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OUT OF BOUNDS: THE BODIES, BORDERS, AND VOICES OF FEMALE  
ATHLETES

by

Scarlett L. Hester

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Communication

The University of Memphis

December 2017

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## **Acknowledgements**

I know the saying, “It takes a village,” is typically applied to child rearing. However, this dissertation has been my child for four years in the making. Therefore, I believe it genuinely took a village to get me to the point where I was able to produce this dissertation, my metaphoric child. In an effort to not offend anyone, I will attempt to acknowledge and thank my village in reverse chronological order.

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demand. While she did not always understand my goals or my research, my mom was my biggest, unconditional fan. The English language does not permit me to adequately express how thankful I am for the love and encouragement my mom gave me. Finishing my graduate work without her guidance and voice of reason is easily the most difficult thing I have had to endure. However, in the moments when I wanted to give up is when I felt her presence the most. Thank you mom. I love you and I hope I have made you proud.

## **Abstract**

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Professional sports and sports culture permeate almost every aspect of contemporary American culture. By its very nature, sports culture focuses on the bodies and performances of athletes. While this is a natural result, the taken-for-granted norms of professional sports culture privileges cisgendered, White, heteronormative bodies. This study investigates how professional sports culture operates as an apparatus of discipline that is inundated in notions of whiteness. Through the case studies of UFC fighter Ronda Rousey, tennis champion Serena Williams, and WNBA star Brittney Griner, this study exposes the modes of discipline that are deployed by professional sports culture and the impact this power and control has on bodies that do not adhere to gendered or racial norms. Because professional sports culture is an apparatus, the means of discipline that are inflicted upon athlete bodies differs based upon criteria such as gender, race, and sexuality. Individuals who occupy non-normative intersectional identity are often placed in a position where they must navigate how their bodies are viewed, consumed, and controlled. Using various audio visual and print mediated texts (including vlogs, interviews, and mini documentaries) I explore how Rousey, Williams, and Griner vocalize their identities as a way to push against the borders of professional sports culture. I assert that their voices serve as a rhetorical tool of resistance that allows each athlete to reconfigure how the disciplinary power of professional sport culture is inflicted upon their body. This dissertation represents the fields of critical rhetoric and media

studies and seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation concerning the invisible power of whiteness and intersectional scholarship.

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## **Introduction**

In February 2016, UFC fighter Ronda Rousey appeared on the Ellen Show to discuss her shocking loss to Holly Holm during the November 2015 UFC 193 fight. Holm and Rousey were billed as the bantamweight title fight and Rousey was favored to win, entering as the current undefeated champion. DeGeneres begins the interview and states, “Going in everyone expected you to win. I expected you to win.” DeGeneres then asks Rousey what was different about this particular fight compared to her previous fights. Rousey offers, “It was my third title fight in 9 months, and I don’t think anyone’s ever attempted that before.” Rousey goes on to discuss the damage her body endured during the fight and quickly contrasts the hits she received to hits male UFC fighters experience. As the interview continues and DeGeneres presses Rousey to explain what she felt when she realized she lost, Rousey tearfully expresses her thoughts of suicide and goes on to state, “To be honest, I looked up and saw my man Travis was standing there and I just looked up at him and I was like ‘I need to have his babies. I need to stay alive.’” Rousey’s comment about her partner redirects the conversation from her body’s inability to perform in a sport competition and refocuses viewer’s attention on her desire to become a mother and her body’s ability to produce human life. Rousey’s interview with DeGeneres may seem prototypical and expected. Athletes commonly participate in interviews following wins or losses. While there is nothing explicitly problematic with this tradition it does bring up the question of how female athlete’s bodies are viewed and consumed. Certainly, Rousey is accustomed to answering questions about her body and performance in the ring. However, when pressed about losing, she reverts and instead presents herself in a rudimentary light. In that match she was not a successful athlete, her

body failed, but she still has the ability to be fertile and produce life – a function that only women can fulfill and arguably, is a diversion tactic reserved for female athletes.

Women in sports have long withstood scrutiny in regard to their bodies and sexuality. However, recently, female athletes are refusing to apologize for entering and excelling in a predominantly masculine space. For example, in a recent interview with *Fader* magazine, tennis superstar Serena Williams states, “I never feel like because I’m black I have to say don’t let them see me do that. I am who I am and I don’t apologize for my color, for my sex, for anything” (“Serena Williams - Soul Intact”). If anything, professional female athletes are embracing the attention granted to them and utilizing their position to call attention to the disciplinary nature of professional sports. Female athletes whose bodies come into question have long adopted this stance of resistance. Susan Cahn (2015) explains,

It cast suspicion on the femininity of women in sport, yet it also contributed to the dynamic image of the ‘athletic girl’ who refused to be excluded from a domain of masculine privilege and pleasure. The female athlete embodied the New Woman, in bold motion, treading fearlessly into forbidden realms and discovering her unique character. (p. 30)

Seemingly, Williams agrees with this bold motion and decision to tread fearlessly into forbidden realms. Williams is accustomed to the spotlight associated with her status as a professional tennis player. However, rather than allowing her body to be consumed solely for its athletic capability and prowess, she vocalizes and, in turn, renders visible the other aspects of her identity. Essentially, through her voice, Williams is able to negotiate the lens through which she is viewed mobilizing her voice as a tool of resistance.

Serena Williams and Ronda Rousey are only two examples of how professional female athletes are placed in a position to negotiate the consumption of their bodies within the disciplinary confines of sports culture. Because sports culture disciplines female athletes, borders as associated with the body manifest to dictate how female athlete bodies are read. This controls and limits the way their bodies are viewed on and off the court. While borders are often thought of as physical lines or manifestations to cross, view, or monitor, they also function as configurations of the body. This dissertation posits the following questions: how does sports culture operate as an apparatus of discipline, which controls and limits the way that female athlete bodies are viewed on and off the court? Further, how do female athletes use their voice to talk about their bodies in a way that pushes against the boundaries of sports culture? Using the case the studies of Ronda Rousey, Serena Williams, and Brittney Griner, I examine how women can use voice as a tool of resistance against often-strict cultural expectations of sports culture.

Moreover, I posit that each of these women illustrates how American professional sports directs societal awareness of how female bodies that do not adhere to traditional gender norms should be viewed and controlled. Professional sports culture is but one context through which to understand the confines that are placed upon female bodies. However, the borders of professional sports culture present Rousey, Williams, and Griner with unique opportunities to resist discipline. Specifically, I assert that each woman utilizes her voice as a tool to navigate how her body. The utilization of voice as a tool of resistance allows Rousey, Williams, and Griner to create new meaning that should be associated with each of their bodies. Such vocal acts help us understand how voice can be deployed as a mechanism of rhetorical resistance. At the same time, the rhetoric deployed

by Rousey, Williams, and Griner underlines how categories of identity, such as race, gender, and sexuality, are ascribed to the body. The central component to each of these professional female athletes is their ability to assert their position in a longstanding masculine space. This assertion helps to reveal how despite seeming progress, gender still remains an underlying component that warrants the disciplining of the body. Cahn (2015) highlights the continual existence of gender disparity in professional sport and explains that “the pressure that many girls and young women still feel to display or emphasize ‘femininity’ in the face of assumptions that athletic bodies and intensity signal inappropriate female masculinity” (p. 311). Rousey, Williams, and Griner must each grapple with different categories of identity. Yet, the underlying factor that unifies each case study is each woman’s ability to embody and advocate for the acceptance of female athletic bodies that signal female masculinity.

This dissertation investigates how categories of identity, specifically gender, race, and sexuality, are mapped on the bodies of Ronda Rousey, Serena Williams, and Brittney Griner through sports mediated discourse. As professional female athletes who must navigate the minefield of sports media, these women’s bodies are often controlled and expected to fit within the confines of professional sports culture. Professional sports culture is an apparatus of discipline, which I later explain in chapter 1. However, due to its assemblant nature, professional sports culture, Rousey, Williams, and Griner are able to manipulate the disciplinary tactics deployed and ultimately direct how their bodies should be viewed and consumed. I argue in this study that each woman previously mentioned capitalizes upon the discipline of professional sports culture to advocate for and embody female masculinity. While female masculinity is the common denominator, I

assert that each woman embodies female masculinity in a way that broadens assumptions not only for athletic female bodies, but also female bodies that occupy spaces of otherness. In other words, female masculinity does not simply reside in white female bodies, but as I discuss in this dissertation, is also performed in non-white and queer bodies. Through this, I hope to contribute to the growing scholarly conversation that remains critical of intersectional scholarship. Rather than contributing to the debate that intersectionality in scholarship remains a buzzword, my hope is to extend the conversation and consider how non-normative intersectional identity works in relation with one another (Davis, 2008). My aim is to answer Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2008) and Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge's (2016) call to embrace the complexity of intersectional identity. Collins and Bilge (2016) state, "The focus of relationality shifts from analyzing what distinguishes entities, for example, the differences between race and gender, to examining their interconnections" (p. 27). Intersectionality, as both theory and method, posits this dissertation as an attempt to enrich the current interdisciplinary investigations that are also concerned with intersectional and relational identities. I not only utilize intersectionality as a theoretical lens, but I also employ a pastiche of scholarship from the fields of rhetoric and media studies. I contrast sports mediated discourse with audio/visual responses from Rousey, Williams, and Griner to explore how the media discusses each athlete's body and then, in turn, how each athlete vocally and rhetorically navigates the mediated discourse associated with their body.

### **Chapter Overview**

In chapter 1, I explore literature in regards to sports culture, discipline, and the female athlete body. This chapter establishes the theoretical framework and methods of

analysis utilized throughout this dissertation. Specifically, I lay the theoretical groundwork and argue that professional sports culture is an assemblage of disciplinary power. Not only does professional sports culture utilize disciplinary mechanisms on athlete bodies, this discipline is imbued in whiteness. As so many scholars of whiteness assert, it is the invisibility and silence, which engulfs whiteness that grants it insidious power (Butterworth, 2007; Crenshaw, 1997; Griffin & Calafel, 2011; Lacy, 2008; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Projansky & Ono, 1999; Shome, 2000; Zhang Gajjala, & Watkins, 2012). I situate professional sports culture within the disciplinary power of whiteness as an analytical lens to understand how female athlete bodies are broken down and reconfigured. Further, I argue that voice serves as a tool of resistance against the regulation of Rousey, Williams, and Griner's bodies. Last, I outline the methods of analysis that I utilize to examine the cases of Ronda Rousey, Serena Williams, and Brittney Griner.

Chapter 2 utilizes Ronda Rousey, the first female UFC fighter, as the case study. In this chapter I analyze audio visual texts including clips from the UFC vlog, "Embedded," interviews with Jimmy Kimmel and Ellen DeGeneres, and commercials for Pantene and Reebok. My analysis pits Rousey's voice against the media discourse about her body and ability as a fighter. Using these texts I examine how Rousey discusses her body within the context of professional sports culture and what aspects of her body, such as her muscularity, she chooses to highlight in order to advocate for the acceptance of her brand of being "femininely badass." I argue Rousey internalizes the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture in order to rhetorically place herself outside of its

boundaries. This manifestation of restraint results in Rousey herself espousing the notions of control upon other female bodies.

Chapter 3 builds upon my argument that professional sports culture is an apparatus of discipline to analyze tennis superstar, Serena Williams. In this chapter, I continue to examine audiovisual texts while primarily focusing on Williams's interview with rapper Common. My focus on this text allows me to argue that Williams is able to advocate for black women and non-white bodies by encoding her rhetoric and capitalizing on notions of code switching. While Rousey internalizes the discipline of professional sports culture, Williams manipulates it in order to reach a broader audience. Williams maneuvers through the mediated discourse that surrounds her embodiment of being a black woman in a way that calls not only for the acceptance of her blackness, but other female bodies that do not succumb to the expectations of whiteness.

Chapter 4, the last chapter of analysis, investigates WNBA star, Brittney Griner. In this chapter I argue that Griner navigates the boundaries of professional sports culture through means that were not granted to Rousey or Williams. Because Griner is an openly gay athlete, she capitalizes upon her sexuality as a way to surpass the confines of professional sports culture. However, while Griner's rhetoric embraces her embodiment of queerness, she must originally obfuscate her race in order to render her sexuality as acceptable within the whiteness of professional sport culture. Yet, after contending with her sexuality, blackness, and domestic abuse charges, I argue Griner fully embodies Collins and Bilge's (2016) notions of relationality. Griner does not only redefine what it means to be a woman who embraces female masculinity, but she further problematizes her embodiment by also enfolding her identity as a black queer woman.

Finally, in chapter 5 I provide my overall conclusions and implications for future research. I argue that professional sports and specifically, female professional athletes, can function as the catalyst to redefine how female bodies as a whole are consumed and disciplined. Additionally, I argue that within sports culture there is a proto-feminist movement that is taking place. Instead of identifying with a particular wave or school of thought typically associated with feminism, Rousey, Williams, and Griner discuss their bodies in a manner that calls for equality among women in a way that considers how borders of identity clash and complement one another.

## Chapter 1

### **Theorizing the Boundaries of Professional Sports Culture & Female Athlete Bodies**

During the months of September through February, American television networks such as NBC, Fox, CBS, ESPN, and the NFL Network will dedicate programming on Thursday, Sunday, and Monday nights to air NFL games (“2017-18 NFL TV SCHEDULE ON NBC, FOX, CBS, ESPN AND NFL NETWORK”). Michael Shackelford (2009) from bleacherreport.com claims that while it is a cliché saying, baseball really is American’s national pastime because the history of the game is “interwoven into the history of America” (“The Importance of Sport in America”). And while many Americans may not care about, participate in, or watch sports, in his TedXTalk, Dr. Andrew Billings (2015) claims, “\$1.9 billion is lost annually to college basketball’s March Madness in lost worker productivity” (“Sports can start meaningful conversations | Andy Billings | TEDxBirmingham”). So, while an individual may not watch March Madness, there is a strong likelihood that the tournaments simple existence impacts them or their workplace. Sports are a vital part of American culture. Often, sports shape cultural understanding in regards to race, class, gender, and sexuality. Historically, sports have been regulated to serve as gauge for men to measure their masculinity. Michael Kimmel (2008) writes, “Guys live for sports, and live through sports. It serves so many purposes – validating our manhood; bridging generational, racial, and class divides; cementing the bonds among men; and more clearly demarcating the boundaries between Guyland and Herland” (p. 125). Sports, by nature, draw clear distinctions between male and female, which inherently, dictates what is and is not acceptable in American culture. As a woman, consumer, and lover of sports, I do not fall outside of these boundaries. I

actively participate in Fantasy Football, I fill out a bracket for March Madness, and am an avid fan of the NFL team the Philadelphia Eagles. It is precisely due to my active participation in and consumption of sports that I believe it is vital that we turn a critical eye to a culture that demands so much from consumers.

In this chapter, I first clarify my definition and understanding of sports culture. I argue that sports culture, in particular professional sports culture, is a disciplinary apparatus that monitors, controls, and specifically disciplines female athlete bodies. Additionally, this notion of discipline is engrained in whiteness. The processes of viewing and consuming are no longer confined to the game. Athlete bodies are not regulated solely during the sport competition. Rather, the disciplining extends past the ring, court, etc. into other aspects of the athlete's life. In this dissertation, I argue that the disciplinary nature of sports culture dictates how the borders on female athlete bodies are negotiated in public. In contrast, when the voice is used outside the public arena of sporting competition, borders can be contested and re-negotiated. Professional athletes are viewed and consumed for their bodies while competing in public. This notion is especially true for professional female athletes, and more specifically, non-white female athletes. In order to navigate the disciplining and consumption of their bodies, I argue Ronda Rousey, Serena Williams, and Brittney Griner utilize their voice as a tool to transgress the borders of identity that are ascribed to their bodies. Their voices and speech acts become a rhetorical device they deploy in order to assign new meaning and understanding to their bodies. I assert that while voice is a tool of transgression utilized by Rousey, Williams, and Griner, each woman respectively employs her voice to advocate for and discuss her identity as a means to resist the disciplinary nature of

professional sports culture. Because each woman analyzed in this dissertation occupies spaces of difference, the modes of vocal resistance differ based upon the identity she embodies. I then provide an overview of scholarship that investigates the history of women in sports. Finally, I discuss the methodology I utilize in this dissertation. I seek to answer the call for intersectional work that understands of how identities work in relation with one another rather than placing focus on one aspect of identity. Instead, this dissertation aims to understand the complex relationship between factors of identity such a gender, race, and sexuality. Further, this dissertation adopts a critical rhetorical perspective to demystify sports and identity.

The rest of this chapter proceeds as follows. First, in order to operationalize my definition of discipline and sports culture, I interrogate Michel Foucault's (1977) theorization of discipline and situate his conception within the perspective of whiteness. I further assert that professional sports culture, as understood by Sut Jhally (1984) operates as an apparatus of disciplinary power. I then proceed to establish how female athlete bodies have historically been viewed and controlled and the implication of this disciplinary power within the realm of professional sports culture. It is necessary to establish the historical and cultural importance of the female body as a means to assert how athletic female bodies are viewed and consumed and in turn, how borders of identity are understood and mapped upon the body. In order to resist the disciplinary power inflicted upon their bodies, I then turn to the theorization of voice as a tool of resistance. I then turn my attention specifically to female athletic bodies and female masculinity. Women in athletics have historically caused suspicion with much of the anxiety revolving around the fear of women "becoming" a lesbian, manly, or overtly sexual (Cahn, 2015).

However, with the implementation of Title IX, the perspective of women in sports seemingly shifted. While this is true to some degree, mainly that women's sports programs must legally receive funding, cultural understanding of the female athletic body and female masculinity still leaves much to be desired. Through the cases of Ronda Rousey, Serena Williams, and Brittney Griner, I argue that an acceptance of female athletic bodies is one way to create a space for female masculinity that accounts not only for gender, but also race and sexuality. After, I discuss the methodology I use throughout this dissertation. Specifically, I clarify how I understand critical rhetorical methodology can be used in unison with intersectionality. Because one of the main goals of this project is to advance intersectional methods and theory, I illustrate how my analysis aims to answer the call for more comprehensive intersectional scholarship. Finally, I discuss the analysis chapters and the specific texts selected for analysis.

### **Professional Sports Culture, Discipline, & Whiteness**

The success of contemporary American sports culture is predicated upon the audience viewership and consumption. Sut Jhally (1984) explains,

While professional sports organizations are cultural institutions, their existence is based on them as capitalist enterprises that are largely privately owned and are all profit-oriented. They operate as commodity producing industries based on the appropriation of surplus-value from the capital/labor relation. (p. 42)

American sports culture is able to maintain its foothold as an enterprise of power because of its economic impact. Certainly, this is true of many capitalist operations in America. However the impact of sports culture operates on a magnitude that often goes unnoticed or is taken for granted. Like many capitalist enterprises, sports culture is maintained via a

capital/labor relationship. Yet, unlike other capitalist enterprises, the labor relationship in sports culture relies on the athletes to behave as an agent of both capital and labor. Professional athletes must labor and perform. Their bodies are capitalized upon for economic profit. In spite of this, they must utilize the capitalistic nature of professional sports in order to maintain a career. They participate in the privately owned and profit-oriented institution. Jhally (1984) further explains this notion and writes, “It is precisely the relationship with the state and with the media that structures the internal framework” (p. 42). Professional athletes are aware of and participate in the capital/labor relation. They engage with the sports media because it is necessary in order to advance in their career. They understand that in professional sports culture their body and athletic ability is a commodity that can be capitalized upon and sold. This is true for any professional athlete. Their body and its ability to perform in athletic contest signify the value placed upon a professional athlete. However, the relationship between professional athlete and capital/labor becomes tenuous when the athlete’s race, gender, and sexuality become part of what is being commodified and appropriated. This is not a new phenomenon. Often athletes of color’s bodies are fragmented and distorted as a way to advance the capitalistic agenda of professional sports. Certainly, white athletes are scrutinized within the realm of professional sports culture. But, their white body implies what Michael Butterworth (2007) calls, “the taken-for-granted norm of American identity” (p. 231). The white athlete in American sports culture is expected and understood. White bodies do not necessitate the same amount of attention as the non-white, non-gender conforming, queer athlete. Non-white athletes are remade to be visible and knowable within the

context of whiteness. bell hooks highlights the impact of disenfranchising Muhammad Ali's body from his voice and mind. She writes,

The unenlightened white world is far more pleased with a Muhammad Ali who has been reduced to brute strength without the sharp keen intelligence and critical wit that characterized his power as a politicized black athlete who dared to decolonize his mind. (hooks, 2004, pp. 22-23)

hooks argues that Ali was reduced to his brute strength and separated from his keen intelligence and critical wit as a means to make his persona and body adhere more with viewer expectations. The presentation of a politicized black athlete was something that created discomfort among "the unenlightened white world." This notion is true almost 40 years later. In his analysis of Seattle Seahawk's Richard Sherman, Abraham Khan (2016) concludes,

The problem is not that Sherman got rich, nor even that Zirin mistakenly identified him as dangerous, but that neoliberalism asks us to behold Sherman's oppositional potential despite the logic it entails. We get to have our politics and our market, too. To enact anti-racism in this way is to accept the hope that conversation, awareness, or dialogue might generate enough energy to restructure racial hierarchies without altering basic socioeconomic structures. The politicization of race, in this instance, is simultaneously a depoliticization of capitalist relations. (p. 46)

Racial politics, the sports media complex, and capitalism seemingly work in unison. According to Khan, to engage in the politicization of race means to depoliticize the

capitalist reign of sports culture. Through this, the symbolic power of sports culture becomes evident. Jhally (1984) further explains,

Sport derives its ability to mediate this dialectic from its power as *symbol*, a symbolism that lies at the root of its role as ritual. This allows us to not merely ask the surface questions of *what* values are internalized through sports, but also questions regarding *how* that movement is structured. (p. 52)

For hooks, Khan, and Jhally, sports culture functions symbolically. When the structures that operate within sports culture are scrutinized and interrogated, we are able to discover the value associated with racial identity and racial politics. Assuredly, this is true of many structures within American culture. However, as I previously iterated, it is the relationship between the athlete and professional sports culture that is unique. In order to profit, or as Khan (2016) states, “get rich,” individual athletes must contest with the commodification of their bodies (p. 46). In the case analyzed by Khan, Sherman had to negotiate how his black body was read and renegotiate its meaning in order to gain a profit. Arguably, the capacity to generate revenue and assign monetary value to their body is impacted by the perspective of whiteness, which saturates American professional sports.

American sport is a cultural institution that has the potential to bring society together, but also has the power to divide and reveal deep-seated, and often racist or sexist, ideological beliefs. This has become increasingly more evident through the examples of Richard Sherman and Colin Kaepernick. Both men are professional football players who have been critiqued for their performance of blackness. Khaled Beydoun (2016) explains, “Kaepernick was the target of racial slurs and blatant racist attacks, on

and off social media, while prominent NFL personalities questioned the bona fides of his blackness because Kaepernick is biracial, and the adopted child of two white parents” (“Colin Kaepernick: Mix of racism, anti-Islam rhetoric are increasingly toxic”). While many citizens and scholars alike claim that the inauguration of former President Obama in 2008 marked the emergence of a post-racial society, it is indisputable that race was, is, and continues to be pertinent to scholarly conversation. Jamie Moshin and Ronald Jackson (2011) define post-race ideals in U.S. culture as the belief that “we are beyond, past, or ‘post-’ notions? of race-, gender-, and sexuality-based discrimination” (p. 214). Yet, as Michael Lacy and Kent Ono (2011) iterate, “Race and racism are often difficult to isolate, interpret, and explain. Race and racism are deflected, denied, disavowed, minimized, and excused” (p. 2). The existence of race and racism becomes more difficult to isolate and explain when whiteness is not included in the conversation. “White” as a racial category often goes unnamed, which grants it the power to dictate what is valued and how those values operate within an apparatus of discipline, in this case, professional sports culture. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995) explain,

Within a discursive system of naming oppression, but never the oppressive class, white can only be a negative, an invisible entity. This characteristic of whiteness is unique to its discursive construction and must be understood as a part of its power and force. Its invisibility guarantees its unstratified nature. (p. 299)

Whiteness maintains power in its ability to remain invisible and unnamable. While whiteness gathers power through its invisible nature, it continues to control and dominate through the perception of alliance with non-white individuals. Raka Shome (2000) further explains this location as important because it is, “Therefore presented as ‘different’ or in

opposition to parts of whiteness that have gone bad and constitute the site of abuse and dominance” (p. 370). In other words, non-white bodies are put in contest with whiteness as a means to reaffirm the normalcy of whiteness and continued dominance of whiteness. These notions become especially true in American professional sports. In his analysis of the media coverage of professional baseball players Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire, Michael Butterworth (2007) writes, “Analysis of this coverage reveals the extent to which whiteness is a taken-for-granted norm in discussions about race and how sports media produce and perpetuate a discourse that privileges whiteness” (p. 229). Additionally, the normalizing nature of the rhetoric of whiteness is not only taken-for-granted, but is strategic. Sarah Projansky and Kent Ono (1999) explain, “In response to various social changes and social movements, the history of whiteness in the United States entails a history of modifications to renegotiate the centrality of white power and authority – this is what we call strategic whiteness” (p. 152). As racial politics evolve, the rhetorical strategies that allow whiteness to remain invisible and maintain dominance also evolves. Racial identity, through the power of whiteness, becomes the oft-ignored norm. Rachel A. Griffin and Bernadette Calafell (2011) argue the erasure of racial identity is new form of racism. They write, “We illuminate one facet of the representation of the new racism, which is defined by the idea that race is insignificant and is no longer as prominent as it used to be” (Griffin & Calafell, 2011, p. 129). Further, they iterate that professional sports and sports culture are foundational culprits of new racism. They state,

We believe that there is a larger discursive set of principles being imbedded in our beliefs and practices through sport that lends itself to the perpetuation of white superiority and black inferiority. In this vein, our analysis of Stern necessitates

ongoing dialogue that critically reflects upon not only the workings of whiteness in sports but also the ways in which critical understandings of race and racism in sport can aid in positive social transformation. (Griffin & Calafell, 2011, p. 130)

Hence, professional sport serves as an important and necessary point of interrogation. As I previously iterated, Jhally states that sports are cultural institutions that have the power to influence how and what values are disseminated via sports culture. In this sense, American professional sports culture has historically and continually perpetuated rhetoric that privileges whiteness. Therefore, in this dissertation, I argue Serena Williams and Brittney Griner use their positions as black women to negotiate the rhetoric of whiteness associated with professional sports culture. Professional sports culture represents and replicates cultural beliefs associated with non-white bodies. Consequently, professional sports culture adopts the lens of whiteness that dominates America's cultural attitude. Through this, I assert Serena Williams utilizes whiteness rhetoric in order to code-switch and encode messages of empowerment designated for black women. Similarly, Griner uses her position as a black woman to seemingly transcend the whiteness of professional sports culture in order to call for acceptance of athletes who do not only transgress racial identity, but also sexual orientation. In contrast, the first case study in this dissertation, Ronda Rousey, exemplifies the taken-for-granted whiteness of professional sports culture. I argue that it is due to the saturation of whiteness in sports culture that allows Rousey to become the first female UFC fighter. Rousey advocates for the acceptance of female bodies that do not fulfill expectation, and ultimately women who embody female masculinity. However, this call is only granted due to her embodiment of whiteness.

The whiteness associated with professional sports culture does not operate without cause or reason. It becomes imbued in sports culture as a mechanism of discipline. In his text, *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1977) explains the effects of discipline on the human body. He writes,

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political' anatomy, which was also a 'mechanics of power,' was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies.

(Foucault, 1977, p. 138)

According to Foucault, when discipline is exercised on human bodies, it functions to re-create a body that is practiced and docile. The body is disciplined to the point that it is remade into something that operates as one, with the technique, speed, and efficiency determined by the apparatus of discipline. The bodies that are reproduced by disciplinary power are remade to become more useful and efficient. In the context of professional sports culture, athlete bodies are physically broken down and remade to become efficient and productive for their respected sport. However, the disciplining of professional athletic bodies does not end with creating subjects who can participate in a sport. Rather, professional athletic bodies are broken down and rearranged through the lens of whiteness. Therefore, non-white athletic bodies must be contained and reformed in a way that produces a subject that is knowable in the context of whiteness. The power disseminated by professional sports culture is not achieved through one aspect or

technology that is utilized in sports. Instead, I suggest sports culture in its entirety functions as an apparatus of discipline. Due to their participation in sports culture, Rousey, Williams, and Griner's bodies have often been fragmented and remade to fit into a shared understanding what it means to be not only a woman, but also an athletic woman. As an apparatus of discipline professional sports culture fragments and contains the bodies subjected to its mechanics of power. According to Foucault (1977),

Discipline may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology. (p. 215)

Foucault explains that the power of discipline is often inconspicuous. Power does not reside in one particular technology or instrument. Instead, it is an assemblage of tools, techniques, and procedures. Professional sports culture is not a singular technology of discipline. The different aspects of sports culture such as the games, interviews, photo shoots, etc. all work in tandem. These modes of restraint and control remain inconspicuous because they operate as an apparatus, which results in individuals becoming inundated and an active participant in the disciplinary power that is distributed.

Foucault (1977) further explains,

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribe in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (pp. 202-203)

Professional athletes become responsible, to some degree, for their own subjection to the power of sports culture and must contend with how and what aspects of their bodies are disciplined. This is specifically true for non-white athletes. The whiteness of sports culture projects a different disciplinary gaze on non-white athletic bodies. Non-white athletes must not only negotiate how their bodies are remade, but also what their race or ethnicity signifies and means within the larger apparatus of professional sports. Because professional athlete bodies are consistently visible, they are subjected to the disciplinary gaze of sports culture. The gaze of professional sports culture operates with the same invisibility as whiteness, which makes the disciplinary power it possesses so insidious. Whiteness maintains its power because it is never named. Similarly, the disciplinary gaze of professional sports culture conducts itself as “omnipresent,” which is able to “make all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible.” The gaze of professional sports culture is a “faceless gaze” that is able to “transform the whole social body into perception” (Foucault, 1977, p. 214). Consequently, the disciplinary gaze of professional sports culture administers exceptional modes of power upon non-white bodies.

Sports culture does not only discipline bodies that fall outside the dimension of whiteness. It also accounts for bodies that do not embody traditional notions of man/woman or masculinity/femininity. Susan Cahn (2015) explains,

Sport, in this widely held view, severs as the metaphorical measure of a good man or woman. Gender appraisal in sports can also entail literal measurement. When an athlete’s biological sex comes under scrutiny, sports governing bodies make judgment on what qualifies a ‘body’ as either female or male for the purpose of competition. (p. 305)

Sports culture, as an apparatus of discipline, examines bodies that violate whiteness as well as gender norms. Individuals who do not assimilate to whiteness or who violate gender norms become suspect, more visible, and thus must work harder to produce a body that is docile and productive. If non-white or non-gender conforming bodies are not viewed as docile, they must be able to maneuver the aspects of their body that do not comply with notions of whiteness. For example, in chapter 4 I argue Brittney Griner's negates her blackness as a way to create a space for her queer sexuality. Within the realm of whiteness, there is not room for excessive difference. Griner embodies blackness, queer sexuality, and a non-gender conforming body. She is the epitome of difference that violates the expectations of whiteness. Because of this, I assert that Griner attempts to normalize her sexuality as a way to render her body docile. Griner is aware of the disciplinary gaze of professional sports culture and the constant visibility of her body. Through this, she focuses the disciplinary gaze on her sexuality, which inherently ignores her position as a black woman. Griner's position of difference causes her to mediate which aspects of her embodied identity should be visible and contained. The same is not necessarily true for White athletes. Again, because whiteness is the norm, white athletes do not have to manage how their race or ethnicity is viewed as productive. It is the taken-for-granted norm. These same notions apply to non-gender conforming bodies. Professional sports replicate the taken-for-granted norms associated with sex and gender. Consequently, bodies, like Griner's, that violate gendered norms must be disciplined in order to create a body that can be transformed and understood under social perception.

The need to be visible often creates a paradox for professional athletes. The need to be seen is essential for individuals to be considered citizens. Andrea Smith (2015)

writes, “The purposeful gaze of the state on some things and peoples serves the purpose of simultaneously making some hyper visible through surveillance while making others invisible” (p. 25). The need to be seen is vital, however, this visibility often comes at a cost. Foucault (1977) writes “Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap” (p. 200). The tension between the need to be seen and recognized as a citizen and the desire to remain invisible as a form of protection is a phenomena many individuals who occupy spaces of non-normative intersectional identity experience. Essentially, individuals who embody or perform otherness, especially in terms of race, gender, or sexuality, must navigate the ways in which their identity is visible or invisible. Visibility grants notions of citizenship, but also creates the opportunity to be controlled and disciplined. Invisibility often creates the semblance of safety. For example, in her interview with Common, Serena Williams states, “And I kind of put myself in a bubble and I shielded myself and protected myself from anything that ever came out about me” (“The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common”). Williams notes that shielding herself from media coverage serves as a layer of protection. If her body is not visible, she cannot be subjected to the disciplinary power of sports culture. Yet, it is this very visibility that necessitates her success and her ability to vocalize resistance. In the same interview she discusses the cases of police brutality and states, “I think that the fact that a lot of this stuff is coming to light makes me wanna speak about it. It takes people like us to kind of say something and to speak up” (“The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common”). Williams refers to herself as “people like us,” which references her position as a hyper-visible black woman. While Williams may want to remain invisible in order to protect her own body, she also understands that the

visibility of her body grants her the opportunity to politicize her identity and experience. Individuals who are othered based upon their race, gender, or sexuality often negotiate how their bodies are viewed and categorized. In this sense, these categories of identity become borders of identity. Visualizing borders on the body permits the renegotiation of identity categories. Yasmin Jiwani (2015) writes, “Recasting the body as border makes apparent the spatial relations of power; thus, the visibility of the marked body operates against the invisibility of the unmarked body, which is the body in dominance” (p. 90). Marked and fragmented bodies are frequently judged as invisible in contrast to the dominant normalized body. Because sports culture is a technological assemblage that breaks down and controls, it inherently fragments and borders the bodies of professional athletes, especially female athletes. Therefore, sports culture as an apparatus of discipline controls how female athlete bodies are viewed on and off of the court. Female athletes are subjected to particular methods of body and border recasting. Sports culture as an apparatus of discipline “works to discipline certain bodies in particular ways, making some bodies hypervisible and others invisible” (Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015, p. 11).

### **Female Athlete Bodies & Boundaries of Sports Culture**

The visibility of the body within professional sports culture increasingly becomes more pertinent to academic discussions when considering how gender, race, and sexuality are mapped and understood on the body. Arguably, the negotiation of gender and contesting categories of identity become a more contested site of discussion for professional female athletes. In her comprehensive history of women in sports, Susan Cahn explains that women in sport have historically been suspect, especially in regard to the embodiment and performance of traditionally feminine characteristics. She explains,

It cast suspicion on the femininity of women in sport, yet it also contributed to the dynamic image of the 'athletic girl' who refused to be excluded from a domain of masculine privilege and pleasure. The female athlete embodied the New Woman, in bold motion, treading fearlessly into forbidden realms and discovering her unique character. (Cahn, 2015, p. 30)

Within the field of communication there has been a vast majority of scholarship, which engages in the discussion of athletic competition and gender, particularly regarding how the media depicts female athletes. One area of athletic competition that has gleaned much attention, both academic and mediated, is the Olympic competitions. Given their historical importance, this is not a surprising realization. Further, the scholarship surrounding these events is equally unsurprising. Much of the interrogation of the Olympic games done by scholars revolves around how female athletes and athletic events are depicted in the media. What is most notable for the purpose of this analysis is that media outlets, which serve as a reflection of the ideology of dominant society, focuses on maintaining the femininity of the female athletes. Additionally, the athletic ability of female athletes was a common topic of discussion among sports commentators. In his study of the 2004 summer Olympic games that took place in Athens, Andrew Billings (2007) states, "An attribution pertaining to the depiction of athletic ability also emerged, as sportscasters enacted such comments more often for women athletes than for men athletes" (p. 341). Ultimately, through the work of several scholars, one can conclude that female athletes are disciplined based upon their appearance and also for their athletic performances. Unlike female athletes, male athletes are admired and applauded for their athletic accomplishments. These accolades are predicated upon their athletic ability, not

their appearance (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Hardin, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002; Linder, 2011; Mean & Kassing, 2008; Shugart, 2003; Sloop, 2005).

Professional athletes stake their career on their bodies. They train to condition, sculpt, and develop their bodies to perform in particular ways. It is not surprising then that often athletes are reduced to their bodies and their ability to perform in any given sporting competition. It is expected, as it is the foundation for their career. However, the notion of the body and its ability to perform and conform to certain standards has historically been a site of contestation for women. A woman's body often signifies how she is able to move throughout society and what privileges she will be granted. The divisions of sex, gender, sexuality, and race are consistently at contest with one another and dictate a woman's perceived identity. Feminist theorists have long since argued that women should not be reduced simply to biological factors. Rather, the over-lapping points of identity such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, should be taken as one whole. Rosi Baridotti (1994) calls for a conception of the body to be "understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological" (p. 4). The implications of a body cannot merely be contained in the biological. Similarly, the sociological cannot capture the full extent of how a body is able to move through societal confines and understanding. Baridotti's call for a progressive understanding of female bodies echoes historic feminist understandings of female biology.

The notion that the biology of the female body dictates how it can move through society and how women are then viewed or not viewed as citizens is certainly not a new concept. Foundational feminist voices belonging to individuals such as Simone de

Beauvoir, Kate Millett, and Shulamith Firestone have long since taken up the argument that female bodies should not be limited to their biological functions. Because women have often been considered the inferior sex, privileges, whether political or domestic, were never present. de Beauvoir (1949) explains this notion more when she states,

From the origins of humanity, their biological privilege enabled men to affirm themselves alone as sovereign subjects; they never abdicated this privilege...condemned to play the role of the Other, woman was thus condemned to possess no more than precarious power. (p. 86)

According to de Beauvoir, Millett, and Firestone, women are inherently trapped in a biological prison. The materiality of what constitutes woman often dictates a female's ability to participate in the public sphere. The imagined biology of a woman often limits her ability to participate in the public sphere as an equal. She is labeled the sexual other. Men on the other hand, are born with material and bodily privilege that then becomes interpreted as political gain. It is the construction of this difference and power placed upon it that consumes much of feminist thought. Much of the contemporary feminist scholarship argued that gender, as expressed through the body, is neither "natural" nor inherent. Rather, gender is performative and fluid.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) states, "Gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (p. 8). Gender is performed, but the body determines sex. Seemingly then, sex, gender, and the body cannot exist without one another. One needs to exist for another to have meaning or to which it can be compared. However, if gender is performed, it represents and embodies the cultural meaning. Sex

then should remain in the realm of the body and biological. However, according to Butler in her later work, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), this does not happen. She writes (1993),

Sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties, but, rather, is replaced by the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as the term which absorbs and displaces ‘sex,’ the mark of its full substantiation into gender or what, from a materialist point of view, might constitute a full de-substantiation. (p. xv)

Socially, gender is an identity category that becomes dominant and makes sex non-existent. Therefore, the materiality of the body is no longer relevant. The body is “de-substantiated” and the performances become makers of gender, which encodes the body rather than biological sex. This project addresses the body as a site of controversy and debate as theorized by Butler. For example, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler (1993) writes,

Hence, it will be as important to think about how and to what end bodies are constructed as it will be to think about how and to what end bodies are not constructed and, further, to ask after how bodies which fail to materialize provide the necessary ‘outside,’ if not the necessary support, for the bodies which, in materializing the norm, qualify as bodies that matter. (p. xxiv)

For Butler and many feminist theorists alike, the biological renderings of the body do not and should not dictate normative associations with gender. Rather, gender is performed and not confined to the biological body.

Sandra Bartky (1997) defines femininity as “an artifice, an achievement, a ‘mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of

flesh” (p. 132). She further iterates that femininity, when placed upon the body, “mandates fragility and a lack of muscular strength,” which in turn “produces female bodies that can offer little resistance to physical abuse” (Bartky, 1997, p. 140). The conceptualization of what is considered feminine is limited to the physicality of the female body, which circles back to the notion that women and men are biologically different and illustrates the necessity for different sex roles and expectations. Patriarchal ideology thrives on this because like Millett (1969) asserts, “male supremacy, like other political creeds, does not finally reside in physical strength but in the acceptance of a value system which is not biological” (p. 27). If the goal of feminist theory is to break down male supremacy and patriarchal structures, the female body must be reconfigured outside of patriarchal standards and norms. In many ways, sports culture and professional female athletes have the opportunity to contribute to this conversation. In his theorization of the sports media complex Sut Jhally (1984) writes,

This was just one part of the use of sports – the creation of new forms of community. The other element was the manner in which sports came to be representative of not merely local communities but *America* (a particular model of course), and the manner in which immigrants (and especially their children) came to identify Americanization *with* sports. (p. 52)

According to Jhally, American sport has the capacity to create new forms of community. In the context of professional American sport and professional female athlete, sports culture has the potential to create a new community that reconfigures how the female body is viewed and consumed outside of patriarchal norms. The female athletes who operate within the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture utilize patriarchal

norms to redefine standards are they apply to their bodies. Additionally, non-white female athletes do not only challenge patriarchal norms, but they also use the community of professional sports culture to challenge the normality of whiteness. This is a notion that has persisted for women who already operate within sports culture, at least on the collegiate level. Susan Cahn (2015) writes,

Using the broad tent of liberal feminism, which generally focuses on how to win a bigger piece of pie for women within existing institutions, sport feminists have made extraordinary gains – remember that women received at most 2 percent of athletic budgets in 1970 – without reaching numerical parity. Since 1995, women have gradually closed the gap in college sports. (p. 287)

Women's collegiate sports have already done the groundwork of creating a new form of community that works toward challenging patriarchal norms. Cahn indicates that structurally, liberal feminists have created a semblance of monetary equality by expanding athletic budgets for women's sport programs. Of course this is remarkable progress and should be celebrated as such. However, progress in sanctioned collegiate sport does not always translate into the domain of professional sports. The laws and rules that dictate budgetary allotments do not apply to female athletes like Ronda Rousey, Serena Williams, and Brittney Griner. As such, professional female athletes have the opportunity to expand upon the sport feminist community created in collegiate sports and extend the same ideals into professional sports culture. This dissertation posits that Ronda Rousey, Serena, Williams, and Brittney Griner use their bodies and voices as a way to create a proto-feminist community within the community of professional American sport. Through this, they are able to expand upon the societal understanding of feminism

established by women such as Millet, Butler, and Bartkey. Rousey, Williams, and Griner expand upon the idea of what it means to be women in the realm of professional sports. Additionally, Williams and Griner are able to provide deeper insight into how non-white women navigate the disciplinary power of whiteness that is inflicted upon their bodies.

The reconfiguration of the body can occur through how we understand and categorize identity. Female bodies create meaning through the categories of identity they belong to. However, rather than shaping identity in a categorical sense, Kent Ono makes a compelling argument that identity often manifests itself on a body in terms of borders. As a body moves and travels through space, so do those borders. Ono (2012) writes, “For instance, the body, itself, has a border – with skin and hair, contours, and thus, a shape. Race, gender, and sexuality can be read onto bodies, as they can onto nations” (p. 28). Echoing arguments similar to the previously mentioned feminist scholars, Ono asserts that the body is read, interpreted, and defined as a means of inclusion and exclusion: a text with borders. In fact, the understanding of a geographical border as something that must be surveyed and controlled serves as an excellent metaphor for identity categories and borders on the body. Ono (2012) goes on to explain,

The body itself is a readable text, is discursive, and therefore may be understood to have meanings that need to be controlled, disciplined, deported, imprisoned, or discarded. The body performs bordered identities, revealing aspects of identity that can be regulated as on this or that side of a given border. The body is also a site of signification and can and does serve a part of a rationale for the distribution of resources. (p. 30)

I have already established how bodies are frequently reduced to their biological ability, which often dictates societal acceptance, rejection, and political gain. Furthermore, I have also highlighted how female bodies should not simply be reduced to the biological function, nor should the body facilitate a fundamental understanding of gender identity or sexuality. In a similar vein to Braidotti's call for a complex understanding of bodies and identity, the theorization of borders on the body allows for a melding of identity. In fact, it demands a more complex interrogation of how body, identity, symbolic, and social conceptions interact with one another in a way that creates knowledge and acceptance. The assessment of borders on the body becomes even more imperative through sports culture. Susan Cahn (2015) explains,

Sport serves as a primary site for defining biological sex and cultural gender, producing the norms that govern manhood and masculinity, womanhood and femininity...Sport is a political arena wherein the actors constantly negotiate, and literally play out, issues of power and justice. (p. 302)

As female bodies traverse into the realm of competitive and professional sport, their biological sex and cultural gender often come into question. As Cahn indicates, they are compelled to negotiate the issues of power and justice associated with their body. One way that female athletes can contest the norms that are affiliated with their bodies and inherently their masculinity, womanhood, and femininity, is to complicate how their bodies are read and understood. They can blur and complicate the borders of identity associated with their bodies.

The theorization of bodily borders creates a space for the complexity of human identity. Robert DeChaine (2012) defines borders as "spaces of identity and

empowerment for those who willingly or forcibly inhabit them” (p. 2). Borders often infer physical places and spaces. They indicate territory and delineate spaces of access. However, as Ono suggested, borders exist not only geographically, but are also embodied on individuals. In this sense, borders are performative, readable, and rhetorical. David Cisneros (2015) iterates this notion and writes,

The border not only demarcates and divides, it also provides the possibility for contact and crossing. It takes shape through the reiteration and performance of those borders in public discourse. The border is pliable and, more than that, rhetorical, such that rhetorical and performative practices materialize the border and demarcate belonging. (pp. 143-144)

Borders on the body, much like geographical borders, signify acceptance and otherness. When borders are crossed illegally or outside of expectation, a person is labeled an alien, intruder, and outsider. A rhetorical reading of borders allows for the performative complexity of identity and body to cross and create meaning. Additionally, conceptualizing borders as rhetorical and performative broadens scholarly understanding and definition of “border” and blurs the demarcation between body and space. This seems to be a natural turn in scholarly understanding as bodies physically occupy and take up space and space is understood as terrain and territory. Not only does the body represent borders, but the body within a geographic location represents “a container with clear borders” (Ott & Keeling, 2012, p. 183).

The theorization of body and borders provides a helpful tool to understand how female athlete bodies are disciplined in sports culture. Arguably, sports culture has pre-determined borders that are assigned to both male and female bodies. According to

Thomas P. Oates (2007), the process of viewing and making meaning of the body is not reserved for just female athletes. In his analysis of the NFL draft he asserts, “The NFL draft positions men as objects of desire, but the implied viewer remains the traditional straight male” (Oates, 2007, p. 83). The borders and categories of identity assigned to bodies in sports culture are ones that privilege the gaze of the traditional straight male. If sports culture disciplines male bodies, it becomes more confused when female bodies are called into question. Sports culture privileges the bodies of men, which automatically puts women at a disadvantage. According to Toni Bruce (2012), sports media “excludes, marginalizes, or trivializes athletes who do not fall into this narrow realm, such as sportswomen, veterans, amateurs, children, and sports unaligned to nationalism” (p. 128). Often, female athlete bodies are not even included in the conversation of sports. Their identity, body, and borders are considered irrelevant or not worthy of discussion.

According to Terry Adams and C.A. Tuggle (2004), sports media powerhouse ESPN is aware of their female viewership and the interest in women’s sports. However, the network still chooses to cater to the male demographic. Adams and Tuggle (2004) write, “ESPN officials have, however, determined there is enough interest in WNBA basketball to warrant the purchase of television rights to a series of games...*Sportscenter* aired WNBA highlights only twice” (p. 246). Adams and Tuggle highlight how women’s sports, while being aired, are not part of the dominant conversation of professional sports culture. With this in mind, the purpose of this project is to argue that female athletes and their athletic performances should be included in dominant sports discourse. This inclusion should not come at the cost reinforcing traditional understandings of gender and femininity. Because sports culture problematizes biological and sociological meaning in

regard to gender, the discourse that surrounds female athletes can and should be viewed as an opportunity to expand discussions concerning gender performance and female masculinity. When women are included in these conversations, it should be as a way to “interrogate the role of journalists and mediasport in the social construction of femininities, masculinities, and sexualities” (Bruce, 2012, 128).

### **Voice as a Tool of Resistance**

I have established professional sports culture is an apparatus of discipline. Additionally, as a disciplinary tool, sports culture marks, fragments, and constitutes female athlete bodies. In order to push against the disciplinary confines of professional sports culture female athletes use their voices as an instrument of resistance. When female athletes add their voice to the consumption of their bodies, they are able to negotiate what aspects of their body are viewed and how their bodies are remade as knowable. The voice becomes a device female athlete’s use as a way to function within the panoptic power of sports culture. Foucault (1977) further explains this notion and writes,

The panoptic mechanism is not simply a hinge, a point of exchange between a mechanism of power and a function; it is a way of making power relations function in a function, and of making a function through those power relations. (p. 207)

Professional female athletes participate in the power relations associated with sports culture. As Foucault highlights, power is reciprocated and fluid. There is not one clear point of exchange of power and the subject that is being inflicted with said power. Power does not move from athlete to consumer and vice versa. Rather, power is something that

seeps into all aspects of sports culture. Professional female athletes become imbued in this power dynamic. It is due to their position as both a receiver and distributor of power that they are able to use their voices as a tool to make power relations “function in a function.” I argue Rousey, Williams, and Griner utilize the function of their voice as a tool to navigate the disciplinary gaze that is applied to their bodies. The gaze functions within the disciplinary apparatus of professional sports culture, so, in order to push against this and redirect the gaze, Rousey, Williams and Griner use their voices to negotiate how their bodies are being viewed and consumed.

Certainly, the main focus of sports is the body’s ability to perform and succeed. However, as previously iterated, female athletes are often in a position to moderate *how* their bodies are perceived. In this dissertation I propose that Rousey, Williams, and Griner use their voice as a mode of resistance against the disciplinary power of professional sports. They utilize their voices in order to complicate how their bodies are consumed. Voice grants these women the opportunity to dictate how the power relations within the surveillance apparatus of professional sports culture uses the power and function associated with their bodies. Bernadette Calafell and Michelle Holling (2011) highlight the importance of voice as a tool of resistance and write, “Voice is political with multi-layered ideological reverberations; it has the potential to enable change, gesture toward new possibilities, and reveal systems of power and oppression” (p. xvii). They go on to explain that voice is personal. It is representative of an individual’s particular standpoint. They write that voice is “embodied, anchored in particular experiences and reflections that tie the individual to social structures, narratives, and discourses” (Calafell & Holling, 2011, p. xviii). In the cases of Rousey, Williams, and Griner, voice serves as

more than a metaphor. Instead, the voice of these three female athletes is the very tool that allows for them to problematize their embodiment and situate their stance as female athletes. Voice creates an opportunity for these individuals, who occupy spaces of non-normative intersectional identity, to challenge the status quo and the normalized oppressive social structure of professional sports culture.

The body produces voice; yet, the voice is often removed from its bodily counterpart. Adriana Cavarero (2005) writes, “The human voice – as it is perceived by the ear that lies at the center of power – becomes an acoustic sign among others, a depersonalized noise to be captured and decoded” (p. 3). Voice is a bodily function that has the capacity to represent the body and identity. Further, Eric King Watts (2012) states that voice is an affect of the body. He writes, “Affect names the experience of the virtual bursting through and becoming the actual” (Watts, 2012, p. 14). Because voice is an emotional extension of the body, it is essential to the theorization of identity. Watts (2012) states, “The characterization of voice is nearly always coupled with notions of contested identity or authenticity” (p. 14). Voice, body, and identity cannot be separated, which creates a problematic space for non-normative intersectional identity to exist. As I previously iterated, non-white bodies are often segmented and broken down so they can be remade within the understanding of whiteness. By breaking down the body, the voice becomes fragmented and removed from the identifying qualities associated with the body. Certainly, this is not necessarily a new or inherently problematic phenomenon. However, individuals who associate with non-normative intersectional identity must already contest with issues of as Watts states, contested identity or authenticity. Therefore, the actualization of their voice becomes even more imperative as a means to

assert and associate authentic identity with the body. In particular, for the cases of Rousey, Williams, and Griner, their voices become crucial to their ability to communicate their understanding of identity and how that is ascribed to their body. This vocalization reveals how each woman navigates not only the borders of their identity, but also the borders and boundaries of professional sports culture. Voice is the tool that allows each woman to navigate and manipulate how her body is framed and discussed within the confines of professional sports culture. The utilization of voice as a tool of resistance allows for identity to metaphorically be ascribed to the body. To be sure, voice, as metaphor is reminiscent of rhetorical invention. Janet Atwill (2002) explains that with invention, “the subject is the outcome rather than the source of the rhetorical situation” (p. xvii). However, Rousey, Williams, and Griner are neither the outcome, nor the source of the mediated situations regarding their rhetorical discourse. Instead, they seemingly are framed as participants in both. Their bodies and identities create rhetorical situations that must be discussed, which then dictates how they are perceived in the outcome of said discussion. Therefore, the inclusion of voice rather than invention allows for an analysis of the complex and fluid borders of identity through which each of the women move between. Voice grants each woman the ability to traverse borders rather than being viewed as either just an outcome or a source. If the varying borders or overlaps of identity are not acknowledged, then they cannot be vocalized. The separation of voice from body and identity functions as a tool of isolation that further classifies particular individuals as the “other.” When individuals are symbolically severed from their voices, they are also displaced from their identities. This distinction between body, identity, and voice creates a space for notions of rights and citizenship to be challenged. Megan Foley

(2010) argues the importance of understanding voice, as representative of identity, especially for bodies that are otherwise thought of as unable to speak for him or her. She writes, “We hear progressively louder calls to grant the rights of citizenship to non-speaking bodies as voices and choices are projected onto more and more forms of life” (Foley, 2010, p. 395). In this sense, voice is neither metaphorical or a bodily production. Rather, voice is assigned to a body that is unable to produce an audible sound. This idea can be applied to identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality. When the relationships between these non-speaking categories are given voice, the body associated with them can then be granted rights of citizenship. Rousey, Williams, and Griner, use their bodies to manufacture the voice of their respective gender, race, and sexuality. This in turn allows them to challenge how their bodies are perceived in professional sports culture and demand rights and citizenship.

Voice is the essential link to body and identity. Without a platform to vocalize their perception of identity and body, female athletes are unable to be included and viewed as active participants in professional sports culture. This allows for spectatorship, commodification, and consumption to continue. Voice, as a rhetorical tool of agency, becomes an important lens to understand how female athletes navigate and negotiate a complex minefield of audience expectations, especially cultural stereotypes associated with women who diverge from the expected performances of gender, race, and sexuality. The theorization of voice creates an opportunity to understand not only the relationship between the voice and body, but also the relationality between the different markers of identity. The voices of Rousey, Williams, and Griner are tools that complicate the surveillance of their bodies. Instead, their voices are deployed as devices that navigate the

consumption and disciplining of their bodies. Their voices highlight the relationship between their bodies and identities within the realm of professional sports.

### **Women in American Sport & Female Masculinity**

This project seeks to answer many scholars call for intersectional research that does not rely on the structures of identity, but instead understands the relationship between differences. I aim to contribute to the intersectional scholarship as called for by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) and Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2008). My goal is to further the theorization of intersectionality in terms of relationality. Collins and Bilge define intersectional relationality as a rejection of “either/or binary thinking.” According to Collins and Bilge (2016), “The focus of relationality shifts from analyzing what distinguishes entities, for example, the differences between race and gender, to examine their interconnections” (p. 27). With this theoretical understanding and praxis in mind, I examine how Rousey, Williams, and Griner utilize their voices as a mechanism of resistance against the consumption of their bodies. I seek to understand how the aspects of these athletes’ intersectional identities work in relation with one another as well as with the culture of professional sports.

Additionally, the hope is to challenge the conversations about female athletes and their bodies as a means to disrupt the space of sports culture as “an overwhelmingly male and hegemonically masculine domain that produces coverage by men, for men and about men” (Bruce, 2012, p. 128). The synthesis of feminist intersectional theory and praxis with the study of sports explicitly fills a gap in literature, which Jayne Caudwell asserts is a scholarly space that is in need of attention. She writes, “I suggest that feminist contributions from the past remain relevant to contemporary sport and that feminist ideas

*can be* passed down and folded in to, recombined with, the present. Feminist issues in sport studies persist and are persistent” (Caudwell, 2012, p. 122).

More importantly, this project seeks to enter the growing interdisciplinary conversation and scholarly interest in girl and women sports. Female athletes have always been scrutinized. Cheryl Cole (1993) writes, “The female athletic body was and remains suspicious both because of its apparent masculinization and its position as a border case that challenges the normalized feminine and masculine body” (p. 90). Female athletes challenge the common understanding of what it means to physically embody “woman.” Because female athletes represent deviance, much scholarship has been produced interrogating viewership of women’s sports as well as how young girls internalize the presence, or lack, of female athletes. According to Dawn Heinecken (2015), female soccer players took to Twitter to voice their opinions about what a female soccer player should physically look like. However, while their tweets seemed to deliver messages of empowerment, Heinecken (2015) argues that the “Tweeps often seem to have internalized a sporting ideology valuing masculinity and injury” (p. 1043). Female athletes have sought to disrupt the masculine ideology associated with sports. Mary Celeste Kearney (2011) argues the show *Roller Girls* provided an opportunity to disturb the narrative that female athletes must subscribe and represent a particular brand of femininity. However, the TV program failed. Kearney (2011) argues that commercial media “continues to avoid representing female athletes and other nonconformist women in ways that legitimate our skills, agency, solidarity, and gender trouble” (p. 298). The lack of coverage of women in sports is a trend that is apparently not changing. Cheryl Cooky, Michael Mesner, and Robin Hextrum (2013) report, “the proportion of coverage

devoted to women's sports on televised news over the past 20 years has actually declined" (p. 225). So, female athletes are often not even included in the dominant conversations in professional sports culture. However, in the off chance that they are covered, either through a reality television show or through traditional sports broadcasting, they are punished for not conforming to gendered norms.

Certainly, the emergence and implementation of Title IX greatly contributed to the presence of women in athletics. According to the NCAA website, the purpose of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 is to end sex discrimination in collegiate sport. The law states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" ("Title IX Frequently Asked Questions"). The implementation of Title IX was meant to provide women and girls equal opportunity to participate and compete in collegiate athletics as well as other aspects of education. The law includes, but is not limited to equitable opportunity for participation in athletic programs, access to scholarship funds, course offerings, and student health insurance to name a few of the benefits and mandates ("Title IX Frequently Asked Questions"). Title IX is often viewed as an equalizer between men and women in sport. However, as John Elia, Jon Martin, and Gust Yep (2010) indicate, this level of equity has yet to be achieved. They write, "The athletic world in general has not followed feminist, postmodern, or poststructural ideologies and continues to embody masculinity" (Elia, Martin, & Yep, 2010, p. 223). Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin (2003) further expand on this notion and write, "This one piece of legislation, brought about through the collective struggles of the women's

movement, would make millions of women into athletes, changing the shape of the ideal female body in seemingly exciting new ways” (p. xviii). So seemingly, the inclusion of women in sports via Title IX was celebrated as an indicator of success and progress. Not only were women included in sport, but the ideals associated with female bodies also shifted. Female empowerment through physical activity and exercise soon became a market through which fitness magazines and other fitness media began to capitalize upon. However, this brand of female empowerment does not come without consequence. Jennifer Maguire (2006) writes, “By emphasizing the individual’s ability and responsibility to take control of her life, the discourse obscures the social and structural factors that constrain and individual’s chances of success, health, and social mobility” (p. 127). If anything, the passing of Title IX created more opportunity to regulate and control female bodies under the guise of empowerment. As Maguire indicates, female empowerment according to fitness discourse did not consider structural circumstances such as access or social mobility. Susan Cahn further explains that while Title IX generated more opportunities for women to participate in sports, the system of sport still maintain stringent patriarchal ideals. She writes,

Moreover, while women are permitted and even encouraged or pressured to take up sport and fitness activities, sport leaders, corporate sponsors, and the commercial media consistently attempt to regulate women’s bodies, their outward appearance, and their sexuality. Sport remains a key cultural location for male dominance, a site where traditional patriarchal values are upheld and transformed in response to changes in the broader society. (Cahn, 2015, p. 278)

Inclusion in sports culture, much like other aspects of American culture, does not necessitate equality. In fact, the very act of including women in sports culture creates anxiety in a predominantly male and traditionally masculine space. Michael Kimmel (2008) explains,

It's the threat to dominance bonding that elicits the defensiveness when women invade formerly all-male spaces – whether professions such as medicine or law, or the science lab, or the military, or the sports locker room. At these moments, men feel threatened by women's equality, because equality includes access to those private spaces. (p. 134)

The anxiety experienced by men due to the threat of women equalizing the private space of sports culture does not only threaten their notion of dominance, but also societal understanding of masculinity. Sports culture has long been a space where men are able to demonstrate, embody, and perform traditional masculine ideals. However, when women were granted permission to enter this masculine space, this foundational understanding of what is considered masculine was challenged. Heywood and Dorwkin (2003) further elaborate and write,

Masculinity has always been equated with achievement and has been connected to the male body as a fundamental part of the formation of modern sport, which was to some extent a reaction to what was seen as the 'feminization' of turn-of-the-twentieth-century culture. (p. 98)

The presence of female bodies in athletics and sports culture only reaffirmed the necessity for sport to remain a “major cultural and institutional support for male dominance” (Cahn, 2015, p. 281).

Despite sports being a culture of male dominance the 2012 Summer Olympics was deemed a victory for female athletes. The 2012 London Olympic Games were the first Olympics where the women athletes outnumbered the male athletes on the U.S. Olympic team. Additionally, the Women's Olympic Team brought home more medals than the men's (Cahn, 2015). The reception and national pride affiliated with the 2012 London Olympics and U.S. Women's Olympic Team is reminiscent of the 1996 Summer Olympics. The 1996 Summer Olympics is often referred to as the "year of the women" at the Olympics. Much of this progress is attributed to media coverage of the 1996 Olympic games. Heywood and Dworkin (2003) explain, "That male athletes were fathers was discussed almost as often as the female athletes who were mothers" (p. 26). Seemingly, the 1996 Olympic games set the tone for coverage of male and female athletes. Both were to be framed as equitable in their roles as athletes and outside of sports culture. However this progress was short lived. When the U.S. Women's National Team won the 1999 World Cup, Brandi Chastain ripped off her jersey, exposing her bare midriff and sports bra covered chest. While Chastain's display of joy is customary in sports, it was deemed inappropriate when enacted by her female body. Cahn (2015) explains,

When Chastain yanked her jersey off and viewers saw – not the shirt, not the triumph, not her whole torso, not even her bra, but her breasts – it called forth a long history of the sexualized female body in sports, whether praised or condemned. (pp. 296-297)

Cahn emphasizes that in spite of the progress that was made during the 1996 Olympic games, when Chastain exposed her body, she was no longer viewed as an athlete who had just won the World Cup. Instead, she was reduced to her sexualized female body. It

seems that even with the progressive movements in sports culture such as Title IX and the celebration of the predominantly female 2012 London Olympic Games, female athletes are consistently caught between a rock and a hard place. They are either overly sexualized, like Brandi Chastain, or they are accused of being too masculine, as is the case with track star, Caster Semenya. As a White woman, Chastain was sexualized for her body whereas Semenya, a non-white woman, was chastised for appearing too masculine. Certainly, each woman's body is read, portrayed, and discussed in ways that are outside of their control. Yet, the borders and signifiers of race dictate the discussion surrounding their bodies and which body is deemed overly masculine or feminine. Semenya, who is a South African World and Olympic Champion, has undergone much scrutiny concerning her gender and sex throughout her career as a track athlete. Most recently, Semenya, who had to undergo multiple forms of gender and sex testing in order to compete on an international platform, will be banned from competing unless she agrees to undergo hormone treatment (Kelner & Rudd, 2017, "Caster Semenya could be forced to undertake hormone therapy for future Olympics"). Semenya's gender was originally called into question following her August 2009 victory in the 800-meter at the World Championship. In his analysis of the initial gender testing, John Sloop (2012) states, "The Caster Semenya case forces these different nation understandings of gender into the open, forcing an exposure that any given 'common sense' is not so common" (pp. 83-84). I highlight Semenya as a means to point out the disparity that persists in our societal understanding of what constitutes male and female, and how these categories become even more contested in the realm of professional sports. Cahn (2015) expands upon this and writes,

But Semenya's story also points to the problematic gendered practices and ideologies that endure at all levels of sport. Competitive excellence, power, and ambition can still jeopardize an athlete's status as a 'normal' woman. Just as important, sports- for boys and men – continue to be viewed as natural and congruent with their masculinity. Despite extraordinary gains in the participation, acceptance, and appreciation of girls' and women's sports, female athletic excellence can still post a contradiction in terms, while the identification of sports with masculine prowess remains firmly in place. (p. 283)

Semenya is not only a successful track athlete, but she also does not embody what is deemed a "natural woman," thus the need to consistently test her gender and demand she undergo hormone therapy. Despite all of the progress within sports culture, female athletes are still relegated to categories of feminine or masculine. There is not a place for women who embody both masculinity and femininity, and certainly not female athletes who are successful at their sport.

The female athlete body serves as a prime site to expand Jack Halberstam's call for a more nuanced understanding of masculinity. Masculinity as ascribed to male bodies, frames female masculinity as "rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 1). Masculinity as a concept does not necessarily imply a discussion of the body when framed as a trait of the male body, especially within the context of sports culture. As I explained earlier, sports culture is often viewed as a predominantly male and masculine space and is reserved for men. However, when bodies that occupy a space of gender and sex ambiguity enter the

conversation, masculinity becomes convoluted. This is especially true when women embody traditional masculine attributes. Halberstam (1998) asserts,

The continued refusal in Western society to admit ambiguously gendered bodies into function social relations is, I will claim, sustained by a conservative and protectionist attitude by men in general toward masculinity. Such an attitude has been bolstered by a more general disbelief in female masculinity. (p. 15)

Halberstam seeks to complicate traditional concepts of masculinity, regardless of which bodies are ascribed these notions. For Halberstam, the body, especially the female body, indicates certain cultural privileges, but only when the body can be read as traditionally feminine. Halberstam calls for a broader understanding of female masculinity. I assert that female athletes are one place to turn scholarly attention to expand this conversation. Essentially, the acceptance of female masculinity as female athletes perform it creates an opportunity to diminish the categorization of masculine and feminine. Cahn (2015) further explains, “Women’s athletic freedom requires that certain attributes long defined as masculine – skill, strength, speed, physical dominance, uninhibited use of space and motion – become human qualities and not those of a particular gender” (p. 279). Creating a space for the acceptance of female athletes, who embody female masculinity, by virtue, also creates a space for women in general to be freed from qualifiers attributed to the biological body.

This project is not assessing audience reception nor is the goal to conduct content analysis and speculate the impact of the lack of coverage of women in sports. Rather, the purpose of this dissertation is to use the research on women in sports as a foundation. It is evident the discourse surrounding female athletes and their bodies is still rooted in

traditional understandings of gender. In fact, in their analysis of women who participate in Crossfit, Myra Washington and Megan Economides (2016) argue, “Women are disciplined into maintaining both markers of gender and gender roles lest they be called out as being too masculine, or at its extreme, not *actual* women” (p. 147). Crossfit is a current fitness phenomenon that totes the idea of accepting new figurations of the athletic female body. However, Washington and Economides (2016) write, “CF capitalizes on and contributes to this moment where female physical strength and strong bodies are valorized and widely touted, it also reinscribes those bodies as sexual objects for both the heterosexual male gaze and the narcissistic gaze” (p. 156). The popular and scholarly conversations surrounding sports and female athletes in particular seem to be circling the same argument. There needs to be a space to discuss female athletes who transgress the traditional notion of the female body. Professional sports culture is a vital place to begin these conversations. Cole (1993) writes, “Sport has been and remains a particularly powerful ideological mechanism because it is dominated by the body, a site of ideological condensation whose manifest meaning is intimately bound to the biological” (p. 86). My aim is to further Cole’s call for scholarship that utilizes sports as a foundation to challenge “our habitual ways of thinking by problematizing the received knowledges and the categories that form and constrain those knowledges (as well as what counts as the study of sport) and our own intellectual identities” (Cole, 1993, p. 78). By merging intersectional praxis with the theorization of voice as a tool of resistance, my aim is to broaden the conversation that surrounds female athletes. While the body is still a major focal point, the use of voice as an analytical tool allows for the conversation to broaden past

the scope of how the body is viewed as feminine or masculine to include other markers of identity such as race and sexuality.

### **Methods**

This dissertation seeks to walk the line between rhetorical methods and media criticism. The analysis of this dissertation is driven by media representations. I utilize critical rhetoric to study how Rousey, Williams, and Griner respond to these representations. Additionally, the texts analyzed in this project are not texts traditionally associated with rhetorical criticism. I plan to utilize a pastiche of audio/visual examples where I will analyze not only what is being said, but also how it is said and what it sounds like. Through this, I am able to account for how Rousey, Williams, and Griner use their voices as a tool of resistance. I view this project as one that blends media theory with rhetorical practice. I believe Darrel Wanzer-Serrano (2015) explains the importance of rhetoric best when he writes, “Rhetoric is not reducible to empty verbiage, deceitful speech, or a form of inaction. Instead, I see rhetoric as both an object of inquiry and a perspective for engaging that object” (p. 15). Through this, my aim is to engage in a critical understanding of how the bodies of Ronda Rousey, Serena Williams, and Brittney Griner are rendered visible and invisible through professional sports culture. Their bodies serve as both an object of inquiry as well as a means to engage in scholarly conversations about intersectionality and how these identities manifest on the body. Additionally, voice, as an extension of the body and a tool of transgression, allows female athlete bodies to move through mediated spaces of professional sports culture. By engaging with critical rhetorical methodology, I seek to understand the relationship between how these women’s bodies are read and disciplined *and* how their voices create opportunities to

transgress the borders of identity. This allows for the complexity of their intersectional identity to be wholly taken into consideration. The scrutiny of women's bodies in sports is certainly not a new phenomenon. However, using critical rhetoric along with intersectional praxis, my aim is to emphasize the tension associated with Rousey, Williams, and Griner and their bodies.

### **Critical Rhetoric**

This dissertation aims to advance Raymie McKerrow's call to use critical rhetoric as a tool to interrogate notions of power. He states, "A critical rhetoric serves a demystifying function by demonstrating the silent and often non-deliberate ways in which rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals through its relationship with power/knowledge" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). Critical rhetoric as a means of analysis and as conceived by McKerrow was an attempt to break away from traditional textual analysis. Instead of merely studying texts and practicing rhetorical criticism as another method, McKerrow (1989) called for a new direction in rhetorical criticism, one that "seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power" (p. 92). Additionally, he asserts, "By producing a description of 'what is,' unfettered by predetermined notions of 'what should be,' the critic is in a position to posit the possibilities of freedom" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 92). The "openness" of rhetoric is what seemingly makes it appealing. In a later piece McKerrow (2010) writes,

The expansiveness of rhetoric is an outcome of its openness to creative interpretations of objects; the direction or scope of what can mean something to someone, and thereby serve a rhetorical purpose, cannot be brought under control, nor should it be. (p. 155)

It is not the critic's responsibility to determine what a text means to a particular individual, but rather, to offer an interpretation of the pervasive power of the text in question. The openness of rhetorical methods is what allows a critical approach to thrive. Certainly, various texts create different modes of knowledge and meaning given the varying contexts and interpretations. Yet a critical approach is one that is attune to how means of power are deployed to simultaneously privilege and oppress. It is this very binary that critical rhetorical methods seek to upend and question. Additionally, instead of focusing on the person engaged in the struggle as an active agent, or individuals participating in discourse, critical rhetoric often places the subject in the context of the discourse and calls for a larger cultural change rather than focusing on the socio-cognitive choices of the subject. This is not to assume that subjects or subject positions are passive or not aware of their subjected position, but that is not the main concern of critical rhetoricians. The focus is more on the text, how that text can be interpreted, and how those interpretations reinforce or negate notions of "power/knowledge."

Given this, critical rhetoric works in tandem with my goal to incorporate intersectionality as a method of analysis and theory for inquiry into my dissertation. One of the main goals of intersectionality is to interrogate how systems of power and oppression work in relation to identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality. Critical rhetoric then serves as an answer to the call for "progressive" scholarship concerned with dominance and power. Jennifer Nash (2008) writes, "Progressive scholarship requires a nuanced conception of identity that recognizes the ways in which positions of dominance and subordination work in complex and intersecting ways to constitute subjects' experiences of personhood" (p. 10). If the goal of critical rhetoric is

to “participate in a postmodern world” without providing a specific outcome, then intersectionality understands the complexity of structural and power relationships.

### **Intersectionality**

In her foundational essay Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) explains the goal of intersectionality as an approach that challenges the “single-issue analyses” that have historically existed in feminist scholarship. It is through this that she asserts “that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional” (p. 63). Intersectionality as a term then can be defined as “the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p.68). The notion of intersectionality, when deployed in feminist scholarship, manifests in two major ways: through method and through theory. Arguably, both are necessary for a “true” intersectional approach, which the aim and scope for this project. Through the merging of intersectional methodology and feminist theory this project strives to contribute to the existing telos of intersectional scholarship, which challenges traditional research in stratification of gender, race, and sexuality. Instead of focusing on one aspect, the goal of intersectional research is to reveal how all three – race, gender, and sexuality – contribute to one another and what the effects of this are. Intersectional research then has the ability to reveal what may not traditionally be seen through these veins of inquiry, which is exactly what Crenshaw (1991) explains when she writes, “Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting

vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (p. 1249). While much research seeks to further question the apparent effects and proponents of subordination, intersectionality is able to reveal how these occur unintentionally. Further, intersectionality no longer forces the researcher to choose which form of oppression is seemingly the most important and takes the conversation away from “oppression Olympics,” to conversations that embrace the complex nature of non-normative intersectional identity and bodies and works toward a more relational and comprehensive method and theory. It is the appeal of intersectional research that has resulted in scholarly pushback and it being labeled as a “buzzword.” Kathy Davis elaborates upon this when she discusses the benefits of intersectional scholarship. While she acknowledges the ambiguous nature of intersectional scholarship warrants critique, she also asserts that it creates “a novel link between critical feminist theory on the effects of sexism, class, and racism and a critical methodology inspired by postmodern feminist theory, bringing them together in ways that could not have been envisioned before” (Davis, 2008, p. 73). From Davis’s perspective, intersectionality is the answer to the polarization that so often occurs in feminist scholarship. Intersectionality as both method and theory forces the researcher to challenge her standpoint and conceptualization of theory.

It is this rift in acceptance and tokenization of intersectional scholarship that this project seeks to insert itself. This dissertation aims to further intersectional scholarship, but to also adapt a methodological standpoint that, for lack of a better term, can be viewed as relational. Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2008) calls for feminist alliances that acknowledge and respect the different positions of both researcher and subject. It is through this relationship that a politics of relation is able to form and be exemplified

through scholarship. She writes, “A politics of relation moves us from a binaristic vision in which white women and women of color are neatly divided (and eternally opposed) to one in which feminists are joined (or divided) over politics, and by extension, through shared (or segregated) experience” (p. 10). Additionally, it is imperative to allow the complexity of the relationships an individual has within oneself as well as with the various structures of power that exist in our society manifest through analysis. Karma Chavez and Cindy Griffin (2012) iterate the importance of relationship when they write, “As an important piece of intersectional history, this theory requires that scholar identify, and give voice to, the interconnected nature of being silenced, in multiple ways, and the lived (bodily) manifestations of those silencings” (p. 7). For these scholars, to delve into feminist intersectional research means to acknowledge and understand how one’s personal stance interacts with all notions and aspects of power, dominance, and oppression. Further, these facets of identity, power, and oppression manifest in various ways – all of which need to be considered when studying intersectionality. To privilege one notion of oppression or power over another completely diminishes the purpose of intersectional research. One cannot exist without the other, and it is this point that is vital when conducting intersectional research.

### **Texts for Analysis**

Chapter 2 is dedicated to an analysis of Ronda Rousey. In this chapter I analyze a pastiche of audiovisual texts along with print sources that discuss Rousey’s body and ability as a female fighter. Specifically, I focus on the UFC sanctioned vlog, *Embedded* that is featured on YouTube, Rousey’s *Nine for IX* documentary short titled “Rowdy Ronda Rousey,” her Octagon interviews, her feature on *Real Sports with Bryant Gumble*,

her video interviews with *Self Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit*, and the *New York Times*, and interviews on talk shows like *The View*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. I selected the vlog *Embedded*, the *Nine for IX* short, Octagon interviews, and *Real Sports* feature precisely because they are all examples of Rousey discussing and navigating her body in the context of explicit sports media. I compare how the discussion of Rousey's body changes and evolves based upon the mediated outlet and the discourse she chooses to engage with. Additionally, I analyze texts, such as her commercials with Pantene and Reebok and interview with *Maxim*, that were explicitly advertised on Rousey's website, RondaRousey.net.

In chapter 3 I utilize Serena Williams as the primary case study. The first half of this chapter focuses on Williams's interview with rapper, Common. I focus on this interview for two major reasons. The first reason is because a black man interviews Williams, a black woman, about topics such as race and social justice. Because I utilize the theory of code switching and encoded/decoded messages, this interview serves as the best example of Williams navigating the confines of professional sports culture through her rhetoric. Additionally, this text was sanctioned by and featured on *The Undefeated*, a syndicate website of *ESPN* that describes itself as providing features on "Sports, Race, Culture, HBCUs, and More" ([theundefeated.com](http://theundefeated.com)). Williams's interview with Common is the best text to exemplify my argument that Williams encodes and decodes her rhetoric as a means to appeal to a larger audience. In order to contrast this interview, I also analyze other sports mediated interviews such as her 2015 Sports Person of the Year speech and *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit* feature. Arguably, the audience of these two texts is not as

specific as in the interview with Common; therefore, I contrast the encoded rhetoric between these texts as a way to illustrate Williams's code switching tactics.

Finally, in chapter 4 I focus on WNBA star, Brittney Griner. In this chapter I analyze texts that span Griner's short career. I analyze the first interview she gave upon being drafted in addition to the *Nine for IX* short, "Brittney Griner: Lifesize," which follows Griner after her first professional season to her playing overseas in China. In addition, I analyze speeches and interviews Griner gave where she explicitly discusses her sexuality in correlation with her position as a professional athlete. Because much of the mediated attention that surrounds Griner was based upon her coming out and sexuality, these texts are instrumental in understanding how Griner navigates the conversations surrounding her body and sexuality. In order to demonstrate this I analyze her acceptance speech at the Human Rights Campaign, Houston awards, her endorsement for the "It Gets Better" campaign, as well as other interviews such as "AOL: My Ink," "The Crowd Goes Wild," "1-on-1: Brittney Griner," and "Brittney Griner: Watch Me Work."

## Chapter 2

### **“This is just the routine of domination:” Ronda Rousey’s whiteness and female masculinity as tools of professional sports culture**

#### **Introduction**

On February 23, 2013, Ronda “Rowdy” Rousey made MMA, UFC, and overall professional sport history by becoming the first UFC Women’s World Bantamweight Champion. Rousey fought Liz Carmouche and defeated her opponent in 4:49 with, what would become her signature move, submission via armbar (“Ronda Rousey MMA Fighter Profile”). The fight was featured as the first female title fight and garnered ample media attention. Dann Stupp (2013) of *USA Today* wrote, “The historic title fight brought a boost of media attention to the UFC, whose boss, Dana White, once infamously said women would ‘never’ fight for his organization” (“Ronda Rousey retains title over Liz Carmouche at UFC 157”). Rousey continued to dominate in the UFC. She reigned as UFC Women’s Bantamweight Champion for 1,093 days. Her UFC fight record is 6-2 and she holds the UFC record for the fastest title submission, which is 14 seconds in the UFC 184 title fight against Cat Zingano (“Ronda Rousey MMA Fighter Profile”).

Rousey quickly made a name for herself not only in UFC universe, but also with other popular sports media. She was featured on HBO’s *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* and in 2015 *Business Insider* named her “The Most Dominant Athlete Alive” on a list of 50. Rousey ousted other known athletic powerhouses such as tennis superstar Serena Williams, quarterback Aaron Rodgers, point guard Steph Curry, and boxer Floyd Mayweather, Jr. (Manfred & Davis, 2015, “The 50 most dominant athletes alive”). Also in 2015 she was awarded the ESPY for “Best Fighter and “Best Female Athlete” (2015, “2015 ESPY Awards Nominees and Winners”). Rousey has appeared in feature films

*Furious 7*, *The Expendables 3*, *Entourage*, and was the host on *Saturday Night Live* on January 23, 2016 (“Ronda Rousey Movies”). Clearly, Rousey has made her mark not only within professional sports, but also in American popular culture in general. She is known not only for dominating in the UFC octagon, but also for being outspoken and breaking down boundaries for women. In the *ESPNW Nine for IX* short that features Rousey she states,

When I was a little kid I wasn’t into Snow White or Sleeping Beauty or the little pretty princesses that were waiting for somebody to come save them. I was always taught to not be that dependent chick. I don’t want little girls to have the same ambitions as me, but I want them to know it’s okay to be ambitious. And I don’t want them to say the same things that I do, but I want them to know it’s okay to say whatever it is that’s on their mind. (“Rowdy Ronda Rousey”)

Rousey uses her position and status as a professional athlete to literally change the game for other women. In 2013 she was named one of *Time Magazine*’s “30 People Under 30 Changing the World.” Sarah Begley (2013) explains Rousey making the list and writes, “Rousey is updating the face of female athletics through her tough skills and commercial successes” (“These Are the 30 People Under 30 Changing the World”). Barbara Walters also placed Rousey on her list of “Most Fascinating People” in 2015. During the special Walters states,

[Ronda's] accomplishments defy gender. In fact, she makes more money than any UFC fighter, male or female ... She has redefined what it means to fight like a girl. In one year she went from 'Ronda who?' to feminist folk hero” (Narins, 2015,

“Ronda Rousey Made Barbara Walter's List of Most Fascinating People for a Surprising Reason”).

Simply put, Rousey is a force to be reckoned with in and outside of the UFC octagon and is paving the way for female athletes.

While Rousey redefines what it means to be a strong and dominant female athlete, she does it within the protection of whiteness and heteronormativity. Rousey certainly breaks down barriers for women, but this privilege is granted to her because of her White body. Given this, I argue Rousey is able to problematize and expand notions of female masculinity. However, Rousey’s brand of masculinity, as vocalized by her, is reserved for straight white women. Additionally, I assert that my analysis of Rousey’s performance and discussion of her body contributes to the growing scholarly conversation that is critical of the invisibility of whiteness. While Rousey’s rhetoric purports to advocate for the acceptance of all women and girls, this acceptance is reserved for women and girls who embody Rousey’s definition of what it means to be “woman.” Rousey functions as a tool within and outside of professional sports culture. She vocally and physically distributes the disciplinary power of professional sports culture, which is a privilege granted to Rousey because of her embodiment of whiteness and specific female masculinity.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I briefly reiterate the power of sports culture as a disciplinary mechanism and how the body works as a point of interrogation within this. Next, I provide a brief overview of the texts and methods of analysis utilized in this chapter. Finally, I provide an analysis of Rousey, which is divided into two major sections. In the first section of analysis I discuss how Rousey views and talks about her

body. In the second section I contrast Rousey's view of her own body with how she sees and discusses other women's bodies. Finally, I offer conclusions and implications for Ronda Rousey as a case study within the realm of professional sports and also as a tool to politicize proto-feminist ideals within sports culture.

### **Sports Culture as Discipline**

In his discussion of sports culture and the sports media complex as a whole Sut Jhally (2006) writes, "This allows us to not merely ask the surface questions of what values are internalized through sports, but also questions regarding how that movement is structured" (p. 52). Taking up Jhally's statement, I argue sports culture has become a movement that extends past the boundaries of viewing a game, match, or fight. To be clear, for the purpose of my study, I am discussing US professional sports culture. However, I do not believe it would be farfetched to say that the ideas and norms associated with US professional sports culture do not also apply to other nations and their conception of professional sports. Rather than theorizing one aspect of professional sports culture or one technology that is utilized in sports, I suggest sports culture in its entirety functions as a mechanism of discipline. The purpose of professional sports culture is to fragment and discipline the bodies subjected to its gaze. As I iterated in the previous chapter, disciplinary power via professional sports culture operates as an apparatus. The power of professional sports culture does not reside in one singular tool, technique, or instrument. Foucault (1977) emphasizes that disciplinary power is essentially fluid and operates as an apparatus. It is invisible and essentially, engrained within any context or system that necessitates power to function. Given this, the different aspects of sports culture such as the games, interviews, photo shoots, all work together. They are a whole

set of instruments that are not specific to one governing sports organization such as the UFC or WNBA. While the norms of professional sports culture may vary from sport to sport, when taken together, they assemble into an apparatus of discipline. The assemblant nature of sports culture allows it to remain invisible. Professional sports culture is functional due to the multitude of parts that work together to enact and disperse control. Like Foucault states, the physics of its power comes from not just one aspect, but rather how each instrument, technique, and procedure operate as one whole. Each part of the disciplinary mechanism of professional sports culture is vital to its ability to function as one unit. The nuances of aspects such as games, promotions, press conferences, commercials, all have distinct characteristics. However, those distinctions still support the larger assemblage of sports culture. Because there are so many parts and intricacies that are involved in professional sports culture, it is able to operate in a way that allows it to remain invisible. There is not one singular attribute that is solely responsible for distributing discipline.

Not only does professional sports culture operate as an apparatus of discipline, its disciplinary nature is imbued in whiteness. The invisible power of sports culture along with the invisibility of whiteness makes it a formidable disciplinary tool. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995) explain the fluid and assemblant nature of whiteness. Much like sports culture, there is not one single identifier that constitutes whiteness. Rather, they claim it is a collection of strategic and tactical rhetorics. Whiteness rhetoric operates to center white as the norm in a way that makes it invisible. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) explain, “Our concerns are focused on the ways that the territory of whiteness is able to mask and resecure its space through a movement between

universality and invisibility” (p. 296). Because of this, the invisibility of sports culture gives it the insidious power to discipline bodies that do not adhere to the norms of sports culture and that are non-white. However, in the case of Rousey, this power and control is internalized and Rousey herself becomes part of the assemblage of whiteness and sports culture. Through this, she is able to physically and rhetorically discipline the bodies that do not fulfill the standards associated with sports culture and whiteness.

### **Body as Point of Interrogation**

Professional sports and athletes explicitly rely on the sculpting, training, and performance of the body. The sports media complex, and understood by Jhally (1984), would not be able to achieve capital success without the bodies of professional athletes. Because of this, sport competition becomes a site of contestation for the argument against limiting female bodies to their biological category, specifically as it relates to female sexuality and the contribution to masculinizing women. Susan Cahn (2015) explains,

For decades critics of women’s sport had linked ‘mannishness’ to sexual deviance, claiming that masculinized female athletes would inevitably acquire masculine sexual characteristics and interests as well. The fear of female sexuality unleashed from feminine modest and male control runs like a constant thread through the history of women’s sports. (p. 165)

Female athletes have historically been criticized for competing at the same level as men. As Cahn indicates, much of the root of this critique and anxiety stems from how female athlete bodies are viewed. If a female athlete embodies any traditionally masculine qualities, she is immediately deemed “mannish” and then becomes suspect for sexual deviance. This understanding of the female body becomes problematic and limiting for

women. Essentially, any woman who embodies masculine qualities threatens traditional notions of femininity. Female masculinity as it is embodied in female athletes then signifies sexual deviance. Therefore, women who demonstrate female masculinity must be ruled suspect as they can potentially disrupt societal understandings of what it means to be woman and feminine. If women were allowed to compete in sport on the same premise as men, then according to Cahn, their femininity would be questionable along with their performance of sexuality. Cahn (2015) writes,

Those who feared sport's masculinizing effects warned that women would become more like men sexually – passionate, uncontrolled, assertive – but neither critics nor supporters suggested that 'masculine' athleticism might indicate or induce same-sex love. Images of Amazonian athletes spoke instead to the fear of heterosexual transgressions. In this view, the physical release of sport might affect a loss of heterosexual control, not inclination. (p. 168)

Female athlete's become a point of contestation not only because of their bodies, but also due to the masculinizing effect of their sexuality. It is evident that the body, male or female, is an important point of interrogation within the context of sports culture. Not only does it biologically dictate who can compete in which sport, but also how sexuality will be inscribed and associated with it. A distinction between women and men's sports necessitates the categorization of who is classified as female and who is classified as male, which in turn directs how those bodies are read and sexualized. Certainly, scholars should turn their attention to the gender parity that exists in sport culture. However, the purpose of this analysis is not to assess the labeling of men and women sports. Rather, this project seeks to understand the complex relationship between body and the over-

lapping points of identity such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Rosi Baridotti (1994) calls for a conception of the body to be “understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological” (p. 4). The implications of a body cannot merely be contained in the biological. Similarly, the sociological cannot capture the full extent of how a body is able to move through societal confines and understanding. Baridotti’s call for a progressive acceptance of female bodies echoes historic feminist understandings of female biology. With this theoretical framework and praxis in mind, I examine how Ronda Rousey utilizes her voice as a mechanism of resistance against the consumption of her body

I argue Rousey is able to push against the disciplinary power of sports culture through vocal resistance and re-negotiate how her body is consumed because she integrates aspects of discipline upon herself. Rousey becomes part of the disciplinary machine of professional sports culture. Because of this, Rousey is able to politicize her body and call for acceptance of female masculinity while simultaneously disciplining female bodies that do not represent notions of her articulation of female masculinity. Rousey’s ability to politicize and render different aspects of her body knowable for her personal gain is only possible in the context of sports culture. For Rousey, female masculinity is only acceptable if it is at the service of being a female athlete.

### **Texts and Methods of Analysis**

To advance the rhetorical scholarship rooted in intersectionality, this analysis seeks to expand upon critical rhetoric as well as to resituate the rhetorical significance of body and voice. Carrie Crenshaw (1997) states, “A rhetorical version of the

intersectionality thesis must account for the ways in which both the presence and absence of images rhetorically and ideologically intersect to privilege heterosexual, White, U.S. women as the ideological norm” (p. 227). In the case of Ronda Rousey, the lack of discussion surrounding her privilege as a heterosexual, white, U.S. woman grants her the opportunity to integrate and distribute the disciplinary power of professional sports culture. This power is not granted to her peers, who do not embody the same privilege. In the spirit of this, this analysis seeks utilize Raymie McKerrow’s principles of critical rhetoric to apply to an intersectional approach.

As I explained in chapter 1, one of the goals of this analysis is to employ McKerrow’s (1989) conception of critical rhetoric as a means to demystify the functions of power. In the case of this analysis, my aim is to demystify the power as it is demonstrated by professional sports culture and also as it is internalized and exhibited by Ronda Rousey. The utilization of critical rhetorical methods provides me the opportunity to reveal how the rhetoric Rousey uses to discuss her body creates a new power/knowledge relationship between her body and female masculinity. The aim of this analysis then is to demystify the power of professional sports culture as it manifests and is embodied in Ronda Rousey. Additionally, McKerrow (1989) iterates that “absence is as important as presence in understanding and evaluating symbolic action” (p. 107). Following this along with Nakayama and Krizek’s (1995) assertion that scholars must be reflexive and “consider that which has been silenced or invisible in academic discussions” (p. 303), my aim is to contribute to the ongoing conversation surrounding whiteness. Specifically, I utilize critical rhetoric and whiteness as tools to frame Rousey’s rhetorical discourse. My intent is to analyze how Rousey’s whiteness is mapped onto her

body while considering the context of her other social relations, such as gender, sexual orientation, and class.

In order to accomplish this, I analyze audiovisual texts where Rousey is the primary rhetor. As previously stated, professional sports culture is assemblant in nature and functions as a disciplinary apparatus, therefore I not only look at sports mediated texts such as the UFC vlog titled *Embedded* and the *Nine for IX* short, but I also look at various interviews given by Rousey and appeared on popular U.S. media outlets such as *The Ellen Show* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, and *The View*. Additionally, I analyze video interviews with *The New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, and her commercial endorsements with Pantene and Reebok. I chose these texts because they were featured on Rousey's professional website and also because they illustrate the mediated discourse surrounding Rousey's body and success as an athlete. I utilize a pastiche of mediated texts in order to outline the narrative delivered by Rousey herself as well as the overarching popular narrative about Rousey. This is necessary in order to put Rousey in conversation with the mediated outlets that discuss Rousey, her body, sexuality, and success and failure as a professional female athlete. By providing a survey of mediated texts, my aim is to further reveal the power and disciplinary nature of professional sports culture and how Rousey internalizes that discipline, which results in her becoming a mechanism to distribute that power outside of sports media.

**“If Ronda Rousey was on the couch with the condoms out...and all I see is Paul Malignaggi, slaughterhouse in a blouse” – “Shady XV,” Eminem**

On February 23, 2013 Ronda Rousey made UFC and MMA history by winning the first women's title fight against Liz Carmouche. While this fight was not the first fight in Rousey's professional career, it was the first match that was sanctioned by the

UFC, an organization headed by Dana White who had previously claimed that women would “never” step foot inside a UFC octagon. However, after meeting Rousey, White changed his mind. According to *ESPN.com*'s Josh Gross (2012), White stated, “She's a real fighter and she's very talented. She has the credentials, the pedigree; I mean everything. I think she has that 'it' factor. I think she's going to be a big superstar. This girl is nasty” (“Ronda Rousey signs landmark deal”). Rousey was named the first female UFC fighter in November 2012, was declared its women's bantamweight champion on December 6, 2012. She then proceeded to defend her title in Anaheim, CA in a match versus Liz Carmouche (Martin, 2015, “Ronda Rousey: Pro fight No. 7 defeated Liz Carmouche via submission (armbar), 4:49, first round”). For a significant period of time, Rousey has dominated the women's UFC octagon. In the octagon interview following her first victory, commentator Joe Rogan (2013) states, “You are not just the first UFC Women's Champion, you are a real representative of women's athletics, you're a true champion, it was an honor to call your first fight” (“UFC 157: Rousey & Carmouche Octagon Interviews”). Rousey's entrance and dominance in the UFC is significant not only for female fighters, but as Rogan indicates, for women's athletics as a whole. The addition of Rousey to the UFC roster is indicative of a changing perspective of female athletes and their ability to compete in sports traditionally dominated by men. Matt Fitzgerald (2013) from *BleacherReport.com* writes, “Not only does that bash down barriers and the perception that females have no place in high-profile mixed martial arts, but it also heightens the intrigue surrounding one of the world's fastest growing sports phenomenon's” (“Ronda Rousey's Triumph in 1st Female Main Event Expands UFC's Audience”). Rousey's victory signifies the bashing down of barriers, but also the pressure

placed on Rousey to be a figurehead for female fighters. Rousey does not take this position lightly. She understands that as the first female fighter she must set the standard. In the octagon interview following her first UFC victory she tells Rogan, “It was different, but you know there’s no amount of press that can save these girls from me” (“UFC 157: Rousey & Carmouche Octagon Interviews”). Because Rousey is the first female UFC fighter, she frames herself in a way that indicates she understands that she must consistently perform in a way that will continue to garner support for the women’s division. Rousey does not singularly place this pressure upon herself. It is generated by the mediated discourse that proceeded and succeeded her entrance into the UFC. As indicated by Rogan and Fitzgerald, Rousey represents a changing dynamic in women’s athletics and women’s MMA. She is a “true champion” and should be regarded as such. This pressure becomes internalized control and is reflected in the way Rousey discusses her body. She emphasizes this notion in the *Nine for IX* short, “Rowdy Ronda Rousey.” In the mini documentary that appeared on *ESPNW.com* Rousey states,

For the Carmouche fight I felt that if I lost that fight there’d be no women in the UFC. And if I won that fight and the Pay-Per-View numbers weren’t good then there would be no women in the UFC. And the only way for this to all mean anything and to actually have everything that I had trained and sacrificed for to stay and live beyond me was I had to win that fight and I had to have it do well...I felt my jaw dislocate and I just remember thinking in that second, there’s no way, I’m just not tapping for this. I would rather break my neck and die than lose this fight. (“Rowdy Ronda Rousey”)

Rousey indicates that she understands the success of the first female title fight was based upon her performance as a fighter. She states, “If I lost that fight there’d be no women in the UFC.” Rousey vocalizes the impact of the pressure placed upon her body and her ability to fight due to the mediated discourse that surrounded women’s UFC. She was the first female UFC champion, so under the watchful gaze of sports media, she had to prove that she was worthy of that title. She not only had to win, she had to perform in a way that secured the future success of the women’s division in the UFC. Because of this, Rousey states that she willingly and literally sacrifices her body for the sake of the continuation of women’s ability to participate in UFC. She explains that she could feel her jaw dislocating and even after that she “would rather break her neck and die than lose this fight.” In many ways, Rousey adopts the stance of media figures such as Joe Rogan and Matt Fitzgerald and positions herself as the foundation and hope for women’s UFC. In the same documentary she states,

I hope that we’re in the golden days of women’s MMA, but I also hope that they’re not the only days. We might be the Ali’s and the Frazier’s running around right now, but I hope there’s some Mayweather’s and Pacquiao’s waiting after we’re done. (“Rowdy Ronda Rousey”)

Rousey cites boxing greats Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier and places herself within the same rank. She views herself as one of the great UFC fighters who lays the foundation for future generations. Rousey is placed in a unique position. She is the first female UFC fighter and because of this, the disciplining and performance of her body comes with more burden and higher stakes. Rousey cites this herself when she states, “If I won that fight and the Pay-Per-View numbers weren’t good then there would be no women in the

UFC.” Rousey understands the nature of sports culture. She knows that she must not only be able to win in her sport, but that she must also be able to contribute to the machine of sports culture. She understands the power distributed within professional sports culture and inserts herself into the network of discipline. She does this by not only through the discipline inflicted upon her body, but also by infusing herself into multiple components of sports media.

One example of this is how the UFC utilizes media to keep fans connected to fighters. One of these outlets is the vlog series titled *Embedded*. The vlog profiles fighters in the weeks leading up to a title match and is uploaded to YouTube. It started in 2014 and has over 53 episodes (“UFC Embedded: Vlog Series”). In one of the first episodes of *Embedded*, Ronda Rousey is the feature fighter being profiled. She is shown training in her hotel room in the Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas. As Rousey prepares for UFC 175 fight versus Canadian fighter, Alexis Davis, she and her trainers arrange her hotel room to provide space so she can spar and train. During this segment Rousey discusses the pressure placed upon her as the first female UFC fighter. She states,

Everyone was saying they’ve never seen that much press on a fight ever. I couldn’t say no to anything cause this card had to do well. It was an experiment you know, women’s MMA. So if it didn’t do well, I was out. You know, I didn’t just have to win I had to win in style. (“UFC 175 Embedded: Vlog Series - Episode 2”)

Rousey explicitly acknowledges the disciplinary power of sports culture and how it is tied to her position as a female athlete. She is aware that because this was one of the first fights featuring female fighters, she had to make her body readily available for display.

The gaze and discipline of sports culture is necessary for Rousey to be considered a successful fighter. As she previously stated in the *Nine for IX* short, she needed to sell Pay-Per-View subscriptions. She literally needed the fight to be gazed upon in order for it to be considered a success. Additionally, it was not simply enough for Rousey to place her body on display. Rather, as Rousey states, she had to perform in a way that had “style.” In this sense, Rousey places herself within the disciplinary power of sports culture and echoes Foucault’s understanding of the panopticon. Foucault (1977) states, “The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately” (p. 200). The UFC and sports fans operate within this mechanism. The visibility of Rousey’s body necessitates the need for physical control. In order for Rousey to maintain her visibility and position as a successful fighter, her fights need to be viewed and she needs to be deemed as someone who makes progress within the UFC universe. Her body has to transgress typical expectations associated with UFC fights because she is a female. Arguably, Rousey internalizes this discipline and has the opportunity to utilize the control of sports culture for the benefit of other female fighters. Prior to her fight with Rousey, Alexis Davis (2014) discussed Rousey’s contribution to the sport and athletics as a whole. She states,

Ronda is great for this sport and for women's athletes in general. She's a very talented person and it's great that she's been able to not only do all of these movies, but to bring attention not only to herself but to women's fighting. She's helped all of us because she's helped (the media) understand how good these athletes are. (“Rousey vs. Davis Results: Winner, Recap and Analysis”)

Seemingly, Rousey cultivates her body not only for her benefit, but also for the benefit of other female fighters who are her opponents. Additionally, she had to win in a spectacular fashion in order for her body to be recognized immediately and for the sustainability of women's UFC. In many ways, Rousey's body is sacrificed for the benefit of other female fighters and athletes. However, Rousey articulates that she does not view it that way. While Davis acknowledges that Rousey's contributions are beneficial for "women's athletes in general," the specific discipline implemented on Rousey's body is for her own benefit. She states, "If it didn't do well, I was out." Rhetorically, Rousey positions herself as both the first and only female fighter who should be of concern. While Davis evokes the whole of "women's fighting" and "women's athletics," Rousey articulates that she is concerned with the "I." So, while other female fighters like Davis may view Rousey as making progress for women who come after her, Rousey only cares about the success of women's UFC as long as she is part of it, or at least as long as she is remembered as essential to its foundation. In the *Nine for IX* documentary she likens herself to Muhammad Ali. She wants her body and identity as a fighter to be as significant and memorable as Ali. In this "Embedded" example she iterates that her body is the only body that should be recognizable. Rousey is often framed as a woman who capitalizes upon the disciplinary power of the Panopticon within sports culture. She utilizes the Panopticon to make her body visible for her personal benefit. Other female fighters can be distinguishable as long as she is the one who is attributed for their visibility. She is the both a participant and practitioner of the panoptic power. She inserts herself within the panoptic mechanism as a way to capitalize upon the power distributed for her own benefit. Certainly, this is not the fault of Rousey. Rather, her seeming need to utilize the

power of professional sports culture for her personal benefit speaks to the larger issues of professional sports culture. Essentially, in order to be memorable and remain an active participant in the disciplining of her body, she must contribute within the apparatus of power. Again, professional sports culture functions as an apparatus of discipline, therefore, no one is able to operate outside of its power. Rousey is one example of this. She functions within the Panoptic machine as a means to maintain some semblance of power and control over her own body.

In the same clip, Rousey goes on to explain the process she went through in order to condition and train her body to be ready for the fight. She describes the impact of training on her body and in doing so, demonstrates how she has internalized the disciplinary power of professional sports culture. She states,

And so, I was so sick the first week of camp in fact I had to stay longer cause I lost my voice. And the fight was right after the movies. I stayed in shape the whole time but I had to keep my weight so low for so long I lost a lot of muscle. A lot of muscle...and you know I spent the whole camp rebuilding and not really improving. Technically I was better than I ever was before, but my body can't take 10 weeks away and 6 weeks on and expect to be at your best ever. But I knew that it had to be done because I knew that I had to be good enough to beat Miesha when I wasn't at my best. And I knew I was capable of it. And then McMann, it was 56 days after that. Fastest successful title defense in UFC history. My whole body was so worn down, I was so worn down. Now I finally got a big chunk of time just to rest and just to focus on training during my rest and not really doing anything else. ("UFC 175 Embedded: Vlog Series - Episode 2")

Rousey not only works to direct the gaze of sports culture upon her body, but she also internalizes its disciplinary nature. Rousey places her body within the working machine of sports culture. In this sense, she echoes the notion that discipline is not something that is simply inflicted upon bodies. Rather, discipline becomes internalized in the body as a way to “obtain an efficient machine” (Foucault, 1977, p. 164). Rousey makes her body a functioning part of the sports culture machine. As I previously argued, sports culture functions as an apparatus rather than one fully identifiable entity. Rousey positions her body to be one part of the overall machine that is sports culture. She fragments body and focuses on her muscles as one of the main components that contribute to her ability to be a successful fighter. The fragmentation and re-assembling of her body is representative of the internalization of the disciplinary power of sports culture and is reminiscent of Rousey functioning more like a machine than a biological human. By rhetorically fragmenting her body, Rousey creates the opportunity for her identity to be separate from her body. She re-directs attention on her body’s ability to perform and compete. Jasbir Puar (2007) discusses the significance behind assemblage and writes, “The purported coherence and cohesion of the organic body is at stake here, as I suggest first, that the intermixing of the organic with the inorganic turban needs to be theorized across an organic/inorganic divide, a machinic assemblage” (pp. 174-175). Puar theorizes how the inorganic turban signifies and becomes part of what is knowable of the organic body of suicide bombers. This theory is applicable to the ways in which Rousey views and discusses her body. Because Rousey fragments her body, for example when she places emphasis on the presence or lack of muscles, she is able to blur the boundary between her body being viewed as a biological or mechanical tool. Rousey’s muscles become part of

the machinic assemblage that equates her organic body. Rousey's body is both organic and inorganic. She is human and machine. This rhetorical move not only fragments her body, but also obscures the boundaries between Rousey as an individual athlete and Rousey as a cog and practitioner within sports culture. She punishes her body because she is an athlete and must be able to participate within sports culture. But, as she has previously iterated, she is also a distributor of said punishment because it is up to her to ensure the longevity of women's UFC. In this example she states that she needed to "be good enough to beat Miesha." So, she trained and conditioned her body to the point of being able to exert discipline on her opponent with the awareness that her fight still needed to be viewed. She "knew it had to be done."

According to Rousey, her body is both biology and machine, which is only possible through her constant interactions through training and fights. She must build muscle in order to become part of "a multi-segmentary machine." This is only possible because Rousey literally breaks down her body in order to re-build it so it can become stronger and more efficient. She specifically cites the amount of muscle she lost and how she had to work to regain what had been previously lost. She was "so worn down." Yet, even at its weakest, Rousey states that her body still needed to be able to perform and to win. Rousey takes full responsibility for the conditioning of her body. She understands that it is a process necessary in order for her to be a successful fighter. She further iterates this notion on her appearance on the talk show, *The View*. During her interview with the women of *The View* Rousey discusses how she processes pain. She states,

I mean, I don't know how other people feel pain, but I try to look at it differently.

I am not the pain I'm feeling. It's not me. It's really information being sent to my

brain. You feel pain for a reason and that's just for information. Do I need to pay attention to this? Or can I just ignore it? ("Ronda Rousey The View 2015 03 23") Rousey decidedly separates herself from the sensation of feeling pain. She fragments her body and re-assembles it as something that is able to transcend the sensation of pain, which further positions her as a machine and as something that is disciplined and able to control feeling. Rousey rhetorically blurs the line between human and machine. Through this, she is able to ascribe new meaning to her body and her identity. Due to the nature of UFC and MMA, her body becomes the main point from which she is able to create and dictate the knowledge generated about her. Seemingly, Rousey understands this and uses it to her advantage. Donna Haraway (1991) explains this notions and writes,

Bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice. (p. 201)

Rousey's participation in professional sports culture allows her to internalize the disciplining of her body to the point where she literally becomes a machine and also make her body visible and within sight. Rousey emphasizes the "I" in her statement. She self-inflicts the cultivation of a certain body that is able to perform in the UFC. She breaks down her muscles and she processes the sensation of pain as information. In many ways, Rousey is able to transcend the materiality of her body. She re-maps how her body should be viewed and what needs to be controlled. In this sense, Rousey separates herself

from the machine aspect of her body. This is not to say that Rousey and her body are not one in the same. Rousey is a woman. She is a professional UFC fighter. Yet, she is also a machine that is able to separate human sensations, such as pain, from the materiality of her body. All of these aspects combine to make-up the human/machine known as Ronda Rousey. Additionally, Rousey exemplifies Haraway's notion of the ability to shift between all of these identities from within. She uses the borders or boundaries of her identity to dictate what is known and visible about her body. This is only possible because Rousey internalizes the discipline of sports culture to the point that she is able to become an active participant in the destruction and re-building of her body. Again, she transcends her body for the sake of her sport and sports culture. Her body is one cog in the machine of sports culture. Yet, she is not a passive participant or tool in the machine. Rousey's discussion of her training camps and the different conditions she submits her body to during different fights positions her as an active participant in the power of sports culture.

Rousey continues to focus on how her body fits and functions within the machine of sports culture. In the same episode of *Embedded* prior to her fight with Davis she states,

This is the most focused I've ever been and the most I've been able to focus on just the fight more than anything else...So this is the best camp I've ever had and the best I've ever felt. By far. But, the best thing to do before a fight is make it seem routine, so this is just the routine of domination that I've finally settled into, you know? ("UFC 175 Embedded: Vlog Series - Episode 2")

Rousey discusses her experience in training camp and explicitly acknowledges the discipline and “routine of domination” that is necessary in order for her body to be sculpted and ready for a fight. The training camps are one element of the machine of sports culture. However, rather than succumbing to the pressure of training camp and conditioning of her body, Rousey articulates that this is routine. Rousey cites her position as an active participant in the mechanism of sports culture and normalizes it. She is in control of the disciplining that is inflicted on her body. Additionally, this process is necessary in order for her to become the best. Rousey states that fighting needs to feel like a routine. According to Rousey, she must condition her body to go through this process without having to cognitively process what is happening, which is necessary for her to become dominant in her sport and for her body to operate mechanically. She literally becomes a fighting machine by breaking down and training her body. Training camps then become a place where Rousey is able to polish and recharge the machine that is her body. At camp Rousey separates her mind from her body and she becomes a tool in the assemblance of sports culture and more specifically, women’s UFC. She becomes as Foucault (1977) states, “a technician of discipline who elaborates procedures for the individual and collective coercion of bodies” (p. 169). Rousey understands and participates in this disciplinary machine and through that, she sets the standard of discipline for other female fighters.

As the first female UFC fighter, Rousey set the norm of how other UFC female fighter bodies should be viewed and how they should be disciplined. Rousey is aware of this and vocalizes the level of control necessary in order to be successful. In the *Nine for*

*IX* short Rousey indicates that she wanted to change the face of MMA for female fighters. She states,

The one thing I saw wrong when I started MMA is all the girls were playing the Miss America role and they were so scared of any criticism that no one gave a damn about their fights. It wasn't that they were bad fights. They were good fights, but nobody cared. And so I somehow needed to make my fights personal to the people watching it. I realized that I didn't want everybody to love me. I didn't want everybody to hate me. I needed people to disagree about it. I needed there to be talk. ("Rowdy Ronda Rousey")

According to Rousey, the emphasis that was placed on the female fighters was based upon their looks instead of on the fighter's ability to perform. The need to craft a persona that correlates with the machine and destruction aspect of her body is something that she iterates over and over. Rousey not only wants to make her body visible, she needs it to be visible for the attributes she deems important, and that means combatting the "Miss America" persona she believed existed in women's MMA. In other words, Rousey wanted the focus to be about the ability of the female fighter's bodies rather than how attractive they are. In an interview and video that appeared in the *New York Times*, Rousey states,

I think having the ability to draw people in and care about your fight is a real skill that a lot of people dismiss and sometimes look at as if it's a bad thing. When I came along in MMA everybody was trying to be Miss America and they were so afraid to be criticized that no one really wanted to play that bad guy role and I'm

happy to do it. (Marikar, 2015, “Ronda Rousey’s Next Fight: Body Image in Hollywood”)

Rousey takes control of how she is viewed through the distribution of her voice. She positions herself as the antagonist of the women’s UFC and relies on trash talking to create an identity that can be viewed in tandem with her body. By pushing against the Miss America trope, Rousey creates a space for female fighters who embody and vocalize a different type of fighter. However, while Rousey advocates for the acceptance of female fighters who are more aggressive and can trash talk, this space is reserved for white female bodies. Rousey evokes the image of Miss America, which is associated with white female bodies. This became evident when Nina Davuluri, an Indian-American woman, was crowned the 2013 Miss America. Following being named Miss America, Twitter exploded with racist remarks such as, “She’s like not even American and she won Miss America” and “This is Miss America...Not Miss Foreign Country” (Fredericks, 2013, “Racist backlash to new Miss America”). For these individuals, American equates to white American. Davuluri did not fulfill this standard. Rousey seemingly understands this, or at the very least, has internalized this notion. Again, whiteness operates and maintains power by remaining invisible and unnamed. Rousey does not have to explicitly cite or explain her conception of what it means to be Miss America. Assuredly, traditionally feminine qualities are associated with the label. In addition, as evidence with the case of Davuluri, the embodiment of whiteness is also ascribed to the title. If sports culture operates within the premise of whiteness, then viewers will only be interested in watching female fighters who fulfill the “Miss America” trope. Therefore, Rousey is the prime candidate to entice viewership and encourage them to accept women fighters as

physically and vocally aggressive. Rousey does not embody the feminine qualities of Miss America. In fact she, frames herself as wanting to be distanced from these attributes, but she still embodies whiteness. Seemingly, the digression from traditional feminine qualities is only permissible because Rousey is white. Because of this, she is able to utilize her whiteness to call for acceptance of her physical and vocal aggressiveness.

Rousey can be both physically and vocally fierce. In fact, this is something that she implies is necessary for her ability to be successful. In her octagon interview following her victory against Miesha Tate, Rousey was overwhelming booed by UFC fans for refusing to shake Tate's hand. When asked if the boos bothered her Rousey told commentator, Joe Rogan, "No man. When I did judo I got booed in 30 different countries around the world and uh, cheering is something new for me. So, I'm much more motivated at proving people wrong" (2013, "UFC 168: Ronda Rousey Octagon Interview"). Through this, Rousey articulates her position as both a practitioner and distributor of disciplinary power. Because she is the first female UFC fighter, she is able to dictate how female fighters should be viewed and also how they are able to vocally express themselves. She iterates that female fighters should be able to "play the bad guy role." In this sense, Rousey creates the mold and standard to which other female UFC fighters must be held. She further explains this in the "Embedded" vlog. She states,

These situations of like, you know, media training duh, duh, duh, pressure, pressure, pressure, work, work, work. That's something I'm doing all the time. I've actively trained to accustom myself to this environment and to be able to

perform in this environment. I have a lot more practice at it than any of these other girls do. (“UFC 175 Embedded: Vlog Series - Episode 3)

Rousey is already completely inundated into the apparatus of sports culture and its power. She is accustomed to it and because of this, she is able to perform in a capacity that other female fighters cannot. She has set the standard of excellence as well as the standard of discipline. Through this Rousey becomes an active part of the machine of sports culture. She has already undergone the break down and discipline to meld her body to a particular form and performance. Because of this, she is no longer a passive subject. Instead, as an expert she is able to submit other female fighters to her mode and standard of power and control. Again, Rousey is aware that she is participating in the control of sports culture. However, she is able to push against these expectations because she *is* the standard. She was the first and is one of the best. According to UFC CEO, Lorenzo Fertitta, Rousey’s dominance in the octagon qualifies her as one of the best athletes in the UFC. He states,

I mean who is to say, why can't Ronda Rousey be the biggest, most popular athlete in combat sports? And that's her whole attitude and that's why she is getting there. And she is blazing a trail and I think what's happening for females in sports, the most interesting story, the most important story in sports is the UFC, because we've embraced it... And [Ronda] has been the most impressive athlete we ever worked with, here at the UFC. I put her up there with the best of the best. (Guillen, 2015, “UFC CEO Lorenzo Fertitta: Ronda Rousey is the most impressive athlete we've ever worked with”)

According to Fertitta, Rousey is one of the best fighters in the UFC, male or female. He also indicates that she is “blazing a trail” for other fighters who come after her. Again,

Rousey is the standard to which other female fighters are compared. She creates the norms that are associated with female fighter bodies through her distribution of disciplinary power. Due to this, Rousey is able to resist the disciplinary nature of sports culture because she was able to mold it to her own expectations in a way that benefits and privileges her body.

Rousey is a dominant fighter in the UFC. In her interview on *The View*, Whoopi Goldberg discusses Rousey's nickname. She states, "You're called the arm collector because you've perfected a move called the armbar, a move that dislocates your opponents elbow. Now, you've been injured many times so you say you don't feel pain the same way" ("Ronda Rousey The View 2015 03 23"). Rousey is trained to dismantle her opponent's body. It is something that has been instilled in her from an early age. On the HBO series *Real Sports with Bryant Gumble*, her mother, AnnMaria De Mars, states that she told Ronda, "I want you to hurt people and break things" ("Ronda Rousey - HBO Real Sports"). During her interview on *The View*, Rousey discusses her instinct to fight and attributes it to her position as a female. On *The View* she explains,

Women fighters are different in that I feel like the women take things more personally. The women are more emotional in a way. The instinct to fight in a woman is different. When women fight, we're programmed to fight to protect our children. Men fight a lot for pride or for status. But women, their instinct to fight is for survival and protection of their children. ("Ronda Rousey The View 2015 03 23")

Because Rousey is a woman, her drive and desire to fight is more instinctual. Rousey defaults on the notion that women are more emotional. Rousey posits that her emotional

programming is what provides her with the instinct to fight. Further, Rousey frames this instinct around a woman's need to protect her children. Rousey does not have children, therefore, her ability to fight with tenacity surpasses what women are typically "programmed" to do. Rousey's body then, is able to outperform typical female bodies. She is able to hone her instincts and use them for her personal benefit. Her body exceeds expectations. Rousey discusses her body's ability to transcend expectation in an interview with Jimmy Kimmel. In this interview Kimmel asks Rousey about her signature submission move called the armbar. When Rousey uses this move against other fighters she causes the elbow to dislocate, which is painful and then results in her opponent submitting and ultimately losing the fight. When Kimmel asks Rousey about this move she explains how it works and then reveals how the armbar did not impact her in the same way that it does her opponents. She states,

Well, it's doesn't feel awesome, I mean. I was like 18 years old and I was at like the German World Cup and I was winning there was like 40 seconds left I was fighting this Finnish chick and I threw her and I left my arm out. And she, before I even knew it happened she dislocated my elbow. So I was like, well, it's already out, I might as well try to get out, right? And so I try to get out and my elbow popped back in and I still couldn't get out so she popped it out again. So then I'm like, well, she already popped it out twice, I can't let her just pop it out twice for no reason. And so then I finally get out and in judo you can't ask for the medics on the mat or else you get disqualified. So I had to pop it back in myself and then I had like 20 seconds left and I won the fight, but, um (applause) thanks. Not

really because I had to fight several other times that day and so after that I wasn't really spry. ("Ronda Rousey on Fighting and Eminem")

Rousey discusses the utilization of this technique in the context of judo, a martial arts sport; however, this is a move that has become her signature in the UFC. Rousey's candor in the discussion of her body and its ability to continue to perform even while injured further emphasizes Rousey's resistance to the discipline of sports culture. While the move normally forces fighters to submit, Rousey was able to rise above this expectation and continue to grapple and fight. Again, Rousey's body was literally breaking down. She dislocated her elbow twice and still competed. Arguably, Rousey's desire to continue to fight is a tenant of the power inflicted upon her by sports culture. Yet, Rousey is the one who vocalizes this example. She provides voice to how her body should be seen and how viewers should see and interpret her signature move. Rousey discusses how her elbow was dislocated, but also how she was able to endure the pain, put it back in place, continue to fight and ultimately gain a victory. The armbar is painful and in most cases is debilitating. However, this move does not render Rousey's body useless. She is able to resist the punishment of the pain caused by the armbar. Not only does she defy a loss due to the armbar, she also adopts this measure of punishment of her own and inflicts it upon her opponents' bodies. Rousey re-appropriates this particular disciplinary mechanism as a means to punish the bodies that do not fit to the standard set by Rousey.

Through her interviews with *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and on *The View*, Rousey is able to position her body as machine that is programmed to destroy. Rousey literally embodies a masculinized muscular machine. As previously established, she is a respected fighter.

This definition and display of respect is a notion Rousey learned upon first entering MMA. In the *Nine for IX* short she states,

I remember going into MMA gyms and boxing gyms and feeling kind of embarrassed and out of place. And not really welcome and not taken seriously. I would be super self-conscious and I would be envious of the kind of respect I saw some of the guys in the gym receiving. (“Rowdy Ronda Rousey”)

Rousey witnessed the male fighters earning respect in an established masculinized space. Due to this, Rousey learned that she needed to embody and perform masculinity as a way to gain respect. Certainly, in her experience training for judo she was trained to fight and destroy. However, upon entering the MMA, the notion of utilizing her body as a means of destruction in order to gain respect is something that becomes more engrained in Rousey. Because she was the first female entering a space dominated by men, Rousey needed to adopt some of the strategies she witnessed as a way to earn a pass to cross the border into MMA. As evidenced by her discussion of her ability to sustain pain and control her emotions, Rousey created her pass by embodying traditional notions of masculinity. Rousey must masculinize and discipline her own body and mind in order to be able to inflict this control upon the other female MMA fighters. Again, because she is the first, she is able to set the standard that needs to be fulfilled by other women. With Rousey as the norm, other female fighters must embody masculinity through their ability to withstand pain and control their emotional instincts.

Rousey takes pride in her ability to discipline and control her mind and emotions. The sculpting and conditioning of her body to become a muscular machine that is able to perform and win is something that Rousey also takes pride in. UFC is unique from other

sports because the fighters do not use additional sport equipment. The fighter's body is the solitary tool utilized to participate in this sport. The discipline of sports culture through the UFC trains Rousey to focus on the matter and materiality of her body. Judith Butler (1993) explains the complex relationship between the matter and material of a body and writes, "Here the body is not an independent materiality that is invested by power relations external to it, but it is that for which materialization and investiture are coextensive" (p. 9). The body, materiality, and power all exist in a symbiotic relationship. Each part is necessary. Rousey is aware of this and is able to manipulate the power of sports culture to her advantage. Again, because she was the first female UFC fighter she is able to establish the norms associated with female fighters and the expectations that should be placed upon their bodies. This becomes more apparent in episode 2 of "UFC Embedded 190." Rousey discusses the muscularity of her body and states,

I have this one term for the kind of woman that my mother raised me to not be and I call it a 'do nothing bitch' or I call it a DNB a lot of the time. The kind of chick that just tries to be pretty and be taken care of by somebody else. That's why I think it's hilarious like or if people like say my body looks masculine or something like that, I'm just like listen. Just because my body was developed for a purpose other than fucking millionaires doesn't mean it's masculine. I think it's femininely bad ass as fuck cause there's not a single muscle in my body that isn't for a purpose cause I'm not a do nothing bitch. ("UFC 190 Embedded: Vlog Series – Episode 2")

In this example Rousey demonstrates vocal negotiation of the consumption of her body. While advocating for the acceptance of her muscular stature she simultaneously vilifies

other women who “try to be pretty” and want to “be taken care of by somebody else.” While Rousey does not explicitly state it, viewers are lead to believe that these women do not share Rousey’s muscularity. In fact, Rousey insists on her difference from other DNB’s by emphasizing that there is not a single muscle in her body that does not have a purpose. Rousey has taken active control of her body and has developed it for a specific purpose – to fight and to win. By vocalizing this, Rousey takes an active stance and does not allow for passive consumption and viewing of her body. She will not be viewed through the norms associated with the male gaze of sports culture. Instead, she challenges this notion by directing the gaze away from the sexual capacity of her body (i.e. fucking millionaires) to its purpose, which is to participate in an exceptionally violent sport. In this sense, Rousey is aware of the disciplining of the body that comes at the service of being a professional athlete. By stating that she has a purpose and is not a “do nothing bitch,” she emphasizes the capacity for her body to be productive. Rousey again places her body within the machine of sports culture. Not only is her body part of the machine of sports culture, she is also able to make her body productive and useful. For Rousey, in this instance, productivity and efficiency transcend the biological capacity of her body. Rousey positions herself in contrast with other women and she asserts that “purpose” is something more than sexual activity. Rousey’s body is capable of doing more than just having sex and eventually producing offspring, which is trait of female biology. Rousey sees her body’s purpose as something that is outside the materiality of her body as it is associated with her sex. Rousey advocates for the acceptance of the muscularity of her body, but it is at the cost of excluding other aspects of the materiality of her body. Rousey explicitly participates in the exclusionary practice that Butler warns against. She

writes, “I suggest that that prized materiality may well be constituted through an exclusions and degradation of the feminine that is profoundly problematic for feminism” (Butler, 1993, p. 5). While Rousey does not make this statement as a feminist claim, her discussion of her body in direct contest with other female bodies echoes conversations that are often associated with female bodies. Rousey’s muscular stature can only be accepted if it precludes her reproductive ability.

Through this, Rousey problematizes traditional notions of what it means to be a productive and docile female body. She accepts the disciplining nature of sports culture and the UFC, but only if she is able to emphasize that her body cannot and should not be categorized as feminine or masculine. Additionally, by stating that she views her body as “femininely badass” because “there’s not a single muscle in her body that isn’t for a purpose,” she echoes Jack Halberstam’s claim that female masculinity “is not simply the opposite of female femininity, nor is it a female version of male masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 29). Rousey seemingly understands the complex relationship between how her body is read as a female athlete in a male dominated sport and the biological and sociological labels that are associated with it. Through this interview, Rousey demonstrates and articulates a stance of resistance. She participates in the disciplinary nature of sports culture, but does not remain passive. In this sense, she pushes against the boundaries of sports culture and redefines how her body should be viewed. She vocally problematizes how her body should be read and categorized.

While Rousey resists the discipline of her body as a female athlete who participates in sports culture, she re-directs this disciplinary nature to female bodies outside of sports culture. Rousey places her body in direct contestation with non-female

athletes, or at the very least, non-muscular female bodies. So while Rousey may seemingly embrace female masculinity for herself, she does this at the cost of distancing herself from traditional notions of femininity. Through this, Rousey manages to politicize her body (one that is muscular and read as “masculine”) while de-politicizing other female bodies. Again, Rousey emphasizes that her body was developed for a purpose, something more than just being read and consumed as a passive female. Because her body is masculine, she can resist being disciplined and advocate for being viewed as “femininely badass,” but this can only occur by pitting herself against non-masculine female bodies. For Rousey muscles and female masculinity equals purpose, while traditional femininity does not. These principles are even evident in Rousey’s commercials for Pantene and Reebok. In her commercial for Pantene, which first aired in December 2016, she states,

Don’t hate me because I’m strong. Strong is beautiful. I am not one without the other. People call me Miss Man. They call me savage. But if you think fierce can’t be feminine, I’m about to show you what only a strong woman can do. Strong is beautiful (cracks knuckles). (“Pantene, Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Strong”)

Rousey delivers a similar message in her Reebok commercial that originally aired in July 2016. In this commercial she states,

Here’s the thing about being perfect. Perfect never gets truly tested (pulls out hair extensions). Perfect never gets to silence its critics. Perfect never gets a shot at redemption (wipes away lipstick). So yeah, I’m fine not being perfect. (“Reebok, Be More Human”)

In both of these commercials, Rousey contests the ideas of what is considered feminine and what is masculine. In the Reebok advertisement, Rousey literally erases attributes of femininity. She wipes away her lipstick and pulls out her hair extensions. While performing these actions she cites the message that she is “fine not being perfect.” This rhetoric paired with her movement indicates that according to Rousey, femininity, or at least traditional elements of femininity, is perfection. Rousey then embodies imperfection. According to the Pantene commercial, Rousey’s imperfect version of femininity includes being fierce and strong because “strong is beautiful.” Additionally, in the Pantene commercial, Rousey purposefully lets down her hair as she performs martial arts moves and cracks her knuckles. Through both of these advertisements, Rousey uses her voice to complicate notions of masculinity and femininity. Rousey rhetorically pairs her voice and message advocating for the acceptance of her strength and imperfections with the images what she constitutes as feminine. Both of these examples are mediated texts that are not within the direct realm of sports culture. Rousey is not being interviewed about an upcoming fight. She is not being featured on a vlog dedicated to UFC viewership. Certainly, she is being paid and endorsed for her athletic ability, so these advertisements are not outside of professional sports culture. Yet, they demonstrate how Rousey is able to navigate the varying borders of sports culture in correlation with her body. In these examples, Rousey does not need to emphasize how her body is a tool of discipline. Instead, she is able to focus on blurring the lines of masculinity and femininity, and ultimately, embody female masculinity.

**“I’m an ovarian goldmine. I can’t waste these genes.”**

Interestingly enough, Rousey’s negotiation and politicization of her body took somewhat of a drastic turn upon the end of her winning streak and loss to Holly Holm. After the fight, Rousey appeared on *The Ellen Show* to discuss the loss and the aftermath. In an interview with Ellen DeGeneres, Rousey discusses her loss and her thought process following that loss. Rousey, who in the interview previous to this claimed her body was designed and sculpted for a purpose other than sexual activity, re-navigates its purpose after her loss. Earlier in the interview with DeGeneres, Rousey explains in detail the hits she took and the damage that was done to her body. She states, “So, on that first hit, I cut open my whole mouth and I knocked my teeth loose and, you know, guys fight for five five minute rounds, they’re teeing off in each other’s faces the whole time and nothing like that happens” (“Ronda Rousey Discusses Her UFC Upset”). She goes on to explain, “You have to try to make it appear as if you are not hurt. Because if someone can tell, they’re gonna swarm in on you. So I was trying my best to make it, to hide the fact that I wasn’t even there anymore” (“Ronda Rousey Discusses Her UFC Upset”). Rousey discusses her body in a way that places it outside the norm of both male and female UFC fighters. Her body was able to take a hit that many male fighters have never experienced. Not only does Rousey place her body outside the norms of other fighters, she reiterates the notion that she must transcend pain and be able to hide the damage that her body endured. In the previous section, I iterated how Rousey is able to rise above the sensation of pain. This is largely in part due to the disciplining of her body. She again emphasizes this point. Her body was injured. Her whole mouth was cut open and her teeth were loose, yet, she was still able to make it appear as if she was not hurt. Again, Rousey

masculinizes her ability to rise above pain, which is an attribute that makes her the best and normalizes her performance of female masculinity. She reaffirms the importance of her muscularity and female masculinity to be a successful athlete, which is why she is able to resist the discipline of sports culture.

However, as the interview progresses and DeGeneres asks Rousey what went wrong and how she felt after the loss, Rousey changes her stance. Instead of focusing on her body's ability to perform athletically and exceed expectation, she refocuses attention on her body to be productive in another way: on its ability to produce a baby. Rousey's body was no longer productive in its athletic capacity. Because of this, Rousey focuses on her body's ability to become pregnant. Rousey states,

I was in the medical room and I was down in the corner and I was like, what am I anymore if I'm not this. I was literally sitting there thinking about killing myself. And in that exact second I'm like, I'm nothing. What do I do anymore? And no one gives a shit about me anymore without this. To be honest I looked up and I saw my man, Travis was standing there. And I looked up at him and I was just like I need to have his babies, I need to stay alive. ("Ronda Rousey Discusses Her UFC Upset")

According to Rousey, because her body failed to perform athletically, it was no longer worth anything, to the point where she contemplated suicide. Prior to her loss, Rousey literally staked her entire worth and value as a human on her ability to fight and be the best female fighter. Her female body only had value because it was able to perform in a way that surmounted expectation. This is yet another example of how Rousey internalizes the discipline of professional sports culture. Rousey created her body to be the first and

the best. However, once her body fails her, she feels as if she needs to sacrifice her body because “no one gives a shit about her anymore without this.” “This” is her body and its ability to perform and win. Because her body did not execute what it was designed to do, it should be terminated. Yet, in spite of her body’s inability to function within the expectations and confines of professional sports culture, Rousey offers an alternate objective for her body. She directs the attention from her muscularity and the sociological meaning she had previously constructed in regard to her female masculinity to her body’s biological ability. This rhetorical move creates a tension for how Rousey presents her body for consumption. According to Rousey, her female masculinity and athletic body should be acknowledged and celebrated. Within the realm of sports culture, she should not be confined to her body’s biological capabilities because her body is able to be productive in other ways. She can outperform the physical limits typically associated with female bodies. She can control how she feels pain and shape her body to be the epitome of what fighter’s should strive for, male or female. However, once her body fails and is no longer able to be read for its athletic productivity, her body should then be viewed in the same way she previously viewed other female bodies. Due to her failure, she is no longer able to contribute to professional sports culture through her athletic ability. Consequently, she can no longer distribute control onto other female fighters, therefore, her body, or more specifically her reproductive organs become the focus and in turn what needs to be disciplined. Rousey directs the attention to her reproductive capability which inherently emphasizes Halberstam’s point that female masculinity and motherhood cannot coincide with one another. Halberstam (1998) states, “I suppose people think that if female masculinity is widely approved, then no one will want to take

responsibility for the trials and pains of reproduction” (p. 273). In other words, it is not possible for women who embody female masculinity to also participate in the “trials and pains of reproduction.” Rousey underscores Halberstam’s argument. Her embodiment and performance of female masculinity failed, so she presents her body through a different context, one that is able to become pregnant and have her man’s babies. Additionally, because her female masculinity failed, the only reason she has to stay alive is to be able to participate in the trials and pains of reproduction. Rousey presents her body as being only able to accomplish one or the other. She is only able to entertain the idea of reproducing once the meaning associated with her female masculinity is quite literally, knocked out of her.

Rousey’s vocal resistance and negotiation of her body is curious because she is only able to politicize how her body is read within the disciplinary nature of sports culture. When she is an active and successful athlete she calls for her body to be seen as something more than just female, feminine, or masculine. Her body is something that she has sculpted and created for a specific purpose (one that is not simply about reproduction) and should be viewed as such. She is able to use her voice to push against the boundaries of sports culture as evidenced in the UFC vlog and other specifically sports media like ESPNW’s *Nine for IX* short. However, once she is in the peripherals of the disciplinary power of sports culture, her need to resist seems to change. This is not to say that Rousey’s interviews with Ellen or any other talk show fall outside the realm of sports culture. They are still part of sports media. Yet, Rousey’s call for a progressive reading of her body appears less urgent in the interview with DeGeneres.

Rousey appeared on *Ellen* prior to her comeback fight against Amanda Nunes and discussed her preparation for the fight. However, unlike previous interviews pre-fight (such as the interviews previously mentioned with Jimmy Kimmel), Rousey spends less time discussing her fight and more time focused on her relationship with her boyfriend. She states, “Yeah. He’s got me domesticated now a little bit.” She goes on to explain her hobby of knitting and forming a club with actor, Kat Dennings. She states,

Yeah, the Yarn and the Restless. But it’s more of a drinking club and you can tell which parts of the, well here’s my scarf. I mean, I call it black-carf (black out scarf) cause it started out as a scarf and you can tell which ones are the sober sections and which ones aren’t. See this is right after my last fight, I was a lot more sad. This is a sad section. And you see me getting happier as like it comes along. (“Ronda Rousey Is Ready for Her Next Fight”)

Rousey is still an active participant in sports culture during this interview. She appears on the show to provide press for her upcoming fight. However, she navigates the conversation away from her body and instead directs the focus to other ways that her body can be productive and produce something. Similar to Rousey’s previous interview with *Ellen*, Rousey chooses to not emphasize her body’s ability to perform during a fight. She instead positions herself as “domesticated.” Additionally, she discusses her emotional state before fights. She states,

You’re so amped up. And it’s like every emotion you could possibly have happens during that week. It’s like the most stress, most anxiety, the most pressure possible, and it’s the happiest you could possibly be. It’s all these things

and it just – sometimes you can't hold it in. It's gotta leak out of somewhere, why not your eyes? (“Ronda Rousey Is Ready for Her Next Fight”)

To be clear, Rousey crying and expressing emotion is not inherently masculine or feminine and should not be vilified. Instead, Rousey's choice to focus on her emotion and body's ability to produce tears, become pregnant, or domesticated highlights the larger disciplinary power of sports culture. In both interviews with Ellen Rousey has to renegotiate how her body is viewed. She is no longer a dominating athletic force, so she must present her body in other ways to still be considered useful and productive. For Rousey, that presentation occurs at the expense of her athletic prowess. In the context of sports culture female masculinity is only useful and acceptable when it is associated with a body that wins. When winning stops, that body must reconfigure how it fits inside sports culture and society as a whole.

Rousey's domestic shift is not unnoticed. On June 27, 2017 Rousey posted a time-lapsed video to her Instagram account with the caption, “Cooking breakfast for my #MCM @travisbrownemma” (<https://www.instagram.com/rondarousey/>). Previously Rousey's social media accounts have been dedicated to promoting her fights. There is very little, if any, content that alludes to her romantic relationships or promotes viewing her body as something that is not actively participating in professional sports culture. Following Rousey's Instagram post, MMAMania.com posted a story titled, “Do-nothing chef: Ronda Rousey trades in UFC gloves for greasy spatula.” Seemingly, both Rousey and the MMA community view Rousey as now being outside of the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture. Rousey is no longer a do nothing bitch who embodies female

masculinity. Instead, her female masculinity and do nothing bitch-ness is being traded in for a “greasy spatula.” Author Jess Holland (2017) writes,

Rousey has been vocal about women — including herself — making the most of their opportunities in life, creating the phrase “Do-Nothing Bitch” as a way to inspire and motivate her female fans. “Rowdy” held up her end of the bargain over the past few years and looks content to finally be able to do ... well, nothing.” (“Do-nothing chef: Ronda Rousey trades in UFC gloves for greasy spatula”).

Rousey is now allowed to become a do nothing bitch, or a do nothing chef. She is a woman who does not embody and perform female masculinity because she is instead emphasizing her domesticity and traditional feminine qualities. Her body only marginally fits into sports culture. She makes breakfast for her fiancé, Travis Browne who is also a UFC fighter. She is able to contribute to preparing his body to fight, but her body is no longer part of that scope. Instead, she regulates herself to the realm of domesticity.

Rousey disciplines her body to be productive in a different capacity. She can produce food for her #MCM (man crush Monday) who happens to also be an MMA fighter.

Professional sports culture still controls how Rousey is viewed, however, because she is no longer an active participant in this culture, her body must be assigned a new meaning. When Rousey was an active participant in professional sports culture, her body signified female masculinity, she was able to control her emotions, sculpt her muscles, and utilize her body for the sole purpose of defeating other female fighters. Yet, when Rousey’s body falls outside of the direct confines of sports culture that meaning is essentially

stripped away and instead of being viewed as a do nothing bitch, she is simply a do nothing chef.

**“I’ve got 99 problems, but a Bethe ain’t one.”**

Ronda Rousey is an active participant in the disciplinary apparatus of professional sports culture. I previously established that Rousey internalizes this discipline and inflicts it upon her own body. While this remains true, Rousey is also a practitioner of discipline and control. This power is granted to her because she was the first and the best female fighter in the UFC. Rousey is aware of this and is not afraid to express it. In her interview on *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* Rousey discusses her attitude upon entering the octagon with another female fighter and states,

You could give up, if you want. You can tap out anytime. I’d be calling you smart, cause it’s going down regardless... know when the joint’s reached its limit because you feel the pop and this is a very sensitive area that I’m putting strain on, so I can feel things pretty well. (“Ronda Rousey - HBO Real Sports”)

Rousey’s body is the tool that controls the other female fighter’s bodies. She indicates that other fighters can try, and can choose to “tap out anytime.” According to Rousey, this would be a smart move because “it’s going down regardless.” It does not matter if her opponents willingly submit or not because Rousey is there to inflict her power upon their bodies. Previously, Rousey discussed how she was able to sustain the pain of the armbar. In this example, she further explains the physical sensation of the armbar, her signature move. She physically pushes her opponents to the limit by dislocating their elbows. She states that she can feel the pop of their elbow. She’s performed the armbar so frequently that she is familiar with the sensation and “can feel things pretty well.” Not

only does Rousey discipline her opponent's body, she is in control of it. For Rousey, this element of discipline and control is not relegated to just her opponent's bodies. Rousey also demonstrates mental control. In the same interview on Real Sports Rousey discusses her then upcoming fight with Brazilian fighter, Bethe Correia and states, "I don't just wanna beat this chick. She needs to be embarrassed. I want her to like, go to therapy afterward. I'm serious. Psychological. Psychological therapy" ("Ronda Rousey - HBO Real Sports"). Similarly, in her interview with *Self Magazine* Rousey states,

There's nothing that happens in a fight that I don't understand. Things happen sometimes that I don't expect, but there's nothing I don't understand. So I always know what's going on all of the time. I have so much belief in my eyes that I believe that no one is going to hit me with something that I can't see. The way that you knock somebody out is that you outwit them. You outsmart them. And you surprise them. And I'm absolutely convinced in my mind that no one that walks in that cage is wittier or smarter than me. No one has the right to beat you. ("Watch Ronda Rousey In Action At The Gym").

I previously established that Rousey controls and disciplines her body through the power of professional sports culture. Rousey embodies this control to the point where there is "nothing that happens in a fight" that she does not understand. Because Rousey is in control of her body, she is able to exert authority over her opponents. Rousey does this both physically and mentally. Rousey has meticulously trained her mind to "outwit" her opponents. She states, "no one is going to hit me with something that I can't see." She programs her brain to anticipate her opponent's next move, which then allows her to physically distribute her power. Rousey does not want to just physically punish her

opponents. As she indicates in her response about her fight against Correia, she also wants it to embarrass her opponent to the point where she needs “psychological therapy.” Rousey internalizes the discipline of sports culture and becomes a tool of the mechanism of power through the way she discusses and ultimately breaks down other female fighter bodies and minds. As previously established, Rousey is in some ways, the paragon of expectation for female UFC fighters. Sports culture is a disciplinary tool that is able to make bodies knowable and readable and Rousey is an extension of this tool. In comparison to other female fighters, Rousey makes her body active and readable. Rousey is only able to do this because of her voice. Rousey uses her voice as an instrument to manage how her body is viewed and consumed, especially in comparison to other female fighters. According to Rousey, her body and her capacity to fight and win is unprecedented, so much to the point that she is able to control the length of a fight and the outcome of the state of her opponent’s body after a fight. Additionally, Rousey uses her voice to dictate how other female fighters are viewed. She uses her voice to emphasize her capability as a means to position her opponent as someone who is not comparable. Again, Rousey is the best and should be viewed as such, especially when compared to her opponents.

During her interview with Jimmy Kimmel, Rousey discusses her record setting title submission, which was 14 seconds against fighter Cat Zigano. When Kimmel asks Rousey about her mindset going into the fight Rousey explains that she is always in control of the fight and her opinion of her opponent often dictates the length of the fight. Rousey states,

RR: Well, if I make the fight fast that means I like you. That's me at my most merciful. You know. She got to go home and do whatever with like a payment to go buy a house. She had a great night if you think about it. But with this next chick that I don't like it's not going to be like that. She's gonna walk out looking different than she did walking in.

JK: Will you try to break your 14 second record here?

RR: Um, no. No. I'm going to make sure this chick remembers and endures every single second of this fight.

(“Ronda Rousey Wins Fights in Under 20 Seconds”)

In this example Rousey further demonstrates the level of control she has not only over her own body, but also over her opponent's body. Further, the amount of discipline Rousey choose to expend on her opponent directly correlate with the amount of respect Rousey has for that fighter. Rousey indicates that the 14-second fight against Zigano was Rousey at her “most merciful.” Rousey chose to not expert much physical power on Zigano. Rousey explains this when she tells Kimmel, “I actually really like her. She's one of the girls that I really have a lot of respect for. And I just told her, I was like, dude, we can do this again anytime” (“Ronda Rousey Wins Fights in Under 20 Seconds). Rousey views herself as a tool that administers various levels of discipline upon the other female fighter's bodies. If she respects her opponent as an athlete and a person, her discipline is more merciful. Rousey indicates that this is not the case for Bethe Correia, a Brazilian fighter. Leading up to their fight, Correia discussed Rousey and stated,

I want to knock her out, show to everyone that she is a lie. She wants to stand up with me, let's see. I want to humiliate her and show the word she has no MMA.

She is focused on movies, books. I am much stronger, I come from a developing country, where people are struggling to survive, not to starve. It is very different from her life of reality. Under pressure, she is proving weak. When her mom put pressure on her, she ran away from home. When she lost, it was because of drugs. That's not a superhero. She is not mentally healthy, she needs to take care of herself. She is winning, so everybody is around her cheering her up, but when she realizes she is not everything that she believes she is, I don't know what might happen. I hope she does not kill herself later on. (“Bethe Correia: I hope Ronda Rousey doesn't kill herself after I humiliate her at UFC 190”)

Correia vocally challenged Rousey. Additionally, Correia attributed much of Rousey’s success to her privilege as an American fighter. Rousey has not had to face the same challenges that Correia has such as “struggling to survive” or starvation. Correia seemingly understands the nature of professional sports culture. She iterates that, “She is winning, so everybody is around her cheering her up.” Correia acknowledges that Rousey’s is constantly visible and on display due to her success. It is due to her hyper visibility that Correia wants to knock her out and show everyone that “she is a lie.” Predictably, Rousey did not take kindly to Correia’s remarks, as evidenced in her interviews with Kimmel and on Real Sports. In both interviews Rousey indicates that she plans on exercising full disciplinary control, both mentally and physically. She tells Kimmel, “She’s gonna walk out looking different than she did walking in.” Similarly, on Real Sports she states that she wants Correia to need psychological therapy. Leading up to the fight, Rousey consistently iterated that she planned to make Correia suffer. On the UFC vlog, “Embedded,” Rousey discusses how she plans to make the fight last as long as

possible. She further explains how she needs each opponent in order to accomplish her personal goals. She states,

I need these other girls. It's not like I could do this by myself. I need a dancing partner and uh, these girls are like plants you know? Sometimes you can grow a crop and harvest it year after year like Misha and sometimes your harvest it once it'll never grow back. Like I don't think Bethe will ever come back after this.

(“UFC 190 Embedded: Vlog Series – Episode 2”)

Rousey needs the other female fighters in order to “grow a crop and harvest it.” She views the other female fighter bodies as something she has the power to grow, harvest, and possibly destroy. Correia’s body was one of the plants that Rousey harvested that will “never grow back.” After the fight and Correia’s consequential loss via knockout in 34 seconds of round one, Rousey stated, “You know, she was screaming in my face at weigh-ins. She was saying, 'Don't cry.' So I turned around to her after I knocked her out and I said, 'Don't cry” (Stets, 2015, “Ronda Rousey reveals cold message she delivered to Bethe Correia after 34-second knockout at UFC 190”). Rousey not only physically defeats and disciplines Correia, but she controls her emotionally as well. After Rousey was named the women’s UFC Bantam Weight champion, Correia retreated to her team and hid her face, seemingly to cry about her loss.

When Rousey vocalizes her desire to control other bodies, she demonstrates the invisible power of sports culture. In her interview with Kimmel, she is not actively participating in a fight. In a sense, she is outside the direct control of sports culture. However, because it is an assemblage of power and Rousey demonstrates her ability to contain, carry, and distribute the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture. Her

body is able to transgress the borders of traditional sports culture. Rousey makes her body visible and knowable not only as a recipient of the discipline of sports culture, but also as a practitioner of said discipline. Rousey operates both within and outside of professional sports culture. Rousey positions her body as a tool in the assemblage of professional sports culture that is able to physically and mentally fragment and destroy other female bodies. Yasmin Jiwani (2015) explains how the body that is visibly marked must contest with the visibly marked body. Additionally, the invisible body is able to remain dominant. In other words, by rhetorically emphasizing that she wanted to physically destroy Correia, Rousey marked Correia's body. In turn, this placed Rousey's body in the position of being invisible and unmarked. Rousey rhetorically put the focus on Correia, placing her within the borders of professional sports culture. Rousey's body then served as the invisible body in dominance that was able to discipline Correia. In this instance, Rousey's is the invisible body that has the power to demarcate borders of sports culture and power. The invisibility of Rousey's body is only possible due to her discussion of the breakdown of other female bodies. She pushes against the gaze of sports culture, but can only do so by subjecting other female bodies to its disciplinary power. Rousey rhetorically marks borders of difference onto her opponent's. This in turn categorizes them as incomplete or inactive participants in sports culture. This rhetorical move by Rousey divides and contrasts her from other female bodies. David Cisneros (2015) writes,

The border not only demarcates and divides, it also provides the possibility for contact and crossing. It takes shape through the reiteration and performance of those borders in public discourse. The border is pliable and, more than that,

rhetorical, such that rhetorical and performative practices materialize the border and demarcate belonging. (pp. 143-144)

Borders on the body, much like geographical borders, signify acceptance and otherness. When borders are crossed illegally or outside of expectation, a person is labeled an alien, intruder, and outsider. Rousey places herself in the position of acceptance. Other female fighters are the aliens and intruders who should not be accepted into sports culture or who do not have the capacity to resist the disciplinary nature in the same way Rousey can.

Rousey iterates this on episode 1 of “Embedded – UFC 190”. She states,

It’s not about individual people and matches anymore. It’s about the whole. It’s about the legacy and I’m starting to think about how that is my grand opponent and I just have to beat that opponent in pieces and Bethe is just one of those pieces one the way to that legacy. I want that more than any of these girls could even possibly want one of these individual matches. I’ve bled more than they ever could bleed. I’ve sweat more than they ever could sweat. And I’ve cried more than they ever could cry. And there’s no way they could ever possibly keep up, especially when every day they fall farther and farther behind. (“UFC 190 Embedded: Vlog Series – Episode 1”)

Rousey discusses the materiality of her body. She emphasizes her literal blood, sweat, and tears she has sacrificed. She iterates how the other female fighters are just “pieces” to help her achieve her desired legacy. Similarly, she discusses the “pieces” of her body. She evokes specific images of the materiality of her body such as her blood and her sweat. However, the pieces of her body assemble to be the whole – the whole machine that is Rousey that is able to exert physical discipline upon the intruders, the bodies that

are marked. Yet, Rousey never explicitly connects the pieces to her actual body, therefore her body proper has the ability to remain invisible and retain its dominant position. By discussing the pieces of her body Rousey is able to contrast herself against the other “girls” she is fighting. She makes aspects body knowable in comparison to her opponent’s bodies as a way to demonstrate that they are incapable of living up to her standard of being a “grand opponent.” She iterates that her body and her legacy demarcate belonging. In contrast, the other bodies she fights do not belong in her legacy or in sports culture. Rousey draws a distinct line and border between herself and other female fighters. She makes the other fighters bodies knowable as a means to control them and demonstrate how they do not fall within the confines of acceptance.

Rousey purposefully physically fragments the bodies of her opponents. She dislocates their elbows through her use of the armbar. She discusses how their bodies will never compare to her own. She marks herself as the body that belongs within professional sports culture and indicates that the other fighters are intruders and that their bodies are merely tools to help her reach her desired level of success. The fragmentation and creation of borders for other female fighter bodies operates as a rhetorical tool to create a space for Rousey’s performance and embodiment of female masculinity. She already established that she is “femininely badass” and that her muscular stature should be appreciated. Rousey discusses her feminine badass-ness in the context of accepting her female masculinity. However, female masculinity as previously established, is often suspect. There cannot be an oversaturation of female bodies that materialize as masculine. When Rousey calls attention to other female fighter’s bodies and their inability to measure up to her body, Rousey creates a limited space for their performance

of masculinity. Rousey presents their bodies as fragmented and scraps of her full embodiment and performance of female masculinity. Halberstam (1998) states, “Female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. In other words, female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (p. 1). When Rousey contrasts her performance of female masculinity with that of her opponents, she adopts a stance of dominant masculinity. She presents her body and her performance as the “real thing.” Therefore, the scraps of female masculinity performed by the other female fighters are not real and should not be taken seriously. Rousey positions her body as the only one that should matter. According to Rousey, all other female fighters pale in comparison. In fact, she states,

I give Bethe so much respect as an athlete where as she just hopes that somehow I’m going to be mentally weakened or something. Why are you hoping for me to fuck up? You should be hoping for yourself to be good and assume that I’m going to be fantastic. (“UFC 190 Embedded: Vlog Series – Episode 2”)

Bethe Correia’s athletic body is only acceptable because Rousey herself is fantastic. The materiality of Rousey’s body and her muscles are what are important. Rousey’s body holds meaning. Butler (1993) states, “To know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where ‘to matter’ means at once ‘to materialize’ and ‘to mean’” (p. 7). Rousey understands the significance of her body and the meaning associated with it. Her body matters because she is able to sculpt and mold it and perform outside of expectation. She is able to provide new meaning to female masculinity. However, Rousey is only able to ascribe meaning to the materiality of her body by placing it in contest with

other female fighter bodies. Rousey is the exception. She is not the norm. No other female fighter can fulfill the standard that she has created. She creates a space for female masculinity and politicizes her body, but *only* her body. Her body is the only body that matters and holds meaning.

### **Conclusion**

Rousey is able to advocate for the acceptance of female masculinity in the UFC vlog because as Halberstam states, she “coincides with the excess of male supremacy.” So her need to vocalize resistance appears to be necessary. She understands that her body will be disciplined regardless of her voice. In order to push against that, she makes her body knowable in a way that she is seemingly able to control. However, as I previously stated, this is only possible when she places her body in direct opposition with other female bodies, which she implies are not as muscular or athletic as her own. In a sense, the politicization and acceptance of a female body that is muscular is only possible because of the disciplinary nature of sports culture.

Yet, even this is a circumstance that is unique to Rousey. She is a straight white female. In other episodes of “Embedded” Rousey discusses various aspects of her sex life – which she indicates is heterosexual. In fact, Rousey discusses how she was accused of “lube shaming” following the publication of an article in *Maxim* magazine. In a Q&A that was featured in the November 2015 issue of *Maxim* Rousey is asked, “Dear Ronda: What should a guy NEVER do in bed? What should a guy ALWAYS do in bed? (Asking for a friend.) - Jack, 36, Los Angeles” (Wilson, 2015, “UFC Queen Ronda Rousey Reveals the Secret to Great Sex”). Rousey answers, “What should a guy always do? Take his time. In general, a girl takes a minute. He needs to get her ready. You should never

need lube in your life. If you need lube, then you're being lazy...and you're not taking your time (Wilson, 2015, "UFC Queen Ronda Rousey Reveals the Secret to Great Sex"). Many critics did not approve of Rousey's response. For example, Rachel Kramer Bussel from *Salon* accused Rousey of "lube shaming." She writes,

There's even a term for this: "lube shaming." Because our culture is somehow obsessed with telling everyone else how to live, a simple step toward sexual enhancement like lube can become a minefield—but only if you listen to people who have no business dispensing sex advice, like Rousey. (Bussel, 2015, "Ronda Rousey gives terrible sex advice: "If you need lube, then you're being lazy" shows she has no business telling other people how to get off")

Similarly, Kristen Sollee from *Bustle* calls Rousey out for her brand of girl power. She writes, "MMA champion Ronda Rousey is no stranger to controversy. Her polarizing us-vs-them brand of girl power recently surfaced yet again in a new Maxim sex column where she suggests that no woman should ever have to use sexual lubricant" (Sollee, 2015, "7 Reasons Using Lube Doesn't Mean You're Bad At Sex"). Rousey does not seem phased by her critics. During an episode of "Embedded" she addresses the lube-shaming controversy. She states,

Some men... I'm just saying, like what's the rush? Where's the fire? Why the lube? I was asked a question, 'what are you like not in to?' Get your lube away from me. If you need the lube, you're not the dude. That's the next catch phrase. We were in the world of open and accepting lubeness till I came along. Lube shamed you. Sorry. I thought I was doing all girls a favor. You know. Making sure that their guys put in some effort. Yeah, but it sounded like some greedy

kiddy bitches are really fucking mad at me. I'm like, it's not my fault you're working with a sandbox. ("UFC 193 Embedded: Vlog Series - Episode 1")

Rousey explicitly discusses a material production of the female body that occurs when she is aroused. She connects her body's ability to produce lubrication without the assistance of something manufactured to her heterosexuality and also to what makes her body better than other "kiddy bitches." She can succeed in performing female masculinity because she is also straight and has sex with "dudes." Additionally, Rousey expresses that by making this statement, she has done "all girls a favor." However, "all girls" is limited to straight white females.

Rousey's rebellion via female masculinity is only possible because she is heterosexual. Rousey is able to avoid the rejection of her female masculinity because she does not associate it with a queer identity, therefore, it is not threatening. Additionally, because Rousey is white, her muscular build is not subjected to the association of her race like it is for other female athletes. Rousey does not have to fight against controlling images in the same way that Serena Williams and Brittney Griner have had to. Rousey's whiteness gives her an additional pass when it comes to accepting her female masculinity.

In fact, the whiteness of the UFC as it appears in the vlog positions Rousey to be, in some ways, the conquering hero – at least for the female UFC fighters. The UFC is an international sport and fights take place in the USA, Brazil, and Australia. However, throughout her span of being undefeated, Rousey considered herself not just a champion for the United States, but also for Brazil. In episode 4 of "UFC Embedded 190" Rousey states, "I promised the Brazilian people I'd come here and I would fight for them and I'm

fulfilling that promise and I'm gonna come here and I'm gonna win" ("UFC 190 Embedded: Vlog Series – Episode 4" Again, the UFC is an international organization, but Brazil had champion fighters previously in Bethe Correia and now in Amanda Nunes. By making the claim that she will win for the Brazilian people and that she is "fulfilling that promise," Rousey further exemplifies her position of whiteness, and the whiteness of the UFC as a whole. She represents what Michael Lacey (2008) calls "white absolutist Orientalism." Lacey explains that in film, whites are able to easily cross borders by learning and mastering martial arts, typically at a faster pace and with better skill than their Asian mentor (Lacey, 2008). While Rousey is not necessarily practicing an Asian martial art, she is trained in and practices Brazilian jiu jitsu and judo. Rousey states that while competing in Rio, she plans to fulfill her promise and win for the Brazilian people. She adopts the stance of a conquering hero, which can be attributed to her whiteness. She has learned and mastered jiu jitsu and will perform it better than Correia, who at the time was Brazil's champion. And while Rousey is the primary focus of this study, I believe it is important to note that not all of Rousey's opponents were white women. Rousey fought and defeated Correia and most recently lost to Nunes. Because Rousey is straight and white, she is able to navigate the disciplinary power of sports culture in ways that would not be granted to her peers like Correia and Nunes. Rousey is able to call attention to the limited understanding of what a female athlete's body should look like and what should be considered feminine, but it is from a straight, white perspective. Rousey does politicize her body, but in a way that is only beneficial for herself or for others like her. Female athletes of color or queer female athletes do not fall into Rousey's politicization.

In 2015 Barbara Walters named Ronda Rousey to her list of “Most Fascinating People of 2015.” Walters states, ““In one year she went from Ronda who? To a feminist folk hero” (“Ronda Rousey, the Making of a Fighting Champion”). However, Rousey herself is slow to claim the title “feminist folk hero.” In her interview featured on *Real Sports with Bryant Gumble* Rousey states,

I don't wake up in the morning and I don't open my eyes and think 'What can I do today for the betterment of women in society.' That's not my first thought over oatmeal. But I try where I can. When I go shoot for *Sports Illustrated* or for *Maxim* I'll purposefully do it heavier. I'm gonna go and do that shoot looking exactly how I look like on a normal day. I'm the same weight right now as I shot *Sports Illustrated*. I could literally take off my jumper and do it right now and I ate dinner last night. If I want to have a real social effect, then that's the way that I can do it. (“Ronda Rousey - HBO Real Sports”)

Rousey does not explicitly think about what she can do for “the betterment of women in society.” Yet, she does understand that she is able to make an impact. Rousey indicates that she uses her body to push against the boundaries of professional sports culture not only for herself, but also for other women. She states that she does photo shoots where her body is the focus, “purposefully heavier.” Rousey refers to her photo-shoot for Sports Illustrated where she was featured in the 2015 Swimsuit Edition. During the photo-shoot Rousey was interviewed and she states,

My name is Ronda Rousey and I'm the women's UFC Bantam Weight Champion. When I go the call about the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue, I was like, 'OMG, SWIMSUIT ISSUE!' I don't even think I was speaking English. I

was just shouting and shaking and I didn't have a moment of hesitation. I was just so happy to have this opportunity because, yeah, I really do believe that there shouldn't just be one cookie cutter body type that everybody is aspiring to be. I guess I'm the first MMA fighter to be a Sports Illustrated Swimsuit model.

(“Ronda Rousey Uncovered 2015 | Sports Illustrated Swimsuit”)

Rousey consistently iterates that she does not believe female bodies should be categorized or viewed as “one cookie cutter body type.” Because of this, she purposefully does photo-shoots “heavier” and “eats dinner.” Rousey continues to manipulate and discipline her body as a way to navigate the border of professional sports culture and how her body is read. While Rousey advocates for the acceptance of her body and other bodies that are not cookie cutter, her call is still saturated in notions of heterosexual whiteness. Rousey does not need to contest how her body is viewed in the same way that Williams does. Rousey does not need to explain how her whiteness correlates with how her body is read because her whiteness is the expected norm. Additionally, she does not have to navigate how her sexuality is mapped upon her body in the ways that Brittney Griner must. While Griner's female masculinity is viewed as a queer and a threat, Rousey's heterosexual and white female masculinity is considered the exception and is even applauded as evidenced by her features in *Sports Illustrated* and *Maxim*. Certainly, Rousey is doing the best she can. Yet, Rousey is far from a “feminist folk hero.” She unquestionably challenges the way female athlete bodies are viewed and consumed, however, this new perspective is reserved for straight white female athletes. Audre Lorde (1984) writes,

Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power. As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define woman in terms of their own experience alone, the women of Color become "other," the outsider whose experience and tradition is too "alien" to comprehend.

(p. 117)

Female athletes of color or female athletes who identify as queer do not fall within Rousey's borders. They remain "other" and "alien." Rousey does not even consider their experience; therefore they fall outside of her call for acceptance of varying female bodies. The white visibility of Rousey's body places queer female athletes and female athletes of color in the realm of invisibility.

### Chapter 3

#### **“I am black and I am confident:” Serena Williams’s blackness, code-switching, and sports culture**

##### **Introduction**

On March 27, 2017, *GQ* magazine tweeted, “We caught up with the greatest tennis player of all time,” attached with a picture of male tennis star, Roger Federer (<https://twitter.com/GQMagazine>). The tweet linked to feature article on Federer that states his “life is essentially predicated on winning, shattering records with no grunts, no sweat: 302 weeks as world number one. In many eyes, the GOAT” (Baldwin, 2017, “Will Roger Federer Ever Be Done”). Twitter users quickly used this opportunity to point out *GQ*’s misstep, tweeting comments such as, “This is a horrible picture of Serena Williams” (<https://twitter.com/kidnoble>) and “Then why isn’t this a photograph of Serena Williams?” (<https://twitter.com/theferocity>). *Fader Magazine*, which had previously published a cover feature on Williams in October 2016 titled, “How Serena Williams Became the G.O.A.T.” contributed to the Twitter conversation. The magazine directly replied to the *GQ* Twitter account and tweeted, “.@GQMagazine We caught up with the greatest tennis player of all time,” and provided a link to the previously mentioned article (<https://twitter.com/thefader>). When it comes to professional athletes and the term G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time), the media often defaults to discussing successful male athletes like Roger Federer or Patriot’s quarterback, Tom Brady. In fact, Brady is featured on the cover of the video game, *Madden NFL ’18: G.O.A.T. Edition* (Stites, 2017, “Tom Brady is on the cover of ‘Madden 18: G.O.A.T. Edition’”). These men are certainly spectacular athletes. However, there is one G.O.A.T. who has been at the top of her game for over a decade and who, as previously evidenced, is usually not the first

athlete to come to mind. Serena Williams has been a professional tennis player since 1995. During her 22-year career as a professional athlete, the World Tennis Association has ranked Williams as the number one singles player 72 times and part of the number one doubles team, along with her sister Venus, 23 times (<http://www.wtatennis.com/players/player/230234/title/Serena-Williams>). On January 16, 2017 Williams made history by winning her 23<sup>rd</sup> major title at the Australian Open (Doerern, 2017, “Serena Breaks Record with 23<sup>rd</sup> Grand Slam”). In fact, in a press conference following the semi-finals in the 2016 Wimbledon tournament when a reporter commented, “There will be talk about you going down as one of the greatest female athletes of all time,” Williams responded by stating “I prefer the words 'one of the greatest athletes of all time’” (Evans, 2016, “Serena Williams Prefers to Be Known As One of the Greatest Athletes of All Time”). Arguably, Williams is completely justified in deeming herself a G.O.A.T. She has earned two “Serena Slams,” which includes winning four Grand Slam tournaments in a row (Tognotti, 2015, “What Does ‘Serena Slam’ Mean?”). Williams has not only established herself as a formidable opponent on the tennis court, but she has also demonstrated her ability to become a pop culture icon. From twerking with Beyoncé in the visual album *Lemonade* and on tour to creating her own fashion line “Signature Statement” with HSN, Williams proves she can seemingly do and have it all (Barron, 2016, “Serena Williams explains why Beyoncé wanted her in 'Lemonade' video;” <https://www.hsn.com/shop/serena-williams/6590>). In this chapter, I argue Serena Williams uses notions of code switching to navigate the borders of professional sports culture. This rhetorical action allows her to advocate for relational

feminism, which gives voice to her position as a black woman while also calling for collective change for women in sports.

However, all of this success and rise to fame has not come without critique. Both Serena and her sister Venus have been scrutinized for their physical appearance on multiple occasions. Venus was penalized a point for her hair beads flying in the 1999 Australian Open quarterfinals, which resulted in her loss to Lindsey Davenport (Dillman, 1999, “Venus Loses Beads, Then Unravels”). The media have continually commented on the sister’s hair and Serena’s body. She is either deemed too fat or too muscular. Serena and her sister Venus are two of the most successful female tennis players. Both women have broken numerous tennis records; yet, both women must still contest comments regarding their race and gender. Prior to Serena’s 2015 Wimbledon match against Garbiñe Muguruza, the *New York Times* ran a piece by Ben Rothenberg titled “Tennis’s Top Women Balance Body Image With Ambition.” Rothenberg (2015) discussed Williams’s body and wrote that she “Has large biceps and a mold-breaking muscular frame, which packs the power and athleticism that have dominated women’s tennis for years. Her rivals could try to emulate her physique, but most of them choose not to” (“Tennis’s Top Women Balance Body Image With Ambition”). According to Rothenberg, Serena’s body allows her to be a successful tennis player, but is not one that many female tennis players would want to emulate since the esthetics of her body diverges from a traditional understanding of what it means to be female and feminine. In spite of this, Serena refuses to see her body as something that is stigmatized. She posed for *The New York Magazine* wearing a black leotard in a full straddle split with her hands on her thighs, drawing attention to their muscularity (Howley, 2015, “The Unretiring

Serena Williams”). In an interview with *Self Magazine*, in which she is featured on the cover, she tells writer Howie Kahn (2016),

I love my body, and I would never change anything about it. I'm not asking you to like my body. I'm just asking you to let me be me. Because I'm going to influence a girl who does look like me, and I want her to feel good about herself. (“Serena Williams, Wonder Woman, Is Our September Cover Star”)

Williams refuses to be shamed for her body, especially as a successful black woman. Additionally, Williams refuses to mute her voice as a black woman. As Claudia Rankine (2015) reports for *The New York Times Magazine*, “She will tell an audience or an official that they are disrespectful or unjust, whether she says, simply, ‘No, no, no’ or something much more forceful” (“The Meaning of Serena Williams”). Williams is unapologetic for her blackness, body, and voice. In many ways, Williams’ blackness grants her the ability to understand the duplicitous nature of professional sports culture. Certainly, her father and coach Richard Williams understood this. In his autobiography, *Black and White: The Way I See It*, he describes training both Serena and Venus and that he “raised warriors.” He writes,

I used to bring busloads of kids from the local schools into Compton to surround the courts while Venus and Serena practiced. I had the kids call them every curse word in the English language, including ‘nigger.’ I paid them to do it and told them to ‘do their worst. As a result, I never had to take up for my daughters on the court. Serena takes care of herself. Everyone knows it. She’ll tell you, ‘Just get the hell out my face,’ or ‘I don’t like what you did.’ (Williams, 2014, p. 54)

The lesson from her father is something that Williams carries with her every time she steps on the court. She understands that she is a professional athlete, but she also acknowledges that she is a black female professional athlete and the meaning associated with that. She tells Rankine (2015), “I play for me, but I also play and represent something much greater than me. I embrace that. I love that. I want that. So ultimately, when I am out there on the court, I am playing for me” (“The Meaning of Serena Williams”). Williams understands that her position in professional sports culture is, at sometimes, larger than just herself. Due to her position as a black female professional tennis player, she is able to navigate how her body is consumed. Serena is able to utilize her body within the realm of sports culture as a tool for political power. The ability to politicize her identity is granted to Williams specifically due to her position as a prominent black woman in U.S. culture. Because of this and the whiteness that permeates professional sports culture, Williams uses her voice to navigate the boundaries of her identity. In this chapter, I argue Williams utilizes aspects of code switching as a way to wade through the whiteness of sports culture. In doing this, she takes a stance of opposition, which creates the opportunity for her to politicize and re-negotiate how her body is consumed and also position herself as an advocate for relational and intersectional feminism. Overall, I assert Williams’s unique position as a professional athlete provides her the opportunity to call for acceptance and advocate for social justice for individuals who occupy spaces of intersectionality.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief background of whiteness in sports culture and the necessity for code switching. Next, I briefly discuss the texts and methods utilized for analysis in this chapter. Finally, I provide an analysis of mediated

audio-visual texts where Serena Williams is the primary rhetor. My analysis proceeds in two major sections. In the first section, I focus my analysis on Williams's interview with rapper Common as a means to illustrate her modes of code switching and encoded rhetoric. In contrast, I compare the rhetoric Williams utilizes during the Common interview to her 2015 *Sports Illustrated* "Sports Person of the Year" speech as well as other interviews including the interview she gave with *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit* and *Good Morning America*. Finally, I provide overall implications for Williams's position as a prominent black female athlete and her call for a more nuanced understanding of relational feminism.

### **Whiteness of Sports Culture & Code Switching**

In the previous chapter, I iterated the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture and how it is saturated with whiteness. Additionally, I demonstrated how white female athletes, such as Ronda Rousey, are able to internalize and disseminate said discipline due to their embodiment of whiteness. In this chapter I use Serena Williams as a case study to examine and establish how professional sports culture still disciplines female athletes, especially female athletes of color, but also the rhetorical strategies developed to disrupt, resist, and control. Specifically, in the case of Serena Williams, I assert that she utilizes her voice as a tool of resistance. However, rather than changing the tone and delivery of her voice, Williams uses nontraditional aspects of code switching as a means to defy the control of professional sports culture. While Williams takes a stance of defiance, she is able to encode her rhetoric to appeal to multiple audiences, which ultimately can be understood as a call for a more intersectional or relational understanding of the female body.

As stated in the previous chapter, the assemblant nature of sports culture allows it to remain invisible, which extends the disciplinary power past the context of an athlete's performance during a game or a match. The different aspects and appendages of sports culture are necessary to control and manipulate how an athlete's body is understood and read. In addition to this, professional sports culture operates under presumed notions of whiteness. This is particularly treacherous, because as Yahui Zhang, Radhika Gajjala, and Sean Watkins (2012) explain, "The invisibility of Whiteness makes it difficult to name, insidious to (re)inscribe, and thus hard to disrupt. Whiteness is given its meaning through the performance of communication" (p. 205). The impact of whiteness can seem invisible until it is inscribed through communicative practices. To be clear, the purpose of this analysis is to understand whiteness as it is rhetorically constructed. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995) underline the importance of this and write,

By viewing whiteness as a rhetorical construction, we avoid searching for any essential nature to whiteness. Instead, we seek an understanding of the ways that this rhetorical construction makes itself visible and invisible, eluding analysis yet exerting influence over everyday life. (p. 293)

Essentially, when understood as a rhetorical construction, whiteness is able to move through communicative practices rather inconspicuously. Whiteness then, is not a specific or identifiable attribute associated with a body or identity. Instead, it is a construction that when used as a rhetorical strategy, is able to transcend embodiment. Additionally, if it remains unnamed and unidentifiable, whiteness is able to, as Raka Shome (2000) states, "secure its power in different ways through different sites" (p. 368). Therefore, while professional sports culture is imbued in whiteness, it is able to maintain

its power due to its assemblant nature. Professional sports culture is constituted by various “different sites,” which allows it to maintain both its power and its whiteness.

Because professional sports culture is saturated in whiteness many athletes of color must negotiate the power it generates in relation to their location and identity. Arguably, female athletes of color are particularly placed in a point of contention in that they must navigate the varying aspects of their identity and body. Essentially, female athletes of color must operate in what Gloria Anzaldua (1990) describes as the borderlands. She explains that the borderlands are “present whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory...it’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions” (Anzaldua, 1990, p. iii). While Anzaldua conceptualizes the borderlands as the borders between different territories and the culture associated to that territory, the same concept can be applied to Williams. For Williams, the borderlands are present when she must navigate the borders of her black culture with the whiteness of sports culture. Additionally, she must maneuver between the territory of professional athlete, female professional athlete, and black professional athlete. The identity ascribed and expected from her differs based upon the moniker, and with that, the culture Williams chooses to vocalize also changes. Not only does Williams steer between these terrains, she also must contend with how her body is read and understood outside professional sports culture. As I previously cited, Williams is not only a figure within sports culture, but in American popular culture in general. Because of this, she must contend with how her body and voice are interpreted, but she is also able to address the structure of power that exists within and outside of

professional sports culture. Rhetorically, Williams is able to bridge the different borders and cultures associated with her body.

Because Williams knowingly straddles different borders of identity and culture, her communicative strategies and language are of particular interest (Scott, 2013). Williams deploys notions of code switching as a way to accommodate the borders associated with her body. As a base description, code switching is understood as the process of encoding the dual identities of a speaker between languages as a means to identify with the two groups (Scotton, 1990). Code switching as it applies to black women is of specific interest for several scholars. More recently, Karla Scott (2013) states, “What still remains largely unexamined, however, is how black women respond to those inequalities and why they choose specific communicative strategies to negotiate identity in those contexts” (p. 313). With the recent popularity of intersectional scholarship the emphasis is no longer on how black women contend with their position as both black and woman. Rather, the focus becomes how black women or women of color confront and cope with the inequality associated with these aspects of their identities. This is not to diminish the work that has previously been conducted on code switching and black women. Instead, as Marsha Houston (1989) states,

The challenge for any scholar who studies black women's talk is to do more than merely acknowledge black women's triple jeopardy. The challenge is also to represent black women's talk as a unique communicative system, the outcome of simultaneous and continuous cultural, gender, and class influences; that is, as talk which is simultaneously defined by the speaker's socioeconomic class as well as her Afro-American culture and gender. (p. 193)

In this regard, it becomes imperative to consider the impact of these women's intersectional identity and their ability to communicate across borders. As Sirma Bilge and Patricia Hill Collins (2016) state, "Using intersectionality as an analytic lens highlights the multiple nature of individual identities and how varying combinations of class, gender, race, sexuality, and citizenship categories differentially position each individual" (p. 8). Therefore, in this chapter I consider the impact of Williams's rhetoric not only as a black woman, but also as a heterosexual and affluent woman.

Williams's ability to code switch and adapt her message to varying audiences is indicative of her understanding of the codes attached to her language. Stuart Hall (1980) discusses the importance of code adaptation between television broadcast and audience. He writes,

The lack of fit between the codes as a great deal to do with the structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences, but it also has something to do with the asymmetry between the codes of 'source' and 'receiver' at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form. What are called 'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange. (Hall, 1980, p. 166)

This same understanding applies to Williams's rhetoric. Williams understands her relationship between professional sports culture to her position as a black female athlete and the "lack of equivalence" that exists between the two. It is specifically because of this lack of equality and structural difference that Williams is able code switch and adopts a position of relationality. According to Audre Lorde (1984), historically,

Black women have been taught to view each other as always suspect, heartless competitors for the scarce male, the all-important prize that could legitimize our existence. This dehumanizing denial of self is no less lethal than the dehumanization of racism to which it is so closely allied. (p. 50)

Certainly, Williams is not immune to the dehumanization associated with racism and her black womanhood. However, instead of maintaining a polarized stance, Williams is able to code and encode her rhetoric to call for a larger acceptance of female bodies, regardless of race. Through this, she is able to push back against the whiteness and inherent racist discipline of professional sports culture. Williams encodes her rhetoric in Aimee Rowe's understanding of relational politics. Williams understands the predominance of whiteness in sports culture and instead espouses rhetoric that is "invested in alliances that span power lines." As Rowe (2008) iterates, she aims to produce an understanding of feminism that "will attend to the multiple forms of privilege and subordination that constitute the uneven terrain of our diverse communities" (p. 168). Williams's encoded rhetoric operates in a way that utilizes the previously naturalized codes of professional sports culture and feminism. As Hall (1980) states, "The operation of naturalized codes reveals not the transparency and 'naturalness' of language but the depth, the habituation and the near-universality of the codes in use" (p. 167). By using rhetoric that is encoded and naturalized in an understanding of whiteness and essentially white feminism, Williams is able to create a relationship between the goals of white feminism and her call for a more relational understanding of feminist politics. Williams navigates the borders and terrain associated with her body and position through her voice and strategic rhetorical messages. Additionally, the utilization of her voice as encoded in

a call for a more relational understanding of feminism and female bodies does not negate her position as a black woman. Instead, it represents Scott's (2013) iteration that black women must develop ways to "represent in both worlds." She asserts that this is necessary for "continued success in predominantly White environments where these young Black women believe they are seen as outsiders by virtue of both race and gender" (Scott, 2013, p. 324). The necessity to be able to bridge borders and "worlds" is different for Williams than it is for Rousey. For Williams, there is more at stake. The need to encode her voice and rhetoric is essential to her position of resistance. Rousey is able to resist, but for her personal benefit. Similarly, as I will discuss in the following chapter, Griner's rhetorical resistance is also encoded in her own personal benefit. Griner also does not explicitly contend with her blackness in the same ways that I argue Williams does. Williams then represents Rachel Griffin's call for the normalization of more black female voices. She writes,

We need to get used to the sound of our own voices demanding space and respect because each one of us deserves it, and we must understand that we are all worthy of the energy of another...Maintaining faith in humanity, Black women have got to resist, imagine, and insist upon a different world. (Griffin, 2012, p. 149)

While Griffin's call is in regard to black women in academia, the same call is applicable to Williams. By adopting a stance of resistance, encoding her rhetoric, and insisting that her presence in professional sports culture is not ignored, she also insists upon a different world.

## **Texts & Method of Analysis**

As I have previously iterated, this dissertation utilizes critical rhetorical methods as a means to interrogate notions of power. In the case of Williams, the disciplinary apparatus of professional sports culture breaks down and remakes Williams's body through an understanding of whiteness. The invisibility of whiteness operates with the same insidious power as professional sports culture. Yet, the purpose of this analysis is not necessarily to replicate the power of invisibility. Instead, in this chapter I seek the name the moments where the invisibility of whiteness and professional sports culture create borders and boundaries. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) state,

We are not driven by a desire to reproduce the invisibility and universality of the center; instead, we take everyday discourse as a starting point in the process of marking the territory of whiteness and the power relations it generates. (p. 296)

With this in mind, I analyze the mediated discourse created by and about Williams and her body as a means to mark the territory of whiteness. Additionally, I assert that Williams understands this power relation and utilizes techniques of code switching and encoded rhetoric as a strategy of resistance in order to push against the territory of whiteness and professional sports culture.

In order to accomplish this, I first analyze the interview produced by the ESPN syndicate, *The Undeclared*. In this interview, Common discusses issues such as race and social justice with Serena Williams. I focus on this text because it best illustrates the manner in which Williams encodes and decodes her rhetoric as a means to code switch. In comparison, I also analyze Williams's feature interviews with *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit*, *Good Morning America*, *Fader Magazine*, and *Sports Illustrated's* "Sports

Person of the Year” speech. The contrast in Williams’s rhetoric between her interview with Common and the other interviews further illustrates William’s awareness of the disciplinary whiteness of professional sports culture. These texts serve to best exhibit how Williams navigates the borders of sports culture and her body.

**She didn’t come to play. She came to slay.**

**“Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you.” -Claudia Rankine, *Citizen***

Serena Williams is not just a tennis superstar, but she is also a pioneer for black female athletes. In 1999, Williams became the first African American woman to win the US Open the US Open since Althea Gibson went back to back in 1957 and '58 (ESPNW.com). On February 18, 2013, at age 31 Williams became the oldest female tennis player to be ranked No. 1 in the world (ESPNW.com). In December 2015, Sports Illustrated named Williams the “Sports Person of the Year,” which was the first time in 30 years that a woman was honored with the title. The previous female to be deemed “Sports Person of the Year” (SPOTY) was Mary Decker in 1983, a World Champion middle distance runner. Williams was not only the first female athlete in 30 years, but was also the first black female athlete. It is undeniable that Williams is a dominant and successful athlete. Not unlike Ronda Rousey, Williams has been able to forge a path of being the “first” to accomplish many things. However, unlike Rousey, Williams has had to navigate how being the first as a female athlete contests and coincides with being the first black female athlete.

Williams’s body is immediately recognizable because of its blackness in the sea of white that is professional tennis. As discussed in the previous chapter, Rousey utilizes the panoptic nature of sports culture to her advantage as a means to leverage how her

body is read and is able to create new meaning and understanding of female masculinity. Through this, Rousey has control of the visibility of her body. She makes it knowable through her whiteness. In the UFC whiteness is the default and the norm, so Rousey does not have to contest with her racial identity. This same privilege is not granted to Williams. Williams's black female body is always visible. While tennis is an international sport, the bodies that are represented professionally are predominantly white. David Whelan (2015) from VICE Sports highlights this issue and writes,

In the 91 years since the four Majors were instigated, only two black players have won a Grand Slam and one Asian player: America's Arthur Ashe (who won one Wimbledon, one Australian and one US Open over seven years), France's Yannick Noah (who won the French in 1983) and America's Michael Chang (the French, 1989). That's a total of five Slams out of the 364 that have been contested since 1924, the inaugural year of the four Majors, or 1.37%. Statistically, it's more likely you'll get into Harvard School of Law than see a male black or Asian player win a Slam in your lifetime. ("Does Tennis Have a Race Problem?")

While Whelan reports the racial and ethnic breakdown for men's tennis, he later indicates that the women's division is only marginally better due to the presence of the Williams's sisters. It becomes evident that Serena's black body, especially in the stark contrast to the white tennis uniforms required of those who participate in the Wimbledon, is immediately noticeable, which makes it possible to constantly see and recognize her. While the Panopticon was originally formulated as a spatial concept, the disciplinary power of being able to be seen and noticed traverses space, especially in sports culture. Williams's body is not only recognizable on the tennis court in contrast to her white

opponents, but also in sports media. The visibility of Williams's body has a direct impact on how she encodes her voice and rhetoric.

Williams's visibility becomes particularly evident in her interview with rapper, Common. Williams sat down with Common and gave an extended interview that was featured on *The Undeclared*. The Undeclared is a website that is headed by ESPN. However, The Undeclared was designed to reach an audience that is more niche than the average consumer of coverage provided by ESPN or ESPN.com. The website states, "The Undeclared is the premier platform for exploring the intersections of race, sports and culture. We enlighten and entertain with innovative storytelling, original reporting and provocative commentary" (<https://theundefeated.com/about/>). The motto of the site is, "Not conventional. Never boring." Additionally, the "About" page includes a quote from author, Maya Angelou that states,

You see, we may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. It may even be necessary to encounter the defeat, so that we can know who we are. So that we can see, oh, that happened, and I rose. I did get knocked down flat in front of the whole world, and I rose. I didn't run away – I rose right where I'd been knocked down. And then that's how you get to know yourself. You say, hmm, I can get up! I have enough of life in me to make somebody jealous enough to want to knock me down. I have so much courage in me that I have the effrontery, the incredible gall to stand up. That's it. That's how you get to know who you are.

[\(https://theundefeated.com/about/\)](https://theundefeated.com/about/)

It is clear the content produced by The Undeclared is intended to have a tone of resistance. Further, *The Undeclared* was created to appeal to ESPN's African American

fan base. Sports journalist Jason Whitlock initially created the site with the intent for it to become the “black Grantland” (Howard, 2015, “How ESPN's Fear Of The Truth Defeated "Black Grantland"). While The Undefeated grappled with ownership and staff issues, it was officially launched in May 2016 (Brady, 2016, “ESPN finally ready to unleash The Undefeated”). It is necessary to understand the foundation of *The Undefeated* in order to examine how Williams’s interview, which appears on the site, is able to encode and decode notions of blackness, intersectionality, and relational feminism.

The conversation between Common and Serena Williams was first advertised on TheUndefeated.com. Maya Jones (2016) reports, “Oscar and Grammy winner Common and tennis supernova Serena Williams have often spoken to each other about how it feels to be at the highest points in their careers — and what these achievements mean while being black in America” (“The Undefeated In-Depth: Serena with Common”). Jones (2016) goes on to explain the premise of the conversation and writes,

This will be the first time that Common who last month released his 11th studio album, BLACK AMERICA AGAIN, on ARTium/Def Jam Recordings, to resounding acclaim. and whose socially conscious lyrics often focus on the daily life of and the struggles faced by people of color, and Serena Williams, the record-breaking tennis champion — both dominant in their respective fields — are sitting down to publicly discuss these topics together. (“The Undefeated In-Depth: Serena with Common”)

Jones also reports that the interview will be broadcast on *ESPN* and *WatchESPN* (“The Undefeated In-Depth: Serena with Common”). So, while the interview aired on a

mainstream sports network, it was sanctioned by and intended for the audiences of *The Undefeated*. It becomes clear through the topics of discussion and Williams's responses to Common's questions that both individuals are aware of the intended viewership. The segment begins with a close up of Common shot in black and white discussing the similarities and differences between the success associated with athletes and music artists and the impact both have on the world. He states, "Some of the most impactful athletes are those that bring out that greatness within themselves that in return affects the fans and affects us and inspires us. And those athletes that do stand up for something seem to be the ones that we hold the highest" ("The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common"). He goes on to explain the importance of the conversation between himself and Williams. He states,

We have the opportunity to talk to one of the greatest athletes of all time. A person who's accomplished something that nobody has done in the world. Being in the position that she's come from. Being a black woman. A person that's come from Compton in a sport that had never seen black women at this level is who she is, what she's represented throughout the generations, the way she's speaking up. It's just important for us to hear from her because you only get one Serena in many lifetimes. ("The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common")

It is evident based upon Common's introduction of Williams and the network that produces the conversation that Williams's message is intended for a primarily black audience. The conversation between the two begins with Common asking Williams if she feels like she is supremely misunderstood. From the onset the question posed by Common and Williams's response is encoded to address black individuals. In his

introduction Common already established that as a successful black female athlete, Williams sticks out. The idea of being misunderstood or not belonging is a notion that is historically associated with black bodies (Collins, 2000; Collins, 2008). This is especially true for black women. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) explains the experience as black women trying to find footing in a crooked room. She writes,

When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion. (p. 29)

Not only are black female bodies hyper-visible, they are associated, as Harris-Perry states, with “warped images of their humanity.” This is a notion that both Common and Williams are familiar with. Common does not need to explain what he means by being “misunderstood.” Seemingly, the meaning that is encoded in his question relates to Williams’s position as a black woman. Williams answers and states,

I think in the beginning of this journey I was definitely misunderstood. You never saw anything like me or Venus in my field of work, in tennis, so we may have said some things that people just couldn’t relate to and they probably thought we were talking about something different and took it the wrong way. Or made a negative connotation out of it when it’s not like that at all. We’re just trying to be us and be the best that we can be. (“The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common”)

Williams continues to address her position in the “crooked room,” but does it in a way that is encoded to address her black audience. Hall (1980) explains the importance of

encoding messages and writes, “It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to ‘local conditions,’ to its own more corporate positions” (p. 172). Williams acknowledges the dominant definition of what it meant to be a tennis player at the beginning of her career. While she never explicitly states the whiteness of the sport, it is encoded and understood in her message. She contrasts herself and her sister Venus to what was previously expected in the sport. Because the Williams sisters are black, both their bodies and their voices were misunderstood. Williams addresses how her body and voice were coded in the dominant discourse and conception of what was expected of professional tennis players. She also acknowledges how both her and Venus’s speech was mistaken for something negative. In this example, Williams decodes the meaning that was previously associated with both her and Venus’s voices and bodies. In doing this, she is able to acknowledge the visibility of her body and politicize her intersectional existence. Serena and Venus were the first and became the best, which resulted in their bodies becoming an object of scrutiny. Unlike Rousey, neither of the Williams’s sisters subscribes to notion of whiteness. They understand that their bodies stand out and they seemingly choose to allow themselves to signify difference. Both women stuck out due to their blackness, so they needed to be disciplined through the whiteness of professional sports culture. Williams goes on to explain when she states,

So before me there was a few black players that played but you know I think Althea Gibson was the only one to win Grand Slams, but never on the level of Venus and I just consistently winning. You know, half the tournaments I go to I’m like looking around to see if anyone in the country looks like me, you know?

...Growing up and playing these tournaments when I was younger, I didn't really see a lot of people that was my color, that was black. So, I think I just got used to it. And then when you go to Russia or like these countries, you just really kind of stick out. I like to stick out. One thing about me, I don't want to be like everybody else. I just like to be different. I don't wanna fit in the mold. ("The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common")

Williams continues to acknowledge the dominant position of whiteness in professional sports culture and specifically in tennis. She discusses how the fact that she is black not only makes her "stick out" in America, but also internationally when she travels to play tournaments. In spite of this, Williams does not allow her body to be disciplined and viewed in a way that classifies her as other or dehumanized. Instead, she states that she embraces her difference. Her difference, as she indicates, is associated with her blackness. Yet again, Williams does not need to plainly state that. Instead, she encodes the notion that her blackness and difference is something to be proud of for the viewers, who again, are an intended audience of African Americans. Williams encodes her message, which allows her to discuss the whiteness of tennis without obviously explaining it or addressing it. This rhetorical move not only demonstrates Williams's ability to encode and decode her message, but to also essentially code switch. Williams also seemingly understand the politics associated with the importance of code switching for black women. Karla Scott (2013) explains this and writes,

The choice of language style is often strategic to mark solidarity with other Black women or to mark identity as a Black person in predominantly White environments, such as college classrooms, where the speaker perceives a need to

speak with authority, from her own racial worldview and experiences as a Black person, especially when the topic concerns issues in Black communities. (p. 314)

The difference for Williams is that while she does not explicitly change her language style in terms of grammar or jargon, she does make implicit references to what it means to be black in a predominantly white environment. Doing this marks her “identity as a Black person in a predominantly White environment.” Williams discusses what it feels like to stick out physically due to the color of her skin, a phenomena that she shares with other black individuals in predominantly white environments. Not only does Williams address this experience, but she also indicates that this difference and moment of standing out is something that she embraces. Williams does not allow her body to be controlled or viewed from the perspective of the crooked room.

    Additionally, Williams’s unwillingness to “fit in a mold” or to “be like everyone else” relates to Susan Cahn’s (1994) call for a richer understanding of what it means to be a female in sports. She writes, “Women’s athletic freedom requires that certain attributes long defined as masculine – skill, strength, speed, physical dominance, uninhibited use of space and motion – become human qualities and not those of a particular gender” (Cahn, 1994, p. 279). Williams’s demonstration of her ability to be a successful athlete is not in her gender, race, or sexuality. Instead, she discusses her embodiment as a female athlete as “human qualities,” which demonstrates an understanding of the importance of the need for relational and intersectional feminism in sports culture. Unlike Rousey, Williams does not use her understanding and performance of female masculinity as a metric to level herself higher than other women who do or do not embody the same form of female masculinity. Williams embraces her performance and the various standpoints she

occupies. She echoes Donna Haraway's (1991) call for the embodiment of cyborgs.

Haraway writes, "From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints"

(Haraway, 1991, p. 154). Williams is seemingly not afraid of her partial identities and contradictory standpoints as both as woman, woman of color, and athlete. She actively participates in sports culture and understands the necessity of discipline. Yet, she utilizes the disciplinary nature of sports culture to catapult her voice and call for a "joint kinship." Her call for joint kinship is encoded in her position as a black woman. Williams uses her blackness as an avenue to advocate and call for a more holistic understanding of her body and identity. She acknowledges her race, but does not utilize it as the only perspective or view through which she can be understood. Because of this, Williams is able to transcend and push against the disciplinary nature of sports culture.

Williams expands upon this more when she discusses how she handles media criticism associated with her body and blackness. She states,

At a very young age, I think I was 17, I stopped reading any press about me. I think cause I was reading an article and they were pumping me up, like being this great player whatever. And being the one to watch, blah, blah, blah. And then I thought I don't want my head to get too big. I don't wanna be that person that thinks they're too good for anyone else. And then at the same time I thought I also don't wanna look at all these negative articles. People talking so negative about me, about my body, about how I look. I didn't want either side of the spectrum. I don't know. No one told me. I just decided that from that day I'd never read and

article and I think that actually helped me avoid a lot of the scrutiny. And I kind of put myself in a bubble and I shielded myself and protected myself from anything that ever came out about me. To this day I still, I just feel like I definitely was scrutinized cause I was confident. You know, I was black and I was confident. And I am black. I am confident. (“The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common”)

Williams places herself outside the disciplinary power of sports culture. She understands that her blackness and confidence makes her hyper visible in a predominantly white sport. However, instead of participating in the media culture created by her blackness, she resists. She “shields” herself from sports media criticizing her for being black. Williams specifically states that she “put herself in a bubble.” By evoking this metaphor, Williams creates a visual that echoes the Panopticon. A bubble is transparent and spectators can see through to the other side. By placing herself inside of the bubble Williams demonstrates that she understands that her body is on display. She knows that her body is visible and something to be consumed through sports culture. Additionally, by discussing her position within a protective bubble, Williams articulates an understanding of her standpoint as a black female athlete. She acknowledges that her position and discernibility demarcate a site of power. Williams cannot control how the media discusses her body and her blackness. However, by not participating in the negative discourse surrounding her body she takes a differential stance. Again, Williams decodes and encodes how her body should be read and understood. Instead of viewing her blackness as something negative, she iterates that her blackness should be associated with confidence and something positive. Williams is seemingly aware of the attitude of

whiteness that is adopted by professional sports culture, therefore her encoded rhetoric is not necessarily a cognitive choice, but is rather an instinctive or reflexive strategy. Williams has become so accustomed to the codes associated with her body that her encoded reaction is to associate her black body with positivity. This is only possible because she is able to utilize what Hall calls the “intelligible discourse” that already exists concerning her body and blackness (Hall, 1980). Williams builds upon this discourse and utilizes the codes previously associated with her body in order to essentially decode the discourse. Hall (1980) writes, “It acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grad significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule” (p. 172). Williams then acknowledges the hegemonic definition associated with her black body while creating her own “ground rules.” She uses her body to be an exception to the rule of what it means to be a successful black female. Williams accomplishes this through the utilization of the whiteness associated with sports media. Seemingly, she understands the images associated with her body through the lens of whiteness and uses sports media to encode a new meaning. In many ways Williams uses her position and visibility as a black female professional tennis player to call out the racism and sexism within professional sports culture. This notion is something Patricia Hill Collins (2000) believes is essential to resist the power and control often inflicted upon black female bodies. Collins states, “Confronting controlling images forwarded by institutions external to African-American communities remains essential” (Collins, 2000, p. 94). Williams uses the disciplinary nature of sports media to co-opt the narrative about her body and positions herself directly within the production of these discourses.

Williams uses her position not only to confront controlling images, but to also demonstrate an understanding of the politics of relation. In her book Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2008) writes,

Thus the work of self-representation, as with the work of self-reflexivity, arises not merely within the interior of the individual, but within the relational spaces in which the subject of feminism locates herself. The contours of her singularity always arise in the ethical encounter with others. (p. 189)

According to Rowe, feminist women cannot advocate for relational feminism without confronting how their body interacts and relates to the spaces that surround them. Instead, they must consider the ethical impact their position has on other individuals. Williams seems to understand this notion. She locates herself within the mechanism of professional sports culture and acknowledges how the media represented and disciplined her body. Despite this, she uses this site to advocate for and acceptance of confident black women. She understands the ethical concerns of her body being on display and how it creates meaning for other female athletes of color. Nevertheless, Williams uses her visibility and location as a black female athlete to create a space for the acceptance of her confidence and blackness.

Williams previously stated that she was confident and black. Not only is Williams confident, but also she is physically able to live up to her standards of confidence due to her ability to consistently and constantly win and dominate in her sport. Williams previously articulates that she is proud of her blackness and encodes new meaning for her body. However, the same process of encoding is not as easily applied to her voice. In many matches, Williams demonstrates her confidence vocally by yelling in joy when she

wins or by confronting umpires and line judges based upon their calls. In fact, in an article that appeared in *Vanity Fair* on July 1, 2013 authors and documentarians Maiken Baird and Michelle Major ask, “The question is—does Serena’s outburst damage the entire game of tennis?” Baird and Major are referring to the 2009 semifinals of the U.S. Open where Williams yelled at a line judge who called her for a foot fault (crossing the line while serving). Williams allegedly said, “I swear to God. I’ll fucking take this ball and shove it down your fucking throat!” In a video of the match the line judge can be seen calling other officials onto the court. Williams approaches all three and states, “Are you scared? Because I said I would hit you? I’m sorry but there’s a lot of people that’ve said way worse.” She goes on to defend herself and says, “I didn’t say I would kill you, are you serious? Are you serious? I didn’t say that!” This vocal outburst resulted in Williams being given a code violation, which caused her to lose the match. The United States Tennis Association also fined her \$82,500 and put her on probation for two years. Serena’s vocal performance was systematically controlled. She was fined and punished for expressing herself on the court. Arguably, Serena’s vocal outcry was hyper-visible and hyper-audible because her voice is attached to a black body. Her body is already more distinguishable than other bodies on the tennis court, therefore it is easier for her voice to be heard and disciplined. The vocal expressions of Serena have also become somewhat of a distinctive trademark for the athlete and have resulted in her being deemed a “sore loser.” In an article that appeared on *USA Today* in September 2015 sports reporter Chris Chase chronicles Williams’s comments against line judges and umpires. In his analysis he calls Williams “the worst kind of loser.” He writes, “Look up to Serena for her athleticism, for her power, for her courage, for her tenacity and for being the

greatest female athlete of a generation. But don't look up to her sportsmanship. It's her weakest link" (Chase, 2015, For the Win). Chase goes on to compare Williams to white male tennis star Roger Federer and even her own sister, Venus. Ultimately, he writes, "I don't mind feistiness or temper tantrums. I quite like them, in fact. It shows a real person is underneath that facade of calm. But if you are that way, own it" (Chase, 2015, For the Win). According to Chase, Williams's vocal performance and hyper-audibility should correlate with a physical performance that mimics Federer or Venus. According to Chase, both Federer and Venus have been gracious losers and have addressed the media and questions with a calm demeanor. Serena has not. She has not held back from vocalizing her displeasure with a call on the court or with questions from the media during press conferences. Williams is not apologetic for her vocal performance and for voicing her confidence in various ways. In the interview with Common she states,

You know, but I would say I feel like I can be number one. Oh, no, no, you don't say that. Well why shouldn't I say that? You know, if I don't think I'm gonna be the best why do I play? I could be hanging out. I could be at the beach somewhere or doing something different. And if I played the number one player and I was like, oh, yeah, I think I can be the best. I think I can be better than her. You know they're like, oh she's so rude or she's so disrespectful. And I never meant anything or said anything in disrespect. ("The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common")

Arguably, if Serena embodied whiteness like Federer, her vocal outcries would not be viewed as something that needed to be contained. Serena's body is also very different from her sister's. Serena is more muscular and is overall more powerful on the court.

Seemingly, the combination of Serena's vocal dominance with her physical appearance creates moments of discomfort for viewers. Williams states that she was viewed as "rude" or "disrespectful" for not being afraid to vocalize her athletic prowess. Williams adopts an unapologetic stance that is similar to Rousey's rhetoric. Both women are the first in their respected sports to accomplish varying levels of success. Yet, Rousey is able to claim this success without apology because she embodies whiteness, which grants her more privilege to transgress expectations. In this case, she is able to be physically and vocally dominant. The same privilege does not apply to Williams. Williams's body clearly signifies difference. Because her body and her voice occupy spaces of otherness and difference both must be negotiated and reconfigured in a way that does not violate viewer expectations. Williams's body is something that can be viewed and can be categorized as an icon or a sign. Williams is able to vocally and rhetorically intervene to negotiate the meaning that is assigned to her body as icon. While Williams cannot encode a new meaning for her voice, she is able to use her vocal confidence and examples of "outbursts" as a way to continue to build relational feminist politics. Adriana Cavarero (2005) writes,

Precisely because speech is sonorous, to speak to one another is to communicate oneself to others in the plurality of voices. In other words, the act of speaking is relational; what it communicates first and foremost, beyond the specific content that the words communicate, is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices. (p. 13)

Williams does not apologize for her outbursts or for vocally assigning confidence to her body. And while Williams speaks about her body and her experiences, as Cavarero states,

the act of speaking about these things is relational. Williams continues to build a relationship between her experience and the experiences of the viewers. To be clear, I am not claiming that Williams is knowledgeable of all of the experiences of black women or of the individuals who view the interview. Instead, I argue that by addressing her voice and vocalization of confidence, Williams acknowledges the negative connotation typically associated with black female voices and resists that association. Collins (2000) writes,

U.S. Black women have been described as generally outspoken and self-assertive speakers, a consequence of expectations that men and women both participate in Black civil society. But despite this tradition, the overarching theme of finding a voice to express a collective, self-defined Black women's standpoint remains a core theme in Black feminist thought. (pp. 109-110)

Therefore, in an effort to redefine how her voice is associated with her body for herself and other black woman, Williams iterates that speaking up for herself and believing that she could be the best is not offensive. Williams's stance of self-asserting her body and her voice is meant to create a positive relationship between the two. Additionally, by vocally advocating for this self-defined standpoint, Williams is also able to create a relationship between herself and the viewers who are black women. She further demonstrates this in the rest of her response. She states,

I believed that I could have been better than who was number one at that point. You don't really see that when I started a lot in a black tennis player. Because we didn't play a lot of tennis and we weren't supposed to have that confidence because black people didn't do that great before. We did some great things in

tennis with Arthur Ashe and Althea Gibson, but there wasn't that one player that was winning. Like I said, multiple, multiple Grand Slams. It became a problem. It was, we literally took the globe and shook it, me and Venus, because we came from Compton. We came from nothing. And in tennis you kind of have to be, have something. And we came. And we conquered. And I shouldn't have to apologize for saying and believing that I could be the best. ("The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common")

Williams again cites her specific experience as a black tennis player. Additionally, she mentions her background as a child and growing up in Compton as a way to address the notion that black Americans must work twice as hard as white Americans, a narrative that is familiar for black individuals. This is not a mythical concept. A study conducted by Christopher DeSante (2013) reveals the truth behind said narrative. He writes, "The results show how work ethic matters differently for blacks and whites. Whites are rewarded more for the same level of work ethic, and blacks are punished more for the same perceived level of "laziness"" (DeSante, 2013, p. 352). Williams is well aware of this notion and the fact that currently, she is an extremely successful and wealthy individual. Yet, but explicitly citing her background of "coming from nothing" to achieve her level of success, she acknowledges the truth behind having to work twice as hard and being perceived as "lazy." She further iterates that she is not ashamed of her confidence and that vocally expressing that confidence is not unwarranted. Williams does not have to say that she worked twice as hard to get to where she is. Instead, the nuance of her message is encoded in her rhetoric and should be decoded by the intended black viewership. Again, this is a narrative that dominates popular *and* black culture. In his

analysis of an episode of *Scandal* where the main character's father recites similar rhetoric to her, Neil Drumming (2013) writes,

The sentiment is one with which almost every African-American of my generation and before is all too familiar. Notice the *them* and the *they* — that's white folks. The you is every black kid who has ever brought home a bad grade or failed to study hard enough for a test being told by their concerned parents that they might never succeed if they don't work harder and smarter than their white peers. ("Scandal's" racially charged motto: "You have to be twice as good as them")

The major difference between Williams's rhetoric and the scene from *Scandal* is that Williams never has to pit herself against "white folks." That notion is simply understood given the context of the interview with Common. In fact, Williams does not even mention "them" or "they." She focuses on the "we." This rhetorical move demonstrates her continuous attempt to be relational to her specific audience. Williams does not need to identify the White individuals who doubted her or the whiteness of sports culture because it is understood. The whiteness of sports culture allows Williams to create relational spaces for other female athletes of color. Williams continues to push against the disciplinary whiteness of sports culture and re-navigate the boundaries of how a black female athlete should be viewed and consumed.

The otherness of Williams's body paired with her openly expressive vocal performances marks her as "something different." In her conversation with Common, Williams acknowledges that this difference resulted in her and Venus being "misunderstood." Williams and her sister were and are misunderstood because prior to

their success, there were few black female athletes who were as successful as the sisters. Williams is aware of her position as the first and marked difference. Williams is what Rosi Braidotti theorizes is a nomad in the realm of professional tennis. Braidotti (1994) writes, “The nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior” (p. 5). As a nomadic subject, a person who does not fully belong in the culture established in professional tennis, Williams is able to adopt a stance of critical consciousness. In the example previously discussed, Williams demonstrates awareness of the twice as hard narrative. Further, she is critical of this narrative, which is exemplified through her rhetorical choice to place emphasis on the collectivity of “we” instead of focusing on the “they” of white Americans. She also positions herself in a way that allows her to question the social codes that were previously associated with professional tennis. Williams is able to do this through her performance as a successful athlete, her vocal expression on the court, and through how she dresses as a professional tennis player. In the interview with Common, Williams explains her passion for fashion and ability to change how her body is viewed through clothing. She states,

Because most people see me on the court. Ninety-nine percent of the people don't see me like this. They see me on the court sweating and grunting and making faces. And that's great and all, but for the most part I want to look great doing it. And I love fashion and when I was first starting out I would look at all these old designs that people used to wear and it was so cute I wanted to bring that back to tennis. Like why are we wearing two pieces? We should wear dresses. It should be these cuts, we should use these different fabrics. We should, we need to bring

pop culture into tennis. It's one of the few sports where you can kind of dress up in like a costume and go on the court and play. It's kinda cool. And you see all these performers and they're wearing costumes when they go on stage and you know when I'm at Wimbledon I wanna wear my best costume. So that's our stage. You know, when you're on stage you wanna look your best. ("The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common")

Williams explicitly challenges the norms of professional tennis. Her ability to manipulate how her body is viewed through the uniforms and clothing she wears is again, because her body is hyper-visible. However, Williams's ability to negotiate the visibility of her body is only due to the fact that she is one of the first dominant black female tennis players. She stated that the world of professional tennis had never seen players such as herself and Venus before. Williams and Venus did not have many images of what it means to be a female tennis player that they could identify with. In a previous example Williams states that prior to Venus and herself, the two prominent black tennis players were Arthur Ashe and Althea Gibson. The lack of visibility of former black female tennis players allows Williams to adopt a stance of the oppositional gaze. bell hooks (1992) explains the oppositional gaze as it relates to black women when she writes,

The extent to which black women feel devalued, objectified, dehumanized in this society determines the scope and texture of their looking relations. Those black women who identities were constructed in resistance, by practices that oppose the dominant order, were most inclined to develop an oppositional gaze. (pp. 316 – 317)

Because Williams had not previously seen many black female identities in professional tennis prior to her emergence, she is able to position herself in a stance of resistance and opposition. She constructs her identity in resistance. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) writes, “To be a person of relative power and privilege viewing a person of less power and privilege is a political act. The gaze of the powerful is neither neutral nor benign; misrecognition hinders the ability of black people to act as citizens” (p. 40). Williams has previously iterated that her body was been misread and misunderstood, or in other words, misrecognized. However, instead of allowing this misrecognition to inhibit her ability to act as a citizen, she uses the skewed visibility of her body to adopt a stance of resistance. One way she is able to do this is to dress in a way that challenges the social codes of professional tennis. Williams does not conform to the traditional fashion standards of the sport. Instead, she views the court like a stage and her opportunity to perform and look her best. She adorns her body in dresses, different cuts and fabrics, and challenges viewers to see her as more than just her “grunts,” “sweat,” and “faces.” Williams different allows her to redefine how her body should be consumed and how she views or does not view herself as a player on the court. Williams’s choice to describe the Wimbledon and her athletic attire as a “stage” and her “costume” highlights even further her understanding that she is simply performing within the structure of sports culture. Her performance is something that is being viewed and consumed, however, instead of passively allowing her body to be viewed and consumed she actively takes control of it by dressing in a manner that is unconventional to the standards of tennis. She fully embraces how her existence as a black female in professional tennis is a challenge of these norms. Rather than assimilating into the norms of professional tennis Williams

pushes against the boundaries even further by wearing different cuts and different fabrics. Her physical embodiment and decoration of her body combine to create her nomadic existence. Williams's nomadism also allows her to traverse between the borders encoded and associated with her body. She wants to "look her best" in a way that challenges the normalized white clothing of tennis. Through this, Williams "learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (hooks, 1992, p. 308). Williams knows that she already stands out and is viewed as misunderstood. It is because of this that she is able to subvert and resist being viewed as misunderstood and instead assert that she is performing and the court is her stage. When Williams states that she views the court as a stage, she invites the consumption of her body and through this, develops a new way to look and be viewed and essentially adopt a stance of resistance.

It is precisely due to Serena Williams's position as a prominent and recognizable black woman that makes her stance of opposition notable. While Williams has never shied away from acknowledging her oppositional stance, it becomes more prominent and explicit in the interview with Common, seemingly because she does not have to decode her rhetoric for a white audience. Williams understands that she is speaking to and on behalf of the black community and the responsibility that comes with that level of recognition. In discussing the current cultural climate and specifically the amount of police violence experienced by the black community, Williams tells Common,

I think now I feel like I do want to do more and I have to do more. Especially with all of the stuff that's socially happening in the United States. I feel like it's just, it's incredibly frustrating and sad and I think sometimes when you're in a position of, in front of a crowd, or you can influence people, I really think it's important to

speak up for what's right or what you believe in. It's so crazy cause 10 years ago we weren't really dealing with a lot of this stuff, or if so it was definitely more hidden. Maybe social media wasn't out and it wasn't as in the forefront. But, I do know 10 years ago I wasn't afraid to have my nephew or whoever at the time drive. Now I just feel like, really be careful, don't do this, don't do that. I feel like it's been really challenging...not too long ago I had to post, you guys, you have to be careful driving. If I turn on the news and you're one of those people and they say, 'Oh, he was such a good guy. He was so nice. He went to church. He helped the community. His only fault was he was black.' That's just, I don't really wanna hear about that. I just wanna hear about reasons why this continues to happen and what's the best way to stop it. ("The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common")

In this response, Williams discusses the "crazy" of current events and her concern for her nephew, and black boy, when he is driving. Williams does not need to explain her fear or the events to which she is referring. Her message is encoded and is intended to reach her fellow black audience on a different. The names of all of the innocent black men and women, such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Jr., or Philando Castile, who were murdered in the past 10 years, do not need to explicitly be evoked. Instead, Williams alludes to the withstanding violence experienced by the black community. She discusses the fear she now experiences when her nephew (a black man) drives, which is a type of fear that seemingly, her White audience does not feel. Williams does not need to explain why she felt the need to post "you have to be careful driving," because her intention is seemingly implied and will be understood. While previously in the interview Williams

uses her position to call for relational feminism, this particular instance definitively marks the struggles and fears experienced by black women. Williams's response to Common operates in two major ways. First, she acknowledges her position and capability to work toward change. Again, Williams demonstrates her awareness of the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture. She is mindful of her hyper-visibility and states, "I really think it's important to speak up for what's right or what you believe in." In this remark Williams does not delineate her position as a notable black individual from other prominent athlete's or celebrities. Through this, she calls for collective resistance. She also continues to demonstrate a nomadic consciousness. Williams is able to continue her critical consciousness while calling for collective resistance. She is able to call for collectivity while also pointedly speaking to fellow black women. Audre Lorde (1984) writes,

Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying. (p. 119)

Certainly, much of the audience that views Williams's interview with Common is, to some degree, aware of the events to which she references. However, when Williams evokes the fear she feels for her nephew when he is driving, she is specifically appealing to black women. As Lorde indicates, there are problems that women universally share, and those are problems that Williams discusses earlier in the interview. Yet, also as Lorde indicates, the level of fear Williams experiences in regard to her nephew, and now unborn child, is different from that of white women. In one response, Williams is able to appeal

to women, and really people in general, and encode her message to specifically reach her fellow black women. What is more, Williams also states that she does not want to hear the rhetoric of niceness or respectability that is often associated with the victims of police brutality. Williams frames this as a message that she does not have to decode for her black audience. She iterates her message in a way that implies she expects her audience to understand her references and the reactions she cites again, based upon the uptake in violence against the black community. Williams explains that her fears and concerns have increased within the past 10 years. According to an article by Celisa Calacal (2016) that appeared on ThinkProgress.org, between 865-939 the police as of December 14, 2016 killed people. 215 of those deaths were black Americans (Calacal, 2016, “This is how many people police have killed so far in 2016”). Williams is aware of this and chooses to directly address these issues again, in a way that does not need to be explained to the black portion of her audience. She gives voice to the concerns of many black Americans, and as Lorde indicates, a concern that has endured for decades. Williams does not need justification as to why so many black individuals are being killed by the police. Instead, she calls for change. Seemingly, Williams is able to speak on behalf of black Americans due to her status as a professional athlete and because she is able to traverse the borders of sports culture both with her voice and her body. Williams resists the discipline of sports culture. She does not “settle into socially coded modes of thought and behavior” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 5). Rhetorically, Williams is able to encode her responses to appeal to the consumers of professional sports culture while also addressing her black audience. This rhetorical unification of audiences further positions Williams in a place where she is able to politicize her identity.

Because Williams is a black woman, who encodes her rhetoric in this interview to reach a black audience, she is able to demonstrate her politics of location and use her voice to call for change. Rosi Braidotti (1994) writes,

The politics of location means that the thinking, the theoretical process, is not abstract, universalized, objective, and detached, but rather that it is situated in the contingency of one's experience, and as such it is a necessarily partial exercise. In other words, one's intellectual vision is not a disembodied mental activity; rather, it is closely connected to one's place of enunciation, that is, where one is actually speaking from. (p. 237)

In the interview with Common, Williams consistently references her experiences and how they relate to her understanding of what it means to be a hyper-visible black woman. Williams uses all of this, her celebrity, blackness, and gender, to provide voice to this position and to ultimately all for resistance and change. She tells Common,

Disgust. Sadness. I was a Wimbledon this year and someone got killed and I just was over, over it. I'm trying to play a semi-final and I turn on my phone and I read the news, I look through social media and it hurts me because they're my people that's being killed because they look like me. Who's to say that I'm not next? It hurts. It really hurts. It doesn't make me feel good and I just wanna use my voice. It's like a chain. It's like a domino effect. That's how I wanna use my voice to influence other people to change. ("The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common")

Again, Williams acknowledges and understands how to navigate her location as a prominent black woman. She cites her reaction regarding the news of yet the loss of

another black life. She states, “It hurts me because they’re my people that’s being killed because they look like me.” Certainly, Williams is fully aware of her blackness. However, by rhetorically placing herself within the black community, explaining her emotional reaction, and the hurt she feels, she not only solidifies her position as a black woman with her fellow black Americans, she encodes her blackness for her white audience. This is not to imply that her white audience is not aware that Williams is black. However, by vocalizing these notions, Williams does not allow her body to simply be consumed for its blackness. Instead, she creates a connection between her body, her location, and her voice. She recasts her image and situates herself as clearly aligned with the politics associated with and inflicted upon black bodies. Williams embraces her black womanhood and is able to do so while still appealing to white audiences. As Karla Scott (2013) explains, Williams understands the importance of her race and is skilled at “dispelling stereotypes, performing competence, and presenting alternate identities of Black womanhood” (p. 325). And while Williams is able to disperse stereotypes associated with black women, she is also able to rhetorically reach individuals in her own black community through her examples and discussion of emotional reactions. In this, Williams represents what Scott (2013) explains as not perceiving her actions “as rejecting Black identity but rather as expanding the definition of Black womanhood” (p. 325).

**“I am who I am, and I don’t apologize.”**

Serena Williams understands how her body is read and disciplined as a black female. This becomes increasingly more evident though the ways in which she discusses her body in sports media that is not specifically targeted to a black demographic. When Williams vocalizes her resistance and calls for acceptance of her brand of what it means

to be a female athlete, she creates an opportunity to call out the racist practices of professional tennis, something Collins argues is essential. Williams does not remain complicit in the misunderstanding of her voice or physical ability. She does not allow her success to be attributed singularly to her race or gender. She understands the visibility of her body and her voice allows her to call for change. Foucault (1977) argues that visibility is a trap. Being visible does not equate freedom. Instead, bodies that are visible are subject to more elements of control. However, Williams uses her visibility and audibility a chance to advocate for difference. For Williams neither her blackness nor her gender singularly dictate how she moves through the space of sports culture. Both are equally important. Rosi Braidotti (1994) also articulates that understanding the complex relationship between identity categories is a “radically anti-essentialist position.” She writes,

In feminist theory one speaks as a woman, although the subject ‘woman’ is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference, and others. One speaks as a woman in order to empower women, to activate sociosymbolic changes in their condition: this is a radically anti-essentialist position. (Braidotti, 1994, p. 4)

In her interview with *Fader* Williams states, “Sometimes you’ll see the tears, sometimes you’ll see the anger, sometimes you’ll see that. I never feel because I’m black don’t let them see me do that. I am who I am and I don’t apologize for my color, for my sex, or for anything” (“Serena Williams - Soul Intact”). Because Serena Williams is visible in sports

culture as well as popular culture as a whole she is able to advocate for the acceptance of bodies that seemingly fall outside the realm of sports culture. Williams's position as a professional athlete grants her the opportunity to politicize both her voice and body in a way that transcends professional sports. In this example, Williams vocalizes a form of female masculinity that Halberstam calls a "unique form of social rebellion." She writes, "Every now and then it represents the healthful alternative of what are considered the histrionics of conventional femininities" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 9).

Williams embraces her muscular body, sex, race, and display of emotions in a way that is alternative to the conventional understanding of femininity. This call for acceptance of differential versions of female masculinity is a notion Williams has developed throughout the trajectory of her career. Also, as previously discussed, her voice is often disciplined and labeled as unruly, rather than an expression of her emotion during a match. Williams is often critiqued for her musculature, which is read as masculine and manly. Following her sixth Wimbledon win in 2015, Twitter users took to cyberspace to comment on Williams's body. Author J.K. Rowling tweeted her praise and congratulations to Williams. In response, user @diegtristan8 wrote, "@jk\_rowling @hansmollman ironic then that main reason for her success is that she is built like a man" (<https://twitter.com/diegtristan8>). In her interview with *Self Magazine* Williams reflects on the instance and states,

I love my body, and I would never change anything about it. I'm not asking you to like my body. I'm just asking you to let me be me. Because I'm going to influence a girl who does look like me, and I want her to feel good about herself. (Kahn, 2016, "Serena Williams, Wonder Woman, Is Our September Cover Star")

Williams states that it is possible for women to embody more than traditional feminine qualities. She does not apologize for her muscles or for her emotional vocal display while on the court. According to Williams, women who embrace female masculinity can have bodies that push against traditional understanding of what is feminine while also displaying emotion. However, unlike other female athletes Williams's social rebellion is about more than the acceptance of her muscular body. She is able to politicize her body as not only a female, but also as a black female. Black women have historically been associated with controlling images such as the mammy, jezebel, and welfare queen (Collins, 2000). Each image is constructed to "justify U.S. Black women's oppression" (Collins, 2000, p. 76). Certainly, these notions and images permeate professional sports culture. Because of this, Williams works to push against the racist tendencies of professional sports and does so by calling for the acceptance of her muscular body. She seemingly understands the disciplinary power of sports culture and utilizes this system to operationalize what it means to be a woman of color. She works within the framework of sports culture and as Collins and Bilge (2016) state, "understands power relations through a lens of mutual construction" (p. 26). In this sense, Williams needs the disciplinary power of sports culture to make her body visible and knowable, however, she is also able to manipulate this view to her benefit. In other words, Williams has a mutually constructed relationship with the dominance of professional sports culture. She cannot escape its gaze; so instead, she capitalizes upon the gaze to advocate for an image and differential understanding of her body. Williams understands that visibility is a trap, but she does not allow herself to be caught in that trap. This is evident in how Williams navigates and highlights the various aspects of her body, such as being female and being

black, in a way that further demonstrates her understanding of the relationship between her race, class, gender, and sexuality as “mutually constructed or intersecting systems of power” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 27). For example, Williams correlates her embodiment with her race, sex, and ability to emote. Williams knows that her body is visible. She states that she has been viewed crying or angry. Seemingly, every aspect of Williams’s body and life is scrutinized through the lens of professional sports culture. Rather than letting this dictate how Williams views her body and lives her life, she capitalizes upon her visibility to create a larger understanding of what it means to be a woman, regardless of race, gender, etc. She understands how all of these aspects of her identity contribute to how she is viewed and consumed, and instead of allowing herself to be controlled; she chooses to unapologetically speak out against a standardized understanding of the female body. Williams’s choice to speak as a woman and a woman of color in defiance of the racist and sexist framework of sports culture demonstrates her acceptance of intersectional feminism.

Williams’s body and muscularity is often a main topic of conversation and is consistently referenced during interviews. Because of this, Williams uses her muscularity to be the catapult that launches into an overall call for the acceptance of difference. This is particularly notable in her interviews that are intended for audiences that are not necessarily black. In the previous section during her interview with Common, the conversation between the two covered a multitude of topics, most in relation to Williams’s position as a black woman. However, because professional sports culture operates in veil of whiteness, Williams cannot be as explicit in her response. Therefore, she encodes her answers and stance of resistance through her discussion of her body and

specifically, her muscularity. In her 2015 acceptance speech for Sports Illustrated's "Sports Person of the Year" Williams states,

I've had people look down on me. I've had people look put me down because I didn't look like them. I look stronger. I've had people look past me because of the color of my skin. I've had people overlook me because I was a woman. I had critics say I will never win another Grand Slam when I was only at number seven and now here I stand today with 21 Grand Slam titles and I'm still going. ("Serena Williams Accepts 2015 Sportsperson of the Year Award | Sports Illustrated")

Williams is familiar with being criticized for the muscularity of her body and how strong she looks. In an interview with Robin Roberts that appeared on *Good Morning America* in August 2015, Williams states,

It's me and I love me. And I learned to love me. And I've been like this my whole life and I embrace me. And I love how I look. I love that I'm a full woman and that I'm strong and I'm powerful and I'm beautiful at the same time. And there's nothing wrong with that. ("Serena Williams Seeks to Make History at US Open")

Williams's answer to Roberts is in response to being shamed for being full figured and muscular. While muscularity should not and does not always signify masculinity,

Williams's call for the acceptance of her strong and powerful body echoes Jack Halberstam's call for the understanding and acceptance of female masculinity, especially as an alternate embodiment of what it means to be masculine. She writes, "Precisely because white male masculinity has obscured all other masculinities, we have to turn away from its construction to bring other more mobile forms of masculinity to light" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 16). Williams's embodiment of strength and muscularity is one

example of a mobile form of masculinity. What is more is that Williams's representation of masculinity is obviously not codified in white male masculinity. As a black female Williams is able to call for acceptance of female muscular bodies of color. Williams's performance of female masculinity not only challenges understandings of what is coded as feminine and masculine, but also what it means to be a person of color who embodies masculine qualities. Halberstam (1998) explains the privilege of masculinity and writes, "Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege" (p. 2). Female masculinity as presented through Williams not only challenges the privilege of masculinity, but also the privilege of masculinity, as it is associated with white bodies. What is more is Williams's articulation of her muscularity and masculinity is specifically encoded as a means of opposition and resistance to consumption of her black body. Stuart Hall (1980) explains,

It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions,' to its own more corporate positions. This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions, though these are only what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power. (p.172)

Williams challenges the logic and "local condition" associated with muscularity and female masculinity. In her response to Roberts she states that she is a "full woman" who is "strong" and "powerful" and "beautiful." In this instance, Williams does not specifically reference her blackness, but it is implied and encoded in her message. She

seemingly understands that a defiant proclamation and correlation of her blackness to being a “full woman” would disrupt the dominant definition of womanhood. To be sure, that is Williams’s intention. However, in an effort to appeal to her larger and predominantly white audience in these two examples, Williams must strategically encode her acceptance for her blackness. Instead, Williams encodes this appeal as a means to disrupt the “discourses and logics of power.” Williams’s blackness in conjunction with her position as a female inherently never grants her the promise of social privilege. Williams states this in her acceptance speech when she cites the fact that she was put down due to the “color of her skin,” or that she was “overlooked” because she was a “woman.” Masculinity as conceived as a familial concept implies inheritance of power. However, because Williams is black and a female she is seemingly doubly disadvantaged in her ability to inherit anything. Yet, it is Williams’s strength and muscularity that allowed her to persevere to win 21 Grand Slam titles at the time of her speech and “keep going.” Williams overtly calls out and challenges masculinity, as it relates to whiteness, men, and female masculinity. Again, by challenging how muscularity and female masculinity are discussed and normalized, she calls for an overall acceptance of difference. Additionally, Williams is able to encode her position of resistance as a means to confront the controlling images “forwarded by institutions external to African-American communities” (Collins, 2000, p. 94). Professional sports culture is not outside of the African-American community. However, the discourse perpetuated by sports culture is saturated with whiteness, which results in the distribution of the controlling images associated with black women. Williams pushes against this through her ability to embody muscularity and strength and be successful. She is also able to be black,

“beautiful,” and a “full woman.” Female masculinity according to Serena Williams is not just about embodying traditional notions of masculinity. Rather, it encompasses the ability to exhibit both masculine and feminine qualities that are not bound in whiteness.

Williams’s position as a black female offers her the opening to discuss her body in a way that politicizes her race, sexuality, and gender. She continues to utilize her location within various categories of identity to advocate for a broader acceptance of what it means to embody woman. Williams is in tune with Braidotti’s conception of a nomadic conscious. Braidotti (1994) writes, “The nomadic consciousness combines coherence with mobility. It aims to rethink the unity of the subject, without reference to humanistic beliefs, without dualistic oppositions, linking instead body and mind in a new set of intensive and often intransitive transitions” (p. 31). Williams does not place aspects of her identity, such as her gender, race, or sexuality, in opposition with one another. Instead, she links her “body and mind” as a unifying package. Not only does Williams associate these identifiers with one another, but also she utilizes this conception of embodiment to rhetorically traverse borders. John Lucaties (2012) discusses the notion of what is seen or unseen in border rhetorics and explains that is “not simply a metaphor for a representational process, but actively and performatively constitute the very terms of our identities in a multitude of palpably visible ways” (p. 228). This becomes more evident in her *Sports Illustrated* interview. Williams is able to discuss her body in a way that does not pit her gender in contest with her race or sexuality. Rather, Williams understands that she represents all of these aspects of identity, especially in the *Sports Illustrated* feature that is predicated upon the exposure of her body. Williams makes her race, gender, and sexuality palpable. Through this she is able to politicize her identity and

call for societal and political change. She does this first by discussing her body as a link to broadening societal understanding of what is considered acceptable bodies for women.

In her interview featured in *Sports Illustrated's 2017 Swimsuit Edition* Williams states,

I want people to come away with the fact that it's okay to be comfortable in your body. First of all, I'm not a size 2. And it's okay to look good and feel good. And I'm strong and I feel like it's okay to look strong and be sexy and to be a woman and to be all those things. I really wanna have that influence for people out there that you, that has my body type and be like, you know what, I look good too and I wanna feel good and that's what I hope for. ("Serena Williams | Uncovered")

Williams's body is obviously visible as she is modeling various bathing suits. The body as a focal point is the sole purpose of the Swimsuit Edition. Williams is aware of this and uses the focus on her body to open up a conversation about the acceptance of her body and other bodies that are not a size two. She continues her narrative of accepting her "strong and sexy" body. She further iterates that there are a multitude of body types that belong to individuals who identify as woman. In this example, Williams does not definitively address her race because it is evident through the visual of her body. Instead she focuses on her body as a whole and refrains from a "dualistic opposition" (Briadotti, 1994, p. 31). Due to the visibility of Williams's body she does not need to discuss her blackness. Instead, she focuses on the overall acceptance of her full embodiment.

Williams views her body and the relationship between strength, sexiness, gender, and race as overlapping points of identity and each necessary to fulfill who she is as a person.

Williams discusses her body with defiance. While black women have historically been absent from media, this does not deter Williams from in the words of bell hooks,

“looking courageously” at her body. In doing this, hooks (1992) argues that by looking Williams and black women in general,

Defiantly declare: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.’ Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency. (p. 308)

In other words, according to hooks, Williams utilizes the discipline and consumption within professional sports culture to “manipulate one’s gaze.” Williams knows that despite her celebrity, she still operates within a structure of domination. However, rather than succumbing to the ways in which her body and identity are dominated and commodified, Williams looks courageously at her body. She does not shy away from discussions about her body and instead, chooses to highlight specific reasons why her body should be accepted and celebrated. Through this, she is able to navigate and manipulate the way in which consumers of sports culture gaze upon her body. Williams actively uses the scrutiny and consumption of her body to gain agency. As an active participant of sports culture, she cannot control the fact that her body is viewed. Williams understands this notion and uses the gaze of sports culture as a way to politicize her body and identity. While hooks theorization of the oppositional gaze is grounded in film theory, it applies to Williams and how she sees and presents herself within the disciplinary nature of sports culture. Sports culture functions as an overarching structure of domination that supports a racist and sexist agenda. Williams combats this head on by refusing to look away from her body. She embraces how it looks and is portrayed. This action gives Williams the agency to subvert the domination of the gaze for her own gain.

Williams is able to manipulate the borders of sports culture as well as the borders on her body. Rhetorically, borders create meaning. Robert DeChaine (2012) writes, “Borders are produced, defined, managed, contested, and altered through human symbolic practices” (p. 2). Additionally, borders as discussed and contested through media representations and discourse “direct and reflect ideological positions and institutional forms of power” (DeChaine, 2012, p. 6). Williams uses her voice to vocally navigate the borders of her body. She directs and reflects the ideological meanings associated with her race and gender. In the interview with Common, Williams frequently and explicitly discusses her pride in her body and her blackness. She states,

I guess they couldn't relate to me cause I'm black, I'm strong, I'm tall, I'm powerful, and I'm confident. My arms might not look like the girl over there. Or my legs might not look like someone else. Or my butt or my body or my anything, you know? ...I'm not asking you to like it. I like it and I love me. And there's other people that do look like me and they love that...And yeah, there was a time I didn't feel incredibly comfortable about my body because I felt like I was too strong. And then I had to take a second and think, well who says I'm too strong? This body has enabled me to be the greatest player I can be and I'm not gonna scrutinize that. This I great. This is amazing. And now my body is in style, so I'm feeling good about it. (“The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common”)

Again, Williams is able to overtly discuss her body and how it is read as a black woman because she is speaking to Common and a presumably black audience. She does not have to encode the meaning associated with her “butt,” which for black woman, is often sexualized through the controlling image of the jezebel or hoochie (Collins, 2000).

Ostensibly, her audience understands the meaning associated with her body and also the notion that it is now “in style.” To be clear, Williams’s comments in regard to her butt and body now being in style are in reference to the recent cosmetic alterations of female bodies to resemble that of black women and the celebration of white female celebrity bodies that emphasize their buttocks and curves. For example, actress Blake Lively recently posted a picture to her Instagram account with the caption, “L.A. face with the Oakland booty” (Harriott, 2016, “Black Bodies and the Last Frontier of Cultural Appropriation”). While the caption may seem innocent, Michael Harriot (2016) from *Ebony* magazine explains that black women created the path for her “Oakland booty” to be praised. Additionally, he writes,

In “Oakland booty” they heard echoes of a past that commodified Black women’s bodies—but only for it’s usefulness or the worth of its roundness. They heard plantation babies suckling breast milk from Mammy. They heard Thomas Jefferson licking his lips at Sally Hemings. They heard Ghetto booty. Black booty. Oakland booty. (Harriott, 2016, “Black Bodies and the Last Frontier of Cultural Appropriation”)

Williams’s “booty” and pride in her body is significant because it prevails through historical oppression of the black female body that previously plagued black women. It is a benchmark, in spite of the commodification of black women and their physical attributes. Williams discusses her body with Common in a way that denotes shared understanding. She does not have to encode and decode the meaning that is ascribed to her strength and butt. It is implied because it is understood between the two and her black viewership. Her audience seemingly understands the ideological meaning that is

associated with the black female body. However, outside of her interview with Common on *The Undefeated*, Williams encodes the pride associated with her blackness. One way that Williams encodes her black prides is by evoking the voice of Maya Angelou. In her 2015 SPOTY acceptance speech she concludes by reciting Angelou's poem, "And Still I Rise." She does not recite the entire poem, however, the lines she does choose to speak reflect her theme of black pride. She states,

My soulful cries out of the huts of history's shame, I rise from a past that's rooted in pain, I rise. I'm a black ocean leaping wide welling and swelling I bear in the tide leaving behind nights of terror and fear. I rise into the daybreak that's wonderfully clear I rise bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave arise. I am the dream and the hope of a slave arise, arise, arise. ("Serena Williams Accepts 2015 Sportsperson of the Year Award | Sports Illustrated")

Williams's decision to recite Angelou's poem while being honored for her accomplishments as a professional athlete manipulates the borders associated with her body as well as sports culture. Neither her body nor her voice can be contained in sports culture. Audre Lorde (1984) writes, "As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women" (115). Williams encodes her black pride through the words of Angelou. Through this she reclaims her blackness and her body. Further, Patricia Hill Collins asserts that mediated representation of black women help reinforce a new formulation of racism. She writes, "Presenting African American culture as being indistinguishable from other cultures is not necessarily entertaining, newsworthy, or marketable. Depictions of Black culture need to be different from White norms, yet still supportive of them" (Collins, 2005, p. 147). Williams

manipulates Collins iteration. If professional sports culture assumes a heteronormative white audience, such as those who view the ESPYS, Williams citation of Angelou indicates that black culture and her blackness specifically does not need to be folded within the norms of white culture. Instead, it can be encoded. Seemingly, Williams adheres to the norms of white culture in her acceptance speech. Yet, in by citing Angelou, she is able to depict black culture, it is just not necessarily readable to a heteronormative white audience. Williams is a hugely successful black female athlete. She is successful regardless of the consideration of race or gender. Her blackness and race should not be negated, rather, they should be considered as part of her identity instead of being put in opposition with her athletic capability. Williams is aware of her history as a black individual and black culture. She uses her position as a successful athlete to call attention to this in a way that appeals to all audiences. In doing this she blurs the borders of her bodily identity as well as how her body fits or does not fit in sports culture. Williams presents a nuanced depiction of black culture in that she does not negate her race or culture, but she also does not necessarily call for black culture to be separate from white spectatorship. Instead, through her SPOTY speech, Williams represents a unification of cultures, and in essence, embodies relational feminism. Rowe (2008) explains, “The meaning of self is never individual, but a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection” (p. 26). Williams understands her relationship with her black female self and how that moves in and out of the spaces of professional sports culture. Her meaning of self continuously shifts and evolves, which she demonstrates through the ways in which she discusses her body and identity as a black woman. Williams does not discern a difference in when she should or should not discuss her race. As she

demonstrates, her race is something that is only one part of who she is. She can choose to highlight it in any context, but that does not negate the meaning associated with her race. Instead, by discussing her position as a black woman in various contexts and by citing Maya Angelou, Williams opens the border, or makes the border less distinct in regards to when, how, and where race can and should be discussed within sports culture. By doing this Williams further highlights her position of identifying with hooks' oppositional gaze. hooks (1992) writes,

We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels. (p. 317)

Williams does not identify or see anyone like herself within sports culture, so she is able to oppose being viewed and consumed for her body or her voice. Instead she utilizes both to create a new meaning for how she should be read. She uses her body and voice as an alternative text. She revises how she should be viewed as a black female athlete and uses her voice to resist and interrogate the viewing of her body. Yet, Williams does not only use her body and voice as a tool to create meaning for just herself or other black female athletes. She uses her stance of opposition and resistance to contest the norms of white culture as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

Arguably, Serena Williams's position as a professional black female athlete provides her the platform to politicize her body. While Serena uses her blackness as the center to her visibility, she does not rely solely on her race to discuss her body and how it

is consumed. In many instances, she advocates for the acceptance of her muscular body and female masculinity. Through this she creates a space for what Halberstam (1998) calls, “The shapes and forms of modern masculinity” (p. 3). Williams does not only advocate for the acceptance of her modern embodiment of masculinity, but also uses her stance as an intersectional individual to “highlight the significance of social institutions in shaping and solving social problems” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 16). Williams’s embodiment of female masculinity is particularly notable because she also resists the controlling images typically associated with black female bodies. She embraces her sexuality and muscles and does so in a way that does not align with notions of the modern mammy, jezebel, or hoochie (Collins, 2000). Collins (2002) further explains this and writes, “Maneuvering through this image of the modern mammy requires a delicate balance between being appropriately subordinate to White and/or male authority yet maintaining a level of ambition and aggressiveness needed for achievement in middle occupations” (p. 140). Williams pushes past the controlling images because she accepts her “aggressiveness” as well as other aspects of her identity. She does not allow herself to be defined by previous mediated versions of black women. Instead, Williams acknowledges and embraces her blackness while overall calling for a more holistic and progressive understanding of women in general. She demonstrates this in the 2016 Wimbledon Semi-Final Press Conference. She states,

Well I would like to see, um people, the public, the press, and other athletes in general just realize and respect women for who they are and what we are and what we do...So basically my whole life I’ve been doing this. And I haven’t had a life and I don’t think I would deserve to be paid less because of my sex. Or

anyone else for that matter in any job. (“Serena Williams semi-final press conference”)

Because Williams’s body is hyper-visible, she is able to politicize her body and her position within the social institution of professional sports to highlight the significant social problem of wage inequality and lack of tolerance of difference. Williams is a professional black female athlete, which affords her the unique occasion to navigate what aspects of her body are visible. She furthers her stance within the framework of the oppositional gaze by refusing to see her body as something that should be oppressed or othered. According to hooks (1992), black women are able to use spectatorship as a site of resistance “individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking” (p. 317). Williams discusses her body that is contradictory to the dominant way of knowing and looking. In the interview that appears in *SI’s 2017 Swimsuit Edition* she states,

The shower scene was amazing cause I’ve always wanted to do something like that. I’ve always wanted to just let go, let my hair wet, let my face wet, and take a super natural picture that just was strong and beautiful at the same time. (“Serena Williams | Uncovered”)

She invites the gaze of the spectator, but she is not passive in the act. By directly addressing how her body is being portrayed, she attempts to create new meaning for her body. She calls for acceptance of her “natural” and “wet hair.” She also discusses her body in the picture as being “strong and beautiful” at the same time. Williams understands her body combined with her blackness positions herself as the other, which is why she vocalizes resistance. Similarly, she uses this stance to problematize the

conception of masculinity and femininity. It is her identity as a black woman that gives her the opportunity to oppose this dichotomy. Collins (2005) states,

It is important to stress that all women occupy the category of devalued Other that gives meaning to all masculinities. Yet, just as masculinities are simultaneously constructed in relation to one another and hierarchically related, femininities demonstrate a similar pattern. (p. 187)

Williams discusses her strength and acceptance of her embodiment of both masculinity and femininity in a way that makes it tangible and within reach. The shower and water, which is usually a tool in eroticizing the body, can also be interpreted as something that cleanses Williams's body, erasing the understood meaning. Williams addresses the water and evokes and discusses the imagery as something "natural" and its ability to reveal her body as strong and sexy. Ascribing new meaning to the strength and femininity of her body creates a new definition of what constitutes female masculinity. Halberstam (1998) argues, "Female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach" (p. 9). While Williams is not capable of single handedly redistributing power as it is associated with her body and female masculinity, the continuity in her message paired with her embodiment brings the power closer and closer within reach. This is only possible because of Williams's position as a professional tennis player. In this sense, Williams uses the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture to highlight the various aspects of her body and ultimately utilize her voice as a tool of resistance.

Compared to Rousey, Williams uses her voice and resistance as a means to build and represent unity for women. Rousey vocalizes her female masculinity as a means to advance her personal position. She reifies her privilege of being a white female.

According to Rowe (2008),

If those politics are invested in white modes of belonging, the feminism we produce will reify those investments; but if those politics are invested in alliances that span power lines, the feminisms we produce will attend to the multiple forms of privilege and subordination that constitute the uneven terrain of our diverse communities. (p. 168)

While Rousey fails to be inclusive in her embodiment female masculinity, Williams creates moments of alliance building. She navigates the borders of power in sports culture to discuss her body and race in a way that acknowledges her privilege. In the interview with Common she states,

If I were any kind of man. Any man, white, black, I mean, it doesn't matter. If I was a man it would have been a different conversation a long time ago. I think being a woman is just a whole new set of problems from society that you have to deal with as well and being black. So it's a lot to deal with, especially lately I've been able to really, really speak up for women's rights as well. I think that gets lost. It gets lost in color or it gets lost in cultures. We are doctors. We are lawyers. We are athletes. We are everything. We are CEO's. Women make up so much of this world. And, yeah. If I were a man I would have 100% been considered the greatest ever a long time ago. ("The Undefeated in Depth: Serena with Common")

She discusses being oppressed as a woman regardless of her race. Williams does not highlight the necessity for women's rights as a racial issue. She asserts that these topics often get "lost in color" or "lost in culture." Williams is not negating her experience as a black woman. She uses her experiences as a black woman as a means to build an alliance among women than spans the power line of gender and the privilege that is granted to men. Williams does not remain complacent in her position of difference. Rather, she uses her difference to call attention to and call out the disciplinary injustice that exists in professional sports culture and culture in general.

## Chapter 4

### **“I wasn’t comfortable in my skin:” Brittney Griner’s intersectional identity and transcendence of sports culture**

#### **Introduction**

Twenty-seven-year-old Brittney Griner stands at 6’9”. She has a wingspan of 7 feet 4 inches and wears a size 17 in men’s shoes (“Brittney Griner”). During her time at Baylor University she scored 3,283 career points, earned the NCAA record for most shots blocked at 748, was named AP Player of the Year twice, was named Big 12 player of the year three times, and lead her team to win the NCAA Women’s Basketball Championship in 2012 (Johnson, 2014, “Brittney Griner: Lifesize”). She was the number one draft pick for the WNBA in 2013 and is one of the only female basketball players who can consistently dunk the ball. In fact, in her first appearance as a professional player she dunked the ball twice and set a league record. She dominates on the court. Her prowess in the paint even garnered the attention of Dallas Mavericks owner Marc Cuban, who joked that she could and should try out for his team (MacMahon, 2013). This past summer she helped lead the U.S. women’s basketball team to a 101-72 point gold medal victory against Spain in the 2016 Summer Olympic Games held in Rio (“2016 Olympic Women’s Basketball Results”). More recently she signed a multi-year deal with the Phoenix Mercury, the team that originally drafted her. After renewing her contract, Mercury general manager Jim Pitman stated, “Brittney Griner is the present and the future of the WNBA and we are fortunate to guarantee she continues her growth here in Phoenix” (“Sports Illustrated, WNBA”). It is clear that Brittney Griner has made her presence known in the professional sports world since day one and is someone the league believes will continue to make an impact.

Griner is a basketball powerhouse whose talent is undeniable, yet whose body and voice have often been deemed unreadable and confusing. In a feature that appeared in the November 2013 issue of *Elle* magazine Laurie Abraham writes,

In a world in which the female body is always up for critique, Griner stands a very tall testament to how much we've changed in our attitudes toward difference, but also to the distance we have yet to travel. Hers is the story of how a 22-year-old physical anomaly with the energy of the goofy skater kid she is during her off-hours—leaving the arena, Griner worked her long torso through an open car window and sat on the door's edge, hollering to a teammate behind us—is challenging norms of both sexuality and gender. (Abraham, 2013)

In this interview and many interviews that proceeded and succeeded this, Griner “hollers” her story and experiences as an openly gay professional athlete. In the story that chronicles her “coming out” that appeared in the May 2013 issue of *ESPN Magazine*, Kay Fagan cites Griner stating, “It feels so good saying it: I am a strong, black lesbian woman. Every single time I say it, I feel so much better” (Fagan, 2013). However, this was not the situation she always found herself in. During her tenure at Baylor, Griner’s sexuality was disciplined and silenced while she was simultaneously lauded and capitalized upon for her physical aptitude. Even though Griner’s sexuality was silenced during her time at Baylor, it served as a catapult that launched her into professional sports culture. Griner’s sexuality and “coming out” was often the default topic of choice rather than her talent as an athlete. In a video that appeared on SI.com featuring the WNBA’s top three draft picks for 2013, Griner is explicitly questioned about her sexuality and coming out. Griner’s capability as an athlete is secondary to her ability to contribute to

the conversation about sports and sexuality, a topic the host, Maggie Gray states is “another big topic in sports recently” (SI.com). The beginning of Griner’s career as a professional basketball player is predicated upon the fact that she also identifies as gay. While it is certainly laudable and indicative of a shift in cultural attitude towards sexuality, the mediated conversation surrounding Griner in some ways tokenizes her as the poster professional gay athlete. I argue the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture provides WNBA star, Brittney Griner, with a unique outlet to navigate and express her identity as a queer woman of color. Similarly, Williams is granted this same outlet and position. Williams capitalizes upon her visibility as a way to politicize her race and call for social and racial justice. However, unlike Williams, Griner must also deal with how her sexuality contends with her race. In many ways, Griner is forced to prioritize her position as a queer woman over her position as black woman.

Griner’s rise to popularity seemingly indicates a change in cultural attitudes toward individuals who occupy a space of intersectional marginalized identities. Griner is an openly gay black woman whose apparent warm reception is certainly a moment of progress for marginalized voices. Admirable as this progress may be, Griner’s body and voice were not always openly accepted. This makes Griner significant for several reasons. First, she represents typically marginalized identities. She is a black lesbian woman and she is not afraid to acknowledge and own that part of her identity. Additionally, Griner physically embodies characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity. She is strong, tall, aggressive, and excels at basketball. Griner demonstrates attributes of masculinity that are typically reserved for men with great success and expands upon societal understanding of female masculinity. The notion of female

masculinity is something that still causes much discomfort in society, especially when it is embodied in an individual who is gay. While this is certainly not a new or unique correlation, the relationship between embodied masculine traits and queer sexuality has an especially specific history in sport. In her book *Coming on Strong*, Susan Cahn (2015) writes,

In the early-twentieth-century parlance, ‘mannishness’ was an all-encompassing concept signifying female masculinity. But the term contained at least three more-specific charges within the general one: that too much exercise would damage female reproductive capacity; that women athletes would adopt masculine dress, talk, and mannerisms; and that the passion and excitement of sport would lead women to the brink of moral, physical, and emotional breakdown (pp. 165-166).

The “moral, physical and emotional breakdown” that Cahn refers to is the acceptance and practice of lesbian behaviors. Therefore, female athletes were excused of their “mannish” appearance so long as they still practiced heterosexual sexuality. However, the combination of embodying masculine traits with lesbianism was deemed as some sort of breakdown. And while Cahn’s account is rooted historically in the early twentieth century, the skepticism and wariness practiced toward masculine and queer female athletes is still prevalent in modern American society.

Female athletes who both embody masculine characteristics and excel in their sport often become suspect. When a female athlete over-performs or excels past expectation, their gender is called into question. In American society, female athletes are allowed to excel within expectation and reason. Women who appear to over perform on their sport become suspect. When this expectation is violated, female athletes are

typically disciplined in two ways – their gender is questioned or they are portrayed as overly feminine to compensate for their masculine performance and physical prowess. For example, after her emergence as a dominant fighter for the UFC, Ronda Rousey posed nude for the 2012 issue of *ESPN the Magazine*'s body issue. Seemingly, Rousey had to contrast her dominance as a fighter by proving the femininity of her body. She is pictured with her long hair down, clutching her breasts, and her hands are wrapped in pink wraps (“ESPN the Magazine: Bodies We Want 2012”). Given this, I argue that Griner’s performance of her sexuality and masculinity places her in a space where she must choose between emphasizing her sexuality or her race. Due to her intersectional embodiment, she is placed with the burden of advancing lesbian politics within professional sports culture. Griner is able to negotiate the borders of her body and render different aspects of her identity visible depending upon the mediated conversations that surround her sexuality and position as a professional athlete. However, this is only possible due to the silencing of Griner’s sexuality prior to her entrance into professional sports culture. Because Griner was the first openly gay athlete to be drafted to a professional sports organization she is placed in a unique position to politicize her sexuality as a black woman both within and outside of professional sports culture. Further, I assert the rhetorical silence that developed around Griner’s sexuality during her time as a collegiate athlete created a space for her to later give voice to and politicize her intersectional identity as a professional athlete. Griner demonstrates her ability to complicate hegemonic ideals and challenge the white heteronormative space of sports as an openly gay professional athlete. I argue Griner uses her voice to politicize her position as a professional athlete. Griner’s case differs from both Rousey and Williams due to the

fact that she has more borders of identity that she must contend with and politicize. Like Rousey and Williams, Griner seemingly understands how the disciplinary apparatus of sports culture operates. However, while Rousey and Williams internalize or manipulate this mechanism of discipline, Griner uses the discussion of her body and sexuality as a means to transcend the disciplinary power of professional sports culture. Griner's voice grants her the opportunity to transform the borders of professional sports culture, rather than internalize or manipulate them like Rousey and Williams.

This chapter proceeds in the following order. First, I give a brief overview of the female athletes and intersectional scholarship then discuss the importance of female masculinity within the realm of sports. I situate both of these theoretical conversations within the context of Griner. Next, I briefly discuss the texts and methods utilized for analysis in this chapter. Finally, I analyze various audiovisual texts where Brittney Griner is the primary rhetor. My analysis proceeds in three major parts. First, I analyze interviews that highlight Griner's coming out and emergence as a professional athlete. These texts are imperative because they help to illustrate how Griner was initially tokenized for her sexuality. Next, I focus on the Nine for IX documentary short, "Brittney Griner: Lifesize." This text highlights Griner's transition from being a rookie American athlete to her premier as a professional athlete overseas. Last, I analyze interviews and commentary that discuss Griner's engagement, marriage, and subsequent annulment to Glory Johnson. I assert that these texts reveal how Griner grappled with and ultimately politicized both her race and her sexuality. Finally, I offer implications and concluding thoughts.

## **Female Athletes & Intersectionality**

Female athletes are disciplined by society for their appearance as well as their capability to compete in athletic competition. Because of this, they are forced to negotiate almost every aspect of their identity such as race, gender, sexuality, and their competence as an athlete. This negotiation of identity as an individual and as an athlete creates tension for females in professional sports culture. The notion of an intersectional identity, especially an intersection of marginalized identities is something that oft times goes unnoticed and unacknowledged. Intersectionality is then often silenced in societal conversations. The “norm” in American society, especially in the context of sport, is a white, able-bodied, often male individual. Any person who does not identify as one or all of these characteristics, or who is not able to socially assimilate becomes an “other.” This otherness leads to invisibility, which essentially renders others as voiceless. If a person who occupies a space of intersectional marginalized identities is not even acknowledged by society, they are certainly not granted the opportunity to give voice to their identity. This is true not only in societal conversations, but also in communication scholarship. Karma Chavez and Cindy Griffin (2012) explicitly call for the field of communication to address this silence in scholarship. As discussed in chapter 1, Chavez and Griffin call to the field of communication as a whole, to consider how to incorporate theories and voices of intersectionality that are typically absent from scholarship. They assert that these voices and identities cannot and should not be ignored.

The discussion of women in sports is not a discussion that is new. In addition, a woman excelling in athletics is something that has always been scrutinized. From tennis superstar Billie Jean King to international track star Caster Semenya, it becomes clear

through mediated responses that society expects, and even accepts, women who succeed in their sport. However, when this success eclipses expectations and standards, these women become suspect and are threatened with things such as gender testing. Brittney Griner excels in the sport of basketball and exceeds expectations and standards placed on female athletes. In an article on ESPN.com, Kay Fagan (2013) summarizes her career highlights and states, “Griner was the three-time Big 12 Player of the Year and led the Lady Bears to a 40-0 season and the 2012 NCAA title. She was drafted No. 1 overall by the Mercury in the 2013 WNBA Draft” (“Owning the Middle”) Additionally, in an article on CBSSports.com, Mike Singer (2013) writes, “The 6-foot-8 center threw down two fourth-quarter dunks, becoming the first woman in WNBA history to dunk twice in a game” (“Brittney Griner makes history, dunks twice in WNBA game”). Arguably, her body violates what is expected of a female athlete, and when that is paired with her talent, she is perceived as a threat. Griner defies both physical and social expectations. In the 2013 article that appeared in *Elle*, Griner is described as being “edgy” due to her choice to wear all men’s clothing when preparing for her appearance on *Conan* (Abraham, 2013). In fact, Griner received a \$5,000 endorsement deal from Nike to wear and model athletic menswear and skateboards through the Nike SB line (Fagan, 2013). Griner metaphorically and literally blurs the lines between her categories of identity. Her embodiment allows her to blur the spaces within, between, and outside of professional sports culture. Griner does not fit into a box and she consistently redefines how her body moves through traditionally understood borders of identity and culture.

Griner’s blurring of boundaries and borders complicates how she is read and understood as an individual. She not only challenges the expectations of female athletes,

but her physical embodiment troubles gendered expectations as well. Her overall presence is messy and creates discomfort. This is a notion that John Sloop (2009) interrogates in his analysis of track star, Caster Semenya. Sloop (2009) states,

Hence, in Africa News (“Controversy Over,” 2009) exercise physiologist Ross Tucker explains that sex is so complex that there is no single way to determine gender. A blogger (Capers, 2009) notes that gender is always a discourse, and we can learn to do it in less binary terms. (p. 89)

Gender is messy and cannot simply be categorized into the idea of a binary. Griner echoes this idea in the feature that appeared in ESPN’s 2015 “Bodies We Want” issue. The online editorial displays photos of Griner, fully nude, but positioned strategically as to not reveal anything other than a bare buttock. One of the captions cites Griner stating, “I don’t know what people think I’m hiding. They thought I was tucking. Let me show that I embrace the flatness” (Griner, 2015). Griner clearly does not see her gender as being defined by having or not having particular sex organs. Instead, Griner disrupts the discourse surrounding the naming of her gender. Griner seems to understand that her body and her gendered performance are messy, and she is okay with that. In the spirit of this, Deborah Hawhee (2006) applies the notion of messiness to rhetorical theory and the body. Hawhee (2006) states:

Rhetoric’s very tendency to stretch or spill over into other arts or disciplines suggests what nearly everyone already knows - almost intuitively - that rhetoric isn’t just a cerebral, conscious process, that it’s messy, unpredictable, and that at some level at least, the body is involved (p. 157).

Hawhee embraces the bodily involvement of rhetoric. Additionally, she asserts that rhetoric is naturally messy and has blurred lines. As I previously iterated, this concept is applicable to the case of Griner. Again, Griner defies notions of expected gender performance as well as expectations as a female athlete. Griner's physicality represents Hawhee's example of the body being "messy" and "unpredictable." Griner's body and overall persona are "messy." Griner is a female athlete who opposes physical expectations and is openly gay. Because of this, she makes many people in society, especially within professional sports culture, uncomfortable. She does not fit into the mold of what a female athlete in the United States should look or act like.

### **Female Masculinity & Griner**

The notion of female masculinity is something that does not get much attention in dominant discussion in our society. In her book, *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam (1998) explores the concept of female masculinity and ultimately argues for more scholarship and more discussion surrounding the topic. This is a notion that applies to the case of Brittney Griner because she is a female that challenges traditional gender norms and embodies the individual that Halberstam argues and advocates for. Halberstam (1998) states, "The suppressions of female masculinities allows for male masculinity to stand unchallenged as the bearer of gender stability and gender deviance" (p. 41). Because of the gender binary that exists in our society, female masculinity is often depicted as the "other" and thus is not accepted as normal. Arguably, this is a sentiment that Griner agrees with and essentially demonstrates in her gender performance both on and off the court. Halberstam (1998) explains our gendered expectations as the following:

We still script gender for boys and girls in remarkably consistent and restrictive ways, and we continue to posit the existence of only two genders. Gender outlaw Kate Bornstein refers to this practice as a kind of compulsory gendering that leaves out all kinds of gender perverts who do not clearly identify as male or female or even as a combination of the two. (p. 118)

Dominant society views individuals who do not neatly fit into one of the two categories of gender as an “outlaw.” The binary that exists in society is restricting and confines us to only subscribe to set and narrow gender expectations.

The concept of female masculinity becomes even more problematic when viewed through professional sports culture. Sports and athletics, as articulated earlier, are typically an arena that is dominated by men. In his book, *The Media and the Models of Masculinity*, Mark Moss (2011) furthers this ideas and states, “Sporting culture in all its variations is seems as a space that is male-focused and male-centered” (p. 168). Moss furthers the notion that sports and athletic competitions are place for athletic men to gain honor and valor like athletes in ancient Greece. This example is further demonstrated when Moss (2011) states, “The competition, the drama, the action, the bonding, and the emphasis on strength, speed, and size coalesce around sport, becoming a tangible way that traditional aspect of masculinity are determined” (p. 178). Ultimately, sports are a place of masculine competition for men. Seemingly, there is no space for women. Sports and athletic competition serve to reinforce the gender binary that Halberstam asserts we should challenge and defy.

Halberstam further exposes the pressure that society places on the gender binary, especially in athletic competition, when she discusses the female boxers. In a sport that is

outwardly aggressive and categorized as “masculine,” women are still afraid to accept their masculinity. Halberstam states, “Even women who are involved in the most masculine of activities, such as boxing or weight lifting, attempt to turn the gaze away from their own potential masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998, p.270). The “manly art” of boxing is a space where female masculinity should be welcomed. However, the boxers are still encouraged to maintain their femininity by society, their coaches, and their parents. She says, “But masculinity is completely factored out of the equation between women and boxing, and we are left with a formulation of female boxing as an expression of true femininity” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 271). For Halberstam, female boxers should not be viewed as performing or the embodiment of female masculinity. Instead, it is another form, or an amplification of femininity, which is not an exposure of the gendered notion of masculinity. The female boxers featured in the chapter do not embrace their skill as an expression of their masculinity. They view it as an extension of femininity because being considered a masculine female is not acceptable in our society. They demonstrate this by growing out their hair, making sure it is styled, and by applying make-up. These are all things that arguably, enhance feminine traits. By embracing their aggressive sport as something that is feminine, these female boxers are only reinforcing the notion that women cannot be female and masculine. Instead, they must justify their masculine performances in a way that society is able to understand and accept. This framework also applies to Ronda Rousey and Serena Williams. Rousey is able to perform masculinity due to the nature of her sport. However, she maintains her femininity by consistently asserting her heterosexuality and through her desire to become a mother. Rousey’s embodiment of female masculinity seemingly embraces the same logic as the

female boxers discussed by Halberstam. While Rousey advocates for the acceptance of muscular women, it is still within the realm of what she deems acceptable, which she explains in her interview for *Sports Illustrated's 2015 Swimsuit* edition. She states, “I hope the impression that everyone sees in the next Sports Illustrate Swimsuit Issue is that strong and healthy is the new sexy” (“Ronda Rousey Uncovered 2015 | Sports Illustrated Swimsuit”). This is not to imply that female masculinity cannot also be sexy. However, female masculinity as it is embodied in Ronda Rousey still aligns with traditional notions of femininity. In the clip previously cited Rousey is shown with her hair long and down and in a black bikini. She amplifies her femininity. Her call for the acceptance of “strong and healthy” more readily aligns with feminine qualities rather than the embodiment of female masculinity. Similarly, Serena Williams also calls for the acceptance of various female bodies. Like Rousey, Williams’s call is still rooted in notions of what Halberstam claims is extended femininity rather than female masculinity. However, while Rousey is able to advocate for female bodies in general, Williams’s call is for acceptance is tied to her blackness. Rousey’s embodiment and performance of whiteness grants her the ability to traverse between masculinity and femininity without having to contend with matters of race. This is a privilege that is not granted to Williams or to Griner. Both Williams and Griner are black women, so their bodies and performances of gender become intertwined with historic controlling images of black women. What is more is that Griner is an openly gay woman, which further complicates her portrayal and societal acceptance of female masculinity. Female masculinity as embodied and performed by each of these athlete’s manifests into different meanings. I argue Griner is able to express and fully embrace

Halberstam's conception of female masculinity due to the constraints placed upon her body as an openly gay black woman.

Maintaining a feminine appearance is a pressure that many female athletes endure. When female athletes do not conform to this expectation, their gender then comes into question. Additionally, when female athletes perform their sport better than expected, their gender also comes into question. In his investigation of the gender testing of track star Caster Semenya, John Sloop (2012) states, "As has been pointed out in sports scholarship for decades, the suspicion initially gets raised only when female athletes excel. In effect, the better one is as a woman, the more likely that one is, in fact, a man" (p. 85). Society expects females to be successful in athletic competition, but only when that success is still measurably below the success of male athletes. This is the problem that Semenya faced. Because she excelled at a track competition, her gender came into question. Further, to reconcile her masculine appearance, Semenya went through a "make-over" to alleviate tension society felt about her physicality. Sloop (2012) states, "Hence, as was widely reported, just after the news broke about the gender testing, Caster Semenya posed for a makeover in *You* magazine. Semenya was not only made over, but she also wore a skirt and traditional female clothing" (p. 87). Semenya was only accepted once she was "made over" to embody traditional feminine qualities.

According to both Sloop and Halberstam, the area of athletic competition poses several issues for female athletes in regard to gender. Women who participate in sports are only accepted if they maintain some element of femininity and if they perform their sport on a level that meets societal expectation. When female athletes defy any of these expectations, society then disciplines these athletes and encourages them to reinforce

their femaleness either by undergoing a makeover or by wearing makeup and growing their hair long - all things that signify traditional notions of what it means to be female. This notion is expounded further in Lindsey Mean and Jeffrey Kassing's (2008) analysis of how female athletes construct their appearance for public and mediated discourse.

Mean and Kassing (2008) state

As a consequence women athletes achieved athletic identities using familiar culturally established dis-courses of male athleticism while simultaneously managing femininity. In this work traditional male hegemony was embedded in the identities and discourses mobilized by the women athletes, re-producing traditional power relations and revealing that limitations to performing female athleticism within "accepted" boundaries persist despite increased participation.

(p. 142)

Ultimately, athletic competition, as it is demonstrated through Sloop, Halberstam, Moss, Mean and Kassing, and the previously scholarship on ancient Greece, is a masculine space reserved for men. Moss (2011) states that it "provides an arena and outlet to demonstrate masculine skill and the related attributes of strength and physical prowess" (p. 173). When women enter that space, they are expected to in some way, maintain their femininity and demonstrate that in a way that is both recognizable and acceptable to dominant society.

### **Texts & Method of Analysis**

As outlined in the previous chapters, I utilize critical rhetorical methods as a means to further interrogate the disciplining power of professional sports culture. Specifically in this chapter, the utilization of critical rhetoric paired with mediated texts

serves to further interrogate the complex relationship between the media and rhetor. In this instance, I analyze the boundaries and borders that are ascribed to Brittney Griner by professional sports culture due to her position as a black, lesbian, female athlete and how Griner vocally navigates those boundaries. Critical rhetoric then serves as an answer to the call for “progressive” scholarship concerned with dominance and power. Jennifer Nash (2008) writes, “Progressive scholarship requires a nuanced conception of identity that recognizes the ways in which positions of dominance and subordination work in complex and intersecting ways to constitute subjects’ experiences of personhood” (p. 10). If the goal of critical rhetoric is to “participate in a postmodern world” without providing a specific outcome, then intersectionality understands the complexity of structural and power relationships.

I focus on audiovisual texts because of the presence of both voice and body. I look at how Griner discusses her body and her sexuality. Additionally, I contrast Griner’s vocalization of her identity with mediated discourse about the same topics. By contrasting Griner’s voice with sports mediated discourse I am able to analyze how Griner navigates how her body moves through sports culture and also which aspects of her identity she chooses to highlight. Since my interest is in the embodiment of intersectionality and vocal negotiation of said body, I focus on audiovisual texts, primarily videos made available on YouTube through various sources such as the official WNBA channel, the Baylor Athletics channel, and the Phoenix Mercury channel. In addition to these texts I analyze the *Nine for IX* short featured on EPNW.com. In summation, I analyze 19 audiovisual texts from media outlets such as *The New York*

*Times*, ESPN.com, and YouTube channels like the Phoenix Mercury channel, the WNBA official channel, and AOL Originals.

**“Another big topic that’s been in sports recently is sexuality.”**

From the moment Brittney Griner entered the professional sports scene, it was known that she was openly gay and proud of that label. Following the 2013 WNBA draft the top three selections including Griner, Elena Delle Donne, and Skylar Diggins appeared on a panel interview for SI.com. During the interview the host, Maggie Gray, asked Griner why there is a “difference” between men and women athletes on the issue of “coming out.” Griner responds and states,

I really couldn’t give an answer on why it’s just so different. Being one that’s out it’s you know, just being who you are. Again, it’s like I say, just be who you are.

Don’t worry about what other people are going to say cause they’re always going to say something. But, if you’re just true to yourself let that shine through. Don’t hide who you really are. (“Griner, top WNBA picks talk sexuality, sports”)

Gray follows Griner’s comment and asks, “You’re in a different position because you’re not just a regular person. You’re a famous athlete. You’re the number one pick in the WNBA draft. How difficult was it for you to make the decision (about coming out)?”

Griner answers and states,

It really wasn’t too difficult. I wouldn’t say I was hiding or anything like that. I’ve always been open about you know, who I am and my sexuality so it wasn’t hard at all. And if I can show that you know, I’m out and I’m fine and everything’s

okay then hopefully the younger generation will definitely feel the same way.

(“Griner, top WNBA picks talk sexuality, sports”)

In this particular interview, Griner is both vocally and visually contrasted against the other women on the panel. While Griner is not the only black female on the panel (she is joined by Skylar Diggins), she is the only woman on the panel who is not dressed in a way that embodies traditional notions of femininity. Griner wears her dreadlocks down, sports a checkered button down shirt and a polka-dot bowtie, and neon orange painted fingernails. The other three women in the interview have long hair, are wearing makeup, and are dressed in clothes that are fitted to their body. Visually, Griner already stands out. Gray further calls attention to Griner's ability to stand out and be in a "different position" and "not a regular person" by positioning Griner as the voice of all gay and lesbian athletes. The other two women on the panel are not asked about their sexuality, but rather how they respond as teammates to someone who is openly gay. Their presentation of cisgender presumes their heterosexuality. By asking Griner to speak about the difference between coming out in women's sports versus men's sports, Gray indicates that Griner is the authority on the experience of coming out in the realm of professional sports and that her voice is representative of all experiences regardless of age, race, class, or gender. And while Griner indicates that her sexuality was something that she did not hide, her response to Gray's questions following her first round draft immediately tokenize her as the expert on being a lesbian in the public realm. Additionally, Gray's questions about Griner's sexuality are not indicative of everything Griner embodies. Griner is clearly a black gay woman, however, her blackness is not of concern. Instead, both Gray and Griner choose to focus on her sexuality. In many ways, Griner's ease and comfort discussing her sexuality separate from her race is representative of the politics of

respectability that are ascribed to black LGBT sexualities. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) furthers this notion and writes,

The politics of respectability that suppress discussions of Black sexuality in general operate to police Black LGBT sexualities that are seen as being a threat to the integrity of the entire African American community. In this context, Black LGBT people may remain closeted within their African American families and Black civil society, yet, they also may live open 'out' lives once they leave African American residential enclaves. (pp. 273-274)

Again, while Griner states in this interview that she has never hidden her sexuality, she was not always able to openly discuss her sexuality. In the 2013 *ESPN* article, "Owning the Middle," Griner tells journalist Kate Fagan, "When I was at Baylor I wasn't fully happy because I couldn't be all the way out." During her time at Baylor, Griner was certainly living in a community that was outside of her African American family. However, because of Baylor's religious affiliation her open sexuality was still frowned upon. In many ways, Griner's transition into professional sports was her true "coming out." Like Gray states in the *SI.com* interview, she is not a "regular person," she is a professional athlete, which positions her within disciplinary nature of professional sports culture. Seemingly, part of this discipline includes advocating for LGBT rights that are not determined by race. Griner is able to vocalize her sexuality, but it is only if her message advocates for all LGBT individuals and does not discern how experiences vary due to race. Griner states, "If you're just true to yourself let that shine through. Don't hide who you really are." Her message does not specify how race impacts an individual's ability to come out. In a sense, Griner is able to be open and out due to the nature of

professional sports culture because race is only acknowledged when necessary. For Griner, her political statement (at least at the beginning of her professional career) is limited to her sexuality and does not include her position as a black woman. She is no longer living within the confines of black civil society; yet, she is still subjected to the respectability politics of professional sports. She leaves the suppression of the “African American enclave” only to enter the culture of professional sport, which is entrenched in whiteness.

The invisibility of Griner’s blackness is evident in the media’s response to her “official” coming out. Following her interview with SI.com, Griner’s sexuality was the main topic of conversation on a segment of 2013 *ESPN’s Sports Center*. Sportscasters Sage Steele and Emele Hill talk about the “ease” at which Griner discussed her sexuality and coming out. Hill states, “What she did was really significant and people should make a big deal out of it.” Hill goes on to discuss Griner’s prominence as both a professional and collegiate athlete. The two women continue the dialogue and ask if the NFL is “ready” to accept gay athletes, to which Hill compares the struggle to that of the Civil Rights Movement. It is also important to note that both of the sportscasters are black women. Yet, aside from the reference to the Civil Rights Movement, race never enters the conversation concerning Griner and her decision to come out or the history of homophobia and disciplining of sexuality within the black community, which would make it difficult for men of color in the NFL to openly proclaim their sexuality. Griner, Steele, and Hill all must adhere to the disciplinary whiteness of professional sports culture. The importance of race is marginally implied, but it is never explicitly invoked.

In order for a conversation about sexuality to occur, race must be negated and whiteness must prevail. Raka Shome (2000) writes,

Whiteness does not always and necessarily secure itself through a rhetoric of normativity; in fact, in historical moments in which whiteness becomes contested, its hitherto normalized practices often become visible. It is in such moments that whiteness begins to mark itself, name itself, come out of its 'hiding place.'

(p.368)

In this instance, whiteness is contested inasmuch as a conversation about sexuality takes place on a prominent sports network. Sexuality, in particular gayness in professional sports leagues is not typical rhetorical practice of ESPN. However, because the discourse diverges from being heteronormative, whiteness must persist. In many ways, because the network devotes screen time and conversation to queer sexuality it must compensate by engulfing these conversations in notions of whiteness. In other words, discussions about out gay and lesbian athletes are only permissible if the privilege of whiteness is maintained. Certainly, Griner's race along with the other NFL players Steele and Hill discuss have a large impact on their experiences of coming out, especially if they are black. Collins (2005) explains the history of LGBT black people and writes,

Historically, LGBT Black people have often remained closeted, tolerated within segregated African American communities just as long as they remained silent concerning their sexuality. In contrast, in the post-civil rights era of desegregation, many LGBT African Americans are not ashamed of their sexual orientation, do not consider it to be a problem or a sin, and refuse to devalue it.

(pp. 272-273)

Griner and her peers may refuse to devalue their sexuality, however, the conversation about sexual preference in sports media is regulated within the normativity of whiteness. Within the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture only so much deviance can be tolerated. For Griner, her deviance correlates with her coming out, not with the acknowledgement of her blackness. The lack of discussion surrounding Griner's race reinforces whiteness as the norm in professional sports culture. According to Griner in her interview with SI.com and the conversation between Steele and Hill, coming out is difficult and individuals who overcome this obstacle should be praised, regardless of race. Certainly this is true, however, as Collins indicates, race has historically had a huge impact on black individuals ability and comfort with coming out. Griner and the sportscasters' refusal to acknowledge or vocalize the impact of race on certain narratives of coming out reinforce the invisible power of whiteness. Shome (2000) explains, "In such rhetoric, whiteness always becomes something that is about someone else, about something else, but never about itself" (p. 367). In the case of Griner, the conversation focuses on her sexuality as a broad concept rather than her sexuality as a black woman. It is through this that the rhetoric surrounding Griner and even espoused by Griner herself, is enveloped in whiteness. Race never enters the conversation, making whiteness the default and norm. Whiteness is able to maintain power by implicitly being part of the conversation. It is never named, however, it is prevalent through the lack of naming and through the guise of advocating for the acceptance of queer sexualities.

While the confines of professional sports culture limits Griner's ability to discuss her race in the beginning of her career, Griner claims an entrance into the realm of professional sports as an opportunity to fully be herself. Following the draft Griner tells

the official Phoenix Mercury YouTube channel about her feelings after being the overall first pick in the 2013 WNBA draft. She states,

Definitely a weight off my shoulders, but it's really hard to describe. It's not like anything else. It was just mind blowing. Thinking about every little thing I just kept laughing and smiling... Definitely feels different. Just saying I'm a professional athlete is a little bit different, but I love it. It's just, I'm free. I definitely love it. ("All Access: Griner in New York")

Griner is "free" to be herself. She expresses this freedom by being able to claim the title of being a "professional athlete." Arguably the freedom experienced via professional sports culture is "mind blowing" due to the restrictions Griner previously faced as a collegiate athlete at Baylor. Again, Griner was not allowed to be openly gay while at Baylor. However, immediately upon being drafted Griner's sexuality became her recognizable tagline. While Griner proclaims freedom as a professional athlete, the capitalization upon her story of coming out and sexuality is reminiscent of Collins (2005) assertion that professional athletes, especially black athletes, are often made into mediated spectacles as a means to create a valuable commodity. Collins' argument iterates the commodification of black athlete's signals changes in race relations in America. As a commodity, Griner is able to speak to the claim that we are in a post-racial society. Her race is not the recognizable trait that bolsters her capital. Instead, it is her openness as a gay woman that centers her as a media spectacle and allows professional sports culture to profit off of her difference. Griner evokes her position as professional athlete and indicates that simply claiming that label is different. However, ultimately this difference and position presents her with the opportunity to be "free," which she "loves."

Griner's freedom within professional sports is paradoxical. She is framed as being able to fully embrace her sexuality at the expense of ignoring her racial identity. Griner also subverts the commodification of professional athletes. Typically, athletes become a media spectacle based upon their race. However, Griner becomes the center of a media spectacle because of her sexuality. The media attention centers on her sexuality, which essentially results in Griner being commodified because she is openly gay. According to Scott Gleeson (2013) in the USA Today, Griner's number one draft pick was not only "mind blowing" for Griner, but was also symbolic of the WNBA undergoing a makeover. Gleeson (2013) writes, "The WNBA has made Griner the focal point of a new era highlighted by a new logo and \$12 million ESPN television deal" ("USA TODAY Sports"). Gleeson also cites the monetary capital Griner will gain from endorsements. He writes, "Off the court, the bigger goal will likely come with drawing endorsements, still uncommon in women's team sports. Lindsay Kagawa Colas, who represents Griner, confirmed to USA TODAY Sports that Griner signed a deal with Nike on Saturday" (Gleeson, 2013, "USA TODAY Sports"). So, while Griner's racial identity is suppressed and disciplined within professional sports culture, her sexuality becomes the focal point from which both she and the WNBA are able to gain monetary benefits. And while this is certainly progressive for individuals who do not subscribe to heteronormative sexuality, it is somewhat damning for Griner as a queer woman of color. By placing monetary significance on her identity as an openly gay woman, sports culture essentially communicates to Griner and other queer women of color that the only noteworthy and profitable trait is their sexuality. Griner's body is only valuable because it represents and embodies queer sexuality.

Seemingly, Griner understands the commodification of her sexuality and intrinsically supports it. Shortly after being drafted, Griner is featured in an “It Gets Better” YouTube video (2013). The “It Gets Better Project’s” mission is “to communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them” (“What is the It Gets Better Project?”). Not only is Griner an openly gay woman, but she also challenges traditional notions of masculinity and femininity for women. In the minute long video Griner states,

I’m Brittney Griner and I just wanna say that it does get better. I’m walking proof right now that it does get better. Somebody that grew up taller than everybody, a little bit different than everybody, always voiced my opinion on my own sexuality and who I was as an individual. I got teased. The big hands, a little bit deeper voice, big feet, just you know I got teased. And you know it was hard growing up, but you have to find an outlet. Basketball was my outlet. It is hard. But it does get better. I mean I wouldn’t be here today if it didn’t get better. And you know, no matter what anybody tells you or picks on you or say you know, you’re different, you’re a freak. No, you’re not. You are beautiful who you are. And that’s one thing I just want to say. Just be yourself. Be different. Be beautiful. Don’t be like the next person. Be your own individual. And it will get better. 6’8” walking proof it gets better. (“It Gets Better”)

Griner’s message of acceptance and advocacy is significant for several reasons. First, Griner delivers this message while on a basketball court and outfitted in her Phoenix Mercury uniform. The Mercury and the WNBA ostensibly support Griner in her

vocalization of this message. Through this, Griner seems to be the face of a changing narrative for the WNBA in regard to lesbianism and sexuality. Historically, WNBA players were sexualized in a way that promoted motherhood or heteronormativity. Collins (2005) writes,

WNBA players are sexualized in the media in ways that never apply to men.

Their sexuality helps sell basketball, yet it must be a certain kind of sexuality that simultaneously avoids images of the muscled woman or the sports dyke and that depicts the women as sexually attractive to men. (p. 136)

As a spokesperson for the “It Gets Better Campaign,” Griner explicitly and loudly pushes against the negative connotations associated with the “dyke” persona that was previously correlated with WNBA players. Additionally, she faces the camera head on while dribbling a basketball. She does not assume a submissive position that is traditionally associated with the male gaze. Instead, she stares straight into the camera while simultaneously demonstrating her physical ability as a basketball player. Griner allows her sexuality to “sell” basketball, but in a way that is converse to how women have typically capitalized upon their sexuality. In fact, Griner exploits her sexuality and body in a way that calls attention to the “image of the muscled woman” and celebrates it. Griner cites her height, “big hands, a little bit deeper voice, big feet,” as reasons for her difference and bullying. She goes on to explain that she understands the reasons for her bullying, but “it gets better.” She explains that you “need to find an outlet” and that basketball was her outlet. Without basketball she, “wouldn’t be here today if it didn’t get better.” Griner vocalizes and re-navigates how her body and sexuality should be consumed. Griner explicitly points out the size of her hands and feet and the octave of her

voice. She correlates aspects of her body with her ability to be a successful athlete. Griner physically and vocally creates a new meaning for professional female athletes. She extends the definition to include someone who “grew up taller than everybody, a little bit different than everybody.” Griner calls attention to various parts of her body, which creates the opportunity for her to navigate the borders on her body. Julia R. Johnson (2012) writes, “A performance approach to the study of borders disrupts fixedness because it requires attending to the processes that make borders meaningful” (p. 35). Griner indicates that she should not be viewed as someone who is just tall, or gay, or a basketball player. Rather, all of these entities work together. Griner rhetorically fragments her body. She disrupts the fixedness typically associated with the consumption and bordering of the body. She creates clear demarcations of her body by discussing specific parts like her feet and hands. This fragmentation is necessary in order to reconfigure how her entire body should be consumed and makes the borders of body and identity more meaningful.

In the early stages of Griner’s professional career, it seems as if her ability as a basketball player comes second to conversations about her sexuality. However, her size, as she indicated in the “It Gets Better” video, certainly contributes to her success as a professional athlete. While Griner was predominantly questioned about her sexuality following her initial draft pick, the media focus quickly shifts to her body and physical capability as a player. In her debut game as a professional athlete Griner literally broke boundaries and records. Brett Logiurato (2013) from SI.com writes, “Rookie Brittney Griner became the third WNBA player ever to dunk in a game and first to do it twice, throwing down two slams in her first WNBA game on Monday” (“SI Wire”). He goes on

to explain the significance of this and cites the two other times this occurred in the WNBA. Logiurato (2013) explains,

The only other WNBA players to dunk during a game had been Candace Parker, who did it on two separate occasions, and Lisa Leslie... Both of Griner's dunks came in the fourth quarter, with the game already well in hand. The first was a one-handed slam early in the fourth quarter. She followed that with a two-handed dunk off a steal that roused the home crowd to its feet. (“SI Wire”)

It is clear that Griner’s physical capability is worthy of attention and is much anticipated. On the official media day following the first few days of training camp, various media outlets questioned Griner. Her responses are published on the official Phoenix Mercury YouTube channel. In the video the primary topic of questioning Griner answers surrounds her ability to physically adapt to the demands of playing a professional sport. Griner initially responds to the media and states,

How physical it was, I guess let me know I was at the next level. No easy buckets. You go up, you go up strong. That was probably the one thing that stood out to be cause I went on one time but, kinda got me a little bit (motions with arm), but I made the shot! (“Phoenix Mercury 2013 media day: Rookie Brittney Griner”)

The narrative dictated by both Griner and sports media previous to this focused on her sexuality. As evidenced earlier, Griner was positioned as the token openly gay professional athlete and was expected to speak on behalf of all gay athletes. However, in the context of training camp where the focus is on her ability to physically assimilate into the pace of professional sports, the conversation takes an abrupt turn and instead centers on Griner’s body. Arguably, change in discourse perpetuated by Griner and sports media

is logical. The narrative about Griner's sexuality was worthy of discussion upon her initial draft to the WNBA because she was new to the league therefore an identity needed to be manufactured for her. Similarly, because official media days take place during or after training camp, the emphasis should be on Griner's ability to perform on the basketball court. It is through this that Griner's body is able to rhetorically gain multiple meanings and layers. Social and political meaning was ascribed to Griner as soon as she officially became a professional athlete. Griner herself adapted this meaning by becoming a spokesperson for the "It Gets Better" campaign. Once that meaning is created and layered on Griner's body as an aspect of her identity the attention shifts to focus on her physical capacity. Both Griner and the media continue to fragment her body and identity. Rhetorically, Griner presents herself in layers as a means to create acceptance for the whole package. In many ways this could be viewed as progressive and accepting. Society must accept Griner's sexuality as the first and most important thing about her before they can focus on and appreciate her physical ability. Griner's dominance on the basketball court was common knowledge to anyone who followed women's collegiate basketball. Sage Steele and Emele Hill state on *ESPN's SportsCenter* that in college basketball "she was the biggest star of the year." Yet, as previously stated, while at Baylor, Griner was not permitted to discuss her sexuality. And while Griner repeatedly states that she was not hiding her sexuality, it was not a prominent part of the conversation about her as a person or her ability as an athlete.

The layering of Griner's identity is not inherently a problem. It seems to function as a strategy to create acceptance for Griner as a whole. However, it is also reminiscent of

Audre Lorde's complaint of being forced to pick which aspect of her identity she deemed the most important. She writes,

As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and as a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. (Lorde, 1984, p. 120)

Seemingly, Griner is placed in similar circumstances. She is an openly gay black woman who is also a successful professional athlete. However, the media is only capable of focusing on these aspects individually. Yet, when given the opportunity, Griner vocally pushes against this. In the "It Gets Better" video she discusses not only her sexuality, but also her body and how it lead to her success in basketball. For Griner, these aspects of her identity are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they all work in tandem as a whole to create her complete identity. In spite of this, the presentation of the layers of Griner's identity via the media communicates a different message. Griner is first introduced as an openly gay athlete, but negates her race. It is only after she is established as someone who is breaks barriers due to the openness of her sexuality that the conversation pivots to discuss her body and her profound ability as a basketball player. The sequential discussion of Griner's identity and embodiment conveys the notion that Griner's sexuality is only acceptable because of her physical appearance and ability on the basketball court, which reinforces traditionally racist and homophobic ideology. Collins (2000) writes, "Lesbianism, an allegedly deviant sexual practice, becomes linked to biological markers of race and looking 'mannish'" (p. 157). Griner's sexual deviancy is permitted because

she “looks mannish.” Physically, she fulfills longstanding beliefs of what lesbians embody. Griner’s blackness is apparent and readable, but it is not acknowledged and in many ways, is taken for granted. The lack of discussion and politicization of her race promotes the notion that her “mannish” looks naturally correlate with her race and sexuality. Further, she is athletic and represents what Cahn (2015) iterates is “a caricature of female masculinity and perversion, the mannish lesbian athlete symbolized the unfeminine ‘other,’ the line beyond which ‘normal’ women must not cross” (pp. 205-206). Griner articulates that she accepts herself, which is possible because she acknowledges her difference and celebrates it. While Griner welcomes her difference, the discourse that surrounds her body reiterates the stereotype that lesbians are successful athletes and that exceptional athleticism is only tolerable if lesbian women demonstrate it. Griner’s acceptance of her difference reifies the idea that there is a standard norm for female athletes, and if that norm includes queer female sexuality it must be presented in a “mannish” body or one that seemingly mocks female masculinity. When these notions are combined and assigned to Griner’s black body, it becomes more problematic. Rhetorically, in the beginning of her professional career, Griner is forced to choose which aspects of her identity are the focal points of discourse. Like Audre Lorde, Griner is only able to give credence to the aspects of her identity that are deemed important by sports media. Everything else, like her race, is not important or worthy of attention.

### **Brittney Griner: Lifesize**

The (in)visibility of Griner’s blackness followed her across the world to China. Following her first season as professional American athlete, Griner played internationally in China. In a short documentary series that profiled various female American athletes

titled *Nine for IX* and sanctioned by ESPN and ESPNW, Griner discusses her transition as an athlete in China and the obstacles that were presented. The *Nine for IX* short titled “Brittney Griner: Lifesize,” is a 16-min long documentary. The *Nine for IX* series proclaims it is “About Women. By Women. For Us All” (“Nine for IX”). The series highlights several prominent female athletes like Ronda Rousey and Jan Stephenson, a top LPGA athlete. The short dedicated to Griner is captioned with the following text:

From a celebrated hoops prodigy to a self-reliant professional basketball star, from Baylor to the WNBA and overseas, Brittney Griner had a wild ride last year. Her trip ended in China, where she drew oohs and aahs from fascinated crowds ... and learned a little something about herself along the way. (“Brittney Griner: Lifesize”)

From the beginning of the short an emphasis is placed on Griner’s body, specifically her height and ability to dunk a basketball. Before Griner is shown speaking or portraying any other action, several shots are spliced together to reveal her height and show her one handed, dunking a basketball. These depictions are not unwarranted as the shorts are dedicated to highlighting female athletes. However, the opening sequence sets the tone for what aspects of Griner should be prioritized and the focal point of the 16-min film. The following sequence of shots and text highlight stats about her body such as her height, her wingspan, and her shoe-size. This information is placed intermittently with shot after shot of Griner dunking the basketball with voiceover clips stating how “no other woman who plays basketball can do that.” The prioritized message of the short becomes clear: Griner is an exception athlete and specifically a physical anomaly in the realm of female athletes.

The short proceeds to show Griner in her hometown of Houston, Texas and indicates that Griner's addition to the Zhejiang Golden Bulls will enhance the team's chance of winning the 2014 championship. From the onset, Griner is capitalized upon for her athletic ability upon entering international sport contest. In contrast to her entrance into American professional sports, the emphasis is placed solely on her body and its ability to perform rather than her sexuality. In many ways, Griner's transition into playing in China is an act of redemption for her professional career and for the narrative surrounding her personal life. Griner discusses her disappointment in her rookie debut and states, "I was disappointed in myself in my rookie season. I got injured and missed some games and I'm not used to sitting on the bench." Griner had to miss the last five games of the 2013 season as well as the WNBA All-Star game due to a sprained knee injury ("Thompson replaces Griner for ASG"). In the short, Griner has recovered from her injury and hopes to redeem herself as a basketball player in China. China also presents an opportunity for financial atonement. According to the short, Griner's rookie salary was \$49,000 in comparison to the estimated \$600,000 Griner received in China. Veteran player Maya Moore states, "It's not that complicated. You want to go where you're going to be valued the best and right now that means China" ("Brittney Griner: Lifesize). The monetary value ascribed to Griner's body is significantly more overseas. I argue the inflation in Griner's salary supports the commodification of her body being other and outside the normal of female athlete's capabilities.

Not only does playing in China provide monetary significance for Griner, but she also has the opportunity to improve as a basketball player. According to Dean Demopoulos, Griner's personal coach, "Brittney has a chance to be a real game changer.

She's working on developing the habits of a champion. She obviously doesn't have them all at this point" ("Brittney Griner: Lifesize"). Griner's professional career in China is important for several reasons. First, Griner's transition into international athletics is emblematic of her ability to navigate physical and rhetorical borders, especially as they are associated with her body. While Griner is enveloped in whiteness in the United States due to the politicization of American sport, she cannot escape her blackness in China. In spite of this, Griner's race is still an (in)visible attribute of her identity. In many ways, her blackness and embodiment of a black American female athlete is taken for granted in China, similarly to the way it is taken for granted in America. However, instead of ignoring Griner's race, it becomes hyper-visible and representative of what all black American athletes embody. Griner's success and athletic performance in China shapes foreign understanding of what it means to be a professional black American athlete. As Robert DeChaine (2012) writes,

In their role as shapers of public knowledge about the propriety of people, places, and social statuses, border rhetorics function as an index for gauging social meanings of the true American citizen and the terms and conditions of membership in the national political community. (p. 9)

Griner is in a position where she is able to negotiate the social meaning attached to her body and identity not only as a female athlete in America, but also as an international athlete in China. Second, Griner's transition into international sports territory reveals the emphasis placed upon her sexuality in America. Her sexuality does not have an explicit impact on her ability to perform as an athlete, yet it is implicitly an important part of her life and narrative surrounding her professional success in America. This narrative

seemingly does not exist when she is in China. Griner is rhetorically and physically isolated. She does not speak Mandarin and she visibly sticks out. The only narrative or aspect of her life that is communicated during her time in China directly relates to her ability as an athlete. In many ways, Griner's experience in China provides her the opportunity to be freed from how her identity as a black gay woman grounds her in American politics. This is not to imply that the Chinese basketball team and fans do not acknowledge her race and sexuality. Rather, while she plays in China, Griner's race and sexuality and not at the forefront of her narrative. Instead, the emphasis is placed on her body as whole and her ability to compete as an athlete. Griner's race is certainly visible, however, it is not vocalized or discussed. Similar to her entrance into professional sports, Griner's race is a taken for granted attribute of her identity.

In a conversation about her favorite shot of Brittney Griner from the *Nine for IX* short, director Melissa Johnson discusses a specific sequence where Griner walks “upstream through the crowd of people. And they’re all, you know these guys looking over their shoulder like who is this gorgeous 6’8” African American woman with dreads. You know, she really stands out” (“Nine for IX Director’s Statement”). Johnson continues to describe the symbolism of the shot, the sea and ocean-like cadence of Griner’s pace and the metaphorical representation of where Griner is in her life in that particular moment. While Johnson’s comments are about one specific sequence and seemingly address the fact that Griner is noticeable due to her height, the notion that Griner’s body and her identity are liquid and fluid are indicative of her ability to utilize her body as a means to traverse literal and rhetorical borders. Certainly, being 6’8”, Griner’s body stands out in America as well as in China. Yet, her ability to become

recognizable due to other markers on her body and her ability to navigate these markers of identity seem to become more apparent to Griner during her time in China. She is an American playing professional basketball in China. The meaning attributed to Griner's body in the United States does not necessarily travel with her to China. As Kent Ono (2012) iterates, "The body as a border, also, is always shifting" (p. 29). Griner's body shifts as she plays and attempts to acclimate to Chinese culture. As Griner's time in China progresses, the borders on her body continue to shift. In particular, her blackness becomes more visible in China than it was in America. Griner literally stands out in China, which inherently shifts the border of her identity to focus on her blackness. However, while this border is visible, it is not discussed in China, much like it was ignored in America. Griner's embodiment of black womanhood is often ignored in American sports, however, as Johnson indicates, she cannot escape her blackness in China. Yet, even though her blackness is readily visible, it still does not necessitate a conversation or vocalization.

Griner's blackness becomes explicitly more visible on the Chinese basketball court. According to the documentary, each Chinese team is only permitted one American player. Therefore Griner is the only black American woman on a team filled with Chinese women. Griner does not only physically stick out on the basketball court, but she also indicates that she is isolated from her team in other aspects. She states,

I'm definitely isolated from my teammates. They all live together. They have to dress alike. They can't leave the hotel at all unless the coach allows them to. They have to eat breakfast at the same time... Got there and I was alone and I was like, 'Aw hell no. My life is coming to an end.' ("Brittney Griner: Lifesize)

Because Griner is isolated from her team she is made hyper visible to her teammates and her Chinese fans. The physical detachment of Griner from her teammates who embody a different notion of athleticism and femininity serves to further other Griner. The seclusion of Griner serves two major purposes. First, it works to garner admiration of her body – her height, her hair, and her physical prowess. While the Chinese fans appreciate these aspects of Griner, Collins indicates that this admiration could also be rooted in fear. She writes,

In some cases, the physical strength, aggressiveness, and sexuality thought to reside in Black men's bodies generate admiration, whereas in others, these qualities garner fear. On the one hand, the bodies of athletes and models are admired, viewed as entertaining, and used to sell a variety of products. (Collins, 2005, p. 153)

Griner's depiction of blackness is synonymous to that of black men. Many of the fans in the documentary cite her height, her ability to dunk, and her style as reasons why she is their favorite. In other words, they enjoy her athletic performance as it is presented on the basketball court. Rachel A. Griffin and Bernadette Calafel (2011) write, "Black males became representative of desired mystique and wonderment. Subsequently, the black male body became a site for spectacular white consumption and enticement, but this only worked so long as black men could be controlled" (p. 119). Griner's ability to dunk the ball and overall physical prowess incites wonderment from the Chinese fans. They admire her and consume her body in ways similar to the historic consumption of black male bodies. Griner's blackness makes her mystical in China. However, because her race is never explicitly mentioned, it continues to be a taken for granted attribute of her

identity. Additionally, Griner discusses how people interact with her when she is in public. She specifically talks about riding public transportation. She states,

Like I'll be on the bus, and I'll just feel somebody at the back of my head just playing with my hair. They're like examining. They thought it was fake, and I was like no, it's mine. You can pull it. ("Brittney Griner: Lifesize")

Griner's vocalizes this comment over footage of Chinese fans asking for her photo and reaching to touch her hair. Griner certainly is admired, but one of the major reasons why is because she is a black woman in China. None of the fans that are interviewed plainly cite her blackness or race as a reason for their adoration. However, it is clear that Griner's blackness is a large contributing factor. Further, Griner's position as a black woman in China provides her the opportunity to "sell" basketball. Maya Moore, the other prominent American playing in China discusses how much Chinese fans love basketball. She states, "It's really amazing how people wanna see it. There's a lot of people here to come see it" ("Brittney Griner: Lifesize"). Griner's body as an athlete is as Collins states, admired and entertaining all while it is also able to sell tickets to basketball games. In many ways, Griner's blackness becomes even more of a commodity in China than in America. Griner's participation in professional sport in China reifies the American notion that black bodies can be exploited and appropriated for pleasure (Griffin & Calafell, 2011, p. 119). By playing internationally, Griner carries the meaning ascribed to her black body across the Atlantic Ocean to China. The border that signifies her race and the commercial value associated with it shifts. However, unlike in America the commodification of Griner's body is not as obfuscated in China. Griner understands, acknowledges, and is an active participant in this process of consumption and commodification.

Ostensibly, Griner is aware of the commodification of her body. She states, “I have to bring it every day, every game, and if I don’t they’ll replace you with another American, like, easy” (Brittney Griner: Lifesize). Griner knows that she is replaceable. Her Chinese competitors and coach also know that she is replaceable, which dictates how they interact with her on the court. Griner describes playing in China and states,

They definitely play a little bit dirtier here. As far as like grabbing my arm. Like I’ll go up for a rebound and they’ll like lock one of my arms in their arm. It’s a freaking foul. I know the ref sees it. The coach is just controlling a bit. We butted heads a lot in the beginning. I was like, ‘This doesn’t make sense,’ and the coach went berzerk. Like, just went off. (“Brittney Griner: Lifesize”)

Because Griner is replaceable and disposable, her opponents challenge her and are more physical with her. Again, she is regarded in the same way that black American men are based upon the fact that she is viewed as a force of physical strength and aggressiveness. This is apparent not only through how Griner’s competitor’s play against her, but also how her coach treats her. Griner’s blackness is hyper visible, but is also an unknown to her Chinese coach. Therefore, Griner is treated as something that has the potential to be feared, so she must be controlled and contained. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) further iterates this notion when she states, “Athletics constitutes a modern version of historical practices that saw Black men’s bodies as needing taming and training for practical use” (p. 153). Griner’s gender is conflated with race. Her body is read for its blackness and the power that is associated with that. In spite of all of this, Griner willingly participates in this treatment. Ultimately, playing in China is one step toward reaching her goal as a professional athlete in America. She states, “Now at the pro level you have to put in

extra. You can't just rely on oh I'm tall, I'll make it. You're not going to be that great player that they always talk about. I wanna be that player" ("Brittney Griner: Lifesize"). Griner must readily participate in the commodification of her body in China in order to be able to excel in America.

One of the major narratives that surrounded Griner during her transition into professional sports was her sexuality and willingness to be openly gay in such a public platform. While this is certainly still an important aspect of her identity, it is not the dominant aspect of her identity in China in the same way it is in America. Prior to her departure for China, Griner discusses her relationship. She states,

My love life was going good, it was going real good. I have a really, really great girlfriend. She knows how to reach me on a level that nobody will do.

Everybody's too busy kissing my ass honestly. Hopefully we can still have this love life going. ("Brittney Griner: Lifesize")

However, as the documentary progresses it is revealed that Griner and her girlfriend end their relationship, so Griner truly is isolated. In America, Griner's voice was primarily utilized to advocate for LGBT rights. However, in China Griner is unable to communicate without a translator. In many ways, because her sexuality is suppressed in the same ways her voice is suppressed. Griner comments on having a translator and states,

Always being dependent on my translator is definitely weird. She has to tell me everything. Like sometimes it makes me nervous. Like I don't wanna be in a situation like into the game and the coach draws something up and I don't get it

all and it costs us the game. Like that's my worst fear. ("Brittney Griner: Lifesize")

Griner expresses the discomfort she feels by not being able to vocalize her ideas herself. She is dependent on a translator to be able to communicate for her. Essentially, Griner's voice is co-opted by her translator and her voice proper is silenced. Not only is Griner's voice silenced in communication with her coach, but also the silencing of Griner's voice is symbolic of her inability to negotiate her identity and how her bodily borders are read. If she is not able to vocalize her identity she is not able to politicize her body. Instead, as previously mentioned, Griner exists in China as mere spectacle and as a means to provide economic substance to Chinese women's basketball.

Yet, just because Griner is not able to vocalize her identity, it does not mean that her body does not contain meaning. Dustin Goltz and Kimberlee Perez (2012) write, "We are never one thing; never singularly gay or lesbian, teacher, or student, racialized white or of color. While we might identify ourselves as one thing in any one encounter, these categories swiftly dissolve, overlap, and intersect" (p. 171). Griner is not void of identity or bodily borders. Even though Griner cannot communicate first hand and vocalize her identity, it does not mean her identity does not exist. In some ways, this notion can be viewed as freeing for Griner. She is not negated of her identity as a black or a gay woman. These attributes of Griner still exist and as Goltz and Perez state, she is never one thing. However, because she is not forced to talk about these aspects of her identity, she does not have to choose to be one thing like she does in America. The meaning assigned to Griner's body in China is more implicit than explicit. Griner is not unaware of the implications of her gender, race, and sexuality. However, instead of focusing on

one singular aspect, like she must in America, she instead can focus on the function of her body as an athlete. Griner's existence in China is predicated upon her physical ability and capacity to perform as a basketball player. In many ways, she is viewed as a machine. Griner understands her relationship to her body as a machine and a process and she capitalizes upon this for her own benefit.

**“Today as an out lesbian black woman I am here.”**

Brittney Griner concluded her rookie year in 2014. However, even though she is no longer considered a rookie, the narrative surrounding her did not change. Instead of discussing how she grew as a player, much of the conversation about Griner was dedicated to her sexuality. Arguably, this was due to the publication of her memoir, *In My Skin*. In reviews of the book she is compared to other prominent out athletes. Jere Longman (2014) from *The New York Times* writes,

Along with the soccer star Abby Wambach, Griner is the most accomplished of the highly visible athletes who have come out to widespread acceptance in the past year or so. Others include -the N.B.A. player Jason Collins, the N.F.L. prospect Michael Sam and the soccer player Robbie Rogers. But Griner's memoir, written with Sue Hovey, reminds us that the wide world of sports can still be constrictingly narrow when it comes to tolerance. (“Life Out Loud”)

Griner's memoir continued the dialogue about her sexuality and her position as a voice for those who are unable to express their sexuality, especially within sports culture.

However, as Griner progressed through her professional career, her ability and willingness to vocalize this political stance shifted, mainly due to her marriage to Glory Johnson and the domestic issues that followed her marriage. In this section I analyze how

Griner transitions from a rookie to a veteran, and how she continues to negotiate how her body and identity are viewed after her marriage, consequential domestic assault charges, and annulment. I argue that while Griner's stance and platform as an LGBT advocate remains, she begins to shift focus to her identity as a black woman due to her relationship with fellow WNBA star, Glory Johnson. However, while Griner accepts her blackness, she must also re-negotiate how her body is viewed as both masculine and feminine. Rather than focusing on her identity as a gay individual, Griner must instead focus on the controlling images associated with black masculinity.

In order to promote her book Griner appeared on various media outlets. In an interview that appeared on FOX Sports "Crowd Goes Wild," Griner discusses her book and how she utilizes it as a platform to provide voices for those who will come after her. She states,

I knew I had a message I wanted to get out to the youth and tell my story. I didn't have anybody I could look up to growing up when I was younger so I definitely wanted to do that now...Message is be true to you. Be true in your own skin and you know just love yourself no matter what...At the time being told you can't be your whole you is kind of like being trapped in a can, you know. You can only see the label but you don't really get to see what's on the inside. ("Crowd Goes Wild")

Griner delivers these remarks to applause from the studio audience and the five interviewers on the show comprised of two women and three men. While giving the interview Griner is seated in the middle and is wearing all white with her locs braided back and out of her face. And while the primary focus of this analysis is on the rhetoric

spoken by Griner, it is interesting to note her appearance. Griner conveys a message of wanting “the youth” to be able to be true to themselves. The message which drips with hope and promise when coupled with her white clothing indicates the notion that Griner is a form of a savior for those who feel like they are “trapped in a can.”

Additionally, Griner cites being “true in your own skin” in this interview as well as in the title of her book, *In My Skin*. Griner explicitly evokes the materiality of her body and how that is tied to her identity. For Griner, her body is a manifestation of her identity and she uses her body as a means to express herself. She explains this further when she talks about her tattoos. While she was at Baylor she was forced to cover her tattoos. Kay Fagan (2013) writes, “In her sophomore season, she got a tattoo of two skulls -- one happy, one sad -- on the lower right side of her back, as a reminder to “laugh now, cry later.” She would get other tats, so many, in fact, that Mulkey required her to wear a long-sleeved T-shirt under her jersey” (“Owning the Middle”). While she was a collegiate player Griner was forced to silence her body and her identity. However, as a professional she is able to fully express and advocate for the acceptance of her body for herself and others. Griner’s choice to advocate for her body via the acceptance of her skin is symbolic of her understanding the importance of the visibility of her body and how her identity is mapped onto it. Lucaties (2012) writes, “Understood as an optic, in other words, border rhetorics offer one avenue for engaging the question, what might it mean ‘to see’ or ‘to be seen’ as a citizen” (p. 228). By specifically discussing the need to be comfortable in her skin and the manipulation of her skin via tattoos, Griner is in turn shapes the optics and borders of her body. She redefines what it means to be seen as a citizen. In an interview with AOL Originals she links the modification of her skin with

how her body as a whole is viewed and her identity as a gay woman. She explains that she was bullied for being different and bigger. She states, “Not that, you know, typical you know, this is a girl and this is how a girl acts. She doesn’t wanna do all the crazy stuff, and you know, that was me” (“Brittney Griner: My Ink,” 2013). She goes on to explain one tattoo in particular and states,

I have a double female sign on my hip over here. I wanted to get branded honestly, but I wasn’t really about that life, getting my flesh burned. So, I cheated. I just had the tattoo look like I was branded. So I got that. Call that my lesbian tattoo...Society gives us a bad rap for having tats or being gay. I’m like, well let me just throw it all together in one and see how you like it now. I’m definitely comfortable in my own skin. I’m definitely comfortable doing whatever comes into this crazy head...It’s my life, it’s my skin, it’s my ink. (Brittney Griner: My Ink,”) )

Griner directly connects the stigma of her tattooed body with her sexuality. Griner correlates her skin with her identity as a lesbian woman. By doing this, she makes her sexuality visible. The visibility of her sexuality allows her to reconstitute what it means to be a citizen. According to Griner, neither her skin nor her sexuality should have a “bad rap.” Citizenship should also be granted to openly gay women.

While Griner associates her sexuality with her skin and body, never once does she discuss her race. This omission is notable due to the sheer fact that she consistently evokes a conversation regarding the acceptance of her skin and her body. The brownness of Griner’s skin is clearly visible, yet Griner never acknowledges it. Instead, she chooses to connect her skin, her body, her identity, to her sexuality. In many ways this decision

represents Collins call for acceptance of black bodies that transcend gender. She writes, “Individuals who reject dominant scripts of Black gender ideology by fully accepting their own bodies ‘as is’ move toward achieving honest bodies...Black people may be bombarded with gender-specific images that deem Black bodies as less desirable if not downright ugly” (Collins, 2005, p. 283). Griner’s discussion of her body works toward an honest body. By omitting her race and instead discussing her sexuality, Griner demonstrates that she already accepts her body as a black woman. She is comfortable in her skin, meaning she is comfortable as a black woman and therefore does not need to discuss how her race impacts how she views her body. Instead, according to Griner, the focus should be on her sexuality.

It is not until she is honored with the Human Rights Campaign “Visibility Award” that Griner connects her sexuality with her position as a black woman. In her acceptance speech she states,

Today as an out lesbian black woman I am here, and I am committed to being that voice for those that are still silent. For whatever the reason may be, I am here to be that voice, to speak out too, so you can have a voice to look up to...I want to thank the HRC sponsor BBVA Compass, all my social media fans that fight for me every single day. You wouldn’t imagine the things I still get to this day. I tell people you know, I’m over getting bullied. But some of my friends tell me you know you’re still getting bullied every day. When you go and look on my Instagram, or I go and look on my Instagram and I see comments I’m like, I guess, I guess you’re right. But I’m over it now. I’m above it. I’m comfortable with who I am. Of course, I have to say again, I have to thank my mom. She’s

been my rock through all the bullying and everything I went through in high school, middle school. I have to, I have to definitely thank my other half. My baby. My better half. Glory Johnson, thank you for being here with me babe. (“Brittney Griner receives the HRC Visibility Award”)

Griner states that she not only wants to be a voice for those who are silent, but also a voice to look up to, which is reminiscent of previous her rhetoric and advocacy for the acceptance of LGBT individuals. However this time she is committed to this as “an out lesbian black woman.” Further, Griner discusses how her body still incites negative comments. However, she does not succumb to the bullies because she is “over it” and “above it.” Griner’s comfort in her “honest body,” is seemingly in part due to her marriage to her “better half,” Glory Johnson. Previously, Griner emphasized her comfort in her skin and her sexuality. She did not specifically advocate for the acceptance of because she indicated that her sexuality and the entire make up of her body, such as her height, were the major aspects of her otherness. However, once she marries Glory Johnson, Griner’s sexuality is no longer just an aspect of her identity that she can make tangible via the acceptance of her skin. Though her marriage she becomes connected to another individual, who also happens to be a black woman. Because Griner becomes connected to Johnson thought marriage she has a constant reminder of what it means to be a black gay woman. Griner’s proximity to another black woman forces her to renegotiate how her body is viewed and consumed. Collins writes,

As a specific site of intersectionality, Black lesbian relationships constitute relationships among the ultimate Other. Black lesbians are not White, male, or heterosexual and generally are not affluent. As such they represent the antithesis

of Audre Lorde's 'mythical norm' and become the standard by which other groups measure their own so-called normality and self-worth. (Collins, 2000, pp. 181-182)

Griner and Johnson's relationship creates a new standard of what it means to be black for Griner. They are both black women who were partnered in a lesbian marriage. Due to this, Griner must re-conceptualize what it means to be Other. Johnson's blackness forces Griner to advocate for the acceptance of her sexuality, skin, and acknowledge her own blackness in ways that she previously had not. Rhetorically, Griner connects her "honest body" to Johnson's. By specifically mentioning her position as a black lesbian woman and calling Johnson her "better half" she re-creates her identity through that of another black woman. While Griner previously stated she was comfortable in her own skin, it is only through her marriage to Johnson that she begins to fully acknowledge the entirety of her skin. She recasts the borders of her identity to be inclusive of all aspects of her identity.

Griner is able to acknowledge and accept her blackness due to her marriage to Johnson. The two were married after a brief period of dating in May 2015. What was made clear throughout the time leading up to the actual wedding ceremony was that this partnership was different. According to an article that appeared in the "Vows" section of *The New York Times*, Johnson states, "'I'm not a lesbian,'" Ms. Johnson said. "But Brittney is different," (Reinhart, 2015, "For Brittney Griner and Glory Johnson, a Complicated Match Made on the Hardwood"). So, Glory Johnson is a woman who previously identified as straight, and seemingly, would still identify as straight. As she iterates, she is not a lesbian, she just happened to fall in love with Griner. Johnson's

assertion and necessity to cling to heteronormative standards is of particular importance. Prior to her marriage, each woman was charged with domestic violence, which resulted in each player being suspended for seven games (Mather, 2015, “Brittney Griner and Glory Johnson Suspended 7 Games in Domestic Violence Case”). In a recollection of the events to *Cosmopolitan*, author Abigail Pesta (2015) writes,

A few minutes later, when the women passed each other, Griner grabbed the back of Johnson's neck and threw her head down. "I've never been grabbed or thrown like that ever in my entire life, not by anybody," Johnson says. "At that point, everything was out there. We were fighting. We were scrapping." Griner hurled a glass dog bowl. "Her eyes were dead black," Johnson says. "I thought I could talk to her, but she was not there." (“Glory Johnson Surprised Even Herself When She Fell In Love With a Woman”)

It is important to note that Griner pleaded guilty to the domestic assault charges. Victor Mather (2015) from *The New York Times* writes, “Griner pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct charges and agreed to complete 26 weeks of domestic violence counseling, after which the charges will be dropped” (“Brittney Griner and Glory Johnson Suspended 7 Games in Domestic Violence Case”). The question in this analysis is not about who is at fault. Rather, it is pertinent to recognize the factors that lead up to the marriage and consequential annulment between Griner and Johnson, specifically because throughout the relationship and fallout, Griner is consistently portrayed as the lesbian who married a straight woman. Additionally, prior to their split, Johnson and Griner sought IVF treatment from which Johnson became pregnant with twins. After their annulment, Johnson filed for child support. Griner initially refuted any financial obligation, however,

according to Mary K. Reinhart of *The New York Times*, Griner was bound by Arizona law to prove that she was not responsible for the children. She writes,

That may not matter, however. Under Arizona law, Mr. Davis said, there is a presumption that a child conceived during a marriage is a child of both spouses. It would be up to Ms. Griner to prove that she has no legal responsibility for the child. “So what is enough to rebut the presumption?” Mr. Davis said. “The fact that she has no sperm? Maybe. This may end up at the Supreme Court if the lawyers want it to. (Reinhart, 2015, “An Abrupt End to Brittney Griner and Glory Johnson’s Marriage”)

While biologically Griner is not connected to the twins (Ava Simone and Solei Diem), she is still considered a parent. Arizona officials agreed and according to *ESPNW.com News Service*, Griner was ordered by Arizona Judge Timothy Thomason to pay \$2,516.97 in monthly child support (2016, “Brittney Griner ordered to pay child support to Glory Johnson”).

While the focus of this analysis is Griner, and not her former partner, Glory Johnson, the relationship and events that occurred between the two has a direct impact on Griner, her body, and how she negotiates how her body is able to move through and outside of sports culture. As previously stated, because of her relationship with Johnson, Griner is able to acknowledge and embrace her blackness. However, once Griner does this, she then subjects herself to the association of violence to black bodies. This is particularly true in her case. Both Johnson and Griner asserted on multiple occasions that Johnson is heterosexual and that she just happened to fall in love with Griner. Griner is

continuously cast as in pursuit of Johnson. In the article that appeared in the “Vows” section of *The New York Times*, Reinhart (2015) writes,

Ms. Griner said she has admired Ms. Johnson since they were college rivals (Ms. Griner at Baylor and Ms. Johnson at Tennessee) but “didn’t have the nerve to flirt with her.” When they both attended a 2013 USA Basketball training camp together in Las Vegas, Ms. Griner flirted like crazy. (“For Brittney Griner and Glory Johnson, a Complicated Match Made on the Hardwood”)

Johnson tells a similar story in *Cosmopolitan*. Pesta (2015) reports,

More drinks flowed after the show, and Griner escorted Johnson to her hotel room in the wee hours. In the room, things got interesting. “It was really awkward because what do you do when you’ve never been in this situation with a female before?” Johnson says. Griner, deep-voiced with dreadlocks and size-17 feet to anchor her lofty frame, put Johnson at ease with her swagger. (“Glory Johnson Surprised Even Herself When She Fell In Love With a Woman”)

In all accounts, Griner was the predator and Johnson was the prey. These narratives along with Griner’s acceptance of her blackness through her partnership with Johnson further the association of Griner’s body to historical and racist images of black masculinity, specifically black male athletes. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) explains, “Historically, African American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of promiscuity and violence” (p. 152). Compared to Johnson, Griner is both deviant and violent. Griner is the lesbian who married a heterosexual woman and according to Johnson, is the one who initiated the violent behavior in their argument. Not only does Griner enact these

behaviors, but she also physically embodies notions of black masculinity. Johnson cites her height, her deep voice, and her “swagger” as all reason why she fell in love with Griner. Griner is also sexually promiscuous in that she “escorted Johnson to her hotel room.” And while the article does not reveal in detail what happened, the insinuation is that Griner successfully made sexual advances on Johnson. The casting of Griner as a depiction of black masculinity is particularly important in the charges of domestic violence. Collins (2005) explains, “Historical representations of Black men as beasts have spawned a second set of images that center of Black male bodies, namely Black men as inherently violent, hyper-heterosexual, and in need of discipline” (p. 158). Griner became violent and in need of control. And while both women were charged with domestic assault, Griner was the only one who pled guilty. Seemingly, Griner understood the borders ascribed to her body. In partnering with Johnson, and heterosexual black female, Griner was no longer viewed as an openly gay woman. Instead, she became an openly gay black woman who, compared to her partner, represented more attributes of black masculinity than black femininity. And while there should be freedom in Griner’s ability to embody gender in such a fluid way, her blackness disavows her to experience this freedom. By acknowledging and accepting her blackness she must in turn accept the controlling images associated with both black masculinity and black femininity.

**“I’m at a place where I’m comfortable...I’m comfortable in my skin.”**

Following the media firestorm surrounding her marriage, domestic violence charges, and annulment, Griner was featured in *ESPN The Magazine’s 2015 Body* issue. In addition to be photographed naked, Griner sat down with sports journalist Kay Fagan

(the same woman who wrote the feature on her coming out) to discuss Griner's reasons behind agreeing to do the photo shoot. In the video Griner states,

The body issue was amazing. I got to walk around naked. Finally. Just walk around free. I'm at a place where I'm comfortable. Before I would have never did that. I wasn't comfortable in my skin. I was too worried about what people would say, the judgment I would get. But, now I'm at a place where I love myself. I'm just like here I am. You know, embrace it. Love me. Hate me. It doesn't matter. This is probably like a big stepping-stone. It's a big milestone for me. It's like the ultimate show that I'm comfortable. ("ESPN The Magazine's 2015 Body Issue: Brittney Griner")

Once again, Griner acknowledges the materiality of her body through her skin. The issue is titled "Body," but Griner draws the focus closer to her skin and her comfort in her skin. Previously, in her memoir, in other interviews, and in speeches, Griner had stated that she was comfortable in her skin. However, this assertion indicates that she was not fully comfortable. Only now that she has agreed to pose nude, is she able to fully claim comfort in her skin. Griner also states that this is a big "milestone" for her because it is the "ultimate show" that she is comfortable. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, Griner is seemingly always aware of how her body is being viewed and consumed. In her initial entrance into professional sports, she emphasized her physicality and identity as an openly gay woman, but not her blackness. It was not until her partnership with Glory Johnson that Griner seemed to willingly discuss her position as a black woman. And so, while formerly Griner had iterated her comfort in her skin, it is not until she is forced to

acknowledge and navigate all aspects of her identity and body that she is able to literally bare it all for public consumption.

Griner further explains her journey to comfort in her skin and states,  
It's a long process, that's for sure. People close to me, you know, kinda helping me boost my confidence. Surrounding myself with people that wouldn't judge me. Doing little things like dressing how I wanna dress, which is basically like dressing like a full-fledged boy... Coming out to my parents help me be comfortable in my skin because I was able to wear what I wanted to wear and not think like "Oh god, I be they think I'm a lesbian right now." And then I finally took the huge step coming out to the world. ("ESPN The Magazine's 2015 Body Issue: Brittney Griner")

Griner reverts to emphasizing her sexuality as her major source of comfort or discomfort in her body and her skin. Additionally, while she chooses to manipulate her skin with tattoos, she also covers her skin with clothing as a means to assert her identity. In Griner's case, the choice of "dressing like a full-fledged boy" is another way to signal that she is a lesbian. Through this, Griner is not only navigating the borders of her body as an individual, but also as a female athlete. Susan Cahn (2015) writes,

As a stigmatized figure the mannish lesbian functioned as a powerful but unarticulated 'bogeywoman' of sport, silently foiling the ongoing efforts of sport advocates to rehabilitate the reputation of women athletes and resolve the cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity. (p. 165)

Griner embraces that contradiction and in many ways, mocks it. Griner's open and consistent proclamation of her sexuality along with her comfort in her skin and her body

and her complete dominance on the court contests the notion that “mannish lesbian” athletes should be stigmatized and viewed as the “bogeywoman of sport.” Not only does Griner accept the fluidity of her gender, she advocates the same for others. What is more is that she has quickly become the face of the WNBA. As was stated at the beginning of the chapter, Mercury general manager Jim Pitman stated, “Brittney Griner is the present and the future of the WNBA and we are fortunate to guarantee she continues her growth here in Phoenix” (“Sports Illustrated, WNBA”). Griner’s embodiment of female masculinity and queer sexuality signals a change in professional sports culture, at least for women. The WNBA and Phoenix Mercury are capitalizing on Griner’s difference.

What is more is in the same interview Griner cites basketball as the place where she can shed all of her skin – her race, sexuality, etc. – and become fully happy. She states, “You have to find that place where you’re happy and I’ve definitely found it. When I come here everything, I kind of just take it off and I get on that court” (“ESPN The Magazine's 2015 Body Issue: Brittney Griner”). Arguably, Griner would not have been able to accomplish this transcendent attitude toward her identity without the disciplinary nature of sports culture. Because she was forced to reconcile with the whiteness and homophobic nature of professional sports she was able to get to a point where she can claim, “I’m at a place where I’m comfortable.” Griner is able to politicize her body in a way that eclipses race and seemingly gender. She does not deny her position as a black gay professional athlete. Instead, she uses her body as a means to create opportunity for others. She creates tools for survival. Audre Lorde (1984) writes,

For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and

manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection. Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes. (p. 114)

If the goal of professional sports culture is to oppress those who do not subscribe to the white heteronormative standards, then it fails spectacularly with Griner. Griner uses these very ideas, language, and manners, to create new knowledge of what it means to be a professional female athlete in America. In the words of Lorde, she is an example of “the oppressed” who is able to “teach the oppressors their mistakes.”

## Chapter 5

### Professional Sports Culture as a Pseudo Feminist Movement

In her book, *Coming on Strong*, Susan Cahn chronicles the history of women in sports. Cahn discusses the impact women in sport have had on American society in general. She writes, “As they have increased some pie shares, women have lost ground with regard to other feminist aspirations, making it harder to see sports as part of a larger demand for self-determination, equal protection, and justice for all girls and women” (Cahn, 2015, p. 312). Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to assert that professional sports provides context for women to advocate for a feminist political agenda. Through the examples of Ronda Rousey, Serena Williams, and Brittney Griner, I have argued that this is in fact true, however, as Cahn demonstrates, this is an imperfect movement to provide justice for all girls and women. For each of the athlete’s examined in this dissertation, the restrictions of professional sports culture becomes increasingly evident through the ways in which each woman discusses her body. However, the boundaries of professional sports culture are different for each woman based upon her race and sexuality. In many ways, this notion further exemplifies Cahn’s notion that the idea of “leveling the playing field of sports may do more to deter than facilitate progressive change” (p. 284).

Ostensibly, the most liberated or empowered athlete in this dissertation is Ronda Rousey. Rousey is able to internalize the disciplinary power of professional sports culture and utilize it to her advantage. When she was at the top of her sport, the power of sports culture manifested through the ways in which she discussed her body in comparison to the other female fighter bodies. Certainly, Rousey’s body exceeded expectation and

demanded some semblance of discipline. Yet, Rousey was the one who inflicted this discipline upon her own body. Through her rhetoric, Rousey appeared to maintain some semblance of agency over her body. She actively participated in professional sports culture because it was necessary in order for her to become the best. What is more is that once Rousey established her routine of dominance, she was able to disseminate these notions of dominance onto her fellow fighters. According to Rousey, she views this as her way to leave an impact on the world. In the *Nine for IX* short she states, “So this is my way that I found to try to change the world a little bit and leave it better than how I found it” (“Rowdy Ronda Rousey”). As I highlighted in chapter 2, Rousey never openly claims the title of feminist. Still, it is evident that she is concerned with in some ways, equaling the playing field, at least for female UFC fighters. Not only does she carve the path for more women to fight and participate in the UFC, but she also vocally challenges known male fighters. For example, on the red carpet of the 2015 ESPY’s, Rousey was awarded the title of “Best Fighter.” In her interview she states,

I just try to be the best at what I do and that’s the real substance that keeps people coming. Not all the outside things, like what you’re wearing today, what magazines you’ve been in, what movies you’re doing. It’s really about the fights themselves and because the fights themselves really hang in there with the men and that’s why everybody loves them... Well um, I can’t help but really say, I wonder how Floyd feels being beat by a woman for once. I’d like to see you pretend to not know who I am now. (“Ronda Rousey wins Best Fighter at the 2015 ESPY's then fires shots at Floyd Mayweather Jr”)

Rousey believes that by participating in fights, she is able to make a difference. For Rousey, it is truly about her body and how her body is able to perform. She is able to make a difference because she represents “real substance” and does not focus on what she is wearing or what magazines she has been in. So, while Rousey promotes the acceptance of her muscular body, she again demonstrates how she disciplines other female bodies. In this example, women who are concerned about their clothes or magazines fall outside of Rousey’s definition of liberation. Yet, in that same response Rousey explicitly challenges Floyd Mayweather, who was also nominated for the “Best Fighter” award. In her response, Rousey directly calls out Mayweather, who in a video featured on BoxingScene.com, stated that he did not know who Rousey was. Rousey implicates Mayweather, and in doing so, asserts that female athletes are asserting themselves in the predominantly male space of professional sports and that they cannot be ignored.

This one example, along with the other examples of analysis provided in chapter 2 further illuminates the complexity of Rousey’s gender and feminist politics. As I argued in chapter 2, Rousey advocates for the acceptance of female bodies, but it is only bodies that she also deems acceptable and that fall within her understanding of whiteness. Rousey has a history of making transphobic comments. When Fallon Fox, the first openly transgender athlete in MMA history entered the scene, Rousey had some rather explicit and offensive things to say regarding Fox’s ability to compete against other female fighters (Koonce & Schorn, 2015, “Fuck Moving On”). Rousey states, “She can try hormones, chop her pecker off, but it's still the same bone structure a man has. It's an advantage. I don't think it's fair” (Wilcox, 2013, “UFC champ Ronda Rousey on Fallon Fox”). Clearly, for Rousey, it is only women who biologically identify as female who

should be granted the body acceptance she espouses. It is this very reason that grants Rousey the ability to move freely through the borders of her identity and the boundaries of professional sports culture. Rousey is a white, cisgender, heterosexual female. So, while she advocates for the acceptance of female masculinity and female bodies that do not fulfill a cookie cutter standard, she is only able to do so because of the privilege she embodies.

In contrast, Serena Williams must contend with more bodily borders in her navigation of the confines of professional sports culture. Unlike Rousey, Williams must contend with her race and how her blackness is inscribed upon her body. Because of this, Williams is not able to internalize the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture in the same ways as Rousey. Although Williams is not granted this privilege, she is able to manipulate the edges of professional sports culture in order to push against its boundaries and appeal to a broader audience. Williams exemplifies bell hooks' notion of a critical black female spectator. hooks (1992) explains, "Critical black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" (p. 317). Williams uses her position as a critical black female spectator to navigate and discuss how her body should be read. Williams's rhetorical strategy does not only apply to her body, but also other black female bodies. Williams continuously discusses how her body and her blackness cannot be separated from one another or her ability to be a successful athlete. In the interview with Common Williams states,

And yeah, there was a time I didn't feel incredibly comfortable about my body because I felt like I was too strong. And then I had to take a second and think,

well who says I'm too strong? This body has enabled me to be the greatest player I can be and I'm not gonna scrutinize that. ("The Undefeated In-Depth: Serena with Common - Serena Williams 2016 ESPN interview")

Earlier, in the same interview Williams discusses how proud she is to be a black woman. She states,

If you think about what the slave had to go through, you know. And then the life that we are privileged to live, I wouldn't want it to be any other color. There's no other race to me that can, that has such a tough history for hundreds and hundreds of years. When I went to Africa, only the strong survive. We were the strongest and the most mentally tough and I'm really proud to wear this color every single day of my life. ("The Undefeated In-Depth: Serena with Common - Serena Williams 2016 ESPN interview")

Williams constantly and deliberately discusses her experience not only as a woman, but specifically as a black woman. This rhetorical strategy allows her to encode and decode her rhetoric for both the audience ingrained in notions of whiteness and her non-white audience. Williams exemplifies Marsha Houston Stanback's call to centralize women of color and their experiences as a means to advance feminist theory and politics. She writes,

Making women's ethnic culture the central organizing concept for feminist theory and research means thinking of women enculturated to a gendered communication ideal within specific ethnic groups, that is, learning how they should communicate as women in the context of a particular ethnic experience. (Houston, 1989, p. 53)

Williams internalizes the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture in ways that differ from Rousey. Certainly, all of the women analyzed in this dissertation are inundated by the disciplinary power of professional sports culture. Yet, it is how each woman navigates this disciplinary power that is of particular interest. Rousey is able to utilize elements of control and fragmentation to her advantage. She becomes a cog within the disciplinary apparatus. In contrast, Williams works within its boundaries. She is able to communicate within the context of her particular experience and relay those experiences to a broader audience. This is only possible because Williams employs her voice as a tool to dictate how her body should be viewed as well as a tool to traverse the borders of professional sports culture. Williams's voice allows her to encode her rhetoric. Seemingly, she is aware that viewers and consumers of professional sports are not all constituted in whiteness. Therefore, she uses her voice to reach broader audiences while advocating not only for feminist politics, but racial politics as well.

Finally, Brittney Griner illuminates how queer non-white athletes can utilize their bodies to explicitly defy professional sports culture. Griner embodies much of the anxiety associated with the allowance of women into a male dominated space. Cahn (2015) explains, "For decades critics of women's sport had linked 'mannishness' to sexual deviance, claiming that masculinized female athletes would inevitably acquire masculine sexual characteristics and interests as well" (p. 165). Griner is a woman who embodies and accepts her "mannishness" and who also openly identifies as a lesbian. Her very existence in professional sports culture challenges normalized beliefs and the disciplinary power typically associated with professional sports. In many ways, because Griner embodies so many categories of identity that typically warrant discipline, she is able to

transcend the power and control of professional sports culture in ways that Rousey and Williams cannot. Rousey is disciplined for exemplifying female masculinity while Williams is disciplined for being a black woman. Griner is black, a woman, and demonstrates attributes of female masculinity. This multitude of characteristics seemingly makes it difficult to regulate multiple aspects of Griner's body and identity. Griner's position within the boundaries of professional sports culture grants her the opportunity to decide what aspects of her body should be the central focus. Compared to Rousey and Williams, Griner is the newest athlete to become indoctrinated with the norms of professional sports culture. However, that does not make Griner naïve to the influence of sports media. Following her annulment and domestic abuse charges to Glory Johnson, Griner had to face Johnson in a game. Understandably, the media was keen to question Griner how she felt about facing her ex in competition. Griner responded,

It should be about the game. It's unfortunate that the media gets tied up in mine and Glory's off the court stuff. It takes away from the game and, most of all, it takes away from what all of the great players are doing on the court. (Levine, 2016, “‘It Should Be About the Game’: Brittney Griner on Good Media, Bad Media”)

Griner understands that her body summons more attention and control, however, she does not succumb to that pressure. She is able to dictate when and how her body should be viewed. Throughout chapter 4, I highlighted how Griner cites basketball as her saving grace. Griner capitalizes on her position as a professional athlete. Certainly, Rousey and Williams do the same. Yet, Griner does not qualify her athletic ability in the same ways that Rousey and Williams do. Rousey consistently discusses how she has trained and

sculpted her body and worked hard to get to where she is. Similarly, Williams references her blackness and her body and the trials she faced entering professional athletics due to her racial identity. Of course these are all characteristics that apply to Griner and yet, she does not vocalize them as a means to atone for her existence in the realm of professional sports. Griner lets her athletic ability speak for itself. This is evident in her promotion for the WNBA. In the video she states, “I look at it like just showcasing what I can do. On the court, in the weight room. It’s kind of just like, come on. Come and see what I can do and I’m pretty sure you’ll be amazed” (“Brittney Griner, Watch Me Work”). Griner does not apologize for entering professional sports culture. She does not qualify her gender, race, or sexuality. Instead, she chooses to focus on her body’s ability to perform as an athlete. She transcends the disciplinary nature of professional sports culture.

While each athlete who I have examined in this dissertation embody and advocate for some notion of feminist politics, it is difficult to categorize professional sports culture as a hotbed for a feminist revolution. Clearly, issues that concern progressive feminists exist and are being combatted within professional sports. Yet, as Cahn (2015) iterates, “It is not a revolution when men’s sports remain essentially unchanged, as do the meanings that emanate from them” (p. 311). This is not to say that there is not potential to utilize professional sports culture as a foundation for change, for feminism, racism, and transgender issues (All of which fall under the umbrella category of feminism. Yet, if this dissertation demonstrates anything, it highlights the difficulty that exists in attempting to address any one issue, let alone a multitude of issues at once). Sports culture has a unique opportunity to call for and demonstrate change. As I mentioned in chapter 1, international sport competition for track athletes will begin to require hormone therapy for women

whose testosterone levels test too high (Kelner & Rudd, 2017). Additionally, in my conclusions about Rousey, I mentioned Fallon Fox, the first transgender MMA fighter. There is obviously room for growth within professional sports. I believe sports culture has a unique opportunity to grapple with and work through these issues of gender identity because sport is one of the few areas of culture that is predicated upon biological sex. However, as culture and societal politics change in regard to gender identity, sports are going to have to change as well. Cahn (2015) also welcomes these new “issues.” She writes,

If athletic ‘masculinity’ in self-identified women disrupts the gender norms of American society, transgender athletes demonstrate that women’s sports are institutionally structured upon similarly normative arrangements. The result is a healthy chaos. Each ‘problem’ creates an opportunity to rethink our assumptions about nature, culture, and sport. (Cahn, 2015, p. 309)

Professional sports culture has the opportunity to redefine the ways in which society sees and understands gender. Additionally, I have worked throughout this dissertation to consistently name the whiteness that is embedded within American professional sports. While each of these case studies is rooted in American sports, I believe it is not a stretch to state that Western sports also adopt a perspective of whiteness. This would not truly be an intersectional or relational project if I did not address how whiteness interacts with our notions of gender, race, and sexuality. It is up to academics to continue the work of naming the spaces in which whiteness resides, and it is in this spirit that I believe this dissertation makes the biggest contribution. This dissertation seeks to build upon the growing scholarly conversation concerning the naming and outing of whiteness. I

repeatedly asserted that whiteness maintains its power due to the invisible nature of the construct. However, given our current cultural climate, it becomes more imperative to no longer grant whiteness its privilege of remaining unnamed and unseen. Professional sports culture is but one area that necessitates interrogation; yet, I believe it is an important context to begin dismantling the power of whiteness. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) state, “We take everyday discourse as a starting point in the process of marking the territory of whiteness and the power relations it generates” (p. 296). Professional sports culture is but one place where whiteness has marked its territory and through which it exerts its power through everyday discourse. It is only once we begin to intrude on this territory that the power of whiteness will be dismantled.

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