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THE COLLEGE OF  
**WOOSTER**

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DOES THIS GRANT THEM AGENCY? AN ANALYSIS OF THE FEMALE ATHLETE AS  
PORTRAYED IN ESPN'S *BODY* ISSUE

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Since 2009, one of the world's largest and most circulated sports mediums, ESPN, has been publishing an annual nude magazine. Formerly known as ESPN's *Body Issue*, this magazine seeks to highlight aesthetics of the athletic form, as well as the power of testimony told through the inhabited bodies of the magazine's featured athletes. Over the years, the magazine has featured many identities, including the representation of varying races, genders, body types, physical abilities, and sports. This study particularly examines the representation of a Black woman athlete, Tori Bowie, as featured in the magazine's tenth edition. Furthermore, this study focuses on the paradox that exists between the liberation of visibility and the restriction of mediated narratives. To do so, this research employs visual analysis in conjunction with autoethnography—incorporating myself, a Black woman athlete, as an additional artifact to be considered throughout this research. Through recognition of particular gazes, including the objectifying gaze and the “black female gaze,” this study dissects depictions of Tori Bowie, as well as my own surveillance of self, for larger hegemonic implications and social structures—including but not limited to whiteness, beauty standards, colorism, and misogyny.

Keywords: race, gender, gaze, sport, liberation, mediated narratives, beauty, autoethnography

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Dear Lord, You've done it again. You knew this project would rearrange my heart, restructure my mind, and reconstruct my behavioral patterns in order to be more conscious, compassionate, and courageous—all to continue fulfilling the purpose You destined for me to have. Although I am still learning what the fullness of that purpose is, I thank You for continuing to guide and order my steps. Throughout this research I have bombarded You with complaints, questions, and insecurities—as I have often done in life—but as always, there were diamonds in the rough. You exposed me to levels of humility, knowledge, and strength within me that had gone unnoticed by the one individual who I thought knew me better than You—me. So Lord, I thank You with the utmost gratitude. Thank You for helping me recognize that You make *no* mistakes, and that this process was orchestrated by You for a greater purpose. Thank You for putting me in another position to save myself from my own ignorance, stubborn nature, and

ego—helping me to reshape those stereotypically negative attributes into some deserving of praise and recognition: cognizance, persistence, and pride. Amen.

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army full of warriors. Some of what we've considered to be our weakest links, happen to be our strongest weapons. It's time to re-up our ammunition and take this world by storm.

#TogetherWeCan.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The number of times I have heard someone say, “I didn’t know you played basketball,” is almost insulting. However, I have recently begun thinking about why this may be the case. In my reflection I quickly realized that I often justify people’s surprise with, “Yea. I usually don’t post any basketball photos or videos so...” Admittedly, I haven’t liked the way I look in my sports goggles, I’m not a fan of my game face, and my uniform does not accentuate the few curves I have. I am not ashamed to say that my fear of judgement has been deeply rooted in a desire to be attractive in the eyes of a male audience. Undoubtedly, I would love for a guy to see me glistening with sweat in a sports bra, performing an athletic activity in a very controlled manner. However, there has always been something frightening to me about not being able to control my gestures and appearance in the heat of a live game. As a result of that fear, I have had boyfriends who I have discouraged from coming to see me play, and who have made me very self-conscious when they did attend games. I have had to justify to my friends why I was so supportive of male partners in their sports, and yet they hadn’t come to see me compete nearly as much. Although the males in my dating life created platonic environments that were free of judgment, it has taken me years to visualize myself as a body that was not created solely for the male gaze.

The reason I am not ashamed to share my story is *not* because I approve of navigating my life for the acceptance of males, but because I recognize that my story is the same as many female athletes. In fact, I often observe female athletes compete in artificial lashes, weaves, nails, and tinted eyebrows in anticipation of someone capturing a moment for all to see. Therefore, I hope that my candid confession helps us all realize the disservice we do to ourselves and our communities, hiding from and or performing for a camera that others fought to get us



(authentically) in front of. Our fears preserve historical assumptions of beauty, attraction, and visibility. Additionally, I hope we begin to understand that the choice to act or not—to hide or not—is indeed a privilege. The more status you acquire, the less control you have over your mediated identity. The surveillance never turns off.

One might argue that women athletes “elect” to be photographed (Murphy and Jackson 19), but I resist that argument. In doing so, I pose the question, to what extent do these athletes *actually* have control? For example, Daniel Sipocz wrote, “ESPN has the power to package athletes however they wish and can do so without permission from those athletes. The athletes do not have any say in how they are covered and represented” (85). Sipocz is specifically discussing the framing of athletes in live action or reconstructions of recorded content. In this case, the athletes did not “elect” to participate in the specific ways their bodies would be framed. Instead, they were packaged in a way that would increase network ratings, views, and revenue.

These questions of control in tandem with my own experiences sparked a curiosity about my own perceptions and understandings of why professional women athletes might agree to being framed, primarily, in nude photographs—in ways that are typically frowned upon by public audiences. Is their participation bigger than the act of simply taking part in an activity? Is it more than just a means to an end? What are the larger implications?

To share my story of self-perception has been liberating in allowing me to reclaim my own body and image, despite what society prescribes. This research allows me to claim my journey—flaws and all. As such, I am inclined to explore and discuss the experiences of other women athletes, and to analyze how their participation could be an intentional form of resistance, while also acting as an unconscious perpetuation of patriarchy. I seek to illustrate how

professional women athletes liberate themselves by way of creating their own narratives, as well as through navigating a dehumanizing industry, while publicizing and emphasizing the paradox between being visible and being seen. The two are not synonymous.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the bodies of female athletes, placing an emphasis on the paradox between the liberation of visibility and the restriction of mediated narratives. Furthermore, my analysis will reflect on my self-conscious athletic body as a byproduct of this paradox.

### **Rationales**

This analysis of female athletes' bodies and perceptions is valuable for many reasons, three of which I will explore here. First and foremost, this study holds cultural value in bringing awareness to the plights female athletes, including myself, face on a daily basis. According to a study conducted by the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) in 2018, one third of female NCAA Division I athletes reported they had experienced symptoms of anorexia nervosa ([nationaleatingdisorders.com](http://nationaleatingdisorders.com)). According to NCAA statistics, this one third represents 85,310 female athletes ([ncaa.org](http://ncaa.org)). That is 85,310 too many, and does not even address the entire population of female athletes competing on other levels. Furthermore, NEDA highlights the unfortunate commonality of “The Female Athlete Triad,” which consists of disordered eating, amenorrhea (the absence of menstruation), and osteoporosis (the weakening of bones). In doing so, NEDA identifies “adolescent girls are most at risk” in part due to “peer and social pressures” ([nationaleatingdisorders.com](http://nationaleatingdisorders.com)). This research responds to those pressures, in the hopes that parents, siblings, friends, and civil citizens will become more conscious of their messaging to

young female athletes. Through reading the truths and pains of my story alongside other female athletes, I hope that a sense of obligation to alleviate the next generation of female athletes of the burdens of conformity, pressure, and appearance will be felt. The time is now.

Contextually, this study extends research on ESPN, specifically, ESPN's *Body* Issue, by employing an autoethnographic approach to critique and analyze its content. Although ESPN "dominates the global sports media landscape," research on the network and its content is scarce (Kian et al. 140). Existing research tends to focus on comparisons of representation based on gender, race, and physical disability, further exploring the objectifying implications of those identities (Kian et al., Sipocz, Weaving and Samson, Fink and Kensicki). However, few of these examples are written to incorporate the researcher—a distinct feature of autoethnography (McParland 474, Nash 738, ). For example, Weaving and Samson conducted a study in which they sought to analyze the sexual objectification of images photographed of female Paralympians who elected to pose nude for ESPN's *Body* Issue (96), without acknowledging how their own abled-bodied experiences might contribute to the objectifications or worldviews of disabled bodies. As such, this study will extend scholarship on texts pertaining to sports media and athlete bodies by incorporating another analytical perspective. The integration of my voice, my story, and my embodied experience into this work is fully intended to be a form of allyship, solidarity, enlightenment, resistance, and a cry for help all in one.

Additionally, my study contributes to existing research by studying the female body as a site of resistance and oppression simultaneously. In particular, it acknowledges the forms of resistance created by the women athletes who elect to be photographed nude, while also being critical of the ways in which their nude bodies are sites of socialized identities that have been

informed by patriarchy and hegemonic ideologies. Prior research has worked to demystify the objectifying gaze by contending that the inclusion of and attention to male bodies in ESPN's *Body Issue* offers "equal 'exposure,'" therefore making female bodies less vulnerable (Kian et al. 153). However, we would be remiss to accept visibility and "equal exposure" as an end to our critiques. While prior research has also examined the female body in relation to hegemony and male domination, this study will contend, as bell hooks does, that the ability to shift the perspective of one's gaze adds to one's mobility and agency in a society (208). Furthermore, hooks writes, "In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness' politicizes 'looking' relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (208). This study will examine the ways in which the photographing of the naked female athletic form functions as a means of visibility, while being careful to acknowledge and examine the social implications of what that visibility symbolizes. Smallwood, Brown, and Billings establish the importance of discernment when it comes to the differences between the intentions of athletes versus what is perceived by audiences (3). The scholars note, "ESPN's website claims that the *Body Issue* magazine is a celebration of the athletic body," however, "such representation still potentially connects to a perceived double standard because of the preconceived notions the reader may bring to consuming the magazine" (7). To claim one's own experiences is liberating indeed, but we still must explore the contexts in which these claims are being made. Consequently, this study offers an alternative perspective to current works studying visual representations of the female athlete's body.

Lastly, this study responds to a call for more work on intersectionality in sports media portrayals (Crosby 229). Previous works have focused on constructions of women athlete

identities as classified under a singular experience based on gender identification exclusively (Hardin et al., Salwen and Wood, Fink and Kensicki). Thus, Hardin et al. focus on the “sexual difference in photographs,” with little attention to identities that are not gender (110). In assuming an intersectional lens, my study will develop a more “sophisticated analysis” by considering the “interlocking oppressions” that reflect “inseparable” identities of women athletes (Crosby 229). Furthermore, in responding to this call, my study will help showcase the “cultural and academic significance of sports media” pushing research narratives away from paying attention to “one facet of identity” exclusively (Crosby 229). Therefore, my study assists in bridging intersectionality theory and critical sport study, further illuminating the social constructions that contribute to the functionality of sport.

### **Method**

This study employs analytic autoethnography. In doing so, I will examine how I’ve viewed and talked about my athletic body/persona in comparison to how professional female athletes have represented their bodies in ESPN’s *Body* Issue. Furthermore, I will dissect these reflections for how they represent institutional structures and social pillars within United States culture.

### **Conclusion**

This study aims to identify how the ways in which female athletes speak about their bodies reflect the realities of their intersectional identities, and therefore the institutions that work to suppress them. Additionally, this study employs a particular critical orientation by considering the paradox between liberation and constraint.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2017, I decided to start keeping an organized collection of poems I'd written. If I were ever to publish these poems, I would have called the collection *My Diary, My Stories, My Voice ... Is Ours*. The dedication page encapsulates everything I envision saying to the readers of this research:

*First and foremost, I would like to thank God for giving me the strength, courage, and wisdom to overcome my circumstances, as well as for giving me the gift of writing to vocalize them through poetry.*

*I would like to thank a dear friend, \*\*\*\*\* for admonishing me to share my heart on behalf of young women and individuals whose hearts may be identical to my own.*

*I would like to thank my readers, especially those who can identify. I thank you for your strength, perseverance, and love, despite the odds. I stand with you.*

*Lastly, I would like to thank those who have walked in and out of my life for making each and every one of these poems as well as every feeling portrayed, as raw and authentic as they could be.*

*Thank you.*

It is in this same vein that I write from this point on.

### Introduction

This study focuses on how female athletes respond to their bodies, specifically engaging with myself as a research subject, alongside Tori Bowie, a 2017 feature in ESPN's *Body Issue*. As such, this chapter will review a number of theories and concepts, including intersectionality, the politics of visibility, the "black female gaze," beauty, and the objectifying gaze in sports. Within those categories, I will specifically discuss intersections of gender and race in sports media, focusing on the cultural significance of sport and the position it assumes as a socially constructed phenomenon. Each of these theories and concepts are broken down purposefully in

order for readers to pay close attention to the ways in which socially constructed identities inform our experiences, regardless of context or setting. Furthermore, I provide this contextual background in order to inform the reader about aspects of myself that are often overlooked. One cannot understand this work without first acknowledging the frameworks from which it was born.

### **The Intersectional Politics of Race and Gender**

One's assumed racial and gender characterization adds a certain stigma to one's identity, and in turn, impacts that individual's perceived credibility and social standing. Furthermore, failure to acknowledge interlocking oppressions contributes to whiteness taking precedence over any other aspect of identity such as gender, sexual orientation, or religion. Society has created an either/or relationship between identities when in actuality, identities are fluid and on a continuum.

*I am **not** this **nor** that. I am the sum of those things.*

*Aristotle said, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," but my wholeness has not been correctly calculated by cultural arithmetic.*

*I am seen as a fraction, but I assure you I am **not** one.*

Double-binds have traditionally limited and imposed on the mobility of women in society. Today is no different. You are either a mother *or* a working woman, feminine *or* athletic, virginal *or* exotic, and the list goes on. Crosby discusses the importance of the "positionality" of a woman, suggesting that "the traditional notion of a gendered double bind does not offer an adequate framework for understanding her interlocking oppressions, which are inseparable" (229). No two identities are mutually exclusive, and especially based on one's standing in

society, it is important to consider the ways in which multiple identities contribute to one's daily experiences and representation. Williams and Wiggins write:

Because African American women are immersed in a social and psychological climate that, despite increased attention to equity and social justice, continues to stigmatize both race and gender, understanding the interaction between the two variables is critical to effective counseling (175).

African American women are just one example. There are many demographics of women and women of color whose intersectional identities are equally important to acknowledge. This study will consider how each subject's identities and experiences might have informed the narratives they have created around their own bodies.

*My Diary, My Story, My Voice ... Is Ours.*

### ***The politics of visibility***

When referring to the idea of the "politics of visibility," we are alluding to the processes of making institutionally marginalized categories of people who have historically been (un)consciously ignored, more publicly accessible to the eye (Banet-Weiser 22). It is important to note however that to be visible is to merely exist in a state of being. Furthermore, Banet-Weiser argues, "It is, of course, important to have bodies at the table, but their mere presence doesn't necessarily challenge the structure that supports, and builds, the table in the first place" (12). Visibility is not synonymous to perception and understanding. Therefore, it is our job as critics to dissect the implications of this visibility for underlying messages and meanings.



### *Intersectionality*

The theory of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to redefine the black woman's experience as multi-dimensional (140). Since then, scholars like Marecek have expanded the concept of intersectionality to act as "an analytical lens for theorizing the oppressions faced by women of color in the United States," rather than black women exclusively (Marecek 177). Furthermore, intersectionality allows for a vocalization and recognition of experience that is often muted and overlooked. Consequently, intersectionality informs society of the ways in which people often experience "double-discrimination," a term referring to an act of marginalization grounded in both race and sex (Crenshaw 149).

Although the theory of intersectionality has been seen as progressive, it has also been critiqued by scholars as reinforcing the very institutions it seeks to deconstruct.

*Food for thought: Breaking double-binds = "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts," but instead of using the correct additive properties, you use our sums to surmise weakness.*

*Guess what? My whole is still greater. I'm reclaiming my parts.*

Patricia Hill Collins discusses the fickle nature of intersectional discourse, categorizing its application as merely reactive. Collins writes, "Intersectionality can be conceptualized as an overarching knowledge project whose changing knowledge contours grow from and respond to social formations of complex social inequalities" (5). In other words, we do not inherently consider the multi-dimensional aspects of one's identity. Instead, we are awakened by protests, strikes, and rallies to understand the complexities of marginalization faced by underprivileged communities. Therefore, Collins is arguing that to only pay attention to intersectional identities in times of strife plays into the hands of whiteness and its consistent silencing of others'

experiences until publicly disrupted. For the purposes of my analysis, it will be imperative to consider the intersectional identities of the athletes to be studied, understanding that *all* of these identities are impacted consistently.

*So yes, I am tired, but you have not worn me out.  
My mind is a little weary and worn but my spirit has never seen a drought.*

*Now is no time to be complacent and to hashtag until we can't anymore. This isn't just a week long fight where after we throw in the towel and walk out the door.*

*NO! This fight is 25/8 -- and I will go to my grave until my people are no longer being envied and murdered because of this thing we call hate.*

*Oh ... and don't be surprised. I'm telling you right now, the revolution **WILL** be televised.*

### ***Beauty: culturally influenced aesthetics***

About two years ago, I wrote a poem, not knowing that part of its purpose would be fulfilled in this research. The title of the poem was “Contradictions of a female nigger,” focused on the hypocrisy of white society, and the forces of expendability imposed on Black bodies. Furthermore, my poem critiqued the paradox between intimacy and isolation. It started like this:

*The word is “contradiction”  
**Contradiction. Can I get a definition please?**  
A statement or proposition that denies another or itself and is logically incongruous  
**May I have the origin please?**  
Middle English and Latin*

*See, when it comes to words, we always wanna know where they're from—whether they're nouns or verbs ...*

So—let's start with “beauty.” What does it mean? Too often, we fall into the trap of believing that “beauty” has singular meaning. However, this mentality can greatly be attributed to the effects of colonization. Within that singular gaze, women must be beautiful according to European standards (Johnson 182). They ought to be “light skinned, with long hair, flawless

faces, and bodies belonging to video vixens,” although not too “full-figured” (Johnson 185). The aesthetics associated with whiteness, detailed above, signify beauty. Anything outside of those realms is insufficient. *Blackness* and all of its physical attributes—is insufficient. As such, Maxine Leeds Craig maintains that Black female bodies as objects, serve as the archetype of sexual “repulsion and desire,” and yet will never be projections of ideal beauty and womanhood—“she is beauty’s friend, but is not the beauty” (168).

***Contradiction***

*The implicit bias that the tone of my skin is tainted, and the lack of consideration that yours lightened over time due to your sexual desire for black women in their prime*

*You experienced a hunger that the fruits of a white woman could never satisfy—a thirst that her titties could never feed*

*You ever wonder how your babies got so strong?*

*Baby, that milk was from me!*

Craig quotes, “beauty’s American history is a white woman’s history,” much like the history of feminist thought in the United States (161). Therefore, as Craig argues, there is no “unified male gaze,” despite the fact American standards of beauty have been customized and targeted to appeal exclusively to the gaze of white men (159). It is the failure of acknowledgement of different cultural perspectives, as well as a devaluing of them, on the part of a hegemonic society that has nurtured a singular standard of beauty. To this end, Craig purports, the “dominant beauty standard that idealized fair skin, small noses and lips, and long flowing hair defined Black women’s dark skin colour, facial features, and tightly curled, short hair as ugly” (163). Blackness—otherness—is ugly.

*See melanin is responsible for the absorption of light*

*I don’t need the cream, and I don’t need the sugar; my flavor is au naturale*

*And yet no matter how beautifully thick my hair and radiant my skin, as long as I look the way I do, you’ll never care to see within*

*No matter how bright based on my absorbed light, I still need to be light, right?*  
***Contradiction***

This dichotomous approach to what beauty is and isn't completely undermines the aesthetics of individualized cultures—beauty is fluid based on preferences, traditions, geography, and many other factors—therefore, we should treat it as such. Dominant culture has tagged anything unlike it with negative terminology. Hair that isn't straight is “nappy.” Skin that isn't fair is “dirty.” Bodies that don't fit into a size zero are “plus size.” However, what the dominant culture doesn't realize is this: (1) shrinkage is a real thing (2) the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice (3) thick thighs save lives. To this end, Craig contends that beauty is a “gendered, racialized, and contested symbolic resource” (160). Therefore, there can be “multiple standards of beauty in circulation” at once (Craig 160). We come in all shapes, sizes, textures, and tones, each with its distinct story and character. No one woman looks the same, because no two of us *are* the same. Indeed, our distinctions are what make us beautiful. We, women of color, are unpredictable—unable to be mimicked despite the appropriation of our culture and gentrification of our streets. Beauty lies in the fact that you, white women, can sunbathe, braid your hair in cornrows, and bump hip-hop until you're burned out, but you will never authentically be us. True beauty is arbitrary, truly in the eye of the beholder. Authentic beauty is “a potentially pleasurable instrument of female agency” (Craig 159)—herein lies its significance to women. Artificial “beauty” however, is a socially constructed mentality that plagues the lives of women seeking to alter themselves for the sake and approval of the white man.

*So once again, the word is “contradiction”*  
***Contradiction, can I get a definition please?***  
*The life of a female nigger who the world never had time to consider*  
***May I have the origin please?***  
*The origin is unknown but we can assume that the word has been used since black queens were removed from their throne*

***Contradiction: P-A-T-R-I-A-R-C-H-Y. Contradiction.***

*See there's the difference between me and you*

*Your definition was superficial, mine was beyond skin deep*

***The "black female gaze"***

Due to the establishment of identities as intersectional, the hegemonic white experience is not sufficient in representing other populations of people. Kimberle Crenshaw contends the overlooking of women of color is magnified and intensified in instances where white women speak on behalf of *all* women without acknowledging a difference of experience (154).

Crenshaw wrote:

Because ideological and descriptive definitions of patriarchy are usually premised upon white female experiences, feminists and others informed by feminist literature may make the mistake of assuming that since the role of Black women in the family and in other Black institutions does not always resemble the familiar manifestations of patriarchy in the white community, Black women are somehow exempt from patriarchal norms (156).

Despite this assumption, Black women and women of color are not "exempt" from patriarchy by any means; however, they experience the oppressions and effects of patriarchy differently. As a result, there are multiple lenses through which the "gaze" should be considered and studied.

bell hooks theorized the "black female gaze," seeking to acknowledge how the realities of Black women change their perception and therefore mobility in a society that differs from "others" (218). Additionally, Black feminist thought has responded to the call for a lens through which Black women can make sense of their identities and experiences (Jacobs 228).

Relationally, Black feminist thought has created a lens through which the "black female gaze" can be employed. Furthermore, hooks argues an enabling of resistance that accompanies the

“black female gaze,” inherently motivating Black women who assume the role of “critical black female spectatorship” to continue pushing back on narratives constructed by white, mainstream feminism (128). This study will take into account the distinctions between womanhood and Black womanhood when conducting analyses of the women athletes and narratives under examination.

### **The Objectifying Gaze in Sport**

The objectifying gaze has not only applied to white women or women of color. As a concept, the objectifying gaze refers to the ways in which individuals are dehumanized and reduced to the value of their bodies having inherently sexual functions (Bartky 31).

*The number of times that life has somehow found a way to make me question my place. Was I ever first and golden? The trophy that few or maybe even one person could ever handle delicately holding? Or was I more like second and silver? Still desirable but yet not enough to attract full attention. I could get a man easily but still struggle in the area of retention. Or was I third and bronze? JUST enough to make it on the pedestal. Feeling inadequate and questionable knowing that my chances of obtaining that spot were minuscule.*

*You begin to question yourself; Was I ever enough? Should I have done that? Maybe I need a touch up here and a take-in there.*

Scholars including Davids et al., Velez et al., and Lanzieri & Hildebrandt have explored the objectification of male bodies, transgender men, and gay men respectively, but quite frankly we focus on men too much. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I focus on the impact of the gaze on women in sports media. Cummins et al. studied the attention given to different parts of female bodies and male bodies through an eye-tracking experiment (5). The authors discovered that more attention was given to female bodies than faces (12)—go figure (literally). In regards to photography, the strategic placement of female athletes outside of an athletic context (i.e. a

field, court, track, ring, etc.) and in scant clothing, perpetuates an audience's view of women as sexual objects. Kian et al. quote Bissell and Smith who also discuss this displacement in saying that "Female athletes have historically been photographed by most media outlets in ways that attempt to appeal to a heterosexual male audience through overtly sexualized portrayals that have little/nothing to do with sport" (Bissell and Smith qtd. Kian et al. 143).

*Baby girl, I'm here to say "never question your place," because the ones who didn't value your worth, never even deserved to be in your race.*

Although there are obvious differences between the objectification of men and women in sports media, it is also important to acknowledge objectification based on race. Crosby states that the gaze has historically exoticized "non-White" women and therefore has "fetishize[d] women of color" (237). She then uses the example of how these assumptions of an exotic identity have informed media portrayals of Venus and Serena Williams, characterizing them as "primitive and animalistic" (237). Media outlets then make these "exotic" bodies accessible through public streaming, explicit photos, and lucrative narratives. For example, Serena Williams was styled by Robbie Fimmano in leopard print for the cover of InStyle (Frey 5). InStyle magazine has circulated to 1,810,539 people in the United States since 2013. According to astrology, the leopard symbolizes one key characteristic that supports the idea of exoticism: "female mystique" ("Leopard Meaning and Symbolism" 1). Considering the reach of InStyle and the styling of Robbie Fimmano, media creators have successfully circulated a narrative around Serena Williams's body that reinforces stereotypes prescribed to "non-White" women.

Often the phrase "sex sells" is used to justify the act of objectifying while subtly dismissing its implications. Some of these implications are explored by Frederickson and Rogers who suggest that sexual objectification "enables-a host of other oppressions women face, ranging

from employment discrimination and sexual violence to the trivialization of women's work and accomplishments" (174). Frederickson and Roberts's study in conjunction with the idea that "sex sells" pushes audiences to consider the costs and underlying messages of objectification more deeply. Critics like *One Sport Voice* writer, LaVoi, have resisted this notion of profitability, asserting that "there is no evidence that sex actually sells sports" (Adams 3). LaVoi pushes back on the notion of financial benefits being the primary motive behind the publicly available sexual images of female athletes by saying it is not the money, rather it is the men behind the money. LaVoi believes that "the overwhelming presence of men on executive boards accounts for all the flashing of flesh in ad campaigns for women's sports" (qtd. in Adams 3). In retrospect, LaVoi's claim has validity to it, as white men are the primary beneficiaries of the gaze and are the primary authoritative figures in the sports industry.

*For too long I have allowed you to be on the prowl, but now is my moment and my voice and force will be reckoned with no matter how loud.*

As a result, scholars have not only critiqued hegemonic masculinity within sports contexts, but also heteronormativity, suggesting that a significant reason why women athletes are so frequently and extremely objectified is more so due to a fear of homosexuality than any other probable cause. Adams wrote, "The issue at play is homophobia" (4). This is because the female athlete represents a rebellion against Victorian traditions: submission, motherhood, public displays of femininity, and heterosexuality (Cahn 14). Therefore, the female athlete's resistance is perceived as completely oppositional: questioning, incapable of reproduction, masculine, and homosexual (Cahn 20). Cahn also discusses this cultural insecurity towards lesbianism in breaking down the three stages of "mannishness" that manifested between 1910-1940s: "unbridled heterosexuality," "failed heterosexuality," and the "boogie woman" (165). These



three stages are characterized by Cahn as women becoming less intimidated by men, women becoming less attractive to men, and women in sport becoming homosexuals (165 and 181). As a result, men and physical educators found ways to modify, moderate, and separate women in sport in order to maintain control.

*Note to self: The insecurity of your oppressor is not your problem. They fear your potential, not you.*

This is important to note because the solution to resolving those concerns is similar to what Adams suggests as the hidden reason for objectification. Smallwood, Brown, and Billings refer to acts of overt feminine performance as “apologetic defense,” contending, “this defense method illustrates one way that female athletes remind and convince society that they are feminine through outward appearances” (8). Therefore we know that the gaze is not exclusively about how beautiful you are; it is also very much about how much of a woman you are, based on societal expectations. To combat the concerns of white males regarding female athletic activity in the 1920s-1940s, teams started putting out statistics on how many female players were married, with children, dating, etc. (Cahn 181). From then until the present, “the most acceptable athletes [have been] the women whose beauty and sex appeal ‘compensate[s]’ for their athletic ability” (Cahn 183). That has been the history of the objectification of women in sport. It is not the sex of women that sells, it is the insecurity of men and heterosexual identification that sells.

*Another note to self: You do not need to justify anything about yourself. “Because I say so” is the only justification necessary.*

### **Intersections of Gender & Race in Sports Media**

The social and cultural significance of sport inevitably make sports media an important area of study, as representation in sport is a manifestation of societal beliefs and values. We’ve

already established that it is not possible to isolate one's gender identity from their racial identity, or to assume that one does not affect the other. However, it is also essential for this study to consider athletic identity as yet another layer of identity that contributes to the mediated constructions of publicity, framing, and oppression.

Athletic identity (AI) is a term used to reflect the “cognitive, affective, behavioral, and social elements of recognizing the self strongly or entirely with one's athletic role” (Poucher and Tamminen 63). Poucher and Tamminen studied how retired and non-retired athletes maintain their AI. Most notably, Poucher and Tamminen discussed the tendency of athletes to compartmentalize their lives. In order to maintain a positive AI, “compartmentalization” was intentionally used by athletes to ensure a separation between their sporting life and non-athletic related circumstances (Poucher and Tamminen 64). In doing so, many athletes felt they could better ignore “external stressors” that could potentially negatively impact their athletic performance (Poucher and Tamminen 64).

However, in spite of an athlete's desires, the sociocultural elements that exist in sport do not exempt these athletes from facing the realities of their other identities. This has become particularly evident in the wake of #BlackLivesMatter where athletes like Colin Kaepernick have remained unemployed for taking a stance against injustice. I am fully aware that posturally he took a knee, but that posture stood for something greater. Another example happened around the same time, when WNBA players were sent a letter intended to remind teams of the leagues uniform policy, after having worn warm-up shirts with statements like “#BlackLivesMatter” and “Dallas 5” (Cortes, *The Undefeated*). As reflected in these examples, it is important to consider

the intersections of multiple identities that athletes possess, further examining how they contribute to particular representations and expectations.

Women in sports have been done an injustice by being categorized by gender exclusively, failing to recognize other aspects of their identities that afford either privilege or marginalization. For example, Mudrick et al. argue that portrayals of women in the sports industry will continue to reify prejudice and bias, so long as sport remains a “sexist entity” (680). While the study conducted by Mudrick et al. gauged the relationship between gender and perceived credibility/attractiveness acknowledged how audiences might respond differently to women based on racial factors, 76.3% of the study’s participants identified themselves as white (Mudrick et al. 676). This disparity in numbers was mentioned by the authors as a limitation to their research, because it did not allow for the same representation and therefore depth of experiment (683). An equal selection of participants based on race and gender impacts the results because perceived credibility, attractiveness, and popularity are largely affected by identities that incur privilege or marginalization. How would the results have shifted if so-called “others” were considered in the experimental processes? This is not a rhetorical question. In fact, the answers have been provided by cultural history.

Although not specific to sport, bell hooks characterizes race as a visual construction of gender (213). The idea that race assists in defining gender and sexuality affects modes of representation and perceptions of attractiveness and credibility that are relevant to studying sports media. The advocacy of women’s empowerment has “historically overlooked and omitted voices of those outside of their [white women’s] experience” (Crosby 233). Interlocking oppressions are inseparable, one cannot be acknowledged without accounting for the others, but

often one aspect of identity is made to be the point of emphasis while other components are ignored (Crosby 229). In other words, being White or “other” are the only identities that gain you recognition until a riot happens.

*Remember what I said: This revolution **WILL** be televised.*

Recognizing the many identities that a single person possesses will be crucial to the analysis conducted in this study. Calling out the institutions of power that have constructed perceptions of those identities is not possible without first acknowledging them. Understand that positionality and personal experiences will inevitably shape how the women in the artifacts examined speak about themselves and their bodies, as well as the ways in which I speak of my own body and its endeavors.

### **Race & Gender Representations on ESPN**

Understanding ESPN’s history with representations of race and gender is crucial to providing context that will help inform the analysis of the chosen artifacts in this study. As a global media outlet, ESPN’s content is important to consider as it demonstrates core values of society such as white privilege, male dominance, and profitability. I’m not particularly certain of how or when I was introduced to ESPN, but for as long as I can remember, it has been my go-to network to watch with friends, family, teammates, and peers. Through its broadcast of sport content, ESPN has allowed me opportunities to engage with people worldwide. Daniel Sipocz attested to ESPN’s cultural significance in saying that because ESPN reaches such a large spectrum of audiences, it has the capacity to shift cultural norms ,as well as the relationships between people and identities(83). However, despite ESPN’s reach and influence, the network

has a troubling history with representations of race—one Sipocz characterizes as “complicated, controversial, and sometimes offensive” (83).

Through insufficient racial representation and the prioritization of revenue over morality, ESPN contributes to hegemonic ideologies. Like many professional sports leagues, ESPN is primarily owned and run by white executives (Sipocz 85). In fact, professional sport has been referred to as a commodifying business, serving as a reflection of the ways the bodies and talents of people of color are largely the ones at the white man’s disposal.

*Note to self: Do I hear “modern day slavery?”*

Othello Harris touches on sport as commodification, specifically for the Black community in saying, “Athletics is to the Black community what technology is to the Japanese and what oil is to the Arabs. We’re allowing that commodity to be exploited” (3). It appears that audiences care more about being entertained than being concerned about whether or not the media they are consuming reifies social inequalities. The ways in which marginalized bodies are represented, including frequency of appearance, is a non-factor. Furthermore, because fans do not always consider the societal implications of the media and messages they’re presented with, ESPN benefits from the ignorance of its fanbase, producing and covering more of the same content—content that superficially “promote[s] diversity and minority athletes,” but that also “does not challenge stereotypes or further racial equality or diversity” (Sopocz 85).

*Note to the audience: WAKE UP! They’re using you.*

In recent years ESPN’s relationship to gender representation has been complicated. In 2017, several allegations of sexually inappropriate behavior towards ESPN staff surfaced (Brady

1). However, Brady, a public editor for the ESPN website, was perplexed by the timing of the controversies as he expressed:

All of this is happening at a time when ESPN has a lot of positives to point to when it comes to women at the company. The network has more female employees in high-profile roles than ever, both on the air and in the executive suites. Thanks to an ongoing commitment to espnW, the company's coverage of women's sports is more comprehensive than ever, and ESPN even holds a high-profile annual conference on women's sports that always features A-list speakers (2).

However, in retrospect there is not much to be perplexed about. Given the history of how female bodies have been objectified, it makes sense to increase their roles in the workplace and their coverage on TV. The sexual assault and harassment cases experienced by women at ESPN suggest that the increased presence of female bodies was meant ultimately to serve the male gaze, not to advance women's position in society. ESPN's ability to perpetuate the male gaze becomes an opportunity for profit, because ESPN's primary goal is to maintain capital (Sipocz 86). *This* is the paradox between progress and control this research seeks to critique. Outcomes, regardless of how good they seem, cannot be fully assessed without a clear understanding of processes.

### **Conclusion**

Sport as a manifestation of cultural beliefs and values maintains hegemonic institutions including whiteness and heteronormativity. This review of relevant theories and concepts provides fundamental context to understand the groundwork from which my analysis will emerge. Through an investigation of the nude female athletic form and its implications of both

resistance and oppression, my study contributes to existing conversations regarding the relationships between objectification, representation, and female athletes.

### **CHAPTER III: METHOD**

In the previous chapter, I provided an overview of literature dealing with the areas of intersectional politics, the objectifying gaze in sport, intersections of race and gender in sports media, and race and gender representations on ESPN. This chapter presents my chosen method of research, analytic autoethnography. This method explores personal narratives and experiences in conjunction with theoretical frameworks, in order to analyze and critique institutions of power and social hierarchy. In doing so, “the lines between self and researcher are blurred by the subjective authenticity that is created through our own recognition of ourselves as meaningful parts of the cultures we study” (McParland 474). Therefore, I will use analytic autoethnography to uncover the implicit social biases and institutions that have contributed to the ways in which female athletes, including myself, have surveilled their (my) bodies(y).

#### **The Power of Autoethnography**

Minnie Bruce Pratt argued that theory cannot be enacted upon without recognition of its presence in our daily experiences, interactions, and activities. Furthermore, she argues that stories are an essential component to progressive movements and ideologies, as they “give theory flesh and breath” (Pratt 22). Not only does autoethnography allow for the stories of people to be heard, but for the stories of marginalized groups whose stories are often overshadowed, muted, and secondary to privileged populations, made public in the scheme of academia. Shellie McParland wrote:

Our flesh and bones hold wisdom waiting to be discovered; they tell stories of pain, exhilaration, and triumph; our muscles remember what was thought to be long forgotten



..... Our bodies and the way they move through space in a presentation of self are shaped by the past (475).

Consequently, one of the criteria of this methodological approach is to provide a “substantive contribution to an understanding of social life” (Jones 772). In doing so, autoethnography explicitly addresses the relationship between what is personal and what is political—the two cannot be separated. The method’s direct confrontation makes it difficult for an audience to ignore the institutions being critiqued. Writing has been considered an art form that in some cases ought to be aesthetically pleasing. However, the beauty of autoethnography as stated by Hughes and Roman is this: “There is some level of safety that disappears for the audience: we can’t hide behind ‘it’s only art’” (4). Therefore, it is the role of autoethnography to inspire social change and “calculated disturbances” (Lane 61 as qtd. in Jones). Marginalized populations have been made to feel uncomfortable since the beginning of time; asking privileged populations to strip themselves for the duration of thirty pages is nothing compared to the prices paid by many over the course of centuries. Autoethnography is the epitome of exploring what it means to be “uncovering and performing” the tensions between oppression and resistance (Johnson 197).

### ***The Role of Storytelling for Women Athletes***

For the purposes of my research, it is important that we specifically acknowledge the significance of autoethnography in the lives of female athletes. The ability to share lived experiences of participation in sports “offers an opportunity to make visible the overlooked experiences of pleasure and physicality that are conventionally antithetical to femininity” (Throsby 244). Female athlete scholars including McParland and Nash have attested to the idea

of visibility through autoethnography with statements like, “Using autoethnography, I now take you with me as I write from inside my body, allowing you to *feel* a new kind of knowledge,” and “This [autoethnographic] research is ‘analytic’ because I use my [boxing] experiences to address broader theoretical issues surrounding gendered identity and embodiment” (475 & 739).

Furthermore, by sharing stories about sports outside of their immediate context, female athletes grant themselves a certain level of agency through autoethnography, as the strength of personal experience “remains a valuable and intellectual resource,” helping to deconstruct “a domain so normatively defined by masculinity” (Throsby 252). After all, the stories are not meant to be merely anecdotal. Instead, they are meant to be theorized in order to “connect them to the wider social and cultural context within which they become meaning” (Throsby 246). Speaking out is almost ineffective if those words are not accompanied by the presence of accountability and a call to action. Therefore, autoethnography functions as a tool used to “push the boundaries of discovery regarding the relationship between the body, power, and gender in the realm of feminist sport history” (McParland 475). You can tell me that you do not agree with the implications of my story, but you cannot deny the institutions that led to those claims. History, as it is written, will not tell the truth about what *actually* occurred in the past. Our stories seek to fill the gaps in those textbooks, articles, essays, and speeches.

For this study, I examined photographs of a Black female athlete featured in ESPN’s *Body* Issue. The first round of observation involved recording my uncut, raw initial reactions to the work of the magazine, as well as featured interviews. I then dissected my reactions for the societal implications within them. Notably, the way we internalize messages is often far more worthy of exploration than the messages themselves. The next round of observation paid close

attention to systemic structures to understand how agency was being enacted through female athlete's mediated representation. It is through these lenses of observation and critique that I also incorporate surveillance and commentary on my own body and experiences in this study to illustrate how mediated narratives become internalized by audiences, and particularly, marginalized populations.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

### Melanin Works: Literally



Figure 1: Setting the Scene (Bowie1)

*Brown skin girl  
Your skin just like pearls  
The best thing in the world  
Never trade you for anybody else  
Singin' brown skin girl  
Your skin just like pearls  
The best thing in the world  
I never trade you for anybody else, singin'*

*Brown Skin Girl - Beyonce, SAINT JHN, Wizkid & Blue Ivy Carter*

*I love this song—loved this song. Its lyrics made me feel seen. Whole. Treasured. Somehow, some way this song made me feel like the beauty of my brown skin was invaluable—nothing could ever compare nor replace it. The effortlessness with which I am encouraged to be unapologetically melanated suggests an evolution of the beauty standard—an evolution of ideology. But suggestions don't matter, projections do.*

In the 2018 edition of ESPN's *Body* Issue, olympic gold-medalist Torie Bowie was photographed by Dana Scruggs, "the first Black female photographer to shoot an athlete for The Body Issue in it's 10 year history" (danascruggs.com). This particular shoot was the first project Dana worked on that was not self-assigned. Previously, she'd launched SCRUGGS Magazine, a print publication intended to showcase Dana's vision of the "male form." Her works became what have been described as her "visual diary and personal manifesto." Upon making a geographic move from her hometown of Chicago to New York City, Scruggs ended up engaging with a psychological transition as well. Originally, Scruggs photographed white people because she thought that content would gain her "legitimacy" (Hughes 5). However, after being admonished to embrace an otherness of creativity that is "underutilized," Scruggs realized how she could bring about social change through her art form. She had established a new mission: "I want people to understand that black people are powerful and have autonomy over our bodies, that our bodies and culture are not just for mass consumption and regurgitation" (Hughes 5). As a result of Scruggs's focus on "shapes and bodies and skin," *ESPN the Magazine*'s director of photography, Karen Frank, felt there could be no person better suited to shoot Tori Bowie than Scruggs.

*Btw: Frank said Scruggs could shoot for the annual Body Issue if "the right athlete came along." By "right," she meant non-white—just sayin'.*

*Brown skin girl, ya skin just like pearls  
The best thing inna di world  
I never trade you for anybody else, say  
Pose like a trophy when Naomi's walk in  
She need an Oscar for that pretty dark skin  
Pretty like Lupita when the cameras close in  
Brown Skin Girl - Beyonce, SAINT JHN, Wizkid & Blue Ivy Carter*



Figure 2: Stance (Bowie 2)

Her silky (probably oiled) dark chocolate skin gleams in contrast with light backgrounds. Her short, dark coiled 4B hair stands in opposition to long, blonde, and straight. Her direct eye contact with the audience gazes with a look that demands respect, as the story behind those eyes cannot be ignored once you've engaged with them. She wears no earrings and has dark-painted nails. The covering of her breasts and genitals eliminate stereotypical signifiers of her womanhood. However, her genitals are shaved clean—smooth as a baby's bottom—a direct reflection of popular culture and its understanding of attractiveness. Pubic hair is healthy, but unappealing, so shave it #priorities. The stretchmarks on her muscularly toned thighs illustrate

the journey of her body through growth and loss. Her form is only athletic because we've been told it is—outside of that description, she is merely a body encompassing a posed position.

*Do you know how much I long to break out of my clothes for people to see my flat tummy, nicely toned arms, and shaven secrets? It is a right of passage in the locker room to flaunt your nudity. When you undress, everyone is watching the manner in which you do it and how quickly you wrap yourself up in those barely-washed, way-too-short, white, skimpy towels.*

*I love the examination to be honest. I literally bask in compliments from teammates who say, "Damn, Aub! You look good," knowing my maintenance doesn't go unnoticed. Especially the summer I dropped fifteen pounds. The weight-loss wasn't intentional, but I wasn't complaining. I hoped to have lost in the face and gained in the waste. The locker room chat would be the test—and I passed.*

*We make banter out of those who shower with the curtain closed. Privacy? What is that? Strut your stuff! Ashamed? No way! Self-conscious? Get over it. Shave. Diet. Work out harder.*

*That's how we are trained to think. Publications like this are why. Her skin color may not be ideal, among many other things, but her body is perfection—a woman's dream.*

She is placed on shipping crates, through which her talent becomes her work and her work becomes her profitability. The definition of her spinal cord resembles welts—battle scars. Her feet emerge from dirt. The intentions of her body in front of the camera are far from how she appears. She is supposed to symbolize an evolution of identity from "woman" to "woman athlete"—instead, she went from "owned" to "auctioned," hinting at the idea of sport as a microcosm of larger societal institutions. This is by no mistake. ESPN made a choice to photograph Bowie with conscious decisions about who was involved, as well as other logistics like settings, themes, and posture. Although I recognize the motives might have been pure, it is important that we address the paradox between intention and reception. Regardless of the initial objective, ESPN's subscriptions to hegemonic ideologies surrounding gendered and racialized stereotypes still persist. So—let's jump right in.

While there is much to be studied regarding the connotations and suggestions inscribed within these photographs—much more than I can cover in this work—it is important to acknowledge progress in the process of critiquing barriers. Tori Bowie is wonderfully photographed in a way that makes her Black body visible—for better or worse—to an audience that might have otherwise ignored it. As such, I must say that we have come a long way from historical conventions of photography. Historically, still photography privileged white people, and did not account for women, people, or objects of color, therefore creating “deficiencies with reference to human skin tone reproduction quality” (Roth 115).

*By the way, we're not really in a place to call this "history," because whiteness is still preferred, but for progress's sake, I rest my case. Anyhow ...*

We were erased by way of being blacked out—ironic right? All pun intended. Even at the most fundamental level, historical processes of color balancing didn't include pigmented objects as matching materials. “Shirley,” the white woman of course, was the blanket-name given to the “skin ideal standard” from the early part of the twentieth century until present day. If you were not or are not a light-skinned Shirley, your visibility within the frame of the photograph has been and continues to be either limited or nonexistent—you were either a shadow or a ghost. You may have been there, but nobody saw you.

*I like to be front and center in a photograph. Let the white people fall in line around me. I refuse to be in the back row, all the way on the side—there's too much potential of being cut out.*

*When we take team photos, all the Black people try to get together, but we're often told to break it up—so we resort to an Oreo pattern.*

Early research, including the works of Brian Winston, upheld the belief that within the industry of photography, people of color were not visible due to issues of physics and chemistry

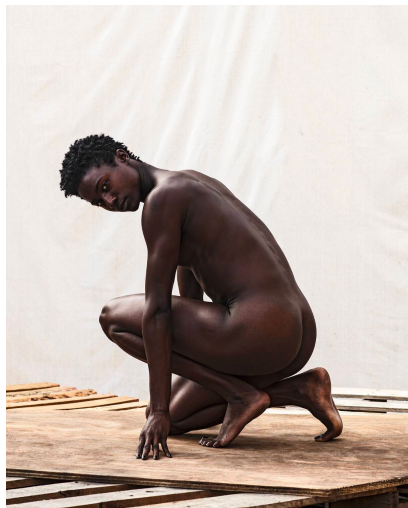


exclusively. Question: how many times are we going to attempt to validate racial injustices through science? Human intelligence: Samuel Morton—craniology. Skin-tone visibility in photographs: Kodak—chemistry and physics. Enough is enough. The fact of the matter is this: chocolate and wood are what got the attention of the industry, furthermore inspiring an advancement of technological equipment to better portray a diversity of color schemes.

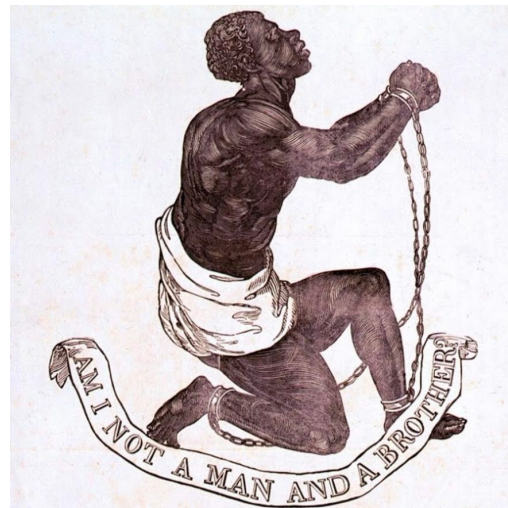
*I guess chocolate and wood are easier to sell than black women—at least ethically speaking.*

Roth called this epiphany incidental, but quite frankly there is nothing “incidental” about it. Everything the white man does inevitably reflects the power of his privilege—his entitlement consciously left us colored folks out—and it was not coincidental.

### **A Job Without Benefits: Her Melanin *is* Her Work**



Kneeling (Bowie3)



Pleading (Wedgewood1)

Figure 3: History Repeats Itself

Tell me the differences. Can you name more than the superficial? “He’s a man, she’s a woman.” “He’s facing right, she’s facing left.” “He’s in chains, she’s not.” Oh—and, “he’s not fully naked, she is.” That’s an issue. Dig deeper. Tell me what you *actually* see. I’ll tell you what

I see. Before I share though, do note that through these observations I'd like the programmatization of particular gazes as a reflection of personal and public experiences in culture and society to be acknowledged. It is my aim to show how the colonization of thought and image therefore informs perception. Furthermore, considering a partial aim of this work is to highlight forms of resistance, I admonish you to pay close attention to which observations took precedence over others, be it praise or critique. You should find the latter was the most immediate response. Colonization—an oppressive history—caught my eye first. Consequently, it is through these eyes that employ the “black female gaze,” I see bondage. Slavery. Blankness. A pleading stare. Despair. Seriousness. The auction block. Profitability. Muscles. Strength. Durability. A ribbed spine. Veins protruding. Dirt. Filth. Respect and intimidation working in tandem. My ancestors. But why?

According to Scruggs, the setting and positioning chosen for this collection of photographs were intended to emulate a Greek statue on a wooden stage. Clearly I didn't quite get that memo, as those descriptors were not included in my list of first impressions. Banet-Weiser's exploration of the politics of visibility contextualizes my thoughts, providing an analytical framework from which each of my observations can be rationalized. Plain and simply, this is what slavery looks to me because that's how I've been taught to identify it.

*As Black and brown people in the United States, we don't know shit about our history. Excuse my language, but I'm protected by the first amendment—that's one thing I learned—and quite frankly, one thing I could've survived without knowing.*

*I'd speak my mind regardless. Give me the consequence. In the words of Marvel's Black Panther's Erik Killmonger, “Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from ships, 'cause they knew death was better than bondage.” I would rather be a prisoner to my own fate than a slave to the white man—but is there really an option? #DoubleWhammy.*

*From third through fifth grade, I attended a private K-12 school. Certain grade-levels were trademarked by certain events and/or celebrations. I believe it was in the fourth grade that we celebrated “ethnic pride.” For weeks, probably even months, we prepared for this event—a time to showcase our ethnic backgrounds, family culture, heritage, etc. We submit graded portfolios of family photos, written letters and artifacts from loved ones detailing their experiences within that culture, and of course—food recipes.*

*I watched so many kids celebrate, embrace, and emulate their cultures, but I couldn’t—I couldn’t trace back exactly where my “Blackness” came from. I don’t know. I have an idea, but my white counterparts knew. That distinction between speculation and knowledge was powerful, even as a fourth grader.*

*So how did I pass this assignment? I chose Mexico. My great-grandmother grew up in Corpus Christi, Texas, so I went with the closest country to there. For all of that preparation and presentation time, your girl was Mexican. I decorated my table station with a towel of the Mexican flag and some pesos I’d brought back as souvenirs from a leisure trip to Puerto Vallarta the year before. My mom and I hunted down a sombrero—because in my fourth grade mind, that would do the culture justice \*insert eyeroll\*. I passed the assignment with flying colors, but I hadn’t truly discovered anything about myself and who I actually was. To this day, I still haven’t.*

*I should have been able to present the origins of soul food, shea butter, and spirituals—but they would have never safciced without a location attached. Even though I was fairly uninterested in my self-presentation at that age, I should have been able to present on skin-care routines, natural oils, hair types and textures. I could’ve talked about hip-hop, line dances, and Kool-Aid. I got stuck between showcasing what was asked of me to obtain a decent grade, or expressing who I really was for my sanity and dignity’s sake.*

*Do note: at the time, it didn’t bother me to pretend to be someone I wasn’t. Now however, I reflect on this project and see more deeply rooted issues in need of digging, exposure, and resolution.*

*I needed to be taught the practical things, and by “practical things,” I mean Black history—Black culture. I’ve still hardly learned.*

It’s no news that Eurocentric educational systems don’t teach us about the Sandra Blands, Michael Browns, and Trayvon Martins of the world—slaves of the twenty-first century. I hear the cries of our murdered brown men and boys yelping the words of Josiah Wedgwood’s image: “Am I not a man and a brother?” (although their cries were not meant to be heard). As the 1807

*Commemorated* team eloquently stated, “though the body of the enslaved is depicted, the actual corporeal experience of the enslaved is absent” (3). Rather than seeking to bring the experiences of the enslaved to the forefront through this piece, Wedgwood’s image of the “suppliant slave” was intended to highlight the work of abolitionists to free the enslaved without acknowledging that those same tongues held them captive.

*\*cough cough\* @ the Founding Fathers—\*sips tea\**

This image is more than a historical artifact and work of art—it is a misused and abused symbol—fraud. The piece titled, “Topic two: The image of the suppliant slave: advert or advocate?” explains “The image presents one view of the enslaved; that of the humble, grateful, respectful African who suffered passively until their cause was taken up by a right-minded minority Britain” (1). However, what was intended to be shown varies significantly from what the image communicates to me.

*In case you're wondering, to me it communicates ignorance and an erasure of factual history. It fails to show the grit of my people that I know existed. Even if the books don't tell me—my existence does.*

As a reflection of the perceived heroic impact of the British on the abolition of slavery, the image became popular—newspapers, books, television programs—you name it. As such, the familiarity of the image “relies on the popular memory of abolition and emancipation, of the good work, moral fibre and courage of the abolitionists,” furthermore creating a “specific way of remembering and a particular mode of seeing the past” (1807 *Commemorated* p.3). This is the politics of visibility at work. After all, to see a photo and reproduce it does no justice to those who can’t read between the lines and move the curtain to see behind the scenes.

*If only to be seen and be heard were inseparable interactions of reception. You can see my tears without wanting to listen to the pains that caused them.*

*For example, #BlackLivesMatter required no action other than retweeting. You saw a trend and followed, just like you have done with the perpetuation of white supremacy under the premise of “status quo.” You see the issues, but would much rather fit in by ignoring them.*

*Ignorance is bliss, not blind. Therefore, you are not excused.*

So, let’s tie this all together. The irony here is that this photograph of Tori Bowie crouched over, muscles bulging, spine ribbed, and feet powdered in dirt reminded me of a disenfranchised experience as portrayed through an image whose motive was the *complete* opposite of displaying it. The intent of “Am I not a man and a brother?” was to expunge the intricacies of the enslaved experience—to perpetuate white privilege. Its expected message did not deliver to me what it was “supposed” to—as is the case for this photograph of Tori Bowie. I was supposed to see an athlete—a trophy. Instead, I saw a slave—an auction block.

As I draw upon the theoretical framework of the politics of visibility as it pertains to popularized images of slavery in relation to the photographs of Tori Bowie featured in ESPN’s *Body Issue*, this next excerpt becomes crucial. In one of the closing sections of *1807 Commemorated’s* dissection of Wedgwood’s piece, the research team writes the following:

A criticism of the image for its contemporary audience should be incorporated into its usage to aid exhibitions and public means of remembrance. One method of achieving this would be to contrast the image with others that depicted the enslaved. The image, if placed alongside drawings, paintings, and photographs of the bodies of the enslaved which portray rebellions, resistance, torture and mutilation, is forced to be integrated into an alternative context (3).

The aim of this section was indeed to contrast these images against one another—rightfully so. Tori’s body is enslaved. Yes—in 2020—enslaved. Not only is she a slave to the

gaze of white privilege, but to the inevitable marginalized experiences of her Blackness, her womanhood, her physical appearance, and the other identities her body and psyche assume.

*I too am a slave to my Blackness, my womanhood, my physical appearance, and the other identities my body and psyche assume.*

However, while her existence in an intersectional body seeks to disenfranchise her, Tori's resistance to what it has traditionally *meant* to be Black, to be a woman, to be physically attractive, and more, forces her visibility to be "integrated into an alternative context" (1807 *Commemorated* p.3).

*I too am redefining what it means to be Black, to be a woman, to be physically attractive and more. Seeing my brown skin, short hair, and lean body as chosen for a feature on one of the world's largest stages (ESPN) through Tori, makes me want to embrace the same #BlackGirlMagic I once only considered a #BlackGirlBurden.*

As I reflect on the larger arguments of this work, it is my hope that the paradox between the liberation of visibility and the restriction of mediated narratives this research seeks to highlight, became more tangible and discernable. I can easily see that Tori's mere presence in ESPN's *Body* Issue was resistant to historical conventions of photography and societal preferences as previously explored through the works of Roth. However, it was difficult for me to focus on the achievements of her resistance, due to the ways I have been programmed by social hierarchy to visualize and perceive certain images, postures, and settings. bell hooks's "black female gaze" seeks to acknowledge how the realities of Black women change their perception of the world and their experiences within it (218). Therefore, I use this particular gaze—one that gives agency to my thoughts and experiences—to understand my own particular observations. Although innate and far from intentional, my reading of this photo is a reflection of how a singular gaze does not exist. No two people, especially with distinct experiences, would

read these photographs the same. My positionality in society as it pertains to analyzing these photos helped me to engage with hooks's "critical black female spectatorship," and to continue pushing back on narratives constructed by white, mainstream feminism (128). Herein lies the paradox I seek to identify, address, and critique.

### **Somewhere Along the Lines of Femininity**



All Smiles (Bowie4)

Strike a Pose (Bowie5)

Figure 4: "Womanhood"

In my studies, I have sincerely struggled to swallow the pill society stereotypically prescribes as alleviation to forms of resistance. By this I mean to say, why are the only images of Tori's body inhabiting a spirit of softness (as it often equates to femininity), the photographs that show her athleticism to a lesser degree than the others? Why could she not embody her womanhood and athleticism in one frame? That is problematic for me—it perpetuates the

objectifying gaze in sport that has sought to erase the same uniqueness of athletic form ESPN's *Body* Issue claims to praise. Hence, you can see how statements like, "ESPN the Magazine's BODY Issue was born in October of 2009 with a singular mission: to celebrate the incredible power of the athletic form," which, let's not forget is inherently imbued with presumptions of masculinity, can be made to seem antithetical to the content the magazine actually produces, publishes, and releases (espn.com).

In my literature review, I discuss the intentional and strategic ways photography has often captured female athletes outside of an athletic context, further perpetuating the ever-intrusive objectifying gaze. What I see here is exactly that—a deletion of the same intersectional identities Crenshaw and Crosby admonish us to pay more attention to—to embrace. With the placement of Tori Bowie as a Greek statue and trophy (athletic symbols) in direct opposition to her body in a more relaxed and passive position (symbols of femininity), ESPN seems to have perpetuated the traditional double-bind of feminine *or* athletic.

*Note: My symbols are not assumptions; they are a manifestation of cultural values. I typed, "symbols of athleticism" into Google, and found four photographs of Greek god, Apollo in statue form. For "symbols of femininity," I found pink, flowers, and primitivism.*

Before—when she was an "athlete" so to speak, she looked muscular. No smile. Direct gaze. No physical indications of womanhood available to the eye. Her feet were dirty—she had grit. Now—that she is a "woman" so to speak, she is smiling. Less tense. Resisting eye contact. Positioned against the hegemonically assigned "feminine" color. Tattoos are revealed. Genitals both exposed and secret. The double-bind persists. Why is her athleticism somehow threatened by her femininity and vice versa? Why can the two not coexist?

*Not gonna lie—I felt somewhat hypocritical—eerie—typing those words. Only because it shows the evolution of my self-consciousness into self-confidence. The girl who never*



wanted to post live action shots of her participating in a sport because she was afraid not to look cute, is now critiquing the society who told her to keep the two identities separate, as if her attractiveness wouldn't be enhanced by combining the two. This whole time I was thinking guys would like me better if I just presented myself well— "hair done, nails done, everything did" -Swizz Beatz. Meanwhile, there was no possible way I could present myself well if I didn't present myself fully—"sweatpants, hair tied, chillin with no makeup on" -Drake. Sports are a part of who I am. I am a female athlete, no separation. Better yet, I am an **athlete**—no gender tag necessary. My participation in athletics does not invalidate my womanhood, nor does my womanhood make me less qualified to compete. **I am an athlete.** I make playing look good and my femininity untouchable. And guess what? Guys still like me while I compete with my short hair, sports goggles, flat chest, and uncontrollable competitive nature. I'm cute on the court and off. The attraction starts with authenticity—I am who I am—in all settings.

As a heterosexual woman, male attention is important to me—and while there may be some shame in that, it is simply another indication of how roboticized I've become by the society that has programmed me to think and act a certain way. However, while the attention is important, I will not sacrifice who I am as God created me in order to gain it. #GetYouAGirlThatCanDoBoth.

### ***Surveillance: An Intrusive Balancing Act***

So—I have to ask—what's it to you? Why is my body the center of attention in everything I do. Be it praise or scrutiny, there is always something to be said about what I'm doing, how I'm doing it, where it's being done. MIND YOUR BUSINESS! But—this is where I recognize my privilege of being an average Joe.

Side bar: yes, I identify as female and referred to myself as an "average Joe." If you haven't noticed, this entire work is about breaking barriers.

Back to my point of privilege ... Although the people I encounter on a daily basis may be concerned with speculating my every move, I am blessed (in some ways—I'd love to be famous to an extent) to not have my body readily accessible to a global audience with EVERY LITTLE THING I do.

The surveillance of women and their bodies in general is despicable. The surveillance of high-status and professional female athletes is reprehensible. It's *literally* never ending. Former professional golfer, Ari Shapiro, pinned the tail on the donkey when she proclaimed that women are scrutinized for basically existing—being too sexual, but also not sexual enough—feminine,

but not too provocative. So basically, women are “constantly walking this tightrope and being criticized from all different directions no matter what they do” (npr 3).

*Don't know if you've ever walked a tightrope, but it's hard as hell—forreal. Take it from a young woman who walks an (in)visible one on a daily basis. I'm no gymnast, but balance is a lifestyle I've been forced to grow accustomed to.*

Every situation seems to be a lose, lose. Bodies are policed in settings based on what is permissible within those particular spaces. Therefore, surveillance becomes an act that is not only externally inflicted, but very much introspective. Women are coerced into being self-conscious, constantly having to maintain what is acceptable and appropriate within the confines of the environments their bodies inhabit for even the smallest moments of time.

Kendall notes, “We are currently in a world in which strong women are forced to choose between sacrificing their strength - and their livelihoods - in order to be considered women, or sacrificing the public perception of appropriate womanhood to be strong” (Kendall 4). This notion of “appropriateness” Kendall alludes to is an interesting one—one that especially caught my attention. Comfort doesn't matter, nor does individuality or pleasure—do what is “appropriate” as defined by your oppressors and those who claim dominion over your agency, and you'll be fine. Sike. This—being acceptance—is yet another example of an arbitrary entity—like beauty—that was manipulated to suggest and assume singular meaning.

At the 2018 US Open, Alize Cornet was issued a code violation for changing her mistakenly inside-out shirt on the backend of the tennis court. Her skin was being revealed to the public in a setting that is arguably considered high-class, and therefore, the act was deemed inappropriate. However, she is a white woman who was eventually “only assessed a warning with no further penalty or fine,” as released in a statement by the U.S. Open (Fisher 2). The larger penalties of course are still the scrutiny, humiliation, and power of misogyny, as they

continue to persist far beyond the lifespan of a headline. However, as a reflection of her racial privilege and leverage—at least I believe—certain rules around wardrobe and permissible changing areas were slightly progressively altered. According to the same statement following this incident provided by the U.S. Open, “all players will be allowed to change their shirts while sitting in the player chair,” and female players “if they choose,” will have the opportunity to change in more private spaces without being assessed bathroom breaks (Fisher 3).

*The white man thought he was doing something with “if they choose.” It was actually pathetic—made me scoff. What a publicity stunt—trying to make women believe they actually have agency under you. What freedom is one that lives and dies by your discretion? In case you want to act naive, I’ll tell you: not one at all.*

Although brought about by a blasphemous incident, I recognize steps in the right direction were taken. However, the penalties of scrutiny, humiliation, and the persistent power of misogyny should not be invalidated by the pacifying acts of minor regulation changes, and a lack of immediately tangible consequences, such as a payable fine. Therefore, we should not be satisfied by temporary means of appeasement, but encouraged to keep pressing towards the mark for more significant change. Persistence is resistance—it defies the assumed definitive nature of rejection and/or restriction.

*Warning: I am totally about to be **that** Black girl who now transitions into the disparities in treatment between Black and white people—specifically, female tennis players. I advise against viewing this as the oppression olympics. It is not. My aim is not to invalidate the experiences of any person’s disenfranchisement, as I understand we all experience trauma differently. Instead, my primary goal is to educate and enlighten, in the hopes that a greater understanding may result in a unity that OUR oppressors cannot retaliate against. There is power in numbers, but we will only accumulate them if we commit to learning the realities of our neighbors. So let us resume.*

At the 2018 French Open, Serena Williams’ catsuit—intended to avoid blood clots after a severely difficult pregnancy—was banned. This time, the skin was covered, but in a tight manner

that accentuated the both natural and earned shape and curvature of the elite athlete's body. As a point of clarity, by "earned," I mean she worked for certain aspects of that body, and "actually train[ed] to be a formidable competitor," acquiring "a physique that reflects that" (Kendall 3).

*In the words of William Shakespeare, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Serena did, has done, and is doing it all. Like I said, #GetYouAGirlThatCanDoBoth.*

No warning issued. No moderations to policy made—in case *God forbid* someone's apparel might assist their medical needs. Nope. Banned. French Tennis Federation president Bernard Giudicelli imposed a dress code, asserting "it," also known as anything that makes a Black woman look and feel as badass as she is, "will no longer be accepted" (Johnson 4). Particular commentary prescribed to certain bodies, and particularly to a Black woman's body in this case, bring heed to the intersectional identities and the systems of marginalization put in place around them to inform executive decisions that inhibit mobility. I personally resonated with the following excerpt from Johnson, as she reflects of the words of Abi Ishola, editor-in-chief and founder of "Beyond Classically Beautiful," an online platform designed to celebrate Black women's beauty, regarding the unspoken threat of Black excellence that resulted in restrictions of agency through dress code regulations. Although lengthy, it is my hope that the following excerpt will accomplish for you what it did for me—it beautifully reflected my own thoughts on the relationship between the inhabited body and the limitations imposed upon it, as I believe this relationship is quite transactional—sometimes for better, and others for worse. Furthermore, this excerpt articulates those thoughts in a manner I could not have better synthesized based on my own merit. Johnson wrote:

It's not far fetched to assume Williams' physique, a beautiful and direct result of her countless hours of hard work in training, played a role in Giudicelli's decision.

If her powerful thighs, hamstrings and butt were thinner — and therefore less accentuated by the spandex suit — would Giudicelli still think that “we’ve gone too far”?

If her biceps were smaller, her torso leaner, her hair in a silky, swinging ponytail instead of a cornrow-braided-bun, would Giudicelli then think she is “respecting the game and the place”?

“It’s because of her curves, more than likely, that people have come after her like this,” said Ishola.

With 23 Grand Slam titles under her belt — three of which come from the competition Giudicelli governs — the most of any modern era tennis player, male or female, it’s ubiquitous that Serena Williams is one of the greatest athletes of all time.

Ishola wonders if Williams’ excelling in a traditionally homogenous sport plays a role in Giudicelli singling her out.

Facts have been spoken by my good sis. Serena—a Black woman—took the white man’s shine, and therefore he *attempted*—yes *attempted* to take her power. Nice try sir. You banned the catsuit, she brought on the tutu and fishnets. Now what? Bring it on.

So now here we are. Cornet reprimanded for making a mistake. Williams attacked for protecting her health. All to maintain a look that is considered aesthetically pleasing and acceptable to the male authorities running the exploitative business we call sports. Give us a break! Asha Dahya, founder and editor of GirlTalkHQ was quoted in an article published by ABC reflecting on the fact, “Women’s bodies seem to be a commodity in public spaces,” continuing to be “regulated through policies” and “dissected by the media” (Fisher 4). This statement triggered two thoughts for me. First, and quite simply, I’m gonna—yes *gonna*—need people to start bringing that same energy to men. I am well aware that male bodies, especially

Black and brown male bodies have fallen victim to the lucrative nature of sports through examination processes, combines, trades, etc. However, I could not agree more with Kendall when she dropped the mic on male privilege following three highly legitimate claims: (1) male athletes don't get paid based on how attractive their female counterparts find them to be (2) you won't find articles that include male athletes discussing comparisons of their own, or even their competitor's physique (3) no male athlete would publicly refer to another male athlete's style of play as "womanly," basically because they're scared of the backlash (Kendall 4). And yet, Maria Sharapova's beauty has gained her more public attention and revenue than her tennis accolades—peep the headlines (O'Neill, Picardi, Woodstock). Women *constantly* compare and critique body types—survival of the fittest, but in the most feminine way possible of course. "She looks manly," she's "playing like a man," and "he" is "a man in hiding" are statements amongst women athletes that roll off the tongue as easily as the alphabet does for a newly taught toddler (Kendall 3, Matlack 7).

So again, bring that same energy. These discrepancies, particularly pertaining to what becomes public knowledge, what comparisons can be made, and who can and cannot make certain commentary with or without critique is a clear byproduct of the politics of visibility. Women athletes are constantly watched, talked about, and framed in specific ways and through particular modes of language and representation. Therefore, visibility is not a band-aid that fits all wounds. Banet-Weiser contends, "in a media context in which most circuits of visibility are driven by profit, competition, and consumers, simply *becoming* visible does not guarantee that identity categories such as gender, race, and sexuality will be unfettered from sexism, misogyny, and homophobia" (11). I would argue, increased visibility in an industry that has historically commodified marginalized populations, is like throwing salt on an open wound—initially there is a sting, but when you learn how to maneuver the space, improvement comes. Katie Sowers has been talked about, criticized, and counted out, and yet has still become the first openly gay and female coach in the NFL—paving the way for young dreamers with similar aspirations (Yang 1). For the first time *ever* in pageant world's history, Miss Universe, Miss USA, Miss America, and

Miss Teen USA are all Black women (Harmata 1). Keep throwing salt on the wounds misogyny has created. Like I said before, persistence is resistance. #BringThatSameEnergy.

Second, I find that women's bodies seeming to be commodities is not exclusive to "public spaces." How much more private does it get than nude? Hence—yet again, the paradox between the liberation of visibility and the restriction of mediated narratives this work seeks to uncover, is made clear. ESPN's *Body* Issue has undeniable liberatory potential through the way it *intends* to empower women of all sizes, races, and abilities, to embrace their own definitions of athleticism and womanhood. However in doing so, ESPN has found itself an extremely public and popular medium engaging with some of people's most private possessions and feelings—making that privacy widely accessible, and therefore profitable. This is an example of how media industries have managed to co-opt activism around body positivity for monetary gains. Banet-Weiser acknowledged, "specific messages of feminism are often incorporated into advertising and marketing," further stating, "major global companies"—like ESPN I might add—have urged us to "pay closer attention to girls and the opportunities available to them (or the lack thereof)" (7). However, in order to be empowered by and through these ads, young girls and women are silently being told that optimal success is only possible with "the right products" (Banet-Weiser 7). This process is referred to as the "economics of visibility"—referring to the shift that transitions visibility into "*the end* rather than a means to an end" (Banet-Weiser 23). More simply, the visibility of any disenfranchised group becomes more significant than the "structural ground on and through which they are constructed" (23). To be seen is sufficient—how you're seen—or better yet, what it takes to be seen, becomes a shadow in your spotlight. Media industries commodify the naivety and aspirations of audiences by any means necessary—all they're thinking is "run me my money"—even at the expense of customer satisfaction and well being. ESPN engages with this economy, as it thrives on human stories that tug heartstrings and hit personal places. If you thought sex sells, try emotional appeals—they'll get you every time.

Once we get over the initial honeymoon phase, consisting of falling in love with the *idea* of activism rather than seeing the reality of its misnomer, it's important to ask ourselves if the

superficial empowerment presented through these images is powerful enough to displace the stigmas around women, women of color, and their bodies—including hypersexualization and exoticism. Pre-Independent Study Aubri would've said, "yup—we good...at least we were featured" Now? Not so much. Now, I say they are not powerful enough—especially having taken the time to dig deeper than what's superficial. The impacts of the policing of bodies, the politics of visibility, and the unlimited surveillance of female bodies far outweighs the temporary satisfaction of a one time cover appearance and five-page spread. Therefore, I contend the mentalities of pre and post Aubri represent the tension that exists between how representation is encoded as liberating, versus how it is decoded and interpreted by audiences—in this case, as potentially artificial and ingenuine. Stuart Hall argued that more likely than not, the message intended to be sent is not the message people receive (During 57). That is very much the case here. Despite the effort ESPN and other media put forth to create singular meanings of appreciation, recognition, and empowerment, my gaze permitted me a different process of consumption. Hall's notion of a communication process involving a decoding process that is contingent upon the positionality of the reader helps inform the employment of my "black female gaze" in this work (During 66).

### Convictions of Nudity: The Vixen vs. The Athlete



The Athlete (Bowie6)



The Vixen (Vixen1)

Figure 5: Convictions on Display

*I admit, my advisor caught me red handed—being a hypocrite. When he first introduced me to the methodological approach of autoethnography, not only did he bombard me with a MILLION sources (yes, I'm dramatic) through which other female athletes*



*employed this particular method, but also with a piece through which the author explored her relationship with the liberation and constraint of being visible as a video vixen.*

*Seeing as to how my research would focus on the empowerment of the athletic form through nudity, I assumed there was **no way** my advisor could be suggesting the stories of a video vixen would help me destigmatize scant clothing and the showcasing of a nude body.*

*So instantly I hit him with a rebuttal—not the strongest, but a rebuttal nonetheless—“they’re not the same.” Of course, he played devil’s advocate—that’s how many of our conversations go—“but why?” He continued to explain his position, arguing that a video vixen has just as much right to explore her body, free of judgement, as the female athlete—if she finds it empowering, it’s empowering—that was his thing. I still did not agree.*

*The video vixen is **choosing** to be sexualized; she signed up for it. According to him, I was wrong. She was choosing to express herself in a way that was empowering and liberating according to her own standards. My assumption of sexualization came from my own biases and beliefs of stigma around women in music videos. I saw absolutely nothing empowering about shaking, gyrating, and initiating seduction. However, that was then—pre-Independent Study Aubri. I am in a better place now—less ignorant and more informed. Hopefully you stuck with me long enough to see me redeem myself.*

Now that I’ve reached a point in my research where I feel far more competent and far less obnoxious, I’ve decided to revisit the text by Amber Johnson reflecting on her video vixen experience. I promise you, I read it with completely new eyes. The first time I read through, practically *all* of my margin notes were judgemental, berating, condescending, and critical. I spent the entire time thinking, “why the hell would you—a Black woman—give these people more to criticize.” NEWS FLASH! I was clearly “these people,” criticizing. I told ya’ll I was ignorant. I don’t regret it though—it’s given me room to grow, learn, and advocate based on my newly acquired knowledge. That being said, let’s delve into my second reading.

This time, I found myself writing nothing but comparisons in the margins: “THIS RIGHT HERE,” “exactly,” “same point I’ve argued.” Your girl did a *full* 180°, because my vision was no longer being clouded by preconceived notions of acceptability and/or appropriateness. Not only

was I then able to see the author, Amber Johnson, as a total person, but as a Black woman who was fighting the same fight as me—resisting hegemonic ideologies, breaking down the institutional structures behind the politics of visibility, and giving people something significant to write, feel, and talk about since their surveillance won’t end anyhow. It is in that vein I write this portion of work. Furthermore, my hope is that by exposing my evolution of thought through disclosing the power of comparison, you as an audience will be able to deconstruct your own biases and stigmas in order to read the sentiments as they are, rather than as they appear. To help achieve this, I will focus on three congruent points, synthesized based on my research of the athlete and the vixen: (1) wanting to be desired is not synonymous to wanting to be sexualized/increased visibility does not guarantee protection (2) the expectation of balance is a common ground (3) understanding the power of the relationship between encoding and decoding is fundamental.

What I realized in my second reading of Johnson was that she had not chosen the oppression that would come with making her body more publicly visible. Johnson mentioned wanting her “desirability to be memorialized” and “validated,” which I had initially assumed to be a personification of/invitation for sex exclusively (182). However, what I quickly learned is this: wanting people to see you as sexy versus wanting people to act or speak on that attraction and/or perception is not the same—at all—in any context. For me, this thought connected very well with the arguments of Banet-Weiser pertaining to the relationship between visibility and protection from harm and scrutiny. As a refresher, Banet-Weiser's argument stated, “in a media context in which most circuits of visibility are driven by profit, competition, and consumers, simply *becoming* visible does not guarantee that identity categories such as gender, race, and

sexuality will be unfettered from sexism, misogyny, and homophobia” (11). Johnson wanted to be seen, not touched and verbally assaulted. So I was wrong. She did not *choose* the assaults inflicted on her body based on her participation in a certain activity—I assumed them. Instead, she was choosing to acknowledge the sexualities and desires of Black women as “beautiful, remarkable, and meant to be celebrated, highlighted, coveted, shared, and embraced” (Johnson 197). Are these not the same sentiments ESPN shares through a desire to recognize and appreciate the athletic form? I believe they are. Regardless of the work our Black female bodies are engaging in—whether athlete or video vixen—it is our choice (to a certain extent) as to *why* we choose to do so. Herein lies our agency—you cannot dictate my why. So, the next time you fix your mouth to say or mind to think, “why the hell would you—a Black woman—give these people more to criticize,”—direct shots fired at myself—make sure you haven’t already calculated a response to a question that isn’t yours to answer. Like I said, feel free to try, but you *cannot* dictate my why.

As stated previously in this work, balance is hard as hell—and you don’t need to be a gymnast to figure that out. However, I feel the need to extend that statement to include the fact that balance is not just enacted in settings we societally approve of—it is expected in all settings. I formerly provided the analogy of a tightrope, proposed by Shapiro, alluding to women constantly being “criticized from all different directions no matter what they do” (npr 3). Guess what? Shapiro was speaking in the context of sport, but Johnson contends the same in acknowledging, “she [the woman] is both reprimanded and applauded for her roles,” in whatever form they come. Therefore, what I’ve learned and would like for you to understand is that the larger implications and experiences of womanhood far exceed the specific spaces through which

that womanhood is being explored—court, track, field, set, or studio—it simply does not matter. Women—as one unit—are being coerced to perform their best balancing act, regardless. It’s hard as hell.

At a very basic level, everything is not as it seems. Hall was absolutely justified (not that he needs my validation) in nullifying the communication process as linear. Messages intended to be sent and those received are not always positively correlated. My experiences of engaging with research produced around the athlete and the video vixen are primary examples, in almost identical ways. Whilst ESPN’s *Body Issue* coverage of Tori Bowie was intended for me to see empowerment, I often saw a history of marginalization reconstructed. Whereas through the works of Johnson, intended to affirm women’s agency in creating their own “why” regardless of the setting, I saw stereotypes of Black women’s hypersexuality being perpetuated. Therefore I contend as Stuart Hall does that, “the message sent is seldom (if ever) the one received and that communication is *systematically* distorted” (57). Exploring the works of ESPN on Tori Bowie made this clear to me—having the same experience with the works of Johnson solidified it. But—it gets more personal than that.

*I have fallen victim to assuming my own “why” to be something completely different than what it turned out to be. The entire “why” of this work was to make you, as an audience, more aware of the systems in place around our bodies, as well as the visibility of them. While I’m hoping that what was intended to happen has still fulfilled my desire and will continue to serve its purpose, I would be remiss to not express that I too underestimated the degree to which I could learn through my own work and discovery. I too have been seeing what is/was most visible without acknowledging the presence of underlying forces. I too became ignorant to the paradox between the liberation of visibility and the restriction of mediated narratives. The athlete versus the vixen brought me to that conclusion. Shout out to my advisor for calling my bluff. That moment and moments thereafter inspired my epiphany. What will it take for you?*

## Election Minus the Campaign

In the same vein of alleviating ourselves the responsibility of guessing other people's "why"—which should not be our obligation at all—it is important that the concluding analyses of this work incorporate the ways Tori Bowie spoke about her own body and its participation in ESPN's *Body Issue*. If only her "why" really existed.

*When I was first beginning this research, the plan was to analyze the experiences and portrayals of multiple female athletes. Obviously that has not happened—for a number of reasons. For one, I found that I had so much to write about with one person—I'm currently on page 52 for crying out loud. Secondly, I found that with my methodological approach, analyzing a Black woman's experience would give me an experience that I might have been able to speak and relate to more than others. I say all this with a purpose.*

*When my original plan was in effect, I had done the first few steps of analysis: writing down exactly what I saw, reading and dissecting interviews, and digging for larger implications. Looking back at those notes, I found a discrepancy in the disclosure of why the women athletes I was looking at chose to participate in this nude publication. I will admit that I did not access the interview questions used to prompt responses from the athletes. However, the substantial differences in the content of their published articles are noteworthy. The two other women athletes I'd originally looked at, Breanna Stewart and Lauren Chamberlain, both talked about their ability to be role models for young tall girls or full-figured athletes respectively. They explored their journeys of finding self-confidence in bodies that in many ways were not socially desirable. Tori's interview didn't do that **at all**. Take it from the headlines: "Tori Bowie's 'biggest feat'? Making the Olympic team," "Chamberlain on how softball changed her body image," "Breanna Stewart on growing up and embracing herself." One of these things is not like the others. Then again—why ever would a Black woman be given an opportunity to talk about loving her body, when she can simply discuss the things that body can accomplish? There's a history in that.*

*All that to say, I'm not really sure of the "why"—it was never explicitly stated. I'm sure there's a "why" to that!*

I'd like to think that maybe Tori said more about her body as it related to empowering others than what is revealed, but sadly I can't confirm that. Furthermore, anything that could have appeared to be empowering was more so implied than explicitly stated. For example, when asked about self-conscious experiences of her body Tori replied, "It has taken some time to be

able to adapt to being so lean and strong and looking really manly. I have had some insecurities there, but over time I'm starting to accept it and embrace it..." (Walker 4).

*For one, "looking really manly" is problematic to include in a publication that seeks to destigmatize—but I digress. We've already covered that.*

To me, this statement can be read as, "if you're out there and you feel manly, it's okay, I do too." However, it does not explicitly say, "you are perfect just the way you are, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise." Furthermore, Bowie ends the statement with "...because this is the figure I have to have and the strength I have to have in order to do my job" (Walker 4). Again I say, why ever would a Black woman be given an opportunity to talk about loving her body, when she can simply discuss the things that body can accomplish?

I am genuinely unsure of why Tori elected to participate in the 2018 edition of ESPN's *Body* Issue, and as much as I'd love to speculate, it is not my place to do so. I searched other articles, interviews, and media streams to no avail. Even on Tori's social media, there are no indications of her participation in this work. Breanna has some of her photographs on Instagram, and one of Lauren Chamberlain's serves as her profile picture. One of these things is certainly not like the other. What sticks out to me most, once again, is the paradox between the liberation of visibility and mediated narratives. It is clear through Tori's interview that she has not fully accepted her body due to stigmas placed around the look of it; therefore, why would she make it more visible by redistributing the works of ESPN through her personal platforms? However, what I struggle to understand is how someone who was not going to serve the purpose of the work was chosen to participate in it. I believe this question can be answered by the "economics of visibility" discussed by Banet-Weiser, wherein the message becomes about what you can attain, as opposed to how you attain it. Tori is a full-bred winner, regardless of her insecurities.

Therefore, the message I gather is this: as long as your body is good at performing something (and therefore profitable), the rest (ie. image, self-confidence, and perception) does not matter.

*@ESPN, does that sound like empowerment to you? Just curious—hit me back when you get this message.*

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Writing this work was an incredible journey. However, the endless amounts of reading, social media stalking, and revising were not in the slightest bit the hardest parts. Looking at myself in the mirror was *by far* the most difficult and unexpected task. I just *knew* coming into this study that the only people benefiting from this work would be my audience—I can humbly say I stand corrected. I misjudged my own place and position. Just as autoethnography includes the researcher as an artifact of his/her/their own work, I contend that we are also a part of the audience we're seeking to address. Furthermore, even as we advocate for causes, people, and events, it is never our duty to assume that we know all there is to know about those things or people for which/whom we are advocating. Consequently, through this work, I have come to believe it is in our ability to be humbled through our studies that its power and influence are truly revealed.

### **I Can't Rely on What's Implied—Let Me Spell It Out**

It is my hope that this study revealed several pragmatic implications. What I deem to be most important of them all is how a single person's gaze can throw off the intended encoded message instantaneously. Initially, I considered this a flaw in the system we refer to as communication. After further thought, we ought not be blamed for who we are. Therefore, I believe this work revealed what I would like to call a reality. Furthermore, it is based on this reality that we must appropriately adjust our behaviors to be as efficient as we can. We ought to be clear in what we mean, but also explicit in recognizing how other perspectives might perceive what is being presented. It is never the fault of the accused to justify feelings of offense; it is the responsibility of the perpetrator to take responsibility for not having considered every possible



outcome. In the words of the eloquently spoken Maya Angelou, “People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.”

The words themselves don’t matter; the weight they hold is where the significance lies. Choose your message wisely.

Secondly, this work contributes to popular conversations around femininity, womanhood, body-image, and athletics. It reveals the endless pressure, surveillance, and balance women are bombarded with on a daily basis, as a reflection of patriarchy and societal norms. Furthermore, this work addresses the persisting stigmatizing rhetoric placed around female bodies. The double-binds handcuffing us undermine our abilities to be whole human beings. Therefore, this study contributes to a number of continuing movements including #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #BlackLivesMatter, while tapping into an industry (and more specifically a media stream—ESPN) that has not been studied adequately in academia. My study breaks the silence of ESPN in this scholarly world. There is no more #JustDoIt, I have #JustDoneIt. Time *is* up, I *too* have been a victim, and my *Black life matters*. I admonish you to join the conversation. Hopefully the inclusion of myself in this work showed that your voice can also be valued and necessary to pushing boundaries. Don’t let your testimony go to waste—it can be your largest weapon.

### **I Can Only Be Me**

What might have appeared to be one of the biggest limitations of this work was of course, my own biases. I cannot claim to have spoken on behalf of all Black women, Black women athletes, women athletes in general, or women for that matter. We all live, act, believe, see, perceive, and experience our lives differently. However, I believe that the distinct nature of my

voice, stories, and ideas were invaluable to this work, especially as a reflection of my chosen methodological approach. I understand and acknowledge that a perceived limitation of this work could be its failure to be inclusive of perspectives outside of my own. However, I am slightly grateful—there is beauty in the fruits that blossomed from me being inevitably forced to spend much-needed time dissecting myself, my flaws, and my power. Instead of serving as something that stunted growth (a limitation), my personal experiences and ideologies helped to initiate meaningful dialogues between myself and others. Opening avenues for self-acceptance, advocacy, and sharing of truths through authentic discourse is indeed a strength of biases—not in a sense of imposing your views on others, or even of creating a hierarchy of values— but of loosening the atmosphere to welcome the stories and identities of those traditionally muted and/or overlooked.

An additional perceivable flaw of this work could be its sole focus on exploring ESPN's portrayals of one Black woman athlete. Tori was who I related to most, but she is not a representative sample of all races, genders, body types, and experiences. Therefore, there were no opportunities to draw comparisons between similar representations of bodies in the ways I initially anticipated doing. I realize that neglecting to include photographs of other athletes might have impacted the potential scope of my findings. However, I also acknowledge that I can only speak to my own experiences, identities, and feelings. Therefore, as I contend with my previous limitation-turned-strength, I find that channeling in on one individual allowed me to interact more intimately with this work in a way that might not have otherwise happened. Sometimes it's okay to be a little narrow, as long as it serves a purpose bigger than your own interests.

### Between Me and You ...

Here are the major conclusions I've personally come to, and admonish you to take away with you as well:

1. **Stop Hiding:** Realize the disservice we do to ourselves and our communities, hiding from and or performing for people who profit off of the performance. Be you—according to you and for no one *but* you, in all settings #GoggleMeNow.
2. **Self-inflicted harm is REAL:** Break the triad instead of helping to build it—become more conscious of the messaging you feed yourself, as well as the girls and women around you #YourBodyIsATemple.
3. **We come in sums:** Do not let patriarchy divide you #DoTheMath.
4. **Beauty is a contradiction:** YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL on your own terms—no ifs, ands, or buts about it—period #TheSkinImIn.
5. **You are entitled to your gaze:** No two experiences are the same—you can only live and speak *your* truth through *your* eyes—own it. Only *you* know your “why” #MindYours.
6. **Storytelling is more than a regurgitation of experiences:** Share your stories to combat the institutions through/by which they were created #StoryTellingSavesLives.
7. **Surveillance is never ending:** Give the people something worth seeing since they'll watch anyways #LookAtMeNow.
8. **BRING THAT SAME ENERGY:** Call it how you see it—no disclaimers, sugar coats, or cover-ups necessary #BringThatSameEnergy.
9. **Be prepared to be called on your own bluff:** Like I said, “Ignorance is bliss, not blind.” None of us are excused #NoExcuses.

**10. What's intended almost never matters:** (If you care) Take a backseat and think more proactively about how people may *actually* receive what you say and do, as opposed to how you *want* them to to receive those things #BeggersCantBeChoosers.

### **My One Ask**

If you take nothing else from this work, please remember the items listed above—that is all I ask. Be conscious. Be bold. Be unapologetic. Be YOU—as fierce, badass, and unique as you are. Begin or continue to challenge yourself and those around you. Check your privilege. Acknowledge your marginalization. Recognize that both exist within you. Persist and resist. #GetYouAGirlThatCanDoBoth.

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