SPORT SPECTACLE, ATHLETIC ACTIVISM,  
AND THE RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF MEDIATED SPORT

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by

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ABSTRACT

Sports is widely regarded as a “spectacle,” an attention-grabbing consumerist distraction from more important elements of social life. Yet this definition underestimates the rhetorical potency of spectacle, as a context in which athletes may participate in projects of social transformation and institutional reform. *Sport Spectacle, Athletic Activism, and the Rhetorical Analysis of Mediated Sport* engages a set of case studies that assess the rhetorical conditions that empower or sideline athletes in projects of social change. The introduction builds a working vocabulary of four key terms—form, style, medium, and genre—that are central to the rhetorical analysis of mediated sports and mobilizes those concepts throughout the dissertation’s case studies. “We’ve Come a Long Way Maybe: Billie Jean King’s Feminism and the Battle of the Sexes” contrasts the bodily material feminism of King’s 1973 victory over Bobby Riggs with the strong emphasis on financial equity that King advocated in interviews and memoirs and notes how King has attempted to leverage control over public memory of the match to position herself as a figure of social transformation. “Three Waves of Gay Male Athlete Coming Out Narratives” considers how the genre compels athletes to reconcile their identities as athletes with their identities as gay men while tracing the evolution of common argumentative appeals for the fitness of gay men in sport since the 1970s. “Black Lives Matter and the Decline of the Decline of the Activist-Athlete” argues that if the Black Lives Matter social movement is viewed only through the prism of athletic activism, some of the central issues that the movement continues to face—its emphasis on horizontal models of organization and leadership, its skepticism toward working through established levers of governance, and its ambivalent relationship to the politics of respectability—are further obscured and refracted by the institutions of sports and sports media discourse and particular instances of athlete-activist protest, even as these athletes
overturn longstanding assumptions about the political quiescence of elite athletes. “‘Absent Athletes,’ Athletic Agency, and the Sports Documentary” considers how the genre of the sports documentary often gives athletes a sense of social importance while simultaneously stripping them of the agency to make such arguments themselves. Through analysis of the sports documentaries of Steve James and Amir Bar-Lev, I argue that documentary is uniquely positioned as a genre that subverts the spectacle of sports and transforms spectators into deliberative civic agents. The conclusion assesses how sports spectators can act as deterrents of athletes’ civic energies through an analysis of the ideograph and sports media hashtag “#sticktosports.”
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Outside of work hours, I’ve had the good fortune to participate in a few collectives of stimulating athletic-intellectual energy. Perhaps more than anything else, these opportunities—playing softball, Ultimate Frisbee, basketball, and racquetball—helped me find a home in State College and inhabit a personal-professional identity through which the ideas in this dissertation could begin to blossom. There’s not enough space to thank everyone, but special commendation goes to Brooke Ricker Schreiber, Adam Lupo, Tom Joudrey, Matt Price, Lisa McGunigal, Nate Malenke, and especially John Marsh. Outside of State College, Keith Whittingham, Ken Stitt, and Tom Kolenich remain models of athletic style and reminders of the dual audiences I am always trying to reach.

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Nicolette Hylan-King has facilitated this dissertation in a variety of material and immaterial ways. My favorite form of support comes in our mutual willingness to drop what we’re doing to help each other find the appropriate word or phrasing to fill out a passage. Nicolette, who helps me find my words, has a devotion and tenderness that has empowered me to complete this project—and which constantly leaves me speechless.
Introduction: The Rhetorical Analysis of Sports Spectacle

In the spring of 2015, as a graduate instructor in Penn State’s English department, I had the good fortune of teaching an undergraduate course titled “Sports|Ethics|Literature.” The course, which was initially proposed by my dissertation advisor, Debra Hawhee, and formally approved by the Faculty Senate in 2014, was not conceived in such good fortune. Sports|Ethics|Literature was a pedagogical response to events that had cast the university into turmoil. In November 2011, Jerry Sandusky, a former defensive coordinator of Penn State’s football team and a well-regarded member of the local community who founded The Second Mile charity for underprivileged and at-risk youth in central Pennsylvania, was arrested on 40 counts of molesting eight boys from 1994 to 2009. Within days, the effects of the arrest rippled through the campus community as local citizens, school officials, and media outlets questioned when allegations against Sandusky first arose and why Sandusky had not been removed much earlier from charitable work and campus privileges that put him in close proximity to underage children. Amidst allegations of a cover-up—or, at the very least, bureaucratic slow-footedness—among prominent university officials, the Penn State Board of Trustees fired university president Graham Spanier and head football coach Joe Paterno, the latter of whom had coached at Penn State for 47 years. Paterno, as many know, was long heralded as a local and national icon for his avowed dedication to cultivating “student-athletes” in the best sense of the word, where academic and on-field success were not treated as mutually exclusive enterprises.

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1 For more on the institutional structure of Penn State University that allowed football to exist on campus without sufficient academic oversight, see Ronald A. Smith, Wounded Lions: Joe Paterno, Jerry Sandusky, and the Crises in Penn State Athletics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016): 75-88; 150-172.
2 As J. Michael Rifenburg has demonstrated, the National Collegiate Athletic Association created the rhetorically savvy designation “student-athlete” in the 1950s to avoid admitting that athletes were “employees,” in the process casting student-athletes as “passive receiver[s] of American
believed that sports could be a training ground for the production of ethical and civic-minded young men. Over time, this process-based approach to cultivating reasonable and responsible young men had been mythologized as Paterno’s “Grand Experiment” and distilled into the easily quotable and somewhat self-congratulatory mantra “Success with Honor.” It promised Saturday afternoon victories without the stench of criminal and academic scandal that surrounds many NCAA Division-I universities attempting to win national championships in profit-geared sports. The Sandusky scandal and its alleged cover-up risked exposing “Success with Honor” as more public relations gloss than lived practice. As Michael D. Giardina and Norman K. Denzin note in the introduction to a 2012 special issue of *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* on “Policing the ‘Penn State Crisis,’” dominant media narratives positioned Paterno as either the mastermind of a university-wide cover-up or “victim of the Board of Trustees or of a vapid infotainment media system screaming for blood.” This dichotomous narrative—villain or victim—ignored the complicating fact that Paterno was astutely adept at the “spectacle of civic branding” that characterizes the corporate university in the late 20th and early 21st century.


3 Smith, 89-111.

4 The dog-whistle of race emerges in the formulation “Success with Honor,” as well. Penn State’s (white, or white-cultivated (given the demographics of central Pennsylvania)) student-athletes are presumed to possess decorum of dress and manner that (presumably black) student-athletes at other universities lack. The paradigmatic example here is the framing of Penn State’s 1987 Fiesta Bowl victory over the University of Miami. See *The U*, dir. Billy Corben (ESPN Films and Rakontur, 2009). For more on a recent iteration of academic scandal and a big-time sports university, see Jay M. Smith and Mary Willingham, *Cheated: The UNC Scandal, the Education of Athletes, and the Future of Big-Time College Sports* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

Giardina, Jordan Bass, and Joshua Newman suggest that this emphasis on public relations—which allowed Paterno to help promote Penn State during its ascent from a relatively unheralded agricultural college to one of the top state-related research powerhouses in American higher education—ultimately caused the Board of Trustees to fire him. Paterno was, as it were, hoisted on his own petard; he was condemned by the same cultural force of sloganeering publicity, within the media and his own university, that first lionized him and shone a limelight on his place of employment. The university’s response, while ultimately reasonable in light of growing evidence that even Paterno himself believed he bore at least some moral responsibility (if not legal culpability) for Sandusky’s continued access to young boys, suggested a prioritization of national reputation over complex ethical decision-making. In this moment, college athletics were treated as but one quantifiable measure of a university’s “excellence,” the “front porch”

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7 Freeh Sporkin & Sullivan’s “Report of the Special Investigative Counsel Regarding the Actions of The Pennsylvania State University Relating to the Child Sexual Abuse Committed by Gerald A. Sandusky,” colloquially known as The Freeh Report, July 12, 2012, reported that Paterno—along with Spanier, former Senior Vice President Gary Schultz, and former Athletic Director Tim Curley—exhibited “a striking lack of empathy for child abuse victims” and “empowered Sandusky to attract potential victims to the campus and football events by allowing him to have continued, unrestricted and unsupervised access to the University’s facilities and affiliation with the University’s prominent football program” (16, 15). Paterno himself admitted that he “backed away” from the situation instead of taking charge, in a 2012 interview with Sally Jenkins shortly before his death. See Smith, 116-117. In March 2017, Schultz and Curley pleaded guilty to one misdemeanor count of endangering children, while Spanier was convicted on a misdemeanor count of child endangerment and acquitted him on a separate count of child endangerment and of conspiracy. Will Hobson, “Former Penn State president Graham Spanier convicted of child endangerment,” *Washington Post*, March 24, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/colleges/former-penn-state-president-graham-spanier-convicted-of-child-endangerment/2017/03/24/d1936e34-109a-11e7-9b0d-d27c98455440_story.html.
that brings universities symbolic (and financial) value in the form of community unification, visibility, alumni giving, and increased undergraduate applications. If this is the only role that sports play in colleges and universities across the nation, however, then athletics have no legitimate educational rationale on campus. What appears to be a forking path between university branding and an embodied pedagogy to teach student-athletes is but one iteration of the central dilemma that motivates this project: Can athletics create any form of positive social transformation? Or—in Giardina, Bass, and Newman’s terms—is it mere spectacle?

I. Tracing the “Spectacle” of Sports

Giardina, Bass, and Newman are far from the only people to label the mediation and publicization of sports a “spectacle.” To call sports a spectacle is to rely upon a rhetorical commonplace—in other words, to use an aphorism, introduce a theme, or make a characterization that a community of people can presume to hold in common with each other. Standout plays and players are routinely described as “spectacular” in nightly highlight shows, and grandiose sporting events and extravagant pregame pageantry are regularly described as “spectacles.” Although the characterization is broadly true across American culture, David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington cite the writings of Christopher Hitchens and Terry Eagleton to suggest that academics may be particularly inclined to use the language of spectacle in order to denigrate sports as a form of escapism. In order to make clear their preference for the life of the mind, intellectuals are trusted to treat sport as the equivalent of “bread and circuses” that numb

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civic discontent. Spectacles are regarded as pleasurable and attention-grabbing consumerist enterprises that distract us from more important components of our social life. Among cultural studies-influenced scholars of sports, such characterizations are fairly widespread. Both Douglas Kellner and Toby Miller have argued that spectacle is a particularly apt frame for understanding developed, professionalized sport since the rise of television rights contracts and the use of athletes as corporate spokespersons. Furthermore, the first published manuscript on communication and sports in an American journal, Michael Real’s 1975 article “Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle,” relies upon the framework of spectacle, as well.

The origins of this scholarly tradition are distinguished, although the implications of relying upon the theoretical lineage of spectacle are problematic. The invocation of spectacle evokes Guy Debord’s famous “society of the spectacle,” his critique of a newly established “social relation among people, mediated by images” in the developed world in the second half of the twentieth century. Debord refuses to offer a concrete definition of spectacle; instead, he uses the term as a catchall cause of and labor for the many plagues of late capitalism in an age of mass media. Distilling Debord’s elliptical writing style, there are several precepts that can be culled from *Society of the Spectacle* (1967):

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11 Sport economist Andrew Zimbalist plays off the “bread and circuses” trope in *Circus Maximus: The Economic Gamble Behind Hosting the Olympics and the World Cup* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 2015).
14 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967; Detroit: Black and Red, 2000): #4. (This edition does not include pagination, only Debord’s epigrammatic numbering system within a larger set of chapters.)
• Spectacle privileges the visual over all other senses;
• Spectacle inculcates passive consumers rather than active citizens;
• Spectacle cultivates individuation and isolation rather than communal being;
• Spectacle emphasizes a perpetual present at the expense of historical context;
and
• Spectacle prioritizes quantifiable and commoditized categories of knowledge and experience over quality of life.15

Debord’s critique of “spectacle,” when considered in the context of athletics, can offer insights about phenomena that post-date Debord. It helps us understand the rise of 24/7 television channels devoted to sports, in addition to cultural obsessions with player statistics and salaries. Michael Real uses a Debordian framework in order to examine how “the institutional organization of professional football is not like American business; it is American business.”16 Spectacular analyses of sport are particularly successful at noting how many elements of sport “reflect and sacralize the dominant tendencies of a culture” and mirror “the sexual, racial, and organizational priorities of American social structure.”17 Debord’s relentlessly critical approach is especially helpful in uncovering the complicit relationship between the institutions of sports, media, and dominant sets of economic relationships.

A Debordian approach to sports spectacle has its weaknesses, however. The central problem with Society of the Spectacle is that Debord’s cryptic style and lack of concrete

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15 This is less a recapitulation of Debord’s exact words than a paraphrase of Debord’s project, which tracks the social alienation caused by commodification culture. Here, as elsewhere in my reading of Debord, I try to cut through the thickets of Marxian language and doctrine in order to access the rhetorically useful. The mood imbued by this decision—attuned to Debord’s critique of industrial and postindustrial capitalism without dogmatically adhering to his line of critique—is upheld throughout the project.
examples make it impossible to identify what spectacle is—and, more importantly, what alternatives to spectacle might exist. As Michael Real noted in a 2013 reflection, Debord’s “opaque pronouncements suggest much and explain little.” Jonathan Crary faults Debord for a serious lack of historicization in his account of spectacle, as though it arose “full-blown out of the blue.” As a result, Debord’s pronouncements read as totalizing. For example, he intones that “In all societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles.” This proselytizing, pronouncing tone carries intellectual consequences. Douglas Kellner’s work on “media spectacles” demonstrates the monadism of adopting Debord’s thought; in Kellner’s analysis, there is never anything that is not to be understood as spectacle. Even Real, the first scholar to transport Debord into sports studies, now recognizes that the more precise work of Maurice Roche on “mega-events” is more useful for understanding the specific workings of sporting events within particular cultures at particular moments, even if it lacks some of Debord’s political force. For Debord and those who follow him, spectacle becomes both a methodology and an ever-present object of study. As a result, spectacular analyses are adept at arriving at economistic explanations of sports’ function in society but struggle to account for occasions where athletes take genuine risks that go against the grain of the economic relations structuring society. The only rebuttal that Debord can offer to

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20 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, #1.
22 I am indebted to Abraham Khan for the idea of “risk” as essential to an athlete’s social ethos or poiesis.
something like the protest of John Carlos and Tommie Smith, the track athletes who offered Black Panther salutes of civil rights protest on the medal stand during the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, is that “the celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being,” can only offer “false models of revolution” that disguise more important forms of economic domination. This rhetorical move—critiquing in advance all athletes as “false models of revolution”—forecloses, in advance, any possibility of the athlete as an agent for social change. Debord offers an aesthetically provocative mode of begging the question; evidence that falls outside his Marxian framework is distorted to fit or else ignored completely. It is not, however, intellectually honest or politically generative.

For these reasons, in order to better assess case studies of athletes attempting to exert social influence, I argue that Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* is best treated as a “diagnosis” rather than a “critique.” Instead of prefiguring and reducing athletes to instruments of team owners, nationalist ideology, and corporate sponsorship, Debord is better read as someone who offers us a set of “spectacular biases” that create resources for and constraints upon any athletes attempting to influence the social. In other words, the concept of spectacle provides a useful context for understanding the social activism of athletes. Spectacle is attuned to the economic relations of mediated sport. Put another way: visuality, passivity, individuality, presentism, and commoditization have been, since the second half of the 20th century, dominant cultural tendencies especially prominent in mediated sport that delimit the horizon of readily available rhetorical tactics for athletes hoping to instill social change. Similarly, these spectacular tendencies inform both athletes’ persuasive production and audiences’ reception of athletes.

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23 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, #60; #57.
However, rather than leading only to “false models of revolution,” these spectacular biases can be worked with, worked through, and worked against. Rather than treat athletes and spectators as passive instruments of capitalism (which is a byproduct of the now discredited “hypodermic theory” of audience reception), this perspective posits that athletes and spectators possess indeterminate amounts and types of agency that can be assessed only on a case-by-case basis. A few scholars working in other contexts, including many in rhetorical studies, have already begun to outline the rhetorical implications of spectacular biases. In the next section, I build a vocabulary to analyze athletes’ efforts to enact social influence that attempts to specify “what makes sport specific within the seeming infinity of possible modes of performance.”

II. A Vocabulary for the Rhetorical Analysis of Sport

The previous section took a prominent trope and sports studies concept, “spectacle,” and argued that it should be treated as rhetorical. In the same way that Debord insists that spectacle is


both “all of” society and “part of” society, spectacle exists as a general climate—the
aforementioned spectacular biases—as well as in specific manifestations as individual rhetorical
encounters. That is to say: even though I have referred to spectacle as an informing context for
athletic activism, there is no easy distinction between the “context” and the “texts” of sports
spectacle. In this section, I further that argument by laying out four central terms for scholars
conducting rhetorical analyses of mediated sport: form, style, media, and genre. When rhetorical
scholars attend to all four of these terms, they can most fully account for the athletic event,
representations of the athletic event, and an athlete’s rhetorical resources and constraints in the
quest for social change. This method, indebted to Michael Calvin McGee’s description of a
“molecular” and “orthogonal” approach to rhetorical criticism, begins through a case study
approach.

My use of form in this project is idiosyncratic and particular to the study of sports
rhetoric. By form, I refer to the rules, regulations, boundaries, technologies, and sets of relations
among players, officials, and fans that structure a sport and give it cultural meaning. These rules,
regulations, and relations help constitute identities and create values for those who play and
watch sports. In other words, scholars must be attuned to sport history. The question of form can
center on any of the following questions: Is a sport played individually or with teammates? Is
competition head-to-head or against a clock or alongside an idealized set of standards? What
type of class structure, specialization of labor, or culture of celebrity is written into the uniforms
or the tracking of statistics? How do new broadcast technologies change the form of play? How
do the spaces in which play occurs suggest certain values? Accounting for form allows scholars

27 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, #3.
28 Michael Calvin McGee, “A Materialist’s Conception of Rhetoric,” in Rhetoric, Materiality,
to recognize that the beliefs, values, and identities that a sport can inculcate change over time. The creation of rules designed to protect National Football League quarterbacks and other marquee offensive players from concussive head injuries are one such change, just as rules that allowed female basketball players unlimited dribbles and the ability to use the entirety of the court in the 1970s were another. As such examples show, formal changes to a sport can occur for a number of reasons: outside political pressure and public relations; entertainment and the broadcast of televised events; and internal cultural and competitive reasons are three of the most likely. The form a sport takes must also be contextualized by asking two questions: How does the form of a sport at a particular moment fit into that sport’s formal history? Also, how does the form of a particular sport exist in a constellation of contemporary sport forms that may be prioritized and valued differently within a sporting culture?29

The second term that my rhetorical methodology toward sport foregrounds is style. By style, I refer to an athlete’s individual tendencies both on and off the field: notable skills or talents; physical appearance, mannerisms, and attire; and verbal and literary style, which could include anything from responses to interview questions to social media activity to syntax and diction choices in a memoir. The study of athletic style recognizes the importance of both inherited and acquired identity markers. Body type, gender, and race can be just as important in this regard as an athlete’s signature techniques. For instance, tennis player Serena Williams’s style is a complex calculus emerging from her genetics, her biography, her training, Williams’s connections to and divergences from the history of the sport, and how audiences read her agency or lack of agency in the manifestation of stylistic expressions that comprise, for Williams, a

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29 This final concern is indebted to the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who examines how various sports are taken up by certain social classes for various reasons in France in the 1950s and 1960s. See Distinction: A Social Critique of the Value of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (1979; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
meaningful way of life. Individual style is also assessed in the context of other relevant teammates’ and competitors’ styles. Too often, style is noticed only when exceptional athletes depart from expected playing and speaking styles. Style is sometimes proffered as the rare expression of agency or invention in an institution that promotes homogeneity and corporate conformism. Nevertheless, rhetorical scholars can also treat style as a useful tool for analyzing those athletes who possess the usual amount of stylistic courage during their era. Most often, analyses attentive to style emphasize material and bodily forms of athletic rhetoric.

However, sports—as they are absorbed and come to take meaning in American culture—are never simply material and bodily. Instead, the athletic event and the athlete attempting to instill social change reach audiences through mediation. The types of media through which events are broadcast and athletes are represented influence how they are perceived; therefore, they are of crucial concern to rhetorical critics. Following the logic of spectacle, athletics have become more and more visual since the rise and ubiquity of television in the mid-20th century, though that is not to say that athletics were not spectacular before the existence of television. More accurately, evolutions in media have intensified spectacular biases and allowed them to saturate American culture. Additionally, spectacle events rarely exist in a single medium, and a single medium can work rhetorically on a number of sensory registers. The interactions among live televised event, pre-event framing, and next-day discourse bring together sonic, textual, and visual forms of rhetoric.

Similarly, my methodology is attentive to the variety of genres available within mediated sport. Particular athletic events, such as the Olympics, have become ritualized to such an extent

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30 This tendency is particularly true for scholars with cultural or literary studies backgrounds. See, for instance, Grant Farred, *In Motion, At Rest: The Event of the Athletic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Yago Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie: Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016).
that generic expectations now exist for its constitutive moments, including the opening ceremonies, the playing of national anthems, and the torch relay. Moments of athletic activism such as the aforementioned iconic Black Power salute at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics are symbolically powerful in part because they subvert the generic expectations of the post-race medal ceremony. Certain media also have hierarchies of genres, subgenres, and microgenres: the highlight reel differs from the one-on-one interview, and only limited genres of print media, such as the ghostwritten autobiography or the *Sports Illustrated* profile, are available to athletes who wish to be political actors. In different ages, different genres carry more or less prestige. For instance, the Sunday evening *60 Minutes* interview, formerly a staple genre for athletes looking to make statements with political or cultural impact, has faded in importance as the viewer demographics of the weekly show have skewed elderly and the show has been eclipsed in a fragmented television market. Additionally, networked social media outlets have created or made apparent other genres that may not have existed or been recognized as recently as a decade ago: case studies in this dissertation will consider social media accounts, and many players now publish autobiographical pieces in the player-managed online outlet *The Players’ Tribune*. Constantly shifting relations among media and genres illustrate the fluid power dynamics orienting athlete-journalist-spectator relations.

The evolving dynamics of mediation illustrate one of the central claims I am forwarding: An athlete’s ability to offer a body and voice to projects of social transformation is to some extent determined by his or her ability to control what McKenzie Wark calls the “means of mediation.”

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31 McKenzie Wark, “Is This Still Capitalism?,” *Public Seminar*, April 30, 2014. Web. <http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/04/is-this-still-capitalism/>. Wark is one of the most astute readers of Debord and the Situationist circle in which he emerged. See also McKenzie Wark, *The*
successful at exerting agency in their efforts at social change than others, who may primarily be represented by others rather than representing themselves. The arc of this dissertation’s chapters is designed to showcase this claim, as outlined below. The media and genres to which one has and wants access are shaped by a number of factors, including form and athletic style. In saying this, I also want to reiterate the centrality of individual biographies, personalities, and idiosyncrasies to athletes’ attempts to enact social change. First, however, I begin the process of assessing the possibility of social change in a spectacular sports environment by returning to Penn State.

III. “Magic” and “Meech” at Penn State

In the years after the Sandusky scandal initially broke, those individuals at Penn State who believed in the positive transformative social possibilities of sport—and I consider myself among its most ambivalent proponents, as this dissertation will reveal—discerned a number of ways to try to reshape the role that sport occupied on the University Park campus. There were well-publicized coaching changes and new forms of institutional oversight introduced at the University level and within the Athletic Department; the formation of a groundbreaking Child Study Center with several research initiatives; the inauguration of courses such as Sports|Ethics|Literature and the introduction of relevant scandal-related case studies in courses such as Ethical Leadership; and speaker series that began to feature athletes and sports media figures to address students on the political, social, and moral responsibilities that they carried.

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within and beyond the institution of sports. Within this latter context, I heard former basketball players Earvin “Magic” Johnson and John “Meech” Amaechi speak in April 2015.

I include this institutional context for a few reasons. First, I want to note how my dissertation arises in part from interactions with students. Listening to students’ concerns and comments—about how their identities have been constituted in relation to Penn State athletics, about how other professional athletes have helped them recognize and shape their own social commitments, and about their responses to mediated representations of Joe Paterno, a figure to whom they often believed they alone possessed unmediated access— informs the types of questions I began asking. Second, my project’s central questions and concepts also coalesced as I reflected on the very different presentations that Johnson and Amaechi gave. Their paid public performances helped me recognize how various institutions, such as sport, media, and the university, can produce a set of rhetorical resources and constraints that both enable and limit an individual athlete’s ability to exert agency toward various types of social change. My own interest in the blending of political and public relations discourses with regard to athletics is a byproduct of six years spent as a graduate student at a big-time Division-I school that prioritizes football as a revenue-producing sport and has faced national scandal. Those individuals who experience sports in different ways—for example, as mindless recreation from the rigors of work, as the parent of a young athlete, or as a passionate fan of a team that allows you to remain connected to a city where you no longer live—have very different expectations of what sports can be and do. Discussing with students some of the texts addressed in this dissertation has also

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34 I know that Amaechi received a payment in the high four digits. I can reasonably suspect that, given his name recognition, lack of connection to Penn State, and funding source that Johnson’s payment was significantly higher.
alerted me to the varying levels and types of expertise that professional and amateur critics bring to the analysis of athletes’ social activism. For sport to have a civic function, these voices must deliberate together.35

Magic Johnson arrived on campus April 1, 2015, as the final speaker in the “Shaping the Future” summit sponsored annually by Penn State’s Schreyer Honors College. Johnson addressed a packed Eisenhower Auditorium, with a capacity of 2,500 people, on the summit’s theme: “The Power of Money.” He was introduced by a compilation of dazzling on-court highlights featuring fast breaks and flashy assists. Johnson gestured broadly and paced around the large stage in order to engage the entire audience. Interestingly, he largely refrained from the nostalgia that can characterize the discourse of retired professional athletes. Instead, he invoked past moments only inasmuch as they taught him business lessons that, as he reported, helped him to build markets for minority consumers who were notoriously underserved in the low-income areas where they lived. As evidence for his claims, Johnson highlighted the amount of revenue generated by each project in order to build his credibility as a businessman, in addition to a basketball player. Johnson’s fundamental argument about sport as an agent of social change was straightforward: the public visibility he accrued as a star basketball player becoming one of the world’s wealthiest black businessmen would inspire future minority entrepreneurs to dream of careers beyond sports; minority entrepreneurs, in turn, are better able to cater to minority consumers who are traditionally underserved by white-run companies that refuse to build in

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35 Two models of amateur criticism as a mode of citizenship are Rosa A. Eberly, *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), and Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016). Eberly highlights letters to the editors of local newspapers that citizen critics wrote about controversial fiction, while Fawaz focuses on how comic book readers interacted with writers as part of a counterpublic world-building enterprise.
minority neighborhoods; and, most tellingly, his sustained wealth as an owner (as opposed to his income as a player) is an appropriate yardstick for racial progress in the United States.

Magic Johnson’s talk was warmly received by a majority of the audience in attendance, many of whom were business majors. Johnson knew his audience well, and, as C. Michael Elavsky has written, Penn State is an institution that can cause students to internalize “professional development,” a “relevant” skill-set, and “job prospects” as the pre-eminent goals of higher education. Johnson’s argument, in other words, matched what the audience might have hoped to hear: racial equality is possible through the capitalist market, and it can be accomplished with scant discussion of race. At the same time, there were a few audience members who were less swayed by Johnson’s presentation. During a question-and-answer period at the end of Johnson’s talk, Georjanne Williams, an undergraduate adviser for engineering students, asked if Magic could codify the ethical precepts that he considered before entering a business relationship with another party. Did he investigate the gender and racial diversity among the boardroom of the other party’s companies? Did he ensure that they focused on community-building rather than shareholder dividends?

Magic mustered a single criterion in response: he ascertained if his potential business partner possessed any past or ongoing lawsuits. So long as Johnson (and his lawyers, presumably) could determine that the potential partner was not a legal liability, he tended to proceed with the deal. Although it may have been a verbal flub at the end of a jam-packed day of events, this response seemed to short-circuit many of the claims that Magic made earlier in the evening. Johnson had seemed to attest that minority entrepreneurship could transform the very nature of American capitalism; this response instead signaled that the magic of the free market

held illusory sway over one of basketball’s premier “Showtime” entertainers. The business world changed Magic more than Magic changed the nature of American entrepreneurship.

Less than four weeks after Magic Johnson spoke in a packed 2,500-seat auditorium, another former NBA player, John Amaechi, spoke in front of a classroom audience of fewer than 30 people. Amaechi was originally scheduled to deliver a keynote address at a small three-day conference, the Athlete Well-Being Summit. The conference was cancelled, however, yet Amaechi honored his commitment by speaking to a group of faculty members who had helped sponsor the talk, undergraduate students who had heard Amaechi was coming from these faculty members (including several of my Sports|Ethics|Literature students), and officials from the Athletic Department. Although Amaechi is perhaps the best men’s basketball player ever to graduate from Penn State, a school without any substantive tradition as a basketball powerhouse, he was an outsider at Penn State in several respects—a 6’10” mixed-race Brit who came out as gay after his professional career ended. Whereas Magic was effortlessly charismatic and placed on a grand stage, Amaechi was forced to duck to enter the room in which he spoke and nevertheless banged his shoulder on the doorframe.

Amaechi was soft-spoken and self-deprecating as he reflected upon the role that sport had played in his life. His height and girth as a teenager, which normally caused peers to treat him as a literal monster, was reframed as a body of possibility. He was assumed to have untapped talent, and friends and coaches went out of their way to allow Amaechi to explore and cultivate that talent without the expectation of remuneration or the constant threat of physical punishment if he failed to meet some arbitrary set of expectations. He noted that while his unusual size obviously shaped others’ treatment of him, he hoped that his story might be used as a model for how we
allow athletics to feature in all kids’ lives, up to and including college athletics, a domain he feared had become over-professionalized and over-commercialized.

Elsewhere, Amaechi has written that sports are “an untapped resource for holistic good” and “that what is magic about sports isn’t the ability to put one ball in a hole or run another over a line, but rather the disproportionate power that skill gives athletes and the programs of which they are a part.”37 For Amaechi as for Johnson, athletic accomplishment is understood as a means to an end. Those ends are very different, however. For Amaechi, sport allows its participants to build confidence and acquire status that can be redeployed in local communities to help endangered youth. Amaechi emphasizes sport as cultural capital as opposed to Johnson’s emphasis on financial capital, even as both he and Magic think through how athletic success can produce community renewal focusing on the underprivileged.

What follows in this dissertation are a series of investigations into the relationship between athletes and their attempts at fostering social change, in addition to the mediated ways that athletes are used as figures for social change in causes which they may not themselves directly advocate. I do not offer an easily generalizable understanding of how athletes come to influence the social, nor do I prescriptively argue that athletes should use some set of specific tactics and arguments but not others. Instead, I mean only to sketch some of the myriad ways that athletes exert or lose agency over their mediated representations, and how these processes give us greater insight into the spectacular biases that shape modern sport.

IV. Chapter Organization

Methodologically, the anchor point throughout this dissertation is genre. Although I argue that a comprehensive rhetorical analysis of sport spectacle must concern itself with media, form, and style, as well, I am drawn to genre as a cognitively necessary point of embarkation, a tool through which humans are conditioned to produce, reproduce, and negotiate personal identity and social reality. Genres provide available means of persuasion through which athletes and those invested in the social possibility of elite mediated sport navigate a context of sport spectacle. This dissertation might then be understood as a survey of some of those available means: the sporting event itself, the athlete’s memoir and interviews, the coming out narrative, the viral image-events of the Black Lives Matter movement, the sports documentary, the social media tweet and hashtag, and more.

The chapters in this dissertation are also roughly organized in descending order of athletic agency. The first body chapter, “We’ve Come a Long Way, Maybe: Billie Jean King’s Feminism and the Battle of the Sexes,” analyzes women’s tennis player King’s relationship to feminism specifically and social activism more generally as mediated by her 1973 Battle of the Sexes match against Bobby Riggs. I argue that the match is a prime example of an individual occasion of sports spectacle, a staged encounter in which the institutions of sports and media conjoin alongside the activities of interested audiences to produce narratives in which athletic endeavors reflect, shape, or intervene upon social will in material and symbolic ways. A bodily material reading of the match offers a persuasive visual argument for King as the symbolic leader of the women’s movement’s athletic front. However, the rich visuality of the match obscures King’s own political emphases on financial equity as the foremost indicator of gender equality. King’s values were shaped by tennis’s history as a sport for social elites slowly
becoming professionalized in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in addition to the rise of television as a cultural technology. Since the Battle of the Sexes first aired, King has attempted to maintain control of the legacy of the match in the interest of continued social reform (and as personal social capital). King argues that the social is moved most by movement itself and offers a model of an athlete taking agency over her spectacular representations. She demonstrates that sports spectacle is a fulcrum for public memory and that contestations over public memory must be won as decisively as athletes’ on-field victories.

The second body chapter, “Three Waves of Gay Male Athlete Coming Out Narratives,” tracks the rise and evolution of gay male athlete coming out narratives. Such a phenomenon appears genuinely new if one only considers presentist mass media coverage that obscures a larger and longer history. The tradition of gay male professional athlete coming-out narratives is decades-long, and I argue that this tradition can be productively grouped into three waves based on the salient argumentative moves that these authors make in order to assert the fitness of gay men in professional sports while simultaneously addressing contextual concerns for gay men in American culture. The first set of texts, published in the 1970s, highlights the need for safe spaces, pursues alliances with popular figures of masculinity, and expresses a willingness to stratify and differentiate among “types” of homosexuals in order to assert their masculinity. The second set of texts, published between roughly 1990 and 2010, issues practical and ethical critiques against the presumptively heterosexual climate of men’s sports and demonstrates the hidden costs that athletes and teams face when players feel forced to remain closeted. The contemporary wave of coming out narratives stresses the reintroduction of the visible, gay male body to emphasize the opportunities available to out, active gay athletes becoming more consciously aware of their place in history. The shift from textuality to visuality in the third wave
of coming out narratives is symbolized by football player Michael Sam’s kiss with his then-boyfriend upon being drafted to the NFL in 2014. While the kiss was successfully politicized into the “critical visual mass” that Charles E. Morris III and John Sloop argue is necessary to a project of queer world-making, and in fact the image’s publicity refuses to allow sports fans to maintain the constructed ignorance that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues is necessary to maintain a regime of discrimination, the publicization of intensely private moments entails a considerable amount of professional risk and a significant loss of agency for Sam.

The third body chapter, “Black Lives Matter and the Decline of the Decline of the Athlete-Activist,” assesses contemporary athletes’ use of image-events in order to align with and promote the message of the Black Lives Matter social movement. I position Black Lives Matter as a social movement that is continuing to work through its relationship to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, at the same time as many black athletes are drawing inspiration from mid-20th century athlete-activists. As a result, if the Black Lives Matter movement is viewed only through the prism of athletic activism, some of the central issues that the movement continues to face—its emphasis on horizontal models of organization and leadership, its skepticism toward working through established levers of governance, and its ambivalent relationship to the politics of respectability—are further obscured and refracted by the institutions of sports and sports media discourse and particular instances of athlete-activist protest. Athletes may not serve as the best representatives to embody and advocate for Black Lives Matter’s organizing principles and tactics, even though athlete-activists have succeeded at drawing attention to and affiliation with the movement’s goals—and building increased energy toward social activism generally.
The final body chapter, “‘Absent Athletes,’ Athletic Agency, and the Sports Documentary,” assesses the trope of the absent athlete in the sports documentaries of directors Steve James and Amir Bar-Lev. I argue that the sports documentary is a genre where directors and interviewees are often summoned as co-constructors of an athlete’s social importance for a given community. Other figures acquire more agency as athletes are incapable of appearing or refuse to appear in mediated sports coverage; the voice of the athlete is communally created, often without regard to individual athletes’ wishes. James and Bar-Lev offer ethical models of how and why absent athletes might be put to use for social and rhetorical purposes. James uses cinéma vérité editing techniques and tactics often found in science documentaries to demonstrate communities’ investments in the lives and social importance of athletes, while Bar-Lev chronicles and critiques the spectacular aspects of traditional sports media coverage and offers documentary as an alternative mode of viewing. Both challenge viewers to themselves become active agents rather than passive spectators in the co-creation of sports’ meaning within various communities.

Finally, my conclusion, “Do Not #sticktosports,” offers two interventions. First, it examines how the ideograph “#sticktosports,” through a variety of convoluted arguments, circulates on social media as a way to police athletes’ and sports media members’ desire to influence the social. Second, it challenges spectators to ethically justify their relationships to the athletes they enjoy watching and positions ethical spectatorship as a potent force capable of undermining the cultural biases and values imposed by sports spectacle.
Chapter One:

We’ve Come a Long Way, Maybe: Billie Jean King’s Feminism and the Battle of the Sexes

I. Introduction

If you know of former women’s professional tennis player Billie Jean King, it is likely for her victory over male player Bobby Riggs in the famous September 1973 Battle of the Sexes tennis match. Although unfounded speculation continues to exist that Riggs lost intentionally to square gambling debts to the mafia, King won the match in a decisive straight sets performance: 6-4, 6-3, 6-3.¹ After Bobby Riggs dumped a feeble backhand volley into the net to drop the final point, King threw her racquet into the air and raised her arms victoriously.² Most viewers understood the gesture as King’s elevation to hero of the women’s movement, the leader of its athletics front, a “pioneer” who “[made] it acceptable for American women to exert themselves in pursuits other than childbirth.”³ The win was, as Jaime Schultz has argued, evidence that “the

² Roone Arledge, executive producer, “Battle of the Sexes.” New York: American Broadcasting Corporation, September 20, 1973. The author would like to thank New York’s Paley Center for Media for access to an archived copy of ABC’s televised coverage of the match, which allowed him to track the match’s patterns of play. Such an analysis was useful in reinforcing and complicating media narratives about the “Battle of the Sexes.”
Conversely, skeptics of the match’s revolutionary potential have posited that the Battle of the Sexes was simply a “spectacle” whose consequences remain overblown and whose feminist credentials are overrated.

These contrasting narratives are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the continued contestation of how to properly interpret and evaluate King’s contributions to a discourse of cultural-material ideas and practices called feminism and a collective meaning-making enterprise commonly labelled the women’s movement—all against the backdrop of tennis’s own complicated cultural history—foregrounds a variety of questions central to the project of assessing the relationship between sports and social change: To what extent can an individual athlete move the social of her own volition? Is this change limited to the realm of sports, or can it extend beyond the world of athletics? Alternatively, how does the larger cultural context of sports spectacle create opportunities and limit the parameters of an athlete’s influence upon the social? In other words, what happens when the bulk of King’s political contributions are productively, reductively, and selectively symbolized into a single on-court endeavor?

Although play-by-play commentator Howard Cosell opened the television broadcast by thanking fans for tuning in to “this very, very quaint, unique event,” the Battle of the Sexes match actually offered a prototype for and distinct occasion of “sports spectacle,” a staged encounter in which the institutions of sports and media conjoin alongside the activities of individual athletes and the gaze of interested audiences to produce narratives in which athletic endeavors reflect, shape, or intervene upon social will in material and symbolic ways. Although one of the goals of such a spectacle is commercial profit for athletes, sport, and sports media, that is far from the only goal. The occasion of sports spectacle offers an opportunity to complicate or

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resolve existing cultural narratives through athletes onto whom media and spectators construct values and ideologies that take material form. As an individual occasion of sports spectacle, the Battle of the Sexes tennis match laid the foundations for the larger climate of spectacular sports coverage in the United States. The rich visuality of television coverage enabled the dramatic narrativization of ritualized athletic endeavor. Arguably, no event has been as successful at creating such a narrative as the Battle of the Sexes. However, to say that sports spectacle is “staged” is not to suggest that results are predetermined or that sports spectacle exists entirely at the level of the symbolic. Although the discursive media framing of the match was highly symbolic, cast in terms of gender and age, the match itself was thoroughly corporeal and material. Repercussions within and outside of sports tied to the Battle of the Sexes match have also been both symbolic and material, and therefore throughout this chapter I aim to recognize the inextricable relationship between the material and the symbolic associated with sports spectacle.

I pay special attention to the material-symbolic conjunction as it pertains to the promotional strategies of women’s professional sports over the past several decades. The values associated with women’s sports are often inscribed on the bodies of circumscribed female athletes and the discourses surrounding them. Billie Jean King provides a fascinating example of an individual athlete’s agency with regard to social change. She teeters on the indistinct boundary between athlete activist and individual brand, someone who at moments of convenience has aligned herself with broader social movements and who, during moments of personal embattlement, has withdrawn her identification from second-wave feminism and the

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5 Of course, television appeals to more than simply the visual sense, though its visual predominance is a notable media transformation from the aural appeal of radio. See W. J. T. Mitchell, “There Are No Visual Media,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 4.2 (2005): 257-266.
battle for LGBTQ equality. While the Battle of the Sexes helped motivate reform and publicize ongoing change both within women’s sports and in households and workplaces across the country, the overhyped match, which was attended by more than 30,000 fans and watched on television by 50 million Americans, was also insidious inasmuch as it offered an incomplete portrait of the corporeal, athletic King as second-wave feminist icon. King’s political beliefs are informed by social and cultural transformations—in particular, the rise of television as a media technology to broadcast sports and tennis’s transition from a recreation of the leisure class to a professional vocation available to the middle class, including middle-class women—that may actually leave her at odds with certain interpretations of the goals and foundational beliefs of second-wave feminism. In this chapter, I argue that King’s on-court playing style—aggressive, confrontational, and forthright—both reflects her political approach and masks some of her foundational values, especially the belief that financial equity on the basis of gender, regardless of what arguments are required to submit such a claim, is central to a feminist project. King’s desire to retain mediated control over how the Battle of the Sexes is understood is an attempt to control her legacy in the interests of continued social reform, which includes—given her belief system—King’s own financial prosperity.

This chapter proceeds in four sections. First, I offer background on three informing contexts that shape King and the Battle of the Sexes: the rise of televised sport, the second-wave feminist movement, and the transformation of tennis from an amateur activity to a profession. Next, I offer a cultural-material reading of the Battle of the Sexes match, which I argue provides viewers the opportunity to interpret King as a second-wave feminist icon. Third, I read beyond the match itself, into King’s published memoirs and interviews, in order to show how her personal beliefs conflicted with many second-wave feminist principles. In particular, I recognize
the pull of the philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand upon King’s thinking. This libertarian aspect of King’s thinking grows organically out of King’s own background and contextual changes in tennis and sports media. However, King has come to value rights-based feminism over time, but only after support for such positions has become safely mainstream. Finally, I conclude this chapter by assessing how this transformation of King has taken place. In particular, King herself has attempted to shape representations of the Battle of the Sexes match in order to cast herself as a feminist and pioneer in women’s sports. By looking at recent reinterpretations of the Battle of the Sexes match, I aim to show how occasions of sports spectacle can function as a fulcrum for public memory of an athlete’s contribution to social change.

II. Television, Tennis’s Open Era, and Second-Wave Feminism

As alluded to above, the Battle of the Sexes is a prime example of sports spectacle. Without the transformation of athletes into a specific form of celebrity through the spectacle of sports, athletes would have significantly diminished abilities to effect social change. The spectacle of sports, as we know it today, is bound to the airing of live sports on television—often on national networks or cable channels, occasionally as Pay Per View broadcasts. As David Rowe writes, “[I]t is difficult to conceive of sport unseen from the multiple perspectives of TV cameras,” though such was not always the case.6 As television initially took hold in the 1940s and 1950s, organized institutions of sports felt that television would be a competitor that threatened gate receipts.7 It would take some years before governing institutions of sport would recognize the mutually beneficial relationship between sport and television, such that, as Philip Auslander writes, “Live performance now incorporates mediatization to the degree that the live

7 Rowe, 569.
event itself is a product of media technologies.” Close-ups, instant replays, and broadcaster analysis have helped to turn athletes into figures onto whom audiences ascribe symbolic value. Athletes were obviously treated as cultural symbols before the rise of television in American culture; the growing ubiquity of television as a cultural product after World War II simply intensifies the already-existing symbolic qualities of the athlete.

The Battle of the Sexes match was among the first live prime-time sports television specials broadcast by a national network. Hollywood producer Jerry Perenchio, who promoted the match, secured broadcast commitments from ABC after realizing the potential magnitude of the event. Perenchio had entered the world of sports by personally guaranteeing the $5 million purse in the March 1971 “Fight of the Century” between boxers Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, although the match was viewable only on closed-circuit television in select locations; most Americans listened to the match on the radio. In that bout, Ali was touted as a symbol of the Vietnam War-despising counterculture, against the upstanding patriotism of Frazier.

Perenchio—and Riggs and King, it should be noted—recognized that the Battle of the Sexes

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9 Before World War II, television sales were disappointing and the cost of household sets was expensive. A twelve-inch RCA model in 1939 cost $600, equivalent to more than $10,000 in 2016 dollars after inflation. Only as the price dropped in the mid-to-late 1960s did televisions become ubiquitous in American households. Gary R. Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 15.
10 This is a qualified claim. The first World Series game was broadcast in October 1947 to 3.8 million viewers; boxing matches and professional wrestling aired on weeknights and college football games aired weekend afternoons on local networks throughout the 1950s and 1960s; the first Olympics were broadcast in the United States from Mexico City in 1966, though often on delay; and even *Monday Night Football* first aired on 1970. My contention is ultimately that the irregularity of the match—its departure from usual programming schedules—combined with the growing ubiquity of television by the early 1970s were the two major components of the match’s market saturation, while also signaling to future broadcasters the rich possibilities for a cable network devoted to sports entertainment. See Edgerton, especially chapters 2, 5, 7 and 8.
could similarly be billed to play into already existing social contestation inside and outside of sports. In this way, the Battle of the Sexes match built upon existing practices of how to cover sports on television while simultaneously drawing from older television genres, such as the 1950s live theater-style “spectaculars” and the 1960s telefeatures, which drew from “social controversies, cultural trends, or whatever was front and center in the nation’s headlines.”\textsuperscript{12} The match’s unusual circumstances—a special event in a prime time slot pitting a man and a woman against each other in a sport where they never directly played against each other in single competition, though where an inter-gender match-up did not seem impossible or patently unequal—and its timing in the ubiquitous era of television before the proliferation of cable channels—resulted in its massive television audience.

What was front and center in the nation’s headlines in the early 1970s—alongside news of the Watergate break-in and the final years of the Vietnam War—was the rise of the women’s movement. Although some women came to second-wave feminism in the 1960s as a reaction to the dissatisfaction they felt when their contributions in the battle for African-American civil rights were minimized or even mocked, many of the women who felt called by the movement had no experience as activists.\textsuperscript{13} The rise of media outlets explicitly designed for young women interested in more than homemaking, such as the publication of the first issue of \textit{Ms.} in 1972, gave voice to new possibilities for women.\textsuperscript{14} Betty Friedan’s apt description of the “problem that has no name” in \textit{The Feminine Mystique} (1963) also challenged the widespread assumption that

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\textsuperscript{12} Edgerton, 163; 258.
\textsuperscript{14} In its first issue, the fledgling magazine solidified its reputation by publishing essays that eventually became canonical to the women’s movement, including Judy Syfer Brady’s satiric “Why I Want a Wife” and Pat Mainardi’s “The Politics of Housework.” The magazine was specifically designed to counter the homemaking focus of \textit{McCall’s} and \textit{Redbook}.
\end{flushright}
a woman’s sole responsibilities included housework, child-rearing, and the satisfaction of her husband.\textsuperscript{15} Billie Jean King had acutely felt this problem when she briefly contemplated retiring from tennis in the first months of her marriage in 1965. However, by the early 1970s, the range of possible female gender performances had been opened up through recent legislation: a ban on employment discrimination (Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act), the right to birth control (\textit{Griswold v. Connecticut}, 1965), equitable education opportunities (Title IX of the Education Amendment, 1972), and the reasonable right to an abortion (\textit{Roe v. Wade}, 1973). Although few women’s players would have explicitly defined themselves as feminists during the time period, most intuitively understood the dominant paradigm against which second-wave feminism did battle as a structure of feeling governing the choices they were allowed to make in their everyday lives. That is to say: though they may not have understood themselves to be active in the movement, women’s tennis players were actively affected by the cultural discourses surrounding the movement, and they made meaningful life decisions alongside that swirl of cultural currents.\textsuperscript{16} Players in their early 20s were peppered with questions from journalists about how soon they planned to retire and have children. Former player Shirley Fry summarized the prevailing attitude succinctly: “We were programmed: get married and have kids.”\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Betty Friedan, \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, reprinted with an introduction by Anna Quindlen (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 57-78.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Here I indicate sympathy with the position taken by Michael Calvin McGee that social movements first exist in human experience inferentially as patterns of consciousness before they become empirically observable events such as self-definition or organized protest. See Michael Calvin McGee, “‘Social Movement’: Phenomenon or Meaning?” \textit{Central States Speech Journal} 31 (Winter 1980): 233-244. Reprinted in Charles E. Morris III and Stephen Howard Browne, eds., \textit{Readings on the Rhetoric of Social Protest}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (State College, PA: Strata, 2006): 115-126.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Billie Jean King, with Cynthia Starr, \textit{We Have Come a Long Way} (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 98.
\end{itemize}
The perceived cultural imperative for female tennis players to get married and have kids was felt more acutely because of female players’ lack of sustainable income. Through the 1950s and into the 1960s, tennis was a sport primarily restricted to an elite leisure class that was born into wealth. Most tournaments were held at exclusive country clubs, and most tennis bureaucrats were members of the moneyed elite who were able to offer financial largesse to the players of their choice, essentially foreclosing the travel opportunities of players they did not like. In this way, King and Riggs shared a common bond; they were discriminated against by Perry T. Jones, who ran the United States Lawn Tennis Association’s operations in California, where both resided. Jones despised Riggs’s backcourt playing style and King’s middle-class background. As King tells it, Jones “was a fussy old bachelor who hated girls,” while Riggs wrote that Jones was “a bit of a snob who was more concerned about a youngster’s family background and how he dressed than his tennis ability.” Jones infamously removed King from a tournament photo as an adolescent because she was wearing her mother’s hand-sewn white shorts rather than the customary white dress. Later, he refused to fund her first cross-country expedition, though he paid for the travel of wealthier, less-talented players whom he preferred. Such practices were common in the game’s “shamateurism” era. Major tournaments did not offer prize money but only “appearance fees” to those players deemed most capable of attracting spectators by tournament directors: valiant men who played a fashionable net-rushing style of play and, on occasion, attractive women. Many of the U.S.L.T.A.’s head administrators doubled as proprietors of tennis’ illegal under-the-table payout system, which benefited a few, often undeserving players at the expense of more meritocratic systems of financial dispensation.

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Players finally began to reform the shamateur system in the late 1960s. They recognized their bargaining power as professionals by organizing outside of national tennis federations in order to gain leverage over tournament directors. The shift went into full motion when the so-called “Handsome Eight”—top male players hailing from six countries—signed professional contracts after the U.S. Championships in Forest Hills with promoter Dave Dixon. By 1968, the move had pressured all four major tournaments across the globe—in Australia, France, England, and the U.S.—to become “Open” tournaments, eligible to both amateurs and professionals. However, even as prize money replaced under-the-table envelopes, women still received significantly less remuneration than their male counterparts. Male winners were frequently paid at least two or three times the women’s champion at the same event. By 1970, the discrepancy had grown so great that some tournaments scrapped the women’s draw altogether, in order to lure top male players with greater payouts.

The blatant discrimination was unsustainable. No one embodied the discriminatory attitude as much as Jack Kramer, who ran the Pacific Southwest tournament in Los Angeles in 1970. The event offered $12,500 for the men’s champion and $7,500 for the entire women’s field, with only $1,500 reserved for the women’s champion. Gladys Heldman, the activist founder and editor of World Tennis Magazine, petitioned Kramer to increase the purse. When he refused, Heldman contacted tennis aficionado Joseph Cullman III, an executive with Philip Morris Inc., who helped raise enough money to sponsor a separate tournament that would offer equitable prize money. Heldman signed the “Original Nine,” a symbolic one-upmanship of the men’s “Handsome Eight,” to one-week contracts in September 1970 worth $1 each. In an iconic photograph of the moment, the young women brandished their dollar bills as if they were

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20 Kramer’s distribution system had planned on paying nothing—not even travel expenses or a per diem—to those women who failed to reach at least the quarterfinals.
championship trophies, indicating how closely the early professionals in women’s tennis correlated financial equity with equality. King, as the best player and most vocal leader among the Original Nine, became recognized as a symbolic figurehead for women’s sports, especially when she became the first female athlete to earn more than $100,000 in a single year, in 1971.

Bobby Riggs, who had retired from competitive play in 1950 at the age of 32 because he could no longer sustain a living during the shamateur era, recognized that this confluence of factors—the rise of sports on television, the women’s movement, and the professionalization of tennis into a money-making endeavor—provided a profitable set of contexts in which to re-emerge into the athletic limelight. Now in his 50’s, Riggs felt an inexorable drive to play high-stakes matches in front of large audiences. Riggs, with the help of Perenchio and with King as a well-chosen foil, seized upon the kairic entanglement of sport and society to pursue and promote the Battle of the Sexes match.

III. The Battle of the Sexes: September 20, 1973

Of course, there were the obligatory band musicians by the hundreds, dancing girls by the thousands; hardhats and hippies, libbers and lobbers, chauvinists and charlatans; handsome gladiators with no outerwear, nubile maidens with no underwear; aliens dressed up in tuxedos, local gentry dressed up as skunks and elephants; billions of celebs ranging from out-of-work Tarzans to out-of-work Monkees; trillions of dollars, including basic and ancillary; television, radio and closed-circuit theater; a man with two horns sticking out of his head, a woman with a diamond-encrusted cross dangling around her neck, a banner from Oconomowoc, Wis., an all-week caramel sucker (gift from Riggs to King that she said she would donate to an orphanage), a live pig with a pink bow (King to Riggs) and a grand entrance by the two of them—she borne aloft on an Egyptian litter, he propped into a Chinese rickshaw—that should have been directed by Fellini and scored by Handel.21

Curry Kirkpatrick’s *Sports Illustrated* recap of the pre-match antics before the Battle of the Sexes captures the grandiose and garish nature of the event through his eye for absurd (and exaggerated) detail. Houston’s Astrodome played host to the most people ever to watch a single

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tennis match, and spectators were given much to see and hear. The event produced sensory overload in a sport more often associated with silence and demure applause. The competitors’ clothing, physical appearances, respective playing styles, and the announcers’ framing of the match creates a multi-sensory argument that allowed Billie Jean King to emerge as a feminist liberation icon, triumphing against the repressive will of most American men.

King was well aware of the visual politics of the Battle of the Sexes, though she initially did not want to participate in an inter-gender match against Riggs. King surmised that beating Riggs would accomplish little for women’s tennis because of his age, and she viewed Riggs’s challenge—which he had begun issuing as early as 1971—as an attention-draining sideshow to her participation in the recently formed Virginia Slims women’s tour, which debuted in 1970. However, King felt compelled to accept Riggs’ challenge after he beat Australian Margaret Court in a less well-known inter-gender match on May 13, 1973, dubbed “The Mother’s Day Massacre.” In the lead-up to the event, Riggs unnerved Court with his chatterbox promotional prattle. She remained a model of passive acquiescence in the face of Riggs’s boorish boastfulness. When they appeared near the net together for the first time, Riggs offered Court a dozen roses in front of the CBS cameras. She curtsied her gratitude. The deferent gesture of traditional ladylike behavior infuriated King, who believed curtsying signified psychological capitulation. Just as Riggs took over the promotion of the match, so too did Riggs’ on-court strategy dictate Court’s play. His array of lobs, drop shots, and soft touch nullified the 5’11” Court’s power advantage, and a flubbed overhead in the match’s second game ruined her composure for much of the rest of the match. Riggs bested Court 6-2, 6-1, in a mere 57 minutes.

22 Roberts, 23.
As a result of the loss, King would have to contest the assumption that women were incapable of “clutch” performances in tense situations.

King was very nearly incapable of playing against Riggs. She was injured and sick in the weeks leading up to the match, a byproduct of the 18-hour days that King worked while traveling, promoting, and playing for the Virginia Slims tour. She also admitted the stress of needing to “redeem” the image of women in tennis. To restore her health, King retired from a women’s tournament in Flushing Meadows and snuck off to Hilton Head, South Carolina, where she rested and trained against coaches who employed Riggs’s particular brand of delicate, precise tennis. King practiced hitting 200 overheads a day until the shot became second nature, under the assumption that Riggs would try to hit lobbed shots against her as frequently as he had against Court.

As the match neared, King endured the demands of public relations appearances and pre-match negotiations better than the deferential Court. King was fun-loving, gregarious, and charming in front of reporters, but she also made sure to take Riggs’s chauvinist shtick seriously enough that his offenses seemed more hurtful than harmless. King may have dismissed Riggs’s boasts about his strength and conditioning regime when she playfully posed for pictures palming Riggs’s biceps in mock admiration, but she never discounted the violence of his misogynist claims that women’s usefulness was restricted to the bedroom and the kitchen, even when he confided in private that his statements were deliberate caricatures. Hardened by Court’s collapse

23 The retirement against Heldman prompted skeptical journalists to speculate that King was looking for a way to cancel the Riggs match. As might be demonstrated from the monikers “Mother’s Day Massacre” and “Battle of the Sexes,” a sensationalist press was quick to caricature and level accusations against all the participants in the early days of tennis’ Open Era. No one epitomizes this style of tennis writing so much as Peter Bodo, whose essay collection of figures from the period, The Courts of Babylon: Tales of Greed and Glory in the Harsh New World of Professional Tennis (1995), has become required reading for aspiring tennis journalists.
in the face of the media frenzy that surrounded her match with Riggs, King resolved not to let Riggs haggle any psychological or tactical advantages. In order to defuse potential counter-arguments should King win in a best two-of-three set matchup (which women traditionally played, whereas men played best three out of five sets), she demanded that the match be extended to best of five sets. She threatened to pull out of the match amidst rumors that Perenchio was giving Riggs a percentage of the gate receipts and television money. King nixed usual ABC color commentator Jack Kramer in pre-match negotiations, fearful that the unrepentant chauvinist would be given an open platform on which to espouse retrograde gender views to millions of viewers nationwide. King also demanded her choice of court surface and brand of tennis ball, decisive tactical advantages she would use to support her style of play.

It was little surprise, then, when Billie Jean King screamed “I love it!” to actress Jo Ann Pflug as a group of four shirtless track-and-field athletes from the University of Houston transported her to court on the evening of September 20, 1973. In contrast to King’s buoyant energy, Riggs looked sullen and nervous as a harem of “Bobby’s Bosom Buddies” dragged him out to center stage. Judging only by the body language both players exhibited as they appeared courtside before the match, King should have been the 5:2 oddsmakers’ favorite, rather than Riggs.

After the infamous exchange of the giant Sugar Daddy sucker and the live pig, the combatants warmed up as ABC’s “Tale of the Tape” was superimposed for viewers at home:

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Numbers belie the stark differences between the players’ body types. King was lean and muscular, wiry and taut, her well-toned arms and legs displayed prominently in a vibrant white dress with blue spangles that designer Ted Tinling had hand-sewn to fit King for the occasion. King admitted that the dress boosted her confidence; her outfit was modeled on the dress she had worn when she won Wimbledon earlier in the year. Meanwhile, Riggs, looking slightly pear-shaped, wore a dull pastel polo and off-white shorts. He even continued to wear the Sugar Daddy warm-up jacket through the first three games of the match, when King aced him to take a 2-1 early lead. The jacket, which Riggs donned because of a sponsorship agreement, hid the beginnings of a paunch that hadn’t existed when Riggs had been training daily for the Court match. Too many promotional appearances had limited his fitness regimen. As soon as the match started, Riggs’ good friend Lornie Kuhle, seated courtside, noted that Bobby looked as though he had “finally realized that the final exam was here and he hadn’t studied for it.”24 Although Riggs had remarkable coordination and timing, even into his 50s, he was not the most graceful or aesthetically pleasing tennis player. Rosie Casals, who offered blatantly pro-King commentary during the match, denigrated Bobby’s athleticism: “I don’t consider someone who walks like a duck a good athlete.” Glancing at the two athletic combatants offered a strong visual argument for gender equality on the athletic field. While King was in the best shape of her life, Riggs resembled a portly version of Woody Allen.25

24 Ware, 7.
25 One simple indication of King’s superior training can be displayed by tracking the number of strokes per rally in each set. As Riggs fell further and further behind in the match, rather than reassert his desire to win by establishing a level of speed and consistency which King could not match, he began to think desperately, ending points sooner and moving to net on almost every point, a departure from his normal game plan. By set, the players struck 4.61, 4.53, and 3.79 strokes per point, essentially an admission of defeat on Riggs’ part. All statistics for the match are my own accounting.
Photographs from the match and its promotional lead-up have been widely circulated. Video of the match itself is less easily available. One explanation for its lack of circulation is that ESPN owns many sports broadcast archives and tightly controls access in order to retain its ability to produce future historiographical content. A simpler explanation is that the match was not very good: King’s win was decisive. However, the match is still worth revisiting. Looking more closely at the patterns of play, tactics, and technical details of the match can contribute to a formal and stylistic account of the Battle of the Sexes match.

Consider the form of tennis. In a singles match, a player either serves or returns serve for an entire game. (A “game” proceeds until someone wins four points, so long as he or she has won two more points than the opponent). The expectation among top players—especially in the men’s game—is that winning games on your own serve (i.e., “holding serve”) is easier than winning games when the opponent serves (i.e., “breaking serve”). This was even true for female players in the 1970s, when courts were faster, more players served-and-volleyed (came to the net immediately following the serve), and racket technology did not yet allow for massive amounts of spin to cause shots to dip parabolically as soon as they crossed the net. Therefore, breaking serve was considered an accomplishment, but the psychological work of breaking serve and building momentum was incomplete until a player held serve in the game immediately after breaking serve (known as “consolidating the break”). A player who breaks serve but then is unable to consolidate the break by holding serve can easily become demoralized and feel as though their best efforts have come to naught.

Riggs broke King’s serve three times throughout the match, including to take an early 3-2 lead in the first set. King immediately broke back on each occasion. King’s unwillingness to

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allow Riggs to consolidate a break of serve testifies to Riggs’ nerviness and King’s resiliency, composure, and ability to focus at crucial stages of the match. Furthermore, she demonstrated an ability to alter her typical game plan for an idiosyncratic opponent. King intentionally hit the ball less forcefully than she was capable of doing and came to the net slightly less often than usual, forcing Riggs to create his own pace and angles—a task with which he had struggled throughout his career—and play more aggressively than he had against Court. Additionally, because of the medium-slow court surface King had chosen, she was frequently able to extend rallies longer than Riggs imagined by chasing shots laterally across the court. The extra time provided by the low bounce of the carpet, which had been rolled on top of a basketball court, allowed King time to set up topspin passing shots but troubled Riggs, who needed a higher bounce on the ball to redirect his flatter strokes past King when she took to the net. A full account of the rhetorical work of any occasion of sports spectacle needs to consider the materiality of the sporting event and its influence on the outcome. A higher-bouncing court surface and different racquet technologies, a fitter Riggs and a nervier King, or a smaller stadium and a power outage that affected the national television broadcast: any combination of these material factors could have profoundly refigured sports’ role as an arena that registers or causes social change.27

The conjunction of materiality and symbolicity was furthermore evident in King’s style of play. The foremost symbol of King’s success in the match was the overhead smash. King recognized that the sport’s most violent shot—a relatively easy shot struck above one’s head, similar to a serve, from a position near the net as a response to an opponent’s high-arcing, 

27 Here I draw on Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), to recognize the limits of thinking of an athlete as a pure subject and her surroundings as mere objects. Although the court surface and the spectacular environment surrounding the match are not the primary focus for spectators, an account of the Battle of the Sexes must recognize their subtle roles in creating the rhetorical contours of the event.
defensive lob—could result in tremendous momentum shifts if missed, particularly among a raucous, energetic crowd. The Astrodome’s high white ceiling promised to make these shots particularly difficult to hit, but King missed only two of the thirteen overheads she faced in the match, hitting nearly all of them as “winners,” successful unreturnable shots (she totaled 65 winners for the match, while Riggs tallied only 16). The technique King used to hit her overheads nicely captures the differences between the opponents’ styles of play. King originally gripped the racket as though shaking a hand. This loose grip permitted a flexibility (a wrist-snapping motion known as pronation on the serve and overhead) that could also be used on volleys at net, so King’s preparedness was never in doubt. King extended her forearm up and out with the stroke, swinging as if attempting to throw the racquet like a hatchet to create the greatest amount of force possible. If a tentative, lengthy rally signifies two apologetic opponents’ inability to approach each other agonistically (i.e., what tennis aficionados colloquially call “pushing”), a well-struck overhead is the equivalent of a one-liner that dismisses any counter-argument: powerful, authoritative, refusing response or rejoinder.28

In contrast, Riggs could not pronate with his racquet on either the serve or the overhead. Instead, his right elbow and hand slid around the side of the ball, producing only sidespin, rather than the velocity and force created by King’s ascendant strike. King’s ability to finish points with the overhead signified a growing sense of confidence and an indication that the match would be played on her terms, rather than Riggs’s. Color commentator Eugene Scott captured the distinction in style most accurately when he claimed, as the score reached 1-1 in the second set,

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that Riggs “lacked a concluder,” an aggressive shot that would allow him to finish points by hitting through or past King’s defense.

Even if Riggs lacked a concluder, viewers watching King’s straight-sets victory came away with clear conclusions. Against a fearless and unapologetic opponent, performance under duress was by no means an inherently male advantage, as the Riggs-Court match seemed to suggest. Riggs essentially conceded after the match’s first set. In a courtside interview with Frank Gifford, Riggs unleashed a torrent of paratactic exasperation: he admitted that he was likely “in for a long afternoon” and needed to “pick the pace up or change my tactics or try to get a little faster or try not to miss too many shots out there” if he wanted to stand a chance in the match. Interrupting Gifford’s pitch back to Cossell as the interview neared a close, Riggs grabbed the microphone and blurted, in a moment of sincerity beyond his typical bluster, “She’s awful, she’s really very swift out there. I think I have them all past her, and she goes and gets them—she’s terrific.” If the Battle of the Sexes represented an argument for gender equality, King made her points terrifically indeed.

IV. Beyond the Baseline: Billie Jean King’s Off-Court Feminism

Billie Jean King’s victory in the Battle of the Sexes validated many of the changes that were occurring in the world of women’s sports in the early 1970s. Although it may have been a connection made in retrospect rather than in the moment, King wrote that she was thinking of Title IX legislation that would open access to girls’ opportunities to play high school and collegiate sports during the Battle of the Sexes match. Additionally, less than two weeks before King’s monumental win, Margaret Court and John Newcombe took home $25,000 each for winning the U.S. Open. It was the first time the winners of the women’s and men’s draws at a major had earned equal prize money; the year before, King had won $15,000 less than men’s
winner Ilie Năstase. The change occurred in large part because of King’s threat that the women would boycott the event at a moment when women’s tennis was attracting larger gates than the men’s sport. Furthermore, Billie Jean and then-husband Larry King used the publicity generated by the match to launch a number of ventures that integrated business, philanthropy, activism, and sport: World TeamTennis, a co-ed league that attempted to supplement and challenge the existing tennis establishment; the Women’s Sport Foundation, established in 1974 as a charitable educational foundation advocating for the benefits of sport and physical activity for girls and women; and womenSports, the first magazine dedicated to women in sports. As Jaime Schultz writes, King’s advocacy during this time period provides ample evidence for the existence of “physical activism,” which she describes as “the melding of physical activity and political activism,” a mode of advocacy that allowed King to reach “segments of the population that [other feminists] could not.”

King acknowledged as much in a 1974 interview by admitting that she had begun Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics (1970), widely considered the first monograph of academic feminist literary criticism, but “couldn’t hack it.” She opined that while Millett’s work was “great for about two percent of women,” her successes on the tennis court would be visible to 100% of the women in the country. In the relationship between the individual athlete and social change, King suggested that the visibility and straightforwardness of sport spectacle were successful tools for social change.

In addition to being more visible and less erudite than academic versions of feminism, King believed that women’s sports could activate both participants and spectators in ways that more rational forms of advocacy could not. As she wrote in a 1974 memoir, “Tennis is an art

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29 Schultz, 213-216.
30 Schultz, 205.
form that’s capable of moving both the players and the audience—at least a knowledgeable audience—in emotional, almost sensual ways.”

When participation in or fandom of a sport becomes a marker by which individuals constitute their identities, King recognized that a sporting event such as the Battle of the Sexes could produce interpretable, persuasive political work. However, even though King wrote that “tennis is a personal expression on my part, certainly the most complete and maybe the only way I can express myself,” King’s physical activism was not limited to physical action alone. Although the Battle of the Sexes match remains an important site where viewers generated emotional, almost sensual understandings about gender equality in and beyond sport, King’s advocacy extends beyond the baseline to include her published memoirs and interviews, spaces where she refined and clarified her politics.

A closer look at King’s memoirs and published statements reveals someone who was fundamentally shaped by possessing a middle-class background in a sport that until her breakthrough was played primarily by social and financial elites; by the professionalization of tennis in the 1960s and 70s; and by sports media’s equation of publicity with success. As a result, a core tenet of King’s feminism is that individual financial equity—often regardless of the moral compromises that might be involved in achieving it—is the cornerstone of gender equality. This point can be elucidated by looking at three related moments in King’s career: her continued support for Virginia Slims as the title sponsor of the Women’s Tennis Association, her explanation of the communal benefits of her individual financial success, and her description of the moment she understood herself to be a political actor.

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32 King with Chapin, 197.
As mentioned above, King was among the “Original Nine” women’s players who signed with Gladys Heldman in 1970 to form a separate women’s tour sponsored by Phillip Morris, Inc. The cigarette manufacturer’s executive Joseph Cullman III wanted to support women’s tennis, but he also saw the new tour as an opportunity to advertise the Virginia Slims brand of cigarette, specifically marketed to young professional women. The cigarettes, which were thinner and longer than traditional men’s cigarettes, carried the tagline, “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby.” Virginia Slims remained the title sponsor of the Women’s Tennis Association until 1995, even as public pressure mounted on women’s tennis to drop a sponsor whose product was associated with disastrous health consequences.\(^{34}\) King emerged as the most well-known stalwart supporter of Virginia Slims. She wrote a 1992 editorial in the *New York Times* defending women’s tennis decision to remain with the cigarette manufacturer. In corporate language befitting a public relations spokesperson, King thanked Phillip Morris for sponsoring women’s sports at its professional inception and noted that there was “no evidence that tobacco company sponsorship of sports or other events encourages non-smokers to smoke.” Furthermore, King implied that it was a free speech right for a tobacco company to be permitted to sponsor the tour: “We live in a diverse society with many conflicting points of view. [...] What’s essential is that we take responsibility for those choices, and show respect and tolerance for the choices made by those who do not agree with us.”\(^{35}\) King is not wrong to be grateful for key sponsorship opportunities that enabled female tennis players to turn professional, though the language that she couches this

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\(^{34}\) Cigarette advertising was banned from television and radio in January 1971. Many cigarette brands viewed the sponsorship of sports that were televised as a useful end-around the Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act, passed in Congress in April 1970. Other than the Virginia Slims tour, the most prominent connection between American sports and cigarette sponsorship has been in auto racing, where NASCAR’s championship series was called the Winston Cup (1971-2003), after a brand in R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.

complimentary attitude in seems to equate corporate decisions with individual free speech rights. Because King relied on advertisers for the success of her own entrepreneurial ventures, this corporate-friendly perspective is unsurprising. Nevertheless, it demonstrates a willingness to sacrifice what others might see as a long-term communal good—in essence, ridding the sport of tennis of products that compromise people’s ability to play tennis healthily—in favor of short-term financial prosperity.

King has long held financial prosperity as a bellwether of the health of women’s sports. When it was convenient, King attempted to draw sponsorship, women’s struggles for social equality, and women’s tennis into the same sphere. As she wrote in 1974, “Virginia Slims was supporting women’s tennis, which was certainly part of the Movement, so why lose all that good dough that could be used to spread the word?”36 She stressed the financial benefits of corporate sponsorship in slang that signals her firsthand desire for wealth. The success of the Virginia Slims Tour in 1971 and 1972 netted King two consecutive years with more than $100,000 total income. Against criticism from fellow players that the tour’s newfound wealth should be distributed more equally among the more than 150 women who were playing the tour’s premier headlining events and two satellite tours in 1974, King offered a version of the economic argument that “a rising tide lifts all boats.” King argued that big paydays to individual players would in turn promote the sport as a whole:

I’m positive that a lot of people who didn’t know anything about women’s tennis—including some sports editors—took a look at those six-figure bankrolls and decided we women must be pretty good athletes after all. Didn’t that compare with what some of the best male golfers and football, basketball, and baseball players made? And they’d been on top of the sports pages for years. Getting paid well is always an eye-grabber, and I’m also sure those $100,000 seasons were one of the reasons I was named *Sports Illustrated* magazine’s first-ever Sportswoman of the Year in 1972.37

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36 King with Chapin, 141.
37 King with Chapin, 146.
King offers only implicit proof that her personal success led to the success of the tour; she assumes her appearance on the covers of prominent newsmagazines necessarily leads to an increase—rather than simply a re-distribution—of publicity, and implicitly contends that increased publicity will result in more equitable financial resource distribution. She presents an individualistic, free-market perspective of how value circulates in sports that many feminists, eager for more co-operative strategies dissociated from traditionally male modes of thinking, were reticent to adopt. Whether or not King’s perspective on sports economics disqualifies her from the label of feminist is an impossible judgment to make, since her priorities remain prominent among many self-described contemporary feminists. Sheryl Sandberg’s recent *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) offers a similar program to King: the benefits of well-publicized female leadership, including equal pay to female executives, will trickle down to rank-and-file workers.

Most social movements—especially when they are considered to be meaning-making enterprises constituted primarily by the flow of ideas, actions, and structures of feeling—are defined by internal tensions in addition to common enemies. Rather than label these differences into stable categories of moral praise or condemnation, however, it is more profitable to characterize her politics by locating the origins of King’s understanding of herself as a political actor. An understanding of King’s emphasis on money and go-it-alone attitude are provided by a closer look at her autobiography. The only literary work which King references in her autobiography at any length is Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). This section of her autobiography recounts a vacation at Stinson Beach in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1972 and is clearly demarcated as a self-reflective turning point, a departure from the autobiography’s collocation of match scores and winner’s checks, positioned directly before King’s self-insertion.
into national political discourse: “Besides, I’m more than a tennis player now.” This problematic section of King’s biography merits quoting at some length:

Sometime in the spring of 1972—I can’t remember exactly when or where it happened—Vicki Berner, who was still playing the circuit then, rushed up to me with a copy of *Atlas Shrugged* and said, “You’ve got to read this. You’re Dagny Taggart. You’re just like her.”

In the next few months I read the book and thought about it a lot, and during those days out by the tree stump at Stinson Beach I realized that Vicki had been exactly right; that in a lot of ways I really was like Dagny Taggart. That one book told me a lot about why I was the way I was, and why other people reacted to me, sometimes pretty strongly, the way they did. […]

It made me see how my love of tennis and what I guess you might call my fanatical desire to see the women’s circuit make a go of it worked both ways. It kept me going when I’d maybe rather have been taking a week off or at least getting a good eight hours’ sleep, but it also made me vulnerable to criticism. If I hadn’t really cared about what I was doing, then people could have said anything they wanted about me and it would have just rolled off my back. No sweat. But I did care, a lot, and that’s why I didn’t understand and couldn’t accept all the bad feedback I was getting. I had the guilt sometimes because I wasn’t strong enough to realize that I was doing the right thing. Instead, I found myself thinking, “Maybe I’m not right about this or that after all.” And confusion was making me learn to hate something I really did love.

I decided, over a long period of time, to become selfish. That’s an awkward word, because all my life I’d been taught to be altruistic, to give unto others and all that. But what is altruism? It comes down to the old question: Is the philanthropist who gives ten million to some charity acting out of true altruism or out of self-interest? Had I gotten involved in all those hassles just “for the good of the game” or because that’s really what gave me, Billie Jean King, the most pleasure and satisfaction? The answer, of course, was both—it wasn’t a question of either-or—but understanding that I didn’t have to feel guilty about my motives, despite what other people said, made things a whole lot easier for me. […]

I found I was able to stop having to justify the money I made. People said I was becoming mercenary, and that used to bother me. But why? Money sure wasn’t the end of the rainbow and I’d never felt it was my only motive for playing, but I also felt that I earned everything I made, and that I deserved what I got. And it hadn’t come easy, either. I’d worked my fanny off for every cent.

I decided I was responsible to myself first, and to no one else.  

That profilers of King, historians of women’s tennis, and feminist scholars have opted not to grapple with this passage is understandable. Rand’s place in feminist thought is particularly

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38 King with Chapin, 138.
39 King with Chapin, 132-133.
fraught because of her emphasis on rational self-centeredness and free market capitalism, though at least one literary scholar has applauded the heroines of Rand’s fiction as “active, independent, professionally successful, and sexually emancipated.” Rand argued at length for the virtues of selfishness in a parasitic world, where cooperation and sharing were watchwords that benefitted the lazy and undeserving. The influence of Rand on King’s thinking is striking. Not only does it reinforce King’s emphasis on personal wealth, but it also helps explain why many of her peers found King strong-willed or egotistical. Journalist Frank Deford wrote that many players thought King’s chumminess with fellow players was a put-on. There was “something Machiavellian in her kindness,” he suggested, before quoting Virginia Slims player Kristien Shaw: “[A]s soon as I got to the point where I could read her too well, she tried to dissociate [our friendship]. She doesn’t want to risk appearing weak in front of anybody. She told me once that if you want to be the best, you must never let anyone, anyone, know what you really feel. You see, she told me, they can’t hurt you if they don’t know [you].”

These charges may be somewhat overblown, especially considering that King was required to carve out a path for herself and women’s tennis where very little groundwork had been laid. Her lack of refinement, which caused women’s champion Maureen Connolly to label the young King “self-centered,” “egotistical,” and “just a terrible person” and former coach Alice Marble to quit working with “the spoiled brat,” was by equal turns a marker of her hunger to

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succeed as much as her lack of *noblesse oblige*. Nevertheless, allegations such as these—intensified by a 1981 “galimony” lawsuit from former lover Marilyn Barnett that brought the supposed “lavender menace” of lesbianism into the open in the world of women’s sports—threatened King’s financial viability among sponsors in addition to her reputation as an agent of social change within and beyond the tennis court. In order to counteract these threats and reinvent her image in accordance with shifting political winds, King has spent the past several decades attempting to control public perception of the Battle of the Sexes match. King has staked out the position that control over sports spectacle entails the ability to shape public memory.

V. **Remembering the Battle of the Sexes**

King’s attempt to shape reception of the Battle of the Sexes finds justification in recent rhetorical scholarship of social movements. As Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples note, both corporations and activists have recognized “the TV screen as the contemporary shape of the public sphere and the image event designed for mass media dissemination as an important contemporary form of citizen participation.”

According to DeLuca and Peeples, the most recognizable feature of the contemporary public sphere is its turn away from consensus through communication—if such a practice has ever been more than a normative counterfactual first outlined by Jürgen Habermas—toward dissemination through public screens. Publics are useful fictions created through mediated publicity; in this conception, images become less reflections than creators of reality.

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42 King with Chapin, 37.
44 DeLuca and Peeples, 249. I owe the phrase “normative but counterfactual” to Rosa Eberly.
45 DeLuca and Peeples, 251.
Peeple’s argument, however. Whereas they see competition between corporations and activists over the control of public screens, King walks a tightrope between the two identities. In other words, she attempts to control her legacy as an individual brand in the interests of continued social reform. This section analyzes two occasions in which King shaped how the Battle of the Sexes was remembered—the 2001 TV movie *When Billie Beat Bobby* and King’s 2008 book *Pressure is a Privilege: Lessons I’ve Learned from Life and the Battle of the Sexes*—and one occasion in which King was not able to control how the Battle of the Sexes is remembered, the 2013 documentary *Branded*, directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady. Not only did the Battle of the Sexes move viewers in the moment it first aired; these examples indicate the role that sport spectacle plays as a pivot point in the retrospective construction of narratives about social change.

The 2001 TV movie *When Billie Beat Bobby*, based on published accounts and interviews with Billie Jean King, leans on the narrative framing devices of the fairy tale in order to position the Battle of the Sexes as a historic levelling of the playing field for girls and women in the United States.\(^{46}\) In an opening scene from King’s childhood, playing tackle football against the boys in her neighborhood, uncredited female narrator Stockard Channing (known at the time for her role as FLOTUS Abbey Bartlett on *The West Wing*) intones, “There was a time not so very long ago when the girls weren’t allowed to play with the boys. Then along came a girl named Billie Jean who was destined to change all that.” The grand historic tones continue throughout the narration: “Billie Jean and Bobby would only play one match against the other, but when it was over, the world would never be the same again.” An inspirational montage following the depiction of the match offers a causal explanation of King’s transformative influence. The

\(^{46}\) *When Billie Beat Bobby*, directed by Jane Anderson (ABC, 2001), streaming online.
camera pauses on spectators watching the match at home and offers subtitles of how the match changed the course of their lives: a housewife who waited hand and foot on her husband and sons, who cheered Riggs, “will divorce her husband and go back to law school”; a mixed-race group of what appears to be sorority sisters celebrate as subtitles indicate they “will be CEO of a major corporation,” “will be partners in a law firm,” “will run for Senate,” “will perform open heart surgery,” “will orbit the Earth,” and “will make a major scientific discovery,” among others. Even a father who watched the match alongside his daughter “will give women top positions in his software company.” The movie is largely divorced from historical context outside of one bridging shot, which declares 1972 to be “when feminism was still considered a dirty word.” As a result, viewers are asked to accept that King’s infectious energy, gregarious personality, and match victory energize a latent desire for social change into manifold futures.

In this portrayal, King is depicted as a lone pioneer who struggles against not only male opposition but the will of many of her peers. The TV movie never shows female players competing against each other; King raises her hands triumphantly after winning Wimbledon twice and loses good-naturedly to Margaret Court before the Battle of the Sexes but is never shown in action against other women. Even her childhood opponents and training partners are male. Outside of King’s close friend Rosie Casals, the named female characters in the film—from King’s mother to most of the well-known female players on tour (Barnett, who began traveling with King in 1971, is erased from the film’s universe)—are proverbial wet blankets stifling King’s attempts to effect social change. Most telling is a scene where several female players disparage King’s chances against Riggs and the fact that she “overexerts herself” while, unbeknownst to them, King is showering within earshot. Scenes like this, which are designed to depict Billie Jean as vulnerable and sympathetic, combine with scenes where she offers lines
like, “These girls, they think I’m a bully. I’m not. I’m a forward mama,” to counter allegations of her selfishness.

Meanwhile, Bobby Riggs, who died in 1995, is cast as an unlikely ally in the movement toward social change. His chauvinism is presented as showmanship and harmless bluster; he even looks at Margaret Court with pity during the final points of the Mother Day’s Massacre, recognizing before she does that she has symbolically set the women’s movement back with her loss. None of this overrides his desire to capitalize on the match; he wants to win, but he knows that the match must be entertaining and closely contested in order to command public attention. In the movie’s final moments, King visits Riggs in his locker room after the match and they share a knowing, wordless acknowledgement that they have enacted a historic, transformative encounter.

King’s 2008 book of advice and anecdotes, *Pressure is a Privilege*, co-written with sportswriter Christine Brennan, reinforces this vision of the Battle of the Sexes match. In her preface, Brennan writes that she was among the nameless celebrants transformed by the match’s outcome: “In the many years since, a few men have told me they thought it was one of the most over-hyped sports events of all time. I always disagree. ‘For you, maybe, but not for me,’ I tell them.”47 The Battle of the Sexes functions as a touchstone through which Brennan can mark the constitution of her own identity as a fan of women’s sports and a future sports media pioneer—she was elected the first president of the Association for Women in Sports Media in 1998. Similarly, King treats the Battle of the Sexes as the exigence for the book. She writes that the values she brought into the match that enabled her to win and the lessons that she learned during

and after the match have shaped her worldview and may be of use to readers beyond the realm of tennis. While the maxims in the book are ultimately geared toward an interesting dual audience of young girls and those in need of corporate motivational slogans—perhaps evidence that the book is comprised of material King uses at public speaking events—Pressure is a Privilege also offers reminders of the usefulness of the spectacle of sports. She writes that she ultimately decided to participate in the Battle of the Sexes in order to offer tennis national exposure beyond the country-club class and because it offered her “the chance to effect social change. If I could win, it would be a visual statement—a strong one.” 48 King continues to counter suggestions that spectacle is ultimately of little value by appealing to visual symbolism.

Pressure is a Privilege also includes praise for Riggs. While she chastises him for not training properly before the Battle of the Sexes match, she commends him for reinventing himself as he aged, enjoying himself in the match’s chaotic environment, and keeping his word on their business arrangements. She contrasts his fun-loving lifestyle with how she felt during the 1970s, in one of her rare public discussions of her “off-the-court-life” at the time: “I couldn’t talk to anyone about it because I was told the WTA Tour would not happen if I spoke publicly about being a lesbian, which sent me even deeper into the closet. I never like to lie or be deceitful or dishonest. Living in the public eye is stressful enough, but being forced to live a life that went against my own value system of always telling the truth and being honest made it even more difficult.” 49 King acknowledges that the spotlight of sports spectacle can bring both much-needed publicity and unwanted attention, the latter of which denied her the opportunity to work out her sexuality on her own terms. The spectacle of sports can result in oversimplified dramatic

49 King with Brennan, 155.
narratives; King writes that the labels that emerge from these events can at times be misleading and hurtful. After all, she suggests, the supposedly misogynist Riggs learned the game from a female coach, Eleanor Tennant. In *When Billie Beat Bobby* and *Pressure is a Privilege*, King demonstrates that sports spectacle can be both a defining force and an event that can be revised to re-write oversimplified narratives. King revises public perceptions of Riggs on both occasions as a way to re-position herself closer to the forefront of social change. In *When Billie Beat Bobby*, Riggs becomes one of King’s closest allies so that she can demonstrate how few allies she had on her quest to orchestrate social change; in *Pressure is a Privilege*, Riggs becomes a model of the internal contradictions within athletes as complex people. This helps King explain how she could be a feminist icon at the same time as she “missed the opportunity to create a more radical rupture in our understanding of sexuality and intimate relationships.”

King is commonly criticized for not taking a progressive position with regard to LGBTQ rights in the 1970s and 1980s, though she did serve as one of two openly gay members of the United States’ presidential delegation to the Sochi Olympics in 2014, a symbolic move designed to protest anti-gay legislation in Russia. That the Battle of the Sexes ignored sexuality is not a principal complaint, however. The 2013 documentary *Branded*, released as part of ESPN’s *9 for IX* series of documentaries on the fortieth anniversary of Title IX legislation, suggests instead that the Battle of the Sexes focused on sexuality in the most predictable and confining ways. King’s focus on financial equity as the cornerstone of gender equality did not contend that women were as good at tennis as men were; rather, she argued that women’s tennis had equal “entertainment value” to men’s tennis. *Branded* uses the Battle of the Sexes match to demarcate...

50 King with Brennan, 97.
a turning point in women’s professional sports: a direct consequence of the framing of the match and its focus on corporate sponsorships for women’s sports’ financial viability was the sexualization and de-politicization of the female athlete. Making an argument about entertainment value allows for the consumers of sports—who are predominantly young, straight, white men—to pass judgment upon what qualifies as entertaining. As a result, Branded suggests that female athletes hoping to attain financial equity with their male peers through corporate sponsorship are forced to adopt one of two limiting personas: as the gymnast Mary Lou Retton explains, female athletes had to cultivate personal brands that were either “wholesome, all-American, [and] squeaky clean” or else become “sexy vixen[s].” Those athletes whose bodies and backstories do not allow for either of these personas struggle to attain the same financial support as those athletes—Branded analyzes the case of tennis player Anna Kournikova, whose corporate sponsorships never matched her lack of professional success—who capture the male gaze. In Branded’s rewriting of the work of sports spectacle, directors Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady indicate that the visual nature of spectacle is inextricably tied to the modes of seeing already pervasive in popular culture. This contestation of the Battle of the Sexes as a transformative event for American feminism or the inauguration of a tradition that tacitly condones the sexualization of female athletes with corporate payoffs indicates that sports spectacle remains a fulcrum of public memory for athletes’ relationship to social change. Controlling the mediation of sports spectacle is analogous to being able to put a finger on the scales of public memory.

VI. Conclusion

Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald argue that sport scholars should understand athletes as “repositories for political narratives” and that critical sports scholars’ foremost task is
historiographical, searching for “the ways in which [the ‘facts’ of their lives] are constructed, framed, foregrounded, obscured, and forgotten.”52 While I fundamentally agree with the agenda they set for critical sport scholars, I ultimately disagree with their choice to conceptualize Billie Jean King as a “text.”53 To do so flattens the distinctions between media so that reading journalistic accounts, watching documentaries, and spectating actual tennis matches are regarded as equivalent forms of evidence that are equally persuasive. In fact, these different media activate different rhetorical appeals and move the social in fundamentally different ways.54 An attempt to correct the historical record in print is much different than what King describes as the emotional and almost sensual appeal of live tennis. The material interpretation of the Battle of the Sexes match as it occurred and was mediated on television undergirds one popular narrative: that the Battle of the Sexes was a transformative event that cemented King’s role as leader of the athletics front of the women’s movement. The spectacular contexts informing the Battle of the Sexes and undergirding King’s political principles suggest a more complicated set of relationships. The forces that propelled King into the Battle of the Sexes match and commanded her so much attention and drew unlikely people toward the energies of second-wave feminism and the women’s movement during the 1970s—the rise of television and the transformation of tennis into a professional endeavor—were the very same forces that threatened to undermine some of the movement’s central values. This is the fundamental tension animating my discussion of athletes as agents for social change. Do the very platforms through which athletes attain

52 Birrell and McDonald, 344.
53 Birrell and McDonald, 344.
54 I find impetus for this argument in Darrel Enck-Wanzer, “Trashing the System: Social Movement, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Collective Agency in the Young Lords Organization’s Garbage Offensive,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 92.2 (2006): 174-201. Enck-Wanzer argues that scholars must account for the “intersectionality” of rhetorical modes without reducing the body to speech or as an instrumental precursor that opens up the possibility of speech.
celebrity and attract attention fundamentally compromise them as members of broader movements? According to Billie Jean King, at least, this relationship actually works in the inverse direction. Rather than sports spectacle disqualifying athletes from participating in social movements, King suggests that the spectacle of sport reshapes the contours of social change. In her telling, at least, the social is moved most by movement itself.

Perhaps the final word on individual occasions of sports spectacle should belong to another of the female athletes whose gender performance became contested in the heat of competition. After she scored the World Cup-winning penalty kick in the 1999 finals, American midfielder Brandi Chastain ripped off her jersey, revealing a toned physique and a black sports bra. Chastain was chastised for the display, which critics argued sexualized the moment. She brusquely dismissed such sentiments, arguing in Branded that “To have a celebration means that you are accepting the good things that you do, and that it’s okay to feel good about the good things that you do. And there are not enough stages for girls to see women having those moments.”55 For Chastain, the spectacle of sports is nothing more than a celebration that counters the apologetic tone with which too many women are asked to navigate the world.56 In its sheer exuberance, it is divorced from sexualization; nevertheless, the collective experience of joy offers a way of moving the social that energizes the possibilities for girls and women in sports. This is close to how King hopes that the Battle of the Sexes can be read, but she recognizes, more than Chastain, that these stages only remain free for celebration if fights over public memory are won as decisively as on-field victories.

55 Branded, directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady (ESPN, 2013), DVD.
Chapter Two:

Three Waves of Gay Male Athlete Coming Out Narratives

I. “FIRST[?] PRO ATHLETE SAYS HE’S GAY”

Recent well-publicized announcements by soccer player Robbie Rogers, basketball player Jason Collins, and football player Michael Sam belong to a burgeoning “third wave” of coming out narratives by gay male athletes in the United States. To acclaim a *third* wave of gay male athlete coming out narratives implies, necessarily, that two previous waves have already risen and receded from collective memory. Contemporary gay male athletes—and the larger public that consumes these coming out narratives—seem at times unaware that they participate in a larger and longer rhetorical tradition. Each athlete claims—or, given the contemporary mass media’s insistence upon invented or imposed novelty, is forced to claim—some semblance of newness in his act of coming out. Viewers are treated to news that is somehow both “new” and “not new” simultaneously.

Gay male athletes’ claims to novelty lead them to adopt lengthy, heavily qualified titles. Rogers labeled himself “the first openly gay male athlete to play in one of the top five team sports in North America” as both a plea for relevancy as his playing career wound down and as a rejoinder to the diminished status of soccer in the United States.1 Similarly, Jon Wertheim admitted that Collins’s designation as “the first openly gay male athlete playing in a major American team sport” was a journalistic construction that *Sports Illustrated*’s editorial staff crafted in order to heighten the publicity that Collins would receive outside the world of sports.2

The linguistic gymnastics used to mark each coming out as somehow novel may sell more

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1 Robbie Rogers with Eric Marcus, *Coming Out to Play* (New York: Penguin, 2014), xii
magazines and mass-market paperbacks, but they also result in a surprising lack of historical awareness. Collins’s appearance on a May 2013 cover of *Sports Illustrated* was punctuated with the headline “The Gay Athlete,” as though he could represent all gay athletes—or as though he were the *only* one. Individual athletes are publicized at the cost of perpetuating what Adrienne Rich, in other context, refers to as “the phenomenon of interruption” that intentionally or unintentionally marginalizes and erases a subaltern group’s intellectual predecessors in the drive toward elevating singular figures. The mass media’s invention of perpetual newness in the case of gay male athletes obscures a decades-long tradition of athletes who have written and spoken passionately, eloquently, and sometimes problematically about the plight of and possibilities for gay men in sport and American culture.

In this chapter, I aim to rectify the phenomenon of interruption by demonstrating that gay male athlete coming out narratives constitute a rhetorical genre that can be mapped in terms of three chronological waves. Coming out is a recurrent situation which demands that athletes reconcile the dominant and revered social status of the male professional athlete in American society with the significantly more vulnerable and stigmatized identity of the gay man. Gay male athletes have issued these statements of personal identity alongside a desire to demonstrate the existence and suitability of gay men in the domain of men’s professional sports. With shared purposes and from similar subject positions, gay male athletes have relied upon many of the same conventions to tell their stories and make their arguments. However, in no way are all these coming out narratives the same. Narratives vary due to athletes’ “complex biographies,

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personalities, and idiosyncracies.” Of equal concern are shifting historical circumstances that open up some argumentative pathways while introducing other rhetorical constraints.

This charting of gay male athlete coming out narratives proceeds in five sections. First, I identify gay male coming out narratives as a rhetorical genre and elaborate upon my use of the metaphor of “waves” to help explain the evolution of the genre. That section is followed by considerations of each wave of coming out narratives through representative texts. The mid-1970s first-wave coming out narrative is represented by former NFL running back David Kopay’s *The David Kopay Story: An Extraordinary Self-Revelation* (1977). Kopay emphasizes the necessity of safe spaces for LGBT populations and demonstrates a willingness to differentiate and hierarchize “types” of gay men in order to assert the worthiness of “macho gays” within the world of sports. Second-wave gay male athlete coming out narratives from the 1990s through mid-2000s, as exemplified by former Major League Baseball outfielder Billy Bean’s *Going the Other Way* (2003) and former National Basketball Association center John Amaechi’s *Man in the Middle* (2007), often critique the presumptively heterosexual climate of men’s sports and demonstrate the hidden costs associated with remaining closeted. Third-wave texts, including Rogers’s *Coming Out to Play* (2014) and Collins’s first-person *Sports Illustrated* narrative, reintroduce the actively out, visible, gay male body becoming aware of his place in history as an opportunity rather than a burden. The reintroduction of the body in these latest narratives allows contemporary gay male athletes to become sex symbols, to activate intersectional arguments by channeling the history of the civil rights movement, and to operate through more provocative visual modes of address.

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In the chapter’s final section, I reflect on the possibilities and limitations that gay male athletes face as agents of social change, paying particular attention to the case of football player Michael Sam. In this conclusion, I assess the risks and rewards of using gay male athletes as representative figureheads of the broader LGBTQ movement. My own inclination is to heed Bonnie Dow’s caution that “poster child politics are double-edged”—needed visibility can accrue on a vital issue because of a singular personality, but the spectacle of visibility can often be mistaken for substantive social and political reform⁵—while remaining hopeful that recognizing gay male athlete coming out narratives as a rhetorical genre might help them become part of what Charles E. Morris III calls the “diverse domain of the usable past.”⁶ Toward this end, I limit myself, whenever possible, to offering what Heather Love has called “surface readings of the social” that “[try] to account for how people felt without telling them that they should have felt some other way.”⁷ These coming out narratives should neither be exalted into canonization nor critiqued into oblivion. Instead, I hope to follow Morris’s lead in recognizing that “the rhetorical contexts that inspire and equip us for the critical act must be balanced by a willingness to situate a given text within the horizons of its own historical context.”⁸ I care most about how to make use of the coming out narratives of gay male athletes, even as some of their stories might seem outdated and even though these athletes may not be attuned to the latest developments in academic queer theory.⁹

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The uncertain extent to which these texts have thus far been esteemed demonstrates the
dual and dueling imperatives facing a social and political group moving toward broader
mainstream acceptance. The LGBTQ movement in the United States is torn between
memorializing the horror of the past (We will never forget!) while working to overcome past
stigmatization (We must never go back!).\textsuperscript{10} The tradition of coming out narratives by gay male
athletes should be explored and charted before more deliberate decisions are made about how to
deploy—or forget—these athletes’ stories.\textsuperscript{11}

II. Gay Male Athlete Coming Out Narratives as Rhetorical Genre

What makes the coming out narratives of gay male athletes a rhetorical genre? These
narratives do tend to feature a common set of \textit{topoi}: childhood upbringing and its possible
relationship to one’s sexuality; youthful attachments to and skillfulness in athletics that earn the
memoirist social capital; the perception that this social capital is under threat due to latent
homosexual attractions; the attempt to preserve one’s status as an appropriately masculine athlete
by dating and sleeping with women; the gradual or epiphanic realization of one’s homosexuality;
some sort of crisis or turning point that makes remaining closeted impossible, insufferable, or
undesirable; and the acceptance of one’s sexual identity, followed by the process of coming out
to one’s family and close friends.

However, a common set of narrative plot points does not in itself constitute a \textit{rhetorical}
genre. As Carolyn Miller argues, rhetorical genres are “typified rhetorical actions based in

\textsuperscript{11} See Charles E. Morris III and K. J. Rawson, “Queer Archives/Archival Queers,” in Michelle
Ballif, ed., \textit{Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric} (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois
University Press, 2013): 74-89. Morris and K. J. Rawson have written of the need to contest what
Morris elsewhere calls “mnemonicide,” writing that “archival queers must be relentless not only
in the operation but also the discourse of preservation and proliferation, a mobilizing discourse
that inculcates a functional and committed relationship to the past” (84).
recurrent situations.”12 The situation that unifies the coming out narratives of gay male athletes as a rhetorical genre is the ever-present tension between one’s identity as athlete and one’s identity as gay male, an issue of “characterological coherence” that runs through each narrative.13 The coming out narratives of gay male athletes read like two bildungsroman narratives that are temporally misaligned: the precocious athletic coming of age is initially prioritized over and sometimes against a late-blooming or sublimated parallel narrative of sexual development. Each author indicates that this prioritization of sports over sexual development is socially encouraged but also a personal choice; young athletes find competitive and recreational enjoyment and social capital through their success in sports. Only in these narratives’ final acts—often as the personal enjoyment and social capital of sport no longer flow so freely—are the authors’ identities as athletes and gay men typically resolved into a (tenuously) coherent identity. The definitiveness of the reconciliation in a particular case offers lessons to the reader about the suitability of gay male athletes in professional sports. As a rhetorical genre that offers what Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell call “strategies to encompass situations,”14 the gay male athlete coming out narrative allows its authors a process of working through seemingly contradictory identities, toward the dual goals of authentic personal expression and the maintenance of the athlete’s social capital. At the same time, readers are educated on how the institution of sports can promote or stifle different forms of personal development, and some may even receive the added benefit of a model that can be followed or rejected in the pursuit of their own identity reconciliation. Recognizing and reading the coming

out narratives of gay male athletes as a rhetorical genre helps to build “a stock of social
knowledge acquired through enculturation.”\textsuperscript{15} The study of rhetorical genres allows scholars to,
in Miller’s words, “explicate the knowledge that practice creates” in order to create both “an
index to cultural patterns” and pedagogical “keys to understanding how to participate in the
actions of a community.”\textsuperscript{16} Gay male athletes use the coming out narrative to poise themselves
between two communities, the LGBTQ community and the world of sports, which are often
perceived to be mutually exclusive.

In addition to bridging two communities and two audiences, athlete coming out narratives
are constrained by the context in which they appear. With few exceptions, these narratives have
appeared as mass-market paperbacks designed to engage broad audiences of sports fans. Some
narratives even feature the same ghostwriters. They fall under Lauren Berlant’s sweeping claim
that “all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience” in the
contemporary consumer public.\textsuperscript{17} Personal experience is considered generalizable, and readers
are trained to treat each narrative as a stand-in or representative anecdote from which they can
learn about all gay male athletes. Yet, to be clear, in treating the coming out narratives of gay
male athletes \textit{generically}, I intend neither to reduce their plight to a set of textual decisions nor to
ignore the material circumstances that prevented many athletes from coming out earlier. Instead,
I hope to recognize how gay male athletes have relied upon a set of shared strategies for identity

\textsuperscript{15} Laurie Gries, \textit{Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetoric} (Logan:
Utah State University Press, 2015), 228.
\textsuperscript{16} Miller, 155; 165.
\textsuperscript{17} Lauren Berlant, \textit{The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in
American Culture} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), vii. Also quoted in Heather Love,
reconciliation that vary depending upon their individual circumstances and the historical moment in which each narrative is published.

To help explain the evolution of the genre, I rely upon the metaphor of “waves.” This decision evokes the historiographic periodization of feminism in the United States, often characterized by periods of swell and recession, unification and proliferation, and Whiggish connotations of progress.\(^1\) Within feminist studies, the wave metaphor has its deserved critics: it can reduce eighty years of first-wave feminist activism to the single issue of white women’s suffrage, ignore transnational activism that falls outside of its nation-oriented schema, and imply that a non-human force dictates upsurges of increased political activity.\(^2\) However, the limited number of texts in this genre allows me to make more definitive claims about gay male athlete coming out narratives than can be generalized about more than a century of women’s political activism. I find the waves metaphor evocative in characterizing the ebb of narratives that occurred from the late 1970s until former Major League Baseball umpire published *Behind the Mask: My Double Life in Baseball* in 1990; the crest of narratives that has proliferated over the past few years on websites such as *Outsports*, used to confirm and celebrate the ubiquity of gay men at all levels of sport; and the shortwave transmission of so many of these gay male athletes’ stories as they found only limited audiences and receded from public attention before later writers could learn from their messages.\(^3\) In the sections that follow, I consider each wave of

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\(^3\) Hewitt also mobilizes both the oceanic wave and radio wave implications of the metaphor, depending on need.
coming out narratives in turn, connecting each to the historical context in which they were produced.


Crucial to the story of the first gay male athlete who came out is one who did not. Jerry Smith played football for the Washington Redskins from 1965 to 1977 and was regarded as the best pass-catching tight end in the National Football League. He was by all accounts a genuine star in the league, and he has been enshrined in the Redskins Ring of Fame. He was also gay. He never admitted so publicly during his life, even as he became the first professional athlete known to die as a result of the AIDS virus, in 1986 at the age of 43. As close friend David Mixner recalled in a 2014 episode of the NFL Network’s 2014 series *A Football Life*, “I believe there were players who knew and didn’t care, and I believe there were players who would have demanded that he be kicked off the team. I believe there are players who would have participated in the oppression of him if they knew, and I believe that he knew all of that. He faced fear, and I know this because we talked about it every day of his life that he played.”

Without putting too fine a point on it, Smith chose the identity of football player over the identity of actively out gay man—he was forced to make such a choice.

The closest Smith came to announcing his sexuality publicly was a string of anonymous quotes in a series of 1975 *Washington Star* articles written by Lynn Rosellini on the subject of homosexuality in sports. The articles broached a taboo topic, and Rosellini received both vitriolic hate mail and heartfelt letters of gratitude in response to his journalism. He also received a telephone call from Smith’s onetime teammate David Kopay, a journeyman running back and special teams player who had retired in 1972. Kopay recognized the quotes as Smith’s. The two

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had shared a sexual encounter one night while drinking, and Kopay had remained smitten. Upset that Smith felt that he could not go on the record, Kopay told Rosellini that he was willing to speak out. It was a statement of identity and an act of love. Rosellini included quotes from David Kopay in his next *Washington Star* article; two years later, in 1977, Kopay published *The David Kopay Story: An Extraordinary Self-Revelation*. It admitted to a sexual encounter with a teammate but used a pseudonym. Feeling that he had been outed, Jerry Smith would never speak to David Kopay again.

Kopay and co-author Perry Deane Anderson had no models of coming out narratives by gay male athletes to imitate. The inventionial resources most readily available to them were two contemporary texts dealing with sports and sexual identity: Frank Deford’s 1975 biography of the American tennis player Bill Tilden, *Big Bill Tilden: The Triumphs and the Tragedy*, and Patricia Nell Warren’s 1974 novel *The Front Runner*. Kopay and Anderson condemn the former while praising the latter. Deford makes an accumulation of missteps in his biography of Tilden against which Kopay and Anderson would react. First, Deford divides his biography into two parts, professional and personal. Only rarely does he dive into the interaction between professional circumstance and personal identity; instead, Deford contrasts professional successes with Tilden’s incarcerated and penniless final years. Second, Deford casually conflates Tilden’s pedophilic attraction to adolescent boys with homosexuality; this presumption makes it impossible for any gay male athlete to act as a role model to children, one of the traditional social tasks of the professional athlete. Finally, Deford links Tilden’s “conceited,” “belligerent,” “opinionated,” and “insufferable” personality and isolated social existence to his concealed sexual identity. By the conclusion of the biography, readers inevitably connect Tilden’s

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“tragedy” to homosexuality. Deford’s biography and Tilden’s life offered Kopay and Anderson three central lessons: do not divorce professional success from sexual identity, do not mistake homosexuality as sexual deviancy, and find spaces and groups of people to counter the possible social isolation of homosexuality.

For all the problems that Deford’s biography poses, *The Front Runner* offers solutions. First, there is no divorce between professional success and personal identity. Warren binds hero Billy Sive’s richly metaphorical front-running style to his progressive and public political stands: he races out ahead of his competitors and dares anyone to keep up with his pace, rather than settling at the speed of the pack. This style earns Sive many victories while placing a target on him. In essence, his athletic style is connected to his personality, and his personality is an extension of but not a reduction to his sexual identity. The athletic reflects the personal, and the personal is political. As a result, athletic identity—as it takes shape in public—can be read politically. As opposed to Bill Tilden’s isolated social existence as presented by Deford, *The Front Runner* demonstrates the need for safe counterpublic spaces for gay men, building off the example of New York City’s famed Christopher Street bars. Out of the coming out narratives of this era, *The Front Runner* is the only text that appears to be attuned to then-current events related to the gay community. (If anything, it occasionally fictionalizes a more progressive future than would come to pass.) As James Darsey has argued, the emphases on strength, independence, and the aggressive presentation of self-identity in gay liberation rhetoric of the early 1960s through 1977 are a direct result of one “catalytic event,” the Stonewall riots of 1969, which led to the formation of a group of “macho gays” who emphasized their ability to actively contest
shows of force by socially conservative institutions. The narrator of *The Front Runner*, then-closeted track coach Harlan Brown, captures this catalytic event as police raid the bars:

I watched with growing rage and sorrow. I didn’t drink, but those bars were about the only public places where gays could be themselves. [...] Something cracked in my head that night, and in the heads of the gays. That night saw the coming out of the militant gay. After that they were fighting everybody in sight, demanding human rights and fairer laws. I was not exactly ready for radical activism. But it had dawned on me that I was now a citizen of a nation where straight Americans did not permit the flag to fly. Without becoming militant, Harlan responds to the bar closures by working to create his own spaces of sanctuary and liberation. He takes in a host of gay and lesbian runners as track coach of liberal Prescott College; upon graduation, several help with the formation of a gay and lesbian studies curriculum and a hotline for youths seeking guidance. One of the most stirring scenes in the novel occurs when Harlan, his partner Billy, and two other gay runners tour Europe for a series of amateur races: “Never again were the four of us so close in feeling and purpose. We were two couples in love. We were friends that would do anything for each other. We were a motherless clan, a gay commune, a little band of guerrillas living off the land.” As idyllic as the moment is, the “never again” of the passage foreshadows the precariousness of safe havens and gay relationships in the world of the novel—and the United States at the time.

Warren argues that neither gay spaces nor gay relationships have the customs, traditions, or resources to be sustained against prolonged assault. Although Harlan coaches Billy to Olympic gold in the 10,000-meter race at the 1972 Olympics, Billy is later assassinated while leading the 5,000-meter final. That Warren allows Billy to win one gold before his character is

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25 Warren, 130.
killed is telling for those real-life athletes who would follow him. Warren suggests that both triumphant glories and tragic defeats awaited gay male athletes. Furthermore, both iconic victories and symbolic victimage would be necessary to gain social standing and earn mainstream support in the world of men’s sports.

Kopay’s memoir builds from the work of Tilden and Warren and uses three major rhetorical strategies to win acceptance for gay men in the world of professional sports. First, it enlists prominent straight allies. Second, it connects lessons and values from the sport of football to valorize the act of coming out. Finally, and more problematically, it differentiates and hierarchizes among “types” of gay men in order to assert Kopay’s status as a “macho gay” who merits standing in the world of professional football.

Kopay positions straight coaches and players as allies who have taught values that necessitate and make Kopay’s coming out possible. For instance, Kopay mentions former coach Vince Lombardi as a source of inspiration. Kopay argues that his coming out narrative, a genre that might otherwise be dismissed as overly emotional or confessional, is actually a natural outgrowth of Lombardi’s teachings: honesty, directness, forcefulness, and assertiveness. Just as Lombardi called him to run through rather than around those trying to tackle him, Kopay announces his sexuality forthrightly and without evasiveness. Kopay also uses the language of “nature” to mark former New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath as an ally. “Broadway Joe,” as he was known, was a longtime bachelor and sex symbol who argued, in a 1969 interview with Playboy magazine, that any consenting, positive relationship between two people is a natural, beautiful thing; Kopay uses the language of the interview to position gay relationships as equally

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natural to Namath’s romantic rendezvous.\textsuperscript{27} Kopay and Young also use the language of nature in the book’s preface. They need not explicitly advocate against anti-sodomy laws, they argue, because such laws will inevitably be overturned as “laws against nature.” Rather than upset anyone by arguing for or against particular legislation, they limit their political motives to helping individual readers find liberation and tolerance: “All we are saying is that we exist and nothing we do in private is as unnatural as forcing a person to live as a heterosexual when he knows he is not.”\textsuperscript{28} Both coming out as gay and living unimpeded as gay are positioned as natural and historically inevitable, though Kopay acknowledges that straight allies are, until this historical inevitability occurs, useful resources.

Beyond enlisting straight allies and connecting coming out to the values of football, Kopay also differentiates and hierarchizes among “types” of gay men in order to emphasize his own masculinity. Within the memoir, Kopay and Anderson complement long chapters filled with newspaper clippings of Kopay’s career highlights from college and the NFL with letters from grateful readers who gained strength from hearing of Kopay’s coming out in the 1975 \textit{Washington Star} series.\textsuperscript{29} These letters indicate that Kopay and Anderson hoped to reach other “maso gays” who felt excluded by pervasive caricatures of effeminate gay men. In one passage, Kopay pithily attempts to capture this sense of exclusion, writing, “I often feel I’m in an in-between place where I’m too gay for the straight world, too straight for the gay world.”\textsuperscript{30} At another point, Kopay even asserts that macho homosexuality represents a type of pure

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{28} Kopay and Anderson, \textit{The David Kopay Story}, n.p.
\bibitem{29} Kopay and Anderson, \textit{The David Kopay Story}, 191-199.
\bibitem{30} Kopay and Anderson, \textit{The David Kopay Story}, 266.
\end{thebibliography}
masculinity since it disregards women altogether. In the 1977 preface, Perry Deane Young notes how he and Kopay became quick friends in part through the critique of other “types” of gay men: “An effeminate man was mocking the best of what was male and taking on the manners of the worst of what was female.” As the sports sociologist Eric Anderson notes, this tactic of distancing and exclusion in order to win over public opinion presumes a zero-sum public sphere in which only one type of gay man—and one type of masculinity—can be recognized with social acceptance.

This element of the memoir now reads as outdated and discriminatory, yet to level charges of exclusivity and privilege against Kopay is to ignore the context in which he wrote and his political goals. He battled against an institution in organized sports that, during the 1970s, felt entitled to express blatant homophobia. For instance, Minnesota Twins PR director Tom Mee signed a callous letter to The Advocate in 1976 after they ran a story on Kopay: “The cop-out, immoral lifestyle of the tragic misfits espoused by your publication has no place in organized athletics at any level. Your colossal gall in attempting to extend your perversion to an area of total manhood is just simply unthinkable.” Within the first wave of coming out narratives in the 1970s, Warren and Kopay wrote coming out narratives that attempted to mitigate blatant homophobia in the world of sports. They found (sometimes unwitting) allies who helped to build safe and liberating private spaces free of such venom, while at the same time insisting that they possessed the criteria of “total manhood.” Gay athletes are fit for professional sports, these narratives insisted. Second-wave coming out narratives, on the other hand, questioned whether professional sports would ever be fit for gay men.

31 Kopay and Anderson, The David Kopay Story, 228.
33 In Kopay and Young, The David Kopay Story, 8.
IV. The Second Wave: Institutional Reform and Coming Out Narratives of the 1990s and 2000s

Second-wave gay male athlete coming out narratives continued to dispute stereotypes and misrepresentations of gay men while advocating for reform in the institutional structure and social customs of men’s professional sports. This evolution in the genre may have been rooted in the fallout from professional basketball player Earvin “Magic” Johnson’s 1991 press conference announcement that he had tested positive for HIV. Even as he acknowledged contracting HIV, Johnson was careful to reiterate his own heterosexuality; nevertheless, the moment functioned as a form of coming out that, coupled with medical ignorance about transmission and the fear of contagion, forced Johnson out of the league.34 If Magic Johnson, one of the best basketball players of the 20th century, did not have the institutional support to continue playing after his diagnosis, what support could other players hope to receive?

Changes within the world of sports during the 1980s and 1990s were reflective of an anti-gay backlash in American society. As Darsey notes, the rhetoric of the gay liberation movement shifted in 1977, when the Save Our Children campaign, spearheaded by musician Anita Bryant, repealed an anti-discrimination ordinance in Dade County, Florida, and put explicit anti-gay discrimination practices into law. As a result, the gay rights movement’s definition of “achievement” changed. Previously, achievements were considered “permanent fixtures” and “the irrevocable work of history.” Subsequently, activists recognized what Darsey calls the “fragility of achievement.”35 Upon the backdrop of a conservative political landscape and the scourge of the AIDS epidemic, many activists adopted a defensive posture and stressed safety and quiescence rather than aggressive claims to self-identity and declarations of liberation. The

34 The Announcement, directed by Nelson George (ESPN Films, 2012).
35 Darsey, 495-496.
late 1970s and 1980s demonstrated that what gay rights organizers had fought so fervently to win could easily and suddenly be taken away. In this climate, little wonder that no gay male professional athlete would risk his privileged social status by coming out between 1977 and 1990. Eventually, several gay male athlete coming out narratives were published from the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s, including titles by Pallone, swimmer Greg Louganis, NFL linemen Esera Tuaolo and Ron Simmons, baseball players Glenn Burke and Billy Bean, and basketball player John Amaechi all of them after the athlete’s professional career had ended.36

Bean and Amaechi exemplify the tactics of second-wave narratives. They hone a defensive tone meant to dispute and dispel common stereotypes. They also stress the hidden costs—for individuals, teams, and all of sport—that result when athletes feel compelled to remain closeted. Second-wave narratives often limit their desire for social change to the institutional reform of men’s professional sports. If professional athletics are unwilling to reform, these athletes begin to suggest that other avenues may offer more robust and fulfilling ways to reconcile their identities as athletes and gay men.

Billy Bean most poignantly demonstrates the personal and institutional cost of remaining closeted. Bean, who returned to baseball in 2014 as Major League Baseball’s first Ambassador for Inclusion, documents an unfathomably painful four-day period in 1995, his final season in the majors. His secret live-in lover Sam, an Iranian exile, dies suddenly of AIDS complications, but

Bean feels compelled to preserve his closeted identity by playing a game for the San Diego Padres *that same afternoon*. Two days later, Bean gets sent down to the minors, as coaches complain that he is thinking too much and seems distracted at the plate. And so Bean dutifully reports to San Diego’s AAA affiliate in a town where he knows no one, rather than attending Sam’s funeral. Due to a fear of rejection from coaches and teammates, Bean adopts a “need-to-please personality” and “relentless, overachieving perfectionism” that actually harms his playing ability: he takes too much conflicting advice from too many people, and he attempts to help others while giving his personal life short shrift. He privileges the idea of the team, not realizing at the time that being a bit more selfish and disclosing his identity in a tolerant workplace environment would have benefited both him and the Padres organization.

This eager-to-please demeanor builds Bean’s likable credibility as he transitions, in his narrative’s final pages, to petitioning for social change within sports. He is reticent to use the language of discrimination in explaining the conduct of Major League Baseball and its teams; instead, he frames men’s sports as a workplace making casual oversights and easily correctable attitudes, in an environment of friends and colleagues. He presents himself as a well-liked employee reporting to human resources out of concern for the team’s well-being rather than spite or personal advantage. Bean’s charges are specific and grounded in analogy: Major League Baseball’s anti-discrimination policy lacks language concerning sexual identity, MLB fails to provide adequate diversity training regarding sexuality, and the Major League Baseball Players’ Association pension plans do not provide opportunities for athletes to list same-sex partners. The structural resources have not been put in place to permit the Jackie Robinson of gay athletes to come out publicly; it takes not only a great player to create institutional change, Bean suggests,

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37 Bean with Bull, *Going the Other Way*, 167-173.
38 Bean with Bull, *Going the Other Way*, 97; 43.
but also a supporting owner, manager, and teammates. Bean offers general managers and coaches the historic opportunity to accept roles analogous to Branch Rickey and Leo Durocher for Robinson’s Brooklyn Dodgers, all while humbly distancing himself from a comparison to Jackie Robinson. Furthermore, Bean recognizes and even supports the possibility of less-than-altruistic motives among management and teammates. Like the racial integration of baseball, “competitive pressures and business considerations”—in short, the pursuit of victory and financial success, which Bean presents as hand-in-hand goals—will ultimately be the frames that dictate social change. Bean accepts the premise that the creation of a winning team atmosphere is the foremost goal for most athletes, fans, and management. Thus, Bean’s memoir offers a series of “lessons” at both the individual and institutional level, all geared toward team success.

Whereas Billy Bean writes his memoir from the position of a scrappy, undersized teammate, John Amaechi’s memoir, Man in the Middle, challenges American sports culture from an outsider’s perspective. Amaechi positions himself as different in four ways: he is a native-born Brit who moved to the United States in order to play high school basketball; he was clumsy, overweight, and bullied as a youth and did not pick up a basketball until age 17; as a black man who grew up in urban London, he spent most of his college years at Penn State University, a semi-rural, predominantly white community; and, of course, he is a gay man in the presumptively heterosexual world of professional sports. Amaechi suggests his outsider status offers him an almost ethnographic ability to diagnose and critique. Yet there are tonal similarities between Bean and Amaechi. Where Bean is deferential and glad to be of use, Amaechi is self-deprecating, possessing the dry wit often associated with British humor. Amaechi disarms and relaxes readers through self-deprecation and playful jest, then uses the credibility he has built up

39 Bean with Bull, Going the Other Way, 230-241; 251-253.
40 Bean with Bull, Going the Other Way, 233-235.
to offer more damning critiques: of racism and the willful ignorance of at-risk children in State College, PA (the memoir was published before the revelations of child sexual abuse by former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky); of a win-at-all-costs mentality that diminishes sports’ role as a tool of moral training and self-formation; and an atmosphere in professional sports that celebrates coaches who verbally berate their players and cultivates a locker room culture that often openly flouts marital fidelity while engaging in blithely homophobic locker room conversations.41

Amaechi is most forthright of all the athletes in this period about hoping to surmount stereotypes of the dumb jock. He pursued a PhD in child psychology while still an active player, and he took on parental duties for several at-risk children in both State College and Orlando, where he played several of his NBA seasons. At one point, Amaechi rejects the label of athlete altogether: “I was never a basketball player; I just happened to be really good at it for awhile.”42 As Amaechi reflects upon life as a recently retired professional athlete, he admits, “There is nothing intrinsically noble about sports. Three years after retirement, I still have nightmares that I will die young while still playing pro ball. In those dreams my tombstone reads, John Amaechi RIP: He Put the Ball in the Hole Good.”43 In rendering this imagined epitaph grammatically incorrect, Amaechi suggests that a life dedicated solely to athletics at the expense of other pursuits is meaningless; he does not want to be remembered as “just” an athlete. Instead, as Amaechi writes, “The truth is that life begins after basketball.”44 His status as a former basketball player—and the former is an important qualifier for Amaechi, since it means he no longer has to concern himself with the anti-gay prejudice that he believes “is more a convention

41 Amaechi with Bull, Man in the Middle, 267.
42 Amaechi with Bull, Man in the Middle, 282.
43 Amaechi with Bull, Man in the Middle, 268.
44 Amaechi with Bull, Man in the Middle, 53.
of a particular brand of masculinity” than genuine hatred—provides a springboard to future political activity. Whereas Bean continues to preach a love of the team and a love of the sport, Amaechi issues an ultimatum: If sports cannot reform to keep the pace of social change, then there is no use in identifying as an athlete.

Former baseball player Glenn Burke attempts to reconcile the positions of Bean and Amaechi. He demonstrates a love of team and sport while moving beyond the identity of professional athlete. Burke, whose Out at Home (1995) was written and published while he was dying of AIDS at the age of 42, is the closest American professional sports has come to an openly gay athlete in the prime of his career. Burke paid a price for his openness. Despite by all accounts being an adored teammate (who, as a recent documentary suggests, invented the high five celebration), Burke was traded from the Los Angeles Dodgers for befriending manager Tommy Lasorda’s gay son. When he arrived in Oakland, Athletics manager Billy Martin harassed him in front of teammates, calling him a “faggot.” He knew, perhaps more than any other athlete, how the space of the clubhouse could transform from a safe space with close friends and teammates to a hostile work environment. In his memoir, then, he values the social experience of being on any caring, welcoming team as more important than playing professional baseball, an inversion of the usual telos toward which many young athletes direct their energies. Burke suggests that community-sustaining and world-building forms of sports are crucial meaning-making endeavors. He writes eloquently of the time he spent playing in the 1982 Gay Games and for San Francisco’s Pendulum Pirates, a gay softball team formed out of regulars at the Pendulum Bar, run by sports journalist Jack “Irene” McGowan. As Burke writes of McGowan’s commitment to the team,

45 Amaechi with Bull, Man in the Middle, 268.
Besides being a very dedicated manager, [Jack] encouraged his players to do something with their lives besides just hanging out at bars. And they responded for the most part to that encouragement in a positive way. He also formed a very cohesive group that included whites, hispanics, blacks, and orientals. And whenever there was a problem within the ranks, he would use his patented phrase, ‘Oh Dear Heart, take a break.’ [...] It was, perhaps, the happiest year of my life.  

For an ephemeral period of time in the early 1980s, Burke was able to find a small community that offered a haven akin to the gay spaces depicted in Warren’s fictions. Burke still cared about being an athlete, but he positions the Gay Games community against the presumptively heterosexual climate of professional sports, whose win-at-all-costs mentality and prioritization of traditional masculine values may never grant full equality and expressiveness to gay male athletes. Bean asks for institutional reform in professional sports; Amaechi critiques the culture of the locker room and threatens to stop identifying as an athlete; and Burke finds a space that allows him to be an athlete and a gay man. Even as he lay dying, Burke was optimistic. This sense of opportunity also pervades the most recent wave of gay male athlete coming out narratives.

V. The Third Wave: Introducing the Body in Contemporary Gay Male Athlete Coming Out Narratives

Second-wave narratives are often characterized by invisibility and hiding. The era’s sports journalism mythologized its appropriately masculine and heterosexual sports heroes in order to erase other types of athletes. Gay athletes were rendered invisible, in part, because to acknowledge their existence would force participants to confront the latent homoeroticism in

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male showering rituals and athletic spectatorship. But if the effects of this enforced invisibility soothed spectators and straight players, it had less comforting repercussions for gay athletes. Tuaolo writes that he purposely held himself back on field because he feared that with greater success would come a brighter spotlight, and that such a spotlight would reveal his homosexuality. Louganis failed to disclose to diving officials that he was HIV positive, posing a minute risk of transmission after he suffered a head injury during the 1988 Olympics. In a recent presentation, Amaechi revealed the lack of bodily self-worth he felt as a youth, when he was regarded—literally—as a monster by his peers for being big and black and feeling that there was something innately wrong with him that he could not explain. Everywhere he went he was stared at; he wanted nothing other than to withdraw from the world. The withdrawal of the gay male body permeates these texts by gay male athletes. Given how responsible these athletes’ bodies have been for their professional successes, the erasure of their bodies from many of these memoirs is striking.

Because of a more welcoming political and social climate, third-wave gay male athlete coming out narratives reintroduce the gay male body publicly. Although imperfect—and with an optimism that sometimes depends too much upon amnesia regarding the horrors of AIDS in gay male culture—recent governmental policy has promoted this shift from private to public queer bodies. Consider as representative the repeal of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy.

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50 Tuaolo with Rosengren, Alone in the Trenches, 1-4; 113.
51 John Amaechi, “More Chance of Being Hit by a Meteor: What to do when your dreams defy probability and exceed other people’s imagination,” Lecture, April 24, 2015, Institute for the Arts and Humanities, State College, PA.
52 Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 5-7.
(1993-2011) and the landmark legalization of gay marriage at the state (Massachusetts in 2004) and federal level (the 2015 Supreme Court ruling Obergefell v. Hodges). Concurrent cultural touchstones such as Will Truman of Will & Grace and Omar Little of The Wire have introduced a diverse range of gay protagonists into many families’ homes. Within this climate of celebrity and amid an environment of enhanced tolerance, third-wave gay male athlete coming out narratives have introduced the symbolic power of the actively out, visible, gay male body becoming aware of his place in history. Gay male athletes today recognize that they are capable of taking on important roles as key nodes in networks of social change off the field while also using their athletic bodies as focal points for visual persuasion and argument.

Athletes of many different ethnicities have come out as gay, but Jason Collins is the first gay male athlete to make an explicitly intersectional appeal in his coming out narrative. While Burke references the ephemeral coming together of diverse bodies in gay bars and Amaechi recognizes his standpoint as black and British, Collins analogizes the LGBTQ movement in the contemporary United States with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in order to try to convince black audiences that gay rights are a cause worthy of lasting support. The simplicity and stylistic repetition of his opening lines—“I’m a 34-year-old NBA center. I’m black. And I’m gay.”—turn age, profession, ethnicity, and sexual orientation into equally important identity characteristics. He lists a visit to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s home as an early experience that taught him the value of tolerance. Rather than viewing homosexuality as antithetical to black identity, Collins implies that an appreciation of the historic struggles of African-Americans in the

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United States should provide a unique vantage point from which black allies can support the quest for LGBTQ equality.

Collins also relies upon strategies from earlier waves of coming out narratives. Collins uses the sport of basketball, his position as a center, and his particular athletic skills to make an argument about his masculine credentials and insist upon his value to a team. Wherever he has gone, he skillfully battled against the strongest men on the other team; he set screens, grabbed rebounds, played defense, and never demanded the spotlight. His usual on-court style, he implies, passes whatever test of masculine criteria one might impose. Collins presents himself as an ideal teammate who belongs at the sport’s highest level, even if few casual fans immediately recognize his name.

Against assumptions that only star players will reform attitudes toward homosexuality in sports, Collins suggests that his role as a journeyman who has played for many different teams has already changed the sport. Collins argues, “Some people insist they’ve never met a gay person. But Three Degrees of Jason Collins dictates that no NBA player can claim that anymore.” All NBA players have already showered with or played against a gay man at some point in their careers, with no negative repercussions. Collins dispels conservative hysteria by insisting that his coming out publicly will not affect the presumptively heterosexual space of the locker room.

Soccer player Robbie Rogers extends the visual publicity of the gay male athlete further, writing the first coming out narrative that explicitly emphasizes his physical attractiveness. Here, the third-wave gay male coming out narrative blends generic expectations with the soccer memoir, since the sport has been a prime cultural location in the rise of metrosexual icons such

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54 Collins with Lidz, “Why NBA Center Jason Collins Is Coming Out Now.”
as David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo. Rogers has also admitted a desire to transition into a career in fashion after his soccer career ends. At any rate, the book’s paratextual apparatus is richly visual and inescapably seductive. The book’s cover features a glossy photo of Rogers with vibrant blue eyes, a gleaming smile, and a coiffure/facial-hair combination equally suited to a member of a boy band. The back cover of *Coming Out to Play* includes three removable cardboard trading cards; since there is little market for card collection and trading among soccer hobbyists, the cards are presumably to be removed and taped to the bedroom walls and ceilings of admirers. Additionally, inside the book are two glossy eight-page photo spreads, which include not only childhood pictures of Rogers and his equally beautiful siblings, but also beefcake reprints from professional photo shoots with *Outsports* and *Flaunt*. Yet even as the memoir recognizes Rogers’s sexual attractiveness, he goes to great lengths to present himself as demure. He is pursued by women and men alike; only once does he initiate a relationship, when he invites his current boyfriend to coffee. Similar to previous athletes before him, all discussions of the male physical body end before Rogers moves to the space of the team locker room. Rogers models the gay male athlete of the 21st century: winsome without being threatening.

Rogers also tethers his coming out to important LGBTQ developments. Those writing before Rogers often offered the excuse that, as athletes, they were so single-mindedly focused on succeeding in their sport that they failed to understand the importance of events such as Stonewall, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and other formative, consciousness-raising events. Rogers admits that his own awareness of current events is belated, but not because of a laser-like focus. Rather, until recently, Rogers admits to imposing a filter bubble on his own news consumption that attempted to block out any current events that would force Rogers to reconcile his identity as

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an athlete with his identity as a gay man. As he writes, “I had so successfully isolated myself and screened out the gay world (except for the bad things I heard people say) that I had no idea there were any gay organizations that provide all kinds of advice for people who want to come out to their parents.” Rogers attempts to make up for what had been a lack of social movement awareness through a sort of historiographical re-inscription, inserting relevant LGBTQ pop culture or legislative events into the chronology of his narrative. Through the first two-thirds of his memoir, these events are presented as contemporaneous but distant happenings that Rogers should have known about and would have known about if he were more honest about his sexual identity. For instance, Rogers notes that his home state of California passed a bill legalizing same-sex marriage; meanwhile, he was attempting to pass as straight at the University of Maryland. These events are portrayed as a catalogue of lightly ironic historical “missed encounters.”

Rogers models an arc from historical ignorance to knowing gratitude that begins to unite the tradition of gay male athletes and present them as possible social movement figures. In a postscript to his memoir, Rogers thanks many of the athletes and gay icons who have come before him and have helped shift public opinion. Similarly, Collins acknowledges, “I’m glad I’m coming out in 2013 rather than 2003.” Rogers and Collins epitomize the third wave of coming out narratives in suggesting that, while some lingering discrimination will undoubtedly remain, cultural attitudes toward homosexuality have liberalized tremendously. Gay male athletes can

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56 Rogers, *Coming Out to Play*, 137.
57 Rogers, *Coming Out to Play*, 57.
58 Collins with Lidz, “Why NBA Center Jason Collins Is Coming Out Now.”
take the opportunity to play openly at the highest levels of sport. As Rogers writes, marking the optimism of the third wave, “Being Yourself Means Being a Better Player.”

As the long ebb between the first and second waves of the genre indicate, however, historical circumstances can render such sentiments naïve or, frankly, untrue. In the following section, I briefly consider the promising and problematic case of football player Michael Sam alongside a final question. As the rhetorical genre of gay male athlete coming out narratives has evolved to respond to changing historical circumstances while retaining its purposes to reconcile gay male athlete identities and demonstrate the fitness of gay men in professional sports, what are the strengths and weaknesses of using these athletes and their narratives as symbols in the contemporary LGBTQ movement?

VI. Conclusion: Gay Male Athletes and Social Change

The most interesting recent development in the rhetorical genre of the gay male athlete coming out narrative has been a shift in the preferred medium through which gay male athletes come out. As athletes come out earlier in their playing careers, perhaps before they are ready to pen memoirs, television and internet journalism have supplanted the mass-market paperback. At risk in this transformation is that athletes may lose control over the stories they want to tell about themselves and be unable to protect a professional space within sports that is not subject to media sensationalism. Even as the frequency with which gay male athletes have come out has increased, the energy of the mass media creates and prioritizes amplitude. Journalistic coverage can create popular political will that is cathedected onto athletes who refuse political roles or, even more poignantly, can result in backlash heaped upon politically willing athletes who face professional and personal repercussions for acting politically in the world of sports.

59 Rogers, Coming Out to Play, 220.
Michael Sam has faced such a set of circumstances. How publicly announcing his sexuality before the NFL draft combine—in a three-way exclusive media deal with The New York Times, ESPN, and Outsports—affected his draft stock and the subsequent trajectory of his football career is impossible to specify. In each media outlet, Sam claimed the desire to tell his story before it was told for him—he felt on the verge of being outing. In speeding up the original timeline of his announcement, Outsports noted that the draft became an overdetermined arena that not only evaluated Sam’s possible skillset at the professional level, but also provided a complicated referendum on individual teams’ tolerance for potential media intrusions. Recent speculation has surfaced that the St. Louis Rams, who finally selected the projected mid-round selection with one of the final picks of the draft, did so as part of an under-the-table handshake agreement with the league not to be selected as the team that would provide a camera crew an all-access pass to off-season and pre-season workouts and meetings. In other words: If Sam thought coming out would be a one-time liberatory act that allowed him thereafter to focus on his professional career, he was badly mistaken.

Previous waves of gay male athletes had the time and wherewithal to reflect upon their sexual identity with the help of a few confidants and a trusted co-author or ghostwriter. Their narratives are lengthy, intricate, and—with the exception of Collins—written in monograph form, spanning the entirety of their athletic career. The coming out memoir encourages the creation of a sustained, empathetic one-on-one relationship between author and reader. In contrast, Michael Sam came out without the same ability to create an intimate mode of address.

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In the digital-televisual media environment in which Sam came out, journalists often both hoped for the best for Sam’s career while hunting for any scrap of information that could elicit page views. Anonymous sources fed reporters quotes playing down Sam’s likely chances of success, creating a spiral of self-fulfilling prophecy. The cutthroat and competitive nature of televi
digital journalism requires 24/7 reporting, often attempting—as the outset of this essay makes clear—to manufacture news where nothing new exists to be reported. As a result, ESPN’s Josina Anderson blundered through an awkward, ill-sourced, and unnecessary update on Sam’s showering habits that set off alarms among teammates and team officials. There was no way, it seemed, to avoid bad publicity—or at the very least, an undesirable saturation of publicity. Rather than attempting to own his story by talking to the media, Sam was seen by many as a media opportunist, publicizing himself while distracting—and thus detracting from—the team. Cut by St. Louis and then the Dallas Cowboys, Sam joined the Canadian Football League’s Montreal Alouettes in 2015, departing shortly thereafter for personal reasons.61 Spurned by football, Sam’s primary means of income came to depend upon the very media industry that may have squelched his preferred line of employment: Sam appeared, as part of the media’s minor-celebrity-industrial complex, on ABC’s Dancing with the Stars reality television competition in late 2015.

And ye
t: if there is much to recommend the monograph as a medium for coming out, television’s visual spectacle also has its merits. Although Sam’s lack of professional playing time strikes many as a disappointment, this was not always the mood associated with his coming out narrative. Upon being drafted by the St. Louis Rams as one of the final handful of picks in the

2014 NFL draft, cameras cut to Sam joyfully embracing and kissing his then-boyfriend. For many football fans, it was the first time they had seen two men—and furthermore, an interracial gay couple—kiss. The moment staged a confrontation: viewers were forced to encounter and reconcile their deepest beliefs and prejudices. As Morris and John M. Sloop write, “From the collision of queer lips is sparked a conflagration sufficient to scorch the heteronormative order in US public culture.” Although the kiss was a spontaneous act of intimacy, critics successfully politicized the image, creating the “critical visual mass” that Morris and Sloop argue is necessary to a project of queer world-making. The vast cultural reach of athletic spectacle offers no escape—there is no longer any excuse for naiveté, and no longer can fans, athletes, or media outlets ignore the history of gay male athletes. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains in *Epistemology of the Closet*, ignorance of the lives of queer bodies is not so much an absence of readily available information as a purposefully constructed space with an intentional lack of curiosity. As she writes, “These ignorances, far from being part of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth.” From the artificial dark, then, in which gay male athletes had for too long been forced to reside, the kiss emerged and shone light upon a longer history of gay men in sports. In this moment of joy, when Sam’s trajectory was still uncharted, other worlds were possible.

Some academic queer theorists and activists may be less optimistic about the role that gay male athletes can play in a larger LGBTQ movement. In order to be granted legitimacy within the presumptively heterosexual world of men’s sports, gay male athlete coming out narratives

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63 Morris and Sloop, 13.
largely pursue an assimilationist impulse. They express a “rhetoric of normal,” arguing that they are “just like” straight athletes in all the most important ways. Many of these athletes write that they are coming out because they have reached an age when they would like to be able to have a steady, monogamous relationship that does not need to be hidden from teammates and fans. Most envision two ultimate political goals: (1) the acceptance of gays in sports and (2) gay marriage. Emphasis in these cases is placed on the values of tolerance, inclusion, and preservation of much of the status quo. It is not difficult to see why. Because many of our cultural institutions are what the gender equality and anti-domestic abuse advocate Jackson Katz calls “jockocracies,” athletes are granted immense cultural capital.65 Combined with these athletes’ status as wealthy men, their disinclination toward completely remaking the social is understandable. The hierarchies that exist remain largely beneficial to them.

Several queer theorists have challenged the assimilationist impulse that these gay athletes espouse. Michael Warner chastises recognition-based identity politics that require “defensive” and “apologetic” rhetoric and succumb to “the lure of the normal.”66 Such a strategy ignores the transformative labor of transgressive social practices and sexual acts in favor of “the invidious and shaming distinction between the married and the unmarried.”67 Davin Allen Grindstaff has contended that the “ethics of monogamy” that gets forwarded by several of these athletes ultimately damage “collective forms of identity and sexuality” that gay men originally

67 Warner, 82. For instance, one might productively contrast the form and politics of a second-wave gay male athlete coming out narrative with a text such as David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration (New York: Vintage, 1991). Perhaps because he faced childhood sexual abuse, only Simmons marks a clear departure from “the rhetoric of normal” among athletes.
formulated as a response to historical stigmatization.\textsuperscript{68} Similarly, Karma R. Chávez’s work has been keen to note the “complicit” outcomes of advocacy that uncritically accept the foundational principles of the discourse that is supposedly being challenged. In the framework that Chávez provides, the very invocation of the concept “marriage” may result in accepting assumptions about the moralism of monogamy and/or state-sponsored relationships as forms of economic exchange.\textsuperscript{69} As Warner concludes, “Marriage, in short, would make for good gays—the kind who would not challenge the norms of straight culture, who would not flaunt sexuality, and who would not insist on living differently from ordinary folk.”\textsuperscript{70} Indeed, demonstrating that gay marriage is “just like” heterosexual marriage sounds like the political upshot of many of these athletes’ narratives.

Against—or at least alongside—this critical impulse, however, I adopt Dustin Bradley Goltz’s concept of “critical frustration.” In his scholarship on the “It Gets Better” campaign, Goltz refuses to allow queer critiques of “It Gets Better”—which have characterized the campaign as “deceptive, condescending, homonormative, lazy, self-congratulatory, and inextricably tied to racial, gendered, and economic privilege”—to impinge upon a proliferation of activist meaning-making enterprises within the campaign.\textsuperscript{71} In that spirit, then, I withhold judgment on whether or how the institution of gay marriage can transform our understanding of possible modes of intimacy between and among people. If anything, I currently adhere to a

\textsuperscript{70} Warner, 113.
position Warner disparages as “common sense”: activists should work “for as many options as possible for gay people, even if they [dislike] marriage in its currently sanctioned form.”

Nevertheless, there is much to learn from Warner’s admonishments: “Marriage, after all, is a concrete personal benefit imbued with intense affect and nearly universal legitimacy. The alternative, a world capacious enough in its recognition of households to be free from such invidious regulatory institutions altogether, can easily seem abstract, even unimaginable.”

Although he rarely mentions athletics, Warner might suggest that rather than the liberal assimilationist impulse toward inclusion that these athletes often express, they should instead be contemplating spatial and institutional transformation, a gesture toward Warner’s notion of more capacious worlds. What else can the locker room or the playing field be used for? How can sports be used to dismantle all hierarchies, to create a more capacious world?

Michael Sam’s kiss with his boyfriend is not enough, but the critical mass summoned by his kiss suggests the potency of visual symbolism in both spectacular and more banal forms. Soon the genre of coming out narratives will be of less rhetorical interest than the bodily rhetorics of athletes who are actively out. Collins offers us the glimpse of one path forward, with echoes toward the history of the coming out memoir. In his return to the Brooklyn Nets during the 2013-2014 season, Collins attempted a subtle transformation of public space. He wore #98 in honor of Matthew Shepard, a student at the University of Wyoming who was brutally murdered in a heinous anti-gay hate crime in the fall of 1998. Watching Collins wear the jersey evokes what Heather Love considers the “forcibly bittersweet” emotion linked to a loaded word such as

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72 Warner, 95.
73 Warner, 105.
“queer,” with its dual genealogies. The same pair of digits gesture toward the always-present threat of violence and the possibility of reappropriative, communal world-building.\textsuperscript{75} Collins’s decision to honor Shepard sartorially curates the LGBTQ movement’s negative past and future promise on the athletic body. An emphasis on the individual player can be transformed into a form of collective subjectivity when potential movement members and supporters can be recognized by a shared item of clothing.\textsuperscript{76}

Such moments of transformative, communal world-building are admittedly rare within this genre, and anyone who believes in the positive socializing potential of athletics is left to reckon with male team sports’ tepid rate of social change. As S. L. Price wrote in a \textit{Sports Illustrated} article alongside Collins’s coming out narrative, on the issue of gay visibility, acceptance, and rights, professional sports has been “the last, lagging indicator of a cultural shift well under way.”\textsuperscript{77} At the same time, there is value in analyzing these athletes’ narratives. Gay male athlete coming out narratives demonstrate how the genre has evolved to allow individuals to reconcile their identities as \textit{gay athletes}, two attributes that have for too long been considered mutually exclusive. Grouping these narratives into a rhetorical genre helps prevent the mass media phenomenon of interruption that makes young gay athletes feel alone in the world. Charting the trajectory of the genre forces a confrontation with the fragility of achievement, even as contemporary gay male athletes feature as symbolic leaders in the fight for gay marriage, anti-bullying, and other campaigns modeled on tolerance and inclusion. And as the genre evolves to become more visual, these narratives will continue to demonstrate the importance of gay male

\textsuperscript{75} Love, \textit{Feeling Backward}, 2.
\textsuperscript{76} This section is indebted to the provocations and insights of a 2014 Rhetoric Society of America panel, “Intersectionality, Jason Collins, and Coming Out: A Critique of Borderlines,” featuring Anna M. Young, Abrahaim Khan, Barry Brummet, and Michael Butterworth.
athletes retaining control of how their stories are mediated until wave after wave crash upon the shoreline of one of American’s society’s most conservative social institutions, eroding the masculine training ground that is men’s professional sports.\textsuperscript{78}

Chapter Three: Black Lives Matter and the Decline of the Athlete-Activist

I. Introduction

On March 23, 2012, LeBron James posted a photo of himself with his Miami Heat teammates on Twitter. James, unquestionably the best (and most-visible) basketball player in the world at the time, frequently used the social media platform as a well-curated repository for motivational quotes, reflections on games, inspirational messages to fans, links to advertisements with Nike and a variety of other commercial sponsors, and videos and images of himself, family, friends, and teammates lounging and enjoying themselves in luxurious locales. This image was different, bringing a new dimension to James’s social media presence.

While the photo included himself and teammates, none of the players were immediately recognizable. Stars such as James, Dwyane Wade, and Chris Bosh looked just like the Heat’s lesser-known role players, faces shrouded from view. In lieu of the sunny climes of South Beach, the photo was taken in a Michigan hotel; its off-yellow paneling contributes to the photo’s funereal pallor. James had posted a photo of thirteen black men wearing hoodies: hands in pockets, shoulders slumped, heads bowed. (The Heat’s only white player, Mike Miller, was
injured at the time and not traveling with the team.) The image evoked and responded to current events a few hours from the Heat’s home court.

In Sanford, Florida, on February 26, 2012, insurance underwriter George Zimmerman surveilled, stalked, and shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Martin, who was black, had been returning to his father’s fiancée’s townhome from a trip to the convenience store to buy candy and fruit punch. Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watch member in a gated community that had recently faced a spate of attempted robberies, had followed Martin out of the belief that he was a suspicious person, despite a Sanford Police Department dispatcher’s caution to the contrary. A struggle ensued, and Martin was killed approximately 100 yards from the home where he was staying. Nevertheless, the Sanford Police Department, which supervised the neighborhood watch, declined to press charges against Zimmerman, who alleged that Martin had confronted and threatened him. In a carefully phrased statement, local police chief Bill Lee determined that “Mr. Zimmerman was not acting outside the legal boundaries of Florida statute by carrying his weapon when this incident occurred,” referencing state “stand your ground” laws designed to allow property owners to defend themselves against threat.¹

The decision not to arrest created substantial outcry, keeping the story in the news for more than a month. The case was tried in the court of public opinion. Martin’s and Zimmerman’s backgrounds were scrutinized for salacious details in the hopes of rendering judgment based on the principals’ past behavior. When this tactic proved inconclusive and unsatisfactory, media pundits grasped for other explanations. Most notably, in a March 22 “Fox and Friends” segment, conservative commentator Geraldo Rivera blamed Martin’s clothing for his murder. “I think the

hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin’s death as George Zimmerman was,” Rivera proclaimed, placing the onus of responsibility on parents of black and Latino children to dress their teenagers “properly” to avoid being mistaken for gang members and criminals.\(^2\) Analogous to the tactic of “slut shaming” women and in a rhetorical maneuver that has become unfortunately commonplace, Rivera suggested that the sartorial choice of a victim of violence had in fact provoked and invited such a response. Incensed by comments like Rivera’s and demanding justice for what they believed to be a case of racial profiling that led to their son’s death and subsequent lack of justice, Martin’s parents spoke at the March 21 “Million Hoodie March” in New York City. Roughly 1,000 people marched in person, while more than 2.2 million signed an online petition urging prosecutors to bring charges against Zimmerman.\(^3\)

A day later, James and his teammates contributed to and reshaped the ongoing discourse. The photo’s symbolism was manifold: the players seemed to mourn, stand in solidarity, and engage in protest all at once. At the sports and culture website Grantland, Wesley Morris’s essay “What We Talk About When We Talk About Hoodies” captured the photo’s multiple resonances and recognized its roots in several sporting and non-sporting contexts. The hoodie became an item of clothing that linked many of these players’ childhoods to their current status as professional athletes. Complementing President Barack Obama’s call for a federal investigation and comment that “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon,” the player photo and hashtags seem to suggest that their fame and basketball talent may not be enough to save them from violence in a


nation that reduces black men to the perceived threat of their bodies. Against the backdrop of a National Basketball Association that had recently instituted a dress code to place distance between its performers and many of their inner-city upbringings, the photo depicted “a team of very well-off black men dolefully identifying with the children they’re paid to stop being.” At the same time, Morris wrote, the image’s “solemnity” and “unified intent” made it “rhyme” with and evoke “the other great moment in sports righteousness”: John Carlos and Tommie Smith’s gloved fist salute on the medal stand of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. In joining a longer history of black protest within sport, responding to their own labor conditions, and nevertheless connecting with a larger audience that may not know these traditions, Morris concluded, “The Heat appeared to understand the presentational aspect of the hoodie.” In posing for and publicizing the photo, James and his teammates had engaged in powerful visual and bodily rhetoric.

Professional critics such as Morris were not the only ones whose emotions were stirred by the Heat photograph. On platforms where the image was shared, viewer responses

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6 The best account of Carlos and Smith’s protest is Douglas Hartmann, Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Hartmann notes that Carlos and Smith were formally tied to the Olympic Project for Human Rights, a project run by then-San Jose State University sociology professor Harry Edwards, where Carlos and Smith both participated in intercollegiate track and field. Contemporary athletes are rarely official members of social movements in the same way that Carlos and Smith were in the mid-1960s.
8 I am stirred to move beyond professional critics’ responses to iconic athlete-activist protest imagery because of the ongoing visual rhetorical scholarship of Cara A. Finnegan. In Making
proliferated. Some Miami supporters expressed appreciation for both the team and the cause they advocated. “Vanessa Granger” posted, “Proud to be a Heat fan right now! Much respect! Trayvon Martin will not be [for]gotten. Here is hoping justice will be swift and just!” Other viewers admitted not cheering for or even actively cheering against the Heat, but ruefully reconsidered their sporting allegiances upon viewing the image. “It’s Nikki!” posted, “Been a[n Orlando] Magic fan since [the] team’s inception, but this picture and gesture has made me rethink my loyalty to my home team! Thanks Heat!” Still others chastised the Heat players as opportunists, suggesting they were more interested in positive publicity and empty gestures rather than dedicating themselves to the black community in deed and pocketbook. A final thread of comments extrapolated from James’s post to encourage other athletes to venture into social justice causes. As “JayJ Ash” wrote, “More of your NBA, NFL, MLB, and other sports brethren and sisters need to have your courage.” Over the next few years, many athletes would find such courage.

This image of LeBron James and the Heat represents the flowering of a new spirit and method of social activism within the world of sports attuned to the dual spectacles of sports

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*Photography Matter: A Viewers’ History from the Civil War to the Great Depression* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), Finnegan insists upon “seek[ing] out and analyz[ing] the public discursive traces of people’s responses to their photographic encounters” (1). As she writes, visual rhetorical scholarship must remain attuned to “photography’s historical viewers” and what Leah Ceccarelli calls “all available evidence of reception to a work” (7) rather than privileging professional critical voices. Image spectatorship is a trained civic capacity among sports scholars and sports fans, even if its resources may be unevenly cultivated or attuned toward different ends.

These comments are taken from the Camera Plus page associated with the image at http://camera.plus/il4E. There are several difficulties in emphasizing the work of citizen critics associated with digital images of contemporary athlete-activism: the possible anonymity of handles and user names, the enforced brevity of certain media platforms, and the informal grammatical and syntactical expectations of social media. When possible, I attempt to categorize responses and select coherent representative examples rather than attempting to quantify every response.
media discourse and the extrajudicial deaths of African Americans. No contemporary movement for social change has been as influenced by the participation of athletes as Black Lives Matter. Drawing upon a range of symbolic resources that exist beyond the traditional scope of the playing field, many professional (and non-professional) athletes have shown support for, amplified the cause of, and reshaped the message of Black Lives Matter to demonstrate and define their political commitments, social agendas, and professional grievances. In this chapter, I track these contributions and position them within multiple contexts. One central context is Black Lives Matter’s emergence as a revision and reinterpretation of the African-American civil rights movement designed to confront pressing social issues that face many black communities in the post-civil rights era. Recent athlete-activist social protest has also gained purchase from race-based issues within the world of sports, been emboldened by the nation’s first African-American president, and repudiated a decades-long narrative about black athletes’ political quiescence. While I attempt to highlight the broader currents of social protest in providing a history of the Black Lives Matter movement, my primary contribution is to weigh how athletes align with and depart from broader rhetorical and argumentative currents in the Black Lives Matter discourse. If the Black Lives Matter movement is viewed only through the prism of athletic activism, some of the central issues that the movement continues to face—its emphasis on horizontal models of organization and leadership, its skepticism toward working through established levers of governance, and its ambivalent relationship to the politics of respectability—are further obscured and refracted by the institutions of sports and sports media discourse and particular instances of athlete-activist protest. Athletes may not serve as the best representatives to embody and advocate for Black Lives Matter’s organizing principles and
tactics, even though athlete-activists have succeeded at drawing attention to and affiliation with the movement’s goals—and building increased energy toward social activism generally.

II. The Black Lives Matter Movement

In one sense, the Black Lives Matter movement is a direct outgrowth of the shooting of Trayvon Martin. George Zimmerman was eventually arrested and charged with second-degree murder by a special prosecutor appointed by Florida Governor Rick Scott. Amidst conflicting eyewitness reports and constantly shifting accounts given as sworn testimony and in media appearances, a grand jury did not find sufficient compelling evidence to convict. On July 13, 2013, Zimmerman was found not guilty of second-degree murder or the lesser charge of manslaughter. Citizens across the country were roiled and saddened by the verdict. From an Oakland bar, labor and transit activist Alicia Garza posted a Facebook message to register her response and buoy friends:

[…] the sad part is, there’s a section of America who is cheering and celebrating right now. and that makes me sick to my stomach. we GOTTA get it together y’all. stop saying we are not surprised. that’s a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on black life. black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.10

Garza’s message struck friend and anti-incarceration activist Patrisse Cullors as poetically poignant. She repurposed Garza’s message into the hashtag #blacklivesmatter and began posting it on others’ Facebook walls. With the help of a New York-based immigration rights activist, Opal Tometi, the three queer women of color plotted ways to circulate a message reaffirming the

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value of black life on social media and translate that energy into broader social activism campaigns.\(^\text{11}\)

Current events would dictate how the message circulated and toward what ends it would be directed. As Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith C. Clark have noted, the phrase “Black Lives Matter” and hashtag #blacklivesmatter appeared only sparingly on social media through the summer of 2014—48 public tweets in June 2014 and 398 tweets in July 2014. However, after the August 9, 2014, police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the hashtag appeared in 52,288 public tweets in August 2014.\(^\text{12}\) Brown was an 18-year-old black man who had stolen cigarillos from a local convenience store. When white officer Darren Wilson approached Brown in his police cruiser, events escalated. Like Martin’s case, many of the details of the confrontation are in dispute; what is not in dispute is that, when the encounter concluded, Wilson had shot Brown six times. Amidst swarming crowds, late-arriving homicide detectives, and gunshots in the area, Brown’s body was left in the street for four hours before it was removed. When combined with actions such as a police cruiser running over and strewing a flower memorial and officers allowing a canine unit to urinate on a second memorial to Brown, locals read the long wait before Brown’s body was removed as both a blatant sign of disrespect for black life and a power-wielding racial spectacle.\(^\text{13}\) To critics, the act of leaving Brown’s body in the street was akin to the spectacular public display of lynched black bodies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As historian Amy Louise Wood writes in *Lynching and...*  

\(^{13}\) Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 154.
Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940, the display of mutilated black bodies symbolized “racial hierarchy and the frightening consequences of transgressing that hierarchy” and “imparted powerful messages to whites about their own supposed racial dominance and superiority.” These messages were reinforced when local protests, vigils, and violent unrest were met with repressive force—a police officer was later suspended for pointing a rifle at protesters and journalists and threatening to kill them. That sense of racial hierarchy was further heightened when, after a November 2014 grand jury hearing, Wilson was not indicted on any charges.

Yet the result of the individual grand jury trial, as dissatisfying as it was to many activists and citizens, also held promise. Throughout the months-long process, activists from around the country convened in Ferguson, built networks of contacts, and circulated news of similar police shootings from cities across the country. Digital activists such as Deray Mckesson and Johnetta Elzie used frequent social media postings to publicize eyewitness reports, harness and grow a new black public sphere of sympathetic Twitter followers, and direct the energy of the mass media toward underreported stories. The #blacklivesmatter hashtag helped broad audiences of

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16 For more on Mckesson and Elzie, see Jay Caspian Kang, “‘Our demand is simple: Stop killing us,’” New York Times Magazine, May 4, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/magazine/our-demand-is-simple-stop-killing-us.html. For more on the idea of a “black public sphere,” see The Black Public Sphere Collective, The Black Public Sphere (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). As a Washington Post reporter who traveled to cover many of the deaths that animated the Black Lives Matter movement, Lowery admits that it became difficult not to over-rely on Mckesson, especially given the horizontal organizational structure of the movement: “Mckesson’s value to me as a reporter came from my ability to keep him speaking freely with me as often as possible—providing me with a sounding
activists and citizens understand that the extrajudicial death of young black men was a systemic and recurring issue rather than an unprecedented series of isolated incidents. As of February 2017, there were thirty-eight official chapters of the Black Lives Matter social movement organization with formal membership rolls, in addition to broad loose linkages of citizens and allies who consider themselves attuned to or inspired by the movement.17

The death of Michael Brown in Ferguson distilled some of the central problems facing many African-American communities in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Many locals were suspicious that the Ferguson police force primarily comprised whites who lived in other parts of St. Louis County.18 This municipal arrangement arose in part because of urban gentrification over the past thirty years, which displaced many middle-class African Americans out of affordable city housing and resulted in de facto resegregation, including inferior education, public transportation, and medical facilities. As Jeff Chang writes, even as black residents were forced to depart cities for less-expensive suburbs, municipal control remained in board for my story ideas and an analysis of the protest movement, challenging my thesis while also giving me information. That’s not to say I never quoted him, but I also wanted to be sensitive to the insistence of the activists that there was no one leader of the movement. Just because McKesson would always answer the phone didn’t mean I should always call or quote him” (162). From this account, social movements might recognize how close contact over a period of months and a willingness to help journalists produce stories can lead to greater identification between journalists and social movements and an enhanced ability to dictate how social movements are framed in the mass media. In contrast, Lowery also writes about how he was frequently stonewalled by police departments that were unable or unwilling to provide information or answer his questions.


18 Nevertheless, any reductive narratives about the relationship between white police officers and black communities requires nuance. For more on how South Central Los Angeles policing has changed over the past four decades and still faces substantial political, cultural, and institutional difficulties, especially regarding homicide investigations, see Jill Leovy, Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015). Leovy’s discussion of black detective Wallace Tennelle’s difficult decision whether to live in the same neighborhoods he policed, which reverberates because of his son’s later murder, encapsulates the ultimate risk of requiring cops to live where they work.
the hands of whites who “reorganized their entire systems of policy making, policing, and justice
to exploit the poor, predominantly Black populations.”\textsuperscript{19} As a result, a Department of Justice
investigation later concluded, community-based policing had been replaced by a system of law
that punitively issued moving violations and fines against African Americans to supply the local
police department with a central funding stream. Budgetary need rather than community benefit
dictated how Ferguson was policed. Those unable to pay court fees and fines were imprisoned, in
a reemergence of the debtors’ prison model.\textsuperscript{20} Furthermore, protests against such arrangements
were increasingly met with militarized police force, which occurs when “local police
departments have been equipped with military arms, military technology, [and] military
training.”\textsuperscript{21} A military-style response to protests in Ferguson signaled to many that African
Americans across the nation could easily be reduced to fundamental Others to whom the basic
rules of civil society did not apply.

Ferguson encapsulated what scholars—including, most notably, Michelle Alexander—
have described as the rise of a “prison-industrial complex” in the United States that
disproportionately punishes young black men and strips them of many of the basic tenets of
citizenship. Racially biased mandatory minimum sentencing laws, predatory mortgage industries,
and for-profit prisons transmuted blacks into fungible assets without the political power to
protest such arrangements. Alexander and Chang cast the current living conditions of many

\textsuperscript{19} Jeff Chang, \textit{We Gon’ Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation} (New York: Picador,
2016), 85.
\textsuperscript{20} Mark Berman and Wesley Lowery, “The 12 key highlights from the DOJ’s scathing Ferguson
nation/wp/2015/03/04/the-12-key-highlights-from-the-dojs-scathing-ferguson-report/.
\textsuperscript{21} Angela Y. Davis, \textit{Freedom is a Constant Struggle} (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 14. Many
liberal-leaning whites became aware of the confluence of these issues through segments of news
comedian John Oliver’s \textit{Last Week Tonight}, which ran a widely-shared segment on the
militarization of police in Ferguson in August 2014 and on municipal violations resulting in de
facto debtors’ prisons in March 2015.
African American communities as a reinstitution of Jim Crow laws, a system of racial segregation. Critical legal theorists such as Saidiya Hartman and Orlando Patterson went further, elaborating the concept of “social death” to insist that contemporary black life remained akin, in important ways, to slavery. As Kirt H. Wilson summarizes this argument,

[S]lavery’s most important features were never its legal or economic structures. The core elements of slavery were, instead, (a) the dehumanization of people of color, (b) a regime of terror, violence, and intimidation in which the slave was unable to protect his or her body, [and] (c) the master’s control of the social, civil, and even personal relations that existed between the slave and others. Defined in this way, current theorists contend that slavery is not confined to the past; these conditions can and do continue.

That the contemporary African-American condition could be compared to the time of Jim Crow or in terms of slavery shocked optimists who had hastily predicted that the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama heralded a “post-racial” era. The repercussions of centuries of physical and cultural violence against African descendants in the United States would not be magically undone by the election of a single black man. Instead, Black Lives Matter activists would be energized to draw from the successes of the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement while recognizing some of the inadequacies of its interpretive frameworks and organizing principles to the contemporary moment. These points of contention also emerge in complicated ways as athlete-activists have contributed to the Black Lives Matter movement. The

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Black Lives Matter movement has advocated horizontal organizational structures rather than top-down leadership models, questioned the efficacy of working through traditional levers of governmental power, and recognized the insufficiency of respectability politics. In the sections that follow, I map these debates and demonstrate how instances of athletic activism have complicated rather than clarified these issues.

III. From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is necessarily grasped in the contemporary moment through partial and selective memories. Some of those memory projects are public, taking the form of memorials, museums, tourist attractions, and speeches. Other memories of the civil rights movement are private, though these private memories of the civil rights movement can have meaningful consequences. How individuals remember the civil rights movement can produce different obligations and tactical choices in the present. In advocating non-traditional leadership structures, distancing themselves from elected government officials, and retaining an ambivalent relationship to respectability politics, members of the Black Lives Matter movement have continued to wrestle with the legacy of the civil rights movement and how its lessons can help to meet a new set of challenges.

In contrast to civil rights scholarship and memory that focuses on the actions of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, most Black Lives Matter activists foreground horizontal and non-hierarchical organizational models instead of traditional leadership models that put emphasis

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27 Wilson, 3.
on charismatic black males. Black Lives Matter activists’ leadership models grew out of members’ experiences in the Occupy Wall Street movement. These activists also drew inspiration from newly recovered histories of the civil rights movement that emphasize the often-unheralded organizational work of women and gay men in the civil rights movement. As Alicia Garza framed the issue, such models are useful for empowering ordinary citizens to catalyze social energy in their own communities. Garza also contends that “the model of the black preacher leading people to the promised land isn’t working right now,” a thinly-veiled critique of black political-religious leaders such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, whom some Black Lives Matter members have critiqued for overemphasizing convictions in particular cases of extrajudicial police violence at the expense of developing sufficient explanatory models of the processes of systemic racial injustice. These leadership models also face pragmatic structural issues: What happens to a movement if its leader dies, is arrested, or is assassinated?

Related to this new model of community organization and skepticism toward elected and self-appointed leaders, Black Lives Matter members differ on whether activists benefit from pursuing the traditional levers of government policymaking. President Barack Obama has, on

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28 Taylor, 146. At least two Occupy Wall Street encampments were founded in the name of black men killed by state violence. In Oakland, a camp was named after Oscar Grant, a 22-year-old killed by a transit police officer later convicted of involuntary manslaughter. An Atlanta camp was named after Troy Davis, a 42-year-old death row inmate executed in 2011.

29 See, for instance, Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, Women and the Civil Rights Movement (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), and Laura Michael Brown, “Remembering Silence: Bennett College Women and the 1960 Greensboro Student Sit-ins,” Rhetoric Society Quarterly, forthcoming. The lives of figures such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Bayard Rustin have emerged as potent organizational counternarratives for Black Lives Matter members.


31 Davis, 31-32; Taylor, 160-162.

32 This seems to represent a significant departure from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which led to landmark court rulings such as Brown v. Board of Education and Loving
several occasions, suggested that activists pursuing social change should move from the streets to the negotiating table, where compromise is required.\textsuperscript{33} As Wilson writes, “[T]he civil society of [Obama’s] civil rights memory leads to a moment when black being must enter into a contract with national being.”\textsuperscript{34} In a model predicated on Obama’s own delicate tightrope walk during his presidential campaigns, black identity must be subordinated to national citizenship for social change to occur through the incremental levers of governance. Some prominent Black Lives Matter members seem to have accepted this model: DeRay Mckesson travelled to the White House several times and ran a shoestring mayoral campaign in Baltimore, while the Executive Director of Teach for America in St. Louis, Brittany Packett, served as a member of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which issued a report with recommendations drawn partly from Campaign Zero, a set of policy recommendations closely tied to the Black Lives Matter movement.\textsuperscript{35} In the waning days of his presidency, Obama called for those dissatisfied with the current state of affairs to run for public office.

At the same time, radical left figures such as Angela Davis, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and Cornell West have emerged as critics of government’s co-optative force. Davis lauds the civil rights movement’s success at achieving “the legal eradication of racism and the dismantling

\textit{v. Virginia}; the ratification of the 24th Amendment in 1962, prohibiting any sort of poll tax; several sets of Civil Rights Acts, including the aforementioned Voting Rights Act of 1965; and the formation of federal agencies such as the civil rights division of the Department of Justice, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the Department of Health and Urban Development.


\textsuperscript{34} Wilson, 7.

of the apparatus of segregation.” However, she suggests that working through governmental levers is inadequate to combatting racist structures that exist outside of the realm of the law.\textsuperscript{36} Taylor is more forthright in her dismissal of African-American government officials, writing, “The most significant transformation in all of Black life over the last fifty years has been the emergence of a Black elite, bolstered by the Black political class, that has been responsible for administering cuts and managing meager budgets on the backs of Black constituents.”\textsuperscript{37} Taylor insinuates that black politicians and preachers have profited at the expense of a black underclass; a rising tide of black wealth and status in the United States has lifted few boats while drowning countless more.\textsuperscript{38} Cornell West has leveled this charge specifically at Obama, decrying him as a “polished professional” rather than a “love warrior” in the quest to end police brutality.\textsuperscript{39} Black Lives Matter activists’ ambivalence toward professional politicians is more than a referendum on Obama, even as a complicated mix of pride and betrayal often characterizes their feelings toward the first black president.

A third ongoing discussion within the Black Lives Matter movement is a reappraisal of the definition and value of respectability politics. The quintessential act of respectability politics during the civil rights movement occurred when Rosa Parks was conscientiously vetted and presented as the well-behaved, pious woman whose sheer goodness could call into question

\textsuperscript{36} Davis, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{37} Taylor, 15.
\textsuperscript{38} James Baldwin’s \textit{The Fire Next Time} (1962; New York: Vintage, 1993) also issues this critique of black preachers and politicians.
\textsuperscript{39} Cornell West, “Obama has failed victims of racism and police brutality,” \textit{The Guardian}, July 14, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/14/barack-obama-us-racism-police-brutality-failed-victims. West also wrote the foreword to Davis’s \textit{Freedom is a Constant Struggle}.
discriminatory busing laws in Montgomery. Fredrick C. Harris has argued that Black Lives Matter activists have necessarily moved beyond respectability politics to instead insist upon a claim to “black humanity.” Harris argues that the appeal to life and existence itself, which he traces to the lesser-known “I am a man” signs carried by striking garbage workers in Memphis in 1968, is required to advocate for figures such as Michael Brown. Some of the individuals killed by extrajudicial police violence have criminal records. Nevertheless, Black Lives Matter advocates insist, petty criminality does not warrant abject dehumanization or even state-sanctioned murder.

There are others who suggest that respectability politics should continue to play a role within Black Lives Matter. Brando Simeo Starkey distinguishes between two goals among those who preach respectability politics: “First, [devotees of respectability politics] hope whites will notice when blacks have reached respectability and, consequently, treat black people better; and second, [they hope] to further black folks’ own interests, regardless of white approval.”

Harnessing respectability politics for social change requires a nuanced ability to distinguish between the internal and external audiences of social movement communication. While Starkey concedes that blacks who hope to use respectability politics to win over reluctant whites toward social justice causes are unlikely to be successful, he suggests that among black audiences, talk

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40 Parks was chosen as the face of the busing movement over Claudette Colvin, even though Colvin had refused to give up her seat nine months prior.
of moral respectability is an uplift strategy designed to improve black lives—and that this goal should be prioritized above how white audiences perceive blacks. In Starkey’s telling, the cry of “Respectability politics!” has become a cudgel to silence conversations about personal agency and forward flimsy structure-heavy models of how the world works that are unlikely to gain broad appeal. A willingness to take those within the black community to task over unhealthy and inappropriate behavior is required because, as Starkey suggests, “A better existence, not a better reputation among whites, should be the objective.” Among Black Lives Matter activists, the strategic usefulness of appeals to respectability may depend on the ability to restrict messaging to black-exclusive audiences.

These ongoing debates about how to organize and whether to work through government channels or utilize respectability politics indicate that Black Lives Matter is not yet certain of how it plans to construct its identity with relation to the civil rights movement. However, one area where activists have followed the civil rights movement is in recognizing the rhetorical usefulness of publicizing the spectacle of violence against black bodies. As Amy Louise Wood notes, by the first decades of the 20th century, antilynching advocates had become successful at repurposing cultural representations of lynching. Spectacular images that had originally circulated among limited white audiences to sustain a communal spirit of racial superiority were instead spread widely to engage viewers’ voyeuristic impulses and engender empathy, outrage, and disgust. During the civil rights movement, the ghastly, iconic spectacle of Emmett Till’s deformed, bloated body at his open casket funeral in 1955 convinced many noncommittal whites of the severity and brutality of Southern racism, precipitating the movement toward later civil rights legislation. Similarly, Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux argue that the spectacle of black

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44 Starkey, “Respectability politics: How a flawed conversation sabotages black lives.”
death has been one of the few ways to make viewers aware of how many black bodies have been recategorized as “disposable” and therefore unworthy of basic human rights in the political-economic climate of neoliberalism. Citing Angela Davis, they note that “the prison [has become] a way of disappearing people in the false hope of disappearing the underlying social problems they represent.” Spectacle counters the opacity of the prison-industrial complex with the publicity of physical violence.

Not all of those killed by police have had their bodies photographed in the street or videos of their death uploaded to social media. Even a panoptic, 24/7 media cycle cannot capture the frequency with which black bodies are dying. Advocates know that the persuasive work of Black Lives Matter cannot be restricted to an ocular epistemology; image after image of disposable black bodies would, after a certain point, fail to inspire outrage and instead induce spectator fatigue. Therefore, Black Lives Matter activists’ reliance on bodily spectacle has been complemented by two other tactics: the chorus of repetition and the copia of the list. Activists host frequent remembrances for those killed by police violence, insisting—as in the case of Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old black woman who died of a possible suicide in a Texas jail following an improper traffic citation—that those affiliated with the movement continue to “say her name” so that it will not be forgotten. The chorus of remembrance, as it echoes across social

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46 Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux, Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle (San Francisco: City Lights, 2015), 118.
media, refuses to grant that any lives are disposable and further reminds activists that state violence can affect black women as well as black men.48

The list also serves a remembrance function, but the rhythm and speed of the list produces a distinct set of effects, as well. Media theorist John Durham Peters captures one possible rhetorical rationale for the list:

[T]he list is one strategy to cope with and make use of our temptations amid information abundance. The comically preposterous juxtapositions of lists repeatedly point to how the world escapes our concepts. There can also be a certain desperation in a list, an exasperation that the universe is so wide and our time is so short. […]Lists, as roving et ceteras, hint at realms of knowledge to be held for later exploration.49

Peters’s understanding of the list may be more serendipitous than how Black Lives Matter tends to use the list rhetorically. Although lists of people who die in interactions with the police do not contain the comic juxtapositions of Peters’s encyclopedic et ceteras, lists of those killed by state violence do reveal desperation and a feeling of inadequacy, that death continues to happen even as advocates work tirelessly to prevent further tragedies. Perhaps the best use of a list by a Black Lives Matter advocate occurs in historian Robin D.G. Kelley’s essay “Why We Won’t Wait,” published in Counterpunch in November 2014. Kelley returns to the phrase “As we waited…” as a refrain at the beginning of multiple paragraphs that proceed to list the names of African Americans who were killed by police officers in the months it took for Michael Brown’s case to move through the court system. The listing strategy not only compels the judiciary branch to act out of a sense of urgency, but also reminds readers that the dead possessed names and life stories that are both individuated and deeply linked. Their collective signifying force exceeds their individual lives even as their individual stories are recognized. The enfolding together of so

48 For more on how black women have been targeted by the criminal justice system, see Beth E. Richie, Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
many stories—from such different places, the same tragic result—creates a snowball effect of such mass and speed that it cannot be ignored and demands response, without requiring the gruesome image of spectacular black death.

Even as these deliberations about movement tactics remain unresolved, athletes have continued to step forward as proponents of Black Lives Matter. How those athlete-activists make their cases and how they are perceived in sports media discourse create necessarily limited perceptions of a much larger social movement. At the same time—and in an analogous way to how Black Lives Matter activists construct memories of the civil rights movement—black athletes simultaneously draw inspiration from and attempt to update the legacy of a longer tradition of mid-twentieth-century black athlete-activists. The next two sections consider how athlete-activists reflect and refract these ongoing debates, given the institutional conditions in which they work, the race-related issues they face in their professional workplaces, and the longer tradition of the black athlete-activist.

IV. Athlete-Activists’ Contributions to Black Lives Matter

Since LeBron James and his teammates’ initial posture of solidarity with Trayvon Martin in 2012, it has become impossible to capture all the ways that athletes—and the world of sport more broadly—have inserted themselves and been drawn into conversations regarding issues that might be considered central to the Black Lives Matter movement. Rather than attempt an exhaustive account, my primary goal in this section is to analyze noteworthy examples that foreground ongoing tactical debates within the Black Lives Matter movement highlighted in the previous section.
Before I discuss those examples, however, it is important to note that at least two relatively well-known athletes have been the victims of unlawful policing. In September 2015, recently retired tennis player James Blake was tackled to the ground without warning and handcuffed outside a luxury Manhattan hotel by a police officer who mistook Blake for a suspect in a non-violent crime.\(^50\) Five months prior, Atlanta Hawks forward Thabo Sefolosha, the biracial son of a Swiss mother and South African father, had his leg broken when he was kicked by a police officer outside a trendy New York City nightclub after a brawl inside the club resulted in Sefolosha’s friend and Indiana Pacer forward Chris Copeland getting stabbed.\(^51\) Fortunately, neither athlete was permanently injured, although Sefolosha—a key defensive stalwart for the Eastern Conference-leading Hawks—was forced to miss the end of the regular season and the entire 2015 playoffs, possibly costing his team an NBA championship. Both won lawsuits against the New York City Police Department and later came out as supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, recounting episodes of racism that they faced as adolescents.\(^52\) These incidents help to demonstrate that celebrity status, athletic renown, and an elite lifestyle do not leave athletes immune to racial stereotyping and unlawful policing.

The spectacular experience of unlawful policing is the most obvious way that athletes have been drawn into discussions regarding Black Lives Matter. Yet in these experiences, Sefolosha acknowledged that he would not be able to control media framing of his arrest. Video taken of Sefolosha’s arrest and injury made it to the gossip show \textit{TMZ}, and Sefolosha was


photographed leaving the police station in handcuffs and a hoodie. In a profile for *ESPN The Magazine* which described him as a minor civil rights hero, Sefolosha lamented that the first image response to a web browser search for his name might forever be this photo of him walking out of the New York Police Department in handcuffs and a hoodie.\(^{53}\)

![Figure 2](https://example.com/image.jpg)

Thabo Sefolosha walks out of the 10th Precinct office in Manhattan on a broken leg after being arrested on charges related to a stabbing at a nightclub. Sefolosha was found not guilty on all charges and sued the NYPD in April 2016, alleging permanent physical and reputational injuries.

Photo by Andrew Kelly of Reuters, April 20, 2015.

This image is not representative of his identity, though he feared being reduced to the image. Once seen, Sefolosha argued, the image of him in handcuffs cannot be unseen by viewers.

Sefolosha’s recognition that the images used in stories corresponding to his arrest would permanently influence public opinion of him is astute, especially because those images may later circulate without much-needed contextual information. Otherwise innocuous images can be decontextualized to reinforce racial stereotypes; photos of Michael Brown circulated after his death that featured what detractors determined was a gang symbol and advocates insisted was a peace sign. Black Lives Matter allies joined the fray through the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown, where commentators juxtaposed “innocent-looking” and “guilty-looking” photos and suggested that the latter photos, which often featured alcohol or signs of irreverence, would more likely

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accompany news stories of their deaths. If they happened to be murdered by police, commentators noted, the photos would be used to imply that officers were justified in any use of force. The nihilism of the hashtag suggests vigilante injustice, and the alienation of its implied “they” suggests a depersonalizing conspiracy against African Americans; meanwhile, Paul Taylor notes that the thoughtful juxtaposition of images associated with #iftheygunnedmedow demonstrates young African Americans’ sophisticated visual media literacy. In addition to challenging cherry-picked images that connote black criminality, activists have also derided images of white alleged criminals whose media depictions were unduly flattering, as in the case of former Stanford University swimmer Brock Turner after an arrest on charges of rape in summer 2016.

In other words, athlete-activists and Black Lives Matter allies have demonstrated an understanding that conversations about social issues are increasingly spurred and framed by “image events.” Kevin Michael DeLuca suggests that televised image events are a key tactic for otherwise powerless actors to “contest social norms and deconstruct the established naming of the world.” While professional athletes are by no means powerless in American society, their political opinions are generally considered to be of minimal importance. By registering social protest before sporting events, athletes participate in the politicization of culture. As politics moves into cultural arenas previously cordoned off from contentious public issues—creating new

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fronts in what are often called “the culture wars”—athletes indicate how contemporary social movements are built upon networks of loose affiliation rather than formal organizational structures. Athletes demonstrate how most contemporary social movements should be understood as linguistically attuned meaning-making enterprises that create “patterns of consciousness,” rather than material resources such as membership lists and fundraising apparatuses. Furthermore, DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples have argued that patterns of consciousness are increasingly formed through the “public screen” of television, with all its affordances and biases toward associative thinking and imagery. My understanding of athletes’ bodily protests as image events therefore recognizes the contemporary athlete-activist as an “affect generator,” a divisive symbol who elicits strong emotional responses of affiliation or repulsion. Athletic protest can spur fans to choose a political position, in some cases, while others may identify or dis-identify with particular athletes based on whether those athletes meet their own political affiliations and social values. The responses that athletes generate are often further nuanced as athletes subsequently use media platforms to clarify the nature of their support to the Black Lives Matter movement, even as their activism is first registered in the visual form of the image event. These image events and how they are discussed in sports media influence broader perceptions of Black Lives Matter.

Discussions of athletic activism in public discourse do not easily reflect the horizontal organizational structure of Black Lives Matter. Consider coverage of San Francisco 49er Colin Kaepernick, among the most recognizable athlete-activists in support of Black Lives Matter. Kaepernick’s decision first to sit then to kneel during the playing of the National Anthem throughout the 2016-2017 NFL season in protest of unlawful policing has both drawn widespread criticism and sparked a tidal wave of similar protests across the world of sports.61 In the nine weeks after Kaepernick’s original August 2016 protest, athletes in four countries, 35 states, 39 colleges, 52 high schools, and a wide range of sports echoed the quarterback’s decision to register dissatisfaction with the state of race relations in the United States through National Anthem protests, compelled both by his gesture and his subsequent argument that “There are bodies in the streets and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”62 Coverage of Kaepernick’s decision and subsequent protests promoted the civil rights model of lone black male leadership. Throughout these protests, Kaepernick was rarely discussed without mention of his playing position, quarterback. Proponents used his status as quarterback to assert his leadership qualities, while detractors turned the argument around to suggest Kaepernick had only


62 Lindsay Gibbs, “Tracking the Kaepernick Effect: The protests are spreading,” ThinkProgress, Sept. 20, 2016, https://thinkprogress.org/national-anthem-sports-protest-tracker-kaepernick-284ff1d1ab3e#.2z760626r.
demonstrated his inability to unify a large team through his controversial actions. Both positions isolated Kaepernick and marked him as extraordinary. Media coverage rarely acknowledged that Kaepernick’s teammate Eric Reid frequently kneeled beside him during the National Anthem. Reid is even screened from vision in a widely-shared photo from a Sept. 1, 2016 pre-season game in San Diego, where an unnamed member of the 49ers staff obscures him completely. Later ground-level photographs of regular-season games would include Reid’s image but rarely mention him as little more than a mute follower of Kaepernick. No articles have asked Reid—a safety who spent much of the season on injured reserve—why he decided to protest beside the 49ers quarterback. Coverage that purports to trace the “Kaepernick effect” offers a cause-and-effect relationship that cannot reflect the horizontal model of leadership that many Black Lives Matter activists promote.

![Figure 3](image)

Initial media coverage portrayed Colin Kaepernick as isolated in his National Anthem protests. Safety Eric Reid, kneeling beside Kaepernick, is obscured in this image by an unnamed member of the 49ers staff.


While images of Kaepernick modeled the civil rights movement mode of a lone black male leader cultivating followers, athletes in the Women’s National Basketball Association engaged in athletic-activism that hewed closer to Black Lives Matter’s horizontal organizing principles. In July 2016, the entire Minnesota Lynx team wore warm-up shirts that included the phrases “Black Lives Matter,” “Change Starts With Us,” “Justice and Accountability,” an image of the Dallas police shield (in reference to five officers who were killed by a sniper as they worked a Black Lives Matter protest), and the names Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, two
black men killed by police that month. Within days, the protests spread to pre-game warm-ups among half the teams in the league; players were haphazardly and inconsistently issued fines for violating the league’s dress code policy. In defiance, players from the Washington Mystics refused to take media questions about their games, answering questions only about Black Lives Matter and their protests, until they received assurances that their actions were supported by league headquarters. Shortly thereafter, the WNBA dropped all fines against the players and scheduled meetings to, in the words of WNBA President Lisa Borders, “work with our players and their union on ways for the players to make their views known to their fans and the public.” In standing together and refusing to back down when fined, WNBA athlete-activists forced their employer into acknowledging and supporting their advocacy work. Nevertheless, inequalities in sports coverage in the United States based on gender and sport ensure that these athletes’ team-based message received significantly less coverage than Kaepernick’s protest.

Athlete-activists also reshaped Black Lives Matter debates over the value of respectability politics. Because of the nature of athletic audiences, athletes cannot normally presume that they are speaking to ethnically exclusive audiences. Athletes often depend on these audiences as an important base of additional income; sponsors can select spokespeople based on how well-known and generally liked athletes are, making controversial political statements potentially unpopular and unprofitable, a topic I return to in the following section. Furthermore, because of their celebrity status in American culture, athletes also require additional security and police protection more frequently than most citizens. As a result, athletes may be more likely than other citizens to adopt and attempt to justify the counter-slogan “All Lives Matter” or its

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police-specific iteration, “Blue Lives Matter,” in instances when black audiences may hope for them to insist on the historical specificity of “Black Lives Matter” as a way to bring awareness to systemic injustices. While the phrase “All Lives Matter” is innocuous on its face, it gained traction among conservative detractors of Black Lives Matter who contended that the movement advocated violence and a sort of reverse racism.

The most prominent example of such a statement came from outspoken Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman. By first hinting that they planned to engage in a collective statement of protest before deciding instead to link arms and proclaim a message of unity, the Seattle Seahawks organization critiqued Kaepernick’s gesture rather than his critics and disappointed many Black Lives Matter activists who hoped to see a cross-racial gesture of solidarity with the movement. In a follow-up interview with Dominique Foxworth, Sherman conceded the premise of conservative allegations and sought to move beyond discomfort caused by the mantra “Black Lives Matter.” Sherman acknowledged that the Black Lives Matter movement was heterogeneous and comprised of many voices with many tactical goals, but singled out “people who are saying, ‘Black Lives Matter,’ and then saying it’s time to kill police” as hypocrites who have rushed to hasty generalizations.64 In making this statement to The Undefeated, an ESPN outlet dedicated primarily to sports and culture issues of interest to black readers, Sherman may have believed he was speaking to a limited audience who needed to become more respectable in their critiques of police in order to initiate change in local communities. Elsewhere in the interview, Sherman deploys a shrewd understanding that race is a social construction and that little social change can happen with regard to policing in black communities unless accompanied by other structural changes in education and local economies.

However, in accepting two of the central talking points by those challenging the Black Lives Matter movements (that activists promote violence and that black behavioral changes are required prior to police reform), Sherman falls into a longer tradition of athlete-activists advocating respectability politics—the primary problem of which, according to Ta-Nehisi Coates, is an “inability to look into the cold dark void of history.”

Careful not to criticize their colleague too pointedly, several athletes and commentators suggested that Sherman’s response may have been different had he paid more attention to the longer treatment of blacks in the United States and the ways that All Lives Matter erases history in favor of insipid moral pabulum.

In addition to debates that position the “Black Lives Matter” motto against “All Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives Matter,” the still-undecided value of respectability politics in Black Lives Matter is also encapsulated by the common protest gesture and chant referred to as “Hands up, don’t shoot.” The gesture and chant are drawn from an eyewitness account of Michael Brown’s final moments, in which he was said to raise his arms and plead with Officer

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Darren Wilson for his life. This account—which was challenged and could not be verified in court—stands in stark contrast to Wilson’s testimony, which alleged that Brown ran at Wilson with the intent to physically harm the officer.\(^{67}\) Regardless of their interaction in Brown’s dying moments, the chant and gesture became one of the most widely adopted symbols of the movement precisely because it affirms respectability politics while simultaneously drawing notice to its insufficiency. As the gesture is practiced in the image below, from a December 2014 rally against unlawful policing around the country held by students at Penn State University, protestors signal an ironized form of innocence. Black protestors who raise their hands and ask not to be shot recognize the police as a repressive state apparatus that prejudges its relationship to black bodies, especially black men. As Claudia Rankine describes the hassle of perpetually being assumed guilty of a crime one did not commit, “[Y]ou are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.”\(^{68}\) That relationship is codified in police jargon, where ethnic assumptions about crime reorder the racial hierarchy so that bulletins about a black male suspect refer to a \textit{number one male}.

While black bodies implicitly chide those police officers who assume they all look alike, white allies performing the “Hands up, don’t shoot” gesture offer an almost apologetic gesture of solidarity; they attempt to place themselves momentarily in the position of those who face such circumstances while acknowledging that the transformation will not be permanent. While the

\(^{67}\) As Taylor writes, Wilson’s grand jury testimony “sounded as if he were describing an altercation with a monster, not an eighteen-year-old. […] [He] went on to describe Brown as a ‘demon’ who made ‘grunting’ noises before inexplicably deciding to attack a police officer who had already shot him once and was poised to do so again” (3-4). For more on the challenges of the “Hands up, don’t shoot” testimony, see Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “‘Hands up, don’t shoot’ did not happen in Ferguson,” \textit{Washington Post}, March 19, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/factchecker/wp/2015/03/19/hands-up-dont-shoot-did-not-happen-in-ferguson/.

\(^{68}\) Claudia Rankine, \textit{Citizen} (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 108.
crouching protester in the sign above insists “I will not apologize for my blackness,” whites standing alongside as allies apologize for the idea that a politics of respectability may be inadequate for others. Those gunned down might do everything properly, including following police instructions—as in the case of Philando Castile, a thirty-two-year-old nutrition services worker shot and killed as he complied with a request to provide his license and registration during a routine traffic stop in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, while his girlfriend and her daughter sat in the car—but proper behavior may not be enough to save their lives, simply because the color of their skin has implanted stereotypes of criminality and violent threat upon their bodies. The gesture promotes a broader strategy of non-violence, evokes the ghosts of those killed, and acquires an almost worshipful quality of surrender that nevertheless asserts a moral superiority to those officers who have taken black lives in the line of duty. The “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture also proclaims innocence in a way that the polysemous hoodie of Trayvon Martin cannot. Open hands carry none of the masculine hardness of the shapeless form of the hoodie, which may hide fists or weapons (or Skittles, in Martin’s case). At the same time, the “Hands up, don’t shoot” chant requires officers to recall life-altering mistakes colleagues may have made in the line of duty. The gesture makes ever-present the spectacle of black death at the hands of the police. When directed toward an audience of police officers, the respectful gesture is rendered subversive by a chant that can seem haunting or even taunting: ‘Hands up, don’t shoot’ is a shrewdly constructed deferential provocation.

As deployed by athletes at sporting events, the gesture may be read as more confrontational. When five St. Louis Rams players came out for pre-game warmups in November 2014 with arms raised in the ‘Hands up, don’t shoot’ gesture only 15 miles from where Michael Brown was killed, their protest differed in important ways. The athletes, in pristine physical condition accentuated by padding, cleats, and helmets, could not clearly present themselves advocating a strategy of non-violence; they wore gear prepared for the combat of sport, a uniform akin to the militarized police addressing protestors outside the stadium. The language of teams and competition used by football players reinforced a sense of oppositionality with police, rather than trying to question and cast aside that constructed hostility. With guards and masks covering their face and adrenaline coursing, players’ intent was ambiguous—precisely the conditions that officers say result in unfortunate deadly interactions. Finally, raised arms draw attention to the gloves that players wore, evoking those attempting to leave no trace of fingerprints. The scene offered an unfortunate and unintentional echo to the most notorious case of a black athlete escaping justice in the criminal justice system, former NFL player O.J. Simpson’s acquittal on murder charges in 1995. The poignant mix of emotions embedded in the “Hands up, don’t shoot” gesture failed to translate the complex politics of responsibility to the football field. Officials from the St. Louis Police Department
declared the gesture “tasteless, offensive, and inflammatory,” even though gestures such as these are none of these things inherently. The setting and the moment, as an image event in the world of professional football, make it much more difficult to appreciate the gesture’s intent.

Image events such as these can hijack the ordinary flow of the athletic calendar; nevertheless, even as occasions of athletic activism encroached upon the space of the playing field in introductions and the National Anthem, only one team went as far as to announce a disruption to their schedule because of ongoing race relations issues. On November 8, 2015, more than thirty black players on the University of Missouri football team announced that they would refuse to play until University President Tim Wolfe was removed from his position. The university community had suffered a series of shocking displays of overt racism since 2010, and black student leaders, assembled into the group Concerned Student 1950 (named after the year when the first black student was admitted to the University of Missouri), had been consistently rebuffed or dissatisfied with attempts to improve the campus climate. The players’ decision to boycott was based in part to protect a beloved Concern Student 1950 graduate student, Jonathan Butler, who had launched a hunger strike five days previously. Players felt that Butler’s life was at risk and administrators had not expressed suitable concerned. Head coach Gary Pinkel appeared to support his players’ decision. Because forfeiting the weekend’s game would have cost the university more than $1 million and untold losses in negative publicity, Wolfe tendered his resignation to the University of Missouri’s Board of Curators the next day.

The protests at the University of Missouri resulted in the most concrete resolution of all the Black Lives Matter protests, the resignation of an administrator whom many held at least

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partially accountable for the persistence of racial inequality and campus hostilities. However, even those occasions of athlete activism that did not result in direct change nevertheless raised awareness of an ongoing policing crisis and the issue of racial inequality in the judicial system. In asserting their responsibility to raise such questions, athletes explicitly drew on a longer tradition of athlete-activists in order to attempt to reshape the narrative of the black athlete in American culture.

V. The Role of the Black Athlete in American Culture

Before the Black Lives Matter movement, what was the role of the black athlete in American culture? According to the provocative title of *New York Times* columnist William Rhoden’s best-seller on the history of the black athlete in the United States, they were—at least since the 1980s—“Forty Million Dollar Slaves” who had acquired immeasurable wealth at the expense of their civic participation. Rhoden suggests that black athletes have historically overcome a number of structural impediments to achieve success in American athletics: rule changes that targeted black athletic style, unspoken quotas on the number of black athletes who could play at a given time and restrictions on which positions they could play, and a lack of opportunities for black athletes to move into coaching and management ranks. This latter issue has had the most important consequences for black athletes as sport has become increasingly professionalized and commercialized. In Rhoden’s telling, white coaches and agents in the post-civil rights era constructed a profitable “Conveyor Belt” of elite camps and clinics to profit from the labor of young black men. Future stars were offered financial inducements and enviable status; in the process, Rhoden suggests, these athletes become isolated and immune from important issues in their communities. As Rhoden writes, “The ultimate effect of the Conveyor

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Belt is not so much to deliver young black athletes to the pros, but to deliver them with the correct mentality: They learn not to rock the boat, to get along, they learn by inference about the benevolent superiority of the white man and enter into a tacit agreement to let the system operate without comment.” Rhoden and others, including Walter LaFaber, have highlighted Michael Jordan as the epitome of the Conveyor Belt process, a study in calculated political neutrality who “cared more about retaining his commercial appeal than dealing with the most important issues of the day.” Although Rhoden leans on the metaphor of slavery for rhetorical effect, he does not do so in the same way that critical legal theorists have opted to discuss contemporary race relations in terms of slavery. Whereas critical legal theorists opt for a structure-heavy explanation of social relations, Rhoden forwards an account that grants athletes considerably more agency. Highlighting a tradition of well-known and more obscure black athletes who engaged in social commentary during the 1960s, prior to the construction of the conveyor belt, Rhoden suggests that the conditions remain perpetually ripe for the reemergence of black athletes who think of themselves as citizens and community members rather than blank canvases for advertisers.

Rhoden’s rise-fall-and-potential-redemption narrative lacks nuance. But the presumption that athletic activism has declined since a heyday in the 1960s is a persistent commonplace in the world of sports media discourse, as Abraham Iqbal Khan documents. By exploring the case of Curt Flood, who petitioned Major League Baseball for free agency, Khan argues that radical traditions of black protest and reformist traditions of assimilation converge in Flood’s critique of his labor conditions: “I do not feel that I am a piece of property to be bought and sold

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72 Rhoden, 194.
irrespective of my wishes,” Flood wrote to Commissioner Bowie Kuhn in December 1969, challenging the reserve clause that allowed Flood’s rights to be traded without his consent through the provocative invocation of chattel slavery.74 Khan’s insights into the converging threads of the black athletic tradition seek to demonstrate athletes’ keen awareness of their labor—with a specific emphasis on how they have been perceived and treated by white owners and fans.

In the years leading up to the Black Lives Matter decision, there were several newsworthy issues regarding these relationships that may have primed black athletes to speak out about issues of structural racism. These issues primarily affected men’s professional basketball, although big-time Division I football and men’s college basketball players have also begun invoking the metaphor of the “plantation” to question amateurism rules amidst the extraordinary profits made by head coaches, university administrators, conference commissioners, television broadcasters, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association.75 Basketball has been a volatile site for monitoring the relationship between white owners and spectators and black players because, as Yago Colás writes, “The NBA tends to treat ‘blackness’ and its stereotypical signifiers as a kind of fluid cultural currency it wants flowing into the NBA in the form of talent and marketable cool, but it wants to control the tap.”76 There have been moments when that structure of control has been exposed as racially motivated. Most notably, a paramour released recordings of racist comments made by Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling in April 2014 that demanded she not bring black men to Clippers games. Sterling’s

75 Joe Nocera and Ben Strauss,Indentured: The Inside Story of the Rebellion Against the NCAA (New York: Portfolio, 2016).
76 Yago Colás, Ball Don’t Lie!: Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 8.
comments were particularly odious because much of his wealth stemmed from owning properties that had faced housing discrimination lawsuits. In a precursor to the University of Missouri football team, the Clippers players considered boycotting playoff games before deciding instead to wear their warm-ups inside-out so that the team logo could not be seen. Sterling was eventually forced to sell the team. Months later, Atlanta Hawks majority stockholder Bruce Levenson resigned after confessing that he had made racially insensitive comments in e-mail about preferring white fans to black fans.

The longer history of this relationship stems back to the infamous 2004 “Malice in the Palace” game between the Indianapolis Pacers and Detroit Pistons. To defuse tensions after a late-game scrum, Pacers player Ron Artest decided to lie on the scorer’s table, away from the fray. White Pistons fans took the opportunity to throw food and drinks at Artest, which caused him and several other players to charge into the stands and brawl with fans. As Grant Farred reflects on the event, there is something visually potent in the “self-immobilized black body.” When a black athlete refuses to play or even stops moving, it is challenged by white spectators and white mediators as an action that interrupts the action of professional sports. As Farred writes, punning off Newton’s first law of physics, “Every black athletic inaction produces an unequal and (hostile) opposite (white) reaction. […] [A] spectacular black stillness where it is imagined to be out of place—interruption is presumed to be verboten on an NBA court—is intolerable to those who understand black bodies at rest to be a provocation, an act against the order of (athletic and political) things.” Following Farred, we can think of the image of Artest’s still body as a counterpoint to the black victim of police violence. While the spectacle of Michael Brown’s stillness reinforces a racial hierarchy until the image can be repurposed in a message of

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protest, Artest’s stillness challenges white spectators’ expectations of how black bodies are supposed to move through the space of the athletic event. In this way, Artest’s refusal to move offers a clear precursor to some of the Black Lives Matter protests.

Beyond events within the realm of sport, many athletes have also drawn inspiration to engage in athletic activism at the invitation of President Barack Obama. *Sports Illustrated* writer Alexander Wolff penned *The Audacity of Hoop* near the end of Obama’s second term to commemorate Obama’s relationship with basketball, including his use of the sport as a political tool to convince skeptics of his credibility with middle America. As Bryan Curtis writes, Obama was “the first president to establish full diplomatic relations with the nation’s athletes.” Many star players enjoyed an easy rapport with Obama, someone whom they believed shared their interest in improving black communities across the country. Players such as LeBron James, Chris Paul, and Dwyane Wade appeared in public service announcements cajoling younger Americans to enroll in the Affordable Care Act and lauding First Lady Michelle Obama’s healthy eating initiatives. James even stumped for Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton as she ran for President in 2016, penning an editorial endorsing the former Secretary of State for *Business Insider* and the *Akron Beacon-Journal*. While Curtis remained confident that Obama had “[midwifed] a new wave of athlete political awareness,” columnist LZ Granderson worried that athletes may not “#staywoke”—citing a hashtag meant to convey an awareness of current

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80 Wolff, 60-62.
events affecting the black community—once the Obama presidency concluded. Whether and how athlete-activists continue to protest in voice and body throughout the presidency of Donald J. Trump, likely not seen as supportive of their social advocacy, is yet to be determined.

VI. Conclusion

As I have tried to outline in the sections above, contemporary athlete-activists have frequently spoken out with regard to issues of unlawful policing and the value of black life in American society. Because of the institutional climate in which they work, their celebrity status, and the tropes of sports media discourse, athletes may not be the most appropriate figures through which citizens can familiarize themselves with ongoing debates within the Black Lives Matter movement about organizational structure and tactics.

Nevertheless, athletes’ expressions of support and concern for those affected by unlawful policing do seem to have marked the demise of narratives about the decline of the athlete-activist. While James’s 2012 post about Trayvon Martin represented a starting point for this change, the tipping point may have been Carmelo Anthony’s July 2016 Instagram post, which challenged his fellow athletes to meet with local politicians, ask them to implement lasting reform, and refuse to allow the risk of losing sponsorship deals affect their resolve or civic engagement. The post was accompanied by a famous photo from what has been called the “1967 Muhammad Ali summit,” when many of the nation’s top black athletes, organized by recently retired football player Jim Brown, met in Cleveland, coordinated with the Black Economic Union, and held a joint press conference in support of Ali’s decision to conscientiously object to

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the Vietnam War. Anthony asked for a new spirit of social activism among athletes by explicitly
drawing on a 1960s tradition of athlete-activists.

Anthony’s social media posting was reinforced by another image event. Less than a week
later, at the beginning of the 2016 ESPY Awards, Anthony, Lebron James, Chris Paul, and
Dwyane Wade issued a compelling public statement in front of a hushed live audience.\(^{83}\) While
remaining careful not to be labelled as “anti-police”—Paul identified himself as the nephew of a
police officer and Wade explicitly condemned “retaliation” of any variety, a reference to the
murder of five Dallas police officers by a former military sniper during an otherwise peaceful
protest against police violence\(^{84}\)—the basketball players cited the death of Muhammad Ali in
June 2016 as a turning point that led them to reconsider how they envision the relationship
between sports and society. Paul also read two lists of names: one of people killed by police
officers, the other of athletes from the 1960s and 1970s renowned for their social activism:

Image 6

Former Cleveland Browns football player Jim Brown presided
over a meeting of black athletes who supported boxer
Muhammad Ali's decision to refuse to fight in the Vietnam War
on June 4, 1967. Pictured in the photo: (front row, L to R)
basketball player Bill Russel, Ali, Brown, basketball player Lew
Alcindor (later Kareem Abdul-Jabbar); (back row) Cleveland
Mayor Carl Stokes, football players Walter Beach, Bobby
Mitchell, Sid Williams, Curtis McClinton, Willie Davis, Jim
Shorter, and John Wooten.

Photo by Tony Tomsic, Associated Press.

\(^{83}\) Melissa Chan, “Read LeBron James and Carmelo Anthony’s powerful speech on race at the
espy-awards-transcript/.

\(^{84}\) Manny Fernandez, Richard Pérez-Peña, and Jonah Engel Bromwich, “Five Dallas officers
were killed as payback, police chief says,” \textit{New York Times}, July 8, 2016,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trayvon Martin</td>
<td>Jesse Owens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Brown</td>
<td>Jackie Robinson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tamir Rice</td>
<td>Muhammad Ali</td>
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<td>Eric Garner</td>
<td>John Carlos and Tommie Smith</td>
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<td>Laquan McDonald</td>
<td>Kareem Abdul-Jabbar</td>
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<td>Alton Stirling</td>
<td>Jim Brown</td>
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<td>Philando Castile</td>
<td>Billie Jean King</td>
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<td>Arthur Ashe</td>
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The lists did what lists do: they attempted to contain an overflowing abundance, of lives cut short and lives lived well, two lists full of opportunities for viewers to direct their attention and educate themselves. The athletes pledged to honor the sacrifices made by the names on each list, and to educate themselves before engaging in civic life. They hoped to add their own names and others to the list of renowned athlete-activists. To do so, they must succeed at a task that now seems impossible: curtailing the swell of names on the list of those killed in encounters with the police. The spectacle of black death and the spectacle of previous activism offered two traditions that shone as a single spotlight, to help a generation of athlete-activists find its voice.
Chapter Four:

“Absent Athletes,” Athletic Agency, and the Sports Documentary

The previous three body chapters of this dissertation have examined how athletes have participated within or alongside broader social movements through particular media and genres. Billie Jean King’s performance in the Battle of the Sexes constitutes an athletic spectacle with repercussions for how second-wave feminism was perceived and understood by mainstream audiences. The coming out narratives of gay male athletes create a shifting set of rhetorical tactics for athletes looking to bridge their identities as gay males with their identities as professional athletes while offering specific interpretations of the goals of the broader LGBTQ movement. Contemporary athletes have continued to use image events to speak out on race relations and on behalf of Black Lives Matter, advocating for its concerns while struggling to mirror the movement theorists’ organizational ideals and tactics. In short, athlete-activists’ primary identities as athletes typically circumscribe their understanding of what leadership looks like, how social change occurs, the most important goals of any social movement, and the best methods of achieving those goals.

Within social movements, athletes face a challenging set of circumstances. Even as they interpret the goals and values of a social movement, they also serve as a key set of interpreted actors. That is to say—as I myself have done throughout this dissertation—others comment upon and attempt to make sense of the importance, success, and moral valence of athletes’ social engagement, occasionally without engaging athletes’ own understandings of their importance or intention. In word and body—and in a paraphrase of Linda Martín Alcoff—athletes speak for
themselves, athletes speak for and with others, and athletes are spoken for and made to speak by others.¹

This chapter focuses on that divergence between athlete-activists and those who interpret their significance. I focus specifically on curious moments of public mediation when interpreters attempt to explain and evaluate the social importance of athletes without their consent. Athletes may refuse consent out of argumentative disagreement, as in cases when an athlete explicitly disavows a narrative or judgment of the athlete’s social importance. The lack of consent may also be circumstantial, when for some reason a sports figure is incapable of co-signing a mediated interpretation. In this chapter, then, I highlight the work not of a specific social movement but of a phenomenon related to the study of sports spectacle and social change: “absent athletes.” I use the alliterative shorthand “absent athletes” to describe sports figures who are unable or choose not to represent themselves directly in mediated sports communication and are turned into placeholders for particular values, beliefs, positions, or policies in a contested public sphere that values the symbolic and cultural publicity afforded to sports figures. This emphasis on absent athletes allows me to foreground several questions crucial to an understanding of athletes’ social influence: What does it mean to say that athletes are agents of social change? What does it mean to say that athletes have a voice? How can athletes represent social causes explicitly and implicitly? How do specific genres and media influence these processes of representation? In short, how do people use athletes to make arguments about the social without their explicit consent?

To manage the purview of my study and begin to understand some of the most rhetorically compelling manifestations of absent athletes, I focus here on the conjunction of a

single genre and medium: the sports documentary film. Perhaps no other genre in contemporary sports media has been as successful at channeling absent athletes into persuasive accounts about sports figures’ social importance. I focus especially on the films of two directors, Steve James (Hoop Dreams, 1994; No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson, 2010; and Head Games, 2012) and Amir Bar-Lev (The Tillman Story, 2010; and Happy Valley, 2014), who offer notable models of how to represent absent figures ethically within a larger culture of sports spectacle.

This chapter proceeds in three sections that move from foregrounding sports documentary motifs to sustained rhetorical analysis to conclusions about the use of absent athletes in sports documentary films. First, I distinguish between the concepts of agency and voice in rhetorical studies. Even as athletes are sometimes talked about as heroic agents of on-court change because of their bodily virtuosity, the sports documentary forwards a more nuanced conception of agency that promotes collective voice-making processes among specific communities. Although athletes are sometimes largely absent from documentaries in which they are featured, they are nevertheless constructed as agents of social change. Next, I survey the sports documentaries of Steve James, who uses cinéma vérité editing techniques and tactics often found in science documentaries to demonstrate communities’ investments in the lives and social importance of athletes. James’s approach humanizes spectators of sports spectacle into active co-constructors of the meaning of particular athletes and the social importance of sport. Finally, I analyze the sports documentaries of Amir Bar-Lev, whose work chronicles and critiques the spectacular aspects of traditional sports media coverage. Bar-Lev’s surface-depth dichotomies distinguishes knowledgeable viewers of sports documentaries from sports spectators in order to position the sports documentary as a complementary and superior mode of viewing for fans who care about the intersection of sports and society.
I. **Heroic Agency, The Voice of the Athlete, and Sports Documentary**

Throughout this dissertation, I have characterized athletes as *agents* of social change. Agents take on active roles and produce specific effects. To act as an agent—with at least partial allusion to “sports agents” who lobby for better contracts for their athlete clients—also implies representation, acting at the behest of or on behalf of some other person or group. Until recently, rhetorical scholars wrote of agents in a limited sense, as human speakers and writers who acted with conscious intention and free will.\(^2\) Sports media discourse continues to talk about athletes’ on-field performance in this way. Single athletes are capable of taking possession of the ball and assuming responsibility for a team’s success or failure in a game’s closing moments, a will-infused concept that might be called “heroic agency.” Heroic agents are not exclusive to the world of sports; for instance, many protagonists on crime or mystery television shows are granted heroic levels of agency, as well. Nevertheless, sports are one of the most prominent cultural realms where the ideology of heroic agency is reproduced.

This understanding of how athletes produce on-field effects as heroic agents does not square easily with recent innovations in rhetorical studies. Newer theories of agency recognize that agency belongs to speakers and audience members, humans and nonhumans alike.\(^3\) Agency is both conscious and nonconscious, and emerges out of fields of activity—in other words, agency is networked and relational, rather than something an individual possesses or fails to

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\(^2\) Marilyn M. Cooper, “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted,” *College Composition and Communication* 62.3 (Feb. 2011): 420-449.

possess. As Risa Applegarth notes, scholars within rhetorical studies have (slowly) come to
develop and embrace posthumanist theories of agency that are “dispersed, partial, and
contingent.”4 Such theories of rhetorical agency may be less successful at identifying clear-cut
relationships between cause and effect and assigning accountability, but they better reflect how
persuasion and influence occur in a variety of rhetorical situations with more than two actors. As
Thomas Rickert writes, “Intent and self-consciousness no doubt matter enormously, but they no
longer suffice to determine what is rhetoric and what is not.”5 Agency is distributed (and not
easily quantifiable) among a variety of actors. Such theories also recognize the importance of
context and timeliness in assessing how persuasion occurs. How agency is assigned to athletes
on and off the playing field, and especially within the sports documentary, is worthy of further
scrutiny.

One proposition I will forward is that athletes’ agency is tied closely to their virtuosic
bodily talent. Athletes are not unlike musicians in that their cultural influence derives from their
skill in public performances that can unite otherwise divisive audiences in common appreciation.
David L. Palmer makes the argument that music contains implicit propositional content in the
form of enthymemes; how a piece is performed tonally can embed a set of claims about the
nature of the world and how to act within it.6 Like musical tone, athletic style can also be
implicitly propositional and revealing of personal identity. How an athlete performs the
movements and bodily skills associated with a sport can be read as indicative or reflective of an
athlete’s biography and values, how he or she affiliates with the traditions of a sport or a

4 Risa Applegarth, “Children Speaking: Agency and Public Memory in the Children’s Peace
5 Thomas Rickert, Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being (Pittsburgh:
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 36.
6 David L. Palmer, “Virtuosity as Rhetoric: Agency and Transformation in Paganini’s Mastery of
community within which an athlete emerges. Similarly, individual spectators and larger communities can instill, adopt, promote, or reject specific athletes’ styles. Athletic style is expressive, affective, and transformative—and the exhibition of persuasive bodily talent has the ability to seduce and influence those who watch it.

At the same time, there are two risks to overemphasizing the bodily virtuosity of athletic performance. The first risk is outlined by Darrel Enck-Wanzer, who notes that social movement scholars within rhetorical studies often talk about bodily rhetoric only as an “instrumental” form of communication that opens up the possibility of written or spoken persuasion. Instead of following other social movement studies scholars who treat bodily rhetoric as “pre-discursive”—in essence, as an immature or unsophisticated precursor that creates the rhetorical space for language—Enck-Wanzer calls for an “intersectional” approach that attempts to assess the relative importance of body, writing, and speech on a case-by-case basis.\(^7\) The second, related risk is that athletes become so closely associated with nonconscious bodily persuasion that their capacity to communicate in speech and writing is overlooked. Some cultural commentators, including the occasional sportswriter David Foster Wallace, laud top athletes’ “kinetic beauty” while seemingly discarding the possibility that athletes can simultaneously function as citizens.\(^8\) Wallace’s treatment of top tennis players as child-like idiot savants reinforces Applegarth’s claim that children are rarely taken seriously as rhetorical agents capable of meaningful argument; children are instead dismissed as doing the bidding of some other actor (usually a


Because sports are often the foremost hobby of children, and because athletes are often invoked as role models for children, athletes can suffer by association: when athletes’ chosen profession is also recreation for children, athletes’ suitability to intervene in pressing political conversations is dismissed as childlike. Either athletes are perceived as incapable of political activity, or they are perceived as acting at the behest of someone else without understanding their own actions. These constructions of the athlete do a double disservice, mistaking athletes for children and mischaracterizing children as incapable of rhetorical agency. Both of these errors also continue to conceive of agency as something that is conscious and intentional.

One way to circumvent these tensions within the concept of agency is to reframe athletes’ contributions in terms of “voice.” Athletes are often urged to “find their voice” and speak out on issues of social importance. As Eric King Watts notes, conversations about agency and voice are closely linked in rhetorical studies without being reducible to each other. The colloquial use of “voice” is tied to the physical body—especially the act of speech. In contrast, because newer theories of distributed or dispersed rhetorical agency look beyond the body, they no longer argue that agency resides within an agent’s physical body alone. Voice, as an individuated phenomenon, may be a concept better equipped to capture the meaningfulness of an athlete’s

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10 As Douglas Hartmann documents in Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), this “childlike” critique was one of the methods used to discredit athletes’ participation in the Olympic Project for Human Rights—they were merely the pawns of sociologist and activist Harry Edwards.
style, as a signature of individuality that exists somewhere between consciousness and non-consciousness.

But voice is not an athlete’s alone. According to King Watts, voice is the conjunction of ideology and identity that originates in but ultimately exceeds the individual body: voice is also a representative status that a community confers upon an individual. A community names its voice, while the individual voice can constitute and remake those communities in speaking. As King Watts explains, voice is a *happening*, an encounter with sound that exposes the ethical difficulties of speaking for others. Voice does not emerge fully formed from an individual speaker, nor is it only bestowed by an audience. Voice arises in the complex and mediated process of community building while simultaneously threatening to tear communities apart that feel they have not been spoken for adequately or ethically.\(^\text{13}\)

Sports figures can become important community representatives in body and language—by their own choice, but also through others’ representations of them. The concept of voice is more successful than agency at capturing the bodily persuasion of athletes (even if, at times, the concept of voice is used in a strict sense to connote sonic persuasion alone). However, King Watts’s broad reliance on an abstract invocation of “community” in his writing on voice is less capacious than more recent concepts of distributed agency. Rather than a dialectical, almost call-and-response relationship between speaker and community, newer theories about agency offer a more sophisticated and nuanced theoretical understanding of how a variety of agents with different amounts of power and influence can come together to create voice.

This conjunction of concepts—agency and voice—is especially relevant to the sports documentary. The sports documentary film is an effective medium and genre through which

\(^{13}\) King Watts, 185.
athletes serve as community representatives. Interviewees who appear in documentaries often implicitly represent particular communities or stakeholders, and featured athletes often similarly hold some sort of representative status for a viewing audience. As Daniel A. Grano notes, building on King Watts’s work, contemporary sports culture longs for “heroic voice,” a sense of timeless and decontextualized moral order instilled and instantiated through athletes’ actions and words. Heroic voice—not to be conflated with what I call heroic agency—appears “as a paradigm of virtues and values that ultimately transcend any particular body, political moment, or career” and becomes “a reverberant presence through technological reproduction” that exceeds any single athletic body.\footnote{Daniel A. Grano, “Muhammad Ali Versus the ‘Modern Athlete’: On Voice in Mediated Sports Culture,” \textit{Critical Studies in Media Communication} 26.3 (Aug. 2009): 194.} Extending Joshua Gunn’s work on haunting at the intersection of technological mediation and ghostly agency, Grano suggests that the athlete’s voice, through “various disembodiments, recombinations, co-optations, and overlays,” is turned into a haunting presence that fulfills the need of contemporary public memory.\footnote{Grano, 196.} The voice of the athletes fulfills some sort of need, even to the point of disembodying and distorting an athlete’s actions and words to fit a particular historical moment in a given community.

Although Grano never makes the point explicitly, he implies that such documentary practices are simultaneously necessary and deceitful. Through his case study of Muhammad Ali in the documentary \textit{Ali Rap} (2006), Grano argues that contemporary social and political commitments can cause filmmakers to abandon fidelity to the truth; director Joseph Maar’s unsubstantiated claim that Ali unknowingly invented rap music is tenuous, at best. Instead, according to Grano, Maar’s foremost purpose seems to be to sanitize Ali’s defiant and revolutionary political persona in the 1960s, a move that he argues is consistent with logics of
“popular acceptability that ground the modern athlete’s political silence.”\textsuperscript{16} In the process of reducing Ali’s complex political identity into an uncontroversial symbol of racial progress, \textit{Ali Rap} generates “scars” and “sutures” in place of real, living athlete-activists.\textsuperscript{17} Potent social and political disagreements about black athletic protest are sutured by the heroic voice of Ali presented within the documentary. Viewers who disagree with this “heroic” version of Ali the consensus-builder apparently do not belong to the same “community” or share the same public memory as the intended audience of \textit{Ali Rap}.

In short, Grano suggests that the calculations and compromises of documentary filmmaking restrict Ali’s own political voice, even as his physical voice permeates the documentary. What Ali would have wanted—an issue of intent—is difficult to determine. Viewers of the documentary are left only with the effects that Ali’s voice produces. Ali’s words and actions give him agency within the documentary, but the documentary genre brings together a host of agents involved in creating a persuasive argument about the role of Ali, the social figure. Ali’s image and word remain a constant presence on the screen—Ali’s voice rings out—but within the telling of the documentary’s narrative, he cannot be the heroic agent who wills the historiographic impression of Muhammad Ali, presented as a heroic agent of social change. In other words: Muhammad Ali is offered as a community hero even as the documentary genre does away with naïve impressions of heroic agency. The sports documentary genre, especially when it profiles individual athletes, performs this fundamental paradox: the heroic agency of star athletes is lauded even as the documentary practices a much more sophisticated understanding of agency to create persuasion. The voice of the athlete that appears in sports documentaries is the byproduct of the interaction of countless agents. Although—as I suggested above—agency is

\textsuperscript{16} Grano, 209.
\textsuperscript{17} Grano, 209.
difficult to quantify, an athlete’s intention may be entirely absent from a documentary that uses an athlete to make a social or political argument. Such sports documentaries feature “absent athletes.”

Often in sports documentaries, absent athletes’ social importance is framed through a narrative of martyrdom. The death of an athlete is used to make a social or political argument by a director or interviewees featured within the documentary. That argument can only be made as a result of the athlete’s absence. For instance, in the ESPN 30 for 30 documentary Without Bias (2009), directed by Kirk Fraser, the basketball player Len Bias is unable to appear because he died of a cocaine overdose two days after being taken second overall by the Boston Celtics in the 1986 NBA Draft. In Bias’s absence, an argument is mounted about his importance as a social agent that builds from the four-act structure of the documentary. The first quarter of the film quotes a predominantly African-American group of Washington, D.C. sportswriters, former opponents, and coaches to memorialize Bias’s playing ability in hagiographic terms. They insist upon his on-court prowess and importance to residents of the D.C. area. The second quarter of the film discusses the day Bias died, with family and friends insisting that they were unaware of Bias’s drug use and suggesting that it was rare—perhaps even his first time using cocaine. If the first part of the documentary emphasizes his on-court talent, the second part establishes Bias’s character. The third quarter of the film widens the scope of Bias’s influence to address the political ramifications of Bias’s death. Just three months after Bias’s July 1986 death, a bipartisan group of law-and-order legislators in Congress passed significantly stricter “mandatory minimum” sentences for relatively minor drug possession offenses, often invoking Bias’s death as a justification to strengthen existing laws. Without intending to influence public policy, Bias acted as an agent of social change, helping to bring about a set of legislation that
critics such as Michelle Alexander have argued has disproportionately incarcerated young black men living in urban areas and labeled them as felons, a status that restricts their ability to vote and access gainful employment.\textsuperscript{18}

The final section of the documentary complicates this legacy, in an attempt to revise what Bias’s absence means. If the spectacle of Bias’s death led to bad policy at a national level, it also forced individuals to confront the cocaine epidemic of the 1980s at a personal level. Fraser moves beyond the national policy narrative by turning to media members, athletes, and even Marion Barry (the former Mayor of Washington D.C. arrested on cocaine charges in 1990), all of whom credit Bias’s death for the reformation of their own drug habits. Reflecting on Bias’s absence allows \textit{Without Bias} to mark a historic time and place: his death is, as Michael Weintraub has put it, “the day innocence died” during the cocaine epidemic of the 1980s. Jesse Jackson eulogized Bias at the time by saying that God “sometimes uses our best people to get our attention.”\textsuperscript{19} Viewers learn that Bias’s death (coupled with the additional tragedy of Bias’s 20-year-old brother Jay, murdered in a 1990 drive-by shooting) has motivated Lonise Bias, Len’s mother, to become a powerful motivational speaker. A narrative that many initially assumed would be about athletic uplift—attaining social status through on-court performance—instead turns into an educational message for a specific community conducted through mourning and memorializing. Bias is presented heroically—his death saved others’ lives during the cocaine epidemic.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The most well-known recent critique of mandatory minimum sentences for crack cocaine and its use as a tool to imprison young black men is in Michelle Alexander, \textit{The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness}, rev. ed. (New York: The New Press, 2012): 53-54; 90-93. Surprisingly, Bias’s death does not feature in the Ava DuVernay documentary \textit{13th} (2016), which traces the consequences of the “war on drugs.” As Julie Stewart, the President and Founder of Families Against Mandatory Minimums, suggests in \textit{Without Bias}, “Len’s death was the turning point for Congress,” especially those legislators looking to get reelected by energizing voters mobilized by racial fear and racial conflict in the mid-1980s.
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\end{footnotesize}
epidemic of the 1980s. The documentary’s title, *Without Bias*, suggests not only that such a project was only able to occur after Bias’s death, but also, with its sly pun on the notion of objectivity, that this is the only appropriate way to understand Bias’s absence today. As Bill Nichols notes, all documentaries can be categorized in terms of whether they care more about the social issues which they are examining or the personal portraits they are offering of specific characters. *Without Bias* demonstrates that documentaries can tackle both projects at once, turning Len Bias into a voice heard at two different registers: through national drug policy legislation and D.C.-area personal habit reformation.

Director Kirk Fraser is an active agent who helps to determine the meaning of Len Bias in the sports documentary genre. Fraser cannot accomplish this on his own; he relies upon news coverage from the 1980s, old Bias interviews, and a host of interviewees who had personal relationships to Bias or modified their drug habits as a result of his death. Two voices from outside of Bias’s orbit also affirm Fraser’s narrative. Julie Stewart, the President and Founder of Families Against Mandatory Minimums, notes that “Len’s death was the turning point for Congress” in passing mandatory minimums, especially those legislators looking to get reelected by energizing voters mobilized by racial fear and racial conflict in the mid-1980s. Eric Sterling, a former counsel to the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary from 1979 to 1989, explains that in the rush to pass laws after Bias’s death, he and his colleagues misgauged the mandatory minimum statutes; the laws were designed to punish drug traffickers, but the amount of possession stipulated for major jail time was wholly disproportionate to the crime committed. Agency is distributed among all of these actors in order to present Bias as a heroic agent of social change whose influence takes the form of martyrdom.

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The documentary scholar Bill Nichols argues that documentaries offer lessons in “axiographics,” “the implantation of values in the configuration of space, in the constitution of a gaze, and in the relation of observer and observed.”\(^{21}\) Because the primary rhetorical art of documentary is not invention but arrangement, as Erik Barnouw argues, documentary foregrounds issues of ethical representation.\(^{22}\) Documentary viewers are inserted into community conversations about the voice of the absent athlete, drawn to assess how much agency athletes have in co-constructing their voice alongside directors and interviewees featured within specific documentaries. A fundamental purpose of the most ethical sports documentaries is to train would-be passive spectators about the creation of the voice-making process in order to “shape [them] as public actors.”\(^{23}\)

In the sections that follow, I analyze the work of two prominent sports documentarians, Steve James and Amir Bar-Lev, who have used different strategies to promote the agency of sports spectators through the use of absent athletes in the sports documentary genre.

II. Absent Athletes and Children in the Sports Documentaries of Steve James

The sports documentary genre has grown in prestige over the past quarter-century, with 1994 marking a turning point in its transformation. That year, Ken Burns’s nine-part series *Baseball* aired on PBS to great acclaim, winning a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Informational Series. In the years since, the sports media network ESPN has partnered with New York City’s Tribeca Film Festival to establish an annual Tribeca/ESPN Sports Film Festival, and ESPN has produced three iterations of its acclaimed *30 for 30* series of sports documentaries, not


counting spinoff series such as 2012’s 9 for IX 40th anniversary celebration of the passage of Title IX legislation. As Travis Vogan has noted, ESPN’s 30 for 30 series has gained prestige by authorizing an auteur approach to filmmaking that allows directors to establish unique filmic styles with minimal network oversight, even though the films are marketed together using ESPN’s 30 for 30 branding.

The auteur approach to sports documentary originated with Burns and the methodological intervention of another 1994 sports documentary, Hoop Dreams, produced by Kartemquin Films and directed by Steve James.

Hoop Dreams revolutionized understandings of the subject matter of sports documentaries and how they could be filmed and produced. James has written that he and Kartemquin co-producers Peter Gilbert and Frederick Marx initially wanted to film a single Chicago basketball court “populated by young dreamers, washed-up ex-ballplayers, and perhaps

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25 Vogan, ESPN, 129-135. According to Vogan, ESPN appreciates not only the cultural prestige that the 30 for 30 series has acquired, but also the low production costs associated with documentary programming, in comparison with purchasing the rights to live event broadcasting.
26 Ed M. Koziarski notes that Hoop Dreams grossed $7.8 million, the most amount of money a documentary had made in theaters to date. According to Koziarski, the documentary’s financial success helped launch “the documentary boom.” See “A dream nearly destroyed, a town divided,” Chicago Reader, January 28, 2010, http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/Allen-iwerson-documentary-steve-james-no-crossover/Content?oid=1361475.
27 In fact, the documentary was so unrecognizable to traditional documentary audiences that its Oscar-nomination snub in 1994 caused the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to create a new division for professional non-fiction filmmakers to vote on future nominees. See Steve Pond, “Celebrating the Anniversary of an Oscar Snub,” TheWrap.com, Nov. 6, 2009; and Roger Ebert, “Anatomy of a Snub,” RogerEbert.com, Feb. 26, 1995. As Pond reports, the documentary voters were until then volunteers required to attend twice-weekly screenings over the course of several months. As a result, the voters skewed older and, as Ebert reports, showed contempt for cinema verité filmmaking approaches toward living social history, in favor of authoritative accounts of historical events that had already taken place.
a pro player who hailed from there” for three to four weeks. They targeted a neighborhood in the Cabrini-Green projects in Chicago where Detroit Pistons star point guard Isiah Thomas grew up. Through St. Joseph’s High School basketball coach Gene Pingatore, who recruited inner-city kids on scholarship for his suburban powerhouse program, the filmmakers hoped to have access to Thomas. However, after filming local teenagers Arthur Agee and William Gates and their families for a month, those plans were scrapped. Instead, Agee and Gates became the preeminent focus of the documentary. Rather than a month, filming lasted for nearly five years, from the summer before high school through Agee and Gates’s first year at college. Editing *Hoop Dreams* required another two years. James describes the documentary as an example of “longitudinal filmmaking” which allowed him to present “someone’s life evolving and changing,” allowing the crew to capture “a more complex portrait and understanding of who this person is or becomes.”

Chris Cagle argues that *Hoop Dreams* is an example of a documentary with “postclassical narration”: exposition (voice-overs), observation (silence), and interaction (talking-head interviews) are intermingled in quick juxtaposition without one formal mode being prioritized. The filming style draws on *cinema vérité* traditions of ambiguous editing, open argumentation, and showing rather than telling in order to prioritize implicit rather than explicit forms of persuasion. According to Cagle, this style permits for “a slightly more democratic narration in an accessible format that communicates and resonates with audiences.” Viewers are left to decide for themselves whether or not Agee and Gates’s lives have ultimately benefited from their emphasis—or overemphasis—on basketball.

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29 James, 210.
31 Cagle, 58.
Despite the original project’s shift in focus and methodology, residue from the initial project remains in the finished form of *Hoop Dreams*. Through no intention of his own, the absent presence of NBA star Isiah Thomas haunts the documentary. In the opening minutes of *Hoop Dreams*, the Agee and Gates families are introduced and connected narratively by watching the NBA All-Star Game, which prominently features Thomas. Within poor and lower-middle-class black families in Chicago, *Hoop Dreams* suggests that the ritual viewing of NBA basketball creates imagined communities that link families who aspire to vault social class through athletic preeminence. Even as these families are connected, though, they are also put into a competition that requires assimilation to racially coded styles on- and off-court. In his only physical appearance in the film, at a showcase that Arthur attends to try to receive a scholarship to St. Joseph’s, Thomas instructs attendees that “in every neighborhood, there’s a guy who can really play, who can shoot the lights out,” but that only the players who learn “the fundamentals of team basketball” will make the St. Joseph’s team. Thomas offers a didactic parable that contrasts the improvisational black style of the neighborhood pickup game and the regimented style of state championship-caliber high school basketball. Thomas cautions that black players must adapt to the latter style in order to have a chance of high school, college, or professional success; those who do not assimilate will be returned to their neighborhoods bereft of glory and riches. This narrative is reinforced by Coach Pingatore, who critiques Arthur’s lack of “discipline” and suggests that, during his freshman year, Arthur struggled in school because he “reverted to his environment, where he came from.” The racial undertones of Pingatore’s comments are impossible to miss. Ultimately, the coach reiterates this dichotomy to explain why

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32 For more on this contrast between styles of play in basketball, see Yago Colás, “‘Ball Don’t Lie!’: Rasheed Wallace and the Politics of Protest in the National Basketball Association,” *Communication & Sport* 4.2 (2016): 123-144.
Arthur’s scholarship is revoked during his sophomore year; the Agee family cannot meet the costs of tuition and books, and Arthur must transfer to public school during the middle of a school year after embarrassingly being held out of weeks of classes at St. Joseph’s.

Both Arthur and William rely on the invocation of Isiah Thomas to chart their aspirations, though those aspirations take markedly different forms. Arthur’s use of Isiah Thomas is fanciful and mediated through consumer packaging: the undersized Arthur wears Thomas jerseys, has Thomas posters on his wall, and adopts Thomas’s number 11 and childhood nickname “Tuss” to feed his dreams of becoming a professional basketball player. After a scene where Arthur cheerily shows off basketball shoes with “TUSS” scrawled on their backs, he is shown dunking over his younger brother with a plush basketball on a miniature hoop stationed in his bedroom doorframe. The scene is shot ironically, played in slow-motion with swelling orchestral accompaniment that insinuates Arthur is play-acting a child’s fantasy. Without making the point explicitly, Hoop Dreams suggests that Arthur is unlikely to replicate Thomas’s professional success. A best-case scenario is that basketball offers Arthur an alternative to life on the street and a path to college, a path that he does eventually realize.33

While Arthur returns again and again to Isiah Thomas as an idol, Coach Pingatore and other members of the St. Joseph’s community invoke Thomas to inspire, cajole, and critique William Gates. Gates, who was ranked the top freshman prospect in the state of Illinois and received recruitment letters from elite NCAA Division-I basketball schools throughout his high

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33 As an epilogue to this motif not pictured in the documentary, Arthur would eventually go on to found the Arthur Agee Role Model Foundation in 1995. In a 2012 interview with the Denver Post, Agee said, “Our mission statement is to help underprivileged kids to understand that their role models are not professional athletes, but their parents at home.” See Christopher Dempsey, “Arthur Agee’s appearance a Hoop Dream for Nuggets’ Tim Gelt,” Denver Post, March 27, 2012, http://blogs.denverpost.com/nuggets/2012/03/27/agees-presence-chicago-hoop-dream-nuggets-pr-director/6211/.
school career, has a much more realistic opportunity of reaching the pinnacle of the sport than
Arthur. A series of interviews with white coaches, teachers, and employers make the point that
Gates has successfully met St. Joseph’s academic requirements and Pingatore’s expectation for
on-court discipline, hustle, and resolve. In a rare scene, Pingatore bolsters William’s confidence
by opining that William’s outside shot as a sophomore is better developed than Thomas’s was at
a similar age. That compliment is offered as the two watch recordings of Thomas’s high school
games to map out the next steps in William’s development. Eventually, though, the comparisons
begin to wear on William’s sense of self. After a scene where an elderly white lunchlady asks
William if he watched Isiah’s game last night, James cuts to an interview where William
laments, “The whole school sees me as Isiah Thomas. But I’m trying to build my own identity.
When I leave, I hope they’re like, ‘You’re going to be the next William Gates!’” Enrolled in a
school that values him primarily for his basketball talent and amongst a student body and faculty
that share little in common with his lower-middle-class, single-parent, urban upbringing, Gates is
only understood and framed through their knowledge of Thomas as predecessor.

Throughout the documentary, Pingatore lauds Thomas’s “total combination of
personality, confidence, talent, [and] intelligence.” So long as William appears to be a replica of
Isiah, Pingatore treats him as a star pupil to be coddled and nurtured. But as a series of
debilitating knee injuries and personal developments alter William’s trajectory, Pingatore grows
frosty toward him. Most shocking are several conversations that William relays from his junior
and senior year. According to William, Pingatore demands that he miss the birth of his daughter
in order to attend a game and abandon his girlfriend and her family’s financial needs in order to
concentrate his energies on basketball: “The only thing [Coach] said was, ‘Write them off!’
What kind of advice is that?” Amidst shots of visibly disappointed coaches and scholarship
benefactors who barely clap at the senior banquet when he is honored as the team’s most valuable player, William says, “Coach Pin always had these dreams in his head. He just wanted me to go the same route he took Isiah.” For Coach Pingatore (and by extension, William), Isiah Thomas’s experiences at St. Joseph’s provide a one-size-fits-all road map of athletic success to be emulated without deviation. Though Arthur and William invoke Thomas in different tones, he remains the only model either has of how to escape the desperation of inner-city poverty. In a documentary where he never gives a featured interview, Hoop Dreams nevertheless succeeds at demonstrating how Isiah Thomas still structures the aspirations of many black families in Chicago. The communally constructed voice of Isiah Thomas offers hope to young black boys while simultaneously circumscribing their visions of possible life paths. The longitudinal filmmaking approach of Hoop Dreams allows viewers to grasp how the force of Arthur and William’s bonds to Isiah Thomas wax and wane over time in accordance with their basketball fortunes.

Steve James’s second sports-related documentary, No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson (2010), covers some of the same themes as Hoop Dreams: both documentaries are about once-in-a-generation basketball players’ relationships to the communities in which they were raised, with the community’s varied uses of its star basketball player taking precedence over the athlete’s own thoughts about his role in the community. In Hoop Dreams, Thomas’s absence was haunting, since mediated representations of Isiah continued to govern community members’ relationship to basketball and their self-identities. In contrast, Iverson’s absence allows him to be turned into a cipher whose meaning is wrestled over and adjudicated through competing narratives. James originally wanted to feature Iverson in No Crossover, part of ESPN’s 30 for 30 series, but Iverson did not want to speak on the record about the primary event depicted in the
documentary, a racially-tinged bowling alley brawl in his hometown of Hampton, Virginia in 1993 that saw he and two other black teens arrested and sentenced to fifteen years in prison under a little-used statute, “Maiming by Mob,” that was originally designed to prosecute Ku Klux Klan members for race-based lynchings. (Local community activists successfully appealed to outgoing black governor Douglas Wilder for “conditional clemency,” allowing Iverson to finish high school before attending Georgetown University for college.) When Iverson opted out of participating, James decided instead to focus on how persistent racial tensions in the Hampton community crystallized during the Iverson trial.

In *No Crossover*, James intensifies his use of *cinéma vérité* techniques: he includes several of his questions in the film’s final cut; features himself and his film equipment in shots to note how interviewees react to the presence of the camera and lighting; and airs multiple conversations with a black cameraman where they discuss James’s understanding of race as a teenager growing up in Hampton in order to help viewers understand how the making of the documentary has not only caused simmering racial tensions in Hampton to resurface, but also allowed James the opportunity to revisit the blind spots of his well-meaning white liberalism. The documentary scholar Erik Barnouw argues that *cinéma vérité* turns the camera into a “catalyst” with a democratizing and disruptive effect, cutting beneath superficial reality to reveal inner truths that participants and interviewees might not otherwise reveal.\(^34\) Nichols writes that *cinema vérité* is a “reflexive mode” that acknowledges the difficulties of faithful representation in documentary.\(^35\)

James is reflexive about these difficulties, acknowledging that he was unable to secure interviews with several key witnesses at the bowling alley brawl and was only able to secure an

\(^{34}\) Barnouw, 253-262.  
\(^{35}\) Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 125.
interview with the former Hampton chief of police Pat Minetti after his mother “gently browbeat” him by appealing to Minetti’s recreational softball career with James’s deceased father. In an awkward encounter, Minetti stonewalls James throughout the interview before questioning what he hopes to accomplish with the finished film. Joyce Hobson, a local activist who petitioned on behalf of Iverson and two other black teens who were arrested, repeatedly refused James’s entreaties before finally relenting. James includes a conversation between the two that stands as the film’s ambivalent raison d’être:

**Hobson:** I really am reluctant to do this interview because I think again it’s critical that African Americans tell their stories. You couldn’t paint it because I lived it, I experienced it. When you look up and a story’s being told and commented on and analyzed only by white journalists then that in and of itself is very callous.

**James:** I think one of the reasons I decided to tell this story from the point of view of who I am—I’m trying to understand it as a white guy who grew up here. And I’m trying to understand what it was like for you—which I do think one can do—because if we can’t there’s no hope, you know?

**Hobson:** [skeptical] Okay…alright.

Hobson argues not only that all documentarians are incapable of mediating lived existence into truthful representations, but furthermore, that the ethnicity of the journalist producing sports media can be a subtly determining factor in coverage of stories, especially when considering white representations of African-American experience. James’s literal response attempts to temper Hobson’s disqualifying claim, while the formal response of cinéma vérité techniques in No Crossover acknowledges that much of the work of the film is to try to get a white filmmaker and white audiences to understand Iverson’s plight from the perspective of blacks in the Hampton area.

To his credit, James recognizes Hobson’s challenge and attempts to model what it might mean to try to understand Iverson’s arrest from a black perspective. It means listening to as many people as possible who are willing to talk about how Iverson’s arrest revealed community
squabbles, including fractures between middle-class blacks who distanced themselves from Iverson while preaching a politics of respectability and lower-class blacks looking to stand up for one of their own in Iverson. To reach an ethical perspective also requires acknowledging his shortcomings with regard to race while he lived in Hampton: James never actively challenged those who callously used racial epithets, and although he played high school basketball on a mixed-race team, he never spent time at the home of any of his black teammates. James ultimately renders a complex but sympathetic judgment toward his actions in the years since the bowling alley brawl. As Joe Leydon wrote in a review of the documentary, *No Crossover* emulates the famous Akira Kurosawa film *Rashomon* (1950) in presenting complementary and sometimes contradictory versions of events without clearly privileging one interpretation.36

Even without Iverson consenting to be interviewed for the documentary, James has said that he “endeavored to make sure [Iverson is] heard” in *No Crossover*.37 One of the ways that James accomplishes this is by featuring Iverson’s athletic prowess and allowing other interviewees to narrate the values that his athletic style represents to them. This tactic allows James to demonstrate differing cultural associations toward particular styles of play, a decision that reasserts Coach Pingatore and Isiah Thomas’s distinction between playground style and disciplined style in *Hoop Dreams*. Regardless of whether Iverson intended his athletic style to represent a particular set of values, Hampton viewers have drawn their own conclusions about what Iverson’s famous crossover dribble and go-it-alone fearlessness means. And in offering a plausible and fair-minded explanation about why Iverson is justified in not wanting to revisit

what was likely the most harrowing moment of his life, James acknowledges that silence itself can be a mode of agency, even in a genre that privileges effusive and revealing testimony.\(^\text{38}\) *No Crossover* offers an explicit and generous acknowledgement that, at least in some cases, public forgetting may be as valuable as public remembrance for community healing.

Steve James’s most recent sports documentary, *Head Games* (2012), differs markedly from his films on basketball and race. James uses a source text, the similarly titled 2006 book by Concussion Legacy Foundation founding executive director Christopher Nowinski, as a guidepost for his analysis. Nowinski, who played college football at Harvard University, began researching the prevalence of athletic concussions after he was forced to retire prematurely from a career in professional wrestling due to recurring headaches. Nowinski offers much of the context and narration in the film; James’s usual inclinations toward *c cinéma vérité* techniques are muted.

Instead, fitting his techniques to his subject matter, James relies on some of the visual styles and narrative modes of science documentaries in *Head Games*. Most of the documentary is based on interviews with scientists and athletes who have suffered concussions and footage of athletic events, which produces a “reality effect” in an expository mode. Several scenes also attempt to explain the symptoms and science behind brain injuries in sports through a combination of reenactments, symbolic visuals, and digital animations. Nowinski is depicted retreating to a dim locker room in the bowels of an arena and lying down on the cold concrete of the locker room floor after a wrestling match where he suffered temporary memory loss, demonstrating the lengths to which athletes will go to hide concussion symptoms that threaten their financial livelihoods. Brain science is digitally animated and explained in metaphoric terms.

\(^{38}\) For more on silence as a rhetorical art, see Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).
A neurologist likens the brain to a Jell-O mold and components of its white matter axons to a garden hose and railroad tracks within that garden hose that carry nerve impulses between neurons and can be permanently damaged by dynamic concussive injuries. By casting the components of the brain in metaphoric terms, Smith provides viewers who do not understand brain science a relative sense of the fragility of the brain. In a third scene, Nowinski’s former college roommate, Isiah Kacyvenski, recounts a hit he suffered during an NFL game as the play is digitally reenacted in monochrome animation. The hit, which blindsides Kacyvenski as he prepares to make a special teams tackle, is accompanied by the sound of television static and the flickering fragmentation of Kacyvenski’s digital body. The reenactment depicts Kacyvenski’s blurred vision and tinnitus and metaphorically suggests that the brain is like a television that receives signals; too many concussions will disrupt the brain’s ability to project in color and with clarity. Whereas televisions might be upgraded and replaced, however, James suggests that brain-altering hits leave permanent and irreversible damage.39

Head Games is the only James documentary that relies upon absent athletes as martyrs—with good reason. While Isiah Thomas was no longer the focal point of Hoop Dreams and Allen Iverson did not consent to be interviewed in No Crossover, the absent athletes of Head Games are deceased. Their stories are told by family members and doctors; they have likely died as a result of the effects of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a progressive degenerative disease commonly found in professional athletes who suffered repetitive traumatic brain injury. CTE initially causes short-term memory loss, erratic behavior, and poor judgment (and CTE has been linked to domestic violence, though not definitively); long-term effects include dementia,

impeded speech, tremors, and suicidality. There are no ways to test for CTE among living patients; the disease is only diagnosed after death, often through the density of Tau protein deposits in the gray matter of the brain. These athletes’ injury histories are voiced by family members who recount the despondent and debilitating final days of these athletes’ lives, and the athletes are only made present through scenes featuring Ann McKee, a Professor of Neurology and Pathology at Boston University School of Medicine who dissects athletes’ brains at the CTE Center’s Brain Bank in Bedford, Massachusetts. Due to confidentiality agreements between families of athletes and the Brain Bank, individual athletes’ brains are rarely identified and discussed except to draw generalizations. Yet James includes multiple instances of McKee slicing into anonymous athletes’ brains. The scenes may be particularly harrowing to any athlete who has competed in contact sports. The reduction of the renowned athlete from virtuosic body to lifeless, bodiless brain offers a warning to future athletes about the risks of chronic traumatic impact. The same careers that can elevate athletes’ status and give them a sense of meaning can cause them to die young.

In addition to relying on absent athletes to indicate the danger of concussions, James also turns to children. Many parents—including former professional athletes who have suffered multiple concussions, such as the hockey player Keith Primeau—admit degrees of ambivalence about their children pursuing athletic passions in contact sports. Parents want to allow their children to benefit from the physical, psychological, and social effects of youth sports, including highly competitive youth sports. At the same time, they struggle to recognize concussions and how to decide when and whether to pull their children from athletics when the risks become too great. Research is still so preliminary that there is no hard and fast way to diagnose when an
athlete should retire from a contact sport, but the brains that Ann McKee dissects do reveal the consequences of playing for too long and enacting permanent damage.

Steve James’s sports documentaries take spectators of sports spectacle and turns them into active agents in the co-creation of athletes’ social importance. Usually, James accomplishes this through the invocation of the figure of children. James often suggests that how sport is used to develop children’s lives should be among the foremost concerns that spectators should have. In *Hoop Dreams*, children use Isiah Thomas as a model to guide their basketball aspirations. In *No Crossover*, Allen Iverson is still legally a child when he is arrested, though his ethnicity and status as a premier athlete cause many Hampton residents to regard him (and wish to see him tried) as an adult. And in *Head Games*, James uses children to signal the urgency with which sports leagues and concussion researchers need to develop safer sports and more easy-to-use tools to diagnose and treat concussions. Children are central stakeholders in the communities that James forms with each documentary, and one of the primary functions of absent athletes in James’s sports documentaries is to act as role models or cautionary tales for future generations of athletes. In *Hoop Dreams*, children want to become elite athletes; in *Head Games*, elite athletes retire and become coaches for their children. By recognizing the permeability of the categories of athlete and spectator, James insists that both sets of parties are required to assess athletes’ social importance.

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40 One of the documentary’s executive producers, Steve Devick, is a co-pioneer of the King-Devick test used to diagnose concussions on the sideline during games. Any mention of the King-Devick test was scrapped from the final version of the documentary as a potential conflict of interest. For a critique of the documentary’s potential conflicts, see Daniel Engber, “*Head Games,*” *Slate*, Sept. 20, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/movies/2012/09/head_games_documentary_steve_james_new_movie_about_concussions_overstates_the_evidence_on_head_injuries_in_sports_.html.
In the next section, I focus on the sports documentaries of Amir Bar-Lev. Perhaps because he does not focus on the permeability of the categories of athletes and spectators, he offers more direct warning to spectators. Bar-Lev treats absent athletes as tools through which he can highlight and then subvert the rhetorical work of sports spectacle.

III. Absent Athletes and the Critique of Spectacle in the Sports Documentaries of Amir Bar-Lev

Amir Bar-Lev is, in his own words, “not a sports fan.” Before attending film school, his academic training was in comparative religion, and Bar-Lev takes an eye for religious institutions and the subsequent power relationships that they create among people into his documentary projects.41 Both The Tillman Show (2010) and Happy Valley (2014) recognize the near-religious forms of devotion that sport can inculcate among its most ardent spectators. Bar-Lev capitalizes on the absence of central athletic figures in both documentaries to demonstrate how myth and spectacle problematically characterize many people’s relationships to sport before suggesting that the documentary is a preferable alternative to spectacle.

The Tillman Story chronicles the life of former Arizona Cardinals safety Pat Tillman (1976-2004), including Tillman’s decision to leave the National Football League in order to enlist in the Marines with his brother Kevin in June 2002. The Tillman Story is not a hagiographic biopic, however; it delves into the contested details of Tillman’s death. Tillman was initially awarded a posthumous Silver Star for heroism in combat during the mission in which he was killed; only after investigations launched by Tillman’s parents is it revealed that Pat was killed by friendly fire. The family’s grief at losing Pat is on full display, but that grief is exacerbated by the public memorialization of Tillman after his death. The military and National

41 Personal communication, June 9, 2016.
Football League mythologized Tillman as a selfless patriot and a martyr for American freedoms in order to help lift morale during two unpopular wars. In the process, they glossed important complicating details in Pat’s life: he was not religious and had signed papers declaring he did not want a military funeral, he had declared to colleagues that he believed the Iraq War to be illegal, and he planned on voting for John Kerry in 2004. In wanting to know more about the circumstances in which their son died, the Tillman family runs into a vast military-government bureaucracy full of individuals eager to displace accountability for covering up the friendly-fire accident. Meanwhile, the Tillmans were further angered as the United States military and the institution of professional football became more intertwined through carefully choreographed military spectacles held during games and a shared language heavy on vocabulary of games and battle.⁴²

Bar-Lev uses two linked sets of contrasts—surface/depth and public/private—to criticize the spectacular nature of media coverage on Tillman. The superficial, public version of the story is told in most media outlets. Emblematic of how Tillman mythology gets perpetuated is a scene Bar-Lev includes of conservative television pundit Ann Coulter on Fox News, who unflinchingly refuses to believe that Tillman read the author Noam Chomsky and planned to vote for Kerry despite clear evidence. Coulter’s need for Tillman to represent a particular set of values and political positions is at once deeply cynical and affectively felt.⁴³ As Stan Goff, a military

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⁴³ Why Coulter holds to a belief in the mutual exclusivity of presumed war hero and presumed liberal is never stated—though it may be because the politicization of football in American culture has broken on familiar fault lines, between those conservatives upholding “a cherished American institution” against, in their view, “those who would make us a softer, wussier people.” See Bryan Curtis, “The conservative case for football,” *Grantland.com*, November 5, 2014, http://grantland.com/features/the-conservative-case-for-football-nfl-politics-republican-democrat-concussion/.
veteran who helped the Tillman family piece together and decode redacted military files, argues about Tillman’s death, too many people “want to take all the complexities of a real-world mission and reduce them to a fable.” As Pat’s widow Marie Ugenti Tillman develops the point, politicians and media outlets “would take parts of who [Pat] was and magnify those to suit their purpose.” What Goff calls “the public dimension to Pat Tillman” became inaccessible to the Tillman family until they responded by participating in *The Tillman Story*. As Ian McDonald argues, sports documentaries exist in a location between traditional sports media and traditional documentaries because they trade upon the vibrant audiovisual quality of the live athletic event to draw in typical sports viewers, while still adhering to some of the “discourses of sobriety” that Bill Nichols argues are attendant to the documentary genre. Those discourses of sobriety, Bar-Lev seems to argue, are necessary to counter the baser tendencies of spectacle, which allow powerful institutions to craft narratives unchallenged by passive spectators.

Bar-Lev’s critique of sports spectacle and audience passivity is intensified in his second sports documentary, *Happy Valley* (2014). *Happy Valley* is a modified example of “longitudinal filmmaking” that tracks the thoughts and feelings of a number of members of the Penn State community in the aftermath of the November 2011 arrest of Jerry Sandusky on dozens of charges related to child sexual assault. Bar-Lev filmed for roughly a year, attempting to capture how local residents’ thoughts and feelings were constantly swayed by news media accounts,

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44 Ian McDonald, “Situating the Sport Documentary,” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 31.3 (Aug. 2007): 210; and Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001): 39. Nichols refers to the discourses of sobriety as “the ways we have of speaking directly about social and historical reality such as science, economics, medicine, military strategy, foreign policy, and educational policy.” According to Nichols, a sober register is required in such fields because they concern real-life problems, and solutions proposed in such fields have real-world consequences. Longform investigative print journalism also likely falls under the discourses of sobriety and is another genre in which a more well-rounded story of Tillman’s death was told. See Jon Krakauer, *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).
especially stories concerning the iconic football coach, Joe Paterno, who was alleged of mishandling knowledge of Sandusky’s crimes, fired by the university’s Board of Trustees, and died of cancer in January 2012. Because of his death but also because of his mythologization on Penn State’s campus due to his forty-five-year head-coaching tenure, Paterno is the absent sports figure at the heart of *Happy Valley*.

The documentary opens with a foggy shot of rolling hills in State College. The idyllic beauty of the natural world is disturbed as the camera zooms out to include a row of portable toilets in the foreground. The space is invaded by a caravan of trucks and RVs; it is a football weekend in University Park. As fans begin tailgating and preparing to enter Beaver Stadium, Joe Paterno is featured for the first time in an old interview, presenting college football as community-oriented escapist pleasure. “College football is something special, it really is,” Paterno concludes. “Hopefully we never lose sight of that or screw it up.” The rest of *Happy Valley* indict members of the community on just those charges—including Paterno himself.

*Happy Valley* tracks how ongoing media coverage transforms the town and its perceptions of Paterno. In an early scene, lyrics from the somber and nostalgic Wilco song “Country Disappeared” accompany a shot of camera crews manically assembling in front of the small Centre County courthouse: “You’ve got the helicopters dangling, angling to shoot / The shots to feed the hungry weekend news crew anchorman.” The spectacle of mass media is configured as rapacious, but also a force that captures how crowds act differently than individuals. (Bar-Lev recycles mass media coverage where students topple a news van after Paterno’s dismissal, chant “Fuck Sandusky,” and generally act uncivilized because of the presence of the camera.) Each mass media revelation about new charges or a possible administrative cover-up registers in the community’s shifting Paterno mythology. A statue of Joe
Paterno is removed and muralist Michael Pilato constantly refines the intricate symbolism of the downtown Inspiration mural in response to the pendular shifts of community reaction to each new development. As Amir Bar-Lev described the community’s shifting allegiances, “In the course of two months, wearing a Joe Paterno t-shirt went from having a set of symbolic values that made it close to a Santa Claus t-shirt to wearing a set of values that made it closer to a Dead Kennedys t-shirt. People who had never thought of themselves as countercultural became countercultural for the first time in their lives.” As the documentary scholar Bill Nichols writes, the “process of mythologization works in two directions, transforming the dead into the eternally remembered and taking from the living something of their historical specificity.” As the community contested how to remember Joe Paterno, the historical person faded. In lieu of more complicated representations of his legacy, factional affiliations emerged not unlike the process of rooting for a particular sports team against a hated rival.

Within this communally toxic environment, Bar-Lev features Penn State communications professor Matt Jordan as a voice who is able to assess the situation with a more long-term view, as both an insider and outsider. Jordan is given pride of place near the film’s conclusion to assess developments in the community through fall 2012, when a large contingent of fans begins adopting the same near-religious attachment toward new football coach Bill O’Brien that they held toward Paterno—a major component of the “culture of reverence for the football program that is ingrained at all levels of the campus community” that the university-commissioned Freeh

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45 Personal communication, June 9, 2016.
46 Nichols, Representing Reality, 254.
Report condemned. Jordan carefully monitors his pronoun use to distance himself selectively from those whose fervor for football exceeds reason:

**Jordan:** They have wanted to quickly replace a powerful symbol with another powerful symbol—long live the king after the old king is dead. They are effectively trying to reestablish faith in something. For a year and a half, people didn’t know what to do around here. The screaming crowd, what does it do with all its energy? It’s looking for its next symbol to attach all that energy to. And now that there is one available, it’s like a magnet. It’s gonna go there. You would think that they would be less ready to anoint a new king after all that happened. We all want to think that we live in a better world than we do, so people avoid taking a deep look at something that is troubling, and it’s pretty easy to do when there’s a big, shiny, loud spectacle.

Jordan’s sonorous tone offers a voiceover to an array of visual footage in this penultimate scene. This scene challenges arguments that suggested that the community needed to “move on” from the Sandusky scandal: a shot of consumers purchasing Bill O’Brien paraphernalia at a local clothing store suggests cynical capitalist motivations behind the communal energy toward football; a steady focus is placed on two wildly cheering fans at a Penn State game until the din of the crowd becomes first ecstatic and then unbearably loud; and finally, the pomp and circumstance of the marching band and cheerleaders correspond with Jordan’s line about “a big, shiny, loud spectacle.”

Jordan offers the most explicitly Debordian understanding of sports within the documentaries discussed in this chapter. To him, the spectacle of college football is ultimately and only a distraction: in his final line in the film, he suggests that “the rest of life is going on, and [these spectators are] not paying attention.” Embracing and uncritically mythologizing the newest coach is not a healthy way of coping with the problems that have been uncovered within the community. It is only in the absence of iconic athletes that more thoughtful forms of

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reflection might take place. The documentary might permit what the spectacular sporting event does not. *Happy Valley* subtly forwards Jordan, Pilato, and the lawyer Andrew Shubin as critical citizens who continually reevaluate the role of football in the community and are willing to step away from the sport and its mythological figures when they no longer benefit all the members of the community.

**IV. Conclusion**

Sports documentary is a genre that, when paired with the trope of athletic absence, often strips athletes of the agency to indicate how their on-field and off-field exploits should be equated with social and political values, beliefs, and policies—or about the relationship between sport and society more generally. However, when done well, these same documentaries can enjoin and empower spectators less as passive consumers and more as active agents. In both James’s and Bar-Lev’s sport documentaries, thoughtful viewers are asked to forensically analyze the consequences of past spectacles and to deliberate better paths forward. What have we done, documentary asks, and what might we do instead?

Absent athletes are not an extraordinary trope within sports documentary; their typicality is what makes them worthy of study. In an echo of Alcoff, Nichols notes that most documentaries’ representation process can be summarized as, “I speak about *them* to *you*.”

Issues of agency and voice permeate all documentaries, even if sports documentaries face the slightly unique challenging of depicting and moving beyond sports media’s common narratives of heroic agency. Ethical documentaries attempt to honor the perspectives of those athletes who may not be able to or may not want to speak for themselves, while acknowledging that athletes’ social importance arises through communal decision-making processes. When done well, these

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documentaries stimulate “epistephilia” in their audiences, a desire to know that extends beyond the length of the end credits.⁴⁹ Beyond a desire to know, however, is a desire to continue to feel affection, sympathy, and understanding for the viewpoints provided and represented. Because they feature interviews with individuals and have the ability to integrate image and sound, documentaries will always have the pull of “affectivity,” what Vogan calls “the capacity to exert emotional and even bodily effects on spectators.”⁵⁰ Open-ended, inquiring, emotionally thoughtful documentaries have the capacity to create publics that are motivated through and beyond spectacle. These publics can become, in Michael Warner’s words, “scenes of self-activity” that are historically located and grounded in “active participation rather than ascriptive belonging.”⁵¹ By challenging viewers to distinguish between mass hysteria and individual thoughtfulness—to move from being spectators of sport to active agents in the co-creation of sports’ meaning in various communities—sports documentaries model the distinction between a crowd and a public. At least in the genre of sports documentary, when athletes’ voices are not heard, it is an opportunity for spectators to gain agency.

**Conclusion:**

**Do Not #sticktosports**

“What do they know of sport who only sport know?” Douglas Hartmann includes this epigraph at the outset of *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete* (2003), his study of John Carlos and Tommy Smith’s Olympic podium protest during the 1968 Mexico City Summer Olympics.¹ The rhetorical question is a broad gloss on the central thesis of C. L. R. James’s *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), a Black Marxist cultural analysis of the role of cricket in West Indian culture. James, the progenitor of academic sports studies, suggests that cricketers were largely unaware of how the sport’s rise among nations formerly colonized by the United Kingdom helped lead to racial and national pride and important symbolic forms of progress, such as playing test cricket at the Imperial Cricket Conference for the first time in 1926 and the appointment of Frank Worrell as the first black captain of the West Indies cricket team in 1960.

In a reciprocal process, symbolic achievements in the realm of sport could lead to material consequences in political life, or changing social circumstances could be reflected in athletic milestones. Until *Beyond a Boundary*, however, the examination of the relationship between sport and society had never been considered worthy of academic scrutiny. James begins remedying this lacuna in prose that is by turns autobiographical and full of rich social context and racial and class analysis. In mixing these forms of writing and reflecting on his own experiences as an athlete, James testifies to the ways that “knowledge-making habits and practices cannot be extricated from the body.”² More than any other single text, *Beyond a

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*Boundary* created a path that makes this dissertation—on athletes’ relationship to social movements in a context of sports spectacle—legible, if not possible.

In a 50th anniversary retrospective on the book, Selma James restated her late husband’s argument in visually evocative phrasing. “What do they know of cricket, or anything,” she asked, “if it is walled off from every other aspect of life and struggle?” In her reckoning, sport too often is divorced from issues of politics, economics, technology, culture, and society more broadly. Only when athletes break the proverbial walls down would they realize that their profession is a matter of public concern and deliberation beyond the partisanship of fandom and the manufactured controversies of sports media punditry. Only when such walls are destroyed will a lasting platform develop for the “athlete as citizen.” This model of citizenship is not extraordinary, either; in her locution, sport and civic participation are bound inextricably as part of life, which she equates with struggle. In claiming struggle as common to all forms of life, she defuses the charge that athletes are too privileged to participate in social movements, while also subtly encouraging latent citizens to begin flexing their civic might.

For the walls that James identifies to be broken down, they must first be identified. There are a variety of factors inhibiting the possibility of athletes coming to understand themselves as participants in civic life. As I’ve discussed elsewhere, corporate sponsorship deals and scrupulously agnostic team cultures dissuade some athletes from choosing to participate in civic life. Other athletes may feel as though they lack sufficient models for how to influence the civic, though hopefully this dissertation has established that there is no paucity of contemporary athlete-activists. In fact—and without typology and needless classification—each athlete profiled

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within this dissertation offers a unique model of how athletes can engage in movements for social change. Social influence can happen intentionally or unintentionally, on court and off, and through a variety of media and genres that can convey an athlete’s style and ideas. A televised tennis match does different work than a memoir, and image-event protests work through different tactics than sports documentaries. Some athletes may opt not to speak out because of complacency with the status quo, which often benefits the athletically gifted. Nevertheless, perhaps the foremost constraint upon the modes of athletic activism is an athlete’s own imagination.

The work of cultivating that imagination does not belong to athletes alone. Sports media members and sports fans also have to welcome the breaking down of walls between sport and society, as well. One central reason why athletes (and those who cover them) may refrain from participating in civic life is that sports fans have attempted to stifle the civic capacity of athletes. In the contemporary moment, one manifestation of this attempt to restrict athletes’ civic voice is through the social media hashtag “#sticktosports,” which takes Hartman’s question, reverses its logic, and makes it into an imperative.

I. #sticktosports as Ideograph

The threat of boycotting the consumption of sport spectacle has become the go-to rhetorical tactic for fans dismissive of athletic activism. Using digital social media, fans chastise both athletes and sports journalists whose commentary they believe veers too far from the occasion of the sporting event. Tweets with this desire are often accompanied by the hashtag “#sticktosports.” I consider such tweets “rhetorical documents,” empirical evidence of what Michael Calvin McGee calls an “ideograph,” which carries “the capacity to dictate decision and
control public belief and behavior.” Often such expressions are borne out of political disagreements that spectators have with athletes and journalists. However, rather than disagreeing substantively with an argument at the stasis point of fact, definition, value, or action, spectators often attempt to disqualify such speech entirely, rather than treating it as one voice among others in ongoing public deliberation. Several propositions are typically nested within social media messages that adopt the hashtag #sticktosports. I organize the propositions here from their most specific to most general claims:

1) The athlete, journalist, or media outlet is unqualified or ill-informed to offer social or political commentary on a particular issue.

2) The athlete, journalist, or media outlet should restrict public expression to a strictly defined professional domain: what happens on the field.

3) Any social or political statements can fundamentally compromise a fan’s relationship to the real purpose of sports: the aesthetic appreciation and entertainment of the athlete’s bodily labor.

4) The realm of sports can and should be preserved as a unifying and entirely presentist space of phatic communication divorced from issues of divisive social contention.

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5 Michael Calvin McGee, “The Ideograph: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 66.1 (Feb. 1980): 5. I walk in McGee’s footsteps throughout this dissertation in many ways, but among the foremost is my agreement that “ideology” and “myth” are necessary supplemental terms that are required in order to theorize the indeterminate amount of human agency that individual actors possess while at the same time belonging to social collectives constrained by various forms of institutional power. Athletes and spectators grow up disciplined by the capitalism- and order-preserving ideograph #sticktosports, yet athletes’ and spectators’ “complex biographies, personalities, and idiosyncracies” shape individual relationships to the expression of and adherence to the ideograph. The latter quotation is from James M. Jasper, The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997): xi.
Because individual propositions are rarely exhibited in isolation, a series of examples can help illustrate these claims. Although the belief that athletes should restrict their public expression has long existed, the first explicit use of the hashtag #sticktosports on Twitter, from 2010, challenges the sports media network ESPN:

Although the author of the tweet never explicitly notes the “history lesson” that ESPN’s SportsCenter highlight show attempted to teach, she is likely referring to a feature segment that linked the NFL’s New Orleans Saints’ victory in the 2010 NFC Championship to the city’s rebuilding and rebranding efforts after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. This style of #sticktosports tweet may challenge the connection between sports and a political or social issue as tenuous:

Some of these tweets dispute a social issue’s relevance to the world of sports entirely, such as coverage on the Confederate Flag’s symbolic usage within the world of NASCAR. Other tweets dispute the logic of a particular argument as tenuous, such as when Bob Costas—in a lengthy

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monologue during halftime coverage of NBC’s Sunday Night Football—connected former Kansas City Chief Jovan Belcher’s 2012 murder of his girlfriend and suicide to ongoing debates about gun control policies in the United States. 

As an extension of the challenge of relevancy, other #sticktosports tweets contest the competence or accuracy of sports media’s coverage of social issues:

These tweets do not explicitly identify themselves in favor of or in opposition to a particular political leaning. Instead, they assert that sportswriters lack the professional training or necessary background research to cover certain issues—although they do not dispute the link between athletics and political issues.

All of the above tweets challenge the professional work of individuals and outlets within sports media. A related but distinct strand of #sticktosports discourse criticizes athletes and journalists who offer political commentary in their roles as citizens, outside of their professional domain:

That Costas seems to spur the ire of more #sticktosports tweets than any other journalist or athlete is perhaps due to the prominence his segments receive on well-watched live event programming. Costas also has a performative tendency toward moral grandstanding that many viewers assume to be a put-on for the purpose of enhancing the negligible social function of the sports media. For a history of this transformation of the sportswriter into a social justice crusader, see Bryan Curtis, “How Muhammad Ali Woke Up Sportswriters,” TheRinger.com, June 4, 2016.
The initial tweet by @JankeStephen suggests that appreciation for an athlete should reside fundamentally in his or her style of play. The author wishes that former NBA forward Charles Barkley would limit his public expression to issues of sports commentary. Barkley’s political utterances, including a 1993 Nike commercial in which he declares, “I am not a role model,” in addition to an expressed desire to run for Governor of Alabama in the late 2000s, complicate and trouble an aesthetic appreciation of his on-court bodily labors.

One response that sports spectators have available to them is the boycotting of athletic speech. The user @Joyner_0 stakes his boycott on a disagreement over a presidential candidate. He lumps both “athletes” and “celebrities” together as figures who may deserve social prominence but nevertheless should not use that prominence to stump for candidates whose policies he dislikes. He offers what he believes is his only means of recourse: trying to remove a
modicum of that prominence, as though the quantity of one’s “followers” equates to the force and reach of one’s political voice. Between 2010—when #sticktosports first appeared—and 2016, it did become a cultural commonplace that the quantification of one’s social media audience was somehow relevant to one’s social standing. In looking to preserve this presumed marker of rhetorical agency—which often doubles as an implicit belief in quantification as a measure of the wealth of one’s personal brand—many athletes and sports journalists now explicitly warn their followers before they engage in discussions that may touch upon issues unrelated to their professional expertise. As seen in the final two tweets above, sports journalists now feel obliged to demarcate the transition from their professional identities to their roles as citizens. Posts about family, travels, and philanthropy rarely receive the same qualification, as though exercising one’s civic voice requires a trigger warning.

Most interesting, however, are those #sticktosports tweets that lay bare not disagreements over a political policy or challenges to the logic or evidence of a particular claim, but rather sports spectators’ near-hysterical demand that the spectacle of sports must be maintained as a realm devoid of any political content, a space for phatic communication that offers spectators what Johan Huizinga described as a “magic circle,” a supposed “escape” from “the real world” of politics.

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9 Although it is outside the boundaries of the project as I am asserting it here, other recent developments in the #sticktosports hashtag are of note. As the hashtag has taken on layers of self-reflexive irony, one of its most widespread contemporary uses is as a self-deprecating preface to photos or videos of users failing at tasks where they perceive themselves to be in over their heads, from cooking to singing and dancing. Professional athletes occasionally engage in this usage of #sticktosports, but the vast majority are amateur athletes and spectators.
Both @fspencer927 and @VavisTrance offer a belief that sport works best as an escape valve “to get away” from political and social issues, in order to prevent oneself from “losing [one’s] mind.” So common is the collective social desire to use sports as an alternative to worthwhile public deliberation that, in 2013, the Washington D.C. Metro Authority traded upon the #sticktosports ideograph in visual advertisements for the reliability of its buses. In one ad, a text bubble beside one man reads, “A Metrobus travels about 8,260 miles between breakdowns. Didn’t know that, did you?” An exhausted-looking interlocutor responds, “Can’t we just talk about sports?” Though the advertisement is light-hearted in tone, its use of the word “just” strips sports of any social relevancy. The realm of athletics is presented as a realm of passive spectatorship. Sticking to sports is more effortless than and clearly preferable to learning a single fact about a city’s public transportation system. Even as this caricature of the “stick to sports”

There were also problematic gender implications at work in the D.C. Metro advertisements. Another ad features two women talking to each other; rather than asking about sports, one asks the other, “Can’t we just talk about shoes?” Assuming the sports is a domain that “belongs” to men is another way to restrict its social usefulness while at the same time promoting a regressive politics. See Dana Hedgpeth, “Metro defends ‘shoes’ ad some call sexist,” Washington Post, Dec. 5, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/dr-gridlock/wp/2013/12/05/metro-defends-ad-some-call-sexist/?utm_term=.d5ed73aa0f92.
position is mildly derided, the audience is presumed to sympathize and identify with the world-weary sports fan.

The #sticktosports ideograph is a subtle form of rhetorical discipline that attempts to assert a strict demarcation upon athletes’ and sports media’s ability to discuss contentious social issues—and to limit sports of its connections to social and political life. Those who adhere to a #sticktosports ideology herald athletics for its presumed social function as a place apart from the potential divisiveness of public deliberation, a necessary site for phatic conversation that can hold together the existing order of society (a system rather implausibly characterized as hanging together by duct tape and conservative will, rather than powerful institutions of social reproduction and dominant quantities of cultural and financial resources). When social justice issues are asserted within the domain of sports (an assertion that is usually framed as an “intrusion” or a “distraction” from the primary goal of winning sporting events), they are read as evidence of cultural fragmentation, or worse:

Image 10: Anti-Jenner #sticktosports tweet

As the above tweet by @gtwentz demonstrates, and as Robert Silverman has noted, the “stick to sports” ideograph frames social issues’ intrusion upon sports as a form of “cultural decay,” a challenge to the existing order of things.¹² In other words, I mean to suggest that the “stick to sports” ideology contains a political viewpoint that masquerades as a form of non-politics. To argue that popular athletes cannot stake a claim to political thought is—at least in certain

sports—a form of disenfranchisement that disproportionately affects a population of Americans who are routinely disenfranchised in other, more overt ways. The spectacle of sports simply offers financial compensation and celebrity to some of these athletes for their complicity; the rhetorical possibilities to enact social change within the spectacle of sports most often lie dormant. Furthermore, in continuation of a point that I make near the end of the chapter on gay male athlete coming out narratives, when fans such as @gtwentz are allowed to wall sports off from the rest of society and dedicate themselves strictly to sports, they construct intentional spaces of ignorance that allow them to enact further rhetorical violence—misgendering and misnaming Caitlyn Jenner is very much akin to the sports fans who refused to acknowledge Cassius Clay and Lew Alcindor as Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

This conclusion’s title, “Do Not #sticktosports,” serves as a double injunction. It is a challenge to athletes not to limit their public expression to the world of sports, and to notice those occasions in which problems within the institutional confines of sport are manifestations of larger structural issues within American society. Such an effort demands that athletes attain a minimum level of cultural literacy on pressing social issues, an effort toward which both athletes and those tasked with educating them bear responsibility. Secondly, the injunction not to stick to sports is an attempt to redirect the energies of sports media pundits and sports spectators who attempt to dismissively discipline athletes’ public expression. Disagreement should be substantively argued rather than staked at the level of ad hominem disqualification based on athletes’ professional occupation. An obligation then that sports spectators face is to help athletes realize that their social importance and self-worth should not derive solely from the performance of their athletic bodies alone—that not only can those bodies be put to symbolic and transformative social use, but also that bodily action can be paired with the arts of speaking,
writing, and listening in order to develop a more holistic civic voice. When athletes do not live up to that potential, as in this introduction’s opening, they can be called to account, so that the celebrity and cultural publicity granted athletes in American culture can be put to more substantive use.

Similarly, fans can engage in useful forms of self-questioning: Which sports do I watch, which athletes do I value, and what do my habits of spectatorship reveal about my own beliefs and ideologies? How might I participate in or follow sports differently in order to promote the world I wish to see? In the introduction to this dissertation, I posited a set of “spectacular biases” that structure athletes’, journalists’, and spectators’ relationship to mediated sport. One of those biases was a bias toward visuality, the cultivation of a sensorium that appreciates only the viewing of the athletic body during the publicized athletic event. One way to work against this spectacular bias is to habituate other sensorial relationships toward sports.

II. How Can One Be A Sports Fan?

This concluding section takes its title from a 1978 essay by Pierre Bourdieu. Originally titled “Pratiques sportives et pratiques sociales” (literally, “Sporting Practices and Social Practices”), the essay has less to do with sports fandom than attempting to sketch a theoretical explanation why children might be drawn to some sports rather than others. As Bourdieu asks near the beginning of his essay, “According to what principles do agents choose between the different sports activities or entertainments which, at a given moment in time, are offered to them as being possible?”13 Bourdieu offers a classic demonstration of habitus. Agents may adopt the sporting lifestyles most appropriate to their class background, financial resources, and spare time—with some wiggle room granted to make decisions based on class and lifestyle aspiration,

as well. Professionalized sport is understood as the combined effort of the bourgeoisie and the state to package dominated classes’ lifestyles back to them as commodity spectacles whose primary function is to reproduce the existing order.\textsuperscript{14}

Richard Nice’s more provocative translation of the essay’s title demands that readers confront sporting practices less as a process of social habituation and more as an existential challenge: If professionalized mediated sport is little more than a reproduction of social domination, why play? Why watch? Why follow? Why study the domain of sports as a rhetorical object? How can one be a sports fan? Isn’t there a danger that academics too might stick to sports, at the expense of other, more worthwhile pursuits?

As I did at this conclusion’s outset, I will make use of certain athletes again in closing. In the course of writing this study, those athletes who have struck me as most remarkable are those who have been willing to risk the financial status and prestige associated with athletic stardom and renounce their status as athletes in the pursuit of some more pressing and more meaningful social commitment. In this group, I include the basketball player John Amaechi, the baseball player Glenn Burke, and the football player Colin Kaepernick as athletes who have rhetorically strived for the right to name themselves and, in so doing, have broadened the horizon of causes to which they can direct their resources—even if the renunciation of their athletic identities limits the quantity of those resources, including the spotlight of sport spectacle. These figures might be juxtaposed against athletes such as Magic Johnson and Billie Jean King, who have traded upon their status as athletes and the processes of public memory and historiography inherent to sports spectacle in the pursuit of institutional reform within sports and the popularization and mainstreaming of liberal democratic visions of social transformation. As I hope some of these

\textsuperscript{14} “How Can One Be A Sports Fan?,” 433.
chapters have shown, this process can simultaneously elevate and co-opt the myriad voices, visions, and sensibilities that constitute social movement. For many athletes, this is a financially profitable and socially prestigious way of life.

Only by retaining a fundamental ambivalence toward the social functions of mediated sport, and expressing a willingness to toggle on and off between one’s identity as a scholar of sports rhetoric and a scholar willing to engage other pursuits that can, at a moment, become more pressing and more meaningful, may be the only way to find intellectual fulfillment and the satisfaction of one’s social commitments. There are many facets of sports that are, to me, profoundly un-encouraging: sports’ manifestation of already existing social inequalities in many of its structures of pay, prestige, and sexualization; its use as an indicator of a person’s cultural worth that perpetuates the worst trappings of male privilege, rape culture, domestic abuse, and a cult of the body; and its complicity in the trend toward pseudo-journalistic public relations, where media outlets work hand in glove with professional sports leagues to maximize doe-eyed feature stories and minimize critical reporting, if only because live coverage of such sporting events enriches those same media outlets’ advertising coffers. Losing faith in the possibility of sports as a site of social transformation during the late stages of this dissertation was a briefly debilitating experience. Turning away from sports—refusing to passively consume sport’s prevailing ideologies—is a reasonable and responsible choice in such moments. There is something deeply satisfying, though ultimately limited, in undoing the cultural habituations to which one has been accustomed. For instance, simply not watching a sport that attempts to hide its connections to participants’ lasting brain damage can be a political act. At the same time, such decisions may also be indistinguishable from the processes of stratification and differentiation that Bourdieu describes in “Pratiques sportives et pratiques sociales”: I don’t watch American
football, in certain communities, is also a display of social distinction. Consider a brief personal example: Although I am quite proud to play with a co-ed softball team in an intramural league that advertises itself as men’s only, it says as much about my political commitments as it does about my social milieu. I know a number of female graduate students who happened to play college softball, and we remain dually committed to the pursuit of gender equality (alternating male-female lineups) and the cult of winning (lineups carefully optimized to enhance our offensive efficiency). Such pursuits offer one way forward that seeks to engage and destabilize the existing order of sports and society without fundamentally overthrowing either.

Then I remember how I felt while listening to John Amaechi relate the role of sports in his own life, and how he hoped to bring sports to others. For him, basketball was only ever a point of entry to the projects that he hoped would come after his playing career ended—sports as a vehicle through which underprivileged youths could build self-worth, determination, and a commitment to fair play that would sustain them in the challenges that they were yet to face. Or how I feel when reading anecdotes about Muhammad Ali’s willingness to risk the prime years of his boxing career for a commitment to nonviolence he was not obligated—and was, perhaps, ironically ill-suited—to make. Listening for those moments when athletes use the symbolic force of their bodies and especially the unexplored potency of their voices to pursue social transformation that may lie rooted in but ultimately transcends the domain of athletics: these are the moments that make sports worthy of the description “spectacular.”
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Graduate Teaching Assistant. Penn State University (2010-2016).

Publications
Articles Published in Refereed Journals

Other Works
https://ussporthistory.com/2015/12/13/review-of-espn-the-making-of-a-sports-media-empire/

Awards and Honors
Kathryn Hume Top Publication Award. Penn State University English Department. Fall 2017.
Fellow, Center for Democratic Deliberation, 2015-2016 Academic Year. May 2015.
Harold F. Martin Graduate Teaching Award, Penn State University. March 2015.