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BLACK FEMALE ATHLETES' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ACTIVISM: AN INTERSECTIONAL AND CYBERFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF U.S. HAMMER-THROWER, GWEN BERRY'S 2019 & 2021 PODIUM PROTESTS

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Communication Studies

---

by

Ariel Racheal Anna Newell

December 2022

BLACK FEMALE ATHLETES' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ACTIVISM: AN INTERSECTIONAL AND CYBERFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF U.S. HAMMER-THROWER, GWEN BERRY'S 2019 & 2021 PODIUM PROTESTS

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December 2022

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ABSTRACT

Much attention has been paid to Black male athlete activism both historically and in the contemporary movement for black lives. Black female athletes have also made historic contributions as activists, and they continue to do so. However, Black female athlete activism has not always been acknowledged or heard. This is a problem, as Black women in American sports and society face overlapping racial and gender inequities and injustices that distinctly marginalize and oppress them. However, some Black female athlete activists (BFAAs) have begun using social media to challenge media narratives about themselves, to redefine what it means to be a female athlete, and to call attention to racial and gender injustices in both sports and society.

This thesis examines two cases of a Black female athlete using social media for activism. Specifically, this study looks at U.S. hammer-thrower, Gwen Berry's unplanned protests at the 2019 Pan American (Pan Am) Games and the 2021 Olympic Trials, the backlash Berry received for those actions, and her responses on social media. It synthesizes those two cases in a rich and descriptive narrative. And it interprets the events and data using theories of intersectionality and cyberfeminism.

Like BFAAs before her, Berry used her body and clothing to silently protest at the medal stand against the injustice she and other Black people face, and she received extensive backlash for doing so. Comparing her experience to white and male athlete activists illustrates the challenges Black female athletes

face in protesting injustice. But unlike previous BFAAs, Berry used social media to respond to her critics, tell her own story of how and why she protested, and establish her identity as a Black athlete activist in the process. By looking at Berry's 2019 and 2021 protests we also see how the changing context of American political life – particularly the murder of George Floyd – significantly impacts the activism of Black female athletes.

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Like Barbara Streisand (1969), “I was going to thank all the little people, but then I remembered I am the little people.” Below, is a list of all the people who have played a BIG role in my personal and professional growth these past few years. I do not know where I would be without your continuous support.

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Gwen Berry- It was a pleasure to learn about your story and write about your activism, but above all it was a joy to meet you.

DEDICATION

From January 2020 to June 2022, I wept the loss of many lives. I dedicate this project to my family and friends who are not with us today.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"Stop Playing With Me"

Gwendolyn (Gwen) Denise Berry is a Black woman, one of the world's top hammer-throwers, and an outspoken advocate for Black lives. On July 25, 2021, at the U.S. Olympic trials in Eugene, Oregon, Berry ignited a sports, social media, and political firestorm. There, on the medal stand, with the national anthem playing, Berry appeared to turn her back on the American flag. Then, with a look of disgust, she retrieved and draped over her head a black tee-shirt that read "Activist Athlete."

Berry later explained on Instagram and Twitter that her protest was an unplanned response to the national anthem being played during her medal ceremony – something the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) promised would not happen. But on Twitter many on the political Right had already made up their minds about Berry. U.S. Senator Ted Cruz asked why she and the left "hate America," and Congressman Dan Crenshaw called for her to be thrown off Team U.S.A. In response, Berry tweeted an image of herself on the medal stand. In the image, Berry's teammates face the flag. However, her eyes stay fixed on the camera with a look of disgust. One of her hands is on her hip, and the other holds red, white, and blue carnations, which dangle at her side. The tweet simply read, "Stop playing with me" (Berry, 2021).

Historically, Black men have had more visible public roles both in American sports, sports media, and sports activism. Black female athletes like Rose Robinson, Wyomia Tyus, and Toni Smith Thompson have also used their platforms to engage in activism, but their activism has largely been ignored. This is unfortunate. Black women in American sports and society face overlapping racial and gender inequities and injustices that distinctly marginalize and oppress them. Their stories of oppression and resistance are just as important and should not be ignored.

Social media presents opportunities for changing these dynamics. Specifically, social media provide marginalized and oppressed groups like Black female athletes a platform to be heard, to make visible the inequities and injustices that they and others face, and to challenge false narratives that often trivialize them. How and why *are* Black female athletes using social media for activism?

To answer this question, this study examines one elite Black female athlete's use of social media for activism – U.S. hammer thrower, Gwen Berry. Specifically, this thesis takes a case study approach. It examines in rich detail Berry's podium protests at the 2019 Pan Am Games and the 2021 Olympic Trials. It also details how Berry used social media to respond to her critics, tell her own story of how and why she protested, and establish her identity as a Black athlete activist. Along the way, intersectional and cyberfeminist theories

are used to make sense of the injustices Berry faced and how she responded on the podium and on social media.

This thesis begins with a review of the relevant literature. First, I examine the long and complex history of Black athlete activism in America. Dr. Harry Edwards describes “five waves” of sport activism, including the rise, fall, and rebirth of the Black athlete activist. Most of that history focuses on Black *male* athletes, though. Importantly, I also identify and describe the protests of Black *female* athlete activists (BFAAs) who courageously stood against injustice and oppression, but whose protests have been largely ignored. I then review the various ways activists are using social media and consider the effectiveness of those approaches. Here, I also introduce the theoretical framework of cyberfeminism. Finally, I explore the marginalization and oppression of gendered and racialized bodies in sports. Specifically, I look at how the male gaze impacts women athletes, how women are portrayed in sports, the ghettoization of Black athletes, the distinct experiences of Black female Athletes, and the practice of “owning” Black bodies in sports. I then consider how Black female athletes can use social media to control their own narrative in the male-centric sporting industry.

My methods chapter explains what a case study approach is and why it is most useful for answering my research question. Case study researchers describe in rich detail concrete “real life” events or processes and the various factors that shape them. In this chapter, I briefly describe the two cases sampled

(Berry ‘s 2019 and 2021 protests) and why they are useful for answering my research question. I identify the data I that draw on for describing those cases, including news coverage of Berry’s protests, her and others’ social media posts, and comments and interviews in response. I also explain how I use intersectional and cyberfeminist theories to understand and study Berry’s experience as a Black female athlete and her use of social media for activism.

In the analysis chapter, I present my case studies of Berry’s 2019 and 2021 protests, the backlash that she received for doing so, and her associated social media use. These case studies provide a rich, descriptive account of Berry’s activism – both on the medal stand and online. I also provide necessary context to make sense of these events and Berry’s and others’ actions. And I use intersectional and cyberfeminist theories to interpret and explain these developments.

In my conclusion and discussion chapter, I answer my research question by arguing that Berry uses a combination of traditional protest and social media activism to challenge her and others’ oppression in sports and society. Berry embodies cyberfeminist precepts by using social media to reply to her critics and set the record straight. She also acknowledges her own intersectionality in her oppression and protest. Through her cyber-activism Berry proudly redefines herself as a Black female athlete. Finally, I argue that the changing context of American political life – particularly the murder of George Floyd – significantly impacted how the two cases unfolded.

Black female athlete activists' protests have been ignored, historically. In this study, I show how BFAA are using social media and other technologies to change this with implications that go well beyond sports.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Sports and Politics Do Mix, Regularly

Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) columnist Robert Scoop-Jackson (2020) describes sports as, “the greatest form of leisure entertainment, a powerhouse of industry, an expression of patriotism, and a generational saving grace” (p. 1). While it is often said that sports and politics do not mix, the two are deeply intertwined (Zirin, 2013). In times of national crisis, sports often function as a unifying national ritual (Billings et al., 2014). For instance, one month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, former President George W. Bush threw out the first pitch of Game 3 at the 2001 World Series at Yankee Stadium. As he did, 57,000 fans chanted “U.S.A., U.S.A., U.S.A” in unison (Butterworth, 2005).

While sports do bring people together, they can also serve as a forum for American domestic and foreign conflict (Dolan & Connolly, 2016). For example, when U.S. track and field star Jesse Owens won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, he carried the hopes of not only African Americans and the U.S., but democracy, more generally, in the struggle against Nazism. Other elite athletes have used their visible, public platforms to explicitly call attention to a range of injustices – from racial inequities to American war involvement (Wulf, 2019). Famous examples include U.S. sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, legendary heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali, and San Francisco 49ers

quarterback Colin Kaepernick. With the eyes of the world upon them, these athletes' public protests have drawn attention to injustice in ways most activists never can. However, when they do speak out, Black athletes are often dismissed or punished (Edwards, 2018).

The Rise of Black Athlete Activism

Dr. Harry Edwards, a professor of sport sociology at the University of California Berkeley, describes five waves of Black athlete activism (Off the ball, 2020). For clarity, I have labeled these five waves as follows: (1) The Pioneers, (2) Breaking the Color Barrier, (3) Black Power, (4) Black Lives Matter (BLM), and (5) One Team, One Voice. Each wave featured significant players and events that made distinct contributions to sports activism and society.

According to Edwards (2018), the first wave of African American sport activism began with cyclist, Major Taylor, in 1896. Taylor was the first African American to reach international sport fame (Finison, 2014). During his career, he battled prejudice, including being banned from cycling for American teams due to the color of his skin. Professional boxers Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and sprinter Jesse Owens are also key figures in this wave of "Pioneers." These athletes called for equal recognition and legitimacy in their professions and in American society (Isenberg, 2017). The Pioneers' efforts focused on being seen in society and drawing attention to the material forms of discrimination they were experiencing on and off the field of play. They were not praised for these actions.

Instead, they were penalized economically, socially, and legally by the gatekeepers of their respective sports (Isenberg, 2017).

"Breaking the color barrier" was the second wave of African American athlete activism. This era featured Brooklyn Dodgers second baseman Jackie Robison, Los Angeles Rams running back Kenny Washington, and Boston Celtics forward Chuck Cooper (Jerca, 2018). What makes this wave distinct is that these key players broke the "color line" by becoming the first people of color to play in their respective major professional leagues – Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Basketball Association (NBA) (Isenberg, 2017). In this wave, athletes sought not just recognition, but also access. They did not necessarily brand themselves as activists. Rather, their activism was that they played with white players at all. Their actions served as catalysts for desegregation in America more generally (Edwards, 2018; Isenberg 2017).

The "Black Power" era of African American athlete activism included athletes like Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith and John Carols, and Cleveland Browns running back Jim Brown. Athletes in this wave called attention not just to racial injustice in sports, but also daily life in the United States and around the globe. They advocated for the U.S. to leave the Vietnam war, challenged notions of progress in America, and spurned expectations of how an athlete is supposed to act (Edwards, 2018; Isenberg, 2017).

The most iconic event of this wave occurred at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. It was there, at the medal stand for the men's 200-meter race, that Smith and Carlos lowered their heads during the playing of the U.S. national anthem and raised closed, black-gloved fists – a symbol of Black Power. Smith and Carlos were part of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (O.P.H.R) – a human rights organization composed of African American male athletes and founded by Harry Edwards. The O.P.H.R. sought to motivate, organize, and mobilize Black athletes to boycott the 1968 games unless a series of demands were met. Those included: barring apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia from competition; the resignation of International Olympic Committee (IOC) chairman Avery Brundage; the restoration of Muhammad Ali's boxing title; and hiring African American coaches. Ultimately, some chose to boycott, while others, like Smith and Carlos, protested at the games (Salomon, 1996; Edward, 2018). Unlike the second wave, these athletes' voices were more brash and assertive. Muhammadi Ali received death threats and mobs swarmed him on the streets (Anderson, 1971). This wave marks the height of African American athlete activism during the 20th century.

The Fall and Revival of Black Athlete Activism

Black Athlete activism declined in the 1980s with the rise of sports sponsorship and commercialism. Notably, Michael Jordan's 1984 sponsorship deal brought rapid changes in sports and marketing (Miller, 2017). Importantly, it also contributed to a decline in the sort of activism that Ali, Smith, and Carlos had

engaged in, as athletes sought to avoid alienating consumers and brands (Koronios et al., 2016). For example, in 1990, Jordan received a request to publicly endorse North Carolina's Harvey Gantt in his campaign for the U.S. Senate (Poole, 2021). An African American and a Democrat, Gantt was running against segregationist Republican, Jesse Helms. But Jordan turned down the request, commenting that, "Republicans buy sneakers too" (Poole, 2021).

By the 21st century, sponsorship and commercialism had seemingly drained sports of activism. Then, in 2016, following a string of fatal police shootings of unarmed Black men, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the playing of the national anthem. Kaepernick explained his quiet protest by saying, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a country that oppresses black people and people of color" (Cauley, 2018, para. 4). Kaepernick's reason for protest was to be in solidarity with the Black and Brown Americans who have lost their life to police brutality. Since Kaepernick's protest in 2015, "police officers have fatally shot at least 135 unarmed Black men and women nationwide, an NPR investigation has found." (Thompson, 2021, para. 8). He explained: "To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." (Cauley, 2018, para. 1).

Kaepernick was fined for his demonstration, and 49ers management issued a statement that both shamed and condoned their quarterback (Martin and McHendry, 2016). It read:

> The national anthem is and always will be a special part of our pregame ceremony. It is an opportunity to honor our country and reflect on the great liberties we are afforded as its citizens. In respecting such American principles as freedom of religion and freedom of expression, we recognize the right of an individual to choose and participate, or not, in our celebration of the national anthem. (Biderman, 2016, p. 1)

As the NFL and many of its fans recoiled at Kaepernick's public protest, athletes at the high school, college, and professional levels began kneeling in solidarity with Kaepernick and the victims of police brutality. None of this sat well with then-presidential nominee, Donald J. Trump. Trump released statements calling for the San Francisco 49ers and all NFL teams to remove players who "disrespected the American flag" (Martin & McHendry, 2016). Kaepernick was later removed as the 49ers first-string quarterback. After the season, Kaepernick opted out of his contract because BLM was "bigger than football" (McDonald, 2017). No NFL team signed Kaepernick for the 2017 season, which prompted him to file a grievance against the league and its owners. Ultimately, Kaepernick settled with the league in 2019, but no team has ever signed him.

On-field demonstrations tapered out following Kaepernick's blacklisting. That was, until the 2020 murder of George Floyd. Floyd, an African American father, was murdered by Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin. The 8-minute bystander video of Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck went viral on social media. In the video, Floyd can be heard screaming, "I can't breathe" over 20 times. In the following hours, the nation erupted in protest for an end to police brutality. These protests lasted for weeks, and they spread around the globe.

In the wake of Floyd's murder, sports became a major site of demonstration. Athletes spoke up, NASCAR banned confederate flags, and LeBron James founded "More Than a Vote" – a campaign to protect voting rights. And after a decade-long battle, the Washington football team retired the Redskins mascot (Millington, 2020). The NBA branded its courts with "Black Lives Matter," and sport sponsors such as Nike released campaigns and videos sharing their support of BLM.

But all this was just the beginning. On August 23rd, 2020, Jacob Blake was shot several times in his back by Wisconsin police officer Rusten Sheskey (Chavez, 2020). Once again police brutality was dismissed by law enforcement. Two days later, during game 5 of their playoff series the Milwaukee Bucks and Orlando Magic players refused to take the court in memory of Blake and in protest of police brutality. This was the first time in sport history where entire leagues and teams stood in solidarity against racism and injustice.

Mrs. Missing-In-Action: The Black Female Athlete Activist (BFAA)

The history of Black athlete activists like Robinson, Smith and Carlos, and Kaepernick is important. Important voices are missing from this narrative, though – those of the Black *female* athlete activists. This is not because they have been on the sidelines. Black female athletes *have* participated in activism for decades – they just have not made it to the history books for their efforts (Liberti & McDonald, 2019). The following sections describe some important historical

cases of Black female athlete activism and the challenges they have confronted having their voices heard and taken seriously.

<u>She Kneeled First</u>

U.S. Olympic high jumper, Eroseanna "Rose" Robinson pioneered Black female athlete activism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Robinson became an activist early in her career. She understood her symbolism as a Black female athlete, and was quite critical of the U.S. government's injustices, both foreign and domestic (Poole, 2021). During the 1958 Pan American games, Robinson sat during the playing of the national anthem because, "the anthem and the flag represented war, injustice, and hypocrisy" (Davis, 2019, p. 1). Fifty-seven years later, Kaepernick's words bear a striking resemblance to Robinson's. But while Robinson scored among the highest in her sport, her efforts were not publicized, as she lacked "newsworthiness" (Davis, 2019).

Robinson continued to fight injustices without any media attention until months later when she refused to pay her taxes. She did so because she believed paying taxes helped fund the war that she did not support. Robinson's refusal to pay her taxes resulted in a year-long jail sentence and missing the 1960's Olympic Games. While in jail her protest did not stop. She went on a hunger strike, and the guards had to force-feed her meals. This finally caught the attention of media outlets and prompted her early release (Shepard, 2021). After her release from jail, Robinson fought for racial justice until her death in 1976

(Poole, 2021). She would not be the last Black female athlete to use her platform to speak out against injustice.

She Wore Shorts

Tommie Smith and John Carlos's raised fists provide the iconic moment of the 1968 Olympic Games. While public attention focused on Smith and Carlos, another protest was taking place across the track field. U.S. women's sprinter Wyomia Tyus turned heads during the 1968 Olympics for her record-breaking 100-meter dash performance. As she raced, Tyus also engaged in a quiet protest. While others on the U.S. team wore red and white shorts, Tyus wore navy blue shorts to symbolize the inequality and differences she experienced as a woman of color who grew up in the Jim Crow South (Liberti & McDonald, 2019). As she later explained, "the shorts were at the forefront of my whole being to bring attention to human rights, whether anybody picked that up or not" (Longman, 2021, p. 8).

Tyus's demonstration illustrates the starkly different treatment of Black male and female athlete activists. In the lead-up to the 1968 Games, O.P.H.R. organizers like Edwards largely ignored and excluded Black female athletes like Tyus. She supported the cause, though. So, like other O.P.H.R. athletes who wore black gloves, socks, or shorts, Tyus wore navy blue shorts (the closest ones she could find to black) throughout the Games, and she also raised her fist on the podium (Longman, 2021). However, unlike Smith and Carlos's protest, Tyus's demonstrations received no media coverage. In fact, the story of Wyomia

Tyus, the “World’s Fastest Woman,” had been hidden for many years. That is, until recently when U.S. hammer thrower Gwen Berry began her own protest during the 2021 Olympic trials. Berry shined light on the story of Tyus and has since brought attention to the many ways Black Americans are oppressed in sports and society (Fischels, 2021).

Not Her Flag Either

The media have given much more attention to athlete activism since Colin Kaepernick took a knee. However, activism was present during the height of sports commercialism – if only you were paying attention to women's sports.

Following the 9/11 attacks, New York City’s Manhattanville College added the American flag to players’ jerseys, and games were dedicated to alumni of the college that died that day. But Manhattanville College women’s basketball player Toni Smith-Thompson had begun to question America’s values and policies in the wake of the attacks. So, in 2003, Smith-Thompson turned her back to the flag during the playing of the national anthem (Luther, & Davidson, 2020). In an interview, Smith-Thompson said:

> My protest was about the policies in practices of our country, and I didn’t think, as the team had to participate in this forced patriotism, that in order for me to show that I had issues that I wanted to raise in regards to our country’s policies and practices that I also needed to sit out being part of my team” (Davis, 2018, 02:54).

During her protest, Smith-Thompson received slurs and harassment, and zero support from her team, college, alumni, and fans (Luther & Davidson, 2020). Like many Black female athletes, Smith-Thompson’s protest was also ignored. In

fact, the *New York Times* did not cover Smith-Thompson for the first six weeks of her protest.

<u>The Atlanta Dream</u>

The fifth wave of sport activism has changed the landscape for sports activism, with entire teams standing in solidarity for Black lives. One such team is the WNBA's Atlanta Dream. This team not only organized and mobilized for BLM, but they also denounced their team owner Kelly Loeffler (Rhone, 2021).

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the WNBA organized the Say Her Name (SHN) campaign which calls attention to police brutality of Black women. At the time, the Atlanta Dream was co-owned by incumbent Republican U.S. Senator Kelly Loeffler, who was an advocate for former president Donald J. Trump. Loeffler also has a history of trivializing the BLM movement despite her ownership of a WNBA team where 83% of the players are women of color (Rhone 2021; Deb, 2020). Loeffler went as far as to say that the Atlanta Dream would not participate in the BLM movement because, "[the movement] didn't align with the values and goals of the WNBA or the Atlanta Dream" (Rhone, 2021, para. 22).

After hearing Loeffler's statements, Atlanta Dream player Elizabeth Williams organized her teammates to protest Loeffler, who was running for the Senate against Rev. Raphael Warnock. In a game against the Phoenix Mercury, the Dream took the court wearing black t-shirts with white block letters that read, "VOTE WARNOCK." They also shared photos of themselves wearing the shirts

on social media. First,Throughout the season they wore the shirts and other WNBA teams joined in on the fun. Loeffler lost the Senate election, and later sold her stake in the team (Rhone, 2021). This type of behavior – where athletes retaliate against their team's owner publicly – was unheard of in professional sports (Deb, 2020). However, it is indicative of the power of this 5th fifth wave of Black athlete activism – an era in which social media play an important role in activism and protest.

Social Media and Activism

Social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have changed the way we communicate, including how activists advocate for social change (Selnes & Orgeret, 2020). These platforms have become key spaces for expanding the range of available ideas and voices. Moreover, they provide activists with a means of organizing offline protest, documenting happenings, and gaining attention (Higginbotham et al., 2021). Together, these practices have been described as "hashtag activism," and they have become the new normal for activist communicators (Jackson et al., 2020). Movements like #blacklivesmatter and #metoo are examples of this form of online activism.

Social networks have been praised for their role in social movements like the Occupy movement and political revolutions like the Arab Spring. However, scholars are divided on the role social media plays in these processes (Allsop, 2016). The following section reviews some of the key uses of social media for activism, as well as the scholarly debate regarding its role and effectiveness.

Activists’ Uses of Social Media

The first use of social media for activism is to synchronize the opinions of key publics and to extend those ideas to media outlets and lawmakers (Clark, 2016; Allsop, 2016). Social media facilitates multi-way conversations. So, groups of people can identify and solidify their opinions about “humanitarian causes, environmental problems, or political and economic debates' (Moscato, 2019, p. 3). Social media also serves as a breeding ground for new social and political structures commonly referred to as networked publics (Boyd, 2010 & Clark, 2016). These networked publics are crucial to the success of hashtag activism campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo. And some argue that they have revolutionized how modern activism is organized (Selnes & Orgeret, 2020).

The second use of social media by activists is to document and share relevant happenings, such as injustices or protests (Allsop, 2016). Historically, evidence of injustices like police brutality came from either personal video recorders or surveillance footage, such as the video footage of Los Angeles police beating Rodney King in 1991 (Watson, 2019). However, smartphones have made it easier to capture some (though certainly not all) instances of police brutality (Newell, 2019). Social media has also made it easier to publish and share those instances of abuses (Weissman, 2019). Activists use smartphones and social media to document protests and other demonstrations. This is important because commercial media have traditionally emphasized the

occasional act of property destruction, rather than the peaceful protesters and their reasons.

The third use of social media for activist communication is to organize and mobilize online for offline participation (Allsop, 2016). With digital communication, organizers can “persuade citizens to support the organization, join its campaigns, and provide financial and physical support” (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2016, p. 25). Examples of such mobilization tools include Facebook groups, crowdfunding sites, and collaborative Google documents, among others.

An exemplar of social media being used to document happenings, synchronize opinion, and mobilize publics is the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin. A bystander recorded the murder in a graphic, ten-minute video that went viral on social media. In the video, Floyd is heard gasping for air and screaming “I can’t breathe” over twenty times.

As the video of Floyd’s murder circulated, people took to social media to share their grief, outrage, and opinions. For instance, in the days and weeks following Floyd’s murder, a robust conversation unfolded about abolishing the police (Kaba, 2020). This example highlights how social media can be used to synchronize public opinions about unfamiliar topics (Kaba, 2020). Hundreds of groups also used social media to organize online for peaceful protests offline. For instance, in Houston, Texas, organizers used the “Justice 4 Floyd'” Facebook account to plan, prepare, and mobilize for a day-long demonstration.

As the George Floyd case illustrates, activists do not engage in these three key social media practices in isolation. Rather, documenting happenings, synchronizing opinions, and online mobilization can complement one another. By documenting and sharing instances of injustices, activists create opportunities for the public to come together to discuss those cases and synchronize opinions (Verhulst, 2013). And those conversations can connect and motivate people to participate in offline actions. Indeed, viral videos like those of George Floyd, Alton Sterling, and others generate attention for hashtag campaigns like #blacklivesmatter and vice-versa.

These three uses of social media for activism are important. Given this study's attention to Black female athletes' uses of social for activism, though, it is also important to consider the role of identity in these processes. So, the following section introduces the first of two theoretical frameworks for this study: cyberfeminism.

Cyberfeminist Perspectives on Gender, Technology, and Bodies

In 1994, Sadie Plant developed cyberfeminism to describe how the 'gendered body' and self-identification shape technologies and how we use them to express ourselves (Cottom, 2016). Cyberfeminism is not singular. In fact, cyberfeminism is, "a range of different theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture" (Daniels, 2009, p. 102). Plant (1994) and Haraway's (1985) definitions of cyberfeminism offer perspectives that are useful for examining Black female athlete activism.

Cyberfeminists like Lucy Hackworth (2018) argue that girls and women can and do use digital technologies to create and redefine the borders of femininity (Hackworth, 2018). Plant (1994) describes how, by embracing the borderless digital world, women can remove the walls of the somatic world. For instance, in September 2022, Iranian women rights activist, Masha Amini was murdered by the governments morality police, allegedly for not wearing her Hijab correctly in public. In viral videos, women across Iran continue to light their hijabs on fire for the unjust murder of Amini (Alkhaldi & Moshtaghian, 2022). So, cyberfeminists not only challenge the male power structure; they also use technology to reshape oppressive ideas and thoughts (Stone, 1996).

Cyberfeminists also see the body as a site of power that, “resists and reinforces hierarchies of gender and race” (Daniels, 2009, p. 101). One important concept in cyberfeminism is that of the “cyborg” (Haraway, 1985). The cyborg is a woman who pushes against the patriarchy by defying the nuclear male definition of “women” and “feminism” (Plant, 2003). This suggests that there is a way out of the web imagery by “both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, [and] space stories” (Haraway, 1985, pp. 204). Cyber activist athletes like Serena Williams and Gwen Berry do this by breaking down and then building up new definitions of identity. The Cyborg suggests that there is a way out of the web imagery by, “ both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, [and] space stories” (Haraway, 1985, pp. 204). Cyber activist athletes do this by breaking down and then building up new

definitions of identity. Before we look at how Black female athletes are using social media to do this, it is important to consider the distinctive ways in which Black female athletes are marginalized and oppressed.

Gendered and Racialized Bodies in Sport

Sports shape society's cultural beliefs, values, and actions (Boxill et al., 2010). Athletes' bodies are particularly important in this regard. Elite athletes are pushed (and push themselves) to be "god-like" in stature – strong, fast, and agile (Brown; 2001; Jirasek et al., 2013). These physical attributes are then elevated as the standard and ideal for health and beauty – not just on the playing field, but beyond it (Macri, 2012).

But not all athletes' bodies are treated or regarded equally. Women athletes face a double standard in that they are often criticized for being "too manly." Their sporting accomplishments are minimized through an inordinate focus on sexual attractiveness and traditional feminine values, such as being a housewife. The following sections explain these tendencies as a result of "the male gaze" in sports media. But doubly oppressed groups, such as BFAs face unique challenges that white women athletes do not. So, this section also examines the representation and treatment of BFAs and their bodies, including the ownership and control of their bodies in arrangements that have been compared to slavery.

Women Athletes and The Male Gaze

The "male gaze" is an important concept in media studies developed by feminist film scholar, Laura Mulvey. Mulvey (2013) argues that media is made for consumption by heterosexual white males. Media do this, in part, using narratives and camera angles that organize the world according to the perspectives of men (Plant, 2003). As John Berger (1972) summarized the male gaze: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (p. 47). The role of women in media, then, is as passive objects for those male audiences (Mulvey, 2013).

Women athletes disrupt the male gaze through their embodiment of strength, speed, power, and control. On the one hand, elite women athletes often have increased muscle definition and boxy, lean physiques – characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity (Brandt & Carstens, 2005). At the same time, when female athletes compete, they are actors with the power to shape their own fortunes, rather than passive objects to be consumed by men. As such, women athletes and their bodies present a conundrum for sports media. These media cannot neatly define the woman athlete into a box as a passive object (Liang, 2011). So, sports media tend to marginalize and trivialize women athletes (Kane & Lensky, 1998). In fact, 74.5 % of sport media coverage focuses solely on male athletes and their sports, while sport women only receive 3.5% of network coverage, the remaining 20% of coverage is gender neutral topics (Medzerian, 2015; Creedon, 2014).

There are situations when women's sports are more widely covered (Angelini & MacArthur, 2022). These include when women athletes are involved in international competitions, such as the Olympics. Here, nationalistic pride can temporarily override gender norms. Media also cover women athletes performing more traditional, objectified versions of femininity (e.g., figure skating, tennis, gymnastics). The 2018 Olympic games had record breaking numbers as “women received 52.2% of NBC’s PyeongChang primetime broadcast coverage when mixed-sex events are excluded, compared to 47.8% for men” (Angelini & MacArthur, 2022, para. 4).

Gendered Portrayals of Women Athletes

Sports media diminish women athletes’ sporting accomplishments, in part, by ignoring their competitions. However, when women athletes *are* portrayed in sports media, their athletic performances are further trivialized through an emphasis on their sexual attractiveness and other aspects of heterosexual femininity. As Brandt and Carstens (2005) explain, sports media do this by casting women athletes in one of three gender roles: the sex object, the woman trying to be beautiful, and the mother/wife figure.

The first role is the “sex symbol,” the woman is seen as a sexual conquest and desire of all men. An example of a woman only playing the role of sex symbol in sports media is the popular magazine *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit* editions. For example, tennis stars Maria Sharapova and Ana Kourinikova both have been featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated Swimsuit editions. Both

athletes were not highlighted on the cover for their athleticism but rather their bodies were glorified to be seen as a sex object.

The second role is the "women trying to be beautiful for men," where a female athlete is depicted in ways that cater to men's desires (Brandt & Carstens, 2005). An example of this is seen in the July 2003 *Sports Illustrated* feature article professional golfer Cherry Moulder. The feature describes Moulder as "Caddy Chic" – a label that calls attention to her style and fashion choices and that suggests she is trying to receive the attention of males (Brandt & Carstens, 2005).

The last role that women can play in order to be seen by sports media is the "wife and mother" archetypes (Brandt & Carstens, 2005). For instance, in their reporting on the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, the *Chicago Tribune* called bronze medal winning trap shooter Corey Cogdell-Urein "the wife of a [Chicago] Bears' lineman" (Chicago Tribune, 2016). This perpetuates the idea that a woman's primary role in society is as a homemaker (Cooky et al., 2015).

These three portrayals tell women athletes that their physical appearance, sexuality, and role as a wife and/or mother are more important than their athletic achievements. When women athletes do not symbolize one of the three "acceptable roles," they are dismissed or condemned. A recent study of social media from Plan International, a girl's rights agency, found that, "Of the negative comments directed at women athletes, 23 percent were sexist, and 20 percent belittled their sporting abilities" (Silva, 2019, p. 1). So, their performance is

dismissed if they do well and diminished if they do not. These leaves women athletes to battle both their competitors and the male gaze.

Ghetto-centric Representations of Black Athletes

Whereas sports media stereotype female athletes as passive sex objects, they tend to characterize Black athletes as, "being violent, lacking authority, and having urban mannerisms" (Tredway, 2019, p. 1). Sports coverage of Black athletes reinforces crude stereotypes such as black men being big, bad brutes or naturally violent (Messer & Sabo, 1994). Black athletes' on-field abilities are often described as "natural," while their white counterparts are seen as "talented" or "dedicated to the sport" (Ferruci & Tandoc, 2017; Messner & Sabo, 1994).

Black athletes also have to contend with ghetto-centrism in American sports and media. Ghetto-centrism is an aesthetic that commercial sports and media organizations create based on racial stereotypes (Andrews & Silk, 2010). This aesthetic relies on racial signifiers of Black urban America, including hair, attire, music, cultural practices, and verbal and non-verbal communication (Tredway, 2019). This communication relies on the "code of the street" (Anderson, 1999). This code suggests that aggression and violence higher among Black men and women in poor communities (St. Vil et al., 2018). Sporting leagues that have a significantly higher number of African American players actively market certain these ghetto-centric conceptions of Blackness to popularize and appeal to white consumer audiences (Anderw and Silk, 2010). This perpetuates the neoliberal idea that, "ghettos are places of individuals

choices and failures not state/policy/racism [systems]" (Andrew & Silk, 2010, p. 1639, & Leonard, 2006, p. 24).

Black female athletes must deal with both the constructs of ghetto-centrism *and* the male gaze. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that can help us make sense of these overlapping systems of oppression. So, the following explains what intersectionality is and how it relates to the representations and experiences of Black female athletes.

Intersectionality and Black Female Athletes' Experiences

Intersectionality draws our attention to the particularly troubling representations and experiences of Black female athletes, who are doubly oppressed in these white and male institutions. The concept of intersectionality has been developed by several thinkers and writers (Truth, Well-Barnett, Tubman, Church-Terell). Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who coined the term, describes intersectionality as the multiple layers of identities and complexities that make up an individual's experiences. These overlapping identities create "matrices of oppression" (Crenshaw, 1989). In other words, the sum of racism and sexism is greater than either system alone. Take wage inequality, for example. Statistics show that, "Black women in the U.S. are paid 38% less than white men and 21% less than white women" (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2019, para. 6).

In the context of sports and media, such matrices of oppression can be seen in the ways sports commentators talk about athletes of different races and

genders. For instance, when white male athletes like Tom Brady demonstrate their frustration on the field of play, they are often described as “passionate” and “serious.” But when women athletes are caught “mis-behaving” during an event, sports commentators often say she is having a “fit” or a “meltdown.” This infantilizing characterization reinforces the idea that women are “emotional. "Black female athletes do the same thing, media commentary also links that behavior to ghetto-centric stereotypes of violence and urbanism.

For instance, at the 2018 US Open, tennis superstar Serena used profanity on the court. The Umpire called Wiliams a “thief.” In doing so, Williams’s behavior was linked to the “Angry Black Woman” stereotype, and she received harsh punishment and criticism for her behavior. Williams called out the umpire for this double standard, pointing out that men in the sport have gotten away with much worse. This double standard is not new. Historically, Black women have been expected to never push back against oppressors. And when they do, their actions are considered overly aggressive – even animalistic (Prasad, 2018).

Historically, movements for gender and racial justice have overlooked Black women’s experiences (Collins, 2015; hooks, 1981). For instance, feminism has catered to white women's progress and liberation (hooks,1985); And Black movements have historically fought for equality among white and black men -- not black men and women (hooks,1981). In either case, Black women’s

experiences are marginalized. This is obvious when looking at the long history of athlete activism, as Black men have always been the predominant focus.

Crenshaw (1989) argues that there is a particular need to understand the experiences of Black women, as they are the most marginalized and oppressed social group in the U.S. Moreover, she argues that Black women need to be at the center of struggles for freedom and equality. This is because their intersectional identities uniquely position them to understand and advocate for more than one cause (hooks, 1981). Thus, Black feminism aims to empower the women who are singled out from other movements for racial and gender justice.

Athlete Ownership

Much of the above has focused on media representations. However, media representations are not the only way in which Black athletes are marginalized. As the Kaepernick example illustrates, the power of sports leagues and teams – most of which are owned by white men – can also undermine sports activism. Because when an athlete puts on their jersey, the name on the back is owned and controlled by the name on the front. Indeed, there is a long line of scholarships that looks at the similarities between modern sports organization and slavery (Rhoden, 2006).

In recent years, Black athletes themselves have been vocal about feeling owned and silenced by their team managers. For example, NBA star Lebron James condemned the NFL for having a “slave mentality full of old white guys” (Golliver, 2018). Kaepernick also spoke out about his challenges with the NFL

Commissioner Roger Goodell who fined Kaepernick during his protest and created restrictions on such demonstrations (Golliver, 2018; Zirin, 2021). These dynamics exist in individual sports, too, where national and international governing bodies establish rules for everything from on-field competition to dress code to political demonstrations.

Controlling Her Own Narrative

BFAs are marginalized and trivialized by sports media because, like women athletes generally, they do not conform to sports' male gaze. She also does not fit the white standards of sexuality and femininity that are glorified. So, when she is represented, she is subjected to ghetto-centric stereotypes. And she has little recourse on the court because whether she plays a team sport or an individual one, her labor is owned and controlled by leagues, teams, and media outlets. So, what are women athletes of color supposed to do in order to challenge the overlapping systems of racial and gender oppression in sports and society?

When cyberfeminists look at Internet-based technology, they pay attention to how gendered and embodied uses of technology challenge the mainstream binaries that do not recognize the complexities of gendered life (Hackworth, 2018). These are important factors to consider when it comes to studying Black female athlete activists' uses of social media. These technologies can be a tool for these athletes to push back against oppression in sports and society, and to redefine themselves in the process.

Indeed, many Black female athletes have begun to use social media to challenge the narratives about themselves in the media and to speak out against racial and gender injustice. The internet allows for BFAs to “commune, mobilize, stabilize, educate, decolonize, and free themselves” (Bukilwa, 2020, 07:03; Jackson et al., 2020). So, when she is not using it for leisure activities or marketing, she can use social media to re-narrate who she is; to explain why she, too, is an athlete; to diversify and define modern femininity; and to demonstrate against racial and gender injustice and for progressive social justice movements. The following chapter will outline a methodology for studying how one Black female athlete activist, Gwen Berry is doing just that with social media.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A Case Study Approach

A major component is missing in the scholarly literature and broader social conversation around athlete activism: the voices of Black female athlete activists (BFAAs). However, BFAAs *are* using social media as a tool to engage in activism. So, this thesis examines how and why Black female athlete activists use social media to engage in activism, and it explores the social implications of those actions.

How can we study BFAAs' use social media for activism? Ethnographic interviews and observation would be ideal, as they could give insight into these athletes' routines and rationales. However, securing time with high profile athletes would likely be difficult, if not impossible. Additionally, since I am not a member of this population, an autoethnographic approach would be inappropriate. An extensive quantitative content analysis of BFAAs' social media use could help describe these athletes' social media use, including which platforms BFAAs use and what they publish there. But this sort of surface-level data would not explain how or why BFFAs use those media the way they do.

Recognizing the limitations of other approaches, I utilize a case study approach. Case studies involve the investigation of concrete, "real life" events or processes, such as particular athletes engaging in actions that challenge the status quo. Case study researchers work with small samples – from just one

case to a handful. In doing so, they examine events and processes in much greater depth than approaches like quantitative content analysis (Yin, 2018). Case study researchers try to make sense of not only what happened but why. Through intensive examination of individual cases, they work to account for the various factors at play in those events, such as money, culture, personality, and power. They also try to look at cases from the different participants' perspectives. Case studies are helpful when conceptualizing how a process unfolds over time by thoroughly explaining what happened at each step of the event (Orum et al., 1991). Thus, case studies are appropriate for studying how and why BFAAs use social media as they do.

Cases Sampled

This study examines two cases of athlete activism by a single Black female athlete – U.S. hammer-thrower, Gwen Berry. Specifically, I examine Berry's unplanned protests at the 2019 Pan American (Pan Am) Games in Lima, Peru, and the 2021 Olympic Trials, in Eugene, Oregon; the sports and social media backlash Berry received for those actions, and how she responded on social media.

In selecting these two cases for study, I am utilizing a combination of purposive case sampling techniques (Palys, 2008). I have chosen to study Gwen Berry and these acts of protest because they fit the basic criteria for this study. In fact, she is a paradigmatic case. Berry is a professional Black female athlete activist who has experienced oppression both on and off the field. And she uses

social media to realize change for herself, for other Black female athletes, and for Black women and communities, generally.

Berry's 2019 and 2021 cases also align with my theoretical frameworks – intersectionality and cyberfeminism. As an African American woman, mother, and elite athlete, Berry faces serious challenges in a white-run and male-dominated sports industry and society. But her intersectional identity also makes her a potent agent for change. Berry's use of social media also embodies the tenets of cyberfeminism, as she uses both her body and social media to challenge the sports and societal status quo while simultaneously remaking her identity.

<u>Data Collection and Analysis</u>

To construct my case studies, I gathered and interpreted documentary data, including media texts, Berry's public interviews and personal statements, press releases, recorded live game coverage, and social media posts. While the hammer throw is not a high-profile event, Berry's activism on the podium and on social media generated significant media and social media attention. Social media posts about Berry could also be quickly identified using the hashtags #freegwenberry and #ActivstAthlete, which were widely used in association with these two cases.

To make sense of the documents I found, I relied on my two theoretical frameworks: intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1985, hooks 1981, Collins 2015) and cyberfeminism (Plant 1994; 2003, Hackworth 2018, Haraway 1981;1985) . Specifically, I am guided by the work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) on

intersectionality and Sandie Plant (1994; 2003) on cyberfeminism. To analyze events and experiences through the lens of intersectionality, researchers must specify the relevant, overlapping categories of race, class, gender, ability, and nationality (among others) that shape an individual's lived experiences (Hackworth, 2018). So, in my analysis, I consider how the relevant layers of Berry's identity shape her experiences and actions.

For example, when it came time to make sense of Berry's podium protest, I point out that Berry is both the daughter of an Iraq War veteran and a Black mother from Ferguson, Missouri. In doing so, her discomfort and actions on the podium make much more sense. To see how race, gender, and status shape how Berry is treated and responds I also compared Berry's experience to that of other athletes, such as Race Imboden and Collin Kaepernick. Lastly, I paid attention to how Berry's overlapping identities shape her social media output, such as her Instagram lookbook posts that drew attention to both her professional, personal and political identities.

Cyberfeminists focus on how women use technology to challenge gendered forms of oppression and create new identities. Through this lens, much of Berry's public posts online can be seen as efforts to control the narrative about her identity, to push back against oppressive institutions, and to advocate for racial and gender justice. But cyberfeminists also see the body as a technology, so I pay close attention to Berry's use of her body, makeup, and attire during her 2019 and 2021 protests. These two areas of focus come together in key social

media posts, where Berry's shared photos that highlight the use of her body during these acts of protest.

A Theory-Balanced Open Approach

I understand that by using intersectional and cyberfeminism theories to study and analyze these cases, I am taking a theory-balanced approach. However, I worked to remain open to other possible interpretations as I explored the data. At times, I had to look at the data from different angles and perspectives to compose an analysis that accounts for the messiness of lived experience. So, I immersed myself in the data, looked at them through a handful of appropriate theories, evaluated those theories' fit, and stayed open-minded to other interpretations. In the analysis, itself, I richly describe the documents and events I studied. And when I look at things from intersectional and cyberfeminist perspectives, I make sure to be explicit that that is what I am doing. I do not claim that my interpretation is the "right" one, but through rich description and explicit theorizing, I try to be clear and transparent about the basis for my claims.

CHAPTER FOUR

CASE STUDIES

Historically, Black men have had more visible, public roles both in American sports, sports media, and sports activism. However, social media provide Black female athletes a platform to be heard, to make visible the inequities and injustices that they and others face, and to challenge false narratives that often trivialize them. The following case studies examine how and why one Black female activist, U.S. hammer-thrower, Gwen Berry uses social media for activism.

Specifically, the following case studies describe in rich detail Berry's podium protests at both the 2019 Pan Am Games and the 2021 Olympic Trials. These case studies also examine how, in the wake of both protests, Berry used social media to raise awareness about and combat injustices in American society and sports. Along the way, intersectional and cyberfeminist theories are used to make sense of the injustices Berry faced and how she responded on the podium and on social media.

Berry's 2019 Pan American Games Protest in Lima, Peru

The Pan American Games (or Pan Am Games) are one of the largest and most important international sporting competitions in the world. At the 2019 Pan Am Games in Lima, Peru, Gwen Berry recorded her longest hammer throw in international competition – a 74.6-meter toss that earned her the gold medal

(Schad, 2021). But it was what Berry did on the medal stand that really turned heads.

Berry is a visually striking Black woman. She stands 5’10” and 194 pounds, and every bit of her is muscle. In the rather conservative world of international track and field, Berry also stands out for her expressive and distinctive look. She has several tattoos, including flowers, quotes, and the Olympic rings. She also often wears bright lipstick to match her attire, and she makes frequent hair style changes.

As Berry took the medal stand in Lima, with daylight turning to twilight, she wore bright electric blue matte lipstick, a short, buzzed hair style, black gym pants, and her blue Team USA track sweatshirt (which matched her lipstick). She stood high on the elevated, gold medal podium, flanked by the silver and bronze medal winners. As an instrumental version of the “Star Spangled Banner” began to play, Berry’s expression and posture changed. Something had clearly stirred in her mind.

To understand what was going through Berry’s head at that moment, it is important to recognize that her identity is multifaceted. Berry is the daughter of an Iraq War veteran, so the anthem is bound to have meaning to her. However, she is also a Black woman in America. Berry grew up in Ferguson, Missouri – a city that, in 2014, was plunged into unrest when a white police officer named Darren Wilson shot and killed an unarmed 18-year-old Black man named Michael Brown. Berry is a mother, and like so many Black mothers in America, police

brutality and killings of young black men like Brown hit particularly close to home. She knows what it feels like to worry about her son in a society that does not value the lives of young black men and boys:

> Knowing that my son, no matter how smart he is, no matter how bright he is, no matter how brilliant he is, there are people out there who will never, ever, ever see him as somebody who deserves to live and thrive in the world ... I know that any time I'm not around my son, he is at risk of being beaten, abused or even murdered by a system of white supremacy (Berry, 2021, para. 31).

Berry has expressed great discomfort with the national anthem – particularly, the third verse. She says that "The third verse speaks about slaves and our blood being slang and pilchered all over the floor. It's disrespectful and it does not speak for Black Americans" (Adams, 2021, para. 6).

As Berry stood on that Lima podium, and that triggering third verse played, her body language shifted, signaling her discomfort. She slowly rocked on the back of her feet with her arms crossed behind her back. Then, as the anthem crescendos at "O'er the land of the free," Berry, with her head dropped, thrust a closed fist in the air and held it there. The two other women at the medal stand stared forward at the flag, motionless. This gesture – the closed fist – is an iconic symbol of black power and resistance. It is the same one Tommie Smith and John Carlos used on the medal stand in 1968 (Corbet, 1969). This is the moment when Berry becomes not just a Black female athlete activist, but an icon of the of the fifth wave of sports activism (Hartmann, 2019).

The Public and Political Backlash to Berry's 2019 Protest

Berry's 2019 Pan Am Games podium protest played out against the backdrop of the Trump presidency – a time when social and racial justice issues were particularly prominent and highly divisive. Throughout his term in office, Trump engaged in racist and sexist discourse, and he advanced policies and supported movements like the border wall and Blue Lives Matter that escalated racial tensions (Desjardins, 2020, 2017).

In this environment, Black athletes who protested social and racial injustices faced the very real threat of public backlash and personal and professional repercussions. Former NFL quarterback, Colin Kaepernick exemplifies these risks. After kneeling during the national anthem to protest police brutality, Kaepernick received public scorn, including from then-presidential candidate Donald Trump. Kaepernick was eventually blackballed from the National Football League (NFL). However, his case also showed that non-violent protests for racial justice in sports could garner extraordinary public attention and support – at least when the protestor is a black *man*. In fact, Nike built an entire advertising campaign around Kaepernick and his stand for racial justice.

Berry, like Kaepernick, received immediate backlash. One Twitter user wrote under her post:

> She's an unpatriotic bitch who has no business representing this country, period. To give a "Black Panther" salute at a presentation while representing the USA is unforgivable. She should be stripped of her medal

and kicked off the team. And that blue lipstick – jeez!" (TaleSpinner3, 2019).

Figure 1. *Critic Tweet*

Interestingly, during her 2019 protest, Berry's critics were mainly internet trolls and unsung figures. As we will see soon, her 2021 protest garnered backlash from prominent political figures, such as Senator Ted Cruz, Congressman Dan Crenshaw, and Donald Trump, Jr.

Amid the public backlash following her 2019 protest, 80% of Berry's sponsors left her, including the premier athletic brand, Nike (Kilgore, 2021). From an intersectional perspective, it is worth considering how differently Nike responded to Berry's protest compared to that of NFL quarterback and racial justice activist, Colin Kaepernick. Like Berry, Kaepernick demonstrated on the field of play, during the national anthem, and in support of Black life. Like Berry, he also received backlash from the public and his sport for doing so. But after his demonstration, Nike didn't just retain Kaepernick; they launched the "Dream Crazy" ad campaign featuring black and white headshots of Kaepernick with the

slogan, “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything” (Nike in Draper & Creswell, 2019). However, when Berry – an outspoken Black *female* athlete – did just that Nike dropped her, reinforcing her critics’ commentary.

Why would Nike treat Berry so differently? From an intersectional perspective, we can observe that Kaepernick is an elite Black male athlete who played one of the most popular and lucrative American sports. He also became somewhat of a household name before taking a knee during the anthem. For Nike, then, Kaepernick’s sport and status made him a significant investment for the company — one that they wanted to find a way to capitalize on, despite the risks. Berry also presented plenty of risk but much less reward. So, Berry’s sponsorship was more easily terminated than Kaepernick’s.

Berry was not the only athlete to engage in protest at the 2019 PanAm games. World-class fencer, Race Imboden also took a knee at the medal stand (something he planned to do ahead of time). Imboden later explained that his protest was against systemic racial oppression, treatment of immigrants, gun violence, and obnoxious comments made by President Trump. Both Berry and Imboden are elite athletes in unpretentious sports, and neither were household names before their protests. However, Imboden – a white male – received a very different public response than Berry did. Whereas Berry was maligned for “hating the country” and some argued that she be removed from Team USA, Imboden went relatively under the radar despite his activism being planned among his teammates (Bieler, 2019).

Berry's protest may have also reinforced stereotypes about Black women as angry and "ghetto." Anger in the media is perceived very differently depending on one's race, gender, and class. For instance, men are allowed (and even expected) to express their anger as a performance of masculinity. White women can do so, too, but only as a call of action to demand change. However, when Black women express their anger, it is seen as wicked and vile. These characterizations are tied to the media's historic stereotyping of black women as rude, loud, angry and aggressive "sapphires" (Prasad, 2018). American sports and media also emphasize ghetto-centrism – "the fetishizing and essentializing of black sporting bodies for their perceived, and indeed conjoined, athletic ability and urban authenticity" (Andrews & Silk, 2010). For Berry, sports welcome her urban authenticity to a degree (e.g., her lipstick, attire, fashion choices), but a line still exists when it comes to militant, black political activism.

Together these stereotypes mean that although Berry's protests differed little from these men, her actions could be interpreted as "angrier" than Kaepernick and more "ghetto" than Imboden. Therefore, Berry's intersection of race, class, and gender creates a double jeopardy situation for her – "the idea that the greater the number of marginal categories to which one belongs, the greater the number of disadvantages one will experience" (Carbado, 2013, p. 813).

Berry Explains Herself and Embraces Her Athlete Activist Identity

Berry did not use social media to immediately comment on her Lima protest. Rather she commented through traditional sports media, including an interview with *USA Today*. In the interview, Berry said of her protest, “Somebody has to talk about the things that are too uncomfortable to talk about. Somebody has to stand for all of the injustices that are going on in America and a president who’s making it worse” (Armour, 2019, para. 4).

On January 1, 2020 – four months after her Lima protest – Berry finally took to social media to comment on the event. She posted an Instagram “lookbook” that included a combination of images and videos along with a lengthy caption. The post was in the style of a “new year, new me” post. In it, Berry described her personal and professional growth over the past year. She wrote: “This past year was the year of reconstruction and elevation; I was able to finally BE ME…” (mzberrythrows_, 2020).

In terms of her professional growth as an athlete, Berry’s lookbook included several images and videos of her practicing and competing in the hammer throw. She also disclosed that – before her protest in Lima – she had contemplated walking away from hammer throwing.

> Season 2019 I gave myself two options: Either I was going to walk away from this sport forever or I was going to make a change (a decision in which I was extremely proud of). I fell back in love with my crazy event and I truly began to be a “hammer thrower “.. I was able to learn an indescribable amount of skills ... I was able to learn from other perspectives... able to hear amazing stories. And finally able to be FREE (in and out of the ring) I found my POWER and more importantly my PURPOSE” (_mzberrythrows, 2020).

The final line here hints that this lookbook is not just about her professional accomplishments. Both the lookbook's caption and images highlight her personal and political growth as an activist. Indeed, the very first picture in the lookbook is one of her, in her monochromatic blue track uniform, on the podium in Lima. In that picture, Berry stands atop the medal stand, flanked by the silver- and gold-medal winners. All three athletes face profile right. But unlike the others, Berry's head is dropped, her eyes are closed, and her closed fist is held firmly in the air.

Podium ceremonies are meant to serve as celebrations. However, this image is full of cool blue hues, which create a dampening effect, and her silhouette is desaturated in low-key lighting. This creates a seriousness and somberness. It is worth considering how this image situates Berry in relation to previous Black athlete activists like Smith and Carlos. Sontag (1977) argues that "cameras miniaturize experience and transform history into spectacle" (pp. 109-110). Like Smith and Carlos, Berry is seen here with her head down and her fist high. This creates a striking effect that links her to the history of Black athlete activism. But unlike Carlos and Smith, she stands in support of Black lives; her teammates stare forward tense and sterile.

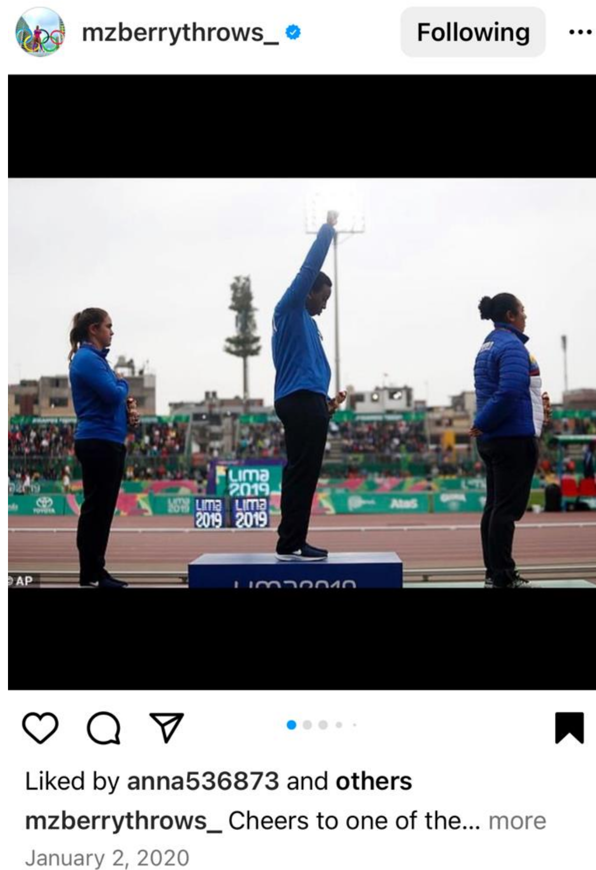

Figure 2. *Gwen Berry Lookbook Post 2020*

In the lookbook caption, Berry goes on to explain why, exactly, she did what she did on the podium in Lima. “In regard to life; I was able to take a stand. I STAND FOR those who sometimes feel like they are lost, misunderstood, and unheard.” More, she explained why it was important that she provide a such people a voice: “Gun violence, lack of equal opportunity and justice. these are the issues I stand for” (MZberrythrows_, 2020). Here, Berry uses her social media presence to clarify why exactly she was protesting, and for whom.

Notice that Berry's caption said: "I found my POWER and more importantly my PURPOSE" (MZberrythrow_, 2020)." The word "POWER" here has two meanings: first, her power as a hammer thrower; and second, her personal power as an activist. In a sense, Berry's professional success empowered her personal and political success and vice versa. In this, Berry did more than throw the hammer well in 2019; she became a new type of athlete – a Black female athlete activist. She embraces that transformation in this Instagram lookbook post.

Keller (2014) describes how young black women use the web to draw attention to the complexities of their social identities. Piñeiro-Otero et al. (2016) explains that cyberfeminists use digital media to create new meanings and identities. In this Instagram lookbook, Berry clearly does this. She describes herself in both professional, personal, and political terms. As she does, she embraces the identity of Black female athlete activist. Historically, BFAAs have not been able to control their own narratives and identities, as they have been overlooked in times of activist mobilization. But in the digital era, the most silenced populations often turn to digital media to write their own narratives (Jackson et al., 2020). Here, then, Berry is doing something new; she's engaging in Black female athlete *cyber*activism.

In October 2021, Berry used a *Players Tribune* blog post to reflect on her 2019 protest. In it, she elaborated on the importance of her identity in engaging in a protest like this:

> Being an Olympian, it's not just about what I represent, but who I'm representing. Who I'm speaking for. Who I'm a reflection of. When I stand on that podium, I am a reflection of teenage mothers. I am a reflection of Black women. I am a reflection of everyone who has had to overcome poverty" (Berry, 2021, para. 29).

Here, Berry draws attention to her background and experiences and her power as an elite Black female athlete to both inspire and draw attention to racial, gender, and economic injustice. So, she is defining herself not only as an activist, but as an athlete activist *for* people like her.

George Floyd's Murder Sparks the Fifth Wave of Black Athlete Activism

Ultimately, both Berry and Imboden were given 12-month probations by the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) for violating Rule 50 of the Olympic charter, which governs political speech. Rule 50 states that, "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas" (IOC, 2020, p. 1, para. 6). Rule 50 has been challenged by many athletes, including Tommie Smith, John Carlos and Wyomia Tyus. However, Berry's case occurred at a critical moment for racial justice protests in American sports and society. That changing context would significantly impact how Berry's probation unfolded.

The climate for racial justice in America changed significantly in the summer of 2020 with the murder of George Floyd. An African American father, Floyd was murdered by a white Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin. In a nine-minute bystander video, the world watched Chauvin kneel on Floyd's neck as he screamed, "I can't breathe!" "Mama!" and "please!" over twenty times. In

response to Floyd's murder, #BlackLivesMatter protests erupted across the Twin Cities, and then spread to other American cities and towns, and, eventually, the world. In a viral video clip, Floyd's young daughter said, "Daddy changed the world." She was not wrong. People took to the streets, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement enjoyed the most public support in its history.

In the weeks and months that followed Floyd's murder a string of killings of unarmed black people ignited subsequent waves of rage and protest. Ahmaud Aubrey was hunted down and murdered by three white men as he jogged through a neighborhood in Brunswick, Georgia. And Breonna Taylor was soundly asleep in Louisville, Kentucky, when police officers forced entry and killed her in her own home.

As protests continued in America's streets, public attention also turned toward its sports arenas. On the one hand, sports provided an escape from the awful news of racial injustice. It also gave viewers a shared experience amid the isolation of social distancing required by the spread of Covid-19 pandemic (Nauright et al., 2020). For Black athletes and others outraged by racial injustices, the return of live sports also presented an opportunity to highlight and denounce police brutality.

On May 25th, 2020, two white police officers shot an African American man named Jacob S. Blake in front of his two children. Blake survived the shooting but is now paralyzed from the waist down (Richmond, 2021). Blake was from Kenosha, Wisconsin, and a few days after the shooting, the NBA's

Milwaukee Bucks decided – as a team – not to take the floor for their playoff game against the Orlando Magic. Several other teams across the NBA and other sports followed suit (Charania & Vardon, 2021). This marked the beginning of the 5th wave of sport activism – a period when sports protests have been much more common and public, and when teams and leagues have also been much more public with their protests

<u>Berry Lobbies the USOPC Not to Enforce Rule 50 at The 2021 Olympic Trials</u>

The U.S. Olympic Trials were originally scheduled for Summer 2020 in Eugene, Oregon. However, those Trials were postponed to June 2021, due to, the social distancing orders of the Covid-19 global pandemic. In the meantime, as part of the fifth wave of American sports activism, Berry and other U.S. athletes lobbied the USOPC to allow them to engage in political protest for social and racial justice at the Trials.

As part of that lobbying effort, in September 2020, Berry was featured in a five-and-a-half minute *New York Times* opinion video titled, “I Used the Podium to Protest. The Olympic Committee Punished Me.” In this five-minute-long video, which is narrated by Berry, she explains why she protested, she questions the logic of her probation, and she accuses the USOPC of being hypocritical and on the wrong side of history. Berry reads the probation letter she received and then explains it in her own words:

> Rule 50 is a rule in the Olympic Charter that states that athletes cannot demonstrate any type of political, religious or racial propaganda in the field of play or on the podium at the Olympic Games. Raise a fist or take a knee? It’s not allowed (Berry, 2020, 01:59-2:15).

Berry argues that this approach to protest is hypocritical. She explains that the IOC expects Olympians to be courageous, strive for excellence and overcome barriers:

> [They] love the stories. They want to pitch, oh, well, this athlete grew up without a father, or this athlete grew up in the ghettos. This athlete had to go without food for months and months … [but] "as soon as the athlete is the best athlete in the world, they say, oh, no, you can't talk about racial discrimination in Black and brown neighborhoods. Oh, that's not for you to talk about. But that athlete is literally a product of the system. (Berry in New York Times, 2020, 04:15).

In this, Berry implies that ghettocentrism is at play on the international stage, and this is what makes her angry. She also sets the record straight about why she protested: "So the idea of white people telling Black people exactly what they can and cannot say or do is exactly why I protested" (Berry in New York Times, 2020, 02:23-02:29). Berry ends the video with a direct message to the Olympic committee, "You need to get rid of Rule 50 and come up with something else. Standing up for what you believe, pushing for impossible dreams— that is the Olympic spirit. I'm ready for Tokyo 2021 and my next podium" (Berry in New York Times, 2020, 05:30). Following its publication by the *New York Times*, Berry shared this video on multiple social media platforms. This drew yet more attention to her 2019 PanAm Grames protest and the upcoming 2021 Olympic Trials.

The USOPC governs the relationship between Team USA and the IOC, and the USOPC's policies usually align with that of the IOC. However, under pressure from Berry and other athletes, the USOPC announced in March 2021

that it would not enforce Rule 50 during the Trials (Killgore, 2021). In an open letter, USOPC Chief executive officer, Sarah Hirshland stated, “This year, the trials have allowed ‘respectful demonstrations on the topic of racial and social justice” (Fischels, 2020, para. 12). This marked the first time Team USA athletes had permission to demonstrate at the podium without fear of probation or disqualification.

During the fifth wave changes in sponsorship were also unfolding. Nike and most of Berry’s other sponsors dropped her in 2019. But in 2020, Berry signed a $15,000 sponsorship with Color of Change (COC), the nation's largest online racial justice organization. The organization released in a statement in. September of 2020, “We are honored to support Olympian Gwen Berry, who is a shining example of the bravery and boldness it takes to take a public stand against injustice no matter what” (Color or Change, 2020, para. 2). The COC support is important, because the organization is committed to helping outspoken athletes fight systemic oppressions in sport and society without fear of losing sponsors. Color of Change also worked with Berry to secure partnership with Puma and create an athlete activist campaign.

Berry’s Protest at The 2021 U.S. Olympic Trials

On June 26th, 2021, at the U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene, Oregon, Gwen Berry threw the hammer 241 feet and 2 inches. That throw earned her third place behind fellow Americans, Amber Campbell and DeAnna Price (Schad, 2021). As the three walked to the podium to receive their medals, Berry stood out. She

wore red matte lipstick with a black line from the cupid's bow to her bottom lip. Her track uniform was color-blocked the same way – a black and red speedo with matching tank top and running shoes. Her hair was cut short, a natural look.

In the phallocentric world of sports, female athletes often struggle to be recognized as either women or athlete (Scheadler & Wagstaff, 2018). So, they often use make-up, hair, and accessories to mark themselves as women on the field of play (Boben, 2022). Donna Haraway's concept of the "cyborg" is relevant here. For Haraway, being a cyborg, "is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them other" (Haraway, in Prins, 1995, p. 363). Hair, clothing, make-up, and accessories are tools that help cyborg women disassemble systemic oppressions. As we have seen, Black female athlete activists like Wyoma Tyus often use their bodies and attire (navy blue shorts) to engage in quiet, but powerful political protest. Here, Berry is doing much of the same. Her red lipstick signifies womanhood, while the thick black line signifies the silencing of her and other Black women in America. From a cyberfeminist perspective, then, social media is not the only technology she uses to engage in activism. She also uses her body and attire to speak truth to power.

The medal ceremony itself began without incident. However, a few moments after the laying of medals around the three women's necks, the U.S. national anthem began to play. Berry's body and facial expression had dropped drastically. She became visibly restless, swiveling her body back and forth. Then,

she made a 45 degree turn towards the stands and away from the flag. She placed one hand on her hip and lowered the flowers she had received with her medal. With a look of disgust, Berry walked away from the podium and returned holding in the air a black tee shirt. She held the tee shirt across her face. It read: "ACTIVIST ATHLETE" in white block letters.

Why did Berry do this? In an interview later that day, Berry explained that, before the podium ceremony, she was assured by the Trials organizers that the national anthem would not be played while she was at the podium. Unlike at the Olympics, the national anthem does not typically play during the Trials' medal ceremonies. Rather, a video rendition of the U.S. national anthem was scheduled to play every day of the Trials at 5:20 p.m. But the anthem did not play at that time. It played at 5:25 p.m. – just as Berry was at the podium (Pells, 2021).

Was this a personal attack against Berry or an honest mistake? To Berry, it seemed personal. She told the *Black News Network* (2021) that she felt "set up" by the organizers. She explained that, had she known the anthem was to be played, she would have waited before setting foot on the podium (Black News Channel, 2021, 02:39).

<u>Berry Tells the USOPC to "Stop Playing with Me"</u>

After a year's hiatus from social media, Berry took to Twitter the next day to respond to the USOPC. She posted an image of herself at the podium. In it, she stands full front towards the camera. Her body appears half turned away from the flag. Her left foot is slightly pushed out to the side, and she has one

hand on her hip. Her head leans to the right as her eyes pierce forward with a look of disgust. The red, white, and blue carnations hang at her side. The Tweet accompanying the image simply read: “Stop playing with me.” (Berry, 2021).

Figure 3 *Berry Tweets, “Stop Playing With Me”*

That same day, Berry also posted to Instagram a five-image lookbook. For the cover image (Figure 4), she used the same photo she had posted on Twitter, but the caption was even more emphatic. It read: “I said what I said… I meant what I said.. STOP PLAYING WITH ME!! PERIOD! # activistAthlete” (mzberrythrows_, 2021).

Figure 4. *Berry's Instagram Lookbook Cover*

In this tweet and lookbook were a direct response to the USOPC, who had assured Berry that the anthem would not be played while she was present for the medal ceremony. Berry's word choice indicates that she felt abused by and disgusted with the USOPC. The medal ceremony moment was meant to celebrate her and her teammates' accomplishments as an athlete. Instead, she felt deceived into the triggering experience of standing yet again for a national anthem that she finds disrespectful to Black Americans like her. Her passionate

words show a woman who is tired of being yanked around, but also someone whose community has been oppressed and silenced for generations.

The other images in Berry's five-image Instagram lookbook underscore those feelings of disappointment and frustration with the USOPC. However, they also demonstrate her embrace of her athlete activist identity (Figures 4 & 5). These images include one of her retrieving and holding up the Athlete Activist tee shirt and two others where she has covered her head with that tee shirt. The caption for the lookbook also includes the hashtag: #activistAthlete. Berry reflects the cyberfeminism ideal of challenging hierarchy by using both tee-shirt and social media as technology to draw attention to injustices and recreate her identity as an athlete activist.

Figures 5 and 6. *Berry's Tee Shirt Protest*

The lookbook's final image is particularly powerful. In it, Berry stands at the podium with her "Activist Athlete" tee-shirt draped over her head. Her face and head hung low in the dark shadows of the shirt. Her red lipstick stands out, and her body is solemnly facing forward. In contrast, her white teammate, Dianne Price stands tall with her head held high. She embraces the national anthem, holding her hand over her heart. This image signifies how two women experience America so differently, because of intersectionality. Both athletes share an identity layer of womanhood, but when the anthem plays, only one hears a patriotic salute to a country, and the other hears the cries of the enslaved and oppressed. Cyberfeminists describe this as a controlling image (Cottom, 2016). Berry uses the shirt to control and establish where her body fits within society's hierarchies of power.

These images also illustrate how Berry integrates both analog and digital technologies in her protests. At the podium, she uses analog technologies like her tee-shirt and lipstick to challenge oppression in sports and society and to establish her identity as an athlete activist. Then, later, she uses social media to draw attention to racial and gender injustice.

The Political Right and Social Media Erupt

In the wake of Berry's unplanned protest, the political and media landscape erupted. Though, Trump was no longer in office, the political context following the January 6th, attack on the U.S. Capitol remained tense and racially

charged. A development like this -- a Black female athlete turning her back in disgust to the flag during the national anthem -- was red meat for culture war politics.

On Twitter, Texas Congressman, Dan Crenshaw called Berry a disgrace to America and pushed to remove her from Team USA. Incumbent Texas Senator Ted Cruz (2021) tweeted:

> “Why does the Left hate America? Sure, we have our faults, but no nation in the history of the world has liberated more people from captivity, has lifted more out of poverty, has bled more for freedom, or has blessed more w/ abundance. God bless America.

Some went as far as weaponizing Berry’s past social media post to suggest she was un-American. The former president’s son, Donald J Trump Jr. retweeted a blurry image of Berry at the 2016 Rio Olympics posing with a large American Flag behind her body:

> “Totally not all an act! She was definitely not protesting to get attention for herself and/or maybe some of those woke Nike sponsorship dollars. 100% legit and not at all a cottage industry victimization scheme we see so much of these days” (@DonaldJTrumpJr).

Some members of the public came to Berry’s defense, pushing back against Cruz, Crenshaw, Trump, Jr., and others. One Twitter user rebutted: “Who says she’s left? She’s fighting for equality - obviously something you’re not interested in” (@JRYZNER, 2021). Berry even received support from White House press secretary Jen Psaki, who spoke to the media about the controversy on the behalf of President Biden.

On social media, Berry corrected the record by brushing off the conservatives' critiques. In one tweet, she said, "...I never said I hated this country! People try to put words in my mouth, but they can't. That's why I speak out. I LOVE MY PEOPLE." And in another, she says, "At this point, y'all are obsessed with me" (@MzBerryThrows, 2021). Here, Berry attempted to silence her critics by dismissing their concerns as petty and misguided. The public controversy fizzled out shortly thereafter. In the end, the USOPC never apologized to Berry or explained their side of the story, and the IOC never made a comment.

Raven Saunders Continues Berry's Activism at The Tokyo Olympics

In July 2021, Berry competed at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. However, she did not have an opportunity to engage in another podium protest, as she did not win a medal. Berry's activism was not missing, though. When Berry's close friend, Raven Saunders received her the silver medal in the shot put, Saunders raised and crossed her arms to make a "X" Saunders is a queer Black woman. She explained that her protest was in solidarity with the Black and LGBTQIA+ communities. Her gesture represented, "the intersection of where all people who are oppressed meet" (Pells & Graham, 2021, para. 2).

While Saunders is not the focus of this thesis, her activism and words demonstrate that other Black female athlete activists are poignantly aware of their intersectional identities, too. It also suggests that Berry's actions created a collective identity – the *modern* Black female athlete activist – that others with

multiple oppressive intersections could also embrace. Just as they did to Berry, the IOC closely examined Saunders's activism to challenge the athletes' dispositions (Pells & Gramham, 2021). Although investigated Saunder was not placed on probation.

Since the 2021 Olympic Trials, Berry has been more active on social media – particularly Instagram and Twitter. Through videos, photos, podcasts, tweets, and shares, she constantly showcases social and racial injustice online. On Twitter, Berry has called for better pay for athletes, tighter gun regulations, and protecting woman's abortion rights. On these accounts you see an athlete who is fed-up with the systematic disadvantages she sees poor and Black Americans experience.

Additionally, Berry has used her platform to draw attention to the Black female athlete activists that came before her. Specifically, Berry highlighted the long-forgotten story of Wyomia Tyus. In T*he New York Times*, Berry said, "I feel there is a direct connection between us [Berry and Tyus] ... it's unfortunate we don't hear their stories. So often women are overlooked. We bear the biggest burdens" (Longman, 2021, para. 12-13). Berry is aware of the challenges BFAA like her have faced. By highlighting Tyus's story, she sheds light on a history that deserves more attention and situates herself in broader narrative of Black female athlete activism.

Berry has also explored how she and others can uplift their communities. In an interview with LeBron James's athlete empowerment brand, *Uninterrupted*,

Berry argued that challenges facing her community and society in general, could be alleviated by standing united (James & Carter, 2021, 01:25). Berry also guest lectures across the nation discussing her activism, the IOC, her controversy, and how she redefines athlete activism. As she explains:

> “I raised my Activist Athlete T-shirt in the air as a reminder to everyone of what I stand for. A reminder to my fellow U.S. track and field athletes, to the fans, to anyone watching at home, that I’m always going to speak out” (Berry, 2021).

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Key Findings

Historically, Black male athlete activists like John Carlos, Tommie Smith, Muhammad Ali, and Colin Kaepernick have garnered much more public attention than Black female athlete activists, like “Rose" Robinson, Wyomia Tyus, and Toni Smith Thompson. This is unfortunate, but not surprising, as the American sport and sports media industries have long histories of both racism and sexism. But social media provide opportunities for Black female athletes to challenge oppression in sports and society, tell their own stories, and shape their identities.

This thesis sought to understand how and why Black female athletes use social media for activism. To do so, it examined two cases in which an elite Black female athlete, Olympian Gwen Berry, used social media to engage in activism – her 2019 PanAm Games protest and 2021 Olympic Trials protest. It also drew on intersectional and cyberfeminist theories to make sense of those events and social media uses.

Like BFAA before her, Berry used her body and clothing to silently protest the injustice she and other Black people face. And like her predecessors, she was maligned and punished for doing so. Unlike previous generations, though, Berry used social media to amplify this message, to tell her story of how and why she protested, and to establish herself as a Black athlete activist in the process. The changing contexts of American life – particularly the murder of

George Floyd – had a significant impact on her ability to do so effectively. The following identifies some of the key findings from this study.

<u>Bodies are Technologies, Too</u>

Before discussing Berry's use of social media, it is important to note that, like Black female athletes before her, Berry uses her body and attire to engage in silent protests against racial injustice. Much as Wyomia Tyus wore navy blue shorts to signal her support with Carlos and Smith, Berry also uses fashion as a form of resistance and solidarity. For instance, at the medal stand in Eugene, Oregon, Berry wore red lipstick with a black line. This distinguished her from her white female counterparts and quietly signaled her support for Black lives.

Berry's more explicit acts of protests also rely on her body and attire. On the podium in Lima, Berry, with her electric blue lipstick, lowered her head, and thrusted a closed fist in the air. In 2021, she let her posture and facial expressions communicate her disgust with the IOC and USOPC. To ensure that the message was not lost on anyone, she wore the activist athlete shirt over her head. Berry's unplanned actions clarify her intentions to be seen and heard as an activist.

Cyberfeminists focus on women's use of digital media to challenge patriarchy. However, Berry's embodied, seemingly non-digital actions on the podium can be understood as cyberfeminist acts because bodies are technologies, too. As a cyborg, Berry uses the available technology – whether it is her lipstick, fist, a tee-shirt, or social media -- to battle oppressive regimes,

including the IOC, USOPC, and society's expectations of women athletes. Interestingly, following both her 2019 and 2021 protests, Berry shared on social media images of her protesting on the podium. So, Berry's use of her body and digital technologies for activism cannot really be separated.

Berry's Protests are Treated Differently Due to Her Intersectional Identity

The theory of intersectionality explains that Black women in U.S. society face overlapping racial and gender inequities. On top of this, Black female athletes compete in a sports and media landscape that privileges male athletes – particularly those in lucrative, high-profile sports, like football, baseball, and basketball – and that condemns Black athletes when the step out of line.

As the comparisons with Colin Kaepernick and Race Imboden show, Black female athletes like Berry confront unique challenges when they stand up for themselves and Black lives. Yes, both Kaepernick and Berry were punished by their sports, and both received dismissive and hateful comments from politicians, internet trolls, and others. But whereas Nike developed an entire advertising campaign around Colin Kaepernick and his racial justice protests, the company simply canceled Berry's sponsorship. And when White male fencer, Race Imboden engaged in his own silent protest (and a premeditated one at that), he received a fraction of the public scrutiny that Berry did.

Similarly, we can ask whether the USOPC or social media would have treated Berry's White hammer-throw competitors the same way they did Berry. Berry raised this question in a September 2022 interview on the podcast

Champions of Change. As she argued, “The world does not want to see a strong Black woman” (Cutler, 2022,20:39-20:43). As a Black female athlete in America, Berry’s intersectional identity causes her to experience athlete activism differently than other athlete activists.

<u>On Social Media, Berry Responds Directly to Critics and Sets The Record Straight</u>

Sports organizations, sponsors, and internet trolls, treat Black female athlete activists differently than their white male counterparts. When confronted with discriminatory treatment, Berry used social media to directly challenge the USOPC, the IOC and her critics and set the record straight about her public protests.

In her 2020 *New York Times* video, which Berry shared widely on social media, she explains, “the idea of white people telling Black people exactly what they can and cannot say or do is exactly why I protested.” (Berry, 2020, 02:42). She also challenged the IOC’s hypocrisy: “Olympians are celebrated for their courage, drive and tenacity. But if they are spurred by those same traits to demand racial justice? That’s a punishable offense.” (Berry, 2020, para. 2). Then again in 2021, when Berry was led to believe the national anthem would not be played while she was on the podium, she powerfully asserted herself on social media by telling the USOPC, “STOP PLAYING WITH ME!! PERIOD!” These examples illustrate how Berry turns to social media to correct the record and confront discrimination in sports.

Berry's podium protests follow a pattern of action and backlash. In 2021, that backlash included prominent U.S. political figures like Ted Cruz, Dan Crenshaw, Donald Trump, Jr., and others. Berry's critics alleged that she was un-American and called for her to be removed from Team USA. On social media, Berry directly challenges her detractors, pointing out that she, the daughter of a veteran, never said she was un-American, and she mocked them for obsessing over her. In this, she sets the record straight and silences her critics. In her responses, Berry can be seen as a cyberfeminist who takes control of her own narrative by using technology to go against the status quo.

<u>Berry Redefines Herself As A Black Female Athlete Cyber-Activist.</u>

Cyberfeminist theorists argue that women use digital media to challenge the gendered status quo and redefine femininity (Haraway, 1985). Berry does this most explicitly in in her eight-image Instagram lookbook on New Year's Day 2020. In that "new year, new me" post, Berry reflects on her personal, professional, and political accomplishments in 2019. In both her words and image choices, Berry highlights these multiple layers of her identity. She explains that injustices against poor and Black people matter to her because she is a Black women, mother, and athlete in America. By embracing this intersectionality, she says that she found freedom, power, and purpose in these core facets of her life: "I was able to learn an indescribable amount of skills ... I was able to learn from other perspectives... able to hear amazing stories. And

finally able to be FREE (in and out of the ring) I found my POWER and more importantly my PURPOSE" (_mzberrythrows, 2020).

Through her image choices, Berry explicitly casts herself as a Black female athlete activist. While some images in the lookbook are more personal and competitive, the very first one is an act of protest. The image is of her atop the podium in Lima with her head low with a closed fist held firmly in the air. Somber and serious, the image is clearly reminiscent of John Carlos and Tommie Smith's iconic, closed-fist protest at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games. When paired with the caption about being FREE and finding her POWER and PURPOSE, this image makes clear that Berry has embraced her identity as a Black female athlete activist.

Historically, BFAAs have not been able to control their own narratives and identities. So, their actions have often been overlooked in times of activist mobilization, or they have been tied to negative stereotypes, such as the angry Black women narrative. On social media, Berry shows and says exactly who this moment was for. In the process, she redefines herself not just as a Black female athlete activist, but as a *cyber*activist.

Context Matters

Harry Edwards describes five waves of Black athlete activism. Each of these waves came at a unique moment in American history, and that context shaped the activism of the time. For instance, Toni Smith-Thompson's flag protest in the days after the 9/11 terrorist attack. In that anxious and intensely

patriotic time, Thompson's flag protest was deemed subversive and unacceptable.

Berry's 2019 protest played out during the fourth wave – a time when athlete activism was resurgent but still faced challenges from sports organizations, politicians, and the public. The fourth wave of athlete activism is exemplified by Colin Kaepernick taking a knee for racial justice and the extraordinary backlash he received for doing so. This context helps explain why Berry's faced so many challenges as a result of that protest, including probation and losing her Nike sponsorship.

Between Berry's 2019 and 2021 protests, much had changed. The murder of George Floyd in summer 2020 propelled the Black Lives Matter movement to peak levels of public support. This, along with the upheaval of the global pandemic and President Biden's defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 election, laid the groundwork for the fifth wave of athlete activism. Now, entire teams were standing in support of social and racial justice, and leagues and large segments of the public were supporting them.

The changing social and political context set the stage for Berry's 2021 protest. If not for this changing context, it is hard to imagine the USOPC suspending enforcement of Rule 50, or Puma working with Color of Change to sponsor Berry. Of course, Berry still faced the USOPC misleading her about when the national anthem would be played, and the conservative backlash following her protest was even more ferocious. But that backlash also meant that

Berry’s protest was much more widely publicized in 2021, and it may have had a bigger effect than her protest just two years earlier.

Strengths and Weaknesses of this Study

This study has a few important limitations. First, the analysis is based on public reporting and social media posts – not interviews with Berry, herself. So, my conclusions about how and why Berry used social media are not based on her first-person perspective but on analysis of her and others’ words and actions. Although I did not study Berry’s thoughts and feelings, an interview would have verified the why and how of her actions. I also did not survey or interview social media users, so I cannot tell the effect her activism had on them. Last, because this is a case study of just one athlete and her social media use, I cannot generalize about *all* Black female athlete activists’ uses of social media.

The purpose of this study was not to generalize about all Black female athletes’ uses of social media, though. Nor did I seek to explain the effects of that media use. Rather, I wanted to understand how and why Black female athletes use these technologies in their activism. So, I examined an exemplar of that activism – Gwen Berry. As a Black female athlete in America, she is someone who is doubly marginalized and oppressed. She also has used social media to challenge her and others’ oppression in sports and society. The purposeful selection of Berry provided a vivid illustration of the processes I was interested in, including intersectional oppression, athlete activism and backlash, and the use of social media for activism.

A case study approach also allowed me to study these events and processes in considerable depth. I was able to study Berry's social media use closely and account for a number of factors, including her intersectional identities and experiences, the role of sports organizations, sponsors, politicians, and media, and the social and political context of the two cases. So, while I did not talk to Berry, herself, I was able to richly describe what unfolded and try to explain why.

Since these events happened within the last four years, my argument is also timely and interesting for a wide range of audiences. At the same time, the paper covers over sixty years of sport activism and draws attention to women whose stories have been repeatedly ignored. Thus, this paper is both timely historically grounded.

Future Research

This study closely looked at two cases of a Black female athlete who exemplifies the use of social media for activism. Future research could also examine how athlete activists from other marginalized communities use social media for activism, including female athletes with disabilities, transgender women, LGBQTIA+ athletes, and athletes of other races, ethnicities, and nationalities.

One key lesson of this study is that context matters. So future research should also investigate athlete activism and social media use in other sports, countries, and times. Research findings could be expanded to understand how

Berry's actions have inspired other athletes to protest, too. Lastly, this study can be used to establish if a sixth wave of sport activism is emerging, possibly one led by Black female athletes.

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