

THE RHETORIC OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS:
GENDER, RACE, AND WHITE HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

By

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Abstract

Violence, specifically gendered violence, has seemingly become commonplace in professional sports. In recent years, sports and news media have navigated a storm of violence allegations. For example, Larry Nassar, former Michigan State University and USA Gymnastics doctor, was accused of sexually abusing hundreds of patients and convicted of seven of counts of criminal sexual misconduct. The extent of the abuse Nassar was accused of reignited conversations about gender, power, and violence in sports. This dissertation addresses one aspect of gendered violence in sports: domestic violence. The following is a sampling of news stories from the last year alone that document professional athletes accused of domestic violence: catcher Derek Norris of the Detroit Tigers, linebacker Reuben Foster of the San Francisco 49er's, center Willie Reed of the Detroit Pistons, WWE wrestler Rich Swann, and boxer Jermell Charlo. There are countless other cases that could be mentioned in addition to a number of cases of officials, coaches, CEO's, and teams owners allegedly committing domestic violence. This project seeks to understand how sports media – journalists, commentators, and fans – contribute to broader cultural understandings of domestic violence. I investigate what this discourse tells us about sex, gender, race, and class as they relate to domestic violence as well as the challenges this rhetoric might pose to a progressive political agenda to end gendered violence. Using Ray Rice and Hope Solo as case studies, I perform a critical replay – a feminist critical cultural investigation of domestic violence in sports that follows linkages in conversations about sports and violence – to uncover the ways sports fans, journalists, and casual consumers of news construct a narrative of domestic violence in professional sports.

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I would not be in graduate school, I would not know how to write an essay, I would not know about feminist theory, and I certainly would not believe in myself if not for Dr. Cate Palczewski. Thank you for showing me the way. I can only hope to be someone's Cate someday.

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Finally, this dissertation would not be possible without the decades of activism, scholarship, and community that preceded it. I want to recognize and honor the feminist legacy that made this work possible. It is my sincerest hope that this project, and my work broadly, does its part to energize and forward a progressive political agenda to end gendered violence.

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Chapter I: Introduction

*“The mythology and symbolism of contemporary combat sports such as football are probably meaningful and salient to viewers on a number of levels; patriotism, militarism, and meritocracy are all dominant themes. But it is reasonable to speculate that gender is a salient organizing theme in the construction of meanings around sports violence. . . Violent sports as spectacle provide linkages among men in the project of the domination of women, while at the same time helping to construct and clarify differences between various masculinities.” – Michael Messner, *When Bodies are Weapons*, 213*

Violence is prolific in sports. Some sports are built on it. Sports like hockey and football require in-game violence as fundamental tenets of success. Professional wrestling, boxing, and other forms of fighting-for-sport are attractive primarily because they are violent. In fact, *violent* is really not an uncommon description of American sports. One article describing a recent hockey game between the Boston Bruins and the Toronto Maple Leafs states that the Bruins “got mean,” and that one player got “bloodied” by another before delivering a “thunderous check of his own” to yet another player who had to leave the game as a result (O’Brien). That does not even include “the most controversial moments of violence” in this game (O’Brien). Nazem Kadri, of the Maple Leafs, was suspended for the remainder of the first round of the NHL playoffs after an especially violent hit in this game, which was the second game of the series. This suspension follows the three-game suspension Kadri received in the previous year’s playoffs, also for a violent hit. Another example is the recent UFC 236, an event held by the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which is said to have ended with “epically violent championships [sic] bouts” (Iole). While UFC is an obviously inherently violent sport, this particular event was unique because it was characterized by spilled blood and “very beaten up and weary men” (Iole).

The most watched sport in the United States is no different. The National Football League (NFL) has been heavily criticized for excessively violent play that results in concussions

and chronic traumatic encephalopathy, commonly known as CTE¹ (Resnick). Some NFL players, coaches, and fans have pushed back at this criticism and defended violence in the game. This includes Mike Mitchell, formerly a safety for the Pittsburgh Steelers who asked “Are we supposed to just allow people to catch footballs now?” and stated “I don't want to hear it from moms or people who are influenced by moms that are trying to change this game. This game was *made* on violence” (qtd in Dunne). The NFL and other major sports leagues are also known for violence that exceeds the boundaries of official competition.

For example, soccer has a long and storied history of spectator violence (Wen). A *USA Today* article called a recent outbreak of violence in London “the worst to take place” in recent history after a fan suffered “life-changing facial injuries” and a police officer was hospitalized (“Soccer Violence in London”). Sometimes spectator violence spills over and drags in the athletes themselves. In 2004, a National Basketball Association (NBA) game between the Indiana Pacers and the Detroit Pistons ended in a brawl that involved both players and fans. The fight started with one player shoving another, escalated when a fan threw a drink at a player, and devolved into complete chaos when the player went after said fan. The massive fight has become known as “one of the darkest days in NBA history” (Haddad), “the ugliest melee ever seen on an NBA court” (Buckner), and even “one of the ugliest brawls in pro sports history” (Ferkovich). This is not even to mention the verbal, often racist violence that happens in sports. One example of this type of racialized violence is when Russell Westbrook, NBA All-Star and guard for the Oklahoma Thunder, was told by a fan to “get down on your knees like you used to” (qtd in

¹ CTE is a degenerative brain condition that, unfortunately, can only be diagnosed postmortem. It is the result of repeated head injuries, or brain traumas, which can be the result of repeated concussions as well as more minor hits. Symptoms include memory loss, aggression, and depression. Former NFL player Aaron Hernandez was diagnosed in 2017 with “the most severe case ever seen in a person his age (27 years old)” (Resnick). Resnick estimates that more than 100 former NFL players have been diagnosed at this point in time.

Chaffers). Furthermore, owner of the NFL's New England Patriots, Robert Kraft, has recently been charged for his involvement in a large sex trafficking operation. A *New York Times* article gives context to the charges,

Beyond the lurid celebrity connection, however, lies the wretched story of women who the police believe were brought from China under false promises of new lives and legitimate spa jobs. Instead, they found themselves trapped in the austere back rooms of strip-mall brothels — trafficking victims trapped among South Florida's rich and famous. (Mazzei)

Professional sports are so strongly affiliated with violence that even sports celebrities are viewed as credible on the question of violence. For example, Golden State Warriors Coach Steve Kerr was asked his thoughts after the February 14th 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, and his remarks were circulated on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (Rollins).

Often, the violence affiliated with sports is gendered. In early 2018, Larry Nassar, former Michigan State University and USA Gymnastics doctor, was convicted of seven counts of criminal sexual misconduct, with hundreds of women, many of whom were teenage gymnasts at the time of their assaults, making similar accusations. Particularly disconcerting was the widespread disbelief of victims that was pervasive in various media. One of Nassar's attorneys, in a radio interview, stated that she did not believe that all of the complainants were victimized by Nassar and accused them of getting confused because of the way the case "spun out of control" (Smith qtd in Connor para. 4). Violence, and specifically gendered violence, in sports is not new; it is not even clear if this violence is increasing or just becoming more visible. Despite societal progress seen in the evolution of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), the

expansion of Title IX to protect LGBTQ students, and the spread and recognition of feminist work raising awareness about victim blaming, slut shaming, and countless other issues, professional sports still harbors, and produces, uniquely gendered forms of violence. Moreover, it is gendered violence that evokes public responses that often support perpetrators, demonize victims, and forward regressive ideologies of gender and violence.

One form of gendered violence that has received a great deal of attention over the last decade is domestic violence. The following is a sampling of news stories from the last year alone that document professional athletes accused of domestic violence: Detroit Tiger's catcher Derek Norris was suspended on allegations of domestic violence (CBS Detroit); Rueben Foster, linebacker for the San Francisco 49's, was arrested "on charges related to domestic violence" (Kay para. 1); Willie Reed, center for the Detroit Pistons, was suspended for six games after a domestic violence arrest (Gartland); WWE star Rich Swann was suspended indefinitely after he was arrested for battery against his wife (Gartland); Jermell Charlo, an American boxer, was charged and acquitted on domestic violence charges after allegedly assaulting and choking his then-girlfriend (Rafael); *and* sports analysts are still discussing the possible return of quarterback Johnny Manziel after he was cut from the Cleveland Browns in 2016, despite the fact that he will face a six game suspension for a domestic violence violation if he returns (Sporting News; Rapp). There has also been a slew of sports media documenting officials, owners, and coaches participating in potential acts of domestic violence. These cases include the following: esteemed NFL line judge Carl Johnson who was under investigation for domestic violence (Rapaport); chief executive of the San Francisco Giants Larry Baer who was caught on camera yelling at and assaulting his wife; and, Robert Kraft who, as I described above, allegedly was involved in a sex trafficking ring.

Furthermore, the hyper-visibility of sports makes them “significant sites where the larger cultural meanings of domestic violence are constructed and struggled over” (McDonald 128). As scholars of communication, we should not write off colloquial discourses about these types of events as insignificant nor should we assume they do not contribute to the continuation of violence. Ignoring this discourse, and the way it interacts with more dominant or official discourses, “results in insufficient understandings and counterproductive discourses which in turn may limit large scale action” (McDonald 129). A rhetorical perspective, in particular, is necessary to understand, undermine, and create effective policies to address these trends. Engaging some of these discourses around sports and violence, this dissertation seeks to answer the following questions: How do sports media - journalists, commentators, and fans – contribute to broader cultural understandings of domestic violence? What does this discourse tell us about sex, gender, race, and class as they relate to domestic violence? And, what are the challenges this rhetoric poses to a progressive political agenda to end domestic violence?

To lay the groundwork for answering these questions, in this opening chapter I review the literature on rhetoric and sport, paying attention to how this research has developed in the contexts of gender, hegemonic masculinity, and race. Then I lay out the theoretical assumptions that ground my research and describe the methodology used in the following chapters. Finally, I preview the remaining chapters, emphasizing two case studies rooted in controversial cases of violence that occurred between 2014 and 2015. This time period is significant because it marks a shift in professional sports organizations’ domestic violence policies and public attitudes, and because these cases influence how sports fans and other community members understand incidents that occurred after them. In the case studies I will consider structural issues and systemic violence while simultaneously paying attention to individual athletes and their

circumstances because, as Emily Deering Crosby argues, these individuals have “rhetorical presence” as professional athletes (242).

Rhetoric and Sport

The study of sport and communication is a somewhat recent area of inquiry but nonetheless comprises a distinct field that is simultaneously well-developed and constantly evolving. In a recent edition of *Communication & Sport*, which launched in 2013, media studies scholar Lawrence Wenner argues that there are three major dispositions within the study of communication and sport: the study of sport and media, which focuses on culture and sociality; the study of professional communication in sports; and communication studies as an approach to considering sport. It is within the third disposition that I position this dissertation. Wenner explains that this segment of scholarship is often concerned with speech communication, “language and symbols in and about sport,” and is the home place of rhetorical criticism in sport (403). Admittedly, Wenner claims this is the least developed area of sport and communication research, but he also thinks it “holds much promise in bridging a notable chasm that can be seen to divide” the other dispositions (403).

Wenner describes a number of challenges facing the field of communication and sport. I will focus on the challenges that my research contributes to remedying. Wenner argues that communication and sport is currently approached from a variety of discrete perspectives and that future research should seek to speak across these divides. He also points out that there are still relatively few scholars specializing in communication and sport and that the existing group lacks diversity of identity and perspective. Wenner describes the need for sport and communication researchers to be interdisciplinary. He points out that the most accessed articles in the subfield

are written by scholars of the sociology of sport, illustrating the lingering need for critical rhetorical approaches to sport.

I argue that communication studies, specifically rhetoric, is necessary to both assess the development and progress of the study of communication and sport and to make the most nuanced claims about contemporary and historical sporting phenomena. One reason rhetoricians are necessary to study communication and sport is that we can analyze messages, and their corresponding assumptions, without getting lost in managerial minutiae. In an earlier essay, Wenner argued,

It [Communication & Sport] can, under one roof, be concerned with social and cultural communication processes, but it can also study leadership, organization, and management styles without being preoccupied with the effectiveness and bottom line concerns of the strategic advance of enterprise, which, to the mind of most critical/cultural scholars, and many working within a social-scientific paradigm, taints too much of the drive of research from the Sport Communication as Profession disposition, most particularly that fueled by some of the sensibilities of sport management. (“Communication and Sport, Where Art Thou?” 256)

Specifically, rhetoricians are trained to pay close attention to language and ideology, which is often lacking in the study of communication and sport more broadly. Take Wenner’s research on communication about Janet Jackson’s 2004 Super Bowl halftime performance. In an essay titled, “Recovering (From) Janet Jackson’s Breast,” language which is problematic in itself, Wenner makes comments such as: “Janet Jackson—a pop star with little modesty in using sexiness in her own marketing” (Wenner, “Recovering (From) Janet Jackson’s Breast,” 320); “I close the essay with some observations about the prospects for ‘ethical health’ in sports promotion and

entertainment at a time when the sports and media industries are recovering from the uncovering of Janet Jackson's breast" ("Recovering (From) Janet Jackson's Breast,"316); and refers to the "embarrassing and negative publicity as a result of the Super Bowl halftime fiasco" ("Recovering (From) Janet Jackson's Breast,"330). In all of these statements, Wenner positions responsibility for backlash and controversy that was often sexist, and certainly always antiquated, on Jackson, *not* the public, Justin Timberlake, sports media, fans, or even gendered norms and expectations. The study of sport and communication, absent a rhetorical perspective, lacks critical edge and nuance, and risks replicating regressive gender norms. In the next few paragraphs, I will present existing critical rhetorical scholarship on sport that provides the groundwork for writing more ethical and insightful criticism about sports.

In a foundational 1991 study of hegemonic masculinity, baseball, Nolan Ryan, and media rhetoric, Nick Trujillo argued that "perhaps no single institution in American culture has influenced our sense of masculinity more than sport" (292). Trujillo outlined the construction of celebrity pitcher Nolan Ryan as exemplar of hegemonic masculinity to demonstrate the ways gender norms are institutionalized in and by sports and argued that, more broadly, the outpacing of baseball by football as the most popular American sport, which had just begun, was noteworthy because of football's "sanctioned aggression" and "other patriarchal values" (Trujillo 292). Trujillo's claim that "the study of mediated sport should not be taken lightly as a category of academic trivial pursuit" rings even more true today in a world of sports media saturated with hyper-masculine, and often violent, sports such as football and mixed martial arts (303). Trujillo concluded his essay by proposing that "media critics should study the attempts made in reporting, broadcasting, and advertising to maintain hegemony," logically, because popular media is a place where knowledge is produced (303). I would add that rhetoricians concerned

with gender and sport should also attend to unofficial, or common, discourses in their analyses because they are a place where knowledge about sports is contested and negotiated.

Since that early essay, a small group of scholars have continued to refine the rhetorical approach to sports. In 2011, Michael Butterworth argued that

it is evident that sporting events are rhetorical performances. As has been demonstrated elsewhere, a baseball or basketball game functions in service of important communal values. Moreover, the ritualistic nature of commercial sport has the capacity to induce audiences to accept particular political commitments as legitimate or normal. (“Saved at Home” 326)

Butterworth centered sports as a terrain that, yes, produces entertainment but simultaneously is “a constitutive site” in which social, political, and cultural issues are communicated (“Saved at Home” 326). In an essay about professional baseball and Christianity, Butterworth pointed out, in regard to the nationalistic traditions and rituals enacted in sport,

These moments generally are not perceived to evoke any particular political position but, rather, to affirm the universal principles that are attributed to national symbols. Thus, the prevailing wisdom about baseball - and all sports in the United States, for that matter - is that while nationalistic rituals are demonstrations of patriotism they are most certainly not political. (“Saved at Home” 311)

With the increasingly common protests of the national anthem across professional sports and the corresponding conversations about police brutality and structural racism, fans, journalists, and sports scholars are still grappling with, and resisting, this notion that sports are apolitical. These phenomena draw our attention to “the extent to which politics and sport not only occupy the same symbolic space but function with a similar logic,” (Butterworth, “Nate Silver and

Campaign 2012” 896). This logic, if left unattended to, has the potential to stabilize power imbalances and normalize systemic inequalities.

Shane Aaron Miller continues this line of research and argues that sports is a sort of microcosm of American society and that researching it allows scholars to “study the communicative behavior of society writ large in a manageable and culturally potent arena” (164). He explains that “much of the allure of sports comes from the belief that what we participate in and watch is an acultural experience - that at the end of the day athletic competition is decided by empirical skills, not cultural beliefs;” that sports, “in other words, provides the one space where we believe that all cultural trappings are set aside and raw bodies compete against one another on the proverbial level playing field” (165). This extends on Butterworth’s point about the perception of sports as apolitical and adds that it is also commonly understood as acultural, or a space of neutrality and fairness. However, sports, including the bodies that participate in them, are “symbolic” in ways that are sexed, gendered, raced, classed, and steeped in stereotypical and normative understandings of culture and nation (Miller 172).

This foundational work on sports and rhetoric acknowledges gender to a degree, but John Sloop most directly emphasizes the “importance of sports as a context for any discussion of gender” (83). Writing about track star Caster Semenya’s “gender trouble” after winning an international race and being subjected to a range of gender and sex testing due to accusations of masculinity, Sloop investigates the “gender logics” at play in, and about, institutionalized sports (83; 84). He argues that the treatment of Semenya by official sports organizations and popular media is evidence that sports is a space “in which gender remains stridently fixed” (92).

The existing conversation about sports and rhetoric draws our attention to race, gender, and sports as both reflective and constitutive of social norms and political commitments. The

persistent, or lingering, conservative value system undergirding the institution of sports means our research here has only just begun. Concluding his book on baseball, rhetorics of purity, and nationalism, Butterworth describes a litany of implications for studying sports and rhetoric, two of which persist in the current socio-political sports climate. First, he argues that “spotlighting” particular issues in sports may be useful for rallying people to critically examine “broader cultural constructions” tethered to popular sports (168). Second, he makes an argument about spectatorship and simply suggests that “we all can be more alert to the ways we are asked to comply uncritically with dominant mythologies” (169). My research will participate in this conversation and forward it by highlighting patterns of discourse about violence in sports and arguing for a more critical read of said discourse. Before moving on to discussions of theory and method, I briefly describe the specific work that has been done in the area of sports pertaining to gender in general, hegemonic masculinity specifically, and race².

Gender

As described above, gender has been central in the study of sports and rhetoric. Trujillo, Butterworth, Miller, and Sloop all make compelling arguments about the rigidity of gender norms in the institution of sports. One of the most significant conclusions Sloop comes to is the “emphatic restatement that gender norms remain largely in place” within sports (91). Miller accounts for recent progress and initiatives to increase the availability of sports to girls and women and argues that “although the physical empowerment for individual female athletes derived from athletic training and competition cannot be denied, what the performance of athletic skills by girls and women means is circumscribed by numerous cultural factors” (Miller 167). Even celebrations of Title IX and increased representation of women in sports have problematic

² Because, as we know, and as I will describe at length throughout this dissertation, racial logics influence performances and understandings of gender as does gender implicate race.

implications. Whiteside and Roessner critique current representations of Title IX in sports media as “contemporary girl power rhetoric” which may inadvertently “position gender equality as a thing of the past” (15). They explain how

Narratives of existing challenges faced by girls and women in finding opportunities to play or receive equitable funding are largely missing from the celebratory discourse produced during the anniversary. We did not see stories providing updates on the existing lawsuits, harassment, and other instances of discrimination that continue to be experienced by women and women’s sports advocates. Ultimately, Title IX is remembered as providing a wholesale remedy to injustice and creating a clear path to today’s era of equity. (Whiteside and Roessner 13)

In addition to framing the fight for gender equity in sports as a thing of the past, Whiteside and Roessner also critique coverage of Title IX for privileging whiteness, spotlighting hyper-feminine heterosexual white athletes, and altogether missing the boat on intersectionality. Indeed, contemporary sports culture, as well as media coverage, has been characterized by hegemonic femininity and compulsive heterosexuality.

Compulsive heterosexuality and hegemonic femininity are two key concepts in existing sports literature. Helene Shugart has addressed media coverage of female athletes and its over-focus on “physical appearance and sexual attractiveness” (Shugart 2). She analyzed coverage of the 1999 Women’s World Cup and found the players constructed as passive objects, sexually objectified, framed compulsively as heterosexual, and regularly defined in terms of their relationship to men. Her conclusion was that increased coverage of women’s sports, and the accompanying sexualization of female athletes, does not represent genuine recognition and agency but a new articulation of an age old sexism.

Similarly, Vikki Krane defines hegemonic femininity as “emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate, and gentle,” and argues this definition matters because of the organizing force of compulsive heteronormativity in sports, which she explains is the way “gender and gender roles are constructed against the backdrop of heterosexuality” (117). This norm produces a hierarchy of women athletes that privileges those perceived to be heterosexual, as well as heteronormatively and stereotypically attractive, over those who resist, or simply exist outside of, this code. The result for women athletes is a forced choice between assimilating to hegemonic femininity and winning the graces of the masses or committing to an existence outside of hegemonic femininity and receiving cultural resentment for gender deviance. Additionally, scholars have investigated the ways popular sports organizations, such as the NFL, have attempted to recruit and maintain female fan-bases, the role of the rhetoric of choice regarding gendered access to sports, and the potential benefits and drawbacks of embodiment as resistance in sports (Johnson; Messner, “Gender Relations and Sport”; Butterworth, “Katie was not only a Girl”). While much of the literature I just described seeks to understand sports and gender via a focus on women and/or femininity, another portion of research prioritizes understanding performances of masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity

R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt define hegemonic masculinity as a distinct form of masculinity; hegemonic masculinity describes an ideal form of masculinity that embodies the “most honored way of being a man,” attained only by an elite group of men (832). Nonetheless, hegemonic masculinity is “normative” in that men are socialized to seek this status despite the reality that it can only be achieved by few (832). The concept of hegemonic masculinity began as a fairly broad idea but transformed into a “widely used framework for research and debate about

men and masculinities” in the production of countless inter- and cross- disciplinary research projects (835).

In the context of sports, Michael Messner defines hegemonic masculinity as “that form of masculinity which is ascendant – is defined in relation to the subordination of women *and* in relation to other (subordinated, marginalized) masculinities” (“When Bodies are Weapons” 205). Sports is a premier place to study hegemonic masculinity and violence because “it is an arena in which individual males actively construct meaning around their acts of aggression and violence *and*, given the fact that sport is a public spectacle, these acts often take on important controversial ideological meanings” (“When Bodies are Weapons” 206). In this sense, hegemonic masculinity in sports functions as the “ideological center” of a “strategy” for maintaining the power and privilege of some at the expense and oppression of others (Messner and Solomon 14).

Trujillo contextualized this conversation for communication studies long ago, and it has evolved in multiple directions since then. Butterworth has used the concept of hegemonic masculinity to consider the relationship between baseball, masculinity, and nationalism as well as the production of heteronormativity and homophobia in sports (“Pitchers”). Foote, Butterworth, and Sanderson analyzed coverage of Adrian Peterson’s child abuse case and found values of hegemonic masculinity were used to justify certain behaviors and as a rebuttal to the perceived loss of traditional masculinity in society writ large. Others have made arguments about the relationship between injury and masculinities, the role of homosociality and disability in constructing masculinities, and the relationship between sports fandom, consumerism, and gender (Furness; Cherney and Lindemann; Wenner, “The Mediasport Interpellation”). Raymond Schuck has analyzed poker as sport and argued it produces a “stylized” masculinity that

legitimizes hegemonic masculinity in a unique way (1612). And while Casey Ryan Kelly's research is not about sports, he does define the concept of "crises in masculinity" clearly and usefully as "responses to the perceived loss of male privilege where, nonetheless, structural inequalities continue to disadvantage women" (96). Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity intersects with race to produce an ideal athlete that is male, masculine, and white.

Race

Butterworth explains that hegemonic masculinity becomes a medium through which "whiteness is affirmed in everyday cultural practices" such as sports ("Race in 'The Race'" 232). Andrews and Silk argue that sports, basketball specifically, "is a contested discursive space" in which cultural negotiations, specifically regarding Blackness, play out (1627). Their argument is that the NBA's "ghettocentric logic" has carefully crafted images of authentic Blackness in prominent players such as Carmelo Anthony, Dwayne Wade, and LeBron James (1639). The effect is both to essentialize and commodify Blackness. Additionally, using openly gay former NFL player Michael Sam and iconic baseball player Jackie Robinson as case studies, Abraham Khan has researched respectability politics and interest convergence theory as they implicate blackness and sexuality.

In an analysis of black masculinity, domestic violence, and commercial sports, Suzanne Enck argues that "what is left out of reports of abusive athletes is as important as what is included" (13). She demonstrates that when white male athletes commit a violent crime the context is filled with background information about their lives that humanizes them and explains the context of the crime, but when black male athletes commit a crime it is often decontextualized, leaving the background to be filled with suspicion. In addition to the study of

masculinities and race, scholars have considered the problematic ways that gender and race implicate women, bodies, and sexuality in sports.

Attention to the racialization of athletes suggests that gender does not operate the same for all women in sports. In the context of Serena Williams, Schultz argues the “overarching” distinction between Serena and her colleagues is that “she is black and they are white” (339). Sloop explains that “black athletes have seen their gender performance doubly problematized” as they are always interpolated as failing the expectations of white femininity and simultaneously embracing masculinity in their athletic performance (85). The Williams sisters have been called too muscular, masculine, boys, and animals (Schultz 346), which demonstrates “the ways in which muscularity comes to stand in for masculinity” and acutely affects how larger publics understand “female athletes of color” (Schultz 347). Katherine Lavelle points out that WNBA star Brittney Griner gets compared not to her peers but to former classmate and football player Robert Griffin III. An overemphasis on Griner’s physicality, i.e. size and skill, means she is both considered different than her fellow athletes who are white women and is held to different athletic standards than they are. This nuanced form of racialized gender discipline dates back to the Olympics after WWII, in which 9 of 11 female athletes from the US were black. The pure white form of femininity was so far out of reach for black women that they were allowed access to public competitive sports because dominant society always already coded them as masculine (Roth and Basow 258).

I would be remiss to not mention the contributions of sports journalism to the existing critical heuristic of sport. In this project, I make an explicit argument for paying closer attention to sports journalism. While sports media often supplies audiences with summaries, hot takes, and sometimes problematic analyses, there are also critical and insightful sports journalists that

scholars of sport and communication should look to. For example, early sports journalists, particularly the black press, exposed the political undercurrents of sports, highlighting the ways race, class, and even gender implicate everything from access to sports to the likelihood of a favorable referee call, from fan reactions to media coverage.

Dave Zirin, editor for *The Nation*'s sports section and author of numerous books on sports on race including *A People's History of Sports in the United States*, is one of the country's most outspoken and well-known sports journalists. He has written about countless moments of racial injustice and the intersection of sports with various cultural and political issues. In *A People's History*, he details how the advent of the "mass media" in the early twentieth century created a "new kind of sports celebrity," a type of celebrity "ornately constructed by a new breed of sports columnist" (54). Zirin describes early sportswriters as "lyrical" and "literary" (54). He points out that journalism about the racially charged 1910 fight between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries was representative of material covered in sports media at the time.

Specifically, Zirin talks about Lester "Red" Rodney's "political sports page" in the Communist Party's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, which Zirin has said "vibrated with the intersection of sports and struggle" (67). Rodney covered sports "with an eye to their social impact" (69). In fact, he launched "the first sustained campaign to end the color line in major league baseball" (69). Around the same time, multiple sports journalists called on black athletes to boycott the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin, Germany in protest of Hitler, taking a clear anti-racism stance (Zirin). A 1936 boxing match between Joe Louis, from Detroit, and Max Schmeling of Germany was so heavily publicized and promoted that the Communist Party organized mass radio listenings of the match and Hitler himself "closed down movie houses so people would be compelled to listen" (Zirin 82). Louis won this match in one round and the fight

became understood as a “referendum on Hitler, the Jim Crow South, and the correctness of antiracism” (Zirin 82). One sports journalist labeled Louis a “symbol of freedom” (82). Scholars have also written about the significance of the 1936 Olympics, including Mike Milford’s research about Jesse Owens - the black American track athlete who competed and won multiple gold medals – and how he was utilized by popular media as evidence that Nazi ideology was false, demonstrating clear overlap between sports journalism and sports scholarship.

While communication and sport is a relatively new area of study in the discipline, it has strong roots and a clear rhetorical disposition. Existing research highlights the importance of investigating whiteness, nationalism, hegemonic masculinity, and gender norms more broadly in sports. Recent research also, at times, demonstrates the need for increased critical rhetorical perspectives. From Wenner’s insensitive, and frankly sexist, essay about Janet Jackson’s Super Bowl halftime performance to sports media’s tendency to frame gender inequality as a thing of the past, sports as a communicative arena is begging for critical rhetorical attention. In the next section, I will outline the theoretical and methodological assumptions that I use to simultaneously critique sports journalism and credit it for its historical and ongoing cultural contributions.

A Critical Rhetorical Approach

I want to begin this section by positing that theory and method cannot be disentangled in this dissertation, and in the study of gender, violence, and sports more broadly, because core epistemological assumptions about the world will inherently determine which methods are appropriate for understanding a text. The cultural and historical aspects of contextualizing a text are intrinsically methodological but also require theoretical perspective in that no description of an event, or its reception, can claim to be neutral. In the spirit of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s

contention that “there are no methods – only language and critics,” this project is a rhetorical inquiry heavily influenced by feminist philosophy and critical theories of race and class with an explicit political stance.

Feminist criticism

Feminist criticism has a long and interdisciplinary history. In this case, by feminist theory, I mean philosophical attention to the ways gender (and sex) is anticipated, projected onto people, and used to determine norms and expectations. Specifically, this approach theorizes violence in relation to, and as a subset, of patriarchy and understands misogyny as “the ‘law enforcement’ branch of a patriarchal order” (Manne 63). The point is not to say that gender norms are fixed and immutable but to make present “the banality of misogyny” and demonstrate that while not all women, or otherwise feminine or feminized people, are subject to continuous patriarchal violence, “virtually every woman is potentially vulnerable to misogynist threats and punishment” (Manne 211; 53). Specific concepts from feminist philosophy I use include gaslighting (Abramson), “himpathy” (Manne 197), and theories pertaining to domestic violence (Berns). Additionally, more specific theories will add texture to my feminist approach. Those theories include gender as performative, hegemonic masculinity, and intersectionality.

There are two dimensions of Judith Butler’s theorizations of gender that are particularly important to this investigation of sports, rhetoric, and violence. The first is her definition of gender and the progressive potential it produces and the second is her theory of the relationship between gender, language, and materiality. Butler understands gender as somewhat distinct from, but in relation to, sex. Her point is that neither gender nor sex are entirely predetermined or completely culturally created. Gender is simultaneously linguistic, performative, intrinsic to a person, and transformative. Butler argues that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender

is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (*Gender Trouble* 7).

Gender is also temporal, according to Butler. She explains that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 519). This understanding shifts our focus slightly, but significantly, from static identity categories to social temporalities (Butler, “Performative Acts” 520). However, we have pervasive and powerful “existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements” that have cemented gender norms in limiting and often violent ways (Butler, “Performative Acts” 527). This is why, for Butler, gender is mutable, people have some agency to alter gender, and there is transformative potential within gender performances.

Secondly, Butler argues that language and materiality are gender and that gender is in language in material reality, not that any one of these holds the power to produce another. In her words:

To posit a materiality outside of language, where that materiality is considered ontologically distinct from language, is to undermine the possibility that language might be able to indicate or correspond to that domain of radical alterity. Hence the absolute distinction between language and materiality which was to secure the referential function of language undermines that function radically. (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 68)

Her point is to blur the lines between materiality and language and push feminist theorists to consider the way language and materiality are co-constitutive. She explains in more detail:

This is not to say that, on the one hand, the body is simply linguistic stuff or, on the other, that it has no bearing on language. It bears on language all the time. The materiality of language, indeed, of the very sign that attempts to denote "materiality," suggests that it is not the case that everything, including materiality, is always already language. On the contrary, the materiality of the signifier (a "materiality" that comprises both signs and their significatory efficacy) implies that there can be no reference to a pure materiality except via materiality. Hence, it is not that one cannot get outside of language in order to grasp materiality in and of itself; rather, every effort to refer to materiality takes place through a signifying process which, in its phenomenality, is always already material. In this sense, then, language and materiality are not opposed, for language both is and refers to that which is material, and what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified. (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 68)

Because of this connection between materiality and language and between bodies and language, gender is inherently rhetorical, by which I mean it is more than a sociological problem or a matter of inclusion and exclusion but a structuring phenomenon that contains and produces meaning far beyond representations. For this reason, I take gender and theories of gender very seriously in understanding sport and violence.

One evolution in theories of gender that I will use is that of hegemonic masculinity. In the previous section, I described how this heuristic has been used to analyze sport and masculinity. A key takeaway of this research is that gender does not occur in a vacuum. Therefore, I utilize a variety of theories for understanding the intersection of gender, sex, race, and class. This includes critical race theory; bell hooks' theorization of race, gender, criminalization and the evolution of the super-predator myth; intersectionality (Crenshaw), and

theories of inferential racism, or racial logic, that multiple communication studies scholars have contributed to the understanding of (Corrigan; Flores and Sims; Lacy and Ono). A core theoretical premise of this dissertation is that none of these theoretical approaches alone is nuanced enough to grapple with the spectacles of violence that permeate sports media.

Method

Rhetoricians view sports as a microcosm of society, or a text with the potential to illuminate facets of a broader culture, making a predetermined and rigid theoretical focus inappropriate. I approach sports media as a network that flourishes because its foundation is comprised of sports experts, sports journalists, and sports fans as well as scholars, celebrities, politicians, popular culture critics, and countless others from outside of the sports world. Following Campbell's directive "that there are no methods other than the recurring patterns that inhere in and constitute our language and its use in human communities and cohere into complex symbolic works that amaze, delight, and sometimes horrify us," I intend to cast my net wider and farther than many traditional rhetorical projects (101).

Campbell explains that, as rhetoricians "our critical task is to possess these riches. Methods, as usually understood, become screens through which we view this symbolic world, and in most cases, these screens distort, alter, or damage what they are intended to explain and reveal" (101). Indeed, each unique case study I have included will call forth unique methodologies as well as combinations and permutations of the theoretical perspectives described above. In order to get a sense of the narratives this discursively powerful network is able to produce, this dissertation is a critical cultural investigation of domestic violence in sports that follows linkages in conversations about sports and violence. The boundaries between texts are blurred in the vast array of available media addressing sports. Sports communication is

architecturally a network; the seemingly independent nodes do not, and cannot, function without communication to and from the other nodes. Take, for example, the most influential piece of evidence in one of the most well-known cases of domestic violence—the Ray Rice case—and ultimately the reason the NFL took serious disciplinary action and began formulating new conduct policies was a video of Rice assaulting his then fiancé Janay Palmer in an elevator that was originally released and circulated by the tabloid website *TMZ*. None of this research project, and arguably none of the recent conversations about domestic violence in professional sports, would be possible without this video or without paying respect to the interconnected nature of sports knowledge. A traditional approach that isolates one text, places clear boundaries on it, and makes an argument about how it tells us something unique is insufficient to understand the rhetoric of sport because sports conversations are networked across form and type of media. I am concerned with how these fragments, hot-takes, blog-posts, and major news articles speak to, and with, each other to create a narrative about gender and violence in professional sports.

It is within this rhetorical turbulence, that I look to Sloop's description of method and text, in the context of sports and gender. He argues, "Rather than the study of individual texts or the study of 'national' texts, the media environment offers multiple sites from which discourse emerges and in which change is initiated" and that "to attempt to gather every fragment of discourse about a public topic is implausible, both because the difference between consumption and production are increasingly blurred and because the limits of 'published' discourse are seemingly nonexistent" (Sloop 92). I call this method a *critical replay* and offer it both as a contextualized yet flexible approach to investigating rhetoric of sports and as a corrective to the seemingly neutral replays produced and circulated in sports media. It is directed both at the reception of the text and the intertextual sense-making that happens in the process of reception.

Questioning and complicating what the average replay shows and tells its audiences, this method captures both the rhetorical construction of gender within sports and gender violence broadly because, as Enck notes, “the importance of studying news coverage of gendered violence lies not in the details of specific cases, but in recognizing how disparate news outlets coalesce around specific thematics” (Enck 4-5). This study does not contain a normative linear tracing of the discourse because there have not been shifts that provide insight into the critical questions that I have posed. Rather, a collection of official, unofficial, amateur, expert, and colloquial discourses have produced and affirmed a particularly troubling narrative.

Case Studies

There is currently mass controversy about the way cases of violence are dealt with in professional sports. This ranges from the shock and anger surrounding former USA gymnastics national team doctor Larry Nassar to widespread mistrust and criticism of the hyper-visible NFL and its treatment of domestic violence accusations (Levenson; Edelman; Macur “N.F.L. Shows it Doesn’t Really Care”, and many more). One sportswriter describes this moment in sports as “the hurdle of indifference” regarding domestic violence (Luther). In this dissertation I take two mass media controversies of domestic violence – football player Ray Rice and soccer player Hope Solo – and investigate the ways sports media have produced a narrative of domestic violence in sport with the two of them as lead characters. I have chosen these two athletes because their cases happened at a pivotal time for sports leagues handling domestic violence and because their cases remain two of the most well-known to this day.

Throughout 2014 and 2015, multiple incidents of domestic violence and sexual violence permeated sports, news media, and contributed to a public repertoire concerning domestic violence. Hope Solo and Ray Rice have come to represent professional sports, its domestic

violence problem, and the role gender, sexuality, race, and class play in this violence. Before previewing the specific chapters, I want to justify my approach to selecting texts of analysis. There are countless texts that could be chosen for each of these case studies. Sports are covered in news media, sports media, sport-specific media, and are debated about on blogs, Twitter, and in comment sections. The texts chosen will vary for each case study but will have in common that they represent formal as well as informal discourse about sports. Kate Manne provides a justification for looking at colloquial, and even petty, discourse. She argues that the connections and unity found in everyday conversations likely contributed to the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (298). Discourse that may seem disconnected, and certainly unsophisticated, formed the base or groundwork of a presidential election, illuminating how colloquial discourse is one way misogyny is operationalized. My goal is not to critique a dominant, or official, statement but rather to figure out how sports media are talking about sports in relation to gender and violence because these conversations produce knowledge and solidify existing gendered and racialized epistemologies that are dangerous and violent.

This involves looking for the rhetorical strategy in the reception and circulation of the text; sports journalists, commentators, and fans make arguments and those arguments persuade other people. I am looking to see how these moments of persuasion work. Similarly to Rosa Eberly's study of responses to literary texts, the rhetorical inquiry I am conducting concerns arguments from non-academic individuals and communities and, therefore, are more "explicitly argumentative" and "less concerned with aesthetics" than a typical primary text might be (4). This research is not so much concerned with the "rhetorical design" of the primary texts, but with the ways in which the responses to the events are rhetorical strategies themselves (Ceccarelli 6). In tracing these rhetorical strategies and teasing out their foundations,

components, and resonance, I will highlight topoi, or “recurring inventional structures” that are “probabilistic foundations for the invention and judgement of arguments” (Eberly 4; 5). These topoi will differ with each text and shift based on perspective and argument within the responses to the primary texts.

Domestic Violence in Sports

Chapter Two lays the groundwork for understanding the case studies that occupy the bulk of this project by providing context for discussions of domestic violence. In this chapter, I define domestic violence, describe its history and policies, and assess evolving cultural attitudes about it. I then shift to describe violence in sports, a storied phenomenon, and how concern over violence affiliated with sports has evolved and amplified in recent years. Next I describe domestic violence in the NFL, specifically NFL policies about domestic violence, historically and now, as well as the ambiguity of the term *domestic violence* as it is used by the NFL and in sports media. This chapter ends by providing a sampling of domestic violence cases, or rather cases that have been treated as such in sports media, in order to give critical context to the cases detailed in chapters three and four. This chapter is intended to demonstrate the significance of the focus on 2014 and 2015 and incidents branching out both directions from that sliver of time and to highlight the racial disparities in sports media attention.

Ray Rice and the NFL

An article published in *New York Magazine* on November 25th, 2017, titled “Is This the End of the NFL?,” argues that professional football used to be “the most unifying public institution we had,” but then adds that it is declining in popularity due to fewer people watching television in general, the limited regular season schedule, the controversy about safety and concussions, and the rise of the NBA (Leitch para. 3). An NPR article also says support for the

NFL is down, but points out that its audience is still “enormous and dwarfs almost everything else on TV” (Doubek para. 4). Quite interestingly, the *New York Magazine* article makes no mention of the countless examples of domestic violence and sexual assault that NFL players have been accused of in recent years. This is not to say that other professional sports organizations are free from accusations, nor that domestic violence is the NFL’s only problem, but rather that the NFL has become the standard representative of this problem, that NFL players have come to represent domestic violence in sports broadly, and that this controversy’s relationship the NFL more broadly should be put under a rhetorical microscope.

Countless professional athletes have been accused of, arrested, and/or convicted on domestic violence, battery, or sexual assault charges but none have achieved the level of notoriety of Ray Rice. Rice has, for some reason, come to represent all of domestic violence in the NFL; articles discussing even the most recent accusations of domestic violence, such as one NPR article from February 2018, mention his name even though his case concluded in 2014. Of all the NFL players accused of domestic violence, Rice has been most public about his attempts to educate himself on the issue of domestic violence, rehabilitate his attitudes, and set a better example for young athletes (Shaffer). But Rice’s progress is rarely the topic of conversation in the plethora of articles that still mention his case; he has become an archetype of domestic violence.

The hyper-focus on Rice is dangerous because it distracts from other players who may be committing violence, obscures structural analysis of gendered violence, circulates racialized tropes and affect about who commits violence, and stunts the development of a discourse for navigating the education and recovery process. The way policies are enforced and the punishments that are doled out are obviously racist; for communication scholars, the

conversations that circulate during, and in response to, these controversies call our attention to the ways in which blackness gets tethered to violence in racist, regressive, and politically debilitating ways.

In this chapter, I approach the NFL and sports media as cultural sites that circulate from, and profit off of, antiblack discourses of violence and criminality both giving credit to white supremacist ideology about the relationship between violence and blackness and providing rhetorical cover for their failing anti-domestic violence initiative. Instead of taking a nuanced and sensitive approach to the leagues domestic violence problem, the NFL has scapegoated responsibility onto a select group of black athletes as part of a broader project to pacify victims and survivors, advocates and activists, and angry fans and community members. Equally troubling is that spotlighting black athletes as perpetrators allows for the survival and amplification of racist ideology.

This research is important both to challenge racist stereotypes about who commits violence and to fight back against widespread attitudes that the NFL is punishing innocent athletes (Edelman). In this chapter, I map discourse about Ray Rice, throughout the years following his suspension from the NFL, to understand the narrative, tropes, and arguments that were made about Rice, domestic violence, and the NFL. I follow these rhetorical strategies closely to see how they are recirculated in contemporary discourse and to illuminate why references to Rice are so persistent in sports media about violence because, most interestingly, Rice has been given rhetorical presence even in cases very much unrelated to his own. I advance the argument Suzanne Enck makes in her 2009 essay that black male athletes are framed as hyper-aggressive and perpetrators of violence by focusing on the ways blackness gets coded in subtle and slippery ways as violent.

Hope Solo

While much progress has been made raising awareness of domestic and sexual violence in society broadly, the institution of sports seems to be immune as incidents of gender-relating violence saturate the news. A range of factors contribute to the insulation of sports from broader criticism and progress and one of those factors is rhetoric: the gendered aspects of this violence is often downplayed or ignored altogether in communication about individual incidents. This chapter confronts the flattening of gender in rhetorics of violence in sport.

Hope Solo has not played soccer since the 2016 Olympics. Her dismissal from the US women's team was reportedly a result of unprofessional comments she made about the Swedish Olympic team, a DUI her husband received while driving a vehicle rented by the team, comments she made about a teammate, and her 2014 domestic violence accusation (Bonesteel). The team has been careful to remain ambiguous about the specific reason for her release. Solo however insists her career is not over, that she is on the market, and hopes to play soccer again someday, which seems increasingly more unlikely.

Solo's domestic violence case is central to understanding both her treatment as a professional athlete and how the public vocabulary of domestic violence is shaped by sports. Solo was arrested in 2014 on domestic violence charges after an altercation with her sister and nephew, at her residence, resulted in a 911 call. A common theme in news and sports media coverage of this case is the equating of Solo to other high profile athletes who had been accused, and sometimes convicted of, domestic violence, battery, and/or sexual assault. These people include Adrian Peterson, Ray Rice, Greg Hardy, and Ray McDonald.

Now, part of this comparison is logical; these four men represent a shift in the way the NFL deals with accusations of violence and they have each received substantial media attention. It is also logical because all of the athletes mentioned were accused of violence, mostly acts that

can be classified as domestic violence or would be commonly understood as domestic violence even if that would not be their legal classification. These incidents took place in the same time period. Nonetheless, part of this discourse is concerning. A substantial portion of the debate in sports media is dedicated to shaping these men and Solo into the public understanding of *who* is a perpetrator of domestic violence in sports, an image which, problematically, does not include white male athletes. Additionally, there is a tendency within this discourse to equate Solo to her male counterparts as a way of disproving the gendered aspects of violence.

In this chapter, I continue unpacking what Suzanne Enck and Blake McDaniel call the “cultural investments in the politics of domestic abuse in U.S. sociopolitical culture” (Enck and McDaniel 619) by tracing the term domestic violence and performing a gendered analysis of its applications and mutations in Solo’s case. The texts analyzed include discourse from both news and sports media that discussed, debated, or otherwise made an in-depth statement about Solo’s case *in relation to gender*.

Conclusion

Chapter Five reiterates the relevance of domestic violence in sports media and the salience of Ray Rice and Hope Solo as representatives of domestic violence perpetrators throughout time and across sport before summarizing and pointing out key themes that arise throughout the dissertation. I conclude the chapter with implications for scholarly research and the discipline of communication studies, advice for sports journalists, and the sentiment that scholars of communication and sport should begin to take seriously the project of bridging the gap between sports scholarship and sports journalism by encouraging and seeking out collaboration.

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Chapter II: Domestic Violence in Professional Sports

In this chapter, I provide a framework for considering domestic violence and describe notable cases of violence that occurred in the NFL leading up to, and following, 2014 when the organization made significant policy changes regarding domestic violence. When I say *notable*, I am referring both to cases that were heavily publicized and some that were not. A notable case, for this particular critical problem, indicates a case that has contributed to the public heuristic of domestic violence in sports. The inclusion of popular cases is intuitive. I am also including cases that are less well-known because what is absent informs the public imaginary as much as, and sometimes more so, than what is present. While black athletes comprise the bulk of public knowledge of domestic violence in the NFL, there are cases of white athletes committing similar acts of violence. Given this, one might make the claim that coverage of violence in professional sports is racist because it over-emphasizes accusations lodged at black athletes and often includes problematic descriptions of both the athletes and the incidents. Another could rebut that this coverage is not racist because it seems, on the surface, that black players are primarily the ones being accused of violence. Responses to that could include that black players are the ones getting the most coverage; black players are accused of violence more because of stereotypes about black masculinity and aggression; white players are being accused of violence and it's not being reported to the same degree; white players are not being accused of violence as regularly because hegemonic masculinity and whiteness excuse them from those types of accusations (to name a few). Thus, a rhetorical problem arises in which, as scholars, we have a complex situation involving race, gender, and violence that is mediated by sports journalism and interpreted by fans and non-fans in ways that implicate broader socio-cultural understandings of violence. Compounding the problem is the reality that almost no one has an accurate depiction of

what has actually happened in these moments nor are these cases of violence being understood through a critical lens.

This chapter is intended to lay the groundwork for the case studies in chapters three and four. In order to parse out how this web of discourse implicates cultural understandings of violence, we must first consider how it is, at least in part, determined by those very understandings. Therefore, I will not just be reporting or summarizing relevant cases of violence; instead, I am beginning a critical investigation into professional sports and violence, assuming that this phenomena is impacted by race and gender. A critical rhetorical perspective is necessary; any other approach would miss the antiblack violence lurking in these rhetorical moments and fail to fully understand, much less resolve, gendered violence because it would severely limit our understanding of the ways violence is represented, mediated, and responded to in racialized ways. To understand those cases, the reader needs a clear picture of domestic violence in U.S. socio-political culture and sports. Therefore, this chapter will unfold in the following sections: background on domestic violence in legal, cultural, and gendered contexts; violence in sports broadly; and, finally, domestic violence in the NFL

A significant portion of this chapter is dedicated to mapping recent cases of domestic violence in the NFL. In providing this history and context, I intend to give the reader more than a snapshot of the current crisis because the reader must first have a broader sense of the problem in order to grapple with how structures and socio-cultural norms and stereotypes impact colloquial understandings of domestic violence. This particular unfolding of the chapter is important because, read outside of the context provided, one might not feel the weight or grasp the implications of the cases that subsequent chapters will focus on.

Domestic Violence as a Cultural and Legal Concept

Domestic violence, a term often used as a catchall phrase for non-stranger violence, is defined by the Department of Justice (DOJ) to mean intimate partner and familial violence.

Specifically, the DOJ defines domestic violence as,

felony or misdemeanor crimes of violence committed by a current or former spouse or intimate partner of the victim, by a person with whom the victim shares a child in common, by a person who is cohabitating with or has cohabitated with the victim as a spouse or intimate partner, by a person similarly situated to a spouse of the victim under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction receiving grant monies, or by any other person against an adult or youth victim who is protected from that person's acts under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction.

In addition to this federal definition, each state has its own statute defining what domestic violence means within their boundaries. Thirty-eight states place a definition of domestic violence in the criminal code and all states have a definition in the social code (National Conference of State Legislatures). These statutes vary in areas such as stalking, harassment, and nonphysical abuse (National Conference of State Legislatures). The DOJ defines sexual assault distinctly from domestic violence and states also have distinct statutes defining sexual assault, but the two are often discussed as one phenomenon.

That being said, domestic violence is most commonly understood in the context of intimate partner violence. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one in three women have experienced violence by an intimate partner. The WHO also notes that, especially in the context of intimate partner violence and sexual violence, domestic violence can result in physical injury, anxiety, depression, PTSD, pregnancy complications, and even homicide and

suicide, among many other serious consequences (“Violence Against Women”). UN Women estimates that of the 87,000 women who were murdered in 2017, more than half of them were murdered by an intimate partner or family member (“Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women”).

Domestic violence should not be conflated with *violence against women* broadly, but it is unquestionably a gendered occurrence. It most often happens to women, gender non-conforming individuals, and trans people. It is most often committed by cisgender men. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention lists “belief in strict gender roles,” “desire for power and control in relationships,” and “hostility towards women” as factors contributing to intimate partner violence, and the WHO confirms domestic violence is a gender problem in demanding “ending discrimination against women” in a variety of forms as part of the project to end domestic violence (“Intimate Partner Violence: Risk and Protective Factors for Perpetration”; “Violence against women”). While domestic violence is a gendered phenomenon, it does not only happen to women and men are not the only perpetrators. Thinking beyond the gender binary and insisting on nuance, in this dissertation gender means something more than, and other than, the stereotypical gender binary (as was described in Chapter One). When thinking through gender and its relationship to domestic violence it is essential that the concepts of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, power, wealth, and culture guide the conversation, not simplistic sex and gender binaries. The history of domestic violence, both as concept and occurrence, will help demonstrate the way systems of power intersect to maintain violence and oppression.

Domestic violence is relatively new to the public lexicon of violence and law. It was not that long ago that domestic violence as concept and legal category did not even exist. Prior to the 1970s, American legal culture and communities lacked a vocabulary to describe violence that

happened in the home, especially between partners, as well as a legal structure to address it. This reflected cultural gender norms that divided the private from the public, or the personal from the political, and asserted that things that happened in the home, whether they be physically, sexually, or emotionally violent or not, were matters of private concern and not to be discussed or addressed publicly. As a result of these norms, women, and other family members, were regularly abused without relief or consequence for the abuser.

Furthermore, this meant that police, courts, neighbors, and community members were without strategy for intervening in domestic violence. Official police department policies directed officers to look “the other way” when confronted with violence in the home (Solic). Officers were “trained to do anything except arrest violent husbands” and the dominant understanding of the time was that domestic violence was “an intractable interpersonal conflict unsuited for police attention and inappropriate for prosecution” (Fagan 8). Women were unable to get a restraining order against a husband unless they also agreed to file for divorce at the same time; violent husbands were typically not arrested, prosecuted, or sentenced to any punishment. It is hard to imagine this cultural moment for those who were not present for it. The following example should concretize just how much patriarchy determined what counted as legitimate violence: A Sept. 25, 1964 issue of *Time* magazine cited a study from the *Archives of General Psychiatry* that claimed people “stay in abusive relationships because their fighting can ‘balance out each other’s mental quirks’” and asserted that the women in these relationships (which were all heterosexual) were partially responsible for violence done to them because they were “sexually frigid,” (qtd. in Dockterman). Today, we would refer to this as victim blaming, but the idea that women deserved, and even needed, to be abused was, at one time, commonplace.

The feminist movements and consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s pointed out abuses of power in the home and within the law, built shelters, created workplace training programs for victims, provided childcare, and pushed for policy changes. During this time, the Litigation Coalition for Battered Women (LCBW) sued the New York Police Department for failing to act in cases of domestic violence. In court, “women testified that police demonstrated tacit approval of domestic violence, joking with husbands and diminishing the legitimacy of the problem” (Solic). The LCBW successfully demonstrated that the police department discriminated against married women and failed to intervene in violence in the home. This case, in addition to countless other small legal victories, led to changes in arrest policies³, gave domestic violence legal standing, and resulted in spousal abuse being recognized as a legitimate form of violence. Shortly after, a “history of abuse” was recognized as a legitimate part of a legal defense for a woman who defended herself or retaliated against an abuser. While some progress has been made, social and legal hurdles still exist for those experiencing domestic violence and those doing their best to combat it.

Unfortunately, there is no way to accurately determine just how widespread domestic violence is at this point in time. Researchers and anti-violence organizations know the problem is under-reported but it is unclear just how much so. According to an interdisciplinary report prepared by researchers from The University of Miami School of Law, the ACLU, and the Battered Women’s Justice Project, to name a few contributors, “most domestic violence victims do not report the abuse and do not seek police assistance” (Bettinger-Lopez et al. 18). Globally, it is estimated that “less than 10 per cent of those women seeking help for experience of violence

³ The most common change was a mandatory arrest policy in the case of a domestic violence call. This was, and still is, controversial both because of the over-reliance on the criminal justice system and because, thinking intersectionally, these policies may further deter women of color from calling the police due to fear of participating in systemic mass incarceration of men of color.

sought help by appealing to the police” and that in the United States only one fourth of women physically assaulted by a partner reported it to police (UN Women; Bettinger-Lopez et al. 18). Compounding the problem of under-reporting, “judges often encourage survivors to negotiate with their batterers, even though many studies have documented the ways in which it is undesirable” and “police are still less likely to make an arrest when a husband feloniously assaults his wife than in other felony assault cases” (Bettinger-Lopez et al. 20). The result is that abusers are rarely prosecuted, victims rarely are able to escape the violence, and women of color and immigrant women are at a unique disadvantage because of existing stereotypes and additional legal obstacles. While knowledge of domestic violence is at an all-time high, there is much left to be desired by way of legal recourse and victim resources. It is as domestic violence has reached its apex as a recognizable form of gendered violence with increasingly clear legal repercussions that the NFL enters the narrative.

Violence in Professional Sports

Kareem Hunt⁴ was released from the Kansas City Chiefs in November 2018 after *TMZ* released a video of him assaulting a woman (Graziano). Sports journalist Britni De La Cretaz opens an article about the Hunt controversy with the following:

Another day, another parade of domestic violence allegations against professional athletes. Another week, another flood of teams failing to respond appropriately to the allegations. It feels like we’re living in some screwed up version of *Groundhog Day* in which the sports world keeps getting opportunities to meet allegations of violence against women by their athletes with an appropriate response, and it keeps failing.

⁴ His case will be discussed in-depth later in this chapter.

De La Cretaz is not far off. As far back as 1982, fans and scholars have been concerned with violence on and off the court including hockey brawls, physical fights in the NBA, and increasing aggression in the NFL (Perelman). A decade later, another essay pointed to the rising problem of violence against women by American football players and considered the role celebrity and narcissism played in that reality (Welch). One sports journalist points out that “some of the biggest names in sports history have pleaded guilty to charges of domestic violence,” a list that includes football players Randy Moss and Tyreek Hill, boxer Floyd Mayweather, and basketball player Jason Kidd just to name a few (Neal). A more detailed list of this sort would include names from every major sports league in every year of play. This trend has received substantial scholarly attention.

For instance, Dan Coogan, in the *Journal of Sports Media*, has compared media treatment of two NFL players accused of violence at relatively the same time—Michael Vick, accused of animal cruelty via dog fighting, and Ben Roethlisberger, accused of rape. Coogan recorded mentions of Vick and Roethlisberger in specific news outlets, measured the substance of those comments, and found disproportionate attention was given to Vick’s case. Significantly, Coogan found that “in almost every instance, the athletes that Vick and Roethlisberger were referenced too [*sic*] were black. The most commonly mentioned athletes were Kobe Bryant, Mike Tyson, and Ray Lewis. The only white athletes ever mentioned were the Duke lacrosse players who were wrongfully accused of sexual assault” (140). Coogan’s study exposed other alarming features of media treatment of black athletes. For example, he discovered that Fox News brought in former LAPD officer Mark Furhman, the officer who lied repeatedly about his racist treatment of O.J. Simpson, to make a statement about Vick. He also found that Vick was described in more

graphic and violent terms, despite the fact that he was accused of harming dogs and Roethlisberger was accused of harming women.

There is also scholarly research that addresses the NFL and domestic violence. Existing scholarship about the NFL and domestic violence, specifically Ray Rice's case, has highlighted the implications domestic violence controversies potentially have for communication theory. Among other things, this research has addressed crisis communication strategies and the cultural capital of the NFL (Richards et al.), agenda setting theory and the role of social media outcry in NFL policy changes (Cascio), and policy changes specific to the Collective Bargaining Agreement (Jackson). A small portion of the research has focused on race, gender, and victim voice. Lauren Anderson, in her dissertation addressing victim voice in news reporting, argues that "although critical discussions surrounding domestic violence emerged during the Ray Rice assault case, there are still many issues surrounding gender and power that must be discussed" (12-13). Christensen, Gill, and Perez's research analyzes media representations of black masculinity to answer a similar question "How is Black masculinity constructed by media reports about the RRDVC? [Ray Rice Domestic Violence Case]" (34).

A portion of this research frames domestic violence coverage as a sort of *dark time* for the NFL and uncritically posits Rice, Greg Hardy, and Adrian Peterson as the source of that darkness. For example, Spencer Jackson opens their essay with "The National Football League (NFL) had its darkest year in 2014" and proceeds to justify this claim by referring to Rice's and Hardy's cases (325). Following this format, Chris Geyerman begins by isolating Rice, Hardy, and Peterson as representative of the NFL's domestic violence problem. Geyerman argues these case studies can be used to understand "public discourse on domestic violence" and concludes that "domestic violence in the NFL currently occupies a space of significance in popular culture,

and rightly so. However, the NFL functions in a larger social system where the scales of justice are unbalanced, tilted by patriarchy” (101; 119). This approach to understanding domestic violence in professional sports is partial, inaccurate, and dangerous representation of the problem because patriarchy does not exist in a vacuum; it is deeply interconnected with race, class, sexuality, and other cultural factors.

What is absent in these essays is equally as important as what is present – there were startling acts of violence before, during, and after 2014 and many of the accused were white players. In fact the word “race” and the concept of blackness only appear in the citations in the Geyerman piece and there is no mention of race whatsoever in Jackson’s essay. This type of scholarship is evidence that the public lexicon of violence, one determined by patriarchy and antiblackness, seeps into academic work. The problem is not just that naïve or uneducated people are having difficulty sifting through representations of violence but that antiblack assumptions permeate discourse at all levels of expertise. Communication studies has undertheorized violence and the NFL and most of the research that exists is not recognized by the most prominent journals and academic organizations. Furthermore, most of this research lacks a rhetorical perspective and/or takes a “race-neutral” approach. The bottom line is that there is academic, peer-reviewed, scholarship that uncritically positions black male athletes as representative of domestic violence in professional sports. The rest of this chapter lays the foundation for enacting a critical rhetorical corrective to that condition and for having a more nuanced and productive understanding of violence in sports that would enable us to make effective cultural and policy changes.

Domestic Violence in the NFL

Prior to O.J. Simpson's trial in 1995, there was little to no public discourse about domestic violence and the NFL (Augelli and Kuennen). It was not until 1997 that the NFL developed a policy, the Violent Crime Policy, which authorized the commissioner to discipline athletes that had been convicted of a violent crime. The policy was revised in 2000 to include non-violent crimes and other "off-the-field conduct" (Augelli and Kuennen 50). In 2006, Roger Goodell became commissioner and drafted the Personal Conduct Policy, an adaptation of the Violent Crime Policy, which applied to all employees of the NFL, not just players, and made other small amendments (Augelli and Kuennen 51). While Goodell's new policy gave the impression that the league was going to enforce a code of conduct, the policy produced very little material change. Augelli and Kuennen estimate that between 2007 and 2014, "of the players that technically violated the Personal Conduct Policy, a majority were suspended by the Commissioner for no more than two games, had no disruption in getting paid, and were able to finish out the rest of the NFL season" (Augelli and Kuennen 52).

In 2014, the Personal Conduct Policy was again revised in response to backlash from the Ray Rice controversy. The updated policy included a number of new provisions including "NFL-funded assistance to victims and families," the development of a critical response team and counseling services, a rule requiring NFL teams to report any incidents that could be a violation of policy, authorization of independent NFL investigations in addition to law enforcement investigations, a six game baseline suspension, and the development of a conduct committee (Brown). Around the same time, the NFL Players Association also created a Commission on Violence Prevention in the wake of the NFL mishandling Ray Rice's case (D'Andrea).

The Commission was originally comprised of 11 experts from outside of the NFL, and its goal was to “tackle domestic violence and other issues facing the league” (Pelissero). In June 2018, domestic violence expert and director of the Georgetown University Law Center's Domestic Violence Clinic, Deborah Epstein, resigned from the NFL’s Players Association Commission on Violence Prevention, citing the actions of the NFLPA as “woefully inadequate” and calling the organization a “fig leaf” (qtd in Simon and Bowman). Susan Else, who formerly served as president of the National Network to End Domestic Violence also left the commission at that time (D’Andrea).

Epstein wrote a statement justifying her decision to step down, published in the *Washington Post*, in which she said, “I simply cannot continue to be part of a body that exists in name only.” Summarizing how her ideas were received by the commission, Epstein stated, “My NFLPA contacts would initially greet these ideas with a burst of enthusiasm and an indication of likely implementation, but efforts to follow up would yield nothing in the way of specific plans, and eventually communication would fade into radio silence.” She specifically referred to the recent signings of Joe Mixon, who had punched a woman in the face, to the Cincinnati Bengals and Antonio Callaway, who had been accused of sexual assault, to the Cleveland Browns as NFL failures. Epstein concluded, “Because I care deeply about violence against women in the NFL and beyond, I can no longer continue to be part of a commission that is essentially a fig leaf.”

One sports reporter claimed that Epstein’s op-ed “was, on the whole, completely ignored, by the NFLPA, by the NFL, and by most of the sport’s fan base” (Leitch). Will Leitch argued that, “In the worlds of politics, media, entertainment, restaurants, being accused of sexual misconduct of almost any form has led to an immediate (if hardly fatal) reckoning, with high-

profile men losing their jobs, having their ongoing projects canceled, losing sponsors and prominent positions. But in sports, this has not happened.” In Leitch’s words,

Our popular culture, or at least those in charge of profiting off our all popular culture, came to the conclusion that we should not be watching Kevin Spacey in a movie, no matter how good an actor he was, or Matt Lauer making a soufflé on morning television, no matter how good he was at interviewing reality stars about their cookbooks. Our sports culture, or at least those in charge of it, have not reached that conclusion.

Leitch is suggesting that something is different with sports and understanding that difference requires leaning into sports journalism and everyday discourses about sports, violence, gender, and race.

Before moving on to the specific cases, I want to discuss *domestic violence* as a term that is used by the NFL, in sports media, and throughout this project. Professional sports organizations and sports media have varying definitions of domestic violence, some of which are inconsistent with the DOJ definition provided earlier. For example the NFL’s definition of domestic violence includes sexual assault but obviously not all cases of sexual assault would also be domestic violence (Augelli and Kuennen 77). The NFL’s, and other leagues’, policies may contain problematic verbiage and categorizations; however, this study is more concerned with the broader conversations surrounding what is commonly referred to as domestic violence than the specific legal imprecision, although that imprecision is incredibly important and should be the focus of another study.

Some of the cases described here concern sexual assault, which the DOJ defines distinctly from domestic violence. In the context of sports media, journalists often simply collapse domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and sexual violence into one concept. I

engage domestic violence on the same terms that sports media does-- recognizing that this violence is gendered, that not all gendered violence is violence against women, and that gendered violence happens to people of all genders. In doing so, I hope to garner some stability in order to investigate some of the most concerning features of the phenomenon. While the categories have been collapsed in some ways and domestic violence is a bit ambiguous in sports media, the NFL has set a precedent, albeit arbitrary, for how this type of violence is, and should be, treated in professional sports. In the next section, I will provide an archive, albeit incomplete, of cases that sports media has considered to be domestic violence before, during, and after the pivotal year of 2014. I keep my focus on the NFL here because it is currently the most popular sport in the United States⁵ and the Ray Rice case is central to popular understandings of domestic violence in sports writ large.

Specific Cases

In this section I will discuss cases with a strong media presence or a notable, or concerning, absence. I am intentionally including cases of white players being accused of violent acts because media has little incentive to report on these cases because the privileges of whiteness mean white athletes are less likely to be caught and charged with a crime and even when they are, their stories are less consistent with dominant cultural narratives of domestic violence. I am attempting to bring them into popular schemas of violence in order to further

⁵ According to a 2018 Gallup poll, the NFL is the most popular sport to watch in the United States. Of respondents, 37 percent said professional football was their favorite sport to watch, which was “by far the most for any sport” (Norman). The NFL was also the recipient of a 2019 Harris Poll EquiTrend Brand of the Year award in the category of Media Entertainment. The EquiTrend Brand Equity Index measures “Familiarity, Quality and Purchase Consideration” to decide which brands are the strongest (“The Harris Poll Announces”). The NFL was the only sports league to receive an award. And, according to the Euromonitor International’s Global League Attractiveness Index, the NFL is actually the most popular sport globally (“Football Dominates”).

communication scholars' understandings of domestic violence, gender, and race in the context of sports media.

As mentioned above, the NFL made significant changes to their Personal Conduct policy in 2014. There are, however, a couple of cases where football players were accused of violence prior to 2014 that also influence how news and sports communities make sense of gendered violence in professional football. These cases include Ben Roethlisberger, quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, and Richie Incognito, former offensive guard for the St. Louis Rams. After summarizing those two cases, I will describe the core accusations, controversies, and implications of the 2014 cases. I am including post-2014 cases as well because they are a critical part of the narrative I interrogate in the following chapters and because it is important to resist reducing domestic violence to the year 2014 in order to get a more complete picture.

I want to caution the reader about two aspects of this last section. First, at some point this chapter will begin to feel laborious to read. I have done my best to narrate the cases in a sensitive and enlightening way. That does not, unfortunately, mean it is necessarily captivating to read. I want to encourage the reader to stick with me through case after case. You might start to think, "I've heard this story somewhere before" and wish to skim through. Because the nature of structural violence is repetitive, cases are often not dissimilar. Writing these cases, reading these cases, and giving each of them careful attention despite their quotidian but tragic qualities is a necessary part of producing impactful scholarship and activism about domestic violence. Second, in drafting this chapter I realized there was nothing intrinsic to the descriptions I have provided that would indicate the race of the athlete. Race is a central part of the argument I make in the rest of the dissertation so, while it may sound a bit awkward, I have indicated which athletes are

white. I chose this particular method to draw attention to the ways whiteness often goes unspoken in sports media and communication scholarship.

2008-2012

Ben Roethlisberger, white quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, was accused of sexual assault twice—once in 2008 and once in 2010. In 2008, he was accused of rape by a Harrah’s casino employee who said Roethlisberger raped her while he was competing in a celebrity golf tournament at the hotel. The case eventually came to a settlement in which it was unclear if there was “monetary exchange” (Mill). As the case played out, however, Roethlisberger’s lawyers accused the victim of fictionalizing the account in order to “extort a big payoff from the Steelers quarterback,” threatened to sue her for defamation, and demanded an apology from her (“Steelers QB Wants Written Apology”). His legal team went so far as to call her a “disturbed and calculating woman” in an official court filing (“Steelers QB Wants Written Apology”). One article celebrated the settlement because the allegations “can finally be put in the past” and stated that “with this lawsuit finally in the rear-view mirror, Roethlisberger and the Steelers can look ahead towards the future” (Mill). Coverage of the 2008 case, which accused the alleged victim of lying and posed questions such as “will the charges mess with his head as he trains for the upcoming season?,” certainly presumed Roethlisberger’s innocence and framed the accusation as a hurdle for him to overcome (Breech, “Steelers QB Ben”). He did not receive any punishment from the NFL for this incident.

In 2010, Roethlisberger was accused of assaulting a Georgia woman in a college-town bar. Again, in this case, much of the public discourse expressed skepticism about the accuser’s motives, most notably comments from Roethlisberger’s agent Ryan Tollner, and reports carefully drew a distinction between rape and sexual assault, emphasizing

that the allegation was not one of rape but of sexual assault (“Woman in Georgia Alleges Assault”). Roethlisberger received a six game suspension, which was reduced to four games because he agreed to attend counseling (Price). Discussing the 2017 playoffs, one commentator pointed out that Roethlisberger’s prior rape accusations “will barely be mentioned, if at all” (Price). This article, in *Sports Illustrated*, argued for Roethlisberger’s innocence by appealing to whiteness, heteronormativity, and the American Dream. For example, the author mentioned Roethlisberger’s faith, his family’s Christian values, his wife and son, and his commitment to being an upstanding team member. Despite Roethlisberger receiving widespread support from the sports community, Terry Bradshaw, former Steelers quarterback and then sports analyst, called on the Steelers to release Roethlisberger (Rosenthal) and Chris Rock called Roethlisberger “the original Cosby,” referring to sexual assault allegations being swept under the rug (qtd in Rose). Rock’s point was to highlight that some cases are more easily overlooked than others and to provoke us to think about race as a determining factor.

In 2012 Richie Incognito, a white guard who played for the Miami Dolphins at the time, was accused of sexual battery with a golf club. The Dolphins conducted an investigation but concluded “that the allegations could not be substantiated” (“Richie Incognito, Guard, Accused of Sexual Battery with a Golf Club”). Commissioner Goodell brought Incognito in for a conversation about the allegations but “no additional disciplinary action was taken” (“Richie Incognito, Guard, Accused of Sexual Battery with a Golf Club”). Later that year, a teammate of Incognito’s described having a similar encounter with Incognito that involved unwanted touching and verbal harassment that included homophobic and racist comments. Incognito was suspended in the fall of 2013 as a result of this incident but the suspension was lifted and he was

compensated for all but two games (“Richie Incognito, Guard, Accused of Sexual Battery with a Golf Club”). He went on to play for the St. Louis Rams followed by a number of other teams until his retirement in 2018.

2014

Ray Rice was a running back for the Baltimore Ravens from 2008 to 2014. In February 2014, he was arrested for assaulting his then- fiancé Janay Palmer. The public was made aware of the arrest on February 15 and on February 19, the tabloid news cite *TMZ* released a video depicting Rice dragging Palmer out of an elevator (Bien). Palmer appeared unconscious in this clip. Despite the arrest and the video, the Ravens owner and general manager supported Rice through this time, appealing to his good character and positive role in their community. On March 24, owner Steve Bisciotti said “we have to support him. I think we'll be rewarded by him maturing and never putting himself in a situation like that again” (qtd in Bien). Rice was formally indicted on March 27 and was not required to have a disciplinary hearing with Commissioner Goodell until June 16. The result of this meeting was a two game suspension (Christensen, Gill, and Perez 364).

Amidst criticism of this seemingly light punishment, Goodell admitted he made a mistake and began drafting a new domestic violence policy. Then, on September 8, *TMZ* released a second video of the incident, this one depicting Rice punching Palmer in the face. That day, the Ravens terminated Rice’s contract and he was suspended indefinitely from the NFL. In response to widespread criticism and mistrust of the league, the NFL commissioned former head of the FBI Robert Mueller to conduct an independent investigation of the way the league handled the matter. While Mueller’s report concluded that the NFL did not have these videos in their possession before they were released publicly, he also stated that “the League did have

substantial information relevant to what occurred inside the elevator indicating the need for a thorough investigation. However, it did not fully consolidate, evaluate, and therefore appreciate the import of that evidence” (54). Rice’s case marks the beginning of an era in professional sports distinguished by public pressure to take matters of domestic violence and gendered violence seriously, whether or not that pressure has resulted in genuine progress or not, and Rice himself is still regularly referred to in the ongoing battle to expose and eradicate domestic violence in sports. Rice did not return to playing football after his suspension; however, at the time of this writing, he is in contention for a coaching spot with the Raven’s in 2019 (Wold).

Ray McDonald, former defensive end for the San Francisco 49ers, was first arrested in August 2014 after police were called to his and his ex-fiancé’s, Kendra Scott, home following an incident that left Scott with “choke marks on her neck and bruises on her arms” (Pilon). McDonald was not initially punished by the NFL for this incident despite the fact that the updated Personal Conduct Policy had just been released. The NFL cited lack of evidence and victim cooperation. Then in December 2014, McDonald was charged with rape of an intoxicated person. He was immediately released by the 49ers but was not formally punished by the NFL. McDonald was signed by the Chicago Bears but was quickly dropped when a domestic violence accusation, also involving Scott, arose in May 2015 (Dickerson). At the time of this writing, McDonald has not returned to playing in the NFL. Just months after McDonald’s case accusations of domestic violence by Greg Hardy were brought to the NFL.

A *Deadspin* article by Diana Moskowitz from November 2015 forwards the claim that Nicole Holder, ex-girlfriend and victim of assault, of former Carolina Panther’s defensive end Greg Hardy, was correct in her original hesitation to report the abuse because she feared “nothing is going to happen to him anyways” (qtd in Moskowitz). Hardy was originally charged

for assaulting Holder in May 2014 after police were called to Hardy's residence. According to reports, Holder told police she was hesitant to talk because "if she ever did anything to damage his career that he would kill her" (qtd in Moskovitz). Ten firearms were seized from the residence and statements were taken, but Hardy was not initially arrested. He was convicted in July 2014 but won an appeal in early 2015 when Holder failed to appear in court.

Hardy was originally suspended by the NFL for ten games and eventually deactivated by the Panthers. He was signed by the Dallas Cowboys and through an appeal, his suspension was reduced to four games (Hanzus). This change allowed Hardy to play for the Cowboys for 12 games during the 2015 season ("Greg Hardy Stats"). Cowboys owner, Jerry Jones, defended his decision to sign Hardy by calling it a "second chance" and stating Hardy was "grateful for the opportunity" to "move forward" ("Photos of Greg Hardy's Former Girlfriend Show Multiple Injuries"). However, Hardy only played one season for the Cowboys. He was let go after being charged with possession of cocaine in September 2016 (Thomas). Hardy signed a contract with Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in June 2018 (Baldwin). His position there is not without controversy, though, and fellow UFG fighter Jessica-Rose Clark has spoken out against Hardy fighting. UFC President Dana White defends signing him, citing that Hardy has "paid his dues" (qtd in Blaustein).

Adrian Peterson, a running back who was playing for the Minnesota Vikings and arguably the best running back of the time, was indicted on charges of child abuse on September 12, 2014 and was deactivated that day by the Vikings for that week's game. He was reinstated to play the next week but when another child abuse allegation surfaced, Peterson was placed on the Commissioner's Exempt List, which is a designation used for suspended players who do not count against a team's roster limit (DiMatteo). Eventually Peterson was suspended without pay

for the rest of the season (Wilson). Afterward, he played for the Vikings for multiple successful seasons and currently plays for the Washington Redskins. This case may seem distinct – and it should - from all of the other cases discussed in this chapter because in this case the athlete was accused of, and punished for, harming a child. That distinction matters legally and culturally; however, sports media often situates Peterson’s case within the context of the cases described above (Battista; Dockterman; Finn; O’Connor; Sandomir to name a few) and discusses his case in relation to the NFL’s new domestic violence policy (Battista; Belson; Stites).

2015-2016

Rodney Austin, who was a guard for the Detroit Lions at the time of his case, was found guilty of two counts of assault in June 2015. Austin’s ex-girlfriend, Yvonne Gill-Sadler, filed a complaint after an incident in which Austin allegedly assaulted her while she was holding an infant child and prevented her from contacting the police. Austin defended his innocence publicly throughout the duration of the case but nonetheless turned himself in and did not appeal the court’s ruling (Birkett). Upon being arrested and charged, the Lions released Austin. He was a free agent at the time of the ruling and was given a six game suspension by the NFL after the official ruling (“Rodney Austin, Guard, Found Guilty of Assaulting His Girlfriend and Infant Son”). Austin “became the first known player to be given a ‘baseline’ six-game suspension by the NFL since the league instituted its new domestic violence discipline” (Pilon).

Josh Brown, a white member of the New York Giants who played kicker at the time, was arrested in May 2015 on domestic violence charges. Brown initially received a one game suspension from the league, which is interesting given the new policy that mandates a six game baseline suspension was fully active and the norm by this point in time. However, the NFL reopened their investigation in October 2016 when police documents were released that included

statements from Brown himself conceding that he had been physically and emotionally abusive to his then-wife Molly Brown (Pennington). The Giants and the NFL claimed they had no prior knowledge of the extent of the abuse committed by Brown, but that is very difficult to believe given that at the 2016 Pro Bowl in Hawaii, NFL staff relocated Molly and her children to a different hotel location that Brown was unaware of in order to keep them separated after Brown showed up to her room intoxicated and violent (Raanan). Included in these “new” documents were personal letters and journal entries of Brown’s. Multiple sources cited Brown as writing, “I viewed myself as God and basically she was my slave,” referring to his treatment of Molly (qtd in Armour; Pennington). One *ESPN* article claims that Brown wrote in an email, “I objectified women and never really worried about the pain and hurt I caused them” (Raanan). At this time, Molly Brown had accused him of “more than 20 instances of domestic violence” (Pennington). In the midst of the investigation, Giants head coach Ben McAdoo stated “I do support Josh as a man, a father and a player. We treat these situations on a case-by-case basis” (Walder), and one of the owners of the Giants, John Mara, confessed that they had been aware that Brown had been abusive to his wife but failed to take any action regarding it (Pennington). This second investigation resulted in a six game suspension, consistent with the league’s new policy (Schefter).

Some reporters and players have pointed out that Josh Brown’s case represents racial disparities in the NFL’s approach to domestic violence accusations (Samuel). One article posed the following question: “People were right to assume the worst with a Greg Hardy. But Brown was afforded a presumption of innocence he didn't deserve. Why?” (Samuel). The same article pointed out that in 2016 three white players were accused of domestic violence and initially only one of them received a meager one game suspension and argues that black players accused of

similar crimes “have met relatively swift league ‘justice’” (Samuel). A separate article observed that fans, reporters, and players were concerned that Brown was getting “a lighter punishment because he is white” (Diaz). Torrey Smith, also a professional football player, is one example of a colleague who questioned the NFL’s treatment of Brown. Smith tweeted criticisms of the NFL’s decision to allow Brown to continue collecting his pay check (Diaz). Brown is currently a free agent.

Johnny Manziel, a white quarterback, is most well-known for being the first freshman football player to win the Heisman Trophy, which he did while playing at Texas A&M, earning him the nickname “Johnny Football.” His debut in professional football was highly anticipated; after his tenure at Texas A&M, he signed an \$8.25 million contract to play for the Cleveland Browns (Dorn). Manziel had gotten himself in trouble with the Browns, prior to the domestic violence incident, for partying, giving the “middle finger” to opponents during a preseason game, conflicts, traffic violations, and missing a game against the Steelers (Martin). In October 2015, Manziel was pulled over by police for speeding and the passenger in the vehicle, Manziel’s then girlfriend Colleen Crowley, is reported to have told police that Manziel had been hitting her but that she did not “want to make a big deal” about it (qtd in Martin). Then during an incident in January 2016, Crowley alleged that Manziel assaulted and threatened her and begged the hotel valet, “Please don’t let him take me. I’m scared for my life” (qtd in Martin). The altercation continued at Crowley’s apartment where a neighbor eventually called 911. Manziel was indicted but the case was dismissed after he completed an anger management program (Daniels). The Browns released Manziel in March 2016 but it’s not clear if his domestic violence debacle was the justification for the decision. Announcing Manziel’s release from the team, one reporter observed that his “two years in the NFL have been nothing short of turbulent (Martin,

“Cleveland Browns Cut”). The same reporter said “ahead of the start of the 2016 league year, it appeared the Browns were planning to release Manziel if they couldn't trade him” (Martin, “Cleveland Browns Cut”).

There are pockets of sports discourse that speculate the cases that get the most attention and receive the most severe punishment do so because the presence of videos and photographic evidence of violence. The details of Manziel’s case, including police reports, photos, and victim and witness testimony were released to the public. Allegedly, Manziel struck Crowley so hard that the blow ruptured her eardrum (TMZ Sports). Manziel never received any sort of punishment from the NFL proper. If he were to be signed by another team, it is possible that he would be required to serve the baseline six game suspension for violating the league’s personal conduct policy, but that is not an official statement of the NFL at this time (“Johnny Manziel Reaches Tentative Deal”). Additionally, possible punishment from the NFL does not prevent an athlete from playing in a different league. Manziel played in the Canadian Football League (CFL) for almost a year before being released for violating terms of an independent contract he had with the league (Breech; “Manziel released, barred from other CFL teams”). The terms of that agreement, and the specific violations, have not been released at the time this was written.

2017

Los Angeles Rams defensive lineman Ethan Westbrooks was arrested in March 2017 on suspicion of domestic violence but was not formally charged (Polacek). In April of 2018, Westbrooks was sentenced to one day in jail and three years of probation for a misdemeanor weapons charge from an incident in September 2017 in which he was pulled over and had a loaded, and possibly stolen, firearm in his vehicle⁶ (Klein). The NFL has not issued a punishment

⁶ It might seem odd to mention a weapon’s charge but “The fatal link between guns and domestic abuse is well-established,” hence convicted domestic abusers are not allowed to purchase firearms (Munguia).

for either of these charges at this time. In June 2017, Will Parks, safety for the Denver Broncos, was arrested for threats of domestic violence (Valdez). The charges were non-physical and were dropped in early 2018 due to lack of victim cooperation. Parks was not punished by the NFL (Conway). New York Giants offensive lineman Michael Bowie was accused of assaulting his fiancé and charged with domestic assault and battery in August 2017. Upon finding out about the charges, the Giants pulled Bowie from the upcoming game (“Giants tackle Michael Bowie charged with domestic assault and battery, won't play Monday”). A week after he was charged, the Giants released him (Wagner). Notably, Bowie’s agent, Peter Schaffer, has been quoted as saying “Michael is an upstanding man, very remorseful about any negative publicity this might bring to the Giants and to the NFL” without mention to remorse for the actual incident (qtd in Wagner).

2018

In March 2018, linebacker Aldon Smith was officially released from the Oakland Raiders after information surfaced that there was a warrant out for his arrest for allegedly assaulting his then-girlfriend. Smith technically had not played a game for the Raiders since 2015 because he was serving a suspension for drug and alcohol related infractions, but he was officially released at this time (Blackburn; Shaprio). Around the same time, Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Jameis Winston was suspended three games by the NFL after he was accused of groping an Uber driver. The NFL’s investigation concluded that he touched “the driver in an inappropriate and sexual manner without her consent” (qtd. in Sessler). He has served his suspension and continues to play for the Buccaneers.

Jimmy Smith, Baltimore Ravens’ cornerback who was set to start the 2018 season, was suspended four games by the NFL in August 2018 for violating the Personal Conduct Policy

based on their investigation of an allegation of domestic violence from November 2017 (Wagner-McGough). Smith was accused of threatening and abusing his former girlfriend. The Ravens have been criticized for not releasing Smith from the team. One sports reporter wrote:

The Ravens are showing a great amount of faith by standing by Smith in the wake of the Rice incident. This is a team that allowed fans to exchange their Rice jerseys, spending six figures for the trade-in. This is a team that sent a letter of apology to fans and sponsors after cutting Rice. This is a team that formed partnerships with and made substantial donations to organizations such as House of Ruth and the One Love Foundation. (Hensely)

The Ravens' response was that they "consulted" with "experts" and that "Jimmy has resolved his custody and support issues" (qtd. in Downing). Smith has finished his suspension and is currently playing for the Ravens. Reflecting on his suspension, he has stated "I was devastated for the simple fact that I'd be missing games" (qtd. in Brown). Also in August 2018, wide receiver Cayleb Jones was released from the Minnesota Vikings just days after he was arrested on suspicion of domestic violence when a woman reported that he "picked her up and threw her down, and kicked her as she tried to leave with her belongings" (Cronin). He is currently unsigned and would likely face a suspension from the NFL if the opportunity to play arose.

The San Francisco 49er's released linebacker Reuben Foster on November 25, after he was arrested on the evening of November 24 on domestic violence allegations. Foster had previously been charged with felony domestic violence in April of 2018. Those charges were dropped when the victim "recanted her story" despite the fact that the district attorney's office concluded evidence suggested Foster "seriously hurt his girlfriend" (qtd. in Silverman and Levenson). The Washington Redskins were the only team to offer Foster a deal and, to much

public controversy, signed him. Redskins President Steve Allen has reportedly conducted his own investigation of the most recent accusation using “contacts he developed during his time as general manager of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers from 2003 to 2008,” contacts who were explicitly not the Tampa police, who are currently conducting an investigation of the case (Hobson). Much of this controversy has to do with the Redskins’ decision to pass on recruiting Colin Kaepernick to play quarterback after their first two quarterbacks were injured with broken legs but to sign Foster who is the center of ethical and legal controversy (Brinson).

One sports journalist pointed out that people within the NFL were “baffled as to why they would make a claim for a player who, regardless of what is found to have occurred in a hotel room in Tampa last week, was clearly going to be unable to play this season while the incident is investigated, and with so little concrete information available at the time the 49er’s placed Foster on waivers” (La Canfora). Since this is Foster’s second offense, it was possible the NFL could have decided to ban him from playing ever again. However, the NFL’s final decision was not to suspend Foster at all but to fine him for two game’s pay.

As was briefly mentioned in the opening chapter, running back Kareem Hunt was let go by the Kansas City Chiefs on November 30, 2018 after *TMZ* released a video of Hunt “in a physical altercation with a woman” (Graziano). Hunt can be seen shoving and kicking a young woman. After the video was released, the NFL began investigating the case as well as two previous potentially violent incidents. Hunt’s case is certainly not one of domestic violence given the three incidents involve different people, none of them family members or intimate partners. I am still mentioning this case for three reasons. The first is that Hunt will be subject to punishment under the same personal conduct policy that players committing formal offenses of domestic violence will and the second is that Hunt’s case is likely to be discursively pooled with

those cases. Here are some examples of this already happening: a *Vice* article titled “Kareem Hunt and a Sports World that Ignores Domestic Violence Victims;” Will Leitch from *New York Magazine* called it “another high-profile domestic violence incident;” one article compares the handling of Hunt’s case to those of Ray Rice and Josh Brown (Steele); a *Boston Globe* article titled “Kareem Hunt incident shows NFL still not taking domestic violence seriously” argues that the Chiefs releasing Hunt was “hitting a woman, but the fact that it was caught on video” (Volin); and a *Huffington Post* article also calls the incident domestic violence and compares the situation to Ray Rice’s case (Skretta). The third reason is that Hunt is a high profile athlete and of serious value to the Chiefs. At the time of Hunt’s release, the Chiefs were “in position for their best chance at a Super Bowl title since they won it in 1970,” and Hunt was a significant part of that success ranking fifth in the league in rushing yards (Graziano). Hunt was picked up by the Cleveland Browns in February 2019 and in March the NFL settled on an eight game suspension, one of the longest in NFL history, which will bench Hunt for the first half of the season (Belson and Mather).

Before moving on, I want to express concern about the praise the Kansas City Chiefs have received for cutting Hunt and echo Moskovitz’s point that we should not mistake the Chief’s decision as them being “tough on domestic violence.” Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned the way sports media uses domestic violence in ways that are potentially too broad at times and Hunt’s case is one example where that happens. His actions were unquestionably violent and unacceptable but probably not domestic violence. I mention this to push back on praising the Chiefs for being tough on domestic violence, especially given they still actively employ Tyreek Hill, who pled guilty to domestic violence in 2015 (“Ex-Oklahoma State football player Tyreek Hill”).

Prior to playing professional football, Tyreek Hill plead guilty to domestic abuse for strangling and assaulting his then-pregnant girlfriend in 2015. The charge was originally a felony, but upon completing the terms of his probation, the charge was expunged from his record in August 2018 (Dixon). The Kansas City Chiefs signed him in 2016 which was controversial among fans, reporters, and in the NFL itself. Notably, Hill is an impressive wide receiver. One sports journalist has argued that “not since Randy Moss has the NFL seen a player who's almost impossible to cover” and pointed out that opponents “marvel at Hill's speed, hands and route running” (Freeman). It is hard to imagine that his nearly unprecedented skill as an athlete did not influence the NFL and the Chiefs’ decision to hire and allow him to play.

Additionally, as of March 14, 2019, Hill was again under investigation for battery after an incident at his home resulted in serious injury to his three year old son (McCann). On April 24, 2019, the Johnson County district attorney announced that he believed a crime had occurred at Hill’s home but due to inconclusive evidence regarding who committed the crime, criminal charges would not be filed (Koch and O’Brien). Then, on April 25, 2019, a local news station, *KCTV5*, released an audio recording of Hill and his fiancé, Crystal Espinal, seemingly discussing the circumstances for which they were under investigation. One example of the discussion in the recording is that Espinal seems to be telling Hill that their son is terrified of him, and Hill replies that Espinal should be terrified of him as well (Ricono). Since the investigative team at *KCTV5* sent the recording to the district attorney’s office, the case has officially been re-opened. The couple also remains under investigation by the Kansas Department for Children and Families (Larrabee). Hill has been suspended indefinitely from all Kansas City Chiefs’ activities, but is still, as of this writing, considered a member of the team (Sweeney).

Conclusion

The cases outlined above are evidence that there is an unwillingness on the part of the NFL to make meaningful changes regarding domestic violence and sexual assault. Nor does there seem to be much pressure from the public to hold the NFL accountable. These forms of violence permeate professional sports, specifically the NFL. As I will show further in the subsequent chapters, the problem is both that instantiations of violence are raced and gendered and that discursive and policy responses to that violence are raced, gendered, and unfortunately deeply influenced by talent and productivity.

While there is little explicit mention of race in sports media about domestic violence, black athletes overwhelmingly occupy coverage of domestic violence in the NFL. In describing the individual cases, I intentionally pointed out when the athlete in question was white. I did this to call attention to those cases and to force an alternative to structural whiteness which deracializes whiteness, leaves it unnamed, and naturalizes it in opposition to all other races. As critical scholars we should hesitate to accept that as reality because countless factors, many structural, influence this moment in sports media. From recruitment practices⁷ to police bias to stereotypes of aggression and black masculinity to the history of racism in the NFL⁸, it is naïve to take this coverage at face value. My argument is explicitly not that these athletes are innocent of the crimes that they were charged with or convicted of, but that sports media coverage that presents black athletes as the normative representation of who commits violence has serious racialized and gendered implications.

⁷ See William C. Rhoden's *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*

⁸ Prior to 1949, athletes from HBCU's were not considered by the NFL, who preferred to recruit black athletes from predominantly white institutions because of the assumption that they "knew how to play with white players; in other words, they knew their place" (Rhoden 21) and independent black football teams were fractured when the NFL integrated because "all of the most talented players left" (Rhoden 141). Black athletes are often described as having an "attitude problem," to point out just a few examples (Rhoden 162).

There are many possible gendered implications of this narrative. First, gendered violence can be used as a justification for antiblack discipline, surveillance, and violence as black athletes are singled out as perpetrators of domestic violence. Second, domestic violence, and other forms of violence that are gendered, end up misunderstood with insufficient, ineffective, or non-existent solutions. This is deeply intertwined with measurements of athletic value. A player that is indispensable to a team's success is far less likely to receive a tough punishment and far more likely to make their way back to the league and continue having a successful career (Adrian Peterson, Tyreek Hill, Ezekiel Elliott, etc). Meanwhile, players not deemed as valuable can be ejected, scapegoated as villainous perpetrators of violence, and used to craft an image of professional sports that does not tolerate domestic violence. Increased surveillance and discipline of expendable black athletes serves as a phantom of justice, all the while concealing and protecting hegemonic white masculinity and its most powerful perpetrators of violence. This project investigates the discourse that creates this reality and the rhetoric that substantiates and justifies these decisions. The next chapter takes Ray Rice as an important starting point for understanding the unfolding of domestic violence discourse and investigates his continued rhetorical presence in sports media's domestic violence narrative.

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Chapter III: Sports Culture's Obsession with Ray Rice

Coverage of Kareem Hunt's release from the Kansas City Chiefs in November 2018, after video footage revealed him assaulting a woman in a hallway, was saturated with references and comparisons to Ray Rice. Much of this coverage mentions Rice in the opening paragraphs and compares and contrasts both the incidents themselves and how the Chiefs, Ravens, and the NFL dealt with the two situations (Brennan; Davis; Felt; Graziano; Leitch; Maske; Shaw; Similien; Skretta; Volin). In the context of Hunt's release, one sports writer refers to Rice's case as the "most memorable incident" of domestic violence in the NFL, and another claims that the "Rice incident" has become an "annual tradition" for the NFL. A *CNN* article states that Hunt's case "echoed" that of Rice's (Levenson); a thread in a *Rival* sports forum is titled "Kareem Hunt pulls a semi-Ray Rice;" a popular Louisville radio station, *Magic 101.3*, states that "Kareem Hunt Has Just Ray Rice'd His Self;" one reporter poses the question "Does the NFL have another Ray Rice?" (Rosenstein); and another states that "the comparisons are too obvious" (Schmuck).

While Hunt and Rice do have some things in common – they are both running backs and there was video footage in each of their cases – this is just one example of Rice's case making its way into discussions of athletes and violence. In 2017, Joe Mixon was drafted by the Bengals after hitting a woman in a restaurant and, despite the fact that this was clearly not a case of domestic violence, Rice was mentioned in reports (Jones; McNear; Lawrence). When Tyreek Hill was drafted by the Chiefs in 2016, after pleading guilty to domestic abuse for assaulting his pregnant girlfriend when he was playing college football at Oklahoma State University, comparison was made to Rice, and in one of these articles Rice was referred to as one of the league's most "high-profile domestic abusers" (Martin; see also Kimes). Comparison to Rice

was also made to Josh Brown (Lingebach) in 2016 and women's soccer player Hope Solo in 2015 (Boren; Brennan; Johnson; Macur; Peterson; White; Whitley; to name a few). By and large Rice is inserted into these other stories in ways that are haphazard and lack nuance.

All of this makes clear that Ray Rice has become a representative anecdote for domestic violence in professional sports. In fact, Carron Phillips, a sports columnist, lists a number of NFL players who have been accused of domestic or sexual violence in very public ways and reflects that “none of them have been scrutinized or received more attention than Rice’s incident” (para. 14). For that reason, Rice’s case, the many reiterations of it, and references to it demand scholarly attention. This chapter seeks to answer the following questions: How is Ray Rice constructed as an archetype for perpetrators of domestic violence in professional sports? How does Rice as exemplar influence how we understand new cases as they unfold? And, what does this mean for gender and race as they relate to domestic violence?

The Rice case has massive cultural salience and failing to question and unpack why it does is irresponsible for rhetorical scholars concerned with gender, race, and violence. Ending the conversation at “there was video footage” evades more important, and difficult, questions about the nature of violence and media representations of it. In what follows I will briefly summarize key points of the case and review existing scholarly literature on Rice. Then I will describe a theoretical approach to understanding this case that is situated within the history of racism in sports and attuned to the relationship between blackness, masculinity, and violence. Finally, I argue that Rice is constructed as a representative anecdote for domestic violence in professional sports and that this discourse injects antiblack narratives of masculinity, criminality, and animality into conversations about domestic violence in ways that deflect from tough, but

critical, conversations about gendered violence, protect whiteness and particularly white perpetrators, and solidify racist ideology in public heuristics of domestic violence.

Race and Racism in Sports

As described in Chapter Two, Rice was arrested in early 2014 for assaulting Janay Palmer, who was his fiancé at the time. *TMZ* released two videos of the incident, which took place in a hotel elevator. The first released video showed Rice dragging Palmer, unconscious, out of the elevator, and the second video released months later showed him punching her in the face. It is unclear how and why the Ravens and NFL administrators viewed these two acts of violence so differently – remember, Rice only received a two game suspension initially, when only the first video had been released – but the second video resulted in his immediate termination from the Ravens and indefinite suspension from the NFL. Former Director of the FBI Robert Mueller, in his investigation of the NFL's handling of the case, concluded that the NFL had substantial information about the nature and degree of violence committed but did not take serious action until the second video was released. This delay and the damage it did to the NFL's image is why this chapter is about representations of Rice in relation to the NFL's public relations campaign to end, minimize, or simply conceal its domestic violence problem.

There has been a moderate amount of scholarly research on Ray Rice. Communication and sports scholars have addressed Rice's case from the perspective of crisis communication strategies (Richards et al.) and agenda setting theory (Cascio); they have also analyzed representations of black masculinity (Christensen, Gill, and Perez), victim voice in media reporting (Anderson), and the NFL's Collective Bargaining Agreement (Jackson). Moreover, Jovante Holloway and Elizabeth Booker have both written theses on Rice's case, respectively paying attention to public attitudes about intimate partner violence during the case and the role

the videos played in proving to the public that violence had occurred. Unfortunately, much of this research participates in the types of discourse I want to be critical of. For example, some of the studies take a race-neutral approach (Cascio; Ferrucci; Geyerman; Richards et al.); one isolates Rice as causing “the darkest year” in NFL history despite knowledge of cases like Josh Brown’s (Jackson); and others fall short because of their hyper-focus on whiteness, colorblindness, or a very brief period of time (Christensen, Gill, and Perez). The role that race should play in understanding Rice’s position as representative of domestic violence cannot be overstated. Therefore, I next describe the role race, and racism, has played in sports historically and in this current context.

Race in sports

Scholars have written about the relationship between racism and professional sports and many have used whiteness as a framework for understanding and critiquing representations of race in sports (Hylton). Hylton points out that one obvious way we know that whiteness is operative in sports is that headlines tend to not mention race when discussing a white athlete. His example is that it would be uncharacteristic to see a headline such as, “white footballer David Beckham,” and the effect of that *feeling unusual* is evidence that whiteness has been naturalized in sport (Hylton 65). Whiteness is so naturalized that it feels out of the ordinary to name it. Hylton argues that this imbues whiteness with discursive power and demonstrates the contingency of whiteness because it is able to be whatever blackness is not. The breadth of case studies and anthologies on this topic is vast and diverse. Sports writers, scholars, fans, and athletes themselves have all participated in confronting, negotiating, and remedying matters of race in sports. Each of these perspectives is essential to understand the broader dynamic and to decode more subtle or latent racial rhetorical themes. My aim in the next few paragraphs is to

give the reader a sense of this history, problems that persist into the current socio-political moment, where the conversation has been and where it may be headed. I will begin with what some athletes themselves have said and then move to sports journalism and academic publications.

This history of the black activist-athlete is long and well documented. Jesse Owens' success at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Muhammed Ali's legacy of politics and protest, and the iconic images and narratives of John Carlos and Tommie Smith raising their fists while being medaled at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics are all evidence that challenging injustice in sports is nothing new. Many have critiqued the so-called demise of the black activist athlete (see Khan, *Curt Flood in the Media*), but countless examples of black activism in sport exist, and persist, today. For example, Serena Williams, international tennis icon, has been at the forefront of discussions of racism and sexism in tennis, and Colin Kaepernick, former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, has been the recipient of awards from Sports Illustrated, the ACLU, and Amnesty International for his protests of racism and police brutality (Darby). Michael Bennett, who is currently a defensive end for the Philadelphia Eagles, former Seattle Seahawk, three time Super Bowl Champion, and one of *The Root's* 2017 100 Most Influential African Americans has worked to expose racism in the NFL and to promote movements like Black Lives Matter. Bennett has written,

The pain of playing this game would be easier to swallow if we had the ability not only to play but, as former players, to have a voice: to become a general manager or even to own. But we don't. The NFL has no Black owners and therefore this sport has yet to truly integrate. Fans might be paying to see the players, but the league is the owners. They make the decisions. They set the policies. They make the money with the extra zeros.

They're the ones holding up the Lombardi Trophy when it all ends. They are also around much longer. The NFL is a hell of a lot more Jerry Jones than its Michael Bennett or Richard Sherman. (27)

In the world of basketball, Derrick Rose and LeBron James, both NBA superstars, have used basketball games as a space to call out police brutality by wearing warm-up shirts that said “I can’t breathe” in reference to the murder of Eric Garner. James has also been outspoken about white supremacy and the Trump administration (Davidson; Zirin). Listening to the voices of athletes themselves is a necessary part of any project that seeks to understand the material and discursive dimensions of racism in sport both to produce well-rounded accurate scholarship and to push back against widespread disbelief of racism in elite institutions.

Sports journalism

Sports journalists and cultural critics have long commented on matters of race and racism in professional sports. William Rhoden, veteran sports writer who has written for the *New York Times* since 1983 and author of the *New York Times* Bestseller *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, commenting on the provocative title of his book, explains “this new title cuts to the chase in describing the white wealth-black labor condition that has merely changed forms from generation to generation. Even in 2005, with African American athletes making up a so-called majority in professional football and basketball and a significant minority in Major League Baseball, access to power and control has been choked off. The power relationship that had been on the plantation has not changed, even if the circumstances around it have” (x). Rhoden is referring to a legacy of racism in sports that dates back to lynching as sport and forced foot races and jockey competitions orchestrated by slave owners (Griffin and Calafell 119). This is a history that includes that “mobs of angry whites beat

up, and, in some instances, murdered blacks” in 1910 after African American heavyweight fighter Jack Johnson defeated his white opponent Jim Jeffries (Rhoden 14).

Racism in sports also means that, historically, certain positions in football have been regarded as white positions (middle linebacker, safety, quarterback) because they “required smarts and good judgement, attributes that white players had and black players, according to stereotypes of the day, lacked” and that the NFL used to recruit black players from white universities because of the (mis)perception that they “knew how to play with white players; in other words, they knew their place” (Rhoden 20; 21). This history includes that Luisa Harris, who in the 1970s was known for her “power and dominance” in women’s basketball, is virtually unknown today. Meanwhile, her white teammates were able to develop successful careers and legacies (Rhoden 219). Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were pseudo-scientific hypotheses and debates about “black athletic superiority” that relied on racist tropes and understandings of blackness and strength and speed (Wiggins 177). This history is neither light nor hard to find examples of; Rhoden, along with Dave Zirin and others, persistently bring this reality into light and challenge sports communities to interrogate the ways in which professional sports still function as apparatuses of racism today.

Zirin has commented on the highly publicized and controversial National Anthem protests that Kaepernick started by taking a knee during the anthem in 2016, and he has argued that NFL owners and coaches “are as complicit in obscuring the actual meaning of taking a knee as Donald Trump himself” (“Taking a Knee”). Zirin was also outspoken when White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders called for *ESPN* reporter Jamele Hill to be fired for tweeting about white supremacy. These moments crystalize that the relationship between sports, politics, and racism is undeniable; the days when sports were just sports are long gone (or, as

these journalists would argue, never existed). Zirin observes that “sports has become a central space over the past several years where the realities of racism are discussed with an overwhelmingly white audience” (“Sports is a Hub for Protests Against Racism”). A significant body of scholarly research has expanded on this journalistic work and confirmed what some critics may be quick to label speculation.

Scholarship

In 2011, Dana Mastro, Erin Blecha, and Anita Seate, did a content analysis of race and crime in sports media, using 475 articles from three major news outlets across a three year period of time. Their research on news coverage concerning athletes accused of crime began from the premise that dominant portrayals of black individuals in news media can broadly be categorized as “criminality and athleticism” (Mastro et al. 537). Their results demonstrated that “black athletes were overrepresented as criminals, compared to Whites as well as to their proportion of athletes in professional sports” (Mastro et al. 539). They also found that “crimes committed by Black athletes (vs. Whites) were addressed in more explicit detail and were associated with more negative consequences” (Mastro et al. 539). Mastro et al. concluded that “this result is somewhat remarkable, as it highlights the disproportionate attention devoted to coverage of Black athletes in the context of crime—exceeding not only their White peers but also the total percentage of Black athletes themselves,” confirming widespread concern about racist coverage of minority athletes (539). Absent specific and accurate data about who is committing what crimes, given under-reporting, celebrity status, whiteness, and a host of other factors that inevitably skew said data, this study provides scholars with direction in suggesting that black athletes are over-represented and criminalized in media coverage generally.

From a rhetorical perspective, Butterworth, writing about the 1998 competition to break the record for most home runs in a single season of major league baseball, analyzed print coverage that described the race between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. He found that public opinion polls of the time demonstrated that fans overwhelmingly voted for McGwire, the white athlete, to win the homerun race; articles about the homerun record often didn't even mention Sosa despite the fact that he was in the race; and that there were racialized distinctions in the way their bodies were described in that "representations of McGwire simply outmuscled those of Sosa" (234). Most interestingly, Butterworth points out that articles sometimes commented on McGwire's size and skill but focused on Sosa's Dominican heritage, rather than his athletic potential. Clearly, this discourse solidified Sosa as a racialized other in a predominantly white sport. Scholars have identified racialized dynamics, or overtly racist discourses and actions, in a number of sporting contexts including the MLB; the NBA's dress code policy controversy following the 2004 Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers "brawl" that involved both players and spectators (Griffin and Calafell 118); the invasive, racialized, and erotic nature of the NFL draft (Oates 79); the tensions between race and gender in media accounts of violence (Enck); and, the masculinization and hyper-sexualization of black athletes, specifically black women (Schultz; Lavelle). Research has also argued that professional sports are a place where cultural negotiations of blackness and authenticity play out (Andrews and Silk). Rhoden comments that in sports, "the strategies of white reactionaries have become predictable: to take back, dilute, divide, and push back any black achievement, in an effort to restore the same balance of power that has existed in this country since slavery" (Rhoden 2). In the remainder of this chapter, I seek to uncover the ways that sports media does something similar in shaping Ray Rice as a symbol of violence in sports.

Rhetorics of Blackness and Criminality in Sports Media

In order to consider the ways in which representations of Ray Rice may perpetuate, and be the result of, racialized understandings of violence, I first want to briefly document the ways racism has controlled widespread understandings of violence in American culture. This may seem obvious to some readers, which is why I intend to be brief, but persistently articulating, and rearticulating, the historical implications of antiblack ideology is a necessary counter to the omnipresence of whiteness and white supremacy. It is necessary in order to denaturalize whiteness and call attention to the ways in which blackness is routinely positioned as other.

bell hooks describes the history of black men being stereotyped as having low intelligence, as “out of control, wild, uncivilized, natural-born predators” (44). A key aspect of understanding black men as hyper-violent is the stereotype of a “lack of emotional responsiveness” that makes them unable or unwilling to account for the fear and harm done to their victim (hooks 44). This tethering of blackness, masculinity, and emotional numbness pathologizes blackness quite literally into the figure of the psychopath and, because of this, black men have had to work “overtime to counter racist sexist stereotypes that represented them as beasts, monsters, demons” (44). In the context of O.J. Simpson, hooks points out that “black males today live in a world that pays them the most attention when they are violently acting out” (53). She goes on to say that evidence of this is that “incredible amounts of money were made from mass media’s exploitation of the brutal murder of Nicole Simpson via the invocation of the black male as murderous beast on the rampage” (53). While violence stemming from white hetero-patriarchy is often celebrated or at least ignored, hooks argues that

black male violence is rarely, if ever rewarded – no matter what the patriarchal myth says. O.J. Simpson may walk the streets but he is a marked man; he is prey. And he has

been preyed upon. It was a public feast, an old-fashioned lynching that had nothing to do with justice for Nicole Simpson or due process. (56)

Her point is that justice for Nicole Simpson may simply have been the pretense under which antiblack representations and violence were enacted. Citing rates of incarceration, juvenile arrests, and the racial disparities of both, Rachel Leah reports that effects of the *superpredator myth* – the myth that young men of color, particularly black men, are prone to criminality and violence – persist today.

While some racist discourse is overt and obvious, other “racism operates in less obvious, subtle, and ‘inferential’ ways” (Lacy and Ono 2). Lacy and Ono encourage us to think about what, in any given narrative, goes unquestioned or is taken for granted. They point out that while it seems obvious to concern ourselves with any act of overt racism, “inferential and figural dimensions of race and racism require further discussion, illumination, theorization, and response, especially from scholars and educators concerned about social justice” (2). This is in part because “in today’s discursive milieu, race and racism are often difficult to isolate, interpret, and explain. Race and racism are deflected, denied, disavowed, minimized, and excused” (Lacy and Ono 2). The form and shape that racism takes transforms “to fit new contexts and situations,” thus warranting immanent concern with logics and rhetoric of race and racism (Lacy and Ono 3). More specifically, Lacy and Ono argue that scholars concerned with popular culture texts and race should use “rigorous and flexible critical methods to unearth the historical dimensions and significance of those discourses, while showing how contemporary media deflect, deny, and disavow racism” (7).

In the context of rhetorical scholarship, this involves the traditional, disciplinary *reading-between-the-lines* but additionally requires an attunement towards racial logics during the

performance of criticism. Flores and Sims argue that racial neoliberalism often results in discourse that articulates “race as threat” without explicitly identifying race as threat (209). Following this presumption, I purposefully do not draw an explicit distinction between theory and method but rather approach sports media texts as diffuse texts, “embodied by discursive signs, fragments, and recurring storylines that tap into, invoke, and activate larger meta-narratives or cultural myths” (Lacy and Haspel 21). In agreement with Lisa Corrigan that “there is much work to be done in evaluating the production and circulation of racial discourses by particular discourse communities, especially the ways in which national ideals, bodies, and borders are constituted and challenged within racial discourses,” I approach sports media and coverage of Ray Rice’s case as a set of texts that speak, and have meaning in relation, to each other; tap into cultural myths about race, gender, sexuality, and violence; and, contribute to incessant antiblack ideologies (189). In the context of the internet, where sports commentary, blog posts, tweets, reddit threads, insightful writing and hot-takes abound, the task seems insurmountable given the abundance of articles, posts, and other commentary discussing or referring to Ray Rice that have been published or posted since the incident was originally publicized in 2014. Therefore, this chapter includes coverage from the incident as it first occurred in 2014, commentary that was given in early 2019, and a sampling of articles between to demonstrate that his presence did not fade out of discussions of sports and violence at any point in time. In concert with Nakayama’s call to “pay serious attention to what is happening online” in order to consider “the ways that whiteness attempts to resecure its position of power,” (69). I intend to pay close attention to the nuances of antiblackness while isolating and giving presence to whiteness, and to articulate the ways antiblackness morphs and seeps into digital media platforms.

Ray Rice as Moniker of Domestic Violence

Sports journalism, scholarship, and tabloids, participating in an act of discursive collusion, have made Ray Rice a moniker of domestic violence. The intent behind this, while suspicious, is difficult to prove and not the subject of this chapter. The effect, however, naturalizes black masculinity as dangerous, out of control, and inherently violent, and it expunges the NFL of its legacy of ignoring, covering up, and functionally permitting domestic violence in its league. Discourses of animality, criminality, and brutality that have historically been used to stigmatize and subjugate black men form the substructure of media coverage of Rice's case and deeply influence how it is read and understood. As a part of this process, the video footage is circulated as evidence used to justify racist tropes of black masculinity.

To be clear, this is not a claim to Rice's innocence or an attempt to minimize the impact of his violent actions. The evidence is clear; what he did was beyond unacceptable. The point I am making is that antiblack ideology manifests in discourse about his case and that, in part because there was visual evidence corroborating the accusation, those tropes seamlessly fit into, and solidify, a public understanding of domestic violence that is racialized and gendered in troubling ways. Meanwhile, reports of white men's actions remain largely race neutral. The evidence of Rice's actions was horrifying, and, for some, sensational, but sports media also had access to a confession from Josh Brown in the form of journal entries in which he admitted to physically and emotionally abusing his wife, Molly Brown, and treating her as his "slave" (qtd in Armour; Pennington). At the time these documents were released, Brown had been accused of "more than 20 instances of domestic violence" (Pennington). The shock appeal of this evidence could have rivaled that of the elevator surveillance video. Similarly, when Johnny Manziel was arrested for domestic violence in 2016, police reports and photographic evidence were released

to the public. Yet, Brown and Manziel avoided becoming symbols of violence and their cases hold very little cultural relevance in comparison to Rice.

As critics concerned by increasingly normalized white supremacy in U.S. socio-political culture and sports fans committed to creating a more just arena, we must attune ourselves to, and build opposition against, discourses of domestic violence that rely on racialized stereotypes about violence. Examples of this discourse include, without any evidence and being unaffiliated with the case, that a prosecutor wrote in the *Huffington Post*, “it would be naïve to believe that this videotaped beating was the first and only time” (Strunksy). Another *Huffington Post* article referred to “the stain Ray Rice has smeared on the Ravens franchise” (McGowan). Activists photo-shopped the Ravens *Cover Girl* ad, “Get Your Game Face On,” to have a black eye, transforming an ad that was intended to sell makeup to wear on game day into a political statement. The photo-shopped version went viral on social media (Finn). Seth Rogan, Canadian-American comedian and actor tweeted on September 8, 2014, calling Rice “a piece of garbage” before critiquing the league’s response to domestic violence broadly. Together, this series of tweets totaled 32,844 favorites and 27,619 retweets. In the same vein, American writer and producer Doug Ellin tweeted, “it looks like ray rice [ray rice] is very comfortable handling unconscious women” and one responder said “he showed absolutely no apparent concern for what he had done. This could have easily been a homicide and he didn’t blink.” While critique of Rice, Goodell, and the league in general is certainly warranted there are textures to this rhetoric that warrant close examination. The assertions that Rice has physically abused women before, is comfortable doing so, and is “garbage” are claims that sports media lack evidence to support, and it is not accidental that these claims are made about Rice but when Roethlisberger was

accused of sexual assault (twice), sports media appealed to his innocence and blamed the alleged victim.

Furthermore, arguing that Rice should be punished for assaulting someone does not require sports media exaggerate his size or strength. The video footage of the assault was, and still is, easily accessible online. There is no logical reason one would engage in rhetorical flourish describing this case, and yet there was commentary such as “Rice is an incredibly powerful man who is able to win physical battles with some of the strongest men in the world” (Steinberg). This assertion is unusual given that Rice was a very successful running back and because running backs need to be strong, fast, and agile, good running backs are far from the largest player on the field. According to Rice’s player profile on *NFL.com*, he was approximately 5 feet 8 inches tall and 206 pounds the last time he played a football game. A *Men’s Health* article points out that Žydrūnas Savickas, a Lithuanian power lifter, is the only person to have won every major strongman competition. Assuming that he would count as one of the strongest men in the world, it is worthwhile to note that he stands at 6 feet 3 inches, weighs approximately 340 pounds, “lighter and stronger than ever before,” and can deadlift over 900 pounds (Cooper and Hicks). The only context in which Rice can be understood as a person capable of winning physical battles with the strongest men in the world is one informed by antiblack dogma that insists on the inherent danger of black men. Evidence of this trend transcends sports journalism and seeps into academia. As described earlier, scholars have referred to Rice’s case as the “darkest year” in NFL history and taken a distinctly colorblind approach to analyzing patriarchy and violence in the NFL (Jackson; Geyerman).

This is an important starting point for investigating Ray Rice’s rhetorical presence in sports media but it is just a starting point. My argument is not so much that coverage of the case

described Rice in explicitly racist ways, although it sometimes did, but that the meaning of the actual event, descriptions of it, the videos, and responses to it, *function as confirmation* of racist understandings of violence that posit that black men have unique and dangerous tendencies toward violence. As Lacy and Ono point out, in the current communication context, racist discourse is more difficult to isolate and, I would argue, sometimes more dangerous because of that. Ray Rice discourse has to be understood in the context of a white cultural imaginary that has produced black masculinity as inherently aggressive, overpowering, and violent, and framed black men as inevitable perpetrators of violence. One journalist, in 2017, claimed that “The Ray Rice case, and resulting fiasco, was supposed to teach the NFL a lesson. But it clearly didn’t” (Freeman). My argument is that maybe the Ray Rice case did teach us something. However, instead of the lesson being about preventing and addressing domestic violence, the lesson was about the way multimillion dollar industries, media, and others in positions of power have collaborated to scapegoat a widespread cultural phenomenon tied to hegemonic masculinity onto particular individuals. Minute details and small slippages in discourse matter when both gendered and racialized violence, not to mention the violence that happens at the intersection of these which is uniquely pervasive and severe, are at stake. Maintaining this level of discursive scrutiny, I will further describe the coverage and references to Rice’s case over the past four and a half years highlighting three phenomena: the bracketing of Rice’s case as unique and its persistent invocation over time; the over-reliance on, and glorification of, visual evidence; and, the role talent plays in public discourse about Rice’s case and domestic violence in sports more broadly.

Constructing Rice as the Exception

Following Commissioner Goodell's handling of Rice's case, the evolution of a two game suspension to indefinite suspension, public discourse about the case took many shapes. For example, Zirin, in the wake of Goodell's initial punishment, labeled Goodell "an utterly insensitive, incompetent cover-up artist" and *TMZ* a "bottom-feeding gossip website."⁹ While Zirin may have a point about *TMZ*, it was unquestionably their release of the second video that catapulted Rice's case into the national media limelight. Shortly after its release, Rice and Palmer Rice did a segment on the *Today Show* with Matt Lauer¹⁰. In this interview, Lauer calls the altercation the "infamous incident" and describes Palmer Rice as "the face of domestic violence in this country." The interview took place across two days and, therefore, aired across two days¹¹. Both segments participated in the re-circulation of the elevator video footage despite Palmer Rice indicating, and confirming in this very interview, that she was not comfortable watching them. At the end of the first segment, fellow *Today Show* host Savannah Guthrie called the interview "fascinating," further spectacularizing, and possibly racializing, the moment of violence despite its incredibly quotidian nature. The second segment focused on Rice and his journey through therapy and self-reflection. The time and energy dedicated to this case, by one of the most prolific daytime news organizations in the country, is evidence of just how much

⁹ We now know that *TMZ* has been central in pressuring the NFL to take action in domestic violence cases and even in cases of violence more broadly (Kareem Hunt, for example). It is not necessarily that *TMZ* uncovered or exposed these moments of violence – the NFL certainly had knowledge of the events prior to *TMZ* footage being released – but that video evidence prevented the NFL from claiming they did not have enough evidence to take action, which is often a claim in matters of domestic violence.

¹⁰ Looking back on this interview is a bit uncomfortable given that we now know Lauer had been harassing and/or assaulting women at NBC since as early as 2001 (Oriz and Siemaszko). It does, however, provide a moment to consider the ways race, class, occupation, and likelihood of surveillance impact who, when, and how someone enters the public consciousness as an abuser.

¹¹ While it is unusual for an interview to span two days and the participants do appear to be wearing the same clothing, Lauer did indeed emphasize that "Ray was not home at the time" of Palmer's interview and that the interviews took place across two days

public knowledge and concern there was and, as I will demonstrate, still is, about this case. It also begins to expose the intensely racialized ways in which U.S. media culture identify and proliferate representatives of domestic violence.

Shortly after the *Today Show* interviews, a *Los Angeles Times* article, that summarized the highs and lows of the 2014 NFL season, highlighted “the focus on the problem of domestic violence,” and labeled Rice’s case “the biggest scandal in league history” (Farmer). It was considered a “scandal” for a number of reasons: Goodell’s initial leniency in punishment and concerns over a potential NFL cover-up; surveillance footage circulated in an unprecedented manner; and a reinvigorated debate about whether or not the NFL should make decisions about employees based on personal conduct. Some journalists and fans came out in defense of Rice. One article refers to “a strong contingent of Ravens fans on Twitter that believe the punishment is just and that the rest of us should just let it go and leave Rice alone” (Celani). Another states that “Millions of Ravens fans want another Super Bowl win and are ready to blame ‘PC culture’ for sandbagging their starting running back and their chance at a title” (J. Lund). Others questioned the disparity in treatment of Rice and his then teammate Terrell Suggs, a Raven’s linebacker who had been accused of domestic violence and received multiple protective orders, who was signing a four-year \$16 million contract at the time (Levin). Suggs’s two incidents, which took place in 2009 and 2012, were both brought to the attention of the Ravens and the NFL. No punitive action was taken and many speculated that was because of a lack of visual evidence. The majority of criticism, however, was of Goodell’s mishandling of the case and of Rice himself.

This discourse constituted the critical mass necessary to solidify Rice as a relevant rhetorical figure and bracketed his case as unique, a discrete moment in time, one that divided

sports history and culture into pre and post-Ray Rice categories. More journalists, fans, and scholars refer to the last four years as the post-Rice era or “the aftermath of the Rice saga” (Clark) than I can reasonably catalog here (Levenson; Davidson; Gibbs; Miller; etc). In December 2018, one article stated “The elevator video remains imprinted on the collective conscious of football fans, even after four years have passed” (S. Lund), and in March 2019, Kavitha Davidson argued that “the Ray Rice incident forced the sports world to confront its longstanding tendency to ignore domestic violence” (“The NFL's domestic violence struggles are clear. What about Major League Baseball?”). This makes clear that time, at least time in the sports world, has been bracketed by Rice’s case. Sports media, literally, refer to “pre-Ray Rice” period of time and a post-Rice period of time (Davidson, “The NFL's domestic violence struggles are clear. What about Major League Baseball?”). In this context, the pre-Rice era refers to a time when professional sports organizations swept both accusations and well-known, clear cases of domestic violence under the rug. The post-Rice era suggests a time period in which the league, and other professional sports leagues as well, take seriously accusations of domestic violence, investigate them thoroughly, and take timely, effective action. For example, one article stated that “Rice’s case prompted a sea change in the league’s understanding and handling of intimate partner violence.”

Believing in the existence of a pre and post-Ray Rice era requires ignoring both that domestic violence existed in the NFL prior to 2014 and the extreme cases of domestic and/or sexual violence committed by white players before, during, and after Rice’s case. It is partially the case that Rice marks a moment in sports history because of the videos, but that explanation is too surface level for those of us concerned with matters of race, gender, class, sexuality and other structuring elements of identity in sports and sports media. There are a litany of other cases

described in Chapter Two where there was substantial evidence that a player, often white, had done incredibly violent things to women, and it is our job as scholars and activists to investigate why none of those cases came to represent the plague of domestic violence in professional sports. The pre and post-Ray Rice dualism produces a false sense of accomplishment on the part of the NFL for addressing domestic violence in its teams, lulls fans and concerned community members into passivity as they believe that NFL *is getting it right*, and consolidates a problem that spans years, races, genders, and cultures into one example, simultaneously scapegoating the problem of domestic violence onto athletes of color and stripping the phenomena of its many nuances. Recently, one journalist wrote that “The recent revelations about Chiefs running back Kareem Hunt attacking a woman in a Cleveland hotel dredged up the same domestic violence that's kept Rice off the gridiron since that fateful February in 2014” (S. Lund). It is this genre of commentary that bookends domestic violence with Rice and Hunt, that is problematic because it both cements Rice as the shameful gold standard for domestic violence in professional sports and requires fans and consumers of sports news to collectively forget all of the violence that happened before and in between these cases. Not coincidentally, the narratives lost, I argue, are the ones that challenge deeply sedimented racialized and gendered stereotypes about who commits domestic violence.

In addition to turning Rice into a symbol of domestic violence that demarcates a particular moment in time, his name and presence have been invoked throughout the last four years in countless contexts. Scholarship has conflated Rice with Greg Hardy and Adrian Peterson and major pockets of sports media coupled Rice with US Women’s Soccer superstar Hope Solo after she was accused of assaulting her nephew in 2014 (Geyerman; Macur; Peterson; Peyser; White; to name a few). Also in 2014, NHL player Slava Voynov was accused of domestic

violence and some hypothesized he “could become the NHL’s Ray Rice” (Lim). He did not, despite the fact that a police officer testified to witnessing Voynov throw “his wife on the ground before repeatedly kicking her body and choking her multiple times” (Lim). This could, in part, be because the NHL is a far less popular sport and the incident lacked video footage, but is nonetheless unsettling, and suggests a racial logic at play, given how close in time these events occurred and just how similar the violence was. In fact, it was not until April 2019 that the NHL suspended Voynov, for one season, and that decision is, at the time of this writing, being reviewed by the NHL Players Association (Kaplan).

In November 2014, Grammy Award winning rapper, songwriter, and producer Eminem did a freestyle rap performance in which he referred to punching Lana Del Rey (another famous American singer and songwriter) “twice, like Ray Rice” (qtd. in A. Howard). To quote directly, *“I’ll punch Lana Del Rey right in the face twice, like Ray Rice in broad daylight in the plain sight of the elevator surveillance/ ’Til her head is banging on the railing, then celebrate with the Ravens”* (qtd. in A. Howard). This insensitive and violent threat demonstrates the popular culture resonance of Rice’s case and the ways he has been used to represent violence more broadly while also raising questions about the implications of a white rapper circulating a narrative of blackness and criminality. Equally strange is that a 2016 article discusses Rice in relation to Donald Trump’s slew of misogynistic comments about grabbing women and calls the two situations “analogous” (Reimer). The application of Rice’s case, especially when it requires transcending sports and domestic violence, is a disturbing example of what bell hooks refers to as circulating a spectacle of blackness and criminality under the guise of combatting violence against women.

More recently, Rice has been used to ground conversations about other athletes. Countless articles refer to Rice's case in an attempt to make sense of the accusations lodged at Jameis Winston, quarterback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers accused of groping an Uber driver in 2018, and formulate opinions about possible punishments (Bieler; Stites; "Why NFL's 3-Game Suspension of Jameis Winston for Sexual Assault Is a Travesty"; are a few examples). Further complicating this particular application of Rice's case is that Winston was accused of sexual assault before being drafted to the NFL and Rice was being referred to at that time as well to make sense of Winston's alleged actions. Sports journalist Lindsay Gibbs, in 2015, said that "in this post-Ray Rice era of the NFL, teams simply can't be too careful" and yet Winston was a first round pick.

Jimmy Smith, cornerback for the Ravens, is maybe the athlete most ripe for a Rice comparison given he plays for the team Rice played for. However, even this application of Rice's case is unsettling. One journalist wrote that "The Ravens are showing a great amount of faith by standing by Smith in the wake of the Rice incident" (Hensely). Four years and countless players implicated in domestic violence, or other forms of gendered violence, later, Smith's case in 2018 hardly took place in the wake of Rice's. Some journalists argue that "much has changed in the four years since Rice's punch" but also point out the NFL still seems relatively ineffective at addressing domestic violence on its teams given that Reuben Foster was arrested twice in 2018 for domestic violence and was signed by the Washington Redskins mere days after being released by the 49ers (Zielonka and Paras). Bell refers to a "post-Ray Rice era" and asks, "After Kareem Hunt, Reuben Foster, has NFL forgotten the lessons learned since Ray Rice?" Bell also declares the Foster and Hunt situations to be "the worst week for the NFL since September

2014...when TMZ... released the inside-the-elevator video of Rice knocking out Janay Palmer (then fiancée, now wife) with one brutal punch.”

The Kansas City Chiefs made a controversial decision to draft Tyreek Hill because of his record of domestic violence. The Chiefs and the NFL received a lot of criticism that was grounded in comparisons to Rice, some of which claimed the only difference between the two was the lack of video evidence (Geiling; Briggs). A sports writer for *Vice* stated that “With Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson mostly out of the picture, Hill is now The Assault Guy,” and while I would question the evidence to support that specific claim, there is clear record of media and fans making sense of Hill via Rice (R. McGowan). And, as described in detail in the introduction, Kareem Hunt and Ray Rice have been tethered by sports media countless times despite their cases differences and the plethora of other assaults that could anchor Hunt’s narrative.

Most interestingly, Rice’s case has been coupled with and used to discuss two recent and incredibly unique controversies. Rice has been mentioned in articles discussing the recent controversy surrounding New England Patriot’s owner Robert Kraft, who has been arrested for soliciting prostitution (“Caught on video: Will Patriots’ Robert Kraft join Ray Rice, Kareem Hunt after soliciting prostitution charges?”). Peter King, of *NBC Sports*, stated that “if the charges against Kraft prove to be true, I believe the Ray Rice precedent will come into play.” Likewise, another journalist refers to Rice’s case and summarizes it in an attempt to contextualize Kraft’s situation (Reyes). A lot of this coverage conflates sex work, human trafficking, and domestic violence. I want to recognize the effort to address “violence against women” as a broad structural phenomenon but challenge the idea that sex work, trafficking, and domestic violence are synonymous and equally representative of gendered violence because

collapsing all of this violence into one category prevents nuance and results in unusual and unhelpful comparisons between Kraft and Rice, for example (“Even as Robert Kraft faces the music NFL players are taking a stand against sex trafficking”). A Forbes article puts Kraft’s situation in the context of Rice and Hunt, primarily to point out that Rice and Hunt both originally denied committing violent crimes and then were forced to face the music when *TMZ* released video footage of their acts (Moore). However, it is unclear if video footage of Kraft committing a crime, which is rumored to exist, will ever be released given his unique status as celebrity, owner, and white male.

Finally, Rice’s case has been compared to that of Larry Baer, the chief executive of the San Francisco Giants, an MLB team. (Davidson, “The NFL’s Domestic Violence Struggles”; Gabrielle). Baer was caught on camera yelling at his wife, Pam, and then lunging at her, grabbing her by the arm, and pulling her to the ground. Baer was not arrested, but at the time of this writing the situation is under investigation by the San Francisco police department and the MLB (Mele). The video has been called “Ray Rice-esque” (Gabrielle). Some have disagreed with the comparison, but nonetheless used an analytic centered on Rice to describe their stance. Comments like the following demonstrate the Rice-centric approach, “The video of the altercation already is circulating the Internet with some reacting to it the same way people reacted to the Kareem Hunt assault or even the Ray Rice video. While Baer obviously could have handled the situation better, I believe treating this case the same is unfair to the women who actually have been victims of domestic violence” (Leger). It is important to note that the comparisons transcend sport, gender/sex, and domestic violence. Rice’s rhetorical presence has become so significant that his narrative, specific case, punishment, and life since 2014 have been the standard with which other cases are understood not just within but outside of the NFL, not

just for domestic violence but all forms of assault or harassment targeted at women, and not just for players but owners as well.

Referencing his case throughout the years despite increasing knowledge of other players' cases is indicative of a desire to cling to Rice as representative of a perpetrator of domestic violence, one formulated based on racialized narratives of violence. In 2018, Joshua Miller, incorrectly, stated that “more than four years after knocking out his fiancée in an Atlantic City elevator, ending his NFL career in an instant, Ray Rice now is looking back in anger — at himself.” Miller might be correct about the anger Rice feels, but asserting that Rice's career ended in an instant is a dangerous misreading. This interpretation of events is significant because it contributes to the idea that Rice did something brutal and was immediately punished for doing so, which conveniently erases all of Goodell and the Ravens' missteps while attempting to keep Rice playing in the league. Only after seven months and a second video from inside the elevator did key players decide on a harsh punishment, transforming Rice into a dangerous pariah and turning him into evidence that the NFL is tough on violence

Further compounding this trend is that Rice is simultaneously forged into the position of the *face of domestic violence* and ignored as an agent of change. One journalist asserts that Rice has “accepted his role as the face of a troubling issue and spends much of his time speaking to amateur and professional athletes” (Walker). Rice has certainly spoken out about domestic violence but that should not be equated to him accepting a position as the representative of domestic violence in the organization. Retrofitting Rice to be the face of domestic violence has racialized implications that are intensified by what is left out of the narrative. Sports media does little to acknowledge the work Rice has done to understand domestic violence and his own abusive tendencies. For example, in an interview with Gayle King, Rice talks about the history of

abuse and unhealthy relationships in his family, how that normalized abuse for him, and the way he regrettably approached football as “therapy” (qtd in Miller). Rice has met with NFL representatives to talk about addressing domestic violence post-Kareem Hunt and Reuben Foster being released for domestic violence related issues and then signed by other teams. Additionally, coverage lacks comparison of the ways Rice comported himself post-NFL with that of other players going through similar situations. Sports media does a terrible job of representing Janay Rice and including her voice in these discussions. What is not present in these accounts matters because silence on these issues amplifies and makes rigid understandings of Rice as a violent criminal which contributes to widespread racist assumptions about blackness, masculinity, and criminality. It gives an already, and increasingly overt, racist consumer base an example to represent, and prove, so to speak, their antiblack worldviews. The presence of visual evidence has been central to this project.

Visual evidence and evading responsibility

I have referenced the significant role that the *TMZ* video has played in centering Rice’s case in the sports media narrative of violence and alluded to some of the dangers associated with the glorification of visual evidence. I want to address those dangers more directly here. Following the release of the Kareem Hunt video detailed in Chapter Two, Kevin Clark, a sports writer who focuses on the NFL, jeeringly states, “It’s been four years, and *TMZ* is apparently still the NFL’s best investigator.” The reality does seem to be that, absent a confrontation with visual evidence, the NFL prefers to pass on investigating accusations of domestic violence. Another sports writer points out that presence of video evidence has been normalized such that it is “as if the only way a discussion about objective reality can happen anymore is through an exploitive rhetorical device that foists it on others almost as angrily and violently as the subject it’s

discussing” (J. Lund). There are two implications to the over-use of, and high premium placed on, visual evidence.

First, visual evidence is a horrible standard for determining what counts as legitimate domestic violence. Domestic violence cases have historically been some of the hardest to prosecute because the elements of power and control result in very little evidence being kept throughout the relationship. There is almost never a video that corroborates that domestic violence has happened on a day-to-day basis, and there is rarely photographic evidence because fear prevents victims and survivors from taking them. There are a litany of other reasons the celebration of visual evidence is dangerous: there is not video surveillance in most homes, where most domestic violence takes place; some physical abuse doesn’t leave marks that can be photographed¹²; emotional and sexual abuse are nearly impossible to catch on video or reasonably photograph; and, the passage of time after a violent encounter decreases the likelihood of visual evidence. Glorification of video evidence functions as a new standard for the burden of proof further quieting victims, already doubtful about legal recourse and protection, who are unable to produce such evidence. Skepticism of legal recourse is already amplified in celebrity arenas, such as professional sports, where victims and survivors are extremely likely to be blamed, accused of lying, and face an intimidating legal team.

Second, the over-reliance on visual evidence of violence uniquely implicates black male athletes both because of the hyper-surveillance of blackness and because these images confirm racist stereotypes in the minds of white supremacists as well as potentially solidify more subtle racial biases. Herman Gray, writing about black masculinity and visual culture, argues that, historically, media representations of blackness and violence have “served as the symbolic basis

¹² Take, for example, strangulation which is a common form of domestic violence, accounts for ten percent of violent deaths in the United States, and often leaves little to no external evidence (Volochnsky).

for fueling and sustaining panics about crime . . . while they displaced attention from the economy, racism, sexism, and homophobia. This figure of black masculinity consistently appears in the popular imagination as the logical and legitimate object of surveillance and policing, containment and punishment” (402). This is in large part because visual evidence, and especially video evidence, appears to confirm the deep-seated cultural myth of the super-predator. As we know,

Stereotypes about black men and Latinos render them more likely to be perceived as perpetrators of crime, including domestic violence, than white men” and visual confirmation of such behavior further solidifies stereotypes of white men as naturally embodying “ideals of masculinity, including qualities such as intelligence, self-reliance, leadership, breadwinning ability, competitiveness, competence, and aggression.

(MacDowell 547).

In this case, over-reliance on visual evidence strengthens racist cultural assumptions that tether blackness to violence. This intensifies the binary that hegemonic masculinity produces wherein white men are successful, strong, and appropriately aggressive and men of color are menacing, irresponsible, and untrustworthy, naturalizing the innocence of white men and the guilt of black men and preventing accurate and successful anti-violence initiatives broadly. Simply put, the circulation of these images, while quote possibly intended to raise awareness about domestic violence, increases the normality of antiblack violence.

Research has documented that visual representations of blackness and violence confirm and codify antiblack stereotypes to non-black people. In Travis Dixon’s 2008 study, black people were over-represented in crime reporting. Dixon argued that multiple exposures to blackness and violence confirm “the stereotype of Black criminality, strengthening the cognitive association

between Blacks and crime” (107). Additionally, over-exposure to blackness in criminal reporting made respondents of this study likely to perceive “unidentified criminality as Black criminality,” demonstrating the activation of antiblack stereotypes (Dixon 121). A follow-up study found white people were over-represented as victims and officers in crime reporting. Dixon posited that white people “overly occupy the most positive crime roles” while being under-represented as criminals (785). Reasons for this include ethnocentric understandings of violence that position people of color as dangerous and white people as either their victims or the saviors of the day; racial bias in news reporting; and, the possibility of economic factors, or that “socialization practices encourage journalists to air news product that appeals to large news constituencies, even if it overrepresents White victims and officers” (Dixon 787). Positioning Rice as representative of domestic violence opens the floodgates for audiences to fill in broad narratives of domestic violence in sports with black men playing the role of perpetrator, exacerbating already existing stereotypes about blackness and black masculinity specifically.

Situating Rice’s case within this context demonstrates the racial implications of the glorification of visual evidence and should make us suspicious of sports media’s over-reliance on it. I understand it is difficult to prove that the discrepancy between black and white athletes caught on camera doing violence is a direct result of racism. However, given the strong history suggesting that systems of surveillance, companies that serve predominately white audiences, and the overall structuring force of whiteness operate with antiblack motives, it is useful, and ethical, to deeply interrogate the context in which sports media has produced a particular prototypical perpetrator of domestic violence. As scholars and activists we should do our best to make sure our attempts at raising awareness about one type of violence do not inadvertently increase other types of violence. However, Rice’s case demonstrates that black masculinity in

sports is not criminalized solely based on race. Talent, and future athletic potential, have played a role in determining which athletes are eligible to be the face of domestic violence.

Talent and punishment

Writing about the NFL and individual team decisions about punishing domestic violence, sports writer and editor Jeff Hartman observes that the conversation often “turns into the sad, but age-old, question in professional sports where you ask if talent trumps morality.” My response to that question is yes, it often does. The NFL and sports media rely on the rhetorical presence and cultural salience of Ray Rice to downplay other instances of domestic violence, distract from those cases, and reassure fans that they have done their due diligence combatting domestic violence in the league. In the process, discussions of domestic violence become debates about talent, player statistics, upcoming playoffs and future seasons, rendering the experiences of victims and survivors invisible and sending a clear message that the athletic potential, and therefore financial contribution to the league, matters more than gendered violence.

In the context of Rice, talent, or lack thereof, certainly did matter. According to one journalist, and many football analysts and fans would agree, “Rice never got another workout. However, he was a dramatically worse player than Hunt at the time of his release” (Clark; see also Felt who considers this the most important factor in Rice’s punishment). *FiveThirtyEight*’s analysis of Rice’s skill is that “from 2009 to 2012, Rice was arguably the best running back in football. But in 2013, he was horrific, ranking last in yards per rush among RBs with at least 200 carries” (Paine). He was also 27 years old and on the cusp of the “running back aging curve” (Paine). *FiveThirtyEight* also concluded that Rice was “unlikely to contribute to a team in any meaningful way” and that conclusion was made without accounting for “just how bad Rice was when he last took the field” (Paine). Rice was unquestionably guilty of domestic violence. It was

also relatively easy for sports media, doing the labor of the NFL and team owners, to curate him as the image of the problem and offer him as a sort of sacrificial lamb for the league. He was a black man, not at the peak of his career, lacking the type of talent that is indispensable to the league, caught on camera committing an act of brutal violence.

Players like Kareem Hunt and Tyreek Hill face an entirely different situation because they are viewed as highly skilled players at the peak of their careers. One journalist stated “Unlike Ray Rice, who was also on video hurting a woman, Hunt is in his prime. What he did off the field? The Browns don’t care. The NFL doesn’t care” (Killion). In Hunt’s case, there is even evidence that the NFL directed the Chiefs to not pursue hotel video footage or any further evidence about the case (Doerer; Wagner, “NFL Really Fucking Botched”). Another journalist, comparing Rice and Hunt, noted that Hunt is only 23 years old and then added:

Unlike Rice a few years ago, he still has a lot of acceleration in his legs after taking the league by storm last year as a rookie. In 27 NFL games, Hunt scored 25 touchdowns and put up 2,984 yards from scrimmage. After fumbling on his first NFL carry, he never fumbled again on 531 touches. And he didn’t launch a protest movement.¹³ (Bell)

Comparing Rice’s punishment to Hill’s, and describing why Hill was such a controversial draft, one journalist proclaimed “Hill is also the reason the Chiefs had a first-round bye in the NFL playoffs. He scored 12 total touchdowns, including three on special teams, and became the kind of speedy gadget player that run-heavy teams lean on” (R. McGowan). In response to the assertion that the main difference between Rice and Hill was the lack of surveillance video, another journalist responds, “Those with that view overlook the fact that Rice averaged 3.1 yards per carry in 2013 and was a declining talent at a position teams increasingly believe the scheme

¹³ Here, Bell is referring to Colin Kaepernick protesting police brutality during the national anthem and likely not being signed by team because of it.

is more important than the talent. If Rice averaged 4.5 yards per carry in his last season, it's likely some team would have signed him” (Briggs).

One sports writer has hypothesized that “At this point, teams have realized that a certain amount of ‘outrage fatigue’ among fans and commentators alike eventually set in. The news cycle will move on” (Felt). There might be some merit to this argument and future research should certainly be dedicated to battle fatigue in the context of media’s representations of domestic violence. However, there is no outrage fatigue in the context of Rice. The news cycle did not move on because Rice serves a purpose. The NFL, and all of its key stakeholders, are a corporation with primary interests in capital. Decisions about who goes and who stays post-domestic violence are, to a degree, and whether we like it or not, intrinsically financial decisions. Those decisions, however, are textured by racial schemas.

Talent is also a discursive technology of whiteness. Black athletes deemed talented enough by an inviolable white mega corporation and largely white audience¹⁴ are contorted into ideal black athletes because of their indispensable contributions to the corporation. Meanwhile, their very existence within the corporation, contributions to it, and perceived capitulation to whiteness are used as a metric for the value of other black athletes, ultimately rendering them unfit for participation in the organization because of their perceived fidelity to, and authenticity

¹⁴ There have been countless assertions that the NFL community is racially diverse. Tom Kertscher, fact-checker and reporter for *Politifact*, points out the following in response to claims of diversity: while 70 percent of NFL players are black, only 16 percent of head coaches are black, and 70 percent of fans are white with only 16 percent black fans, nine percent Hispanic fans and four percent Asian fans. Other sports journalists have pointed out that NFL coaching, broadly, is mostly white, presidents and CEO’s are entirely white, and that all but two owners are white (and the two that are people of color are not black) (Frank; Garcia). To add context to these statistics, I would add that because of professional football’s strong ties to national identity, patriotism, and whiteness I would expect to find a fan base that is disproportionately white. In fact, Tamir Sorek and Robert White, in *Social Science Research*, have argued that “the football spectacle may facilitate more favorable national sentiment among white fans” contributing to the maintenance of a relatively uniform fan base (274).

of, blackness. More simply, the success and assimilation of some black athletes is used to stigmatize others. In the context of O.J. Simpson's rise and fall in the graces of football and popular culture audiences, Greg Howard, a *New York Times* journalist who also spent three years writing about sports for *Deadspin*, calls the narrative "the story of a halfback trying, and failing, to outrun his own blackness." Howard posits that talent "is the mechanism through which whites acknowledge the humanity of black superhumans and which allows these few to move, supposedly, beyond blackness, their talents granting them safe passage through white spaces, mouths and memories" and demonstrates that Simpson initially achieved this transcendence because of his "priceless talent" (G. Howard). However, this transcendence was, and still is, contingent upon ongoing contributions to the league and a willingness to participate in performative whiteness. Absent an indisputable, almost unparalleled amount of talent, black male athletes are easily discarded and made into examples of what not to do, a narrative process that relies on antiblack stereotypes and assumptions at its core.

The process of rationalizing decisions about which players should be exiled from the professional football community and which are *worth taking a risk on* creates space for racialized understandings of masculinity and violence to make their way into the conversation. Sports media, and its often unwavering commitment to the preservation of the game, participates in a process of siphoning out the talented players from the most difficult discussions about domestic violence and re-focusing attention, again and again, on Ray Rice. Kristen Doerer, a journalist who covers gender, race, and sports, is not overstating a frightening reality when she claims that under the current circumstances, "For the image of the NFL and the teams themselves, it's easier to sweep violence against women under the rug and keep the best players

on the field despite their records. It's easier for PR teams to try to protect players and minimize the incident, and to hope victims don't press charges" (Doerer).

Conclusion

Attention to both overt and more amorphous features of antiblack discourse in sports demonstrates that the NFL is a cultural site that trades upon, and benefits from, antiblack discourses of aggression and animality all while giving apparent substance to claims made by white supremacists about the relationship between blackness and violence. Instead of confronting the issue of gendered violence head on, the NFL has made a series of conciliatory gestures (NFL Women's Summit, female legal advisors, etc.) that allow popular media to spin a narrative of individual black men, most notably Ray Rice, perpetrating violence despite the NFL's hard work to stop it. The forefronting of Rice as an abuser builds a foundation for the survival of racist tropes and prevents productive discussions of domestic violence because this discourse effectively, and affectively, individualizes a structural problem. Given the history of racialized underpinnings and accusations of violence, including the scapegoating of black men in contexts of domestic and other gendered forms of violence, the burden of proof for Rice's case as an example of racialized scapegoating should be lowered. In this chapter I did not, and should not have to, provide you with mountains of racist discourse to prove a racist phenomenon but instead paid close attention to discursive choices and rhetorical nuance to demonstrate the subtlety and insidious nature of racialized ideology in sports. History and theory tell us that race impacts how we understand masculinity and violence. Chapter Two tells us that white athletes commit equally heinous acts of violence. The over-representation of Rice's case *given all of that* tells us that other factors are at play regarding the hyper-relevance of his case. I have argued that one of those factors is the stigmatization of black masculinity as inherently criminal and prone to violence.

I want to note that even sports media that attempts to credit Rice for working on himself and thinking critically and reflexively about domestic violence participates in racialization. One article, seemingly in good faith, states that “The NFL confirmed to CBS that Rice has shared his story as part of their domestic violence program, and he's willing to work with Hunt, Reuben Foster, or anyone else who's struggled to control their rage around women. But, they have to be willing to do the work” (Lund). Referencing black men as full of rage and lacking control over their emotions both perpetuates super-predator stereotypes and misunderstands domestic violence, simplifying a phenomena about power and domination into a matter of men toning themselves down around women.

The implications of sports media using Rice as a framework for identifying and understanding domestic violence in professional sports are vast. First, the cultural obsession with Ray Rice is predicated on, and circulates, antiblack ideology. Expanding on hooks' argument, I have argued here that domestic violence is the pretense under which the NFL and sports media produce and circulate racist representations of black men. Second, the compulsion to forefront Rice in the context of any and every case of domestic violence prevents nuanced and productive discussions of domestic violence in a number of ways. It individualizes a fundamentally structural problem by isolating a small number of men who represent the problem and framing them as outliers, reproducing the age-old public-private dichotomy and assuaging institutions like the NFL of responsibility to address domestic violence. That these select men, mostly Rice, are black is no accident and creates a rhetorical distancing of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness from domestic violence, a dangerous move given the close relationship between hegemonic (toxic) masculinity and domestic violence. And, finally, domestic violence, a pervasive and destructive cultural phenomena, becomes more misunderstood, and more ignored,

every time Rice is invoked. At its core, all forms of gendered violence necessitate a discussion of hegemonic masculinity, power, and whiteness, and defaulting to Rice, allowing his narrative to take up so much space, prevents those conversations from happening. Allowing a single caricature of a perpetrator of domestic violence to take up so much discursive space directly trades off with an interrogation of toxic masculinity and allows unquantifiable numbers of other perpetrators to continue to live safely, albeit violently, under the radar.

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Chapter IV: Hope Solo & Sports Media's Gender-Neutral Narrative of Domestic Violence

As briefly mentioned in previous chapters, American Olympian and Soccer World Cup Champion Hope Solo was arrested on suspicion of domestic violence amidst the domestic violence controversy that Ray Rice had come to define. In June 2014, Hope Solo was arrested at her home after local police responded to a 911 call seeking assistance and describing Solo as violently attacking another person. The police arrived to find Solo visibly intoxicated and distressed, noting the presence of her accusers, Solo's sister, Teresa Obert, and Solo's 17-year-old nephew (Obert's son). Police documented that Solo's nephew's shirt was torn and he was experiencing minor bleeding from scratches. The case was initially dismissed in court on a procedural basis, lack of victim cooperation, in January 2015 (Fainaru-Wada). In the months leading up to the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup tournament, however, the case saw a great deal of media attention and was eventually re-opened, after the tournament, in a rare move that required special approval from a city administrator. In June 2018, Solo was again cleared of all charges. In closing the case this time, prosecutors noted insufficient victim cooperation and concluded the incident was unlikely to reoccur (Withiam). Throughout this media and legal controversy, Solo has made clear she hopes to play soccer again for the United States, but with the 2019 women's World Cup tournament only a few months away at the time of this writing, that is decisively not going to happen. In fact, sports commentators started expressing concern about "how to replace legendary keeper Hope Solo" (Waldron) as early as mid-2018 and have called the team's current keeper a "wild card," pointing out her inexperience and emphasizing Solo's unparalleled skill and knowledge of the game (Armour). Given that Solo has now been cleared of charges twice and that countless male athletes who have gone through similar arrests, some of whom have been charged with committing violent crimes, were able to continue playing

after relatively brief suspensions, I am compelled to ask: Why is the end of Hope Solo's career inevitable? What role might her domestic violence case play in that? And, what can comparing and contrasting her case to those of male athletes in similar situations tell us?

The answer to these questions is complicated because it involves recognizing and naming patterns in the treatment of professional athletes accused of violent crime, understanding Hope Solo as a complex rhetorical figure, and a parsing of rules, policies, and norms in sports as they relate to, and are influenced by, gender, race, and class. Indeed, the rhetorical context in which Solo, and her domestic violence case, were understood is one permeated with other high profile athletes, mostly African-American male football players, and their own moments of violence. Throughout the four years in which her case played out, sports and news commentators have compared Solo to a host of other athletes, but primarily Adrian Peterson, Ray Rice, Greg Hardy, and Ray McDonald (Peterson; White; Macur). As mentioned in chapters two and three, these individuals are all, or were, NFL players accused of some act of violence, ranging from child abuse to aggravated assault to sexual assault to felony domestic violence. Some of these individuals were officially charged with domestic violence, while others were afforded plea bargains or the charges were dropped. Regardless, each of them was subject to public scrutiny and, thus, discourses developed and circulated about their individual acts of violence. This chapter is concerned with the folding of Hope Solo's case into these existing narratives of sport and violence as well as the implications of sports media's close association of Hope Solo and Ray Rice.

Initial commentary about Solo seemed to address a fundamental, and neutral, confusion about disparate punishment from professional sports organizations regarding violent crime with remarks such as "while several football players recently accused of assaults have been removed

from the field, she has been held up for praise by the national team” (Macur), but dramatic parallels were quickly drawn between Solo and NFL players with comments like “celebrating Solo’s achievement right now is like allowing running back Adrian Peterson, who has been accused of child abuse, to continue to play for the Minnesota Vikings – and then awarding him the game ball for his next 100-yard game”¹⁵ (Macur). Sports reporters have argued that “as the Rices and Petersons become pariahs, Hope Solo remains beloved” (Johnson). This particular discourse of domestic violence invites scholarly attention because it concerns a high profile women’s professional athlete and happened amidst a nationwide crisis in professional sports organizations’ treatment of domestic and sexual violence accusations that has primarily concerned male perpetrators. Given that, the critical problem this chapter seeks to address is: How did existing discourses understand Hope Solo as a potential perpetrator of domestic violence? How did these conversations make sense of gender as it relates to sports and violence? And, in what ways did this discourse inform broader understandings of domestic violence, especially in moments that tether Solo and Rice together?

In answering those questions, this chapter argues that the problem in coupling Solo’s case with those of Rice, Peterson, and others who have been punished by the NFL for domestic violence is twofold. First, it simultaneously escalates the degree of violence we can reasonably assume took place based on police reports of the Solo incident, while pacifying the often horrendous acts of violence committed by the NFL players. Second, in doing so, these discourses neutralize the gendered nature of violence such that conversations about domestic violence presume that all humans are equally capable of, and likely to, commit domestic violence. Effectively excavating gender, as well as race and class, from discussions of domestic violence

¹⁵ An interesting comment to make given Peterson did, in fact, continue to play for the Vikings for multiple seasons as well as go on to play for the Redskins.

prevents nuance in cultural narratives of violence, distracts attention away from profoundly gendered moments of violence, and fuels anti-feminist discourse. Even if one were to presume Solo's guilt, erasing sex and gender as factors risks flattening violence and ignoring the ways in which violence against women is systemic.

Examples of female athletes committing acts of violence, and particularly the discourses that circulate as a result, present scholars of rhetoric, gender, and sport with an anomaly in women's sports coverage and, in this dissertation, provide important insight into a male dominated phenomenon. Expansive media attention to the accusations against Hope Solo, and its apparent controversy, produces a critical site to investigate the relationships between sports, gender, class, race, and violence. In 1999, Helene Shugart argued that "analysis of media coverage of the US Women's National Soccer Team reveals that mainstream media coverage of women's sports continues to be hegemonic, although the ways in which that function is realized appear to assume distinctive patterns" (26). Shugart's argument was that while the sexualization and objectification of women athletes may no longer be as obvious as it has historically been, it still happens and in even more insidious ways. This chapter unpacks a newer, also very subtle, feature of hegemonic media coverage of women's sports.

Sports and popular media discourse about Solo's case presents domestic violence as gender-, race-, and class-neutral which solidify the existing hegemonic framework that maintains systems of violence and oppression. In order to unpack this discursive moment, I begin this chapter by outlining the legacy of gender discrimination and misogyny in sports. Then I flesh out the details of Solo's case in order to understand her as a powerful rhetorical figure, specifically in the context of a historically patriarchal institution. Finally, I analyze coverage of Solo's case, specifically the discourses that tether her to what appear to be her male counterparts, and show

how this fabricated sense of gender equality may alter cultural understandings of domestic violence in dangerous ways. Before diving in, I want to just briefly remind the reader that domestic violence is discussed with a profound sense of imprecision in sports media and that imprecision is especially acute in this case. Similarly to chapters two and three, I meet sports media where it is at in order to capture a rhetorical moment to investigate its relationship to gender, while recognizing the potentially harmful implications of this catchall definition (or lack thereof) of domestic violence.

Discrimination and Misogyny in Sports

Shari Dworkin and Cheryl Cooky argue that “one of the most central and coveted beliefs in sport is that of male physical superiority and female physical inferiority” (21). In fact, gender discrimination can be traced back to the Ancient Greek Olympics where women were thrown off a cliff for trying to participate and men competed nude to ensure women could not sneak in (“The Role of Women in the Art of Ancient Greece”). Historically, athletics have provided an arena for “public displays of masculinity” that play an important role in centralizing hegemonic masculinity as a utilitarian good (McDonagh and Pappano 2). The narrative of masculinity tied to athletic achievements gained cultural salience parallel to the “myth of female inferiority” that relegates women weaker, more sensitive, fragile, and less physically competent than men (McDonagh and Pappano 6). Sports as an institution was cemented in part to “quell fears of male social feminization and were viewed as providing suitable societal forums to” train men in socially acceptable forms of masculinity (Dworkin and Cooky 21). Because of this, even throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, there were fewer sports available to girls and women, fewer competitions, low quality or nonexistent uniforms, and play times and rules were different than those in the men’s sports (including but not limited to basketball, where women used to play

six players at once so they were not running back and forth but stationary in offense or defense). In part as a result of feminist protest, state and federal legislation geared at preventing discrimination in a variety of social and work arenas began to emerge.

Perhaps the most important piece of legislation, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 was passed to foster gender equity broadly and applies to “all educational programs that receive federal funding, and to all aspects of a school's educational system” (American Civil Liberties Union 2015). The legislation was not solely directed at sports but it was intended to level the playing field, so to speak, and it contained mandates that girls and women should have comparable access as boys and men, and that institutions should spend equal amounts of money on women’s and men’s sports. While the spirit of Title IX was gender equality, Title IX did not end sexism or gender norms in sports. As mentioned in Chapter One, Whiteside and Roessner have studied the way contemporary Title IX coverage “generally positioned discrimination as an historic relic” (17). They argue this discourse also “divorces Title IX from the history of the women’s rights movement, presents progress as neat and linear, and ultimately offers an apolitical prescription for its future” (Whiteside and Roessner 17). This research is insightful because many of these seemingly-historical problems persist today and women in sports are constantly facing new and increasingly complex challenges.

Internalized gender norms continue to prevent girls from fully participating and reaping the benefits of sports. Some may argue that sports are now available to girls in ways equal to boys so a lack of participation simply signals that girls lack interest in sports, but, as Cooky, argues, it is more likely that internalized gender ideologies have prevented full participation. Specifically, the persistence of sex segregated sports solidifies the idea that women are incapable of competing with men and naturalizes female inferiority. Debates over sex segregation do come

up over time, but the practice has been normalized and most ardently defended “when women outperformed men at athletic performances” (Dworkin and Cooky; see also Sloop). Dworkin and Cooky cite the 1936 example where female pitcher Jackie Mitchell struck out both Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, after which women were banned from competing in professional baseball.

Strict sex segregation results not only in exclusion from the highest echelons of sport but produces a culture in which sex and gender testing become acceptable. After South African runner Caster Semenya won the gold medal in the 800 meter run at the World Championship in Athletics, the organization announced that she would have to undergo gender testing in order to keep her medal because of her shocking speed and masculine appearance. Sloop argued that the cultural “panic” and demand that Semenya prove she is a woman “is part of a cultural fabric that, in the main, reproduces a binary understanding of gender” (82). The first conclusion Sloop comes to at the end of the essay is telling: “the emphatic restatement that gender norms remain largely in place” in sports (91). I will mention just a few more examples of contemporary gender norming in sports to demonstrate the many ways hegemonic masculinity continues to control the cultural script of sport in U.S. culture.

Gender norming in sports can be found in language, which provides evidence of just how deeply ingrained stereotypes about women’s inferiority are in sports culture. The phrase “you play like a girl” continues to be an insult that limits girls because “to tell a girl that she throws like a girl, and to intend that to be an insult or subordination of her skill, is to tell her that being a girl renders her incompetent in athletics” (Chase 4). It simultaneously belittles boys by telling them they are not fast enough or strong enough and therefore too much like a girl. The rhetoric of playing like a girl, and gendered language broadly, “is a product and producer of a larger system of gender inequity in sports, one that places restrictions on what girls and boys, and

anyone in between or outside of that binary, can reasonably achieve within the existing institutions of organized athletics” (Chase 4). Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano explain that “girls don’t like to be told they ‘throw like a girl.’ Yet when researchers investigated the widespread cultural belief that males are inherently better throwers than females, they discovered no throwing gene attached to the Y chromosome” (McDonagh and Pappano 22). The prevalence and implications of this insult provide one piece of evidence for the devaluation of girls and women in sports. The ways women’s sports are covered in media provides additional evidence.

There are still massive gender discrepancies in sports coverage, and “when female athletes do receive mainstream media attention, it is typically in sexualized ways that trivialize their athleticism” (Cooky and Lavoie). Cheryl Cooky, Michael Messner, and Michela Musto, as a part of a longitudinal study spanning 25 years, have presented scholars of sport and gender with a number of concerning issues. First, they found that while there, at times, is more coverage of women’s sports than there used to be, it is not equitable coverage and rarely top tier in that women’s sports still have little to no coverage on the most popular sports shows like Sports Center. Disparities in outlet and popularity, experience level, and cultural resonance of reporters serve to retain “sport as a potent site for the reproduction of ideologies of male superiority” (Cooky et al. 280).

Using this same data set, their 2017 study compares “the quality of men’s and women’s sports coverage” and argues that “coverage of women’s sports has shifted away from being overtly denigrating” to simply “lackluster” and “uninspired” which “perpetuate[s] beliefs about men’s inherent athletic superiority” because it signals that only men’s athletic accomplishment are capable of producing enthusiasm (Musto et al. 575). Musto, Cooky, and Messner argue that the shift is simply “a new framework through which sports news and highlight shows normalize

beliefs about men's athletic superiority" (Musto et al. 590). They call this "gender-bland sexism" and draw comparison to the type of colorblindness often used by white people to justify exclusionary ideas and practices. Gender-bland sexism is a discursive move that makes sexism and gender imbalances in sports coverage more "difficult to detect" (Musto et al. 590). Moving beyond sports coverage, I will mention a couple of specific examples of the persistence of gender inequity before moving on to the next section.

U.S. Women's soccer is currently in a legal battle with the U.S. Soccer Federation over unequal pay and other disparities because of the stark gap in men's and women's pay and overall treatment. There is not even a remotely reasonable objection to this lawsuit; it is certainly well-known by now that the 2015 Women's World Cup final was the most watched game in soccer history and that the women's tournament brings in more revenue than the men's tournament (Alexandra). Additionally, an incident at Rowan University in the fall of 2018 very publicly reignited sexist ideologies of modesty and victim blaming as the head football coach came under fire for telling the women's cross country team they could not practice in sports bras because it would distract the football players. The university initially stated that they do in fact have an informal policy, technically a norm, that all athletes wear a full shirt while practicing. However, after much criticism of the women athletes for speaking out and alleged attempts to cover-up the discrimination, a Title IX investigation uncovered "a picture of a protectionist and hierarchical athletics department, where secrecy and intimidation left athletes and coaches feeling helpless and bullied" and the university rescinded that statement and announced that there will be no such regulation of practice clothing (Stripling). Those seeking to defend the status quo will point to Title IX, the WNBA, and countless other places to argue that the feminist movement has already succeeded in the sporting world, but, as this section demonstrates and Cooky and Lavoie point

out, “the movement for gender equality in American sport is partial, the revolution incomplete” (Cooky and Lavoie). It is within this legacy of gendered divisions and limitations that Hope Solo arose as a popular female athlete.

Hope Solo’s Rhetorical Presence

In addition to understanding the gendered context of sports that Solo’s case happened within, it is also important to note that her past public persona had at least some bearing on how her actions were interpreted. Of particular importance to the case is the investigative piece that “Outside the Lines,” a popular *ESPN* program geared at covering controversial issues surrounding athletes outside of competition, produced and released about Hope Solo’s domestic violence case *the day before* World Cup tournament play was scheduled to begin (Butt). In this episode, Mark Fainaru-Wada summarizes the case and interviews Teresa Obert, Solo’s sister. The alleged victim, Solo’s nephew, declined to participate but Obert emphasized her son’s innocence despite the size disparity between the two (he was approximately 6 feet 8 inches and 270 pounds at the time) (Fainaru-Wada). The timing of the segment’s release and the severity of its accusations catapulted the story into mainstream news media and the story was then picked up by major and minor news outlets across the country.

Additionally, even prior to winning the 2015 World Cup, Solo was arguably the world’s best goalkeeper and one of the more permanent and prominent faces of women’s soccer in the United States. She was awarded top goalkeeper of the World Cup tournament because, in a truly remarkable performance, she allowed only three goals to be scored in seven games, leading the US team to its first world championship in 16 years (Baxter). However, before Solo’s case was even officially re-opened, a discursive framing of her as an athlete proximate to violence was already circulating in popular entertainment and news media outlets.

Sports media were familiar with Solo prior to her domestic violence accusation. In fact, there are a multitude of discursive moments that influence how she is understood as a public figure. One of those moments involved domestic violence. Solo's husband, former NFL player Jerramy Stevens, was arrested in 2012 on domestic violence charges for allegedly assaulting Solo (Clarridge). The charges were eventually dropped. Then in January of 2015, Solo was suspended by US Soccer after Stevens was arrested for driving a team vehicle, in which she was a passenger, while intoxicated ("Reports: Stevens Driving Team Vehicle"). Solo is well known for these cases, as well as for her confrontational persona while performing on the popular television contest *Dancing with the Stars* in 2011. Solo has acknowledged her controversial public image and is characterized as unapologetic of it (Ellis).

Following a quarterfinals loss to Sweden in the 2016 Olympics, Solo called her competitors "cowards" for playing defensively until the second half (Ahmed). This resulted in an immediate suspension and eventually Solo's contract was terminated by Coach Jill Ellis who referred to this incident, as well as past behaviors, in justifying her decision (Gonzalez). While I do not think that anyone who takes competitive sports seriously and with any integrity would condone Solo's name-calling, it does seem extreme that she was fired for doing something that male athletes do with regularity. For example, fellow soccer player Richard Chaplow made homophobic remarks to another competitor and was not released from the men's team (Ahmed). Compared to the punishment fellow Olympian Ryan Lochte received, Solo's punishment seems suspicious at best and egregious at worst. Lochte, a U.S. swimmer and medalist who was arrested and charged for vandalizing a gas station and falsifying a robbery in Rio, received a 10-month suspension from competition and was required to perform community service hours (Ward-Henninger).

Additionally, Solo has taken outspoken stances on various issues that inform how we understand her rhetorical presence. She made problematic and controversial social media posts before the Rio Olympics regarding the insect population for which she was heckled at the Olympic Games (DeCourcy). She has recently critiqued the institution of soccer as privileging and benefiting wealthy white children and for becoming less accessible to working class children and children of color (Gleeson). And Solo is an advocate for equal pay and has been vocal in pointing out that pay disparity is a result of gender discrimination (ESPNW, “Hope Solo calls for more women”). These strong, and arguably inconsistent, facets of Solo’s character make her a complicated but relevant rhetorical figure.

Domestic Violence, Sports, and Gender

Extensive literature exists on gender, violence and rhetoric. This scholarship ranges from critical gender analyses of cinema to neocolonialism and international intervention to the normalization of sexual violence against Black women to the positive potential of violence (King and Gunn; McKinnon; Phillips and Griffin; C. R. Kelly). Among other things, scholars have made arguments about patriarchal control of legal argumentation in murder cases, the way women are masculinized in order to make sense of their violence, and how Disney movies romanticize intimate partner violence (Hasian and Flores; Pearson; Olson). The rhetoric of domestic violence and gender, or the way narratives of domestic violence circulate and create gendered norms about behavior, bodies, and agency is relatively undertheorized. In this chapter, I continue to use the core theoretical and methodological tools of this dissertation, adding a bit of theoretical nuance about what it might mean to de-gender something a violent phenomenon such as domestic violence.

Especially pertinent to this chapter is Suzanne Enck's investigation of the relationship between rhetoric and domestic violence. Enck contextualizes black masculinity with violence in sport, and argues that "news accounts of abusive black athletes tend to employ narratives that naturalize black masculinity as aggressive and efface deeper cultural connections" (Enck 3). In a separate article, Enck and McDaniel argue that popular cultural representations of domestic violence obscure "culpability from domestic violence (as a system of power and control) by which men benefit from broader networks of privilege" (Enck and McDaniel 629). In their article on Eminem and Rihanna's song "Love the Way You Lie," Enck and McDaniel argue that the lyrics and accompanying music video contribute to a culture of domestic violence that neutralizes gender and race as factors determining violence and perpetuates traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity. They demonstrate that the music video utilizes a lens of gender-blindness that mirrors widespread U.S. cultural assumptions that domestic violence is an "'equal opportunity' endeavor" (Enck and McDaniel 629). This flattening of gender contributes to the "belief that domestic violence is mutual violence and not, as feminists would suggest, a systemic cycle of power and control that elevates all men at the expense of all women" (Enck and McDaniel 634).

In a similar vein, sociologist Nancy Berns describes the process by which media, ranging from talk shows to articles on the internet, "reframe domestic violence in a way that obscures men's violence while placing the burden of responsibility on women," which she calls "patriarchal resistance" (262). There are two techniques for achieving this: "degendering the problem of domestic violence" and "gendering the blame" (262; 263). When domestic violence is de-gendered, it gets reframed as "human violence" instead of gendered violence or violence against women, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of domestic violence happens to

women (265). The rhetoric of domestic violence matters then because it fosters particular understandings of violence that either maintain status quo power relations or deconstruct them.

In the remainder of this chapter I continue unpacking the “cultural investments in the politics of domestic abuse in U.S. sociopolitical culture” by both tracing the term domestic violence and performing a gendered analysis of its applications and mutations in the context of popular sports and news media (Enck and McDaniel 619). I pay special attention to the way Solo’s domestic violence case was presented and discussed in relation to gender. Set within the context of multiple elite male athletes being accused and charged with domestic violence, the vocabulary used to describe Solo and her case was carefully crafted to produce a gender-neutral narrative of domestic violence.

Butterworth argues that, because of the extremely gendered nature of even contemporary sports, “a rhetorical engagement with sporting bodies is imperative if we are to envision more inclusive representations of sex and gender” (263). Norms such as sex segregation, the grooming of boys into sports that require the most physicality, and the overwhelming popularity of football, a definitively male-dominated sport, suggest that “sport must play a more prominent role in rhetorical scholarship, therefore, because it is the cultural institution that arguably provides the most vivid and persistent articulations of oppressive gender norms” (Butterworth 270). Moreover, it is not just the actual rules and playing out of sports that reflect institutional norms but also the ways in which games, bodies, and athletes are mediated and understood. For these reasons, I have chosen to make an argument about the consistent and repeated comparison of Solo to male athletes who have been accused, and sometimes convicted, of violent crimes broadly.

Discursive Constructions of Hope Solo as a Perpetrator of Domestic Violence

Hope Solo has been most commonly compared to Ray Rice, Adrian Peterson, Greg Hardy, and Ray McDonald, all of which were described in detail in chapters two and three. As a brief reminder, Rice was arrested for assaulting and knocking unconscious his then-fiancé Janay Palmer and was suspended indefinitely from the NFL. Peterson was indicted on child abuse charges multiple times, was suspended briefly, and then continued to play successfully in the NFL. Hardy was convicted on domestic violence charges after an incident in which ten firearms were seized from his residence, was suspended ten games by the NFL, deactivated by the Panthers, and was signed by the Cowboys where he was eventually released for possession of cocaine. Finally, McDonald, in two separate instances, was arrested for domestic violence and accused of rape. He was released by the 49'ers and given a second chance by the Bears where he was eventually released when another domestic violence accusation arose.

To give the reader a clear sense of the conversation surrounding Solo's case of domestic violence, I first want to provide a sample of said discourse. Juliet Macur, writing in the *New York Times* and referring to Rice stated, "One can argue the differences between an N.F.L. player punching his soon-to-be wife and a soccer star brawling with her family, but it is indisputable that both qualify as domestic violence." Macur also said that "celebrating Solo's achievement right now is like allowing running back Adrian Peterson" to continue to play (which, as I just explained, he was in fact allowed to do). If the association that Macur advanced was not clear enough, she went on to pose the following question and answer: "When Ray Rice, Greg Hardy and Adrian Peterson were arrested, there were loud calls for those players to be suspended. The response to Solo's case? The sound of crickets" (Macur). Journalists also wrote "as the Rices and Petersons become pariahs, Hope Solo remains beloved" (Johnson); "Greg Hardy and Ray

McDonald are in the same camp” as Solo but that Solo was the only one whose career went “uncompromised” (Johnson); and that while “It hasn’t slowed down her career. . . the rogues’ gallery of sidelined football players — men convicted of domestic-violence-related crimes or just charged with them — grows by the day” with reference to Rice, Peterson, Hardy, McDonald and Jonathan Dwyer, who was put on the NFL reserve list after being indicted on assault charges (Peysner).

The discursive treatment of Hope Solo as a perpetrator of domestic violence is significant both because it emanates from the institution of sports, where gender norms are still rigidly enforced and punished with regularity (Sloop), and because it is a textbook demonstration of the power of language in determining what counts as violence, who is violent, and how easily structural factors can be ignored or framed out of public discussions about violence. In this section, I map the discourses that equate Hope Solo with male athletes accused of domestic violence and demonstrate how descriptions of her body, actions, and attitude masculinize Hope Solo in order to de-feminize and make her intelligible as a violent woman. Then I describe the implications of the circulation of these particular discourses in understanding violence as a gendered phenomenon.

The coupling of Hope Solo and NFL players

As described earlier, what initially seemed to be concern about disparate punishment for violent crime between different professional sports organizations culminated in a rhetorical collapsing of Hope Solo and prominent male athletes accused of domestic violence regardless of historical, contextual, and legal differences. What began as an argument that all violent crime should be punished equally regardless of the gender of the perpetrator snowballed into an anti-feminist argument that parallels accusations of reverse discrimination. Commentary from the

heart of the controversy (2014-2015) claimed that men receive harsher punishments from sports leagues and stronger social backlash when these types of accusations arise because “there is a difference on how we view female perpetrators” and that there is “one rule for men, another entirely for the women” (Johnson; White). While this commentary reflects a lack of understanding of the details of this case and an unwillingness to compare the ambiguity and complexity of this case with the more straightforward evidence of violence in the NFL cases I have described, I want to be clear that my argument should not be mistaken as an appeal for Solo’s innocence. The discourse I describe here is likely a reaction to Solo not being punished by her sports league upon being arrested and resentment about the details of the case not proliferating publicly until long after the arrest.

In some cases, reporters gave generous amounts of credit to the NFL in their recent domestic violence debacles in suggesting that celebrating an athlete accused of violence “wouldn’t happen in the N.F.L., it shouldn’t happen in women’s sports, either” (Macur). Emily Shire, a writer for the *Daily Beast*, a news reporting organization known for its left-leaning attitude and generally progressive stances, made the following statement about the situation, “In comparison, the NFL was hammered by the press.” She goes on to say, “it’s not that we’ve exactly forgotten that Solo has some very upsetting domestic-abuse charges against her, but it’s unclear how much we care. It would be hard for U.S. Soccer to more defiantly give zero fucks about the charges against Solo” (Shire). Shire ends her argument about US Soccer with the statement that “part of the reason U.S Soccer gets away with keeping Solo on the team is that Americans do not watch women’s soccer in remotely comparable numbers as they watch the NFL” which is a compelling point because if she is correct that Americans pay far more attention to the NFL than women’s soccer, the number of times Solo and Rice get compared and conflated

is genuinely curious. There are two implications to these assertions. First, it presumes that all NFL players accused of violent crime were reprimanded appropriately, when in reality many of them were allowed to play shortly, if not immediately, after their case was settled and many of them ended up signing new contracts. It imbues a sort of gendered trust in the organizational system of the NFL as a justification for mistrust in the treatment of Solo's case.

Second, this discourse, when read historically and culturally, is an appeal to reverse discrimination. Macur, in response to a statement made by Solo saying that she belongs on the field, said "but actually she doesn't. Not in a world in which female and male athletes are ever to be treated equally" (Macur). Macur is suggesting that allowing Solo to play *is evidence* of discrimination against men. There seems to be consensus from news and sports media that "we should hold women athletes – and their organizations – equally accountable for mistakes, too," and that the Solo case represents a failure in that accountability (C. Kelly). Shire also claims there is a "double standard" in how women and men athletes are penalized for violent crimes because in her mind "Solo has been granted a relative free pass."

In a more intense description of the gendered, or not gendered, dynamic of violence in sports, Cathy Young writes in a *Time Magazine* opinion piece, "The arrest of an Olympic gold medalist on charges of domestic violence would normally be an occasion for a soul-searching conversation about machismo in sports, toxic masculinity and violence against women. But not when the alleged offender is a woman." She goes on to argue that "family violence is not necessarily a gender issue" and that "this woman-as-victim bias is at odds with the feminist emphasis on equality of the sexes." She explains,

Traditional stereotypes both of female weakness and female innocence have led to double standards that often cause women's violence—especially against men—to be trivialized,

excused, or even (like Solange's assault on Jay Z) treated as humorous. Today, simplistic feminist assumptions about male power and female oppression effectively perpetuate those stereotypes. (Young)

The implication of these statements is that men are being punished more severely than women for similar crimes. Taken to its logical extent, this is an argument about reverse sexism, an allegation of reverse discrimination, and a refusal to see, name, and understand violence as gendered.

Hope Solo as Aggressor

The existing default lens for understanding sex and gender in sports is one of biological determinism, one that says female genitalia will produce femininity and male genitalia will produce masculinity and there will be nothing in between, outside of, or contradictory. Of course the reality is that there are far more than two sexes and genders and that both are as socially constructed as they are biological (Butler 5). These norms have been challenged and expanded in certain spaces, but, as Sloop points out, sports are an example of a space "in which gender remains stridently fixed" (92). For example, he explains how Semenya after winning an international race, was surveilled and punished with drug and gender testing for breaking norms of femininity with her androgynous appearance and untouchable speed (Sloop 82). Traditional gender stereotypes that glorify men as strong, capable, and determined render women weak, uncertain, and hesitant, positing "that there is little natural about female athleticism and muscularity" (Schultz 348). Furthermore, FIFA has a gender verification policy that targets women's teams for players who are "too manly," despite the fact that FIFA's official statement says all players will be tested (Fagan). The purpose of this policy is to police and discipline athletes "who might not meet whatever definition of 'woman' has been set by FIFA" (Fagan). It

is within this sexed and gendered arena of sports that media make sense of Hope Solo as perpetrator of domestic violence. To do this, Solo was purposefully and consistently masculinized.

The discourse that conflates Solo's domestic violence case with those of male athletes relies on a characterization of Solo as masculine. An article in the *New York Times* states that "one can argue the differences between an N.F.L. player punching his soon-to-be wife and a soccer star brawling with her family, but it is indisputable that both qualify as domestic violence" (Macur). While Macur may be correct that both of these altercations could legally constitute domestic violence in certain states, this statement does not account for the degree of violence or the history and culture in which the violence was produced. The treatment of evidence is especially relevant to this conflation. While photographs and video footage have often been released to the public when NFL players have been accused of domestic violence, similar evidence did not surface in Solo's case. Because of this, public understandings of Solo's case relied more heavily on discursive constructions than her contemporaries' cases did.

Descriptions of Solo's athleticism and physique were exaggerated and tailored to masculinize her. One source claimed she had "biceps the size of most men's thighs" (White). At approximately 150 pounds that is quite literally impossible; this is an intentional rhetorical move to make Solo seem less of a woman in order to add masculine texture to her as an athlete (United States Olympic Committee). Solo's goalkeeping style has been described as "dramatic" which is odd both because there is a degree of drama intrinsic to tending a goal and there is a lack of evidence of drama unique to Solo as a keeper (Shire). While accusations of drama are typically gendered feminine, I take them, in this instance, to mean overly invested in the game, animated, and aggressive. It would be unusual to read a headline describing a man's performance this way

because the assumption is that men naturally play that way. Discourses that describes Solo as playing too hard or too aggressively are a necessary part of the narrative that produces Solo as failing to perform femininity. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that coverage of the incident quoted the police describing Solo as “combative,” threatening the officers, and having said “if the handcuffs were off, I’d kick your ass” (Fainaru-Wada). Shire states that Solo was accused of “beating a minor and cursing out cops.” Paying close attention to the language used here highlights choices that were made and how those choices implicate the larger narrative. Shire does not refer to the actual charges, attempt to describe the altercation with any precision, or use the language of the arrest; instead, Solo is described more intensely, yet ambiguously, as “beating” and “cursing” which invokes a particularly unruly masculine image of violence.

The masculinization of Solo makes her, as a rhetorical and sports figure, more physically threatening and more capable of violence than the idealized appropriately-feminine woman and produces conclusions such as the following: “anger knows no gender, nor does domestic violence” because “the issue is about anger and power, about controlling relationships with violence, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator, regardless of the gender of the victim” (Fagan). Solo is described as aggressive, combative, and threatening, which are traditionally masculine traits. This discourse functionally removes her from the arena of traditional gender norms and stereotypes, but not in a liberating way because it simultaneously sensationalizes her and decouples gender and domestic violence such that gender critique and nuance become impossible.

Class also plays a role in popular understandings of Hope Solo. Here, class is not just a description of a status but a performance of identity. It is both a material condition and a position that is constantly negotiated, perceived, categorized, and re-negotiated. Julie Bettie describes this

performance as a “learned set of expressive cultural practices that express class membership” (11). Bettie argues that too little “attention is given to the ways in which race and class are politically, historically, and situationally constructed (and performed) in relation to gender” (5). I am attempting here to address the experience, performance, and perception of social class in relation to gender and whiteness as performed by a celebrity athlete.

Understanding class performatively and rhetorically, as opposed to purely financially, Solo’s working class affect delegitimizes her intentions, her femininity, and, to a degree, her whiteness. And it’s not just that Solo is coded as working class but that she embraces her identity outside of the middle class elite script. Stephanie Foote argues, about Tonya Harding, that “she seemed to revel in performing a class identity that became, for reporters and critics, the limit as well as the source of her personality” (4). Solo’s public performances such as cursing, using her body in dramatic or expressive ways, her willingness to throw punches and to take verbal jabs at her opponents, and her open and loud critique of soccer as privileging wealthy white players all agitate against the middle class sensibilities of sport and gender. Solo’s identity is interpellated as malfunctioning middle class whiteness and failing femininity, resulting in a caricature of her that emphasizes physicality, carelessness, rudeness, and violence. Distancing Solo from both proper femininity and whiteness plays a significant role in the larger discursive project of de-gendering domestic violence.

De-gendering Domestic Violence

The proposed neutrality of gender within systems of violence is crystalized by the institution of sports. Despite the fact that sports are fundamentally organized by gender, “much of the allure of sports comes from the belief that what we participate in and watch is an acultural experience - that at the end of the day athletic competition is decided by empirical skills, not

cultural beliefs” (Miller 165). This is why Shane Miller argues that “organized sports are a phenomenally rich resource for studying gendered identity construction precisely because of the set of cultural assumptions through which athletics operate” (165). He explains that “athletic competition, in other words, provides the one space where we believe that all cultural trappings are set aside and raw bodies compete against one another on the proverbial level playing field” regardless of factors like “race, ethnicity, gender, sex*” (Miller 165). Miller suggests that “the progressive potential for sports is curtailed by the organizational make-up of professional sports itself” because competitions are organized around strength and speed which unquestionably privileges some bodies over others (167). I contend that there is another level of organizational limitation placed on progress in the context of professional sports, a limitation that operates at the intersection of gender, violence, and rhetoric.

The close association of Hope Solo with NFL players accused of domestic violence not only halts discussions of gendered violence in sports but participates in larger anti-feminist rhetorics that de-gender violence broadly. This discourse renders Solo’s act of violence intelligible by masculinizing her both physically and socially. Apprehending Solo this way pushes back against growing concerns about gendered violence in sports. In equating Solo with Rice, Peterson, and others, she is positioned as a scapegoat for cultural anxieties about the failings of hegemonic masculinity, in this case the increased exposure of gendered domestic violence. This rhetoric strips domestic violence of its gendered underpinnings and casts an undue amount of attention onto Solo in ways incredibly similar to the way Ray Rice has become representative of perpetrators of domestic violence in the NFL. Notably, Solo and Rice as scapegoats prevents a focus on white hegemonic masculinity.

The accusation that women receive gentler punishments when they have committed violent crime, the presumption of a double standard, and the argument that all violence matters equally because it all materializes the exact same way regardless of bodies, backgrounds, and sociality culminates in an extraction of gender from discussions about domestic violence. Cathy Young's commentary crystallizes the narrative that circulated about Hope Solo. Young says explicitly that family violence is *not* a gender issue. She makes a fair point in saying that women are not always innocent victims, but her observations become problematic when she leaps to the conclusion that "simplistic feminist assumptions about male power and female oppression effectively perpetuate those stereotypes" and asserts that there is a "bias" regarding the regularity with which women are reported as victims of domestic violence. The flaw in her argument, as well as others who have used Solo as anecdotal evidence to deny gendered violence, is not the observation that women do in fact commit violence, but the presumption of violence as an "'equal opportunity' endeavor" (Enck 629). The erasure of the possibility of violence based on gender, or as a result of gender norming, eliminates our ability to understand violence as systemic or structural. It detaches violence within the home, as well as violence between family members and intimate partners, from larger systems of patriarchal domination and control.

In the case of Hope Solo, the rhetoric of gender-neutral violence reframes domestic violence as "human violence" despite the fact that women are disproportionately victims of domestic violence (Berns 265). The problem is that in framing domestic violence as human violence, these conversations miss the boat; yes, all violence does matter but this is a crucial moment to understand that gendered violence especially matters and make a commitment to ending it. Understanding domestic violence as gender neutral ensures that trends stay this way; leaving hegemonic masculinity, and its relationship to power and control and violence,

unquestioned allows gender norms that socialize boys and men into aggression and emotional paralysis, and girls and women into passivity and sensitivity, to remain dominant and pervasive. If hegemonic masculinity is operative, then it is irresponsible and dangerous to allow these discourses to circulate unproblematized.

Moments of violence that are extracted both from their immediate context and broader social context can be interpreted in a vacuum that neutralizes complexity and prevents the development of sophisticated understandings of those acts of violence. Bryan McCann argues that a lack of “sociohistorical contexts” produces “rhetorics of decontextualized violence” (2). The reason this happens, according to McCann, is because “whether women are victims, purveyors, or both victims and purveyors of violence, our stories of women and violence function largely to discipline gender and sustain other cultural narratives rather than gesture toward new avenues for critique” (3). Decontextualizing Hope Solo’s domestic violence accusations from the relationships she had to the two accusers, the location of the incident, the approach of the police, vast public scrutiny of Solo throughout her soccer career, the intricacies of Washington state laws regarding domestic violence, structural patriarchy, among countless other things mean this narrative can be, and has been, weaponized to maintain dominant power structures.

The de-gendering of domestic violence is one way that domestic violence can continue circulating relatively unperturbed. The masculinization of Hope Solo, or the rhetorical construction of her as more like a man than a woman, is another texture to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. Descriptions of Solo as a very large, strong, physically threatening person, combined with the foregrounding of a police report citing her verbally threatening people, discursively constructs Solo as too masculine, too working class, and too defiant to

whiteness to be properly woman. Women committing violence “risks destabilizing gender norms” so their actions and identities have to be made intelligible in some way (McCann 4). Therefore, popular and sports media narrate Solo as never belonging to femininity or womanhood in the first place, because if she did, she would not have been capable of the harm she was accused of doing.

To be clear, the effect is not gender fluidity or that women can always perform masculinity effectively. Instead, the effect is to isolate Solo as failing to perform proper femininity in her performance of masculinity, thus rendering her acts of violence intelligible. Women are expected to be feminine, which means sensitive, graceful, and non-threatening, so “popular and political cultures, therefore, typically frame violent women as transgressors of femininity whom the state and broader culture must discipline” (McCann 4). There is an additional layer of complexity to the de-gendering I described above. While the effect of this narrative is a gender neutral, or gender-blind, understanding of domestic violence, the process inherently involves appeals to gender norms that subtly expose just how deeply engrained gender norms are and how strongly they are tied to mainstream understandings of violence. Defeminizing Solo, alone, was insufficient to understand her as a violent actor; she has been overwhelmingly discussed in opposition to middle class white femininity and therefore representative of lower-class masculinity. Beyond de-gendering the phenomena of domestic violence, this rhetoric, problematically, solidifies understandings of men, and masculinity, as perpetrating violence and women, and femininity, as victim.

Conclusion

Conversations about gender as a motivator of violence are zero sum with gender neutral discourses because media are constrained by time and space. This is especially true in the way

this discourse unfolded. I have demonstrated that Solo was simultaneously de-gendered, masculinized, and used as an example of a woman committing violence in order to obfuscate conversations about gender-based violence that have recently risen to the surface in professional sports. Recognizing that women also commit violence is not the same as equating violence done by a woman to a legacy of violence against women that is necessarily intertwined with hegemonic masculinity and professional sports. The assertion that women are equally perpetrators of violence is a rhetorical strategy that threatens to de-gender violence. No one would deny that violence committed by women matters, but collapsing the narrative into an *all violence matters* approach obliterates discussions of gender, race, class, and sexuality and how they often determine what, and to whom, violence happens.

Analysis of media treatment of Solo demonstrates how perceptually unorganized statements can, and do, form networks of discourse that serve as reinforcements for existing gender norms and stereotypes. In this particular cultural historical moment narratives of violent women are a response to growing concerns, regulations, negative media attention, and public outcry about gendered and domestic violence, specifically in professional sports. The vast majority of these concerns have been targeted at men's sports leagues. Contouring Solo's case to fit the dominant narrative of gendered violence allowed Solo to be effectively equated to the aforementioned male athletes. The prevalence and persuasive weight of this discourse downplays the domestic violence debacle currently confronting the NFL and reduces a phenomenon deeply implicated by, and intertwined with, gender to a generic human condition. This slippage additionally invited arguments about reverse discrimination based on the perceived lack of coverage of Solo's case and the initial lack of punishment from the US Soccer Federation. Discourses of reverse discrimination are coupled with the masculinization and villainizing of

Solo, which ultimately serve to de-gender discussions of domestic violence. This flattening of violence ensures that violence-as-usual, and hierarchies of masculinity, can flourish absent gendered critique and resistance.

Hope Solo's case tells us something about the way we talk about domestic violence and why it matters for understanding and addressing gendered aspects of violence. The treatment of Hope Solo by popular media highlights a continuing disbelief in contemporary sexism, the insidious nature of hegemonic masculinity, and the importance of persistent gender critique of violence and the norms associated with, and produced by, said violence. Bonnie Dow cautions us that "the increasing sophistication of our theoretical understandings of gender and sexuality has complicated our conceptions of identity categories, but those categories still operate in quite unsophisticated, even violent, ways in our daily experiences" (261). My hesitance to force this analysis into a traditional rhetorical method and my insistence on paying serious attention to colloquial discourses, in response to Dow's call, is an attempt to re-center gender and violence in the spirit of practicality. Because, ultimately, allowing a narrative of a single instance of domestic violence to overwhelm public and scholarly concern about the relationship between violence and gender increases the opacity of domestic violence and renders its gendered nature mute.

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Chapter V: The Normalization of Violent Hegemonic Masculinity and the Scholar-Activist's Role in Unsettling It

*“But one thing is certain: we can pretend sports isn’t political just as well as we can pretend there is no such thing as gravity if we fall out of an airplane. The truth remains obstinate as a mule. Sports are what we make of them. If we sit back and let political messages be casually pumped through our play, it will be the death of us. If we challenge sports to be as good as they can be – a force to break down the walls that divide us, a motor for inclusion – they can propel us toward a better world, a world worth playing in – and worth fighting for.” – Dave Zirin, *A People’s History of Sports in the United States*, 268*

An April 2019 *New York Times* article states that homicides linked to domestic violence are on the rise and the majority of victims are women; this is startling news after four decades of consistent decline in this type of homicide (Holson). A second April 2019 *New York Times* article reminds us that “half of all female homicide victims are killed by what experts” consider to be intimate partners and “abused women are five times more likely to be killed by their abuser if the abuser owns a firearm” (Stolberg). These statistics are alarming and increasingly important as the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) has recently become controversial, with the addition of “a new provision — aimed at curbing sexual violence by expanding law enforcement’s ability to strip domestic abusers of their guns” (Stolberg). This provision is intended to address the “boyfriend loophole” (Stolberg). The current law prevents a person from owning a firearm only if they are (or were) married to, live with, or have a child with their victim, leaving a dangerous number of exceptions. As of the time of this writing, the reauthorization of VAWA, which also includes expanding protections for Native American and transgender victims, remains in limbo (Tully-McManus).

A major reason VAWA is facing such opposition is that the National Rifle Association (NRA), and its powerful lobby, strongly oppose reauthorization because of the firearm provision. The NRA has announced they will keep track of and publish which way lawmakers vote on this

version of the bill, which will likely be used during the upcoming election cycle. While the reauthorization bill has passed in the House, it remains unclear what will happen in the Senate with increasing likelihood that the Senate will “shoot it down” (Van Pykeren). Because the NRA remains incredibly powerful in American politics a significant number of lawmakers in the GOP-controlled Senate have vowed to oppose the reauthorization, signaling to Americans that gun sales are more valuable than the lives of the women that are lost as a result of those sales. It has never been more obvious that the human and ethical aspects of domestic violence are being drowned in logics of profit and politics.

In addition to the current VAWA debate, news and sports media have continued to cover domestic violence in the months since this project began. Amber Heard, who indirectly accused superstar actor Johnny Depp of domestic abuse in a December 2018 *Washington Post* op-ed, has recently been the target of a defamation lawsuit. Depp claims she has lied about the abuse. In court, as a part of her request that the defamation charges be dropped, “Heard shared numerous incidents where she claimed Depp lashed out violently against her” (qtd in Kreps). Heard’s bravery to speak out publicly, while valiant, has resulted in gaslighting and harassment from Depp and his supporters (which are not few). In fact, Depp’s attorney has publicly called Heard’s testimony a “hoax” and a “lie” (qtd in Kreps). At the height of Hollywood’s #MeToo moment where entertainment industry moguls are being held accountable for their behavior, we are still witnessing the world’s richest and most powerful women be shamed, accused of lying, and verbally harassed for coming forward about abuse. The cultural instinct towards disbelief when powerful men, embodying hegemonic masculinity, are accused of domestic violence is alive and strong.

The epidemic of disbelief and the trend of placing gendered violence on the backburner extends into the sports world. Larry Baer, the San Francisco Giants CEO caught on camera assaulting his wife, has received his official punishment: an unpaid suspension until July 1, 2019. That punishment is both discouraging and woefully inadequate. MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred stated, “Based on my conversation with Mr. Baer, it is clear that he regrets what transpired and takes responsibility for his conduct” (qtd in Schulman). The comment feels so disappointing to read for at least two reasons. First, regret does not seem sufficient to make up for assaulting his wife. It was an altercation during which she yelled, “Oh my god, no, help!” in a public space, leaving little question about what was happening or how she interpreted the events. Second, a minor suspension justified based on a perfunctory apology is an excessive demonstration of male privilege that hinges on whiteness and wealth. This climate of disappointment extends to the NFL.

Kareem Hunt, who was being investigated after *TMZ* released video footage of him assaulting a woman, eventually received an eight game suspension which, at this point, feels like a drop in the bucket. Jenny Dial Creech, sports journalist and president of the Association of Women in Sports Media, commented that “the worst thing that can happen now is Hunt serving his suspension and everyone moving on and forgetting about this issue — which is usually what happens.” Even less promising is the case of Reuben Foster who has recently been fined for two games worth of pay after the NFL completed its investigation. As a reminder, Foster had been arrested twice for domestic violence incidents, and in the first of those cases, the district attorney’s office stated that Foster had “seriously hurt his girlfriend” (qtd. in Silverman and Levenson). While investigating the second case, the league concluded that in the events leading up to the arrest Foster did not violate the Personal Conduct Policy (Whyno). The Baer,

Hunt, and Foster cases demonstrate that domestic violence, as a real and dangerous form of gendered violence, has often gotten lost in politics, profits, and an idealized and wholly imagined *pure* form of sport.

In Chapter One I observed that sports media response to these cases is often regressive in that it is racist, sexist, and otherwise ideological in ways that participate in, and maintain, existing structures of power. We already know that victims and survivors are often blamed for their experiences and/or accused of coming forward for attention, as an act of vindication, or an attempt at financial compensation. As a result, victims and survivors were not the focus of this project. Rather, I sought to understand the textures of a prototypical perpetrator of domestic violence in sports media's public consciousness. To do so, I posed the following questions: How do sports media - journalists, commentators, and fans – contribute to broader cultural understandings of domestic violence? What does this discourse tell us about sex, gender, sexuality, race, and class as they relate to domestic violence? And, what are the challenges this rhetoric poses to a progressive political agenda to end domestic violence? Then, throughout the chapters I demonstrated the ways sports media construct an archetype of a domestic violence perpetrator. My argument has been that the long-term cultural obsession with Ray Rice and intense media frenzy about Hope Solo reflect broader societal anxieties about power that are deeply racialized, gendered, and classed; displace blame for domestic violence as a gendered phenomenon; and, obscure structural critique. In what follows I will thematically summarize the key points of the project, draw implications for scholars of communication, and offer advice for academics, activists, and journalists.

Domestic Violence, Gender, and Sports Implications

The most important takeaways of this project concern the rigidity of gender norms in sports, the pervasiveness of gendered violence in sports, and the ways domestic violence gets individualized and scapegoated onto a few individuals. First, gender norms remain incredibly rigid in sports, and sports media, and these norms contribute to a culture of violence characterized by whiteness and hegemonic masculinity. Domestic violence is an unfortunate but logical result of gendered norms that privilege aggression, power, and control. The continued subordination of women in this social dynamic means our vocabulary for addressing domestic violence is still insufficient, a problem that is exacerbated by the relatively recent addition of domestic violence to the public lexicon of abuse. While gender progress is undeniably happening in some areas – increased diverse representation in Congress, gender-inclusive bathrooms are increasingly a norm, gender-neutral children’s toys and clothing, and so on – domestic abuse remains rampant as a gendered form of violence and sports continue to be a segment of society where gender norms are rigid and valorized.

From the execution of women attempting to participate in the Ancient Greek Olympics to contemporary sex segregation of sports and from the gender testing and exclusion of trans athletes to the egregious pay gaps between men’s and women’s professional athletes despite the recent success of women’s leagues, women’s value in sports is still far from that of men’s. That is not even to mention the internalized gender norms that result in self-surveillance and prevent girls, women, and trans athletes from reaching their full potential or participating at all. Changing ideology, and therefore social and cultural norms, is a requirement to end the gender norms that produce conditions where domestic violence can flourish. Absent this type of change, power imbalances and core cultural assumptions about gender will continue to recreate violence.

Breaking down gender norms requires questioning practices and ideas that have been naturalized over time. The division of women's and men's sports leagues seems natural, or intuitive, to many participants, fans, and even scholars, but at its core the division requires belief in the assertion that women are less athletically competent than men. Sex segregation also makes the participation of trans, nonbinary, and gender fluid people difficult and, in some cases, impossible, further revealing the intrinsically violent nature of the division. Agitating against, and fundamentally upending, core assumptions about gender is essential to violence prevention; in the meantime, challenging socio-cultural implications of gender hierarchies is a meaningful step.

One implication of deep-seated cultural privileging of men and masculinity is what Kate Manne calls *himpathy*, “the often overlooked mirror image of misogyny” defined by the “the excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence” that is “frequently extended in contemporary American to men who are white, nondisabled, and otherwise privileged ‘golden boys’” (197). Manne states that in the US, himpathy is “so common that we regard it as business as usual” (197). Here, Manne is describing himpathy in the context of Brock Turner, the twenty year old Stanford student and competitive swimmer convicted of sexual assault. Manne further describes how during Turner's trial, his father testified of his concern that his son would “no longer enjoy a nice rib-eye steak fresh off the grill, having lost his appetite” over the ordeal, and even the judge himself expressed worry about Turner's resilience (196). Himpathy is also pervasive in the case of professional sports. In Chapter Two I described the way some athletes, Ben Roethlisberger for example, receive great amounts of sympathy and compassion from sports media, fans, police, and the legal system. Remember Roethlisberger's lawyers called one of his accusers disturbing, calculating, and a liar; and sports

media, by and large, framed the case as a challenge to be overcome and something Roethlisberger could hopefully put in the past.

This dissertation contributes to scholarly understandings of himpathy by suggesting that himpathy is not universally awarded to men; but it is a racialized and classed act of grace. First and foremost, the most egregious cases of himpathy seem to be afforded to perpetrators who embody hegemonic masculinity and whiteness, such as Turner and Roethlisberger. Second, as a result of himpathy for these individuals, concerns about domestic violence get deflected onto perpetrators who are distinctly not the golden boys, because they are people of color, poor, and/or women such as Ray Rice and Hope Solo.

The second important takeaway of this dissertation is that, gendered violence, and thus domestic violence, is still shockingly pervasive in sports and US society writ large. In the last thirty to forty years, domestic violence has become an official legal term with recognizable cultural meaning. Victims now have access to more legal, financial, and cultural resources than ever before. Shelters and networks of volunteers reach survivors every day and impact their lives in immeasurably positive ways. However, there are still massive hurdles that include hesitancy to report, police misbehavior and lack of judgement, and gender norms in testifying including the myth of the perfect victim, as well as racism, classism, and age old sexism. One of the most visible examples of the pervasiveness of domestic violence and the lingering struggles for justice is the plague of domestic violence in the NFL.

In Chapter Two I presented an incomplete lineage of domestic violence cases in the NFL in order to give the reader a sense of the problem. I cannot stress enough that the list was far from exhaustive and is intended to represent a much larger problem. The cases I mentioned included Richie Incognito and Ben Roethlisberger, who were accused of sexual battery and rape,

as well as Ray Rice, Ray McDonald, and Greg Hardy who were all accused of domestic violence shortly after. Josh Brown, one of the most egregious and disturbing cases from the NFL, was accused of more than 20 instances of domestic abuse. As noted in Chapter Two, Brown wrote in his journal, which was made public, that he viewed his wife Molly Brown as his “slave” and declared he had “never really worried about the pain and hurt he caused” her (qtd in Armour and Raanan). Around the same time, Johnny Manziel was accused of abusing his then girlfriend Colleen Crowley, who had pleaded to a hotel valet, “Please don’t let him take me. I’m scared for my life” (Martin). Evidence from the Brown and Manziel cases demonstrate they each understood the harm they were doing to their partners and illustrate clearly the gendered, and power, dynamics at play in domestic violence. The most current controversy surrounds Tyreek Hill who, as a reminder, plead guilty in 2015 to domestic abuse after assaulting and strangling his then girlfriend who was pregnant. Hill is again under investigation after an incident at his home resulted in a severe injury to his son. This was the second time police were called to Hill’s Overland Park home regarding child abuse (Conway). Although he has not been charged at this point, the case has been re-opened at the time of this writing and he has been suspended from participating in official Kansas City Chiefs activities.

The cases presented in Chapter Two, as well as emerging cases, current debates about firearms and domestic violence (Leins), and new research about adolescent dating violence (Chatterjee), demonstrate that the fight for freedom from domestic violence has only just begun. I want to echo sports writer Will Leitch that it is time for the sports world to have its #MeToo moment. The cultural salience of sports makes it an ideal place to do this work because, as Dave Zirin has said, sports “affects our lives whether we consider ourselves sports fans or not” (*A People’s History*, 268).

A stronger relationship between scholars and activists is needed. As noted earlier, Debra Epstein, director of the Georgetown University Law Center's Domestic Violence Clinic, left her position with the NFL Players Association Commission on Domestic Violence. When she left, she stated “Because I care deeply about violence against women in the NFL and beyond, I can no longer continue to be part of a commission that is essentially a fig leaf.” Anti-domestic violence work is mentally and emotionally exhausting and the network of scholars and activists has to be larger, stronger, and more vocal in order to maintain stamina. A single commission with a small number of experts is certainly likely to experience battle fatigue and hopelessness and members of that commission could, and have, reasonably decided to leave. This community of activists needs support - direct and indirect – in the form of scholarly and activist collaboration, political participation, and the production of both traditional academic work as well as more accessible writing on domestic violence in sports. Those working in the trenches need to know there are people working right behind them. As scholar activists, it is time to commit to the types of collaboration that have the potential to change institutions and norms that hold influence over millions of people.

As for the final important takeaway, when the public lexicon of domestic violence is comprised of images and discourse of Ray Rice and Hope Solo, it strategically does not contain images and discourse of those who most closely embody hegemonic masculinity as it is characterized by whiteness, wealth, and social status. This is a way sports media pushes back against growing concerns about gendered violence in sports, by making the problem seem less about gender, less about hegemonic masculinity, and less about whiteness. In elevating Solo and Rice, sports media positioned them as scapegoats for cultural anxieties about the failings of hegemonic masculinity. This discourse produced an archetype of a domestic violence perpetrator

in the public imaginary that exists outside of, and agitates against, whiteness and hegemonic masculinity effectively redirecting blame away from those who have the most privilege, power, control and capacity to do violence without repercussion. In her book on the logic of misogyny, Manne refers to the “tendency to let historically dominant agents get away with murder – proverbially and otherwise – vis-à-vis their historical subordinates” (201). The sports world extends this tendency when it hones attention on a few potential perpetrators.

Isolating Rice and Solo as representatives of professional sports’ domestic violence crisis is problematic because Rice and Solo are not necessarily representative of domestic violence writ large and because it individualizes a structural problem. The violent impact that white athletes have had on the sports community is glaringly obvious, but only to those looking for it. In elevating Solo and Rice, sports media provides cover for athletes like Johnny Manziel and Josh Brown and prevents violence emanating from privileged white male bodies from being the focus of public outrage. Secondly, domestic violence, and all other forms of gendered violence, is not a matter of a few bad apples acting out; it is the result of socio-cultural norms that position, and entitle, some people over others. This project calls out the ways both sports media and existing communication scholarship go astray “by overemphasizing isolated, individualized acts and failing to effectively challenge the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy (IWSCP) that cultivates space for this violence to flourish” (Enck 101). Discourse that isolates and elevates a few perpetrators understands domestic violence as an individual aberration as opposed to the logical result of violent gendered hierarchies. We must shift our thinking about domestic violence to follow Enck’s insight that “beginning from a position of inquiry that presumes intimate partner abuse as the cultural norm rather than the exception” will result in more fruitful

and effective research (Enck 102). In the remainder of this chapter, I will talk about the implications this research has for the discipline, sports media, and activism.

Contributions to Scholarship and Activism

In general, critical rhetorical scholars should consider the rhetoric of domestic violence more closely and sports is a paramount place to do that because gender norms remain relatively intact and details play out publicly. Zirin, in *A People's History*, took a jab at academia, specifically the dissertation genre,

The 1990s began with the slogan that launched a thousand unreadable doctoral dissertations. A state department intellectual named Francis Fukuyama alerted the world that we had reached “the end of history.” The fall of the USSR and the Berlin Wall meant that globalization and market economies would dominate every corner of the globe. The time of great ideological or military struggles was past. (229)

He goes on to point out and critique the Iraq war that immediately followed this announcement and the “prominent role” sports played in “hyping the war” (230). I take from this a serious concern with the way sport is still undertheorized despite having clear relationships to US exceptionalism, militarism, capitalism, and violence broadly. This dissertation represents a call to the discipline to take more seriously the role sports plays in shaping fundamental worldviews of countless people.

More specifically, this research contributes to, and participates in a debate about, the discipline's understanding of gender, violence, and rhetoric. As described in Chapter Two, I engage domestic violence on the same terms that sports media does, recognizing that not all domestic violence is violence against women and that not all gendered violence is violence against women (gendered violence happens to people of all genders). In a recent special edition

of *Women's Studies in Communication* on violence and gender, Mack et al. argue for a shift in the way scholars and activists discuss gender's relationship to violence. They propose,

gendered violence as opposed to *gender-based violence*. Conceptualizing violence as gendered rather than gender based not only opens up possibilities for more expansive and intersectional analysis of gendered and racialized bodies but also centers rather than obfuscates the role of institutional and colonial violence in the production of the precarity of marginalized bodies. (Mack et al. 95)

In the same edition, Kate Lockwood Harris posits that “gendered violence” is an inadequate term because it actually solidifies a gender binary and it is “insufficiently intersectional” as it over-focuses on gender at the expense of race and class (115). Partaking in this invaluable debate about language, I agree with Mack et al. that “gendered violence,” as an analytic, is not simply a reiteration of gender-based violence and all of the gender normativity baggage of that term, but a way for scholars and activists to attune themselves to the ways violence is gendered is nuanced ways including the ways race, class, sexuality, and other factors intersect with gender in moments of violence. *Gendered violence*, as opposed to *gender violence*, in its elasticity points to the ways in which violence is gendered and avoids, at least minimally, the binary that gender violence sets up when it invokes the binary. My hope is that this dissertation will contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations about the way our language, and research, needs to continually change to produce the most nuanced understandings of violence and create a less violent world.

Additionally, the case studies presented in chapters three and four contribute to the discipline's understanding of methods in analyzing sports media, gender, and violence. They are also part of a broader methodological project to challenge media frames that depict and describe violence that is gendered. Building on Kyra Pearson's argument, this work is not intended to

“sanitize” violence done by female perpetrators but instead to consider the ways “female criminality circulates in public discourse” (270). In the context of sports media and domestic violence, this dissertation is an example of a *critical replay*; instead of taking sports journalism and other sports commentary at face value, this method explicitly seeks to trouble what the average replay tells us has happened. For Rice and Solo’s domestic violence cases, this meant following long complex media conversations that spanned multiple years, tracing themes in that discourse, and triangulating the reception of their cases with formal details of the case and the reception of other cases that were similarly amplified in sports media. It involved an intimate parsing of the language used to describe each of them and an immanent concern for the ways discourse may be racialized, gendered, and classed. Broadly, this method is an insistence that scholarship, as well as sports media, put more effort and care into contextualizing moments of violence within, and in relation to, white supremacist patriarchy as a structuring force and logic. As public discourse moves away from those structures and produces isolated, detached narratives of domestic violence that frame violence as random and unrelated events, we must take seriously, and as an obligation, drawing connections back to broad systems of violence. Absent a commitment to this labor, patterns of violence will continue as such. As critical scholars, writing critical replays enables us to interrogate and break down the ways in which sports journalism mediates athletics in ways that are gendered, raced, classed, and otherwise problematic

This project is a call to scholars of communication, gender, and sport, as well as fans and activists, to acknowledge sports journalism and approach it with more energy and rigor. There are three aspects of this call. First, scholars should pay closer attention to popular media, sports media, colloquial discourse, and even sources of commentary that appear petty, unintelligent, or gossipy. I was recently at the International Association for Communication and Sport Annual

Summit and after a presentation overheard a number of scholars talking about how they “don’t read the comments” and really putting down the conversations that happen in comment sections, on Twitter, and other similar places. I understand the urge to protect oneself from reading bigotry, I really do, but these places are undeniably sources of knowledge production and confirmation. If we want to make the world a more ethical and equitable place, these are locations we will research. Second, considering sports journalism with increased rigor involves stepping outside of the elitist confines of academia to take seriously the concerns that sports journalists and athletes themselves are raising, listening to their perspectives, and committing to collaboration with non-academic actors to enhance and amplify the work many of them are already doing. Bridging the gap between scholarship and activism is an essential part of challenging gendered violence in sports. Finally, this involves taking an active role in challenging sexist, racist, classist, and otherwise bigoted reporting. To echo Creech, “Having tough conversations, showing remorse, truly learning from this and other incidents and talking openly about them could go a long way in raising awareness to the ongoing issues of domestic and sexual assault.”

Final Thoughts

An article on the American Bar Association’s (ABA) website from 2015 summarizes a panel discussion on domestic violence in sports at the ABA’s annual meeting and states that “Ray Rice changed the world.” The article quotes sports lawyer Scott Andresen as saying “We’re in a new world of awareness.” And, describing the sports world pre-Ray Rice, “Andresen said the teams didn’t care about domestic violence because they get paid to win and they win by having exceptional athletes.” Panelists concluded a key takeaway of the conference was that in a post-Rice world “Everyone is holding players, teams and leagues accountable” (“Domestic

Violence Scandals”). This dissertation has demonstrated that is far from true. In fact, so-called accountability has only applied to a few athletes and in gendered, racialized ways. The only post-Ray Rice world that exists is one that scapegoats domestic violence onto a few perpetrators, perpetuates myths of gender equity and safety, and glorifies hegemonic masculinity. If we want to create a more just sporting world, and world in general, we must insist on more complete and nuanced narratives of domestic violence that consider race, class, gender, and other cultural factors as they contribute to both the enactment of domestic violence and public understandings of it.

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