tennis players, and has an estimated net worth of 130 million dollars—Williams earning approximately 15 million dollars a year as a result of the endorsements that she is secured, the awe that follows her presence, and the amount of money she has earned by winning titles and grand slams.

Serena Williams’ journey as a black female tennis player has been eventful, successful and rewarding. However, Serena Williams as an individual has suffered a great deal during her tenure as a professional tennis player. In 2002 after verbally threatening a line judge she was fined $10,000, which then was followed by an $82,500 fine with two years probation the USTA. This punishment, had she violated the terms, would have warranted her inability to play in the upcoming tournaments and Grand Slams. This was the highest fine ever for a tennis outburst during competition. In the next year her eldest sister, Yetunde Williams, was murdered brutally as a result of gang violence. Media reports noted Williams’ loss of her older sister Yetunde caused an extended, though abhorred, break from its usually unsympathetic elitist society. Yet another family crisis emerged in 2011 when Venus Williams, Serena’s cherished older sister and mentor was diagnosed with Sjogren’s syndrome, an autoimmune disease, that has exhausted Williams’ energy. Serena’s
fear for Venus’s life was yet another strain on her own. In addition, Serena Williams’ doctors discovered a series of blood clots surrounding her lungs, which questioned her ability to play tennis for the rest of her life. All of these hardships came at points in Serena’s life that were crucial to her career and to her ability to make history in the sport. Williams’ comments on the time she spent off the court, “I really missed being out there. Not the crowd or the atmosphere. I just missed hitting the ball.”

Williams’ time away from the court functioned as emotional and physical rest while also reminding her of the desire she had for the sport. The time spent off of the court illuminated how crucial the Williams family as an institution, functions as Serena Williams’ rock.

Serena Williams has existed not only as a token black woman in the arena of tennis but she also has functioned as an object in which she is constantly under scrutiny and critically analyzed. Within the institution of tennis she has been and branded as excessive, animal like, and by her body parts. The tennis institution’s depiction of Williams’ as excessive, animal like, and parts of a body reinforce the various ways in which Williams’ is subject to violence within the institution of tennis.

Over nearly 20 years of professional tennis Serena Williams became both sophisticated and upper class, both essentials in the sport of tennis. Her assimilation into high status and tennis often obscures her Compton identity. Often remembered as a Cinderella from Compton, California, Serena’s identity is never viewed fully. The Serena who existed in Compton, and the Serena that exists as the reigning

---

international champion in tennis are uniquely intertwined, as both identities are crucial to understanding Serena Williams as an individual.

**Indian Wells: The importance of Facing Ones Fears**

Williams is constantly watched in and outside of the arena. The unrelenting gaze that follows Serena penetrates her being as it aims to diminish her existence while simultaneously highlighting her being. Although Williams’ body rarely falls through the cracks, the harm that the gaze reproduces is covert. Often, the invisible racism linked with her visibility is ignored, as it is not considered a direct act of racism. However, the indirect aggressions that are accepted in the institution of tennis and within American culture highlight obvious white racism. In the summer of 2001, at the Indian Wells tournament, considered a home base in California, Serena and Venus Williams first encountered what was seen as invisible racism. The two sisters entered the stadium as the crowd shouted obscene racist and derogatory time to the young girls and their family. Richard Williams, the sister’s father recounted that, “[o]ne guy said, 'I wish it was '75; we'd skin you alive.'” Richard Williams continued to reminisce saying, “[t]hat’s when I stopped and walked toward that way.” In that moment, Williams realized that his “best bet was to handle the situation nonviolently.” Emotionally he recalled saying, “I had trouble holding back tears. I think Indian Wells disgraced America.” 14 The audience at the tennis match continued to terrorize Venus and Serena Williams; these actions were justified as angry mobs cried for feeling cheated at the finals game in a tournament, while relentlessly booing
the young teenagers. After experiencing the crowd’s rage, the sisters vowed to never play at the Indian Wells Tournament again. One might say that this decision was made because of fear; horror that Venus and Serena Williams believed they could never be accepted at Indian Wells. Serena passionately remembers, “[i] t has been difficult for me to forget spending hours crying in the Indian Wells locker room after winning in 2001, driving back to Los Angeles feeling as if I had lost the biggest game ever- not a mere tennis game but a bigger fight for equality.” Williams’ resumes, “[e] motionally it seemed easier to stay away.” Serena Williams concludes with her audiences’ hope that “say [she] should’ve returned years ago.” 

On a deeper level, the incident at Indian Wells justified of angry white men’s mob mentality, and accepted overt racism. Validating the angry crowd screams and recognizing the reasoning for such covert racism reinforced the power hierarchy within Indian Wells and the USTA. The anxiety that was seen in Serena and Venus’ eyes was not enough to convince the men in power that the young girls were under visible racial attack. The invisibility of obvious white racism within the institution of tennis produces a violent space for black women tennis players while offering no form of protection.

Repeated acts of racism within the institution of the USTA and in tennis more broadly induces unnecessary, but real fear, and it all too justifies the unequal treatment of players. However, in 2014, thirteen years after Indian Wells, the USTA supported the Williams’ sisters when they were publicly humiliated by being referred to as the “William brothers” by Russian Tennis President Shamil Tarpischev. His

comment accumulated much attention internationally. The USTA fined Taripischev within a few days of his making the statement and the organization took the unprecedented step of making a public declaration that bullying would not be allowed in 2014. Serena Williams comments,

I thought they were very insensitive and extremely sexist as well as racist at the same time, I thought they were in a way bullying. I’ve done the best that I can do, and that’s all I can say. So I just wasn’t very happy with his comments. I think a lot of people weren’t happy as well … but the WTA and the USTA did a wonderful job of making sure that in this day and age, 2014, for someone with his power, it’s really unacceptable to make such bullying remarks.16

Taripischev’s comments illuminate the ways in which Serena’s body is regularly subject to racial and sexual harm. However, Taripischev’s remarks provided an opportunity for the WTA and USTA to create boundaries while also supporting black players like Serena Williams. The WTA’s and USTA’s actions showed Williams’ that in 2014, the game of tennis has progressively evolved.

Thus, 2015 was a year of mighty change for Serena Williams. Appreciative of how the WTA and USTA supported her against racism lead her to think again about returning to Indian Wells. Williams posted, on her Instagram:

At age 19, I was dealt the hardest serve of my career. A serve that I didn’t know how to handle. One that I thought time would take care of. That 18 majors titles could easily put away. I’ve finally figured out there is no way I can return that serve if I’m not facing it.17


17 Instagram.com/serenawilliams
Serena returned to Indian Wells in order to practice forgiveness. Williams’ homecoming continued to pave a path of transformation while also healing the tennis institutions violent, embarrassing, racial circumstance. In Vogue Magazine’s April 2015 issue Mary Joe Fernandez, former professional tennis player observes, “She’s changed, but so has tennis.” Fernandez proceeds to express, “[w]e’re never going to see anything like the Williams sisters again in American tennis, so having her back at such an important tournament is like seeing a circle close. She’s one tough cookie, but she has the biggest heart.”

![Figure 1 Serena Williams' Instagram post on the eve of her Indian Wells Tournament. Source: Instagram.com/serenawilliams](image)

Although white racism is uniquely crafted to remain invisible, the blackness of Serena Williams and her black culture is made hypervisible against the white traditional fabric of tennis and the USTA. The levels of judgment within the USTA and WTA create opportunities in which Williams differences cause others to regard

her skill as “brute power” as opposed to intelligence and skill. Williams’ love for her family exist within black historical traditions of drawing great strength and support from the broken yet sound institution of black families in America. The ways in which the family of Serena Williams has been viewed has caused there to be an examination of respectability and class on the tennis courts. Williams’ family is painted as uneducated, and classless, furthermore demanding that they be banned because of their inability to follow tradition. Douglas writes,

The Williams family’s narratives of Black ignominy, malfeasance, and misery offered by dominate media. Thus, the sisters’ expressions of (Black) pleasure and joy threaten the status quo, because self-actualization is one way to challenge sexism and White supremacy. 19

These labels that have been placed on Serena Williams’ family to function as representations of how Serena is viewed. William’s constant love for her family, and support provided by her family reroute the negative narrative that has been provided by the media. Institutions are typically founded on metaphysical beliefs socially or religiously. In addition, institutions are also considered to be the establishment of relationships by law. Thus, the Williams’ family remains as an institution with the foundation of tennis that is powerful and black as it has been established as a lawful partnership in tennis as it is founded on the metaphysical beliefs of love, religion and friendship. The Williams family represents racial cultural difference and a pocket of cultural normalcy in tennis as her backbone. Serena Williams’ position of power and high ranking on the court further validates her family structure as an impenetrable

institution in tennis. Although, the disapproving and damaging description of the William’s family has been reinforced, these words depict the cyclical and internal power that feeds off of the skill and will of Serena Williams. Her connection with her family combats white supremacy as it seeks to validate the existence of her institution as outstandingly positive and compulsory. Williams intertwined identity as a young girl from Compton, California with strong ties to family and as a reigning champion grant her the agency to direct and facilitate the gaze that passes over her body unrequitedly. Furthermore, Williams is able to control the way she is viewed on the court because she exist in a position of power supported by her uniquely crafted institution that has continuously dominated tennis society. The young Compton girl embraces her cornrows and beads, as it is a direct link to her history and black culture. Media sportscaster Chris Evert “proclaimed that she was ‘tired of the beads!’” This is an animated example of various “discussion [s] and commentary about the William’s sister’ hairstyle reflect how ‘sportscasters often seem challenged and mystified what to say about them.’”20 Evert’s ability to comment on Williams bead strikes questions of agency and privilege. As a sportscaster and white woman, Chris Evert is capable of colonizing Williams’ body. Evert’s agitated opinion on the choice of hair and beads are examples of commodity and cultural racism that was heard nationally. Additionally, the lack of disciplining on the USTA’s part of Chris Evert fortifies the skewed truth of covert racism within the USTA. Scholars then describe, “the trivialization or denial of cultural significance of the sisters to blacks is symptomatic of ‘white conceit’ and its attendant mechanisms of containment are

emblematic of the power or whiteness to denigrate those deemed racial subordinates.”

21 Evert’s vile comments on Serena Williams’ body and hair successfully captured and tamed her obvious blackness to be in line with needed whiteness. The advantage Evert exercised was permissible because of her race, and was most hurtful because of her gender. The intersectionality and violence that continues to prosper on Williams’ family and hair are tolerable because of her reality as a black woman. Williams’ manages her gaze by being aware of how she presents herself. Whether it is the flashy colors of beads or her arrangements of expensive jewels as she plays, Williams makes it a point to direct and focus the audience’s gaze on what she is willing to show. Serena William’s beads function as a direct link to black culture in a predominantly white space. Her beads and cornrows accessed an opening that many skilled, white tennis players cannot approach. Her diamonds rings, and variety of expensive earrings demands undeviating attention to her excessive wealth and success within the institution of tennis. In addition, her jewelry depicts class and femininity that is not otherwise seen on Serena Williams’ body alone. Williams regulates the gaze by focusing on how to stretch and tease the limitations of tennis. Where her body is seen as excessive, Williams chooses her tennis apparel in ways that can show her muscular and curvaceous physique while barely remaining within the regulations of the USTA. Her eccentric tennis apparel succeeds in making her visible as she chooses what to show and what to hide. However, as she combats and manipulates the gaze, she is also subject to the judgments of others on her body.

Media: Public and Not So Private Spheres

The media enacts violence on Williams’ body and morals, which dehumanizes her by repressing her sexuality and femininity. Male perpetrators often focus on Serena Williams’ body and sexuality to devalue her skill as a professional woman athlete and repress her sexuality and femininity. Men and women view Serena Williams’ body as excessive, hypersexual and invalidated. A Rolling Stones article called Serena “who is black, beautiful and built like one of those monster trucks that crushes Volkswagens at sports arenas.”

Williams’ body is constantly compared to inanimate objects, and is portrayed in a humorous manner, rarely considered to be desirable. When her body is coveted, it is in an exceptionally sexual lens. She is a woman with muscular legs, a round behind, and a sizable chest. Academics theorize conveying, “Hyper-muscularity as both a new social phenomenon and a denigrating stereotype is especially evident in sport, which has embodied in the past the natural superiority of men in contrast to the ‘otherness’ of female athletes,” furthering them as “objects of ridicule, weakness, inferiority, decoration, passivity, and as erotically desirable yet transgressive.” Consequently, audiences are constantly, “searching for new ways to disparage the powerful and therefore ‘uppity’ African American sportswomen.”

Williams’ body is not only being compared to men, but also additionally compared to normalized bodies of white women. The emblem of white

---


sports bodies and accepted standards of white beauty specifically, small frames, thin
noses, and long hair, directly cause harm to Williams’ identity and perception in the
media. The media’s inability to handle a contrasting body subjects Williams to harsh
ridicule and perpetual hate. Instantly, her body becomes hypersexual, when
describing her large breast and behind and asexual when discussing her animal-like
brute aggression. The public is unable to grapple with Serena Williams’ versatile
femininity and fails in approving her excess athletic body.

Perpetrators provoke harm by focusing on the bases of Serena’s skill and the
uniqueness of Serena’s presence. The fixation on attributing Serena’s skill to
perspectives other than hard work is an example of scientific racism. Scientific racism
uses objective theorems and assumptions to validate the belief in racial inferiority and
superiority. This action causes women like Serena to be judged on her possession of
innate talent instead of hard work and discipline. Even more so, the mere act of
questioning Williams’ excellence discredits her process and progression of acquiring
an intelligent and mindful skill like tennis. Focusing on her evolution of raw talent
continues to weaken her ability for aptitude and cleverness as a black woman
dominating the game of tennis. This incessant depreciation of Serena Williams as an
athlete eradicates her capacity to be viewed as a role model for young athletes
everywhere.

Frequently, Williams’ body is used as an example for others to gaze upon.
Djokovic, a male Serbian tennis player, is known for his impersonation of Williams
in which he stuffs towels and t-shirts in his chest and behind to exaggerate the
proportions of her body. Easily, he can occupy and taunt her body; his actions and lack of chastisement from the USTA bolster his privilege to colonize her body. In addition, journalists enjoyed a reporting frenzy in 2001 when Williams entered the US Open wearing a black spandex outfit, later titled the “Catsuit” and identified as scintillating and outrageous.

Hobson argued that by attacking Williams for her ‘tackiness’ and ‘inappropriate’ display of sexuality in the catsuit, the press reinvigorates ‘a racialized sense of aesthetics’ that position blackness in terms of grotesquerie while whiteness serves as an emblem of beauty.24

By showing her large breast and behind in a body sculpting outfit, Serena Williams accentuated every part of her that is not considered standardized white beauty. In
doing so, she became representative of blackness deemed as excessive and tasteless. Furthermore, the relentless remarks and interpretations of all of Williams’ outfits represent the public agency practiced on her body which she lacks control over. More importantly, the lack of commentary on other women’s attire characterizes the nature in which Williams’ body is constantly framed and depicted as excessive and uncontrollable. Serena Williams’ body is perpetually dissected, and examined as pieces like the late Hottentot Venus, Saartjie Bartmann a South African woman who was put on nude display during her life and after for the amusement and curiosity of white people. They compare greatly due to the similar interest in parts of their body. On the other hand, these two black excessive bodies rarely contrast due to the similar need to feed the appetite of white gaze. The interest and awe in the black woman's body undermines and demoralizes the existence of the black woman as an individual and as a being. Most importantly, it invalidates any sense of womanhood as it disrespectfully talks about the most sexual parts a woman’s body like her breast and genitals. One blogger posted on the YBF, “Serena leave steroid alone because it making you look not sexy at all heavy,” and as if the insulting nature of his comment was not already intense, the blogger continues to say, “[it is] in all the wrong places nigger go natural is the best put some clothes on nigger hide some of those muscle before they take you for a man you look.” The comment above, was just one of many. Audiences are privileged because of their ability to shame Williams’ body. Johnson and McKay write on sexuality and shaming,

---


According to Hobson, harsh criticisms of the attire that Serena Williams has worn during some of her matches are best comprehended in relation to the black female body’s history of enslavement, colonial conquest and ethnographic exhibition in which it has been labeled grotesque, unfeminine, lascivious, and obscene.  

The USTA rarely punishes the blatant disregard for a woman's body because of the lack of visible harm words inflict. However, the open and frivolous talk of a black woman’s body, as demonstrated by references to Williams’ body portray black women as morally bankrupt and less than human. American culture warrants the agency of white men and women voices to critique and scrutinize what is not theirs because of the historic and traditional agency in being able to covertly colonize bodies. Racist and sexist attitudes of Serena Williams and her body are linked to the violence committed in tennis.

In addition to Williams’ body being subject to men’s overarching privilege, she also falls prey to her white professional tennis peers. The voices of her women perpetrators are privileged primarily because of their normalized, accepted bodies and presence within the tennis arena. The rights that other females have on Williams’ body are laced with the power of control and violence. Kimberle Crenshaw and Professor at Columbia University Law, explains “[w]hile gender, race, and class intersect to create the particular context in which women of color experience,” it is imperative to understand that “violence and certain choices, made by allies can reproduce intersectional subordination within the very resistance strategies designed

---

to respond to the problem.” 27 This is best seen in Williams’ relationship with Caroline Wozniacki, formerly ranked number one tennis star and friend, which is both refreshing and challenging. Williams and Wozniacki are often together, on and off of the court. Because of the close relationship between the two, Wozniacki is able to poke fun at Serena. After a win, Wozniacki, like Djokovic, stuffed her tennis wear with clothes to mimic Serena. Additionally, a separate occasion records Wozniacki and Williams comparing butt sizes. Although the difference in their bodies is recognizable and acknowledged, Wozniacki participations in using William’s body as comic relief reproduce the traditional appearance hierarchy seen in tennis. Furthermore, the constant comparison of Wozniacki normalized body to Serena’s masculine and excessive body represents the constant labeling and devaluation of Serena Williams’ physical appearance.

Conclusion

Williams’ skill, culture, and body are under constant assault because of the foreign nature it possesses within the institution of tennis. Culturally, Serena Williams’ clings to black culture as she bases her existence, strength, and experience in it. Unlike past tennis players, William’s culture has functioned as her backbone and her source of inspiration. As she continues to be a reigning champion, her roots based in Compton allow her to cling on to her identity as a princess from the ghetto. Had it

---

not been for her family and ingrained understanding of being black in America, Serena would have fizzled out. Her survival as a black woman in the realm of tennis is based on her ability to remain within her identity. Cultural racism occurs because of the desperate need for hierarchy and tradition within the institute of tennis, in addition, to the blatant ignorance that exists towards various black cultures. These white men and women are cultural perpetrators and practice racism to undermine historical custom and ethos that are essential to the existence of black people in America by reinforcing institutionalized racism and sexism within the institution of tennis. The forced assimilation that has burdened Williams in tennis and in popular culture has generated damage that cannot be undone. Conversations about her black presence within the arena focus primarily on how Williams does not fit the normalized, ideal mold of what a woman athlete should look and behave like. These engineered boxes that apply to other women athletes are used as standard rules and expectations that all women, including Williams’, must fit and accept. Because Williams cannot exist typically within these molds, she is ousted as something that is different and not accepted. Women like Chris Evert and Caroline Wozniacki indulge in cultural racism by creating an exclusive space, rejecting varying backgrounds and authorities. The continued dismissal of aspects of Serena Williams’ ethos further devalues and destroys her presence and cultural identity.

The unremitting aggression that is practiced on Serena Williams’ morals, love for tennis and extracurricular activities debase her presence as a champion of the United States Tennis Association. The intense vehemence towards Serena Williams succeeds as it paints her an immoral, and greedy woman. Douglas writes on the gaze that follows Williams when outside of the institution of tennis:
Thus the preoccupation with Serena Williams’ ‘on-court’ play and ‘off-court’ activities functions as a form of racialized gender marking that constitutes a form of surveillance that is used by Whites to observe, identify, and ultimately, control the range of available representations of the sisters. I contend that this kind of media attention and surveillance is an important form of ‘race talk’ that unofficially penalizes Serena while simultaneously affirming whites and normalizing whiteness.28

The constant supervision—or “surveillance” as Douglas terms it in the quote above, represents the USTA’s and media’s need to discipline and control the ways in which Williams moves on and off of the court. The need to watch over Serena Williams hints that she is seen as a child, and that she cannot be trusted to represent the USTA outside of the arena. Furthermore, the shadowing of her off-the –court activities allows a space for her morals and decisions to be judged outside of the arena. The ignorance of her black culture and the need to track her off court activities are just simple examples of how Serena Williams is controlled by the media and USTA. Although the USTA has failed at trying to control Williams by harshly commenting on her outfits and hair beads, they succeed in watching her existence in white America. Because Serena Williams is constantly under attack when she steps on and off of the court, her body remains colonized as she is unable to protect herself from the various forms of shaming and disciplining. The persistent ignorance that continuously produces cultural and scientific racism, within, the ethos of tennis works diligently to disintegrate the soul of a champion. The relentless debasing of her being, body and identity effectively thrust out every form of blackness in the white sport.

Researchers contextualize, “[that] [t]he criminalization of a black female is part of

the tradition of White supremacy,” further suggesting “the enthusiasm for punishment is an example of the culture of ‘permissibility and impunity’ that continues to sanction anti-black misogyny and gendered racism.\(^{29}\) In line with this opinion, Serena Williams is constantly reprimanded as a way to keep her in line with White American culture. The USTA demonizes people and behaviors that cling to blackness. Serena Williams’ presence as a princess from the ghetto and champion further elicit white fear and white hysteria. Serena Williams is invasive, and violent because she succeeds in dominating the game of tennis. She is the black woman that everyone knows and talks about; her ability to penetrate the social fabric of tennis and modify it as her own causes her to be a resilient threat to white traditions and hierarchy within the arena of tennis.

White America and white supremacy struggle in understand Serena Williams as a person and as a branded entity. Tennis is a sport internationally that focuses on the surplus presence of normalized white bodies, white mindsets, and white fear. In the institution of tennis internationally, white supremacy reigns on as a “persistent, resurgent and veiled racism.”\(^{30}\) This prevailing and hidden racism is best understood as structural, scientific, and commodity racism. Crenshaw postulates, “women of color occupy positions both physically and culturally marginal [ing] [them] within dominant society,” resulting in “information targeted directly to them in order to


In order to maintain the status quo, the institution of tennis attacks Williams covertly. Serena’s powerful spirit, fierce body, and winning status insights white fear and white frenzy as she disrupts what has been traditionally identified as normal in the arena. As she is seen controlling endorsements, championships, and media, Serena poses a threat to white supremacy by making the sport “more black” and her presence larger than life. Out of fear, the media subjects Serena to violence against her body, mind, culture, morals, femininity, sexuality by means of surveillance and punishment.

The violence formed against Serena is intense and varies in delivery. First, the violence on her body can be seen in terms of commodity, structural, and scientific racism. Evidence of this can be seen in the ways that she endorsed, talked about, how she dresses, and how she celebrates and her off-court activities. Surveillance in these aspects of Serena’s life operates as part of the racial discourse of whiteness insofar as it organizes and disseminates differential forms of social knowledge about Blacks and blackness integral to sustaining racial inequality. Caroline Wozniacki and Chris Evert are some examples of women who have devalued Williams’ culture, body and presence. This creates the opportunity for Serena to be seen as hypersexual, yet unfeminine. Even more so, the fear on her sexual racial morality in the realm of tennis function to demote her as less than the normalized white body.

The perpetual shaming, judgment, and ostracizing of Serena Williams are in direct response to fear. One way that white fear is rectified is with the continued

---

surveillance and punishment on black female bodies like Serena Williams. The constant surveillance and punishment is successful in dehumanizing her body while simultaneously labeling her as a dangerous, criminalized body. Delia Douglas refers to this phenomenon as the ever-present “captive body”. This racist hostility successfully deems American Black women athletes as “unpatriotic and un-American.” Douglas on the power of media using Williams as a representative writes,

The undeniable prevalence of media accounts that represented Williams in terms of difference, however re-inscribe whiteness as the normative identity in women’s tennis, thereby marginalizing blackness and discrediting ideologies of color blindness in U.S. sport, media, and society. 32

The invisible racism and sexism that exist on her body and in her presence is purposefully placed in order to suppress her presence in tennis overall. Serena has revolutionized her sport, whilst renaming what it means to be a champion. As she takes control of the court and her body, she remains as a token to white tennis that she is large, black and powerful. Her continued presence and love of black culture continue to challenge the boundaries set for convention within the institution of tennis.

White violence on black women athletes like Serena Williams devalue, break, and disseminate black women’s morals, body, and culture in order to validate their presence in mostly white spaces and institutions. How does Serena stay relevant? After attacks on her personhood Serena remains and exists through love for and from her family, love for herself, blackness, and her culture. Williams’ states, in the Vogue

April 2015 magazine, “I feel like I have a desire to be better than ever. I am never, ever, satisfied. I always want to do more, be more reach a new level. Not Just in tennis but in everything I do.”

Her love for her various identities allow her to remain relevant and powerful. Although her body is broken and her morals invalidated, she remains within and around love to counteract the hate perpetrated by white supremacist America.

Can Play With Men: Brittney Griner, The Fierce and Powerful Androgynous Beauty

“I am a strong black, lesbian woman. Every single time I say it I feel so much better.” - Brittney Griner
Brittney Griner: the superstar of the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) stands at 6 feet 8 inches, 200 pounds and is of striking physical build. Griner was the first WNBA draft picks in 2013. She is strong, agile, physically and mentally focused when she steps on to the court. Griner, a southern Texan woman, graduated from Baylor University and is the WNBA’s first openly black lesbian who has marketed herself in the Lesbian, Bi, Gay, and Trans community. In a short span of two years, Griner has successfully charged the WNBA with discussions concerning the politics of queer people in sports, the intersections of gender, sexuality and race, and conceptions of normalized beauty. Brittney Griner is marketed and branded by the WNBA as an icon for many women in the United States and is a role model for many young girls with aspirations of becoming phenomenal athletes. Her presence as a heroine has revolutionized the definition of what is moral, feminine, strong and accepted. She exists as a pioneer in women's athletics because she demands abstract critical thinking about pervasive concepts of idealized womanhood and femininity.

Griner obscures stereotypical boundaries of beauty, athleticism and sexuality when on and off of the court. At almost 7 feet tall she lives as a walking anomaly. Her presence combats the controversial ideals of heteronormative standards of beauty, and ideals of true womanhood. As a champion, Griner repeatedly questions the power of patriarchy and the construct of womanhood, completely liberating and transforming the ideals of the WNBA. Griner continues to figuratively and literally expand the boundaries that confine women athletes as she aims to demonstrate the power and talent that resides in the female body.
Olympics Foundations

The Olympic games, founded on the principles and measurement of masculine strength and ability, serve as an enduring platform that enhances individual athletic accomplishments, but also illuminates and celebrates the most masculine teams worldwide. Until 1900, men were chosen in order to represent their country in skill, sportsmanship, and desire, and to do so required masculinity. The continued competition of men against men, muscles against muscles and bodies against bodies fueled cultural investments in and appreciations of defined revered masculinity. Masculinity, in the early 1900s, then, branded femininity, as it’s opposite. The ability and skill of men was imbedded mentally and intrinsically as an exception to the female body. The competitions were founded on innate grit, discipline and dedication. As the definition of masculinity continued to develop, the meaning of femininity emerged as an abstract counterpart.

Many women in America were believed to be weak, docile, and incapable of any strength or mental capability in comparison with a man and such thought persisted well into the 1960’s. During these times, women were required to represent high morality and respectable behavior. Constructed characteristics and ideals of true womanhood, as written in the Cult of Domesticity, pressured women to strive for model “piety, femininity, and their dedication to husband, children and household duties.” Women who behaved outside of these restrictions were considered deviant because they did not submit themselves to the inferior position with relation to men.

Trademarked as the antithesis of man, white women bore the physical shame of having less able bodies as well as the often-inaccurate assumed necessity that they needed to be cared for by a man. Female bodies were marketed as less than warranting women to continue to be treated as less than.

The social construct of gender and sexuality during the early 20th century functioned as the foundations of gender binaries and differentiation. However, in 1900, the first women to compete in the Olympics disrupted the social trend of women being less physically capable men. In 1990 there were a total of 975 male competitors and 22 female competitors. One of the first women to compete was the French, Hélène de Pourtalès, who won Olympic Gold for her country in the sport of sailing. Exhibitions of strength and speed pioneered the possibility that women possessed similar physical strength, dismantling the belief that women needed to be cared for.

The foundations of the Olympics were practiced within a hierarchical awarding system. The more physically and intellectually strong a person is grants them a place at the top of the masculine hierarchy. The best athletes are seen to have high dedication and desire for the sport at hand and are recognized to have elemental, natural ability and skill. Some might argue that the games and competitions are fair as they seek to take natural ability and transform it into competitive strength. However, the television production of the Olympics, the tabulation of analysis of how many minutes of coverage are allocated to each genders, and the ways in which men are endorsed in comparison to women supports the disproportionate paradigm of the gender hierarchies. In the piece “(Re) Calling London: The Gender Frame Agenda Within NBC’s Primetime Broadcast of the 2012 Olympiad” critic Billings, explains,
“Activities with traditionally masculine participation, such as sports, often forge men as a tacitly defines in-group,” resulting in the need for women to “develop a cognizant set of cues that results in seeing sports as an out-group activity.” 35 Billings suggests that the exclusion of women in sports and competition causes women to view themselves as less capable than men. Men remain the “in-group”36 because sports were designed solely to measure masculinity. Women are exiled in the “out-group” in sports as they can only attempt to maneuver within the confines of masculinity. Women athletes in the Olympics are judged and understood as peers of men as they work within the purview of a competition created specifically for singular male bodies. Women are marginalized as they are stereotyped as docile and weak, even though it is required that some basic level of masculinity is practiced. Athletic women thus occupy a position cast out by both gender binaries because they are too strong to be considered feminine, and too sexually attracted to be considered masculine. Women’s athletic actions cause them to be ousted from standard stereotypes of femininity and beauty, as they are cast out from masculinity as a result of their sex. Women athletes become the exception, not belonging to either masculine or feminine groups and remaining on the outskirts of discussion: marginalized.

36 ibid
Women in Sport

Social and cultural hypocrisy do not consider women athletes feminine because of the constant training required to ensure bodily strength and ability. Athletic women, like men, push themselves mentally and physically in order to prove that they too are capable of intense competition. Women athletes are underrated, because there skill is determined to be less than that of the average male ability. For example, Serge Ibaka, stands at 6 feet 10 inches and plays center for the Oklahoma City Thunder of the National Basketball Association. In his 2014-2015-basketball season he averaged 14.3 points per game, 7.8 rebounds per game, 2.4 blocks per game and a player efficiency rating of 16.62.37 Brittney Griner, a center on the Phoenix Mercury of the WNBA and averaged 16.7 points per game 6 rebounds per game, 3.8 blocks per game and a player efficiency rating of 25.6.38 Comparably, Griner is competitive with Ibaka and is statistically a much more accomplished professional athlete. Even more so, the valued player expertise does not directly correspond to the pay that each player receives. Griner earns about 100,000 from playing in the WNBA, while Ibaka earns 2 million dollars. Women athletes like Griner, who encompass power, aggression and passion, are vibrant exceptions to the stereotype of docile and fragile women. Strong, agile, and skilled female athletes consistently create arenas in which their bodies are controlled by their actions; however, athlete or not, a woman’s body is not her own. When western society

---

demands that women be ruled by white male patriarchy, then society upholds restrictions of visible idealized femininity and heterosexuality on women athletes prevails. Thus, hierarchical social order of women requires them to be multifaceted, as they must continue to maintain sexual respectability, true womanhood and docile behavior in the presence of men.

Some key aspects of contemporary female solidarity first became apparent in primary feminist movements during the 19th century lasting into the early 20th century. Female solidarity can be in part attributed to women’s sports; it also continues to maintain the white patriarchal power structures that infiltrate marginalized groups. For women, discussions of race, gender and sexuality permeate the fabric that for many women is disguised as solidarity. Even in uniformity, women must take into account multiple marginalized identities resulting in a multidimensional vision of female solidarity. Historical facets of race and gender are reproduced in competition, within publicity, and in the media. Dr. Mary McDonald—who discusses whiteness as property and identity, asserts that; “[w]hile women of color engaged in hard physical labor, excessive exertion including competitive sport were marked as dangerous to white female bodies.” Here, McDonald highlights the doctrine of cherish and protected white female bodies, bodies the white male patriarchy values deeply. Conversely, McDonald identifies women of color as being dangerous and having characteristics that are threatening to the maintenance of the white woman’s status quo. The nature of confining white women to light work reinforces the stereotype that white women are docile, fragile,

and incapable of handling their bodies without men. This destructive stereotype allows for white men to remain at the epicenter of control when involved with white women. Even more so, white women are restricted to scaling back their abilities so that they can also replicate white male patriarchy through reproduction.

Inversely, women of color are stereotyped as hard working, strong, and capable of surviving; they are not imagined as needing to ask for mental or physical aid. These assumptions results in added stress and confirm their reality. Their bodies are unprotected as they are marginalized within the female group and subject to racial hierarchies. Since the beginnings of the early American colonies, black women bodies encounter judgment on standards of morality, normalized white motherhood and deviant sexuality. The racialized verbal and physical harm that is perpetrated by men and white women is contrary to the idealized characteristics of normalized white womanhood. The historical foundation of the ability to reproduce a white nuclear family further guide’s contemporary racist patriarchy as it strengthens the character of one woman over another. The traditional abuse and enslavement of the bodies of women of color strengthens white male patriarchy as it causes reproductive harm to women who are having and raising children. In other words, the increased creation of more black bodies reinforces racial inferiority. Slave women in the Antebellum South and contemporary black women are not afforded the same “care luxuries” as white women. This distinction is significant as it stabilizes the belief that black women are inherently stronger and more capable of greater stress on their bodies than white women; consequently, allowing black women bodies to be judged, used and abused by the social standards of white male patriarchy. In the Antebellum South, the
physical and mental strain of being exceptionally active drains the female body of reproducing energy therefore slowly decreasing the amount of colored children born. As in slavery, black women’s bodies are not their own and continue to be used and dissipated. The treatment and discussion of black and white women in the Antebellum South are explicit as they successfully highlight the hierarchical physical difference. These stereotyped characteristics of black women bodies contrast idealized white female behaviors and ultimately indicate the inferiority of black women.

Women’s athletics depended on awful race and gender based stereotypes, which seek to construct boundaries that innately marginalize various groups of women both racially and sexually; the divisions ground discourses of racist and sexist crimes against women by women perpetrators. Specifically, the WNBA has created a structure in which women must balance a demanding life between competition and motherhood. The WNBA prides itself in its women athletes by being multifaceted, balancing both roles of being a matriarch and a professional athlete. These images of maternal nurturing combat notions of masculinity by openly embracing images of femininity. Suzie McConnell Serio, a retired WNBA player who averaged 6 points per game, 2 rebounds per game, and 4 assists per game playing in the league from 1998-2000, best depicts this likeness. McDonald comments on basketball star and mother Suzie McConnell Serio:

This image of McConnell Serio’s dedication is also powerful not only in attempting to reassert heterosexuality in the form of the nuclear family as the unquestioned norm, but also in asserting whiteness as equal to motherhood as equal to goodness. This is a powerful depiction, especially in this historical moment when racialized notions of reproduction and racist discourses in the United States direct attention away from global and local inequalities and instead
demonizes black women, Latinas and recent immigrant mothers and in case in the case of single mothers as failed heterosexuals.  

McConnell Serio, a white heterosexual woman, was celebrated as a mother who also played in the WNBA. She was praised and celebrated for her capacity to maintain a home, family, and full-time career. The mainstream media constantly comments that McConnell Serio participates in professional sports and dedicates time to her children insisting that she is a role model for other female athletes. Earl Gustkey, a sports writer from the Los Angeles Times in his piece “This Rocker No Rookie to Motherhood” writes, “[s]he’s [McConnell Serio] [is] the champion mom of women’s pro basketball.” The journalist further promotes her informing his readers that “[t]here are 11 mothers in the WNBA, nine in the American Basketball League [and] only the 5-foot, 5-inch McConnell Serio, who plays for the WNBA’s Cleveland Rockers, has given birth four times.” Gustkey mentions that McConnell Serio is “only 5-foot 5-inches” in order depict her as a small, yet strong woman; Gustkey words thus coin her as an exception. The public eye demands that a maternal figure must remain responsible for their matriarchal duties. The required all-round maternal and athletic behavior and attitude reinforces the continuous establishment of white patriarchy in women’s athletics as it supports idealized standards of sustained white nuclear families. The whiteness associated with nuclear family further excludes colored women as it aims to shame and expose what society deems to be unacceptable motherhood. McConnell Serio’s hyper-public dedication to her children

---

and husband depicts her as a good mother, while also portraying other women as failures. The delineation of McConnell Serio ultimately demonizes women who are not heterosexual as they fail in female reproduction and heterosexual relationships. McConnell Serio’s marketable and highly valuable identity further deprecates Brittney Griner’s character as it illuminates the ways in which Griner does not fit the standardized, heterosexual white mold because of her identity as a black lesbian in the WNBA.

**The Toxic Relationship between the NBA and WNBA**

Businessmen founded the National Basketball Association (NBA) on June 6, 1946 in New York City. As of 2015, the NBA consists of 30 professional teams and has a regular season lasting eight months, beginning in October and ending in May. Adam Silver, the fourth commissioner of the NBA, is in control of running the league and heads the departments of finances, media, and sponsorship. Silver, an American lawyer educated at University of Chicago Law School, has dedicated most of his time as a program developer for both the NBA and WNBA. The existence of the WNBA was conceived by the NBA and at one point was fully managed by the commissioner of the NBA. Currently, in 2015, the NBA owns 6 of the 12 WNBA teams. The WNBA was founded April 24th, 1996. It was originally owned and controlled solely by the Commissioner of the NBA, which suggest that the ideals of the commissioner are inevitably mirrored onto the NBA and WNBA programs. Initially, the WNBA teams were created as female counterparts of the matching NBA teams. This meant that teams would share arenas and spaces like training room and
gyms. Presently, the Connecticut Sun, Seattle Storm, Tulsa Shock, and Chicago Sky no longer are affiliated with any male counterparts in the NBA. In addition to those four WNBA teams, the Atlanta Dream and the Los Angeles Sparks are independently owned by women and responsible for their own media and player coverage. The NBA and WNBA are bounded by a relationship that is not beneficial for the WNBA because of the ways in which the WNBA is treated as a constant second to the NBA. Although the WNBA is young in comparison to the NBA, the push for progressive change continues to be dormant.

The NBA Mission statement states:

Our mission is to be the most successful and respected professional sport league in the world guided by two principles: We will grow and celebrate the game of basketball and we understand that the popularity and visibility of our teams, players, and league obligate us to demonstrate leadership in social responsibility.  

As the current iteration of the mission statement indicates, the NBA primarily aims to be successful and respected but also to be the most successful and respected professional sports league in the world. In addition, the mission statement expresses a sense of teamwork amongst the players and the owners to broadcast their position and examples of social responsibility. Their mission statements seeks to hone in on the league's popularity in order to exponentially grow basketball skills and culture. The concise statement also indicates that Adam Silver's responsibility, as the commissioner of the NBA is to build ties within communities and work on social issues on a global level. Correspondingly, the mission statement suggests that the

---

branding of the sport needs to be based on diligence, dedication and sacrifice.

Altogether, the NBA aims to honor the sport of basketball and uplift many communities nationally and globally. The values statement, specific to the NBA, asserts:

We have a commitment to excellence. We apply our passions for basketball to the activities that support the game and the business that grows from it. We do every task as well as it can be done, reflecting quality and attention detail at every stage - from inception, to planning, to execution. We believe in equal opportunity to grow professionally and be empowered to make appropriate decisions. We also recognize the importance of job satisfaction and the need to balance the demands of work and personal life.  

The politically savvy use of “we” in this statement actively illustrates a united front of the players and administration. The NBA uses its mission statement to claim that it is dedicated to the collective growth of basketball and sportsmanship. However, here in the values section the NBA reveals that their passions also include the various business endeavors that follow the players and league. The league also claims to be a firm believer in giving attention to the faction of business from “inception” and believes in equal opportunities professionally. This mission statement emphatically suggests that the WNBA was paid close detail and offered equal opportunities. In spite of this, currently the NBA and WNBA do not share equal court and season time: the NBA plays for a total of 8 months, while the WNBA plays for a total of four months while the NBA is out of season, more than 50% of the time. Off of court and competition time alone, the WNBA is not awarded equal time to use the shared spaces. Leading NBA players like Serge Ibaka and Kevin Durant of the Oklahoma

---

City Thunder make 12 million dollars and 19 million dollars annually, respectively. The maximum salary contracted in the WNBA is merely 105,000 equivalent to the NBA player Elliot Williams of the Utah Jazz who is ranked 417 out of 429 NBA players. Many WNBA professional players like Brittney Griner of the Phoenix Mercury and Skylar Diggins of the Tulsa Shock, must play for teams internationally during their off season in order to make substantial money off of their professions by working more and harder than most men in the NBA.

Although the NBA controls the WNBA, the mission statements of the different organizations vary significantly. The WNBA, under the jurisdiction of the NBA, fails to have a league mission statement that relates specifically to the sport of basketball. Instead, the WNBA has an objective intently entitled WNBACares that proclaims:

Through WNBA Cares, the WNBA is deeply committed to creating programs that improve the quality of life for all people with a special emphasis on programs that inspire youth and families worldwide, promote health and wellness and education. WNBA Cares goal alignment focuses on Philanthropy, Service, Legacy and Inspiring Women.44

At no point in this objective does the league state its dedication to the game of basketball or its commitment to establishing honor and respect for the league internationally as the NBA statement does. Instead, it highlights the responsibility of its women players, an identifying phrase not noted anywhere in the statement, to uplift and become role models for young women across the nation. The WNBACare

statement thus reinforces morality-based stereotypes that suggest that women are always and innately concerned with nurturing and molding the surrounding society. This assumption then distracts the public from the details that women athletes, like those in the WNBA, are capable and interested in focusing on other masculine identified aspects of their lives like basketball. This contrasting distinction produces unequal gender dynamics in the varying media perception of professional basketball players. The gender divisions created by the NBA targets the empowerment of women by other women; this peculiarity then requires support from the NBA that has yet to be consolidated in favor of women athletics, or aspiring young women athletes.

The control that the NBA has over the WNBA is significant. The Women’s National Basketball Player Association, founded November 6, 1998, created by professional women players in the league, aims to stop the mistreatment of women athletes and decidedly gendered commitments. WNBACares also functions as the first athletic league labor union as it works to secure equal pay and safeguard individuals rights within the WNBA. The player’s association mission statement declares:

Among many other things, the WNBPA provides WNBA players with a unified voice. Its mission is to unite, in one labor organization, all women basketball players eligible for membership regardless of race, creed, color, age or national origin and to promote a high sense of loyalty among all members. Specifically, the Association’s charge is to: (a) Represent its membership and establish through collective bargaining with the WNBA and the management of the various teams comprising the WNBA, improved working conditions, economic benefits and job security for all members; (b) Engage in whatever educational, legislative, political, civic, social welfare, community or other activities which will advance and safeguard the economic security and general social welfare of employees in this industry both during and after their playing careers; (c) Function as an autonomous labor organization and to enter into whatever cooperative efforts with other labor
organizations the WNBPA deems to be in the best interest of its members; and (d) Take all steps and actions consistent with the Constitution, By-Laws and policies of the WNBPA to implement and carry out the objectives, rights, activities and responsibilities of the organization. 45

This concise mission statement, like the WNBA objective, refers less to basketball and more to the treatment of the players and to the survival of the league. It indicates that what the women of the WNBA plea for across the board equality and calls into question inequitable benefits of NBA players and WNBA players. These various mission statements call for an examination of the varied responsibilities of men and women professional basketball players. The mission statement of the NBA insistently validates and emphasizes that all male professional athletes are focused on basketball and the various business pursuits that emerge because of the league. However, in stark and sobering contrast, professional women players are required by the NBA to balance and manage responsibilities of being professional basketball players, symbols for women, and spokespeople for their rights. The vast differences illuminate the gender disparity and dynamics that afflicts both of the leagues. In this sense, the NBA and WNBA are intertwined, but only one of the multimillion-dollar organizations benefits. The NBA continues to be the monetary beneficiary of the league while the WNBA functions as the moral compass that is responsible for uplifting the NBA.

Heterosexuality: Love and Basketball

Although the WNBA and NBA focus heavily on publicity and monetary gain, both leagues idealize heterosexual love and maternal responsibility as the primary standard for professional women basketball athletes. These stereotypical roles of women are detrimental to non–normalized bodies of women basketball players who are lesbian women. The bodies of heterosexual, maternal women dedicated to their extracurricular activities and home life, paint a picture allowing them to be broadcasted as “good” and “family friendly.” These images of required maternal nurturing and heterosexual love are disruptive as they reproduce constraints on women’s bodies and lifestyle that are in sync with a white, heteronormative norms. Scholars emphasize the that “[t] he body of McConnell Serio is deployed to mainstream, homogenize, and tame the subversive possibilities of the WNBA’s strong, erotic, athletic bodies.” Thus, audiences consider “McConnell Serio [‘s], white heterosexuality as an antidote to the leagues female sexed bodies.” Academics then stress the these non-white bodies are “ troubling as they disrupt convention of gender to perform masculinity.” As McDonald expresses, the presence of unsettling masculine women, is distracted by the talk of maternal nurturing and family. This tactic is successful in the portrayal of the WNBA as it allows women athletes to work within the confines of the masculine and feminine gender binaries. Because of this, the WNBA has been able to create a common ground in which women are still under white patriarchy and control. This mutuality, constructed by the WNBA, allows for athletes to become masculine without losing their feminine touch. This strategy

inherently restricts and promotes liberation through one perception of athletic
to womanhood. Bruce Jacobs, radio host of Game On declares, “[t]he WNBA’s
promotion of motherhood and maternity signals a defensive response in which the
league has had to situate itself within a long and conflicted history about women and
sport.” The radio host accentuates that the WNBA “has attempted to assuage sponsors
fans that their sport, although professional and athletic, was not overly ‘masculine’
or ‘lesbian occupied.’” As Jacobs writes, the promotion of heterosexuality and
motherhood are positioned in order to enhance the somewhat unclear gender binaries
demonstrated by the professional women players of the league. The league struggles
as it tries to liberate female athletes yet keep them entrenched in the politics that rule
their bodies and families.

Women’s athletics focus heavily upon the differences within sexuality while
organizations concentrate on politics of masculinity and the constraints that society
places on women’s bodies, and women’s career in sport. The league and western
societal restrictions on women in sport centralize heavily on queer sexuality of many
women athletes. Most importantly, queerness comes not out of sexuality, but rather
the immense white patriarchal blanket that covers women in athletics. By normalizing
specific identities that have been historically depicted by white female
heterosexuality, the WNBA marginalizes women who are neither white nor
heterosexual. Thus, women who are outcast from the normalized group are then
assigned various deviant identities. The reproduction of these identities and depiction
of black and/or queer women purposefully counter attacks any positive behaviors or
actions in which black queer women such as Brittney Griner performs. Griner’s presence as an open, lesbian player, places her at the epicenter of queer discourse in the WNBA. The clear demarcation of the physical and sexual differences of white women, with women who are non-white and queer in the league functions so that individuals like Brittney Griner, continue to engage with oppression and politics of race, gender and sexuality. Mary McDonald remarks,

Articulations of whiteness and heterosexuality mark McConnell Serio’s body as materialized fantasies and analytic categories that exist and intertwine in systems of difference. As the opposite complement to the absent presence of racist images of motherhood, the body of McConnell Serio mobilizes mythic images of the nuclear heterosexual family and respectability.48

It is vital here to recall the marketable perception of McConnell Serio as a mother, professional basketball player, and moral ambassador for the league, consistently succeeding in recreating whiteness by way of romanticized heterosexuality and glorified motherhood. In this case, the portrayal of whiteness as a race is intertwined with white male patriarchy and utilized as property. Whiteness in the WNBA functions as a structure that maintains gender inequality by requiring that participants of the league abide by particular norms. Even more, whiteness as property suggests an innate difference in the depiction and production of non-white, non-heterosexual bodies as disruptive and not tolerated. Whiteness depicted as property aims to mold behaviors that coincide with the various ways in which whiteness is branded. In terms of the WNBA, whiteness has been branded in terms heterosexuality, maternity, and

family-friendly behaviors. When players take on these roles, they then accept the branded identities of whiteness. These properties of whiteness, are the foundation of the WNBA and NBA, and sustain the complexities of white supremacy within the league.

Why is it that the WNBA and NBA are so focused on whether or not female players can present themselves as feminine individuals? The constant need to prove heterosexuality is a tool used to justify the skill in the WNBA. Thus, heterosexuality validates the NBA’s societal patriarchal submission to the restrictions placed on women. These restrictions not only exist to maintain the branding necessity for the WNBA, but also persist in enabling the racist and sexist dynamics that ground the basketball leagues in America. Brittney Griner has confessed that “the WNBA’s rookie orientation program included sessions on makeup application and fashion tips,” in order to urge players to dress and behave in accordance to the WNBA. This quote demonstrates that the WNBA profits from feminine identities and straight sexuality.

Skylar Diggins, 24, was first drafted into the WNBA approximately three years ago. She and Griner are connected; as they were two of the top three draft picks of 2013. Griner was positioned at number one; Elena Delle Donne was seeded at two, while Skylar Diggins was placed at number three. Many fans and players devalued Skylar Diggins’ skill because of her beauty, fame, and not just her straight sex, but also her capacity for deviant straight sexuality as exhibited on a sex tape that emerged in 2013. However, in her 2014 season, Diggins averaged 20.1 points per game, 2.5 rebounds per game, 5 assist per game 1.5 shots per game as a guard on the Tulsa Shock of Oklahoma. In comparison to the 4th draft pick, Tayler Hill, a guard for the Washington Mystics, averaged 1 point per game, 0.2 rebound per game, 0.4 assist per game and 0.2 shots per game. Comparably, Diggins’ basketball statistics validate her position as an elite professional basketball player. The WNBA branded Diggins as a symbol of hope for the WNBA primarily because of the attention and proposed popularity that she could gain for herself and for the league. Sports Illustrated has described her as “sizzling” in the 2014 swim issue and focused heavily on her
presence in hip-hop media. Currently, Skylar Diggins has by far the most social media presence and support comparison to other professional women basketball players. Updated number from the Blog Swish Appeal records Skylar Diggins as the sole benefactor of the press. It reads:

As of March 13, 2015, Skylar has over 574,000 followers on her Twitter page. This makes her the most followed WNBA player on the social network site. Candace Parker is the only other player to come remotely close to Diggins with over 219,000 followers; Maya Moore has over 135,000; Lauren Jackson has over 94,000; former WNBA star Lisa Leslie has over 110,000, and Cappie Pondexter has over 38,000. Among the other Big Three picks, Phoenix Mercury center Brittney Griner has over 65,000 followers; Chicago Sky forward Elena Delle Donne has over 89,000, and the fourth pick, Washington Mystics guard Tayler Hill doesn't even have 21,000 Twitter followers.50

The evidence above shows the Diggins has at least three times as many followers as the other women athletes. This suggests that her popularity is based off of her sexuality, and non-maternal status. In addition, these facts show that Diggins presence in the WNBA attracts mainstream publicity in comparison to the others. The Twitter accounts of these WNBA stars reveal the support that Diggins receives, but also demonstrates the WNBA’s use of sex appeal. Each account has a profile picture in which the player wears makeup, whether or not they are playing or standing still. Furthermore, the players who have children, Tayler Hill and Lisa Leslie, place their children all over their websites. These manipulated, maternal behaviors are endorsed by the WNBA and NBA and intended to make the players look respectable. By showcasing the femininity of these multifaceted basketball players, the WNBA and

NBA continue to brand their women players as heterosexual, maternal and ideally feminine. Additionally, the last comments that Diggins’ posts range from details about her body, her beauty and her sex appeal. One follower commented “She bad and can totally beat me in bball.” In contemporary popular culture, the term “bad” is used to describe a woman who is considered top tier beautiful and sexy. On a separate picture two instagammers commented “adorable angel, lawd you are perfect” and “u r so beautiful.” On the other hand, comments made on Brittney Griner’s Instagram are as such: “Guy or Girl? Why the hell are u lesbian! U are a role model for other people!!” and “Can you be my boyfriend?” These unfavorable comments highlight the various conversations that surround these women and their bodies. On social media, Brittney Griner is subject to public comments on her sexuality and gender; and while she provides ample opportunity for the public to comment on her amazing skill and multifaceted being, they do not. Although sex appeal is beneficial for Diggins and the WNBA, it grants the oppression of marginalized people, as they do not fit within the feminine restriction. Even more so, the distinction causes more harm to the institution primarily because it focuses on the need to control the perception of the athletes as opposed to simply focusing on professional basketball.

Players like McConnell Serio and Diggins, are not the exception; rather they are the product of the broad efforts to feminize the WNBA. The commitment of the WNBA players to feminine contrasts the history of female athletes who were so often

---

51 instagram.com/skylardiggins
52 ibid.
53 instagram.com Britney Griner
criticized for their distinctly unfeminine qualities such a muscularity and athletic skill. The WNBA focuses heavily on the ideal woman— one who is masked by makeup and who wears gender conforming clothes. These women are constructed to be athletes who build revenue for the WNBA and the NBA. Their presence as the faces of the WNBA provides insight into the ways in which the WNBA chooses to be branded. The WNBA concentrates on heterosexual desire for support, sponsorship, and popularity; it relies on figures like Skylar Diggins to attract men to the game. Often, when discussing the need for equal gender support in professional basketball, the focal point is on why men do not attend the WNBA games as much as they do the NBA games. Often this discussion produces theories that “women are not aggressive enough.” In actuality, men are not entertained by the WNBA because of the masculinized lesbian presence of the players and audiences in the arena resulting in their little interest in the game. The WNBA, in response, then, desperately tries to direct its audience to view the league as a space for purity, morality, and motherhood. These actions promote white heterosexuality while simultaneously marginalizing queer women and women of color. The harm enacted by the WNBA on their women athletes by restricting them to a heterosexual way of life is detrimental for those who do not fit the traditional heterosexual female role. Thus, manufactured heterosexuality results in the production and maintenance of the WNBA as a dangerous space in which players like Brittney Griner are subject to the internalizations of white patriarchal ideals.
Lesbian Spaces, Audiences, and Media Outlets

The WNBA often wrestles with creating a space for both “family friendly fun” and lesbian players. The issue that faces the WNBA is one of building community while simultaneously establishing a brand. How can the WNBA manage to infuse their sport with heteronormative ideals while still trying to maintain a liberating lesbian community? The WNBA survives on the presence of community and camaraderie amongst the fans and players, as it also becomes popular with images of sexy, straight women playing basketball. The attempted coexistence of heteronormative ideals and a liberated lesbian community holistically causes more damage than it generates benefits.

In the scope of the WNBA, the lesbian collective, band together in support of a cause or mutual interest, forms in order to support the WNBA, women’s strength, and to cultivate a space in which lesbian players can feel liberated. Having an athletic institution is empowering as it allows otherwise ostracized behaviors, lifestyles, and sexual orientations to be expressed safely. However, as Dr. Tiffany Muller, discusses, “[t]he challenge in conceptualizing community, therefore, lies in the conflicting assumption of ‘community’ as simultaneously boundary-less and bounded.” Muller implicitly suggests that the comfort in community can also be detrimental. Collectives that are not questioned by those who participate subject themselves to issues of accountability and conformity. The lesbian community in the WNBA functions under the scope of heteronormativity, causing matters of inclusivity and exclusivity to arise.

Muller anticipates this development: “Moreover, lesbian community, like lesbian

subjectivity, is situated within an oppressive system of heteronormativity and homophobia."\textsuperscript{55} As Muller suggests the WNBA, although intended for liberating practices, functions as an oppressive space for the lesbian collective. In terms of heterosexuality, the media positions women in the audience and women in the league to be stereotypically beautiful. Those who do not exhibit conventional, straight beauty become ostracized. Researchers theorize the problematic term “lesbian community” by further asserting that, “[n] nonetheless, even as synonymous with communality, the conflation [of lesbian] community as a concept, is static and that does not require interrogation.”\textsuperscript{56} The static nature of the collective then becomes the basis for violence on the lesbian community and within the media and WNBA. Even in the attempt to escape the sexual conformity imposed by the WNBA, homosexual people are left with a recreation of an oppressive force by way of attempting to coexist within the ideals of heteronormativity in the WNBA. Thus, collective identities bred under and surrounded by oppression, reconstruct the forces in which suffocate them. This being the case, then, is it possible for a lesbian community to thrive within the WNBA? Furthermore, how is queer agency branded? The WNBA aims to construct and control the sexuality of it players and audience by restricting queer communities.

The lesbian community exists within boundaries and restrictions that shape the various ways that lesbian audiences are viewed publicly in the media and socially within the WNBA. Existing within the confines of heteronormativity and white patriarchy causes marginalized people to adapt and assimilate into the publicly


\textsuperscript{56} ibid.
accepted role. Tiffany Muller discusses “covering,”57 in her piece, “Lesbian Visibility and the Politics of Covering in Women’s Basketball Game Spaces,” as a term that is used to describe one way in which lesbian fans decide to portray themselves. Covering can come in forms of conforming more to gender norms by the way one dresses and behaves or by choosing to control the amount of stereotyped homosexuality visible. People within the lesbian community are faced with a choice of determining how much of their true sexuality they can express. Determining the acceptable degree of lesbian sexuality that can be expressed is a way of labeling lesbian people and behaviors as excessive. Established differences within a community are labeled as excesses; labeling excess sexuality, excess difference, and excess beings marginalize people and control and trivialize their behaviors. Systems of patriarchy control, founded on concepts like true womanhood, exploit the sexuality and gender dynamic of the lesbian community in the WNBA. Dr. Muller writes,

Today, when passing as straight is read by many lesbians to be an untenable position of privilege and inauthenticity, covering being “less out ‘ in certain spaces and contexts and ‘ more out’ in others, for example - appears to offer a defendable solution. 58

The use of the word “defendable” is misplaced. Why must a person in a community that is supposed to be liberating and safe, behave in ways that cause them to be defensive? The lesbian communities fear of losing a common space like the WNBA causes queer fans to indulge in heteronormative behaviors as a way to facilitate the coexistence of women solidarity and lesbian spaces. Lesbians who are forced to be

58 Ibid.
defensive and participate in heteronormative behaviors in the WNBA are taking precautions against the management and less amongst the players, fans and space. The uncovering of a strong lesbian community in a proposed family setting is one that insists upon the destruction of the league and liberation of women. To what extent does the lesbian community suffer at the hands of the patriarchal boundaries and restrictions?

White heteronormative boundaries are built in order to control the levels of exposure and coverage that appear in the WNBA. Nonetheless, varying arguments suggests that the level of awareness surrounding the lesbian community in the WNBA functions as a form of liberation for queer, marginalized women. Proposing the creation of an arena in which women and families are capable of existing is complimentary of the limited progressiveness within the WNBA. However, the limits that suppress the progressiveness are founded in the continued oppression of the marginalized people within the WNBA. Indeed, attaining exposure that represents’ normalized, if marginalized, difference is encouraged within the identity politic paradigms of civil rights and is an implied as a reward for those who are recognized as legitimate within the boundaries of a particular group. This important conclusion implies that individuals who submit to the theory of covering have more of a chance to be justified as “legitimate” within the white patriarchal confines of white patriarchy that oppress the WNBA. In addition, this line of argument proposes that hierarchies and boundaries exist and thrive in marginalized groups. As a result, the lack of control that the WNBA players and fans have within the confines of the WNBA is justifiable. The reward of acceptance and mobility within the arena and
media is short lived as it remains subject to external forces and public supports of
t stereotypical sexist, homophobic, and racist clout. Muller continues:

One key implication of lesbian compliance in tolerance for and
reproductions of the normative script in the acceptance of spatialized
heteronormativity as a given. Lesbian fans who cover rather than
critiques the normative logic that structure WNBA games spaces
demonstrate the heteronormativity is an acceptable framework through
with to organize mainstream leisure spaces.  

Heteronormativity is the warped lens in which the WNBA functions. In its existence,
the WNBA reproduces oppression as it formats what true womanhood appears to be
while simultaneously depicting and labeling other women as “ disruptive bodies.”

The act of covering, and the acceptance of a lesbian community within
heteronormative restrictions reproduce lesbian invisibility. The WNBA is meant to
function as an arena to liberate and reveal what true womanhood is while
simultaneously highlighting the many ways in which marginalized women need not
be justified by the constraint produced by white patriarchy. The stifling restrictions
placed on the queer community in the arena is one that chooses to repress and hide
difference, rather than creating avenues that allow for various kinds of people to
coexist. The need to compartmentalize the complexities associated with queerness is
simply a tactic used to continue to control and guide ideals of womanhood and
morality for the media and reputation of the league. Lesbian women who decide to
practice covering fail to understand that their compliance and restraining of their
sexuality and behavior only supports and enhances white heterosexuality and white
womanhood.
The WNBA couples itself with the necessity of proving women players and fans heterosexuality by maintaining a heteronormative status quo. The cultivation of heteronormativity is crucial to the WNBA’s survival. The anomaly of the women athlete is one that suggests that women can be both feminine and masculine, or that they can altogether take over a masculine role. With blurred boundaries, women’s athletics tends to very clearly enhance heteronormative stereotypes by implementing media ideals of womanhood, motherhood and femininity. Historian Mary McDonald explains:

I am using the term [queering whiteness] in two ways as an analytical metaphor to guide the interrogation of the ‘normative’ culturally created categories of heterosexuality and whiteness and as a perspective that revises commonsense understandings of heterosexuality and whiteness mere matters of identity to recognize the semiotic significance of the categories.  

McDonald highlights how normative culture in women’s athletics and in the WNBA is coded as white and straight. These validated beliefs cause for the isolation of individuals who do not fit the white straight mold. Markers of white heterosexuality false heartedly assemble and exile marginalized groups, specifically people of color and queer people, by forcing peripheral people to adapt to white norms. Queer fans and players are required to embrace behaviors that favor white straight females as this benefits the players and the WNBA as a whole by sustaining heteronormative perceptions. Lesbian players and their fans are labeled as dangerous because of the threat to the construction of white patriarchy and white womanhood. Lesbian fans and

---

athletes must decide between expressing their sexuality and supporting an institution that is meant to positively shape young women and promote solidarity. The presence of out, non-covering lesbians impedes on the institutions efforts to portray women athletes as feminine under the theory of true white womanhood. If lesbian women are revealed, then the facade of heterosexuality is threatened, holistically pressuring athletes in the WNBA to be viewed as less feminine and consequently less desirable. Even more so, the presence of lesbian women in the institution directly pressures the concepts of male dominance that are embedded in the theory and practice of hierarchies in sports.

Consequently, the perpetual effort placed on the white, heterosexual portrayal of female athletes aims to completely eradicate any notions of difference or opposition to the higher white male dominated order. Those within the WNBA—players and fans—must choose whether or not to support the WNBA and thus uphold white male dominance and white womanhood. Dr. Darcy Plymire, a professor of kinesiology at Western Illinois University, in her piece “Breaking the Silence: Lesbian Fans, The Internet and The Sexual Politics of Women’s Sports” states: “Accusations of lesbianism police the borders of appropriate gender behavior and help to maintain male social power.”62 Plymire asserts quite convincingly that the act of creating and maintaining boundaries is just one way of compartmentalizing various differences within the WNBA community. Practicing these restrictions, not only preserves skewed gender binaries, but also pressures marginalized people to silence themselves and to become compliant in their own masking and invisibility. Even

---

more so, in supporting the WNBA, marginalized lesbian fans are positioned to accept and follow the rules that oppress their own bodies. Disruptive bodies, then, must continue to punish themselves because they cannot exist holistically within the heterosexual confines offered. Plymire postulates the limited existence of lesbian community as she states:

That policy while it claims to only limit public displays of sexuality while allowing homosexual behavior in private actually legitimates and increases regulation of sexual behavior. Women who work in a conditionally tolerant climate are constrained to constantly monitor their speech, dress, and other behaviors to ensure that no evidence of their stigma ever leaks out. In these contexts lesbians and lesbian visibility are seen as the problem not homophobia and heterosexism. Lesbian self-censorship is offered as the solution, a damaging solution that does not challenge or threaten the Heterosexist status quo.  

The regulation of sexuality and gender by heterosexual standards is unjust and detrimental to the survival of the lesbian community. In addition, visible sexuality is pointed as the problem, as it only deflects the attention on how noticeable sexuality affects others, rather than homosexuality as a threat to white patriarchal institutions. The media and administration of the WNBA demands that lesbian women and marginalized people must check the amount of disclosure and detectable lesbian behavior by monitoring what lesbian women wear and how they behave in public. These ideals require traditional heteronormative values and demand the submission of all women in sport, fans and players alike. Brittney Griner’s existence as an openly lesbian player and role model shatters conceptions of respectability and self-veiling. In her being she destroys hierarchies of heterosexuality, white womanhood and male

---

dominance. Griner embodies beauty, strength and resilience when in the arena and in life. Her ability, body, and skill liberate her within the restricted space of the WNBA. Griner is capable of fully functioning as an open lesbian in the WNBA because, as a phenomenal athlete, she is a positive outlier as she drives the league and young women into the mindset that they too can be better than what others have set out for them to be.

**Brittney Griner: The Anomaly**

Griner, a single homosexual player, unlike McConnell Serio, is very unique within the WNBA because she is not forced to think about the true ideals of womanhood. She exists within herself. Unlike McConnell Serio, Griner is not married with children and thus is more likely to be able to focus on basketball without being critiqued for not dedicating time to family. The WNBA struggles with Griner’s presence as she single-handedly destroys perceptions of white patriarchy and white womanhood. Griner’s locked hair, colorful tattoo sleeves, and open lesbian actively combats white standards of femininity and beauty. Brittney Griner is one body that will not reproduce ideals and bodies of white patriarchy and whiteness. In herself, she produces a growing space that encourages marginalized people to flourish within the WNBA, transforming it into an institution that is welcoming and a replica of its supporters and audience. This transformation, specifically for Griner, is accepted because of her elite skill and high moral compass. In Brittney Griner’s case, the time as a collegiate star, at Baylor University, a catholic, southern, and Texan institution,
required that Griner remain closeted for her safety on and off of the court. Contrastly, Griner’s time in the WNBA has functioned as a space for minor liberation as it allowed more freedom as a lesbian in the WNBA than she was as a player in the NCAA. Griner liberates herself by obliterating vicious, negative stereotypes by choosing to be openly homosexual. Mary McDonald who has written—specifically on the climate of the WNBA and Griner’s presence, asserts that the “ambivalent, multiple meanings of ‘queer’ have not simply created a great deal of definitional confusion, they have also occasioned the revision of notions of sexuality, identity, and knowledge construction.” She then questions the “way[s] [in] which queer can be deployed as an analytic tool to illuminate contemporary and historical meanings of race.”

In this case, the queer race is imagined as blackness. The ways in which whiteness is used as sexual and moral property highlight the various avenues in which lesbian and black women in the league are continually punished. The consequences of being outside the narrow definition of what whiteness is has ostracized and demonized women who are not categorized as such. Whiteness as perpetrated in America and in the league requires the stability of white male patriarchy, the reproduction of heterosexuality, and the invisibility of anything that threatens the status quo. McDonald understanding of whiteness contends,

Rather than assume that gender, sex, race, class, ability and sexuality are merely unstable identities, these categories are increasingly understood in terms of a cultural politics of knowledge enabled by narratives that create, mark, and place bodies into hierarchies.65

---

65 Ibid.
These identities are labeled as “unstable” not because they cannot exist on their own but rather because their presence in mainstream media and the WNBA is threatening to the foundations of the sport, masculinity and idealized femininity. As a defense, however pathetic, the league attempts to distract the audience and media from the presence of different women and players. This deceitful tactic is successful as it diverts attention away from the black and lesbian bodies that are prevalent in the WNBA, and focuses on what the management of the WNBA tries to portray as true womanhood. Brittney Griner simply cannot be confined by the limits and distractions imposed by the defensive logic of the WNBA. As an athlete and role model, Griner has postured herself as an atypical, androgynous symbol for invisible and visible women in the league.

Figure 4. Britney Griner photographed in 2013 as a Phoenix Mercury Star. Source: WNBA
Conclusion

Brittney Griner’s authority impinges upon the security of white straight women athletes in the WNBA. Griner’s ability to transcend racial and sexual hierarchies with her outstanding skill radically positions her above normalized athletes as a black female lesbian. Griner represents the great possibility of the WNBA to be transformed for the inclusion and benefit of all women associated with it. Furthering her point, McDonald argues,

Read from the perspective of white masculinity, this promotional strategy projects images of heterosexuality indexed via maternal concern and care, the obverse dominant representations of black women, which in other arenas have emphasized hypersexuality, immorality and incompetent motherhood. 66

Here McDonald highlights that, the WNBA, in some ways has liberated Griner because it does not hypersexualize her as it does most other prominent athletic females in her league. However, the WNBA does not stop there: it brands Griner as incompetent with regards to motherhood as she does not fit the mold of the white nuclear family because of her homosexuality. Instantly, homosexuality demotes and demoralizes a woman because of her sexual practices. She is unable to be proficient in motherhood, based on the restrictions of white maternal nature, because she is neither white nor heterosexual. Although Griner’s sexual orientation is the focus of her being a female athlete, it fails to distract from the overall perpetual harm caused by the women institutions and management. Griner’s acceptance in the league is an exception; the WNBA has granted her small forms of liberation but has not succeeded

in offering emancipation for all marginalized women in the WNBA. Brittney Griner is still considered by mainstream society and the WNBA as immoral because of her openness as a lesbian, and her aggression and skill on the court. Her labeled “masculine” behavior on and off of the court causes Griner to be subject to complexities regarding feminine masculinity. Griner is unable to combat this because the root of lesbianism is riddled with issues of deviant sexuality that coincides with white morality and white femininity. On one hand, Griner’s engagement to Glory Johnson, another black, lesbian professional basketball player, has cloaked her deviant sexuality and behavior as acceptable. However, it has only become acceptable because it functions and sustains under the white male patriarchy paradigm. Griner, the more masculine partner, proposed to Glory Johnson, a forward on the Tulsa Shock, on a bended knee and graced her with a large diamond studded ring. In addition, the couple took time out of their busy schedules to pick the perfect dress for Glory Johnson to wear.

The maintenance of heterosexual tradition in marriage is sustained by these two women further reinforces restrictions on heterosexual love and marriage. Marriage continues to commission the necessity for a woman to belong to another, and admonishes sexual behavior outside of marriage. Even more so, it binds two individuals by law, statutes that continuously overtly support the success and survival of white men in America while simultaneously reproducing the injustices and violence on marginalized beings.
Griner is an accessible and iconic symbol because she is capable of transcending discriminatory practices and punishments by thriving as herself. She represents a true and formidable triple threat to the institution of the WNBA and whiteness. She is black. She is a lesbian. She is a woman. Her skill, presence, morality and sexuality annihilate the conventions of white womanhood. She remains visible to all and she pressures the league to see her and to conform to behaviors that benefit the fans and the supporters of the WNBA.
Safe in The Net: Briana Scurry’s Evocative Transformation from Elite Soccer Player to Philanthropist

“Anyone can be a winner. It’s dedication, passion and hard work that makes you a champion.” – Briana Scurry
Briana Scurry is known as one of the most profound female soccer goalkeepers and athletes in the world. She stands at 5-feet 8-inches and was the only African American starter on the outstanding US Women’s National Soccer Team in the 1990’s. Scurry lead the US National team to a bronze medal in 1995 in Sweden, one FIFA Championship in 1996, and two Olympic gold medals in 1994 and 2004. Scurry remained the only black player to be on the starting lineup for as long as she played professional soccer. Her fellow teammates, Mia Hamm and Mary Harvey, describe Scurry as an athlete who is “even-keeled, calm, cool and collected.” Her competitors view Scurry as “ice-cold, intimidating, unreadable, and having great hands.” She can best be described as the eye of a hurricane, as she possesses the standard of mental toughness necessary in order to be a champion.

Scurry was the first black person in the world to play 173 international soccer games, exponentially exceeding the record amongst women soccer players. She was the number one pick goalie during her time on the national team for six seasons straight. For six-seasons-straight, her unquestioned skill and drive enabled her to outshine her fellow goalies Mary Harvey and Saskia Webber. In the first year, she played a total of twelve games and achieved seven shutouts. After three major concussions, the last one coming about when another player’s knee crashed into her temple, she was forced to retire from the game of soccer on September 8, 2010. Scurry’s time on the Women’s National Soccer Team provided opportunities for her to represent black women athletes, by also becoming one of the founders for the Women’s United Soccer Association. Following her retirement, Scurry has dedicated

---

the majority of her life to AIDS research and to the Make – A- Wish foundation. She has spent substantial amounts of time giving motivational speeches and educating youth on the serious harms that concussions can cause. When educating youth in high school and adults in corporate America, she repeatedly proclaims the need for black youth to know that they can accomplish anything that they desire. She continuously focuses on bringing soccer to urban areas by hosting soccer camps and workshops; using her fame and talents to discuss the harms of concussion, and the necessity for educating youth in America.

Briana Scurry was born September 7, 1971 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Scurry, the youngest of nine children, has five sisters and three brothers. Her need to be thoroughly active at the age of seven, led to her parents making arrangements for Scurry to have a position on an elementary school-level boys soccer team in Daytona, Minnesota. Her parents attempted to keep Scurry safe by placing her in the goalie’s net; however, the net proved to be the best place for in terms of relative safety for the moment and became her destined position. She continued her young soccer career at Anoka High-School, in Anoka, Minnesota, with a very small population of racially diverse students, in which she played one year as goalie and three years in the field. Even in her youth, she remained the only black player on her team and one of few black players at Anoka High School. In 1989 she became a Soccer All-American, and lead her team to a state victory as she facilitated a shutout game. That year she was acknowledged as the top female athlete in Minnesota, outshining all of her fellow teammates by wide margins. Scurry then continued her soccer career on full scholarship at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst where she graduated with a degree in Political Science. In 1993 she earned the title of collegiate All-American
and was recruited to the Women’s National Soccer Team by her coach, Jim Rudy, the
nation's best goalkeeper coach, at UMass Amherst. At the end of Rudy’s career he
had won a total of 239 matches, lost 137 matches, and tied 22 matches averaging 65%
overall wins. UMass Amherst set the stage for Scurry’s athletic development in the
Atlantic 10 Conference, Division 1 level. From 1990-1994, Scurry led her team to
two winning seasons. In her college career, Scurry led her team to a total of 48 wins,
13 losses, and 4 ties winning 80% of her games. Scurry outstandingly executing 30
shutouts and played a total of 4,323 minutes in her last three years in college. Briana
Scurry’s identity as a young soccer player and as a two time All-American has
molded her identity. Scurry is discussed primarily on her accomplishments as an
athlete, and by the work she has done in non-profit organizations. Over the many
years, her participation in professional athletics, team sports and many non-profit
organizations, has allowed Scurry to successfully and deliberately groom herself into
and elite athletic role model for many and especially young individuals in the United
States.

**Ideal Womanhood**

Briana Scurry is not only a superb athlete, but she also is extremely unique in
her coddled hyper-invisibility. In comparison to the excessive visibility of other elite
soccer athletes, Briana Scurry’s images focus on soccer, and no other facets of her
personal life. Her life is painfully private, and requires maximal effort that may
expose a little more than the public knows. Despite her many accomplishments, she
exhibits a lack of popularity in the media and advertisements. Scurry’s lack of public
presence calls to attention the consideration given to black professional women
athletes who exist within the restrictions of morality and appropriate behavior that is
influenced by white male patriarchy. The ways in which Scurry is portrayed in the early 1990’s in relation to marketed athletic sexuality in the 2000’s depicts the vast differences between women existing in heteronormative standards. Marie Hardin, a Professor at Pennsylvania State in Communications states,

Hegemonic femininity positions women as opposite to everything masculine, thus the ideal woman is, at her core, powerless and non-threatening. Women, who participate into competitive sports, then are ultimately perceived in terms of femininity and by extension sexuality.69

Marie Hardin statement depicts Briana Scurry as “powerless and non-threatening.” Briana Scurry attempts to maintain a public presence but fails in comparison to other professional women sports athletes. Scurry’s active Twitter account has 623 followers in comparison to that of former teammate Mia Hamm who has 131,000 followers.

These characteristics, although proven false by her skill on the field, highlight the power of media and perception on female athletic bodies. Scurry was deemed safe in the net, protected from the real action that occurs on the field, and safe from upsetting unequal gender dynamics that are proven to be detrimental to white male patriarchy. The first picture below is one of when Briana Scurry was a star player on the University Of Massachusetts Amherst team. In this picture she is portrayed as unkempt, messy and dark. Her hair looks as though she has not run a comb through it and he smile seems disingenuous. In addition, the juxtaposition of the white jacket top next to her brown face, gives the illusion that Scurry appears darker than she is. This picture, taken in 1993, illustrates the ways in which Scurry carried herself when she led the team in her senior year to an Atlantic 10 championship. Unlike many
other professional athletes, Scurry’s path to stardom and elite athleticism started with a standardized, constructed path. She began her soccer career playing Soccer at Anoka High School, to then be considered for a full scholarship in Division 1 athletics. From there Scurry established herself as a grade—A athlete and was then recruited by the United States National Team. Her looks, and lack of physical desirability did not hinder her skills and ability to play. However, Scurry’s messy appearance did distract from mainstream support and public appearance. The next photograph is of Scurry celebrating the 2004 Gold Medal in Athens, Greece. Here, Scurry remains unkempt. Even while being recognized as an elite athlete worldwide, Briana Scurry remains disheveled. In addition, to her grimy hair, Scurry is made larger by the goalie gloves she wears, the bright and unfavorable green long sleeve jersey. The goalie jersey covers more of her skin then the other players while simultaneously, drawing attention to the woman in the goal. The successful win in
Athens, and the covering of her person with the American flag triumphantly shields her rumpled, untidy appearance.

![Figure 8 Headshot of Scurry for her motivational speaking campaign. Source: Washington Post](image)

The last picture depicts Briana Scurry as a philanthropist and as a motivational speaker. Even now, middle-aged Scurry, has cleaned up a bit, but still has this air that lacks desirability. Scurry dresses herself deliberately lacking visions of sexuality; at no point, are her breast or cleavage ever exposed. Scurry is rarely seen wearing tight fitted clothing and is seldom ever seen wearing makeup. In some ways The decision to not conform to heterosexual hierarchy and standards makes Scurry an exception; however, her choice to exist beyond the confines of normalized beauty while upholding morality deems her as invisible, leaving fans and audiences with nothing to talk about.
Yet, while Scurry’s femininity is measured in terms of her physical appearance, it is assessed by her actions on and off of the field and by the ways in which she subscribes to the social constraints on women in soccer, and race in sports. Scurry’s existence in the warped lens of both sexuality and race and became the exception to racialized femininity. bell hooks, acclaimed author of, *Ain’t I A Woman* declares confidently that: “Most Americans, and that includes black people, acknowledge and accept this hierarchy; they have internalized it either consciously or unconsciously.” hooks specifically discusses the maintenance of internalized white

---

patriarchal oppression, and the damage it produces when it becomes the driving force in identity, morality and sexuality. Scurry accepts the identity of a moral compass in her actions, and the philanthropic work she participates in.

Figure 10. A headshot of Briana Scurry for her motivational speaking campaign. Source: *Washington Post*

Thus, her role not only makes her invisible, but also silences her chances to break out of the respectable constraints of white society. Briana Scurry has molded—over the course of 20 years and stages of career, into the ideal black woman athlete. Scurry, an individual, who is not sexually deviant, non-threatening and under the control of the institutions social construct sustains gender binaries simply by being submissive to the roles of femininity that have been casted in opposition to idealized masculinity. Scurry is not sexually deviant because she does not have a publicized romance; because of this Scurry is viewed as asexual as she lacks of a romantic partner, whether female or male. Scurry is propitious to the soccer institution because she follows the rules of the league, and takes care in depicting her best self, thus, she is
not a revolutionary thinker or doer. Lastly, Scurry succumbs to gender binaries as she is quiet in social media, submissive to the roles of women in the soccer league and is passive in her behavior towards her teammates. Scurry’s goal as a soccer player and teammates has always been putting the team first, thus her shine as an elite goalie is dimmed due to her goals of teammate equality.

**Philanthropy:**

The newspaper articles that mention Scurry take care to acknowledge her as an instrumental role in the women’s success at the Olympics and in the World Cup. Hank Browne of The Chicago Tribune writes on winning an the 1998 Olympics, “The game was decided by penalty kicks, and there was only one save. It seems to me the real hero was (goalkeeper) Briana Scurry.” Articles for sports enthusiasts focus heavily on her last minute save against the Chinese Women’s National Team as the public views it as the climax of her career as a professional soccer player. In all that she does, Briana Scurry is constantly associated with the triumphs of her past. Scurry is defined by her behavior while supervised by a league of white women and men. Her best “athletic” self is broadcasted to society when it was most controlled. In other words, when Scurry is discussed in the media only when she has maintained moral stance, and is considered respectable by the standards of the white men and women in soccer. Now, five years after her late retirement, Briana Scurry remains active in urban communities and in foundations dedicated to research on head injuries. However, her actions and monetary contributions to the AIDs foundation and to the

---

Make- A- Wish Foundation are publicized only by her website. Scurry’s participation in the Make- A - Wish foundation was prompted by her dying nephew, Jerome. After winning a bronze medal in Sweden, Scurry gave her medallion to her mortally ill nephew in hopes to make his dreams come true. In addition, Scurry works closely with the HIV/AIDS foundation because of a close friend who has suffered with the disease. Scurry’s public philanthropist efforts depict her as a woman who deeply cares for others and an athlete who seeks to morally uplift the communities surrounding her. Although she is intimidating in the net, she characterizes herself as, nurturing, loving, caring, and most-importantly non-threatening. Instantly, Scurry transforms from a force within the goalie net, to a caretaker of children and disabled people.

**An Injured Mind, A Used Body**

Scurry’s place is in the net in order to be safe; her parents and coaches thought that she would be taken care of by her teammates in the net. Goalkeepers must be calm under pressure, have quick reactions, great hands, and be very agile. Goalkeepers also are in the most dangerous position on the field as they continuously dodge, swinging legs, loose and fast charging bodies. They can be kicked, knocked out, but worse they could lose a game. However treacherous, Scurry’s body was never safe in the net. Her teams always counted on her, as she was responsible for keeping goals out of the net. Scurry had the hardest job on the field, and her teammates relied on her mental toughness and quick thinking. Her skills and mental
capacity won games, and made the US Women’s National Soccer team unstoppable so much that the team was invulnerable to a loss of a game, and vulnerable in ways that caused Scurry to lose her memory and deteriorate for 3 years of her life.

Scurry’s body was at the forefront of many violent kicks and aggressive charges on the field and harsh interactions within the contact sport. Nonetheless, she gave soccer and her team every bit of energy she had. The National Women’s Soccer team used Scurry until she could be used no more. After a poor performance against Brazil in September 2007 attributed to multiple concussions, she and her coach were asked to retire. Scurry had a 12-0 winning record as a goalkeeper against Brazil. This particular game Scurry let 4 goals pass by her; just like that, the woman who carried the team on her back became useless to the team. After coming back from a hard loss, Scurry worked her way back to the top until she was kneed in the temple by a forward on the Philadelphia Independence team.  

Caitlin Dewey, of The Washington Post, in her article “The Biggest Save” writes:

Briana Scurry couldn’t be sure if it was the painkillers or the fact that surgeons had just plucked pea-size balls of damaged tissue from the back of her head. For her, the biggest problem was always the headache, a relic of damage done to her neck and the occipital nerve when the blow to her temple snapped her head back.

Just as her neck had snapped back, her career, too, had reached it’s own breaking point. She was forced to quickly and silently retire from soccer, causing the beginning of her battle with mental illness. Sadly, when she needed her teammates and support the most, they could not help her. In that moment, Scurry began to realize the extent

73 ibid.
of the violence inflicted on her body and the severity of the concussions that she endured during her time as a soccer player. Scurry’s passion to be on the team, be a champion, and be the best was instantly shattered when she came to terms with her mental and physical injuries. Scurry elucidates, “I was so incredibly bitter. I felt betrayed. There was no way I was going out like that, not if I had anything to do with it.”

Scurry’s body had not only deteriorated, but her calm, cool and even-keeled nature also had crumbled. Abandoned, she was left to pick up the pieces of her life; she had to do this lonely work because she lacked a visible immediate family and she has had no visible, publicized lover. Scurry was alone, with no hopes of being cared for by another. The United States Women’s National Team left her broken body on the field, and assured her that she no longer was needed on the team. Following this, Scurry suffered from major depression and anxiety and was left to battle mental illness alone, without the support of her teammates. The harm that Scurry endured for the benefit of the team is comparable to the harm and struggle that she continues to face. This situation depicts the harsh treatment and lack of concern that black female bodies receive.

Conclusion: She Is No One’s Concern, She Remains Invisible

The lack of romanticization, sexualization and attention to desirability are ever present on Scurry’s body. The mainstream medias necessity to sexualize the US

---

National Women’s Soccer team is an attempt to increase popularity and support. Scurry’s narrative and private lifestyle does not fit the heterosexualized trope, thus resulting in her marginalized presence on and off of the field. Briana Scurry has not been seen publicly involved with anyone. The tabloids and magazines are not concerned with her asexual, unstimulating romantic life. The formidable reality is that no one is curious or amused with Briana Scurry. The white heterosexuality standards have highlighted fellow teammate, maternal, married, and in love Mia Hamm, while genuinely shadowing Scurry. In the same respect, Scurry is also overshadowed by mentee Hope Solo, in aggression and erotic sex appeal, as shown in the image above. Scurry molded her life so that the public can identify her as an ideal black woman. She remains a non-factor because her body and mind are in the control of the gender restrictions that surround her in soccer and in the media. She lacks the sexual deviance that many black women are classified with. Lastly, Scurry is the black exception in soccer and in the public because of her skill demonstrated and her complaisant position in soccer. For that reason she is gracefully accepted by the white majority and shielded from the media altogether. Her role and acceptance within her restrictions makes and maintains Briana Scurry’s invisibility.

Figure 11. Mentee Hope Solo on the left, Mentor Briana Scurry on the right. Source: Daily Mail News
Nonetheless, Scurry is not concerned with the media’s perception of her; she is focused on the education of urban youth, student and athletes. She seeks to bridge the gap between suburban whiteness in soccer, as it represents wealth and status, and blackness in cities. She has accepted her role as a moral compass for many people of color, and willingly burdens herself with the idealized black perception of herself for the public to dissect. The reality is, by standing as a moral compass, she is completely overshadowed. Furthermore, Scurry fails in making impacting the gaps that exists racially and economically in soccer, as well as locally and professionally.

Who benefits from the invisibility of an accomplished professional young woman of color? White America gains when Briana Scurry is kept silent and invisible. Mainstream white majority is satisfied because it is clear that Briana Scurry was and never will be a threat to the white, heterosexual hegemonic society that surrounds athletes in the US. Scurry, has helped enable the behaviors and hierarchy of the white majority with her chosen identity as a moral compass, and her desire to bridge the gap between whiteness into the lives of urban youth by pushing for more urban, black youth to participate in soccer. Scurry is not considered by anyone because she has never posed a threat, and continues not to.

Scurry is a rare, and exceptional athlete and an equally rare and exceptional African American athlete. Her skills, and statistics on the field provide hard facts that indicate that Scurry was and still is the best goalkeeper in the world. She has proved herself by leading her various teams to National College Athletic Association championship titles, Women’s World Cups, and Olympic gold and bronze medals. Even still, Briana Scurry has remained a public figure and has controlled her narrative by keeping out of gossip and drama like many other black female athletes. Scurry
successfully controls her narrative, but to what degree? At what point does her controlling image become desirable or beneficial for the many young black athletes who seek to break racist, and sexist figurative barriers? All in all, one piece that Scurry and many athletes cannot control is how mainstream public and various audiences view them.

One might suggest that it is necessary for black women to be shown in positive lights in the media. Yet, one is compelled to ask, at what cost and on what terms are black women to be portrayed in the media? Briana Scurry has not been portrayed at all because she is working within the confines of the “master’s house” as the legendary feminist critic, Audre Lorde, states. She has found a way to survive under oppressive restrictions that exhausted her mind, body and identity causing her to be subject the treatment and attention that she receives from others about her body, skill, and achievements. Her efforts in the Make-A-Wish Foundation and AIDS foundation are not unseen, but are also not made visible. Thus reminding the audience on how good a black athlete can be morally, physically, and mentally. Scurry has been bred under dim light, and still remains invisible. Passively accepting the gender and racial roles assigned to Scurry’s body has caused her innate invisibility. Scurry is seen as a revolutionary goalie, but will always be regarded as a black female athlete who fails in capturing the interest of media and fans.

---

Conclusion

“Her masculinity is the illusion of self that covers over a void, a lack, an absence at the center.”

- Leslie Heywood, Built To Win: The Female Athlete As a Cultural Icon 2003.

The unequal gender dynamics portrayed and confirmed nationally in professional athletics mirror the still-oppressive climate that plagues women in America. Issues of race, gender, and sexuality are embedded within an American culture that exploits women and marginalized people. The restrictions of gender binaries, white heterosexuality, white hegemony, and validation of racist stereotypes produce violence on bodies that cannot be eradicated. The practice of masculinity in sport, the devaluation of women, and the shaming of anything deviant has shown to be exponentially increasing as they continue to maintain male authority, power, and control.

Serena Williams, Brittney Griner, and Briana Scurry are remarkable examples of elite black women athletes that have been subject to the horrific stereotypes of race as it relates to their intelligence, skill, and bodies. These destructive standards reinforce racialized hierarchies of marginalized people in athletics while sustaining the oppressive power structures that belittle them. The established practice of denigrating women athletes transforms every aspect of their personal and athletic lives to fit a mold of white hegemony and patriarchy. Although these women work within the confines of racist practices and restrictions, they are capable of transcending those constraints, granting them the identity of alpha women.
The racist and sexist restrictions of black women in these sports are socially institutionalized in athletics. Kevin Hylton, author of *Race and Sport: Critical Race Theory* contends that racism persist even when it’s reminisces and actions are not outwardly shown. Hylton discusses the various levels of racism, stating, that “[w]hen institutions like sport become complicit in institutionalized racist acts it no longer takes the effort of rogue actors or right-wing organizations [because] racism is intentionally or unwittingly perpetrated.” Scholars further theorize “[i]nstutional racism is often marked by its more subtle covert incarnation as opposed to the more overt expressions of behaviors by individual actors.” Thus, concluding that “[s]tructural- or societal- level racism reinforces the pervasive embedded nature of racism in the major arena of our social lives.” 76 Hylton asserts that when racism becomes apart of institutions like athletics, the need for a scapegoat is nil. Hylton highlights that the reproduction of racism through the institution of sports is one that is not attributed to one person and one person’s actions. Rather, it occurs due to the acceptance of unequal treatment that is inadvertently supported by various sporting leagues. Thus, acceptance of whiteness as property and whiteness as normalized behavior reinforces racist mindsets and intentions of women athletes of color in these institutionalized sporting leagues.

Concerns about gender binaries in the athletic realm represent existing oppressions while also creating avenues for acceptance. Williams, Griner, and Scurry are exceptional “alpha female” athletes because they are able to create their own identities and innovate definitions for femininity, masculinity and female

masculinity. Pat Griffin, a Professor Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Amherst discusses the presence of women in sport. Griffin explains,

Women’s presence in sport as serious participants dilutes the importance and exclusivity of sport as training ground for learning about and accepting traditional male gender roles and the privileges that their adoption confers on (white, heterosexual) men. 77

Arguably, the presence of women in sports threatens the long-enduring status quo of masculinity, requiring the revaluation of gender definitions and the formation of multiple abstract and androgynous ways to grapple with ideas of masculinity and femininity. This malleable definition moves past the former explanation and purpose of sport. Scholars consistently argue that,

The preservation of athletics as a male-only activity is essential in maintaining a gender order in which men and women adopt, separate and unequal gender roles. The interconnections of sexism, homophobia and heterosexism are powerful forces that ensure that male privilege and dominance endure. 78

Essentially, Griffin asserts that athletics are created and sustained for the growth of male privilege. Even more so, athletics are instrumental in the portrayal of masculinity and femininity as it seeks to make them the opposite of the other.

Because sports were created as an avenue to express male masculinity as early as 1850 B.C., it is imperative to understand the roles that an alpha woman, does and often might play. Women like Scurry, Griner and Williams not only invade male egos and masculine spaces, but they shatter perceptions of femininity and force white heterosexuality and white hegemony to acknowledge and interact with the existence


78 Ibid.
of marginalized power and its disruptive forces. The creation of feminine masculinity, as portrayed by Griner, Williams, and Scurry, functions as the first stage in the complex and necessary eradication of gender binaries and the growing margins of acceptance in sport, culture and society. However, despite their successes, the respective leagues of these women still attempt to control and utilize them to uphold white male dominance.

These ebony athletes have shattered normalized conceptions of sexuality. Williams, Scurry, and Griner have molded their sexualities by ways of exposing their body, practicing homosexuality and by redirecting the gazes that follows their bodies. The societal and cultural focus on sexuality with regards to women often is concerned with a woman’s ability to take care of herself and take control over her life choices and decisions. However, deviant sexuality for these influential female athletes is less about sexual activity and more about their revolutionary thought processes and enhanced sexuality. Intellectuals then articulate that, “[w]hen the physical and mental come together in sexual activity, they are intensely and pleasurably merged.” It is then understood that this is a process in which “the abstract nature of thinking becomes incarnate in actual physical experience.” 79 The sexuality of these athletic women is merged and defined by the ways in which their bodies move in competition, and by the ways in which their thoughts are innately connected to the imagined deviance of their bodies. Their bodies become representative of the ways in which femininity, masculinity, and sexuality are intrinsically connected and cannot be discussed separately. Sexuality as an action is not to be imagined as second to

---

passion, rather expressions, assertions and interpretations of sexuality constitute deliberate and powerful ways of thinking and become essential elements in the transformative process of substantial liberation.
References


Instagram.com Britney Griner

Instagram.com/skylardiggins


